

MARCH 11, 2018

FOUNDATIONS

WEEK FOUR: BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

CORE COMMITMENT: Connect with other believers in a Community Group for mutual encouragement and accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Many of you, like me, were part of a vital christian movement on the campuses where you attended college. Maybe you were a part of “Vertical” at Baylor, or “Breakaway” at A&M, or “Passion” at Georgia Tech.

There was usually a weekly gathering. The worship was loud and bold. The teacher was lively and energetic, and always found crazy cool insights in Scripture. The energy in the room was palpable.

You would gather through the week in discipleship groups where you were deadly serious about opening the Bible and following Christ. You didn’t just talk about sharing your faith, you were actively sharing your faith. After group, you converge on campus to talk to people about Jesus. Some of the bolder members of the group took advantage of the free speech plazas, while the rest of us participated in quiet conversations on the periphery.

We didn’t just see each other at “Vertical” or “D-Group” we saw each other in class. Greeted each other as we were walking to class and frequented the same haunts after class. We studied together before big tests.

Throughout the year there were larger gatherings with students from similar movements across the country. Cindie and I had our first date at the Waffle house in down town Ft. Worth during one of those events. Cindie was one of the speakers. She stood up in front of thousands of students and casually talked with a young lady she had led to Christ about what it means to follow Christ. I don’t remember what she said, I just remember she looked really hot while she was saying it.

I hung out with five guys. We studied Scripture together, did student camps and disciple now weekends together, broke all the campus rules together and spent time in the deans office together. Two of them are local pastors. One of them is a Christian Studies professor at Dallas Baptist University and the other one is in jail (not really, I have no idea where he is).

Those were the days. We didn't know it then, but we were experiencing something that is vital to our walk with Christ—authentic biblical community. Listen to how close our college experiences reflect the experience of the early church in Acts 2.

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

You will never recapture the glory days of your college years, but you can recapture the joy and vitality of being in authentic biblical community. That is the topic we want to tackle this morning. We'll start with four big truths about community, then we will talk about how we can more fully experience community in our church, in our groups and throughout the week.

WE WERE CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

The first big truth is, “We were created for community”

We were created with two built-in design flaws. We have a deep need for God. We have a deep need for each other.

You have to go back to the very beginning to tease this one out. In Genesis 2:18, we hear the startling words, “It is not good...”

The Bible is brutally honest, so we are used to things being “not good” in the pages of Scripture. But not here. Not now. This is the perfect moment. God has fashioned everything exactly as he wants it to be. He has created the perfect space for us to know him and thrive in our relationships with him and each other. The stain of sin has yet to enter our experience. In fact, before we hear the phrase, “It is not good,” we have heard six times in succession, “It was good, “It was good” It was good.” Then, in an amazing crescendo, “God saw everything he had made and it was very good.”

The phrase, “It is not good” takes us back to the sixth day, when God created man. God looks at Adam and observes, “It is not good for man to be alone...” Man was never created to be a solitary individual. He was created to be in community.

God's initial response to man's isolation follows in verse 19, “I will make a helper suitable for him...”

The Hebrew word for help, עֵזֶר (*'ezer*).¹ can be translated “help” or “strength.” It is most often used of God. Psalm 146:5 is a great example, “Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob...”

God has not given this enormous task to Adam and then created Eve to darn his socks, cook his meals and put the kids to bed at night. God has given an enormous task to Adam and Eve together and invited them both to play a significant role in the completion of the task.

She will be a help to him in much the same way God helps him, by coming along side him to complete him. Adam will do the same for her. Adam cannot be everything God has created and called him to be without the help of God, and by God’s design he cannot be everything God has called him to be and created him to be without the help of Eve. The same is true for Eve.

How will she help him? That is where the next word comes in. She is not just a helper, she is a “suitable helper.”

The Hebrew word for suitable is כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (*kénegdo*), which literally means “like opposite of him.”² It is a word that emphasizes sameness and difference in the same breath. A great translation would be “a companion corresponding to him.”

How does Eve correspond to Adam?

In one sense, she corresponds to Adam by being everything he is. In a dramatic move God creates Eve from Adam. She is made of the same stuff he is. In addition to being made of the same stuff as Adam, she shares in the image of God. She is everything he is in substance. She is everything he is in her standing before God.

