

Chapter 4

Jesus and Community

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SABBATH

Jesus and Community (John 17:23)

Because human beings are social creatures, they naturally group together on the basis of common interest and preferences. The variety of clubs, associations, and organizations available is endless. Christians also form communities based on their common interests and concerns. The general name for Christian community is *ecclesia*, literally “the called out ones” and translated as “church.”

What makes Christian community different from all the many clubs and groups where people come today in community? Study carefully the lead verse for this section (John 17:23). Christians are joined to Christ in fellowship, and through Him they become joined to one another. Jesus is the glue that holds Christians together. So strong is “the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love” that spiritual brothers and sisters often are closer than siblings.

John 17:23;
Luke 10:1;
Matthew 10:5-10;
Matthew 26:36-38;
Mark 3:13-19;
Matthew 13:52;
Matthew 10:42;
Matthew 18:6, 10, 14;
John 13:34-35;
John 17:11, 22, 23

The community of believers in Jesus—the church—becomes the greatest evidence to the world that Jesus rose from the dead and lives in His followers.

To the non-believer, Christian community does not make sense. How can we bond with Someone we cannot even see? No, we cannot see Jesus in the flesh, but, through the Holy Spirit, He is as real and precious to us as our dearest family member or closest friend. Jesus is alive! We know Him; we love Him. “Though you have not seen him, you love Him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8).¹

Thus, the community of believers in Jesus—the church—becomes the greatest evidence to the world that Jesus rose from the dead and lives in His followers. So it was in the beginning of the church; so God wants it to be now among us.

SUNDAY

Jesus and His Friends

(Luke 10:1; Matthew 10:5-10; 26:36-38)

During His ministry in Galilee, Jesus attracted huge crowds. Luke refers to “a crowd of many thousands” (Luke 12:1). These men and women and children were not followers of the Lord; they simply had heard about Him and came, some from afar, to listen to His words or to be healed by Him. Some of them, however, became attracted to Jesus and became disciples.

As we read the Gospel accounts, we discern, as it were, concentric circles around Jesus. The curious crowd was on the outside, but beyond that, moving in toward the Master, we see successive groups that were ever closer to Him in community.

What was the largest circle of disciples? When

we read Luke 10:1, we see that there were 70 or 72, as some ancient manuscripts of the New Testament suggest. Jesus sent them out two-by-two on a training mission. They were to teach, heal, and preach, and ultimately, announce the dawning of the kingdom of heaven (compare Matthew 10:5-10).

In Mark 3:13-15 we read about a smaller group of followers, with whom Jesus was in more intimate fellowship. We shall look more closely at this group, the Twelve, later, noting their characteristics and diversity. They appear frequently in the Gospel accounts. Sometimes particular ones are mentioned by name, but usually the Gospel writers simply call them “the disciples” (in Mark, “apostles”).

The Twelve enjoyed high privileges. They had the inestimable blessing of being with Jesus on His travels, hearing Him preach and teach, observing how He healed the sick and raised the dead. And they were special to Jesus: He called them “friends” (John 15:15). As He approached the ordeal at the end of His ministry, He craved their companionship. “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,” He told them at the Last Supper (Luke 22:15).

Among the Twelve, three disciples were closest to Jesus. He wanted them near at critical moments. We read about them in Matthew 26:36-38 and Mark 5:37.

Who were these three, and why do you think they became so close to Jesus? What does Jesus’ desire to have friends, particularly intimate friends, tell you about Him?

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¹All biblical quotations in this chapter were taken from the *New International Version* of the Bible.

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MONDAY

The Twelve
(Mark 3:13-19)

Mark 3:14 in the KJV reads: "And he ordained twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach." This translation is misleading. The Greek word translated "ordained" is *poieo*, which means "to make" or "to appoint." The New Testament nowhere uses the word for ordination. Instead of ordination as we understand it today, the New Testament has the idea of commissioning for a particular task or service by the laying on of hands (see Acts 6:6; 13:3).

