

## Community of Purpose

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No Date

Scripture: Acts 4:32-37; 1-Corinthians 12:4-31.

Text: Isaiah 41:6-7: "They helped everyone his neighbor; and every one said to his brother, 'Be of good courage.' So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smoothest with the hammer him that smiteth the anvil saying of the soldering, 'It is good.'"

Whenever a group of people take up a new project or enter into a new compact of relationship, there always arises a desire to give outward recognition to their common purpose by some mechanical system which shall bind them together into one fold and under one sign. This desire has manifested itself in various forms. The community of goods, denying the right of private ownership of property has been tried again and again, and has always failed. A common creed has also been used and is still used. This is a method which in theory denies the right of free thought, and is in fact an intellectual impossibility. Not always have people recognized the fact that in the very nature of things the only binding force essential and possible is the community of purpose, or as Paul says, "to desire earnestly the higher things."<sup>1</sup>

These various methods of expressing in a limited mechanical system that which is essentially infinite in manifestation have been tried time and again during the history of the Christian church, and they have failed, because of the utter impossibility of the attempt to limit that which is infinite.

Jesus had hardly finished his brave and noble life, devoted to breaking the mechanical system of Judaism, and infusing into peoples' lives the common purpose of Love to God and love to man, when his followers made their futile

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<sup>1</sup> 1-Corinthians 12:31.

attempt to organize the Christian Church into a communistic society. It seems somewhat sad and pathetic to see how soon the followers of a teacher, whose teaching was so large and so free, whose purpose was so high and so noble, attempt to bind and limit his influence by the restrictions of community holding all things in common. Jesus' conception of life and the soul was so broad so grand that this feeble attempt to interpret his conception of life in terms of land, bread and material wealth, and that so soon after his death, only seems to drive home to us the truth of how little Jesus' life was appreciated even by his closest followers. With all due regard to the enthusiasm and spirit with these few people [as they] organized themselves into this community, it still remains true that it was a short-lived venture, without apparently any valuable results either for the communists themselves or the cause to which they had bound themselves. In fact when we group together the passages in Paul's epistles in which he refers to the Saints at Jerusalem, and the great efforts which he made in collecting money for the support of the Saints at Jerusalem, we cannot but feel that there lurked in Paul's mind some impatience, not to say contempt, for those few who attempted thus to limit the spirit of Jesus' life, that same life which sent Paul preaching and teaching all over the civilized world of his time, to endure ridicule and suffer punishment, in seeking earnestly higher things.

This attempt failed, as others of the same nature have always failed, and always will because they are based on misconceptions concerning life and wealth.

In the first place we do not always remember what constitutes our right of property. I take a piece of wood, and from that wood I construct a table. My hand has sawed, cut and finished it. My brain has conceived of the plan of the table, and directed my hand in the execution of the plan. That table is mine because it is stamped with my personality, because by the sweat of my brow it was made. Why is it that you and I care for a spot of ground called our home, our farm, more than we do for all the rest of the world. Simply because that spot is stamped with our personality, every bit is associated with something that we have done. Why do you and I care for some one book in our library much more than we do for books just like it in other libraries? It is because the leaves of that book have been turned by our hands, the pencil marks along the margins represent our thought. Why do you care for this

church house here in comparison with some other more elegant and costly? Because this represents your work, your labor, your thought, your sacrifice, and it is that that makes it yours. Upon this ground, the stamping of our personality upon some object outside of us, rests our claim to own property. Now it may happen I can make tables better than you can, but you can make chairs better than I can. So I make a table for you, while you make a chair for me. Because we think that it is for the advantage of our living to have both tables and chairs, then in consideration of the fact that you give up your claim to your extra chairs, I will give up my claim to the extra table. We exchange. Both are better off than we were before. Thus we keep on exchanging each other's property, until we have about us all that is worthwhile for life, home, comforts, books, music, art, opportunity to work. We have accumulated wealth by the interchange of our property and products of our personalities, for wealth is that which avails for high and noble living, as Ruskin says. Wealth is that which makes possible the attainment of the purpose of life which Paul describes to desire, earnestly the higher things of life.<sup>2</sup>

