

# COMMUNITY

## *Re-Plugged*



**Unearthing the  
Treasure in  
*Christ-filled*  
Community**

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## *Unearthing the Treasure in Christ-filled Community*

The opening chapters of Genesis recount the amazing story of creation, in all its wonder and beauty. It is little surprise that the Creator signs off every day with a reflective, **"It is good"** (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Six times He does so and then, taking an added pause in an eternal moment of bliss, says **"very good"** after completing the pinnacle of His creation, mankind (Genesis 1:31). The majesty of creation is matched by God's own affirmation of His handiwork. It is thus a wonder that so many read the next statement God makes and give it so little thought: **"It is not good"** (Genesis 2:18).

God breaks the run of six "goods" and one "very good" with a statement in the reverse direction. **"It is not good"**. Huh? Say what? What could possibly be "not good" in the dawning of God's creation?

**"It is not good *that man should be alone*"**. Adam had God for company for goodness sake! Even before sin ruined the perfection, one with his God and in harmony with the created world, God declares that Adam is incomplete. This is how deep our need for community goes. This is how deep within our created makeup as human beings we long to 'be' known by others. This is how deep our itch for a shared life with other 'beings' runs.

Through the '90's a TV sitcom had the world glued to the box, underscoring this itch within us. For a decade Monica, Phoebe, Rachel, Ross, Chandler and Joey enjoyed more community in each 22-minute episode than what most people experienced in a year. The success of "Friends" made the unknown actors household buddies and re-runs continue to be played the world over a decade later. Who hasn't playfully repeated Joey's pick-up line, "How you doing?" among friends.

We as human beings crave community. Even if we aren't necessarily the social type, preferring our alone time, we all long for a community of a few others with whom we can do life deeply together. We all yearn for the life-giving and life-affirming bliss community promises. After all, solitary confinement is still used as a highly effective punishment. Loneliness is a crippling disease that is unprejudiced in whom it draws into its merciless jaws yet, interestingly, often finds those who lack for little easier to sink its venomous fangs into. Loneliness is head-above-shoulders the number one ailment of the West. Many are aliens in their own nation; we build walls to protect ourselves, not realizing that these are the very walls that end up imprisoning us.

This concept has not been lost on advertisers, who – promising community – sell everything from beer to cars to coffee to clothes to fast-food to mobile phones. In fact, in one sense, we're the "connected-generation". We're connected via mobile, sms, mms, mixit, email, facebook, twitter, et al. but remain, in another sense, increasingly disconnected at the core where it really matters. Twenty-first century irony at its worst!

Okay, back to our genesis and genius as a species. It still startles me, every time I think about it, that despite unbroken fellowship with His Creator, Adam had a lack that only another created being could fill. And God Himself created us this way. Of course, the need for human friendship – like all our basic needs – is to be an overflow of our essential union with God Himself, as we – like Adam – trust God to fill the needs we have.

The fall turned this need and all needs – which again, ought to be met through connection with God – into burning, driving obsessions; fixations we seek to fulfil outside of God. Thus fallen, we can easily turn the need for friendship into yet another idol we worship on the altar of "me".

However, having made this qualification, we cannot underplay just how deeply God has created within us this essential need for community. At the risk of complete redundancy; again think about it. Adam had God: all to himself! Yet it was God who poked at the core of the matter. **"It is not good that man should be alone"**. Thus, there is a God-created need within each of us that God cannot fulfil directly Himself; He fulfils this need through joining our heart with others. (The first part of the last sentence almost sounds like heresy. Almost. God fulfils the need – or else we're worshipping our friends – but He does it through our friends.)

For one, the phrase, "It's just me and Jesus" – used too often today – is complete rubbish. From the account of our created origins – and repeated repeatedly again and again throughout holy writ – it is clear we need community. Yes, if Jesus is not the source and sustenance of this community it will be another black hole that sucks away our very soul and leaves us hollowed out in the trivial pursuit of yet another dead end\*. But God never created us to be alone, to be "just me and Jesus". God intended that it be "Jesus and us". Deeply connected to Jesus, we're joined by Him in life-giving community to others.

There is no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian in the New Testament... "Hey, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto!" The only person who flew solo...was Superman...and sorry, to burst your bubble, but you're not Superman! The wisdom writer diagnosed this condition with chilling accuracy: **"a man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wide judgment"** (Proverbs 18:1).

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\* Apologies for the repeated qualifications in this discussion. The inherent weakness in writing is that without regular qualification (which can make the writing clumsy); the reader may make assumptions that derail the flow of thought the author intended.

## Starting with God...

In a way, this God-created "need" ought not to surprise me as much as it does. After all, I am made in His image and what is God, in His very essence, but a Community.

God has chosen to define Himself (and thus exist) in community. There is no point in debating whether He chose to exist in community or was simply always a community; the issue is that we cannot fully grasp the God of the Bible until we understand Him as a Divine Community. Paul referred to Him as the "**Godhead**" (Colossians 2:9) and Christians have, for centuries, found the word "Trinity" helpful to try to describe the Divine Community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I personally don't think we can fully grasp this awesome, otherworldly Communion within the confines of our linear, earth-bound restrictions. At times, I think our sincere attempts to explain Him steal away from the mystery and majesty and romance of the Divine Community – that woos us closer – turning it into a clinical, scientific exercise that is about as appetising as antiseptic. Yet, transformed on "that Day" we will no longer "**see in a mirror dimly**" but in mind-blowing, cosmic "**face to face**" intimacy (1 Corinthians 13:12). (Oh, words do it no justice!)

"**God is love**" (1 John 4:8, 16). What a statement! John did not say, "God loves". He revealed "**God *is* love**". Yes, God loves (John 3:16) but John is peeling back the curtain of heaven to reveal who God is, not just what He does. God loves because of who He is; His identity defines His actions, not the other way around. And for an utterly self-sufficient, self-existing Being to "*be love*" speaks outrageous volumes about the source and substance of both His character and of the nature of community. To "*be love*" implies His Being necessitates community and community is only possible in "being". And we, His offspring, are human *beings* not human *doings* after all.

In our English language we use the word "**love**" too broadly and so cheaply. We say, "I love a good steak" and "I love my children" in the same breath. We express our love for cricket one moment and then express our love for God in the next. We intend different degrees of love, for sure, but because we are so familiar with this word, it is easy to dilute what it means to love as God loves.

The word God uses for love is a verb, a doing word. We tend to use it as an adjective, a way of describing how *we feel* – which is, of course, very subjective. Yes, we may feel tremendous devotion to God or parental affection for our children but love, as God defines it, has nothing – yes, nothing – to do with feelings. In our sentimental day and age, love is filled with so much mushy-mush that it has been downgraded into a romantic adjective describing an airy-fairy

feeling...that sadly can change with the weather. While poets (and song writers) have the luxury of philosophizing about love, we who follow Christ are obligated to live it.

There are three Greek words to define the different expressions of love. The first Greek word is the word *eros*. This is a **get**-love. I *eros* something because of what I get from it; the pleasure or reward I derive from it. It is negatively translated "lust" when used to describe how we crave things outside God's will or twist God-given blessings into opportunities for self-indulgence. *Eros* is the Greek word from which we derive the word "erotic". Positively it could be used for our "love" for steak or cricket. We get a good deal of healthy pleasure out of eating a good meal or enjoying an interest or leisurely activity. But don't *eros* your steak too much! (It's not very pretty).

The second Greek word for love is the word *phileo*. This is a **get-and-give**-love. I *phileo* my friend because I enjoy the mutual relationship we share. It is often translated brotherly affection as it describes the give-and-get nature of any true friendship. If I am the only one giving into a relationship, and the other party is not reciprocating in some way, I don't have a true friendship. There is no *phileo* love. We could also, for example, use this word to describe our love for our vocation. We may put a great deal into our work but derive a great deal of delight from it too.

The third Greek word used for love, as in "**God is love**", is the word God snatched out of the first century Greek language and loaded with divine ramifications: *agape*. This is a **give**-love. *Eros* is a get-love. *Phileo* is a get-and-give love. But *agape* is a give-love. It is **sacrificial**: it gives even at personal expense; whether we have feelings for the person concerned or not. It is **selfless**: it gives without consideration of self; without thought to personal reward or sentiment. It is **unconditional**: it gives without condition; without pride or prejudice.

