

A Compelling Community

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[0 : 00] So last week and this week we've been doing almost like a micro series as we are thinking specifically about this Life in Christ series that we're doing and trying to prepare the congregation for doing an outreach event like this where we are essentially inviting people to come in and to listen to an explanation of the gospel.

How should we as a church think about that? How should we think about our own role in that? What part do we play? Now often one of the chief factors, humanly speaking, involved in somebody coming to faith is their experience of the Christian community.

How they experience being around you guys basically. I remember Timothy Keller saying, and I can't remember where he said this or in what context, but it always kind of stuck with me because I've seen it play out in a lot of people's lives.

But he said, humanly speaking, people need three things to come to faith. Number one, they need to have their objections to the gospel, their intellectual objections removed. And start to see, I can actually intellectually believe in this thing, that Jesus is the son of God, that he came to save me from my sin.

Number two, they need a plausibility community. That is, they need to look at a bunch of people and go, these people are not completely crazy. I could see myself being a part of them at some point. And then number three, they need some sort of an existential crisis.

[1 : 18] Like, oh my word, I need Jesus. I need God. I need something. Now we can't go around inducing existential crises in people. We can try, but it's probably not going to work.

We can, though, give our attention to the first two things there. Last week, we looked at being beautiful messengers. Also from Romans. And in many ways, that's the first part.

Helping people intellectually come to grips with the faith as we share the gospel with people. This week, I want us to think about the second one. Being the kind of community that is accessible, welcoming, and hospitable to those who are exploring the Christian faith.

Now the Bible uses several different metaphors to describe the Christian community. To describe how Christians are related to one another. But there's one metaphor that the Apostle Paul comes back to over and over and over again.

And that is that he calls the church a body. A people, though, who though they are different, diverse, are inseparably bound to each other because of what Christ has done in their lives.

[2 : 26] So in three places, Paul actually gives quite a decent amount of treatment to this. In Romans chapter 12, in 1 Corinthians 12, and in Ephesians 4. We're going to jump around those passages a bit, but we'll probably spend most of our time in the passage that we read, which is Romans 12.

And I want you to see four things. I want you to see the call of the body, the glue of the body, the task of the body, and the tools of the body. So the call, the glue, the task, and the tools of the body.

Here's the first one, the call of the body. For Paul, this gospel word that we spoke about last week, when it's preached and it's believed by people, it creates a gospel community.

That is, when you repent of your sins and you believe this good news of Jesus, God, by his spirit, comes and he lives in you. You are baptized in the Holy Spirit at that point as you become a Christian.

And as a result, you straight away enter into spiritual community with everybody else who's a believer who has been baptized in the spirit that way.

[3 : 31] Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 12, verse 13. He says, To make it even clearer, if you go to the passage in Ephesians 4, he says this in verses 4 to 6.

He says, There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called, to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

And then there's the same idea, although it's a lot shorter and more abridged in Romans 12, verse 5, Paul says, In Christ we, though many, form one body.

So if you're in Christ, because you believe this gospel, this good news about Jesus, God's spirit has come into you and made you alive, You are now in, whether you like it or not, you are now in a spiritual community, a new spiritual community.

You have one, you get the other with it. It's a package deal. Now here's what Paul says you should do with this spiritual community.

[4 : 38] Ephesians 4, 3, he says, Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. So the Christian that you're sitting next to this morning, as you sort of look around and you see all these good looking people, I didn't notice that until I got these glasses, but you're actually relatively good looking.

But as you look around at these Christians around you, that Christian's going to spend eternity with you. He's going to be around, she's going to be around for a long, long time.

And Paul says, don't wait for eternity. Get on with it now. Start living it out now. Make every effort. You don't just sit back and lean on the spiritual reality.

You need to practice it in real life. I'll give you an example of this. I have a marriage certificate that says I'm married to Robin. I have two birth certificates that say that Genevieve is my child and that Christian is my child.

Status-wise, theologically, legally, and as far as sort of social convention goes, we are a family. But if I lived in Seapoint, where I've always wanted to live, if Robin lived in Stellenbosch, where she's always wanted to live, if Genevieve lived in Paris, where she's always wanted to live, and if Christian lived in London so that he could play for Arsenal one day, and if we never ever spoke to each other, well, you would say we're an incredibly dysfunctional family.

[6 : 11] We're family in status, but are we really family? See, Paul says take the spiritual status as you have, this communal spiritual status as a united body, and turn it into a tangible reality on the ground of people sharing their lives together.

Make every effort, he says. That's what we're called to do. That's the call of the body. And so if this church, if Union Chapel is to be a compelling community, then it has to be a living, breathing, flesh and blood, life-on-life community.

