

HOW THE
BODY
OF CHRIST
TALKS

Recovering the Practice
of Conversation in the Church

C. CHRISTOPHER SMITH



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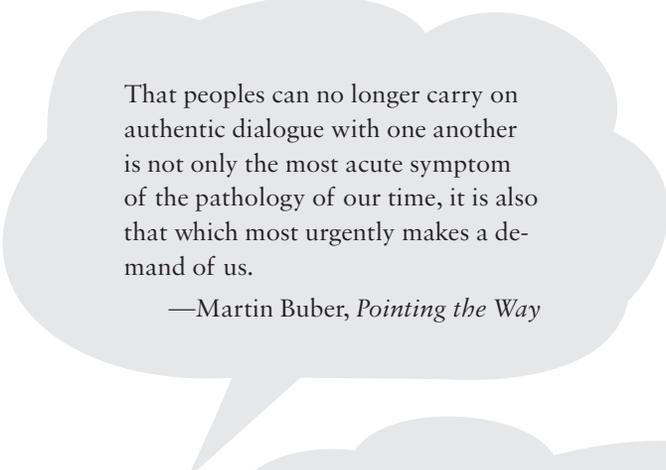
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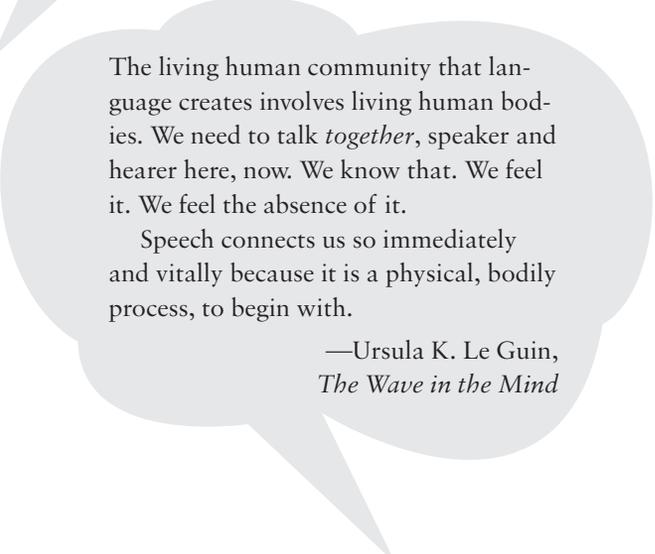
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That peoples can no longer carry on authentic dialogue with one another is not only the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time, it is also that which most urgently makes a demand of us.

—Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way*



The living human community that language creates involves living human bodies. We need to talk *together*, speaker and hearer here, now. We know that. We feel it. We feel the absence of it.

Speech connects us so immediately and vitally because it is a physical, bodily process, to begin with.

—Ursula K. Le Guin,
The Wave in the Mind

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Introduction

We Are Conversational Bodies

More than one scientist has expressed frustration with how little is known about the *organization* of our biological faculties, functioning with such an integrated degree of coordination that we are capable of what would seem to be mental and physical miracles.

—Sherwin Nuland, *The Wisdom of the Body*

It's no secret that many churches today are struggling. Much has been written about the exodus of millennials from church life, but this exodus is broader, cutting across all generations. "Americans are attending church less," notes the Barna Group, which tracks trends within Christianity, "and more people are experiencing and practicing their faith outside of its four walls."¹ The force of individualism runs rampant not only in Western culture but also in our theology; it forms in us the sense that one can be a Christian and not be part of a church.

One of the most acute pains that prompts the exit of church members is the sense that they don't belong. Church members may feel that they are invisible or that some of their deepest convictions

are not being heard or taken seriously. This invisibility, if it persists, will eventually trigger the response, “You lost me.” (This sentiment is the title of a 2011 book by David Kinnaman exploring this phenomenon.) Although Kinnaman’s book focuses on millennials and other younger Christians, the exodus is bigger than that. People of socially and theologically conservative convictions leave churches that are becoming more progressive. People of socially and theologically progressive convictions leave conservative churches. People of older generations leave churches that are enamored with youthfulness. Young people leave churches that seem resistant to adapting to the times. Many people want to follow Jesus but increasingly feel like they are being forced out of churches where they don’t belong—hence, we see the rise of those who see themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

We didn’t realize the full effects of what we were doing at the time, but over twenty years ago my own congregation, Englewood Christian Church, located on the urban Near Eastside of Indianapolis, created a space in which the convictions of our members could be spoken and explored, and in which we began to know one another more fully. In the mid-1990s, our church had a Sunday evening worship service that was rapidly dying off, but we didn’t want to give up being together on Sunday nights. Someone suggested that we gather on Sunday nights for conversation about our faith in Christ. So we gathered and awkwardly tried to talk together, but we rapidly realized how deeply we had been formed by a culture that has little capacity for conversation. Our early conversations together were a hot mess: people sometimes yelled at each other and often were deeply sarcastic; some people left the church altogether; others remained in the church but steered clear of our Sunday night conversations. Maybe it was stubbornness that kept us going, but we persisted in conversation on Sunday nights—week after week, month after month, year after year—and we gradually found that we were coming to know and trust one another and, in the process, were maturing in our capacity for conversation.

