

COMMUNITY-BUILDING PRACTICES

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A Theology of Community from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

1 - Christian community is not a human culture but cuts across all cultures.

Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. Christian brotherhood is a spiritual and not a human reality. In this it differs from all other communities.- *D. Bonhoeffer*¹ What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together...because...they have all been loved by Jesus himself....They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake. - *D.A. Carson*²

2 - The gospel frees us from the need to control people either 'love' or 'truth.'

I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love. I must leave him his freedom to be Christ's [not mine.] Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love will meet the other person with the clear Word of God and be ready to leave him alone with this Word for a long time, willing to release him again in order that Christ may deal with him. Human love produces human dependence and constraint; spiritual love lives in the clear light of service and creates freedom. From the first moment when a man meets another person he is looking for a strategic position he can assume over against that person. It is vitally necessary that every Christian face this danger squarely and eradicate it.

3 - Free from the need to confront

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to them. As love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them. It can be greater service than speaking. There's an impatient, inattentive listening that despises, only waiting for a chance to speak.

4 - Free from the fear of confronting

[But] Where Christians live together the time must inevitably come when in some crisis one person will have to declare God's Word to another. It is unchristian consciously to deprive another of the one decisive service we can render to him....We admonish one another to go the way that Christ bids us to go. We are gentle and severe....

5 - Free from self-importance or self-absorption

The second service is that of active helpfulness. This means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. We must allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. We may pass them by, preoccupied with our more important tasks, as the priest passed the man who had fallen among thieves, perhaps reading the Bible.

6 - Free from contempt or disdain

We speak, third, of the service of bearing others. It is only in bearing with my brother that the great grace of God becomes wholly plain. To cherish no contempt for the sinner but rather to prize the privilege of bearing him means to be able to accept him, to preserve fellowship with him through forgiveness.

7 - Free from the fear of looking or being weak

“Confess your faults to one another” (James 5:16.) He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everyone must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship, living in lies and hypocrisy. But it is the grace of the Gospel, which is so hard for the pious to understand, that says: “You’re a sinner, a great desperate sinner. Now come, as the sinner that you are, to the God who loves you”....A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. -- D. Bonhoeffer³

A Biblical survey of Community-building practices

Paul says we are “*members of one another*” (Rom 12:5.) This goes deeper than the modern concept of being a “member” of a club. The Greek word *melos* was the common word for a part of the human body. Paul is saying: “You are the limbs and organs of one another. You are the eyes, arms, and heart of one another.” We are profoundly interdependent. In ourselves we are radically incomplete. When Paul says: “*Do not lie, for we are members of one another*” (Eph 4:25) he means that to tell a lie, and therefore to cut yourself off from other believers, is like stabbing yourself in the vitals. The implications of this principle are spelled out practically in dozens of “one another” passages in the New Testament epistles:

Affirming one another

- Affirming one another’s strengths, abilities and gifts
Rom 12:10- *Honor* (praise the accomplishments) *one another*; Jam 5:9- *don’t grumble* (don’t groan and roll your eyes) *against one another*. Rom 12:3-6 *confirm the gifts of one another*.
- Affirming one another’s equal importance in Christ
Rom 15:7- *Accept* (welcome, appreciate, include) *one another as Christ accepted you*. 1 Cor 12:25- *Be equally anxious* (regardless of ability, or socio-economic status) *for one another*. 1 Peter 5:5- *gird yourselves with humility toward one another*. Jas 2:1-*don’t show favoritism*.
- Affirming one another through visible affection.
Rom 16:16-*greet one another with a holy kiss* (culturally appropriate, visible affection.) Jam 1:19- *Listen more than you speak*; 1 Thess 3:12- *abound exceedingly in love to one another!*

Sharing with one another

- Sharing one another’s space, goods, and time.
Rom 12:10- *show brotherly love* (treat one another as family); 1 Thess 5:15- *do good* (meet the practical needs) *of one another*; 1 Pet 4:9- *offer hospitality* (open your homes and share your food and goods) *to one another*.
- Sharing one another’s needs and problems.
Gal 6:2- *Bear* (share the difficulty and pain of) *one another’s burdens*; 1 Thess 5:11- *encourage* (come along side and strengthen) *one another*.
- Sharing one another’s beliefs, thinking, and spirituality.
Rom 12:16-*become of the same mind* (work to come to consensus) *with one another*; Col 3:16- *teach the Bible to one another*; 1 Cor 11:33-*wait for each other to take the sacrament together*; Eph 5:19-*sing God’s praises to and with one another*.