The eternal Godhead loves one another in perfect and powerful harmony; in ways we can only, as finite beings, guess at. And because of the very nature of love we can only assume that the reason God created us was, at the risk of sounding profoundly simplistic, because He wanted to invite us to share in the divine party.

Our God, who "**is ONE**" (Deuteronomy 6:4), decided *together* (our minds struggle to grasp it!) in that creation phenomenon: "**Let US make man in OUR image**" (Genesis 1:26). Theologians can wax eloquent all day and never scratch the surface of these words, so I won't even try. Rather I urge you to spend some time meditating on these passages, allowing the Holy Spirit to enthuse your vision of the Godhead. Without meaning to be naive or patronising, unless one receives a download from heaven, diving deeply into God Himself and being immersed in what it means to love, true connection (of the God-kind) with others is not possible.

Let me then rather jump to the point of our discussion here. God is, in His very holy essence, a Community. Having created us in His image, we have His same disposition; we are created for community. Yes, firstly as an extension of His Divine Community – without which we remain a lifeless being in every way – but then as we enter into Spirit-created community with other people.

This is more important and far more practical than at first glance. This is not just a theological proposition we are obliged to nod in agreement to before “moving right along...”

### **Busy, busy, busy...**

In fact, “moving right along” is the motto of our insanely busy age yet completely at odds with true community. You cannot build community in a rush, you cannot cultivate community “fast” and there are simply no formulas you can use or strategies you can implement to “create” community. Remember, we are human beings not human doings; community requires that we *be* together before we *do* together. And *being* requires time; lots of un-pressured, unforced, agenda-free time, the womb in which creativity, initiative, vulnerability, honesty...all the ingredients of love...can blossom.

“Community” is a buzzword in church circles today. There are myriads of courses and programmes available; small groups of all shapes and sizes on offer...all promising “instant community”. But flawed in inception, it is all smoke without fire. When we attempt to add “community” to our busy, busy lives it is worse than putting the cart before the horse, it is akin to putting the horse in the cart and strapping ourselves into the harness.

True community is not at all easy. It is built on the sweat and graft of selflessness. Of course, we all want the sweet bliss of life-giving union with others but a programme or small group meeting on Wednesday night is not going to cut it. We may have a good meeting more often than not, but putting our roots deep into the soul of another cannot be added to an already full plate of responsibilities and commitments. We simply cannot milk the benefits of community with short-cut curricula and quick-fix formulae. To reap the heavenly delights of community requires selflessly sowing into people’s lives faithfully over time; through thick and thin, even when thin is of the toilet paper kind.

We all want community but let’s face it; we want it on our own terms. We want community that can be boxed, packaged and squeezed into a convenient time that suits us; we certainly don’t want it to interfere with our life and mess with all the important priorities we already have. In a word, we want community *lite*. And thus we are doomed to settle for community without substance, friendships without heart and being without life.

In Psalm 133, David revealed that when we dwell together in unity, God commands His blessing upon us. A popular psalm for sure and a wonderful promise to claim. But notice, David wrote, **"when we dwell together"**...not just when we "meet together" (v. 1). This is not a promise to claim, a prayer to pray or even a meeting to organise; it is a life to live.

We pray for God's Presence in our meetings but often fail to realise that He desires to dwell in our relationships first. How many church's pray for God's blessing upon their meeting when all the time the lack of quality in their relationships gives Him no welcome? Jesus was emphatic: **"leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift"** (Matthew 5:24). God desires to Presence Himself in our relationships first; His Presence in our meeting together will be an exponential overflow of the purity and charity He finds in our dwelling together.

Thus in a very real sense, we have to unplug from life as we know it to plug into life as God intends it. Of course some, like the Amish, have taken this too far. (By the way, there is much to admire about them and their commitment to community). But without first unplugging from the matrix of our "busy schedules" and re-plugging into the Divine Community we may never harness the resolve required to allow Him to inject us into life-giving community.

This will have some serious ramifications. For some it may require a job change. Oops! Yes, this is serious stuff...much easier to try to squeeze community into a 90-minute meeting on a Wednesday night after twelve hours at work. "I may not be able to keep my eyes open but hey, I'm there aren't I?" (How we deceive ourselves!)

For others, it may mean stripping a hectic schedule of social engagements with a thousand acquaintances down to a primary core of relationships. (I do not mean to imply in anyway that people are expendable and we can turf them out to fit into our new "community diet". I am referring to being honest with ourselves and others; realising that spreading ourselves so thin, and thus settling for multiple shallow relationships enriches no one. More on "primary relationships" in a moment.)

For others, it may mean giving up on the many social or religious programmes we're neck deep in as we search for community. Double oops, now I'm in trouble! Again, we owe it to ourselves and others (and God) to get this right. Until we do, we're only giving bits and pieces of ourselves and never the full gift we're supposed to be. We're short-changing others and not being true to ourselves or the One who created us. We're living a token life and at some point we will, like so many people, either quit the charade we finally realise we're playing or continue the game knowing we're faking it. Whether we burn out or rust out, either way we're out. Thus whatever it takes, we need to resolve to freshly engage with God, the Divine Community; allowing Him to re-define community, teaching us how to mirror and represent the community of the Godhead.

## Knitted and rooted...

You may not like the concept or terminology of “unplugging and re-plugging”. So let’s use some Biblical language and thereby prod deeper into our soul (just in case you thought I was going to let up sometime soon).

First, two psalms stand out. In Psalm 1, the psalmist urges us to plant our roots deep into the Word of God, explaining this is vital to a fruitful life (vv. 1-3). Unless we dig our roots into the nature and counsel of God we drift off course (v. 1); only by plugging into Him, to use this modern phrase, will we bring **“forth fruit in its season”** and **“prosper”** (v. 3).

Jump ninety one psalms and we find this same analogy in Psalm 92. **“Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God, they shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing”** (vv. 13, 14). Psalm 1 spoke of digging our roots into God Himself; Psalm 92 now speaks of digging our roots into **“the house of the Lord”**.

But what is the New Testament **“house of the Lord”**? Let’s be clear: it is not the brick and mortar building on the street corner labelled, “Church”. Space prevents us amplifying on this thought; we urge you to simply *trust* that the apostolic writers meant what they said when they defined the **“house of the Lord”** as a ***community of blood-washed, Spirit-filled believers living out their faith together*** (Acts 7:48-50; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4, 5). For sure, you may find community of this nature in a programme run by the “church” operating from the brick and mortar on the street corner and you can find it in a “church” that chooses not to have a building at all.

Even the **“house of the Lord”** in the Old Testament had nothing to do with brick and mortar. Yes, God’s people made the brick and mortar to be the important thing, but God never did. To God, it was always about ***where His Presence would manifest among His people***. In the Old Testament, God’s Presence was restricted to the brick and mortar temple; in the New Testament, His Presence is not restricted at all (John 4:21-24). Jesus said that He magnificently manifests Himself in community, **“where two or three are gathered together in My name,”** stressing: **“I am there in the midst of them”** (Matthew 18:20).

Yes, Jesus is present by His indwelling Spirit in the life of every believer; to be a Christ-follower means having “Christ within”. But there is a dimension of God’s Presence only possible in community where “Christ is in the midst”. And according to Jesus, this can happen in the smallest of communities, a group of **“two or three”**. For reasons we will outline below, I am absolutely convinced that a community enthused with the love of God will not remain only two or three. God Himself, a community of three, imparted His love, creating all we know; giving life to a countless number of new families and communities. If God chose to

remain in His self-sufficient aloneness; well, then there wouldn't be much of a story to comment on, let alone imitate.

The **"house of the Lord"** is the New Testament equivalent of a community of faith, in which God presences Himself in our relationships and communal life. The psalmists teach us that we need to plant our roots into God Himself and just as importantly, dig our roots deep into the soul of others; the community of faith in which the Spirit has planted us.

