

If My Church is a Community, Why Do I Feel So Isolated?

Series: The Reality and Responsibility of Unity

by Doug Goins

Psalm 133 begins, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" Our focus this morning will be on our identity in the body of Christ, a spiritual community. I have been a part of that community for 41 years, ever since my mother and father came to personal faith in Jesus Christ when I was five years old. At times I've been a rebellious member; there have been seasons out of fellowship with the Lord and with his people. My relationship with that community of faith has not always been comfortable. I have always had to resist shyness; I am basically an introvert temperamentally. I've never quite felt like I fit in or belonged to any church. I've always had a vague suspicion that I probably didn't need the community anyway. And because of my own sinful tendencies toward perfectionism, I have struggled with intolerance of the imperfections of those around me in the church.

There was a nine-month period 16 years ago when I sat in church every Sunday morning but never pursued any relationships or ministry opportunities in that particular church body. I rationalized that I was at least one in spirit with those believers. We were enjoying the communion of the Lord even if I didn't know them as individuals because it's the spiritual relationship that's the important one anyway, right? I could get to know them in heaven; we'd have all eternity for that. For that entire school year I also sat in seminary chapel services twice a week with 800 brothers and sisters in Christ, but I allowed only a tiny handful of those people into my life, just the ones who seemed to be able to understand and identify with my unique problems as a single parent going through a difficult divorce with a five-year old son.

I have struggled over the years, as well, with impatience toward Christian community. The church has seemed to respond so slowly to my purity of vision for what community ought to be like! I have a history of forcing the issue. Twenty years ago, at the height of the Jesus Movement, some other young people and I tried to force more contemporary, informal worship with all the wonderful new music on a terrific congregation of people in Santa Cruz. We tried to jam body life down their throats "for their own good," even though we were making them very uncomfortable. We were terribly insensitive as we tried to force this wonderful thing God was doing on these dear people.

I have asked myself many times in my adult life the question that is the title of our message this morning: "If my church is a community, why do I feel so isolated?" We need to hear from the Scriptures for the answer to this question. Psalm 133 will remind us of who we are, what we're about, and what God wants to do among us.

**Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!**

**It is like the precious oil upon the head,
running down upon the beard,
upon the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!**

**It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!**

**For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life for evermore.**

This is one of fifteen *Songs of Ascent* (Psalms 120 through 134) tucked away in the Hebrew psalter. It is a mini-psalter that was collected for the Jewish pilgrims to sing together as they traveled up from their cities all over the nation of Israel to worship in Jerusalem (geographically, the highest city in Israel) three times a year, for high, holy feast days. They went up for Passover in the spring, as they remembered and celebrated God's salvation history; the Feast of Pentecost in early summer, as they renewed their commitment as God's covenant people; and at Rosh Hashana, or the Feast of Tabernacles, in the autumn, as they responded with gratitude for God's blessings to them. These psalms are short, and there is one central theme in each of them. They were easy to memorize in Hebrew. They survey the fundamentals of faith--life lived in relationship to *Yahweh*.

This psalm is a song of King David, the "sweet singer of Israel." We don't know when David wrote this or what he was responding to. There is, however, a wonderful story in 2 Samuel 5:1-10 about how the Lord finally united all the twelve tribes under David's leadership after he led the southern tribes for 7 1/2 years as king in Hebron. The northern tribes finally came to David and said to him, "We are your

own flesh and blood. We want to follow the Lord under your leading." With that united commitment, David then went with his army, and God gave him Jerusalem. He claimed it as the capital seat of leadership of the nation of Israel. Because of that he brought the ark of the covenant up into Jerusalem, and finally all the tribes could worship together. It must have been an overwhelming experience for David to stand with all the tribes gathered together, worshipping God in unity.

There is irony in this statement, however, because as David stood with all the Israelite worshippers, they would have had vivid memories of the nation's long, difficult struggle to maintain community. Tribal jealousy was a reality. Pettiness, mistrust, competition, and hurt feelings were constants throughout Israel's history. They were all the sons of Abraham, but great differences among the tribes developed over the years. There were larger and smaller tribes, urban and rural tribes. Some of the tribes became militarily dominant and powerful, while others remained weak and subservient. There were cosmopolitan sea-coast tribes that had trade routes running through their territory. Some of the tribes were more backward because they were isolated in mountainous regions. Some tribes were blessed materially with great riches; others struggled economically. Some tribes even disdained how others spoke the Hebrew language, making fun of their accents. During the period of the judges there is a frightening story of how eleven of the tribes tried to annihilate the entire tribe of Benjamin. It was only the grace of God that preserved that little tribe. So you can imagine the powerful experience it was to all stand together in the tabernacle or the temple in worship and sing this song of unity, which had been hard to win and which was hard to maintain!

