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# Is the Gloriavale Christian Community founded on the early Christian church?

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## **Abstract**

*Much has been written about the Gloriavale Christian Community in New Zealand. This secluded community since its inception in 1969 has grown into a strong self-sustaining farming and business community. Their claim to be a true Christian community is based on their application of the same principles as the early Christian church. This claim of being Christian has been met with mixed views and as of late, with the surfacing of more allegations of unjust actions within the community, a general belief has been established that the culture of the community is exploitative. This study looked at the functioning of the early Christian church and compared the community of Gloriavale to that. The study showed disparities between the two and found that Gloriavale cannot be equated to the early Christian church mainly because of its belief to live in isolation from society which not only jeopardizes sound oversight from the broader Christian community over their teaching and practices but also creates a breeding ground for a controlling and inhibiting culture. This community is therefore a false representation of the early Christian church.*

## Opsomming

*Baie is reeds geskryf oor die Gloriavale Christelike Gemeenskap in New Zealand die afgelope paar jaar. Die gemeenskap het sedert sy ontstaan in 1969 tot 'n sterk selfonderhoudende besigheidsgemeenskap gegroei. Dit is veral die gemeenskap se aanspraak dat dit gebaseer is op die beginsels en praktyke van die vroeë Christelike kerk in die boek Handelingte wat onder die loep gekom het met die bekendmaking van ongeruimdheid in die gemeenskap. Dit het gelei tot die beskouing dat die gemeenskap daarop gerig is om deur 'n Christelike skyn hulle volgelinge uit te buit en te misbruik. In hierdie studie is die Gloriavale gemeenskap se aanspraak dat dit op die vroeë Christelike kerk gebaseer is ondersoek deur hulle gebruike en optrede met die van die vroeë Christelike kerk te vergelyk. Die ondersoek het gelei tot die gevolgtrekking dat die gemeenskap se aanspraak nie gegrond is nie, omdat hulle in isolasie leef van die wyer gemeenskap, asook die Christelike gemeenskap wat geestelike oorsig oor hulle praktyke en lering beperk. Dit het daartoe gelei dat die gemeenskap 'n teelaarde geskep het vir 'n onetiese en inhiberende kultuur. Die gemeenskap se eis dat hulle gegrond is op die vroeë Christelike kerk is dus nie 'n juiste voorstelling nie.*

## 1. Introduction

Different Christian communities like the Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites, to name a few, seem to believe that the most appropriate means to live a godly life is in a secluded community separate from general society. The measure of seclusion or privacy differs from one group to the next mainly due to what worldly devices or means are permitted to be used within the community. Some even disassociate from mainstream Christian denominations or churches that have, according to their view, deviated from true biblical principles. The early Christian church in the first century A.D. is generally presented as justification for this lifestyle. The Gloriavale Christian Community in New Zealand is such a community that believes their members must live as a separate community away from society to display how true Christians should live and function. This article endeavours to investigate the Gloriavale Christian Community's claim that they function according to the early Christian church model. Does the claim of this group that their lifestyle

is based on the early Christian church indeed portray some or all of the elements of the early Christian church?

## **2. Formation of secluded religious groups**

It is generally accepted that groups that break away from a Christian church or a denomination based on dissatisfaction because certain doctrines were neglected or ignored are referred to as a “sect” (Deist, 1984:153). In other cases, it may also be the result of their refusal to conform to a particular culture forced on them that they form a separate community. Or even because their belief and expressed lifestyle bring about persecution and to survive, they flee and establish a community elsewhere, as was the case with the Hutterites. In most cases, the reason for their breaking away is to either restore the neglected doctrines or to be able to continue living them out. The term “cult” on the other hand in a theological context is closely related to the word “sect” in the sense that it also refers to a group or a community away from mainstream Christianity, but in this instance refers to heresy and describes a group whose beliefs or behavior are considered to be founded on a “false belief”. In these cases, the groups move away from established Christian doctrines by forming their own. These groups are further distinguished by a charismatic leader who promotes isolation from society with no affiliation to any mainstream religion. The use of the word “cult” in this context has the function of distinguishing between “true beliefs” and “false beliefs” concerning Christian doctrine (Saliba, 2003). Other terms that are also used to refer to cult-like groups include “new religious movements” or “secluded religious communities”. For this study, the word secluded Christian communities will be used when referring to the Gloriavale Christian Community.

Secluded Christian communities generally base their isolated lifestyle on the early church or the “Jesus movement” in the first century, mostly as interpreted by their leader(s). Such a claim that may seem justifiable at face value mostly lacks a full comprehension of the stages of development of the early church. This can in turn bring about an over-emphasis on corrective and preventative action that can lead to stringent directives of a work-based and controlling culture. The Gloriavale Christian Community claims that Christians are required to live in community, as seen in the first early church.

