

BIBLICAL COMMUNITY  
A THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF ITS ATTRIBUTES

A Research Paper

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## Introduction

It is apparent, even from a skimmed reading of Scripture, that those who are called of God enter into a relationship with Him and fellow believers that stands in contrast to the relationships among people who are outside of God's family. There is a sense of sacrifice and a strong theme of mutual love that permeates the Scripture when examples are given of men and women who are in communion with both God and His followers. This paper, by investigating these themes, seeks to (1) define community, (2) ascertain if community is actually prescribed in Scripture or simply described, and (3), if community is prescribed, answer the question, "what are marks of proper Biblical community in a contemporary New Testament church?" This will be accomplished by looking at a number of Biblical texts about community with the goal of putting together a theology for the attributes of community.

The English word "community" is not prevalent in most Bible translations.<sup>1</sup> However, the word "fellowship" (κοινωνία) is applicable to the theology of community, and it will be these two words, the English fellowship and the Greek κοινωνία that will be examined in ascertaining the meaning of community. These two words are defined below.

### What is Community and Does the Bible Prescribe it for All Believers?

The questions, what is community and does the Bible prescribe it, can and must be answered together. A non-Biblical definition of community will serve little purpose for determining if the Bible prescribes community for contemporary believers. However, as will be clear from looking at the Bible's teaching on community, human beings are relational creatures

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<sup>1</sup> The word "community" does not appear in the ESV, NLT, or the KJV. The NIV uses "community" numerous times in the O.T. [Gn 28:3; 48:4; Ex 12:3, 20, 47; 16:1-10; Lv 16:5; Nm 1:2; Jos 22:17] referring to the nation of Israel. "Community" appears once in the NASB, but not in relation to communion among God's children. "Fellowship," however, is found in English translations, both modern and dated.

and therefore there are clear similarities within the actions of community for both believers and non-believers.

For instance, people tend to enjoy the company of other people. This stems from the words of God in Genesis 2:18 ESV, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” Human beings, unless they have some type of mental or physical illness, enjoy and desire relationships with others.<sup>2</sup> In Christian relationships this desire should be intense because of the prospect of genuine relationships that can be found only through the salvation of Christ and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

The believer feels no shame, as though he were still living too much in the flesh, when he yearns for the physical presence of other Christians. Man was created a body, the Son of God appeared on earth in the body, he was raised in the body, in the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected fellowship of God’s spiritual-physical creatures. The believer

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<sup>2</sup> This is commonly understood in secular psychology. A person who avoids relationships may be diagnosed with Schizoid personality disorder. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2000) says that a person with this disorder will have “a pervasive pattern of detachment from social relationships and a restricted range of expression of emotions in interpersonal settings, beginning in early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts.” Seeking relationships with others, on the other hand, is encouraged by psychology. Brehem, Miller, Perlman, and Campbell (2002) write, “Intimate relationships fulfill basic human needs for belonging and caring, they involve strong emotional attachments to others, and often interdependence with others as well. It is now well known that the single best protection anyone can have against the risks of many mental and physical illnesses is being part of a viable social support network. Intimate relationships provide meaningful, often enduring, networks of social support, of other people we can call upon when distressed, and in turn give aid and care to others when they are in need”(p. xv). “Across the life span, people who have few friends or lovers have much higher mortality rates than do those who are closely connected to caring partners” (Berkman & Glass, 2000).

therefore lauds the Creator, the Redeemer, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of a brother. (Bonhoeffer, 1954, pp. 19-20)

Christians should have a strong desire to be around likeminded believers. “It may be argued that one aspect of being made in God’s image is being made for community” (Hammett, 2007, p. 368).

This is not to say, however, that secular community is comparable to the community that the Scriptures describe (Schaeffer, 1998). Genuine Biblical community is “a community formed by the Spirit under the sovereign lordship of the exalted Christ” (Moore, 2004, p. 155).

### *Community Defined*

To define community, it is important to examine the word fellowship (κοινωνία). Darrell Bock writes of this word that “Luke points to fellowship to underscore the personal interactive character of relationships in the early church at all levels.... There is a real sense of connection to, between, and for each other” (Bock, 2007). J.R. McRay points out that the “basic meaning conveyed by the Greek term *koinōnia* is that of participation. Both fellowship and communion, as translations of this term, are to be understood in this light” (McRay, 2001).

