

COMMUNITY – GOD’S BIG PLAN FOR THE WORLD

A member of our church tells the story of a visit to a Latino from their agency working in a country north from here. The Latino brother was part of a support group in the country he worked in. The support group was almost wholly formed from those who were ethnically Anglo-Saxon. Both of them went to one of the meetings of the support group while he was there. They predictably arrived a bit late. The Bible study had already started. They were allowed to settle in as the study continued without a break. As soon as the study was over the members of the group got up and left, leaving the Latino shell shocked – No one had bothered to shake his hand, let alone hug him and enquire as to how he was.

I tell this story to illustrate a point I want to make right at the beginning. As we begin to deal with community we will need to deal with our present attitudes, structures and cultural practices. The apostle Paul frequently expressed concern with the social attitudes and structures of his day. Some times he called these into question, at other times he insisted that they be carefully followed. When they came into conflict with basic gospel concepts, there was never any doubt in his mind which one gave way.

In the Greco Roman Judaistic world setting in which the New testament was birthed, there were two types of community, people might associate with – the politeia or public life of the city or nation state and oikonomia or the household order to which they were attached. Most Greek and Jewish citizens played an active part in both, but there were significant segments of the society that did not have the freedom to do this eg slaves and in certain spheres women. By the middle of the 1st century then, there were already groups that were attempting to forge an identity beyond ethnic, linguistic, geographical or occupational ties. The principle of community here was neither politeia or okonomia but koinonia i.e voluntary partnership

Koinonia, then was the principle that governed the early church. By its very nature it meant that the community was beyond any linguistic, geographical or racial identity. It recognized no social distinctions in determining membership and, in theory at least could be universal.

Theological Principles:

In Jesus Christ, through His death and resurrection, God has extended to mankind the awesome privilege and possibility of freedom. The concept of Christian community springs from this amazing possibility.

Salvation granted to human beings

Freedom from sin and the guilt and punishment of sin

A new freedom towards others

freedom from the fear of another’s judgement

freedom from one’s own tendency to manipulate

freedom to serve others – voluntarily giving oneself in love 1 Thess 2:8 and 1 Cor 9:19

Freedom then says Paul has 3 components

1. Independence
 - a. From sin, law death
 - b. For righteousness, conformity to Jesus and suffering
2. Dependence
 - a. Upon Christ
 - b. Upon the Spirit – making us more Christ like
3. Interdependence
 - a. With others as liberty leads to service
 - b. With the world as the universe itself will experience the liberty of transformation

Our Independence from sin leads us to a dependence on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit which is then worked out in our interdependence with each other. Jn 17; 21 & 23 means that the cycle is

truly complete when this interdependence on each other leads others into the independence-dependence-interdependence paradigm

The gospel binds people to God but also to each other

Acceptance by Christ necessitated acceptance of those He has accepted Rom 15:7

Reconciliation with God entailed reconciliation with others who exhibit gospel character Phil 4:2-3

Union in the Spirit involved union with one another

The gospel is not a purely personal matter, it is a communal affair

Eph 4:1,11-16

It is interesting that the Bible paints its most enduring picture of the church as the Body of Christ.

True Community essentially reflects the **four characteristics** that we mentioned earlier

Dynamic concept – flow of life, nurture, changing, character

Growth factor – optimum growth – proportionate growth

Diversity Expectation – a body with only hands or even 3 hands

Interdependency formula – ever had an infection at the tip of your finger, or a small bruise in between one of your toes?

What is community?

A group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, mourn together, to delight in each other and make others' conditions their own.

Community is and must be inclusive.

True community does not have membership limits. Acts 11:18

Dynamism and inclusivity together means that the community is always reaching to extend itself. Where a church is a true community mission will happen naturally

Inclusivity is not just about sex, ethnicity and language. It is also about operational diversity and the expression of the full range of human emotions – tears and laughter, fear, doubt and faith.

Commitment:

It is impossible to maintain inclusivity without a high level of commitment

Including others is messy and inconvenient and uncomfortable.

We hang in there together

Transcending individual differences:

Through commitment community learns to transcend (not obliterate – but climb over) differences

Appreciation of differences – diversity expectation – differences are seen as gifts or as opportunities for service

Transcending requires the operation of love – speaking the truth in love (Eph passage) and faith working through love (Gal 5:6).

Affirms individualism (rugged individualism – wholeness and purpose is in MY grasp and achieved through MY skill set, perseverance and hard work alone, no room for others who derail this purpose, big boys don't cry and expression of weaknesses is seen as counter productive vs soft individualism – we cannot be truly ourselves till we are able to share freely the things we have in common: our weaknesses, our incompleteness, our inadequacy, our sin, our lack of wholeness, and our lack of self sufficiency. I'm not OK, you are not OK, but that is OK, Rugged individualism predisposes us to arrogance, soft to humility, where we begin to appreciate each others gifts, learn to understand our own limitations, witness others share their brokenness and therefore are be able to easier accept our own imperfections, When we are fully assured of the validity of human variety then we will more fully recognize our interdependency) Providing place for the significant minority –

A Safe place

Perhaps the defining statement in the search for true communities.

I can cry here

I can be myself here

I can speak my heart and I will be listened to and heard and accepted and supported

Becomes a place for true healing and conversion. It is a safe place because no one is trying to fix you.

Because there is open confession of brokenness.

Place where there is expression of vulnerability

Place for personal disarmament

Place of graceful conflict:

Paradoxically true

An unusual battle ground

Place where the gladiators have laid down their personal weapons, have learned the art of listening and understanding, where they respect each other's gifts and accept each other's limitations, where they learn to communicate honestly, where they celebrate differences and bind each other's wounds, where they are committed to struggling together rather than against each other

A place where conflict can be resolved without physical or emotional blood shed and with wisdom and grace.

Do you see a similarity to either Acts 2: 42-47 or Phil 2:1-11

Anti community trends:

The need to heal, convert, fix or solve

Motives are usually self serving and self centred

Conversion does not take place through a fierce attack on some one's world view, but by a demonstration of the healing and wholeness of another world view

Sharing the other's pain is usually more effective than trying to fix it (remember Job and his friends)

We celebrate differences and do not try to convert others to our way of thinking or doing things.

The need to control

Usually has its roots in the fear of failure and an inability to trust the other.

In a community one has the freedom to fail.

How is Community forged

Is this just a dream state? Or is it possible?

It is just as possible as it is to be holy or it is to truly love

The work of the Holy Spirit

Community can only be forged in a spirit of love and peace (harmony)

These are from the Holy Spirit

Through a series of small personal deaths - you do not belong to your selves

Emptying oneself of self serving desires, the need to control, my cherished notions, the need to have my way

Through the sharing of experiences (of our lives) – suffering together

The reality also is that this type of community living is counter culture, is divinely enabled.

No wonder Jesus chose this aspect of Christian life as the final demonstration of His Divinity and the most convincing proof of the truth of the gospel.