

When the church was a family

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Ekklesia / Community / John 17:20–23; Acts 2:42–47

John 17:20–23 “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

Acts 2:42–47 42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

We find ourselves dropping into the middle of two different stories that are about 55ish days apart. The First, some scholars call the “High Priestly Prayer.” In these last

moments of the life of Jesus, He begins to pray for his disciples. In the section we read he is specifically praying for those who will believe in the message of the Gospel in the future.

The second story we read is right after the Holy Spirit has come upon the disciples of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit is revealed through the signs and wonders of the day of Pentecost. Peter, who previously wasn't the greatest with words, is empowered by the Spirit to preach a message that leads to 3000 people being born again. **While these two stories are found in separate writings and have different writers, they bear an undeniable connection.**

It would seem that the description we have of the first church is the answer to our Lord prayer in John 17. Jesus prays that His disciples would be one, He prays that they would be one with Him, and here in Acts 2 we read the outworking of the vision and prayer of Jesus for His community.

ADD DESCRIPTION OR PARAPHRASE OF ACTS 2

American Individualism

But jumping to today, I look at our church culture (especially in the Western American church) and it would seem we are struggling to live out the prayer of Jesus. If we are going to honestly critique our culture, it's safe to say we are the most individualistic culture in the world.

We in America have been socialized to believe that our

own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group to which we belong (our church or our family, for example). The immediate needs of the individual are more important than the long-term health of the group. So we leave and withdraw, rather than stay and grow up, when the going gets rough in the church or in the home.

We view life as an individual journey, where we are free to be ourselves, and perceive ourselves as we wish, and our goal is to be self-sufficient and the creator of our own happiness.

There are many problems with this extreme individualism. For one, this view of life rips apart any hope for long term deep relationship. How can we expect marriage to thrive when life is all about my happiness? But on top of the relational damage, people are feeling the effects of individualism through loneliness and narcissism. our culture is more lonely than ever before and I would bet more self consumed than ever before.

According to David Brooks (a columnist for the New York Times), 35% of Americans over 45 are lonely, 50% of Americans say no one knows them well, married couples entertain friends at their home on average of 8 times a year, only 8% of Americans have meaningful conversations with their neighbors, The fastest growing religious movement is unaffiliated, depression rates are rising, suicide rates have risen 30% since 1999, teen suicide has risen 70% in last couple years. 32% of Americans trust the

people around them and millennials only 18%.

People are uncommitted, struggling to find any support, lonely, fragmented, and without deep relationship. But this isn't just an out there problem its a in here problem also. Churches are full of people who view church as part of their journey to spiritual enlightenment not a commitment or a family. People come in get their fix of Bible reading and leave. Our relationship with church can be half hearted and really just centered on us as individuals instead of the community of Christ. I wonder, if Acts 2v42-47 was written about us what would it say? Maybe it would say something like this...

(ACTS 2:42-47) They studied the apostle's teaching when they had time. They went to fellowship when they could fit it in. They prayed when they needed something and got coffee together every now and then. They were content without, and had low expectation for, signs and wonders in their midst. They sometimes talked about generosity but kept all of their possessions for themselves. 2 out of 5 Sundays they came to corporate gatherings. They didn't invite people into their homes and rarely revealed their hearts. They were largely irrelevant to all the people, and occasionally, someone was randomly saved.

I'll be honest I didn't write this but its pretty accurate to where we are broadly at. The question is, was this what Jesus wanted? Some of us in this room are experiencing deep levels of loneliness, maybe you find yourself in a similar place to our imaginary verses in acts. maybe f your

honest you are consumed by your own ambitions to build a life for yourself and care little about the people we are supposed to call our eternal family.

Dr. Joseph Hellerman says this: Exchanging the New Testament's community-centered approach to the Christian life for our own culture's individualistic view of spiritual formation has, in turn, subtly skewed our conception of God. God has now been recast in the role of a divine therapist who aids the individual Christian in his or her personal quest for spiritual enlightenment and self-discovery... As a result, when a person with this view of God encounters conflict with others, he or she generally feels the liberty to take their "personal Savior" from church to church and from marriage to marriage, desperately hoping that they can somehow improve the quality of their life by escaping the immediate pain that often clouds the potentially redemptive relationships in which God has placed them.

