

If My Church Is a Community, Why Do I Feel Like a Piece of Machinery?

Series: The Reality and Responsibility of Unity

by Doug Goins

As we were planning the service for this morning, Ron Ritchie reminded me of one of Ray Stedman's old couplets, in light of our anticipation of the perfected, glorified community we'll enjoy in heaven, and the process we're going through down here: "To dwell above with saints we love, oh that will be glory, but to dwell below with saints we know, well, that's another story." I think that does speak accurately to the struggle we experience at times to be the people of God.

We're trying to understand the church as community these two weeks. Last week, out of Psalm 133, we focused on community as a gift of the grace of God at work among us. We're to enjoy it with gratitude. That's the place to begin in understanding community. Psalm 133 is a description of what God has done and continues to do in the Christian community. The problem, we discovered last week, is our sinful tendency to avoid the experience of community by isolating ourselves. God's solution to isolation is for us to see, with new eyes, both ourselves and those around us in the community, to allow the oil of the Holy Spirit to soothe and heal abrasiveness in relationships in this family, to become excited about the potential in our brothers and sisters, to become loving optimists as we view them and where they are in the process of growth the Lord has for them, and to rejoice in the new believers being drawn into the fellowship because of its attractiveness, because they love how we treat each other! "They'll know we are Christians by our love."

If community is a gift of God, as we affirmed last week, what responsibility do we have with that gift? Candy and I have given all of our children bicycles for birthdays or Christmas, expressing our unconditional love and acceptance for them. They are given to enrich their lives; owning a bicycle is a privilege for them to enjoy. But we tell them that "with privilege comes responsibility," and in all kinds of ways we try to communicate loving exhortations and imperatives that result from our giving them the gift. So I lovingly yell, "Why is your bike lying on the sidewalk halfway down the block?" "Don't leave your bike in the rain!" "Did you lock the garage after you put the bike away?" Those are loving imperatives of grace! They're all a way of saying, "Take care of the gift."

The Apostle Paul says essentially the same thing to the Christian church regarding the gift of community. He's writing from a Roman prison to the Ephesian church, but with the intention that the letter will be circulated to a number of other churches because the issues he deals with are universal. Churches down through the ages are exhorted to "[be] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Paul is saying here, "Take care of the gift of community!" If Psalm 133 is a beautiful description of unity, then Ephesians 4:1-6 is a powerful imperative toward unity. It's a call to responsibility. Let's read it together:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

In the opening statement of this paragraph, Paul says that community begins with consistency between my daily lifestyle and with my identity in Jesus Christ. Paul's "therefore" refers back to the first three chapters of the letter. He is saying, "in light of all I have been teaching you about God's riches of his grace and his blessing to you, in view of my prayers for you, in the context of the eternal truth you're being blessed with, I want you to live a life that is consistent with your adoption into God's family." Paul has been unfolding, in these three chapters, God's eternal purposes in human history. Through Jesus Christ, who died for sinners and was raised from death, God is creating something entirely new and radical: not just a new life for individuals, but a new community of redeemed men and women. Paul has described an alienated humanity being reconciled to God and to one another, a fractured human race that's being made whole. God is even creating a new humanity. Let's look back at Ephesians 2:19-22 for a summary statement of this miracle:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Clearly, we're called into a new community. Now, Paul's own life demonstrates his commitment to who he is in Jesus Christ. He is writing from prison because he's sold out to follow the Christ of the Gospel. He has surrendered to God's accomplishing his will through his imprisonment. And, as a matter of fact, in the letter to the Philippians, he tells them that his imprisonment works to their advantage as a community. He makes the same appeal to them, as to the Ephesians, in Philippians 2:1-2a: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any

incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind..." He wants them to think as Jesus thinks, to live as Jesus lives, and to "live a life worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called."

Now, in chapter 4 of Ephesians, he begins the practical application of this reality, and shows us how God expects his community to live and act. He doesn't address the body as a whole here, but individuals within the body. He focuses on personal implications for everyday living. This responsibility to fulfill our calling as the church belongs to each one of us individually.

The question I must begin with in the light of verse 1, as I examine my church and my place in this Christian community, is, do I walk my own talk? Is my lifestyle consistent with who I am in Jesus Christ? When I think of the problems in our fellowship, do I examine my own attitudes and behavior first? C. S. Lewis said, "Of all the awkward people in my home and in my office, there is only one I can do very much about." Paul makes the appeal to me very personally. When I think about community, I've got to start with myself.

