

“Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him . . . from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” *Paul*

“Community is the coming together of a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, mourn together, delight in each other, and make other’s conditions their own.” *M. Scott Peck*

Community

The kind of Community that is vital to human existence.

Christianity that does not start with the individual does not start. Christianity that stops with the individual, stops. Community is an important part of the Creator’s design of life. Nothing is to exist in isolation. Each part of the cosmos has meaning shaped by its context and relationships. It might be said that the wholeness of any individual can be measured by the health of the community of which that individual is a part. Heaven is the perfect community where the greatest potential of each participant is realized. The sin of Adam destroyed community by disrupting the friendship links between individuals. This disruption is at the heart of our soul’s sorrow today. Social and individual struggles for “salvation” and “wholeness” are, in the final sense, struggles for restored community.

Social researcher Margaret Wheatley reminds us that the instinct of community is everywhere in life. We see it in the ecosystems of nature where many diverse species thrive in harmony with other life systems that are totally different and yet mutually supportive. We see it in our system of government where both diversity and unity are respected and protected values. The government of the USA has been successful, I believe, because it respects two fundamental elements of human nature – the need for individual freedom, and the need for community.

It is doubtful that we can know ourselves apart from community. We need a point of reference and the observations of others to understand who we are and where we fit. We are called to “walk in the light”, that is, to live our lives with a realistic perception of who we are, who God is, and with whom we share this broken world. Yet we “see as in a glass dimly” which means that our perceptions will always be in need of refinement through interaction with others. Humans do not do well outside this kind of community interaction. Children left in isolation during the formative years of their lives suffer greatly later in life and sometimes barely look and act human. If for no other reason, communities are vital to foster an environment where healthy children can be given roots and wings.

Community is most simply the free interaction of individuals for the common good. Human community is the social connecting of friends - the meaningful free interaction of individuals in caring for each other in the pursuit of common goals. But what is it that makes for meaningful interaction? As we seek to answer that question, we might make the following observations.

1.

We must not assume that just because we occupy a common space that we have community

because communities are not formed from a shared space but rather a shared life.

- A. **Neighborhood communities** – This is the traditional community feeling that many people long to experience where they live. These alliances function to create and maintain environments that foster a quality of life that enables its participants to feel like a large family sharing many basic life experiences. These communities include people that occupy the same geographical vicinity and include “consolidated” personal communities. In this category we might identify scores of communities that call from us some level of commitment. These communities center around – social preferences (like education, race, vocation, economic class, age, stage in life, etc.), interests and values (hobbies, special needs, political preferences, etc.). Most of us have connections with several such communities at various times in our lives.
- A. **Vertical industrial communities** – These alliances function to create and maintain environments that foster common business objectives that are mutually rewarding. These communities are not geographically defined but may include companies that cooperate over vast distances but have common objectives of cooperatively serving the needs of customers.
- C. **The Church as community** – God sent His only begotten Son to a fallen world so that He (God) might have a family or community of millions of sons (and daughters) who share a common Spirit, a common Identity, and a common Purpose. Jesus told His disciples that they would be known by their communion with Him, love for each other, and engagement with God’s purposes. The power of the church lies in its experience and expression of authentic Christian community that is characterized by intimate communion with Christ, practical caring for one another, and bold compassion for the broken world.

Note: The same basic principles govern all types of communities.

2.

We must be sensitive to the elements that are common to all healthy communities

because community experience is not unique to Christianity or religious faith.

- A. **Shared Soul-shaping Experiences and or Goals** – Koinonia is the Greek word that captures such experiences. These experiences usually involve personal vulnerability. It can range all the way from the life threatening experience for soldiers in battle together to the affirming gesture to a person feeling rejected or the closing of an important business transaction.
- B. **Free interaction and communication** – Community involves the interaction of individuals in something other than a superficial way. This can range from the vulnerable sharing of close friends to the business transaction between providers and customers. The level of intimacy necessary to define a healthy (healing) community will be measured by the extent

to which the participants are free to discover and disclose their innermost fears, beliefs, and pains. Until community reaches a level where such sharing takes place there will be only a form with little power to heal the wounds of abandonment that characterize all of us as Adam's children.

- C. **Mutual concern for and commitment to the general “good of the community”** – Community does not require the sharing of all values but at least of some significant values and especially one – public good over absolute personal autonomy or freedom. The balance between rights and responsibilities, self interest and public good, short term and long term benefits are always points of tension in community. If freedom is denied, the creative energy that gives life to a community will be absent. If sacrifice for the common good is given up, the community and its benefits to all is forfeited. One of the concerns of trends in our current federal, state, and local governments is the seemingly hostile view toward the “common good” in favor of the unchallenged free for all of competing personal interests.
- D. **Common identity** - Community usually includes a banner or label that is shared by those in the community. This can range from an ethnic or age group label to a family name or personality type. For Christians, our identity is in Christ Jesus, the Creator, Redeemer, Lord.

