

The Community of God

And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a **community** of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. (Genesis 35:11)

εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ θεός ἐγὼ ὁ θεός σου αὐξάνου καὶ πληθύνου ἔθνη καὶ συναγωγὰς ἐθνῶν ἔσονται ἐκ σοῦ καὶ βασιλεῖς ἐκ τῆς ὀσφύος σου ἐξελεύσονται

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֱלֹהִים אֲנִי אֵל שְׁדֵי פְרָה וּרְבָה גוֹי וּקְהָל
גוֹיִם יִהְיֶה מִמֶּךָּ וּמְלָכִים מִחֲלֻצֶיךָ יֵצְאוּ:

dixitque ei ego Deus omnipotens cresce et multiplicare gentes et **populi** nationum erunt ex te reges de lumbis tuis egredientur

I. Introduction.

The Hebrew word קְהָל (qāhāl) means *assembly, company, congregation*. This word was often used for God's chosen nation of Israel. The Septuagint translated the word in Greek as συναγωγή (sunagōgē) which later began to mean specifically the building where Jewish congregations meet (*synagogue, place of assembly*).

The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “*The body of those having common or equal rights or rank, as distinguished from the privileged classes; the body of commons; the commonalty.*” Community is also defined as, “*a civil community, who have certain circumstances of nativity, religion, or pursuit, common to them, but not shared by those among whom they live; as the British or Chinese community in a foreign city, the mercantile community everywhere, the Roman Catholic community in a Protestant city, etc., the Jewish community in London, familiarly known to its members as ‘The Community.’*”

John Stott wrote, “So the Church is God’s people, his *ecclesia*, called out of the world to be his, and existing as a separate entity solely because of his call.”ⁱ And again, “Such is the Church, God’s people, called out of the world to himself, called to holiness, called to mission, called to suffering, and called through suffering to glory.”ⁱⁱ And quoting Bishop Leslie Newbegin:

The Church ... is a community *in via*, on its way to the ends of the earth and to the end of time ... the Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one.ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words the Church is a God-ordained community, which by the help of God is being renewed into His likeness.

II. Biblical Basis of Community.

A. Community in the Creation.

God created Adam in his own image as the crown of his creation and positioned him to subjugate His creation. God saw that Adam could not establish a relationship with the rivers, mountains, trees, fish in the water, birds in the air, or the animals on the land. Adam was utterly lonely. In Genesis 2:18, we read, "*The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."*"

Observing the loneliness of Adam, God responded in two ways. First, he said, "It is not good for the man to be alone..." Second, "I will make him a helper suitable for him." (Gen. 2:18) We understand from this verse God's opinion that a non-communal individualistic, independent, and lonely life is not good. God's intention for mankind is to live in communion with others.

B. Community in the Trinity.

Leonardo Boff wrote,

Just as there is Trinitarian *koinōnia*, so there is ecclesial *koinōnia*. The main definition of Church is this: the community of the faithful in communion with the Father, through the incarnate Son, in the Holy Spirit, and in communion with each other and with their leaders. The Spirit and the risen Christ has lavished many gifts and charisma on the faithful (cf 1 Cor. 12). But the Spirit who gives is the same as the Lord (1 Cor. 12:4). Episcopal collegiality finds its best theological basis in the communion of the Trinity.^{iv}

We believe in a God who is a community within himself. The three persons in the Godhead are united perfectly with each other. There are three distinct personalities with different functions yet the attributes are the same. We see a perfect example of unity in diversity in the triune God. Against a background of polytheistic religions in Asia Minor and Asia where each god or goddess is ascribed an office and a status and the society is divided among many religious sects, trinity is certainly a unique revelation of God, given to the Church, to unite human beings into one community.

C. Community in the Commandments.

When God gave the Decalogue to Moses, six out of the Ten Commandments, are concerned with community living. This implies God's intention for human beings to live in communion with each other. God knows that our sinful nature will continue to be a hindrance towards community living. Our natural tendency is to disrupt the harmony of the community and become independent. God gave laws through Moses to help us overcome our sins and facilitate community life.

Later Jesus came and reinforced those six laws of Moses in a simple imperative statement, "Love your neighbor as yourself." He called it the second great commandment. This indicates that Jesus did not come to call us out from the world to escape our responsibility towards community. Unlike many oriental religious teachings that major on asceticism, hermit lifestyle and solitude, Jesus sends his Church back into world to live as a community and carry on His mission of loving the world with actions.

