

## **Community**

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### **What is our commission? Making God's kingdom visible...**

We are created in order to build God's kingdom and to make God visible in this creation. Building God's kingdom means making the reality of Jesus' reign in this world visible and tangible through our lives. This is the destiny and the fulfillment of man. What Jesus accomplished on the cross, we want to testify to in Jesus' name in this creation, thus bringing light into this darkness. We want to proclaim the good news from Romans 8, „So now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.“ This is the good news of salvation, of liberation from the occupying power of evil.

God's kingdom grows where people are transformed more and more into the character of Jesus. God's kingdom comes. It is established and becomes visible in this world. At the same time, the kingdom of darkness is driven out.

As a community living and working together we want God's kingdom to be built in us and through us. The revelation of God's reconciliation with man in Jesus should become tangible and visible in us. That is the goal and content of our lives.

As you read the following instructional text you will see that when we concern ourselves with God's kingdom, we return to the same things over and over again. As endlessly varied, creative and colorful as God's kingdom is, the essential thing is still simple. It is so simple that Jesus said, „I praise you, Father, because you have revealed these things to little children“ (Matt. 11), and not to those who have the impression that something simple would be asking too much of them. What is absolutely essential to God, he has revealed to the simple. For his kingdom can unfold only in a heart which is aware of its poverty and need, confessing, „Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.“

### **Community living is an expression of my relationship to God**

Living in community is often misunderstood and seen one-sidedly as an opportunity for weak persons who cannot cope with life to find a place where they are protected from life's rugged demands; an opportunity to get rid of one's own needs and limitations, especially one's own loneliness, and to experience security and care. But relationship in the biblical sense, the basis for all fellowship, is something quite different. It means looking away from oneself, being wholly directed to the other, relating to the other person. The extent, the depth, and the commitment with which I share my life with my brother and relate to him is an expression of my own personal relationship to God the Father. „Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen“ (1 John 4:20). My love for God must become visible in love for my brother.

Community living is not just a matter of people living together in a house, a center, or a cloister, thus sharing everyday life in a natural way. Our community is not centralized in one locality. We purposely live in various households around the city, in order to be a light to people. We purposely invest time, travel and limitations, in order to meet several times a week for prayer, meals and sharing, instruction, worship and common projects. We also spend some of our free time together. In order to fulfill these commitments and appointments, inner determination is necessary. By committing ourselves to these structures, we are able to approach each other, share our individual lives with one another, and encourage, strengthen and correct each other.

## **The goal of creation**

In order to deeply understand the basic connections of my own personal relationship to God and to community living, it is important to grasp God's thoughts about creation.

God created man as his vis-à-vis, to have fellowship with him, for God is a God of relationship. Thus fellowship is neither an organization nor an institution, but rather the expression of lived relationship.

The goal of the whole creation was and is fellowship - fellowship of man with God, of persons with each other, and man with all the rest of creation. God made man as a creature of relationship. Only in relationship to God, his creator, does he experience his self-understanding, his identity, his safety, his security, his peace -- everything which makes up his life. God who created man as his vis-à-vis made him in his own image as a creature of love. God wanted people to wholly partake of his own nature. And God's nature is love. Love reveals itself in a relationship.

What happened at the Fall is a breaking of relationship on all levels. Man no longer made reference to God and his word to him. As a consequence, he had to realize that he had definitely fallen out of every vital and life-sustaining relationship: out of the relationship to God, out of the relationship to himself, and out of the relationship to other persons. This also brought the loss of his self-identity and safety. He has forgotten who he is, for detached from every relationship, man has no information about himself. He does not know who he is if he does not live in relationships.

The world remains in this reality up to the present day. Even we who are saved from it experience the results of this great tragedy: We live in more or less destroyed, unhealthy, non-transparent, unclarified relationship to ourselves, to our neighbour, and also to God. Fear, egoism and self-fixation have become the driving powers. Love is extinguished, the relationship broken off - thus fellowship is no longer possible.