### 3. The Jesus movement – the early church

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost resulted in a radical lifestyle for the followers of Christ. The new church that was birthed on Pentecost began as a movement within Judaism, known as the Jesus movement. In the early days of the movement, the Gospel was still proclaimed in the synagogues (Kurtis, 2010). Although the Christian church did not sever its connections with the parent faith of Judaism at first but sought to interpret it afresh in the light of the new revelation, its separation from it was evident from the beginning. By the end of the first century, the church had largely separated from the synagogue (Tenney, 1965:184; Kurtis, 2010). Keener (1993:330) explains that the initial functioning of the early church is not according to the Pythagorean model where everybody turned over their possessions to the leaders so they could withdraw from society and live in isolation. Instead, the early Christians of Acts realized that Jesus, both owns them and their possessions. The economic pressure in the infancy stage of the church as a result of the addition of new converts, as well as the unavailability of work because of their convictions, did not deter believers. They assumed responsibility for the existing needs and sold their goods and gave funds to the church to address these needs (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35). Alexander (1963) points out that there is no indication whether the selling of houses and possessions during this stage was a divine institution or if it was a voluntary act. Different viewpoints are held in this regard. Some believe it was a divine but temporary constitution suited for the infant stage of the church or a normal and commanded state which ceased when the church departed from its primitive simplicity and will return when that returns, or a mistaken well-meant attempt to continue the church at large to the mode of life adopted by our Lord and his Apostles. The account in Acts 5 seems to support the view that it was a voluntary act and that not everyone was commanded or expected to participate. It was thus not set out as a condition of the early church. Alexander (1963:190) refers to Acts 5:4 and concludes "... that no compulsory abandonment of property or absolute community of goods existed in the primitive church".

The daily life of the early church included a public life of going up to the temple (Acts 5:12) as well as a private life where their houses in Jerusalem became meeting places for fellow Christians, resulting in the formation of a social bond and place of fellowship [koinonia] (Tenney, 1965; Keener, 1993). The fellowship included the early churches steadfastly continuing in the apostle's doctrine, and breaking of bread, in prayers. Alexander (1963) points out that doctrine in this context refers not to their adherence to a

certain system of belief but their adherence to the actual instruction of the Apostles. It meant that they were instructed before baptism seeing that they were mostly religiously trained Jews. The Lordship of Christ over their lives brought about cohesiveness in the group that was established by continuous instruction in the principles of the new faith (Acts 2:42). These principles most probably implied a body of formulated material about Christ not found directly in the law. The exact contents are not defined but the passage implies that it is related to the life, and teachings of Jesus and his death and resurrection as Lord and Messiah.

The word fellowship is comprehensive and includes communion, communication, and community. These three practices were inseparable in the early church. The organization of the church was that of a family of a community. It was during their social meals that their charities were dispensed, at the same meal the Eucharist was administered. The breaking of bread introduced the Jewish meal. All of this was done in devotion and prayer (Acts 2:42). The charity reached outwards in providing for the needy even if it meant sacrificial giving to them (Inoue, 2017). The Apology of Aristedes (1889) describes this sacrificial offering:

And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days to supply to the needy their lack of food. They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them.

As the church grew, the administration of supplies for the poor necessitated a change in the organizational structure of the church that resulted in the election of deacons to perform this task (Acts 6). The communal aspect is not an ascetic ideal as in some Greek and Jewish sects but is a practice displaying their radically valuing people above possessions. This practice lasted well into the second century and was long ridiculed by pagans who were eventually overwhelmed by it (Keener, 1993).

At the end of the first century, the Jesus movement separated from Judaism and started to function as an independent church founded on the above tenets being developed into practical applications. Their sense of community not only created solidarity but also distinguished them from the Jews as a unique group. Their otherness and concept of the Messiah differed from Judaism, causing tension with the existing order. Their undeniable assertion that Jesus' claims had been vindicated by His resurrection portrayed their opponents as rejectors of the purpose of God by murdering their own Messiah. They were further jealous of the following that the apostolic preachers gained (Tenney, 1965).

Inoue (2017) points out that the early church attracted people outside the group through their identification as “alien residents” – as sojourners on earth (1 Pet 1:1) a unique term in the unsettled world of antiquity. The message that Christians brought was new to the people and presented new perspectives and new possibilities outside of the scope of this world (Kreider, 1999). The Christian beliefs and power were attractive. The sick were brought out to the streets laying on beds and couches and were healed. The good news messages reached wide as a multitude gathered on one occasion from surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed (Acts 5:15-16). Believers were increasingly added to the Lord. Members of the early church were revolutionaries amidst the divided melting pot of the social and religious ideas of the Roman Empire Christians, yet followers were still added to the early church (Warner Wallace, 2020). Because of Jesus’ resurrection, believers did not fear persecution or death. The presence and working of God’s power among them resulted in healing and the liberation of the demon possessed. Their kindness was a social reality that spread and transcended the Roman Empire. The early church corresponded with other churches, accommodated travelers, and supported fellow Christians in prison. According to the Didache of the first-century, people chose the way of life namely: to first love God and then their neighbour as themselves. In practice, this meant freely sharing one’s possessions with the needy without being repaid because the things of the earth belong to God and He also made them available to us to share (Inoue, 2017).

