

What Kind of Community Do We Need?

Sequel to last issue's article "Community – and Why We Need It"

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In the previous issue's article, we looked at the many reasons we as believers need community based on Hebrews 10:24-25:

...and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

It was argued that love is never stimulated (encouraged, nurtured, motivated) apart from community. We will now look at the qualities that should be part of any community, any church.

One of the things we need to be encouraged to do is to be reconciled. We are called to be agents of reconciliation. If we are going to be able to share the message of reconciliation with the world, we need to be a reconciled community. In II Corinthians 5:18-21, Paul writes:

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us a ministry of reconciliation namely that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Note that God is the one who initiates the process "All these things are from God." William Temple once wrote: "...all is of God; the only thing of my very own which I contribute to my redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed."

Note also that Christ, of course, is the one who carries out the task of reconciliation. We are reconciled "through Christ," "in Christ," and it is Christ that takes our place. Christ who was perfect took our sin on Himself that we might become righteous in Him. There is a double transfer: our sin is transferred

to Christ's account and Christ's righteousness is transferred to our account. Luther put it this way:

Learn to sing to Him and say, Lord Jesus you are my righteousness. You took on you what was mine, you set on me what was yours. You became what you were not that I might become what I was not.

Now it can not only be said of us "no condemnation" but also "righteous." Christ's righteousness covers us like a full length coat. Now when God looks at us, He sees Christ. There is a sense in which you look as beautiful to the Father as does His Son. There is also a sense in which you are as accepted by the Father as is the Son. How accepted is the Son? One hundred percent. How accepted are you? One hundred percent (in Christ). How accepted do we feel? Often we do not experience the real acceptance we have in Christ.

Notice also that because of what God has done in Christ, we are given a task. We now have a "ministry of reconciliation;" we are entrusted with a "word of reconciliation;" we are "ambassadors for Christ;" our new message is "be reconciled to God." The only way we can speak this message with conviction is if we are reconciled ourselves. We must be reconciled in order to be reconcilers.

The Cross is the only basis on which community can last. Christ's sacrificial love on the cross impels us to love sacrificially. In Christ's teaching forgiveness is not optional, it is absolutely necessary. Jesus says these shocking words right after teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer:

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Matt. 6:14-15

One of the marks of being reconciled to the Father is a willingness to be reconciled to others – to forgive. If you do not forgive, you are not forgiven.

I say that this is the only basis on which community can last because no other religion or philosophy makes reconciliation and forgiveness an absolute necessity. Back in the 1960s there were many communes that emerged around the United States. It was supposed to be all peace and love. Yet, after hearing many stories of how they fell apart, the pattern is familiar. Sooner or later an issue arose between individuals or between rival groups that could not be settled. Bitterness rose until the individuals or group split off. Then the same thing happened again to the remnant. The problem was that the philosophy of the 1960s was often hedonistic – pursuing personal pleasure. This self-oriented philosophy did not mandate reconciliation or forgiveness. There were many good intentions to be sure, but nothing that made the painful act of loving a necessity. The philosophy was inward towards self and not outward to love the other person as you loved yourself.

Some of the communes were based in an Eastern religious perspective, but this did not work either and the same pattern recurred. This is because the whole thrust of the New Age (Hinduism and Buddhism) is inwards to the divine within or upwards to merge your identity to that of the One but definitely not outwards because the external world (including other people) were philosophically regarded as “maya” or illusion. They were not thrust out to take seriously distinct people because distinction was regarded as the ultimate lie since “All is One.”

Once I met with a leader of a New Age think tank. For fifteen years he studied the best of New Age philosophy and met all the top leaders and gurus. He was profoundly disappointed. He said that all the leaders were so “narcissistic.” I pointed out to him that New Age direction was inwards and upwards but not outwards. He agreed. Of course, people in these communes did love and care for each other. But when difficulties arose, there was nothing in their philosophy that necessitated their breaking down walls between rival individuals or groups. Why would you want to reconcile when you were already “One”?

Marxism had a glorious vision of a utopian community of the workers. It was to be “from each according to his ability to each according to his need.” Why was the utopia never realized? The whole thrust was outward: to overthrow the ruling classes that oppressed the workers. But the end always justified the means. There was nothing that was prohibited if it led to the good of the masses. Murder, theft, even genocide could be strategies or tactics viewed as necessary to accomplish the larger goal. Anyone was expendable – not exactly a philosophy

that fostered trust. Just study the history of Lenin, Stalin, Pol Pot, or Mao if you want to see how it worked out in practice. Again, there was nothing in this philosophy that necessitated reconciliation and forgiveness.