3.

If we want our communities to feel like traditional communities we must find ways to consolidate our many diverse community experiences because ideal communities are not defined by one common experience.

- A. **Traditional social communities** were largely rural, stable, and consolidated.
 - 1. They were characterized by a lack of mobility, technology, and diversity. As a result they included an overlapping or sharing of an individual's multiple communities so that their community experiences were more concentrated around and with the same group of people.
 - 2. Rural communities were both compulsory and coercive. It was this lack of privacy and freedom, which so often characterized rural communities, that made the city so attractive to those “stuck” on the farm. But what made the city attractive also made it anarchic – (Anonymity and the absence of compulsive and coercive elements eroded a sense of community).
 - 3. The first to point out that humans need community was Ferdinand Toennies, in and 1887 book, “Community and Society.” The rural community that Toennies hoped to preserve is gone forever. The task today is to create urban communities – something that Peter Drucker notes, “never existed before.”
 - 4. Drucker suggests that for such communities to emerge a number of things must be realized.
 - a. Urban communities need to be free and voluntary.
 - b. They need to offer the individual in the city an opportunity to achieve, to contribute, to matter.
 - c. Governmental programs have been a failure in their attempts to create communities in our cities.

- d. Likewise the idea of a “plant community” centered around a business has also been disappointing. (Japan being a possible exception).
- e. The private non-profit social sector offers the greatest hope for building community.

Drucker’s observations move us back to the Biblical story of salvation, which includes the church as an indispensable part of our healing.

- B. There is an increasing desire to overlap our many communities into what might be called “**consolidated communities**” that multiply our “sense of community identity” and simplify our lifestyles.
 - 1. Communities tend to form around the following areas of our lives.
 - Families and ethnic clans.
 - Work place and vocational experiences.
 - Shared political convictions.
 - Recreational and hobby interests.
 - Shared trauma or joy.
 - Age and stage of life experiences.
 - (and especially) Religious convictions.
 - 2. Communities involve us at varying levels and over differing periods of time.
 - a. Religious communities tend to be strongest and longest lasting. This is because they are grounded in the deepest seated and most pervasively influential values.
 - b. The greater the shared trauma the longer and deeper the community experience tends to be. War buddies often remain in touch with each other throughout life.
 - 3. This consolidation moves us in the direction of traditional community experience.

4.

The communities of the future must take into account factors that proved destructive to traditional communities

because communities are fragile and can easily be hindered in modern culture.

- A. **Mobility** has enabled us to make significant connections with people outside our immediate geographical area. In traditional communities where mobility was limited, our community sphere consisted of people who lived near to our homes.
- B. **Technology** has enabled us to communicate instantly with people around the world. The Internet especially has created the possibility of worldwide networks of people who feel as though they are in community. But is this real community? The World Wide Web exacts a minimal commitment and maximizes freedom of choice so that people come and go “with respect to the community” with the push of a button. The technology that brings people around the world into personal contact with each other also gives them the option of ignoring each other. Social institutions (churches, civic clubs, local government, etc.) serve as glue through the hard times when we would choose to abandon our community commitments. Technology tends to by pass such institutions rendering their role insignificant.

- C. Exposure to **Diversity** in traditions and values has changed our sense of options with respect to relationships and thus communities. The fact of the matter however is that these choices often are exercised in order to protect ourselves from the rest of society with its “differences.” We are no longer forced to find a way to get along as we were back on the farm. Diversity has encouraged a radical social and ideological pluralism that expands our relational options. This freedom gives us an excuse and reason to abandon community commitments prematurely, especially when community demands that we do the hard work of building bridges across natural differences like race. The homogeneous church congregation may grow rapidly and find a common language easily but it will certainly lack depth.
- D. **Individuality** has become an increasing demand within Western societies. It is elevated to such a lofty position that any and all threats to it are seen as destructive to human progress. The result has been the tendency to minimize community with its emphasis on a balance between individual freedom and sacrifice for the general good of the community. Our modern political impulse to sacrifice public responsibility at the altar of personal freedom may in the final analysis force us to forfeit both freedom and community. The only environment that enables freedom to exist without anarchy is an environment of self-sacrifice and discipline. The “enlightenment liberalism” which shapes much of our modern public (political) life precludes efforts on the part of the state to nurture and safeguard community networks, or to foster conditions conducive to their flourishing. Liberalism’s highest commitment is to the maximization of individual autonomy and thus the erosion of community.
- E. **Commoditization** is the reduction of everything to a product or service that can be traded on the market. It reduces everything to a product in a market economy, which in turn produces a market society. This has the effect of marginalizing the significance of personal relationships that are at the heart of any community.
- F. There are four obstacles to community according to John McKnight. These obstacles grew out of the disintegration of traditional community at the hands of the forces mentioned above. The “false communities” or systems addressed human needs that were best met by healthy communities. In so doing they discourage and even destroy any sense of community.
1. **Professionalism in addressing social, psychological, relational need.** We do not need experts to meet basic personal needs.
 2. **Scientific health care.** People are more than biological machines. When we are treated only as complex biological machines we disregard our distinctive humanity.
 3. **Social services systems.** Money, education, and housing has not moved poor people into the middle class.”
 4. **Criminal justice system.** We educate criminals to be better criminals and then put them back on the street.

