

S e s s i o n 1 , E s s a y 1

# REDEEMPTIVE COMMUNITY

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Community is essential to the Christian life, but we often dismiss the beauty and significance of community life in favor of autonomy. While we long for connection, our fallen human condition inclines us to cling to our independence.

By tracing the story of community through the biblical narrative, it's possible to discover God's redemptive intent for our relationships and our congregations. This narrative asserts that our life together provides the context of God's redemptive action in our lives and in the world.

***Creation—Community as it ought to be.*** The triune God existed in community before time and everything He created originated within Himself. He drew humanity from Himself and for Himself. Humanity was born into community and flourished. Humankind's relationships with God, with each other, and with creation were marked by purpose, love, transparency, collaboration, and friendship. John 17:21-23 tells us we are to be in community as God is in eternal community. We experience most fully what it means to be human when we reflect God's image in our relationships and in our communities.

***The Fall—Community as it often is.*** Sin first showed its devastating effects in creation's social structures. Adam and Eve experienced shame and hid from God. Then they turned and blamed one another and manipulation entered the marriage relationship. Human community was shattered and creation ceased to flourish, as it ought. The New Testament recognizes the brokenness of our relationships and teaches churches how to live in Christian community. (See Colossians 3: 9-14.)

***Redemption—Community as it can be.*** The human race is made for community, and yet we find it difficult to sustain deep, diverse corporate relationships. In modern Western culture, personal freedom is often chosen over community life. In Eastern culture, where the group is more important than the individual, the community can become so important that the value of the individual becomes distorted.

Even so, redemption happens in the context of human relationships. It is in and through human community that God works in the life of His church. Ephesians 2:21-22 says that Christians are “being built together

to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.” Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 describe the body of Christ wherein every believer is a part of building up the whole. Living and growing together as God’s people is an essential part of salvation and sanctification and it is fundamental to the Christian’s identity. And God has made His people “who were not a people” into “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9, 10).

God is not only working *in* the church but also *through* the church in the world. The relational and social structures of the church are central to its participation in this mission. Local congregations make it possible for the church to be a visible and tangible expression of God’s kingdom. Community life provides a platform for social engagement and creates a context for the gospel’s credibility:

- Matthew 5:14 says that we are called to be a “city on a hill,” not just individual lights.
- Luke 6:12 tells us Jesus began His ministry by calling His disciples and forming a community.
- Matthew 6:9-13 gives us the Lord’s Prayer, a corporate prayer meant to be prayed together.

***Consummation—Community as it will be.*** On one real and beautiful day in the future, all the relational and social structures in creation will be fully healed, remade, and unbroken and humanity will once again live in perfect community with God, each other, and with the created order. God will dwell with humanity, and we will be His people. (See Revelation 21:1-3.)

### Reuniting Christian Mission and Community Life

God acts redemptively in the world through

the body of Christ, His church. The Christian life and mission is communal. It is what we are called to do together. As Christians live in redemptive community with other Christians, they are called, equipped and empowered to move into the culture with the gospel.

The indivisible nature of Christian mission and Christian community is assumed throughout the New Testament. Consider the following passages:

In Ephesians 2, Paul explains that salvation involves both bringing people back into community with God and with His body. This new community is then responsible to make God’s presence visible and available to the wider world.

In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul describes salvation as the restoration of community between fallen humanity and God. As He brings the lost back into His fellowship, He makes them alive *together with* Christ, raising them up *with* Him and seating them *with* and *in* Him.

***Ephesians 2:1-10.*** “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

In Ephesians 2:11-20, Paul describes salvation as the restoration of community between peoples—the Jews and Gentiles. God’s plan of salvation involves reconciling people to himself *and* to the broader community of believers.”

**Ephesians 2:11-20.** “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone...”

Finally, in the last verses of Ephesians 2, God causes His diverse body to grow together into one holy temple. In the Old Testament the temple was a visible sign of God’s presence and was central to community life, providing space for worship and ministry. God is building His church into a new temple for the same purpose. Today, God’s presence is made visible through Christian community life.

**Ephesians 2:21-22.** “...in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for

God by the Spirit.”

In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches that communities of believers are like a city set on a hill, unmistakably different than the surrounding culture. Light suggests that although the community is different, it still moves into and penetrates the broader world. Moreover, because both salt and light are effective commodities (salt prevents decay and light dispels darkness) we know we are intended to have an effect in society.