No other religion or philosophy requires reconciliation and mandates forgiveness. No one but Jesus said that if you do not forgive, you are not forgiven (Matt. 6:15). No other religious teacher requires that we reconcile with anyone who just might have something against us (even if we think it unjustified) before we come to worship (Matt. 5:23-24).

How Does Community Stimulate Character?

Without fellowship, without joy. So how are we stimulated to love and good deeds – through fellowship. In I John 1:3-4 it says:

...what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write so that our joy may be made complete.

So our fellowship is first with the Father and the Son and that leads to fellowship with each other and that results in joy. When there is deep fellowship there is joy. And conversely, let me suggest, if you are without joy you are without fellowship.

In Psalm 133 we see the joy of fellowship pictured in imagery.

Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, coming down upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing – life forever.

I have experienced how good, pleasant, and joyous fellowship can be on a number of occasions. One instance stands out among them. I went on tour with the Continental Singers (I played trumpet) for almost a whole summer. We drove around in our big bus with about 50 in the choir and orchestra performing every day at churches, in gyms, and in concert halls. Sometimes we performed more than once a day which meant much work setting up and breaking down all the equipment involved. On this tour we left from Los Angeles and went all around the United States with a few days trip on a cruise ship culminating in a performance at a hotel in the Bahamas. We had devotions on the bus each morning and

various people had the opportunity to share what had happened in the homes they stayed in that night and to ask for prayer. There was also a policy instituted that you had to sit with a different person each day on our several hour bus rides between cities. That provided unique opportunity for each person to get to know each of the other people on tour. We also had a time of prayer and sharing before each concert. A number of times, issues came up that needed confrontation. We had some remarkably honest people on that tour and our sharing times were not always nice and comfortable. There were times when virtually the whole group was in an uproar. But by working through our problems, a deep unity and love grew.

When we were on the cruise ship out of Miami to the Bahamas, we made friends readily with those on the ship particularly, being musicians, with the band in the ship nightclub (we even performed a couple songs there). Many people on the ship were drawn to ask what we were about because the unity and love was evident. Fourteen people made commitments to Christ through individual conversations that few days. One of these was the drummer in the nightclub. I will never forget the time when we were all sitting in the bus, on the dock in Miami, ready to leave for the rest of our tour. The drummer got on the bus and asked for the microphone. He said to us, "Thank you for all you have done for me on this trip. I have committed my life to Christ. I have just quit my job. I have decided to go back to England to try to get back together with my wife." There was not a dry eye on the bus. The love and unity seen in our close fellowship acted like a centripetal force drawing others to talk to us. We did not have to force conversations into spiritual areas; people, out of their need, were attracted to ask about these very things.

The last week as we drove each day (doing concerts in between) across the southwestern United States to Los Angeles, each person on tour had an opportunity to take the microphone and share what the summer tour had meant to them. Because each person had gotten to know each of the others there was a personal bond with each person that we shared and also a deep bond that held together the whole group. That week was filled with emotion, tears often flowing as people shared and expressed their love to others on the tour. It is difficult to express what it was like, but it was something like what I imagine heaven will be like. We basked in a unity that I have seldom experienced since that time.

A few principles that I drew from that time that have been verified through my study of Scripture

and my experience later are these. First, if you want community, you need to come together before the Word of God (as we did each day). Second, community is best nurtured not as an end in itself, but in the context of doing the work of Christ in the world. Third, a community is only as unified as the relationships between each one of the members. Fourth, expressing our love verbally for each other and verbally encouraging each other is essential to building unity in the Body of Christ.

In Psalm 133, the images are along the line of what I have experienced. Unity is like precious oil being poured on our head. Oil often signified an anointing, a being set apart as holy, as in the anointing of kings or priests like Aaron—"even Aaron's beard." Fellowship is something holy, set apart, and sanctified. Oil in the Psalms also signifies joy as in the "oil of gladness." Fellowship is surrounded by holiness and joy. It is also abundant and overflowing. Like the oil "coming down" upon the beard, "coming down" upon the edge of the robes, "coming down" upon the mountains of Zion. The last image—the dew of Hermon coming down on the mountains of Zion—is powerful. The mountains of Zion are quite a distance away from the mountains of Hermon. The mountains of Hermon are described as being lush and having abundant water supplies while the mountains of Zion are often dry and dusty. Imagine the dew of Hermon dripping on the dry, dusty mountains of Zion. What would the mountains do? Naturally, "clap their hands." So do we when the dew of fellowship drips on our dry, dusty souls.