There has to be that here for us to demonstrate this compelling community for people. The fact that Paul says we need to make every effort, in fact, I think the original says exert yourself, in order to maintain this community means, I think, that it's not easy.

It's not easy. And so we need glue. We need really good glue to keep us sort of all stuck together. The spiritual body, the spiritual status, that is indestructible.

That is the work of the Lord. No one can break it up. No one can destroy that. That is indestructible. But because of human sinfulness, this on-the-ground flesh-and-blood body that we inhabit here, well, it's fragile to some extent.

[7 : 34] And it's prone to come apart at the seams sometimes, as we act in our sinfulness. And so we need good glue. So here's the second thing we need, the glue of the body. If you go to that passage we read, Romans 12, if you've got that open in front of you, most of Paul's discussion actually about the body is in verses 4 down to 8.

But on either side of that section of text are two bookends that are crucial for flourishing community.

So in verse 3, he says, For by the grace given me, I say to every one of you, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

Then at the end of the section, verse 9, he starts the next section with these words, Love must be sincere. Have sober assessment of yourself. And love is sincerity.

Those are the bookends. And I want to suggest that that is the glue that we need to get this community to stick together. We need those two things. And if we have those two things, we will have a community that sticks together.

[8 : 41] So think about this. Think about sober judgment of yourself. Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather have a sober assessment of yourself. How do you assess yourself? How do you accurately assess yourself as Paul is saying here?

Well, Paul, he says, do it in accordance with the faith that God has distributed to you. Now, a surface reading of the text, it looks like Paul is saying God's given each person a certain amount of faith.

And if you've got a lot of faith, well, then you'll be super humble and sober-minded. And maybe if you've only got a little bit of faith, then you'll be a little bit humble and a little bit sober-minded. But I don't actually think that's what he means here.

In the original text, it literally reads that God has distributed to each of us a measure of faith, or even the measure of faith. One of the world's leading experts on the book of Romans, a New Testament scholar by the name of Doug Moo, he points out that that word measure there is not being used like measuring out a cup of baking flour for baking a cake, but rather measure in terms of a standard that you measure yourself up against.

Like when some boy wants to come and date your daughter, and you eyeball him, and you say, how do you possibly think you measure up to my girl? That kind of way, the word measure is being used here.

[10 : 08] There's a standard according to which we should soberly assess ourselves. The standard of faith. And up until this point in the book of Romans, all the way through the book of Romans, Paul has used faith to refer to simple trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.

That is the standard that we measure ourselves up against. So the measure of a Christian then is not, well, how smart you are, or how emotionally intelligent you are, or how enthusiastic you are, not how hardworking you are.

The measure of the Christian is the same for all people. Do you have faith in the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ? His death on the cross, His resurrection, saving you from sin and death.

Do you have faith in that? Are you trusting in that? The way that you're supposed to think about yourself in sober judgment is not on the basis of anything that you contribute, but on the basis of what Christ has done.

His work is the measure of faith. Maybe you heard this, quote before, because I think I've used this quote several times. It comes from, actually the origin I think comes from a man by the name of Jack Miller, who was quite a prominent Presbyterian minister in the US in the second half of the 20th century, but he was famous for saying this, you're more sinful and flawed in yourself than you ever dared believe, yet at the very same time you are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than you ever dared hope.

[11 : 38] You've probably heard a version of that quote somewhere along the line. You are so sinful, that Christ had to die to save you, and yet because of his death, you are so incredibly loved and cherished by God.

Now, do you see why measuring yourself up against that standard would give you such healthy, sober judgment of yourself? You'd be filled with humility because you didn't earn your salvation.

You didn't get into Jesus' good books because you're such an upstanding citizen with such impeccable morality. You weren't this moral specimen.

You needed to be dragged, kicking, and screaming into the kingdom. The way that you could become a believer, just think about this, was that the divine Son of God had to die on a cross to get you in.

That's pretty drastic. That says your problem was significant. That's going to make you humble. It's going to make you incredibly humble. It's going to rip any sense of superiority out from underneath you.

[12 : 52] But at the same time, at the same time, you don't need to feel inferior to those around you who maybe achieve more than you, who you think maybe are better than you, because Christ stood in your place.

He stood in your place. Personalize that. He's given you his righteous record. He's justified you before his Father. He's accepted you into his family.

Out of love, he said, I want you in. I'm going to do this for you. You don't need to feel inferior then. You see how they bring such sober balance to your view of self?

Humility without shame? Self-deprecation without being lesser? So that's the one bookend there. The other bookend there, Paul says love with sincerity.