Stanley J. Grenz has defined community as “a reconciled people who enjoy fellowship with him (meaning God), with one another, and ultimately with all creation” (Grenz, 1996, p. 23). This definition reveals the two primary means of fellowship for human beings—vertical and horizontal. Community throughout the Bible is developed first with God and then with other people. As argued above, secular community pales in comparison to the relationships that are available to those in communion with God. A relationship with God also makes it possible for believers with different backgrounds and beliefs to fellowship together in Christ. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* expands on this idea as follows:

The unity in the fellowship of the early church was not based upon uniformity of thought and practice, except where limits of immorality or rejection of the confession of Christ were involved. The capacity to fellowship with one with whom there were disagreements extended beyond the cooperate church into the home itself. (McRay, 2001)

Therefore, it can be seen that community involves a bond between believers that overcomes disagreements and relationships that extend outside the church.

Community, though a contemporary phraseology, is not a new concept. The *Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith*, which was adopted by the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1742, says this about community:

All saints that are united to Jesus Christ as their Head, by His Spirit, and faith, although they are not made thereby one person with Him, have fellowship in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection and glory; and being united to one another in love, they have communion in each others [sic] gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, in an orderly way, as do conduce to their mutual good, both inward and outward man...Saints by profession, are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services, as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities; which communion, according to the rule of the gospel, though especially to be exercised by them, in the relations wherein they stand, whether in families, or in churches, yet as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended to all the household of faith, even all those who in every place call upon the Name of Jesus; nevertheless their communion one with another as saints, doth not take away, or infringe the title or property which each man hath in his goods and possessions. (2007, p. 64)

This confession of faith calls for a community of believers who share in each other's joys and burdens. This confession even goes so far as to call fellowship mandated. This will be examined further under *Community Prescribed*.

Fellowship cannot, as it often is, be understood as mere time together, though that is most certainly involved. Oftentimes churches have "fellowship halls" or "fellowship meals" or "fellowship greeting times." Fellowship and community may be present and cultivated in these buildings and scheduled events, but they do not define fellowship. The converse is true. Genuine fellowship and community should be the desired outcome of any events that take place in all church buildings, should be the natural outflow that leads to meals together, should be obvious to everyone gathered for corporate worship in a time set aside for greetings (Segler & Bradley, 2006, p. 85; Malphurs, 2007, p. 81).

Having examined several sources, this writer discovered that community is a broad idea. It is, however, a state of being that God desires to permeate the lives of His children. True community can only take place among believers and it will be marked by their love for God which will be demonstrated in love for one another and the world around them. It has been said that imitation is the greatest form of flattery. In community, Christians will honor and glorify Christ by imitating His love for community as displayed in both His heavenly and earthly relationships.

### *Community Described*

Having been defined, it is important to examine the Biblical record for a description of community. Beginning even before the creation of the world, community was present within the three Persons of the Trinity. Jesus, who was with God in creation (Jn 1:1-3), prays that all believers would "be one (in unity) just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may

be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21). This “togetherness” of the Trinity is evident in Genesis 1:26 with “let us make man in our own image.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work as one to create all that has been made (Hammett, 2007). This coupled with God’s proclamation mentioned above from Genesis 2:18 shows that God is a relational being and created humans with the same desire.

The sin of humanity broke the intimate community present before the Fall between God and the pinnacle of His creation, Adam and Eve. This broken relationship limits man’s access to God. John H. Walton writes:

In Israel, while there was undoubtedly a recognition of the inherent nature of sin, the biggest problem of the Fall was not concentrated in the change in human nature or the heart condition but in the loss of access to the presence of God and the reduced ability to participate in the blessing. (Walton, 2001, p. 231)

This meant that community was no longer possible with God, at least in the same manner it had been. “A thick veil separated the people from God’s presence” (Norman, 2005, p. 95) once the temple was built. No longer could just any person have direct access to God. In fact, the presence of God often scared people in the Old Testament (Ex 30:18-19). Though the Law and the sacrifice represented a means of restoration of the relationship that existed before the Fall, it was by no means perfect (Isa 1:11; Rm 3:20).

The possibility for community with God and others changed at the cross. “The work of the cross restores our relationship with God (Eph 2:16) but also creates a new community among humans—the church” (Hammett, 2007, p. 368). This is beautifully pictured when the veil that separated the Jews from the presence of God in the Holy of Holies is torn from top to bottom after Jesus’ death (Mt 27:51; Mk 15:38; Lk 23:45). No longer would human sinfulness demand

that God separate Himself from them (21:27) because through Christ there is reconciliation available to those who will believe. This community, available through Christ's atoning work on the cross, is seen almost immediately after His ascension.

