

**Life Together In Christ** | Reading: John 13:34-35; Gal 5:14-15; 1 Cor. 13:1-7

These three passages as well as many others in the NT highlight that the second greatest commandment, as summarised by Jesus, should be seen most clearly in Christian community. Of course we are called to love everyone but we are especially called to love one another. For that is how people will know we belong to Jesus. Paul writes to the Galatians in 6:10; **“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”** Why did Paul feel the need to put that last bit in? Is it not because there are times when we find it hard to love our brothers & sisters in Christ? Perhaps we expect more from them than others & therefore are more disappointed when they disappoint us.

The emphases in our call to love one another is not on how loving the others are, it's not on the history between us & our brother or sister, but on how good of a neighbour we are to them. It's not about how lovable our Christian brother or sister is to us, but how loving a Brother Christ is & out of his love for us how loving we are to our brothers & sisters in Christ in spite of the many times they fail us! This is loving one another as Christ has loved us. And if we find it hard to love one of the people God has placed in our life then take note of the following point made by G. K. Chesterton, he said *“unlovely things must be deeply loved before they become lovable.”* In the gospel love always comes first & transformation happens because of it. If we focus on how much others love us things will

never get better for us in church life but if we gaze on how much Christ loves us & live out of that then we will prosper in love.

We are called to love our neighbour *as ourselves* & we are called to love one another as Christ has loved us. We cannot learn to love one another as Jesus has loved us apart from church. Jesus is building a church, an ekklesia, a gathering, community, a body of people called out & set apart by nothing but his amazing grace.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 says; **“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of the one Spirit.”**

These verses are not describing what we know as baptism in the Spirit which is Christ's work of empowering us with the Spirit. These verses are talking about the Spirit's work of making one in Christ by immersing us into the body of Christ – the Church – when we are connected to Christ. This baptism happens when we are born again. To be connected to Christ is to be connected to one another. That is God's reality whether we like it or not. There is no connection to Christ apart from connection to one another & of course the clear testimony of Scripture is that this is worked out in local fellowships. This is why we have most of the NT letters. Most of them are written to local congregations to teach them how to work out this teaching of loving one another.

When Christians struggled to love each other in NT times Paul & the others didn't write to them & say *"okay it's time move to another town or find a new church where people are easier to love."* No he wrote things like **Ephesians 4:1-6 & Colossians 3:12-15**. All the epistles in the NT are teaching us how to do Christianity together – there is no such thing as solo Christianity. One of the surest signs of spiritual immaturity is isolating oneself from Christian community.

Believe me there are reasons to leave a church & find a new one but finding the other people hard to love is never one of them. For one of the primary reasons God's puts us in Christian community is that we learn to love one another as he has loved us. Christian fellowship is as much for our sanctification as our encouragement. Understanding this will help us greatly in maintaining our commitment to it. It is hypocrisy to believe the gospel & leave a church because you find people in it hard to love or because it failed to meet our expectations. Where would we be if Christ had done so with us? Someone might say; *"but you don't understand what they done to me"* to which I reply *"no, you don't understand what Jesus done for you."* The very essence of the gospel we are called to declare & reflect is this: In the words of Romans 5:8 **"but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** Or in the words of 1 John 3:16 **"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."** Like I said we cannot learn to love like Jesus apart from commitment to Christian fellowship.

There is no escaping this truth but at the same time this is the very truth that sets us free – free to love one another without conditions. Church is the Spirit's great tool for sanctifying us, for rooting out of our lives everything that stops us loving like Jesus – look again at 1 Cor. 13. In Christian community we learn how impatient we can be with others, how envious we can be, how bitter we can become etc. We are shown the sins which stop us loving like Jesus & when we realise, own & repent of such sins we find the grace to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

To love Jesus himself means loving his church & loving his church means learning to love our Christian brothers & sisters in the local church we find ourselves in today. Isn't this the truth which echo's through the letter of 1 John! **"By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked."** Isn't that what Jesus is saying when he commands us to love one another as he has loved us. Therefore John continues; **"Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because darkness has blinded his eyes"** (1 John 2:9-11). 1 John 3:11; **"For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another."** He is pointing us back to Jesus' words. 1 John 3:23; **"And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he**

**commanded us.”** Believing in Jesus means believing in what he said & what he said is that we are set apart, called out to love one another as he loved us. Believing in Jesus always includes loving one another. READ 1 John 4:7-12; 19-21.

Oh how easy the Christian life would be if we could live it on our own apart from others BUT the whole point is you can't. We cannot follow the way of Christ & turn our back on Christian community – even when we get hurt, betrayed, let down, disillusioned, deserted when we need them most or even crucified in some way. For it is in & through such things that we learn & mature in loving one another as Christ has loved us! The very gospel which tells us God has accepted us in Christ enables & empowers us to accept one another in Christ. This is all part of the very reason being part of a local church is so essential to the Christian life, so essential for our sanctification, & so essential to us becoming like Christ.

