



# GROUPS

*"People are longing to rediscover true community. We have had enough of loneliness, independence, and competition."  
— Jean Vanier*

*"The church is a community of people on a journey to God. Wherever there is supernatural togetherness and Spirit-directed movement, there is the church – a spiritual community. Why is spiritual community so rare? I suspect it has to do with the requirement of brokenness. We'd much rather be impressively intact than broken. But only broken people share spiritual community."*

— Larry Crabb

*"Americans are good at forming clubs and gathering crowds. But clubs and crowds, even when they are religious clubs and crowds, are not communities. The formation of community is the intricate, patient, painful work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot buy or make community; we can only offer ourselves to become community."  
— Eugene Peterson*

It happened to me while I was on a train in Scotland. I was 21 years old, and wondering what to do with my life. I had picked up an oddly-titled book at a Christian book store, I supposed because it intrigued me: *Cinderella with Amnesia* by Michael Griffiths, perhaps the worst title of all time. But then again, maybe not, since I can recall it now, 36 years later. It was a book about community - a living, breathing network of deep relationships — and it startled me because it was describing something I hadn't associated with deep, meaningful relationships: the church. I had grown up in a church - sort of, although our family didn't really seem to know anyone in particular there. And since I'd become a Christian, just two years earlier, I had viewed church as a place to learn and to do ministry, but it had never occurred to me that it could be a family, a place to be myself, to share life with actual friends. Here's the passage that stopped me in my tracks:

"The whole emphasis of Scripture is that Christians need the body, need each other, and cannot really exist as healthy, balanced Christians except as members of the body. To be an "independent operator," a kind of free-lance Christian, is not only to be missing the blessing you should derive from others, but also to be depriving them of your own contribution. It is not enough to say that you are a member of the universal church. You are properly required to be a member of that church in its local setting. The spectator Christian who merely attends services is missing part of the gospel."

Could he be telling the truth? Could church be more than what I'd already experienced? That wondering hope set me off on a quest to find authentic *koinonia* — Greek for "fellowship" — and the ensuing search turned up some things that changed my life...

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## God Creates Community: A Brief History

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Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, one of the founders of Willow Creek Church in Chicago and a professor at Wheaton College and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, used to point out that God is in the business of creating community. In fact, that

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*"Community is not easy. Somebody once said, 'Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.'"*

— Henry Nouwen

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is what He always does. First of all, He is a holy community within Himself; the Trinity functions as three loving, communicating persons who are somehow mysteriously one in essence. Then, when God created man, He said, "It is not good for the man to be alone," and so He created woman — similar but not identical — complementary and unique. (And the man really liked her!) Adam and Eve soon had children and became a family — dysfunctional, to be sure, but still a family — another type of community. When God graciously began His plan of redemption, He chose one man, Abraham, and miraculously gave him a family, and over time his family multiplied into a nation-community: Israel. When God sent His son, Jesus did not live an isolated life, but chose a dozen men to do life with. They were His disciples, a roving mini-community, but He made a point to call them friends (John 15:15), and after the resurrection He made a special point to call them brothers (John 20:17). When Jesus ascended and the Spirit came, the church was born on the day of Pentecost. It was not just a massive gathering of

individuals, but an interconnected “body” of believers who sensed an inner shared life and expressed that life openly as a community. Here’s a snapshot of their common life together:

*“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47)*

And finally one day, when human history draws to a close, as revealed in the next-to-last chapter of the Bible, God will consummate His love relationship with His people:

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (Revelation 21:1-3)*

There you have it. God created, formed and redeemed humanity, all the while doing it through the vehicle of community.

And yet we have an inner conflict. We sense that we are wired for community, but we live in a society, especially here in America, which is highly competitive, consumer-driven and individualistic — not very community-friendly. Yet our desire for authentic community is reflected in some of the most highly-rated television shows in our culture: MASH, Cheers, Seinfeld, Friends, The Office. There’s even a new program called “Community.” Each of these shows features a quirky ensemble of characters with their own idiosyncrasies but who are necessary to the whole. And while we laugh at the strangest characters, at the same time we can’t imagine the group without them. We secretly long for a place where everybody knows your name, where you’re accepted, warts and all, and where you’re sincerely missed if you don’t show up.