In verse 2, he points out the need to examine my character, my attitudes: "...with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love..." This runs contrary to my own natural tendencies in community-building. If I want to begin building community or diagnose and repair a breach in community, I don't naturally think of these personal moral qualities, these internal character traits. I tend to think first of the whole, the externally defined structure or organization. How can I fix it? My first instinct in community-building is toward being an activist. I want to schedule meetings, create organizational charts, encourage dialogue, establish a budget, hire an ombudsman, get a policy statement down on paper, etc. But Paul says I need to start with my own interior life in the Spirit. He prayed earlier that we would be "rooted and grounded in love" (Eph. 3:17). And now he says to let that life of love be evidenced by four character qualities that have a powerful influence on the community we enjoy.

First, we're called to humility or lowliness. That idea was despised in the first-century Greek culture. They even caricatured that word as "the crouching submission of a slave," cowering in terror before his master. Jesus wiped out that caricature. He lived out a life of perfect humility. He was the "servant of all" in his own words. The actual word construction in Greek means to think humbly. It's the recognition of the infinite worth and value of every other person in the body, the attitude that they are of greater worth than I am; they deserve more deference than I do. It's other-centeredness, not self-centeredness. It's Jesus' example of self-emptying in Philippians 2: "taking the form of a servant." Humility is a willingness to give up my rights for someone else. Paul says it's essential for community.

He uses the word gentleness or meekness. Meekness is not a synonym for weakness. It means strength under control. It means moderate reactions to things rather than harsh overreaction or outbursts of undisciplined emotion. It's the opposite of being manipulative and overbearing. Findlay says in his lexicon, "It is the quality of a strong personality who is nevertheless master of himself and the servant of others. It is the absence of the disposition to assert personal rights, either in the presence of God or of men." The community is enhanced by my choice to be a gentle man.

Patience means having a long fuse with other people. It means to be long-suffering toward people who are aggravating, just as God is with us. When Paul wrote to Timothy in his first letter, he was concerned about Timothy's reticence to assume leadership, his poor self-image, his struggles to be who God called him to be. Yet Paul talks in 1:16 about his own personal experience with the unlimited patience of God and the perfecting of patience in his own life. He can be merciful and patient with Timothy because he has experienced God's patience himself. Patience is tolerance for the shortcomings of others, and it is necessary for community.

The word "forbearance" is a bit different from patience. Forbearance means the willingness to put up with people until God changes them. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says that "love bears all things." That expresses the same idea. Literally, he says "love covers over everything." I see the struggles in your life, but I make a decision not to concentrate on that, to see instead the Lord at work in you in these struggles. First Peter 4:8 says that "love covers a multitude of sins." Unless I learn to forbear with you, I'll be a detriment to the community. I won't be able to enhance our relationship in the least.

Patience and forbearance protect us from having unrealistic expectations of one another in the body, from a superficial idealism that says, "How can they act like that?" When I say that, it shows that I really haven't learned patience through the Spirit. I haven't learned to be forbearing with the failings of others. Patience and forbearance will help us live with the imperfections we see in Christian community.

As a young man just out of college I was given a job on the program staff at Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center. I was pretty cocky and arrogant, and I thought I pretty well knew everything about running that place. I wasn't content to do just my own job, but I was quick to tell everybody else how to do their job as well. After about 18 months, some of the men in leadership at Mount Hermon discussed the possibility of letting me go. When I look back on it now, 25 years later, they had every right to do that! I'm surprised that they didn't; it really showed patience and mercy. But it was one man, Bill Gwinn, the executive director, who stood up for me and said, "No, this young man is in process. We'll do damage to him if we fire him." Now, he confronted me and told me the truth about my attitudes, and God used that truth in my life. But he wasn't willing to give me the thumb. I thank God for his patience and forbearance in my life.

The umbrella word that ties these four characteristics together is love, *agape*. It's the supernatural love of God. It can be expressed only when the Spirit of God is in control of us, expressing himself through us. It's the quality that embraces all of the preceding four: "And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:14).