Serving one another

- Serving one another through accountability.
Jam 5:16-*Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another*; Rom 15:14- *admonish* (lovingly confront) *one another*; Heb 3:13 *exhort each other daily about your sin*. Eph 4:25- *tell the truth to one another*.
- Serving one another through forgiveness and reconciliation.
Eph 4:2- *be completely humble, gentle, patient, putting up with one another*; Eph 4:32- *forgive one another as Christ forgave you*. Gal 5:26-*don’t provoke or envy one another*; Rom 14:19- *don’t condemn one another*. James 4:11- *don’t slander or attack one another*; Matt 5:23ff, 18:15ff.- *re-establish broken relationships with one another*.

- Serving one another's interests rather than our own.

Rom 14:9-*edify one another*. Heb 10:24-*consider how to stir one another up to love and good works*; Gal 5:13- *be servants* (literally 'slaves') *of one another*. (The goal of each interaction is the good and spiritual growth of the other person.) Rom 15:1-2 *Don't please yourself*.

“AFFIRMING ONE ANOTHER” is about how to be *friends*.

1 - Affirming one another's strengths, abilities, and gifts. This is a general mindset that loves to praise, appreciate, and make supportive statements. It is to 'catch people being good' and then to affirm them in it. More specifically, it is a deliberate practice of identifying in our friends: a) where they are growing and making progress, b) what talents and gifts they have that benefit others, and c) which sacrifices and efforts they are making to do the right thing (that others may not see.) All of this is to *"give honor"* to other (Rom 12:10.) When these three kinds of things--fruit, gifts, and sacrifices--are confirmed and affirmed in community it greatly multiplies their growth. *Note on specific texts:* Romans 12:1-8 taken as a whole indicates that we should appreciate one another's (very different) gifts and abilities, not despising those who are different. The opposite of an affirming, honoring spirit is the what James 5:9 alludes to. There *"grumble"* means literally to sigh or groan. There is a way to show disdain in a way that makes others feel not simply critiqued but belittled--made to feel small and marginal.

2 - Affirming one another's equal importance in Christ. This is a general mindset that refuses to be impressed with the world's status-ladders or 'pecking orders.' In the world some classes, races, vocations, and cultures have more power than others. But the Bible calls us to refuse to let those distinctions in the church control us within the church. Specifically, this is the deliberate practice of building relationships with other believers across traditional cultural barriers as a sign of the coming kingdom. (Many of today's efforts to do 'racial reconciliation' are one form of this community-building practice.) *Notes on specific texts:* Rom 15:7-Think of how Christ accepted us. His acceptance is quite different than the modern 'tolerance.' Christ does not ignore our faults at all. He insists (out of love) that we change them all. His directives to us, however, are put in the larger context of his absolute and unconditional commitment to us. I Cor 12 admits the brute fact that many people have greater gifts (e.g. speaking ability, brilliance, leadership ability) that tend to attract greater honor in the world. But within the church, v.25 says, every member must be treated with (literally) *"equal anxiety."* We are to be as emotionally loving, accepting, welcoming, and concerned for the less gifted as for the most gifted. Jam 2:1-14 forbids showing favoritism to the rich over the poor.

3 - Affirming one another through visible affection. There are a remarkable number of directions in the New Testament to *"greet one another with a holy kiss."* (Rom 16:16, 1 Cor 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12) or *"with a kiss of love"* (1 Peter 5:14.) It is customary to mentally 'skip over' these verses with the thought that this was an ancient cultural greeting that we don't use any more. But even if we grant the need for some 'cultural translation' to our own time, that does not remove our responsibility to obey the Biblical command. The command is--communicate love and affection in a visible way. Some cultures are more emotionally expressive than others, and, in general, women are more emotionally expressive than men. It is appropriate for different people groups to choose different ways to communicate love and affection, *but they must do it.* We must communicate warmth. We must not be cold, clipped, abrupt, indifferent, and harsh with one another. More than that, we must be willing to actually talk about our love for each other. We say, "so long" when we mean "I'll miss you a lot." If you will miss the person a lot, say so. It is a critically important part of friendship, and it is commanded in the Bible. *Notes on specific texts:* James 1:19 tells us one of the easiest way to practice and show warmth--to listen very attentively to others more than 'holding forth.'