## **Truth and forgiveness create fellowship**

In spite of this, forgiveness create stuck to his desire: He wanted fellowship. Therefore in Jesus he gave us a chance to find the way back to him, the God of relationship: a chance to be newly born into this fellowship. Jesus says of himself: „I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life“ (John 8:12). Whoever follows Jesus relating to him, aligning himself with him, will experience life and fellowship. „But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son purifies us from every sin“ (1 John 1:7). Fellowship comes about only to the degree in which we live with each other and before each other in Jesus' light. Brotherly love (or fellowship) is possible only in the light, and both of these together keep us on the straight path to the Father. „Whoever loves his brother lives in the light and there is nothing in him to make him stumble“ (1 John 2:10). Whoever lives transparently in the light can have genuine fellowship with every person, no matter what the other's background, social level, culture, or life style. And every Christian is called to live in the light and thus to share his life.

Our own sinfulness, our guilt and weakness become visible in the light, and we won't be able to stand this place unless we allow ourselves to be cleansed by Jesus' blood, to forgive and be forgiven.

„If you do not forgive your brother, neither will the Father forgive you.“ If I do not forgive my brother who has become guilty toward me --- whether because of ineptitude or misunderstanding - I do not participate in building God's kingdom. Whenever I do not

forgive, holding fast to the accusation against my brother, I am in agreement with the accuser. His character becomes visible in me. Accusation attracts the enemy like manure attracts flies. If our relationships are characterized by forgiveness, our Father and his kingdom can be recognized in us. Therefore Jesus challenges us to ask, „forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who have sinned against me.“ This is not just a matter of forgiveness as payment for forgiveness. God wants his character to become visible in us - he who is merciful and quick to forgive.

Every accusation weakens us. If we forgive each other daily in the community and cleanse ourselves from all accusation against each other, our relationships will become a protection for each individual, a fortress which the enemy cannot so quickly penetrate. If I am living in peace and in reconciliation with my brothers and sisters, I can be sure that I am thus under God's protection as well, free from accusation. I am not just handed over to the enemy.

### **Reconciliation gives the ability to relate to others**

Jesus' most central concern was to lead us through his death back to the state prior to the Fall, into a healed, perfect, whole relationship with the Father. He reconciled us with the Father so that reconciliation would also be possible with ourselves and with our neighbour. Reconciliation means turning toward one another again. Relationship and fellowship are the fruit of reconciliation. When I have no fear or mistrust, I can again be concerned with my neighbour's life and I can allow him to share my life. Turning to another person, also means wholly accepting him as he is, with all his insufficiencies and weaknesses. Deeply trusting relationships, free of accusation, mistrust, and fear, become possible. Destroyed relationships are turned into healed relationships only when they are lived and clarified, only when I am willing to be led by the Holy Spirit into the truth - the truth about myself, about God, and about my neighbour.

„Search me Lord and know my heart... „ (Ps. 139.) If we want to become well trained ambassadors of reconciliation, the Holy Spirit has to search us, lead us into the light, and change us. Reconciliation is demanding and requires a life which is lived consciously. We need God's spirit, who repeatedly leads us to the truth about ourselves and reveals to us where our lives are still dominated by accusations, bitterness and lack of reconciliation. Because we are still on the path to sanctification and have not reached the goal, we must exercise this reconciliation daily.

The shared life and the close relationships to one another give each one sufficient opportunities to grow increasingly into reconciliation: reconciliation with my brother, with myself, with my place and my situation. With growing reconciliation, every accusation against God, my brother and myself disappears more and more from my life. God's kingdom grows in me.

In community living, in my relationships to my brothers and sisters, my position in my relationship to God and myself becomes to some extent more tangible and visible to me. In my relationships with others, Jesus' salvation becomes flesh in my life. It can be grasped.

Community can come about and remain only if everyone involved cleansed his relationships every day, living in the truth and in forgiveness. In the community, none is able to persist in a lack of reconciliation for long, without being discovered.

Thus the community life promotes the growth of God's kingdom in us. Jesus' nature must become increasingly visible in us, or else we could not stand each other. Our relationships to one another are a mirror of God's kingdom. That is why we work on our relationships and on our own lives. That is why counseling is so important. That is why biblical instruction is so important to us. It is not a matter of creating an elite class of Christians or a special spirituality. We want to live out the normal word of God in our lives. This costs a great deal

because it begins with ourselves. For in God's kingdom, one cannot do a job independently of one's own self. Whatever one does, „in words or in deeds, do for the Lord and not for men.“ There are no functionaries in God's kingdom because in everything God wants to be recognizable in us. He will be witnessed to through our being, through our character in this world.

