

WHY IS AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY SO ELUSIVE?

BY JEFFREY P. GREENMAN



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Amidst the busyness and fragmentation of contemporary life, many Christians yearn for the experience of authentic community. Many feel lonely or disconnected, cut off from any real sense of belonging to an extended church family. They long for their congregations to be more than “normal” organizations, more than occasional gathering places of strangers, more than places of merely fleeting transactional relationships. Frequently, this lofty ideal proves elusive. If we are honest, authentic Christian community is a struggle.

What is it about community that remains so difficult, despite how earnestly it is pursued? In North America, no doubt a large part of the explanation is that we are deeply formed by the individualism of our culture. Community does not fit naturally into our cultural fabric. But we need to move beyond cultural observation and into the riches of Scripture to truly understand the challenges (and the vital importance) of authentic community. One of the richest descriptions of community in the New Testament is the idea of the church as the body of Christ. If we look at the Apostle Paul’s discussion of “one body with many members” in Romans 12, we find the three vital qualities that constitute authentic community. It is the absence of those qualities that makes community so elusive; it is the hard-earned attainment of them that makes community possible.

Romans 12 is best known perhaps for its first two verses, which appeal to Christians to offer their bodies “as a living sacrifice” and not to be “conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of your minds.” This transformation is the dramatic work in human lives by God’s Spirit, as radical as a caterpillar’s change into a butterfly. This renewed mind, which discerns and enters into the will of God, is nothing less than the mind of Christ. This is our first quality: it takes a transformed mind to enter into authentic Christian community, which is impossible if we remain conformed to the world’s ways, priorities, and expectations.

The first thing that Paul says about this renewed mind is that it is marked by humility—our second quality. In verse 3, he says that “everyone among you should not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” The renewed mind is not caught up in abstractions or theoretical speculations, but is expressed in down-to-earth, practical ways. Humility is a profound Christian virtue, the clearest mark of our becoming like Christ, who “being found in appearance as a man ... humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

It is easy to overlook the spiritual progression of this passage. The Apostle Paul knew that arrogance, self-reliance, and self-importance are massive obstacles to authentic Christian community. And that’s why it is directly before entering into his discussion of the Christian gifts that he drives home the need for Christlike humility. His logic is this: a renewed mind leads to Christlike humility, which leads to accurate self-perception, which, in turn, swings open the doors to authentic communal life. If we neglect the humility step, community remains elusive.

Why is humility so important? Because unless we bring a humble mind to any community, we will fail to value others—our third essential quality. Without humility, the gifts, talents, and contributions of each member of the diverse body of Christ will go unappreciated. This is why Paul takes the time to list the varied gifts and ministries (verses 6–8): “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” Each one matters. Each person’s contribution is essential to the functioning of the whole body. No one is replaceable, no one less or more important than another. Failing to see and value the importance of each member of the body can only prevent or threaten community.

The biblical view is remarkable: we are “members one of another” in the body of Christ, by grace, joined inseparably with people we never would have chosen. Each person, in their uniqueness and in their difference from us, is essential to the health and witness of the whole community. This is a major challenge. We are comfortable when others cater to our preferences. We like people with whom we choose to associate, who are typically people like us. Yet biblically, authentic

Christian community is characterized by something much greater than mere similarity or comfort. Christian community lies outside our control and outside our comfort zones. We are the diverse body of Christ. This is God's gift, to be received with gratitude and nurtured with humble care.