



Supplemental Reading on Community

[The following is material from Tim Keller (Pastor, author, scholar). While Summit Church does not necessarily align with all of Pastor Keller's beliefs or teachings, this excerpt aligns well with our vision and beliefs around the importance of Christian community and is a good example for Community Groups to follow.]

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Book: Center Church

Chapter 24: Connecting People to One Another

Pages: 311-321

The gospel creates community. Because it points us to the One who died for his enemies, it creates relationships of service rather than selfishness. Because it removes both fear and pride, people get along inside the church who could never get along outside. Because it calls us to holiness, the people of God live in loving bonds of mutual accountability and discipline. Thus, the gospel creates a human community radically different from any society around it.

Accordingly, the chief way in which we should disciple people (or, if you prefer, to form them spiritually) is through community. Growth in grace, wisdom, and character does not happen primarily in classes and instruction, through large worship gatherings, or even in solitude. Most often growth happens through deep relationships and in communities where the implications of the gospel are worked out cognitively and worked in practically — in ways no other setting or venue can afford. The essence of becoming a disciple is, to put it colloquially, becoming like the people we hang out with the most.

Just as the single most formative experience in our lives is our membership in a nuclear family, so the main way we grow in grace and holiness is through deep involvement in the family of God. Christian community is more than just a supportive fellowship; it is an alternate society. And it is through this alternate human society that God shapes us into who and what we are.

The Function of Community

It is natural to think of “community” as a category separate from evangelist and outreach, or from training and discipleship, or from prayer and worship. And of course, we have done this by calling it a distinct ministry front. But to do so can be misleading. Community itself is one of the main ways we do outreach and discipleship, and even experience communion with God.

Community and Our Witness

Community shapes the nature of our witness and our engagement in mission. The real secret of fruitful and effective mission in the world is the quality of our community. Exceptional character in individuals cannot prove the reality of Christianity. Atheism, as well as many other religions, can also produce individual heroes of unusual moral greatness. Though such individuals may inspire us, it is all too easy to conclude that these individuals are just that — extraordinary heroes who have set unattainable standards for the rest of us.

What atheism and other religions cannot produce is the kind of loving community that the gospel produces. In fact, Jesus states that our deep unity is the way the world will know that the Father has sent him and has loved us even as the Father has loved him (John 17:23). Jesus says that the main way people will believe that Christians have found the love of God is by seeing the quality of their life together in community.

As we have often seen in this volume, to be faithful and effective, the church must go beyond “fellowship” to embody a counter-culture, giving the world an opportunity to see people united in love who could never have been brought together otherwise, and showing the world how sex, money, and power can be used in life-giving ways:

Sex: We avoid both secular society's idolization of sex and traditional society's fear of sex. We also exhibit love rather than hostility or fear toward those whose sexual life patterns are different from ours.

Money: We promote a radical generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak. We also must practice economic sharing with one another so "there are no needy persons among us."

Power: We are committed to power sharing and relationship building among races and classes that are alienated outside of the body of Christ. One practical evidence of this is that we need to be as multiethnic a body as possible.

Western believers usually think we show Christ-likeness through our individual lives as believers. But it is just as important to exhibit Christlikeness through our corporate life together.

Community and Our Character

Community shapes the development of our character. In a "classroom relationship," students and teachers have contact with one another primarily at the level of the intellect. The teacher and his or her students do not live together, eat together, or have much additional contact with one another socially, emotionally, or spiritually.

We do not find a classroom relationship between Jesus and his students, nor did his students relate this way with one another. Instead, he created a community of learning and practice in which there was plenty of time to work out truth in discussion, dialogue, and application. This example suggests that we best learn and apply what we are learning in small groups and among friends, not in academic settings alone.

Our character is mainly shaped by our primary social community — the people with whom we eat, play, converse, counsel, and study. We can apply all the "one another" passages of the Bible to this aspect of Christian community. We are to...

Honor (Rom 12:10) Bear with (Eph 4:2; Col 3:13) Cheer and challenge (Heb 3:13)

Stop gossiping and slandering ((Gal 5:15) Stop being fake with each other (Rom 12:9)
Share possessions (Acts 4:32) Accept (Rom 15:7) Forgive (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13) Warn (1
These 5:14)

Teach one another (Col 3:16) Bear burdens (Gal 6:2) Submit to each other (Eph 5:21)

Pray for / confess sins to one another (James 5:16) Admonish and comfort (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16; Gal 6:1-6)

In short, there is no more important means of discipleship — or formation of Christian character — than deep involvement in the life of the church, the Christian community.

Community and Our Behavior

Community shapes our ethics and the spoken and unspoken rules that guide our behavior. Far more of the biblical ethical prescriptions are addressed to us as a community than as individuals. The Ten Commandments were given to Israel at Mount Sinai to form them into an alternate society that would be a light to the nations. The call of Romans 12:1-2 to “offer your bodies as living sacrifices” is usually interpreted as a call to individual consecration, but it is actually a demand that we commit ourselves to a corporate body and not to live as autonomous individuals any longer.

All of Romans 12, in fact, should one read as a description of this new society. In the same way, Jesus' call for his followers to be a “city on a hill” (Matt 5:14) means we must read the entire Sermon on the Mount as a description of this new community, not simply as ethical guidelines for individual believers. Most of the ethical principles or rules in the Bible are not simply codes of behavior for individuals to follow; they are descriptions of a new community that bears the spiritual fruit of love and holiness.

