

## Christian Growth

### Week 7: Community as a Means of Grace

#### Note to instructors

Remind students that the Discipleship Packet (one of the week 7 handouts) must be completed before they can take their first Christian Ministry class. In order to take any of the Christian Ministry classes, they must first complete the readings in the packet and answer the study questions. The packet also explains how to turn in the completed questions.

#### Introduction

Over the last four weeks we studied the essential *theological* dynamics of spiritual growth (GRACE; FAITH; SIN; LAW). Now we turn to the *practical* ways that we pursue spiritual growth.

We do this primarily by participating in the means of grace (MOG) in the same way the early church lived (Acts 2:42\*)<sup>1</sup>—plus God’s discipline (LATER).

- God’s Word
- Community (*koinonia*)- Fellowship is the common translation of this word. It literally means “together.” The Biblical emphasis on community is foreign to the individualism which is so common today.
- Prayer

#### Important general principles concerning the MOG

- View them as *God’s prescribed avenues through which we relate personally to Jesus and are nourished by God’s grace* – like having a delicious, nutritional meal with someone who really loves you. NOT as ways to earn/keep God’s acceptance or approval, to make him more inclined to bless us, to gain the approval of other Christians, etc. (That’s why “means of grace” may be better than “means of growth.”) Read Revelations 3:20 in this light. When you have this perspective, these activities are “I get to’s”—not “I have to’s.” If you find yourself relating to these activities as “I have to’s,” you are under law.
- We need to *consistently participate in* the MOG (“continuously devoted themselves”). We want to build a lifestyle that thrives on these spiritual activities. But because we are fallen and attacked by Satan, we must have a category for engaging in these activities by faith when we don’t feel like it (like exercising; e.g., GOING TO A MEETING WHEN WIPED OUT). (This is why some Christians refer to these activities as

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:42 also refers to the “breaking of bread.” This may refer to communion, or to sharing a meal together (including communion) in homes (Acts 2:46). Communion combines the other three MOG—we remember the gospel and thank God together for his grace. Understood in this way, and done in a lifestyle of the other three MOG, taking communion regularly is an excellent spiritual activity!

“spiritual disciplines.”) This is also why when we become chronically sick or weak spiritually, this is the one of the first things we should check (e.g., WEAK PERSON WHO EATS ONLY SPORADICALLY).

We need to participate in the MOG so we grow and develop:

- A lifestyle that thrives on these spiritual activities.
- An understanding of our internal spiritual struggle and the attacks by Satan.
- We need a “*balanced diet*” of all the MOG—not specializing in one or two while neglecting the others. Most of us find certain MOG’s appealing and others unappealing—so we tend to specialize in the appealing ones, thinking this will make up for neglect of the others. But this will always cause problems. For example, Christians who try to grow through private Bible study and prayer without community will not develop beyond a primitive level. Properly understood, the MOG are not entirely separate categories—they overlap (EG. HC, worker team, responding to God’s discipline w/ help from others who use the Word, etc; 3 OVERLAPPING CIRCLES?), and it is good to “multi-task” whenever possible (EXAMPLES).
- The MOG are an avenue through which we *give* God’s love and grace to others. Yes, they are the primary ways by which we “*set our minds on the things of the Spirit*”—but they are also the primary ways by which we “*keep in step with the Spirit.*” It is appropriate for younger Christians to emphasize the receiving aspect of the MOG—but maturity requires that we learn early on to give through them (e.g., PRAYING TO BUILD UP ONE PERSON AT HOME GROUP; PRAYING FOR OTHERS). Otherwise, a “consumer spirituality” results that will stagnate your spiritual life (SEA OF GALILEE vs. DEAD SEA). On the other hand, seasoned Christian workers never outgrow their need to receive through the MOG (*contra* STUDYING ONLY TO TEACH; NOT WILLING TO LEAN ON OTHER CHRISTIANS).

We have opportunities to love other through the MOG and that’s what the church is meant to practice. For example:

Prayer- supplication- offering our prayers for others

The Word- learning the Word so you can teach others

Fellowship- to build others up and speak the truth in love to one another.

- We should participate in the MOG in both *spontaneous* and *planned* ways. For example, on the one hand, I should turn to God in prayer spontaneously throughout the day. If I only pray at “scheduled” times, my relationship with God is not fully personal. On the other hand, I need planned times of prayer because otherwise I tend to drift into prayerlessness. The same principle holds true for relating to other Christians and getting into God’s Word. Planned and spontaneous MOG participation should never be pitted against one another—they complement one another.
- We should participate in the MOG both *privately* and *corporately*. (This refers to the Word and prayer—it is impossible to participate in community privately!) In the Bible, Christians pray alone, and they pray with other Christians. They meditate on the Word alone, and they study and discuss the Word with other Christians. Some Christians pray

privately, but refuse to pray with other Christians. Some Christians get into God's Word with other Christians, but feel it is unnecessary to study and meditate privately. Lean against all such dichotomizing tendencies if you want to have a healthy spiritual life!

## **Community as a MOG**

### **What is the basis for Christian Community**

Read and discuss 1 Cor 12 and Romans 12.