D. Community in the Unity.

Church is not a community of people forced into a box with one big brand name but it is a spontaneous and natural assembling of individuals who share many things in common. Eugene Peterson in his foreword to the book, *The Safest Place on Earth* by Larry Crab wrote:

Americans are good at forming clubs and gathering crowds. But clubs and crowds, even when – especially when – they are religious clubs and crowds, are not communities. The formation of community is the intricate, patient, painful work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot buy or make community; we can only offer ourselves to become community.^v

The common experience of the Holy Spirit is a major mark in the lives of the member of this community and thus unity is an obvious outcome. In Ephesians 4:4-6, Paul wrote, "*There is **one body and one Spirit**-- just as you were called to **one hope** when you were called-- **one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father** of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*"

Paul S. Minear wrote:

The community of saints has been born of the Spirit and baptized into this one Spirit. On this community this Spirit is poured out; within this community as a temple the Spirit dwells. Thus the life of the saints is at every point circumscribed by the Holy Spirit, and determined and empowered by it. In this holiness lies the unity and power of the Church.^{vi}

III. The Characteristics of the Community.

Since the fall in the Garden of Eden, the community of mankind has been torn apart with languages, ethnic identity, racial affiliations, economic classes and political barriers. Humans are separated from other humans. We have become our own enemy and the cause of *homo sapiens*'s genocide. These things have been seen in the past, we see them today and we will continue to see them till the kingdom of God comes.

The kind of community we see in the world today is certainly not the kind of community God originally intended. He sent his only begotten Son to purge the sin of the world and reconcile lost mankind to Himself. Having paid the price of atonement on the cross, he has begun building a new community through the Church as the only solution to the problem of barriers among human beings.

God expects this new community to be different and distinct with the following characteristics:

A. A Loving Community.

In 1 Corinthians 13:1- 7, Paul wrote:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (NIV)

Practice of divine love is the supreme priority of the community of God. Such emphasis is reiterated again and again through out the New Testament. Peter wrote, “*Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love **one another** deeply, from the heart.*” (1 Pet.1:22) The divine love is not shallow but involves our sincerity and the heart.

The apostle John wrote, “*If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the **love** of God be in him?*” (1 John 3:17). The Bible commends a love that is not only felt emotionally but that also acts to meet others need. In other words sincere love shares one’s possessions with others’ poverty. For John such sincere love is the natural ability of a person who is born of God. Again in John 4:7,

he emphasized divine love by saying, " *Dear friends, **let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.***"

John believed that God's presence is evidenced truly only if love is exchanged between one another generously. In fact God's love remains incomplete until it is acted out towards one another in deeds. He wrote, "*No one has ever seen God; but if we **love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.***" (1 John 4:12)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is explicit in His expectations of the quality of love from this new community, He said:

*But I tell you: **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*** (Matthew 5: 44 – 47).

B. A Community of Mutual Submission and Humility.

Loving with compassion is one thing but loving one another with submission and humility is another thing. Submission and humility are important spiritual marks of this God-ordained community. They are essential virtues because they enable a person to love selflessly, sacrificially and without claiming any credit for it. In Romans 12:10, Paul wrote, "*Be devoted to **one another** in brotherly love. **Honor one another above yourselves.***" This virtue indeed separates a genuine Christian love from mere sympathy and charity. It helps us to be open and willing to love a person that God calls us to love, and not choose someone easy to love. Paul wrote in Romans 12:16, "*Live in harmony with **one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.***" Before God we are not better than those who are socially outcast, filthy and immoral individuals in our city. In Paul's words, all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. Had it not been for the grace of God in our lives we would have been found in their places. In Romans 15:7, Paul wrote, "*Accept **one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.***" Often we Christians, who have accepted Christ, become indifferent towards those who are drug-addicts, prostitutes, homosexuals, lesbians and serial killers. We focus more on judging and criticizing but much less on loving and caring, in our attitude towards them. We often wonder why they are doing what they are doing not realizing that we would have been doing the same thing if the grace of God were not given to us. Imagine how Christ was patient, kind and gracious to us in the times of our rebellions; how Jesus saw our ugly private sinful lives and yet he was willing to forgive us. Such understanding encourages us to be submissive and humble in loving those who may not deserve our love.

