

New York Times columnist David Brooks recently went around the country interviewing students at some of the most prestigious campuses in America. He admits the students he met represent only “a tiny slice of the rising generation,” but still, their comments are striking. Here’s how Brooks concluded his article about this series of interviews:

“I was...struck by the pervasive but subtle hunger for a change in the emotional tenor of life. ‘We’re more connected, but we’re more apart,’ One student lamented. Again and again, students expressed a hunger for social and emotional bonding, for a shift from guilt and accusation toward empathy. ‘How do you create relationship?’ One student asked. Brooks concludes, “That may be the longing that undergirds all others.”

We were Created for Relationship

That longing for relationship is common to all of us. This message will focus on the spiritual practice of being in relationship or in community with other followers of Jesus. In past weeks, we’ve talked about spiritual practices like solitude, meditation on Scripture, and prayer. In each of these, we’ve encouraged you to carve out time to be alone with God. But we were made for more than just private devotions, and we long for more. As important as it is to learn to be alone with God, this isn’t the pinnacle of our Christian lives. We were made to know, serve, and worship Jesus together.

Consider the picture of heaven the New Testament places before us. We’re not hiding in a closet alone with God and our Bibles. We’re not standing all alone before a beautiful mountain peak praising the Creator, but we’re joyfully part of a throng of people from every time, tongue, and nation worshipping before the throne of God.

We were created to be in relationship. Our longing for relationship is fundamentally part of what it means to be made in the image of God. God himself has existed in relationship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit communed together throughout eternity. In the same way, we’ve been created for community. We simply can’t do the Christian life alone.

Two important New Testament words convey this, both of which are largely misunderstood. The first one is church. The Greek word for church is *ecclesia*. In Greek culture, the *ecclesia* was just an assembly of citizens in a city. In the Old Testament, this

word was used for God’s people whom he’d called. And in the New Testament, it’s used in much the same way. It’s never about a building or a structure or even an organization, but rather the people of God whom he’s called together through the Gospel.

The second word is fellowship. We’re told the early church devoted themselves to fellowship (Acts 2:42). But that word has fallen on hard times. It’s been domesticated and trivialized to mean potluck dinners with tuna casserole and green Jell-O. But the word points to a commonality, a partnership and a sharing of life, which is centered on the person and work of Jesus. The Greek word is *koinonia*, and the word can point to a practical sharing of basic needs like food and shelter. The word can refer to a sharing in the faith, or in the Spirit, or in the work of Christ. Maybe you remember Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It was made up of four Hobbits, two Men, one Elf, one Dwarf, and one Wizard. Those nine had a tight bond, and it was centered on their mission. It was an all-in, life or death collective venture in the face of great evil and opposition. Fellowship is much more like *The Fellowship of the Ring* than a potluck dinner.

But today there seems to be this mistaken notion we don’t have to do the Christian life with others. We can listen to a podcast as we work out, we can watch a YouTube video in our kitchen while we cook a meal. What was once considered a necessary spiritual practice has been relegated to the category of optional.

The Hebrew Believers were Neglecting Christian Community

But maybe this isn’t such a new thing after all. Maybe this has been a problem since the very beginning of this thing we call church. Look with me at the letter we call Hebrews. The writer was concerned the people were slipping back into their old ways. Not the old ways of paganism, but the old ways of Judaism; of thinking they had to keep the Jewish law to be acceptable to God. So this writer calls them back to simple faith in Jesus; the Son of God. And in the midst of this he wrote:

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24–25)

You can see some of these folks had stopped meeting together. We don’t know exactly why, but it mirrored their general apathy

towards Jesus and the Gospel. Perhaps they went back to the synagogue services they'd grown up in. Maybe they were just more comfortable there. Maybe they were afraid of the ostracism or persecution they'd have to endure if they continued to meet with other believers.

I try to think of some of the reasons people stop being part of Christian community today.

- Many people feel the church has let them down. They entered with high expectations but left disappointed and cynical about the church. Maybe a leader they once respected had a moral failure, or there was just so much hypocrisy in church people.
- There are others who are just too busy. Christian community is just one of a hundred other things they have going on: soccer tournaments, home improvement projects, weekends away.
- There are still others who kinda feel, "Been there, done that." Maybe the kids are grown, and it's just not as important as it used to be. You've sung the songs, heard all the sermons, and it's just not that helpful anymore.
- Some people stop because they have real questions that aren't being answered. Maybe there are some things the church teaches they're not sure they even agree with. Maybe they don't feel like it's place where they can ask hard questions and express real doubts.
- Finally, there are people who just feel like they can connect with God better in some other way. It's like Bono when he sings that line, "I have run. I have crawled. I have scaled the city walls. Only to be with you. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

There are all kinds of reasons people might do what this writer says not to do—forsaking meeting together as Christ-followers. But he also addresses why it's so important to practice Christian community.

