



Part Six in the series: *"Towards a Christocentric Ecclesiology, or A Christ Centered Church"*

Shared Life Community

When it comes to defining the wonder of the Early Church, one concept seems to surface over and over again, and it is that of *Shared Life Community*.

We have grown up with the notion that Church = A Meeting, but in the early Church the emphasis was on people who lived in community who also experienced one element of that being a meeting. If we were to use lettering to describe the proper emphasis, it might look like - Church *is* a "COMMUNITY" as well as Church *has* a "meeting."

Frank Viola, when asked to describe how to find an organic Church says the following: "... *church*" is a gathered community that's having an ongoing encounter and experience of Jesus Christ together. **This community gathers often, not just once a week.** And when the members gather, no human being is leading or facilitating. In other words, there is no pastor, no reverend, and no minister—whether titled or untitled. Instead, the members are gathering under Christ's Headship alone. As to their meetings, they are not a Bible study, a prayer meeting, a songfest, nor a supperfest, but something different. Namely, the church meets to reveal and display Jesus Christ together out of a real, experiential, life-giving encounter with the Lord. And everyone is functioning on equal footing. No one is dominating. And few, if any, are passive." In another quote "The members of the church see themselves as sisters and brothers. And they pursue the Lord throughout the week, not only individually, but corporately. They also live their lives together as a family. They take care of one another. They don't just talk about community; they are experiencing it in living color." And another: "Incidentally, when a group of Christians meets once a week for a Bible study, songfest, or supperfest, they will experience minimal problems. But when they live in authentic community, the problems are endless."

It is clear the early church highly valued deep and intimate relationships, as the logical expression of love and joy for what Jesus had done in their lives. They enjoyed being with each other, knowing one another, and sharing the new life of Christ they had discovered, with each other.

In every culture new believers desire to experience their new life in Christ together with other believers. If the form of Church they connect to encourages and develops community, their lives will be defined by an ever deepening community experience, but if Church is defined as filing into a building, finding hundreds of believers sitting and staring at the back of strangers' heads, and then leaving, overwhelmed by the sheer number of people present, then slowly but surely that initial desire for and joy in community will die. We simply cannot share deep and intimate

community life with hundreds of people.

The form of Church we develop will either contribute to or hinder the development of community. In this article we will explore the reasons for and means of maintaining a strong community concept in each local Church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his great book "Life Together," says the following: "*Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must **realize**; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may **participate**. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.*" Later he says "*The existence of any Christian life together depends on whether it succeeds at the right time in bringing out the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God's reality, between spiritual and human community.*"

In other words community is a spiritual reality in Christ. We "are" a community. It is not so much something we strive to become, as recognizing who we are in Him. When once we realize this is our truest identity, then our experiencing it will be a logical outflow of this shared awareness of our reality.

We begin by looking at the many "One Another's of Scripture" :

This short phrase "One Another," pops up over and over throughout the New Testament, and forms a clear emphasis of community throughout its writings. One anothering takes place in the context of intimate relationships. Many of the following "One Anothers," imply the necessity of tightly bonded relationships for them to manifest.

Matthew 24:10 And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.

A failure of community sets up the body for betrayal due to a lack of intimacy of relationship and developed love.

Mark 4:41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

We note the disciples "shared life," as they followed Jesus throughout the land. They ate, slept, walked, talked, prayed and lived with one another for a space of 3 ½ years.

Mark 8:16 And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread.

Their meals were shared, due to spending consistent time with one another.

Mark 9:34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

Intimacy of relationship will always lead to conflict, at some point in the relationship, but such conflict can become the doorway to deeper relationship for those committed to community.

Mark 9:50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

It is fairly easy to walk in peace, when we aren't in tight covenant relationships with others, but add in one bonded relationship, with different past conditionings, personal wounds, differences of opinion, unique temperaments and personality, and you have a prescription for conflict, but because of the power of His love we can learn to experience peace with one another, and a "one another" type peace is a surpassing peace to isolation styled peace.

Mark 11:31 And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?'"

When believers hammer out biblical doctrine and beliefs together they grow in truth and knowing Christ. Those who develop doctrines in isolation are candidates for deep deception. It is as our studies and beliefs are forged in the fires of relationship, that we come to know if our conclusions will stand the test of the Spirit of Christ in one another. We need each other to test our doctrines, and to help us hold fast to that which is true and discard that which is error. We must walk closely enough with one another to have such deep discussions of doctrine and beliefs.