Acts 2 provides a good representation of what community looked like among the earliest Christians. Luke tells his readers that those who were added to the number of disciples (Acts 2:41) continually devote themselves (Acts 2:42) to the apostles' teaching and also to fellowship. Luke goes on to write that they were together and had all things in common (Acts 2:44). He continues that they were of one mind and broke bread from house to house taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all people (Acts 2:46). Luke then finishes this section by showing that this lifestyle of community is the sovereign will of God when he states, "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Community is not only beneficial for the Christian, but is ultimately for the work of the Kingdom. From the beginning, writes George E. Ladd (1974), there has been a clear call for fellowship among believers. He states:

One of the most striking elements in the life of the primitive churches was their sense of fellowship. 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship' ([Acts] 2:42). The several statements that the early Christians were 'together' ([Acts] 2:44, 47) designate the quality of their fellowship as much as their common assemblage. The early Christians were conscious of being bound together because they were bound to Christ. They were an eschatological people not only because they were called to inherit the eschatological Kingdom but because they had already experienced the blessings of the messianic era. In a sense, their fellowship was a foretaste of the fellowship of the eschatological Kingdom, displayed in history in the midst of Judaism. It was

inconceivable that a believer should be such in isolation. To be a believer meant to share with other believers the life of the coming age, to be a believer in fellowship, to be in the *ekklēsia*. (p. 350-51)

This demonstrates why the writers of the New Testament would spend so much time talking about the relationship among believers. Christianity is, by nature, a relational faith; first and foremost is the believer's relationship with Christ, but, as an outflow, relationships with others.

The Apostle Paul writes extensively about the community of believers in his letters to the various churches. Several of these passages will be discussed below, but it is clear that Paul has a high view of importance of relationship among believers. He frequently chastises those who are contentious (Ti 3:10) and laments when there are divisions among the brethren (1 Cor 11:18-19). Paul desperately wants unity among believers (Eph 4:1-3) and his teaching on community makes that clear.

1 John 1:1-10 also provides an accessible description of what community is and how it is possible. John writes, “[I]f we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another” (1 Jn 1:7). Therefore, one must be in fellowship with Christ, through His blood, which cleanses the believer of sins (1 Jn 1:7). A believer, having been cleansed of his sins, will then be able to have community with Christ in truth (1 Jn 1:6) and community with other believers who are communing with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3). John R. W. Stott writes:

The fellowship created by Christ in the days of his flesh within the apostolic band, and deepened by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, was not to be limited to them. It was to extend to the next generation (*that you also may have fellowship with us*), and so on

down the ages. . . . The purpose of the proclamation of the gospel is, therefore, stated in terms not of salvation but of *fellowship*. Yet, properly understood, this is the meaning of salvation in its widest embrace, including reconciliation to God in Christ. (Stott, 1989, p. 68)

Fellowship, therefore, is uniquely Christian because only those who are children of God are able to partake in it. Fellowship is communion, both with the Trinity and among those who have also been forgiven by His blood.

Community does not end with the Parousia of Christ. In fact, community will be perfected when the Kingdom of God is fully consummated. John records in Revelation 5:9 that he saw the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders bowing before the Lamb and “they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation’” (Revelation 5:9). In Heaven, people from every nation of the world will be in communion with both Christ ( Isa 60:19; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23; 1 Thes 4:17) and each other (Eph 2: 19, 3:14; Heb 11:13; Rev 7:9). The community that God desires for His church is a foretaste of community in eternity (Grenz, 1996, pp. 252-300).

### *Community Prescribed*

The writer of Hebrews gives one of the clearest exhortations that fellowship with other believers in community is mandated in Scripture when he writes:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb 10:24-25)

Some in his day were apparently prone to neglecting fellowship with other believers—making it their habit. He exhorts his readers to stir up one another to love and good works. In so doing they will encourage one another and be more prepared for the Day of the Lord. This passage of Scripture has led many churches (especially churches of previous generations) to adopt a discipline policy for those who neglect “to meet together.”<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Leeman (2010) sees an intrinsic connection between neglect of community and sin in the life of a believer. He writes,

The person who neglects meeting with the saints is on his way toward God’s judgment, and the dim picture of that judgment represented by church discipline is a merciful act of warning. When members stop attending a church and don’t join another one, they are often sinning or on their way to sinning. There’s something in their life they don’t want to be seen. There’s accountability and love they would prefer to be without. (p. 316)

Continuing to develop the idea of community, the writer of Hebrews goes on to say, “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28-29). He then goes on to say that the way this is done, the way that Christians are grateful

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<sup>3</sup> Driscoll & Breshears (2010) list “when a Christian is not consistently in community” as a reason for discipline from the church body. They cite Hebrews 10:24-25 as reasoning for this discipline (p. 329). The authors also link this text and the command to gather together with the Great Commandment of Christ in the Gospels (p. 311). The practice of discipline for absenteeism was common in the church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. For example, this writer’s own church’s history records that a rule once existed that stated, “. . . [I]f a member failed to attend church and failed to contribute to the church programs for a period of one year, he automatically excluded himself” (Hendricks, 1986, p. 48). Witmer (2010) writes of Hebrews 10:24-25 that, “This represents not merely a commitment to be in worship *somewhere*, but to be in attendance with the other members of . . . [a] particular flock” (p. 200). Flock is a good term for community because a sheep separated from its flock has a similar chance of survival as a Christian outside of her community.

