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Chapter 1

OUR NEED FOR COMMUNITY

Human beings have been created by God to live in community. When God made Adam, He said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). This statement reflects man’s need not only for a woman, but also for intimate relationships that cannot be found among other creatures.

People are not just hungry for community; they require it to truly live. This is not the result of some weakness found in humanity, but rather reflects the divine mark left upon every soul. We need community because we are made in the image of God, who has forever existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has always known the love and harmony of communion within Himself. As people who bear His image, we are relational beings who need others like us with whom we can live life. And for Christians this is especially true. We need the love

and harmony of the communion of saints. Without it, we will grow weak, and God's image will not shine as brightly in us as He intended.

SAVED TO COMMUNITY

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

(1 PETER 2:9-10)

When God saves sinners, He forgives their transgressions, cleanses them from all unrighteousness, and declares them to be righteous in Jesus Christ. Salvation includes receiving a new identity, heart, and spirit (Ezek. 36:26). But our redemption in Jesus Christ is not merely a rescue of the individual; it is a deliverance of a people from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of light, from friendship with the world into the family of God. We are saved by grace through faith into union with Christ and communion with His people (see 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4). We are saved into the communion of the saints, where we find life and spiritual growth.

SANCTIFIED IN COMMUNITY

God promises to sanctify His people. This promise was prophesied in the Old Testament and realized in the New. God works in the soul of every Christian to grow them in faith and godliness. This inner transformation is the work of the Spirit through the ministry of the Word (see John 17:17; 2 Thess. 2:13). Just as we cannot be saved apart from the activity of the Spirit and the Word, neither can we experience spiritual growth apart from the Spirit and the Word. The work of the Spirit and the ministry of the Word are found and flourish in the church, and they are frequently intensely experienced in our personal relationships with other believers.

The community of faith is what forms and reforms the Christian. Believers are formed by the ongoing instruction of the Word and fellowship of believers in the church and are reformed by brothers and sisters who hold one another accountable through loving correction, reproof, and rebuke. Such accountability is effective only in a community where a common faith gives birth to mutual love.

SERVING IN COMMUNITY

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or

asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

(1 THESS. 5:9–11)

The environment of our smaller gatherings and friendships in the church is where we can fulfill God's call on our lives. The people of God must meet together in smaller numbers to carry out the will of God in each other's lives.

For instance, if we gather together only on the Lord's Day for corporate worship, how can we possibly carry out the "one another" passages that pepper the New Testament? Apart from the environment of the table, it is impossible to truly

- "love one another with brotherly affection" (Rom. 12:10);
- "outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10);
- "live in harmony with one another" (Rom. 12:16);
- "welcome one another as Christ welcomed you" (Rom. 15:7);
- "instruct one another" (Rom. 15:14);
- "have the same care for one another" (1 Cor. 12:25);

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- “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, [bear] with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2);
- “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32);
- “[submit] to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21);
- “stir up one another toward love and good works” (Heb. 10:24);
- “[encourage] one another” (Heb. 10:25);
- and “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another” (James 5:16).

We can do some of this only in part on Sunday mornings, but we can do it fully as we dwell in the environment of the table.

We need community because we were created for it. This means without community we cannot experience life as God intended. As God said, it is not good for anyone to be alone. Isolation is a consequence of the fall and a major reason many Christians flounder in the faith. It is only as we learn to live life together by faith that we can begin to understand the value of the church and experience the Christian life in its fullness.

Specific programs that help facilitate the ministry of service and meeting people’s needs are good. But even

more important to the life of the church is that we be people who are naturally caring for one another in ways that require sacrifice and thus result in bringing relief to those who need it. When one member or family of the church is served by others in tangible ways out of a sense of love from others, the environment of the table yields fruit. For this to happen, relationships are necessary. However, building a culture that helps these relationships to grow and remain strong requires the context of smaller gatherings and groups.