

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 (Conclusion of Seven Part Series)

Christian Environment : Five Things To Look For

The New World Dictionary defines environment as “All the conditions, circumstances and influences surrounding and affecting the development of an organism.” Environment presses its finger prints all over hearts, contours minds and shapes souls, all to later ooze out through one’s words and actions. All need to take note of the influences of environment, doubly so for those wishing to be shaped by God.

We have spoken about the environment of the world, but what might a distinctly Christian environment look like? Although there may be other characteristics, I believe that at least the following five things must exist for an environment to be classed as a truly Christian one.

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(1) A Teaching Environment: A Place Where Teaching “Sticks” By a teaching environment I do not merely mean a place where people get a lot of teaching; I mean a place where people have such a dedicated relationship with God and one another that they not only commit to applying the teaching themselves, but also commit to supporting each other in living it out. In a non-community environment, many hear the teaching, but it rarely sticks. In a Christian environment the teaching is more likely to stick because the people are more likely to “stick with” one another.

Let me offer an example from our own community. I remember asking those attending one of our courses to raise their hands if they were committed to refrain from gossip and slander. Every person’s hand went up. I then directed everybody to look around the room. “See all those hands?” I asked.

Everyone looked around the room. “Let it be clear that your brethren are not only committed to the concept of loving speech, but they are committed to love YOU.” I don’t think one person left the room that night without a deeper conviction of the love of their brethren. Although such teaching must be continually pastored to remain alive, I can honestly say that loving speech has become so much a part of who we are, that when gossip, slander or other kinds of unloving speech does appear, it stands out like a hippo in a doll house.

Preaching God’s word outside of a committed relational environment is like planting seeds in the clouds; they blow away, and no one knows where they are. Ask an auditorium of Christians who are strangers to one another if they are willing to abstain from gossip, and I am sure that you would see almost every hand raised. But how powerful is such a commitment when those who affirm such a

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resolve don't know one another? It is like saying, "I make a resolve to love the Aborigines." A good sentiment, but not one that is likely to be lived out if you live in New Jersey. For most, loving one another is good theory, but poor practice. But when a Christian people are specifically and personally committed to one another in "up close and personal" kinds of ways, their commitment to love adheres to flesh, "concept" becomes "reality," and the Word finds a place to root.

(2) *A Pastoral Environment: Pastoring a Vision for Community* A pastoral environment cannot materialize unless the pastor is committed to make sure that Covenant love pulsates throughout every aspect of church life - from worship to child care. If community is not pastored in practical, "up-close and personal" ways, it will not exist.

The pastor committed to build community must be a person who is *interpersonally connected* to his flock. If the pastor does not know his flock, they cannot really know him. How can he speak a loving, personal word to his people, or expect them to receive it as if he were committed to their best, and still be relatively anonymous? He cannot.

I have witnessed instances where pastors were "faithful to speak the truth," only to have their parishioners deflect it back like ricocheted bullet. "Who are you to say that to *me*?" they would retaliate. Good question. Who is he? If those receiving "ministry" only see the pastor as yet another "professional," pastoring can be misinterpreted as little less than intrusive bullying.

In a Christian environment the teaching is more likely to stick, because the people are more likely to "stick with" one another.

(3) *Community Contexts: Relational Structures That Express Community* If Community is to exist, it must exist *somewhere*; there must be "a place" where community can be expressed in specific, interpersonal ways. A small group can be one such way (but not the *typical* small group; see below). The small group in a genuine Christian community is a place where God's people

express their love and commitment. Such a group not only studies and prays together, but studies and prays to learn how to love, how to share their lives in honest yet sensitive ways, how to be accountable to each other so each can move ahead in discipleship, how to both speak and listen in ways that encourage trust and mutual care.

This small group does not exist *primarily* to provide emotional support, or to attract people to the church/Lord. Although both goals are noble, the small group of a Christian environment does not exist to *do* something, but to *be* something; to be Community. The small group is *both* means and end, proclaiming the Gospel while being the Gospel. This is an environment where Covenant love influences how people minister, serve, share resources, think and live, not just a meeting that people attend.