### **Why do we start here?**

Many Christian workers first emphasize prayer and Bible reading for new Christians. But we emphasize community with other Christians for three reasons:

- **PRACTICAL:** Private Bible reading and prayer can be very daunting for new Christians. Getting involved in community automatically exposes us to the Word and prayer, and in community we learn more quickly how to get into the Word and pray.
- **MISSIOLOGICAL:** Healthy Christian community attracts non-Christians to Jesus because it demonstrates what they were created for (Jn. 13:34,35; 17:20-23), and because we are strengthened through Christian community to be good representatives of Jesus at home, at work, in the neighborhood, etc. (Heb. 10:24,25).
- **THEOLOGICAL:** We are created in the image of a communal God, and we have been redeemed as members of God's family/the Body of Christ. Therefore, we are intrinsically constituted for community—we cannot be truly human or grow spiritually without it (see Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:11-16\*\*). The western view that exalts autonomous individualism is false, and Christian attempts to accommodate this view will fail to develop mature Christians who are vital witnesses for Jesus. Even the biblical picture of heaven is intensely about community (Isaiah 25:6-9).

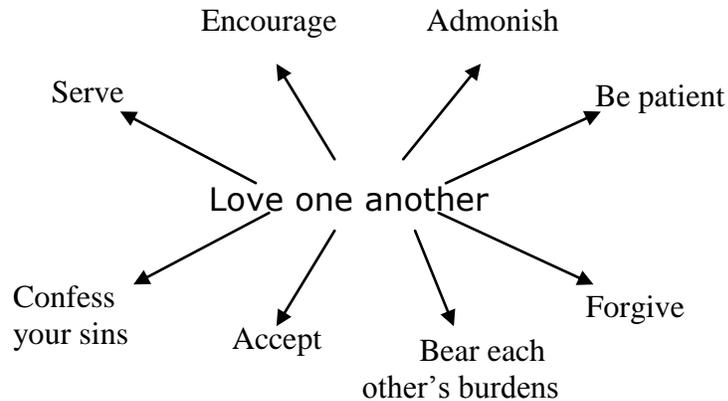
### **How involved in Christian community should we be?**

Some of may want an answer in terms of meetings/week or hours/week, but the Biblical answer is principle based.

Christians often want to answer this superficially and legalistically: "How many meetings a week must I attend?" Xenos members sometimes differ only in the number of meetings in their answer. Sometimes we even feel superior to another Christian because we attend more meetings per week. But the Bible answers this question in a way that allows more flexibility, yet is *much* more challenging.

**We need to be involved enough that we are practicing the “one another’s” reciprocally.**

We need to be involved enough that we are practicing the “one another’s” reciprocally (Jn. 13:34,35; expounded in the New Testament letters by the “one another” imperatives).<sup>2</sup> This requires intensive relational involvement.<sup>3</sup>



Are you involved enough that you regularly *receive* encouragement, admonition, etc. from others? Are you involved enough that you regularly *contribute* encouragement, admonition, etc. to others?

Are you involved enough that you need to practice patience, forbearance, forgiveness, etc. with others? Are you involved enough that they need to practice patience, forbearance, forgiveness, etc. with you?

Do you have enriching relationships with Christians who are so different from you (e.g., cultural tastes, socio-economic background; age; education; etc.) that you would not want to know them apart from Christ?

This implies not just a network of fairly involved relationships, but also at least a few *close spiritual* friendships.<sup>4</sup> Are you involved enough that you have these?

This argues for (ideally) daily significant interaction with one another (Acts 2:42,46).

What is the value of church structures like home church, cell group, central teaching, etc?

Meetings (EXAMPLES) and other structures (e.g., SINGLES LIVING TOGETHER) are important because they *facilitate* this kind of involvement—

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete explanation and application of these “one another” imperatives, see Gary DeLashmutt, *Loving God’s Way: A Fresh Look At the ‘One Another’ Passages* (Xenos Publishing, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Supply biblical references for each of these “one another” imperatives: serve (Gal. 5:13); encourage (1 Thess. 5:11); admonish (Col. 3:16); be patient/forbearing (Eph. 4:2); forgive (Eph. 4:32); bear burdens (Gal. 6:2); accept (Rom. 15:7); confess (Jas. 5:16)

<sup>4</sup> For practical help on building close spiritual friendships, see Gary DeLashmutt & Dennis McCallum, *Spiritual Relationships That Last* (Xenos Publishing, 2001), pp. 29-53.

but they do not insure it! You will have a difficult time having this kind of involvement without meetings—but you can be involved in many meetings without having this kind of involvement. Beware of being too rigid about meeting structures and schedules—but beware also of being too loose!

**We need to be involved enough that we can discover and use our God-given spiritual gifts.** (Eph. 4:11-16\*\*).

- Each of us has been given spiritual gifts to play a special role in the building up of Jesus' church. We need to be involved enough that we are regularly contributing our spiritual gifts and regularly receiving others' gifts (Eph. 4:11-16\*\*; Rom. 12:4-8 AS "NORMAL" SPECTRUM?). As members of Christ's Body, we have each been given spiritual gifts to play a special role in the building up of his church. This is much different than simply "going to church" on Sundays.

