

## Big and Small Obstacles to Living in Community

Contributed by Eberhard Arnold  
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Eberhard Arnold: Big and Small Obstacles to Living in Community. (1933.) Source: Plough Publishing House. If everybody wants to be in the right, or even if only one person wants to be in the right, it is impossible to live in community. That is egotism or self-love. Touchiness, like opinionatedness, is another form of self-love. We must seek what brings us together, what is the same for us all. We must think of others with hearts filled with love. If only we could come to the point where we recognize ourselves as being all in the same situation, all in the same state! The actual equality of all men, the similarity of their situations, is quite amazing. When that is clear to us, much of our opinionatedness, our wanting to be in the right, and our touchiness falls away. But that is not yet all. That does not remove the obstacles. Worst of all is what afflicts people who think about themselves the whole day long: they suffer from a widespread and deadly disease. It destroys body, soul, and spirit. People who live with themselves in the center, who relate everything to themselves and see everything from their own point of view, are seriously ill. They are mentally disturbed. They are far from becoming true men and true brothers and sisters. They are lost even in the midst of a community household.

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People who live with themselves in the center, who relate everything to themselves and see everything from their own point of view, are seriously ill. They are mentally disturbed. They are far from becoming true men and true brothers and sisters. They are lost even in the midst of a community household. These are all obstacles: touchiness, opinionatedness, self-love, self-centeredness. To have a higher opinion of oneself than of others is a deadly poison. Whoever still does this is completely incapable of community. He will not be able to experience the unity of the great Cause. This is what is crucial. Of course it is a help to think of others and of their situation and to look for the best in them. That will help us not to think of ourselves as better than others, but it is not the main thing. We are inclined to see the shortcomings of others far out of proportion and forget that we ourselves are weak human beings. We should not always try to improve on what another does wrong. We must become reconciled to men's imperfection. This self-centeredness is a lying spirit. It is out and out false. Whoever has such a high opinion of himself that he cannot admit a mistake is living in the deepest untruthfulness and insincerity. Egotism must be condemned, not because it does not fit into community or because it is to be rejected as morally wrong, but because it is lying and death. It is poisoned through and through and brings destruction. It is the mortal disease. The quarrelsome spirit that destroys community comes from this mortal disease of the soul. The self-centered person is mortally sick. He must be redeemed. Those who turn around themselves do not know that Christianity has an objective content, that it is actually a cause for which we can completely forget ourselves with our own little egos. Self-importance is nothing but autosuggestion. It leads to a hypocritical attitude. We must be freed from all posing, from all affected holiness, otherwise we are utterly lost. The people who are most endangered are the artificial saints who take such pains, yet just these efforts are the root of their hypocrisy. They see God from their own point of view and make God relate to themselves. That is their undoing because it is utterly untrue. For I am not the truth, and because I am not the truth I cannot and may not place my own person--not even as a Christian--in the center of my thoughts. I would simply make myself an idol. The Cause must be in the center. We must come to true faith in God and the Church. Redemption from the life of self, from wanting to be in the right, from imposing our own ways, from our unfitness for community, from this deadly disease that will be our ruin--redemption can come only through a cause that exists completely outside of our own selves. God's cause is a cause for which we are not needed. We are not indispensable. It is not just that I am unimportant; I am an obstacle. I am an adversary of the Cause. Redemption cannot begin until we recognize this and each of us sees himself thus in the light of the Cause, until each one realizes that he himself is an adversary, especially in his own piety. Until that happens we are merely deluding ourselves with our own cramped efforts. We human beings can recognize light only in contrast to shadow and darkness. We can grasp the Cause only through an awareness of its opposite and of its adversaries, for we are not gods but men. Why do torches give us so much joy? Because they are lit in the night and we become an illuminated circle in the dark. It is the dark background that makes the shining circle of our common life visible at all and allows it to speak to our hearts. Whoever is still in love with himself cannot recognize the Cause; nor can he who is still in love with his own religious experience, with his conversion and rebirth. Not until we see the great Cause against the wretchedness of our own little being will we grasp its greatness. In the early Church the Holy Spirit came to men only after they had recognized themselves as the murderers of the longed-for Messiah-King, as the adversaries of the holy Cause for which they had always striven. We are afraid of this awful awakening, especially if we have sought for years or decades to live in a certain holiness and suddenly must recognize ourselves as murderers and adversaries. That is hard but necessary. Paul was blinded when the Spirit of the Cause came upon him, and it was no subjective exaggeration on his part but his deepest conviction when he said, "I am the worst of all men," because he alone had been responsible for the persecution of the Church of Jesus Christ, he personally had the leading responsibility for the murder of the Christian martyrs. That was Paul's experience, this tremendous contrast. He was a

persecutor of the Church of the Messiah, a persecutor of the Kingdom of God. Not until he recognized this could he become an apostle of God's cause. That same contrast helped the early Christian Church to realize that God's cause is very different from what they had imagined; they would have never grasped God's cause in any other way. Karl Barth says rightly, "The Kingdom of God must strike us as being totally other, or it remains closed to us." This Cause, which is totally other from what we ourselves are, this Cause alone can free us from our self-centeredness, from our touchiness. It can free us from our opinionatedness and our quarrelsomeness, from all that we complain makes us unfit to live in community. Unless we recognize ourselves as adversaries--even in our own piety--we will never grasp the greatness of this Cause. Because of this we experienced recently how people whose vow was given on the basis of their own radicalism, their own piety, or their extreme "thoroughness," were incapable of standing firm. Their vow was bound to collapse in disgrace. But a vow that springs from the Cause and is for the Cause, a promise that leads us away from self, simply cannot be broken. It absolutely must be kept, because the Cause is greater. A person gripped by the Cause would never say, "If that is such a great thing, I am going away." Anyone who can talk like that shows that he has not yet been called by God. No one can think or say that about the holy Cause.