But in the interchange of these things which constitute wealth, men discovered that it would be very convenient to have a medium of exchange, so that if I had a table to exchange for a piece of land, I could sell the table to the man who wanted it, and go and buy from the man who wished to sell the land, and carry from the man to whom I had sold the table, the money, medium of exchange, and give it to the man from whom I bought the land. That is a very convenient device, but the mischief came into the arrangement when people began to think this money, a very convenient yardstick, is wealth itself. Just as if you or I should go to a store and ask for 20 yards of cloth, and the storekeeper should give us 20 metal yardsticks worth in the market just as much as the cloth, and we should run home to make a dress out of twenty yardsticks. So people pile up money, metal yardsticks, thinking that it is wealth, when

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<sup>2</sup> John Ruskin (1819-1900) in his 1862 essay, "Unto this Last," wrote "There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. The country is the richest which nourishes the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others." (Section 77.)

it is not wealth, and never was wealth, and never can be wealth, for that only is wealth which avails for higher and better living, and higher and better living cannot be estimated in terms of metal yardsticks.

Now these early disciples of Jesus made this same mistake of estimating the worth of life in terms of money, and thought that by dumping all their possessions into one common file they had solved the problem of life. Their dream failed because it does not recognize that the right to property depends upon the sweat of our brow, and impressing our personality upon some object, or some plan whether it is making a chair, running a railroad, or as servant of the government. It failed because it does not recognize that wealth is that which makes life better, richer and more simple.

Property of some kind, wealth in some degree is necessary to the interpretation of life, but life itself can no more be satisfied with or confined to the limits of property and wealth than can the power of electricity be confined within a few electric generators. Community of goods as a means of expressing the higher life, the common purpose of living fails us.

This plan of the early followers of Jesus failed to satisfy as does the other plan of amassing large amount of money and thinking you have become wealthy. After a brief experiment, the idea of the community of goods died out. But they had no sooner learned their first lesson than they entered upon another plan equally as disastrous. They attempted to express the purpose of their living by a community of ideas, and then began the development of creeds. By the year 325 we find the creed fairly well defined, and the church started out on its career of living under a community of ideas. They attempted to dump all their ideas into one common form, and to live within the limits prescribed by the creeds produced.

But a plan of living such as this has even greater difficulties than the plan of community of goods, and it involves more serious dangers. A man cannot say, "I believe," simply because someone tells him to. He can only say, "I believe," when the truth that he believes has become a part of his nature, stamped by his personality, true to his experience and his deepest freest thought. When he says, "I believe," to a statement which he does not

believe, which is not true to his experience, he forfeits his self-respect, and his right to utter truth.

We exchange our ideas as best we may by the use of words and forms. In all our intellectual life, we are so much in danger of mistaking mere words and statements for the truth that was once behind them. We turn to a worn out creed, long since free from all meaning and truth that is valuable to life, and say, "I believe," just as one might count over bills of confederate money and say I have wealth. It may not be very bad for the man who is counting the confederate money to say to himself, "I have wealth," but when he hands that money over to some unsuspecting person in exchange for property, he become a villain. It may not be bad for a man to repeat those meaningless creeds to himself, but when he hands them over to others as if stamped with his approval, he is upon very doubtful ground. Sometimes when I hear the pessimistic cry going abroad that society is becoming corrupt, that businessmen no longer hold to the ethical laws of business, that people no longer live up to their sacred marriage vows, the thought often comes to me, "How much of this laxness is due to signing of church creeds which those who sign do not believe and those who cause them to be signed do not believe." Why should a young man and woman who have been told to sign a certain creed whether they believe it or not, why should they take any more seriously the marriage vows made before the same altar, and in the presence of the same people, and in the name of the same God? When we go into a great library and see the books that have been written to express the ideas of men, the absurdity of thinking that we can express our beliefs within the limits of a creed, and that creed a thousand years old, the absurdity of living under the system of a community of ideas comes over with such force, as to make me wonder why man ever attempted it, to say nothing of why it still continues. Freed from all fake standards, our words pass for their real value, the value which is put upon by the stamp of our own personal integrity and honor, the value which they contain for high life.

