

Community as a means of sanctification/COB /08.17.14

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: Title]** How many of you have seen an episode of *Friends* or *Cheers* on TV? When we watch these shows we see something desirable: close fellowship. The *Cheers* theme song said, “Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name.”
- So that you will feel this welcome, the New Testament repeatedly instructs us to greet one another with a kiss. How many of you fulfilled this command this morning? Some churches take a minute during worship for meet and greet, should we stand and kiss one another?
 - I have known heterosexual men who would greet me with a kiss on the cheek; in their ethnic subcultures, it represents manly affection. It was the same in the early church, plus a kiss there represented a shared intimacy in Christ and his grace.
 - They didn't greet each other with a holy kiss on the show *Cheers*, but does anyone remember what happened when Norm would enter the bar? *Norm!* They would all enthusiastically yell out Norm's name. That's the kind of greeting the Bible is talking about.
 - It would be cool if you would do that for me. When I come up on stage, you can call out, “Will!” Or maybe someone on the praise team could introduce me like Johnny Carson, “Here's Willie!” Actually, I want you to sing out the name of Jesus, not my name, but please do greet one another with great enthusiasm.
- † Two things bother me as I watch *Cheers* or *Friends*. First, I think in some ways these characters have better fellowship than we have in the church. They spend time together multiple times a week, while some of us say we don't have time to meet even once outside of church on Sunday morning. They share their troubles and triumphs while most of us try to stay independent and private. It makes me wonder, if the pagan world recognizes the need for intimate friendships, why don't we?
- It also bothers me that there are severe flaws in their kind of fellowship. The world recognizes the need for intimate friendships, but its vision for fellowship is not the same as God's. In these shows, nobody helps another to grow spiritually; and while they have some accountability, they don't encourage each other to live out the biblical standard of having the character of Christ. I'm not sure there is a single episode of *Friends* that doesn't revolve around one character lying to another. That's an accepted part of their fellowship.

We are one community in unity of Christ

- † So the world's concept of community or fellowship falls short of God's standard, and it also falls short of what we need to thrive. In a few minutes, we will explore the details of what we mean when we talk about biblical community. For now, please understand that the Bible does describe a type of community, a type of fellowship, that is supposed to be a part of Christian life in the church.
- † **[Slide 2: one body]** We can expect the Holy Spirit to lead us into deeper involvement in this biblical community. To begin with, we are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ, which is the church.

- 1 Corinthians 12.13, 27 NIV: “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... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”
- † **[Slide 3: belong]** Thus we are connected to one another and belong to one another.
- Romans 12.4-5 NET: “For just as in one [physical] body we have many members, and not all the members serve the same function, so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members who belong to one another.”
 - This implies an obligation to one another and an opportunity to be blessed by one another.
- † **[Slide 4: unity]** We are to become unified with Christ and each other, to accomplish the purposes God gave the church.
- 1 Corinthians 1.9-10 NET: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship with his son, Jesus Christ our Lord. I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree together, to end your divisions, and to be united by the same mind and purpose.”
- † **[Slide 5: sanctify church]** In our sermons, we have been talking about progressive sanctification, which is God’s plan to progressively purify and grow each person spiritually, so that we all move away from sinfulness and toward a true reflection of God’s character. God’s plan is not only to sanctify the individual, but to sanctify the church of which the individual is a vital part.
- We have discussed the fruit of the Spirit already in this sermon series. If you consider each element of the fruit mentioned in Galatians 5.15-21, you will notice they each would be helpful in building the church community, whereas the works of the flesh mentioned in that passage work to destroy such community.
 - In a few weeks, we will discuss the gifts of the Spirit, and we will see that these also focus on building the body of Christ, the church.
- † **[Slide 6: Ephesians 4.11-16]** Let’s take a look at a key passage that connects the sanctification of the individual with that of the church: turn in your Bible to Ephesians 4.11-16 NET: “It was he [Christ] who gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, that is, to build up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God— a mature person, attaining to the measure of Christ’s full stature. So we are no longer to be children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who craftily carry out their deceitful schemes. But practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head. From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body grows in love.”
- God’s plan is that each individual will grow, and thus learn to do his/her part in the ministry of the church, and this will result in the church body growing.
 - **[Slide 7: unity]** I don’t mean growth in numbers, though that is one expected result. Paul says we will grow into unity of faith and unity of the knowledge of the Son of God. We each grow in knowledge and understanding of what Scripture teaches, so we have unity in major doctrines. We grow in relationship with Christ, so we have unity in purpose and identity. And this growth should lead to a change in our character and thus in how we live, so that we become like Christ.