**Matthew 5:13-16.** “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is an incredible passage that begins with Jesus declaring His lordship over all space and ends with Him claiming all time as His own. Sandwiched in between these incredible claims, Jesus gives us a four-part command: **go, make, baptize, and teach.**

**Matthew 28:18-20.** “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

**Go**—We are to go to all nations and social spheres. This involves much more than geographic location. The church is called to “go into all the world,” penetrating every layer of society with the gospel (Mark 16:15). The objective is not simply to go, but to go, stay, and grow—to go and be present and available.

**Make**—The central command of the

passage is to make disciples. This goes well beyond making converts; we are to press on until converts are yoked with Christ (Matt. 11: 28-29) in discipleship, “growing together” with other believers (Eph. 2) in community. The community itself is integral to both discipleship and evangelism.

**Baptize**—We are to baptize new believers in the name of the triune God who exists in eternal community. Through baptism we become identified with God and, according to John 17:21-23, we become beautifully and completely entangled with one another.

**Teach**—We are to teach disciples to observe all that Jesus commanded. Since Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, this includes the entire biblical narrative. This can’t be done quickly. We learn to live the Christian life by living in community, allowing others to model what it means to live and love as Jesus intended us to.

When the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 is considered in light of Ephesians 2 and Matthew 5, we see that the church’s mission is a corporate mission. As the church seeks to be obedient to the Great Commission, new disciples are brought into a community that is being built into the temple of God. The temple or community then becomes the visible expression of God on earth, making it possible for still others to see and know God.

This occurs when a church embodies the gospel and its members experience a complete reorientation toward God and His life. This reorientation produces a lifestyle that counters the culture in areas such as interpersonal, ethnic, and class relationships, as well as attitudes toward sex, power, money, and position. These are just some of the ways Christian communities can offer kingdom alternatives for our culture.

First century Christians demonstrated this when they, “brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death.”<sup>1</sup> Because God values human life, “Christians condemned both the cruelties and the spectators [of gladiator games].... Christians effectively promulgated a

moral vision utterly incompatible with the casual cruelty of pagan custom.”<sup>2</sup>

### Redemptive Community in Essence

Our life together provides the context for God’s redemptive action in the world. Therefore, the quality of a congregation’s social and relational life determines its effectiveness in mission. At a minimum, Christian congregations can participate with God in mission to the degree that *Jesus is worshipped, members are continually transformed by grace, and the basic tenets of the faith are taught and obeyed.*

***Jesus is worshipped.*** A redemptive community is one in which Jesus is worshipped. His life is experienced in the new life of the believer and the community continually remembers and retells the human story with God as the redeeming hero.

***Members are continually transformed by grace.*** Christian communities are not perfect. If they were, Paul wouldn’t have admonished the Colossians to bear with one another and to forgive each other. He assumed Christians would have complaints against one another. However, just as sin is often revealed in the context of the church, so is God’s grace. This is where the Holy Spirit does His sanctifying work. Embracing God’s grace, we become conduits of grace for others.

***The basic tenets of faith are taught and obeyed.*** Christian community life protects the congregation from the onslaught of socially accepted values that directly clash with biblical norms, making it possible for Christians to be faithful to the most difficult tenets of their faith.

As Jesus’ value system is normalized in the congregation, the Christian’s view of things like power, money, sex, and status are reshaped. This makes it easier for community members to live contrary to the broader society. Furthermore, the community casts a new moral vision for young believers so they can learn what it means to be a

Christian and to trust and obey Christ within the broader culture.

### Redemptive Community in Action

Christian community is designed to be both visible and accessible to those outside the faith, allowing outsiders to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Building *windows* and *doors* into our congregations will provide this accessibility.

**Windows.** Windows give outsiders an opportunity to look into Christian community and see Jesus Christ. A congregation opens a window anytime it allows outsiders to observe and scrutinize their community life. Outsiders should see at least three things – *counterculture alternatives*, *love*, and *reconciliation*.

**Counterculture Alternatives.** Every society will resonate with parts of the gospel and recoil from other parts. When biblical values clash with the values of the broader culture, Christian communities can model alternatives to cultural norms by living differently and making those differences visible. This doesn’t need to be highly confrontational or aggressive; our actions should speak louder than words and both should flow from love.