Paul captured this essential truth in different words in his letter to the church in the city of Colosse. In this epistle in which he unfolds a breathtaking picture of Christ, he stresses the essential importance of being **"rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith"** (Colossians 2:7). A fuller expression of Psalm 1...awesome stuff! And just a few verses earlier, he prayed: **"that their hearts may be encouraged, *being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God...in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*"** (Colossians 2:2, 3). Wow!

Paul prayed that the Colossian believers would be **"knit together in love"**. The Greek word for **"knit"** (*sumbibazo*) means to "unite (in association and affection)". This metaphor is a tremendous picture of lives interwoven together by the *agape* love of God. And Paul drops a gem in verse 3, **"in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"**. Do you see the connection he is making? ***There is a treasure in Christ we will never know until our hearts are knit together with others.*** Living an individualistic Christian life is to settle for a one dimensional view of God; living in community opens every conceivable dimension of the glory of God.

Whether we prefer the psalmist's metaphor of digging our roots into community or Paul's picture of knitting our hearts in community, we cannot simply nod our head in agreement – we've got to roll up our sleeves and get dirty; dirty in the "agriculturelational" sense. We've got to plug into the Divine Community and allow our renewed revelation of His nature to plug us into a little bit of heavenly community here on earth (even when it means confronting every bit of hellish darkness in ourselves too). We've got to dig our roots in the counsel of God for ourself – not just snacking on sermons and books – and we have to plant our roots into the lives of a small community of "primary relationships", allowing the Spirit to weave our hearts with theirs.

To do this will require unplugging from the matrix, de-rooting from pseudo community and untangling from artificial life-support systems.

It would be important (and integral) to state that many do find community through their programmes, whether it be a "cell group" or some other initiative. If this describes you; it is more than likely despite the programme, not because of it. More than likely, it is because you and your community have tapped into the Divine Community at the expense of your own personal comfort and convenience (an attitude that no course or programme can foster or manufacture). In fact, this leads us to our second core thought. The first is, then, a deep revelation of and continual response to the Divine Community...and His invitation to *agape*.

Then the second is aiming for covenant community rather than convenient comfort.

### **Selfless and other chilling words...**

The paradox of salvation applies to community too (and all issues of faith for that matter). Jesus taught us to "**deny**" ourselves; explaining "**whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it**" (Matthew 16:24, 25). In losing our lives to Him, we find our true, beautiful 'self' in Him. Of course, at the time of being confronted with the awfulness of our sin and His demand upon us, the beauty we will become in Him is the furthest thing from our mind. In gratitude words cannot describe, we fall on His mercy and pledge our allegiance to Him, completely willing to be His slave (whatever He requires). When, in kissing us, He instead calls us sons and invites us into friendship (Luke 15:20; John 4:23, 24; Romans 8:14-17; John 15:15), we start blossoming – humbly unaware of the profound change in us; our hearts and minds enraptured with the sublime wonder of salvation. Unless we feel the sting of repentance there can be no joy of salvation.

The paradox? Die to live; that is, ***really die to truly live***. (There are no pretend deaths allowed; pretence only foments religion and religion of the ugly variety). The same applies to community. Certainly Jesus' teaching on self-denial, mentioned above, runs off the back of His first use of the word "**church**" just a few verses earlier: "**I will build My church**" (Matthew 16:18). It is consistent with the context of this passage that Jesus implied this same paradox was vital to engaging with true community.

The kingdoms of this world teach us through a wide and effective variety of ways to look after number one...or no one else will! (Whoever came up with that line was clearly short of a few friends or two). Of course, as fallen and selfish creatures, we find this so easy to do and take this same "me first" attitude into our attempts to build friendships and community. In fact, our relationships are usually built on two questions:

- How do **I** fit in?
- How will **I** benefit?

Yes, these are innocent expressions of personal need. We are, mostly, sincere in our attempts to build relationships. We're not deliberately trying to use and abuse others. Or at least that's what we convince ourselves to believe. Sincerity and self-deception are close cousins. Just ask Uncle Abe. He was sincere when he called Hagar to his tent to "help" God out. Can you get more sincerely *wrong* than that? (Actually, I could offer a few close seconds. How about you?)

When we meet a new potential friend or when we engage with a new possible community we instinctively ask these two questions. How do I fit here? And how will I benefit from my association with this person or group? The focus is on me and the relationship is weighed up against the benefits offered to me. By default my attitude is to "use and get". Unless I realise this, even if I have walked with God for many years, I will begin this friendship, or enter this new community, as a "consumer" and once I've had my fill, I will shop around somewhere else (or bemoan the poor service I'm getting).

Community done by the Spirit is paradoxical. Having re-plugged into the Divine Community I'm no longer operating on default but by a new design, asking these two questions:

- Where is **God** adding me?
- What does God desire of **us**?

I am to start by asking for His guidance, "Where is God fusing my life into the life (or lives) of others?" Paul wrote, with the analogy of a human body in mind, "**God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased**" (1 Corinthians 12:18). This has absolutely nothing to do with joining the membership of an organisation; signing up for the promised perks, paying the required dues. The word "membership," in this sense, is not found in the Bible.

By "**member**" Paul is referring to a "body part". Yes, an eye or a hand or a foot. And we are not called, at any point, to be a "member" of an organisation; rather we are called to be "**members of one another**" (Romans 12:5). Thus, in community, we are parts of one body; we belong to one another. And the point is emphatic: **God** puts us together as parts of a body "**as He pleases**". It has always been the Father's delight *and prerogative* to "**set the solitary in families**" (Psalm 68:5, 6). My task is not to find a "church"; instead, it is to identify the people He is knitting me into community with. The focus is on Him as we follow His lead, planting our roots deep into community.

Once I identify the relationships that He is weaving me into, I am to continue by asking this *open* question, "What does God desire of us?" First notice, we ought to ask, "What does God require of *us*?" not just "of *me*". I need to learn to reason from the whole to the part, nurturing a collective rather than individualistic attitude. Yes, each "part" is precious and vital; but the "part" only finds its fullest expression in the context of the "whole". Therefore "us"

certainly includes “me” (we’re not talking about being an expendable cog in the machinery); but focusing on “me” produces a consuming black hole of self-obsession that leaves no place for anyone else.

Second, notice I stressed that this is an “open” question because, as we begin the journey together in community, we will be graciously shown just the next *few* steps; seldom (if ever) will God map out the entire ball game. The mystery of the journey fills every step with romance. We’re not after the last word on the matter, we’re following the Lord and nothing else matters. Together in community our attitude is to “discover and give”. We’re pilgrims on an adventure together, discovering the beauty in each other and giving ourselves to serve one another. I discover the God-given potential in my fellow explorers and pray, serve and give of myself to help them realise their prophetic destiny. I get to know them deeply so that I can serve them fully. And then a wonderful thing happens.

In really dying to myself... in community, I truly find life.

In choosing to no longer be a self-sufficient individual (no matter how qualified I may be), I allow myself to be known (warts and all) and allow myself to be served (even though it makes me uncomfortable and I’d prefer to look competent by serving). In discovering the beauty of those I’m in community with and giving myself to serve them; I begin to discover, quite by accident, my own beauty. (Conversely, when we pursue our own beauty, we get uglier and nastier). And overwhelmed, I realise I have a family given to serving me to be the best I can be; committed to me in love for excellence. Engulfed with gratitude, I cherish these precious people even more, stretching myself even further that they may become all they are called to be. Even when – not if – this means sending them across the seas to serve and stimulate new communities of faith; even when – again, not if – it means releasing them across the street to start a new community of faith.

Before I am accused of painting a naïve and idealistic picture of reality, let me remind myself that true community is truly challenging. Even attempting to do life deeply with “my kind of people” is hard, let alone the kind of people the Holy Spirit seems to think I should find community with! (Apologies to the precious people I do community with! You know what I mean and love me anyway).

If we allow the Lord to weave our life together with others, it is seldom with “perfect people” who act like us and think like us. Usually there is a good (and healthy) mix of variety and diversity. (We don’t really get it at first, but God seems to love it!) Through this journey with a “mixed bag” of imperfect and flawed and blemished individuals (among whom, in my case, I’m the biggest stink); invited through humility and patience on our part, God creates life-giving community and moulds us into the people we’re destined to be.

