

PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY DISCIPLESHIP

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“Is community really important, or is it simply a nice idea for people who ‘get into’ such things?”

“Haven’t many Christians done just fine without it?”

“Isn’t it more important that we focus on preaching the Gospel?”

“Just because the early church did it, does that mean we need to do it?”

If any of us are asking these questions it probably reveals that we have been greatly influenced by the sixteenth century Reformers and by Western civilization.

Our western American culture is not rooted in community. It is rooted in individualism. So much so that the word self-reliance is considered a positive term.

Ed Welch notes that this concept of self-reliance is notoriously a problem for translators. For example, in some Asian countries the phrase makes no sense, or it is a sign of mental instability. The *person* should never be self-reliant, according to most Asian traditions. The person should be interdependent.

Well... let’s now look at the culture of Bible times.

Prior to the New Testament era, there was much focus on family lineage and family loyalty. The tribe or family line you were from was a very important thing. It was a person’s identity.

We see this all throughout the Old Testament. Often when a person is introduced in the Old Testament his father’s name and or his tribe is also mentioned.

This pattern changes abruptly in the early church. As the early church got started, all of these family dynamics were greatly diminished and the family concepts got applied to The Church, the family of God.

Many people in the early church joined the church at great cost. Their family members did not join the church with them. The church WAS their only family.

We can see this same thing happening today in many places around the world where churches are being planted with first generation Christians. The church is their only family.

So the first principle necessary for community to happen is for the church to become our family. Our life must not just revolve around biological family but also around our spiritual family.

In a healthy biological family, each member is more interested in the success of the family than in their own personal accomplishments or interests. The same must be true in the church family.

In a healthy family, family members give account of their activities and plans, they get advice and counsel from other family members, and they try to do avoid doing anything that would disrupt the peace and harmony of the home.

In a healthy biological family, discipling and spiritual nurture take priority over ministry projects or financial accomplishments. The same must be true in the church family.

In a healthy family, individuals listen to each other and learn from each other and they care about what the others are thinking and feeling. They don't assume that their perspective is likely the best perspective.

A healthy family recognizes the diversity of personalities within the family and yet somehow they have this deep sense of unity in their mission and purpose.

In a healthy family there are routines and customs such as eating meals together. These routines bring order to the home and convey a sense that all is well.

In a healthy family, new ones in the family grow up with a strong sense of security and belonging. They don't feel a need to proclaim their ideals or parade their accomplishments. They just live out their life of service with joy and singleness of heart.

In a healthy family, each member of the family is willing to do at least his share of the work load and makes family times a priority.

In a healthy family the parents don't control their children with anger or manipulation. They teach them and train them.

In a healthy family there is a desire to share and minister to the needs of others outside the family.

Can you make the parallels to a healthy church family?

Can you imagine what it would look like if all our churches were like a healthy family?

Contrast this with an immature or dysfunctional family in North America in which each person does his own thing independently of the others.

In some homes, dominant personalities run the show and the more docile personalities are pushed aside.

In some homes, some people do all the talking and everybody else is expected to agree with them.

In some homes, some family members are frequently antagonizing other family members and getting embroiled in conflicts.

In some homes, there are a few workaholics who just can't sit down and enjoy an evening with the family.

Are you making the analogies to the family of God?

Nearly twenty years ago I had an opportunity to be a volunteer at a Discipleship Training Center, that ministered to broken and dysfunctional men - men who found it difficult to love and be loved.

Our goal as staff was to disciple these men in a healing, healthy, Christian community.

This environment was the closest thing I've ever experienced to what we read about in the book of Acts and in the journals of intentional Christian communities.

Talking about spiritual things, personal needs, and praying for each other was as natural as talking about the weather.

If you had stopped by our facility for a visit first thing in the morning, you would have found a group of men sitting around a table discussing the scriptures and praying for each other.

If you had toured the wood shop during the day, you might have seen some photocopies of the Bible laying around that were being used for Bible memorization.

If you stayed around for the evening, it would have been common to see fellows propped up on a porch swing or sitting in a gazebo reading their Bibles and asking each other questions about life.

Each day during the week we gathered early in the morning to pray with each other and to give each other advice and encouragement for the tough challenges we would be facing that day.

Next we gathered with all the men in a room where we silently prayed and read the Bible in each other's presence.

After eating breakfast together we again assembled to share with each other what we had heard from the Lord as we prayed and read the scriptures that morning.