5.

Community is developed by focusing attention on what goes on in the heart of the community not on the form and structure of community

because communities are not a mater of forms but of relationships.

- A. Community cannot be legislated; they must be freely entered and left.
 - 1. The failure of communism is a vivid example of an attempt to structure community without freedom. In many ways, religious cults are examples of community with one glaring flaw. The debilitating characteristic of a religious cult is its lack of freedom for the participants. Communism is a political cult in that it seeks to establish community without freedom.
 - 2. Government directed housing projects (attempts at creating community) have been, for the most part, disappointing if not outright failures in American history. This may be the result of defining community in a physical and not a spiritual way. Just because people share a common space does not mean that community will develop. The curse of the inner city is not so much poverty as the lack of authentic community.
- B. Community is based on a personal impulse not mandatory directive in serving others. This is illustrated in a junior high school that operates as a robust community of students, faculty, and staff by agreeing that all behaviors and decisions are based on three rules, and just three rules: “Take care of yourself. Take care of each other. Take care of this place.” The principal reported that after the building had to be evacuated during a rainstorm, he returned last into the building and was greeted by eight hundred pairs of shoes in the lobby. The children had decided, in that particular circumstance, how to “take care of this place.” They made free choices but with discipline for the common good.
- C. When the Roman Catholic Church teaches that there is no salvation outside the church, they are “right on” but not in the way we at first suppose. Our healing from the Fall of Adam cannot take place apart from the experience of authentic Christian community. Everyone has experienced some sort of trauma in life. Why do some people seem to escape traumatic experiences (like child abuse) while others do not? The answer may lie, in part, in the role of community. The most damaging part of living in a fallen world where we will be treated unfairly is the sense of abandonment that too often is a part of our story. If and when we have a powerful community attachment, we are equipped to better withstand the storms of life and heal from past scars.

Christian Community

The Christian story is not only one of personal redemption but of community formation. The church (Ekklesia) consists of those “called out” and “called together.” Paul defines this community as the “Body of Christ”, a spiritual fellowship of individuals who share a common story in life. They share the Spirit of Christ who calls them to a life of intimate communion with Christ, practical caring for one another, and bold communication of the Christian story with the world. For this community to be effective it must respect five basic issues. These truths are summarized in Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter twelve.

1.

Christian Community and celebration.

First, Christian community is built upon celebration of all that is good. “**by the mercies of God, . . . your spiritual service of worship.**” The original Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11) was a

time of rest and remembrance (celebration) of what God had done. His creation “was very good” (Genesis 1:31) and we were all to recognize that fact. In the spirit of Sabbath, we should celebrate “the good” that we see in God’s Creation, Community, and Covenant. It is because of God’s mercy in Christ that we call a Sabbath and celebrate. We should call a special Sabbath and celebrate when a member of our community does outstanding work in the name of Christ, and when we see God’s hand in a special way working His will among us. The twelfth chapter of Romans is all about a response to what God has done in Christ at the Cross.

“¹I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Christian community needs celebration to be a regular part of its communal life. We certainly should do this on a weekly basis as we gather for worship. But we can do more. We need to be eager to recognize every good thing that is a part of God’s hand among us and especially the outstanding events that shape our story. We would do well to “call a Sabbath” to celebrate special occasions where the community has seen God work and can rejoice and give thanks together. Such times of celebration, encourage God’s people, focus the attention of God’s family, and glorify God. In the same way that a family has a birthday party for a child, or calls people together to celebrate a graduation from college, a wedding, or a special accomplishment, so should a church celebrate good deeds. A healthy community loves to celebrate. It frequently calls a Sabbath, gathering the community to celebrate.

2.

*Christian Community and **Sacrifice**.*

Second, Christian community is built upon “**presenting our bodies to God as a living and holy sacrifice.**” Christian community forces people to deal with their greatest challenge – selfishness. Christians are united by one common Spirit who leads each believer on a very similar path after the cross and resurrection of Jesus. This is a path that asks us to carry our own cross and lay down our lives as He did that we might find true life in Him. Community will not work if the people involved are “in it” primarily for themselves or for the community experience. While healthy communities require self-sacrifice for the common good of the whole, this is not the primary focus of the Christian’s self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice for a Christian is in **response** to and focused on what God has done in Christ at the Cross. It is a sacrifice that we make before we ever face the challenging demands of community living. It is not a self-sacrifice that is offered in order to get a response from the community but a sacrifice that is made in response to the grace of God in Christ. This is the point of Rom.12:1-2.

