



# Cultivate

A Christ-Centered Way of Life

*... as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted, and built up in him and established in the faith... Colossians 2:6-7*

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## COMMUNITY – A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

By Marius Gradwell

Community is something we all want.

Every human being long for meaningful relationships.

This longing for community is rooted in God himself.

It is important that we see community through the biblical grid of:

- | CREATION: Being created in God's image provide the foundation for meaningful community.
- | FALL: The fall destroys community.
- | REDEMPTION: Redemption in Jesus renews our capacity for community.
- | CONSUMMATION: Community provides the context for our ongoing transformation?

No matter how you are wired – introvert, extrovert, socially adept or socially awkward – something in your soul longs for meaningful relationships with other humans. We long to know others and be known by them. We treasure friendships that allow us to truly “be ourselves.” Though some of us have never found this sort of community and though others have been deeply wounded by relationships, all of us still long for deep, authentic, real community.

Why do we long for community? How did we get this way? How did this craving, this longing, get hardwired into us? The Bible answers that question by explaining that we are created in the image of God.

### 1. CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

One of the oldest and most cherished doctrines of historic Christian theology is the doctrine of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed (c. AD 325) summarises the Trinity this way:

*I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. . . . And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord*

*and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified.*

The Trinity means that God himself is in community. More accurately, God *is* community: one God, three persons. “*Before all worlds*” – before any sort of human community existed – there was God, dwelling in perfect, loving harmony in his threefold being.

In the biblical account of creation, this Triune God says: “*Let us make man in our image*” (Genesis 1:26). Human beings are made to *image* God, to reflect his likeness. That is why our longing for community seems so deep rooted in us. It is how we are made as God’s image bearers. So, if deep community is what we all want, if it is part of being made in God’s image, then what makes it so hard to attain? What keeps us from achieving the type of meaningful human relationships that God wired us for?

## **2. THE FALL: BROKEN COMMUNITY**

If you think for a moment about the nature of your relationships, you will quickly identify another tendency that is present – something darker and more sinister than your God-given desire for community. It is the tendency to use people to meet your own needs first. It is not hard to see how often we are self-focused, pursuing our own interests and protecting ourselves from people and relationships that will demand too much of us. For example, think of the times you have intentionally avoided someone who bothers you. Or the times you have said what people wanted to hear to avoid offending them. Or the times you have stopped pursuing certain friends because they were no longer useful to you. Or the times you have clung to bad or unhealthy relationships just to escape the feeling of being alone.

These selfish tendencies reveal that something has gone deeply wrong in our pursuit of community. Though made in God’s image, we have fallen from our original glory. We have devolved into something less than what we were made to be. There is something selfish and self-absorbed about us that prevents us from imaging God the way we were designed to.

Our inherent selfishness is evidence of what the Bible calls “sin.” When we hear the word *sin*, we tend to think of bad behaviour. But sin is deeper than external actions. The Bible often talks about sin in terms of unbelief. In other words, rather than believing what is true, we believe lies, which obviously leads to bad behaviour and negative emotions. Unbelief was at the root of the first sin. Eve believed the Serpent’s lie about God and his intentions toward them: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Genesis 3:4–5). Unbelief is a failure to see and believe what is true about God, the world, and ourselves. It is not taking God at his word, not believing his promises, not trusting in his goodness. And sin’s impact is not just that we *do not* believe, it is that apart from Christ we are *unable* to believe. Sin has turned us in on ourselves and warped our relationships with others. We need Someone who can deliver us from our unbelief and selfishness and restore our capacity for true, deep, lasting community.

### 3. REDEEMED FOR COMMUNITY

This is where the good news of the gospel meets us. The word *gospel* literally means “good news”—a message, a proclamation, an announcement. One of the paradoxes of this message is that before it can be good news, it must start with bad news: we are sinful, broken people. We are rebels against God. We are mired in lies and self-worship, and we look to things other than God to give us identity and significance. We cannot free ourselves, make God happy with us, or do enough good works to make up for our sins. But God, rich in mercy, sent Jesus to earth as our substitute. Jesus took our place in his life as he obeyed God fully and worshiped him totally, things we failed to do. He substituted himself for us in his death, as he paid the penalty we owed to God for our sin and unbelief. If we humble ourselves, acknowledge our need, and turn to him, God the Holy Spirit will apply Jesus’ substitutionary work to us by faith. The Bible calls this *redemption*, a word that means “to be delivered, ransomed, or set free.”

