



Growing in Community

(Notes from Flagstaff Church Camp 2012)

On the topic of ‘Growing in Community’ the first question I would want to ask is why; why is community important, important enough that we should want to grow, nurture, and foster it?

To answer this question we need only open the Bible to the first book, the first chapter and the first verse. In Genesis 1:1 we read

“In the beginning God...”

The first point I would like to make is that community is not simply something that we ascribe value to. It is not simply something that scripture encourages us to pursue. Nor is it simply something we embrace as a good idea for practical reasons. Community is at the heart of who God is.

In scripture God is revealed to us as a Trinity, the three persons of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing as a community of personality. Before all else was created by God, there existed a diversity of personality in the community of the Trinity. God is a community, a communal being.

This means that community is of eternal and ultimate importance, because community is rooted in the very character and nature of who God is.

The first reason that community is important is because it tells us something about who God is.

The second reason is that community tells us something about who we are intended to be as individuals.

If we continue to read the Genesis accounts we come to Genesis 2 and the creation of the first man, Adam. We are told that God forms the Man out of the dust of the earth, then breathes into the Man’s nostrils, and the Man becomes a living soul.



This is an incredible piece of imagery if we stop and take the time to imagine the scene as it is communicated to us in scripture. God is crouching in the dirt that He has recently called into existence by His word, perhaps on His hands and knees. His hands coated in the medium in which He is working, the earth getting under His nails as He is shaping, moulding, sculpting the form of the Man out of the dust, dirt, and clay.

When He is satisfied with His handiwork, He bends over the form He has made, closes His mouth over the nose of the sculpted form, and breathes His divine life into it.

Te he Maori Ora! The chest rises as the lungs fill with air, the heart beats in the Man's chest, blood begins to flow carrying this new life throughout his body. The clay softens and warms; the eyes flutter and open for the very first time. And what is it these newly formed eyes see as the first image to enter through the pupils; God. Not a God who is far off, or a God who has left the scene to leave His new creation orphaned, but the God who is there, face to face, eye to eye, nose to nose with His creation.

This is an incredibly beautiful image as this intimate moment is captured for us in scripture. It communicates something of the nature of the relationship that the God of the Bible desires to have with His creation. It communicates that He desires to be near to us, and just how near, close and intimate that relationship is intended to be.

God has made each of us to live in an intimate relationship with our creator; to live in community, the Creator with His creation.

The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it this way;

“The chief end of Man is to know God and enjoy Him always.”

Each of us has been created to enjoy a personal, intimate relationship with God our creator, to live in community with the Triune, communal God.

The third reason that community is important is that it tells us something about God's ultimate plan for His creation.



After God creates Adam, He declares that it is not good for the man to be alone (Gen 2:18). Why?

We are told in Genesis 1:26-27 that God created human beings in His image and likeness, but as we have already discussed God exists as a community in the Trinity.

One man alone cannot fully reflect the image and likeness of God. Because God is a community it takes a community to fully reflect His image and likeness.

God creates the first human community in Adam and Eve and instructs them to go forth and multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:28). His instruction here is to go and add to the community of human beings that God has created, but is this community for community's sake? No, God has other intentions in human beings coming together in community and growing numerically in that community.

God's purpose here is that we are to be formed into communities with God as the central pillar, where each individual within that community is enjoying the personal relationship with their creator for which we are intended. That community together then is to reflect the image and likeness of God, reflecting God's communal nature as well as resembling Him in its character.

God ultimately wants to dwell in the midst of His people so that He not only has a relationship with the individuals within a community but that He resides in the midst of the community as a whole. This is an idea that is found in both the Old and New Testaments in Leviticus 26:3-12 and in 2 Corinthians 6:16, however, this is revealed as the ultimate purpose of God for His creation in Revelation 21:3.

God's desire is that He will dwell in the midst of a people that He has called together in community, a community that reflects the communal nature of the Triune God and bears His image and likeness. He desires to reside at the centre of such a community where He will be their God and they will be His people, a people called after His own name.

Because human beings have been created for an intimate relationship with God as individuals, and to dwell in a community that reflects the communal nature of the triune God as well as bearing His image and likeness in terms of its character, anyone not living in an intimate relationship with God individually and not living as part of the community of God's



people corporately, is not being human in the fullest sense. They are being less than what they were made for and not fulfilling the purpose for which they were made.

The fourth reason that community is important is that it tells us something about who we are intended to be as the Church.

If we continue to read over the rest of scripture we see that God's act of creating community doesn't end with Adam and Eve. We see God gathering a community in Noah and his family, in Abraham and his family, and ultimately in the Church.

