

Gospel-centered community

Pastor Wyley Jenkins

The Giant Sequoia tree is an impressive sight. These trees can make us feel small and weak. How do trees that are 1,500 years old and 75 meters high last so long? You might think it's because the trees have deep roots. That's not the case. The Sequoia tree has roots that only grow 4-5 meters deep, even at maturity. That is 5 meters in depth to 75-90 meters in height. How then do they grow so high and live so long? The answer is they almost never grow alone. The Sequoias that last the longest and stay the strongest are found in groups of trees called Sequoia groves. Each tree in a grove locks roots with the trees around it, and so each becomes almost impossible to knock over. They are truly one of the most magnificent examples of community on earth.

What does it take to produce a strong, long-lasting spiritual community? Uplifting music? Solid children's programs? Great preaching? I would say all these are important, but none are essential. The one essential element is the Gospel. Without the Gospel, there are no roots to lock with the people beside you. To have a solid church, we must have Gospel roots.

To show you how this is true, I want to explain the meaning of Galatians 2:11-21, and then I want to share three ways we can live out the lessons learned from this passage here at IBC. Let's start with verses 11-13:

"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy."

First, it's crucial you understand the situation that caused this incident. Antioch was the place Paul was first sent out as a missionary. It was his home church in a sense. Peter came to Antioch and had been participating in meals where Jews and Gentiles ate together. This probably included the Lord's Supper. There are different thoughts amongst New Testament scholars as to who were "the men from James", or why Peter feared "the circumcision party" and "separated" from the Gentiles. There are a few facts

all New Testament scholars can agree on. In the times of the Apostles, there existed a great divide between Jew and Gentile. The Jewish people had many rules and traditions outside of the Bible. They had many commentaries on the law. They even had traditions that functioned as law. There was a contemporary belief in Peter's time that eating with Gentiles was something God did not like. More importantly, many Jews were confused as to why Jews were accepting Gentiles without making them convert to Judaism by getting circumcised. There must have been tremendous cultural pressure and maybe even persecution for Jews at times. Regardless of the reason, it was wrong of Peter. He was leading people away from the Gospel and dividing the Christian community at Antioch.

This is where the Apostle Paul stepped in. He had had enough, so he confronts Peter in front of everyone:

“¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, (...)”

Paul's criticism is not about the music style. He is not complaining because the preaching is less exciting than in other churches. Paul is not worried about the annual budget or the color of the carpet. When Paul stands up to Peter, it's because Peter has totally forgotten the Gospel. Because, while Peter and everyone there were professing and proclaiming that they were declared righteous because of Christ and not their own works, they were still going back to works of the law. They were acting like hypocrites. They were creating tribes. They were uniting on their Jewish identity, and not on their Jesus identity. This is where Paul lays out how the gospel is central to community: ***“But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel.”*** What conduct did Paul see that was not in step with the gospel? He saw them saying one thing and doing another. He saw the fear of men and no love for brothers who were different. He saw treating people badly because they were not Jewish. He saw division instead of unity. He says all these things were the result of not understanding and living according to the Gospel. Paul finishes with this:

²⁰ “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

Paul says, in effect, there is no Jew here. The Paul who was a Jew is dead. He died with Christ. The Gentile that was unclean is no longer here; he also died with Christ. God has destroyed the wall that divided the races. Every Christian person from every race and every tribe is joined together now into one body because of Jesus. Faith in Jesus is what saves us all. Doing spiritual rituals like circumcision makes you no better than anyone else. Eating certain foods doesn't make you righteous. Righteousness comes by faith. That is why Paul eats with Gentiles. The Gospel is the only glue that can hold us together. That is what it means to have a Gospel-centered community. Now, how can we live the gospel out today? Here are three practical ways:

1. A Gospel-centered community knows they are a family and lives like one.

How many languages are spoken here? How many cultures are represented? How many nationalities are present today? If we were not Christians, there would be little if any reason for us to have met each other. We're all very different, but the fact is most, if not all, of us here consider ourselves Christians. Because Jesus died in our place, we are connected to him. We are tied to him. We are bound to him. We are one body, with Christ as our head. We are one building, being built by God. We are one temple, where God's Holy Spirit dwells. We are the most beautiful of brides, and Jesus is coming to take us home to live with us forever. We have so much in common with each other from an eternal perspective that all our differences now are nothing by comparison. We share one eternal heavenly Father because we believe in Jesus. In fact, our bond is stronger than an earthly family because we are forever family. Jesus taught us this. Mark 3:31-34:

***“And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him.
32 And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers
are outside, seeking you.’ 33 And he answered them, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ 34
And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’”***

He was challenging his disciples to see themselves as his true family. We are all family because we have all been adopted into God's family. We are sons of God and brothers and sisters, everyone.