Mark 12:7 But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'

While this is an example of error in relationship, at least it manifests "co-ownership," and if the body of Christ is to be strong we must experience co-ownership of the Church we relate to. While it can result in negative things, it is also a great joy to share the ownership of responsibility to be edifying to one another in the community of believers we relate to.

Mark 12:28 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

Disputing with one another, while it is uncomfortable, is far to be preferred over not caring about anything enough to dispute over. Jesus walked in a community of those who regularly disputed over truth and divine ideas. This is the joy of gathering. We don't all see truth exactly the same. We each have varying levels of maturity and spiritual insight, and in the context of shared life we work through those disagreements with the goal of discovering what full agreement with Christ looks like. It is painful at times, but it is necessary part of growing in Him.

Mark 15:31 So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself."

It is a good thing when leadership share life together. Here it is a negative affiliation of leaders, but for leaders to be strong they must walk closely with other leaders. In such close relationships, with those of similar maturity and calling, they can discuss the deeper issues of doctrine, away from the immature in the body who might not yet be ready for working through controversial doctrines.

Mark 16:3 And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?"

Many things in life require the participation of another. It is a good thing to know that we need others to help us with all kinds of tasks in life. God has placed us, as humans, in the midst of humans, so that we might learn to help and care for one another. Where better for this to happen than in the body of Christ?

Luke 2:15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

A shared joy is a double joy. Who wants to experience the deep and wonderful things of God all alone? To be able to discuss the wonders of God in deep relationship with others is incredibly important. The body of Christ has been designed by Jesus to be a place of ongoing revelations, signs, and wonders, to be experienced and discussed in community and shared life. This is how we grow. We see Jesus through the eyes of another, and that sight is a completely different sight than our own.

Luke 4:36 And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!"

We need to ask such questions, and who better to do it with than a brother or sister we are walking closely with? When Jesus brings forth a Word we all hear it a little differently, and as we discuss what we have heard in Him we discover that while we all heard the same basic thing we each heard it slightly different, and that difference can make a huge difference in our lives when we share it.

Luke 6:11 But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Here again the discussion is negative, but there will be times when we will need to corporately discuss how we are going to confront the sins of our generation, the sins of an erring member of the body, the sins of our community, etc. It is in such discussions that we learn to value truth and holiness. We need to work through such matters. We need to care enough about righteousness that we will come together, pray, do spiritual warfare, and settle on practical methods of combating that error.

Luke 7:32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep."

As children know to play with one another, the body of Christ needs to learn to play with one another. It is not a good thing to just gather for heavy bible related discussions and prayer. Jesus teaches us that we need to learn from children, and one of those lessons is learning to play with one another. Camping, bowling, hiking, etc., can be great ways to increase community.

Luke 8:25 He said to them, "Where is your faith?" And they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?"

To ponder the mysteries of God's ways together is an important aspect of community life. Those who are attentive to the work of the Spirit in their lives will find ample sources for discussion and shared life.

Luke 22:23 And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this.

Many times, as believers gather, there are things God is saying among us, which we haven't yet comprehended. These can be great times to openly ponder together, and if repentance or insight result from it then all the better.

John 4:33 So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?"

In essence the disciples said to one another "Do you understand what He just said???" Have you found yourself feeling this way? This is a great time to share such questions with others.

John 5:44 How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

Community life is a good thing, but trying to derive something from one another that we cannot give is the point at which community must recognize its limitations and seek God for what only God can give. We are called to humble ourselves before one another, not seek personal glory.

John 7:35 The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?"

Once again, discussing together the things of God that confuse us can be a great exercise for community.

John 7:35 The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?"

It is through such honest questioning that hearts are prepared for more revelation.

John 12:19 So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

How important it is for community to recognize the power of God and that His will will be accomplished no matter what. Our weakness can be traded for His great strength.

John 13:14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

This is the first direct instruction for Christian community. The community act of serving one another at the point of humility is an important place to come. Unless we humble ourselves and lay down our lives in shared life community we will miss some of the most precious of life experiences. Jesus models shared life humility and service so as to give them an example of how their lives are to look in community.

John 13:22 The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.