The early church as it expanded had its own internal and external challenges. It was not only surrounded by many different pagan religions and forms of worship but also faced the Imperial religion of the Roman Empire. Two classes of worship existed in the Roman Empire, first the mystery religions that refer to personal worship and devotion to various divinities. This form of worship had no impact on their public worship. The second was the Imperial Religion which required that every citizen submit their whole life to this religion since no opposition was tolerated. A person was considered a good citizen if they acknowledged Rome as the supreme power and the emperor as the son of God or some even as Lord (Phillips, n.d: 1-2). The early church was not among the mystical religions but challenged the Imperial religion by its proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord and not Caesar (Legge, 2003). The church believed they had the vocation of bringing His authority to bear on every area of society. This belief was all-encompassing in that it focused on influencing “piece by piece, institution by institution, nation by nation, person

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by person, all things need to now be reconciled to Christ. That is the mission of all Christians, who are called to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19) in the task of bringing all things back into subjection to the Lord" (2 Cor. 10:5) (Phillips, s.a: 2).

The early Christian church started as an unpromising movement and against all expectations and state-sponsored efforts to eliminate this offshoot of Judaism it rapidly achieved a dominant role in world history. Three centuries after its origin in the time of Constantine, it increased over most of the Roman Empire and enjoyed a dominant social and political position in the western world. The church proceeded and spread from the upper room in Jerusalem to the Goths in Britain, and the plains of Persia (Shelley, 1982).

The way the people of the early Christian church lived closely as a community at its inception was by no means an indication of an intention to remain motionless at one location but a preparation that would eventually propel them into their distinctive mission to reach the ends of the earth (Matt 28:18-19; Acts 1:8). As Alexander (1963:95) explains it when referring to their lifestyle as "... characteristic features of the infant church, but which can no more be revived by us, than the innocent simplicity of childhood, or the habits of a father's house can be continued in mature age and distant homes". As the church developed, their distinct and true regenerated lifestyles accompanied by a demonstration of God's power impacted different layers of society in the Greco-Roman cities. Stark (1996:161) describes their lifestyles as providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent problems in Roman-Greco cities.

In top cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fire, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.

Persecution did not deter them nor caused them to pull back into a secluded community, instead it motivated them even more. With the persecution they also gained respect because at times they were feared as those that came to turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

## 4. Gloriavale Christian Community

Gloriavale is a Christian community situated on the South Island of New Zealand that started in Springbank but later relocated to the 917-hectare farm nestled at the foot of the southern Alps in Haupiri. The new home of the community was named Gloriavale in honour of the founder's wife Gloria (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2014:10). The community consists of believers from all over the world that forsook all to follow Jesus. Currently according to the website, more than ninety families have found a home in this community. The families are large: between seven and eight children per family and there is a biological increase of thirty to thirty-five babies each year. This is a good thing according to the church since it keeps the population in Gloriavale young (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2022). It was founded by Neville Cooper aka Hopeful Christian in 1969 after about twenty years of working as an evangelist in Australia. From the different reports and articles, it seems that the Gloriavale Christian Community followed suit by giving other names to their members based on biblical virtues (apart from their birth names) that signify a specific role or position in the group.<sup>1</sup> Cooper had the vision to not only see the gospel preached but lived out in daily life. He envisaged a church that was based on the principles of the Bible and the early church. The community was built up and developed into a self-sustainable unit accommodating a private Christian school, early childcare centers with biblical values, children taught by teachers that are members of the community, a dairy, and other enterprises. The community's income is generated from export enterprises and as a result of their activities supports the West Coast by spending around four million New Zealand dollars a year on building supplies. It does not receive any welfare benefits, borrow money, nor invest money to gain interest (Faithful Pilgrim, 2022; Gloriavale Christian Community, 2014:13).

### 4.1 “Community concept” in Gloriavale Christian Community

Although there is substantial material on their website about the Christian lifestyle of the Gloriavale Christian Community, this study will focus on some important aspects of their belief in the necessity of a “Christian or godly community”. Living together in a godly community forms an essential part of the functioning of the Gloriavale Christian church. According to the Gloriavale Christian church, Christian living has no room for selfishness,

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1 The Gloriavale community give their children names to inspire them. These names include names such as Charity Love, Willing Disciple or Trust Steadfast. Adults also take on similar names such as Steadfast Joy, Elijah Peace, or Faith Ben Israel (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2014:15).



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independence, pride, or self-will. In this sense a Christian community with all its challenges is the purest form of expression of Christ's love (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2014:2). The leaders of Gloriavale seem to base their concept of community on the work of Andreas Ehrenpreis (1650) the leader of the Hutterian Brethren in Moravia. In his translated work "Community is the highest command of love" Christians are required to live in community, as seen in the first early church (Acts 2 and 4), where they continued steadfastly in the Apostle's doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayer (Acts 2) (Ehrenpreis, [1650] 2021:5).

