

The Communal Nature of Christianity

a sermon in the series
A Gospel-Oriented, Mission Driven, and Community-Centered Church

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Matthew 29:19

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Why did Jesus say baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”? Why not just simplify and say, “baptizing them in the name of God” or, as some suggest, “in the name of Jesus”? Why does He delineate all three persons of the Godhead in the baptistic formula, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*? Why is He so technical?

There are several reasons but one has to do with our current sermon series, which is about community; I hope to show you this in just a few moments. As we think of the word *community* I harken back to last Sunday’s message and remind you of what community is. What is the local church?

A local church is a community of believers whose lives depend upon each other and interact with each other through food, relationship, and sharing of life for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

If this is to be a true New Testament patterned church, there has to be a sense of community, which simply means there is a dependency upon one another. Are you depending upon others here in this local church for your Christian advancement? Do you truly feel the need of other believers to be connected with you and interacting with your life in order that you can be all God has planned for you to be? And let me expand the question to not only ask if you feel dependent upon others here, but do they depend upon you? These are the questions the Spirit of God is asking us. I’m convinced of it. This is how this message becomes livable, practical, and doable. Are you depending on others here and are others here depending upon you? If there is not that relationship and the practicing of it, there cannot be true New Testament Christianity.

New Testament Christianity was not designed to be lived in the spirit of American individualism, and although we feel the worth of every single individual and would uphold their rights of individuality, the church is not a collection of individuals doing their thing to serve Jesus. Rather the church is individuals coming together and losing their identity in the whole for the advancement of the whole, which is the church.

What does this text on the Great Commission have to do with community and church and all that we have said about the two? I think it has a great deal to do with it and for this reason Jesus delineated the three persons of the Godhead. Surely He could have said, “Baptize them in the name of God,” and it would have been sufficient. Certainly He could have said to baptize them in His name and it would have been sufficient. But Jesus wants us to understand that when you come to faith in Him you just don’t come to Him, individual to individual, but you enter into a community—a divine community.

I. THE ORIGIN OF COMMUNITY

When you trace back to the beginning of community, you come to God Himself. In God is the beginning of all community. He is the archetype or model of community.

A. The Trinity.

God is revealed in a community of relationship: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. God is one. We don’t worship multiple gods, we’re not polytheists. We are monotheists; we worship only one God. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!” The one God is comprised of three persons and those three form the very first community from which all community flows.

The Father is Father Because He Has a Son.

The Son is Son Because He Comes From the Father.

The Holy Spirit Proceeds From Both the Father and the Son.

Concerning the Holy Spirit, some great theologians have said that the third person of the triune God, is the love that exists between the Father and the Son and that love is so vital and vibrant that it has all the characteristics of personality. Thus the Holy Spirit is that person. I don’t think that’s too far wrong. Each distinct person has a distinct function in the person of God.

The point is that the three persons of the Godhead relate to each other on a personal level in a perfect union or togetherness called *God*. This heavenly community is God, this interaction between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is what we reverently and worshipfully call God or deity.

As we look into the heavenlies and try to understand something inexplicable, the person of God, we see the making of community.

You cannot have the Son without the Father.

You cannot have the Father without the Son.

You cannot have the Holy Spirit without either the Father or the Son.

God is a community of perfect love. Therefore when God made man, He made him not to be alone but part of a community. The Word of God says about the first man, Adam, "it is not good that man should be alone." God the Father was not alone, God the Son was not alone, God the Holy Spirit was not alone, and it was not right that man should be alone.

If God is a community of three, then it is right that God would form a community on this earth. Human beings belong to community. It doesn't matter how much American individualism may creep into our psyche, we still know and recognize there is a need for community because saints and sinners alike are parts of communities. We're all a part of some sort of community.

If you have a fire, you're going to call a community of fire fighters. If somebody is breaking into your home, you're going to call 911 and be thankful for the community of police officers that come quickly. Human beings belong to community.

Think about you. You had a father and a mother. There are no more virgin births. You are the product of community.

It is, therefore, both divine and human to have relationships. I know there are people in this world who are very illiterate when it comes to relationships. There are folks for whom relationships are very difficult but they are the exception not the rule and exceptions always prove the rule. Why do we call them exceptions, why do we look upon them with pity and compassion and say, "Oh, life must be difficult for them being so alone"? Because we know what the rule is, and the rule is togetherness, relationships.