Again, when I think back over my adult life, my natural instincts have been very much in contrast to asking the Lord to work on my own character and pursuing individual relationships enabled by the supernatural love of God. But whenever I begin to address problems in the community from the perspective of external structures, I end up avoiding personal responsibility in relationships. Neither my own heart nor yours can be changed by externally imposed organizational structures. The problems that threaten community always have to do with character, what's inside of us. They are issues of arrogance, insensitivity, self-assertion, jealousy, impatience, pride, harshness, possessiveness, irritability, lack of concern for others, holding grudges. They cannot be organizationally managed. They can be covered only with the cleansing, forgiving blood of Jesus Christ.

Do I see problems in my church? Am I concerned about unity at PBC? Yes, I see faults and inconsistencies here. We have our blind spots. But I must ask the Lord to give me greater humility, self-control, patience with other people, and tolerance for others. I need to ask him to express his *agape* love through me to others. I need to allow him to work on my character if I want to see our community here affected by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We have considered, in these first two verses, how God wants to start with us individually to enhance community. For now, I want to skip over Paul's strong exhortation to work at community in verse 3 and come back to it later. I'd like us to consider what beliefs and experiences we share in common. What are the objective foundational reasons for our common identity? Verses 4-6 focus on the Trinity. They establish the fact that community is based on the indestructible unity of a God who is triune--three in one. Seven times in these three verses you'll find the word "one." They will focus on seven things that we have in common. Verse 4 addresses the ministry of the Holy Spirit, verse 5 addresses the ministry of Jesus the Son, and verse 6 addresses the ministry of God the Father.

Look at verse 4. It talks about the unifying work of the Holy Spirit. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call..." Because there is but one Holy Spirit, there is only one invisible, universal body of Christ. And there is only one hope--essentially becoming completely like Jesus Christ in every aspect. That's our common experience.

The Holy Spirit is the power behind this place no matter what it looks like externally. The prophet Zechariah was concerned about what instrumentality God would use to effect change on earth. God spoke to him and said, "Not by might, nor by power...", and both of those ideas speak of human effort, of material resources, of external human organizational manifestations of influence. In contrast, it will be "by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts." Our strength, as a community here at PBC, is not dependent on money, numbers in attendance at any given meeting, or the wisdom of the leadership of this church. It is dependent solely on the work of the Holy Spirit of God. This is the consistent witness of the scriptures.

And because there is only one Spirit, there is only one body. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "By one Spirit we were all baptized (or placed) into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit." Notice, he doesn't say we're baptized into one organization, but rather into one body, a living organism. What the parts of an organism share in common is life.

Now, if the threat to community that we wrestled with last week was a desire to isolate ourselves, the threat to community that occurs here is a tendency to view community as an institution. This is another way we avoid spiritual community. We turn the organism into an organization. When we don't view PBC as a living body, then people are treated not on the basis of personal relationships, but in terms of impersonal functions, what they do rather than who they are. Goals are set that will catch the imagination of the largest number of people. Structures are developed that will accomplish goals through organization and planning. Organizational planning and institutional goals become the criteria by which the community is defined and evaluated. In the process, the church becomes less of a community, that is, people who pay attention to each other "in love," and we become more and more, in sociological terms, a collectivism of contributing units. The result will be less and less of a place where each person is taken seriously as an individual, where we learn to trust each other, where we depend on others, where we learn to be compassionate with each other, where we rejoice with each other. And more and more we become a place where individuals feel like pieces of machinery!

The one "hope that belongs to our call" that we share in common is finally being made completely like Jesus Christ, as Paul says it in Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That is our final expectation as Christians, to be more like Jesus, and it is guaranteed by his Spirit working on us from the inside out. That promise also shows up in Philippians 2:13: "God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." God will finish what he starts in us. That's our hope; that's what we wait for. When we participate in the shared life of Christ here in his body, involved with other people who are in the same process of growing up, it will enhance that inevitable process that is leading us to the eternal experience of perfected Christian community in heaven. It really will be terrific, as the song says, "when we all get to heaven!" All the things we struggle with now in relationships will be taken care of, finally, completely. That's the blessed hope.

Verse 5 talks about the unifying work of the Son of God: "...one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Because there is one Lord Jesus Christ, there is just one faith, the revealed faith that was given to the apostles concerning trusting in the Lord Jesus. And there is only one spiritual baptism. That's when we are instantaneously placed into the body of Christ by the Spirit at conversion.