According to Ehrenpreis [1650] 2021), the community provides several beneficial aspects. Firstly, an opportunity to live separate from the world and forsake the material possessions of the world and follow Christ wholeheartedly with joy and freedom as the Holy Spirit leads. The calling to abandon all includes selling houses and giving possessions to the needy as in the early church (Acts 2 & 4). This lifestyle is not only possible but essential as is demonstrated by people of faith in the Bible such as Abraham who left his homeland to follow God's lead (Genesis 12). The Apostles left their father, boat, net, and all they had, to follow Jesus (Matthew 4). The Apostle Paul forsook his riches and high standing in society and counted those things as dung that he might win Christ (Philippians 3) (Ehrenpreis, [1650] 2021:8).

It secondly produces a strong sense of camaraderie. Despite the challenges of living in a community members should display brotherly love to one another, meaning making allowances for each other, living in peace together, and never forsaking each other because of human weakness (Matthew 6) (Ehrenpreis, [1650] 2021:7). Differences or challenges within the community must not be an obstacle to anyone. It means a surrender of the whole self and all their possessions in service to God. Only through such surrender can salvation and joy be found.

Thirdly, it teaches contentment with what you have. The desire for material things such as clothes and riches are downplayed as unimportant. Someone filled with the spirit of community becomes simple and modest and is content with what they have. In being honest to oneself and others, one finds a common recognition and reaches a common agreement in faith. Any profits that the community accumulated should be shared with all the brothers in God. Profits are also for the feeding, housing, and clothing of the poor, the hungry, and the old. It was through love that Jesus became poor and one of the lowliest on earth (Ehrenpreis, [1650] 2021:11-12).

Fourthly, it is a visible expression of a practical Christian life that would serve

as a witness of how Jesus expects them to live. Living a Christian life in a community is not only supportive of the preaching of God's word but also provides new converts with an example of how to live for Christ. Converts are also surrounded by other experienced believers that can provide guidance and assistance in living a truly Christian life.

Fifthly, the community must reach out to fellow Christians in the community but also work to make a provision for widows and orphans as well as for poor and handicapped people. They must willingly and lovingly prepare meals for people who are in need. This must all be done with a heart of love and without wanting to receive payment knowing that we will be rewarded in heaven (Ehrenpreis [1650] 2021:24).

Despite all the elements listed above of the Gloriavale Christian Community, the foundation for the success of a "godly community" seems to be the fact that it functions as a secluded community that withdraws from culture and lives separate from society. They believe that God's people are called to separate themselves from the evil ways of the world and the only way to live a godly life is to live their own distinctive life together as a godly community. The community withdrawal from society encapsulates the following aspects: (1) a withdrawal from the world's debauched pleasures and entertainments, ambitions, love for material things, preoccupations, and anxieties; (2) disregard for the world's criticism or praise, keeping their minds focused on God's thoughts and knowing His will; (3) the true Church's separation from Babylon – the great worldwide conglomeration of religious systems centered around Roman Catholicism is inevitable and should never be friendly with "that great harlot, drunk with the blood of the saints". (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2021: par 5)

A strong motivation for the Gloriavale Christian Community's conviction to function as an isolated community seems to be based on the belief of the fallen state of the church in general as described by Bercot (1989) in his book, "Will the real heretics please stand up?" The secluded community is an attempt to correct the divisiveness in the church and the departure from the unity of the church. The Christian church, in general, is divided and many denominations exist because of the carnality of people that led to envy, strife, and division. The many denominations are proof of the division. According to the Gloriavale Christian Community, Jesus said "On this rock shall I build my church in the single form, not churches but only one true church" (Matt 16:18). The fact that there are many professed churches of Christ does not invalidate nor change the express declaration of Christ. The fact that the

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church should be in unity and function as one is confirmed in John 17:20-23. For the Gloriavale church, the modern idea that the good in all the different churches constitutes the true church of Christ is untrue, and also that the good in different churches makes up the spiritual church of Christ. The only true Christians are those who have been baptized by one Spirit into one body, which is the visible church (Bercot, 1989). To remain as the unblemished church of Christ, the church of Christ must honestly and diligently strive to maintain a united membership. The best way to achieve that is through a seclusive community even from other Christians as described before.

The motivation for the Gloriavale Christian Community to live separate as a godly community encapsulates two elements: firstly, to separate themselves from the evil of the world as well as the Christian church because of its fallenness and influence by the Roman Catholic church. Secondly, the community is a means to correct the fallen state of the church and return to a true Christian lifestyle. In essence, they promote isolation from society and church as their way of becoming the only true undivided church of Christ.