Without Community, You'll Struggle to Embrace the Gospel

One of the reasons is found in the verses that precede the ones I just read. Look up a few verses to vv. 19–23

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

You can see this is the third "*Let us...*" in this paragraph. Since through Jesus' work on the cross we have open access to God, let us draw near to him with full assurance, and let us hold fast to the hope we profess and let us consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. These are all Gospel privileges we have, and when we forsake meeting together, we're not embracing the implications of the Gospel in our lives.

These three things go together. We need to be in community with other believers to continue to draw near to God, and to hold fast to our profession of hope. It's like stoking a fire. Being in community is meant to stoke the fire of your faith and cause you to burn hot for Jesus—to draw near to him, to hope in him, to profess him. This command to be in community isn't a peripheral thing; it's central to the Gospel and your life in Christ.

Without Community, You'll Miss the Impact God Wants You to Have on Others

Another reason it's so important is without a community of believers you'll miss the impact God wants you to have on others. We're all called to spur one another on to love and good deeds. You're an integral part of the body of Christ. God wants to use you. Your brothers and sisters in Christ need you to do this. Part of your calling is to spur them on. So whenever you meet with God's people, like when you come to church, you're not there just to receive something, but to minister to others.

And you're called to be thoughtful in this. That word "consider" means to pay close attention to something. Pay close attention to how you'll spur one another on to love and good deeds. It won't happen by accident or by osmosis. It requires effort. It requires some study, not of doctrine, but of people. Not of people in general, but of specific people--those in your community of faith.

To do that you have to be in relationship with people. You ask questions. You observe. You listen. What are their strengths and weaknesses? What are their gifts? What are their needs? Where are they struggling? You ponder these things. Then, you do what you can do to spur them on to love and good deeds. Maybe they need affirmation, or exhortation, or even reproof. Maybe you just set an example of this for them. Or maybe you see they have a gift or a resource, which can help someone else in the body, and you match them up. It's interesting, those words "spur one another on" literally mean to provoke one another. It's a word often used in a negative way to speak of contention. But here it's used in a positive sense of rousing someone towards love and good deeds.

We know Jesus taught us to love one another. Jesus said to his disciples and to us, "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:34–35). And that love isn't just some kind of sentimental feeling; it's manifest in good deeds.

You have a ministry. And part of that ministry is spurring your brothers and sisters on to love and good deeds.

Without Community, You'll Miss the Impact God Wants Them to Have on You

There is a flip side to this. Without a community of believers, not only do you miss out on the impact God wants you to have on others, but you miss out on the impact God wants them to have on you! Not only do they need you, but you need them. You need them to spur you on. You can't be the person God wants you to be without letting others into your life.

Notice how the writer says, "*encouraging one another.*" This is one of many "one another's" in the Bible. Someone counted 59 of them. You know: "*Love one another. Greet one another. Confess your sins to one another. Submit to one another. Honor one another. Accept one another. Forgive one another.*" The list goes on and on. It seems the main thing the church did was one-anothering one another. But this one, encouraging one another, is my favorite. The word "encourage" has two sides to it. It can mean to exhort someone to do something, or it can mean to cheer someone on. I love what William Barclay wrote about this, "It is easy to laugh at men's ideals, to pour cold water on their enthusiasm, to discourage them. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept a man on his feet. Blessed is the man who speaks such a word."

People need encouragement. You need encouragement. With encouragement, we can do great things. You'll never meet someone who is over-encouraged. You'll never ask someone, "How are you today?" And their response is, "Oh, I'm so exhausted from all of the encouragement I got this week from people. I need a break from all the people who are trying to encourage me."

At the end of the school year in 1997, Judith Toensing wrote in one of her sixth-grade students' report cards, "It's been a joy to have you in class. Keep up the good work! Invite me to your Harvard graduation!" Twenty-one years later, the student did just that. Kristen Gilmer, age 33, kept the note from her former sixth-grade teacher for encouragement. So when Gilmer graduated from Harvard as a doctor of public health in May 2018, she made sure Judith Toensing was there to share the big day with her. Why? Because, as Kristin said, "She lit a fire in me." Encouragement can light a fire in us! I need that. You need that. But we all miss out when we separate ourselves from God's people.