In a more profound sense, she corresponds to Adam by being everything he is not. While she is everything that Adam is, she is not a duplicate. Her strengths and weaknesses correspond to Adam’s strengths and weaknesses. She will be strong in ways Adam never will. Adam will be strong in ways she never will. Neither one of them can accomplish God’s mission or reflect God’s glory alone. They need each other.

The unity of the man and woman is described in verse 24 as “becoming one flesh.” “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).”

As two people who become one, they are reflecting the image of their creator, who is “three in one.” As C. S. Lewis put it, “they are participating in the dance of the trinity.” God created us for community as a reflection of himself. He has existed for all eternity in life giving, life affirming

¹ The English word “helper,” because it can connote so many different ideas, does not accurately convey the connotation of the Hebrew word עֵזֶר (*'ezer*). Usage of the Hebrew term does not suggest a subordinate role, a connotation which English “helper” can have. In the Bible God is frequently described as the “helper,” the one who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, the one who meets our needs. In this context the word seems to express the idea of an “indispensable companion.” The woman would supply what the man was lacking in the design of creation and logically it would follow that the man would supply what she was lacking, although that is not stated here. NET BIBLE Translation Note on Genesis 2:18

² Comment on Genesis 2:18 in Wenham, Gordon J. *Genesis 1–15*. Vol. 1. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998.

community. The Father loving the Son and seeking his glory. The Son loving the Father and seeking his glory. The Spirit loving the Father and Son and seeking their glory. No selfish ambition divides them, they each exist for the other and for us.

WE WERE REDEEMED FOR COMMUNITY

The second big truth is that we were not only created for community, we were redeemed for community.

You'll remember we began by saying we were created with a deep need for God and a deep need for each other. We will never be everything God created and called us to be apart from his help and apart from the help of others.

We have a huge problem though. We have rejected God and as a result we are not only alienated from God, we are alienated from one another as well. Sin always has serious relational consequences. Each of us have turned our back on God and declared "We don't want your help. We don't need you hovering over our shoulder telling us what is right and wrong for us. We can decide that for ourselves. In fact, we think we could do a far better job of being God for us than you ever could. If we need your help, we'll let you know. Other than that, we are doing just fine, thank you!" So instead of looking to God and each other, we look to ourselves.

No sooner had Adam and Eve taken a bite from the forbidden fruit, than they cover, run and hide. Nothing is more detrimental to community than covering, running, and hiding. When God confronted them they took things a step further and added blame shifting and finger pointing to the mix. Authentic community is replaced with open hostility and mistrust.

So our redemption not only involves a restoration of our relationship with God, it involves a restoration of community as well. Notice how Paul describes the restoration between Jew and Gentile in Ephesians 2.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2:14).

Christ's purpose was to take two warring parties and create in himself one new humanity. The original reads to create in himself "one new man." In other words, the two become one. Where have we heard that before? In the Godhead three are one. In the marriage two are one. In Christ the many are one.

How do the many express their "oneness?" The answer takes us back to the garden. By completing and complementing one another. In the same way God created Eve to complete and complement Adam, and Adam to complete and complement Eve, he made every member of the body to complete and complement one another.

Notice how Paul explains this dynamic to the church in Corinth.

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (1 Corinthians 12:12-21).

So while there is a lot to unpack here, Paul is telling us we were made for each other, and that God is doing something unique and unprecedented in every local church by arranging the parts exactly as he wants them to be. No one can say, “I don’t need the church.” No one can say, “The church doesn’t need me.”

WE THRIVE IN COMMUNITY

The third big truth is this, not only were we created for community, and redeemed for community, we thrive in community.

We thrive in community because we are giving ourselves away for the sake of Christ and his body, and we are receiving from others who are giving themselves away for the sake of Christ and his body. We are built up in the act of giving, and we are built up in the act of receiving.

Notice how Paul describes the dynamic in Ephesians 4.

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

So for the Apostle Paul, maturity is a community project. Notice that he is far more concerned with the maturity of the church than he is with the maturity of individuals. Individuals are equipped to serve, and each part does its work but the goal is “that the body of Christ may be built up...”

I love Paul’s end goal. We are equipped to live and serve in community...

...so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

That’s it. That is the one thing we should desire more than anything else in this world—experiencing everything God has for us. Or as Paul put it, “Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” And we can only do that together “as each part does its work.”