**Love.** Jesus calls His followers to imitate His sacrificial and indiscriminate love. Christian love extends to all people, crossing all boundaries, making it possible for many to encounter Jesus through His followers. Love is the hallmark of the Christian church. Rather than merely a moral cause, the Christian’s concern for neighbor and enemy alike is in response to Jesus’ great love toward them. Love should identify the Christian (John 13:34-35), create a bond of unity among Christians (Colossians 3:12-17), and be made complete in Christian community (1 John 4:16-5:1).

**Reconciliation.** Reconciliation is perhaps the most powerful window into Christian community. The Bible views reconciliation

as multifaceted, including humanity’s reconciliation to God and to one another. Christ is committed to tearing down all walls that divide people, including education, class, profession, gender, and urban/rural distinctions. We, as people transformed by grace, are able to facilitate this reconciliation through our Christian communities, revealing the power of Christ’s love.

**Doors.** If windows allow the outside world to look in and see Jesus, doors suggest welcome, allowing the stranger to come in and experience Jesus. When we welcome people into our communities, they experience Jesus firsthand. Doors, of course, go two ways; not only do we welcome people from the outside in, but Christians also travel from inside out, taking Christ’s love to the world. These doors can take many forms, including *hospitality*, *service*, *our everyday work*, and *proclamation*.

**Hospitality.** “Let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Hebrews 13:1-2

Through hospitality, the Christian is to love and serve others in Christ’s name. Hospitality, especially to the stranger, is fundamentally a response to God for His hospitality toward us. It goes well beyond entertaining family and friends to helping people who are outside one’s immediate circle of relationships. As a result, hospitality is a moral responsibility in the Christian tradition.

When we open our hearts and lives to strangers, we offer human connection that can meet the deepest human longings in a fellow being. In *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen explains how hospitality creates “free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.”<sup>3</sup>

**Service.** Social service, or mercy, is love for love’s sake. Christians go into the world and live lives to benefit those whom Christ loves.

Christian service involves acts of mercy and a commitment to justice. 1 Thessalonians 5:15; Romans 12:17-18; Galatians 6:10; Titus 3:1-2; and 1 Peter 2:17 reveal that Christian service is to go beyond the church *to all people*. In these verses, the Christian is commanded to seek the good, respect what is right, be at peace, do good, be kind, show consideration, and give honor to those outside the body of Christ.

If our religion does not move us beyond ourselves into faith communities, and move our faith communities into the world for the sake of the world, our religion does not reflect the life and love of Christ. In *Reaching Out*, Nouwen goes on to write, “[I]f the catastrophic events of our day, the wars, mass murders, unbridled violence, crowded prisons, torture chambers, the hunger and the illness of millions of people and the unnamable misery of a major part of the human race is safely kept outside the solitude of our hearts, our contrition remains no more than a pious emotion.”<sup>4</sup>

**Everyday Work.** When we work with Christian distinction, our work becomes a doorway into the gospel story.

Work done according to kingdom values such as honesty, integrity, justice, excellence, creativity, and concern for the created order will be so counterintuitive in some cultures that a door is opened into a new reality. In addition, Christians can make a quiet statement about their orientation toward God in love by how they steward and lead in the work place. Understanding God’s view of work can bring joy and purpose to the work, even when the work itself is not enjoyable.

**Proclamation.** Proclamation opens a door into personal faith. We invite others to come through this door so they can live and walk with Christ. However, many times our friends will first enter our community and later enter the faith. Community is important to evangelism because it gives our non-Christian friends relational connections with multiple believers while they are in the process of coming to faith.

In *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*,

Lesslie Newbigin clearly captures the significant relationship between church mission and Christian community:

If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society...it will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel.

Newbigin goes on to say that these congregations must, “recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as a foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.”<sup>5</sup>

This is a compelling vision for both church mission and Christian community. Redemptive communities are a foretaste of God’s redeeming grace, existing for the sake of those who are not members!

In addition, when our life together is shaped by the gospel and we embody the incarnate love and humility of Jesus Christ, Christian community makes faith not only visible, but also plausible and compelling. And so, community as it is meant to be undergirds those in the faith helping them to remain faithful, and invites those outside to come in.

This description of Christ-like community may seem daunting. However, the goal is not perfection but transparent progression toward Christ-likeness. The objective is to work within our current communities to tangibly demonstrate God’s kingdom on earth.

True Christian community is only possible in the shadow of the cross, where men and women are transformed by Jesus’ love and grace. Fortunately, Jesus himself has prayed for us, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in

you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-23).

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1. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 214.
  2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 215.
  3. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 51.
  4. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of Spiritual Life*, 31.
  5. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 232.