If you want fellowship, go to the Word. Fellowship is never an end in itself but a by-product of our relationship with Christ and the task of reconciliation to which we are called. In John 17:20-23 it says,

I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those who believe in me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity that the world may know that Thou didst send Me....

Note here that Jesus emphasizes twice that the effect of the believers being one in truth and love is that the world will believe. When believers are not reconciled or not unified in ways that diminish who Christ is, it is a tragedy for the world. At times the disunity in the Body may be responsible for the unbelief

of the world. Especially note here that the unity of believers is not here described as an end but as a means to show the glory of the Father and Son to the world.

In the passage discussed earlier, I John 4:1-4 it says in verses 1 and 2 that the “Word of Life” is the means through which the Father was manifested to us and through that Word we have come to have fellowship with each other. It seems that the “Word” here is Christ or perhaps the Word about Christ—the Gospel—but in either case this is the source of our fellowship. When we come together we need to focus on Christ, not primarily on ourselves.

For about three years, prior to being married, I traveled extensively speaking at colleges, churches, and in prisons. In my travels, I have often seen or heard about fellowship groups that seem to be stuck in a rut. When they come together they start by sharing their problems and by the end of the time things have spiraled down into a rather depressed state of affairs and there is little or no time left for Bible study or prayer. This approach is the opposite of what ought to be. We need to first focus on Christ and on His Word and let that shed its light on our struggles. Our difficulties are seen differently when viewed from the perspective of God’s eternal truth.

I have seen this in my own experience, not only on the Continental Singers tour discussed earlier, but in a Young Life Leadership House in which I lived. We had about ten leaders of Young Life Clubs (high school ministry) around the Pittsburgh area living in two row houses. Every night at 11:00 p.m. whoever was back from their clubs, campaigners, or contact work gathered in one of the living rooms and together we read a chapter of the Scripture, shared insights about the passage and talked about points that related to our experiences that day or that week. Then we would pray for kids we knew, parents, teachers, and school administrators. Those times of fellowship were incredibly rich and the prayer times flowed with amazing intensity praising God, thanking Him, confessing sin, and pleading for our needs and the needs of people we knew. I am convinced that the key to our times was that we started with time in the Scriptures. Otherwise our sharing would be just like any other secular support group. It is only when we come together in Christ that we see his light shed and His power flow.

It is of value to have a spiritual director, discipler, or mentor. Apart from the general value of fellowship to stimulate us to love and good deeds it is often good to have someone older, wiser and more experienced to hold us accountable and give us insight on how to overcome our particular problems

and difficulties. Whether we call this a spiritual director or mentor does not matter. What matters is that we have a plan designed particularly with our needs in mind to move forward in our spiritual lives. Each of us has different learning styles, different personalities, different besetting sins, different family situations, and different callings. General Biblical principles are essential for us to know but exactly how do they apply to us? That is where a discipler or spiritual director can help. This is an area of my ministry focus. I was involved with teaching, discipling, and mentoring during my six years at the Ligonier Valley Study Center and since 1987 at the C. S. Lewis Institute in the Washington, D. C. area. I have had numerous, regular individual meetings with people that have lasted up to about ten years in duration (although usually shorter). I have also worked with two groups (of about 12 people) for a year at a time—the Falls Church Fellows (post-college) and the C. S. Lewis Fellows (mid-career professionals). With the former group, this will be my tenth year.

What has become clear over that time is that there is a crying need for discipleship in the Body of Christ and that the Church is largely unable or unwilling to provide it. It is especially the case that young people are not specifically prepared to be disciples in their professions and that professional people are desperate to know how faith in Christ relates to their work in politics, business, law, medicine, science, education, and so on. In *Christianity and Real Life*, William Diehl says this:

I am now a sales manager for a major steel company. In the almost thirty years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there be any type of accounting of my on-the-job ministry to others. My church has never once offered to improve those skills which could make me a better lay minister, nor has it ever asked if I needed any kind of support in what I was doing. There has never been an inquiry into the types of ethical decisions I must face, or whether I seek to communicate my faith to my co-workers. I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career. In short, I must conclude that my church really doesn’t have the least interest in whether or how I minister in my daily work.