The very reasons a person might be tempted to give up on church may be the very reasons they need to stay. For in Christian community, especially when we find it hard, the Spirit of God is working in our hearts chipping off every condition we have placed on our love until we finally learn to love one another with the sacrificial & unconditional love our Saviour & Lord. The reason you & I feel like throwing in the towel at times is because others don't meet our expectations. Can I tell you now that they never will! We will never meet one another's expectations so we may as well get rid of them & focus on loving one another as Christ has loved us.

We quickly forget that outside of Christ we would not meet God's expectations. However Christ in mercy, grace & agape love has met all the expectations of God's law on our behalf, & he has also done that for the Christian brothers & sisters we struggle to love. The fact that church or people don't meet our expectations should remind of us the gospel – of the only reason we are free from the crippling & humanly impossible expectations of the Law. Of the reality that we ourselves are only accepted because of the love of another & this gospel should in turn help us to let go of the often divisive expectations we place on others. The problem is we need the gospel of grace to penetrate deeper into our hearts if we are to learn to truly love one another as Christ has loved & loves us. Jesus is calling us to love unconditionally, to love with a heart of amazing grace & he will purposely put people around us in the Christian life, people who fall short of our expectations to teach us how gospel-less our hearts can be so we repent & mature in loving one another as Christ has loved us.

It's when you feel you need a break from church that you need to go most because it's not about how you feel it's about maturing in loving one another as Christ has love us. The only thing that will keep us away is hypocrisy of greatest kind – a failure to let the same gospel we depend on affect our relationships towards one another. Where did we every get this idea that church is about us, about how we feel, about what we think, about what we expect, about our needs being met. Where did we ever get that idea? Church is where we learn to die to self & love others.

Christ is our all in all, yes he will often dispense his grace through Christian community but the Christian community itself is not our all in all. It is not where we go to get all our needs met. No Christ alone is where we go & therefore it is Christ & not Christian community itself that holds us together. If you come to church to get your needs met you will never be satisfied & often disappointed. Christ alone can satisfy us & when we are truly satisfied in him we find that we come together already satisfied & therefore we are not disappointed with a gathering which was never designed to meet all our needs or expectations. We gather around Christ, this is what church is – a gathering around Christ alone. This does not excuse the Christian community from caring for one another, but it does remove our excuses for isolating ourselves from Christian community.

Christian community is made up of imperfect people who know Christ is enough; Christ is all in all, Christ is everything we ultimately need. This is what unites us. This is the conviction that holds us together, that enables us to bear one another in love & love one another more & more.

Christians are people nourished by Christ alone. For this reason the Christian does not go to church as a consumer but as a giver & lover because he has found all he really needs in Christ alone.

He is the vine we are branches. He nourishes each of us, the nourishment we need does not come from one another although it can & should flow through us to others. Christ, the One who nourishes us, who keeps us

spiritually alive, also holds us together. Since we find life in him we are also united in him like branches dependant on the same vine.

It's when we realise this, that all we need flows from Christ alone & not the other branches, that we find ourselves in a place of strength to love one another. When we are nourished directly by his love for us, communicated in the gospel of Jesus, his love begins to flow from branch to branch & love for one another saps out for all to see. We love because he first loved us.

To disconnect from one another is to disconnect from Christ, to disconnect from Christ is to disconnect from one another. He is the Vine & we are the branches – the Vine & the branches go together. In Christ all things hold together (they don't pull apart) & therefore in Christ alone true Christian unity & fellowship is found & secured. The truth is we already are one in Christ; it is learning to live in this reality we find difficult at times.

The reality, in which Christians will always find themselves in this world, until Christ returns, is an imperfect Church on the road to perfection. And part of the Church being perfected – being made ready for Christ – is our personal sanctification. In this way the very imperfections we struggle with in church life are the very things that help sanctify us as individuals & therefore help sanctify the Church at large. One of the best things we can do therefore is rid ourselves of our ideals, expectations & personal visions of what church should be & embrace the reality of church in the here & now. Imperfect people united together in their Saviour as he leads them

towards maturity. The paradoxical truth is we cannot learn to love one another as Christ has loved us outside of imperfect Christian community.

Never say you cannot go to church because someone hurt you when we follow a Saviour who is coming back to spend eternity loving a Church full of people whose sin put him on the cross. Do you realise that your level of commitment to Christian fellowship reflects your level understanding of the gospel? If we understand the gospel, if it has truly penetrated & changed our hearts then we simply can never give up on Christian community & we mature in loving it. We cannot escape it because we are bound to it in Christ. We are the church because of amazing grace & the reality (not our ideal) of Christian fellowship gives us the opportunity to show amazing grace to one another. **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** Or as Paul put it to the Romans 15:7; **“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”** That is where it is at & that is what it is all about! My prayer is that what Paul wrote of the Thessalonians will be able to be written of us; **“Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been *taught by God* to love one another.”**

Finish with Bonheoffer...