Without a Community, You'll Not be Prepared for the Approaching Day

There's one more thing you miss out on. Without a community of believers, you'll not be prepared for the approaching Day. That's what he says, "Spur one another on...encourage one another...don't stop meeting together. And do this all the more because you see the Day is approaching." What Day? The Day Jesus

returns. You need Christian community to be prepared for the Day Jesus comes back.

Jesus once told a story about this Day. He said he'll separate the sheep from the goats. He'll say to the sheep, "*Come, into the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*" But they'll ask, "Lord, when did we do those things for you?" Jesus answered, "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*" That's why we need to provoke one another to love and good deeds, and that's why we need to encourage one another, the Day is drawing near.

I think about something we do every month here—we take Communion together. We don't do that all alone. We do that together. The Apostle Paul wrote about this and said, "*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Notice those three words at the end—until he comes. Part of why we meet together is to remember those three words—until he comes. I want to be prepared. I want to be ready. But I need you, and you need me, for it to happen.

How to Practice Community

Let me get practical for a moment. I'd suggest there are three ways you can flesh this out in your life. Three arenas in which this can and should play out in your life.

Corporate worship: The first is corporate worship—that's what you do when you attend a church service. What you're doing is a spiritual discipline or practice fundamental to being a follower of Jesus. Jesus went to church. Luke 4:16 says, "*He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.*" What we do at CPC, together, is called worship. It's what we'll be doing together in eternity as well. Every song we sing is a tune-up for heaven where will join with "*thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly*" (Hebrews 12:22). I love what Martin Luther wrote, "At home, in my own house, there is not warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through." That said, it may not always be exciting. You may not care for the music, or the message, or the building, or the announcements. But we don't come as consumers; we come as worshippers offering something up to God. The Bible talks about "the sacrifice of praise." Right here in Hebrews, the writer says, "*Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased*" (Hebrews 13:15).

Small Group: The second arena is in a small group. You can't experience true Christian community by just coming here a couple of times a month on Sunday morning, shaking a few hands, and putting a few dollars in the offering. It's hard to do the one another's when everyone is sitting in rows. You can't confess your sins to one another, bear one another burdens, and forgive one another. Small groups are where you can use your own spiritual gifts, pray for others, and be prayed for, discuss how scripture applies to the specifics of your life, and where you can actively reach out to meet the needs of others.

For some of you, this would be a huge step forward. And it's a scary one. What if I join a group and I don't like those people? What if they don't like me? Are they going to require I share my deepest and darkest secrets? Or maybe you're just not sure how you could possibly crowd it into your busy life. Or maybe you tried it once, and it was a disaster.

But consider this: There was a Sunday in this church when the only two pastors on staff resigned. This was before we even built this building and we met in a local Community Center where we rented a room. There were about 300 people at CPC at the time. And it was a tough day. Some who are still around here affectionally refer to it as "Black Sunday." And you might wonder, how could this church survive? They didn't own a building, and they didn't have any pastors. But here's the deal: this church thrived during that season because we taught people the church isn't the building, it's the people of God. And we trained men and women to be pastors/shepherds of their small groups. And we taught people we're all ministers with spiritual gifts, which we're called to use to edify one another. And this church didn't die, but instead, it thrived during that time.

You know the way our country is going, the day might come when they shut us down. The day may come when what some of the things I say up front here might be considered a hate crime. How would this church do? How would you do? Would you be connected in such a way you'd continue to thrive in fellowship?

Spiritual friendship: So there's corporate worship, small groups, and finally the third arena is what I'd call a spiritual friendship. I'm talking about just one person with whom you can tell all. One person who shares your desire to know and walk with God. One person who you can call at 2:00 am. One person you can confess your sin to and hear him or her say on behalf of God, "Christ died for you. Your sins are forgiven. And I still love you." Do you have a person like that?

It's said the giant redwood trees we enjoy in this part of land have a relatively shallow root system. Their enormous weight is supported by the interlocking of a tree's roots with those of other trees around it.

As believers, we need interlocking roots with other believers to withstand the enormous weight of life in this world. Eugene Peterson put it this way, "There can be no maturity in the spiritual life, no obedience in following Jesus, no wholeness in the Christian life, apart from an immersion in, and embrace of community. I am not myself by myself." To this end, I invite you to deepen your practice of Christian community through corporate worship, a small group, and a spiritual friendship.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.