At the same time, we began to see conversations popping up in other parts of our life together, not just on Sunday nights. We have started a handful of businesses over the past decade or so, and those brought with them their own sorts of conversations and questions: How do we do the work well and faithfully as a community of Christ followers? How do we partner well with other groups who are doing similar work in our neighborhood and beyond? How do we do this work in a way that is increasingly sustainable and just, both for our employees and for our customers?

We also found ourselves drawn into vital conversations about the health and future of our neighborhood, and we were prepared to contribute significantly to these conversations because we had years of experience navigating the tensions of conversation as a church. Conversation has become a way of life for us over the past two decades. Our life together is often slow and messy (more on that in chap. 6), but our many interconnected conversations over the years seem to be leading us into deeper presence with one another and deeper into the compassionate way, truth, and life of Jesus. As the body of Christ, we are learning what it means to belong to one another and to work together, just as all the parts of the human body belong to one another and work together for the health and growth of that body.

Our bodies, created in the image of the Triune God, have much to teach us about the virtues of conversation. The human body is a wondrous symphony of diverse parts: 206 bones and over 600 muscles, controlled by more than a billion neurons and energized by 60,000 miles of veins and arteries in the circulatory system, enough to circle the globe twice. These intricate parts work together in a harmonious conversation, mobilizing our body and striving for its health. Our bodies constantly adapt to instabilities among their members. When I trip over a curb, for instance, my body tries to adjust itself and regain my balance. If that doesn't work, it will in an instant adjust its members to break my fall and cause as little damage as possible. When my body is thrown into

instability by an infection, the lymphatic system works around the clock to fight the infection and restore the body's stability. Instabilities like these are not merely exceptional cases; to walk, for example, is to fall and repeatedly catch oneself. Similarly, our bodies are constantly fighting toxins that enter through the air we breathe or the food we eat, and the overwhelming majority of these skirmishes go unnoticed by us. In order for systems and body parts to work together successfully in these ways, the body maintains a complex, constant conversation among its parts; information and needs circulate and are refined and adjusted as a result of this ongoing conversation. We exist in our flesh as a many-layered conversation that is not simply idle banter but that moves us toward stability, health, and action.

At the most basic level, the human body is a conversation among proteins that are absorbed by our cells or transferred from one cell to another. The emerging science of proteomics studies the dynamics of this conversation, but it is still developing the tools necessary to listen effectively to the conversation and track the changes and movements of the proteins within it. Researchers like Danny Hillis, a computer scientist who has developed some of the rudimentary tools of proteomics, are hopeful that by better understanding the conversation unfolding at the protein level, we can better describe how diseases like cancer operate. Cancer is a breakdown, Hillis notes, "at the level of this conversation that's going on between the cells, that somehow the cells are deciding to divide when they shouldn't, not telling each other to die, or telling each other to make blood vessels when they shouldn't, or telling each other lies."² Indeed, it seems that the health of our bodies is intimately tied to the ability of their members to effectively converse together.

Our nervous system is perhaps the most familiar example of the way in which the human body is a conversation. Neurons, the cells that comprise the extensive network of our nervous system, have been specifically created for conversation. In a shape similar

to that of a tree with both its branches and its roots, a neuron has dendrites on one end that resemble the tree's branches. These dendrites serve to receive input from a host of other neurons. The dendrites converge in the soma at what would be the top of the tree's trunk. The soma compiles the input from all the dendrites into one final signal. This signal is passed from the soma to the axons, which resemble the roots of the tree and serve to pass the neuron's signal on to other neurons. The synapses are the conversational space in which information is passed from the axons of one neuron to the dendrites of another.

Our bodies move and act through the ceaseless conversation that is unfolding through this vast network of neurons. Sensory data is passed at light speed from the exterior of the body to the brain, and the brain is constantly processing and discerning this data, sending instructions to all the parts of the body. Our muscles, tendons, ligaments, and bones are set in motion in harmony with this intricate conversation that is constantly rippling through our nervous system.

Our bodies are a multilayered conversation carried on internally, among the various parts. But that is not the full story. We are also the product of, and situated within, conversations external to ourselves. We exist as the result of the intimate, sexual conversation of our biological parents,³ and we are an extension of the conversations and the histories they embody. Our bodies are situated within particular genetic, cultural, and socioeconomic conversations. Specifically, we exist and function within places that have been formed (and continue to be formed) by a multi-dimensional conversation that includes law, science, language, mythology, geography, and other dimensions. Language is the medium for this conversation, but we are continually negotiating the meaning and usage of words over time. As we learn to speak and eventually to read, we are being immersed in this conversation and cannot escape the deeply conversational nature of reality. Language is not the only extension of social conversation; clothes,

food, housing, and many other facets of life are also embedded in social conversations.