What three purposes did Jesus have in view by appointing the twelve apostles? (See Mark 3:14-15) Do these purposes still apply to us today? Give reasons for your answer.

In addition to the list of the Twelve in Mark 3:16-19, there are two other complete listings in Matthew and Luke and a fourth listing in Acts 1:13 that omits the name of Judas Iscariot, who committed suicide before the events that were recorded in Acts.

The names in these lists bear close resemblance. There are a few differences, but these are probably to be accounted for by individuals having more than one name. The Twelve are the following:

Simon, later known as Simon Peter
Andrew, brother of Simon Peter
James and *John*, sons of Zebedee
Philip
Nathaniel, also named Bartholomew

Matthew, also called Levi
Thomas

James, the son of Alphaeus
Simon, the Zealot or Canaanite
Judas, brother of James
Judas Iscariot

How diverse was this group of twelve? Note especially the polarity: Matthew (tax collector) and Simon the Zealot (member of a radical party opposed to the government). What does the diversity among the Twelve chosen by Jesus suggest about the nature of Christian community?

TUESDAY

The Disciples as Learners
(Matthew 13:52; 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14)

People in Jesus' time were familiar with rabbis, who went around teaching, and with students who accompanied the rabbis and hoped in time to become teachers of the law themselves. The Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, occurs more than 240 times in the Gospels. It usually refers to followers of Jesus of Nazareth, but occasionally we find it in other contexts, such as when there are references to the disciples of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:12; John 1:25, 37; 3:25), disciples of the Pharisees (Matthew 22:16), or disciples of Moses (John 9:28).

While Jesus in several respects was similar to the other itinerant rabbis of His time, in other respects His practices differed sharply.

Diversity among the twelve disciples

They played a vital part, but it was not in caring for food preparations and other chores. These women—at least some of them—were women who occupied responsible positions in society and who were independently wealthy.

Read carefully Luke 8:1-3. Probably you have read these verses many times. What do you think is the radical nature of what is being described here?

Luke's account makes clear that many women were part of the band that accompanied Jesus, going from one town and village to another. This was something unheard of in the society of Jesus' time. It was radical. It must have aroused criticism.

What were these women doing? They played a vital part, but it was not in caring for food preparations and other chores. These women—at least some of them—were women who occupied responsible positions in society and who were independently wealthy.

Mary of Magdala clearly had considerable means, because she purchased a fabulously expensive jar of pure nard to anoint Jesus' head just before His Passion. It cost more than a year's wages—at least \$30,000-\$50,000 in our terms today (Mark 14:1-9).

Joanna was the wife of Chuza, who managed the household of King Herod Antipas. Herod was the ruthless monarch who gave the order for John the Baptist to be beheaded (Mark 6:4-29). We can only speculate about how Joanna became a disciple of Jesus. What must her husband have thought of her being part of Jesus' group?

Susanna was a prominent follower of Jesus though we don't know anything more about her other than that the readers of Luke's Gospel would have heard about her.

How wonderful to have been a part of that wandering band of disciples who accompanied

Jesus and learned directly from Him! How can we still allow Him to teach us today?

WEDNESDAY

The Test of Community

(John 13:34-35)

How will the world know that we are disciples of Jesus? Read John 13:35.

In America today, millions of men and women call themselves Christians. Religion is big business—televangelists appeal for money and live luxuriously; preachers attract crowds and develop mega-churches with themselves at the center. But merely to profess Jesus Christ does not make one a disciple. Jesus said that not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom (Matthew 7:21). The litmus test of discipleship today is precisely what it was 2,000 years ago—love for our brothers and sisters.

What does it mean to "love one another"? Is it basically feeling good, or does it go further? Try to spell out what it means in the context of Sligo Church.

Read James 2:1-9. Here is an example from the early church that we can readily grasp today: Two men show up at Sligo for church. One drives up in a Mercedes; he's dressed in a one-thousand-dollar suit. The ushers greet him warmly, shake his hand, and make sure he finds a choice seat in the sanctuary. Then, a homeless man wanders in off the streets. If the church people are not impressed to see him, and they

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do nothing to make him feel welcome, they have made James's letter come true today.