#### ***4.2 Gloriavale Christian Community's outreach to society***

The foundational truth in the Gloriavale Christian Community is the belief that a godly life is only obtainable through the establishment of a self-sustaining secluded community. (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2021 par: 5 The Church is "called out"). Apart from living a secluded life, they indicate that they do reach out to society. In the early years of the Gloriavale Christian Community around the 1970s and 1980s, they had reached out to society in the square of Christchurch on the South Island with the purpose to share the gospel. In more recent years their involvement and outreach to society include free concerts they present to local people every two years with an attendance of between 5000 and 6000 people. There have been no concerts in the last few years (Gregory, 2022). They also provide food and music for Waitangi Day, art in the park, and the Pike River Memorial Day. During tornados in the area, they have repaired damaged houses, and also provided water and food to areas in Christchurch that were affected by an earthquake. They have also provided a pilot and one of their light aircraft to fly doctors from Greymouth to Karamea once a week. Their hospitality is extended to visitors to the community by supplying free food and accommodation. The community has further extended to communities in India and Kenya (Faithful Pilgrim, 2022). Another form of outreach is towards the children in the community.

All the above outreaches to society are commendable but seem to be mostly

occasional and a lesser priority. Only some are involved in them while the majority of members' life is confined to the community away from society because of the demands of the community. Their likening of the community to a city set on a hill, as Jesus said, that all men may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in Heaven implies that they see themselves mostly separate from society and not being amidst it (Gloriavale Christian Community 2022(b)).

### ***4.3 The precepts and tenets of Gloriavale and the reality***

The aforementioned justification of the Gloriavale church living as a community based on the Bible, specifically the early church principles, seems admirable at face value. Unfortunately, despite this presentation of the Gloriavale Christian Community as an idyllic, godly, and peaceful community of committed Christians, accusations of misconduct and sexual abuse within the community have broken through this peaceful surface (One news, 2020; Leask, 2022(a)). Testimonies of members at Gloriavale paint a less pleasant picture of this community. The media covered different stories, investigations, and court cases based on the complaints of members. They started around 2015 and have since increased with numerous articles in the media.

It is important to note that media reports also have to be evaluated in reaching conclusions about the Gloriavale Christian Community. Media outlets use "framing" to present a case with a specific purpose (Burmeister, 2020). The more sensational the message the better. Framing in media terms entails the arranging of "arguments, information, symbols, metaphors, and images" in a particular way to push the reporter's idea. If a particular frame with pre-existing beliefs and values is already established in the minds of the reader catchwords such as "cult" or "new religious movements" can narrow a reader's perspective and present already settled views hinted at in the article (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019:19-20). The way information is arranged creates a logical flow and causes the reader to resonate with the underlying message and in most cases accept it without question. Mediated stereotyping is effective in shaping cognitive attitudinal and behavior outcomes (Dixon, 2019). Burmeister (2020:28) evaluated the news reports of Gloriavale in 2019 and concluded that

My research showed the representation of new religious movements in the New Zealand media was similarly negative as was found in the academic research. It was true that most reportage was about former members as that made up more than two-thirds of the articles. The reporters did use many anti-cult groups and experts, such as Liz Gregory from the Gloriavale Trust. The main difference

was that New Zealand articles on Gloriavale tended not to use the word “cult” but instead used a more neutral term such as “religious community”. It was clear there was a narrative being framed of Gloriavale as the “baddies”, controlling and abusing people.

It is also important to note that much of the reporting in the media is obtained from Gloriavale leavers. Different factors can influence their reporting on their experience. People are different and view things differently. What is traumatic for one is not necessarily for the next. What all of them have in common when leaving a secluded community is a life entailing years of hard work, and commitment to building and maintaining a spiritual home for themselves and their families. They leave without anything, no financial backup, in most cases with damaged family and other networks, and need to start life outside the group from scratch. They have to deal with many emotions including disillusionment, hurt, resentment, anger, and distrust. Taking into account all the emotions of the leavers and being cognizant of the influence of the media in their reporting on Gloriavale events, and the impact of stereotypes, several issues that surfaced cannot be denied as they indicate unlawful and unjust actions and practices associated with Gloriavale. An investigation is needed to find the underlying dynamics that may cause these harms. Such allegations and actions need to be investigated and redressed. The purpose of this study is not to evaluate the full media coverage of Gloriavale but to briefly point out the substantiated abuse in the community as was determined by a court of law.

In summary, the media reports on the Gloriavale Christian Community were mostly about leavers and also about incidents of abuse and court cases. Two substantiated cases worth mentioning that the local media reported on are (1) court documents that revealed that more than 60 young people have fallen prey to harmful sexual behavior at the Gloriavale Christian Community. A police inquiry into these allegations started in July 2020. A twenty-one-year-old resident of the community pleaded guilty to 11 charges of sexual offending against children and one was under the age of 12. The man was charged with rape, sexual violation, and indecent assault of eight girls and one boy in the West Coast religious community. The age of the 10th alleged victim is not known (2) Accusations of control, long working hours, and mental abuse have been raised by members of the community. Three young men, now ex-members of the Gloriavale Christian Community, went to the Employment Court of New Zealand claiming that they were required to work long hours, and under harsh conditions, from the age of six until they left the Community, and also that they were employees. The judge ruled on 10 May 2022 that the three young men were employed by the community

from the age of six to do strenuous, difficult, and dangerous work while they were legally required to be at school. These jobs could not be classified as chores as the defendants of the community claimed (Leask, 2022(b)). More allegations and court cases in this regard are pending.

