



## WHY COMMUNITY?

PAUL EMPHASIZES HERE, and in many other places, that Christ wants to create ‘a people,’ not merely isolated individuals who believe in him.”<sup>1</sup> So says Sinclair Ferguson, the Scottish pastor and theologian, commenting on Titus 2:14. We are not saved individually and then choose to join the church as if it were some club or support group. Christ died for his people, and we are saved when by faith we become

part of the people for whom Christ died. The story of the Bible is the story of God fulfilling the promise, “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7; Revelation 21:3). If the gospel is to be at the heart of church life and mission, it is equally true that the church is to be at the heart of gospel life and mission. John Stott says:

The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the contrary, the church is God’s new community. For his purpose, conceived in a past eternity, being worked out in history, and to be perfected in a future eternity, is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build his church, that is, to call out of the world a people for his own glory.<sup>2</sup>

### **THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS CENTRAL TO CHRISTIAN IDENTITY**

In much of the world the question “Who am I?” is answered communally. According to a Xhosa proverb, “A person is a person through persons.” Singaporean, Malaysian, Hong Kong, Cambodian, Australian, and mainland Chinese all proclaim the *tong xiang* or “familyness” that binds them together. For many Muslims membership in the global Islamic community or *ummah* confers identity and demands loyalty. Common to these cultures is the perception that the

wider society determines your identity. For most Westerners, however, this starting point feels increasingly strange. We see ourselves less in terms of role identities such as positions held or group affiliations and more in terms of dispositional identities such as character traits or behavioral tendencies. “Who am I?” is becoming a question for which I am encouraged to find, or create, an answer for myself.

An identity that I construct for myself is far removed from an identity I receive by grace. Churches are full of people trying to earn their identity or prove their worth. As a result we lack assurance or contentment or put others down to bolster our own self-perception or are dependent on the approval of others or are self-righteous or vulnerable to any circumstance that prevents us from fulfilling our ministry. But the key defining relationship for Christians is our relationship with God. Who am I? I am a child of God, the bride of his Son, and the dwelling place of his Spirit. And this identity is given to me by grace.

More than that, the Bible shows that we are

communal creatures, made to be lovers of God and of others. When it comes to humanity, God does not simply speak a word of command; he engages in conversation. “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26). This conversation shows that God himself is a social rather than a solitary being. And so his image cannot be borne by an individual, but by man and woman together (Genesis 1:27). Genesis 2 underlines this as the writer tells us that the only thing in all creation that is not good is the man on his own (v. 18). Divine personhood is defined in relational terms. The Father is the Father because he has a Son. God is persons-in-community. Human personhood, too, is defined in relational terms. You can no more have a relationless person than you can have a childless mother or a parentless son. The trinitarian understanding of our humanity suggests we should define ourselves by the network of relationships in which we live: I am a father, husband, church member, child of God. This makes me unique (no one else shares the same matrix of relationships), but it also defines me in relation to other people. I am not

autonomous. I am a person-in-community. I cannot be who I am without regard to other people.<sup>3</sup> Into our pervasively individualistic worldview, we speak the gospel message of reconciliation, unity, and identity as the people of God. This is perhaps the most significant “culture gap” that the church has to bridge.

By becoming a Christian, I belong to God and I belong to my brothers and sisters. It is not that I belong to God and then make a decision to join a local church. My being in Christ means being in Christ with those others who are in Christ. This is my identity. This is our identity. To fail to live out our corporate identity in Christ is analogous to the act of adultery: we can be Christian and do it, but it is not what Christians should do. The loyalties of the new community supersede even the loyalties of biology (Matthew 10:34–37; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 11:27–28). If the church is the body of Christ, then we should not live as disembodied Christians.

Peter writes to Christians facing persecution, calling them “*strangers in the world*” (1 Peter 2:11). The word literally means “without family” or “without home”

(*paroikos*). The Roman Empire was viewed as a family (*oikos*) with Caesar as its patriarch. But God’s people are now outsiders. For many, conversion may also have meant exclusion from their immediate family and its support structures. But the Christians are being built into an alternative “house” (*oikos*) (v. 5). It is not a sectarian ghetto, for it is called to respond to hostility with good works (v. 12), just as Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon to seek the welfare of the city (Jeremiah 29:7). Nevertheless, the church gives us a new community and a new identity.

Today it is often difficult for people to contemplate conversion to Christ if that means distancing themselves from their existing networks, especially if those are the close bonds of a minority community such as those found in the gay community or among ethnic minorities. They need a new home. In *The Crowded House* we have also found some people wanting to be part of our church community not initially because they were interested in Christ but because they wanted a kinder, gentler alternative to their existing network of relationships. In one case

they did not want to associate with other refugees from their homeland because of its violent and factious culture. In another case they wanted to leave a drug-taking group of friends.

Name: Samuel

Occupation: Part-time TESOL (Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages)

Church: The Crowded House, Abbey

“We run an open-door policy in our house,” laughs Samuel as we sit around his kitchen table. “And an open-fridge-door policy too!” The former Overseas Missionary Fellowship UK student worker and his wife, Fiona, have a “full-on” life with The Crowded House but are adamant they wouldn’t have it any other way.