All those things speak of what we're convinced is true and what we agree is true, our common belief. The early Christian confession of faith

was, "Jesus is Lord!" His Lordship is where we start. When we surrender to his rightful authority, his desire to rule and reign in our life, then we experience his work in saving us from our sins. That was emphasized in Philippians 2:8-11:

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This says we all share a common position of submission on our knees before Him as Lord. We're on common ground under his Lordship.

When the first-century Christians confessed the Lordship of Jesus Christ, they also submitted to the apostolic teaching about life in Jesus Christ that had been delivered to them, because Jesus had personally commissioned the apostles to establish the doctrines of the one faith that Paul is speaking of here. These doctrines are contained in the New Testament. Every Christian who confesses Jesus as Lord has to submit to the common authority of the scriptures. The Bible is central to who we are and what we do at PBC. We want to be controlled by the scriptures--not more than the scriptures say, because it gets confusing when you add things to this one faith that's been revealed, but not less either--taking it seriously in all that we do.

We experience one baptism as well. This is the spiritual reality of being placed into the body of Christ at conversion. In Romans 6, Paul said we were "baptized into his death." We have been made one with Jesus Christ, united with him in all the value of his death and his resurrection. That is symbolized physically by some sort of involvement with water--total immersion, having water poured on your head, or having water sprinkled on you. In drought times like this, perhaps it's just being wiped with a damp cloth! But what's important is not the symbol; it's the spiritual reality it represents that we agree on.

These three unifying realities of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" define a community in full agreement on essential, central matters of faith. There are many peripheral issues. But the core of what we believe must be commonly agreed on. Martin Lloyd Jones writes:

The New Testament everywhere insists upon true doctrine. I emphasize this because, as we have seen, the whole tendency today is to discourage talk about doctrine and to urge that we work together, pray together, and evangelize together, because "doctrine divides." Doctrine is being discounted in the interests of supposed unity. The fact is, however, that there is no unity apart from truth and doctrine, and it is departure from this that causes division and breaks unity.

Verse 6 says that the Father himself is at work among us bringing unity. "[There is] one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all." There is one God and, therefore, only one Father. He is the source and authority for all life.

We are unified in community by the Fatherhood of God. All of us are his children, equals beneath his loving authority. Children learn that principle quickly. My own children say to one another, "You're not the dad!" That means there's only one dad in this family, and you ain't it! Both natural children and we in the family of God spend more time than we should trying to exercise fatherly authority over one another. The church is a family, not a corporation. We build up one another in love, not corporate hierarchies. In Matthew 23, Jesus tells the disciples, by implication, "All of you are brothers." In Mark 10 he said, "You are servants of one another." The Corinthian church had really struggled with relationships, especially with their relationship to Paul, their loving father in the Lord. In his second letter to them, the first chapter, concerning his own apostolic authority, he said, "Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy." Our submission to God as our Father means we can freely submit to one another in community.

So we see that our community is based on the unity of our triune God--the Father, the Son, and the Spirit--and their work among us. Now practically, what should our response be to these truths? Can we make this less of a place where individuals feel like a piece of machinery? Will we give love relationships priority over performance expectations? Verse 3 holds the answer. It's a powerful imperative. "[Be] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This (Revised Standard Version) is a weak translation. The New American Standard is better: "being diligent to preserve the unity..." The King James says, "Earnestly endeavoring to keep the unity..." Markus Barth, in his commentary on Ephesians, has this to say about verse 3:

It is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency contained in the underlying Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort of the whole man is meant, involving his will, sentiment, reason, physical strength, and total attitude. The imperative mood of the participle found in the Greek text excludes passivity, quietism, a wait-and-see attitude, or a diligence tempered by all deliberate speed. Yours is the initiative! Do it now! Mean it! YOU are to do it! I mean it! Such are Paul's overtones in verse 3.

Finally we have an emphasis on activity, something to do! It's an activity of maintaining, preserving, keeping what God has already created. We need to recognize the reality of our unity and look for ways to pursue relationships with people as a peacemaker.

Paul implies in verse 3 that we do have problems in unity in the body. We have our differences. We are an extremely heterogeneous community in the church universal and in the local church here at PBC. There are influences at work to undermine our unity. We have an external Satanic enemy trying to destroy the church, and at the end of chapter 6 of this letter Paul talks about how to deal with Satanic attack. But here he's dealing with the internal enemy. As Pogo said, "We have found the enemy and he is us!" We are our own worst enemies in maintaining community.