for receiving this kingdom, is through the community that this kingdom has created. He says, “Let brotherly love continue” (Heb 13:1). This idea of brotherly love will be developed below under the first mark of Biblical community, but the writer in Hebrews uses this phrase to begin what Daniel Akin has called “Marks of a Healthy Community of Faith” (Akin, 2009). The entire thirteenth chapter of Hebrews discusses, in part, what a healthy Biblical community will look like. Several of these topics will be discussed below under *Marks of Biblical Community*.

If these attributes are present, the church is a place the believer desires to be. Aubrey Malphurs (2007) has rightly said that “believers and unbelievers alike—especially younger ones—yearn for this kind of relationship [deep fellowship] and look for it within the church” (p. 81). This gives the church a prime opportunity to foster these relationships and meet the spiritual and social needs of those in the community of faith. At the same time, Malphurs gives this warning:

If they don’t find it there [meaning the church], they look for it in other places outside the church, such as the workplace, sports, clubs, and bars. Churches that desire to reach people and minister to them, especially younger believers, need ministries that address this deeply felt need for fellowship. (p. 81)

Community and fellowship are thus Biblically described and prescribed, with some overlap between the prescriptions and descriptions.

Seeing how the Bible both describes and prescribes community, believers may ask why there is a void in fellowship among Christians. John S. Hammett strikes at the heart of this question when he writes:

By their very nature, churches are called to be a community. But human sinfulness, along with cultural obstacles, such as individualism and the consumer culture, as well as

religious obstacles such as churches so large individuals fall between the cracks or ignorance of the Biblical teaching on community, has left many churches sorely lacking in this area. (Hammett, 2007, p. 406)

Sin and culture keep believers from rejoicing with one another, in Christ, about the great work He is doing in their lives. Sin and culture also keep Christians from leaning on one another, in Christ, and sharing the burdens in their lives together. Believers should strive hard to keep sin and culture from ruining the relationships God wants them to have with each other.

#### Marks of Biblical Community<sup>4</sup>

There are several distinct marks of Biblical community in the Scriptures. These marks will take different shapes among different believers, but they are all commands that must be present in the church that is seeking to follow Christ's will. These are not attributes that individual Christians can cultivate on their own. "The theological motif that underlies the doctrine of community is that it must be a divine creation, not a human achievement" (Hammett, 2007, p. 398). John S. Hammett sees this motif developing in three ways throughout the whole of Scripture. By no coincidence, the motif develops along Trinitarian lines:

1. God has made the promise "I will be their God, and they will be my people."

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<sup>4</sup> These "Marks of Biblical Community" represent attributes of community, not activities. Activities such as cooperate worship, prayer, mission activities, charitable endeavors, Bible study, meals, trips, various social ministries, and other programs will, and arguably must, be present within the community of the Church and local congregations. The marks presented below are attributes that must be present within these activities for Biblical community to take place. Therefore, prayer, for example, must be done in love, without pride, and both seeking and giving forgiveness. Mark Dever (2004) gives a number of activities that will take place inside a healthy Biblical community. Many of these activities are a direct result of the presence of these attributes mentioned above.

2. The Holy Spirit is sent to dwell in the hearts of people. Fellowship is not found in the New Testament until the arrival of the Spirit at Pentecost.
3. Christ's death is "the bringer of reconciliation and the ultimate source of the church's unity and community" (Hammett, 2007, pp. 398-99).

Believers should pray that God will develop within their fellowship these principles so that they can enjoy the privilege of fellowship within the community of Christ. The love that is displayed in the communal relationships of the early Christian church has several distinct characteristics. Christian community involves love that is brotherly, free of judgment, humble, not envious, forgiving, patient, honest and kind. The community of Christ is most importantly mark by the Gospel.

#### *Christian Community is Marked by Love*

Love is the first mark of Biblical community (Long, 2004). Love is at the root of all the commands of God. As Jesus says in Mark 12 (quoting from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19):

‘And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mk 12:30-31 ESV)

He had been asked what the greatest commandment is. This was His reply. In fact, Matthew records that after giving this command, He said, “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22:40 ESV). This love, however, is not superficial, as love so often is in contemporary society.