Also sitting at the table having breakfast is one of their lodgers, a young Kurdish asylum seeker who has been through more so far than many of us experience in a lifetime. “For us, The Crowded House is literally that—

having people live with us,” says Samuel, “and that’s something that allows the friends of our lodgers to interact with our lives too. Often we come down in the morning, and there are a couple of Kurdish refugees sleeping on the living room floor.”

Samuel splits his time between leadership of TCH Abbey and four mornings a week teaching English as a second language in a local college. Teaching was an eye-opening experience. It didn’t take long for Samuel to realize that many of the sixteen- to nineteen-year-old refugees taking English lessons had very damaged lives. “I saw it as my job to try and create a family in the classroom,” he says.

The New Testament word for community is *koinonia*, often translated by the now anemic word “fellowship.” *Koinonia* is linked to the words “common,” “sharing,” and “participation.” We are the community of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14) in community with the Son (1 Corinthians 1:9)—sharing

our lives (1 Thessalonians 2:8), sharing our property (Acts 4:32), sharing in the gospel (Philippians 1:5; Philemon 6), and sharing in Christ's suffering and glory (2 Corinthians 1:6–7; 1 Peter 4:13.). The collection of money by the Gentile churches for the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem is an act of *koinonia* (Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 9:13). Our community life is celebrated and reinforced in Communion, where we participate (*koinonia*) together in the body and blood of Christ: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf"(1 Corinthians 10:16–17).

This image of family extends to his view of the Abbey congregation. Another young Christian from the church also lodges with Samuel and Fiona. "We want to be accountable in our generosity and share our possessions," he reveals, adding, "We also want the people who share our home to share our griefs and our joys, and that's why we live open lives."

Samuel also loves the teaching preparation time he spends with Abbey's other leaders. "It's a community hermeneutic," he says. "We discover things in the text of the Bible we'd never discover on our own." This communal learning extends to the congregational meeting, when the fruits of their labors are brought to the rest of the "family." "Often it becomes an extended, directed conversation," says Samuel. "That's when some of our best teaching occurs."

Samuel and Fiona admit they have made choices that have often bewildered their families. In their own words, they live in an "interesting" neighborhood, with people coming and going all the time. Yet, when asked to sum up how he feels about this, Samuel offers the word "content." "We believe we are living the good life," he says. "We want to offer something that comes from within."

Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul says, “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes? Is it not you?” (1 Thessalonians 2:19). The church at Thessalonica is Paul’s investment in the future. His future is bound up with them and their progress in the faith. He will boast on the final day not in what he has done but in what they have done. He has staked his reputation before God on them. He goes on, “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord” (3:8). The NIV has added the word “really.” It is literally: “for now we live.” Paul’s life now is bound up with the church.

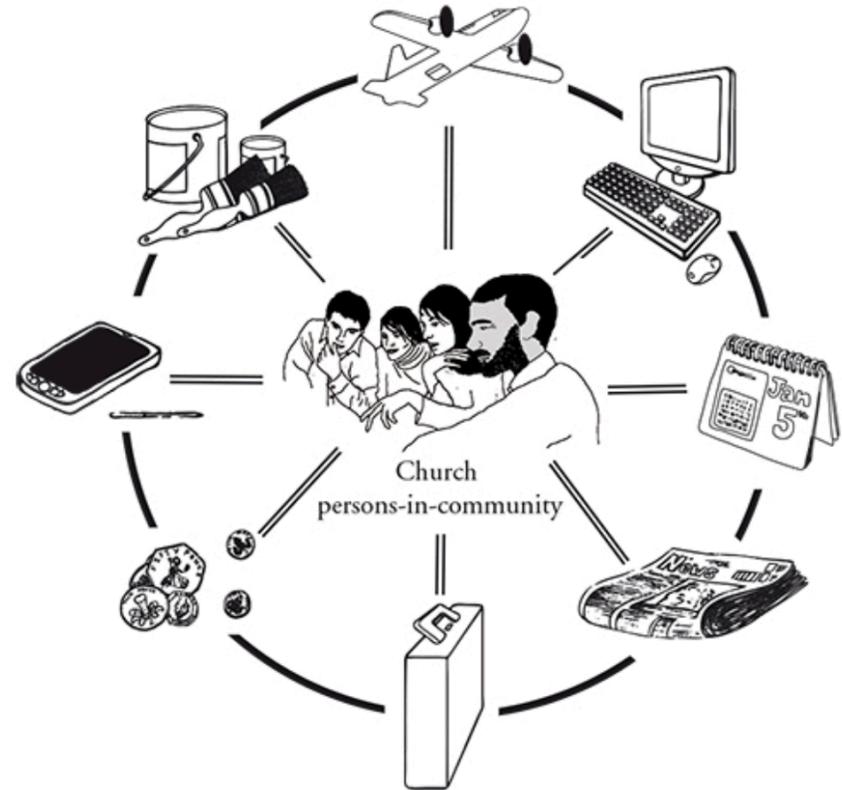
The prevailing view of life today is that of an individual standing on his or her own, heroically juggling various responsibilities—family, friendships, career, leisure, chores, decisions, and money. We could also add social responsibilities like political activities, campaigning organizations, community groups, and school associations.



