

# Growing Great Community

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Richard Dawson

1 Cor 12<sup>12-26</sup> / John 15<sup>1-17</sup>

A preacher some years ago likened the Christian life to a burning coal in a fire. The fire, he said, was like the Church – ablaze for God. The individual coals were like individual Christians– adding in their very burning for God to the great blaze of the fire. But what happens if that single coal which is blazing for God is taken from the fire? Does it continue to burn? Yes of course it does but if anyone has ever done this they will know that within a matter of minutes the coal begins to die and if left to itself will become a loan and dark and cold piece of charcoal. In short it goes out and we who are Christ-followers need to recognize that our life as Christians is inextricably link to our life together. We can as little be ‘individual Christians apart from the Church’ as a fish can swim by itself out of the water. The context of our faith is the community of the Church and it is to this community that our faith is first tested and made sure.

Is this reflected in the Gospels? Is this a biblical understanding? Furthermore, assuming it is – do we really believe it? The answer to the first question, I believe, is a resounding yes! Paul is clear that the body of Christ, the Church, is nothing if it is not a **unity** of different members each which have their place and their purpose. Being together is vital if we are to utilize the gifts and callings of each purpose. We do not accomplish this on our own. In Hebrews we read this...

**<sup>24</sup>And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebs 10)**

It is within the community of faith that we are **provoked** to form the habits of faith **if we will not give up the practice of meting together.**

Furthermore Jesus in the story of vine makes it clear that members are, in fact, dead, if they refuse to be a part of the great vine which is Himself. ‘I am the vine,’ says Jesus, and you are the branches. So we are alive because we are a part of Christ but also because we are together – we are one in the vine together, we are a community.

The second question is a harder. Do we believe it? I think most of us have some idea that we should, for some reason, ‘belong’ to a Church but I suspect that if you scratch the surface many of us would say that it’s not that important to go to church every Sunday – that we can survive as Christians quite well apart from the Church and there is some truth in this.

If you took the excuses people use for not going to church and applied them to other important areas of life, you’d realize how inconsistent we can be in our logic. For example: **10 Reasons Not to Wash**

1. I was forced to as a child.
2. People who make soap are only after your money.
3. I wash on special occasions like Christmas and Easter.
4. People who wash are hypocrites, they think they are cleaner than everyone else.
5. There are so many different kinds of soap, I can't decide which one is best.
6. I used to wash. It got boring, though, so I stopped.
7. None of my friends wash.
8. The bathroom is never warm enough in the winter or cool enough in the summer.
9. I'll start washing when I get older and dirtier.
10. I can't spare the time.

It is the case that being a part of the Church doesn’t amount simply to Sunday service attendance. Indeed it is far from simply coming every Sunday to Church. As G K Chesterton used to say – going to Church on

Sunday as little makes you a Christian as being parked in a garage makes you a car. But before we carried away with that little truism it's important to weigh the other side of the argument.

Sleeping at home doesn't make me a father or a husband but it actually becomes pretty difficult to be a husband or a father if you don't sleep at home pretty regularly. You're not a teacher just because you work in a classroom but imagine trying to teach children each and every day on a rugby field! You're not a mechanic just because you have a set of mechanic's tools but try being a mechanic without tools! You're not a doctor just because you work in a hospital but try being a doctor without hospitals!

Going to church isn't perhaps the epitome of being a Christian but it really does help. Connecting each week with people who believe as we do and who worship the God we do and who pray as we do and who know the love of Christ as we do **isn't a minor thing for we who would follow Christ. It is absolutely vital.** The question is, why and why, indeed, should I even need to raise this? I raise it because you and I have been brought up in a culture that worships the individual and which consequently does not understand how much community we've lost because of this.

Nothing could be clearer than that as a community of faith though we are oriented primarily towards Jesus that very orientation leads us immediately to **be together, to love one another.** One of the first and major fruits of faith in **Jesus is that it leads us to and creates community;** it brings dispirit and separated peoples back together; it brings healing to relationships, it brings wholeness to people who were once alone and independent.