The opening word of the psalm is a strong imperative: "Behold!" It means, take a good look; examine this carefully. We're tempted to approach something like this psalm casually, to take it for granted. We assume we know what community is all about, or else we evaluate Christian community by our own biases, our preconceptions of what it ought to be. Just as Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18), that they would have spiritual understanding of what God was doing, this psalm can give us spiritual understanding that is not controlled by the perceived needs we might bring here on any given Sunday. It can protect us from our own subjective idealization of Christian community. So let's look carefully at this psalm, asking the Lord to teach us, not demanding that he give us what we want or think we need.

I want to focus on two things: the four ways David defines spiritual community, and the three effects or results of learning how to live together in unity. First let's look at how David defines community. The first three definitions are in verse 1. First, he says, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity." That's God's definition of community. The king is saying that God has declared family life to be good. That's an objective reality, a theological statement about community: morally and ethically it's the way to live. He also says it's pleasant. That's the subjective, existential quality of community. It is pleasing, attractive, enjoyable. It feels good. If I dread it, if I am uncomfortable throughout the process or experience, it isn't pleasant. The scriptures know nothing of solitary Christianity. When we are born again, we are born into the fellowship of community. This declaration of goodness that is pleasing comes from the very nature of God himself. He is not reclusive, a hermit, or an old bachelor. He is triune--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is community in the Godhead! And the Church of Jesus Christ is to reflect that same fellowship.

So the question is, if that is true, why do I feel isolated? Why do I resist this call to community? Because as a sinful human being I tend toward isolation by nature. I desperately want to be part of the community, but I consistently find ways to separate myself. I end up being a walking contradiction. Philip Slater, a sociologist, wrote a searching study of the American way of life entitled *Pursuit of Loneliness*, examining how we live together. He says that we all desire and have a need for community. He calls it "the wish to live in trust and fraternal cooperation with one's fellows in a total and visible collective entity." He goes on to give some frightening insights into why we experience isolation instead:

It is easy to produce examples of the many ways in which Americans attempt to minimize, circumvent, or deny the interdependence upon which all human societies are based. We seek a private house, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, self-service stores, and do-it-yourself skills of every kind. An enormous technology seems to have set itself the task of making it unnecessary for one human being ever to ask anything of another in the course of going about his daily business...we seek more and more privacy, and feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it...our encounters with others tend increasingly to be competitive as a result of the search for privacy. We less and less often meet our fellow man to share and exchange, and more and more often encounter him as an impediment or a nuisance: making the highway crowded when we are rushing somewhere, cluttering and littering the beach or park or wood, pushing in front of us at the supermarket, taking the last parking place, polluting our air and water, building a highway through our house, blocking our view, and so on. Because we have cut off so much communication with each other we keep bumping into each other, and thus a higher and higher percentage of our interpersonal contacts are abrasive.

He is not writing as a Christian, but as a thoughtful observer of the American condition. He is describing sinful independence, prideful self-sufficiency, individualism. Christian community is good and pleasant, but I'm tempted to choose isolation because of these things.

Secondly, David defines community as the experience of brothers. The scriptures tell us that when we are born again we become part of a family of brothers and sisters in Christ. No Christian is an only child. Family life speaks of home, of safety and security, of acceptance and equality. In the life of Israel itself, all citizens of the nation were considered brothers and sisters. As a matter of fact, in Deuteronomy 15:3, 15:12, and 25:3, three classes of citizens we wouldn't normally consider to be our equals or in familiar relationship with us are defined as

brothers: those who are hopelessly in debt, those who have sold themselves into slavery, and those who are convicted criminals. Israel was commanded to be a spiritual family.

In the same way, we are called into a family today in the church. It's supposed to be a place of full acceptance, of loving equality, of family security--even if we happen to be hopelessly out of control in our finances, head over heels in debt because of our own bad decisions or self-centeredness, slaves or in bondage to some sort of addiction or compulsion, or felons.