Not a bad place to be! It is through such interaction that we will discover the truth and help one another face its implications.

John 13:34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

This is perhaps the highest exhortation towards community in the entire bible. They are called to love one another with Agape love...a love that looks less at the worthiness of the recipient and more at the call of sacrificial service and care. Only when we discover how this is to look among us will we understand what was in the heart of Christ as He inspired the apostles to form Churches throughout the earth. Just attending a Church service fails to fulfill the intent of this verse. This verse calls for a lifestyle of meaningful interaction with those we relate to. This will manifest in both heart and practical expressions.

John 13:35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The only way the world is ever going to know the reality of Christ is when we walk in loving community with each other. The life and we share in community will form a witness of hope to the lost...that by the grace of God we can experience an interdependence that enriches all of life. We need not look much further, for an answer as to why the world sooo disdains the Church. They see us bickering with each other, forming denominations as manifestations that we can't get along with each other. They hear us bash each other, bash politicians, bash homosexuals, etc., and then we wonder why so few in our culture walk closely with Jesus? When we learn to walk in unified

community the world will sit up and take note...not until then.

John 15:12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

The "as I have loved you..." statement of Christ expands the meaning of His words in chapter 13 to a place that boggles the mind. It is one thing to be nice or loving to another believer, but Jesus is talking about a "lay your life down" sort of love. A service that goes way beyond personal comfort zones, that spends time caring when it would be much more comfortable or easy to just care for self. A willingness to experience great difficulties in relationship because it means the kingdom of God will expand in their hearts and Christ will be formed within them. A kind of love that looks less at what people are today and more of what they are becoming in Christ. We have a part in that process, and we are called to it by these words.

John 15:17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Getting the message yet? Jesus repeats Himself doesn't He? Is this worth repeating? Is this worth discussing deeply? Is this worth paying close attention to? I think so...if for no other reason that Jesus repeats this community shared life exhortation so many times.

John 16:17 So some of his disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and because I am going to the Father..."

There is something very powerful about getting together with other brethren and pondering together, in prayer and accountability, the things we observe Him saying and doing in our lives. Many things we will never figure out by study and prayer alone. We need one another.

Acts 2:12 And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

Such questions open communities up to God's revelation.

Acts 21:6 and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

Community that has shared in the life of a gifted apostle, though it is hard to let him go, knows that the shared life they have experienced is one of life's greatest treasures. There must be times where men of God are sought out for the deep revelations God has given them, and the body sit before them to receive from Christ through them. In these moments the community is welded together in love and respect for God, His servants, and His Word.

*Romans 12:10 Love one another with **brotherly affection**. Outdo one another in **showing honor**.*

Paul takes Jesus' words of shared community love, and expands on it to include showing honor.

How does this look in our fellowships? As a community discovers this together and manifests it, the life of Christ will explode among them. When Jesus says, "In that you have done it to the least of these my brothers you have done it to Me," we learn just how important shared life really is. The body of Christ has perhaps more to learn in this area than just about any other. We must deeply study, ponder, and pray over how we honor Jesus in the way we treat one another.

Paul uses a very important word for "brotherly affection." It is the Greek word "Philadelphia," and means to love "with a brotherly affection." It is a strong familial term, and implies depth of family relationship. This is not something that can develop in a short Church meeting environment. It takes time, and involves the experiencing of many seasons and aspects of shared life. Just as with our nuclear families, we develop intimacy of relationship over a long period of time and shared experiences, so in the body Christ we are called to "walk" with one another, not just "visit" with them.

Paul describes how this love should look among us, in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

1Co 13:4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends.

Each of those phrases communicate deeply shared life. Robert Banks, in his excellent book "Paul's Idea of Community," writes the following:

"This description has to do with fundamental attitudes: patience, humility, tolerance, kindness, resilience, generosity, confidence, perseverance, optimism. Both here and elsewhere these attitudes detail not so much individuals' relationship with God as the interaction between Christian brothers and sisters. These attitudes should accompany their communication with one another and should also lead them into a real depth of relationship with one another."

