

Community

“We Are Family” by Pete Bullette

The concept of Biblical community can at times be a tough one for us to grasp in our day and age. In Western culture, we embrace what social scientists have come to call *radical individualism*. The default mode of our culture is that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment take precedence over any connection with a group or the good of the group.

The Mediterranean world in Jesus’ day and, for that matter, most societies throughout history have been much different. Rather than being *radical individualists*, they were *collectivists* in their view of the world. This meant that individuals would put their own good as secondary to the good of the group they belonged to, whether that group is a family, a village, or a religious community.¹ The well-being of the group received first priority.

Next, it is important to know that in the New Testament world, a person’s most important group was his blood family. In the family, the deepest bond and loyalty was between siblings.² It would be a treacherous act of human disloyalty to betray one’s brother.

Thus when we read in Scripture about Jesus³ and Paul using familial language, specifically sibling language, to speak of how followers of Jesus are to relate and live with each other, we can start to understand just how deep Christian brotherhood and sisterhood is supposed to go in Christian community. If you follow Jesus, you are now a part of God’s family (Eph 2:19), and brothers and sisters with other people who follow Jesus. Just as we are *justified* with respect to God the Father upon salvation, so also we are “*familified*” with respect to our brothers and sisters in Christ.⁴

Paul wrote that, upon our conversion, we are united into this family by the bond of the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:3). So while we may come to Christ individually, we are to follow Him corporately as a family. The idea that one could acquire a “personal relationship with God” and yet ignore the family of faith is totally foreign to Scripture and ignores what our Lord taught about how we are to live and love as brothers and sisters. Needless to say, the sibling language of brotherhood and sisterhood used by Jesus and Paul is not just good “Christianese,” but is descriptive of how we are to live in community with each other.

I want to share three major ways that real brotherhood and sisterhood play out in daily life. We will call them Care, Share, and Bear.

Care

As mentioned earlier concerning ancient Mediterranean society, blood siblings shared a deep emotional bond and loyalty to each other. This means Jesus’ use of sibling language is calling us to deeply care for and love our brothers and sisters in Christ. There should be an intimacy in our relationships that is found in families. Intimacy is built from sharing our hearts with each other. We need to open our hearts to each other as brothers and sisters so we can truly care for each other. This means that we will need to lower our masks, open our hearts, and be authentic to each other. We are called to confess our sins to one another⁵, rejoice with those

¹ Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 6

² *Ibid.*, 50

³ Mark 3:33-35, 10:28-30

⁴ Hellerman, 132

⁵ James 5:16

who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn⁶. Jesus tells us that we are to care for each other by washing each other's feet. We are to take a posture of humility with each other, honor each other, and serve each other in whatever way possible.

Often overlooked, but extremely important, is the fact that we need to care enough for each other to confront each other when we see a brother or sister in need of correction. As it says in Proverbs 27:6, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." To truly care for someone, we must seek the divine good in their life, which means at times that we need to care enough for them to confront them and see our brother or sister restored. This also means we need to give brothers and sisters permission to "wound" us out of a heart of love and care.

Share

The first thing we see after the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts is a description of what this "family," defined by the work of the Spirit, looks like in action. One detail that cannot be overlooked is how they were generous to each other. Acts 2:44-45 speaks of how "All believers were together and shared everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need." In Acts 4, we get a very similar picture of God's family of the Spirit taking care of each other.

In chapter 10 of the gospel of Mark, we see that Peter talks about all of the sacrifices he made to follow Jesus. Jesus' response is an interesting one. He says, "You will not fail to receive a hundred times as much in return—homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields." To what could Jesus be referring? The terms houses and fields imply that those who become part of Jesus' community will have access to the material goods of the family—just like siblings in an ancient Mediterranean family. True community is to be generous with each other.

Bear

Finally, we see that to truly be family is to bear with one another. One thing that is certain in any relationship is that at some point, there will be conflict. But one characteristic about healthy families is that when conflict happens, there is really only one option—to come back into family unity as fast as possible. This means that as brothers and sisters, we need to be quick to ask for and extend forgiveness as needed. In Matthew 10, Peter came to Jesus and asked, "How many times shall I forgive my *brother* when He sins against me?" (emphasis added). Jesus tells him not seven times but seventy-seven times, and then launches into a powerful story about the importance of offering forgiveness.

In his book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about the subtle temptation but severe dangers of expecting perfect community. I have ended the article with his wise words of caution and exhortation to thankfulness for the community we currently experience.

Every human dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.

God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by

⁶ Romans 12:15

others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.

Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what he has done for us. We thank God for giving us brethren who live by His call, by his forgiveness, and His promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what He does give us daily.

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, with 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 salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by the one Word and Deed, which really binds us together—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mists of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship.

Relevant Scriptures

Mark 3:33-35	<i>"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked...</i>
Mark 10:28-30	<i>Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"...</i>
John 13	<i>Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet</i>
Acts 4:32-35	<i>All the believers were one in heart and mind...</i>

Questions for Discussion

- What would the implications be for us if we really viewed our Christian community in the same way we viewed our family?
- What are the implications of our salvation being both justified before God and "familified" with his family?

Care

- The article says that "we will need to lower our masks, open our hearts, and be authentic to each other." Do you feel that you are able to currently do those things?
- Who in your life can "wound you" and you receive it?
- What brotherhood or sisterhood relationships are you currently building that you hope will last beyond graduation into every season of your life? What can you do to make it happen?

Share

- How does the picture of the early church inspire you?
- What are some ways that you could start to live this out?

Bear

- Are you a person who forgives quickly?
- Is there someone you need to be reconciled with in your life? If so, how can you seek it?
- Give your thoughts on the Bonhoeffer quote at the end of the article. Which way do you tend to go the quickest—towards criticism of where the community falls short, or towards thankfulness for the community you do have? How could you foster a thankful heart?

Recommended Reading

Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

When the Church Was a Family by Joseph Hellerman