Are you involved enough to see and appreciate the diversity of gifts in the church?

Are you involved enough that you are gaining clarity on your specific roles/gifts and using them consistently to build others up (both inside and outside home group)?

**THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THIS HAPPENS:** This increasing clarity normally develops *only* as you get involved in community and love/serve others consistently ("ONE ANOTHER'S," FOLLOWING UP; DISCIPLING). It is in this context of serving that God begins to give you insight into your spiritual gifts.

**INDICATORS OF GIFTING:** There is no formula for discovering your spiritual gifts. Possible indicators include: FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS; CONSISTENT DESIRE; NEEDS YOU SEE; EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S POWER & JOY AS YOU SERVE; GOD-GIVEN OPPORTUNITIES IN RESPONSE TO PRAYER. With this insight comes the responsibility to faithfully exercise your gifts to serve other Christians and non-Christians.

### **What beliefs/attitudes impede involvement in Christian community?**

We shouldn't legislate or impose involvement in Christian community on ourselves or on others.

We want to develop deep theological and principle-based convictions.

Consider the following common attitudes that impede Christian community and the Biblical provision for each.

- Autonomy/individualism

vs. healthy individuality (1 Cor. 12:15-19); Rom. 12:3-5)

- Spiritual pride

vs. humility & self-distrust

Heb. 3:12,13 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.(NASB)

- Relational idolatry (“My boyfriend comes first;” “My parents would be disappointed”)

vs. trusting God to meet love needs.

1 Pet. 4:19 Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right. (NASB)

- Materialism (“My possessions or savings make me secure and significant.”)

vs. gaining joy and significance from taking up the role God gives you in the church.

- Preoccupation with media or hobbies (“I can’t miss my TV shows.” “I have to keep my Facebook updated.” “I can’t miss one of my six softball games this week.”)

- Super-spirituality (“Jesus and me is all I need;” “God is leading me to follow my career out of town, work 80 hours, change churches, etc.,” THIS IS USUALLY A SPIRITUAL JUSTIFICATION FOR ONE OF THESE OTHER BARRIERS) vs. scriptural priorities & wise counsel

- Tribalism (“I put God first, my family second, church third, etc.”) vs. realizing that community involvement is necessary for a healthy family (Col. 3)

- Moral impurity (e.g., sexual immorality; substance abuse) vs. walking in the light (1 Jn. 1:7)

- Shyness/introversion (“I’m just not a people person;” “I do best spiritually when I only interact with other Christians once in a while”) vs. embracing other-centered love as the universal feature of spiritual growth & maturity (Gal. 5:13)

- Excessive dependence on Information Technology (for entertainment &/or “connecting”) vs. the priority of face-to face involvement with other Christians (1 Thess. 2:17-3:11)

- “. . . the kind of community required for the resuscitation of (spiritual) life requires the grace that comes through the human touch, the human voice, the human gaze. Genuine community shines through the human presence of truth expressed personally. Cyberspace can only mimic or mirror these things (however convincingly); it cannot create them. It can, however, beguile us into mistaking connectivity for community, data for wisdom, and efficiency for excellence. If

cyberspace is kept closely fastened to the real world, and if we refuse its temptations to exchange the virtual for the literal, it can be our servant. Otherwise it will become a demanding and all-consuming media monster."<sup>5</sup>

- Previous bad experiences with Christian community may sour one's perspective. vs. embrace healthy community as God's will as revealed in Scripture.

Are you acknowledging and repenting from these—or are you minimizing and rationalizing them? Some of these wrong beliefs/attitudes are broken by decisive repentance (e.g., SEXUAL SIN), while others are gradually expelled as you experience the goodness of Christian community (see below).

### **The joy of living in Christian community**

Merely repenting from these challenges will not be sufficient to build a lifestyle that thrives in Christian community. **We must embrace the promise that real Christian community leads to fullness of joy (Jn. 15:11,12)—a joy that is greater than worldly joy and well worth the investment that it requires.** Consider the ways God gives us his joy through community:

- The joy of experiencing God's help and encouragement in personal and timely ways through your brothers and sisters vs. being adrift and/or alone when crises hit (Eccles. 4:10).
- The freedom of experiencing joy in giving God's love to others (Jn. 13:17; Acts 20:35) vs. the disappointment & bondage of seeking joy from favorable circumstances & people treating you the way you desire
- The joy of deep and lasting spiritual friendships (MY FRIENDS) vs. the hollowness & loneliness of shallow relationships
- The joy of being part of a team and playing your special role in ministry (ME WITH TEACHING)
- The joy of seeing God draw others to Christ through your community (RECENT CONVERTS IN OUR HOME GROUP)
- The joy of seeing spiritual children flourish and mature (3 Jn. 1:4; 1 Thess. 2:19; MY "CHILDREN")

How much joy do you want to have? How deep do you want this joy to be? How long do you want this joy to last? What One step of faith does God want you to take toward Christian community?

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas Grootuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1997), p. 143.