Within and without, we are conversational bodies, created to live most fully and most healthfully in conversation. It is in community—in the social bodies of church, family, and workplace, for example—that we learn what it means to belong to others and to a story that is bigger than ourselves. Although we may have close and intimate connections with others, we never belong merely to individual persons. Rather, we belong to social bodies. A marriage is a great illustration. When I married my wife, we joined ourselves not only to each other but also to each other’s families. The social bodies to which we belong are most healthy when they have a high capacity for conversation and are able to discuss their identity, work through challenges, and envision their futures.

Sociologists have reminded us repeatedly over the past half century that many of our social bodies in the twenty-first century are far from healthy, as described in renowned books like Bill Bishop’s *The Big Sort* (2008), Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000), and *Habits of the Heart* (1985) by Robert Bellah and others. The individualism championed by Enlightenment philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has saturated Western culture and—together with other factors, including consumerism and an ever-accelerating pace of life—wreaked havoc on almost every sort of social body. Robert Putnam writes, “For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into even deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of a century.”⁴

Bill Bishop describes one of the societal forces at work in the last quarter of the twentieth century as “the big sort,” a shift in which the networks of people we interact with have become substantially more homogeneous.⁵ Our neighbors, our coworkers, our

fellow church members, he argues, are more likely to be of similar ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds than they were fifty or more years ago. As our social networks become homogenized, we lose the capacity to talk, to work, and to be with those who are different from us. And Bishop's book was released in 2008, before the boom of social media, which has only amplified the homogenizing effects of the big sort over the last decade.

Regardless of where we sit on the ideological spectrum, it is difficult today to have conversations with those who locate themselves at a substantially different place on this spectrum. Those on the Left struggle to talk with those on the Right, and vice versa, and those who identify with neither Left nor Right are often castigated by both sides. Many people feel the awkwardness of our inability to converse in family gatherings, for instance, which sometimes feel like a field of landmines that we all tiptoe across, trying to avoid those topics in the news or in our neighborhoods that are sure to explode if we misstep.

Our churches often are not much better. We file in, worship, perhaps chitchat over coffee, and then file out. We rarely have meaningful, sustained conversations with the sisters and brothers in our congregations. We read familiar passages about being the body of Christ, about bearing one another's burdens, and even about loving our enemies, but we have little imagination for how to *embody* these convictions in the everyday lives of our church communities. And yet, the situation of our churches should not come as much of a surprise. We are formed by the forces of a culture in which belonging to social bodies has ebbed, and in which we—often without realizing it—sort ourselves into spaces where most of the people are of similar backgrounds to us. The cumulative effect of these social forces is that we are being formed with a diminished capacity for conversation, and we bring this resistance to conversation with us as we gather in our churches.

Just as cancer is a breakdown in the human body's ability to adequately converse among its members, so too our inability to

talk together in our churches, and especially to talk with people of different ages and backgrounds, is a cancerous disease that erodes our congregational health and threatens the future of our faith. Recognizing that we belong to one another in Christ's body, our health and our future depend on our ability to learn to talk and work together as the members of our human bodies do. The fundamental question that I wrestle with in this book, therefore, is: How do we learn to talk together in our churches when we have been formed by a culture that goes to great lengths to avoid conversation?

You may wonder, why *churches*? Shouldn't we learn to talk together in our homes, our neighborhoods, and our workplaces? Yes, of course we can and should continue to hone our conversational skills in all the communities to which we belong. But in the church we are provided with the scriptural story, which—as I will explain in the next chapter—offers us an account of *how* and *why* we belong to God and to one another and thus why our capacity for conversation should be one of the church's defining marks. It is in our churches, I believe, that we learn how to talk well with others. Our practices of forgiveness and reconciliation, for instance, create a space in which we can toddle and fall repeatedly as we are learning how to talk together.

Following in the way of Jesus, we learn to set aside our personal agendas and to seek the common good of our sisters and brothers and that of our place. As we mature together in our capacity for healthy conversation in our churches, we will find ourselves increasingly capable of patient and compassionate conversation in our homes, neighborhoods, and beyond. In a world where the pace of life seems to be ever-accelerating, I am hopeful that our churches can be communities that embody a different way, one in which we slow down, gather our hearts and minds together, and discern thoughtful, creative, and compassionate ways to respond to the situations in which we find ourselves.