From time to time the pressures overwhelm us, and

TOTAL CHURCH (RE: LIT BOOKS)

we drop one or more of the balls. All too often church becomes one of the balls. We juggle our responsibilities for church (measured predominantly by attendance at meetings) just as we juggle our responsibilities for work or leisure.



An alternative model is to view our various activities and responsibilities as spokes of a wheel. At the center or hub of life is not me as an individual but us as members of the Christian community. Church is not

another ball for me to juggle but that which defines who I am and gives Christlike shape to my life.

According to this model, Bob and Mary do not drop church. Instead, their life as persons-in-community enables them to retain their sanity! For others in the church, some of their engagements (work, leisure, friendships) will adjust for a season as they share responsibility for the new children.

In our experience, people are often enthusiastic about community until it impinges on their decision-making. For all their rhetoric, they still expect to make decisions by themselves for themselves. We assume we are masters of our own lives. “It’s my money, it’s my life, it’s my future,” we say, “so it’s my decision.” In contrast, in *The Crowded House* we “expect one another to make decisions with regard to the implications for the church and to make significant decisions in consultation with the church.”<sup>4</sup> A married man must take into account his wife and family, consulting with them over significant decisions. It should be the same in the family of God. Paul says: “in Christ we who are many form one body, and each

member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). My family owns a car. It belongs to us, and so we are responsible for it, and we make decisions about it together. In the same way, in the Christian community we belong to one another, and so we are responsible for one another and make decisions together. This is not a process of “heavy shepherding” where the leader tells people what to do. Our statement does not say decisions are made *for* people. It says they are made *with regard to* the community to which they belong. Nor is it top-down. It is a community process in which everyone is accountable to everyone. As leaders, we submit our schedules, priorities, and key decisions to the community.

Imagine a young couple, Bob and Mary, who are involved in a local congregation. Mary gives birth to twins. Bob and Mary are now facing the prospect of trying to cope with babies who constantly need feeding and changing. In the first model, juggling the church ball alongside the new family

responsibilities becomes impossible. Bob and Mary decide they will have to forget being involved in church activities on anything more than a minimal level for quite some time. So they make a unilateral decision to absent themselves from much of church life.

In the alternative model, it is not only Bob and Mary's issue when the babies are born. It is an issue for the whole church. The congregation takes on some of the responsibility because their identity and life is that of persons-in-community. So perhaps a couple of people go around early each morning to bathe the babies so Bob and Mary can have time together over breakfast. Or someone offers to take Bob to work for a few months so that on the way Bob can sleep or read his Bible, or they can pray together because Bob is not getting much chance to do these things at home. Bob and Mary may not be as involved in the church meetings, but they are more involved than ever in the life of

the community.

The church is to be a light to the world. Jesus asks us to let that light "shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Church that is a discrete set of responsibilities, juggled among other sets of responsibilities, can never carry the weight of Jesus' mandate. Only life that is infused and transformed by a communal identity can be lived "before men." It is this kind of life that can only be explained in a way that brings praise to our Father in heaven.

One of The Crowded House congregations has had to adapt to several major changes in recent months. A member from Pakistan has had to start an English course in order to qualify as a nurse on top of her existing job. This means that her husband has taken on more of the care of their young son; so he has less time for his ministry among the Pakistani community. Another couple is expecting their

first child, and the husband has just started his own business. One young man moved from part-time work to full-time teacher training while his fiancée started her first full-time job. Rather than expecting church members to adapt to these life changes on their own, others have thought together about what changes it means for them as a church. They have reviewed their meeting times, rethought their gospel opportunities, and shared responsibilities.

## **THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS CENTRAL TO CHRISTIAN MISSION**

God is a missionary God, and God's primary missionary method is his covenant people. Humanity was made in the image of the Triune God. The purpose of an image is to represent something, and we were made to represent God on earth. God made us as persons-in-community to be the vehicle through which he would reveal his glory. But humanity has grasped for autonomy from God. We fell under the curse of

God, and human community has become fractured. The image-bearers of God fall short of his glory.

God begins his plan to create a new humanity with his promise to Abraham. By focusing on Abraham, God has not abandoned the rest of humanity, for through Abraham blessing will come to all nations (Genesis 12:1–3). Although humanity as a whole retains its identity as God's image-bearer, Abraham's family becomes the prism through which God's grace shines to the world. These words of promise set the agenda for the entire biblical story. God fulfills his missionary intent for the nations through the nation of Israel.

After the exodus from Egypt, God constitutes the descendants of Abraham as a nation under his rule. Israel alone is called "out of all nations" as God's "treasured possession" (Exodus 19:4–6). Yet this unique status is good news for the nations. God calls the nation to be "a kingdom of priests." Israel's priests represented God to the people by expounding the Law and represented the people to God through sacrifice and intercession. So the nation as a whole has a