These accusations resulted in an investigation and most probably ignited the departure of more than fifty members who have left since September 2020 according to the Gloriavale Leavers' Support Trust (2022).

#### ***4.4 Challenges with a secluded community such as Gloriavale Christian Community***

It stands to reason that any group living together in a community setting, whether Christian or otherwise, will be faced with challenges. When a community becomes seclusive or functions in an isolated environment away from society, the chances of unjust and unlawful incidents are likely to increase. Such an environment can be conducive to producing certain abusive activities. When a community claims to be Christian, the belief that God's intervention and guidance will safeguard the functioning of such a community is generally subconsciously established. Trust in this notion of being in a safe environment with godly leaders puts members' minds at ease and increases their susceptibility to abuse.

Crawley (2016) uses the French post-structuralist Michael Foucault's (1926-1984) theory of circular interdependence of power, truth, and subjectivity in a secluded society and applies it to the Gloriavale Christian Community. Based on Foucault's theory, the acceptance of power and truth in a secluded community legitimizes the subjectivity of the members. This subjectivity can even be maintained through reward and punishment. The members' continuous submission to power and truth keeps the leader in charge. Subjectivity to the truth and the power of the leader affords the leader the prerogative to decide how truth is manifested. As a result of members' full trust in the leader's presentation of truth, their lifestyle becomes merged with this interpretation of scripture believing they are living the truth, the "truth of God" (Crawley, 2016:41). In the Gloriavale Christian Community, the foundational truth seems to be living together as a "godly community" will not only safeguard the believers from the influences of the evil world but also preserve them for the life after.

The seclusive community of Gloriavale with more than six hundred members is governed by rules and protocols. Unfortunately, rules and protocols in such a seclusive community can undeniably be excessive and detrimental to the overall well-being of the members as some scholars below point out. Some

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of the challenges include: firstly, creating an inward-bound lifestyle ideal for conditioning through strict rules, peer pressure, conformity to the group, and role modeling. Secondly, being out of sight of society opens opportunities for physical abuse including hard labor, physical punishment, sexual abuse, and financial exploitation (Baron, 2000; Riggio & Garcia 2009:109). Thirdly, a seclusive environment increases the chances of progressive conditioning that can have a great impact on members' rational decision-making and allows for enforcing responses of the leader such as punishment for disobedience and praise for obedience (Hayes, 2002:155). Fourthly, it contributes to the formation of camaraderie amongst members built on their belief in uniform sacrifice and commitment to a sacred cause. This is founded on a centralized source of truth and strengthened through regular contact and association with other members. According to Lalich (1997:11), the sense of camaraderie is an important deterrent against members leaving the group. Fifthly, such an environment is conducive to reminding them of their calling and enforcing it by rules and regulations. Sixth, universal thinking on "common religious doctrines" can cause members to come to a similar understanding of situations (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980:42). Lastly, the secluded community can produce a drug-like hold on members, more specifically through cult memes resulting in replicating information patterns that are passed on (Henson, 2002:343). A desire to receive favour from the leader can result in members spying on one another to provide information to the leader that will reward them. Progressive and continued seclusion from the outside world accompanied by the totalitarian authority of the leader and tenets of the group have not only rendered their rational abilities ineffective but have also created a dependency on the instructions and protocol of the group and leader. Members are in many cases also isolated from family and known networks.

A secluded community enlarges the possibilities for an interrelated dynamic of power, truth, and subjectivity. The leader's authority and access to the "truth of God" results in the subjectivity of the members, allowing control of information, association and thoughts, secrecy, and mental detention.

#### ***4.5 Disparity between the early Christian community and Gloriavale Christian Community***

As pointed out above a secluded community poses certain challenges of control and abuse which are either justified or ignored because of the power and control of the leader. The Gloriavale Christian Community displays clear disparities from the early Church as will be pointed out below.

The early Christian church withstanding its challenges was not secluded from but amidst society living in Jerusalem (Acts 3). The Apostles used the religious structure of the day, i.e. the temple and houses, to teach and preach daily and were accused that they “filled Jerusalem with [their] doctrine” (Acts 5:28, 42). These early believers understood that they are in the world but not of the world (John 15:19). The early church seemed to live amongst the world although they were His followers and not of the world, their ministry was amongst those in the world as He commissioned them. In this regard, He prayed that they would not be taken out of this world (separated) but that they would be kept from evil and not only them but also everyone that should believe in Him through them (John 17:14-20). To be effective as His disciples in the world they must guard against being defiled by the culture of the world and not conform to it (Romans 12:1-2). They would be amongst the world but they should continually and prayerfully guard over their purity as called ones of Jesus. They kept themselves pure and committed through the teaching of the Apostles, prayer, and by following Jesus’ command to go out into the world and make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). Paul confirms this when he refers to believers as light bearers in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (Phil 2:12-14). Their being a community was not a lifestyle of isolation from society but a means of equipping and preparing them to reach society. Their mission was not to build a secluded self-sustainable community but to function on the belief that in their mission of reaching out God would provide for their needs. Their assemblies were not the end goal but an opportunity for equipping them for the work of God (Warner Wallace, 2020).