Romans 12:10 ESV, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor,” is foundational for Christian community. Paul here speaks of devotion and honor that is worked out in the love that Christians have for one another. This is not, however,

just any type of devotion, but as Leon Morris says, a devotion uniquely Christian. He reports the following about the word “brotherly love” (*philadelphia*):

Unique to the Christians . . . the idea of brotherly love . . . is not found anywhere but among the Christians. They saw themselves as a family in a special sense. God was their Father and they were all brothers and sisters. Therefore they were united in a love that other people saw only in those of a natural family. (Morris, 1988, pp. 444-45)

With this in mind, Christians are, in reality, brothers and sisters, with the same Father and are commanded in Scripture to show affection as such. This love is vitally important for the spreading of the Gospel and the ministry of the church but does not always take place. Christian relationships should be as Everett F. Harrison has said:

To honor is to accord recognition and show appreciation. Presumably, this is based not on some attractiveness that is perceived or usefulness that is known but rather on the fact that every Christian has Christ in his heart and is able to express him through his own individuality. . . One honors God when he recognizes his transforming work in human life. (Harrison, 1976, p. 132)

Brotherly love and the giving of honor go hand in hand and separate Christian relationships from those relationships found in the secular world.

#### *Christian Community is Marked by Withheld Judgment*

The next mark of Christian community is in the commandment not to judge others found in Romans 14:13, “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” There are differences between each Christian. No two believe exactly the same thing about every iota of theology. Paul, using the example of food, gives the command not to “judge one another anymore” or to “put an obstacle”

in a fellow Christian's way. Often Christians refuse to have fellowship with other believers because they judge them for something that in reality is no different from the decision to eat all things or simply eat only vegetables (Rm 13:2).

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., in his book *The Disappearance of God* highlights issues that he rates as "first-order," "second-order," and "third-order" (Mohler, 2009, pp. 1-8) issues. A good understanding of where various theological topics fit into these categories can rectify much of the tension between believers on issues that, in the end, should have little or no bearing on their ability to fellowship. Mohler says:

First-level theological issues would include those doctrines most central and essential to the Christian faith. Included among these crucial doctrines would be doctrines such as the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, justification by faith and the authority of Scripture. (Mohler, 2009, p. 3)

These are non-negotiable and compromise on any of these points completely prevents genuine fellowship because they will result in "an eventual denial of Christianity itself" (Mohler, 2009, p. 5). "Second-order" issues, such as baptism, are those things which may be great enough to keep those on different ends of the argument from worshiping together on a regular basis, but do not prevent fellowship, as Mohler, a Southern Baptist, has clearly shown with his regular preaching in the Presbyterian church. Of the rest of theological issues, which Mohler calls "third-order," he writes:

Christians may find themselves in disagreement over any number of issues related to the interpretation of difficult texts or the understanding of matters of common disagreement.

Nevertheless, standing together on issues of more urgent importance, believers are able to

accept one another without compromise when third-order issues are in question. (Mohler, 2009, p. 7)

This, however, is not always the case. Common examples include eschatology, Bible translations, and the music used in worship. Often there are disagreements, sometimes minute, which are dwelt upon to the extent that it becomes important for the Christian to alienate himself from anyone who does not have the same viewpoint he does. Here in Romans 14, Paul makes the case for fellowship for “second-order” and “third-order” issues. Here are men “for whom Christ died” (Rm 14:15), and they were being judged for what they ate. Paul saw bigger things at work and understood that believers should “pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (Rm 14:19).

This love is also demonstrated in the acceptance that must take place among believers. Paul gives the church at Rome the command to “bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves” (Rm 15:1). Christ has born the weakness of the lost and “did not please Himself” (Rom 15:3); therefore, the Christian should be accepting. This carries back into the discussion of judging above. Not only should the Christian not judge those who are within orthodoxy but have beliefs somewhat different from his own, the Christian is to be accepting of them. The believer must also be willing to bear weaknesses when she finds herself in a stronger position. This runs counter to everything that believers are told by contemporary culture. It runs against the accepted stream of Social Darwinism, which teaches that only the strong survive. Christians are in a race together. As Morris’ quotes above so aptly puts, Christians are brothers and sisters. *Acceptance* here is not merely tolerance either. Christians do not simply tolerate one another. There may be tolerance of viewpoints, but the believer will find he is incapable of ministering as Christ has intended and laid forth in His Word, unless there is a genuine

acceptance of other brothers and sisters in Christ. There must be a willingness to bear weaknesses and be of the same mind for Biblical community to take place (Rm 15:5).