No! We cannot put into a creed, however large, however small it may be, that great purpose of our life which is so poorly expressed even by all the symbols of languages which are at our command. To enclose truth in a book, that is impossible. Living under the community of intellect, as represented by adherence to a common creed is impossible

and inconsistent with personal integrity and does not give free play for the infinite varieties in which truth manifests itself. Slowly, but surely the creeds are passing, simply because they do not and cannot express our real belief, and are in no way adequate to the cloth the great truths that you and I feel to be the very part of our nature. The community of thought is as fake a basis upon which to unite in a common work as the community of goods. The man who binds himself to a creed, deceiving himself with the idea that it is truth, is even more in error than the man who counts his money and thinks he is wealthy, for the money may pass as current value for property but the creed is like the money of a government long since wrecked and scattered upon the shores of history. The money of an old time nation is interesting and of some value as a relic of the past. The creed of an age that is past is interesting as [it] has some value as an historic relic, but as a living vital force in the life of man, and as a mechanical device to unite us in a common cause, it has no more value than any other dead shell of an earlier age.

No, we cannot find our basis upon which to unite and give expression to our purpose either in the world of things, or the world of thought. To be sure we have our church which we own in common, to be sure we have many ideas which we own in common, but the only plane upon which we can unite in our common work is the plane of the spirit, the plane upon which we may all stand looking forward to the realization of those high purposes that are before us. We cast aside as common and inadequate the idea of uniting ourselves upon the low basis of things, or within the limits of creeds, and boldly pledge ourselves to a common purpose of forgetting the things that are behind and pressing forward to the things that are before. "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any praise, think on these things."<sup>3</sup> To realize the best and highest ideals of life to which our minds, by the utmost study and thought, can attain, that is the common purpose that binds.

But we realize that the growth into these ideals must take us through paths of labor and study, and devotion. We have besides this great purpose of climbing to the top of

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 4:8.

the mountain, the more immediate purpose of picking our way carefully step-by-step among the rocks, trees and ravines at the base. We have the work of this church to do, we have to help each other to find the way, we may have to construct a bridge across the streams that prevent our advance, we have to clean the way and blaze the trail for other who may come after us.

In this work, in traveling each day's journey, comes the difficulty. We can all get to a point of vantage, and in perfect harmony gaze longingly at the vision on the mountain top, but when we take our eyes from the vision and put ourselves to the immediate task before, then comes the danger of friction, and uneasiness. So let us gaze so intently at the vision on the mountain that as we go about our daily tasks of picking our way up the mountainside always that mental image of that vision may be within us to help when things go wrong, and we become impatient or discouraged. Sometimes for a long distance as you struggle, the vision at the top will be obscured by some obstacle, some passing cloud. But always it is there, and the memory of it must keep us encouraged as we slowly climb up, up, up.

If we have obstacles to overcome, we will take wise council together, each one contributing his part to the whole truth through the power of which the obstacles are to be put behind us. If we have work to do, each one will do his part, and thus working together, day-by-day we can put behind us the difficulties which seem so tremendous. Always we are inspired by the vision on the mountain top, which is still fresh in our minds. Always we are quickened to more harmonious action by the thoughts of our community of purpose, expressed so simply by the ancient prophets. "They helped everyone his neighbor; and every one said to his brother, 'Be of good courage.' So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smoothest with the hammer him that smiteth the anvil saying of the soldering, 'It is good.'"