

The Last Supper: A Study in Group Dynamics

by Una Maguire

In 1942 Fritz Redl put forward a paper in which he considered group formation around a central person.¹ He formulated ten categories and one of these seems of especial interest when we consider the formation around Christ at the time of the Last Supper.

One might have thought that the apostolic group would have fallen into Redl's fourth category, that of a group which has 'The central person as a love object'. Tentatively it is here suggested that this was not the case and that the apostolic group might more fittingly be considered as falling into Redl's fifth category, that of a group that has 'The central person as the object of aggressive drives'.

It must be stated at the outset that the suggestions put forward by Redl concerned a group in which there was recognition of the aggression that was prevalent. For the purpose of this article it is assumed that the apostolic group not only gave no overt sign of their aggression but it is likely that it was so repressed that they did not even know it was there.

It is not the writer's intention in this paper to enter into a discussion as to whether Christ was God, nor to dispute whether as God he could have changed the situation. This paper is really an interpretation of an interpretation. The Gospels were written some years after the event, and illustrate partly what happened and partly what the writers saw happen. Perception, as we shall see, is affected by so many needs that the accounts must in some degree differ from the event itself.

For the purpose of this discussion, the situation is being regarded as a human group formation and the group dynamics which seem to have taken place will be surveyed. Certainly, such a key biblical event is open to all kinds of interpretation and biblical scholars and psycho-analysts and sociologists could all usefully and creatively put forward theories which would make for useful meditation.

Whatever insights occur in this paper have arisen out of the writer's experience as a member of, and a consultant to, groups which met for the purpose of discovering the dynamics which operate when a number of people come together over a period of time, for the purpose of examining their own reactions in a group situation.

In such a situation the power of a group and the forcefulness of the group feeling becomes abundantly clear. One is continually faced

¹'Group Emotions and Leadership', by Fritz Redl. *Psychiatry*. Vol. V, No. 4, 1942, pp. 575-585.

with the problem of denial and irresponsibility which surrounds the actions of the members, who seem to lose their individuality and become carried along by the group feeling.

For this reason it seems possible that the act of betrayal carried out by Judas was not entirely his own, but partly at least a reaction to the pressure of the group in which he found himself that night. It is surely in the light of the total dynamics of the group that his act should be seen and not in isolation as has formerly been the case.

Judas was, it seems, manipulated by the group to carry out their wishes—he was a scapegoat in the real meaning of the word. He was the carrier of their sin and ours into the wilderness of that dark night.

So successful were the apostles in their scapegoating technique and so fearful of their own guilt, that they set up a conspiracy of blame which has been retained ever since by Christianity.

In our own time there have been many modern examples of scapegoating. The German people deny any part in the massacre of the Jews. It was the work of the Nazi party and Hitler in particular. The bombing of Vietnam is America's fault, and the setting up of President Johnson as the real perpetrator of the crime gives us a contemporary example of scapegoating.

Where scapegoating occurs we can be sure that those who set up the scapegoat are to some extent to blame. Unless one stands firmly against a crime one colludes to some degree in it. The setting up of a scapegoat is a way of handling guilt and aggression. The need to really care about one's fellow human beings is solved. We can deny responsibility for what is going on and the scapegoat performs on our behalf the actions which, for a variety of reasons, we fear to carry out ourselves. What is frequently collusion in a crime becomes a source of virtue. One looks outside oneself for someone to blame and in tones of righteous horror self-indulgently condemns the scapegoat. St Serafim of Sarov tells us: 'We condemn others only because we shun knowing ourselves.'

In any group situation, the members bring a variety of feelings and expectations which are affected by major events in the society in which they live. The apostles were living at a time when there was strong aggressive feeling directed against Rome. The Jewish people, from whom the apostles came, were in bondage and awaiting deliverance. They had waited all during the ministry of Christ for him to fight their battle. They were disappointed; loyal, but disappointed.

During the years they had followed him there had been no battle. To some extent the gentleness which at times Christ showed must have been a source of frustration, and made it all the more possible for their aggression against Rome to be displaced on to him.

Another possible source of ambivalent feeling to Jesus which is rarely mentioned in Christian literature is the devotion of the

women. They praised him, called blessings on his mother, fell at his feet, clutched the hem of his garment, and finally poured spikenard over his feet. In a totally male group it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that such adulation caused some jealousy, since as far as we know the apostles appear to have been more or less excluded from it.