As we look at the origin of the Divine Community from which all community flows, where we can see it and understand it in time and history we find that the holy community of God became fractured.

B. The Fracture of the Divine Community.

There is a point in time when this collective community of the Father, Son, and Spirit suffered separation, a fissure, and a division.

The cross did more than separate Jesus from His followers and family, it separated Him from His Father in Heaven. The words, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" is the evidence that proves that this Divine Community of perfect unity was splintered. Jesus was absolutely alone without any community, naked and shamed before men. A few women had gathered and a few of the disciples but only at a distance.

The only man to know the blackness of true loneliness is Jesus Christ. It's not good for man to be alone but Jesus was. Maybe you have experienced loneliness, maybe you are experiencing loneliness, but you've never experienced its blackness nor its depth like Jesus, the only human being to know absolute loneliness. He was without anyone, including His Holy Father, the One

He had known in eternal intimacy. Beyond time, beyond understanding, there was the Father and the Son in perfect community. Now there He is on the cross, ripped from the one He loves the most. Something has broken His relationship. Sin caused a division between Jesus and His Father. Jesus was abandoned only to one community. The only community Jesus was abandoned to was the communal hounds of hell that attacked Him in His separation from every good relationship. Why? So that new members could be introduced into the divine Community. I'm talking about you. I'm talking about me.

C. The Introduction of New Members in the Divine Community.

The fracture opened up the Godhead to all of us who believe in the Father through the Son by the Spirit. Again, I ask my initial question, why delineate all three in the baptism formula? Because it takes community to save you. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it takes all three. The atonement requires at least two—Father and Son—one who is the sacrifice, the other to whom the sacrifice is offered. We know the Holy Spirit was also involved in the atonement because the Scriptures say Jesus offered Himself up through the Spirit as a sacrifice to the Father to satisfy holy justice for you. Here is this perfect community from which all communities come and something came and ripped it asunder. What was it? It was the love of God! It was the love of Jesus for you that took the relationship with His Father and ripped it in two so you could come in.

This is hard to fathom, isn't it? Should I offer an illustration to try and help us get a somewhat of a handle on this? What illustration can you find that describes in detail the sacrifice, the cost, and price that Jesus experienced being alone on the cross, separated from the Father? In vain we search. Any illustration will fall short in the end.

For example, think for a moment of a married couple who you know love each other deeply and are the example of marriage. Surely everyone knows somebody like that. They are soul twins, they are lovers, they're best friends, they're knitted together. Truly they are one. They are inseparable. You've maybe even thought, *What will the future hold if one of them goes before the other? How will the other survive alone?* That's how close they are. Do you have somebody in mind?

Let us suppose that this couple and their 3 year old son while in their car, have a sudden accident on a cold day in January. They survive the accident but the car careens and falls into a frigid river. The temperatures are so cold that hypothermia will set in within minutes at most. Fortunately, the wife was able to get out of her side of the car right next to the bank. She climbed out, shaken, cold of course, but sure to survive. However, the husband and the child are still in the car on the deep end of the river. The father thinks quickly. He knows time is of the essence and fortunately he's not panned so he's able to get out. He has to make quick calculations. He knows that he only has a few moments before paralysis from hypothermia sets in and his muscles will not function, so he quickly runs through the back window and unfastens the car seat. He's able to take the child out before it passes out into unconsciousness. He leaps and throws the baby to the trembling arms of the mother. But that's all the time he has. His body temperature is rapidly decreasing, the river is working against him, and all of the sudden he begins to sense it. He tells

his arms to move but they don't move. And before her eyes, she watches her beloved go under, never to rise again.

Here we have an illustration of three people in community. Two love each other with a love that is almost divine. And there one of them watches their beloved sacrifice himself in order to save their child. Certainly we can say we have somewhat of an illustration of what Jesus did for us.

But the illustration is flawed. It's flawed first of all because Jesus didn't come to rescue beloved children who are innocent. Jesus didn't enter into the chilling waters of sin and death to rescue those drowning hopelessly and innocently because they were beloved children. No, He came into the icy rivers of death to rescue rebels, enemies, sinners, who had tried to rip He and God apart for centuries. For centuries man has rebelled against the Creator in attempts to somehow create a fracture within this community and overthrow it. Jesus was willing to do that for you and me, sinners, who wanted nothing to do with this Divine Community. We would have been just as happy to have not known about it. We would have been quite pleased if this Divine Community would have left us alone and let us live our lives the way we wanted. All this Divine Community does is remind us of our guilt. We would have been happy to wash our hands of Him, yet Jesus came for us. He was willing to die in our place.

