

# The Community of the Church

## God – The Designer

I was baptized into Christ in 1977 and I believe I have done a fairly good job (or possible a goodly fair job!) of continuing to seek His truth in His Holy Word.

However, only in more recent years have I begun to get a real sense for the evidences in our physical world for a Common Designer. As I look at the many kinds of animals, I can see that our Common Designer used His tried and true approach in His design of humans as well as hippos, and hawks as well as hyenas.

God is that Common Designer and there is plenty of evidence of His existence in the intricacies of His design.

## God – The Author

Likewise, when we read through God's Word we see plenty of evidence of a Common Author by the consistent themes in His Holy Word. From the Creation to Christ we can see that the Bible is in harmony throughout and that it was all written by one Author who is also the Creator of all things. We can see that He is all knowing and that He has a thorough and complete plan for us.

## The Community of God's People – Old Testament

Today, we are going to examine one of those common themes as we read about the community of God's people. Let's begin by looking at the Old Testament, understanding what it was that God wanted for His people as they traveled to the promise land.

In Numbers 2:1-31 we see that God had specifically called out how the thirteen tribes were to set up and break down their camp as they traveled through the wilderness.

Nu 2:1-2 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron,

The people of Israel shall encamp each by his own standard, with the ensigns of their fathers' houses; they shall encamp facing the tent of meeting on every side.

We might guess that part of God's reasoning for this pattern was defensive, so that the people would be in good position should they suddenly come under attack. But I can't say this for sure and I would rather suspect that God had more than one single purpose in mind when he gave this instruction. This was a basic design for living together as a community of God's people.

In Numbers 5 and 6 and we can see that God had described the ways the people ought to live together in harmony, and how they should treat one another. God explains about what His people should do with the unclean. He writes about the laws of restitution, of jealousy, and of the Nazirites. These are clear instructions on how to live together as a community.

There are more instructions throughout the Old Testament on how His people should live together. How about in Leviticus 19:18 where His people were instructed to "love your neighbor as yourself".

To God, the importance of community of His people is evidenced by the way God instructed them to live.

## **The Community of God's People – New Testament**

In a similar way, and not surprisingly, in the New Testament we see this common theme about the importance of the community of God's people in several scripture locations.

Let's read together Romans 12:1-8.

- 1 I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
- 2 Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
- 3 For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him.
- 4 For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function,
- 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.
- 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;
- 7 if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching;
- 8 he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Paul, in his letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, and the Colossians, uses the word "body" more than 30 times to illustrate the functioning church. Approximately half of the times he used the word, he was referring to the human, physical body with its many parts and members. In the other half, he applied the term to the church – the body of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12:14-31, we see a good example of where Paul uses the word "body" in reference to the human body. But even in these instances he uses the analogy to describe how the church should work together.

While I believe that it is good for us to seek ways to work for God, and to use the gifts that He gave us, I do not believe that these scriptures so much encourage us to find our separate spiritual gifts, rather they instruct us how to live together as one, and to work together in community.

Notice how Paul encourages us to be "members, one of another", and to "have the same care for one another".

Paul teaches us that no individual Christian can function effectively by him or herself.

We see the same principle in Ephesians 4:1-3. Paul teaches us that all Christians should work hard at creating unity in the body of Christ.

- 1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,

- 2 with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love,
- 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

He also opened his first letter to the Christians in Corinth with an appeal that they be united, that they agree and have no divisions among them.

We need each other and we should be doing everything we possibly can to keep misunderstandings from arising and divisions from erupting. It is apparent in Paul's first letter that the church at Corinth lacked this unity.

The Bible encourages each of us to become mature in Christ and that love for others is the most significant key to unity and effective body function.

## **Our Needs – Focus on Our Community – One Another**

We need to focus on one another. We need to desire to strengthen our community, the community of Christ. "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." (Romans 12:5)

## **Practical Steps**

### **Step 1**

Note that most Biblical references to the functioning body of Christ focus on local churches. We can really only function practically and minister to each other in close relationships. We know that there are Christians suffering all over the world but we don't necessarily know what it is like to suffer as a Christian in China, or to deal with persecution in Nigeria.

The only possible way for body function to be effective, meaningful, and dynamic is in the context of local bodies of **believers who know each other well and who are able, on the basis of knowledge, to minister to each other**. In this type of close relationship, true body function takes place.

### **Step 2**

A local body of believers does not function automatically. There must be a degree of **spiritual maturity**. In order to become mature, believers must be taught the nature of the body of Christ. This, of course, is why Paul took so much effort to spell this out in the Corinthian letter. **Spend time reading Paul's direct references to the functioning body of Christ**, especially in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians as they appear to be more mature churches.

### **Step 3**

**Are you, as a leader or a regular member of Christ's body**, emphasizing "looking for gifts" or are you emphasizing "becoming spiritually mature"? Emphasizing looking for spiritual gifts can lead to confusion, rationalization, and even self-deception. An emphasis on becoming spiritually mature will lead to concern, humility, patience, sensitivity, freedom, and unity. These are true expressions of love.

