

Contemplation of the Social Identity of a Human Collectivity through Animated Metaphors (family, body) – A Success Factor For Its Functioning. Case Study – Primary Church

Remus SOARE

*PhD, Independent Researcher, Spain
soareremus@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes how the metaphorical identification of a human community with a living, functional organism is a key factor in transmitting the mode of operation into its unity and harmony. The metaphors of the “family” and “body,” some of which identified the primary church, helped to strengthen the internal and external perception of the church as a well-woven body and ensured its historical survival.

KEYWORDS: family, body, metaphor, primary church, unity, collectivities, social

Introduction

We live in a world dominated by independence and in which the spirit of camaraderie has lost its importance. The society traverses a postmodern era characterized by an unprecedented social isolation. At the shelter of virtual socialization, people have converted into small islands of loneliness. Even God has become “personal”, a kind of bourgeois possession for the salvation of private souls. The result of this existential philosophy shows us more significantly a fragmented, indifferent and inert society.

The world of the early church, based on the concept of the well-woven organism, has succeeded in developing another type of society, whose values should be resuscitated and implemented in human structures that will last, be it churches today or other human collectivities.

Throughout history, it has been observed that social paradigms (agrarian, industrial, computer science) have been accompanied by corresponding illustrative metaphors. The nature of the functioning of the agrarian society, with its spider-shaped relations and “grafts” is expressed effectively by biological, organic and anthropomorphic metaphors. Industrialization has replaced them with mechanical metaphors. For example, comparisons with a clock or a machine were easier on people’s lips than those that were done with parts of the body. Nowadays, illustrating expressions are made by cybernetic, impersonal, contourless metaphors. Bits, trolls, or spam travel unhindered through the universe of our abstract thinking. We’ve come to have networks instead of relationships and profiles instead of people. A retrospective in the world of the early church and the analysis of metaphors illustrating its structural identity can help to better understand the effective functioning of today’s human communities.

Case Study - Primary Church

People are created to relate to each other and cannot live properly without relationships. Watson’s statement (1982, 186) that “there are no solitary Christians in the New Testament” is consistent with Jesus’ invitation to relate both to Him and to His followers. The composition of the church is the result of God’s decision to invite human beings to develop a relationship with Him. Once acceded to it, people experience an identity change which they reconfigure both in Christ and in the process of building relationships with other members of the church. The new hypostasis was described by new testamentary authors in the form of different metaphors. Two of them, which faithfully render the social identity of the church, are the metaphors of “family” and “body.” These involve the development of special relationships between the members of the group, designed to guarantee its functioning. Buck (2010, 28) highlights the importance of relationships, quoting John Wesley’s suggestive words: “The gospel of Christ knows no religion other than social religion; knows no holiness other than social holiness,” and “changing it to a solitary religion means destroying it.”

Church - A Family

The historical survival and ascension of Christianity in the first three centuries of existence can largely be attributed to the identification of the group of believers with a living and well-woven social organism - the family. The image of the church as a family appears in different places of the New Testament (2 Cor 6:18; Eph 3:14, 1 Thes 5:1-2). This assumed identity led the believers to a high dimension of covenant and loyalty. Membership of the church meant for them more than belonging to a group that reunited, but rather living in a family of believers who loved and supported each other.

The new identity was exciting, appealing, because the family thus formed was open to all social classes, in which the slaves could live together with the free people. Participating in the Christian community embraced believers in a visible, very united communion, which ethical and conceptual dimension exceeded the dramas of ethnic, family and religious upheavals caused by conversion.

The concept of the home

The importance of home space for the first Christian communities and the role of the master of the house is well-documented in the Biblical narrative. According to the Acts of the Apostles, in the first period of church development, Christians reunited in houses, putting domestic space at the disposal of the congregation (Acts 2:46; 5:42, 12:12). In a similar manner, the practice of the Pauline mission established the communities of believers in private dwellings (Hk 17:5-9; 1 Cor 16:19, Rom 16:3-5,23). Billings (2011) claims that the reason for this practice is the low number of members at that stage of church development. The author sees in the meetings of Tiran's school (Acts 19:9-10) an indication of the argumentation of the gradual transition of the church from the domestic, private space to specific places dedicated to practicing the cult of Christ. But this opinion is counterbalanced even within the biblical passage mentioned. Verse 9 explains that the new location was used in Ephesus only for Paul's public preaching, where there could be debates and confrontations. In this way, the community of believers was protected by the opposition spirit of those who opposed the apostle, remaining to confratern for worship in the family environment of the house.

Although the circumstances of Paul's preaching activity are only partially known, it is certain that in every community receiving the Christian message, the living space had a vital role to play in establishing and maintaining the Christian presence. Arriving in Rome under house arrest, Paul himself continued to preach in his own home to those who came to visit him (Acts 28: 13-31). Although the meetings in the homes culminated in cultic activity, the fact that we do not have a detailed description of the beginning or the way of any religious ritual in the New Testament, it is clear that the main reason for the meetings in the houses was rather the desire to strengthen links of the "family" type among the members. Pellitero (2010) considers "pedagogical" the nature of the connections between those baptized in this domestic environment.

