

## Community In Christ

**[Proposition: Christian community is a spiritual reality established by God in Christ, therefore we can experience it with others who are unlike us in many ways.]**

### Introduction

Amidst the rise of the Nazi party in German during the 1930's the protestant church in large part gave in to Nazi ideology. But there was a remnant who continued to recognize and preach that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was opposed to Hitler and his ideology—they became known as the Confessing Church. The government closed down the old seminaries in 1934, but quickly five new illegal Confessing Church seminaries rose to equip ministers of the Gospel. One of those seminaries, at Finkenwalde, was led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer from 1935-1937. His book *Life Together* is an exposition of the principles and reflection on the experience of marked men seeking to live out the reality of Christian Community. In 1937, the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde, but Bonhoeffer continued to train and mentor pastors of underground church in the years that followed. Finally, in 1943 he was arrested for treason, and imprisoned until his execution in April 1945.<sup>1</sup>

I've called this new sermon series "Life Together" as an homage to Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*, not because I wanted to do an exposition of Bonhoeffer's book—but because I find the book so richly Biblical and challenging. For our purposes this morning, I find the following quote defining "community" to perfectly encapsulate the Biblical truth we want to explore:

Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.<sup>2</sup>

That has the power to be a barrier breaking, relationship renovating idea, that's thoroughly Biblical, and it forms the heart of the message this morning:

**Christian community is a spiritual reality established by God in Christ;  
therefore we can experience it with others who are unlike us in many ways.**

### **I. Christian Community is a spiritual reality established by God in Christ.**

#### ***A. Made and Saved for Community***

God created humans to be in relationship to him and to each other. In Genesis 1:26-27, we were made in the "image of God," male and female in relationship. The sin of our first parents<sup>3</sup> and our own rebellion against God and his purpose<sup>4</sup> have made true relationship and

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<sup>1</sup> I'm indebted to the slightly longer summary by Geoffrey B. Kelly in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Reader's Edition, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), vii-xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3

<sup>4</sup> Romans 3:23

intimacy with God impossible and relationship with each other fraught with danger and difficulty.

In the NT we see that the community of Christians exists to love one another,<sup>5</sup> help each other understand,<sup>6</sup> serve one another,<sup>7</sup> encourage and care for one another,<sup>8</sup> and live on mission together.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, in the Bible community is an essential, central part of what it means to be human and what it means to follow Jesus. We need community in order to be who God has made and saved us to be, and to do what God has called us to do.

No wonder then that we long for community, and yet it often seems to escape our grasp.

Illustration:

Some of the most valuable and successful companies in the world have leveraged the longing that people have for community. Facebook promotes a form of online community and is worth upwards of \$400 billion. Have you ever noticed the key place relationships and community play in Apple's advertising? What about Google's introduction of the "Group selfie cam" so you could fit more of your awesome friends into your picture of that once in a lifetime experience. Virtually everyone is trying to sell you a product that includes community as one of its key benefits.

And it works because we have such deep longings for community, but part of the Good News of Jesus is that all who believe have real community.

As we turn to 1 Cor 12, Paul presses us to recognize the community that we have in Christ and let it challenge and transform how we live. He says

***B. All who believe, though many, are one in Christ (v. 12)***

He writes in v. 12:

*12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*

Paul uses the analogy of a human body, though it is made up of diverse members, different types of body parts—never the less the body is one. So it is with Christ. Here in Chapter 12 he is going to talk about the diversity of spiritual gifts, but for our purposes note the principle he is illustrating: ***All who believe, though many, are one in Christ (v. 12).***

We are one in Christ because

*1. Christ is the foundation of Christian Community (v. 12b, 1 Cor 3:11, Eph 2:11ff)*

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 13:8

<sup>6</sup> Colossians 3:16, Hebrews 6:1-3

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 5:13, Philippians 2:5

<sup>8</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:18, Hebrews 3:13

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 28:19-20, 1 Peter 2:9, Hebrews 10:24

Just as the “one-ness” of the body comes from their union to the body so the “one-ness” of Christians comes from our faith union to Christ. The relationship we share with one another is a relationship in him, built on him, flowing from him.

Through the perfect life, sin and wrath bearing death, and victorious resurrection of Jesus. God is reconciling all things to himself,<sup>10</sup> saving a people for his own pleasure and purpose,<sup>11</sup> and re-creating humanity and all things.<sup>12</sup> All who believe have been reconciled to God through faith in Christ, and to one another by that same grace.<sup>13</sup>

We are now together one body in Christ because Christ is the foundation of our community. Earlier 1 Corinthians 3:11 Paul makes it explicit in a different analogy. He writes of the church as a Temple saying:

*11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

Christ is the one source, the one foundation of Christian community.