Could the church be the place that meets that longing?

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## Jesus’ New Commandment and Paul’s Follow-up

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The New Testament describes in detail what the life of this new community is to look like. Gathering His follower-friends for one last Passover dinner, Jesus announced that He was ready to issue a new directive. “A new command I

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*“Love — and the unity it attests to — is the mark Christ gave Christians to wear before the world.”*

*— Francis Schaeffer*

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give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). And just to prove how serious He was about this, He added in the very next verse: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” In other words, this “love” thing is not just a sidebar to being a fully-devoted follower – it’s the essential measuring stick. It’s the proof Jesus will offer to the world that a Christian really is a Christian. Francis Schaeffer, in his booklet [The Mark of the Christian](#) commented: “Love — and the unity it attests to — is the mark Christ gave Christians to wear before the world. Only with this mark may the world know that Christians are indeed Christians and that Jesus was sent by the Father.”

The Apostle Paul picks up where Jesus left off. In his epistles, Paul took this command to “love one another” and expanded on it. Like a prism that expands white light by showing all the intrinsic colors of the spectrum, so Paul’s use of the Greek word “allelon” (“one another”) spells out in detail what love looks like. (Outside of the gospels, the word occurs 58 times, and Paul’s share of that number is 40.) As portrayed by the “one anothers,” love is not so much a feeling as a conscious choice to act in certain ways in our relationships. A survey of the New Testament occurrences of “allelon” yields this partial list:

- love one another
- honor one another
- accept one another
- forgive one another
- encourage one another
- bear with one another

In addition to the “one another’s,” Paul also used a striking metaphor for the church that would highlight not only the need for connectedness but the fact that Christians are organically linked together. He spoke of the church as a “body,” and in the process he also dealt with the twin psychological problems of inferiority and superiority:

*“The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ...”*

*Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, “I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand,” that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, “I am not part of the body because I am not an eye,” would that make it any less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?*

*Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."*

*This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.*

*All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12, New Living Translation)*

Gene Getz, who wrote the groundbreaking book Sharpening the Focus of the Church at the beginning of the church renewal movement in the early 1970s, wrote:

"The church is pictured in the New Testament as a unique organism. Even in its local expression it is more than an organization. Every localized group of believers is composed of individual members, who are to function and be part of the whole."

But just because the church has the potential to experience deep community doesn't mean it always happens. Sometimes it occurs as a serendipity, but it usually takes some intentional effort. That may come in the form of someone risking rejection by sharing a vulnerability or struggle. Ray Stedman was pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo, Alto, California for forty years, from 1950 to 1990. But it wasn't until he was almost halfway through his tenure there that he and the church began to discover what they called "body life." They began to devote their Sunday evening service to a time of sharing needs and then meeting them on the spot, whether they came in the form of prayer requests or physical needs, like a place to stay for the night. Ray wrote, "In the early church all Christians were intimately and actively involved in the vibrant life of the body. Their witness to unbelievers coupled with their love for each other rocked the Roman world. And it must be so again."

Throughout the 1970s churches began to realize that while large gatherings like Body Life were exciting, community was much more likely to happen in small groups. Call them what you want – fellowship groups, mini-churches, community groups, home groups – the point is to create a smaller expression of the larger church, a safe place, often in someone's home, where you can actually get to know one another. Small groups can "do life together." Each individual meeting may not be spectacular, but the long-term effect of caring for one another through life's ups and downs is priceless. Whether it's an exciting answer to a year-long prayer, or the angst of a negative report from the oncology center, who can you call who will really care? That's the beauty and value of small groups. And while it may be very meaningful for a pastor to visit you in the hospital, there's nothing like the praying presence of a group of friends who've come to know, love and support you.

