
Community in the Church

1 John 1:1-7

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America today is a nation of individuals, and this impacts the way we live, reason and believe.

This worldview deeply affects our faith, for individualism is an understanding of the world that has as its epicenter the individual soul. In other words, for Americans the most important thing is the individual, not the community, which is perhaps why Mother Teresa referred to America as the most socially impoverished country in the world. She could see no visible community.

There is nothing inherently wrong with individualism. But like all worldviews, individualism impacts our relationship with God, in both good and bad ways. American Christians correctly understand the importance of a relationship with God being personal, and that growth comes through personal study, prayer and worship. But our individualism can blind us to the importance of a community, leaving us lonely and disconnected from one another.¹

This kind of thinking often determines how churches disciple. We often define discipleship as some kind of hierarchical system of one-on-one or one-on-two times together where a more spiritually mature person meets regularly with a less spiritually mature person to mentor the “disciple” in spiritual training and growth.

While this is not necessarily wrong, it leaves out the idea of the church as a community of believers as a discipling mechanism. If the church is indeed a family of believers (and I realize there are many, many definitions of this), then the church includes believers both mature, young, peers, mentors, and a place where we come together in community to disciple.

Thinking this way, your presence and participation matter.

Think a moment of the people you know and the relationships you share. Each of us is constantly enriched by family and extended family, friends, and acquaintances. Beyond that, many of you have literally hundreds of other connections in the virtual world of social media. For most of us, relationships are the most important aspect of our lives.

Our relationships with those in the church are especially important. As Christians, we have become brothers and sisters in the family of God through the blood of Jesus. The Bible gives these relationships a special honor beyond mere friendship. That’s because bonds between believers can develop a degree of spiritual closeness that far surpasses the limitations of natural human friendships.

Christian relationships enjoy biblical Christian fellowship.

God has always expected discipleship to take place in community. After the Fall, it appears that God’s redemptive work almost always involved the building of communities as places of growth.

¹ Author Unknown, “The Role of Community in Discipleship”

Israel serves as an example of a community and its impact. In Deuteronomy chapters 26 and 27 we see that:

- The people worshiped together as a community.
- They celebrated holy days as a community.
- God promised blessings if they, as a community, obeyed God and curses if they, as a community did not (Deuteronomy 28).

When we get to the New Covenant, we do not see examples, of one-on-one discipleship as the normative means of spiritual growth.

- Jesus walked with many, and finally 12, yet we very seldom see one-on-one teaching time.
- New Testament epistles were written to churches for the most part, and not specifically individuals.
- Even Paul's most personal letters to Titus and Timothy were not just for them but were collected and distributed to the church at large.
- While Paul may have spent individual time with men like Titus or Timothy, he clearly invested his time to create a community of disciples – the church.

Where does the idea of Christian community come from?

There is a myriad of texts that speak of community, or fellowship, but I want to focus on the heart of it this morning in 1 John

Look at 1 John 1:1-7

The word fellowship, or community, is derived from the Greek word koinonia. Koinonia can be defined as “holding something in common.” Koinonia describes the unity of the Spirit that comes from Christians’ shared beliefs, convictions, and behaviors. When those shared values are in place, genuine koinonia (biblical community) occurs. This fellowship produces our mutual cooperation in God’s worship, God’s work, and God’s will being done in the world.

This morning I have been using the term community. It has the similar ideas as fellowship, but in today’s church lingo, fellowship has become a cheap word.

- Churches have fellowship in their name.
- Churches have fellowship halls
- Fellowship lunches
- Fellowship groups
- In our home Jayne and I never argue, but we sometimes have “intense fellowship”

But community is so much more than that. Look at the text again – specifically verses 3, 6-7.

The idea of community reflects an interactive relationship with each other and an active participation together as a church. And the focus is always on what we, as believers, have in common – our new life in Christ!

Look at this short list of ways the Bible encourages and commands us in community

- Our mutual dependence and interdependence upon Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-31, Col. 2:16-19)

- The command to love one another (John 13:34-35, 1 John 4:7-21, 2 Thess. 1:3)
- The command to stimulate and encourage one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24-25)
- Christ’s model of unity and humility to prefer the interests of others (Phil. 2:1-11)
- The command to encourage and build one another up (1 Thess. 5:11)
- The principle of maturing in our walk (Col. 1:28, Heb 5:11-6:3)
- The importance of prayer for one another (Col 1:9, James 5:13-18)

And we cannot forget that there are at least 31 times in the New Testament that we are told to do something for one-another.

Look at the list on the screen.

- Be Devoted to One Another with Brotherly Love
- Outdo One Another in Showing Honor
- Live in Harmony with One Another
- Do Not Judge but Build up One Another
- Welcome One Another 6. Instruct One Another
- Do Not Sue One Another 8. Care for One Another
- Do Not Provoke and Do Not Envy One Another
- Bear One Another’s Burdens
- Forgive One Another
- Be in Submission to One Another 15. Bear with One Another 16. Teach and Admonish One Another 17. Increase and Abound in Love for One Another 18. Comfort One Another 19. Encourage and Build up One Another 20. Be at Peace with One Another 21. Seek Good for One Another 22. Pray for One Another 23. Stir up One Another 24. Do Not Speak against One Another 25. Do Not Grumble against One Another 26. Confess to One Another 27. Be Hospitable to One Another 28. Serve One Another 31. Have Fellowship with One Another

Dr. Stuart Scott writes,

People, created in the image of God, are made for relationships. Although the term “relationship” does not appear as a word in most modern translations of the Bible, the concept is found in all the books of the Bible. The term “one another” is repeated numerous times in the New Testament—and always in a way that demonstrates how one believer is to relate (or be in a certain relationship) to another believer.