“¹I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Self sacrifice leads to **vulnerability** in relationships which is vital to the intimacy that builds community. This vulnerability is realistic in the context of the kind of “living sacrifice” that Paul calls for in Rom.12:1-2. We, like Jesus, bear a cross, offer ourselves as “living sacrifices”, and share His story as our own. In doing so we find ourselves in the company of others with like-minded postures of self-sacrifice. The experience of Community is a

byproduct of the commitment of one's life to Christ and the security that accompanies that commitment.

True community in Christ is not a collection of lonely or isolated individuals but a dynamic interaction of people who know they are accepted and beloved in Christ. Neither is Christian community a club for social extraverts who must constantly be with others. A commitment to Christ and the Cross, leads us to an appreciation of personal **solitude** which is an important aspect of the lives of those who build successful communities. Authentic Christian community starts with individuals who live on the far side of a deep personal encounter with the grace of God through the Cross of Christ. If this first priority of the Cross of Christ is ignored our experience of community will be disappointing. Those who are unable to meet Christ in personal solitude will find it hard to find Him in the challenge of social relationships.

3.

Christian Community and diversity.

Third, Christian community is built upon respect for diversity, “**we who are many are one body in Christ.**” Community cultivates an appreciation for the breadth of God's nature and way of doing things. Two misunderstandings must be avoided here. The diversity that we need to respect in the Christian Community is not only a superficial diversity of differing names, body sizes, sexes, skin color, etc. Nor is it a diversity of basic spiritual beliefs or roots. We are not called to be a part of a “radically pluralistic” community of different faiths. In Christian community we share a **common faith, baptism, Lord**, etc. The diversity that Paul speaks of in Rom.12:3-5 is a diversity of ministries, abilities, passions, and roles.

³ For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. ⁴ For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

Christian Community will not work if the people involved are seeking to relate intimately only with others who are like themselves in personality, perspective, and preferences. There must be love for, reception of ministry from, and cooperation with people who have differing roles, passions, and abilities in the community. Paul likens the community to a **human body** with many different members that have differing abilities and roles yet work in cooperation with each other.

It also must be understood that the **Head of the Body** is Jesus, not a pastor, political ideology, or a narrow theological tradition. The role of human leaders in a community is to point each member to the Lord Jesus Christ as the Head and respect and facilitation of each members role in the family. Human leaders are to facilitate a bonded connection between Christ the Head and each member of the Body. Human leaders do not have a spiritual franchise with the option of shaping and using the community to carry out their personal vision. The greatest commandment is that we first love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and second, that we love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). The order is as important as the integration of both the vertical (spiritual) and horizontal (social) aspects of the commandment. It is our common love for Christ that compels us to love those among us, even the least of them. It is this commitment to Christ as our Sr. Pastor that is an important mark of Christian

community. It is this commitment that calls human leaders to facilitate and not frustrate the gifts, passions, and ministries of members of the Body.

Our identity as authentic believers will be seen both in our identity with Christ as our Head and in our response to, respect for, and relationship with other believers in the body of Christ, especially those who are different than ourselves. Jesus identifies with His spiritual family so closely that one cannot separate a response to “**the least of these my brothers**” from a response to Jesus Himself (Matthew 25:40). Our response to those who are different and by natural accounting “least” among us is an indicator of our response to the “greatest” Lord of all. The question is - Will our involvement be constructive or destructive to the health of the community? Will it reveal our faith to be authentic or false? Involvement in Christian community is not an option for a true believer.

4.

Christian Community and Strengths.

Forth, Christian ministers “**according to the grace given to us.**” This means that we value each other’s strengths and **overlook each other’s weaknesses**. A community that fails to see its members as assets with gifts of value to the community will quickly develop what some have called spiritual lupus, the tendency to devour one another. When we relate to others in terms of their failures and inadequacies we quickly dismantle community. Paul tells us in Rom.12:6-8 to publicly move in the areas of our strengths not our weaknesses. The community needs to affirm and encourage each member to find their place in the body with their unique gift or strength.

⁶ And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; ⁷ if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.”

Christian Community not only provides a place for ministry for every believer, it also provides a place for each believer to experience the fulfillment and significance that comes from seeing God work through them. We need to know that we are **valued by others** and that our presence makes a contribution to the Kingdom of our Lord.