John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church,

writes in his article "The We We Want to Be,"

"When we hear the phrase spiritual formation, we usually think about individual lives. That's not a bad thing; Paul says he labors and struggles "to present everyone mature in Christ." However, Paul wasn't writing to an individual at the time. Most of the New Testament books are letters to congregations; to corporate bodies; to groups, not individuals.

If I'm a member of a gym, it may not matter much to me what kind of shape other people are in. I'm interested in my fitness. I don't have a strong investment in the fitness of other people. In fact, I don't mind a little flab in the bodies working out around me. It makes me feel better by comparison. I use the fitness center to get my body in shape. The fitness center is a tool for individuals.

The church is not a spiritual fitness center. The church is not a tool. The church is a body. It is *the* body. It is Christ's body."

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## **Pain, Forgiveness and Celebration**

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But experiencing authentic community isn't always easy. Often it requires a conscious commitment, because in community we expose our weaknesses and flaws. We can hurt one another, and we may need to resolve conflicts. Frankly, that's messy, and many people would rather not take the risk. Sometimes we feel like Woody Allen, who said, "I wouldn't want to join any club that would accept me as a member." Jean Vanier, director of the L'Arche community for severely handicapped individuals, writes,

"Community is a place of pain, of the death of ego. In community, we are sacrificing independence and the pseudo-security of being closed up. We can only live this pain if we are certain that for us being in community is our response to a call from God. If we do not have this certitude, then we won't be able to stay in community."

Shortly before his death, the Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen described community in his 1995 article: "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry." Using the account of Jesus' "long day" in Luke 6, Nouwen observed that Jesus began that day (actually the night before) in prayer, then spent time with his disciples, and finally ministered to the crowds of people with all of their various needs. Nouwen noted that in solitude Jesus allowed himself time to be reminded of his relationship with a Father who called him his beloved son, a practice we should emulate. That identity as the beloved was the core of his strength. But he did not venture out alone; he deliberately lived with and served in the context of his disciples. Using that paradigm, Nouwen made the following comments:

- "Why is it so important that solitude come before community? If we do not know we are the beloved sons

and daughters of God, we're going to expect someone in the community to make us feel that way. They cannot.

- Community is not easy. Somebody once said, 'Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.'
- Within the discipline of community are the disciplines of forgiveness and celebration. Forgiveness and celebration are what make community, whether a marriage, a friendship, or any other form of community.
- What is forgiveness? Forgiveness is to allow the other person not to be God.
- This is where celebration, the second discipline of community, comes in. If you can forgive that another person cannot give you what only God can give, then you can celebrate that person's gift."

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*"...let him who has the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart."*

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Despite the hassles of dealing with mess-creating sinners like ourselves, once we have tasted the blessings of authentic community, most people conclude that the downside is worth it. We sense that we were not made to go it alone, as tempted as we are to try it, and that God has somehow wired us to experience life with others. When we are accepted and known and cared about, we begin to feel we are part of a team, that life is not just about me.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor in Nazi Germany during World War II, experienced authentic community with fellow believers in a sort of underground fellowship. He was captured and imprisoned, and finally executed shortly before the Allies liberated Europe. He described his experiences of real "koinonia" in the book [Life Together](#):

"It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace that any day may be taken from us. Therefore, let him who has the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren."

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## Recommended Reading

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- [Body Life](#), by Ray Stedman
- [The Body](#), by Chuck Colson
- [Life Together](#), by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- [Cinderella with Amnesia](#), by Michael Griffiths
- [The Mark of the Christian](#), by Francis Schaeffer
- [The Safest Place on Earth](#), by Larry Crabb
- [Love One Another](#), by Gerald Sittser
- [Building Up One Another](#), by Gene Getz
- Articles in Leadership Journal:
  - o John Ortberg, "The We We Want to Be" (Spring 2010)
  - o Henri Nouwen, "Moving From Solitude to Community to Ministry" (April 1, 1995)