*Romans 12:16 **Live** in harmony (phroneo) with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.*

Notice how we are to "live," in harmony "with one another." We expect (according to modern Church understanding) to hear him say "having meetings where you are in harmony with one another for a couple of hours," but he says "LIVE" and we're not really prepared for this. They apparently didn't "just have meetings," or "do Church." They experienced "life together." Paul didn't think of Church as shared meetings, but shared life. However they walked out their faith in Christ it had the appearance of brothers and sisters in Christ literally living with one another. They were so close to each other, and spent so much more time with one another than just a 2 hour meeting once or twice a week, that he could describe it as "living with one another." How is that to look among us? Does this encourage us to change our priorities, redefine the notion of "Church," and think far more in terms of Community? I hope so. Clearly it did to Paul. The more we look at relational phrases in the apostles writings, the more we will discover they thought more of "shared life community," than just "doing meetings together."

From Vine's Expository Dictionary we learn this word "Live" comes from the Greek word - PHRONEO: (Strong's Concordance - 5426) and signifies:

a. To think, to be minded in a certain way.

It is rendered by the verb "to mind" in the following: Rom. 8:5, "(they that are after the flesh) do mind (the things of the flesh);" 12:16, "**be of (the same) mind**," lit., 'minding the same,' and "set (not) your mind on," "mind (not);" 15:5, "to be of (the same) mind," "**to be likeminded**";, "be of (the same) mind;" Col. 3:2 "set your mind," lit., 'mind (the things above)."

b. To think of, be mindful of. It implies moral interest or reflection, not mere unreasoning opinion.

It denotes a mind set developed over a prolonged period of time, in which relationship has had sufficient time to be established and challenged. The context for this development exceeds that of simply a casual relationship, but implies sufficient time in relationship for challenges to develop, of which harmonious thinking is deliberately chosen, over lack of harmony. Thus the outflow or implied meaning is "**Living with a deliberate and developed commitment towards harmonious relationship.**" The whole implication of this phrase is that believers would spend sufficient time with each other, and have depth of relationship, to experience difficulties; ...know the thinking of the other and find it challenging to embrace and respect their perspective, but because of their commitment to shared life community they work through those difficulties and come to a place of **sharing Christ's mind (1 Cor. 2:16)** as regards their conflicts and challenges.

Notice how it challenges our natural tendencies, when it comes to being with other people and choosing our friends. In the world, and perhaps all too often in our Christian lives, we choose those whom we draw close to as those who "think" like us, who we are temperamentally well suited towards, personality-wise compatible, station in life-wise similar, etc., those whom we think we are compatible with, but Paul tells us, when it comes to the body of Christ, we don't have this luxury. We are to not to refuse to associate (be carried along in relationship with) those who are sufficiently different from us that we might not normally consider them close friends. Such an attitude denies the "family" nature of the Church. We are called to reach beyond our comfort zones in relationship and develop intimacy with even those we would not normally be that inclined to befriend, and who think differently than ourselves. How much time will it take to leave an obvious appearance to others, that we are "associating with," not just tolerating or giving casual assent to, those who appear as lowly? We must deal with any internal manifestation of independence from the body.

The whole implication of this verse is that we spend time, much time, thoughtful, thought provoking, intimacy developing time, beyond what a 2 hour meeting can afford, and when we experience differences of opinion, unique perspectives, and theological conflict we don't just roll up our tent and steal away in the middle of the night. We work through those conflicts towards true mindset harmony and new depths of relationship. This may mean accepting "unity in the midst of diversity"(win-lose), or we may actually find we work all the way through to sharing the

very mind of Christ in full harmony with each other and with Him (win-win). This is the way we approach the entire Church.

Romans 13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

What a beautiful way to describe share life. While it is certainly possible to love someone, even though you only spend 2 hours a week with them, how much more so when we think of the greater commitments of community. When we think community that love transfers from being primarily a “concept, emotion, or words” to a practical reality, in terms of reaching out and practically expressing that love in acts of loving service. Paul describes it to the Thessalonians as a “labor of love...” *1 Thessalonians 1:3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Romans 14:13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Because we “live” with one another, and deal with any spirit of independence we might otherwise have tolerated in ourselves, we will experience conflicts at times, and be tempted to pass judgment on them, and whereas if we were of an independent attitude we might just write them off and walk away, now, because we see ourselves as a community, we work through, apart from judgments, the issues that could separate us, and the result is even deeper community life. Very different from the world isn’t it? We think of one another as blood relationship brothers and sisters whom we don’t just walk away from in conflict. We work through our differences, just like we would with our own blood related nuclear family.