Together then with strong feelings of loyalty and love were also feelings of anger and jealousy and aggression. A common enough human mixture. Yet for some reason, perhaps because of the personality of Christ and the teaching to which they had been subject, the apostles were never able to admit that this mixture of feeling was there.

This may have been the source of the denial that seemed to have eaten its way into the heart of the group. Denial has more meaning than just to 'say not'. It implies a refusal to perceive, or to recognize. Perception, as it is commonly known, is influenced by our values and our goals, and above all, it is narrowed by threat.

On this particular night, it is clear that the apostles were simply not seeing what was before their eyes. To have really seen Jesus, that is, the sadness in his face, his gestures and his words, must have been too threatening for the twelve to accept. How else can we explain their strange behaviour?

This denial of the true happenings occurs even in the gospels, which were written later. St Luke and St John try to explain away the betrayal by maintaining that 'Satan entered into Judas'. Even if we accept that this is not an unusual form of expression amongst orientals,¹ it is nevertheless a denial of individual or group responsibility for the actions which have taken place.

Judas, it must be remembered, was the stranger in the almost parochial gathering made by the apostles. The other eleven were from Galilee and he from Judea. He was concerned chiefly with finance and with temporal power, and the others ostensibly with what we might call the therapeutic aspects of the ministry. Judas was the isolate in the group, basically different, and forced to compensate for his loneliness by petty theft. What was not given to him in love from the group he stretched out and took in material form.

It was with these feelings of anger and loneliness and disappointment, all of them unexpressed, that Judas took his place in the Upper Room.

The amount of inversion or reversal that occurred on this night was remarkable. The apostles who wanted to take the world by storm were up in a small room away from everyone. It was the time for looking backwards and forwards and the apostles were aware of the quiet ministry marked by detachment from the world. The room was full of symbols which the group must have assimilated to some extent, if only unconsciously. The symbols of the past were clearly

¹*Jesus in His Time*, by Daniel Rops.

there: unleavened bread—the symbol of past misery; the bitter herbs—the symbol of slavery; the fruit puree, which has the colour and consistency of clay—the symbol of slave labour; the Paschal lamb, the victim in whom the flesh and blood had to be separated for the sacrifice to have taken place. These were the symbols of the past slavery and the future was symbolized by Jesus in the posture of a slave washing the apostles' feet. The leader who had really reversed his role, a leader who was no longer a leader. What makes a leader is his ability to fulfil the needs of the group, at the time. One thing was clear by this night and during this supper that Christ, whatever he was, was not the man who would oust the Romans and reinstate the Jews and make the apostles great men.

In any group situation, whether it be industry, or politics, or even the Church, if the leader abdicates from his role, the group will quickly usurp his power and set up another in his place. Some member of the group will make a bid for the leadership. Unconsciously, perhaps, but certainly, wrangling about leadership had arisen and they were wondering which of them should be accounted the greatest.

It is difficult now to know exactly how the arrangements for the seating at this supper were made. It seems likely that John was on the right side of Christ and if he turned on his left elbow he rested his head on the breast of Christ. Peter was on the left and Judas on the outskirts of the group so that his work as a steward might not be impeded. He was so placed that his coming and going would not inconvenience the rest of the apostles. Psychologically, it is difficult to know when a group excludes a member or whether the person excludes himself. Probably it is both things. One way of testing out whether one is wanted or not is to exclude oneself so that one may be asked in.

Whatever the reason, Judas was in a less-protected spot than John or Peter and he needed protection the most. It was possibly the seat of the stranger rather than simply the seat of the steward. Judas was isolated by his occupation and personality, and was not protected by the old saying, 'In Galilee money counts for less than honour.'

The depression felt by Christ began to pervade the place and it joined with the anger and guilt of the men before him. When he spoke about the betrayal, St John asked: 'Who is it, Lord?' The reply was quite clear: 'He it is to whom I shall give the sop when I have dipped it. And having done this he gave it to Judas' (John 23, 23-26).

St Matthew reports this slightly differently and it may be that as the thought was uppermost in the mind of Christ he spoke of it more than once. 'He that dippeth his hand in the dish with me, the same shall betray me' (Mat. 26, 23).