Paul has more to say. He takes it a step further in verse 14,

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The engine that drives community forward is deep God-centered relationships that allow us to speak into one another's lives. In verse 14, Paul tells us what we don't want to be. We don't want to be "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves."

In verse 15, he describes how we can move from infancy to maturity.

15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ (v. 15).

Notice once again. Paul's emphasis is not on mature individuals but on a mature body.

Paul highlights two critical elements of our life together—"Truth" and "Love." When we speak truth without love we callously dismantle one another with our words. When we attempt to love each other without speaking truth, we turn a blind eye to the careless behavior that undermines the unity of the church and our witness in the world.

Community thrives when it is built on the truth of God's word and a deep love for one another. Community is neither a social gathering where we catch up on the events of the week, nor a bible study where we go deep in the word. Community happens when we are meaningfully engaged with God and one another through his word, and are actively building each other up by speaking the truth in love.

Community calls for a lot of time and patience on our part. It's hard work. We have to be walking with God and walking with each other, before we've earned the right to speak into each other's lives. The investment of time and energy is well worth it. We were created for community, we were redeemed for community, and we thrive when we are in community.

COMMUNITY FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD

The fourth big idea is this, "We not only live in community for Christ's sake and our sake, we live in community for the sake of the world."

John 13-17 is known as the upper room discourse. In the moments before going to the cross Jesus shares his heart with the disciples. The disciples have no idea of what is about to hit them, but Jesus does. He prepares them not only for the next few hours, but for a life-time of following him.

Jesus sounds a strong note of community early in the discourse. In John 13:34, 35 he tells us:

34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The distinguishing characteristic of Christ followers everywhere will be the love that they have for one another. It is not our theological precision or our dazzling worship services that mark us out as the people of God. It is community.

Jesus brings the discourse to a close, in chapter 17, by pausing to pray. He prays for himself—that he might glorify the father in the face of the cross. He prays for his disciples—that they would stay true to the gospel in a hostile world. He prays for us—that we might be one as he and the father are one. It is a remarkable prayer. Let's pick up in verse 20.

20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

There it is again. The concept of "oneness." In the Trinity the three are one. In Marriage the two are one. In the church the many are one. Notice the kind of oneness that Jesus has in mind. It runs much deeper than wearing the same t-shirt and showing up at the same ministry events. I pray... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

You'll remember we spoke of Adam and Eve participating in the dance of the Trinity. The dance could not be any more explicit than it is here. May they be one, "just as you are in me and I am in you." Jesus is asking the father to unify the body of Christ with the same kind of organic unity you find in the trinity. I don't even know how to wrap my head around that concept.

But Jesus is not through. He builds on the concept in verses 22 and 23.

22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

Jesus is not looking for superficial unity, he is praying for "complete unity." He also highlights both the purpose and result of unity. We find the purpose in verse 21, "so that the world may believe you sent me." We find the result in verse 23: "Then the world will know that you sent me and loved them even as you have loved me." Jesus is praying that we will experience community for the sake of the world.

One of the biggest openings for the gospel is "bad church stories." I was sitting at the bar in a local restaurant the other day, working on Sunday's message. The bartender walked over and said, "What cha doing, bub?" I told him, "I'm the teaching pastor in a local church, I am working on my message for this weekend." He asked me, "What are you going to tell them? So I got to share a bit of the gospel. He replied, "I'm not much of a church guy myself." I responded, "Let me guess you have a bad church story." He did. It was a slow day for him so we got to talk for quite a while. One of the waiters joined us. She had a bad story too. We all do.

Jesus calls us to be a vital exception to bad church stories by living in authentic biblical community. We not only live in community for our sake and his sake, but for the sake of the world.

HOW DO WE EXPERIENCE COMMUNITY?

So how can we experience biblical community? It is really pretty simple. Not easy, but simple. Let me give you three common sense steps to experiencing biblical community.

A. We Experience Community By Being in Community

98% of biblical community is just showing up. Good things happen when we are walking with God and with each other.

You'll remember the pattern of the early church.

They devoted themselves... to [the] fellowship, ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common... ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people (Acts 2:41, 44, 46-47).

They didn't simply show up. They showed up often. They didn't just show up for small group, they showed up in the larger gatherings as well. They placed a premium on fellowship. You cannot explain the word "devoted" in any other way. They made biblical community a huge priority and they rearranged their lives to make it happen.

