

Pastoral Thoughts on the Benefits of Community in the Local Church

One of the issues facing the Corinthian Church was their lack of love for one another as they did not consider their brothers and sisters, particularly in reference to the Lord's Supper. Let me read the context in 1 Cor. 11:17-22: **"But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not."** After this, Paul reminds them of their example, the Lord Jesus. What did he do? (Phil. 2) He left heaven, took on flesh, lived among us, obeying perfectly the law of God in his heart and his actions. Then, he laid down his life for us, the godly for the ungodly, the all-deserving One for those who deserve only death, punishment, and separation from God. He tells them (and us) to remember the "body" of the Lord. And, as a result of his death, those who believe in Him are now called the "body" of Christ. So, by not considering the great example and humble sacrifice of Christ (which was evident as they were divisions among them), not considering his "body," they were not considering one another.

In this way they were sinning in such a harmful way to themselves and to the entire body of Christ. This is why Paul says in vv. 28-30: **"Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died."** Brothers and sisters, WE MUST CONSIDER ONE ANOTHER as members of the body of Christ! With this in mind (as we examine ourselves and remember the body of Christ broken for us) I want to follow up with Gil's message last week (How are we doing?) with and focus on the benefits of community. David and I are reading a book together. And in this book, he highlights community as one of the means of grace God uses to strengthen faith and repentance. I merely want to mention and briefly comment on 8 benefits of community.

1. We remind one another of the truth. In 1 Tim. 3:15 Paul says, we are **"the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth."** God has chosen to reveal what is TRUE (particularly of things pertaining to faith and godliness), through the church. This means that we speak and proclaim and teach what is true to the world. This also means that we speak the truth to one another. In the Lord's Supper we have visible elements of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We remember his death and what He has done for us. In his great humiliation God took on flesh. He was sinless. He laid down his life as a sacrifice for our sins. He rose again and now sits at the right hand of the Father. In this way we are reminded of the truth of the gospel. We sing about this gospel. We pray about this gospel. We preach about this gospel. We speak to one another of this gospel. We do this IN COMMUNITY, in our weekly gathering.

When we come together (in all settings) we also remind one another of all the truths of God found in the Bible. In Eph. 4:25 we read: **“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”** Brothers and sisters, this is what we do!

2. We are taught the Bible by those God has gifted for this purpose. Speaking of God’s gifts to the church Paul says in Eph. 4:11:13: **“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . .”** Here we see that pastors and teachers are given to body for the very important work of building up the church. In our case, particularly with elders, Paul makes it clear that in order to be a pastor, this man must be able to teach. And where this happens in local churches, the people are greatly blessed, the church grows and is edified. Where this is not happening, over a period of time, I would argue that the church will suffer, and even decline to the point of dying. I think as I have looked around through the years, this has certainly been the case. Here at Grace I am so grateful for our elders and others God has gifted!

3. We pray together for God’s help. When we gather we pray. We pray at the beginning. We confess our sins through prayer. We have general prayers and pastoral prayers. We pray for God’s will to be done . . . on earth as it is in heaven. And at the core of EVERY prayer is a petition for God to help us. Our prayers begin with praise and thanksgiving and confession . . . but they eventually move to petitions. Phil. 4:6-7 says, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** In Jesus’ name we ask for God’s help. And we know that God will answer our prayers . . . But, how do we respond when God does not answer, at least as we desire? When we don’t “feel” God is helping? This is a good question. Well, I think this verse tells us HOW God helps. In this life of sin, death, the work of the devil, afflictions, heart-aches, persecutions, sufferings, God helps us with “peace,” peace which surpasses understanding. This is what we do when we come together. And not only on Sunday mornings, but in our home groups, in our women’s meetings, in our men’s meetings, in our one on one times together. All of this is done in COMMUNITY.

4. We model Christian change and holiness for one another. Paul reminds the Thessalonians: **“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.”** (2 Th. 3:6-9) In this passage, he is speaking of “physical” work. But, the principle

remains. In Heb. 13:7 we read: “**Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.**” This doesn’t merely apply to the example of leaders. In the life of the church there must be godly men and women we hold as an examples. Titus tells the older men and the older women to set the examples in godliness. And let me ask, “*How do we know how someone lives if we do not get into their homes and into their lives?*” This doesn’t merely apply to raising up leaders, but to creating an environment of godliness in the church. YES, this happens on Sunday mornings. YES, this happens in Sunday School. YES, this happens in home group. But, I would argue that our community must go beyond even these as we meet one on one. (I have been encouraged here through the years. Speak to this.) At the end of the day, iron sharpens iron (Prov. 27:17). And this only happens in community, starting with Sunday morning all the way down to individual meetings.

5. We see God at work in the lives of others. This truth follows what I have just mentioned. . . How good is it when you see a new Christian grow in grace! How precious is it when you see God work in the lives of those with whom you are encouraging and giving counsel! How edifying is it when you see someone suffer (and YES, your heart goes out to them), and then you see them gather in the body SINGING their hearts to the Lord in praise and thanksgiving! This happens in COMMUNITY!

6. We remind one another of God’s greatness and goodness as we worship him together. I see this particularly in our Sunday morning meetings EVERY TIME I see and hear you sing, as I listen to your prayers. I know we are encouraged to consider the greatness of God as we preach the Gospel, as we speak the whole counsel of God. I am encouraged to hear of ALL the ways God is working in your lives . . . things that can only point me/others to the greatness and goodness of God. (Story after Story). This only happens in community, TOGETHER as the Church of God.

7. We are given opportunities for service. From our elders our deacons (and our wives) to other individuals (both men and women) who serve, I am very grateful (So many examples – Too many that I will certainly leave folks out). I know that HERE our mind goes to the physical things we do. And so they should! But, I think of prayer as a way to serve. Some of you pray so much more than me and others. And for many in the life of the church, what a beautiful gift! Also, when I think of service, the sky is the limit; opportunities are almost limitless. We serve through visiting the sick and those in hospital. We serve through meals for those in need. We serve in setup and tear down and getting ready to take the Lord’s Supper. This service works its way all the way from giving a cup of water in Jesus’ name to giving financially to physical works of a deacon and many men and women behind the scenes . . . all the way to counseling and preaching and teaching. And the primary reason behind this service is the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives gifts to ALL his people for service in the body, our OUR community called the Church. Again, this kind of powerful service is ONLY happening in the body of Christ. So be encouraged in your service (I am).

8. We provide accountability for one another. This is an obvious truth. The old picture that coals burn hotter together is certainly the case. There are many kinds of accountability in the world, many social clubs with endless interests. Every religion has accountability. God designed accountability to be essential to how this world works. But, ONLY in the Church do we find accountability that leads to eternal life! (I do not know where I would be without the church, without the elders, without all of you! We need the body. We need community!)

I so appreciate Gil's message last week as he highlighted our covenant. This is what a covenant is made for: accountability. This is what the Church is made for: accountability. And, it flows down from the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as we are united to Christ in a mysterious powerful relationship.

As we turn our attention to the table, I want to finish with some application as to how such a sermon on community can help you. This sermon can serve as an encouragement, or conviction for the Christian. As we examine ourselves we must ask, "*How are we doing?*" "*How can I grow in community?*" I think we must ask, "*How am I growing to love my neighbor?*" "*Am I expecting to receive when I come on Sunday mornings, or am looking to give of myself?*"

(This sermon can also serve as a warning to the non-Christian, the one who doesn't desire such community. At the end of the day, Christians desire community, they desire to be with God's people often.)