

Week 3: Growing In Community

Introduction:

When we are saved, the Holy Spirit places us into a new community of faith, and it is he who keeps us in community, and who draws us back into it when we want to stray and do our own thing.

Sunday services are an opportunity for us collectively to gather, sing praise, hear the word preached and partake in communion, as scripture instructs us. But most of our discipling and maturing happens outside of Sundays. Realising and embracing this has life-changing spiritual implications. If we are not in Christian community at the moment, in the way God intends, we are probably not being disciplined or maturing very well in our faith.

Today's message looks at what scripture says about the role of Christian community.

1. God Commands Community

- Read 1 Peter 2:10, Hebrews 10:24-25

God has always existed in community within himself, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He created humankind in his image, to be in relationship with him and with each other. When sin entered the world, community was fractured, but God had a plan, through Jesus Christ, to restore that once-impenetrable hostility. In doing so, God called people back into relationship with him and into relationship with one another. This new community was birthed through Christ's death and resurrection, and has existed ever since. Everyone who surrenders his/her life to Christ is added to this new community – called the church.

❖ Q: In light of this point, what does the Bible mean by “the church” and how is this different to what most people think about the church?

2. What Does Christian Community Look Like?

- Read Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 1 Corinthians 1:10

Paul describes the church as a body. Each part of the body is connected to the head, as well as to the other members of the body. This means that the church-global is interconnected, but it also means that each smaller group of churches has a significant role to play. Our local church can also be likened to a body, in which each member works together with the others, in order that the body should function in the way it was designed to. This changes the way we view each other entirely. Every single person in our church is a family member. We are not lone rangers, but belong to one another, in the same way that our eyes, ears and hands belong to our own bodies. Not being part of the fabric of community amounts to disobeying the biblical imperative to function as God's people.

Two Characteristics of Christian Community:

2.1. Christian Community is love

- Read John 13:34-35

Christian love – This means being selfless, others-focused, allowing ourselves to be inconvenienced for the sake of others, giving them our time and walking the walk, not just talking the talk. In living this way, the world will recognize that we are God's people because we will be living differently to the world.

2.2. Christian Community is trans-cultural

- ❖ Read Revelation 7:9-10

Because Christ died to break down the hostility that sin brought into relationships, it is only through Christ that true reconciliation can result. When we are brought out of the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of light, we are born into a new humanity, one where every child of God is embraced and loved equally, despite their differences. This truth has got to permeate our sinful prejudice to the point that it radically alters our perspectives on the culture's view of race, age and all the other statuses that are projected, and it should give us completely new, prejudice-free lenses.

BBC CORE

Gospel | Spirit | Community | Mission

Our sinful nature is so biased towards our own status in life, that we desperately need this truth to confront us and the Holy Spirit to convict us. Only then can we respond in humility and repentance, knowing that we need the Holy Spirit to empower each and every attempt to obey God in the way we view and treat others, and to bring about transformative change deep within our hearts and minds.

- ❖ Q: Even though we meet as a regular group, do you feel that we are connected, as a body, in the way scripture describes Christian community? If not, why do you think that is the case, and how do you think we should we respond?
- ❖ Q: Why is it important to define what the Bible means by love, when we think about Christian community being "love"?
- ❖ Q: What is the most difficult part for you in loving community biblically and why (i.e. giving your time, being inconvenienced for the sake of others and being selfless)?

3. What Does Christian Community Do?

- 3.1. **It is in Christian Community that we are discipled** – this happens in Gospel Communities where we stir up one another's faith, encourage one another, and push one another towards Godliness (see Hebrews 10: 23-25).
 - 3.2. **It is in Christian Community that your new birth is confirmed** – you can only tell if you are growing in maturity if there are other maturing Christians to witness and affirm this. They need to really know you in order to know whether the change is superficial or deep and lasting.
 - 3.3. **It is in Christian Community that you know and are known** – at Gospel Community level, we should be getting to know one another at a very vulnerable and transparent level, where those in our groups know of our spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical struggles and strengths – where, in other words, we are known for who we really are, and not for who we project ourselves to be in many other contexts (see Acts 20:18).
 - 3.4. **It is in Christian Community that we are cared for** – we are to be there one another, to encourage, build up, strengthen, teach, rebuke & correct (i.e. confront sin in a gentle and loving way – see 2 Timothy 4b), and lead by example. *"Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin."* (Bonhoeffer, 1954)
 - 3.5. **It is in Christian Community that we grow in our spiritual gifts** – God has gifted each and every Christian with gifts, with which to build up and serve the body. There is no one that has no gift, and it is only in community that you can observe and confirm those gifts, and put them to use in order for the body to flourish (see Romans 12:6-8).
- ❖ Q: Discuss as a group in which of the five areas of community that you think you are doing well and in which areas you think need improvement, and why. (Then take some time to pray through each of the areas that need growth and ask God to show you how to respond in obedience and faith; ask for the courage and strength to do so without delay.)

General Response:

- ❖ Q: What is one thing that God has firmly impressed on my heart in response to this message, and what step of obedience is he asking of me as a result?