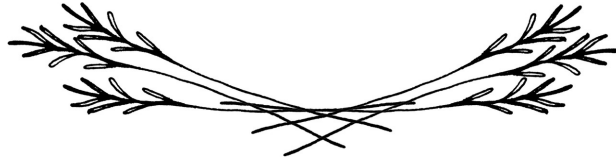


WEEK 6

A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS



PHILIP GOAD

Empty seats. On any given Sunday, most worship assemblies will have some of them—perhaps way too many. Narrow your focus for just a moment to a specific empty seat in your church building. Think about a seat that was once occupied by a faithful brother or sister: a seat that is now vacant not due to death or because someone moved away. That once faithful Christian is simply gone. Disappearances like these often cause us to wrestle with important questions. What went wrong? Did the Christian fail the church family, or did the church family fail the Christian? Could this have been prevented? Is there a way to bring the missing family member back?

What God Wants

In Hebrews 3:12–14, we are reminded that disappearing acts by Christians are not what God wants. He wants every Christian holding fast rather than falling away. Verse 12 reminds us of the value God places on each person when it says, “Take care, brethren, that there not be **in any one of you** an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away...” (NASB). Thankfully though, the text also describes God’s preventative measure, his divine plan for achieving success. Verse 13 says, “but encourage one another day after day as long as it is still called today.” God’s planned result is a community of believing hearts who have a commitment to “hold fast the beginning of

our assurance firm until the end” (vs. 14). What a blessing it is that God’s plan for securing the saved is effective church community!

As such, the big idea for our study is this: every member of a church family has an important role in nurturing the kind of strong Christian community where we are actively helping each other go to heaven.

In spite of God’s great plan, many congregations face challenges in achieving success. Attendance boards indicate that Christians are assembling less than they used to. How do members of a community actively encourage each other when the community is spending less time together? How can members be convinced of the value of spending time in community? As shepherds, preachers, and other Christians struggle with questions like these, solutions that work often seem elusive. Could it be, though, that one solution may be much less complicated that we realize?

Meeting People Where They Are

Understanding where people are as they arrive can be valuable in successfully helping them become invested and active in Christian community. This understanding may also help us more successfully create the kind of community that God calls us to be.

1. Some think they want God but not the church. The abuses of organized religion have caused some people to be wary.
2. Some think it is too risky to admit weakness. As people arrive in community, do they see our congregations as being more like country clubs or more like hospitals?

3. Some first arrive as consumers rather than looking for ways to add to and invest in the community. Is it immediately evident that we offer something of value?
4. Some are just barely hanging on. People often arrive locked in a daily struggle against being pulled back into the world.
5. Some are desperately trying to fit in. Do we make it easy or difficult for new people to find a place in the community to both fit in and be active? Have we honestly assessed the question from a new person's point of view?

How To Help People Do Church Community Well

Acts 2:42-47 paints a beautiful picture of vibrant Christian community. The church is new and growing. Excitement is in the air. Worship and prayer are constants. Needs are being met. Apostles are on the scene. Doctrine is being embraced. And the Christians are together...seemingly all the time.

While we love this scene, we also understand that the twenty-first century presents the church of today with challenges in replicating what we read about in Acts 2. While the church is new for the new Christian, the church is no longer new. That "sense of awe" (vs. 43) is sometimes lacking. We have the entire Bible rather than apostles, yet doctrine is not always valued. We often do well in meeting needs and in loving each other, but we are challenged in finding ways to get busy, geographically-scattered people to spend an appropriate amount of time together in community. We realize that "daily" is probably out of the question in a practical sense.

In his first book on church growth, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church*, C. Peter Wagner presents the idea of experiencing church community at three levels. The first is Celebration, which refers to what is hopefully a vibrant worship assembly. No matter the size of the assembly, a Christian must worship. The second

level is Congregation, which represents the 30-80 members we know by name, and with whom we regularly spend time in fellowship. Wagner refers to the third level as Cell, and it may provide the greatest area of opportunity in allowing us to do church community more effectively.¹

Wagner describes the Cell level as the group of 10–12 people who actively help a Christian live out his faith. In other words, this is the group where deeper more interpersonal relationships are formed.² Most congregations have groups that fit Wagner’s definition of a Cell. Some are formally organized while others are not. For example, Bible classes often function as cell groups. The group that eats breakfast together once a week may function as a cell group. The group of people involved in a ministry together, such as benevolence, may function as a cell group. These groups are important because research seems to reflect that church members who are not active in a cell-sized group are most at risk of disappearing from church community.

Consider some of the reasons that these smaller groups are so vital to realizing effective Christian community. First, it is difficult for a Christian to simply disappear, since members of the group will immediately notice his/her absence. Further, it is far less easy to be pulled back into the world when there are 10–12 people who are committed to preventing that from happening. In that regard, the close relationships formed in one of these groups make it more difficult for a member of the group to make bad decisions without being challenged biblically by someone in the group. Closeness facilitates accountability.

¹ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church*, (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1976), 111–23.

² Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 123–25.

In his 2012 book, *Why They Left: Listening to Those Who Have Left Churches of Christ*, Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr. references Wagner's work and then provides survey data to illustrate the vital role that close, personal friendships play in effective church community. In his discussion of assimilating new members, Yeakley states, "The most important differences between new members who are assimilated into the congregation and those who drop out of the church are how many close personal friendships they form in the congregation, how many specific church work assignments they are given, and how quickly they are involved in some area of ministry."³

In our efforts to effectively live out Hebrews 3:12–14 as a community of believers, it is in our best interest to do everything possible to ensure that every Christian finds a place in some type of a smaller group. But groups must never be perceived as closed circles to those who are trying to find a place. Closed circles become cliques. We must remember that every small group should be open-ended and that most people will not enter the group without an invitation.

God values community. It is, after all, His plan for securing the saved. That is why every member of a church family has an important role in nurturing the kind of strong Christian community where we are actively helping each other go to heaven.

The question becomes, how are we finding our place and helping other people find theirs?

³ Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., *Why They Left: Listening to Those Who Have Left Churches of Christ*, (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 2012), 93-4.

Questions For Discussion

1. How would you rate your congregation in the area of “doing” community? Think in terms of “Outstanding,” “Average,” “Marginal,” or “We need an intervention!” Upon what do you base your rating?
2. As a congregation, where are the best opportunities for improvement?
3. How would you encourage a Christian to be active in church community who asserts that he or she wants a relationship with God but not with the church?
4. How many active, cell-size groups can you identify in your congregation? Are they functioning effectively? Why or why not?