The early Christians’ outreach and influence on the culture of the day yielded not only respect and fear for them (Acts 2:43) but also awarded them favour with all the people. As the early Christian church expanded, they were known as emissaries of the kingdom of God, turning the world upside down wherever they went (Acts 17:6). Latourette (1964:65) indicated that although we do not possess the data to calculate accurately the growth of the early Christian church, Christianity “won the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman Empire and the Roman State in the first five centuries from its inception. The seemingly insignificant Jesus movement that started in an upper room in Jerusalem transformed into a major religion spreading over the world with millions of followers from India in the East to Ethiopia in the south to Britain in the west” (Dreyer, 2012:1).

Gloriavale Christian Community’s preaching and reaching out to society seems to be mainly when people visit the community or attend the two-yearly concerts in the community and on other sporadic occasions as pointed out



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before (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2021). It is nowhere presented as the main priority but is second to ensuring and developing a self-sustainable community that will ensure their survival and preservation independent from society. Instead, it seems more important that prospective members will be attracted to the community concept to live a separate life according to the Pythagorean model (Keener, 1993) where everybody turned over their possessions to the leaders so they could withdraw from society and live in isolation away from the hustle and bustle of the world. Different from the early church that first sought the kingdom of God and the belief that all other things will be added (Matt 6:33), Gloriavale Christian Community's priority seems to provide for themselves before seeking the kingdom of God. It can also be seen as signifying a lack of faith that God can sustain and preserve His own in a fallen world.

The early Christian church was distinguishable amidst a society in several ways: new converts were convinced of the truth of the gospel through genuine lifestyles and the demonstration of some supernatural spiritual gifts like visionaries, martyrs, prophets, healers, or learned men (Schor, 2009:475). The traveling charismatic preachers kept to the teaching of the Apostles and they gained respect, through the hardship, danger, and even death they experienced associated with traveling. The early believer's lifestyle of humility and love defined them and their Christian values and outsiders could identify with it and were drawn to it (Dreyer, 2012:2; Schor, 2009:478). The social and working enterprise inside the Gloriavale Christian Community does not seem to have a real continuous contribution to society, apart from financial contribution to the economy and occasional outreach to society.

The biological or natural increase seems to be an important aspect of the growth of the Gloriavale Christian Community. The growth of the community is encouraged or sped up through arranged marriages as it is God's will for women to have children and be housewives (Buttigeig, 2016). Strict rules and rituals are imposed by a group of older men in the community that determines who the young women would marry. Marriage is consummated when the committed man and woman marry each other through the sacred act of sexual union (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2014:17). An internalized aspect for young married couples is to have many children, and birth control is not allowed as the community trust God to provide in their needs. Therefore, a married couple may have up to 13 children. "A natural increase from around 30 to 35 babies a year keeps our living standards realistic and prevents us from becoming self-indulgent, it also increases the growth of the younger community" (Gloriavale Christian Community, 2014:18).

The early Christian Church community valued the sanctity of life which had an impact not only on their reproduction rate but also on their refusal to partake in abortions, infanticide, selling of children as slaves, or feeding them to wild animals (Dreyer, 2012). Dreyer (2012:4) refers to 'The Epistle to Diognetes' (AD 130) which can be regarded as part of the corpus of early Apologists. According to this Epistle, Christians were sojourners whether in their fatherland or foreign country. They shared all things as citizens but at the same time suffer as strangers. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign country. They marry as all men, and they bear children, but they do not expose their offspring. They offer free hospitality but guard their purity (Goold & Lake, 1975:358-361). Although the early Christian church also increased through natural growth it was not intended to grow their community as a secluded population. The main source of growth of the early church was through people converting to Christianity through the gospel.

Gloriavale Christian Community seems to have no association or communication with other Christian groups or organizations unless they think like them. The early church functioned as a social community that was strategically organized and revered by society and that was linked with acquainted people across many cities. Hand in hand with the social connectedness of the early church was the establishment of good networks and communication systems that linked individuals and groups together. Schor (2009) believes that the social network that existed successfully aided not only the functioning of groups but also the placing of individuals in society. These networks explain how the gospel message was disseminated by traveling teachers, healers, and merchants. Dreyer (2012:5) indicates how these travelers could bring news or money to assist the local Christians and also how the news and contributions were passed on to the next group of Christians. They could even set up a Christian community if there were none yet. These elements seemed to have functioned in the early church until the church became institutionalized with the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. which, according to many, changed the dynamic of the church that functioned as the body of Christ (Dreyer, 2012:5).

All the above-mentioned disparities between the early church and the Gloriavale Christian Community can be laid at the door of their isolation from society that withholds them from engaging on the same level as the early church. Their isolation not only radically changed the way they function but also stopped their ability to be effective witnesses in the world.