In every community there will be leaders. Leaders are those that others follow. A wise community will put leaders in positions of leadership. The role of leaders in a community is very important. Leaders have a liturgical role in that they speak the truth to and for the body of believers. They declare and demonstrate the core values that bind the community together. They are watchful or literally “heads up” with respect to tending the flock. They listen, discern, and act with wisdom and in a timely manner. Every community needs gifted leadership.

While recognizing gifts in the body, we also must be aware of weaknesses. A community is committed to minister through strengths to the needs and weakness of the lives of those we love. Love demands that we not aid and abet foolish behavior. It compels us to help one another in our struggle to grow to responsible maturity. This may require confronting one another and even the use of discipline. But when it comes to our inclusion in the community, we want to major on the assets of each person not their liabilities. It is only in extreme cases that removal from the community as a matter of discipline would be the loving thing to do. A healthy Christian community addresses weaknesses but celebrates assets.

5.

*Christian Community and **love**.*

Fifth, Christian community is built upon “**active caring for one another.**” Love is meaningless in isolation it demands community. It is a shared experience and Spirit that binds us together spiritually. But it is the active expression of that Spirit through love that binds us in practical, social, relationships. Romans 12:9-16 is full of practical exhortations to build community through practical expressions of love.

“⁹Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; ¹¹not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹²rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, ¹³contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.”

Love is not just a feeling of kinship but also an active expression of commitment and identity. Care for one another will not only strengthen the community but also attract others to it. Notice some of the specifics that Paul high-lights – “devoted to one another”, “give preference to one another”, “rejoicing”, “persevering”, “devoted”, “contributing”, “weeping”, “associate with the lowly”, “be humble.”

We are called to among other things, “be devoted to one another.” Community is created as we move toward each other with a genuine interest in one another’s souls. As we find others of great value and interest we create a place for them in our lives and they feel secure and significant in the relationship. This is especially important as it is applied to “the lowly” among us, those who are not as attractive to the flesh. In some ways a communities health is measured by the strength of the bonds of love, respect, and interest between those on the top of the social food chain with those on the bottom.

6.

*Christian Community and **evil**.*

Sixth, Christian community is built upon “**overcoming evil with good.**” In a fallen world where individuals are called to relate intimately from a posture of vulnerability there will be injustice, evil, and abuse of others. This “evil” will come from both within and outside the Christian community. Community will work only as those committed to it are prepared to respond with grace and good works. There is perhaps no greater enemy to Christian Community than idealism about community experience. Christian Community is not going to always be fair, free, or fun. It will more often be messy, imperfect, and trying. When we are treated unfairly, misunderstood, or “used” by others, there is a temptation to flight (withdraw) or fight (strike back). Both of these natural responses tend to compound the problem and make it worse, destroying community. For community to work, we must be committed to breaking the cycles of abuse by overcoming evil with good. We must be realistic and prepared to deal with a less than perfect family. Sometimes the family may even be dysfunctional.

Romans 12:17-21 is full of practical exhortations to love when we have not been loved, give when we have not been given to, forgive when we have not been forgiven, etc. Christian faith is expressed through our willingness to trust God to deal with those who treat us unfairly.

This is not to suggest that we do not have responsibility in love to protect those around us but protecting others is not the issue in this paragraph. These verses address our need to lay our claims for justice aside and make a commitment to minister to those who have hurt us.

¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "*Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,*" says the Lord. ²⁰"*But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.*" ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

A model of Christian community

Christian community is modeled in the **second chapter of Acts** where the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost established a dramatic example of Christians relating with each other and with God in ways that would shape the Christian church for hundreds of years. There are a number of key observations that we can make from this chapter that should guide our posture and expectations in modern Christian community.

1.

Christian Community takes **priority** over all other communities in our lives.

First, while we are engaged in many "communities" (recreational, vocational, life stage, social interest, etc.) it is our common experience of Christ (His Cross and Spirit) that trumps all others as we seek His Kingdom and Purpose. Pilgrims came to Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire for the Jewish celebration of Pentecost. Many of these pilgrims encountered the living Christ as they repented and were baptized in response to the Gospel. Rather than returning to their respective communities and former living situations, they stayed in Jerusalem. This dramatic life change could only be explained in the context of the new community of the Spirit of Christ that now controlled their lives.

Like Jewish believers in Acts two, we should expect our commitment to the community formed by Christ's Spirit to take president over all of our other community commitments. Our vocational, recreational, social, special interest, etc. involvements should be influenced by and directed, to some extent, by the most important relationship connection with God and His people – the Church. Continuing to cultivate communities based on our special interests is not wrong or harmful if the Christian community connection is put in its proper place as central to all other aspects of life. Sacrifice of our natural inclination to build our lives around interests other than Christ must be expected if we are to experience authentic Christian community. This leads to a second observation.

2.

Christian community involves **self-sacrifice** to sustain its existence.

⁴⁴And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; ⁴⁵and they {began} selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.