In Philippians 2:3, Paul cautioned us, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”*

In Ephesians 4:2, understanding the difficulty of loving people who are not easy to love requires patience and forbearance. Paul wrote, *“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with **one another** in love.”*

In a society where submission was expected from an inferior in the hierarchy to the superior, from a minority to the majority, from a slave to the master, from the poor to the rich, from a female to a male, Paul instituted a new criteria of submission in the new community. In Ephesians 5:21, he wrote, *“**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**”*

In our society, pride and the unwillingness for mutual submission between the youth and the adults have separated them further. Peter specifically exhorts young men who are vulnerable to pride, to be submissive and humble. Quoting the Proverb 3:34 in 1 Peter 5:5, he wrote *“Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward **one another**, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”* Therefore in this new community there is no place for pride and segregation of young and old, but mutual submission and humility are called for.

C. A Community of Encouraging & Building.

Genuine love cares and the care goes beyond an emotional feelings. The question is how do we provide care for another person in this new community? The Bible teaches us to encourage and build up one another. This is the least that we can think of doing to another person as a part of our spiritual care. John Stott says, *“The word CARE is an acronym for Congregation, Affirmation, Relating, Encouraging.”^{vii}*

In 1 Thessalonians 5:10, Paul wrote, *“He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. **Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.**”* According to Paul the ministry of encouragement and building up are an outward sign that you are one with Christ. It is not necessarily confined to the one who is especially gifted in doing so.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul specifically indicates those to who we are to provide this care. He wrote, *“And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, **encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.**”*

The author of Hebrews encourages us to do this ministry on a daily basis because of our vulnerability. He wrote, *“**But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.**”* (Heb. 3:13) He emphasizes the same thing in Hebrews 10:25 also. He wrote, *“Let us not give up meeting*

together, as some are in the habit of doing, but **let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**" The Day refers to the eschatological event when our righteous acts will be rewarded, encouraging us to continue the good deeds and not be deprived of our reward at the last moment.

D. A Community of Forgiveness.

Since this new community is composed of imperfect sinners saved by grace alone, in addition to love, forgiveness is essential to keep this community truly enjoying genuine relationship. This is why Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."^{viii} Jesus reinforced the importance of forgiveness on the cross, when in his agony he cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Forgiveness therefore is another important glue along with love that keeps this new community together and vibrant. In Ephesians 4:32, Paul exhorts the believers at Ephesus, "**Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**" And then in Colossians 3:13, he wrote, "**Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**" These churches needed to exercise the practice of forgiveness to the measure of Christ's forgiveness to emerge as a witnessing community in non-Christian surroundings. Cautioning the Christians for their critical spirit, James exhorted, "**Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.**" (James 4:11)

E. A Community of Servants.

According to Jesus, this new community is a community of servants. Our greatness is qualified by our service to others rather than by our authority and position. In Mark 10:42-44, John Mark wrote, "**Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all...'**"

Peter exhorted the church leaders to be willing servants. In 1 Peter 5:2, he wrote, "**Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;**"

Likewise Paul challenged the Galatians to exercise their freedom in Christ to serve each other. In Galatians 5:13, he wrote, "**You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.**"

In fact Jesus demonstrated the life of a servant through the life he lived on earth. John Mark records the words of Jesus saying, "**For even the Son of Man did not come to**

be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) And the apostle John reports Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and urging them to do likewise. Jesus said, “*Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.*” (John 13:14)

F. A Community of Healthy Communication.

A true community of God provides an atmosphere of mutual trust where an honest exchange of personal information freely takes place. This helps the members of the community to come closer to each other and understand better. Honesty and transparency are two indispensable prerequisites in such communication because they are contagious and therapeutic. It always draws individuals involved closer to each other. It is risky because it often exposes and makes one vulnerable to others but always liberating from the guilt of pretensions.

Larry Crabb wrote:

My burden is to see spiritual communities develop, where spiritual friends and spiritual directors *connect* with people. I long to see communities where people feel *safe* enough to be broken. Where a *vision* of what the Spirit wants to do in people's lives sustains them, even when they are far from it. Where *wisdom* from God sees what the Spirit is right now doing and what is getting in His way. Where the literal life of Christ pours out on one to energize that life in another, offering His divine touch.^{ix}

Small cell groups are ideal place for healthy communication. It is because of one of these reasons small cell group is rightly considered as the building blocks of the church. Any church, which does not foster strong small cells for healthy communication is likely to suffer with anomalies of communal disharmony and poor emotional health.

