

Digging Deeper

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Community- and why we need it

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"...let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...." (Heb. 10:24-25 NASB).

I heard the story of one young man who was so certain about hearing directly from the Holy Spirit that he said "I don't need my Bible any more; I get mine direct." Similarly some people say, "I don't need other people; all I need is my relationship with Jesus," or "I don't need a church; all I need is a few friends with whom I can fellowship." I believe, however, that love is never stimulated apart from community and that almost always means a particular local church.

Although we can gain the power to love others by our times alone with the Lord, that love is never expressed or stimulated except by being with other people. The Greek word for stimulate (paroxysmos) is sometimes used in English: paroxysm. It means "provoke," "irritate," "exasperate," or "stir-up." It is a word that communicates intense emotion and is almost always used in a negative fashion. For instance, when the Apostle Paul sees the city of Athens "full of" (under) idols (Acts 17:16), his spirit is deeply moved or "provoked" within him. This seems to be a powerful negative reaction to the idolatry that he saw all around him (Acts 17:16). It is because Paul saw the idolatry that he was moved (provoked) as he was, and thus spoke as he did. But in our context, Hebrews 10:19-25, a positive meaning is demanded. The context of the community stimulates—provokes—love and good deeds by all kinds of means. Without community (the church), love and good deeds are not provoked or stimulated. Love is in fact impossible in isolation. Love demands another: God or our brothers and sisters.

Why then do so many people think they can make it on their own? I suppose a major reason is because we live in a society that encourages autonomy and independence. One pastor coming from England to America saw a sign in New England that said "We serve no sovereign here." He wondered how he was going to talk about the Lordship of Christ and the sovereignty of God in a society that most highly values independence. One study found that the value most encouraged in American children was independence. Yet, the most often heard complaint of American parents was that they were too independent. Many people have the attitude "I don't need you" or "I don't need anybody." Self-

sufficiency, for some, rules over all other virtues. Do we really need others? Do others really need us? What happens when we live our lives in isolation?

Why do we need community?

"When we live our lives in isolation, what we have is unavailable and what we lack is unprocurable," wrote Basil (an early Church father). When we live our lives independently, other people are poorer because they cannot benefit from our gifts: "what we have is unavailable." Also, when we isolate ourselves, we are poorer because the benefits of others' gifts are lost to us, so what we lack, we cannot get. There are good things in others that are "unprocurable" unless we interact with them. So if we take on the role of "lone ranger" believer, others are poorer and we are poorer too.

We already do need each other. C. S. Lewis says that we are "one vast need." Yet often we spend much of our lives denying this vast need—and we are helped along by a culture that blinds our eyes. I once saw a foreign film, *"La Strada,"* where Anthony Quinn plays a hardened circus performer. A young girl is drawn to him, and they leave the circus and try to make a living going town to town. He treats her harshly, but she puts up with him because she has a love for him. After a while, he tires of her company and just leaves her asleep by the road. When she awakes, she is devastated. She goes to a town and leads a sad and lonely existence. Towards the end of the film, the man attempts to seek her out and arrives in the town only to find that she has recently died. He hears more about her sadness, and at the end of the film, he starts saying repeatedly, "I don't need anybody," even pointing to the heavens saying, "I don't need anybody," and he dissolves into tears. It turns out that he had more needs than he knew. There is a section of Scripture that addresses this need that we all have.

The classic passage on the body of Christ is I Corinthians 12. In that passage two erroneous beliefs are addressed. First, "I am not needed." Second, "I do not need you." I am not needed. Paul argues that even if you are a part of the body that is not as prominent as you would like to be, and even if you think you are unnecessary, you are wrong. All the parts of the body are needed, functioning in a healthy way, for the body to do well. Maybe you want to be a hand, but you are a foot; does that mean you are irrelevant? Paul writes, "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?"

But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired" (I Cor. 12:15-18). Once while I was speaking at a singles retreat, I met a young woman who was convinced that she had nothing to offer anybody. I reminded her of the principles of Scripture that each one has a gift and that each person is needed. I asked her several questions about herself and as a result suggested to her several ways she could contribute to other people's lives. I am not sure she was convinced. But we need to be. You are an important, essential, and needed as part of the body of Christ, and the body will not thrive or be fully healthy without you. Even if you are in a less prominent role, others will be poorer unless your gift is used.

I have no need of you. On the other hand, there are those who in their self-sufficiency and arrogance think that they are superior to others and do not need them. Paul writes, "And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' or again the head to the

feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary" (I Cor. 12:21-23). It is very easy to regard someone as lesser because of education, status, job, sex, race, socio-economic level, and appearance. Scripture smashes that kind of pretended superiority. We all have needs and we need to be open to the possibility that someone quite unlike us can meet them.