Literally love without hypocrisy or love without a mask on. Now if we define love in an accurate way, I think, as being something more than just the warm fuzzies that you feel towards another person.

[14 : 07] But if you define love as a self-giving of yourself for another person, a deep commitment to think and act favorably towards another person, then I think if that's what love is and it's not easy, it might be easy to see why we would be tempted towards insincere love.

Love with a mask on. See, because you can do loving things for a person. You can serve them. You can say affirming things to them. But you can be doing all of that in terms of your external workings, your outer posture, when inside your heart is not really engaged with this person.

Your heart is not engaged in love for the person. Why would you do that? Well, you do it to get things from them. You can outwardly love people to get favor from them.

You can outwardly love people to get favor from other people as they look at you and go, oh, look what a loving person he is. You can outwardly love people in order to make yourself feel better about who you are.

I must be a good person because look how many people I love. Look how I expend myself for other people. I must be a good person. At the root, at the heart, those are all essentially selfish reasons for loving.

[15 : 17] All of those are examples of insincere love because you're not really giving of yourself without your own self-interests being served. You're giving to get.

I will love you if I get something out of this giving that I'm doing. That's a love then that is built, the premise of that love is built on getting.

And a love that only loves when there's a possibility of receiving, well, that's the love of the mask because it's covering over the real intention which is selfish. Paul says, I don't want that sort of love.

I want love that is sincere. Love of sincerity. Now, step back just for a second. Sober assessment of ourselves in light of Christ-saving work for us and sincere and hypocritical love.

Put those two things together and I think you create the sort of mixture that powerfully glues a community together. Because in that community now, you've got genuine humility.

[16 : 24] In the midst of all of our differences, you've got this genuine humility. No one is trying to one-up the other person. When there's a bunch of people together who realize that the only way they got into the kingdom is because the Son of God had to be crucified, it's hard for you now to go, well, I'm better than that person on the other side of the pew over there.

Now you've got that humility at operative in the community. And then there's genuine love. There's not, I'm just serving you to get something.

There's a giving of you because I want good for you. Real heartfelt concern for the other. I think Satan would have an incredibly difficult time trying to sow discord and conflict in a community like that.

It's a glue that we need to cultivate on the ground community here at the Union Chapel to be this compelling community. Now what does that look like practically?

Here's the third point. What is the task of the body? Two things. Things we say, things we do. Let's switch that around. Things we do and then things we say.

[17 : 43] So what do we do? Verse 13, Romans 12. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Share your life.

It's pretty straightforward. There's no real need to interpret that. Share your life. Give your attention. Share your time. Share your energy. Share your material wealth. Share your home. Share your food. That's how love happens.

That's the tangible thing we do as we engage in love. The word hospitality literally means to show kindness to or to show love to the outsider. We tend to think of hospitality as maybe hosting some sort of a dinner party at your house or your apartment where you put out all your best.

You put your best foot forward. You schedule it months in advance because that's what we do in Cape Town. Schedule months in advance. You make sure that your apartment looks immaculate for that moment when the people are going to come.

You pull out your checkers odd bins because that's the only way you can get fancy wine at an affordable price. And then the people come and you all have nice polite conversation together.

[18 : 50] And then they all go home. But hospitality in the Bible is a lifestyle. It's a life of bringing the outsider onto the inside or into the inside.

Showing kindness to the outsider. Loving the outsider. So that they then start to feel like insiders. Many of us in this room I think have grown up in a culture that is predominantly western and individualistic.

Even though we're on the tip of Africa the influence of the west is significant. We've prized private space. We've prized boundaries. I think there's a conflict there.

I really do. I think I think that there is something of a conflict between that particular culture and biblical hospitality. And so it's going to be hard. Because it's going to mean loosening boundaries.

Being more free with your private space. Implementing biblical hospitality will be a struggle. It won't be easy but our friends it is so necessary. Necessary and it's necessary for you if you're afraid to do that.

[20 : 03] It's necessary because if you're that person who only ever lets people in when when your life is scripted and controlled that scripted controlled dinner party scheduled months in advance if you're the person who only lets people in into those sorts of environments it's possible that you're actually participating in that insincere love that Paul speaks about.

Love with a mask on. Because you only let people see the part of you that you want them to see. the image that you want to cast for them.

But you know that only giving out that sort of love to people then will mean that you won't be well loved by other people. Because nobody will know the real you.

They won't be able to. They won't have a chance to be able to do that. They only ever get to see you with the mask on. They only ever get to see the image that you project. You can basically actually do the social media thing.