What would a disciple at Sligo Church do in a situation like this?

Read John 13:34. In *The Message Bible*, John 13:34 reads, "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another."

Why did Jesus say He was giving the disciples a new commandment?

Already in the Old Testament, the Lord had commanded: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). So the "new" commandment to love one another was not new in time but in quality. As followers of Jesus, we are to love in the same way Jesus loved us. This is something new! That incredible life of compassion, thoughtfulness and concern lived again in the lives of men and women—the Roman world had never witnessed anything like that. No wonder the story of Jesus spread like wildfire. And it can happen again.

THURSDAY

Unity in Community

(John 17:11, 22, 23)

What was Jesus' prayer for His followers just before He went to the cross?

John 17:23 reads, "I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

The disciples were far from united. They argued among themselves as to who should be first in importance. They were jealous and selfish, and they were ambitious for their own interests. Jesus tried to teach them that their thinking was the thinking of the world, not His kingdom. When James and John accompanied their mother to persuade Jesus to ensure that they would have the places of highest honor in His Kingdom, He told them: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. . . ." (Matthew 20:25-26). Luke tells us that even when the Twelve sat down with Jesus for the Last Supper, "a dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest" (Luke 22:24). Incredible!

Read Acts 2:1. This passage takes us 50 days after the Last Supper to the Feast of Pentecost. How different are the disciples now? Then what happens (verses 2-4)?

What made the difference between their conduct at the Last Supper and their conduct at Pentecost?

The cross made the difference. The cross shattered all their ambition and pride for worldly honor and glory. The cross showed the disciples how much they needed forgiveness, how much they needed to rely on God's strength. The cross, as it revealed their desperate need, also revealed the depths of divine love and grace. The cross changed them.

What other factors contributed to the change from a quarreling, arguing group to one that was

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unified? See Acts 1:14.

Jesus' prayer in John 17 gives the key to unity. Read verses 20-26, noting especially, the following:

- Verse 21: "May they also be in us"
- Verse 22: "that they may be one as we are one"
- Verse 23: "I in them and you in me"
- Verse 26: "in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may in them."

What do these verses reveal concerning the nature of Christian unity? Do the Father and Son lose their individuality because they are united? Should believers lose theirs for the sake of unity?

FRIDAY

The Sligo Miracle

More than any other factor, Sligo Church takes its model of community from Jesus Christ. He who in His ministry chose a diverse group of twelve unlikely individuals to form the foundation of the Church, and He who included women in His traveling band of close followers—He is the One to whom Sligo looks.

God has brought together a fusion of cultures and nations in this congregation, which in several ways distinguishes Sligo. Initially an all-white congregation, Sligo has made the transition to a community in which no racial or ethnic group predominates.

Today, the American society is increasingly diverse. Racism, bigotry, prejudice, suspicion and hatred can create a fragmented society, but Sligo Church members demonstrate that in Christ healing

is possible. At Sligo, people of different races and ethnicities don't just get along—they rejoice in each other's differences. In view of the fractured state of society in America and elsewhere, the Sligo community is nothing short of miraculous. Sligo, albeit imperfectly, is a fulfillment of Jesus' high-priestly prayer in John 17 "that they may be one."

Sligo has also led the World Adventist Church in the roles given to women. In the 1970's, Sligo was the first to include a woman on the pastoral staff. In 1975, Sligo was the first to ordain women to the gospel ministry.

We need to remember, however, that the Sligo miracle must not be taken for granted. Community is not automatic; it can be lost. Long-time Sligo members can recall a sad period when the church fell into division, and when ugly, racist feelings rose to the surface and poisoned the atmosphere. So here are some questions we need to take to heart:

What are the warning signs of potential division? How can Sligo be pro-active in maintaining community?

What role does the Holy Spirit play in Christian community? Try to be specific.

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being highest, where would you rate Sligo's strength in community? What do you perceive to be points of potential conflict? What would you recommend to address these areas?

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