- **[Slide 8: maturity]** Paul says we will grow to be mature in faith. What was our VBS theme this year? “Discover, decide, defend.” Paul expects we all will come to have discovered the truth in the Bible, we will decide to believe to the point of living it out, and we will understand well enough to defend or explain it to others. This will protect us from being swayed by the false teachings that come at us from the outside world and even from within Christian churches.
- **[Slide 9: truth/love]** And Paul says we will grow in our ability to practice truth in love, and thus we will better reflect Christ, God’s image, as individuals and as a church body. And we will better be able to build fellowship with each other.

Why we need biblical community to be healthy and growing

- † **[Slide 10: psychologists]** In the Bible, the sanctification of the individual occurs in the context of biblical community, because it is only in such community that we can get what we need to stay healthy and growing. God designed us to need each other. The Christian loner is an American myth: we are supposed to be in a tight-knit community, because we need each other.
 - Cloud and Townsend, two Christian psychologists, wrote this book called, *How People Grow*. In it, they argue that God’s plan A is to use other people to help grow us; and the reason God does it this way is because so much of the transformation he wants to work in us has to do with how we relate to each other. We could be the best Bible scholars or theologians in the world, but if we couldn’t relate to each other well, we would be missing a main theme of God’s revelation.
 - Cloud and Townsend also said that, “Virtually every emotional and psychological problem, from addictions to depression, has alienation or emotional isolation at its core. Recovery from these problems always involves helping people to get more connected to each other at deeper and healthier levels than they are” [122].
 - Plus, as we discussed a few weeks ago, many of our emotional and relational problems have spiritual problems at their core. So getting right with God and learning to live and relate in his way will cure those problems and provide a fresh start.
- † **[Slide 11: blessing]** If we work together toward fulfilling the purposes of the church, we will bless each other along the way. We will talk in a few weeks about spiritual gifts and serving together, but in summary, God has designed each of us to be unique, such that we can accomplish more ministry for each other and others if we work together than we ever could by all working separately.
- † Even when we all can offer the same things, in some cases we still need to receive them from each other. I can offer you encouragement, but I still need encouragement from you. I can give myself a pep talk, but I still need encouragement from you. God designed us such that we need to receive certain things from one another in the church in order to thrive.
 - **[Slide 12: flower]** Think of a flower. I know that doesn’t seem manly, but I like gardening, and I am really hoping those of you who know what you are doing will teach me about these Yankee flowers, because gardening here is totally different than in Florida.
 - So, think of a flower. The Bible indicates that God wants every believer to blossom in three relationships: to blossom with passionate worship of God, dedicated ministry to each other, and loving outreach to non-believers. The more a believer grows to be like Christ, the more we see this flowering occur. But to grow, we need good, healthy, roots, which is biblical community, being rooted into the body of Christ.

- † **[Slide 13: ἀλλήλων]** In Greek, there is a term, ἀλλήλων – say it with me... – this means “one-another.” There are over forty “one another verses” in the New Testament that command us to love one another, serve one another, encourage one another, and so on, and God put those verses there because we need those things from one another. We need them to stay healthy spiritually, to grow spiritually, to thrive spiritually. It is only when we experience these aspects God designed into relationships that we steadily grow spiritually and have a chance at reaching our spiritual potential.