### **Jesus' testament. A new commandment...**

Through his sacrificial death, Jesus led us to the place where we can again keep the one command which fulfills the law and the prophets, and all his plans. By restoring our relationship to God, he made us capable again of that for which we were created: for love: „Love the Lord, your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.“ This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself“ (Matt. 22:37-39) The second is like it. Love for God will always result in love and concern for, in devotion to our brother. And the more my relationship to myself become whole, the freer I am to approach my neighbour. John emphasized this in his first letter, „He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother „(1 John 4:21) Love becomes visible through the way I stand by my brother, turn to him, relate to him. In principle, it is impossible to have a living, rich relationship to God which does not become visible in the relationship to myself and to my neighbour.

A shared life, community life, is not a Christian extra for those who are especially called or gifted. It is the basic mark of recognition of Jesus' disciples. Jesus said in his testament, „A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples according to our spotless life or by supernatural manifestations, but by the way we relate to each other. God's kingdom becomes visible, experiencable, and tangible in our relationships. The goal of the community must always be to make Jesus known and talked about in this world.

As soon as we decide that we want such relationships in the light, whether in our family, our house group, or our place of work, we will unavoidably be confronted with the truth about ourselves and about our brothers and sisters. All the narrowness, unreliability, egoism, pedantry, self-centredness, and superficiality - everything in my brother's life which still need healing will get on my nerves. (To be sure, he will have the same experience if he opens himself to me!) His life will become a tangible burden for me only, when I become involved with him and everything which concerns him; only when I no longer avoid him, but am concerned for his life, when his life becomes a part of mine; only when I become his „keeper“ out of love for God and for my brother, and no longer turn away like Cain, saying, „Everyone should look after himself!“

Paul knew precisely the costs of brotherly love and of relationship to one another. Therefore he said,“ Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ“ (Gal. 6:2) The law of Christ is summarized in the double law of love (Matt. 22:37-39). If we want to fulfill it, we will have to bear our brother's burden. But this is not only a matter of another's burden. I must also allow my burden to be borne; I must entrust myself to my brother without distance or filter; I cannot withdraw from him. To the extent that I am willing. I will also be revealed to my brother in Jesus' light. Community living entails a decision renewed daily that I will not distance myself from my brother, will withhold nothing from my God and my brother. Then God's kingdom will be built and testified to in me and through me.

### **In this world - but not of this world**

The motivations for fellowship in the world and fellowship in God's kingdom are basically different. In the world, fellowship always serves a certain purpose: People with a common

interest find each other and profit from each other until changing interests separate them. Sympathy or some form of achievement such as talent, knowledge, beauty, or power play an important part. Each one chooses his relationships according to the advantages that they bring. I need the other in order to attain life. Christian fellowship, God's kingdom, is like a family into which we are born; we cannot choose our siblings. The only thing which binds us together as Jesus' disciples is that we belong to this family. The legitimation for this belonging is not some achievement. Talents, interest and education are secondary. We do not come together in order to receive life from each other, but to experience Jesus, who gives life, with each other and in each other.

Fellowships with a certain goal can be dissolved again at any time; but we cannot simply step out of a family, as uncomfortable as this may be at times. These familial relationships well remain in eternity.

The motivation for encountering another person is not what he represents, but Jesus in him who encounters me. Because Jesus alone confirms my life, my value, and my personality, I do not need to bind the other person to my needs. I can let him be free. Thus God's kingdom becomes tangible when people bear each other out of love for Jesus (not out of mutual sympathy) and do not withdraw even when weakness becomes apparent.