“SHARING WITH ONE ANOTHER” is about how to be *family*.

1 - Sharing one another's space, goods, and time. This is a willingness to share one's physical material world with others, the way family members do. Specifically, this practice includes: a) first, sharing space with one another. Unlike students who only share a classroom, or colleagues who only share an office, Christians are to invite one another into their living space. And they are not simply to do one thing (such as study) but all the life practices together. This means eating, studying, playing, praying (and so on) together. b) Second, it means sharing one another's goods with one another. In the most practical way, we help one another. It may mean doing practical errands, giving financial gifts, or providing for needs in other concrete ways. c) Third, it means sharing common *time* together. This means both being available to one another as well as a commitment to meeting together with regularity. All of these practices assume another. You can't build community if you are too mobile. If you are constantly traveling and constantly moving you can't share space, goods, and time with any one on a regular basis. *Notes on specific texts:* Any place that the text reads we are to "*do good*" to one another (cf. 1 Thess 5:15, Gal 6:10) it is speaking of very concrete material help. It means providing money, shelter, or other practical help for life-needs.

2 - Sharing one another's needs and problems. Sharing resources and possessions is one way to become vulnerable to others in a community. But many who are willing to share resources are not willing to be transparent and open about their own problems, material, emotional, and spiritual. Yet the Bible calls us to that as well. We are to let others in on our grief and weakness and allow them to give us their love and support. On the other hand, we are not to avoid sufferers for fear of the 'drain' that it will cause us. We are to be willing to 'sniff out' people who are hurting and offer whatever support they need. *Notes on specific texts:* The famous Galatians 6:2 text tells us to bear one another's burdens. Picture how you help a person who is trying to carry a load which is too heavy. To "bear the burden" means to come under it and let some of its weight, responsibility, and pain come on to you. 1 Thess 5:11 and many other passages call us to "*encourage*" one another. The Greek word is the word *parakaleo*, a compound word that means to 1) come along side "*para*," and to 2) call "*kaleo*." It means to come very close and cheer and support the person in a journey.

3 - Sharing one another's beliefs, thinking, and spirituality. Another category of community-building practices has to do with developing unity of mind and heart in the gospel. Christians are called to study and teach the Bible to one another, to pray and sing God's praises with one another, and to take the sacrament together. All of this has the effect of creating unity of belief and heart in the gospel. This means on the one hand there is an intellectual component to Christian community. We are to constantly discuss and apply the Word to ourselves, and in doing so we develop unity in the faith. Romans 12:16-*become of the same mind* means to work to come to consensus on issues. Compare this with Eph 4:14-15-"*not blown about by every wind of human doctrine, but speaking the truth in love ...the whole body is joined and knit together.*" On the other hand, we must practice our unity in the 'majors' of the gospel even when we disagree on other matters. For example, Paul urges two women in the Phillipian church to "*agree with one another in the Lord*" (Phil 4:2.) That is not "decide which of you is right" but "remember, despite your disagreement in the minors that you agree in the majors--the gospel of the Lord." Of course, many communities are fractured because they can't agree on what is 'major' and what is 'minor'! Determination of the difference between doctrinal 'majors' and 'minors' is important therefore important for community-building. If a church draws the boundaries out too far (e.g. not insisting on any doctrinal unity at all)--the 'community' of that church will be non-existent. If on the other hand a church draws its boundaries too narrowly, making many rather minor things 'major' (e.g. views of the end-times, political views, etc.)--the community of that church will also constantly be interrupted through fighting. Unless it remains extremely tiny.

"SERVING ONE ANOTHER" is about how to be servants.

