

## The High Cost of Christian Community

*42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Act 2:44-47)*

A saying in economics is “buy cheap and sell dear” which means, when you are the buyer, you want to pay as little as possible, and when you are the seller, you want to charge as much as possible. In fact, the book of Proverbs reports this reality when it writes, “It is good for nothing” cries the buyer; But when he has gone his way, then he boasts. (Pro 20:14)

Everyone wants to pay as little as possible to get as much as they can. Every seller wants as much as possible to give as little as they can. And in a free market, this is mostly a good thing, because supply and demand, and competition bring about a fair price.

Unfortunately sometimes this kind of economics tends to bleed over into other areas of our lives. Particularly in a culture that shapes us to think of ourselves as consumers and buyers, we tend to view a lot of life as a transaction – how much do I get for what I give? This is particularly a problem when it comes to those parts of life that are not products we are buying and selling – such as the church.

Everybody I have met has said what he or she wants to have in the church. And almost everyone agrees that the church is supposed to be more than a preaching station, more than a lecture hall, more than a Bible college. Everyone who reads the Bible understands that the church is meant to be a community, with all that a community entails: mutual dependence, service of one another, involvement in each others' lives, compassion, counsel, example. I have not met a Christian who opposes the whole idea of the church as a family, the church as a communion of saints.

But what not every Christian does is accept the cost of community. Just like a buyer who wants to buy cheap and sell dear, everyone wants the benefit of people caring for us, people phoning us in our loneliness, distress or pain, people counselling us, people assisting us. Everyone wants a family that cares. But not everyone embraces the cost. Everyone wants the privilege, but not everyone wants the responsibility. Everyone wants the benefit, not everyone wants the sacrifice. Everyone wants to receive community, not everyone wants to give it.

Scripture teaches us by command and by example that if we want to enjoy the benefit of community, we have to accept there is a cost. And we have to think of it not like a product we consume, where we bargain on the price. Instead, we have to accept that the price we pay may seem greater than it is worth. The cost to us is going to exceed what might be the immediate benefit. If you think like a consumer, you won't pay the price. You'll say, Christian community might be nice, but it's not worth that much of my time or my effort. Community in the church is a nice thing, but I'm not willing to go to those lengths. And the result of more and more people saying that, is less and less community in a church.

On the other hand, when Christians embrace the cost of community for a higher motive, they will pay that price. When their motive is not merely, “What do I get out of this” but “has Christ commanded this? Is a unified and close family of God dear to him? Is a close communion of saints a powerful witness to the world of the reality of Christ within us?” - that's when they are willing to

pay the price for Christian community.

And we know, these are the motives for having a close church. Yes, it is wonderful when people visit you when you are sick. Yes, it is great to receive help and counsel when you are struggling. Yes, it is a sweet thing to find friendship and encouragement. But if these are the only things that motivate us, then we are still selfish consumers, who will decide that the giving outweighs the receiving, and so we won't do it.

But Christians know that our fellowship in a church comes by command.

*34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (Joh 13:34-35)*

Later on in the Gospel of John, Jesus says a similar thing in His prayer to the Father:

*21 "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. (Joh 17:21)*

We must desire to have a close community for motives that are not man-centred, but God-centred. We want to have a compelling community. We want to have a church whose love for one another witnesses to the world. We want our church's closeness to be a revelation of God's love to one another, and through one another. This will glorify God.

And then, it will edify us. Yes, we will receive the sweet and precious benefits of living in a Christlike, caring community.

Now assuming we believe that, and accept that, what is the cost of community? What is the price of a close and deeply compelling community? Here in Acts 2, we read of the first church at Jerusalem. We usually look at this passage as an example of a healthy church, or as the model of simplicity with power. Today I want us to look at this passage as an example of a close, compelling community of saints, and see what it looked like, and what it took.

## **I. Compelling Community is Built on Pursuing Doctrine**

*41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. 42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship,*

The beginning of the church at Jerusalem was when over 3000 people heard God's Word, believed in it, and then publicly identified their belief in Jesus as Messiah with baptism. Once they had embraced that truth, they continued to identify with the truth. How? Our text says, "they continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine and fellowship."

Those words "continued steadfastly" mean stubbornly persisting, busily engaging in, attaching yourself to, persevering in." What did they do this to? The apostles' doctrine. The teaching of the apostles, which would have been the Old Testament, now interpreted and explained with apostolic authority and new revelation, some of which would become the inspired New Testament. The church at Jerusalem occupied themselves with the truth of Scripture. They were giving themselves to Christian doctrine. They were eager and teachable students of God's Word.