Our human bodies bear witness to the deep correlation between belonging and conversation. If we understand ourselves as

belonging to a body, we should be willing to have the conversations necessary for the health of that body—even if they prove to be painful. At the same time, conversation is crucial to the sort of discovery by which we discern the identity of the body to which we belong and thus become more confident in our sense of belonging to it. As babies, we go through a phase of discovering our senses and discovering that the parts of our bodies are connected to one another. We learn, for instance, that we can touch nearby things that we see, or that things we touch and move into our mouths with our hands can be tasted. This journey of discovery never ends. We learn with time that our bodies can do all sorts of things—talk with other bodies, paint pictures, write sentences, sing, dance, climb mountains—and with enjoyment and repetition, our identity is constantly refined and all the parts of our body slowly learn the skills required to mature into that identity. In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, Brené Brown explores what it means to belong to a community. “True belonging is not passive,” she writes. “It’s not the belonging that comes with just joining a group. It’s not fitting in or pretending or selling out because it’s safer. It’s a practice that requires us to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are. We want true belonging, but it takes tremendous courage to knowingly walk into hard moments.”⁶

What I offer in this book is a field guide of sorts for the journey toward belonging—a treacherous journey, no doubt, in an age when the terrain is so unfamiliar. Like Abram, called out of the land of his ancestors, or the Israelites, led out of Egypt into the wilderness, we don’t know where this journey is headed or what kinds of turns we will take along the way, but we have a sense of who God is, our call to be God’s people, and a promise that God will bless and heal us. I have spent the last quarter century wandering this terrain: uprooting myself from family and church to go to college five hundred miles away from home, then discerning a call to live in Christian community after college, and eventually

landing here at Englewood Christian Church, a community on this journey of learning to talk together and belong to one another in Christ.

My convictions about the transformative power of conversation that begins in our local church communities have emerged and are continually being formed by my own participation for over fifteen years in the conversational life of Englewood. A variety of stories from Englewood's journey, as well as those of other churches that are also learning to talk together, are interwoven throughout this book.

After an initial chapter that provides some orientation for our journey from the scriptural story—reminding ourselves of who God is and who we have been created to be as humans in God's image—the remainder of the book is divided into three parts. The first of these parts, "Setting Out on the Journey," offers some wisdom for churches that desire to begin practicing conversation. In the second part, "A Spirituality for the Journey," I identify three other practices that will help members of our churches converse better with one another. In the third and final part of the book, "Sustaining the Journey," I explore how we can keep growing and moving on this journey, even in the face of threats like tedium and conflict.

One of our deepest human desires is to belong. God, our Creator and Sustainer, has provided in the people of God a channel through which this desire might be fulfilled, a school in which we learn the virtues that we need to become healthy and Christlike communities. Although we find joy and fulfillment in belonging to healthy and maturing churches, our end is something bigger: a witness to the world of the loving and just character of God and of the hope of belonging.

1

Orienting Ourselves for the Journey

Theological Roots of Conversation

God's very nature is to be in dialogue: [the Trinity] in an eternal movement or flow of openness and receiving, a total giving and accepting, spilling over into creation and calling creation back into communion with Godself.

—Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder,
Prophetic Dialogue

Our bodies are always situated within larger conversations and larger stories. The world didn't begin with me or you, and I suspect that it will not end with us either. According to the scriptural story, even the first humans were created from other preexisting materials, as part of God's story of creation. We are creatures in God's story, and we function best when we are guided and oriented by our knowledge of who God is and of the story of God's action in creation.

The fundamental question this book addresses is, How can our churches initiate and sustain practices of conversation? But before we turn to this central question, it will be beneficial for us to look first at the questions of who God is and what God is doing in the world, as these questions will highlight *why* conversation is vital both to who we are as human beings created in God's image and to the work of reconciliation that God is doing in creation.

The Mystery of the Trinity

Over the past half century, theologians have increasingly recognized that our conversational existence as humans is at the core of our being as people created in the image of the Triune God, who exists as three-in-one, an eternal conversation characterized by love, presence, and cooperation. The Trinity is one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. It defies our rationality. How can God be both one and three?¹ Philosophers and theologians have grappled with the nature of the Trinity since the earliest centuries of the church. One prominent, longstanding interpretation of the Trinity, social trinitarianism, emphasizes the three divine persons, in contrast to other interpretations that emphasize their unity. Social trinitarians maintain that God is fundamentally a social being and that humankind created in God's image is also fundamentally social. This social account of the Trinity offers us a depiction of God-in-conversation—that is, God invites us into a life of conversation not only with God but also with our fellow human beings.

As we prepare to reflect on the discipline of conversation, I want to highlight three facets of the relationship among the persons of the Trinity. Following the theology of social trinitarianism, I believe that careful reflection on the nature and the relationships of the Trinity will illuminate the ways we seek to live faithfully in community with other human beings. Although there are many facets of the Trinity that could be explored, I will focus on three:

mutual presence, an economy of reciprocity, and the way in which the Trinity is bound together in diversity.

