



## LIVING CHRISTIANLY IN COMMUNITY – CHRIST IN ALL

Colossians 3:12-17

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### Introduction – The Challenge of Community

Community. It's a wonderful idea, isn't it? Yet the actual doing of community—well, that's a whole other story, isn't it?

We struggle at community, perhaps now more than ever.

You may have heard of Harvard Professor Robert Putnam's national bestseller, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). The thesis of the book is well-captured by the title, *Bowling Alone*. It's not, Putnam suggests, that today fewer people are bowling; it's that fewer people are bowling in leagues and more people are bowling *alone*. That's the difference: a loss of civic engagement or what he calls "social capital," what the rest of us would simply call a collapse of community.

What's killing community in the United States? Several things, as he points out, none of which will be surprise you. Here they are: (1) the pressures of time and money: people need more money and thus have less time for community; (2) mobility and sprawl: people want more space in which to live and thus are in less close proximity to one another, to community; (3) technology and mass media: in particular, the television, which has privatized and individualized our leisure time and entertainment; and (4) generational change: what he refers to as "the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren" (p. 283).

According to Professor Robert Putnam these several forces are undermining civic engagement and killing community in America. But for all the merits of his impressive study, I think he has missed the most fundamental problem of all: you and me. You and me – we're the problem with community. Here I think of the brilliant quip once made by the British writer and journalist, G. K. Chesterton, in response to the question: "What's wrong with the world?" His response was very succinct and much to the point; he simply wrote back in reply: "I am. Yours truly, G. K. Chesterton."

I am. That's what is killing community—rather, that's *who* is killing community. Me and you, people like us: selfish, fickle individualists. We're the challenge to community, whether it's the bowling league or the church Life Group. We're what is ultimately undermining community because, quite frankly, we can't get along with each other.

Interestingly, early Jewish rabbis were fond of referring to Adam, the progenitor of the entire human race, as the "man of divisions," the one who, because of his own disobedience and rejection of God, plunged humanity into chaos and confusion, division and discord, so that, as has been said by one theologian, we are a "torn humanity suffering from a thousand wounds" (Barth, *CD* 4.3.2., p. 798). And is it not a little ironic (or perhaps prophetic) that of Adam and Eve's first two children, the one murdered the other, and then went and founded a community, a city?

Yet, friends, at the very heart of the Gospel, at the very center of what God is doing in and through Jesus Christ, is healing humanity's brokenness and restoring human community in the world.

But where? Where is God restoring human beings to right relationship with him and with one another? Where is he unveiling his design for renewed and restored human community?

*In the church*—that's where.

Look with me at Colossians 3:11, this most remarkable verse. "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free." Isn't that an astonishing statement? What a bold thing to say. Listen up Oak Park! Here, that is, in the *church*, these age-old divisions of race and class and background and culture are at last overcome!

But how?

What is the key, what is the formula, what is the secret, to community? It's there in the second half of the verse: "... but Christ is all, and is in all" (3:11).

*Christ is all, and Christ is in all.* That's the key. The key to community is Jesus Christ being *everything to* the community, and Jesus Christ being *everywhere in* the community. That's the key, that's the secret, that's the Holy Grail of community.

But what does this look like? And how do we do it? How do we as a community let Christ be everything to us, and let Christ be everywhere in and among us? How do we do it?

Well, this is exactly what Colossians 3:12-17 explains. For what Paul does in this passage is takes both sides of this formula—Christ is all and in all—and explains each side in turn in the two paragraphs that comprise this single passage of 3:12-17. He first addresses what it means for Christ *to be in all* in the community in 3:12-14. Then he addresses what it means for Christ *to be all* in the community in 3:15-17.

However, today, in this sermon, we will only deal with the first half of the formula: *Christ is in all*, and so we will only deal with 3:12-14, returning next week to 3:15-17, *Christ is all*.

### **The First Half of the Key to Community – Christ In All (3:12-14)**

The first half of the key to community is *Christ in all*. That is, for Christ to be in our community, in all our interactions with one another; for Christ to inform and shape all our relationships with one other. And this passage points to three specific ways in which Christ can be in our midst, in our relationships, in our community.

#### ***Clothing ourselves with Christ-like character (v. 12)***

The first way in which Christ can be in all in our community, in all our relationships, is by us *clothing ourselves with Christ-like character*. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved," Paul writes, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (3:12). Here, again, as we saw earlier (3:5-11), we see Paul's fondness for lists; this time it's a list of virtues or character qualities—but not

a randomly chosen list. These virtues, these qualities that we as a community are called to put on are the very kinds of qualities Jesus wore all the time, as he interacted with people.