What does Jesus redeem us *from*? Sin and all its effects. What does Jesus redeem us *for*? A life that images God and reflects his goodness to the world. In other words, one of the chief things that Jesus accomplishes when he redeems us is to restore our capacity for community. Not for a community of people who look and act just like us, but a community made up of people from every tribe and tongue and nation on earth (Revelation 7:9). God has created us for community, and Jesus has redeemed us for community. In doing so, he has made us into his very own body (1 Corinthians 12:27) that is able to live, love, and make known his “good news” to our friends and neighbours.

But wait: If Jesus redeems us for community, then why is community still such hard work? Why are relationships still fraught with brokenness, even among Christians? This is the tension we live in. Even though Jesus has delivered us from the penalty and rule of sin, he has not yet eradicated sin from the world. Because of sin’s ongoing presence, we are prone to unbelief. We easily forget the good news of the gospel and fall back into lies and self-worship. That is why the Bible encourages us not just to receive the gospel, but to “stand” in it (1 Corinthians 15:1) and to “continue” in it (Colossians 1:23).

In other words, building and enjoying healthy community is going to require us to believe the gospel, to believe that what Jesus did for us has power and relevance for the way we relate to God and others. This requires an intentional focus on our part. It means identifying the unbelief in our hearts that hinders our ability to love and serve others and to receive love from them in turn. It means receiving the healing, liberating truths of the gospel in ways that allow them to soak deep into the core of our being. And guess where this work of ongoing transformation takes place? In community.

### 4. TRANSFORMED IN COMMUNITY

Did you ever notice how patient you are – as long as no one is getting on your nerves? Or how loving you are – as long as you are surrounded by people who are easy to love? Or how humble you are – as long as you’re respected and admired by others? Every one of us is a saint in isolation! It is in community that our real weaknesses, flaws, and sins are exposed. That is why community is essential – not optional – for transformation. We cannot become the people God wants us to become outside of community.

You see, redemption is not the end of the story. God is preparing us for "new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). His goal is a renewed creation, where redeemed humans dwell in perfect harmony with each other and with their Creator. God is out to prepare his people for this glorious future by transforming them now, a process the Bible calls *sanctification*.

The agent of sanctification is the Holy Spirit.

The tool of sanctification is the truth of the gospel.

The context of sanctification is community.

Consider some of the "one another" statements in the Bible: "Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honour" (Romans 12:10). "Comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace" (2 Corinthians 13:11). "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13). "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another" (Ephesians 4:32). Isn't it obvious that none of us can do these things perfectly? These commands are not given just so that we will know what we *should* do; they are also given so that we can try, and fail, and grow in our experience of God's grace. Trying to fulfil these "one another" commands helps to reveal our sin, drives us to Jesus in repentance and faith, and causes us to depend on the Holy Spirit for transformation.

Community is the laboratory in which we learn to rely on God's grace and experience the gospel's transforming power.

Community is also the primary context for *mission*, our outward focus as believers. God wants to use our communities, messy and broken as they are, to draw others into his story and introduce them to Jesus, the Redeemer! It is not just about us becoming more like Jesus; it is about people who do not know Jesus coming to know him as Saviour and Lord.

We sometimes treat community like the safety net under a tightrope walker: it is a good thing to have in case something bad happens. But the Bible talks about community as if it is the tightrope itself: you cannot move forward without it.

We are created for community. We are redeemed for community. And we are transformed in community.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How easy is it for you to relate and open to other people?
2. When we talk about becoming part of a church community - what positive and negative thoughts and feelings are you experiencing?
3. What stood out in today's teaching to help you understand that it is impossible to live a healthy and productive life as a believer and follower of Jesus Christ outside of a Gospel-centred Kingdom Community?