Mutual Presence

Theologians who take a social view of the Trinity often describe the unity of the three divine persons in terms of their “indwelling” of one another. To say that the persons of the Trinity indwell one another is also to say that they are mutually present to one another. In mutual presence, the persons of the Trinity are fully attentive to one another, speaking and responding out of this complete attentiveness. In addressing the Jews who were upset that Jesus healed on the Sabbath, Jesus responded that

the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing: for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. . . . Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. . . . I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. (John 5:19–21, 30)

This link between the words, the being, and the actions of the Trinity is also reiterated in John 14. Philip asks to see the Father, and Jesus insists that Philip has already seen the Father in Jesus himself: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves” (John 14:9–11). Later in the same admonition to Philip, Jesus emphasizes that he will ask the Father to send the Spirit to live among his disciples, and the Spirit will come and abide with them and live in them (v. 17). The role of the Spirit is to guide

Christ's followers "into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears" (16:13).

Later in this chapter, we will flesh out the ways God desires to be present with humanity. Our bodies, created in the image of the Triune God, reflect the mutual presence of the Trinity. The members of a fully mature and fully healthy human body are mutually present to one another and act according to their presence with one another. The action of my hand, for instance, flows from its response to the messages that are passed to it via the nervous system, in accord with the action of the arm and shoulder to which it is attached. My hand does not do anything apart from the conversation and action of my body as a whole. If my hand were injured, the rest of my body would respond to protect and heal it, allowing it to rest, fighting infection with white blood cells, and so forth.

Our local churches, manifestations of Christ's body in our particular places, are similarly intended to be social bodies in which one crucial marker of health and maturity is members who are mutually present to one another. The L'Arche communities—founded in 1964 by Jean Vanier as places where "people with and without intellectual disabilities live and work together as peers"²—are a good example of faith communities in which all members are learning to be mutually present to one another. Often the core members of L'Arche communities (those who have a disability) are not able to communicate with words but instead speak through motions or emotions. Noncore members have to be present and attentive over time in order to learn to communicate with core members. Communication cannot be taken for granted; it is hard work that is cultivated day-by-day as all members of a L'Arche community live together and care for one another. Journalist Kristin Lin spent some time with L'Arche communities and articulates this work well:

I've come of age in the world of words; I believe in their power to connect, even redeem, us. I take faith—comfort—in their ability

to frame, account, order, justify. But I think I've forgotten (or never knew) the value of *not* knowing what to say, or even what to think, or do—the value of simply *being*—and being accepted for just that. . . . Presence is difficult, and L'Arche members seemed acutely aware of the uncertainty and awkwardness and hurt that comes with it. The gifts of presence are not always found in the comforts of getting along with each other, but rather in sitting with messiness and complexity.³

Both core and noncore L'Arche members regularly find that they are being transformed by their mutual presence with one another. Vanier tells the story of a woman who came to a L'Arche community in her early forties. This woman was epileptic and paralyzed on one side of her body. When she arrived, she was prone to frequent violent outbursts, but as she continued for months and years as part of L'Arche, being cared for and accepted for who she was, she slowly began to be transformed and the violence began to ebb.⁴ Similarly, noncore members of L'Arche have reported being transformed by their presence with core members, learning patience, tenderness, and unconditional love.

An Economy of Reciprocity

Any community will necessarily have an economy, a flow of resources that is an expression of care for its members. Although we would err to say that any person of the Trinity has need of anything, resources are freely shared in the caring triune community that is God. Jesus acknowledges several times in the Gospel accounts that everything he has comes from the Father (e.g., Matt. 11:27). As the Spirit descended on the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, one of the characteristics of the life that they found in the Spirit is captured in the Greek word *koinōnia* (Acts 2:42), and similarly in this life that flows from the Spirit: “There was not a needy person among them” (4:34).

Our human bodies function by an economy of reciprocity through, for instance, the processes of metabolism and respiration. In the alveoli and the capillaries, oxygen is taken from the air and infused into the blood; at the same time, carbon dioxide goes in the opposite direction, from the blood to the air. In metabolism, food is changed into energy that the body needs for action. In the economy of our bodies, these needed resources flow freely to the members who need them. Our bodies, of course, are not a self-contained system. Through respiration and metabolism we take in substances that originated in other creatures. Plants and animals become life and energy for us in our food. Similarly, oxygen created through the photosynthesis of plants and trees flows through our lungs and circulates through our bodies, giving us life. In these ways, our bodies reflect the free-flowing economy of the Trinity.

Hospitality, for instance, is a practice through which our churches create spaces in which this economy of reciprocity can flourish. In her landmark book on Christian hospitality, *Making Room*, Christine Pohl describes Christian communities that have sought to live in solidarity with the poor, noting that “hospitality offers a model for developing more reciprocal relationships.”⁵ One of the most striking stories of Christian hospitality in the last century is the Reformed Church in Le Chambon, France, led by André and Magda Trocmé, who guided their community to shelter thousands of Jews escaping Nazi Germany. The people of Le Chambon not only opened their homes, schools, and churches to the Jews and helped them create illicit paperwork that could save their lives but were also present and in conversation with their guests. They did not look down on the Jews in their tragic circumstances but saw them as equals and worked to find opportunities for their gifts to be employed in the life and work of the town.