For them, it was an everyday thing. For us it needs to occur far more frequently.

The writer of Hebrews, tackles the issue from the other end of the spectrum as he admonishes us, "Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing..."

B. We Experience Community By Participating in Community

The writer of Hebrews not only tells us to show up for community, he tells us to be actively engaged in community. "Let us spur one another on to love and good deeds..."

We talked a couple of weeks ago about how you can be an encouragement to one another in our Sunday morning gatherings. Show up early. Engage the people around you both before and after the service. Enter wholeheartedly into the worship of the church. Nothing is more encouraging than a church that is buzzing with lively conversation where people are lifting their hands and their hearts to God with one voice in joyful praise.

Do the same thing at community group. Show up early with a big smile on your face. Engage people in conversation. Be engaged in the study of the word. Don't dominate the conversation, but ask great questions and offer your insights. Chances are, God has given you an insight because he wants someone else to hear it.

Don't just be there. Be there. I know that this is really difficult for introverts because I am an introvert. God created me for studying and spending hours alone with him in the word. But he also created me for community, so I have to work hard at it. You can help me and every other introvert you know, by making the first move. We warm up slowly, but when we warm up, we are so much more fun than extroverts.

C. We Experience Community By Making Unique Contributions to Community

God not only designed you to be in community, and desires you to be fully engaged in the communities you are in, he designed you to make a unique contribution to community. We will talk about this a little more next week, but let's close with a word from Peter. He encourages his readers,

¹⁰ Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

If you don't know what your gifts are, ask those closest to you. They can tell you instantly. If you do know your gifts go to your community group leader. Tell them "I think I am really gifted at... Can you think of any way I can use my gifts under your leadership for the benefit of our group?"

You can also come to David or me with the same question. "I think I am really gifted at... Can you think of any way I can use my gifts under your leadership for the benefit of Christ Church?" I am scheduled to have one of those conversations this week.

Here's what we will tell you. Absolutely. But before we place you in leadership, let us get to know you. Distinguish yourself in your love for Christ. Distinguish yourself as a servant by doing small things. Distinguish yourself as a shepherd by loving and caring for the people around you. Now you are ready for leadership.

You need to be famous for doing the small things, before seeking a big platform.

CONCLUSION

We are created for community. We were redeemed for community. We can only be everything God created us to be and called us to be when we are in community. We are even gifted to make unique contributions to community. And when we are in community we make a bold statement to the world about the transforming power of the love of Christ.

Like the early church, may we be a church that is "devoted.. to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." When we are together, let's be together.

AROUND THE TABLE

1. Have you ever had a vibrant experience of biblical community (similar to the one Paul described in Sunday's message)? Describe your experience. What were some of the things you saw God doing in the lives of others? What were some of the things God did in your life?
2. How does the way Adam and Eve were created to complete and complement one another, and the way the members of the Trinity complete and complement one another, serve as a model for how we should complete and complement one another in the body of Christ?
3. READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-21
 - a. In what ways is the human body a great illustration of the dynamics God intends for us to experience in the body of Christ?
 - b. Why is diversity important?
 - c. Why is unity important?
 - d. What are some practical ways we can maintain unity while celebrating diversity?
4. READ EPHESIANS 4:14-16
 - a. In Sunday's message we said, "The engine that drives community forward is deep God-centered relationships that allow us to speak into one another's lives." What kind of groundwork do we need to lay, before we are ready to speak the truth in love?
 - b. What happens when we speak truth without love?
 - c. What happens when we show a lot of grace to one another but never really get around to speaking the truth?
 - d. Is there anyone in your life who regularly speaks truth into your life? How would you describe the dynamics of that relationship?
 - e. What are some ways we can all be better "truth tellers?"
 - f. What are some ways we can lay the groundwork for "truth telling" by being "more loving?"
5. In Sunday's message, we described three simple steps to experiencing deeper biblical community. (1) Show up for community; (2) participate fully when you are in community; and (3) make the contributions only you can make in the community you are involved in.
 - a. Why are all of these important?
 - b. Which one needs the most work in your life?
 - c. How has God gifted you to make a unique contribution to the life of the church?
 - d. What are some practical steps you can take to be more fully engaged in authentic biblical community?

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