

Rebuild



And they shall 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)

Ingredients for Community: Environment (Part Six)

Its What's Around the Table, Not On it, That Counts

Christ came that “he might deliver us out of *this* present evil age” (note present tense; Galatians 1:4).

Where today is the “delivering” from one age (the world’s way of thinking, relating) to another (one reflective of God’s heart)? In Christ, we are to be “transferred from the *domain* of darkness to the kingdom” (Colossians 1:13). Where are people being transferred from one *domain* to another? That is, where are people’s thoughts, actions, and relationships being turned *from self-interest toward*

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relationships of Covenant love? Where this does occur, Christian environment exists.

Some think these passages are purely “spiritual,” having little to do with “this” life. But “getting saved” is not God plucking people from the mud, “marking” them, and then throwing them back only to later fish them out. God’s intention is to bring us into His domain *now*, and in Eternity.

Salvation and the Kingdom of God are not just heavenly realities, they are “earthly” as well. Remember Pentecost? When the Jewish pilgrims heard Peter preach the Gospel, they were not admonished to go back from where they came, and continue on with life as normal. When they “accepted Christ,” they accepted His government as well. They did not leave to

“blend” into their old neighborhoods. They *stayed* in Jerusalem. Why? To devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching and covenant fellowship (Acts 2:42).

“[B]e saved from *this* perverse generation,” Peter exhorts (Again, note present tense; Acts 4:40). In essence Peter says, “Join yourselves to Christ. Join yourselves to one another. *Be* the Gospel. You can’t do this on your own. You can’t do it outside God’s loving reign.”

The word “perverse” is significant. It not only means evil, but all that “entices toward evil.” Of course! The way of an anti-Christian culture is not level ground, but sharply slanted so people will slide toward a way of life that denies God’s intentions.

Peter knew what we have forgotten. To believe in Christ, yet refrain from entering into an intentional Christian Community is as

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contradictory as swimming in quicksand with a life preserver.

Going to church for a few hours a week is not being a part of God's domain. "Visits" to church are not going to offset the multiple hours we have sat in front of the tube, the number of times our hearts have been ripped in two through abusive relationships, or the years we have spent at jobs where profits, not people, are the priority.

Hearing an inspiring sermon, "taking" the sacraments, or anything else we may do for a few moments on a particular day of the week is no more going to counter the pollution we breathe and drink in our day to day life, any more than a 16 oz. bottle of Pierré can turn a polluted lake into fine table water.

In order to live what we believe, we need to live *in* what we believe. No, this does not mean we take our sleeping bags to church, or that we all move to monasteries. But it does mean that the life we experience in our assemblies should set such a clear and distinct pitch of what it means to love God and one another, that we know how to harmonize with that melody wherever we are.

Being a part of a Christian environment is not the same thing as being "busy" with church work. There are people who are going to church all the time. They go to Bible Studies, prayer meetings, small group meetings, and constantly volunteer for ministry. In most cases, such busy-ness is a proof that they are *not* a part of a Christian Community, rather than an indicator that they are. Why? Their relationships are probably defined more around what they are doing, than who they are as persons.



A husband does not go home to his wife to *do* something, but because she is his wife. Picture this: "Honey! I'm home. Does anything need to be done around here?" "No, nothing today, dear," she replies. "OK, give a call if something comes up. I'm staying at the Marriot." This is not a loving relationship. It

is a service contract.

Genuine relationships do not exist because there is a job to do. Relationships exist because people love each other.

Similarly, if a church's "togetherness" is primarily based on people doing stuff (or *getting* stuff), their relationships are tied together by activities, not Covenant love. Such a church can never be a true Christian environment, no matter how much time the people spend (doing things) together.

So, how can one know if he/she is a part of a genuine Christian Community or merely filling out a service contract? Here is a good question to ask to find out. "Is my relationship to my church centered around activities, or based on God's Covenant?"

In most churches, leaders call people to come together to *do* something (ministry) or *get* something (be ministered to). But if this is the emphasis, then that congregation is singing along with the world, not the Kingdom. In the world, people are valued for their

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performance. In the kingdom, God's People are valued because they are Family. If God's people are not taught and pastored to make this distinction, they will never grow in love, they will never demonstrate the Gospel. Let's illustrate the significance of this distinction with a story:

Grandma Mitchell has been looking forward to spending Thanksgiving dinner with her son, his wife, and their two beautiful children for months. She has spent hours preparing a grand feast in their honor. She can't wait to grab her precious grandchildren, give them a whirling hug, and then plant kisses all over their faces. She has been looking forward to holding her daughter-in-law's hand and just sitting and listening to what is happening in her life. And of course, always the eternal, loving mom, she is so full of joy about spending the afternoon with her one and only son, she cannot help but be teary-eyed for joy. She looks around her dining room table, and imagines that in just a few moments the empty chairs around her table will be filled with those she so dearly loves. Ding-dong! "Oh, that must

be Roger and Belinda!" she exclaims aloud. "They are a bit early. How wonderful! All the more time for us to share together!"



As she opens the door she sees her beloved son, daughter-in-law, and small grandchildren. "Oh, Roger, Belinda!" she gushes. "Come in! Come in!" "Ma," Roger sternly interrupts. "Just tell me, what is on the menu?" "What?" she says startled by the terse tone. "Well," she continues, "we have a great, big roasting turkey and..." "Wait. Wait. Stop right there," Roger commands, holding up his hand like a traffic cop. "Did you say *turkey*?" "Why yes!" the elderly woman responds. "Oh no-o-o-o!" Roger moans. "We were looking forward to honey roasted *ham*."

Quickly Roger turns and shouts, "OK, kids, back to the car! We're going to the Johnsons'. *They* are having

ham." "The Johnsons'?! But, you hardly know the Johnsons," the crestfallen Grandma cries out. "I know, but they are having ham. We'll get to know them." Without a wave, Roger, Belinda, and kids varoom off toward better "eats."

What's wrong with this picture? Roger and Belinda have a deeper relationship with what's on the table than with the people who sit around it!

But what if the story had a different ending? What if Grandma Mitchell had stood in front of the car, and shouted, "Don't leave! I didn't get a chance to tell you! I *also* have a 20 pound Virginia Honey Baked ham!" What if the final scene of the story finds us looking in to see a full dining room table, smiling faces, laughing, and plates piled high with pink meat? Wouldn't that be a touching story? Hardly. "But they're having fun! They are all enjoying one another. They're all together. Isn't that wonderful?" If it were love, and loyal familial ties, that drew them to the table, well, yes, it might be a tender moment. But face it, without the tender pig, there would be no tender moment.

Does it make a difference whether churches call people to “come and get it” or call them together because Covenant has made them Family? All the difference between the world and the Kingdom, between using people for what they do, or loving them for who they are. All the difference between those who have yet to transfer their citizenship from the domain of darkness, and those who have given themselves to live in God’s reign.

Yes, we may see scenes of people praying together, seated together listening to “solid Christian” teaching, serving and being served, but

what are we really seeing? Is it an *expression* of Community, or simply a consumer based look-a-like?

We must confess what those on the outside already know about us, what we are many times afraid to admit about ourselves. We are more *of* the world, than a challenge to it.

The reason people do not believe us is because we are unbelievable. We have few life-sized illustrations of the Gospel to explain the greatness of God’s love. We have siphoned out only the words, and left an empty shell.

If there is a task for us as a Christian People, it is to work at learning how to love one another, no matter what we “get out of it,” no matter what we do along the way.

We are to be committed to each other because we are brethren, not because of an activity. To key our lives around such love will make us look different from those in the world.

Of course! That is what the Gospel is supposed to do.

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