### **Respect and admonish the brother**

In a fellowship which orients itself by Jesus' word, no one needs to fight for his place, his rights, his life or his value. Submitting to one another means no longer putting myself forward. It means aligning myself with my brother. In a shared life I can practice turning away from myself daily. In everyday life I can practice rejoicing from my heart over everything God has laid in my brother and has developed in him. I can learn to joyfully learn from my brother without calculating in my mind which areas I am superior in. In this way I honor and respect Jesus in my brother. This doesn't mean I have to be blind to his weaknesses or sins. The community life stands and falls with the certainty that Jesus dwells in our midst and in the life of the other person. It makes it possible to grow in a basic respect for my brothers and sisters, apart from their origins or abilities. I respect disrespectful of Jesus. In God's kingdom it is impossible to have a good relationship to Jesus and not to esteem my brother (cp. John's letter). If I inwardly distance myself from my brother, Jesus will always be on his side. The way I treat my brother reflects my true attitude toward my Lord. This is more visible in the shared life than anywhere else.

We often think: He overdoes it, he is too one-sided, completely uninterested, too vain, too immature and so on and on. We lose sight of Jesus in the other person. God must point out to us the truth about our relationships, because as fallen persons we have lost touch with reality regarding ourselves and our neighbour. God want us to respect one another, whether the other is a leader or a newcomer. Jesus lives in him. None of us is worth loving for his own sake. What is worth loving is always Jesus, who lives in us. "Admonish the brothers and sisters who are at fault, but in the spirit of gentleness, esteem, and respect."

In our relationship to one another we should uncover and reject sin, not fearing to speak about it. But with respect. Without exposing the other person. I have no right to reject him because of it. In the admonishment, the brother should experience my unbroken love and care for him. We must differentiate between sin and the sinner. Each one must be aware of the fact that he himself is capable of every sin which others have committed. This awareness will keep me merciful. Only from a reconciled and healed relationship to God will it be possible to seek my brother for his sake without any thoughts of using him in some way for myself.

## **Community creates breathing space**

„How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of this robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessings, even life for evermore.“ (Ps. 133). God looks kindly on his children who share their lives in mutual care, reconciled to each other (in unity). There he sends blessing, life of imperishable quality. Isn’t this what we really desire and with all our power of imagination strive to somehow grasp?! „Live together“ does not necessarily mean in the same house, not even in the same town; this expresses more the quality and depth of the relationship. These people are close to each other, they go in and out of each other’s homes. The life of one concerns the others, they can no longer be indifferent to each other. My brother’s welfare, his relationship to God, his everyday life, his paths concern me. This leads me to think and pray with him, to bear his burdens, to do something for him. God will react to this sharing and mutual concern with his kindness and blessing. He himself will create life and breathing space for all concerned.

Breathing space arises for one thing through the expression of my brother’s concern and love. Security is created when I experience that people totally stand by me, seek me, and accept me. God’s love is tangibly expressed through my brother; trust grows toward God and toward my brothers and sisters. This releases from tension and frees a person to give up his persistent struggles for his own life, for recognition and confirmation; he can let go of his fear of being on the short end. He will experience what the psalmist wrote, „In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free“ (Ps. 118:5) When I discover through my brother that I am wholly accepted by God, loved, valued, and recognized, this will create breathing space, a broad horizon for my heart. Of course God can reveal this directly to our hearts. But he also wants his love to become flesh: for me in my brother, through me for my brother. Breathing space is also created when I totally entrust myself and everything in me to my brother, trusting that his love for me will continue even if he discovers my guilt, mistakes, and weakness. In order to entrust ourselves to one another to this degree, we need to agree to a clear framework of commitment. We must expressly agree to such terms as discretion the determination to keep on going to each other and to live before each other in truth and openness. Only a house with insulated windows and doors is warm... Even then it requires courage and termination to let others see behind the private facades of my everyday life; it requires to live in light spoken of in 1 John 1:7. Everyone tries to shirk, to camouflage or distract from himself. These hide-and-seek games are imaginative because by nature we are too cowardly to truly admit what is in us, for fear of rejection. However, if I have made the decision to share my life, it will become a piece of public property for a defined group of brothers and sisters. Within the framework of this committed community, my insecurity, fears and weaknesses can come to the light because in my brother I have experienced Jesus’ unconditional love which even then will not withdraw from me. Nakedness can become visible without resulting in humiliation or withdrawal because it is covered by my brothers and sisters. My dignity remains.

