



The Bridge Church

The Spiritual Practice of Community

Community might seem the least exciting practice for our year. It's very ordinary. And, aren't we already practicing community? Yes, but... Anyone who has been hurt by a church community before, knows that fire seems a gift in the cold unless you've felt the excruciating pain of its burn.

What can and should be a beacon of beauty and blessing for Christ, can often seem the very opposite. The wrapping that carries the gift of the gospel is sometimes so scraped and sloppy that people won't open it.

Many Christians love Jesus but find the doors of his church incredibly painful to walk through. In fact, there are likely very few Christians in church that haven't felt some sort of sting: cliques, criticism, or crud.

Why does this happen? For better and for worse: the beauty of the church is the brokenness of the church. We are a rag-tag riff-raff of imperfect people joined together by a perfect God. You belong to a church in truth when you stop hiding from your failure and come to be covered in Christ.

This famous line is famous for a reason, *'the church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners'*. If the church is being the church, we should expect a bit of mess. But there is a fine line between a hospital for sinners and a huddle for sin.

There are many ways that the brokenness can drown out the beauty. We will always be a community of recovering sinners, but the healthiness and potency all depends on the extent that the gospel of grace is woven into the fabric of every layer.

The Cultural Problem

Part of the issue is not only our sin, but our moment. We're all carrying around a heavy pack of cultural baggage that weighs down our attempts at meaningful community. The weightiest items? Individualism and consumerism.

For better or worse our default is to think about 'me' before 'we'. My life is architected according to the shape and preference that I choose. The very fact I can design my life shows a double-edged freedom that cuts me loose from the expectations and needs of other people. My truest self (according to our moment) is discovered within, and my greatest life is found when I express it without inhibition or obstacle.

Deep relational bonds are still very important to us, but their importance is determined by... me. Similarly, these bonds are breakable and movable in a way that they never would have been in previous history. Whether marriage, family, friendship or church, common wisdom would encourage us to step away if it is no longer helpful or is currently harmful.

Almost everyone lives their life primarily as an individual. No matter the amount, type or scope of relationships within our life, they are something that fits into one's life and not the other way around. Duty, honour, commitment and obligation have mostly faded from our relational vocabulary.

Church will always be fighting an uphill battle, because it is always fed through the grid of: *'is this church what I want it to be?'* We're constantly making assessments about the praise, the preaching, the programs, the pastors (not about our pastors, obviously), and... the people.

The Biblical Y'all

One of the paradigm shifts in my faith was when someone showed me that most of the Bible is written to you (plural) rather than to you (singular). Or, if we were in Texas, it is written to y'all rather than you. Meaning all of those incredible verses and teachings that I have received and held close to my heart aren't ultimately just for 'me' but for 'us'.

Another paradigm shift was realising that spiritual maturity in Scripture, was not what I thought it was. I expected the mark of someone mature was an incredible knowledge of God, a rich prayer life, or a mastery over niggling habitual sin. Yet, the highest height of holiness is defined by love. How can it not be, when in himself, God is love? (1 John 4:16).

Leaning deeper into the heart of the gospel, we realise Christ has called us to himself as individuals but he binds us together more deeply than we might ever have expected. The church is not simply a Sunday service. The church is his Bride, his Temple, and his Body. The church is the family of God, brothers and sisters in more than theology.

A lone wolf Christian has missed the point entirely: God has saved us into the church, and the truest expression of Christianity is a communal life of love. Beautifully, the spiritual practice of community is not about you. And yet... there is no other place to become who you would become.

Community is, therefore, not a spiritual practice you practice for your own spiritual benefit. It is simply living out the Christian life as it was designed to be lived.

And yet... All boats rise with the tide. By contributing selflessly and sacrificially to a community of biblical love, you learn quickly that *'it is better to give than to receive'* (Acts 20:35).

Let's now consider a few biblical principles and challenges toward a deep practice of community.

Going Deeper

All boats rise with the tide.

'Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.' (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The beautiful gospel irony is that when you finally give up your life and turn to Jesus, that is when you truly find it. The same is true of community. When we finally take our eyes off ourselves, and turn our attention to the other, two things happen:

1. We realise it truly is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:25).
2. We invest into a culture of depth that ultimately comes back to pay spiritual dividends, for a maturing believer will in turn invest in us.

By showing up in vulnerable relationship, you'll be contributing to a community where others are invited and sharpened do the same. As their boat rises, so too does yours upon this spiritual tide.

Commit to your imperfect community.

'Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.' (Colossians 3:13-14).

Most of us understand there is no perfect church (if not, let's get clear real quick). But we need to learn what that means in practice. Christianity requires committing to a specific, broken, imperfect community with the aforementioned love.

We must put to death our constant frustration that our church is not what we wish it was. As Bonhoeffer wrote, *'those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial.'*

Commit to loving the community as it is. You're a part of the imperfection anyway. Love the community toward what it might become in Christ. Lead through love towards what you wish it could be. But love it as it is.

Show up.

'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.' (Hebrews 10:24).

Church often fits into the category of 'extracurricular activities' for many Western believers. Without sounding too much like a grouchy frustrated pastor, that's simply not a Christian attitude. My greatest frustration and longing for our church communities is that people would show up, and show up consistently.

I often wonder what the culture and dynamics of church relationships would look like, if every believer who called that community home made a sustained commitment to show up consistently over the long haul? And while they're there, they're really there? Maybe coming early to pray with others beforehand, and staying around afterwards to welcome and talk with others?

It's not about how many people are in the seats, or how full the service seems to be. The number of small groups and members therein is ultimately superfluous. It's so much more about a 'one another' culture of relational depth and commitment, where our presence is not primarily about the self, but about the other.

Now, of course there are plenty of footnotes and asterisks to add to this picture. Life has seasons, and there are all sorts of constraints. But, with grace and believing the best about each other – what if we lifted the bar on what it means to belong to community?

Take off your mask.

'Love must be sincere' (Romans 12:10).

The Greek word 'sincere' derives from the same root as 'hypocrite' (in reverse) picturing actors in ancient theatre covering their faces with a mask to act out a character different from themselves. Love cannot tolerate masks.

We (at least in this corner of the world) present our life and self in the best light possible. We gravitate to small talk, and downplay the significant realities of our lives. In the best case, we're following the cultural lead or not wanting to be a bother to others. In the worst case, we're unwittingly cultivating a double life of inconsistency.

Do you hold people at a distance? Do you keep your 'stuff' to yourself? Do you struggle to let your guard down with people?

Again, insert relevant footnotes and asterisks. Scripture doesn't expect all relationships to be equal, nor to wear your soul upon your sleeve. Vulnerability can take time, and we grow into relationships. But... it does paint a picture of integrity, loving the loveless, sharing one another's burdens, and ultimately being sincere.

Live the gospel with your love.

'And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.' (1 John 4:16).

We who know the love of God live the love of God. We frequently talk about 'godliness', 'holiness', or being 'more like Christ'. Ultimately these attributes are all expressed and embodied in a cross-shaped life of love. I think this is why Jesus can say so boldly, 'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.' (John 15:12).

Now, of course this entails all of life. But how brightly should love shine in the community of He who is Love? The growing temple where his presence dwells (Ephesians 2:19-22)? His very body spread throughout the world to bear witness to his love?

If we major on the majors, and follow love to its logical conclusion as Christians, we will find ourselves immersed in a community of the deepest love.