Notice what is missing: accountability, development of ministry skills, support, help in ethical decisions, encouragement to evangelize, and affirmation of a God-given calling to professional life. In other words, he and others like him are not really equipped,

helped, or supported in specific ways for what they do 9 – 5 (or more), Monday to Friday. This evaluation of Diehl's has proved true in my own experience. Churches seldom help professional people in anything other than general support in their jobs. Specific issues are rarely addressed and accountability is almost non-existent. Calling in a profession is not affirmed in any public way as a ministry. There is a desperate need for attention to be given to these matters.

For example, in the Washington, D. C. area many churches have congressmen, senators, cabinet officials, top aides—to pick only one part of the cross-section—in attendance. How many of these are followed up with regular individual meetings with pastors or other leaders of the Church? Not many. It is difficult enough to run a church with all its responsibilities. That does not leave much time except for the issues that demand immediate attention. Yet those members that could be significant shapers and builders of the Kingdom of God are seldom nurtured. There is a crying need for more stimulation to love and good deeds in professional life.

We need a theology of the ascension. We have regular holidays that celebrate Christ's birth, death, and resurrection (Christmas, Good Friday and Easter) but little, if any, place given to the ascension. Yet the ascension has three particularly relevant implications. First, Christ was going, not on vacation, but to be crowned King of kings and Lord of lords. He was seated at the right hand of God—the position of power and authority. Second, He was sending the Holy Spirit in His place. The Holy Spirit comes to glorify the Son. Jesus says that it is to "your advantage" that He goes away (John 16:7). In other words, His absence is better than His presence. It is better that He goes than if He stays. The One whom He sends in His place is better than Christ standing in the flesh beside us. I wonder if we believe that. The third implication is what He is now doing in the heavenlies, namely praying for us. "Christ died for us, rose for us, reigns in power for us, and prays for us" (Romans 8:34 Phillips translation). In other words, the implications of the ascension have to do with what Christ is doing at present, now, at this moment for us. He is Lord of all life, the Sender of the Holy Spirit, and the great High Priest for us. We have focused (rightly) on what Christ has done for us in the past, but (wrongly) neglected what He is doing for us in the present (and what He will do for us in the future).

The Body of Christ needs to discover the gifts given for the church and the world and use them. Over the past twenty years, I have done vocational interviews with hundreds of people helping them to sort out their gifts and work out a plan to use them.

Normally, I focus on teaching Apologetics, Theology, Ethics, Spirituality, and Bible courses. However, because the need is so great, I am often called on to help people clarify their gifts. Rarely do I meet someone who knows their giftedness with clarity. What would happen if church members knew their gifts thoroughly and utilized them in the church and in their profession? It would be a revolution. There are groups that have helped churches do this such as People Management and the Doma Group. But there should be a hue and cry for more of this kind of equipping. Not only are people encouraged and stimulated by such a process, but they are given a newly clarified purpose when they see what they were created to do.

Stimulating to love and good deeds takes many diverse people. It is good to have a mentor and an accountability group, but it takes what one counselor called a "cast of thousands." It is not enough to have one person or a group; it takes exposure to the whole Body to grow into what Christ wants us to be. Each person sees a different side of us, brings out different aspects of who we are, can provide solutions from different areas. For instance, I have worked as spiritual director alongside a counselor where I focused on spiritual issues and he focused on therapy. Often people do not have the strength to face their deepest struggles and move forward unless they gain spiritual strength to do so. But more than this, everyone needs close relationships with family and friends, a sense of physical well-being (sleep, exercise, and nutrition), a sense of who they are as a man or a woman. Different people can help in these different areas (i.e. a personal trainer, nutritionist, doctor, a psychiatrist, etc.). But these people need to be mobilized to help and asked to participate in the process of discipleship knowing that the sole weight does not rest on them.

We all live on the edge. In Alcoholics Anonymous there is the sense that each person lives on the edge of falling back into their addiction to alcohol. Therefore, they can call on any member of the group, day or night, for support. In the same way, we all live on the edge of falling into sin, and not just individual acts, but patterns of behavior, bad habits (let us call them addictions). If we do not have such destructive habits (who does not?), then we continually need to beware of falling into them. The Scriptures warn us to beware when we think we stand lest we fall (I Cor. 10:12). We need the kind of support that Alcoholics Anonymous provides. So many people suffer silently with profound moral issues and struggles and are afraid to let anyone in their church know about it. We need to, as Christ did, let them know that a

“bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick He will not quench” (Matt. 12:20). Even the weakest, most struggling believer is welcome and will be stimulated and encouraged to love and good deeds.



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