Second, in order for the pilgrims gathering in Jerusalem to form and function as people in the emerging Christian community, great sacrifices needed to be made. Their cultural differences were set aside. Their ties with home were put on hold. But nowhere is self-sacrifice more evident than in the sharing of material resources. These early Christians were willing to pool their resources and share with each other. This radical action reflects the high priority placed on Christian community.

While such dramatic actions are seldom necessary to facilitate community today, the spirit of selfless sharing should characterize all Disciples of Christ. Is Christian community important enough to our lives to warrant this kind of sacrifice today? What sacrifices have we actually made in order to promote Christian community? Are we connected to others in Christ to the extent that we will sacrifice to cultivate and continue Christian relationships in the face of pressure from other community connections?

We cannot assume that authentic Christian community will start and continue without sacrifice on the part of its members. God could have provided manna in Jerusalem as He did for the children of Israel in the wilderness but He did not. He rather notarized the presence of His Spirit in the way in which His disciples related to their resources and the needs of the community. In this sense, the self-sacrifice is not only necessary for the community's survival; it is also the mark of its nature.

3.

*Christian Community **FOCUSSES** its life on the Spirit.*

“⁴³ And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together, . . . ⁴⁶ And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God”

Third, while the community was open to all who would believe it was defined by “belief” in the resurrected Christ. The New Covenant is a formal contract between Christ and his followers. It is not a contract between his followers. Its life was centered not on community for community's sake but on Christ who alone was the common ground and point of connection for those in the fellowship of faith. Members of the community were drawn to one another not only because they shared a common goal or passion, but primarily because they constituted the body of Christ. The focus of the Christian Community was and is Christ.

Social, political, economic, racial, and life style issues often draw us together and become the glue of community experience. Christ's Church however, is remarkable in that those natural preferences take a back seat to one overriding and all consuming spiritual focus. Barriers that tended to define and divide us outside our relationship with Christ now become a testimony to the richness of God's creation in Christ.

Playing to the “natural” preferences that connect us in community is an easy way to facilitate the experience of community in the church. Problems of authenticity arise when the natural points of affinity drive the community. Christian witness is based on the degree to which those natural preferences are subordinate to the special connection that we share in Christ. We need to work hard to demonstrate that our Christian community is not based on “natural affinity” criteria but on our common relationship to Christ.

The Christian Community was exclusive but not elitist. All were welcome, especially the downtrodden, poor, sinners, and socially marginalized. Inclusion in this new community was not without conditions however. The price of admission was provided by Christ's own suffering and death the benefits of which were liberally given to all who repented of their self sufficiency and turned in faith to Christ. The initial sign of this repentance was water baptism. The sign of continued faith and covenant loyalty was participation in the Lord's Super.

4.

Those in Christian Community share a common experience.

⁴² And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they {began} selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,

Fourth, the emerging community of Christ's Spirit was a community of shared experience. First there was a common faith. There was also a common sense of "awe." There was a common sense of identity that issued in the sharing of material resources. There was a common "mind set." While diversity was preserved with respect to individual personalities and roles, there was a "one mind" that distinguished this community. They shared a common identity, purpose, value system, and allegiance to Christ.

Today's church should reflect this same unity and diversity. Differences in secondary issues make our Christian community richer. Unity on the major spiritual identity issues gives us authenticity in our expression of community.

The common experiences that marked the early Christians are mentioned in Acts 2. A common faith and Spirit was recognized in water baptism. Submission to the Apostles teaching and authority set a common direction for the early church. Sharing resources (homes, material goods, food, etc.) followed authentic faith. All of these things became building blocks for the shared community. Our churches should seek to provide many opportunities for members to share meaningful experiences that help individuals connect with each other as Christians. The ministry of the Word of God (the teaching of the Apostles) will be an important guiding light for Christian community. As we read the rest of the New Testament we get some idea of the many different challenges faced by the early church and the important role of apostolic doctrine in addressing these challenges.

Christian community is not elitist but it is exclusive in participation. Water baptism (an expression of repentance and faith) and the taking of the bread and cup (an expression of participation in the body and blood of Christ as Redeemer) are distinguishing marks of community members. Close association with non-believers was taking place with the result that new members were being added on a daily basis. But the church community was defined by faith not just by friendship. Having said this, we turn to a final observation.

The role of the preacher in the local church is defined in part by two important elements that work to facilitate an experience of community.

First and most importantly, the preacher provides a public confession of what the community stands for, what it values, where it is going, etc. When the preacher tells the

Biblical story in such a way that it touches people at a deep level, they feel drawn into that story in a special community building way. Even though the preacher may not know their name, they feel known and they sense that they share a common knowledge that defines them and the community of which they are a part. This is why some large congregations share a sense of community even when the individuals within it may not know many other people who worship beside them. Their shared experience of being able to say a heart felt “Amen” to the message draws them together toward and in their common confession.