Another passage tying into the idea of judgment in the Christian community is James 4:11: “Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law...” This is an easy sin to fall into, as it is easy to speak against another brother or sister on a number of different levels.. How many conversations would not take place if there was an attitude present in which fellow believers were not talked against? James has been writing against misuse of the tongue and encouraging the brethren to avoid conflict. These two exhortations have a direct bearing on the context of his statement in verse eleven. Oftentimes, speaking against a brother or sister leads to even more sin against him or her and more importantly, against God. James has spoken of the effects of a small rudder on a large ship (Ja 3:4) and a small fire in a great forest (Ja 4:5); accordingly, seemingly small words have a large and lasting effect on the relationship between Christians. Peter H. Davids (1989) writes:

It is immaterial whether the accusations are true or false, for however true the charge may be, to spread it to people uninvolved in the situation is destructive to community harmony. ‘Love covers a multitude of sins’ (1 Pet. 4:8). It does not broadcast sins, so Christians must not speak negatively about others. (p. 104)

Secondly, refraining from speaking against a fellow believer is a simple step in avoiding conflict. Words spoken against a brother or sister are often the beginning of conflict. Because the body of Christ is called as one family, conflict, in reality, is a splitting of the body. The efforts of the Church and of those in it are difficult enough without adding conflicts to be dealt with.

Adding to the mandate to withhold judgment and to avoid speaking against fellow

Christians is a call to refrain from complaining. Fault is easy to find with others and James warns against complaining when he writes in James 5:9: “Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged.” It is good to note that complaining is different from speaking against a brother or speaking evil. There are times when a complaint could be justified. However, in this context there is a clear indication that complaining is inferior because the focus of the Christian should be on his mission for Jesus. James has stated earlier (Ja 5:7-8) that the time of God is near and a Christian should live in patient expectation. The relationship among believers should be characterized by a concentration on the high call of God—the Gospel. It is easy to get sidetracked into inferior matters, which often lead to sin and dis-fellowship. This is not in keeping with the commands and promises of Scripture. John Calvin wrote, “[H]e [James] declares that thus they would all be condemned, because there is no one who does not offend his brethren, and afford them an occasion of groaning” (Calvin, 1984, p. 249). Complaints do not accomplish anything for God’s kingdom, but rather should be replaced with encouragement and godly correction.

#### *Christian Community is Marked by Humility*

Humility must be present in Christian community. No believer can say they love their brothers and sisters when thinking too highly of himself. Galatians 5:26 gives this command as Paul writes, “Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.” Paul is giving instructions for the Galatians to live by the Spirit (Gal 5:16) and in doing so, to put off the things of the flesh. William Hendriksen summarizes this passage and comments of it:

‘Let us neither brag about that which we have (or think we have), thereby calling forth equally pretentious swagger on the part of the person whom we are speaking, nor grudge that other person what he has.’ Haughtiness and conceit, the ‘know-it-all’ attitude, brutal

aggressiveness, these ill become those who claim to be followers of him who was always showing the very opposite spirit. ...God does not approve of windbags. If there had not been a special need for this warning Paul undoubtedly would not have issued it.

(Hendriksen, Exposition of Galatians, 1968, p. 227)

The Christian should not boast, challenging another believer to embrace the sin of envy. Likewise, he must not envy, causing arrogance in another. What Hendriksen places in parentheses challenging as well. Most things which are bragged about either do not actually exist or are not the result of anything the believer has personally accomplished. Paul captures this sentiment in 1 Corinthians 3:6. He writes, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.” Paul was obviously a great preacher and missionary, but he knew who always had the bragging rights—it is always Christ.

*Christian Community is Marked by a Freedom from Envy*

Paul makes it clear that envy has no place in the Christian community. He gives clear instruction as he writes:

Godliness actually is a means of greater gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and cover, with these we shall be content. (1 Tm 6:6-8)

Christ’s purpose for each Christian “is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (The Westminster Shorter Catechism). Within the church there have always been differences among believers. Some have great wealth, while others suffer impoverishment. Some will find employment, while others seek to no avail. There is, however, nothing to be envious of either way. “Love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant (1 Cor 13:4 ESV). The greatest confidence that Christians have is Christ and they have Christ in common with one another. This passage

shows that there is nothing to brag about in any worldly situation. As Paul writes, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (2 Cor 10:17).

*Christian Community is Marked by Forgiveness*

Even if believers do put into practice, within their relationships, all those principles mentioned above, the reality is humanity is fallen and Christians still sin. Believers still wrong other people and, though they have forgiveness from Christ, they still sin in such a way as to need forgiveness from others. Forgiving hearts must be present in the Christian community.

Paul writes:

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. (Col 3:12-13)

This passage in Colossians not only gives the command to forgive, but the reason. Paul spends the first seventeen verses of chapter three speaking of the new self that the Christian is to put on. This process of sanctification is preparing the believer for her eternal glorification, but does not eradicate sin in her life. This is why forgiveness must take place.