But still, the illustration is not sufficient. There is another problem. Although the father in the story sacrificed himself for the son, the problem is his beloved wife stood helplessly on the shore watching. She powerlessly watched her husband; there was nothing she could do to save him. The problem with that is God is not hopelessly and helplessly watched His Son die on Calvary for you.

The illustration ought to be that these two lovers, whose lives have been intertwined—for better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health—now, in the hour of his demise, the wife places her foot on his head and pushes him under and drowns him. Ah, now we're closer. The Bible tells us God was not helpless or hopeless watching His Son die, no, He was the executioner.

God sacrificed Himself. The Son is the perfect image and expression of God. There is no difference in this regard. They think alike. They feel alike. What the Father thinks, the Son speaks. That's how close they are. Yet the Holy Father takes His foot and crushes His Son, says the Prophet Isaiah, and breaks Him into pieces and delights in doing it. Why? Because He knows that will open up this holy, Divine Community so that we can come in and be loved by Him and love Him in return. It takes a community to save you.

I want you to see in this statement, "baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," that you are entering into the Divine Community of the three persons of the Godhead. You're entering into community and it took every person of that community to save you.

II. THE DOOR AND FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The door and foundation of Christian community is Jesus Christ. I use the metaphors *door* and *foundation* to help us describe how we enter in because Jesus said, “I am the door,” and then to understand that He is the basis of us being a part of the community of God. You enter this community through Jesus, so when you’re baptized it is portrayed and is stated publically that you have believed upon the Son whom the Father has sent. You have responded to the conviction of the Holy Spirit who has proved to you your sin, unrighteousness, and judgment and you are immersed into this heavenly holy, holy, holy community.

A. We Enter the Community Because of Christ Jesus.

We’ve just heard an illustration, poor as it might be, how Jesus died for us, and it is this message—the Gospel—that is the basis by which you enter in. You believe the Gospel message. Remember last week when in Acts 2 three thousand heard Peter and they believed the message of Jesus, the Word of God. Jesus is the *Logos* of God. The Word became flesh, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. Those three thousand believed that Word and were saved. They were converted and were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You are in this community through the activity and work of Jesus. Not your works but His.

B. We Are In the Community Only Because We Are In Jesus.

Perhaps the best way to make this clear is the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians. Paul is writing to those who are mainly Gentiles, there are some Jews, but they were mainly Gentile believers in this church. He wants them to understand how they were outsiders. Up to the time of Christ, the work of God was mainly an ethnic work mainly dealing with Hebrews, with national Israel only. There were some Gentiles along the way but mainly the work of God in redemption was mainly through one nation—Israel.

I’m going to read this passage out of the Amplified Bible because I believe it gives us the nuance that the Apostle Paul wanted the believers at Ephesus to receive. Let’s read it together and think about yourself. I don’t think there’s anybody of Jewish descent here, most of us are of Gentile descent. We’re Gentiles by physical nature and ethnicity.

[Remember] that you were at that time separated (living apart) from Christ [excluded from all part in Him], utterly estranged and outlawed from the rights of Israel as a nation, and strangers with no share in the sacred compacts of the [Messianic] promise [with no knowledge of or right in God’s agreements, His covenants]. And you had no hope (no promise); you were in the world without God. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were [so] far away, through (by, in) the blood of Christ have been brought near. (Ephesians 2:12-13, AMP)

My mind’s eye sees an ocean filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins and I see someone able to ride the tide of that blood all the way into heaven’s shores, brought in by and in the blood. That’s why you’re in the community of faith because Jesus is the community, the Father, the Son,

the Holy Spirit. Now that you're in Him you're in this Divine Community and in this local church, a microcosm of this Divine Community in Christ.

C. The Community Only Thrives Because of Christ.

It doesn't thrive because of us and our performance, our ministries, our programs, or our giftedness; this community thrives because of Jesus. This has been the theme throughout this series of messages. When we were talking about Gospel orientation, the whole emphasis was that we grow up into Christ Jesus, our Head, by speaking truth, which is the Gospel, to one another. In other words, we enter because of the Gospel message of Christ, we are sustained upon the Word—the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and we thrive and flourish spiritually by the same Word and message, the Gospel.