"But I don't need the church; all I need is my fellowship group." This is an often-heard claim, especially from those that are high school, college age, or young singles. Often these people are reacting to the deficiency of churches they have encountered in the past, and this deserves sympathy. Sometimes people leave churches not because they have lost their faith but in order to save it. New Zealand pastor Alan Jamieson has written the book, *A Churchless Faith*. He points out that more than nine-tenths of the people he interviewed (who are without churches) were leaders—deacons, elders, Sunday school teachers, etc. About 40% were at one time in full-time ministry. Many said that they left the church not because they had lost their faith, but because they wanted to keep it. When you look at some churches that are dry—lacking in power and vitality—it is not surprising to see this happening. This phenomenon is not just isolated to the United States. David Barrett, author of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, estimates that there are 112 million Christians worldwide that are outside the church (5% of the total who call themselves Christians). Raymond Brown says about those who "forsake ...assembling together":

It is because some people have not found within our churches the warmth, care, and concern for which they hoped that they turned away from the organized or institutional churches to religious communities and house churches, some of them vibrant with more intimate commitment to fellowship and caring.

Calvin comments about this tendency to leave the organized church:

There is so much peevishness in almost everyone that individuals, if they could, would gladly make their own churches for themselves....This warning is therefore more than needed by all of us that we should be encouraged to love rather than hate and that we should not separate ourselves from those... who are joined to us by a common faith.

German theologian Adolf Harnack speculates about why some were "forsaking" the assembly:

At first and indeed always there were naturally some people who imagined that one could secure the holy contents and blessings of Christianity as one did, those of Isis and the Magna Mater, and then withdraw. Or in cases where people were not so short-sighted, levity, laziness, or weariness were often enough to detach a person from the society. A vain-glorious sense of superiority and of being able to dispense with the spiritual aid of the society was also the means of inducing many to withdraw from fellowship and from the common worship. Many too were activated by fear of the authorities; they shunned attendance at public worship to avoid being recognized as Christians.

The Greek word for assembling together is *episynagoge*. "Epi" means "in addition to." This word may indicate that early Christians worshipped in the Jewish synagogue and later, in addition, at Christian assemblies such as those in house churches. It is not certain whether this is the intent of this passage. It may be that believers are simply being urged not to forsake Christian meetings as some were doing.

Certainly in the New Testament house churches there were quite small groups that functioned as local churches. It is important to note, though, that they did not cut themselves off from other churches or the Church Universal. The problem with replacing informal fellowship groups for the church is evident on several fronts. Often these groups are of similar age so that older and wiser people are in effect excluded. There is often not an understanding of what is needed for our life in Christ—in-depth instruction and teaching; worship where our hearts are directed to Him according to Biblical principles; outreach in word (evangelism) and an action (serving other people's physical, emotional and spiritual needs); the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper); and authority (offices of elders and deacons) as the New Testament prescribes. If any or all of these elements are omitted, the people who are part of that fellowship are to that degree poorer.

Certainly we can have a great problem dealing with the inadequacy and fallen-ness of individual churches. When we compare the New Testament ideal for the church with the reality of the church, there is reason for dismay. One writer said that the church is much like Noah's Ark: "If it were not for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the smell inside." Martin Luther, back at the time of the Reformation, was quite aware of the profound imperfections of the particular churches around him. He said, "Farewell to those who want an entirely pure and purified church. This is plainly wanting no church at all." This expectation of a perfect church gets in the way of real and good—but not perfect—options in front of us.

If we do not make a commitment to a particular body of believers, we will never have in-depth community. This problem of idealism or perfectionism manifests itself often in people's lives. I have seen a pattern in what happens. First, an individual or a couple joins a church thinking that the pastor, worship, fellowship, etc. is great. They give glowing recommendations to others. However, after a few years (or months) they begin to be dissatisfied with the sermons, the pastor and the church leadership, members of the congregation, the worship style, or some other fault. They leave and move to another church where the cycle starts again. They have found again the perfect church. But, no, after a time it is not perfect. So they church hop for the rest of their lives or just give up.

This is not to say that you need to stay with the one church you are with, never changing churches. If there are good reasons for leaving a church, by all means go. But, realize that if you never commit yourselves to a particular body of believers and press in despite obstacles, go through the sometimes painful act of loving, you will never have in-depth relationships in community. There are times when we need to forgive, be reconciled, or give until it hurts. Real community requires that we do continue to love despite the difficulty of particular people that are unlovely. Many times we need that stimulation to love rather than walking away alienated from others.

Above all you (and I) need to be stimulated to love. You need to encourage others to love and you need others to encourage you in that pursuit. You need to give to others the gifts God has given you and receive from others out of the gifts God has given them. You are "one vast need" and must avoid the extremes of saying, "I am not needed," or, "I don't need you." Where possible you need to find a church that upholds the Gospel and preaches the Word of God! All of us need instruction, worship, fellowship, and expression of our faith (in evangelism and service). You need both sacraments and structure that will regularly stimulate you to love and good deeds. So don't forsake the "assembling of yourselves together."