IV. What are the Objectives of Community?

A. Meet the Spiritual Needs of Members.

1. Through mutual mentoring.
2. Through Discipleship.

1.Through mutual mentoring.

- i. Between spouses.

Consider the examples of Aquila and Priscilla's togetherness and their ministry to the great orator, Apollo.

- ii. Between spiritual friends.

Take the case of Barnabas and Paul
Take the case of Paul and Peter's strong bond of relationship despite their differences of opinion.

2. Through Discipleship.

i. Between father/mother and son/ daughter.

Thank God for a mother like Eunice or a grandmother like Lois who raised a person like Timothy for the furtherance of the community. In 2 Timothy 1: 5, Paul wrote, "*When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in **thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice.***" This new community needs to procreate and continue. We are called to follow in the footsteps of Lois and Eunice.

ii. Between spiritual leader/ followers.

Paul's gift to the next generation was Timothy and Titus.

In Philippians 2:20, we read Paul's commendation for Timothy. He wrote, "*I have **no one else like him**, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as **a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.***" Paul was a disciple maker for the benefit of the future of the community of God. He invested his life so much that Timothy became an extension of his life after death. Where is our Timothy? Are we disciple-makers for the furtherance of the community?

B. Meet the Social Needs of the Members.

Samuel D. Proctor wrote, "Compassion must become actualized. Genuine community calls us to go beyond sentiment and pity to intervene effectively. Community is not a frothy, pithy, perfumed gesture. It has grip, cleats, traction, results."^x

Consider the social needs of the members who are:

Widows/widowers.
Senior members.
Single mothers.
Divorced couples.

Could the community of God become involved by:

Providing healthy Christian counseling.
Providing financial help and assistance to the families who are undergoing economic crisis.
Starting a Christian arbitration center to defend the weak

And so on.

C. Be Salt and Light to world.

The Church as a community is called to be salt and light to the world – salt that preserves and gives taste to the world, light that dispels the darkness and illuminates the path for the world. We cannot do it individually and so we need to join our hands and be salt and light to the needy world together. In the past Christian community has achieved great things for human society in the world by working together. These are milestones crying out to us – “You can do it too.” John H. Westerhoff III wrote:

Christianity is essentially a response. When we were baptized we were baptized into a two-fold vocation – the worship of God and the redemption of humanity. Nevertheless, we will be able to live in and for this Gospel only insofar as it becomes living truth for us. This is why no matter who we are or what we do, we need to reflect, contemplate, withdraw, meditate, and participate in corporate prayer. We will know if we have met Christ in these moments of worship by our fruits. If we have met Christ we will have a new way of looking at life, and the outward manifestation of our transformation will be seen in our working to change at least a portion of the world in which we live.^{xi}

The Church has done great things by being a community in the past and can achieve great things for the world by being together even today. We must continue to be a godly community and exercise faith to impact the world with His gospel. Evangelism and the appropriate Social Actions should be our two wheels on which the church must move forward daily lest we are grounded.

V. Conclusion:

Community living is biblical and mandatory.

The model for this community living is the triune God himself.

The spiritual marks of this new community are:

Loving one another.

Mutual submission & humility.

Encouraging & building one another.

Forgiving one another.

Serving one another.

This community must procreate and continue through:

Meet spiritual needs – through mutual mentoring, through discipleship.

Meet social needs - consider the needs of hurting members and get involved.

Be Salt and Light to the world.

- ⁱ John Stott, *Helping Your Church Become a Caring Community One People* (Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, Inc, 1968), 23.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid., 24.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., 23.
- ^{iv} Leonardo Boff, *Trinity And Society* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 153.
- ^v Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), VIII.
- ^{vi} Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 137.
- ^{vii} John Stott, *Helping Your Church Become a Caring Community One People* (Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, Inc, 1968), 112.
- ^{viii} Matthews 6:12.
- ^{ix} Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), 56.
- ^x Samuel D. Proctor, *Preaching About Crisis in the Community* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), 103.
- ^{xi} John H. Westerhoff, III *Inner Growth Outer Change: An Educational Guide to Church Renewal* (New York: A Cross Road Book, 1979), 30.