Is this the prayer of Jesus? Is this what Jesus prayed wept over, and died on the cross for? You and I both know the answer is obviously no, so that means we must embark on a Journey to understand what the Christian community should be, not through the lenses of the American dream or any other earthly understanding but through the teachings of our Rabbi Jesus and the writers of the Scripture.

HEAD

Movement #2: Family in the New Testament Church

One of Jesus' favorite ways to describe those who follow him was to refer to them as a family. As you read through the NT you will see the writers use this family language to describe their bond with their God and the other disciples of Christ. But to fully understand what it means to be a family we have to understand what family looked like around the time of Jesus. As most of you know family in the ancient middle east looked much different than our current family structure looks like today.

Scholars notice two distinct differences between our conception of the family and the ancient Mediterranean culture ;

First, In the New Testament world, the group took priority over the individual.

In what is called a strong-group society a person perceives his or herself as a member of a group and responsible to the group for his or her actions, big life decisions, dreams, and life in general. The individual person is embedded in the group and is free to do what he or she feels is right as long as it fits in what the group thinks is right and is in the best interest of the group. The group takes priority over the individual. Big life decisions such as what am I going to do with my life, who am I going to spend it with, and where

am I going to live are all made as a group, not as an individual.

I know some of us if not most of us are cringing inside at the thought of this. Don't worry I'm not making the case our society needs to go back to this, just hold on it will make more sense soon.

The second difference between our conception of family and the New Testament world is in the New Testament world, the closest family bond was not the bond of marriage it was the bond between siblings.

Today, if you have ever taken pre-marital counseling you know this, the relationship that brings us the most meaning, intimacy, satisfaction, and emotional and physical support is marriage. There is a concept that is taught in those pre-marital classes called the inner circle. Your inner circle is your spouse and kids and that is the center of your relationships. But in the times of Jesus, this wasn't the case. In those days the bond between siblings was the most supportive, nurturing, and satisfying relationship one could have. This didn't mean that marriage wasn't intimate but the blood bond between siblings provided each individual with the highest level of emotional and relationship support. This, in turn, meant that at a central value in that time was the display of sibling loyalty and the greatest act of human disloyalty was

to betray one's sibling, not their spouse.

With this understanding of ancient family structures, we can see exactly what Jesus meant by calling His disciples a family. He called us siblings because we are supposed to prioritise our relationship above all else, and the good of the Christian community should always be at the fore front of our minds.

When someone is saved they are not just saved into a relationship with a loving father but they are also saved into a relationship with brothers and sisters. Jesus intended his followers to live with the group in mind (love your neighbor as yourself, they will know you by your love for one another) and to experience love, support, meaning, and satisfaction in our relationship with our brothers and sisters.

SEAM: we see this family identify clearly lived out among the early church.

i see three distinct characteristics of the early church that defined them as a family.

The NT Churches shared their heart with one another, they shared their stuff with one another, and stayed, embraced pain, and grew with one another

The New Testament church shared their hearts with one another rather than run from emotional connections

We see immediately the Holy Spirit weave a sense closeness, intimacy, and emotional connection between

the brothers and sisters of the early church. This is clearly seen in the relationship between Paul and the family of God.

Philippians 1:7–8 (NIV) It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. 8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

This isn't just a warm and fuzzy passage, Paul has incredible emotional attachments to his family he longs to see and this can be seen throughout Paul's letters. We can see in the life of Paul the ancient Mediterranean sibling relationship we talked about early where the closeness between these adopted siblings is something to learn from. Paul wasn't just a strange church leader who wrote to correct people, Paul loved his brothers and sisters and that love compelled Him to share his heart with them. Paul says he held them in his heart regardless of his circumstances. And in other passage he expresses how he longs to see his family to be present with them.

today, often our natural reaction to relationships is not to get too invested because we have seen people leave, back stab, and cause pain our lives. But this is not how the early church lived. they took the risk and created actual emotional bonds between each other

The NT church was there for each other, it is not secret that the church went through a lot of pain and persecution. I can only imagine the countless untold stories of people

stepping out of their own world and seeking to comfort their hurting brothers and sisters. Building one another up is part of our christian journey.

