

# Rebuild



*Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, they will raise up the former devastations, and they will repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:4)*

## The Ingredients of Christian Community

*(Part 1: A Specific Commitment to Real People)*

What is community? The word is used in a variety of ways: First Community *Bank*, Community Quadra-Plex *Theater*, *neighborhood* community, the *World* community, etc. It can be a bit confusing. For instance, how is the community of a bank similar to a neighborhood? And how can *the entire world* be *community*? And if we want to focus in for even greater clarity, how is *Christian* community different from the above varieties? How are the relationships between co-workers, and relatives, supposed to be all that different from relationships within Christian Community?

People are as vague about the meaning of *community* as they are the word *love*. What does it mean to love? Have a strong emotion? Sacrifice for another? Become someone's doormat? We love pizza, our children, a hot shower, and God. How can the same word describe our attitude about everything from deep dish pizza to the Holy Trinity?

Most peoples' understanding of love and community are like a blurred and surreal painting of feeling and experience. To many of us, community and love are like the holiday aromas people spray in living rooms at Christmas. People enter into the room, take a deep breath and then associate the scent with freshly cut Christmas trees, singing carolers, and big cups of egg nog. But when they look for the bushy evergreen, they don't find it. They find, instead, a shiny aluminum cylinder with a plastic push button aerosol top. The feeling of cheer totally vanishes when they pick up the can to read the

ingredients, a list of chemicals none of which have anything in common with a pine tree.

When Christians talk about Christian Community, they often think of intimate Bible Studies, prayer groups, pot-lucks, church services, and people helping others in time of need. Community certainly can be expressed through these things, but these activities may just be an aroma that stems from something else other than genuine community. When one takes a closer look, the person must find something more than goodwill and sentiment; there must be a genuine commitment to one another's best – there must be New Testament love.

To recognize the difference between community-like aromas and the smells that flow from *authentic* community, we must not only go by the first impression of our nose, but we must look at what the Bible actually teaches about community and then compare our understanding alongside of the Biblical prescription. Finally, we must then be bold enough to ask, "Is anything in my Christian Community *real*, or just merely stuff that makes us *feel* like a community?"

So what do the Scriptures say? How can one know the difference between genuine Christian Community and a close imitation? What are the necessary ingredients that need to be "in there" before one can experience true Christian Community? In next issues of *Rebuild* I will look at seven essential ingredients; this issue introduces the first ingredient:

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**Ingredient 1: A Specific, Mutual Commitment to Real People.** One cannot experience genuine Christian Community unless he or she is willing to commit him or herself with *specific* people, that is, real people one truly knows. This commitment must be shared by *all* within the community; it cannot be the one-way commitment only of a few, but must be the returned pledge of *everyone*.

In the New Testament, to be a Christian meant you joined your life to a specific body of people, i.e., a Christian *Community*. No, this does not deny each believer's membership in the *world-wide* Christian community (and, if one wishes to include the saints in heaven, even the *universal* community), but no one can realistically affirm their membership "over there" or "up there" if that reality is not also specifically planted *somewhere* down here. In other words, Jerusalem believers joined themselves to the *Jerusalem* Christian Community, Corinthian believers joined the Christian Community *in Corinth*, Thessalonian believers to... well, you get the idea.

A Roman could not refrain from joining his life to the Christian Community in

Rome and defend his individualism by saying, "Well, I don't need *that* community. I am a member of the universal, mystical, invisible Church in heaven." The Roman Christians there would have looked at that man with squinted eyebrows, and asked, "What kind of bizarre, heretical sect are *you* a part of?"

Although we rugged American individualists may not like it (and we don't), Christian *Community* is a *coming-in-union* with God *and* His People. Being a believer is not just a matter of coming in union with God, nor is it just a matter of coming in union with people (note the distinction between *Christian*, and mere *natural* community). "[H]ave fellowship with us," the Apostle John exhorted his readers, "[for] *our* fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

The love of God in Christ demanded the Personal investment of His life. The Gospel was not the Son leaning over a big marble heaven bolted desk and shouting, "Hey, you people down there! Cheer up! I love you!", and then His getting back to work. He *showed* His love by *identifying* with us skin-bearing, heart-beating, and sometimes sweaty-smelling people.

The Gospel is this: "The Word [God the Son] became *flesh*" (John 1:14). If we are to proclaim the Gospel, our love is going to have get just as "fleshly," we are going to have to commit ourselves to fellow skin-bearers. Why? It just is not possible

to love mystical, metaphysical, invisible, universal-type people (whoever they are).

It is one thing to say we are "Community" because we gather in small groups and share strong emotions; it is quite another to look at people *you know* and declare, "Because God in Christ has loved me with His life, in His Name, I pledge to you mine." Without such an intentional love, Christian Community will be an on again, off again feeling at best.

I think we sometimes defend both our independence and superficial relationships because we do not really think committed relationships are necessary. We are already "saved." What is the connection between our salvation and sharing our lives with specific people? Basically, we have no idea that Christ's laying down of His life for us is a mandate to love the brethren in the same way (1 John 3:16,16). But without such love, Christian Community is an impossibility.

But even this commitment is not enough. Unless the persons to whom we are pledging our lives both receive, and then *return*, our commitment, there will be no coming in union and therefore there can be no community.

I have known zealous believers who tried to get their congregations to become Christian Communities. I have never seen it happen. Why? The same reason why even the most

fervent single guy cannot just pick any girl he wants for his bride and make her marry him. The marriage commitment is a *joint* venture; his strong commitment is not going to override her indifference (not to mention the possibility of her downright hostility). Unless *each* person says "I do," there can be no marriage. The same kind of mutual comitment is a necessity if people are going to form an intentional Christian Community.

Many believers assume the "I do" is implied within their congregations because each professes Christ. That is a mistake. Most people do not even know what *Covenant* means, let alone know the sacrifices required to live it out. Unfortunately, even when all is made clear, many unconsciously prefer to keep their understanding of community vague and fuzzy. This way it is easier to fool oneself into thinking that the "feelings" of love and acceptance he or she shares with others is genuine Community, and that a definitive life commitment to others is not necessary. But if we sidestep this essential expression of Christian love, the mist of Community will eventually evaporate in the heat of our individualism and we will turn full face to reality and discover that we were not really married, we just felt like we were.

Rev. Jordan Bajis is the pastor of the community of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Fort Collins, Colorado. In the last 20 years he has sought to restore the Covenant foundations of the Church as a missionary, author, speaker, and evangelist.

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2136 Sheffield Drive

Fort Collins, Colorado 80526

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