First, forgiveness must take place because of the new heart that God has given to His chosen, a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. This new heart is different from the heart of stone (Ez 36:26) and leads the Christian to react and live differently from the way he did when he was the old man (Rm 6:6). The new heart is full of love and should, therefore, display the characteristics of love (1 Cor 13:1-8).

Secondly, every person possesses a great debt that he personally owes to the Lord. This is a debt that he cannot pay, a debt which costs every human being his life (Rm 6:23) in both this

life and the next (Rev 21:8). Jesus, however, has given mankind the opportunity to have his debt removed (Ps 103:12) and by suffering has made a way to God, for all people (1 Pt 3:18). The Christian has forgiveness (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14) but does not deserve it (Rm 5:8). Why then would there be any hesitation to forgive any brother or sister who has committed a wrong? King David writes in Psalm 51:4, “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight.” D.A. Carson, in a sermon entitled “On Being Prepared for Suffering,” points out that God is always the most offended party when sin takes place (Carson, 2005). Yet, though He is the most offended party when sin takes place, He is graciously willing to forgive. When a believer is wronged by another, she must realize that God was the One most offended by her brother’s sin. She should, therefore, have a much easier time forgiving than God did.

A Christian should not only forgive as God has forgiven, but with the same finality. Just as Psalm 103:12 tells believers that God removes transgressions “as far as the east is from the west,” so Christians too must forgive and move forward in Christian community. Continuing to act as if another brother still owes a debt is not the design of forgiveness for those in Christ.

#### *Christian Community is Marked by Patience*

Patience is a difficult concept to grasp in contemporary culture. Twenty-first century society is on-demand and round-the-clock. From twenty-four hour news stations to never-closing grocery stores, there is little room for patience. But Paul, in Ephesians 4:1-2, calls for it when he writes, “Therefore I, a prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love.” Andrew T. Lincoln (1990) writes of this verse,

μακροθυμία, ‘patience,’ is literally ‘long temper’ in contrast to a short temper and can have the sense of steadfastness or forbearance. Since relationships with others are in

view, it is the latter sense that is relevant here... This ability to make allowance for others' shortcomings, this tolerance of others' exasperating behavior is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and again a quality essential for communal living. (p. 236)

Christians are not perfect, but not every shortcoming is a sin that needs forgiveness. Oftentimes simple patience will be sufficient for a relationship to move forward. Francis Foulkes (1989) writes, "*Patience (makrothymis)*, [is] a word...used...of slowness in avenging wrong or retaliating when hurt by another. It is used of God's patience with humanity, . . . and the corresponding and consequent quality that the Christian should show towards others" (pp. 117-18). Biblical community is to be marked by patience between brothers and sisters in Christ. This community treats each other as equals, while keeping in mind that each member of the community is at a different place in his relationship with Christ and that patience is necessary for the health of the group. The community is also vividly aware of the patience that God has shown His people. They frequently draw to mind that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rm 5:8).

#### *Christian Community is Marked by Honesty*

Paul tells the church at Colossae, "Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices" (Col 3:9). He has told them previously that they are to die to the old things and follow Christ (Col 3:3). One of the primary marks of the old self is lying, and in Christ, it has no place. Lying has no place in Christian community as well. Arthur G. Patzia writes, "Lying...certainly fits the context as a verbal sin as well as causing grievous damage to personal relationships, particularly within the body of Christ" (Patzia, 1990). Trust is hard enough to gain from someone. Lying destroys that trust and often ensures that it will never be gained back.

Lying was the first demonstration of what the sin nature, now present in every human, would look like. Lying began when the serpent informed Eve that if she ate of the tree in the middle of the garden that she “[S]urely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gn 3:4-5). Man kinds eyes were open to evil but closed to God. No longer could He commune with God in the cool of the evening. Rather he would hide when God walked in the Garden. Men would be cursed to toil the ground and women to struggle in childbirth. A lie started the downfall of man, his castigation from the Garden of Eden, and the punishment of death. This drives point that the truth is important. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). The truth must be a staple of Christian community. Obviously, the Truth, meaning Jesus, must be present, but also the words spoken among the believers must be honest words. This is difficult and sets Christian communion apart from the interpersonal relationships of the world. Honesty and truth are not valued by the unregenerate, but this must not be the case among believers. True Christian community will value the truth above all else.