## **Whoever loses his life will find it...**

When I decide to live a committed, shared life, I simultaneously waive the right to a certain private sphere and individualism, which really serve the illusion that with them I could create my own breathing space. This renunciation has a cost for every type of person because there is no born „fellowship type“. Every person is a born individualist, no matter what the reasons. By nature, every person attempts to create his own breathing space. Depending on his possibilities and personal ideals, this can be through material good, taking much time for

himself, achievements in education, knowledge, and career, through Christian activities, hobbies a special service, or through relationships which he calls his own. But everything which is possessed belongs to this world, and one day we will have to leave it behind. Possessions can be taken away from one day to the next. They are not part of the eternal life spoken of in Ps. 133. Life in eternity is not a possession, but rather the experience of God's concern through my brother. This changes my heart and leads me into the trust and the certainty that God is for me. Even when my brother is no longer present, I can remain reconciled in my life, on the basis of this experience.

The goal of the community, lived brotherly love, is always to reveal Jesus and to make God the sole source of my life. A shared life and committed fellowship will lead the individual into an ever deeper relationship with God, not into dependence on people, as some object; for in community living, my brother's and my own insufficiency become clearer and clearer. Each person will depend all the more on God's grace to accept the other in spite of his „incorrectable faults“.

The genuineness of every Christian fellowship can be seen in the degree to which its members find a mature, independent, deep relationship to God the Father, and out of this relationship, can live and can testify to Jesus in this world.

### **Community enables and sets free to serve**

The experience of reconciliation with God, with myself, and with my neighbour, the healing of relationships and the creation of an inner breathing space are a work of the Holy Spirit. Even though we experience all of this in relationships to our brothers and sisters, even though God's love reaches us in them, it is nonetheless the Holy Spirit himself who creates this reconciliation and this potential in us.

The Holy Spirit's goal is always to build and spread God's kingdom. By doing this first in my own heart, he makes me ready for service. Community living is not a goal in itself, nor does it consist only of personal healing. Just as we have been called to mutual love, so we are also called to seek and to save the lost. The world should recognize Jesus in us. When our own question of value has been clarified, we are to a great degree made capable of every type of service. In a trusting, committed relationship to my brothers and sisters, I will one day have understood in my heart that my value is based solely on God's love for me. None of my acquirements, none of my private riches, neither my talents nor what others think and say about me make up my self. God the Father is the only one who has the right to grant me my identity. Living in the light has taught me to move freely and fearlessly. Once I have been revealed before my brothers and sisters, I have nothing more to lose. Then the path is free for relationships and friendship to all sorts of people, beyond my own experiences and personal sympathies.

### **Effective testimony**

When I am committed to share my life, I continually learn to know God the Father better and am led closer to his heart. At his heart I will experience not only security for my own life, but also his perception of people who may be strange to me, but are known by God and close to him. Only being near the Father's heart will make me approachable and awaken in me the growing desire to bring the good news to those who are lost, living in loneliness, coldness, and imprisoned by death - the good news that God loves them. It is not necessary to be in full-time service as a missionary or a pastor in order to do this. In every profession, in every office, on every building site, in every shop and neighbourhood many are living in darkness, loneliness, and fear of death. Every kind of daily work can become an opportunity of

confessing Jesus to people not primarily by my theological knowledge, but by my heart relationship to the Father and by the experience that he has given me everything with Jesus.

When we encounter the enemy of God, he will not ask how eloquent or bold I am. He will first lay his finger on my own life and rightfully ask, „What about your relationship to your God, to yourself and to your brothers and sisters!? Can you even offer any alternative to me?!“ If he finds accusations, bitterness, hopeless and lack of reconciliation in my life, he will easily be able to push me back. He doesn't have to take me seriously.

The devil fears people who live a life of forgiveness because he cannot draw them into mistrust, bitterness and hate. People who are willing to forgive spread the smell of death for the devil. He recognizes which spirit's children we are and in whose name we act, by the way we treat our brothers and sisters. This name alone gives us protection and authority to move around in the kingdom of darkness.

**„All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.“** John 13:34

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