In fact, when we are knit together by Spirit-led conviction, individual differences enrich and empower the whole; but if we are only stuck together by our own preferences, then individual differences separate and polarise the parts. (This is a sentence worth reading again).

Paul spoke of living the Spirit-filled life and revealed that the **"fruit"** of such a life is **"love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"** (Galatians 5:16, 22, 23). It is interesting that Paul used the singular word **"fruit"** (not fruits) and that this verse could be written with a semi-colon after the word **"love"**. Thus, it could be read as: **"the fruit of the Spirit is *love*; joy, peace, longsuffering..."** Hence, the fruit of the Spirit is *agape* **"love"** and the rest of the verse highlights the various characteristics of this God-kind of love.

Needless to say, what is more important is this: the fruit of the Spirit is grown in bad not good soil; meaning, it is easy to be patient with or kind to people who don't tax your patience or who are kind to you. That doesn't require Spirit-filled empowering; just human common sense. Jesus said **"Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"** (Matthew 5:46). But when you're on the journey with people who do excise your patience, whose imperfections expose your own, then it is only our commitment to walk in the Spirit that will produce the nature of Christ within us.

What's more, have you noticed who the beneficiaries of the fruit of the Spirit are? Yes, God desires that we bear fruit that brings Him glory (John 15:8), but most of the nine words used in this passage are directed manward not God-ward. The immediate beneficiaries of our joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are people, not God. Jesus also affirmed that God is glorified when others are the beneficiaries of our faith (Matthew 5:16). People, **"especially"** those in community with us, ought to feast on the fruit of our lives (Galatians 6:10). (Especially does not mean exclusively; only that if we bless others but short-change our own spiritual community we have no integrity. We're playing footie without a ball). May anyone and everyone who bites into our life **"taste and see that the Lord is good"** (Psalm 34:8)!

One day a pig and chicken were chatting. Forgive me, I have two young daughters; in their world animals talk. They were discussing how best they could contribute to mankind. They envied the cow that provided milk. They admired the sheep for contributing wool. What could they do to serve mankind?

Suddenly, the chicken had a light bulb moment: "I know! We can provide mankind with breakfast. Bacon and eggs!"

The pig was excited for exactly 0.2 seconds. "No way! You just have to give a few eggs...breakfast would cost me my bacon!"

Covenant relationships cost us our bacon. The world builds Kleenex relationships on *convenient contributions* that are conditional and as flimsy as toilet paper. God calls us to build relationships on *covenant commitment* that stand the test of time (and the numerous tests that are a part of living life together).

### **Love expanded...**

In Matthew 5 Jesus laid the foundation on which the early church launched their assault of selfless, heroic love upon a love-parched world. The ancient Hebrew people understood nuclear family-love – that is, dad, mum and kids – so well. They also scored ten out of ten for tribal-love; their love for their fellow Jews (of course, the religious establishment flunked this test; they only loved themselves). But that's where they stopped. They turned this love inward, becoming conceited, nationalistic and self-obsessed. That's when Jesus came and blew the lid off in His teaching in Matthew 5:43, 44, **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, love your enemies..."**

Jesus expanded the boundaries of family-love and tribal-love to humane-love, which embraces the stranger, and to then out-of-this-world unconditional-love...which even loves our enemies. He expanded the boundaries of love to embrace the entire world, pouring into the Greek word *agape* the divine nature of God. And as the early church *agaped* their world, they provoked the world to jealousy. The teachings of Jesus and the infilling of the Spirit enlarged their capacity to open their hearts and arms to others, even those who oppressed and exploited them (Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 5:5). The *agape* love between parents and their children is now poured out to all people. Wow!

This has a vital implication for true community; an insight easily lost after factoring in the cost we pay to invest into community in the first place. Having given our bacon for this, we may find it hard to hold community lightly. For sure, we ought not to hold community loosely; it is a treasure we must guard and cherish. But it is not ours; we do not own it and should not hold onto it tightly. It is a gift from God to be held lightly, with an open-hand. We invest deeply into community so that we – as a community – can be spent by God for His purposes in this world. The boundaries of love are expanded so that God's healing arms can be wrapped around this war-torn planet. And we're to be a missional community; His hands, His feet, His ears, His voice...His heart.

Paul taught: **"Owe no one anything except to love one another"** (Romans 13:8). I don't own my community and I don't owe them anything: **"except to love"** – and this is a mighty exception. I am to cherish them as a gift from God and to give myself completely to them as

God enables me (a.k.a. *agape*). But because my identity remains in Christ alone, I don't attempt to own them or feel indebted to them because of my own insecurity or need for affirmation. In true community I am making an investment into them out of the overflow of my essential union with God and secure in Him, I don't expect anything in return. Oh yes, I ought to express my gratitude for the many, many blessings poured out upon me from those who, likewise, give of themselves in love. But it is love freely given and received, not a string of IOU's.

True community is not an exclusive arrangement of elite, controlling relationships. It is inclusive and outwardly focused; extravagantly missional. It deliberately avoids becoming ingrown by keeping the door wide open, not just for welcoming the needy in; but for sending one another out in love-fuelled mission. Thus, as a natural family grows by releasing its maturing children to become parents themselves, spiritual community does the same.

As spiritual children mature in the incubator of life-giving community, spiritual parents selflessly serve them into adulthood and, as God leads, encourage them to become spiritual parents in their own right. True spiritual parents don't keep their children in their shadow; they lift them onto their shoulders. True community fathers don't look to build an empire to feed their own egos or nurse their own insecurities, they release their sons to extend the family name; His Name that is.

In this way, true community remains both small and dynamic. While some people in the community may remain together for years, many others move through the community; raised and released into their prophetic destiny, multiplying spiritual communities around the world or around the block.

Little by little we fill the world.

### **Primary relationships...**

So what does the phrase "primary relationships" refer to? By "primary relationship" I'm referring to ***discerning the core relationships God is knitting your heart with***. We simply cannot invest ourselves deeply in this way into everyone, but we can, along with our spouse and children, give ourselves to a core group. And having done so, we are to be faithful to these primary relationships. (I am resisting the temptation to suggest a numerical size for this core group, which would be terribly prescriptive and entirely meaningless. There is no specific size to which a spiritual community should grow to or at which point it must reproduce; each one will be unique in every way including at what size it starts to lose a sense of authentic community. This is the critical factor: "At what point do we start to lose our sense of family?" And if we are faithful in nurturing each other and serving one another's dreams, new "daughter communities" will start from the "mother community" as God leads).

Depending on what kind of social animal we are, we will more than likely have second and third (and fourth and fifth...) levels of relationships alongside these primary relationships. And we will give ourselves to everyone who comes across our path, without prejudice, as God enables us to do so. But here is the issue. To whom are we accountable? Where are we known inside out? Where do we confess our faults (James 5:16)? With whom do we seek counsel and confirmation as we make big decisions in line with our prophetic destiny? This is where our primary relationships matter. And if – and this happens in our busy world all the time – we have to make a choice as to where we will spend our time, we give our choice time to our primary relationships; unless the Spirit of God directs us on that particular occasion otherwise (in which case, the people in our primary core cheer us on, celebrating our courage to follow His lead).

The Bible outlines over 30 **“one another”** commands: practical ways in which we are to interact in community. We call these the “intimate responsibilities of Scripture.” While every person ought to be the beneficiary of our love and gracious deeds, these 30 exhortations to community life can only be realistically lived as a “lifestyle” in the context of our primary relationships or “home church”.

The list below is not an exhaustive list and many of these exhortations are repeated in other passages, but it gives you a definitive sense of what happens in community.