In the New Testament the Greek word that is translated into English as church is *ecclesia*, which means to be called out. The Church are the ones whom God has called out.

In Jesus, God enters into creation in the form and fullness of a human being and calls out, draws to Himself a community in the disciples. Isn't it interesting that the one we proclaim as both fully God and fully human gathers together a community?

In doing so He demonstrates two major ideas. Firstly it is God who gathers the community of the Church. And secondly by doing so, Jesus fulfils what it means to be truly human by living in an intimate personal relationship with the Father, and in living in a community that has God as its centre.

Jesus gathers a community around Himself and we must follow His lead. That's not to say that we must gather a community around ourselves, the community of the Church must be gathered around the person of Jesus.

A community can be gathered around many things, personalities, words, philosophies, ideas, activities, but the Church can only truly be the Church if she is gathered around the person of Jesus and His Gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way;

"A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities. They are heard, learnt and apprehended and that is all. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or hearts, but living men who will follow Him. That is why He called His disciples into a literal bodily following and thus made His fellowship with them a visible reality."¹

¹ The Cost of Discipleship, P. 223



Unless the community of the Church is first and foremost formed around the Son of God, and is therefore also Gospel centred, that community can have no fellowship with Him. His fellowship will not be a visible, felt, or tangible reality.

As a result, if the community of the Church is not a Gospel centred, Gospel believing, Gospel living community, all of our, events, preaching, worship, services, and music will be seen as empty. People must encounter the deep truth of the presence of God in the midst of the community.

Not only is the Church a community of those whom God has called out, but the Church is also a community that has been sent out (Matt 28:18-20 et al).

If the Church is to truly be the Church she must not only allow herself to be gathered, but she must also allow herself to be sent. The Church must have an outward stance.

This is all very well said and done, and certainly is not a new message, however, down this path dragons of trial and temptation await.

It is all too easy for the modern Church to view her mission as being to gather and form a community. However, this is not the Church's mission. Instead the Church is to *be* a community on a mission, and that mission is to make disciples.

The tendency for the Church today (and I am of course speaking in generalisations) is to go out into the world and form relationships or to form a community. This is often pursued under the covering of being community focussed, or under the auspices of social justice or some other worthy ideal. However there is a real reticence in the modern (or probably more properly post-modern) Church to go out into the world proclaiming the Gospel in word as well as deed.

There is an attitude of fear across the Church of today, an attitude that believes that the people of our societies will be offended if we speak of Christ and His Gospel – however, the reality is that God is offended if we do not.

The catch cry of our day is that we want to be the hands and feet of Jesus, but very few are *also* willing to be His mouth.



If we are to believe the image presented by much of the modern Church, our Lord is some kind of divine octopus. He has many arms, legs, hands, and feet, but no mouth.

We all seem to be hoping that the Lord is really good at sign language because He is mute. There are some who are hoping that He is really good at signs and wonders language, and that He will do all the work for us.

The reality however, is very different. We, the Church, are the primary vehicle God is now using to gather people together under the cross of Christ. The Church then, is to join God on His mission to seek and to save the lost.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 we are told that the Church has been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation and the message that through Christ, God is reconciling all things to Himself.

“The Church then is not something additional or optional; it is at the very heart of God’s purposes. Jesus came to create a people who would model what it means to live under His rule. It would be a glorious outpost of the Kingdom of God, an embassy of Heaven. This is where the world sees what it means to be truly human.”²

If the Church is to truly be the Church, to be a glorious outpost of the Kingdom of God and an embassy of Heaven, then we must strive to hold together the message of the Gospel and the ministry of reconciliation. We cannot separate the proclamation of the Gospel from the deeds of the Gospel and still truly be the Church.

What happens more often than not when we separate the hands and feet of Jesus from His mouth is that we might form good relationships with the people of the societies in which we live, but we are unlikely to see them become followers of Christ. We might grow a community but we are unlikely to make disciples for Christ.

Unless the Gospel is central, visible, vital, and proclaimed in both the lives and the words of Christians as individuals and the community of the Church, new converts will first and foremost see their conversion as conversion into a new community rather than seeing their conversion as turning away from sin and idolatry and turning towards Christ.

² Timmis and Chester, Total Church



Conversion must always be conversion to Christ as Messiah, Saviour, and Lord.

What this means is that Christians as individuals and together as the community of the Church need to go out into the world and look, sound, and behave differently. We must look different from the world around us, almost as if we come from some far off country. That's not to say we must reject the culture around us outright, by no means. Instead what I am saying is that we must have something different and distinct about us from what is on offer in the culture in which we find ourselves.

