

Gospel Community: What Makes the Church Unique

Jonathan K. Dodson | Ephesians 2:11-22 | January 25, 2015

Piece by piece, we're looking at what it means to be the church, the third word in our vision statement. Last week looked at the formative role of Sunday gatherings and this week we're looking at how the rest of the week shapes us *through community*. In Austin, there are innumerable communities: Crossfit, cycling, homeschool, startup, AA, UT. Is there anything that makes Christian community *distinct*? Some find community challenging; others find it easy. What makes it *difficult*? And how do you *do* it? Three questions: what makes community difficult, how do we do it, and why is it distinct?

Difficulty of Community

Cities create unique opportunities and challenges for community. When you move to a city, it can be exciting to discover new people and places, but eventually it wears off and you begin to feel like "strangers and aliens." Cities have been summed up as **diversity + density = complexity**. The *diversity* can make community difficult. I was talking to a new resident this week and he was sharing how he's had work a lot harder to connect with people because their vocations are so different from his. He felt what many new residents feel, like a stranger. The sheer *density* of a city can make community intimidating, especially for introverts. Where do you begin? Diversity, density, complexity. How do you go below the surface into deep community? First, you have to reconcile your views of community with the Bible. The way into deep community has to do with *how you view people*. This week we had quite a few overcast, rainy days, days where we tend to stay in, but then the sun came out, and we were all eager to come out with it. This reminded me of something Hemingway wrote about Paris on Spring day: "[The only thing that could spoil a day was people and if you could keep from making engagements, each day had no limits. People were always the limiters of happiness except for the very few that were as good as spring itself.](#)" What's he saying? He's saying there's a potential of unlimited happiness in the day but people often get in the way as "limiters of happiness." Or you can find the "exceptional few" that are as good as Spring itself. Let's take a closer look at these two approaches: limiter/exceptional. The **limiter** lives in a corner. You try to get along without all of us. If you have free time, you prefer to read a book or go to a movie by yourself. This bleeds into your view of faith, which you tend to see as a private matter. You're slow to share things with others, to open up about your beliefs, to share your struggles. *The limiter links privacy to community*, which makes people more of a threat or obstacle than an opportunity. But Christianity is the opposite. The church is body of Christ, made of many parts, a house, comprised of many members. It began on the very open faith of Christ and his disciples. So it's not private. In fact, its openness is what leads to its inclusive impulse, creating communities around the world. So why the privacy? Perhaps because you prize individuality and struggle with fear. For example, some people would skip Sunday gatherings, and say they are going to have "church at home." But that is impossible. Church is plurality not individuality, the people of God gathered around the person of Christ. This is hard for us introverts to swallow. Why? Because, despite what the Bible says, we've defined happiness through our individuality. In my mid-twenties, I carried books everywhere. Still do. But now I have a smartphone. Then, it was hardcopies. More conspicuous. And

whenever people got boring, I just pulled out my book. It didn't matter where. At a party, in our home, with people at the dinner table. If you lost my interest, I'd whip out my book and start reading. Why? *Because I'd made Christianity a private affair, and theology something to serve my individual, intellectual happiness.* It wasn't until I began to grasp the fact that the God of my faith was inherently relational, a divine, loving community, that I began to put the books down. I actually became a seeker of others and eventually a pastor! How? I had to reconcile my view of the church/of people with the Bible, AND my view of myself, with God. You see, my identity was fundamentally *individualistic*, defined by my preferences, my happiness, my opinions, my desires. As a result, I missed all the corporate appeals to the church's collective identity in Christ. Maybe that's you? And even if you don't see people as limiters of happiness, if you're American, you probably tend to see yourself this way. But our identity in Christ changes everything: [But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility" \(14-16\).](#) What's he saying? That people who are different (diversity) are all brought together into one new humanity (density) through gospel (theology). **Diversity + density + gospel theology = new humanity.** The result is people become not a threat to private individuality but a God's new community that transcends and fills a Spring day. Now, the other tendency if to approach church looking for the **exclusive** few. Instead of living in a corner you live in the crowd, drawing meaning and energy from being with people. You struggle to be alone. People aren't an obstacle; they're an opportunity. For you faith isn't private; it's all public. But a lot of social people make the mistake of thinking they're great at community when they're actually really bad. Why? *"Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone."* Bonhoeffer. Their fear forces them to use the community. You're not defined by individuality but by community, what people think of you. So you build up the exclusive few, on your terms. And if those people don't live up to your expectations, you end up an episode of Friends. You judge community and complain about your community. You're aware of how they've let you down. They didn't show up at your party, don't call you enough, spend too much time with so and so. For you, community is an idol. You love it so much you become possessive about it. *"We do not live with other Christians for the sake of acquiring them."* Bonhoeffer. **Community isn't something you own; it's something you work at.** *A social club is where you pick your friends. The church is where God picks your family.* This makes it difficult and wonderfully diverse. So how do we do it, cultivate community that is neither individualistic nor possessive, that sees people as limiters or exclusive objects of happiness?