- Love one another (John 13:34)
- Be members of one another (Romans 12:5)
- Be kindly affectionate to one another (Romans 12:10)
- Giving preference to one another (Romans 12:10)
- Rejoice with one another (Romans 12:15)
- Weep with one another (Romans 12:15)
- Be of the same mind towards one another (Romans 12:16)
- Do not condemn one another (Romans 14:13)
- Accept one another (Romans 15:7)
- Admonish one another (Romans 15:14)
- Greet one another (Romans 16:16)

- Wait for one another (1 Corinthians 11:33)
- Care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25)
- Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)
- Carry one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- Be kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- Submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21)
- Esteem one another (Philippians 2:3)
- Bear with one another (Colossians 3:13)
- Teach one another (Colossians 3:16)
- Comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Edify one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Consider one another (Hebrews 10:24)
- Habitually meet with one another (Hebrews 10:25)
- Exhort one another (Hebrews 10:25)
- Do not grumble against one another (James 5:9)
- Confess faults to one another (James 5:16)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Have compassion on one another (1 Peter 3:8)
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9)
- Minister to one another (1 Peter 4:10)
- Fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7)

## **A band of brothers and sisters...**

I hope to point out that true community is so much more than just a social group or accountability group; it is the "safe place" of covenant relationships – where we are secure enough to be transparent and teachable – through which a large degree of our character is shaped: the launch pad to our prophetic destiny. In spiritual community we journey with a band of brothers and sisters to see the Kingdom come in the collective spheres of influence we represent. Together we, in community, learn to discern the heart and mind of God as a self-governing community enjoying the privilege and pleasure of testifying, **"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"** (Acts 15:28).

While every community will have spiritual parents, together we are a community of equals. Yes, we all have different gifts. Yes, we are all at different stages in maturity. And yes, we all have different roles and responsibilities in the Kingdom (if I was exactly like you, one of us would be redundant!), but before God we are equal; we are all sons and daughters of the Father. And we aren't conforming *down* to some colourless, uniform, lowest common denominator either; no, we're conforming *up to the multifaceted beauty of the image of Jesus*, who is **"the firstborn among many brethren"** (Romans 8:29). Note this word **"brethren"**.

When Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day, He addressed their tendency to consign people to different levels in a hierarchy of pride and prejudice. Listen to His words: **"do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren"** (Matthew 23:8). He rebuked their use of titles and exhorted them: **"you are all brethren"**. Can you hear the passion in His plea?

The phrase **"brethren"** is used extensively in the epistles in addressing a community of God's people and carries significant implications. It is worth stating upfront that it is a gender-neutral word as is the phrase **"sons"** of God and **"bride"** of Christ. In other words, the phrase **"brethren"** refers to **both men and women** (see for example, Galatians 3:15-29; Philippians 4:1-8). Ladies, if I have to be the "bride," you can stomach being the "brethren".

Consider that when Paul had to address the many disturbing problems in the church at Corinth, he appealed to the **"brethren"** (for example, 1 Corinthians 1:10; 3:1; 4:6; 6:5; 7:24; 8:12; 10:1; 11:2; 12:1; 14:6; 15:1). It is amazing that he did not address the leadership and hold them solely responsible for the mess they were in.

No doubt the leaders were responsible to facilitate their repentance and re-alignment with the apostolic correction Paul delivered. But he addressed the whole community – the **"brethren"** – expecting them all to take ownership and responsibility for their progress (in their case, lack thereof) as a community in Christ. He expected them to be a **self-governing community**

even as he expected each individual to exercise self-control (Galatians 5:23). There is no hierarchy in God's community; there are no second class citizens. We are all brothers (and sisters). In Jesus words: **"you are all brethren"**.

This of course does not mean the community votes on issues; nor does it mean we must seek 100% consensus on the issue concerned. The community of God is not a democratic society. The centre and constitution of our society is not the rights of man; the centre of our Biblical society is Christ and our constitution is rooted in the Truth He reveals. The brotherhood of all believers means that while every voice will be sought, heard and appreciated; we are seeking nothing less than the Mind of Christ in our community.

True parent-leaders help to facilitate the community in discovering God's will and, in faith, obeying what He is revealing; even when the way forward – as often happens – cuts against our childish notions and faithless opinions. And it is in this process of discerning the Mind of God together – patiently and intentionally – that we all mature in the ways of God.

It should be clear then that the word **"brethren"** is not just a term of greeting. It is in no way similar to contemporary means of addressing a group of people such as the word "folks," for example. Rather it refers to a community's identity in Christ and has vital connotations: in community, we counsel and admonish one another, ***bringing the rule and reign of God into our lives and our spheres of influence***. And thus...

....little by little we rule the world. (Not by political agenda or denominational strategy but by truth-fuelled love).

### **Getting personal...**

Jesus launched the *agape* revolution when He said: **"And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two"** (Matthew 5:41).

Imagine an older, devout follower of Jehovah being forced to carry the weapons of oppression by a snot-nosed Roman private. Rather than becoming resentful, Jesus taught him to love his oppressor through unconditional, sacrificial, selfless *agape*. The first mile he would have to carry as the oppressed, out of obligation, but the second mile he could serve as the liberated: out of love.

Let's get down to basics then – I need it! Jesus said that loving (*agape*) God and loving our neighbour are the essential, pivotal issues (Matthew 22:37-40). And He built into this divine injunction a baby step for you and me, a starting point for us to perfectly demonstrate His *agape*. Jesus taught us to **"love our neighbour as ourselves"**. How do I love myself?

For one, it doesn't mean I have to feel *fond of* or *affectionately about* others. I don't always feel fond of or affectionately about myself. Yet I still love myself enough to overlook my unpleasantness. It doesn't mean I have to *like* everything about others – or even like anything about them at all. There are times I dislike myself terribly but I still love myself despite my ugliness. It doesn't mean I have to *agree* with everything the other person does, or think him nice. I act inconsistently with my own convictions from time to time and don't think of myself as a nice guy. (I know the condition of my own heart too well!). In fact, I can even hate the things I do, or would do but for the grace of God. But I still love myself. Actually, the reason I hate these things is because I love myself and am saddened by the depths of low I'm capable of.

Yet even in those times in which I disdain myself I still believe in myself; that is, I believe I will get better, I will grow...I will become something more likeable. I give myself the benefit of any doubt and wish the best for myself. Why? Because it's me. I am loved by God and if He loves me, who am I to disagree?

Thus, God has inserted this baby-step within me. All my life I have been "loving myself" and this is the starting point for loving others. Of course, I have not done this perfectly but I have learnt the basic rule. Now with a revelation of God's *agape* love I can, by His enabling, demonstrate this love to others.

To *agape* others as I *agape* myself means that I am to *give* them the benefit of any doubt, that I think well of them, that I wish their very best, that I believe – in time, with God's help – they can be better. And then to *give* myself in a way that serves their journey into the best God has for them. Why should I *agape* others? Because they too, like me, are loved by God.

What about our *agape* for God? Some people worry about this because they don't necessarily feel anything towards God. Feelings have nothing to do with it. How do you think a 5-star Christian would act if they were enthralled with feelings of love for God? Then act upon it. Do it – regardless of what you feel. *Agape* is not an emotion; it is an act of the will. And here is the amazing blessing. When we act – when we *agape* – the good feelings follow.

"So are you saying I should just act like I love God?" Yes. But I didn't actually say it. The Bible exhorts us to "**be imitators of God...walk in love**" (Ephesians 5:1, 2). The word, "**imitate**" means: "to copy, to mimic, to follow". Remember too the repeated exhortations to "**put on**" Christ (Romans 13:14; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10-14). Love has nothing to do with how I feel; it has everything to do with giving myself unconditionally to the service of God and mankind.

"But I'd feel like a fake?" you counter. If your intention is to buy God's approval or impress others; then yes, that would be false advertising. And to that we all yell, "Stop it!" But if your

heart's desire is to delight God's heart out of gratitude for the approval you have in Christ, then to act like you do *agape* Him – when no feelings are present – is not fake. It is a true reflection of your heart. Actually, to make our devotion to God dependent on our feelings is an awful crime; we're just so good at doing so we know longer see it. But let's spit it out while we're on the subject. To make our love for God conditional on our erratic feelings is a terrible affront to the majesty and worthiness of God. How would we feel if our loved ones made their love for us subservient to their emotions?

When we truly understand *agape*, many will actually find it at first cold and unfeeling. Why? Our heads, in this Hollywood-fairytale age, are swirling with sappiness and sentimentality! But to truly *agape* will bring us into a depth of compassion that will move us way beyond natural sympathy and feeling (see Matthew 9:36).

