

each others' lives in meaningful ways; causing us to open up, be real, share, receive, listen, and appreciate.

Church membership is analogous to the relationships that make up a family. No family can maintain and develop vibrancy by spending a few hours together in casual interaction.

Include Outsiders

The call to community drives us to consider the true meaning of hospitality; the Greek word in the Bible means "love of stranger." Sometimes what passes for community is really just a clique of very similar people who are fairly comfortable with each other. That's not biblical hospitality.

We need to be focusing on the neediest among us. How many of us have complained about a lack of community. "We're so lonely" we say. And yet we have shut-ins who have little to no human interaction all week. There's an opportunity for community! Alluding to Matthew 25:45 Bonhoeffer says, "The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ..."

We cannot judge Christian community on the basis of experience of fellowship. We are bound together by faith, not by experience. Nonetheless, God is calling us to labor with him to more fully reflect the reality of who we are in Christ.

In that message there is both ample encouragement *and* call to action.

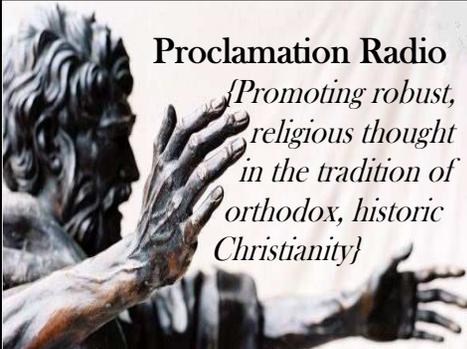
¹ All quotations in this article not otherwise referenced are from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954). Page numbers are omitted for the sake of space.

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PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic Christianity
March 2012, Issue 33

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY: SEEKING CONTENTMENT WITHOUT COMPLACENCY

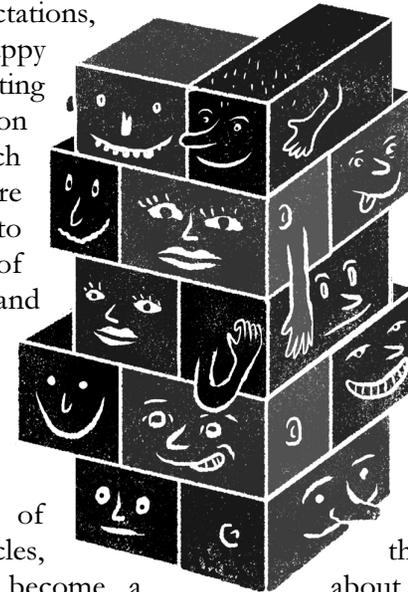
BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

Christian reflection on community is often an exercise in romanticism. By viewing the early Christian community of Acts 2 through rose-colored glasses we imagine a homogenous cloister of haloed saints meeting all of each other's expectations, living as one big happy family. By projecting this abstract ideal on our own church context we are almost guaranteed to foster a spirit of disappointment and disillusionment, often leading some to desert the pursuit of community altogether.

Even outside of Christian circles, "community" has become a buzzword; being so overused and having so many definitions, it ceases to mean anything. Thankfully, the Bible does offer a clear definition of community. It also teaches us how to live as a community without expect-

ing either too much or too little from it.

If you want to stop romanticizing Christian community consider reading a little book called *Life Together*¹ by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (a 20th century German theologian who was executed for participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler). Living as he did, under the religiously suppressive Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer's perspective on biblical community can help us to develop a more balanced, less self-centered understanding of Christian fellowship. He helps us understand that community is less about what we need to do than about what Christ is doing, which helps us to seek contentment in Christ's community while at the same time preventing us from becoming complacent in our responsibilities to that community.



The Principle of Community

The word “community” is from a compound Latin word describing the unity of individuals. What Webster says of communities in general is true of the church too. A community is a body of individuals unified by a common history, character, policy, interest, and activity.

The Church as Community

Every church member has a shared history of being outsiders to God’s grace (Eph. 2:12) before being brought into the community through Christ’s blood (v. 13). All believers are united in character; they share the Holy Spirit and begin to take on the character of Jesus Christ. Every covenant member is united in the policy of Scripture. We don’t each get to decide how to live; the Bible determines that for us. All God’s children have a common interest in the glory of God and in a desire to see the ungodly submit to him. And every Christian is united in the activities of worship and the pursuit of peace and holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

“Community” is God’s word of choice to describe his redeemed assembly, the church (the word is used some eighty times in the NIV’s Old Testament). The believing community in both testaments is a people chosen by God to live and act as a body.

God grants the right to join his family. God works faith in our hearts and brings us into his family apart from the will of the flesh and the will of man (John 1:13). Christ is building a church by bringing saved sinners

into community with himself and other believers through his work on the cross. We reality is, we don’t create community; we’re brought into one.

Before community is an imperative (“you must...”) it is an indicative (“you are...”). The most important part of living as community is coming to terms with the reality of who we are in Christ. As Bonhoeffer said, “In Christian brotherhood everything depends upon its being clear right from the beginning: Christian brotherhood is not an ideal, but a divine reality.”

The Danger of Getting this Wrong

Bonhoeffer warns against not being content with the community God is creating. “One who wants more than what Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood. He is looking for some extraordinary social experience which he has not found elsewhere; he is bringing muddled and impure desires into Christian brotherhood.” How often do we think of community as an ideal to be pursued, while at the same time neglecting the community into which we have been placed? Bonhoeffer warns, “He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”

Your community may be broken in terms of social interaction. You might not feel as closely connected as you might like. You might occasionally fear that you are part of dysfunctional family. But such brokenness

actually confirms the supernatural character of the Christian community. The church is only a community because of what God is doing, not because of what we are making ourselves into. “Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God’s sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it.”

The Practice of Community

The call to community is not just about being a friendlier church it’s about being the church! How do we live out the principles of Christian community?

Count Your Blessings

The Christian community to which you belong is not exactly what you would like it to be (if it was, says Bonhoeffer, people would join simply to gratify their flesh). But do we think about how much we have to be thankful for?

Bonhoeffer explains: “It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in the world to share God’s Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands stand alone.” Because God binds us into one body through Jesus’ broken body, “We enter common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients.”

Failure to count blessings is devastating to community. “If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been

placed, even where there is no great experience...but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty—if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches that are there for us all in Jesus Christ.”

Think Globally, Live Locally

This phrase has been applied in various settings and disciplines but it applies well also to the Christian community. All of us should concern ourselves with the challenges that face all people everywhere. Bonhoeffer explains. “Life together under the Word will remain sound and healthy only where it does not [turn inward] but rather where it understands itself as being part of the one, holy catholic, Christian Church, where it shares actively and passively in the sufferings and struggles and promise of the whole church.”

The reality is, that concern cannot be expressed everywhere. We demonstrate our concern for community by living with a discernable commitment to the local church.

Be Intentionally Intrusive

Peter describes believers as “living stones...being built up [into] a spiritual house.” That’s quite a metaphor! Living stones must grow into each other, becoming cemented together in tangible ways through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). Vibrant Christianity is a community project. Love for Christ and his church brings us into