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## 5. Conclusion

When reference is made to the early church in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37 it is important to understand that these two passages describe the infancy stage of the early church and that the church did develop as it grew and expanded. Both these passages are synchronous or co-extensive as to time. It describes the whole history of the primitive infant church, as it existed in Jerusalem. Although interrupted by some events in between, it refers to the same stage (Alexander, 1963:92).

The description of the church's functioning in its infancy stage does not describe a permanent way of living for the church but anticipates change as it grew, especially in its location and reach. It displays daily public life in the community as well as the private life of worship also in the community, not as a private community removed from society. It is therefore not appropriate to assume that the infancy stage of the early church substantiates a fixed model for contemporary Christian communities, especially if it is a secluded community. Infancy assumes growth and development into maturity. With the persecution and death of Stephen, believers were scattered to Judea and Samaria away from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Some of those persecuted after Stephen's death fled to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch where they spread the gospel to fellow Jews. Some also shared the message with Greek gentiles in these areas (Acts 11:19-20). The early Jesus movement had a mission to fulfill that was started in Jerusalem but would eventually reach the outermost parts of the world. Another crucial aspect of the early church is an oversight that ensured that the church stay aligned with the teaching of the Apostles and the word of God. This function has been performed by the leaders or Apostles. Paul, in his letters to the Corinthians and Galatians, corrected some issues and challenges that occurred in these churches. Also, in other letters clear descriptions of what lifestyle the salvation through Christ has brought about is given.

It cannot be denied that the Gloriavale Christian Community has been successful in establishing a strong self-sustainable community. It can further be commended for their desire to live holy, committed lives. But their justification that their community living is based on the Jesus movement described in Acts 2 and 4 in its infant stage shows some deficiencies. Firstly, they seem to believe that this stage of the church represents the be-all and end-all of the Christian church. Secondly, it suggests that this type of community living may minimize persecution of believers and give protection from the influence of the world. This view does not align with the view of being in the world but

not of the world which implies being among the worldly. As pointed out, the church did not remain in Jerusalem as a motionless movement but grew and evolved and expanded and spread across the world and in doing so, it was met with persecution and hardship. Lastly, the lack of oversight over the doctrines and function of the Gloriavale Christian Community places its members in harm's way of abusive doctrines and practices.

Against this backdrop, the Gloriavale Christian Community cannot be viewed as a true representation of the early church in its infancy stage. Their scripture reference for justifying this lifestyle seems to have the purpose of sanctioning the secluded community as a "godly community" and is a deceptive representation of the early church. Although it displays elements that are similar to the early Christian church it falls short in the most important aspect, namely, having as its main goal the desire to be visible and active in society, to reconcile it to God to the level of the Jesus movement, not only locally but to the outermost parts of the world. Proverbs 18:1 says, "A man who isolates himself seeks his own desires; He rages against all wise judgement." According to Ellicot's commentary for English readers "The man of small mind is here described, who will only follow his own narrow aims, who holds himself aloof from men of wider views than his own, and will not join with them in the furtherance of philanthropic or religious plans, but rather opposes them with all his power, as he can see nothing but mischief in them" (Biblehub, n.d.).

Jesus's involvement in day-to-day political and social issues was based on the message of salvation. Although He reached out to those who were mishandled, disregarded, and abused, He offered profound healing to the broken-hearted, deliverance to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to those who were bruised (Luke 4:18). The early church followed His example and was not attempting to escape the influence of the culture by seclusion or to create a haven for its existence but its main focus was to find ways to influence and reconcile it to God. Disobedience to the word and guidance by the Holy Spirit were addressed, and unjust acts in the church were dealt with swiftly (Acts 5). Despite the persecution of unbelieving Judaism and the challenges of the Roman Empire, it did not deter them but motivated them even more. Their mission was to reconcile all spheres of life to God and declare that there is only one true God. Under the guidance of the Apostles, they were guided to remain in the doctrines of the Apostles.

The absence of, or minimal oversight, over the Gloriavale Christian Community has led to the community being accused by outsiders of being

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false teachers and prophets as is indicated in the Bible (2 Pet 2:1-3, Matt 7:15, 24:11, 1 Tim 4:1, 2 Cor 11:4, 1 Joh 4:1). The apology offered by the leaders of Gloriavale for the hurt and abuse of the community (Daily Vale, 2022) will not rectify the underlying secluded system and all its dynamics that are prone to abuse. The culture that directs the functioning of the community is embedded in years of isolation and strengthened by inward rationalization in the absence of sound counseling and guidance by other Christians. An apology and pure intentions of changing the culture may not be sufficient to get out of the deep threaded groove of the Gloriavale culture created over many years. Members in the community that are kept by any form of coercion through the manipulation of “truth” of being a “Godly community” or by authoritative power have never been true members but pawns. The survival and effectiveness of a Christian community does not lie in seclusion but in true conversion and submission to the word of God and guidance of the Holy Spirit living openly, and outwardly open for correction and reproof. Birthed out of a true desire to follow and submit to God entails living and reaching out even in the turmoil of the world and amidst the culture of the day, trusting Him for wisdom, protection and guidance.

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