Why? Because the foundation of Christian community is when those Christians become like-minded. They become like-minded when they all submit to one standard – the standard of Scripture.

The word for repent in the Bible means a change of mind, and as Christians come together and diligently seek out God's truth, they should all be repenting of worldly, sinful or wrong ways of thinking, and align their minds with God's Word.

A.W. Tozer put it this way, “Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.

When churches become dismissive of theology, when the members decide, “there's too much teaching, and not enough community, they are missing the very foundation of that community. We do not get unity because we play volleyball or have breakfasts together. We get unity because firstly the Spirit comes in to dwell each of us, and then because we through the preaching of God's Word come to love what God loves and hate what God hates. Try to create unity for its own sake, and you will create something that does not last. Get everyone on the same page spiritually, and the result is the next word – fellowship. Koinonia – common partakers.

But there's a cost to that, isn't there? There's a cost to saying, I am going to hear every teaching, and every sermon that my church hears – in Sunday School, at church, and the Lord's Table. I am going to make that time commitment, that petrol commitment, the commitment with my children, with my work – because I do not want to be five years behind everyone else in church. I want to believe what they believe, love what they love, know what they know. So I am going to devote myself to the apostles' doctrine.

## **II. Compelling Community is Built on Practising Spiritual Life**

Verse 42 says they continued in something else.

in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

The breaking of bread here may refer simply to shared meals. It may also refer to the feast that early Christians celebrated alongside the Lord's Supper. But the proximity of the words 'in the breaking of bread, and in prayers' suggests more than simply a meal, it suggests shared spiritual life. These believers were gathering to pray together, to celebrate Christ's death for them together. They were gathering to not only learn, but to share spiritual life together in the act of praying together.

What happens when Christians get together to pray? When Christians get together to pray, they avoid the danger of all this teaching becoming mere head-knowledge, an exercise in academia. Why? Because we take this knowledge, we take this truth from God's Word, and together, we respond to God in prayer. We go from hearing, to responding. We continue to align our minds with God's Word, we continue to grow in loving what God loves, but now it goes deeper. Now we in one another's presence, vocalise our agreements. We think God's thoughts after Him. We Amen God's Word together.

We are knitted together deeply not simply we because we share the same orthodoxy, but because we respond to God together, and so we are coming to feel the same love and awe for God – orthopathy. Notice how committed these believers were to sharing real spiritual life together.

46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate

their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God (Act 2:46-47)

Apparently, they found time to come together daily either for a corporate meeting in some section of the Temple grounds, or in meeting in homes, but there they praised God, and prayed.

And here we must confront the fallenness in our hearts. On the one hand, we say, “we don't want a church that is nothing more than a lecture hall. We want there to be love and friendship!” But then on the other hand, God says, that will come about when you pray together. And which are the most poorly attended meeting in any church? Give me community, we say, but if the price means praying for an hour or two a week with the believers in my church, that's too much.

The cost of community is shared spiritual life.

“The Cinderella of the church today is the prayer meeting. This handmaid of the Lord is unloved and unwooed because she is not dripping with the pearls of intellectualism, nor glamorous with the silks of philosophy; neither is she enchanting with the tiara of psychology. She wears the homespuns of sincerity and humility and so is not afraid to kneel!” – Leonard Ravenhill

You want a compelling community? You want a body knitted together in mutual concern? Will you pay the time price, the petrol price, the fatigue price? Will you pay the price of putting up with the immature prayers of others, while we seek to grow and sharpen in each other in praying better? Will you pay the price of opening your mouth to pray, at the risk of being thought unspiritual or unskilled in praying?

### **III. Compelling Community is Built on Prioritising Church Over Self**

44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

This text has been of course seized upon by liberation theology and those seeking a political or economic agenda, trying to prove communism or socialism from the Bible. That is not what this text teaches. The disciples still owned private property, and the proof of that is in the story of Ananias and Saphira. When Ananias lied about how much he had given, Peter rebuked him by saying no one had co-erced him to give up his property. *"While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? (Act 5:4)*

So if this text does not teach the forced collectivisation of goods, what does it teach? Simply this. This church at Jerusalem had so come to love the church, that they did not put their own wealth and goods as more important than Christ's church. If the body of Christ had a need, and they could meet it, they felt a happy obligation to meet it, since the needs of Christ's church became to them more important than the needs of their own households.