*Rom 15:1 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." 4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you **to live in such harmony with (phroneo) one another**, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that **together** you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore **welcome one another** as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

Whew!!! When you connect verses 1 and 2 with verse 5 “to live in such harmony with one another,” it takes on a completely “other” understanding than most of us have had of Church. In the past we might have done this with one or two in any given Church where we attended, but to have this be the way we relate to all the Church, and in a context described as “living together,” this is another thing entirely different isn’t it? We are called to relate to the body in a “shared life” sort of manner that denies self’s preferences and chooses to take on a “living together”

manifestation, though we will physically live in our own homes. Somehow we will spend enough time with one another that it leaves the clear impression to observers that we actually live with one another, and we have such a profound commitment to it that even those we might never choose to be close to we will be close to. We will endure with one another, when we face things in them that would urge us towards independence and rejection. We will not be satisfied with merely “tolerating” each other...we will press towards full “harmony.” That is very different isn’t it?

Apart from this Paul tells us we won’t truly glorify Jesus Christ! How does the Church experience we have known match up to this? The very glory of God among us hinges on such shared life experience.

*Romans 15:14 I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, **filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.***

We are called to instruct one another. I thought that was just the job of the Church leaders??? Paul is not saying this to Church leaders. He is addressing the entire body. The likelihood that this can be fully experienced in the context of a “once a week” Church meeting is highly unlikely. This takes time, depth of relationship, solid bridges of trust, and much love. It means we are each to be tightly connected to Jesus, so as to have the revelation our brothers and sisters need for their lives, and solid students of His Word. This is not likely to be formal instruction, as much as shared life instruction while sitting and sharing time with one another, taking a walk, going shopping, praying with one another, etc. How wonderful that God calls all believers to this and not just leaders!

It is only when we hear and accept our call to become disciples that we take study of the Word, prayer, and service seriously. As I recognize that the way the Lord has made the body of Christ, each member is dependant on the life of Christ that comes through the other members. I look to you to feed me with the heavenly manna you collect in Christ. Your role of edifying me and my role of edifying you are not options to our spiritual growth. The way God has designed things, there are just some things I must gain from Christ in you. What a joy and privilege this is!

This can and should happen both in our formal gatherings and outside those. As we learn to think and pray for one another throughout the week, when we believe Christ has given us something for another member of the body, we need not wait until the following gathering. We can set a time to email them, call them, or get together with them. As we learn to think this way we will find Jesus giving us things for others. Sometimes those “things” will be words from God, other times they will be practical acts of service. Whatever...just so long as we are being led by the Spirit, not law, and moving in love, our life together will become a beautiful thing.

Romans 16:16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

Here's a good one... How would this look in our culture? A warm hug or hand shake that says more than just hello, but clearly communicates "I love and value you...you are a dearly loved brother or sister?"

Note also something else very interesting here. However Paul taught community within each of the Church fellowships, he also taught the individual Church fellowships to be in some form of community relationship among themselves. One Church knew another. Somehow they exchanged the life of Christ together, knew the leadership from among them, and cross pollinated each other.

1Corinthians 6:7 To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?

The downside of "living together," is damaging one another in the way we relate. Because shared life is to be so valued we must not behave in this manner towards one another. This sort of thing kills shared life community. We must be vigilant against anything that threatens the life of the community and its members.

1Corinthians 7:5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Inherent in Paul's exhortation regarding sexual fidelity in marriage is his concern for others in the body who will be wounded by couples who have wounded each other in the way they handle their sexual relationship in marriage. If they leave their bedrooms in conflict they will bring this wound into the gathering, and if the wound is not healed it can lead to even further damage to the body through divorce resulting. Our lives are not lived in a vacuum when we live in community. What we do and how we handle ourselves will ultimately affect others.

1Corinthians 11:33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another-

Paul is addressing their behavior at the Lord's Supper. Because it was a full shared meal, they experienced a great deal of shared life. When brethren come together, and put their elbows on the table and eat together with folks they might not otherwise invite out to dinner, they show their commitment to the family of God beyond their natural preferences. Thus, when they are out of sorts with one another at the table they will be out of sorts with one another in gathering and in their shared life outside of the formal gathering. Therefore, Paul exhorts them to learn to wait for one another so that in shared life they aren't wounded. If they don't give adequate time for folks to arrive and share in the meal, then when some come on time, and the body has already eaten, it can wound them. We show our love for the body by the way we eat together.