The Greek word for "**compassion**" (*splanchnizoma*) means to be "moved from our bowels," which the Greeks considered to be the deepest seat of our emotion. Thus we are, in fact, to love God from our guts not our heart. True love moves us with no less than God's emotions; it doesn't swoon with dreamy schmaltziness. Hallmark, however, would have a hard time selling cards that read: "I love you with all my bowels". But herein lies our choice. Are we representing Hollywood or Christ? Is our love of Hallmark quality or of divine origin?

### **Dealing with offence...**

If you have had any experience in doing community at all, you will know that it does not take long before conflict arises. Of course, at the first sign of it people usually head for the hills! But conflict is not an interruption to life; ***it is a part of life***, in fact, a vital and healthy part of life. The issue is not whether conflict will arise; the issue is how we respond to it. It is always more rewarding (and honouring to God) to resolve an issue than dissolve a relationship.

Jesus explained, "**It is impossible that no offence should come**" (Luke 17:1). Thus, the potential for offence in every relationship is inevitable. As long as we live on God's green earth we will have the *potential* to be offended, for two reasons:

- The people that we interact with, no matter how mature in the Lord they may be, are not yet perfect.
- ***We still have imperfections!*** Yes, believe it or not we're not perfect yet and the imperfections of others often expose or are exposed by our imperfections.

Every single believer will have the potential to be offended at some point, and most will honestly be able to say, "**I was wounded in the house of my friends**" (Zechariah 13:6).

We all have scars. The more time we spend with believers the more likely their imperfections will reveal our own imperfections and cause offence.

In response to the question, **"how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"** Jesus replied emphatically, **"seventy times seven"** (Matthew 18:21, 22). Jesus was not referring to keeping score; He was referring to *limitless* unconditional forgiveness (1 Corinthians 13:4, 5) for **"if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses"** (Matthew 6:15).

I remember one wise spiritual father saying, "Show me a man who has served the Lord for forty years and still exudes the sweet love of Jesus and I'll show you a man who knows how to take his offences to the Lord".

The truth is that the ease with which we get offended is directly related to our lack of maturity (Psalm 119:165). Mature believers know how to take offences to the Lord, **"bearing with one another, and forgiving one another"** so that even if one has a justifiable **"complaint against another"** forgiveness and reconciliation prevails (Colossians 3:13).

On the run from a murderous, drunk-with-envy Saul, David lamented: **"In return for my love they are my accusers"** (Psalm 109:4). Out of loyalty and devotion, David's only desire was to serve Saul. Yet all he got in response was fury and blind-rage. Outlawed, David reflected on the injustice he was victim of. But what did he do? Did he nurse the temptation to be offended? Did he have a pity party? No, David knew how to take his offence to the Lord. He said: **"In return for my love they are my accusers but I give myself to prayer"** (Psalm 109:4). Like David, we're not to spill our pain on others in gossip or bottle up our bitterness: no matter what the offence, we are to pour out our hearts to an audience of One: Jesus Christ!

Gossip is a backwash of un-prayed prayers that destroys three people: first, the person that you are gossiping about, second, the person that you are gossiping to and finally, yourself, the gossip. **"Pursue peace with all...looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled..."** (Hebrews 12:14, 15). If we will give ourselves to prayer, we will receive the love of God for any person and every situation!

If love is the Great Commandment, upon which all else hinges (Matthew 22:37-40), then it is understandable that God is strict on those who violate the spirit of love. It is striking that the New Testament mentions only two occasions that require community discipline; that is, where the transgressor is cut out from the community in an act of redemptive discipline (in the last-gasp hope that they will repent).

The second occasion was gross **“sexual immorality”** in Corinth, when one **“man had his father’s wife;”** more than likely, a reference to the man’s step-mother (1 Corinthians 5:1, 2). The offence violated not just God’s will but even the social decency in the immoral world of Corinth; where the phrase “to Corinthianize” was a synonym for debauchery and prostitution. Refusing to repent of his immoral ways, Paul called the church to enact community discipline upon the man in the hope that he would turn from his wickedness (vv. 3-5).

That was the second occasion and an atrocity we understand deserved serious action. But what was the first? Jesus Himself presented the first occasion; that being, should a person refuse to be reconciled with his brother. Jesus taught that such a man ought to be viewed as **“a heathen and a tax collector”** (Matthew 18:17). What? How can He be so harsh on such a small indiscretion? Boy, our view of what is disgraceful differs remarkably from what God considers heinous.

The bottom-line is this: if someone who claims to know the love of God refuses to reconcile with his brother, he is acting in complete opposition to the love of God. Redemptive discipline is thus the last desperate attempt to appeal to him to consider whether he in fact does know the love of God; in “tough love”, urging him to lay aside the “issue” – at least long enough – to put the relationship first.

It seems to God that because He has forgiven us of our cosmic crime, we ought to forgive others irrespective of what they do against us. For one, after teaching on reconciliation – and the drastic last-gasp consequence should one refuse to reconcile – Jesus taught the well-known parable of the man who, having been forgiven of his \$50,000,000 debt, then had his friend jailed for not being able to pay the measly \$100 owed him (Matthew 18:21-35). We know this parable well; the difference in the amount of debt is often lost on us in most translations that compare **“ten thousand talents”** (v. 24) with **“a hundred denarii”** (v. 28). The equivalent contrast of \$50 million versus the token \$100 should remind us that any offence done against us is infinitely small in comparison to our offence against God.

Because this is so important, Jesus actually gives us a three-step plan to resolving conflict. This is a notable exception to Jesus’ instructions; nowhere else does He or any other Biblical author give us a formula or step-by-step plan. It seems God’s general intention is to teach us by principle and example, urging us to follow the leading of the Spirit in applying these lessons. However, that Jesus would go to such lengths to make an exception to this, giving us instead a three-step plan to deal with offence, shows just how important this is for the safeguarding of healthy community and the impact we are to, through our love for one another (John 13:35), have upon the world.

## Resolving conflict...

Let's look at this three-step directive in dealing with a person who has sinned against us (Matthew 18:15-17).

Firstly, Jesus said: **"if your brother sins against you, tell him his fault between you and him *alone*"** (v. 15).

Clearly, we are not to drag others (not even leaders) into our mess! Furthermore, because we have given ourselves to prayer, our primary goal is *reconciliation* of the relationship, not to justify the situation and "put the other person in their place". We should not arrive with a chip on one shoulder and a bazooka on the other! Listen to the words of the wisdom writer: **"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger"** (Proverbs 15:1).

**"Between you and him *alone*"**, you should share how you felt hurt by what the other person did or did not do, not demanding justice, but giving the Spirit of God space to do His work (Romans 12:19; Proverbs 28:23). On the one hand, be sure not to speak out of the emotion of the offence, and on the other hand, do not allow too much time to pass before seeking reconciliation, or the offence will fester and poison you (Ephesians 4:26).

Secondly, if he will sadly not reconcile with you, Jesus said: **"take with you one or two more"** to serve as a mediator (v. 16).

Again, the purpose is reconciliation, and with that in mind, we need to select an unbiased mediator! The person you select should be mature in the Lord and should not be polluted with "your side of the story". If you truly desire reconciliation and have acknowledged your wrong in the situation, you should invite a mediator in without first priming them with "your facts".

If you are ever asked to serve as a mediator, refuse to hear the "facts" until you have both parties before you; **"the first one to plead his cause *seems right*, until his neighbour comes and examines him"** (Proverbs 18:17). Even at the risk of seeming unsympathetic, don't violate this gem of wisdom. Again, the wisdom writer puts it best: **"He who meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears"** (Proverbs 26:17). In other words, forget this sage advice and you're going to get bitten! Rather compassionately say, "I can see you're deeply hurt. It would be a privilege for me to attempt to help. To do so though in love and truth means that I should not be seen as taking sides".

Sadder still, thirdly, if the person still does not reconcile, Jesus said: **"tell it to the church"** (v. 17).