But why do I resist this call to family life? Living as a family may be necessary and desirable, but it is enormously difficult. It is hard to live like brothers and sisters because brothers and sisters fight. The first biblical story about brothers living together is the story of Cain and Abel. It is a story of murder committed because one of the brothers resented God's acceptance of the other brother's gift. The story of Joseph and his brothers follows a few pages later in Genesis. His brothers envied his place in the family and sold him into slavery. David the king acknowledged estrangement from his own brothers early in his life. In Psalm 69:8 he said, "I have become a stranger to my brethren, an alien to my mother's sons." Even the Lord Jesus was misunderstood by his brothers. The only record we have in the gospel of interaction between Jesus and his brothers is when they tried to drag him away from his messianic work because they were convinced he was out of his mind! That was his relationship to his brothers.

Modern psychology calls this sibling rivalry. There are many books on it, but all those books are only a footnote to what the Bible says. We all know that children fight a lot. That's the way families are. Each brother is quick to take offense; each child wants his own way. All children compete for the major share of Mom's and Dad's attention. As much as children may consider their brothers and sisters allies, they just as often see them as competitors.

There are also profound differences in children's temperaments and personalities, even in the same family. This came home to me powerfully a few weeks ago. Candy and I had gone away to the Napa Valley for Valentine's Day weekend, and a young couple took care of our three children while we were gone. (By the way, I asked my children if I could tell this story.) When we got home we sat down in the family room with them, and one right after the other, our children each asked us for something. Kathryn (11), the thoughtful, reflective one, said, "Dad, I want to write a novel. Have any 11-year-olds ever had a novel published? Do you think I could write a novel? I've been thinking about this all weekend." As soon as she was done sharing her dream, our son Micah (9) said, "Dad, there's something I really want. I want to take \$40 out of my savings account [which has only \$120 in it]. I want to buy a World Wrestling Federation ring and six figures" (Hulk Hogan, Hacksaw Jim Dugan, and these other characters, you know). That's what Micah had been thinking about all weekend. Our daughter Alayna (7), as soon as Micah got done asking about buying the wrestlers, said, "Dad, can I get a tattoo?"

That's kind of like our church. We have differences temperamentally. We've got artistic, creative, thoughtful, reflective people. We've got sports fanatics who live for the competitive moment, and we could even have a few tattooed ladies around that we don't know about! These things sound funny, but we have to live with people who are very different from us, don't we?

Further, the spiritual reality is that just because we are of the family of faith does not mean that we are "just one big happy family." Our brothers and sisters in Christ are not always nice people. They don't stop sinning the moment they begin believing in Christ. They don't suddenly become the exciting conversationalists, sensitive listeners, caring companions, and glowing inspirations that we think we need. The truth is that in relation to one another we are often cranky, dull, insensitive, and thin-skinned. In a word, we can be a real drag with one another. But we are brothers and sisters in the process of growing up together into a spiritual family! Christian community includes brothers and sisters, but I'm tempted to reject them because of their imperfections.

Thirdly, David says that Christian community is dwelling together in unity--literally, "living together." This emphasizes physical togetherness and permanence, collective identity in a place with an unbreakable common life. You don't just check in for a month or two and then decide to wander off. Once you're part of the family you belong to those people. Back in the days of the Jesus Movement we used to talk about the fact that we were part of a "forever family." The scriptures give consistent witness to the fundamental need for physical and material relationships. In Genesis, creation was not complete until God gave Eve to Adam. Humanity wasn't whole without that community. God never works with individuals in isolation--in intimacy, yes, but not in isolation from the community as a whole. Jesus chose twelve disciples and lived with them in community for three years. In Acts 2:1 it says, that when the Church was formed by the Spirit of God, there were 120 people "all together" in one place. In Hebrews 10, when some early Christians were dropping out of the community and pursuing their own private interests, the writer of this letter urged that they nurture their precious gift of community, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25).

So, why do I feel isolated instead of experiencing physical togetherness and permanence? Here are a couple of reasons out of many I could suggest: (i) I "spiritualize" my identity with you. I imagine our oneness in Christ, but only occasionally rub shoulders with you. I may not want my name listed in the directory because you might invade my privacy. I somehow define myself as a perennial visitor, always evaluating, doing reconnaissance, investigating this place, but not physically and materially committing myself to you as flesh-and-blood people with my time, my presence, my involvement, my money. We say it's our spiritual communion that really matters the most, not the physical involvement.