Because sin entered the world, the way people relate to one another is often disrupted. The breakdown of relationships is apparent in the home, in the church, and in society all around. Many people go to pastors or counselors for guidance because of problems they have in their relationships with others—problems with their spouses, children, parents, siblings, friends, coworkers, employers, employees, etc. The good news is that the Bible has a lot to say about how to build God-honoring relationships with one another. It all starts with God, and your love for him—something that begins when you come to repentance through Jesus.

Your relationship with God and your relationship with others is directly and intricately linked. As you work on loving other believers by obeying the “one another” commands, you are, in fact, also growing in your love for God. The “one another” passages of Scripture give very clear guidance on how to develop and maintain good relationships.”²

² Scott, Stuart; Jin, S. Andrew. 31 Ways to be A One-Another Christian (p. 11). Shepherd Press. Kindle Edition.

So, how does this play out at the Chapel?

It plays out in what we value.

- We value community that is God-oriented and Christ-centered. Not community for community's sake.
- We value community that intentionally and ultimately will draw people to a deeper love for God.
- We value community that draws people to Biblical relationships of love, care, and accountability.
- We value community that expresses the joy of fellowship in Christ and love for one another.
- We value community that expresses a love and care for one another that is both practical and visible.
- We value community that expresses a love for the lost that intentionally engages unbelievers with the Gospel.

It is one reason we value membership at Clearcreek Chapel

When an individual is saved, he becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Because he is united to Christ and the other members of the body in this way, he is therefore qualified to become a member of a local expression of that body.

To become a member of a church is to formally commit oneself to a distinguishable, local body of believers who have joined together for specific, divinely ordained purposes. These purposes include community.

Although Scripture does not contain an explicit command to formally join a local church, the biblical foundation for church membership pervades the New Testament. This biblical basis can be seen most clearly in (1) the example of the early church, (2) the existence of church government, (3) the exercise of church discipline, and (4) the exhortation to mutual edification.

These all take place in community.

Much is expected, but much is at stake. For only when every believer is faithful to this kind of commitment is the church able to live up to her calling as Christ's representative here on earth. To put it simply, membership matters.

When we are in community, God's Word becomes real. Every Lord's Day morning the Word of God is preached with power and authority, but the application takes place in flock, men's and women's ministry, and in Bible Education.

That is not a weakness, it is by design – and a good design. These gatherings may inspire people toward changed lives. These gatherings enable one-anothering within the church. Categories of “one-anothers” include:

- Unity
- Loving each other
- Humbly serving
- At least 12 one-anothers regarding general spiritual growth.

At the Chapel, one-anothering takes place in community.

Corporate prayer is a form of discipleship in community. Prayer times in Flocks is effective in transformation when done in community. I am not saying that individual prayer is of no use, in fact it is absolutely vital. But it is a different function than when praying together.

I remember as a brand-new Christian going to church on a Wednesday evening for the first time and meeting with a group of 12 men who simply prayed together each week. These men prayed diligently for each other, for their own needs, for the needs of the church, and for those struggling whom we knew even outside the church. It was transforming for me and my understanding of prayer. I understood what it was like to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another...” I grew at a rate that never would have happened if I had simply knelt by my bed each night and prayed. I was disciplined through prayer in a community.

Hospitality is a means of community. When we bring groups of people into our home, or to church events, we can do one of two things:

- We can talk about our favorite soccer teams, what our children and grandchildren are doing in life, etc.
- Or we can talk about what God is doing in our lives, the struggles we are facing, how we can work together to accomplish good in our church, etc.

Hospitality gives us opportunity to glorify God in our conversations and “encourage one another and build one another up...”

Meeting needs is a means of community.

When physical needs are met by the local church, discipleship very often takes place. We model the grace and mercy of God, putting other’s interests ahead of ours, outdoing of one another with honor, and practicing the truth of the Scripture.

Our benevolence fund is designed to help us remember this important aspect of community.

I remember as a new attender to the Chapel, hearing Pastor Russ, at the end of a service one morning say, “If you are a member of Clearcreek Chapel, we will always care for you.”

I don’t remember the sermon or even the text that morning, but I remember those words.

And as an Elder I have seen that turned into action over and over again.

- We take care of each other in our Flocks
- We take care of each other between our Flocks
- We take care of each other from the Benevolence Fund
- And when the benevolence fund falls short, we find the resources other ways

SUMMARY

Living out this community in the local church involves many responsibilities:

- exemplifying a godly lifestyle in the community,
- exercising one’s spiritual gifts in diligent service,
- contributing financially to the work of the ministry,

- giving and receiving admonishment with meekness and in love,
- and faithfully participating in corporate worship.

Expect a mess. Relationships are difficult. So, community is difficult.

Remember, God is the only properly and completely functioning community that exists.

And so, only when we as a church live in community, do we most fully reflect the likeness of Christ.