A foreign embassy is often in the style of the culture to which it belongs even though it is located in a foreign culture.

I remember being in London and roaming the streets with my wife doing a bit of sightseeing when we came across a building the sight of which made me stop and do a double take. The building immediately reminded me of New Zealand. It was in a style familiar to me and evidenced by many buildings that could be found in Christchurch pre the recent earthquakes.

It was an ugly building, all steel and concrete and glass; a typical modernist building, all function and no flair. It looked very much as though it would have been at home in Cathedral Square in Christchurch rather than in London.

As Jodie and I got close to the building we realised that it was New Zealand House, the New Zealand embassy in London.

It stood out in the context of the buildings in which it was located, and so should the community of the Church.

"The otherworldliness of the Christian life ought to be manifested in the very midst of the world, in the Christian community and its daily life."³

This means that if we want to grow the community of the Church in service to the mission of God, then the Church must carve out for itself a place in the midst of the society in which it finds itself. Bonhoeffer calls this 'the living space of the visible Church'.

³ Cost of Discipleship P. 239



If we want to grow the community of the Kingdom of God by making disciples we must get close enough to the world to be able to communicate in word and deed, but yet remain distinct enough so as to have something different and compelling to offer.

This kind of Gospel centred community, living on the mission of God, serving with this kind of Gospel intentionality comes at a cost. The cost will be persecution, rejection, denial, and revulsion on the part of some within the society we are trying to reach. But it will also come at a cost to the community itself in terms of time, money, effort, and other resources.

It's for these two reasons that this kind of Gospel centred community is in the minority of the churches of today, it is deemed as too costly, too hard.

But this is how disciples are made. This is how the community of the Church has most often grown, by the gathered community committing themselves to Christ and His Gospel first and foremost, and going out into the soil of the world to die that a great harvest might be brought in.

The community of the Gospel can only grow properly and healthily if the members of that community individually and corporately are willing to die to themselves and live for Christ.

If we are going to mobilise the Church to embrace the mission of God then we need first to get the Church to understand who we are in Christ. Being always leads to doing. It must be in that order.

If we simply get on with the doing without first being established in our identity then we will find ourselves inadequate for the task and get burnt out. In the end the mission becomes another burden on our shoulders that we bare under the yoke of legalism. We start to believe that this is what we must do to be in, to be accepted, to please God, and to win His love and favour. Alternatively we might refuse the mission at the outset because of the cost. Either way, unless we start at the level of being, we will at some point give up on the mission, find ways to lessen the cost, or the mission will be deemed too hard at the outset and left untried.

Only when the Church realises that it is God who gathers us, called us out by the power of the Gospel, and that it is God who sends us out, can we then realise that it is also God who empowers us for the mission with which we have been entrusted.



The power of the Gospel forms a people of the Gospel whose identity is sure in Christ. This people then live out the purposes of the Gospel by the power of the Gospel in their everyday lives with focused Gospel intentionality.

The Church is a community gathered by God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to be a Gospel centred, Gospel empowered community who provide a witness to the world of the truth of God and who He is, as we live out our mission in the midst of the world in our daily lives.

Because this is true, every aspect of this Gospel community must reflect our identity as the Church and facilitate the mission of the Church.

This means that to grow in community in the way I believe we were intended, we will need to look at every aspect of our churches in terms of their structure, organisation, and practice, and ask why we do things the way we do and whether the way we do things reflects our identity in Christ and facilitates the mission of making disciples.

It has been said that your church structures and programmes are perfectly suited to produce the results that you are getting. In other words, if we want different results then we will need different structures, organisations, programmes, and practices.

This means that our worship services, our small groups, our activities, our leadership structures, it means everything must be geared up with the purpose of making and growing disciples and equipping them to live their lives faithfully in accordance with their new identity in Christ, and to join in the mission of God as His ambassadors to a hurt, broken, and sinful world.

Why is community important? Because it tells us something about who God is, who we have been created to be as individuals, it tells us something of God's ultimate plan for His creation, and it tells us something of who we are to be as the Church in the world now.

The Church of today must not fall into the trap of thinking that it is our mission to gather community. That path leads to community for community's sake and community at any and all cost.



If the Church is to truly be the Church then the Gospel community needs to be gathered at the foot of the cross of Christ and to find its expression as such in the midst of the world to which we have been called to serve.

“It is by seeing the cross and the community beneath it that men come to believe in God.”⁴

Kristopher Bate

Director

Thinking Faith Ministries



⁴ Cost of Discipleship, P.108