Doing Gospel Community

There are a hundred metaphors for the church in the Bible, most of them are corporate. A lot, familial. Ephesians, Colossians, Corinthians, and Romans all conceive of the church as *members* of a body or household. ["So then you are no longer strangers and aliens \(limiters & exclusive\), but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" \(19\).](#) God radicalizes our view of community. How does he do it? In the house, Christ

is head of the family. The head of the family sets the tone. If Dad is militant and overworking, the family fragments, people doing their own thing, breeds individuality. If Dad is passive and volatile, the family will look for another anchor by acquiring community or comfort. But when Christ is head of the family, he provides stability, assurance, an anchor, **bringing you near to God and closer to others**. The nearer you get to God, the less you have to demand from others. *When God has acquired you, your affection and hope, you don't have to acquire others.* You become quite selfless, happy to sacrifice your privacy or social time to serve and bless others. This reminds me of my wife, **Robie**. As a mother, she sacrifices privacy all the time. Kids walk in on her in the bathroom. You have no idea. But she's also the first to invite people over, fill the calendar. Why? Not to feel important. She wants to get into people's lives. This week we've had two dating couples over, a single, an entire house of moms and kids, and she's begging me to let us host the city group again. *She's not acquiring; she's loving.* This is how I know. She apologizes for her cooking and then gets busy creating a feast. With every person she asks questions, starting at the top of life and moving down, layer after layer. Appetizer to dessert, she starts with life, gets into history, then right down into dreams, fears, beliefs. Why? She sees people as members of her family, with Christ as her head. With Jesus as head of the family every single member has dignity, through the indignity of the cross. *He suffers rejection so we can have acceptance, and the more you trust him, the more you radiate that to the family.* **He brings you near to God and near to others.** That's what I see in Robie. My wife knows when I'm not near to God. She has to ask me if "everything is okay?" She can sense the instability of my distance from Christ, and so do my kids. But when I'm near to God, the family flourishes. I don't need to withdraw for happiness or demand it from the exclusive few. People are no longer an obstacle or an idol. They are family. Now, think about a family. What makes a family work? They love one another, mom and dad date and kids get doted on. They forgive one another when they offend. They serve one another, family chores. They celebrate together, holidays and birthdays. Rest together, family vacation. They live together. **It's impossible to be a church family when you don't live together.** City Groups are our attempt to help you be a family, members of a household, where Christ is the head. You may need to confess and ask your CG for forgiveness for trying to squeeze happiness out of them, for seeing them as limiters of happiness. That will make more of Christ. All of our CGs are planning their year right now, discussing how they'll be family: chores, celebrations, forgiveness, rest. Jump in one close to you. Become a dad, we need more leaders. This is how you do gospel community, with Christ as Head.

Distinctive Community

We've looked at why community is difficult, how to do it, now what makes it *distinct*, unique? When we treat church like family are we any different than other communities in the city? Some secular communities act like surrogate families. I'm reading a book right now called *Living the Secular Life*, and it's a case for living a moral, human life without religion. It documents all kinds of humanist organizations where people are forming communities around their common belief in secularism. Many of them have been formed in reaction to the church. They don't want the church's beliefs but they do want their community. Some have no background in the church and focus on doing substantial good in the community. There's some great ideas in there. It sounds great, but there's a problem.

Only 1-2 percent of secular people actually get involved with organized secular communal life (124). Do you know why? They've found their secularity actually works against them. Anthropologists have observed that secularity generates suspicion of being with organized groups; there's hesitant to social immersion. Community. Psychological studies back this up, explaining that secularists radical orientation to the *autonomy of the individual* makes community incredibly difficult. Everyone wants to have a "free thought" which keeps them from community. When the head is missing, or there are many heads, it's hard to have a healthy family. **Deep communities gather around a center that generates interdependence, forgiveness, sacrifice, and love something difficult for so-called free thinkers.** The church, however, had an authoritative head, a redemptive center. And unlike other communities what binds them together isn't core principles or ideas but a sacrificial, personal, communal God. His life and death and resurrection form the basis for the church's life together. The family's born out of sacrifice. This makes it distinct; its **center.** A second thing that makes it unique is its **citizens.** The word citizens means city dweller. Where's the city? It's eternal, the city of God. Revelation as the holy city to come. [By faith Abraham looked forward to the city whose designer and builder is God](#) (Heb 11:10). The city is eternal and that affects identity in the community. Notice we are "fellow citizens" not independent citizens. **Eternal citizenship in the kingdom of God means we don't have to carve out a name in the city,** no jockeying for position on the social ladder. Since our citizenship is eternal, we don't have to forge uniqueness in the temporal. Austin is the opposite. Everyone is trying to be unique, to forge identity with their art, their clothes, their diet, their homes, on and on. Why? Because they have no sense of eternal enduring identity. But possessing eternal citizenship frees you from carving out uniqueness. Do you know why? The church outlives the universe (CSL) and any significance we can wrench from it. We need not frantically assert our individuality nor acquire a social club for affirmation. **Because we are eternal citizens of the city of God where love flows from a never-ending fountain.** We don't have to define ourselves because we have been eternally defined by the love of God in Christ in the Spirit: "In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (2:22). We are the stones of the city put together as the locus of God's presence and love. This is how the church is utterly unique. Its center and its citizens. Neither individualist or collectivist but mystical, indwelt by the Spirit. Secular humanist organizations don't have that. They live, serve, and die. Full stop. No lasting value, no eternal good, no everlasting love. And that should generate compassion, service, and witness. *As citizens of the kingdom of God, we have the unique privilege of living, working, and playing in that city that is, in a way that points to the city to come.* **You are celestial signpost, a foretaste of the future.** So let your communal life bear witness to the city of God and its center, Jesus Christ our Lord.