*1Corinthians 12:25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same **care** for one another.*

Notice once again, in shared life, we don't play favorites...we don't choose to be close or loving with those for whom we have natural affinities towards. We care for all equally...even if they rub us wrong, don't appeal to us, and seem a bit odd. How we handle divisions among us tells us how much we value shared life community. If we can just wound one another and leave divisions among us, then it shows we have very little respect for the Lord's call upon our lives to "live with one another" in a loving way.

Note too, we don't just "meet" with one another. The definition of our relationship is "care" not just "meet with." This takes time. This involves sacrifice. This means a conscious thinking about one another outside of the formal gathering, and into the rest of the week, making conscious choices to reach out through some means. All of us can do this, and in the doing of it we will experience a concept of Church and relationship that far surpasses just a meeting orientation.

1Corinthians 16:20 All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

There it is again...brothers and sisters, in every culture, find ways of expressing warmth of relationship WITH EVERYONE in the gathering. The predominant manifestation of the "holy kiss" in our Christian culture is "a hug." Both say the same thing. What is said in them is extremely important because we don't just hug anybody. We hug family, or those with whom we feel safe in expressing family type warmth.

2Corinthians 10:12 Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

Some "one anothering" is clearly unhealthy. Comparing is one of those. Inevitably, in shared life experience, if we compare one another to one another someone is going to come up short in that process and the one who does will be treated with less value. This must not happen among us.

2Corinthians 13:11 Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Comfort and Agreement are great gifts we can give to those we share His life with. They both take time. They both communicate strong desires to "know" those we relate to. They are what make the family experience of one anothering so enjoyable.

2Corinthians 13:12 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Ummm...hug the brethren! I'm glad he keeps repeating this. Such repetition speaks loud and clear of the depth of warm relationship we experience and share in our lives with one another.

Galatians 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Ah yes...serve one another. Just at a meeting? Come on now...if you think this is all Paul has in mind then you've ignored the book of Acts and all of Paul's other exhortations on this subject of community. He has to have in mind both in the meeting and outside of it. We live our lives together in such a way that we are regularly serving and looking for ways to serve one another. When this happens then shared life takes on a whole new thing. When we serve one another, especially if it costs us something, we forge deep bonds of relationship. People know that it cost us to love on them like we did, and they connect all the more intimately with us because of it. Shared life really happens in the midst of service.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks eloquently to this, *"The service that one should perform for another in a Christian community is that of active helpfulness. This means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. There is a multitude of these things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good for the meanest service. One who worries about the loss of time that such petty, outward acts of helpfulness entail is usually taking the importance of his own career too solemnly. We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions."*

Listen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on not allowing our freedom to be hurtful to others, *"Is the invisible presence of the Christian fellowship a reality and a help to the individual? Do the intercessions of others carry him through the day? Is the Word of God close to him as a comfort and a strength? Or does he misuse his aloneness contrary to the fellowship, the Word, and the prayer? The individual must realize that his hours of aloneness react upon the community. In his solitude he can sunder and besmirch the fellowship, or he can hallow it. Every act of self-control of the Christian is also a service to the fellowship. On the other hand, there is no sin in thought, word, or deed, no matter how personal or secret, that does not inflict injury upon the whole fellowship."* Why? Because we are a body, and when the sickness of sin enters the body it affects all the members, just like a natural sickness does in the human body.

Galatians 5:15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Once again, if we see this both in and beyond the gathering, then you can see the danger expressed here. These people lived closely with one another, and if their shared life was full of bitterness then how much more that would have destroyed the unity of the community.

Galatians 5:26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

More negatives. These are things that destroy community. Paul is saying, "Watch out for anything that will threaten community life. These things will do it!"

Galatians 6:2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Again...both in the meetings and outside. When burdens are shared in the gathering what do we do outside the gathering? Pray for them, but not reach out to them inbetween gathering? If so, why? It is in these places that we reveal the depth of the reality of our love relationship with Jesus. If we cannot practically reach out in love towards those we see, how can we say we love Him Whom we have not seen. This is John's argument in 1 John 4:12,19-21. It takes time to bear one another's burdens, but it is time well spent, and it increases our shared life together.