Now please don't hear me demonize independence. We all need to grow and mature as people. We all need to discover who we are as individuals and to develop our individual skills and strengths. The Christian faith does not seek to **bury** our individuality in some sort of Communist regime. But we, in this culture, have exalted individuality and independence to idolatrous heights. We have made an heroic figure out of the lone and strong and independent man or woman forgetting that we were made for

each other and that we actually complete each other – forgetting that we were made for relationship. In doing so, in making the individual the hero of our culture we have sabotaged relationships by sacrificing the learning of relationship skills and insights for more individualistic pursuits. Sex has become in our society the currency of choice in many relationships – it has become the glue which holds us together and as such it is, in fact, rather unreliable. The sad fact is that sex is such a powerfully habit forming behavior that if we cannot find ways of controlling it we will allow it to control us. And please don't hear me say the sex is bad per se. It's not. It's just terribly powerful and, as with all things powerful including money and beauty and physical strength, we must use significantly robust methods to control it or we will be controlled by it!

In the midst of this the Church is and is called to be a **community of faith.** Now you might be tempted to interpret this little phrase to mean a group of people who come together because they share a common belief but that is not the NT emphasis. The NT turns this on its head and says in many different ways **that it is true community which builds faith** and that in Christ's true community faith will arise. This is why Paul, for example, would encourage his readers to live new lives because as they did so, as they lived according to the example Christ taught – so their faith came alive...

**<sup>17</sup>Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. <sup>18</sup>They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. <sup>19</sup>They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. <sup>20</sup>That is not the way you learned Christ! (Eph 4)**

**This is not the way you learned Christ...** what a fascinating little phrase. What is it Paul is referring to here? He's saying, isn't he, that the Ephesians 'learned Christ' by living out new lives – lives informed not by darkness and futility but by the Gospel? Notice what comes first here. **Faith is learned by**

**the way we live.** Similarly James will insist that faith cannot be separated from works...

**<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2)**

Of course those works are informed by Christ; of course the way we live is in accordance with what we know of Christ but the fact remains, faith doesn't stand in a hierarchical relationship to the way we live as if we must have faith first which then baptizes everything we do. No, what we have here is a truly reciprocal relationship between faith and works. Faith actually grows in a properly Christ centred community. What **we do** ploughs the ground for faith to prosper and if we don't do that ploughing 'by our works' the corollary is that faith will not prosper, indeed, it may even die. Paul will go even further in Romans. Listen to this...

**<sup>12</sup>All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. <sup>13</sup>For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. <sup>14</sup>When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. (Romans 2)**

So important is our living out of God's word that Paul suggests that those who do it, even if not motivated by faith, will enjoy the fruits of faith.

This is why, friends, we have elevated community to the place it is within our life. 'Growing Great Community' may seem like a statement devoid of God but the God we worship is a God constituted by a community! God lives through a community of love between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Community is the very life of God so what we are seeking to do at Leith is to

mirror that community in our life together. And we are attempting this because we believe that as we come closer to doing this the very life of God will arise amongst us bringing healing and wholeness with it. Furthermore, as we build this kind of community within our ranks we believe that it will, by its very nature, call unbelievers to give their lives to the kind of God in whose name such a community exists. I long for the day when I hear testimony after testimony of people saying something like 'I knew something of God but my neighbour told me about this Church where I could get help with my children; my finances; my marriage; my grief; my loneliness etc, etc and when I came here I found they were right and I am now a Christian. This is how we **'learn Christ!'**

The implication of faith in Christ is that we live in community – that we discover what that means and that we begin to live in that way together. I believe the great weakness of the Western Church lies here. What we've tended to do is to import a culturally conditioned idea of community into our life and the great problem with this is that it is focused largely on the rights of the individual. Christ's new commandment implies something different. It implies that the first task of faith is to love one another. Next time I want to ask the question what are the marks of such a community. Till then let me leave you with this little quote from G K Chesterton...

“The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.”