Not only that, but we are one in Christ because

## *2. He brings us into this Community (v. 13)*

As you look at v. 13, Paul writes:

*13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*

He’s talking about conversion— in the early church, conversion and baptism were so closely associated that to speak of one was to speak of the other. Baptism quickly followed coming to believe the Gospel message that God the Father reconciles us to himself through the work of Christ applied to us by the Spirit.

Here Paul simply highlights the role of the Spirit as the one who gives new birth and leads people to repent and believe that Jesus paid the penalty of their sin and reconciled them to God. When we believe in Christ, we “drink” that one Spirit and he fills and empowers us to follow Christ and to live as his one body.

Illustration:

If you look back on the history of our family of churches we belong to, today called the EFCA, you see a sweet example of the principle that it is in Christ that we are a community. The roots of the “Free Church” stretch back to Sweden and Norway, during a time when many Christians were dissatisfied—and yet required by law to attend—spiritually dead Lutheran churches.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 1:23, Colossians 1:20

<sup>11</sup> Luke 22:19-20, Romans 12:4-5, 1 Peter 2:9-10

<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:15-16, 22, Revelation 21

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 2:11ff

Desiring to grow in their faith, they began to meet in homes to study the Bible and share the Lord's Supper together. When these folks immigrated to America, they pursued the same habits, focusing on the essentials—their shared faith in Christ. The EFCA is now a fairly large family of churches ministering the Gospel all over the world, but it all started with a focus on Christ being the source and foundation of the community of believers.

Through Christ God has brought about his plan of redemption to make a people of his own possession, reconciled to God and one another, and united in Jesus Christ. **Christian Community is not an ideal to be realized but a spiritual reality established by God in Christ.**

Because of this spiritual reality,

## **II. Christian Community transcends human divisions and earthly considerations.**

### ***A. The Corinthian church struggled with human divisions.***

From our passage you can see two of the divisions that threaten the community in Corinth: Jews & Greeks, and Slave & Free. Look at 1 Corinthians 12:13:

*13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*

First, we see the familiar problem of the division between Jews and Gentiles. In Corinth as elsewhere there were disagreements over the Law mixed with ethnic tension between Jews and Gentiles.

There are also division between slave & free (and rich & poor). In 1 Cor 11, Paul writes to oppose this division:

*20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.*

Apparently, the rich/free are at liberty to arrive at the fellowship when they pleased. The rich indulged themselves during the meal which culminated in the Lord's Supper. The poor/slave were unable to eat and meaningfully participate in the gathering, because they were only able to arrive when their work was done or their master allowed,

There were other divisions too: some though Apollos was a better teacher than Paul,<sup>14</sup> they argued over food sacrificed to idols. Paul vs Apollos, Jew vs. Greek, Slave vs. Free (or poor vs. rich), this Spiritual gift vs that one... Here Paul says ALL are One in Christ (v. 13)

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<sup>14</sup> Paul rebukes them in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7:

*6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*

But it isn't just that all are welcome in Christ regardless of background, ethnicity, or social standing—

***B. God's Intentional Plan was to create one new community made up from the many (v. 14, cf. Eph 2:11ff)***

You see this hinted at in v. 14:

*14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many.*

The human body is not simply the sum of its parts—but it was created by God to have its many and varied parts. In the same way the body of Christ is created by God through the Gospel with its many and varied parts.

In this chapter we see that the diversity of gifts is God's design, but elsewhere in Paul's writings, like Ephesians 2:11ff he writes of the inclusion of different races (Jews & Gentiles) into one new humanity in Jesus. He, and the other NT writers,<sup>15</sup> say this inclusion is not an application of the Gospel, but at the very heart of the Gospel, and a key component in the mission of the church as we will see in the weeks to come.

In Titus 2 Paul envisions a church in which various age groups and social positions co-exist and share in the task of disciple making and making the Gospel beautiful to outsiders. Through the work of Jesus Christ, God's heart for the poor, marginalized, and downtrodden, intentionally accomplishes a beautifully diverse community in Christ.

Now the obvious implication of God's heart and Christ's accomplishment is that:

***C. We must seek to experience and excel at true Christian Community which transcends human divisions and earthly considerations.***

We look at those divisions and have no problem with Paul's rebuke. We too—at least in theory—would reject divisions in our church community rooted in personalities, social class, or race/ethnicity. But are there other forms of division that we are content with?

Do we seek Christian community that tries to build first on the foundation of age, stage of life, worship style, or whatever else?

Or do we avoid expressions of the community offered to us because they don't meet our personal preferences or expectations of how a group must look, talk, or think enough like us?

This truth challenges us to resist the temptation to use earthly considerations as the foundation of our expressions of community.

