

Jew and gentile are sinners; through the work of Christ, both are brought near, not only to God, but also to each other.

In our time and culture, relationships are founded on commonalities: same race or ethnicity, same socio-economic status, same educational level or even same college, same interests. God calls us together across the most fundamental divides.

What can you do this month to take a small step in making a connection with some group or person in the church who is significantly different than you?

Day Six: Restoring the Fallen James 5:16,19-20

*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.... My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back,
²⁰remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

Christian community exists not merely to provide friendship to meet our needs for socialization. God calls us to relationships that have significance for eternity. For this to work as God intends, we need transparency in a context of confidentiality, mutual support, and admonition.

If you are not in an encouragement-and-accountability group, join one. If you are in one, what can you do to help the group grow deeper, more transparent, and more effective in helping each other grow in Christ and in calling back to faith those who wander away?

Core Value #4 Communal, not Individualistic

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow led the most thorough and comprehensive study of small groups ever conducted. He notes: “Community is what people say they are seeking when they join small groups. Yet the kind of community they create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past.”

Among the differences Wuthnow observes between traditional community and its contemporary manifestations: (1) community is more fluid, with people regularly moving in and out, and relationships correspondingly more short-term and superficial; (2) community is more narcissistic and therapeutic, with its chief purpose being to support the emotional well-being of the individual, with people joining or leaving depending on how well the group meets individual emotional need. He concludes: “Families would never survive by following these operating norms. Close-knit communities in the past did not, either.”

Since community is such a big part of biblical Christianity, it is worth exploring what traits Scripture expects to mark our lives together.

Day 1: Community is Intrinsic to Christian faith 1 Cor 12:12-13
The [human] body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free.

Becoming a Christian, according to the apostle Paul, is not just praying to receive Christ, and having a personal relationship with God. When we come to faith (formalized in baptism), we also come into relationship with a group of believers. And such a tight relationship that it is parallel to the human body with its different appendages. A dismembered limb is a disturbing, grotesque, condition. So, Paul supposes, is a Christian who floats around without long-term attachment to a specific church community, or regular participation in it.

If you have given your life to Christ, have you also committed yourself to a local church? Are you formally a member? Do you consistently participate in a fellowship group?

Day 2: Community is Sacred 1 Cor 3:16-17

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

Here Paul is not saying that we individually are God's temple because the Spirit indwells each of us; he says that collectively we are God's temple, because the Spirit of God dwells in our midst, much as he did in the tabernacle and temple of old. And so, he warns the contentious Corinthians, and their modern descendants, if you destroy God's temple – if you split the church through factions and contention – God will destroy you.

We take two lessons from this, one positive, the other ominous. The positive: despite our frailties and failings, by virtue of the Spirit's presence in our midst, our community is sacred. The ominous: because our community is sacred, to harm it through gossip, conflict, harsh criticism, factions, or church splits brings the threat of divine sanction.

Review how you treat others in our fellowship and in the church. Reconsider any harsh criticisms or destructive complaints that you have against others or against the fellowship as a whole. How could you work to improve individual or corporate weaknesses without engaging in destructive criticism?

Day 3: Community is Essential to Faith 1 John 4:20-21

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. ²¹And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Realistically, it is hard to live closely together without rubbing each other the wrong way on occasion. Yet John warns against allowing small annoyances to become bitter contentions.

Are you at odds with someone in your small group or in the church? Is there something practical that you can do to reduce the tension, and to encourage positive interaction?

Day 4: Community has Evangelistic Impact John 17:20-22

I pray also for those who will believe in me [in subsequent generations] ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

We spend a lot of time and effort coming up with logical arguments why people should believe in God, or refutations of their arguments for rejecting him. Jesus offers an entirely different evangelistic argument here: the quality of our corporate life.

If our community life were really going to impress seekers, how might that happen? How might we live together? Concretely, what would our community look like? What single, small step toward that goal could you take this week?

Day 5: Unity in Diversity Ephesians 2:14-16

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

The most fundamental division in the ancient world was between sanctimonious Jew and repulsive gentile sinner. Faithful Jews shunned any significant contact or relationship with gentile, and gentiles were unsurprisingly offended by such treatment. Paul insisted that such divisions have no place in the kingdom of God, and thus, no place in the church. In the presence of Christ, both