Richard Unsworth, biographer of the Trocmés, describes two particular Jews who were given the opportunity to work in Le Chambon: Madame Berthe, who served as a helper for Magda, and Monsieur Colin, a cabinetmaker who was originally from

Berlin and built furniture for households in Le Chambon.⁶ These stories gesture toward the economy of reciprocity that began to take shape in this French town as Christian hospitality was extended toward the Jews. The Jewish refugees were not merely the recipients of resources; they also were given the opportunity to work and contribute to the life and economy of Le Chambon. The Christian hospitality embodied in Le Chambon reminds us of the life of the Trinity: God is a community of persons, a community that is open to humankind in all our woundedness and immaturity, making a space for us to participate in and contribute to the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Bound Together in Diversity

A crucial tenet in understanding the Trinity, according to orthodox Christian theology, is that “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not identical.”⁷ The Trinity thus consists of three persons bound into one, through their indwelling of one another. We see in the scriptural story that the three persons of the Trinity have distinct roles and functions: the Son took on flesh and lived as a human being in first-century Palestine; the Holy Spirit came among the gathering of Jesus’s followers at Pentecost and continues to abide with and guide God’s people today; the Father, enthroned in the heavens, is the divine mystery, the source of all creation.

Yet despite their diversity, the three persons of the Trinity are one, indwelling one another, each bearing witness to the others in their particular work. Indwelling allows the three persons to be bound without coercion; each member remains free. Our human bodies reflect the nature of the Trinity, as a community of diverse members bound together. Each body part has its own function and yet relies on the body as a whole. One part of the body is free to perform its function or not, but because it is indwelled by other parts of the body, the one thing it cannot do is leave the body of its own volition. One or both of my eyes might go blind, for

instance, but they cannot choose to leave my body. The body as a whole may choose to act together to pluck out an eye (or two), but this is a coordinated action of the mind, the hand, the arm, and so forth, and the body will suffer as a result of this choice. Unlike our bodies, God is defined by love and wholeness and would not choose to remove a member of the Trinity.

The history of the Christian tradition, beginning with the New Testament stories of Jews and gentiles being committed to each other in the earliest church communities, is full of stories of diverse people bound together in congregations—women and men, rich and poor, highly educated and uneducated, native peoples and foreigners—worshiping and working together in the same church community. Likewise today, amid the deeply broken racial history of the United States, some of the most striking stories of diverse people committed to one another can be seen in interracial churches. Chris Rice tells the story of one such church—the Antioch community in Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1980s—in his powerful book *Grace Matters*. Rice is frank about the many challenges of life together in this community, but he and other members were being transformed by their daily presence with one another in a neighborhood riddled with crime and poverty. He describes the experience and in particular his friendship with Spencer Perkins, one of the black leaders of the community: “It was not a gift I would have chosen, but maybe it was the gift that I needed.”⁸ Stories like this remind us that we have been created in the image of the Triune God, not merely to be in community but to be in community with those who differ from us.

God Desires to Be Present with Humanity

Just as the persons of the Trinity are mutually present to one another in conversation, so too, as the shape of Scripture’s story

from beginning to end reveals, does God desire to be present with humanity. God is present with Adam in the garden of Eden and is in conversation with him there. Given the social nature of the Trinity as described above, God deems that it is not good for Adam to be alone (Gen. 2:18), and so God creates the animals of the field and the birds of the air and invites Adam to name each one. God not only talks with Adam; God is also attentive to Adam's presence, recognizing his loneliness and the fact that even after the animals are created, Adam still lacks a helper and partner (v. 20). Thus Eve is created. Adam and Eve, male and female, are two distinct persons, yet both are created in the image of God.

In the garden of Eden, God and humans are present to one another and in conversation with one another, but this presence is shattered by human disobedience. One of the first consequences of the fall is that Adam and Eve “hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God” (Gen. 3:8). As a result of their infidelity to the life God had prepared for them in the garden, the humans are banished from the garden. Although God always desires and strives to be present with humankind, the human condition is marked thereafter by our efforts to hide ourselves from the presence of God. Our failure to abide in God's presence quickly devolves into violence, first in the story of Cain killing Abel, his brother, and then in the age of Noah, when “the earth was corrupt in God's sight, . . . filled with violence” (6:11). After the flood and the preservation of Noah and his family, God vows that humanity will never be wiped out by a flood again, and God works to establish a new way of being present to humankind—by dwelling among a particular people.