- *Compassion* – that is, merciful love, the kind of love that not only *sees* the needs others, but is *moved* by their needs. And this is precisely what we see in the life of Jesus. “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34).
- *Kindness* – that is, doing good for the good of others. Again, the life of Jesus was filled with kindness. When speaking of Jesus, the Apostle Peter says in Acts simply that Jesus “went around doing good” (10:34). He was busy blessing others by doing them good.
- *Humility* – that is, not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought, and considering others more important than yourself. Of course, the whole mission of Jesus was launched as a result of the Son’s own humility, as we learn from that famous passage in Philippians: “Your attitude,” Paul writes, “should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he *humbled* himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (2:5-8).
- *Gentleness* – this is behavior that flows from humility, from not being overly impressed with oneself. Ironically, however, Jesus had every reason to be overly impressed with himself, given who he in fact was. Yet he says to all of us who think we’re something when in fact we’re really nothing: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29).
- *Patience* – this is the response of a gentle and humble heart to people. And, of course, you can’t read the Gospels without seeing the amazing patience of Jesus toward the ignorance of the crowds, the arrogance of the religious leaders, the fickleness of his own followers, and, not least, the timing of God’s own sovereign plan.

Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. These are critical qualities for the life of a community, aren’t they? These five Christ-like qualities are like David’s five smooth stones, with which he slew his enemy, the giant Goliath of Gath (1 Sam. 17:40). For these five Christ-like qualities—compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience—can slay the community killing giants of envy and discord and bitterness and jealousy, the very things that crush community.

Clothe yourself, then, with Christ-like character. That’s one critical way in which Christ is to be in all in our community: he is to be in all our interactions with one another. In a similar passage in one of Paul’s other letters, Romans 13, he says the same thing but even more succinctly; there he simply says: “clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (13:14).

That's it! *Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ*. That's how we let Christ be in all: by clothing ourselves with Christ himself, his life, his character.

***Practice Christ-like forgiveness (v. 13)***

This passage identifies another, closely related way in which Christ can be all in our community. Christ is in all in our community when we not simply *feel* compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness or patience toward “the church” or toward people, as it were, in the abstract; but when we actually *live out* these character qualities in *close, day-in-day-out contact with real people*.

Note, I said, “with real people.” Not fictitious people, but real people. You know who I'm talking about: the kind of people who annoy us, and disappoint us, and frustrate us, and even, from time to time, hurt us—real, fallen, sinful people.

Has anyone ever been—or is anyone currently in—a community with people who annoy you or disappoint you or frustrate you or even hurt you? Here we return to the heart of the problem, the great challenge of community: real people, you and me, sinners.

But the Bible calls us to: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (3:13). *To practice Christ-like forgiveness*—that's the very heart of community. Yet, as Paul Tripp and Tim Lane point out in their book, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*, “forgiveness is one of the most poorly practiced activities in the Christian community—if practiced at all” (p. 93).

This probably explains why our Christian communities, our churches, are so fragile: we see a little something we don't like, a little something goes wrong, a few people get their noses bent out of shape, and poof! The whole community goes up in smoke! This probably also explains why our churches are so weak and ineffective for the Gospel in their communities; and why our churches are sometimes so unattractive to outsiders, who—like us!—are broken and hurting and wondering, “Is this a safe place to unload my burdens? Or should I look for another?”

But the Gospel calls us to, as this passage says, “Bear with each other” (3:13). That's what we're called to. We are called by Christ into community where we *bear with each other*. This means bearing with each other when we annoy one another, or hurt one another, or snub one another; this means bearing with each other's struggles and pains and disappointments and idiosyncrasies and bad habits and awkward interpersonal skills. Christ calls us, not to get out from under and get away from, but bear up under and bear with each other. This is fundamentally a call to stick it out with each other, not to be a community wimp or coward, who flees at the first sign of difficulty or danger. Instead, we are to hang on and hang in with one another, to bear with each other. This is what husbands and wives do in a marriage; this is what Christians do in a church: we bear with each other.

But more than that—the Gospel call is more radical than that! We not only are to bear with each other, but to go the next step and forgive each other. As Paul says, “forgive whatever grievances you have against one another” (3:13). Friends, there is nothing more Christ-like than to forgive a grievance you have against another person. Extending forgiveness—especially when it's costly to you—is right at the heart of what it means to have Christ be in all in community.

But how do we find the ability, indeed, the strength to forgive? Where do we look for resource? For example? Our texts points in the only direction: “Forgive as the *Lord* forgave you” (3:13b).

What a beautifully succinct and yet remarkably profound statement! We are to forgive as the Lord has forgiven us. Here I think two things are being said.

- First, we forgive *in the same way* that Jesus has forgiven us. But how did Jesus forgive us? *Lavishly*—that’s how. You may remember that at one point in his life, Jesus was saying some rather provocative things on sin and forgiveness, which caught the attention of his disciples. In fact, his disciple, Peter, who evidently was trying to make sense of Jesus’ teaching, finally asked Jesus: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Seven times?! No doubt, Jesus gasped at the question, as if to say: Are you kidding?! “I tell you,” Jesus replied, “not seven times, but *seventy-seven times*” (18:22). Forgiveness must be lavish. No forgiveness misers in this community!
- Second, we forgive *because* Jesus forgave us. Our own debt has been paid in full by Christ on the cross once for all. We have no need, then, to hang onto the debt of others by failing to forgive them. When it comes to debts, mine has been paid in full and I’m completely free! “Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Full and free forgiveness! No condemnation! And so I have no need to *collect* anything from anyone anymore! Even when I’m hurt, I don’t need to put a lean on anyone’s life, as though I can’t rest content until I extract from them what they owe me. Instead, because I am one who has experienced this utterly free and utterly freeing forgiveness—I can freely forgive others!