The second way in which a preacher may play a role in developing community is by knowing each individual in the congregation (personally) and networking them with each other. This is hardly possible in congregations over 500 in number or in situations where there is a large turnover in attendance. It is not generally fair to say that community exists where everyone is tied only to the minister in a pastoral relationship. Such congregations are generally not very healthy.

5.

Christian Community is contagious.

“47... And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Fifth, while there is no indication that evangelistic strategies were present in the Acts two, there can be no doubt that non-believers were being reached. The power of the Christian community was getting the attention of the people in Jerusalem and someone was telling the Gospel story to observers. Authentic Christian community will make a powerful statement to a culture that is plagued by selfishness, loneliness, and injustice. As the church looks more and more like a healthy family, it will attract people. Those who see the love of Christ will be inclined to listen to the truth of Christ’s Gospel.

While the Christian community is exclusive in one sense it is open armed in another. Its inner core (membership) is made up of baptized believers while its social arms are open to anyone who will receive ministry. A healthy church should be very easy to enter. The church should have many ports of entry with a comfortable level of social interaction between believers and non-believers. The authentic church will have no secrets but many mysteries. Its doors and books are open but its values and vision are prescribed and non negotiable. Its blessings are graciously offered to all while full participation is limited to those who trust and obey. There are two occasions in the life of a congregation where it should be made very clear that there is a distinction between those who are “in” and those who are “not in.” Water baptism and the Lord’s Supper provide natural and powerful opportunities to make clear the boundaries between believer and non-believer. These ordinances or sacraments need not be signs of elitism but rather opportunities to explain the gospel and boundaries of its blessing.

Leadership in Christian Community

If the Holy Spirit is the power in Christian Community, human leadership is the gate keeper to the unleashing and guiding of the Spirit's dynamic expression. In Acts 6 we see a clear and dramatic example of how leadership functioned in the early church. While this example does not address all the issues associated with leadership, it gives us a number of principles that I believe have broad application in Christian Community generally.

Acts 6 "1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing {in number,} a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic {Jews} against the {native} Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving {of food.} 2 And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3 But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." 5 And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

1.

Leaders must listen to the concerns of the people.

The first thing that strikes me as I read this text is the fact that the leaders took the complaints of a minority in the congregation seriously. The out-of-towners were feeling marginalized by the locals. There were differences in language and custom that no doubt lead to distrust if not discrimination between the Greek and Hebrew cultures. The leaders did not marginalize, rationalize, or ignore the complaints of the outsiders (the Greeks). The Greek speaking Jews bringing the concern could have easily been dismissed as partisan. Some may have labeled them as lacking faith or spirituality. Labeling the complainers as winners, uncooperative, obstacles to unity, etc. was not the Apostles tendency. Numerical growth can produce tensions with respect to fairness in how people are treated. When money is involved we can count on people's feelings being sensitized. According to this text, the Apostles listened and took these people seriously.

When leaders refuse to listen to the concerns of people community always is insulted and damaged. People who sense that their concerns are heard, feel respected and have hope that issues will be resolved even if not in their favor. There may be several ways in which a concern or problem can be solved but there must be a sense that the leaders will take the expressed concerns seriously and work wisely in resolving conflicts. If this is not taking place, people will withdraw in a sense of hopelessness and distrust of leaders. It will not do, for leaders to simply go through the motions of "listening" without communicating to others that they really respect and understand the concerns. Sometimes leaders may feel that the only way they can convince those with complaints that the complaints are being heard is by following the complainers suggested solution. Here is where leadership's boundaries come into play.

2.

Leaders must respect the boundaries of diverse roles.

Many problems in a local community can be solved as leaders understand and protect the boundaries of both leaders and congregation. In Acts 6, the complaints come without a demanded solution by the complainers. They simply say, “We do not feel fairly treated.” They do not say, “And the only expectable solution to our pain is . . .” They defer to the leaders for a strategy to solve the problem and they remain open to God’s leading through the wisdom of the Apostles. If the leaders are to listen to the congregation, then the congregation must also listen to the leaders. In this case the congregation is expressing sensitivity to its limited boundaries in addressing a particular challenge. Leaders were needed to address this issue.

The Apostles respond with a number of moves that suggest that they also understand the importance of their boundaries. First, they affirm their role as teachers. This role is so important that they cannot be distracted by stepping in and taking over another ministry that needs attention. In this case the Apostles viewed the distribution of material goods as outside their role responsibility. Second, the Apostles sensed that they could provide leadership in directing and equipping others to solve the problem. They ask the people to select individuals from among their ranks to address the concerns about discrimination. It is interesting to note that the names of the individuals selected to correct that problem are Greek names. This suggests that the minority group’s sense of fairness would be addressed because it was their people who would be in charge of making things right. Third, the leaders recognized that they had unique power to empower those who were chosen by officially recognizing them and ordaining them for their task. The leaders were thereby notarizing the decision of the people.