Next we had a class on some topic related to being more like Jesus. Then each man would meet with a mentor to give account of his life for the previous 24 hours and to receive counsel.

Each Thursday at break time we looked each other in the eye and said, "Brother, I love you. I like how you..." and then we would mention something we appreciated about him.

Also each week we had a time when the men would look each other in the eye and say, "Brother, I love you. Here is weakness I see in your life and here is an example of that weakness that I noticed the other day."

Even though this was very difficult to do and very difficult to receive, the men in the program who made the most spiritual progress would say that this exercise was probably the most helpful part of their time at this discipleship center.

The rest of the day we worked together in a wood shop that had scripture verses painted all over the walls and photocopies of scripture laying on the workbenches that the men were using for scripture memorization.

It was in the wood shop that I got a vision for what community could really look like.

It was not uncommon at all for one man to go to another brother in the shop and talk about an intense struggle that was going on in his heart. If a man was

struggling severely or being attacked by Satan, we would shut the whole shop down and gather around the man and pray with him.

As I lived there day after day, this seemed really right to me. Having previously worked in a business that was geared toward efficiency and profitability, this wood shop seemed to have the kind of atmosphere that I think God intended for all Christian work places to have. . It was almost as spiritual as what we read about with Boaz and his reapers in the book of Ruth.

But good things like this came at a cost. It costs somebody or some church \$25 - \$30,000 dollars in donations in order for a man to spend 8 months at this discipleship center.

For some reason in our western culture, we've lost the principle of discipling each other but we are willing to give hundreds of thousands of dollars to non-profit organizations to do this discipleship work for us. It's a lot easier to give money than to roll up our sleeves, change our work schedules, and get personally involved. (BTW, The work we did at this discipleship center was work that anyone who is walking with the Lord can do. Those of us who volunteered at this Discipleship Center were not anything special. We were just people who loved the Lord.)

I've observed in our western culture that Christians will gladly involve themselves in all types of work projects and Christian ministries but apportion very little time in their schedule for discipling other people in the church and community.

Then if someone eventually gets into a really bad state of mind, people will take off work, open up their wallet, throw tens of thousands of dollars at a discipleship center or hospital to get the person "fixed up".

Then life goes back to "normal" which is a fast-paced lifestyle that doesn't take time for people.

There is something really broken about this system of living. I wonder if it is even fair to call such a system - living.

Many of the broken men who came to the discipleship center where I served would have never ended up in the broken state they were in if someone would have mentored them earlier in life.

All of us can benefit from discipling but discipling is especially effective with people who are in their teens, twenties, and thirties.

And so the principle here is that an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure when it comes to Christian discipling.

One of our big challenges was transitioning these men we disciplined back into a normal capitalistic work environment.

What if we would give money to individuals and employers in our churches instead of sending people off somewhere else to be disciplined?

There are at least three reasons why I think many employers don't hire "losers" or don't stop work to mentor and pray for an employee in the middle of the day.

First, they have never done it before and aren't sure how to get started doing it. Maybe the idea has never crossed their mind. Maybe they are afraid their customers will not understand.

Secondly, their profit margin may be so tight that they can't afford to stop during the day and take time for an employee who needs disciplined. (This is especially true for employers who only have a few employees. After working at this discipleship center there were some churches who wanted me to disciple some troubled young men in the work place but they discovered that they couldn't afford the inefficiency)

3. Some employers are under some illusion that discipleship centers and missions are depending on them for money, and so they need to be really profitable as a business so they can give lots of money.

There may be some businesses that are called to this. I would not want to judge.

But it would seem to me that employers discipling employees and employees discipling fellow employees is a largely untapped resource.

One of the best places in the world to do discipleship is in the work place and yet it appears undoable to many employers.

For some reason we think people in our churches should be willing to disciple others for free, but if those same people would go to work for a non-profit organization, then they deserve to be supported financially.

And so a final principal for community discipleship is that those who labor in behalf of the church need to be supported, proportionately. This is especially

true in communities that do not have a common purpose. Otherwise people in the community are going to get missed and neglected.

In conclusion,

I would like to call the church of Jesus Christ to create healthy communities. - Communities that are a safe place, and a place where children and adults can experience the same kind of spiritual nurture that many of us experience in a healthy Christian family.

And secondly, I would like to call the church of Jesus Christ to take seriously the work of discipling each other. This vision starts with parents discipling their children and then as children grow into adulthood, it includes discipling within the church community.

If this calling is truly of the Lord, then let us rise up and embrace this calling!