This is not a license to gossip! Consistent with the counsel of God's Word, the best way to follow this instruction is to bring the matter along, with the mediator, to the spiritual parents of the community who would then have to follow God's leading in carrying out Biblical correction. I believe that this is, as mentioned already, a last-gasp attempt to call the offender back to the love of God, reminding him of the mercy he himself is a beneficiary of. Personally, I think the thought of this consequence is intended to provoke the fear of God in those in whom the Spirit of God dwells so that it never happens!

Yet there are unfortunately times when, no matter what we do, others will refuse to reconcile with us. As long as we have made every attempt to seek reconciliation we can have peace with God: **"as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men"** (Romans 12:18).

Too many believers approach reconciliation with a confrontational heart that demands 'righteousness'. This seemingly "uncompromising" approach just serves as a cloak for us to speak out of our own insecurities, and *violates* the second of the two Great Commandments: **"you shall love your neighbour as yourself"**. It has been said that we sadly judge ourselves by our *intentions*, but judge others by their *actions*. This should not be so, for **"whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them"** (Matthew 7:12). We all desire to be understood and we will all, generally, receive what another has to say if they treat us with *respect*. We expect this from others; therefore, we ought to do it for others!

Love believes the best in every situation and therefore can speak the **"truth in love"** (Ephesians 4:15) in such a way that it *imparts grace*, not judgement, to the hearers (Ephesians 4:29). In other words, we must share the truth – for nobody grows where truth is absent – but we must share it *wrapped in God's love!* And the love of God is pure, secure and unailing (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). Simply using a humble tone, and words like, "I felt hurt by what happened..." rather than, "you hurt me..." go along way to wrapping the truth in love.

### **A crucial principle...**

Since most of us dislike confrontation so much and are seldom taught to respond to it appropriately, these three steps may sound like huge leaps for most of us. Perhaps it is better to view them as three *stages* rather than three steps. Three steps may sound clinical: "One-two-three...presto! We've ticked the boxes off". Instead, three stages imply an unfolding, sober and patient process in which we sincerely hope we never need to go further than stage one! (But bravely do so if required).

Firstly, I urge you to, with your community, resolve to wrestle through this passage and purpose to flesh it out together. It is Jesus' antidote to the virus of offence. Secondly, I want to suggest an important principle to community building. Let me first spit out the principle and then try to explain it:

***Resolve to cover others while confronting necessary issues or else you will end up rejecting others over these issues.***

On *issues of personal preference* we ought to simply cover one another. You may not like my hairstyle, my sense of humour, my passion for Liverpool Football club or the size of my appetite, but then we all have our irks and quirks (after all, I could be a Man U fan!). In community, we love each other by covering one another; refusing to turn molehills of preference into mountains of prejudice. If you expel me from your community on non-essential issues like this, then you've settled for a very, very shallow version of community as God intends. Instead, in true community, we do a lot of "covering".

Peter taught, **"above all these things have a fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins'"** (1 Peter 4:8). Having addressed several core truths in his first epistle, Peter stresses, **"above all these things"**. In words that parallel Paul's (Colossians 3:14), Peter calls us to the priority of love. He urges us to have a **"fervent love for one another"** because **"love will cover"**. Love covers; it **"suffers long...thinks no evil...believes all things"** (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Love provides a safe place of acceptance so that we can be ourselves without fear of judgment. Then, and only then, people will grow and flourish. Thus, love does not **expose** ... yet nor does it **excuse**.

On *issues of Biblical conviction*, where my actions or attitudes are detrimental to others and/or discredit my testimony, you should lovingly confront these issues for my sake. Notice, there is a huge difference between confronting *an issue* and confronting *the person*. I'm not a fool; I know the difference. We know when people care for us versus when they couldn't care less for us. If my sense of humour is rude or my passion for soccer dominates my every discussion or my appetite is gluttonous; then as my spiritual family, you must **"in a spirit of gentleness"** help me to see how I'm damaging others and myself (Galatians 6:1). Thus, in community, there will be times we admonish one another by, in genuine love, confronting appropriate issues.

Listen to Paul's superb confidence in a Christ-filled community: **"Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another"** (Romans 15:14).

First, notice that he addresses them as **“brethren”** affirming them as a self-governing community; they needed no external life-support systems. Second, filled with **“goodness”** (Greek: *agathosune*) – referring to the nature of God – and the **“knowledge”** of the truth, Paul was confident they could admonish one another. The Greek word for **“admonish”** (*noutheteo*) literally means, “to put in mind;” thus, “to instruct and counsel by word”. It is both our privilege and responsibility to admonish one another as a spiritual community; with only one qualification, we are to do so full of God’s goodness and His truth. Without truth, people rot. Without love, people struggle to swallow the truth that will heal them.

**“Faithful are the wounds of a friend”** (Proverbs 27:6). True friends stab you in the front because you ask them to!

If we fail to cover people and, when necessary, confront appropriate issues, life will drain from our community. A thousand little uncovered preferences will become a heavy chain around our collective neck; then suddenly a “little thing” becomes an unbearable “big thing”. And “that” inappropriate issue becomes a septic, pussy sore infecting all; spawning agonising frustration within the community. If we are unfaithful to cover the person or confront the necessary issues we will end up rejecting the person because of the issues; and down this horrid wrong turn, many end up rejecting the gift of community too.

### **How to destroy community...**

If you ever wanted to sabotage a community, it’s very easy. First, infiltrate the community you’ve targeted by putting on your warmest smile. Be liberal with your use of flattery; phrases like, “This is the most loving bunch of people I’ve ever met” or “This is the closest thing to New Testament church life I’ve ever seen” will seal the deal. Second, implement one of the simple strategies below. (Just in case you don’t get my silly sense of humour, I am not really advocating that you aim to kill community. But hang with me for a moment, and see just how easy it is to work against God’s purposes for community).

#### **Strategy 1: Suggest that the needs of the community ought to be the primary focus.**

This is a subtle but effective strategy. Pitched correctly, it sounds so right: “For sure, community ought to be for the benefit of its members”. And there are tons of Biblical passages that, taken out of context, can back this up. Of course, the subtle error lies in the phrase “for the benefit of its members,” but don’t worry, most won’t see it. You’ll notice the first signs of the effectiveness of this strategy in the members’ unease with new believer’s zeal or in their discomfort if unsaved people engage with the community. These kinds of people upset the status quo, you see.

But don't expect instant results. This strategy is a slow-death tactic; in fact, the group will probably die with a smile. Happy and comfortable, they won't even realise that they've become ingrown. In fact, they can exist for sometime in pre-death mode but don't let that disappoint you; the chances of recovery are close to zero.

In contrast, while there are many, many benefits to all who experience the joys of community, true spiritual community exists *for the benefit of the world*; that is, our love for one another, overflowing into good works to all, testifies of God's glory. **"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven"** (Matthew 5:16).

### **Strategy 2: Make one aspect of ministry the "main thing".**

Here's another subtle yet useful strategy similar to the first; actually, you may find it helpful to use in conjunction with the first. Find out what aspect of ministry the group really enjoys; whether it is worship, or Bible study, or fellowship, or prayer. Then choose this aspect of ministry and make it the "main thing". In fact, write out a really "holy sounding" purpose statement and spell it out: "We exist to study the Bible" or "We exist to pray for one another" or "We exist to hold one another accountable". How will this help destroy community I hear you ask?

While these are all important ingredients of community, if you make one of the ingredients the whole recipe you'll never actually bake the cake! The "cake," let me remind you, is to be a missional community; the purpose of a spiritual community is to be partnering with the Divine Community in His mission in this world. Make your mission one or two aspects of ministry (or all of them if this is what it takes to muddy the waters) and you'll sabotage the group's future.

For sure, to be faithful to this mission, the community will have to do ministry (worship, study the Bible, fellowship, prayer and more) because ministry is the means to fulfilling the mission. But **"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son"** (John 3:16), He didn't start a prayer meeting, a Bible Study or an Accountability Group. And Jesus Himself commissioned us: **"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you"** (John 20:21).