You know on social media we're all projecting this fancy life for ourselves that we don't really live. It all looks amazing and magical. You can do that even if you don't have a social media account. Just by the way that you engage in hospitality in this scripted controlled way.

[21 : 20] But the people won't see you. They won't see the real you. They won't see your brokenness. They won't see your failures. They won't see your weakness. They won't see your sin. And if they cannot see those things then they cannot help you.

And they cannot love you. Practicing hospitality will push us out of that. And so while you end up exercising love to those outsiders that you're including you start to become a recipient of love.

Of sincere love from others. I know it's not easy. there's vulnerability there. There is exposing yourself there.

Exposing your time your energy your material resources your heart. But it is worth it. It is so very very very worth it for you personally and for the body that you're intrinsically a part of.

So share your life with others. That's what you do. But then there's a second thing. It's not just what you do it's what you say. So Ephesians 4 verse 15 Paul says speaking the truth in love we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head that is Christ.

[22 : 41] What are we to say? Well Paul says I want you to speak the truth in love. Throughout Paul's letters he's constantly telling us to be speaking loving words of gospel encouragement to each other and loving words of gospel correction to each other.

So there's kind of a positive and a negative aspect there. It's not just like oh you're doing so well well done keep going in Jesus. It's also like hey sometimes there's some stuff going on and we need to talk about it. There's a positive and a negative aspect to that gospel speaking to each other speaking the love and truth to each other.

Today I think there's an increasing growth in what you could maybe call personalized designer spirituality. People wanting to be spiritual but then wanting to sort of step outside of the formalized religious structures or institutions and then really sort of tailor make their religious experience for themselves and then mostly by themselves as well.

So I will encounter many many people who will speak will use language like God and Jesus but then the more they speak the more you start to realize that there's this personalized spirituality underneath.

This designer spirituality and the hallmark of this spirituality is that you the individual build it. You build it according to your tastes your preferences you embark upon certain spiritual practices that you think will get you more in touch with your conception of who God is.

[24 : 11] It's all you. What you don't do in designer spirituality is you don't have other people speak authoritatively into your life and into your spiritual practices and experiences.

Now friends according to the Bible that is not Christianity. Christianity requires a community of people lovingly speaking the gospel truth to each other. It's called a church. It's been around for a long time.

This personalized designer spirituality is built upon I think something of a cultural lie. You've heard us talk about this before here. This cultural lie called expressive individualism.

The idea that you sort of have to look down deep inside of yourself and look at your feelings, look at your desires, look at your wants, your needs, your hopes, your dreams and through realizing a sort of collection of those things discover who you really are, your true identity.

But I think expressive individualism is a lie. It's a lie because it's not really you building your identity or your purpose or your meaning or your spirituality.

[25 : 18] Think about it. You, you in terms of your wants and your desires and your hopes and your dreams, you are made up of a collection of influences that come from multiple different other communities out there.

So you're influenced by the community that is your family. You are influenced by the community that is your friends. You are influenced by the community that is social media. You are influenced by the community that is your professional community.

Those are all communal voices that are shaping you. Having input, saying this is how you should live your life. Telling you how to think, telling you how to behave, forming you. And so this is going to sound like terrible English, but you is not really you.

You is a collection of an amalgamation of all these other formative communities. The idea that we can sort of just get away from having an authoritative community around us that speaks and forms us, that's a lie.

It doesn't exist. It's going to happen to you whether you like it or not. What we can do though, is we can curate better which communities we allow to speak authoritatively into our lives.

[26 : 30] And so if following God is your desire, if walking His way is your desire, if obeying His word is what you want to see in your life, then you surround yourself with a community that speaks His truth into your life.

So you need this body of Christ that Paul is speaking about. Let me give you just one example of this. This isn't pertinent for our city bowl culture here, but the area of sex and biblical sexual ethics.

Living God's way in the area of your sex life. The biblical sexual ethic that sex is exclusively reserved for a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage and that all deviations from that are sexual sin, that is such an alien idea in our culture and our city right now.

Super alien. It's unthinkable for many people, even offensive to many people to even say that. Now why is it such an alien idea? Well because multiple communities have influenced us to think of sex as not much more than a biological urge that we should fulfill.

Bearing in mind that the people, the participating parties are of the correct age and there's consent. That's it. That's the lowest common, the lowest barrier. And then fulfill that biological urge that you have.

[27 : 47] Pretty much anything else goes beyond that. If you're a typical progressive young person in our city that embraces that quote sexual freedom, you think to yourself, look I'm not going to let Victorian ideas about sex or conservative religious views about sex instruct me on how to have a fulfilling sex life.

I want to be free. I want to be free to express my sexuality how I want. But friends, you're not free. You're not free. Because you didn't come up with your views on sex by yourself.