In closing, let me share three things the Lord has been teaching me in recent years about actively "maintaining unity in the bond of peace." First, I'm learning not to trust relationships in the body that are based primarily on natural attraction or affinity. I'm learning instead to choose commitment to everyone whom God places before me and not to embrace just the favorite few people that I feel most comfortable with in this body, those toward whom I feel spontaneous warmth and pleasure. I'm learning to commit myself lovingly to those who irritate me, those with whom I may disagree on some things, or even those who repel me. Our text says we all belong to one another inclusively.

After I'd been at PBC a couple of years, a dear lady stopped me on the patio one day during the week and said, "I just want you to know I don't like you very much. I feel uncomfortable with you. I don't like your leadership from the platform on Sunday mornings." I said, "Is there anything I can do?" She replied, "No, I just wanted you to know." Now, at that point we both had a decision to make. She felt better for airing her feelings, I'm sure, but she still had to live with me and be a part of this church family. And I had to be involved with her. I could feel sorry for myself, think about what an awful person she was, and keep my distance from her. But as a tribute to the grace of God, for the last 10 or 12 years she, her husband, and her children have become better friends with my wife, me, and our children. We have learned how to overcome the differences and the discomfort, and today I count her as a good friend!

That's the triumph of grace in all this, and it starts with choices I make. There is a problem with relationships based primarily on natural attraction rather than the sort of loving commitment I just described. Mutual attraction will result in an unstable relationship, because both parties end up having to work at being attractive, and the moment I fail to be attractive enough, I may alienate the people who matter the most to me. Far from being a place of acceptance and committed love, relationships based on attraction become a source of anxiety and strain. Actively "maintaining unity in the bond of peace" means expressing steadfast love based on commitment.

The second thing I'm learning is how to look at conflict differently, the big and little differences of opinion. I'm learning how to avoid thinking and talking in what I would call the we/they dichotomy, reinforcing "us against them" attitudes. Listen to your language; when you start saying "we" and "they," "us" and "them," you may be saying something really profound. There is a suggestion that there are "in" groups and "out" groups, power groups and powerless groups. It emphasizes stereotypical differences. It pigeonholes groups and individuals within the church. Those attitudes are always self-serving and self-protective. We do that kind of thing out of fear, or out of the desire to hang on to our place or position. It usually comes across as self-righteous or pharisaical. Or we can set ourselves up as a misunderstood or martyred "poor, innocent victim" of some other, awful group of people. I grew up in the church, and have seen more "range wars" and power struggles than I care to remember. The results are always violence to relationships. Individuals are not seen as persons anymore because prejudice distorts our ability to see people clearly, the way God sees them. We do it to bolster our courage and to protect ourselves from being intellectually and spiritually wiped out. We dehumanize and stereotype "them" so they will seem less threatening and we will feel less vulnerable. Actively "maintaining unity in the bond of peace" is active love refusing to indulge in the we/they dichotomy and encouraging others to understand that we are all in this together.

To conclude, the third thing I'm learning about is my responsibility to be an initiator, to be a peacemaker in relationship to others. I want to close with the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi to be a reconciler, a peacemaker, a person who makes a difference, a person who is part of the solution instead of part of the problem in maintaining community. This prayer may suffer a bit from its familiarity to us, but try to listen to it again with new ears:

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is darkness, light; and
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may
not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
for it is giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

All five of the destructive things listed in the first section are at work in our community, either in our own lives or in the life of somebody we know: hatred, injury, doubt, darkness, and sadness. We have a choice along with St. Francis of Assisi to express love in response to hatred; to offer forgiveness; to encourage faith; to shine the light of truth in the darkness, confusion, and despair; to bring joy. The second section lists legitimate needs we all have. We all need consolation. We need to be understood. We need to be loved. But again, we make the choice to offer consolation, to extend understanding even if we don't feel understood, and to love aggressively, expressing an in-spite-of kind of love to those we come face to face with. Thus we become peacemakers in our community.

God has called each of us to the glorious responsibility of "being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." It matters greatly to him. Let us do it!

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Catalog No. 4248
Ephesians 4:1-6
Second Message
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March 17, 1991
Updated October 25, 2000

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