In many parts of the world, becoming a Christian means losing your earthly family. I worked in one country where this was the greatest reason people would not convert. They knew believing in Jesus would cost them their earthly family. That is painful. I was taught by an older and wiser national believer that until they could believe the church family would really love them like their biological family, it would be hard for them to commit. What about you? Maybe you don't have the capacity to adopt a physical child, but could you become family to somebody who has no family? The apostle Paul challenges us to see our family members all around us in 1 Timothy 5:1-2, when he says: ***“Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.”***

In another church, I had a married man confess to me that in the past he avoided a woman in the congregation because he felt attracted to her. However, now he could interact with her, and it did not affect him. I asked him what changed. He said: “I began to imagine her as my blood sister. Just thinking like that transformed my heart.” I believe here at Immanuel you can expect a family. I invite those of you who feel like you need a greater community around you to be the family to others that you wish they were to you. Stop waiting for someone to be family to you, and go out and be family to someone else. Let the gospel of Jesus Christ give you a new set of eyes to see you are a family and to live as one.

2. A Gospel-centered community comes together around the Gospel.

If you search the Internet for a chess club, soccer club, movie club or ski club, you will inevitably find it. People tend to organize around what they enjoy and are passionate about. The mistake we can make in

churches is that we can arrive at church on Sunday and literally forget why we are here. Is it to hang out with friends? Is it to be with people from our particular country? Is it to help others? Why do churches meet on Sunday? What did Jesus want us to do? Many times when we lose motivation, it's because we've lost sight of why we are here. But Jesus gave us a purpose. He told us what to do:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20

God desires to glorify himself by saving people from every tribe, tongue and nation, and by making them like Christ. That is what it means to make disciples. The bottom line is that we come together to do this. If we join together for any other reason, it will not last. God has called us here at Immanuel to do great things together. No one person can do it alone. Each of us here has a way to serve both at the gathering on Sunday and in our daily lives. You can help make disciples as a Sunday school teacher, as an usher or as a missionary. All of us are called to play a different part in God's great plan of salvation and restoration.

3. A Gospel-centered community is a community of grace AND truth.

Some churches are extremely detailed in their doctrine, but don't seem to care about people. Some churches are disobeying the truth of the gospel, but appear to be loving churches. Both extremes are bad. Here at Immanuel, we want you to hear and understand what God says in his Word. We believe it all. We stand on it. We don't care what is popular in the culture or what is accepted in society. If God says it, we believe it. We stand on the truth. We are not ashamed of the gospel. At the same time though, we believe in the power of love and grace. Our doors and our hearts are open. We stand on the example of Jesus, who said to the crowd, ***“You who have not sinned cast the first stone”***, and then said to her, ***“Go and sin no more.”*** Truth and love must exist together. The truth will always be held in check by our love and grace. And our love and grace will always be held in check by God's truth. At times, it is a tug of war. But that is the way God designed it to be.

Paul saw the truth and grace of the Gospel were being diminished by the actions of Peter, Barnabas, and others. Paul stood for the truth. God's word is higher than any other authority or standard. There is no experience, no Pope, no Pastor, no Apostle, no church council or committee, no denomination that is higher than God's word. Peter went wrong when his actions contradicted the Word of God revealed in the Gospel. If you have ever wondered where Protestants differ from Catholics, this is the foundation. We believe God's word is a higher authority than the Pope or than tradition. Most of us are wired one way or the other. Very few of us are truth and grace people. If you are a truth person, let me give you some advice. Always think about how you could be graceful to others. Ask questions before you accuse. Truly listen to others. If you are a grace person, always think about how you could tell the truth to people. Ask yourself, how can you use your good, loving, caring relationships to tell people the hard things they need to hear? May God help us all to be a Gospel-centered community.

Discussion questions:

1. What did you learn from the Sequoia tree about community?
2. Why did Paul confront Peter in Galatians 2:11-14?
3. How are we a new eternal family because of the Gospel? How could we be more like a family to one another?
4. What causes do Christians share in common? How does sharing a common cause unite us?
5. What does it mean to be a community of truth AND grace? What happens if you leave either element out? Which side do you lean to more, truth, or grace? How can you pray and seek to grow the weak side?