You didn't sit one day and say, hey, what would be the best way for me to have a sexually fulfilling life? Let me come up with a view of what sexual fulfillment looks like. You didn't come up with those views by yourself.

They're not a genuine expression of you. You've had all sorts of communities speak authoritatively into your life and create a picture of sexuality in your head. You've had Netflix. You've had Instagram.

You've had YouTube. You have had discussion around the braai. At the gym. At the sports club. Those communities authoritatively shape your opinions.

[28 : 59] And what did they all say to one level or another? Or many of them at least? They basically said sex is a biological urge that needs to be fulfilled and if you go for more than three months without sex there's something wrong with you.

So you might not be Victorian or you might not be a religious conservative. You might think you're being all self-expressive. But really you're just subscribing to a different set of rules given to you by another body somewhere else that said this is how you must live your life.

You didn't come up with those rules by yourself. Now friends if there are all of these communities around us these communities powerfully influencing us and forming our views and our practices on so many different things way beyond just sexuality then we need reinforcement to live God's way.

We have to have reinforcement to live God's way. If we are to live God's way we are going to need communities around us that reinforce God's good way by speaking loving truth over and above the noise of the culture.

So you can't do this Christianity by yourself. You can't do me and Jesus. If you just come to church for a very personalized experience with God a song and a sermon and a personal experience with God and you don't dive into the communal life of the church then friends please please do not be surprised when your life looks nothing like Jesus is.

[30 : 28] Please don't be surprised. The task of the body is to perform tangible acts of love for each other and to speak truthful words of love to each other.

And guess what we have everything we need to be able to do that. All three of the passages where Paul talks about the body he has an extensive treatment on the concept of gifts.

Now we don't have time to dive into that exactly but simply to say this he has gifted us all in different ways to carry out this task of demonstrating this communal love and speaking the truth in love.

He's given us everything we need. He's given us the toolbox. But there's one gift. There's one gift alone that makes it possible for us to exercise all the other different gifts.

There's one gift alone that actually makes it possible for us to make every effort. There's one gift that alone empowers us to do this sincere loving.

[31 : 29] One gift alone that gives us the courage to speak words of love and the humility to receive words of love. Look at the beginning of Romans 12 verse 6.

Paul says we have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us. grace. Greek word for gifts is the word charisma.

The Greek word for grace as you can see it's related is the word charis. So the sentence you could basically read it like this reads we have different charisma according to the charis given to each of us.

And so you say well what is this charis? What is this grace? What is that gift? Well Paul has already actually told his readers earlier on what it is in Romans chapter 6 verse 23. He says the wages of sin is death but the gift of God that is the charisma of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It's that gift alone that enables us to be a compelling community. We can't make every effort to build this community until our eyes are fixed upon him who made every effort to the point of shedding his own blood to create this community.

[32 : 51] We cannot with sober assessment daily not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to until we see him who as scripture says who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.

we cannot love each other sincerely taking the mask off until we truly see him who dies with his love completely unmasked for us.

He is naked on the cross. You get to see all of the love. We can't speak the truth in love to each other until we hear our savior crying out the most loving words the most loving truth it is finished.

Your sins are atoned for you're forgiven. That's the gift that's the charis the grace given to us that makes us a biblical community the grace given that fuels this biblical community.

We can't do this by ourselves. We don't have the strength we don't have the ingenuity we don't have the character to pull it off but with the grace of Christ operative amongst us we can we can be that foretaste of the heavenly community.

[34 : 29] So we invite people into this community through this life in crisis series I pray that God would make us this people. Let's pray that together now. Our Father and our Savior you have given us the gift of gifts in your son Jesus Christ.

You have taken us the outsider and made us insiders in this community through that glorious gospel. Won't you transform and change us or change not just us at the individual level where we are all changing to become more like your son but change us at the corporate level where we become this compelling community so that when people come here they taste Christ they see him they see the gift as they experience our gifts in operation.

Lord we want to be this community but it's not easy we have to make every effort we have to exert ourselves and so we ask for strength we ask for humility we ask that we would be quick to forgive quick to love that we would remove our masks that we would open our lives to each other make us these people Lord and I want to pray for any person who's sitting here this morning who's maybe going I would like to be a part of that community but I don't know Jesus I don't know this love that you speak of I pray that you would bring them to a place of salvation this morning that they would repent of their sin and trust in Christ's blood shed for them and they would find entrance into this community by your grace alone Lord as we go tonight to make a plea to people and invite them into this community won't you bless that and use it for your good purposes we ask this all for Christ's sake and his glory amen