Or, (ii) I feel isolated because I am selective in my relationships. I may choose to identify with only that part of you all, that one tribe if you will, with which I feel the most comfortable. I try to experience spiritual community on the basis of my own needs. Historically, there's a precedent for that. The tribes of Israel had the same struggle. I will "dwell together in unity" with those of the same socioeconomic standing, of the same political sensitivities and persuasion, in the same season of life, or with the same problem orientation I have, who can understand me and the struggles I'm going through. Now, all of those relationships exist quite legitimately right here at PBC, so don't get me wrong. I'm not criticizing those kinds of groups in the least. But they don't ultimately define spiritual community. Those kind of relationships view community exclusively because of common interests or experience, rather than inclusively because of who we are in Jesus Christ.

During the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, a young Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent three years heading an illegal, underground seminary with 25 young men preparing to be pastors. Out of that three-year experiment came what I consider the best book ever written on Christian community, *Life Together*. The heart of the discovery he made was that community wasn't based on all of them being pastors. It was based on Jesus. Listen to what he says:

Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.

That's at the heart of the prayer of Jesus to the Father in John 17. Community is based on our relationship to Jesus, and it's a gift of his heavenly Father. Christian community emphasizes permanent physical relationships, but I'm tempted to either spiritualize it or be selfishly selective and exclusive.

Fourthly, verses 2 and 3 of Psalm 133 tell us that community is a gift of God. "It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life for evermore." There is beautiful symbolism in these two verses. Three times the word "descending" (translated literally) is used: *descending* on his beard, *descending* on the collar, and *descending* on the mountains of Zion. So we have oil poured out from above on the high priest, flowing down from head to foot. And we have dew falling from the heavens onto the high mountains, with enough volume of water to refresh even the lower hills of Zion. Only God can provide an amount of oil and water sufficient to cover so thoroughly. Human beings cannot manufacture or sustain that. Both the oil and the water are gifts imparted from above. (In a moment we'll look at what these symbols represent, but first let's think a bit more about Christian community as a gift.)

In the second half of verse 3, where it says this blessing is commanded, there is a strong emphasis on God's initiative in this whole process. When it says the "blessing of unity is commanded," it means that God has determined it to be. Literally, he has conferred it; he's given it already. And the result is only his to give: "Life for evermore" is eternal life, salvation. God is the giver of that beautiful gift.

But if community is a gift, why do I feel so isolated? Because I impatiently try to contrive it. I try to create and manage community. I think, if only I can find the right group to meet my needs. Or I find a group, but they seem to be sadly lacking in what I define as community, so I think I will help them with quality control. I'll help them make it better. I end up echoing Jesse Collin Young. Back in the 1960's, he had a band called the Youngbloods. With great zeal and enthusiasm they sang, "Come on people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, try to love one another right now." That's often my approach to community in the church. "Come on, folks, you need to try harder." When I try to make it happen, I end up being continually frustrated, resentful, and unfulfilled with you all and with myself. A gift can only be received. I cannot create my own gift. When I do accept imperfect human community as a gift from God, I end up being grateful, appreciative, fulfilled, and relaxed! Spiritual community is not contrived, but given by God. It's a blessing, not an achievement. In John 17:20-26, five different times Jesus acknowledges His heavenly Father as the author of community and prays on our behalf for the Lord to generously give us unity.

Elsewhere in *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes this reality that we can't create community:

It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.

The issue is my attitude, my perception of you all. Christian community is a gift of God's grace, but too often I impatiently try to create it on my own terms. The question this morning is, do I view the people in this room as being too imperfect a community to be a part of? Do I view you as a problem to be solved, as a corporate project to be worked on, as a big mess to be cleaned up? Or do I see you first of all as a gift from God to enjoy and appreciate, a blessing for which to give thanks, an expression of God's grace to me? When I am receptive to ideas like that and grateful and at peace among you, exciting things happen!

Now, David promises three results that will come if we live in community this way. It will be, first, like oil and secondly, like dew in the morning, and, finally, it will bring eternal life for all kinds of people. It says, first, (verse 2) that Christian community has the same qualities or effect as the anointing oil used to sanctify Aaron the high priest for his temple service. This picture comes out of Exodus 28-30. There, instructions are given for the ordination of the priest as he is appointed for service in the temple. The oil that anoints him is called "precious." That word means it has great value; it's costly. There's a recipe given in chapter 30 for the oil to anoint just one priest. It calls for twelve pounds of liquid myrrh, six pounds of ground cinnamon, twelve pounds of cassia, one gallon of olive oil, and six pounds of fragrant cane sugar, all blended together. It's wonderfully aromatic, a beautiful influence. Throughout the scriptures, oil is a sign of God's presence, a symbol of the Spirit of God at work. Oil has wonderful medicinal properties; it soothes irritation and injury. It also eliminates friction by acting as a lubricant that soothes abrasion. Remember how Philip Slater talked about the abrasiveness of relationships? The Spirit of God can soothe that and heal that. It gives a wonderful quality of warmth and ease to Christian community which contrasts to the icy coldness of the world, to the hard edges of people jostling each other in crowds.