We are called to be the means of God's grace and love to His children, our brothers and sisters.

SEAM: the second characteristic is...

The New Testament church shared what they had with each other rather than look out for themselves only

While sharing our material goods with one another may be the most basic practice of a Christian family, it can sometimes be the hardest. But the sharing of material goods has always been a key aspect of the church and impossible to skip over. Lets take a look at 1 John 3:16-17

1 John 3:16–17 (NKJV) By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

It would seem that John cannot perceive the love of God residing in someone and them not sharing their material goods with those in need in the church family.

We hear stories all the time of people getting checks in the mail when a bill is due, money on their desk when their car is broken. We hear and experience these stories. I myself have many miraculous stories when it comes to be provided for through the church family. But without taking

the glory away from God lets think logically about those moments. A church family member saw the need, responded to the love of God in their heart, listened to the Holy Spirit, and shared what they had “earned” with someone else.

God has made sharing material goods an essential piece of demonstrating his love in His family. We live in a culture where sharing what one has is looked down upon. You earned that, its their fault they are struggling, they should be doing this or that, look out for yourself. But thats not the way of Jesus.

Sharing our material goods is more than just giving money it could also be opening up our homes for each other. The early church practices radical generosity and radical hospitality. The NT church understood that they may not have had much but what they had they would share.

SEAM: lastly, the third characteristic of the family life of the early church was

The New Testament church stayed, embraced pain, and grew with one another rather than live “unchurched” lives

It is said that one cold and gloomy day, Dwight L. Moody visited a man who had expressed some interest at one of Moody's meetings. Moody was ushered into a comfortable room with a fire blazing on the hearth. After some gracious preliminary conversation, the man began to argue that it was possible for a person to be a Christian without

participating in the life of the church. As he made his elaborate and detailed arguments, Moody leaned forward in his chair, took the poker and pulled a flaming coal from the fire out onto the stone hearth. Moody watched as the coal slowly dimmed and went out. He then turned and looked at the man, without saying anything. After a long pause, the man said, "Mr. Moody, you have made your point!" In today's world, it is not uncommon to encounter an "unchurched christian". Often the terminology is I love God but don't love his people. And it's not just those who never come to a Sunday gathering, it can be people who sit faithfully each Sunday yet never step into real authentic christian relationships.

In the NT church you didn't find an unchurched believer. While some may argue the thief on the cross and the Ethiopian eunuch are unchurched believers, clearly they are the exception to the rule not the rule itself. The NT church understood that while they weren't saved by the church they were saved into the church or into the family of God. This led them to embrace each other's pain and grow up together. The NT church understood that of the flame of the Gospel was to thrive in a world that was extremely anti Jesus, the community of believers would have to remain with one another.

This is a beautiful outworking of the vision of Jesus. It is not. A community of people centered around the Gospel of Jesus, there for each other, practicing generosity and hospitality, staying with one another, embracing each

others pain. a real church family

HEART

Movement #3: Transformational Community

The Problem with Community

SEAM: There is a problem with this vision of community - that problem is you and I

I have grown up in the church, and I know some of us here have not grown up in the church, but I think no matter what your church experience, you will understand what I'm saying. I have seen the vision of community and not seen the practice of community. I have seen "Christian communities" that were defined by gossip and slander. I have seen entire communities of people get consumed with earthly kingdoms and miss out on the work of the Kingdom of heaven. I have both seen and heard and, unfortunately, experienced the hurt and pain that sometimes comes with being part of a community. People use words as a means of tearing down rather than building up.

And I'm willing to bet that I am not the only one. I bet some of you today hear the vision of Jesus for his community and think, "yea, that's cool but have you met them." I bet some of you struggle with deep pain due to people in the body of Christ. And this whole community thing sounds great in theory, but in reality, it seems like more of a

burden than a gift. As a result of our pain, we pull away from the family of God. We are alone and isolated and yet socially exhausted and emotionally drained all at the same time. The problem with community is you and I.

Stages of Community

Some have said there are four stages of Christian community. The first is **excitement**. We find a church or a small group - teaching is great, worship is amazing, and they have coffee. Or in a small group, they meet on a Wednesday beautiful living room. They all are super deep and open.