God makes a covenant with Abraham and abides with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, speaking with them and guiding them. Human infidelity is marked throughout Israel's beginnings by people who hide from God's presence and who do what they prefer instead of what God asks of them. Indeed,

throughout the entire story of the Old Testament, Israel is ambivalent toward God's presence with them. Sometimes they honor God's presence and follow God's guidance. Often though, they reject God's presence and act as if they can guide and govern themselves. One of the most powerful stories of this sort is that of Israel rejecting God's presence and demanding a king, like those the pagan nations around them had (1 Sam. 8). God tells Samuel all the horrible things that will happen if Israel chooses to follow a human king, but the Israelite people refuse to hear the wisdom of Samuel and make up their minds to reject God's presence and governance in favor of a human king.

Although Israel rejected God's kingship, God continued to be present with them in the era of the kings in the temple that King Solomon built. God's presence did not stay in the temple, however. Ezekiel tells of how the temple in his day was full of abominations—the Israelites worshiped foreign gods in the temple and filled the land with violence (Ezek. 8:17). God rebukes Israel, and the presence of God is withdrawn from the temple. After God's presence is gone, Israel is driven into exile and the temple is destroyed by the army of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. God does not intend, however, to abandon Israel forever. Ezekiel records God's promise to make peace with Israel and to restore the presence of God with them forever (37:26–27). This promise would be fulfilled as God would eventually become present with Israel in a new way, by taking on flesh and dwelling among them.

Jesus, God incarnate, fulfilled God's promise to be Immanuel, God-with-us. God took on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and dwelled with first-century Jews in Palestine, experiencing all the joys—for instance, the wedding feast at Cana, where he turned water into wine—and all the sorrows of the human experience, including the death of his friend Lazarus. Jesus gathered a community of disciples around himself, and day-by-day he ate and drank and traveled with these friends. Being God, Jesus could have seen them

as servants, but he instead chose to call them friends (John 15:15). God's presence in Jesus is ultimately rejected by the masses, and Jesus is sentenced to die on a cross. Although he died and was buried, Jesus was resurrected on the third day, underscoring that God's presence with humanity cannot be killed off but will indeed abide with us until the end of time.

For a time after his resurrection, Jesus walks and eats with his disciples, and eventually he ascends into the heavens. Jesus emphasizes that the ascension is not a forsaking of his followers and that the Holy Spirit will come on them after he ascends. God will continue to guide the community of God's people through the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, not long after the ascension, the Holy Spirit becomes present to Jesus's followers. The book of Acts is an account of God's people learning to be attentive to the Spirit's presence with them and of the ways that God guides them through controversies, through the inclusion of gentiles into God's people, and through the spread of the gospel to a large swath of the Mediterranean region.

A large chunk of the New Testament story consists of epistles—letters written by the apostles to churches throughout the Roman Empire—aimed at helping them discern and live faithfully with God's presence among them in the Holy Spirit. Our churches today are located within this story of God being present to and guiding local communities of God's people. Where is this story headed in which we are enmeshed? The end of the story, as told in the book of Revelation, is depicted as the whole earth living and acting faithfully with God's presence, a return to the conversational life for which we were created. The new creation, established in Jesus, has been completed; the old world of infidelity and rebellion is wiped away. Death is no more and life flows from God's very presence like a river, sustaining the whole of creation (Rev. 21:1–4). This eternal city that draws its light and life from God's presence is the flourishing, conversational life for which we were created!

The Church as Continuing Incarnation

Amid the deep fragmentation of the late modern world, we seem to be a long way from the fulfillment of this new creation built on God's presence with humankind. We find ourselves still in the thick of the scriptural story. Like the early Christians in the book of Acts, guided by the Spirit, we struggle with every fiber of our being to stay focused on the end of the story and to pay attention to how the Holy Spirit is already present with us and guiding us through the many particular challenges that we face in the twenty-first century.

I have long been fascinated by the apostle Paul's references to the temple of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians (e.g., 6:19). The grammar of these references is often obscured by the quirks of the English language and the prevailing individualism of our modern age: "Your [plural] body [singular] is the temple of the Holy Spirit." In contrast to the convictions of popular theology, we are *not* wholly autonomous individuals who each bear the Holy Spirit within us. Rather, Paul seems to be saying that the Holy Spirit is present in the local gathering of God's people. First Corinthians was written to a particular church community in first-century Corinth, and therefore Paul seems to be referring to the body not as a universal and abstract entity but as a particular congregation of God's people situated in a particular time and place. Throughout Scripture, we learn that God's presence dwells primarily with the people of God. Apart from Jesus, the presence of God does not dwell *in* an individual in Scripture but rather is located in and with God's people.

Through this reading of Paul's epistle, we see that God's presence with our church communities in the Holy Spirit is not just for our guidance but also serves to bear witness to God's presence to our neighbors who regularly see and interact with us. In this way, we embody Christ—albeit immaturely and imperfectly—in ways that help our neighbors see and interact with God. Christ's

body takes shape in our local community as we talk together and discern the particular ways the Spirit is present among us and ways God's presence with us guides us as we move forward.