Illustration:

Bonhoeffer warns us:

**We have one another completely and for all eternity... This dismisses at the outset every unhappy desire for something more. Those who want more than what Christ has established between us do not want Christian community.... Precisely at this point Christian community is most often threatened from the**

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance Matt 28:16-20, Revelation 5: 9-10

**very outset by the greatest danger...of blending the devout heart's natural desire for community with the spiritual reality of Christian community.<sup>16</sup>**

In this series I would like to challenge us to see the real, true, spiritual community we have in Jesus Christ and begin to live it out. To seek to experience the community we have in Christ by intentionally seeking relationships with those different from us. To refuse to confuse preference and comfort with the potential for God to bless us in community with those different from us.

That is challenging, but this message is also really good news.

#### ***D. This is good news***

It's good news because you don't have to be in the "in group" in order to belong to Christ and the community we have in him. You don't have to pretend to be someone you aren't, nor wait around for people just like you before you can experience Christian Community. You and I, all who have faith in Christ, belong to something that transcends human divisions, people's failures, and even your own emotions.

Illustration:

I'm thankful for all the group leaders and groups we have. In good faith they try to balance stage of life, demographics, geographical factors but make sure Christ is the real foundation. One group in particular stands out to me: if you were to look at a picture of them, or to hear their backstories it's hard to see what they have in common. A family with teenagers, a young married couple, some college students, a couple single folks—where is their community found? Not in their commonalities or preferences, but in Christ. He is the gravity that holds them together.

**Christian Community** is a spiritual reality established by God in Christ which **transcends human divisions and earthly considerations**, so we need to push ourselves to seek out Christian Community which transcends human divisions and earthly considerations.

### **III. This community is experienced in both gathered worship and smaller gatherings of believers.**

We perhaps think first and primarily experiencing of community when we think of the body of Christ gathered for worship, teaching, and sacraments. Certainly

#### ***A. The New Testament's picture of Christian community emphasizes gathered worship on the Lord's Day (Heb 10:24-25)***

For now, I'm going to take that as a given.<sup>17</sup> Because,

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<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> We know from the New Testament that the earliest Christians both continued and transformed the Jewish practice of gathering for worship once a week. Jews gathered at the synagogue on the Sabbath. Christians at first gathered on the Sabbath and the Lord's Day, and slowly transformed into primarily gathering on the Lord's Day—the day of Jesus's Resurrection (Acts 20:7). In fact this letter, in 1 Corinthians 16:2, alludes to the collection taken during the gathering of believers on the first day of the week:

***B. The New Testament's picture of Christian community includes more than just weekly worship (Heb 3:12-14, Acts 5:42, Titus 2)***

For instance, take a look at Hebrews 3:12-14:

*12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 **But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today,"** that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*

The writer of Hebrews the Christians to be constantly exhorting—encouraging and challenging one another to follow hard after Christ—lest they be hardened by sin. We see a similar “every-day-ness” in Acts 5:42

*42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.*

And Titus 2 envisions a web of life-on-life discipleship in all areas of life that simply could not happen in an hour or two on the Lord's Day.

These passages are a picture of what the earliest Christians found useful, wise, and necessary as they sought to live together as the body of Christ. The Scriptures and just the realities and hardships of life require us in some way to participate *daily* in the community of Christ and in communal discipleship and mission. Christian community is experience **in both gathered worship and smaller gatherings of believers.**

Over the next four weeks we are going to challenge you to prayerfully consider next steps God is calling you to so that you might experience the community we have in Christ. One of the main expressions of that here at CCC is through groups. We hope you'll commit to being a part of a group, and really more so that for some of you will step up into leading a group and helping others experience the love of God in Christ through Christian community.

Please be praying for those outcomes and for an openness in your own heart as well.

**Conclusion:**

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*2 On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.*

We can see from Acts 2, Hebrews 10, as well as 1 Corinthians 11 that Christians were encouraged to be diligent in gathering together for worship, word, and sacrament.

*24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

We began by noting how sin entered the world and our lives and has estranged us from God and one another. Perhaps you are not a follower of Christ, and you feel that distance from God and/or your fellow man. You can't repair it on your own, your best efforts are tainted with the very sin that caused the breach. But, if you will trust in Christ, then his death and resurrection have reconciled you to God and his grace can change your life and reconcile your broken relationships.

Or maybe you are a Christian, but you long for community, or you feel like you don't fit. Christ is still the answer, the foundation, the source. Let us begin to live this Life Together by taking to heart that **Christian community is a spiritual reality established by God in Christ**, and let that empower us **to experience and seek out community** we have in Him. Amen.

### **Lord's Supper Verse:**

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

*16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

### **Confession:**

Lord, help me examine my actions, my motivations, and my heart. Forgive for failing to obey you by loving my neighbor. Forgive me for being selfish when I already have so many blessings. Forgive me for focusing on my preferences and comfort. Help me to discern the one body of Christ, of which I am a part by your sheer grace.

### **Assurance:**

Ephesians 2:13-16

*13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*

### **Benediction:**

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 (adapted)

*12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all... 13 so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*