



Current Thoughts

From Dwight's Corner

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No Community, No Church (1st of 2 parts)

Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there... (Matthew 18:20) It is clear that for Jesus, being “gathered together” is an essential part of following Jesus in his living presence. So we come to the second node of the network of meaning implied by my definition of “church” as individuals committed to life together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The first node is: No Christ, no church. The second may be stated: No community, no church.

This poses a challenge for us, both as Americans and as Baptists.

While the drive for community is deep in our psyche—indeed, I believe it was put there by God and is one element of being created in the image of God—Americans are ambivalent about “community.” The tension is created by the rugged individualism that is deeply rooted in American life. We celebrate the iconoclast, the outcast, and the non-conformist. At the same time we have a longing for community. Too often that longing is directed toward an unrealistic romantic vision of community which may end up being destructive and creating disillusionment about the possibility of community.

In contemporary American life, Scott Peck talks about “pseudo-community,” and we read about “bowling alone.” While the metaphors may be stretched, it is clear that something is fundamentally awry when it comes to community in America. We are reluctant to surrender our “personal rights,” and in good juvenile fashion consider any kind of boundaries as offensive, if not oppressive or satanic.

At the same time community is a challenge for Baptists because our ideas of “soul competency” and “priesthood of the believer” (which are not the same thing), when infused with American rugged individualism, result in a near-exclusive emphasis on personal decisions and actions at the expense of a robust ecclesiology. We end up with anemic definitions like a church is a group of baptized believers.

A church is more than a group of persons who happen to have been baptized. They are persons who are committed to life together. Often this commitment is expressed in covenant language—either explicit or implied. As stated in the Second London Confession of Baptists (1677): Church members do willingly consent to walk according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves to the Lord and to one another.

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John McKnight has used the secular language of mutual/reciprocal “consent and care” to describe the covenant of community.

While the longing for community may be part of our very nature as human beings, and has solid theological foundations (the concept of “trinity” includes community) the practice of community (apparently) is not something we do very naturally. Both of Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth expose a church struggling with the meaning and practice of “life together.”

The Fall narrated in the opening chapters of Genesis is marked by a four-fold alienation—alienation from God, alienation from others, alienation from creation, and even alienation from ourselves. The Fall has resulted in an anti-community environment. To be blunt, our inability to create and sustain community is sin. And in no area is the evidence of sin in the institution we call “church” more widespread than in our inability to live in community under Jesus Christ.

Churches are often very inhospitable places. It is evident in our lack of care for one another. Too often it erupts into abuse of one another—member against member, congregation against pastor, and pastor against congregation. We hide this with a thin veneer of “being family” or a flurry of good works. This is pseudo-community.

Regardless of how warm and fuzzy our language is about one another, or how vigorous our worship appears, or the number of “successful” programs we run, or the multitude of neighborhood ministry activities, or the dollars sent to distant mission and ministry, if there is no commitment to life together, if there is no mutual consent and care, if there is no community, then we are not a church.

To adapt Bonhoeffer’s language, we are substituting “religion” for Christianity.

Of course, we are sinful individuals, and the churches we compose are always going to have sin in them. So our churches will always be broken and our community imperfect. If we expect perfection from our church on this issue, we will end up living a life of disillusionment or denial. But God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins... including this one. This is one way that the church is constantly re-forming.

You have probably detected that I have a little passion about this issue. And that passion may have caused me to use a hyperbole or two. But please do not nitpick my language and miss the point. Jesus called a household, a people, a community not just a bunch of lone wolves who occasionally cross paths.

There are many implications that flow from this. Another time, another place....

Further reading:

Robert Banks Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1980.

Gilbert Bilezikian Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as a Community of Oneness Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1997.

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Curtiss Paul DeYoung Coming Together: The Bible's Message in an Age of Diversity Judson Press: Valley Forge, 1995.

Curtiss Paul DeYoung Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge—Our Only Hope Judson Press: Valley Forge, 1997.


Clifford Green Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1999.

Stanley Grenz Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living Baker: Grand Rapids, 1998 (second ed.)

John McKnight The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits BasicBooks: New York, 1995.

Christine Pohl Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1999.

Philip Selznick The Communitarian Persuasion Woodrow Wilson Center Press: Washington, 2002.



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