The call to intercession for one another is no small call. As we press on through our disappointments with each other, and enter into spiritual intercessions for the body, our hearts meet in Christ and agree with Him as touching the needs of their lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes *"A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner."*

*Ephesians 4:1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, **bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***

How does true unity in the body take place? Through consistency of love in the shared life of community. It is not possible to look up into Jesus' face (by the Spirit) and then reject a brother. When we come into agreement with Him, as regards His approach to an offending or patience stretching brother, then we are moving towards community peace. Failure here not only dishonors the brother, but most especially the Spirit.

It is in community we stand the greatest chance of overcoming our sin, and for this reason we can easily see why the devil has worked so hard over the centuries to keep the Church from community. Bonhoeffer writes again, *"Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride. To stand there before a brother as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable. In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful, shameful death before the eyes of a brother. Because this humiliation is so hard we continually scheme to evade confessing to a brother. Our eyes are so blinded they no longer see the promise and the glory in such abasement."* Later he writes, *"Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of self deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light. But since the sin must come to light some time, it is better that it happens today between me and my brother, rather than on the last day in the piercing light of the final judgment. It is a mercy that we can confess our sins to a brother. Such grace spares us the terrors of the last judgment."* *"Does all this mean that confession to a brother is a divine law? No, confession is not a law, it is an offer of divine help for the sinner."*

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

All community behaviors that make community such a wonderful thing. Over and over again Paul is telling us that we are going to live in close proximity to one another, and because of that it will test the reality of our love, but if we persevere and learn to hang in there with one another awesome things will come of it. Those who “do” Church in a shallow “Church attendance” sort of way will never experience these things.

Ephesians 5:19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart,

More spiritual commitments that enhance shared life. We are sharing the life we are experiencing in Christ. For this reason, shared life extends waaay beyond our times of gathering. I am to walk intimately with the Spirit, so that when I come together I’m prepared to hear from Him and express that within the gathering. I’m not an island unto myself. I live in community with a call to edify that community. The Spirit of Christ is more than willing to give us things that will so strengthen the community.

Ephesians 5:21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Oooh, there’s a tough one! I must submit to you, even if you aren’t an elder or leader. You are my brother and sister, and as such, because I know Christ is in you and may want to address something in me through you, I maintain an attitude that says “At any time we are experiencing the life of community together, you hear or see something in Him that would adjust me, I want to receive that and submit to Him in you.” That is exciting shared Jesus life!!!

*Philippians 2:3 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you **look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.***

“Looking to” the interests of others must of necessity extend beyond just a short visit in a meeting, though certainly it encompasses it, but it communicates an outreach that far exceeds it. It calls us to get involved with, share the burdens of, take time for, and spend extended periods of time with those in the Church we are called to.

Colossians 3:9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices

Of course not! Why, because you aren’t just “somebody,” you are family. We don’t lie to family unless we want to disintegrate the very thing that holds great meaning to us.

Colossians 3:13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Community life has its challenges, but every time we do this our shared life is strengthened.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Just look at all the one another's in this verse. We must not allow ourselves to think that he was primarily speaking of these happening in formal gathering. These extend way beyond formal meetings. I must be willing to be admonished by you if I'm to take community seriously. If I won't let you admonish me then I'm telling you I only want a formal relationship with you, confined to a short amount of time at the meeting. We don't let just anybody admonish us either. We require of them that they have strong relational history with us...a good bridge of trust and love that precedes such admonishing. How does this develop when all we spend is a couple of hours loosely connected to one another once a week? Answer...it can't!

1Thessalonians 3:12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

Yes...Amen! Let this happen among us! If this happens more and more then what was originally in Jesus' mind for our community life will so far exceed anything we ever experienced in the traditional Church that there will be no comparison. Some in the traditional Church may experience these things with a "select" few, but when our entire Church experience, with everyone in the Church, is defined by these things, then Church itself, and not just a few close friends, becomes something very different than most of us have ever experienced.

1Thessalonians 4:9 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,

May it be so... Oh God, teach us to love one another in shared life community. Teach us to spend time both in the meetings and outside, with those we are inclined towards and those we aren't. Mature us, challenge us, bless us, and encourage us, as we share Your life in our midst. Amen!