*32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. (Act 4:32)*

They did not give up private property. But they erased the distinction between personal good and corporate good. They did not have a barrier between family and church, between self and church. They did not view the needs of their brethren as competing with their own needs. They had so identified with the corporate body of Christ, that private good was subordinated to corporate good.

Now what happens when Christians start thinking like this? What does it look like when Christians

say, “Yes, I own my house, but for intents and purposes, it is available to the church. Yes, I own my car, but I make it available to those needing lifts. Yes, I have these possessions, or these abilities, or these opportunities. But I do not want to hoard them. I want them to be used for Christ's honour in the church.

*46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Act 2:46-47)*

This group of people met daily. They found ways to meet. Not only did they find ways to meet, they hosted each other in their homes, where it says they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.

This was an early church devoted to refreshing each other spiritually. They were devoted to building each other up. They did so with mutual hospitality.

Now when you think of hospitality, you immediately think of a rather special meal prepared, guests coming at an appointed time, and spending a few hours together over a great meal, and enjoyable conversation. But the idea of mutual hospitality is much simpler, much easier, and even much cheaper than that. It means simply that we want to refresh one another's souls, and we are happy to do that at our own expense. So while this can involve making a special meal and having someone over, it can also mean many other things.

It can mean simply phoning another believer to listen and to encourage. It can mean sharing a link to an article that you know will bless and help that believer. It can mean meeting someone for coffee to listen, counsel, share Scripture and pray. It can mean a really simple meal, or a purchased ready-made meal that you buy for someone or share with someone. It can mean helping in practical, everyday ways – cleaning, transporting, babysitting, buying groceries, preparing a CV, helping with an interview. It can mean getting a list of the church members and seeing how you can edify and be hospitable to another. It would mean finding out needs. It would mean using your home, your car, your schedule, your money, your leisure time, your family time to refresh the saints.

When this begins to take hold of us, the church is no longer one of many service organisations that orbit around you, alongside work, the school, the hobbies, the family. Church becomes Christ's body, and since Christ is most important to a Christian, the fleshing out of Christ's body in the imperfect form of the church becomes to us essential. *20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can<sup>1</sup> he love God whom he has not seen? 21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1Jo 4:20-21)*

Very little in 21<sup>st</sup> century culture will prepare you to think this way. You have been taught by the world that it is all about you. And then you have been taught to enhance your life, and realise your potential by selecting various goods and services that will make you feel like a whole and fulfilled person. Select a career for the financial side of your life, select a school or university for the educational side of your life, select some friends for the social side of your life, select some hobbies and entertainment for the emotional side of your life, select a diet and a doctor and some exercise for the physical side of your life, and then select a church for the spiritual side of your life. The church is just one extra piece of the pie to make you feel like full person. But that's not biblical Christianity. In biblical Christianity I give up my life to find it, and a lot of that giving up of myself is in God's church.

This is the equivalent of wanting a luxury good for next to nothing. You want the joy of being a compelling community? God says, the cost is – put the church above selfish gain. Build your schedule and calendar around its. Build your budget around it and spiritual priorities. Build your social life and friendships around it. Don't draw this distinction between self and church. Find your identity in being a Christian among Christians.

Aristides wrote a defence of Christianity to the Romans emperor Hadrian before the year 138. Here is what mutual hospitality looked like then : “and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.”

I'm like you. I like how the idea of community looks in the shop window. A compelling witness to the world, close relationships, support, encouragement, friendship, counsel. But the price-tag is nothing like a commodity in the world. You have to give up far more than it looks like you will gain. You devote yourself to doctrine every time it is preached. You devote yourself to shared spiritual life, praying and worshipping together. You devote yourself to putting the life of the church over selfish wants in terms of time and service and needs. You devote yourself to mutual hospitality.

Now you could take this all wrong. You could say, “Now that I know what it does cost, I won't complain about it anymore, because that's too high a price, I'll simply do without.” But that is not an option for us. Christian community is not an optional product. This kind of community is commanded of us by Him who died for us.

*14 For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; 15 and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. (2Co 5:14-15)*

He gave us the new commandment by which all me will know that we are His disciples. He prayed we would be One as He and the Father are One. He sent His Word calling on us to be of one mind and one accord. So for the honour of His name, for the spread of the Gospel, we must be devoted to shared doctrine, practiced spiritual life, and the priority of the local church.