Here at our church in Indianapolis, the covenant that gives shape to our life together describes our congregation as both “a manifestation of Christ in this location” and “a tangible presence of Christ in this place.”⁹ In each of these expressions, we use the indefinite article (“a”) instead of the definite article (“the”) because there are other churches in our neighborhood that are also manifestations of Christ's body in this place. This grammar reminds us that no church—neither ours nor any other—is fully equivalent to Christ's presence. “The church can never control, but only submit to Christ's presence,” writes David Fitch. “It is always a witness to Christ's presence, embodying it but never equivalent to it.”¹⁰

By learning to talk together, to be present to one another, and to follow the guidance of Christ's presence with us in the Holy Spirit, we are maturing into the “full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). As our churches mature, learning to talk and be present with one another, we discover the particular functions that each member has been prepared by the Holy Spirit to enact in the life of our church body. This life for which we have been prepared, and into which we have been called as God's people, is precisely the life of the Trinity, characterized by mutual presence, an economy of reciprocity, and a community of diverse persons bound together as one.

The Dialogue of Salvation

Conversation, as I describe it in this book, is a discipline through which we learn and practice the abundant life of God for which we were created. Earlier in this chapter, I described the relationships of the persons of the Trinity in terms of their mutual presence,

their reciprocity, and their bond in diversity. As we are learning to talk together, we are learning to be present to one another, to give and receive from one another in the reciprocity of God's abundant economy, and to be committed to one another despite our diversity. Conversation is difficult for us as human beings. We have been shaped by histories of brokenness: of oppression due to poverty, race, gender, or ethnicity; of the national violence of war or the domestic violence of abuse; of greed that drives both oppression and violence. And these are only a handful of the causes at the heart of our profound brokenness. These histories compel us to withhold our presence from others out of fear—or, on the opposite extreme, to withhold our presence by manipulating others through authoritarian control. These histories incline us to resist sharing ourselves and our resources in reciprocity. They also make it difficult for us to stay committed to others, particularly those who differ from us.

Within this history of brokenness that goes back to the garden of Eden, we human beings are not well prepared to enter into and sustain a conversational life. Indeed, we will inevitably avoid and wound one another in our efforts to talk together. Although we should not intentionally try to inflict these wounds, we should recognize the opportunity that we are afforded in them to practice forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.

The salvation into which we are invited in Jesus, as Dallas Willard has reminded us,¹¹ is a life. Specifically, it is a life in conversation with God, with the sisters and brothers of our local church communities, and with our neighbors. The love and grace to which we are called in Jesus make our local churches an ideal place to practice our conversational skills and to mature in them, but our conversations should also eventually spill over into our neighborhoods. Although the history of mission and evangelism in the Christian tradition has often been marked by manipulation and violence, our posture with our neighbors—and especially those who do not share our Christian faith—should be one of conversation.

“God, in an age-long dialogue, has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind,” writes the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. “In faithfulness to the divine initiative, the Church too must enter into a dialogue of salvation with all men and women.”¹² The abundant life into which we have been called in Jesus (John 10:10), and into which we invite our neighbors, is one of conversation and presence, of knowing and being known. And yet, as I detailed in this book’s introduction, conversation is extremely difficult for Westerners in the twenty-first century.

We Need Intentionality

God created humans to be conversational beings, but we have been formed by the powers of the modern age to resist conversation. In this context, we need spaces within the common life of our church communities where we endeavor to relearn the arts of conversation by undertaking the discipline of intentionally talking together. Like ancient Israel when they were led to construct the tabernacle, thus creating a space for God’s presence to be known in their midst, our churches today can create conversational spaces in which God’s presence can be known among us. I have found it helpful to think of conversation as a corporate spiritual discipline, like prayer or worship. Spiritual disciplines “all deeply and essentially involve bodily conditions and activities,” writes Dallas Willard. “Thus they show us effectively how we can ‘offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable unto God’ and how our ‘spiritual worship’ (Rom. 12:1) really is inseparable from the offering up of our bodies in specific physical ways.”¹³

Although someone may be innately gifted, say, as a pianist or a basketball player, she will not fulfill this end without hundreds or even thousands of hours of practice. Conversation is an essential discipline that helps us cultivate the sort of faithful presence for which we were created. Faithful presence, writes David Fitch, “is

at the heart of what it means to be the people of God. This is the thing we do that we call church. This is how God changes the world.”¹⁴ Disciplines, Fitch argues, are essential to the work of embodying faithful presence in our communities: “[Disciplines] open up space for God to rearrange the world, starting in our social relationships. These disciplines invite us into what God is actually doing in the whole world.”¹⁵

Given our formation in a fragmented world that has little capacity for conversation, we desperately need to practice the discipline of conversation in our local church communities in order to mature in the witness we bear to the conversational nature of the Triune God and the dialogue of salvation into which God has invited humanity. The remainder of this book will explore how our churches can initiate disciplines of conversation, how we can cultivate a Christian spirituality that will nourish the discipline of conversation, and how we can sustain practices of conversation in the face of powers that vehemently resist it.