- † These relational activities lead us to emotional and relational healing, further our ability to appropriate our renewed nature and the promises of God, and encourage our obedience. Thus sanctification happens to the community as God works through his people and each of his people experience sanctification as a result of being in the community.
 - This is why we see value in support groups that provide accountability, encouragement, prayer support, love, acceptance, and the other things the Bible says characterize the body of Christ. Christian fellowship encourages and instructs us how to appropriate our renewed nature and new identity in Christ, and thus to walk in freedom and victory over sin.
 - We are healed by our association with Christ, but that association is in the context of being in the body of Christ. This is why the Bible gives extensive instructions on how to live in community with other believers, because this healing and growth process depends on God working through us to help each other.

What Biblical Community Looks Like

- † Let’s look at some of the characteristics of biblical community or Christian fellowship...
 - **[Slide 14: love]** We love one another sacrificially and unconditionally: John 15.12 NET: [Jesus speaking] “My commandment is this– to love one another just as I have loved you.”
 - We forgive one another: Colossians 3.12-13 NET: “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if someone happens to have a complaint against anyone else. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also forgive others.”
 - **[Slide 15: accept]** We accept one another unconditionally: Romans 15.7 NIV: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”
 - At the same time, we exhort one another to follow Christ: Hebrews 3.13 NET: “But exhort one another each day, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ that none of you may become hardened by sin’s deception.”
 - We teach and admonish one another: Colossians 3.16 NASB: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another...”
 - **[Slide 16: encourage]** We encourage and edify one another: 1 Thessalonians 5.11 NET: “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other...”
 - We serve and help one another: 1 Peter 4.10 NET: “Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of the varied grace of God.”
 - We show devotion to one another: Romans 12.10 NET: “Be devoted to one another with mutual love, showing eagerness in honoring one another.”

- **[Slide 17: greet]** We enthusiastically greet one another: 1 Peter 5.14 NET: “Greet one another with a loving kiss.”
- We care for one another: Philippians 2.3-5 NET: “Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well. You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had.”
- **[Slide 18: patient]** We are patient with one another: Ephesians 4.1-3 NET: “I, therefore, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live worthily of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”
- We are kind to one another: Ephesians 4.32 NET: “...be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.”
- **[Slide 19: comfort]** We comfort one another with scriptural truth about our future deliverance: 1 Thessalonians 4.18 NASB: “Therefore comfort one another with these words [of scriptural truth].”
- We pursue what is good for one another: 1 Thessalonians 5.15 NET: “See that no one pays back evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.”
- **[Slide 20: restore]** We work to restore one another in relationship with God and each other: Galatians 6.1-2 NET: “Brothers and sisters, if a person is discovered in some sin, you who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness. Pay close attention to yourselves, so that you are not tempted too. Carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”
- **[Slide 21: confess]** We pray for one another and confess to one another: James 5.16 NET: “So confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness.”

How it works

- † **[Slide 22: confess expansion]** If we confess our sins to each other and then pray for each other, we experience many benefits, the first of which is obtaining prayer support. I don't know why prayer works, but I know I want you praying for me!
 - When we confess to each other, we also unburden ourselves, we come clean about not being perfect and needing both fellowship and grace. This brings emotional and spiritual healing.
 - So does what is implicit in that James verse: that the person who hears your confession and prays for you is unconditionally accepting you and loving you, while still exhorting you to get right with God and walk in the light.
 - The exhortation will help you take necessary steps. Just as important, when you experience unconditional grace, love, and acceptance through your Christian friends, then you can truly feel and understand the unconditional grace, love, and acceptance that God is giving you.
- † **[Slide 23: accept]** As we read a few minutes ago, Romans 15.7 NIV says, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