But then we meet **Disillusionment**. We suddenly realize you are in a community of a bunch of people like you. Sinner. "I thought this group was gonna heal me but they are all as messed up as I am." That Disillusionment causes us pain. What we thought was going to be a safe community that met our needs, brought us love, actually have people that make mistakes. You thought you were joining a community of saints, but in reality, everyone is just messed up.

Unfortunately, this is where most of us stop. We experience the pain of community and especially for us introverts we crawl back into our shells and try to find "healing" in our isolation. WE KNOW THIS IS NOT WHAT GOD WANTS, but we cannot perceive another option.

But God desires us to push through that Disillusionment and enter into **Recognition**. First we recognize that it is

possible to hang out at church, some to Sunday worship, raise our hands, amen the pastor, read our bible, and still never experience transformation (meaning never actually change) We realize that this Christian walk is more than just learning to hide our sin but become people with less sin through the transformation into the image of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. **When we become aware that our relationship with God is less about knowing where we end up when we die but about becoming like His Son Jesus Christ.** Once we recognize this spiritual journey in us we can recognize that in others as well. All of us should be dedicated and on a journey of spiritual transformation. Lastly, we recognize that our communities are not just Christian hangout times but centers of spiritual transformation. When we gather together our aim should be to journey with one another towards Christ-likeness. When we push through the Recognize these things we get to the final stage and that is experiencing unconditional love for one another. Community is no longer about our personal preferences but about transforming into Christ and loving one another without condition.

Communities of Spiritual Transformation

I love how Robert Mulholland puts it,
“When we don't feel like worshiping, the community should carry us along in its worship. When we can't seem to pray, community prayer should enfold us. When the

Scripture seems closed for us, the community should keep on reading, affirming and incarnating it around us... [and] when God begins to work with us at the deep levels of our incompleteness and brokenness, our bondage and sin, we need the body of Christ to support, encourage, challenge and nurture us toward wholeness. We may be able to work through some of our bondage and brokenness alone with God. But when God begins to deal with some of the deep distortions of our being, we need others.”

Once our communities become centers of spiritual transformation that is when we can live out the vision of Jesus. When our Life Groups, men’s studies, women’s studies, youth and young adult groups, and very bible study we can possibly have our church realize that we are here with one another to become more like Christ that is when we as Awaken Las Vegas will experience the vision Jesus had for his family. Jesus wanted us to be one with each other and himself.

A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Tony showed you this screen and said, “Before we can become the church, we must have a rightful identity and relationship upward. This week that center beam is not filled in. Before we can become the church, we have to have a rightful relationship with each other. We will never experience our Lord's vision for His church until we begin to live in the transformational communities He desires us to.

This transformational community cannot be forced upon anyone, it takes each and every one of us to respond to the

call of our Lord and walk together along this journey of transformation. When we begin to do that, we will experience building each other up in love, radical hospitality and generosity, a family-like community, and everything else Jesus envisioned for His community. The journey is in front of us. Will we walk it?

HANDS

The question for many of us is how?

There are a lot of practical things we do here at the church specifically to foster transforming communities. What I want to highlight today is Life Groups. Life Groups are not designed to be just another church program. It's our best attempt to replicate what the early church had. If you are a Bible nerd I'm sure you noticed the church in Acts had their gathering in the synagogue for worship and then they met in homes the rest of the week. Life Groups are our practical interpretation of that. We meet for worship on Sunday and then once a week we strongly exhort you to be a part of a life group. Our hope and prayer is that these groups are transforming groups where we take what we learn on Sunday and encourage one another to practice it. After this service there will be some Life Group Leaders out by iPads. These are new life groups that have just begun and want to meet you and do life with you. Please stop by and get plugged in.

That's what we offer here at this church. But that doesn't change our hearts.

Today we are going to take a moment to respond to the Holy Spirit. Miriam is going to come up and play some music and she does. Respond to God with what he is speaking to you. Maybe he wants you to practice hospitality and invite a brother or sister in the Lord over for dinner more often. Maybe he wants you to give financially to someone. Maybe he wants to lead you to someone to confess sin or be held accountable. Maybe he wants you to join a life Group. Respond to him and go and live out your faith and join the family of God in the journey to Christ-likness.