That oil was poured out liberally; we saw how much of it was used on one man. That's why it flowed down his head, over his beard, and onto his high priestly garment, all the way down to the tips of his toes. As the oil flowed down over his chest-piece, inscribed there were the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. It was a powerful symbol of the oil of the Spirit unifying all twelve of those tribes who were so different, drawing them together. God's blessing is not limited to a select few in the community, but it's spread out to all to be shared equally. It's going to unify to a greater and greater measure as we allow the Spirit to work among us.

This is anointing oil. As it was poured out on this man, it set him apart for the special ministry of priesthood. Living in community means seeing the oil flow over the entire body of our brother or sister. We begin to see each other differently--as priests, as God's anointed, able to minister to one another. That profoundly changes relationships. Every one of us in this room, if we're part of the family of God through faith in Jesus, have been anointed by the Spirit of God, and we share a wonderful common life of ministry together. It's what the Reformation called the church back to, "the priesthood of all believers."

Secondly, Christian community has the same qualities and effect as the heavy morning dew on the slopes of Mount Hermon in the Lebanese coastal range. Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in that part of the world, 9000 feet at the summit. I've backpacked enough in the High Sierras for 20 years now to know what it's like to awaken on a crystal-clear, glorious morning to find my sleeping bag and all my belongings drenched with heavy morning dew. Dew is a symbol for something that is refreshing, renewing, invigorating. That dew is even extended down to the arid slopes of Mount Zion in Judah, only 2500 feet high. A Puritan writer said of this picture, "both high-born and low-born [in the body] drink of the same sweet refreshment without distinction." Towering mountain peaks and low hills are all blessed equally by the dew of the Lord.

We can enjoy, in Christian community, a continually renewed sense of optimism and anticipation of what God is doing with all our brothers and sisters in the faith. That way we don't end up labeling one another and stereotyping one another. We're guilty of that. I tend to label you once I get to know you: "You're going to be stuck in some kind of a rut; there's a deficiency in your walk with the Lord. You'll never grow up." "She's real fast-track; she's going to grow quickly in the Lord." No, this understanding of the freshness of the dew saves us from that awful way of looking at one another. We claim God's promise that "...his mercies...are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:23) in the lives of those around us. We see each other as unique, as especially loved by God, as particularly led by his Spirit. I refuse to predict your behavior or your growth. When I view people this way it is impossible to be bored with community. It is impossible to feel alienated among such people. This understanding counters isolation and self-centeredness.

The third effect of community is that it is where God has chosen to give the blessing of salvation, of "life for evermore." In Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, he said, "This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." Another wonderful result of authentic Christian community will be evangelism. The primary concern of Jesus' prayer for unity in his church was that the world would believe that God had sent him to be the Savior. He mentioned it three different times. There is no fear in the scriptures that spiritual community will become ingrown and selfish. If that happens, then the church is not functioning as the body for whom Christ died. Christian community is attractive. People will be drawn into relationship with the Lord Jesus because of our relationships and because we tell the truth, because of plain speaking when the world is full of lies. That was the call of the twelve tribes of Israel: to be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). And now it is ours, and the quality of our fellowship will be a powerful attraction.

This morning in the early service we heard of a junior high girl who had been drawn into the fellowship in our church, one of four to receive the Lord at the junior high snow camp at Hume Lake last weekend. Maxine Bradford shared in the prayer meeting last Sunday night about a girl named Mandy who had only recently come into the fellowship of Pioneer Girls. In one of her first weeks here, she ended up singing in the morning worship service in both services before she even knew the Lord Jesus. The very next Wednesday night, after they sang in church for us, she opened her heart to Jesus because of the acceptance and the love she experienced here. That goes on here all the time, and I praise God for that.

Do you want to live like this? Do you want to get over your critical spirit, your pickiness, your dissatisfaction? Learn to see this place as a gift from God. Learn to see the people around you as gifts to you personally. We need to hear this psalm over and over again. "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity."

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Catalog No. 4247

Psalm 133

First Message

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March 10, 1991

Updated October 25, 2000

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