- First, if you know that you are accepted here for who you really are, then you can relax and be authentic here, you will be more open, honest, and vulnerable, and thus you will have a better opportunity to form real relationships with other Christians.
 - Second... Hmm... I want you to think of the person in this church whom you have the hardest time accepting – don't look at him or her! just think about it. God is going to use that person to help you grow spiritually, starting today.
 - Today he wants you to realize that he has accepted that person and therefore so should you! And then God wants to use you to help that person grow spiritually. But relationship comes before influence, and the relationship begins with acceptance and affirmation. You have to grow to be able to accept that person, and then God will use you to help that person grow in an environment of acceptance.
- † **[Slide 24: Hebrews 10]** Hebrews 10.24-25 NIV: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”
- As I preached in my first sermon here, we are to meet together to provide two kinds of encouragement to each other: encouragement to do the things necessary to strengthen our faith and encouragement to live out that faith by doing amazing acts of love together.
 - Without this kind of support, none of us can reach our potential, none of us will grow spiritually up to God's expectations, and so none of us will experience the fullness of the blessings God desires for us.
 - The problem is, it is impossible to deliver these two kinds of life-changing encouragement to each other consistently at a large-group Sunday morning worship service. So we as a church have to be intentional about developing other contexts for biblical fellowship to occur. That's why we have small groups, our monthly fun events, our coffee break after the service, and less formal small gatherings throughout the week. As individuals, we need to avail ourselves of these opportunities to experience biblical fellowship.

Conclusion

- † **[Slide 25: SF group]** God wants us to grow spiritually, to be more like Christ. That growth is necessary so that the church will be effective in its mission. That growth occurs fully only when we are in true biblical community.
- True biblical community is modeled for us by the early church and described to us by New Testament teachings. In essence, true biblical community means doing life god's way together. It starts here on Sunday morning, certainly, but it is extended into Small Groups where we covenant with one another to do all the one another commands, and then it goes beyond those meetings, to where we are truly intimate with each other in our personal lives.
 - So please this week pray through the list on your handout from Insight for Living. Pray to be able to receive and share these aspects of true biblical fellowship with others.
 - Please also be intentional about placing yourself in biblical fellowship during the week. This might be informally gathering regularly with family and friends or a more formal gathering as a small group of believers who will learn to live biblically together. Doing both is optimal.

- As a church, we want to increase the number and quality of our small groups. Leading a small group does not mean you have to host the group or necessarily teach the group, it means you are intentional about cultivating the community of the group so people stay healthy and growing. So it is more than a Bible study, but not beyond your abilities if you are growing and somewhat mature in your faith. If you are interested in getting some training and coaching to help you start leading a group, let me know.

† Let me finish with an illustration. Many years ago, when LeeAnn and I were in a church of about 650 people, there was a fellow named Al, who had been coming to this church for six months, and still only knew the two people who had invited him. He was painfully shy, and as a result he was unhappy, lonely, and a bit alienated from, and disillusioned with, the church. To his credit, he kept coming.

- After a church service one week, LeeAnn invited Al to our small group. Al came to group every week after that, but for about two months he didn't speak, not even during the social time! But as he realized that we accepted him, and as we continued to affirm him and pray for him, he began to relax and become more active in our discussions. Eventually, he became friends with most of us in the group.
- Now when we met Al, he not only had a lot of emotional and relational issues, he also was confused in a lot of ways about God and being a Christian, even though he had been going to church and reading his Bible for years. This is not a criticism of Al: it is a common problem for people trying to grow in isolation!
- Several months later, Al gave an interesting testimony to the group: He had taken a maintenance job at a large retirement facility, and he now found himself sharing the gospel and praying with the residents of that retirement facility! He told us that being in our small group had changed his life!
- In the small group, Al found acceptance and affirmation; he found people who would pray for him; he found a safe environment to learn how to relate to others, and through that he found healing for his emotional and relational problems, which resulted in accelerated spiritual growth; he was able to overcome his shyness to become a bold sharer of the gospel to relative strangers, and because he was healing and because he had friends with whom to discuss his questions about his faith, he also began to grow in his understanding of God's Word and of God himself.
- I hope we will all benefit from the fellowship in this church just as much, and be ready to offer it to all others who wander in our doors. Let's pray...