

Martin White. Sunday, 21st September, 2008.

They devoted themselves to...fellowship (Acts 2:42)

It feels like for the last 10 years we have been aiming for “the moon” (multicultural church); but it feels like over the last few months, all of a sudden we have entered the gravitational field and instead of our efforts to aim towards it, it is now drawing us towards it. The pace is quickening; instead of constant navigating towards it, it feels like we are being drawn, and the main job now is to control the approach and cling on, making the many smaller adjustments we need to.

Another word that I have shared recently is about DNA and the sense that God is wanting to work on the essence of who we are as a church – to make any alterations He chooses to in us, in order that we would be as He wants us to be – a church of many cultures becoming “One new man in Christ.” The other part of this word is that of God reproducing what He has done in us across this and many other cities and nations.

I feel an incredible amount of faith, excitement and confidence in what God is doing and believe that we are in a ‘gravitational pull’ that means we will see quick increases in the work God is doing.

And it is in this context that I want to start a new series looking at an issue that I believe is hugely important in the Bible, but is rarely preached on and, although it is not difficult or technical, is easily overlooked in the Church in the West; **what it means to be a community.**

John Kpikpi (God’s new tribe) illustration about Solomon – spiritual “blind spots” because of culture

Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places. (1 Kings 3:3)

Solomon was genuinely loving God and walking His way...except that there was a glaring area of sin & compromise – he was still offering sacrifices in a pagan style of worship!

The previous verse gives a clue to the reason:

The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD. (1 Kings 3:2)

I believe that Solomon sincerely wanted to follow God, it's just that, immersed in his culture, he had a blind spot; everyone else did it, and so there didn't seem to be anything wrong with it.

I believe that the issue of community is a cultural *and* a biblical issue; it can be interpreted and worked out differently in different cultures, with good and bad effects in all cultures, but it is also a biblical issue with, I believe, a biblical plumb line that we should measure it against.

In other words, there is a godly, biblical way to be in community, and there is an ungodly, less than biblical way to work out community.

And another word for attitudes and practices that are 'less than biblical' is "sin."

I believe that in the West, things have moved so far away from the Biblical example of what we are called to in terms of being God's New Community; God's Family; the Body of Christ; an outpost of Heaven; that we go through the motions, but sometimes they are nothing more than an empty shell or paying lip-service to this biblical Truth.

So in some churches, there is a part of the service called "The Peace" where everyone stands and shakes hands with the people around them. I have been to RC & CofE churches and have been happy to do this, and think it is meant as a symbol of a bigger truth; but over the years, I think that this has, at times, become the only expression of this amazing Truth about what we belong to as Christians.

And in case we think that this is only a problem for the Traditional Church, I read a very provocative quote from a Muslim woman who had converted to Christianity and had then left the Church, who said "I gave up my family, my

culture and my friends to follow Jesus...and all I got in return was two meetings a week.”

In a multicultural society, the Western attitude to hospitality and community; the way we relate to extended families, the way we treat different members of the community (the elderly) and the way we express hospitality and care, must be a massive stumbling block that makes it difficult for people to become part of a church that’s actions are so far less than a non-western culture that people may have grown up in.

And yet the issue of hospitality and community – of sharing our lives, is so important that if it’s not part of a person’s life, then they shouldn’t even be considered for leadership in the Church:

Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, **hospitable**, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. (1 Timothy 3:2-3)

Imagine how shocked people would be if I turned up to church drunk!

(This isn’t just for elders, but also is a list of character traits that refers to all mature Christians!)

The culture in Britain hasn’t always been like this, and I want to talk for a minute about how things have changed in Britain, and then to look at a verse from the Bible which gives a snapshot of what ‘normal’ biblical life in God’s Community should look like.

- **Pre-Industrial Revolution:** Village life, Church parish caring for needs of community; Extended community in identity, care & local ‘government’.
- **Industrial Revolution:** Move to cities; breakdown of community → idea of nuclear family.
- **Rise of classes:** Use of hospitality to reinforce social position; “An Englishman’s home is his castle.”
- **“Blitz Spirit”** – War years – taste of community responsibility.
- **Mobility:** in last 40 years more fragmenting of family.
- **Individualism**

"They are casting their problems at society. And, you know, **there's no such thing as society**. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and *then*, also, to look after our neighbours." (Margaret Thatcher, 1987)

(This isn't meant as a political statement, I think that she was describing the spirit of the age.)

So gradually British society has changed, not because British people are unfriendly, but rather that, like Solomon, the nation we live in has drifted into the place it is in now.

But the 1st Century Church was different – made up of many nationalities – even from Day 1 (Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome - both Jews and converts to Judaism; Cretans and Arabs – Acts 2:9-11)

And Acts 2 also gives us a snapshot of what this growing, vibrant, multicoloured church was like and what they did:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42 NIV)

They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers. (The Message)

They spent their time learning from the apostles, and they were like family to each other. They also broke bread and prayed together. (CEV)

Concentrate, because this is deep theology!

"They" – not specific, all-inclusive

"Devoted" - committed, gave themselves to, to fellowship as much as to the Apostles' teaching or prayer.

Devoted → eg. Girlfriend (talk about her, give time to, value.)

Half of what they did (Fellowship & breaking bread) – their distinctive, what other people noticed about them, was fellowship & eating together

Not a one-off fad – throughout NT

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, (Acts 2:44-46)

All the believers were one in heart and mind. (Acts 4:32)

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. **And all the believers used to meet together** in Solomon's Colonnade. (Acts 5:12)

Acts 6:1-4 → Daily distribution of food – apostles appoint others to wait on tables.

This was such a feature of the Early Church that people thought to record it when they described what was happening.

“Fellowship” – technical word; basically it means being together and being united.

We, in the Western Church have grown up knowing how important it is to pray & love the Bible; I think it is time to give just as much devotion to unity, fellowship, being together, eating together & sharing hospitality.

There has been a false split between “holy” activities (prayer, studying the Bible) and “secular” (normal) activities (eating, chatting, being together, socializing); this division is not in the Bible; it was all for the glory of God.

And as the Believers gathered together, their lives were changed and the Gospel spread and the Church grew. It wasn't a choice of either fellowship or evangelism; both things happened at once:

...And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (2:47)

Many cultures have many things to teach the Western Church about hospitality, but we don't want to just want to learn from different cultures: The

Church should lead the way in this because Jesus is at the centre & the Holy Spirit works to bring unity –

**Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
(Ephesians 4:3)**