The Gospels anticipated the concept of the home that was to be converted into reality with the advent of the church. The convergent centrality of the three parables of Luke 15 is the house. The whole speech of parables gravitates around the house. The shepherd returns the sheep in the house (verse 6), although the text mentions that the place where the remaining sheep were left and it was supposed to be reintegrated was the common (verse 4). The woman, who had lost the money in the house, finds it after a thorough search inside it. Although the little son does not explicitly speak of the house, "going to the father" means returning to his father's house (vv. 17, 18). In this last parable, the house is the central axis in which the characters manifest their conduct: they move away, they come back, they go around it. As a hermeneutical update of the time of Luke's community, it is worth remembering the image of the church as the Father's house, the place where the lost sons are met, and where the brethren must reconcile, rebuilding communion and enjoying the presence of God the Father of All.

Communion means experiencing life together. The metaphorical use of the terms brother and sister to designate relations between church members, traced the new identity of the ecclesiastical body that aimed for an organic solidarity. The faithful of the primary church practiced communion to a high degree by sharing everything (Acts 4:32) as an anticipation of the eternal communion, centered in God. The surrounding society has been impressed by this type of love manifestation. The nature of this fraternal, community love, and the bold proclamation of faith, were the keys to the efficiency of original Christianity.

The authority in the primary church was rather paternal rather than autocratic. The apostles took special care of the members of the community in a paternal manner. This type of relationship was born at the cross through the new affiliation established by Jesus between John and Mary and developed throughout the New Testament. In his epistles, John calls the faithful “little children” (1 John 2:1). Peter called Mark “my son” (1 Peter 5:13). In the same way, Paul addressed Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2). The fledgling slave Onesimus was called “my son, whom I bore in my chains.” Paul did not feel well when some relationships degenerated and had no pleasure when he had to impose his apostolic authority to obtain obedience (2 Cor 1: 23-2:2).

The Church - Body of Christ

In Paul’s theology, (Robinson 1952) claims, the concept of body holds a key position. It is a concept that unites its great themes. We are redeemed from the sinful and mortal body, we are saved through the crucified body of Jesus, we are incorporated into the body of Christ that is His church, we preserve our identity through the Eucharistic communion with the body of Christ, in our body there must be a new life and the glorified body will be exalted to heaven.

Park (2003) states that through the church metaphor as the body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12:12, the apostle Paul highlights the idea that all members of the church relate and belong to one another, being part of a whole. Without membership and relationship with the whole, no part can exist individually. Sanders (2007, 68) calls this situation “the irony of the community” and explains it as follows: “You as an individual will never be able to achieve your personal destiny, you will not accomplish what you are, you will not use your gifts efficiently and you will not be able to unleash your potential until you are part of the community. The individual and the collective are intrinsically linked.”

Existence in Christ as described in Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11 is purged of racial, social, religious or sexual particularities that operate as barriers to the division of persons. Askew (2009, 35) considers that “the unity of the church does not depend on man’s will, domination or personal faith. Instead, it depends on God and His gracious will that allows people to participate in divine fellowship in Christ through the Holy Spirit.” The parties, in their diversity, must harmonize in unity, as elements that can not exist or function if they are separated from the whole. Consequently, true identity is found

only in belonging, and the reason of being of the parts is the maintenance and functioning of the unity of the body.

In the writings of the apostle John, the theme of “remaining” refers to the same idea of functional unity and harmony. John the Baptist saw the Spirit “stopping” over Jesus (John 1:32,33). Two of the disciples, interested in finding out where Jesus lives, accompanied Him and “remained” to Him (John 1:38,39) as an anticipation of the Comforter’s future stay (John 14:17). The full functioning of the church was explained in John 15:1-17, through the parable of the vine and the branches, in terms of “staying”. Staying with one another and with God presupposes a relationship of full communion, constant communication and unconditional love, all of which in a mutual manner.

According to Warren (2006), reciprocity is the heart of the community, it is the art of offering and receiving in the process of service to each other. Paul used the example of kenosis in Philippians 2 to express the need of the local Philippi church to live in unity and mutual communion with the spirit of dedication that was in Christ. The Bible recommends that we enliven, serve, cherish and engage with each other in our relationship with others. The New Testament advocates, on more than fifty occasions, that certain attentions to be dedicated “to others” or that tasks be carried out “together”. Paul, in Philippians 4:11, 14, advises that reciprocity is manifested even in tribulations.

Waetjen (2001) notes the ideology of reciprocity in the parable of the midnight friend (Luke 11:5-8). Van Eck (2011) mentions that reciprocity in domestic space, according to the custom of the time, was a norm for the entire community. In his opinion, the parable provides the listeners with an alternative to the indifferent way of life created by the aristocratic society and the religious elite. Reciprocity that goes beyond the social barriers of a community is transformed into altruism. Mitchell (1992) attributes to altruism both a social dimension and an ethical dimension. For Evangelist Luke these terms are synonymous with the idea of sharing the same spirit, embracing the same thought, and having the goods in common. The contrasts depicted by Judas’ story, as well as the narrative of Anania and Saphira, which violates the principle of altruism, help the reader of the Gospels to appreciate the force of this principle within the functional identity of the church. Instead, the descent of the Holy Spirit took place over a united and harmonious community as a body.

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