Church growth experts say the way you get people through the doors of your church is the way you will need to keep them there. If you are going to have a big campaign and give away big door prizes or give away hot dogs, well, you better buy stock in a hot dog company because you're going to have to keep giving away hot dogs to get people to come. And sooner or later you'll have to improve the menu and go to hamburgers and French fries because the flesh says, "that's not enough, we want more." But if you've come by the way of the blood, the message of the Gospel, it is enough to constantly feed you. You don't want anything else. Everything else is like, well, it's like eating Styrofoam after you've had great cuisine—it doesn't satisfy. We are sustained by this Gospel and by sharing it one with another. Therefore, we need one another to speak the Gospel into each others' lives.

I don't care how advanced you are in the Christian faith, you need to be reminded of how you got into this community and how you're going to get all the way to glory.

D. The Community of Christ is Christ to the Community.

Let me unpack what I mean by that. This is the community of Christ, the church. All who are redeemed are part of this community because of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. If you're not a Christian, you're being blessed by the overflow of this community. I want to be clear on that. God so loves you that He lets you get the crumbs off the table, but friend, you don't need to be eating crumbs. God loves you. You're not a little dog. God wants to make you sons and daughters of His if you'll just believe the Word of Jesus. That Word, Jesus Christ says, "I did everything sufficient to bring you to the Father and into this divine community, just believe. Turn from your sin and turn to Me and you will be welcomed!" And not only will Jesus welcome you, but we will welcome you also. No longer will you have to feed off the crumbs we leave, you will be seated at the table with us. We want you to be at the table with us! Oh, we want you here with us. I would give my plate up to you if I could, I would fast for you if that would save you, but it won't. Only God saves in response to faith and repentance.

But this is the community of Christ and this community of Christ is God's way of manifesting Christ to the community. The church is Jesus' way of revealing Himself to all who are in the community of Christ. This is what the Gospel tells us. Christ is manifested and experienced in community. That doesn't mean you cannot experience Him in your private devotions alone, you can, but the Bible is clear that although a personal relationship is necessary, it is not sufficient. God did not intend for you to be a lone ranger. In fact, I don't know why I use that illustration because even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. He had community. It was small but it was community nonetheless, he wasn't alone. You're not Superman! You're not Superwoman! You need other believers and you need the Jesus that is in them. That's how you see Him. As I said last week, often—especially when you're in a trial and adversity and your faith is weak—the word of Jesus through a brother or sister will have more life than the life of the word of Jesus in you.

This community is not perfect, far from it. The Divine Community of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are perfect, but they by grace have welcomed us in and they are working on us, but we're not perfect yet. While this community is not perfect it experiences the Gospel of Christ in shared grace. If we could understand this biblical principle our church would grow mightily. The grace God gives you personally is not to be hoarded. We could do a documentary on Christian hoarding. We think when God speaks to us, gives us a verse, answers a prayer, *that's for me*. No. It's for you to share and to give. This is the principle, "it's more blessed to give than to receive." The more you give the more you get in order to give; we said that last week. Even though this community is not perfect, it experiences the Gospel of Christ in this shared grace.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer did an excellent job explaining this in his little book *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer was a German theologian and pastor who, two weeks before Hitler committed suicide in a Berlin bunker, was hanged by Hitler for his opposition to the fascist regime in Germany. They told him to quit preaching and he wouldn't quit preaching. They tried to get him off the radio but he went underground and even created a seminary. He was an enemy to the state of Hitler and he paid for it ultimately with his life. He knew what it was like to be alone in solitary confinement, all by himself with just Jesus. He also knew what it was like to be with a huddle of believers in a Nazi prison and the fellowship and community they experienced. Bonhoeffer is well qualified to talk about being alone and in isolation as a believer and being together as a believer.

Here's what he says,

And is not what has been given us enough: brothers, who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of His grace? Is the divine gift of Christian fellowship anything less than this, any day, even the most difficult and distressing day? Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, in whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably [beneficial], because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can live by our own words and deeds, but

only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 28)

That's why God designed the church. Bonhoeffer is right. What has been given to us in the fellowship of believers is sufficient for us even on the worst day. The grace of the Word of Jesus in you is sufficient for me on my worst day. The Word of Jesus in me is sufficient for you on your worst day. This divine gift, as he calls it, of Christian fellowship is in fact a divine gift and even when sin and misunderstanding comes into this imperfect body—if one of us sins against another—the community of God is not going to be hindered by that sin if we do as God designed us to do: respond with the Gospel.