#### *Christian Community is Marked by Kindness*

The walk of those who are outside the body of Christ is in “futility of...mind” (Eph 4:17). The walk for the Christian, in contrast, should be with a sound mind. A sound mind for the Christian comes through those actions laid out in part in Ephesians 4:32: “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” Paul has been discussing the needed unity among those who have faith in Christ (Eph 4:1-6) and now turns to the walk of the Christian. This passage speaks of being kind, and of forgiving (which has already been discussed). Kindness is not always considered a desirable trait for a human being to have, especially a men. There is a sense in which men are to be rugged and crass,

though some seek now to swing the pendulum too far in the other direction and feminize men. This sentiment is depicted in many contemporary television shows where there is very little kindness shown. A popular movie, entitled *A Knight's Tale*, provides a good example to this fallacious attitude. One particular scene depicts a joust in which one knight allows another to finish without causing him further bodily harm, essentially allowing him for forfeit. The knight's love interest in the movie exclaims to a person also watching the joust that the knight "shows mercy." The onlooker quickly refutes this, stating, "He shows weakness" (Leder, Sewell, & Sossamon, 2002). That is the popular sentiment of much of culture.

This, however, has no place in Christian community. A barrage of put-downs and insults, even though thought in jest, are, in reality, contrary to the speech that should take place among believers in Christ. William Hendriksen (1967) writes:

*Kindness* is Spirit-imparted *goodness* of heart, the very opposite of the *malice* or *badness* mentioned in verse 31 [of Ephesians 4]. The early Christians by means of kindness commended themselves to others (II Cor. 6:6). God, too, is kind (Rom. 2:4; cf. 11:22), and we are admonished to become like him in this respect (Luke 6:25). (p. 223)

A lack of kindness is very evident among young people, even in the church. They have grown up, for the most part, in a time that is desensitized to violence and anger. On television and in movies there are very few portrayals of people being kind to another person in their words and their actions. This makes for a difficult adjustment into a community that is called to kindness. Colossians 4:6 says, "Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person." The words and actions of the Christian community are to display Christ through their kindness.

*Christian Community is Marked by the Gospel*

A final attribute of Christian community is the centrality of the Gospel. This is the one attribute that no one outside of the body of Christ may claim. Some may argue they have love, or that they do not judge or have envy, but the Gospel is the great divide between saved and lost, believer and non-believer, elect and reprobate. All of the aforementioned characteristics of community are tied up in the Gospel. There is no greater love than the Gospel. There is no more superior nor definitive act of forgiveness than the forgiveness of the Gospel.

Believers in Christian community have the Gospel in their hearts and on their minds. There is a desire to allow the Gospel to define the actions of the community and have the Gospel at the center of those activities. This separates true Christian community from what often passes for fellowship in many churches. There should be a desire to let the wonderful relationships made possible through Christ point others toward a saving relationship with Him. Greg Gilbert (2010) writes:

I wonder if God's grace to you has caused you to love the world around you more, and to long to see people come to know and believe in Jesus Christ. If we truly understand the grace God has shown us, our hearts will burn to see that same grace shown to others. (p. 118)

The Christian community seeks to grow. Those who comprise it understand that they have been chosen by God for the purpose of bringing Him glory. They achieve this in great part by sharing with others the good news of what Christ has done. The Christian community is not a reclusive group. It is separated from the world because of the Gospel, but not out of the world. Members are called to the world to share with the world the Gospel (Jn 17:15-18).

### Conclusion

It seems that for an extended period of ecclesiastical history, church was something you did as opposed to something you are. It also seems as if a new generation of believers has an intense desire to see church function as a community as opposed to an organization. Many young church leaders see the Christian community as a way of life as opposed to one of many activities that someone would plug into his calendar.<sup>5</sup> This view must be present going forward. Ed Stetzer (2003) writes,

Community is a central value in most churches that are reaching postmoderns.

Community will be a central value in all postmodern communities whether secular or sacred. This is good news for the church because community is central to its mission.

With a culture anxious for genuine community, the church of Christ can offer community with man and with God. In the new church of the postmoderns, spiritual growth does not take place outside of community. (p. 150)

Community is God's design for the church. "You can't buy community; you can't program community" (Stetzer, *Planting Churches in a Postmodern Age*, 2003, p. 151). It is important for the church to recapture the community that is so prevalently seen in the Biblical record of the early church. They were a people on mission together in love and filled with the message of the Gospel. They were not perfect but they were together with all things in common (Acts 2:44).

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<sup>5</sup> Joshua Harris (2004) writes, "Passion for church involves diving into the community of the local church. It means 'doing life' with other Christians by pursuing relationships that extend beyond the church building and official church functions. . . . Fellowship means belonging to each other. . . . Every 'one another' command shows that the church isn't merely about programs or meeting, but about *shared life*. . . . The opportunity to share life with other Christians and experience this kind of fellowship is one of the most exciting parts of being a committed member of a local church" (pp. 75-77).

They are one, just as Jesus had prayed they would be (Jn 17:21). Biblical community in a contemporary Christian context must be marked by that same oneness for the sake of the Gospel of Christ.

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