1 - Serving one another through accountability. Above we mentioned that we must be willing to let others in the community know about our problems or needs. But more specifically, we must allow ourselves to be accountable to others to live as we should, even in the more private areas. In particular, we must be willing to admit where we have besetting sins and look to community to help us overcome them. This aspect of community-building is fraught with dangers on either side. On the one hand, some churches have used this practice abusively, demanding people make all sorts of sins and problems completely public. They have also 'held people accountable' for the details of their lives, down to when a person is allowed to miss church and by traveling on a weekend! On the other hand, most churches make no effort to hold members accountable for their behavior at all. A more balanced approach would be to have a believer voluntarily develop a circle of Christian friends to whom he or she is regularly accountable for areas of behavior that are especially difficult or in which self-deception is easy: a) devotional life and level of spiritual experience, b) life balance (work, health, and rest), c) use of money, d) sexuality, e) family relationships. Another way to do this is to use John Wesley's questions for his 'band meetings': a) Have you had any spiritual failures since we met last? b) have you had any spiritual successes? c) Have you been tempted but delivered? How did it happen? d) Did you do anything that you are not sure was the right thing to do or not? *Note on specific texts:* James 5:16 is the only place that we are told to confess our sins to others. Some have concluded (because of the context) that this is only for people who are seeking healing from physical illness. But Hebrews 3:13 tells us to *exhort one another daily* lest we be hardened by 'deceitful' (i.e. hidden) sins. This certainly entails having a fairly intimate knowledge of one another's flaws! Rom 5:14 uses a word *noutheteo* which means to 'admonish', to lovingly confront someone. If you place this with 1 Thess 5:15 (to 'encourage' one another) and Col 3:16 (the call to 'teach' one another) we see that we are directed to do 'peer counseling' in the community.

2 - Serving one another through forgiveness and reconciliation. This community-building practice is so important that we will devote a whole session to it later in this series. In general, this is the mindset of never giving up on anyone in the Christian community. We must never tire of forgiving (and/or repenting!) and seeking to repair our relationships. Matthew 5:23ff tells us we should go to someone if we know they have something against us. Matthew 18:15ff says we should approach someone if we know that we have something against them. In short, it is always your move--to repair relationships in the community! *Notes on the texts:* Eph 4:2 is a very general directive, telling us to 'put up' with one another. This means we must be patient and forbearing over small irritations. Gal 5:26 uses two words that have the opposite meaning. To '*provoke*' means basically to despise someone, to look down and disdain because someone has less (intelligence, appropriate views, proper behavior, looks, status) than you. To '*envy*' means to feel inferior to, to resent because someone has more (intelligence, education, looks, status, power) than you. Both kinds of attitudes breed conflicts and unreconciled relationships. Romans 14:19 and James 4:11 forbid the kind of condemning, judgmental, harsh language and attitudes that continually break relationships and prevent their repair. Obviously, in light of Rom 15:14, this does not mean we can never criticize. "*Condemnation,*" however is criticism which seeks to a) punish, b) marginalize, and/or c) be rid of a person.

3- Serving one another's interests rather than our own. This is a general mindset of putting the needs and interests of others in the community ahead of your own. This is the classic 'servant heart.' This means to deliberately look for needs around you of all sorts and find ways to meet them through loving deeds, seeking as little in the way of recognition as possible. Paul boldly tells us to be *douloi* of one another (Gal 5:13)--literally bond-slaves. Extending the metaphor, Paul says that we owe one another love as a kind of 'debt' (Rom 13:8.) (Indentured servants, when they fell into debt, became bond-slaves of their creditors until the debt was paid.) Because Christ humbled himself and became a servant and met our needs even at the cost of his own life, now we are like indentured servants--but to one another! We owe everyone a debt of love. There is a sense in which this is not so much another community-building 'practice' as the motive and dynamic beneath all the other practices. On the other hand, Hebrews 10:24 tells us that we should be giving deliberate consideration how to build up those

around us into Christ-likeness. To 'edify' our brothers and sisters is not simply to give them whatever they ask for. Rom 15:1-2 says we are to please them *for their good, to build them up*.

Finally, this means that we are not to enter into community-building simply to make ourselves feel needed and connected. This is a hard balance to strike--because our need for community is deep and natural. (Adam 'needed' Even by God's design--Gen 2.) But it is very possible to exploit others in Christian community. One way is by making ourselves so indispensable to others that we become dependent on others' dependence on us. Another way is by taking emotionally, materially, and spiritually from the community and by not giving anything back. In Christ we should not be so proud that we don't need community, nor so empty and needy that we exploit others in the community. Practically speaking, Christians 'give each other some space.' Claustrophobic, co-dependent relationships are to be avoided.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Which of the 9 categories of community-building is your small group currently the best at? Why? Which of the 9 categories is your small group currently the worst at? Why?

2. In light of your analysis choose 2 or 3 practical things you could do to improve your community-building practices.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954), p.23,25,26.

² D.A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (Crossway, 2002) p.61.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954),