If a brother or sister sins against you, remember you both stand under the same Gospel. And will not his or her sin against you be a reminder to give thanks that you both are saved by grace? When you're sinned against you have a readymade occasion to start worshipping. You ought to worship because what your brother or sister has just done is a reminder that you have been forgiven by grace under the same blood. That's how Bonhoeffer is saying community works. If your brother or sister gives brings despair and disillusionments, it is God's way of working something that is so advantageous to you because it teaches you that neither your brother or sister or you stand in this community by what you have done but you're in this community solely by what Jesus has done. That's the basis of our fellowship.

This is not about getting you to perform better, this is about getting you to believe better. Believe what? The Gospel. That's how the church flourishes. It flourishes by us preaching the Gospel to one another and demonstrating it as God has demonstrated it to Jesus Christ. I have no right to hold any bitterness or resentment against you because I have been forgiven far worse.

This is the message of the parable about the wicked steward who was forgiven by the king of a huge debt. He could never pay it back and yet the king forgave, cancelled the debt. Afterwards, he immediately grabs a fellow employee by the neck and says, "You better pay me the small amount you owe me or I'm going to have you thrown into prison!" "But I don't have it, have mercy!" "That's not enough." And the forgiven but wicked servant has his debtor thrown into prison. The king hears of it and calls the man back in. "Why did you not have mercy on your fellow employee as I have had on you?! You've insulted me. You had an opportunity to honor me, because if you had been merciful to him it would have called attention to my mercy toward you. You could have honored me and my grace to you!" Brothers and sisters, you and I have no right to hold resentment toward another brother or sister. What you ought to see, if you start thinking with a Gospel orientation when someone sins against you is, "Here is another opportunity to see the Gospel demonstrated."

I want to conclude. We need community. I need community. You need community. Perhaps the greatest evidence is in my audience today. I want to ask you a series of questions. Please answer these internally.

How many of you often experience a mini-revival almost every Sunday? “Mini-revival” might be too strong of a phrase but you get the idea. Perhaps you come in limping on a Sunday, you’re struggling, as you probably did this morning. But while you were here something happened so you left stronger than you came? Maybe you came in limping but while we were singing your soul began to come alive just through some of the songs? Have you experienced that? Or maybe it wasn’t the songs but somebody stood up and said, “Here’s what God has done for me this week,” and in their testimony God spoke directly toward you and you felt strength?

Or maybe it wasn’t the testimony or the songs but by the time somebody prayed as God led them and inspired their prayer it was as if they were reading your mail and God helped you because you didn’t have the faith or the strength to pray. All you could do was piggyback their prayer and hold on tight. Maybe you said, “God, I can’t pray but I’m latching onto their prayer because it’s for me,” and you were helped. Have you ever had that experience?

And, against all chance, maybe you got something out of a sermon one day, when the Word of God became a sharp, powerful, two-edged sword in your heart and God was able to communicate and you knew it was God and you left this place joyful and hopeful. Have you ever had that happen?

Perhaps though by Monday or Tuesday what you felt on Sunday was gone. Have you ever had that experience? The revitalization, the new sense of hope had already left by Monday afternoon. Would that not prove that interaction with believers with an intentional focus on Christ in us should not be something we only do only one day a week but should be happening several times a week. Could this not be proof that something is wrong? Is this not evidential that something is wrong with the way we think and practice the community of faith? I’m convinced it’s so. It’s proof that the Christian life is not to be lived in isolation from other believers? We are meant to live together for Christ not apart.

Sin expelled us from the community of God in the Garden. But Christ left the community of God in Heaven and discovered the loneliness of being outside His beloved community so that an opening could be made for you and me to enter back into community with God. That community finds its expression in this community of faith as we bear one another, forgive one another, love one another, support one another, and serve one another, all in the name of this word called the Gospel.

It’s awesome to come to the point where you say, “I’m not sufficient to do this by myself. I need community.” May God help us in the days and months to come to not interact with each other only on Sundays and Wednesdays but every day. May God bring that to pass so we can say we are a part of the community of God. Amen.