So we see here Jesus at the center of the center of community. Jesus is the key to forgiveness, which is the key to community. Jesus is both the model of forgiveness and the basis for forgiveness; he is both the pattern and foundation of forgiveness. And that is why it is inconceivable that there be a lack of forgiveness within the community of the church; that is why it is utterly inconsistent with the Gospel itself to harbor grudges or resentment or bitterness toward others—regardless of what they have or have not done to or for you! A failure to forgive others is a failure to embrace the Gospel—plain and simple.

Now some of you may not only be wondering what this looks like and whether we might be able to help you learn how better to let Jesus and his gospel and his peace settle your disputes. If you are in that situation, let me strongly encourage you to take advantage of the Explore Peacemaking class that begins next Sunday morning, March 29, at the 11:30 hour. Find out more about it in your *Calvary Family News* or by calling the church office.

### ***Put on Christ-like love (v. 14)***

Finally, we come to the third way in which Christ can be in all in our community, which is, you might say, the summary of the whole, the main thing, the ultimate thing. As we saw in 3:12, Paul talks about clothing ourselves with Christ-like character. Now he returns to that same imagery of clothing. But here it’s not another piece of clothing,

as it were, but that which goes over the top of the clothing—the overcoat, if you will. “And over all these virtues put on love” (3:14).

Love, as theologians have pointed out for centuries, is the sum of the virtues; love is *the* virtue, the essence of the Christian life, the heart of Christian living. One of the reasons why love is the essence of the Christian life is because love, as Paul says in the second half of this verse, “binds them all [that is, all the other virtues] together in perfect unity” (3:14).

Love is, then, not only the sum of all virtues and the most excellent of virtues; love is also the *key* to every other virtue, every other character quality we seek to embody as followers of Christ. This is because love, first of all, *binds* all other character qualities together: love has a way of taking disparate character qualities and fusing them together into a single, holistic way of life. For example, love causes compassion and kindness to come together so that you not only feel toward others, you act on their behalf. Or love causes humility and gentleness to come together, so that you not only have a proper view of yourself, but act in light of who you know yourself to be or not be.

Secondly, love also *balances*. Love not only “binds them all together,” but does so “in perfect unity.” Love doesn’t let us get lopsided in our living out the Christ-like life. Love won’t allow our compassion to make us squirrely and weak-kneed; love won’t allow our humility to make us mousy and sheepish; love won’t allow our gentleness to make us soft and cowardly. Love, instead, brings all the virtues into a perfect unity, each virtue in balance with all the rest, forming a coherent and beautiful whole – which will then reflect the coherent beauty of character we see in the person of Christ himself.

This is why, then, it’s so critical to put on *Christ-like love* when doing Christian community. Nothing sticks together without love. And nothing’s in its proper place or in its proper proportion without love. So let me challenge you to reflect on your own life and ask: Where is my character out of balance? And then ask the Lord to cultivate in you, by his Holy Spirit, the gift of love, which will bring greater balance and harmony to your character and greater consistency to your life. And let me encourage you to put on, therefore, Christ-like love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

## Conclusion

In his book, *Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead*, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests that one of the leading questions facing the church in this century is this: Can the church sustain community? In his words (p. 32):

The church of the twenty-first century, like that of previous centuries, will probably remain vibrant as long as it can provide people with a strong sense of community. The congregation, therefore, remains at the heart of the church and, in turn, at the heart of Christianity. But can the congregation continue adequately to sustain community?

Can we sustain community? Can we be, as we talked about last week, that city on a hill? And if so, how? How do we do community, so to speak? We’ve seen at least part of the Bible’s answer to that question today in this passage. What is the key to community?

*Christ is all, and Christ is in all.* We've explored one half of this formula; next week we'll take up the second half.

But for now we're confronted with this high calling and great challenge: to let Christ be in all in our community: to clothe ourselves with Christ-like character; to practice Christ-like forgiveness; and to put on Christ-like love. In a word, in order to sustain community we must put on Christ.

But let us also remember that community is not our creation, but God's. It's not something we manufacture, but something God gives. Hence, our calling is to *embrace* what God has already done for us in Christ to restore us to him and to one another. This means, quite practically, that the more we turn away from ourselves and turn toward Jesus Christ—Christ is all, and Christ is in all—the more we in turn will realize the kind of community God envisions for us.

In his classic work on Christian community, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently captures the essence of what Paul is saying in our passage:

Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it (p. 38).

So let us look to Jesus Christ alone for community, and there rest secure, and pray expectantly, and hope confidently. *Christ is all, and Christ is in all!*

Amen.