The small group of a Christian environment is a living model that can provide insight into how to live in love at home, work, among friends - wherever! For example, if someone were to have a conflict with one's spouse, he or she should be able to think,

“Now, how have I seen conflicts handled in a loving way within my small group?” Such a moment of reflection can give both insight and inspiration as to how to proceed. Most small groups do not present such a model.

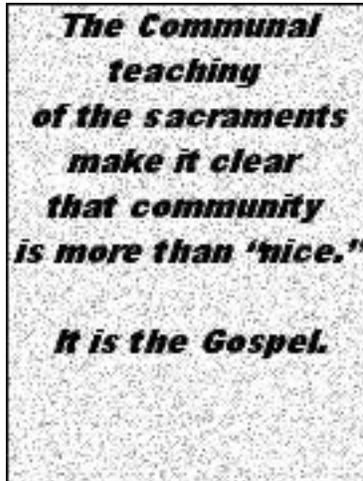
(4) A Sacramental Environment: A Covenantal Respect for the “Rites of God”

The majority of Christian theologies readily admit that both the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper and Baptism imply Christian Community. Strangely, however, the average American Christian relates to these sacred ordinances as if they were private, individualistic devotions, as if they said something more “interior” than corporate (i.e., “Jesus and me” rather than “Jesus and us”).

In the instance of the Eucharist, Jesus presided over a *Covenant Meal*, one where the participants not only entered into covenant with God, but with one another (Luke 22:20). How many Christians today would “drink the cup” and “take of the loaf” if they knew that such participation were to actually put their lives “in common” with fellow church members?

In respect to baptism, virtually no Christian church would

recognize the baptism of someone who baptized him/herself in the privacy of their bathtub. Why not? Because no matter how the Christian traditions look at baptism, all understand baptism to be about *identification with Christ* — an identification that is to be professed before those who have likewise “identified” themselves as members of Christ (“...all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...” 1 Corinthians 12:13).



If a congregation is to be a Gospel environment, the people must honor the Covenantal symbols for what they are, and cease to think about them in independent, and individualistic ways. When people partake of the Cup and the Loaf of the Eucharist, for example,

churches should admonish their people that this act is not only a confession that they “trust Christ,” but a vow of trust to their brethren. The same holds for baptism. Persons who say they want Jesus, but aren’t sure about the brethren, need to wait until they are ready to take Jesus on His [covenantal] terms, rather than impose their private ones.

The Christians of the earliest centuries saw the sacrament-community connection. They knew it was a serious thing to dishonor Covenant by ignoring its communal foundations. Paul even warns of condemnation to all who eat of the Covenant meal, yet relate to their brethren as mere attenders, and not relatives of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27, 28; Romans 12:5).

The communal teaching of the sacraments make it clear that community is more than “nice.” It is the Gospel.

(5) An Environment that Heals and Restores: The Existence of Loving Church Discipline

The 20th Century Church typically either shuts its eyes to sin (assuming it is a “private” matter), or buries the sinner with lava-laden words, all the while making no personal commitment to offer spiritual healing or restoration. It is no

wonder that social scientists note that the difference between the professing Christian and the unbeliever is hard to identify.

Although the early Christian communities were by no means perfect, their leadership did not turn the other way when a brother/sister sinned. They offered concrete help and discipline for each person who was truly repentant. This is the way that it must be. There is no way that Christian community can truly be an environment in distinction to the world if it does less.

As it is in the family, so it is in the church. Where there is no discipline, there is no love. Love is more than sentiment and

hugs; it is a costly commitment to the other's best. When a brother or sister has been on a path of destruction, and as a result, has both inflicted harm and been harmed, the only loving response is to take that person by the hand and show him/her the way back. The Christian environment is different from the world, and it is this kind of committed compassion that evidences it.



A Note Regarding Frequency of Publication: *As some of you may have noticed, this issue is not the June-July issue of Rebuild, but the Summer issue. What happened? Ministry demands make it too difficult for me to keep publishing Rebuild on a bimonthly basis so, starting with this issue Rebuild has become a quarterly publication. As always, thanks for your concern for the Church, and that the message of Covenant love be restored among God's People. (rebuild@peakpeak.com).*

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