It should not be overlooked that this process found favor with the entire congregation suggesting that all parties were in support of the solution. Such unity cannot be ignored, as it was no doubt an important part of the success of this or any solution. Wise leaders will work hard to use their authority to create unity. Skill and wisdom is needed for unity building and there are perhaps no greater tools for the task than listening and trust.

3.

Leaders must work hard to build and preserve **TRUST** between people.

After Pentecost, many things changed. The Spirit that was reserved for a select few under the Old Covenant was now liberally poured out on all who believed. Every believer now had a role in the drama. God would be speaking through men, women, masters, slaves, sons and daughters, Greek and Jew. Wise leaders would be listening for God’s voice in the words of the people. In Acts 6 the Apostles trust the congregation to select men of good reputation from among themselves to care for the ministry needs. Not only were “lay people” to do the ministry, they were also to make decisions about the “who and how” of ministry. The role of the leaders’ trust of the congregation cannot be underestimated in terms of its power to empower. The Apostles’ trust is a witness to their faith in God’s Spirit working through the people. It also reveals the leaders’ willingness to take risks of faith as they relinquishing control of some of the important details of the process.

One of the important signs of a healthy community is seen in the trust displayed between leaders and followers. As both leaders and congregation live in their respective roles and yield themselves appropriately to one another, community is experienced and advanced.

When community is disrupted (and it will be) by betrayal, fear, selfishness, and pride there will be need for the hard work of repair. But here in is a second test and sign of a healthy community. Strong communities have leaders who will spend a lot of time mending fences, repairing the walls, restoring the fallen, and working to preserve the bond of unity. The fifteenth chapter of Acts provides an interesting window into the way the early church struggled with conflict, disagreement, and distrust. We see the conflict and distrust addressed and overcome so that in the end community continues.

4.

Leaders must empower others and support their decisions.

One of the important roles of leadership in any organization is in the use of its authority to affirm, encourage, affirm, and when necessary protect those under its care. The Apostles role as an ordaining body is very important. In Acts 6 we see the Apostles laying hands on those chosen by the congregation (vs.6). In doing so, the leaders are affirming not only the newly ordained leaders. They are affirming the decision of the congregation. Everyone is affirmed in the process. While the Apostles' work was minimal in terms of time invested, their work in assigning responsibility and ordaining the congregation's choice was major.

Leaders must understand and liberally use their power to affirm others if they are to build and preserve community. Christian communities that are successful should be energizing to those who are a part of them. The sense of empowerment that comes from family support and correction is integral to the proper working of each part of the Body of Christ. Only the most confident will step out in ministry unless there are liberal displays of affirmation and support by those who have the authority to ordain and constrain. In most communities there are people who lack confidence and fight self-doubt. Shepherds of the flock must nurture these weaker sheep so that they can step forward with their gifts and abilities. The body of Christ needs every member's contribution. Unless there are forces within the body that empower the members with encouragement and support, many gifts will lay wasted and unused. But it must be understood that when leaders are empowering others, they are relinquishing control and this leads us to the next principle.

5.

Leaders are not afraid to relinquish control of many aspects of church life.

Apostolic authority and responsibility was expressed in Acts 6 as the leaders ordained others for the work of the ministry. The leaders took responsibility for guiding the choice of those who could and would be trusted with the task of meeting the challenges of managing ministry. They did not feel the need to micromanage the solution. The leaders were confident in the Spirit's ability to work through those who had been chosen. The leaders relinquished control and returned to their unique role. (vs.3 *"whom we may put in charge of this task."*) Community is developed as trust is transferred from leaders to others. Insecure, faithless leaders who feel the need to protect their "right" of control have no constructive place in the Body of Christ. They serve to destroy community and prevent the development of the gifts designed and needed for the church's proper function. If there is one quality of leadership that is in sore need today among evangelical Christians it is faith expressed in the proper relinquishing of control to others in ministry. Let me summarize this section with a list of seven ways a leader can damage his or her credibility with those under their charge.

1. **Give little attention to administration** because it is worldly. If we just preach the leading of the Spirit we won't have to resort to administrative work.
2. **Marginalize those who whine** about being treated unfairly. There will always be people who are unhappy.
3. **Take responsibility for micromanaging** the ministry. We are responsible for running everything.
4. **Make decisions for people** and then tell them what to do and how to do it. They will mess things up and it will get out of our control if we don't.
5. **Don't waste time supporting the ministry of others.** Let them sink or swim on their own. We have more important things to do.
6. **Don't empower others.** It will go to their head and they might rise up to challenge you some day.
7. Never forget – the name of the game is **keep the power in your corner.**