### **Strategy 3: Adopt a "me-first" attitude.**

Okay, let's get ugly. If you want to suck the life out of your community, expect the group to exist for you; to meet your needs. This may not destroy the community quickly, especially if there are a number of patient people with gifts of mercy and service, but in time you'll become a weight that the group buckles under. Milk the group for all you can and then look for another host you can parasite on; nothing discredits the Name of Christ more. This strategy is particularly lethal if there are several participants in the group with their mouths open demanding: "Me! Me! Me!"

On the contrary, nothing strengthens community like an attitude that puts other people first. **“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself”** (Philippians 2:3). It is with this heroic selflessness that Jesus builds His church.

#### **Strategy 4: Gossip!**

Now here is a rapid-fire killer especially if you can get others to participate in this gruesome and gory exercise. It doesn't matter what you talk about, any old rumour will do. Simply accentuate personality quirks in members in the group and slap in a little bit of exaggeration. For best results; start the gossip with those people who are particularly negative and struggle to believe the best in others. What works tremendously well is to phrase a juicy morsel of gossip with these words: “I'm really concerned about Bob, but please keep this in confidence. We really need to pray for him”. People just cannot resist passing on a secret; many define “in confidence” as telling only one person at a time.

And if you want to make the poison in your gossip more potent simply allow yourself to get offended with a person in your community; let bitterness twist you into a cruel and malicious and hateful creature. Gollum, from Lord of the Rings, should give you inspiration. Harbour unforgiveness in your soul as “Precious” and your gossip will be exponentially vindictive and brutal and wicked.

In contrast, refraining from gossip – and refraining from listening to gossip – is one of the most powerful immune-boosters in the prevention of community decay. **“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers...forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you”** (Ephesians 4:29, 32). Notice, the point is not just to avoid gossip but to get on the front foot and engage in proactive, life-enlarging encouragement. The goal is not just to do “no wrong” but to do all the good you possibly can!

#### **Strategy 5: Don't pray just socialize.**

Here's a strategy that is extremely successful with a group suffering from a little complacency. If you sense the group is spiritually tired, pop this sleeping pill into the mix. Suggest that you spend more time “resting” and less time “working” in your spiritual journey. Be careful to use those words. Actually labelling prayer, ministry, service, etc. as “work” and contrasting it with any of these kinds of words – rest, fellowship, Sabbath, etc. – will push the right buttons every time. If anyone tries to remind the group that “work” is not the problem and that all prayer and service ought to be done from a place of rest not at the expense of rest, simply up-the-anti by throwing in the word “law” as a synonym for “work”. This should crack even the most devoted nut since most Christians' are very confused about the concept of the “law”. Then sit

back and watch the community morph into a tired, wheezing social club. At least you'll have a social life!

While great friendships grow in community, bringing a genuine sense of fun and enjoyment into our lives, the old saying is a true saying: "Friends that pray together stay together". In the rest God gives, true community never drifts from its Divine Centre: **"where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them"** (Matthew 18:20). Intimately aware of Jesus in our midst, we're always tuning into His voice and will for us; a **"yoke"** – yes, His yoke yet a yoke all the same – that is **"easy"** and a **"burden"** that is **"light"** (Matthew 11:29, 30).

### **Strategy 6: See the group as a platform to get your gift working.**

Looking for something more subversive? Well, here's a strategy that can even split the group; an insidious adaptation of strategy 3, "adopting a me-first attitude". Get it in your head early on that this group is simply a stepping stone for you and greater ministry influence. It is your laboratory where you can experiment with self-promoting ideas and where you can sharpen your spiritual marketing skills; oh, and see the participants as guinea pigs upon whom it is your right to practice. And if you play your cards right; when your wheeling and dealing corrupts the group, you may even have won over a few gullible members with whom you can launch your own Ministry Inc. Slam dunk! Perfect group split!

Of course, Paul warned against this self-gratifying, rabid-attitude: **"savage wolves will come...not sparing the flock...drawing disciples after themselves"** (Acts 20:29, 30). James explained that **"where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there"** (James 3:16). Arresting statement! (It should drive us into the fear of the Lord!) He went on, calling us to a higher path: **"wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy"** (v. 17). Now this is the attitude upon which community thrives.

### **Strategy 7: Criticise initiative and leadership as "controlling".**

This strategy is the inverse of strategy 6 above, "viewing the group as a platform to get your gift working". Here you simply accuse everyone who shows initiative or leadership potential of being controlling and of exploiting the group for personal advance. Of course, if you piously claim you only want the Holy Spirit to preside in the community, you'll force everyone into a witch-hunting panic. Suspicious and fearful, the group will either drown in itself or splinter into pieces. Job done!

Without question we ought to prize the Presidency of the Spirit and it is vital to affirm our dependence upon Him continuously. One way to do so is to fully appreciate the way He uses

people as channels of love, gracing us with gifts **"as He wills"** (1 Corinthians 12:11 c. Romans 12:3-8; 1 Peter 4:10, 11). Another is to value the Biblical role of servant-leaders and honour the principles of authority He has clearly revealed through the Scriptures He authored (Hebrews 13:7, 17, for example). Being anti-leadership and anti-authority is **"lawlessness"**; an anti-Christ spirit and not of the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 7:21-23; 24:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 7; 1 John 4:3).

### **God's outrageous intention...**

As we come to the close of this drama, I trust that you have been inspired to re-plug into the Divine Community and allow Him to pour you into a little bit of heaven on earth, a spiritual community. I am absolutely convinced that God has put all the ingredients for life in two communal "units": firstly, the nuclear family of father, mother and children and secondly, the spiritual family, the church. If our nuclear and spiritual families are filled with Christ, we will lack for nothing; matured in the wholesome diet of these God-designed communities, we are launched into Kingdom exploits that glorify our Father **"from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named"** (Ephesians 3:15).

Yet in a love-starved world of dysfunctional nuclear families it is the privilege and responsibility of faith communities to resurrect, in the power of God, what the home has often put to death. This is our sublime call and His overwhelming desire. And we, as the redeemed, are uniquely equipped for this holy task: **"rooted in Him"** and **"knit together in love"** we **"are complete in Him"** (Colossians 2:2, 6, 10). No other agenda, programme or ideology can answer this deepest of human need. In Christ, we are it! And lest we forget: **"in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead"** (Colossians 2:9). *In Him through* us (as communities of love), God desires to fill the earth with Himself. God really does intend that our spiritual families be **"the pillar and ground of the truth"** (1 Timothy 3:15).

Listen to Paul echo this passion in God's heart.

What would, above all, fulfil the joy of the veteran, frontier-blazing, demon-routing, Gospel-preaching apostle? Having awesome times of worship? Embarking on a fruitful evangelistic crusade? Engaging in significant mercy ministry? Executing a global church planting vision? No doubt, Paul would enthusiastically rejoice in all of these things; but what, above all, lit his fire?

Writing to his dear friends in the city of Philippi, Paul writes, **"fulfil my joy by being likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind"** (Philippians 2:2). Resonating with God's overwhelming passion, Paul pokes at the very core of this article; resonating in harmony with Jesus' prayer: **"that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You...that the world may believe that You sent Me"** (John 17:21).

We, in community, can either fulfil our high call to be a channel of God's healing mercy to our neighbours and a launch pad for Kingdom exploits to the nations or...

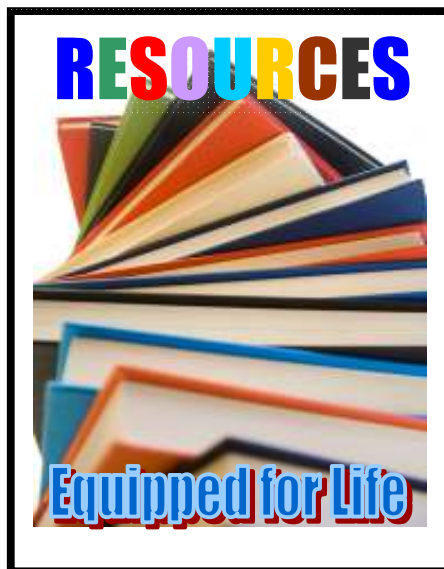
...we can become another dysfunctional, septic sore of "us four and no more".



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## **CrossWave**



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