But this should not surprise us. It is really just common sense. Why? Because we all know by experience that it is far harder to live godly lives as individuals. Unless we make ourselves accountable to someone, we will repeatedly slip up and fall away. In addition, many of the ethical prescriptions of the Bible seem maddeningly general— not specific enough to directly address our particular situation. But this is because Jesus expected us to determine how to apply these teachings as a community.

Take, for example, the numerous warnings against greed in the New Testament writings. Unlike adultery, which is clear, does it say when we are spending too much money on ourselves? Greed is so insidious that unless we talk with other Christians about it, we will never see it in ourselves.

The battle against these sinful habits and idolatrous affections is best worked out in community. Not only can a body of people, pooling their wisdom and experience,

come up with culturally appropriate markers and signs of biblical sins such as greed and ruthlessness in business but the community can more effectively hold itself to live consistently with its beliefs.

Community and Growing to Know God Better

Community is the key to true spirituality as we grow to know God by learning to know one another in relationships. In a famous passage, C.S. Lewis describes a very close friendship between himself, Charles Williams, and Ronald Tolkien (better known as J.R.R. Tolkien). After Charles Williams died, Lewis made this observation:

“In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald’s reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him “to myself” now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald.

“Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth.... We possess each friend not less but more as the number of those with whom we share him increases. In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious ‘nearness by resemblance’ to Heaven... For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah’s vision are crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ to one another (Is 6:3). The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall all have.” (The Four Loves p 92, 93)

Lewis’s point is that even a human being is too rich and multifaceted a being to be fully known one-on-one. You think you know someone, but you alone can’t bring out all that is in a person. You need to see the person with others. And if this is true with another human being, how much more so with the Lord? You can’t really know Jesus by yourself.

The Gospel and Community

Building community is no longer natural or easy under our present cultural conditions. It requires an intentionality greater than that required of our ancestors, and it is uncomfortable for most of us. But our weapon is the gospel itself.

In his classic book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer grounds Christian fellowship solidly in the gospel of justification by faith:

“The Reformers expressed it this way: Our righteousness is an ‘alien righteousness,’ a righteousness that comes from outside of us...

“God permits [Christians] to meet together and gives them community. Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ and this ‘alien righteousness.’ All we can say, therefore, is the community of Christians springs solely from the biblical and Reformation message of the justification of man through grace alone; this alone is the basis of the longing of Christians for one another...

“Without Christ we... would not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own ego.”

How does this work? Our natural condition under sin is to be “glory empty” — starved for significance, honor, and a sense of worth. Sin makes us feel superior and overconfident (because we are trying to prove to ourselves and others that we are significant) and inferior and under-confident (because at a deep level we feel guilty and insecure). Some people’s “glory emptiness” primarily takes the form of bravado and evident pride; for others, it takes the form of self-deprecation and self-loathing. Most of us are wracked by both impulses.

Either way, until the gospel changes us, we will use people in relationships. We do not work for the sake of the work; we do not relate for the sake of the person. Rather, we work and relate to bolster our own self-image — to derive it, essentially, from others. Bonhoeffer reminds us that the way to transparency, love, and mutual service is “blocked by our own ego.”

But when the gospel changes us, we can begin to relate to others for their sakes. It humbles us before anyone, telling us we are sinners saved only by grace. But it also emboldens us before anyone, telling us we are loved and honored by the only eyes in the universe that really count. So, we are set free to enjoy people for who they are in themselves, not for how they make us feel about ourselves. Our self-image is no longer based on comparisons with others (Gal 5:26; 6:3-5). We do not earn our worth through approval from people or through power over people. We are not overly dependent on the approval of others; nor, on the other hand, are we afraid of commitment and

connection to others. The gospel makes us neither self-confident nor self-disdaining but gives us boldness and humility that can increase together.

Strong community is formed by powerful common experiences, as when people survive a flood or fight together in a battle. When they emerge on the other side, this shared experience becomes the basis for a deep, permanent bond that is stronger than blood. The more intense the experience, the more intense the bond. When we experience Christ's radical grace through repentance and faith it becomes the most intense, foundational event of our lives.

Now when we meet someone from a different culture, race, or social class who has received the same grace, we see someone who has been through the same life-and-death experience. In Christ, we have both spiritually died and been raised to new life (Rom 6:4-6; Eph 2:1-6). And because of this common experience of rescue, we now share an identity marker even more indelible than the ties that bind us to our family, our race, or our culture.

Peter writes to the church "As you come to him, the living Stone — rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him — you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4-5). Like stones that have been perfectly shaped by the mason, the builder lays each block next to the other, and they interlock into a solid, beautiful temple. When we speak to others who know God's grace, we can recognize that their identity is now rooted more in who they are in Christ than in their family or class. As a result, Christ has created a connection that can surmount the formerly insurmountable barriers to our relationships.

We often think of community as simply one more thing we have to follow in the rules of behavior. "OK, I have to read my Bible, pray, stay sexually pure — and I need to go to fellowship." But community is best understood as the way we are to do all that Christ told us to do in the world.

Community is more than just the result of the preaching of the gospel; it is itself a declaration and expression of the gospel. It is the demonstration of the good news of freedom in Christ through the evident dismay of our transformed character and our life together. It is itself part of the good news, for the good news is this: This is what Christ has won for you on the cross — a new life together with the people of God. Once you were alienated from others, but now you have been brought near.