It seems clear that Christ told the apostles quite explicitly that the betrayal was to take place and they considered it briefly. Later they were to forget it but they did for the moment consider the reality of what he was saying. 'Is it I, Lord?' Unless they had at least some guilt feeling why would they have asked the question? They were

fearful for it was as much a possibility for them as it was for Judas. This was their vulnerable spot which they refused to consider further.

When the symbolic gesture was made between Christ and Judas they neither heard nor saw. This was the first connivance of the night. In closing their eyes and their hearts they carried out the first denial. Even when St John is writing later the denial is still being carried on. 'After the sop, Satan entered into Judas. Then Jesus said, What thou doest do quickly. No man at the table knew for what intent he spoke to him. For some of them thought because Judas had the bag that Jesus said to him, Buy those things we need against the feast, or that he should give something to the poor. He then having received the sop immediately went out.'

The rationalization to defeat all others! They had been asking questions all night but they never questioned his departure. The group was small, they were in a circle, Christ was sorrowful unto death on a night of the greatest celebration, one of the members departs. They never followed him or wondered why he didn't return. They never spoke about it at all. Almost a kind of superstitious ritual seems to have taken place. This is a common phenomenon which can be seen almost in any group of people. There is a tendency to believe that if one doesn't talk about something it may prevent its happening.

Maybe they didn't see him go out. Yet they never missed him. Nor did they try to find him to have him in their group's centre on such a night. One gesture from, one movement on the part of any of them, might have prevented Judas from his feeling of exclusion and isolation. No such gesture is recorded. Maybe they didn't miss him, but this in itself shows how little he had been taken into the heart of the group. At least how little he had been taken into the heart of the group that the apostles wanted to recognize. In some ways, Judas was the heart of the group. Sometimes psycho-analysts refer to the good and bad breast in a group. The good and the evil. The apostles had successfully centred all the good in Christ and all the evil on to Judas, and they left him with the burden when they should have gone to help him.

It would be erroneous to suggest that the apostles who remained consciously or actively wanted the death of Christ. Nevertheless, they did nothing to prevent it. They sat there protesting firstly that they would die for Christ and then demanding in tones of incredulity what was the reason they might not go with him.

When Christ foretold Peter's denial, he hotly denied it. What had the previous actions of Peter shown Christ about Peter? One doesn't suddenly overnight completely deny knowledge of a friend. The seeds of betrayal were in Peter also.

Judas, when he had the coins in his hands, as he felt the silver against his finger, may have seen them as the symbol of a new slavery

for him. He would carry for ever the transaction in his mind. Instead of a leader he had become a slave. As he swung on the cord that held him between heaven and earth, he worked out to some extent the aggression that had been torturing him. Directed against himself in expiation or as the final reversal in a night of reversals.

Christ was God and destined from all eternity to die for our sins. Yet to some extent there is no doubt that Christ exhibited a personality pattern which is sometimes seen in group situations. Frequently, there is one person set up by the group to suffer for the rest. They are both set up and set themselves up and suffer on behalf of the others. It may be that they find it easier to suffer than to allow others to suffer. Whether easier or harder, this is how it was for Christ.

He seemed in some ways quite powerless and his washing of the feet symbolized his abdication and his position in the group. He had become the servant who would carry out their deepest wish and desire.

In the very early morning when some power still lay with the apostles, they went with Christ to the garden and slept. The gospel tells us that 'they were overwrought with sorrow'. Sleep is a withdrawal mechanism, and is sometimes hostile. To some extent it might be seen as the physical demonstration of the symbolic closing of eyes that had been there all the night. Left on guard to watch over Christ at a time when one would have expected every nerve in the body of a real man to be alight, the apostles slept.

After this denial of the terrible event that was at hand, there is achieved at last through Peter the true denial in words. It was no more terrible or dramatic than the denial that had been omnipresent that night.

The group had ignored and denied Christ's sorrow on a night when it was strange for him to be sorrowful. They had denied Judas protection, they had denied his absence. They had ignored and denied through sleep the warnings given to them by Christ. When the cock crowed, the words that had been nearly spoken during the night were spoken by Peter. Indeed, so often the spokesman for the group! For all the aggression that had been there, despite the sword demonstration in the garden when the words of denial were finally spoken, the fight changed into flight and Christ was alone in the dark.

Denial, collusion, aggression, jealousy, all of these seem to have been part of the personality structure of the group. They denied knowing Christ and maybe it was true. Certainly they seem not even to have known themselves.