

Chapter 6

Community and Personal Identity

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SABBATH

Introduction

The term *Ubuntu*, which originated in Southern Africa, expresses the inter-connectedness of people in a community. It literally means, "I am what I am because of who we all are." Commenting on Ubuntu, Desmond Tutu, former Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, reflected, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours."

The spirit of Ubuntu marked much of Old Testament life. It was expressed in the concept that biblical scholars call *solidarity*, meaning roughly that in a community all members represent one member and one member represents all members. "[The] Israelites saw society as an aggregate of groups rather than as a collection of individuals, that in worship the king could embody the aspirations of the whole community, and that individuals in worship or prayer could feel that their experiences were those of the whole group."¹

¹John R. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Sheffield UK: JSOT, 1984), 25.

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A resident alien in Israel was often associated with a particular family. Such a connection was considered necessary if that alien was to have a sense of identity and be seen by others as belonging to the community. Without such a connection, the alien had no real standing in the society; he was treated as a non-entity or a foreigner. If a resident alien was circumcised, he could partake of the Passover (Exodus 12:43-49). One's identity derived from the group to which one belonged. Doing one's own thing and looking only after one's own interests was a foreign concept to the Old Testament life.

In what ways can you demonstrate that you were not created to live a life of solitude? How can your Sligo Church family express their connectedness with you?

SUNDAY

God chooses to live in community in order to express His identity

God, as the Trinity, lives in community. But, why are three members of the Godhead necessary when they are each perfect in power and knowledge, and are of the same essence? While we can only speculate on the answer to this question, one fact is apparent: an essential element of the divine nature is community, living in partnership with others:

God is not only loving, He *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16). Love must have an object, argued Richard of St Victor in the twelfth century. If God is love and has always been love then he must always have had 'another' upon whom to direct his

love. Furthermore, argued Richard, love must have a third party otherwise it is self-indulgent. True love desires the beloved to be loved by another. So the Father and Son desire to share their love with another: the Holy Spirit.²

So compelling is God's desire to be part of a community that in His earthly associations He chooses to attach Himself to specific groups of people, defined by kinship or geography. He had a special relationship with Israel, based upon the covenant He made with them. Although the covenant extended to all humanity, God chose to describe Himself as belonging to a specific group. Thus He called Himself "the God of the Hebrews" (Exodus 7:16), "the Mighty One of Israel" (Isaiah 1:24), and "God of Israel" (1 Kings 8:23). In turn, Israel's corporate sense of community and identity was firmly based on their relationship with God.

Jesus became known as a member of Joseph's family and a resident of Nazareth. He was Mary's son. If Jesus had come to earth merely as God, He probably would have found it impossible to build any kind of substantive relationship with those He came to save. He most likely would have been regarded with awe and fear but not with affection and love. In order to be seen as a part of the human community, Jesus often referred to Himself as the Son of Man.

Created in the image of God, it is natural for human beings to find fulfillment and completeness in community. "For if 'God is what God is in interrelatedness,' then human transformation is both dependent upon and realized in a similar interrelatedness. Humans are created physically

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²Tim Chester, *The Good News of the Trinity*, <https://www.theologynetwork.org/christian-beliefs/doctrine-of-god/the-good-news-of-the-trinity.htm>. Accessed November 13, 2017.

through physical union, we grow in families through loving attachment, and we become spiritually mature through interdependent living.”³

When you consider God in community, whether as the Trinity or on earth, what does it tell us about the way He works and about how He desires us to live?

MONDAY

Jesus Establishes a New Humanity

Jesus is often thought of as the world’s greatest reformer, but to describe Jesus as a reformer is to miss the magnitude of what He came to earth to do. He did not come merely to reform society. He came to establish a new community and a new humanity. As Jesus miraculously formed the first community of human beings through creation, He came to earth to establish a new community through recreation.

The characteristics of this new community are summarized in 2 Corinthians 5:14-20. In this passage, God gives to members of this new community a new point of reference: “Christ’s love compels us” (v.14); a new purpose for living: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (v.15); a new view of people: “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (v.16); and a new identity: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (v.17). In other words, whoever is in Christ has a new identity.

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³Tod E. Bolsinger, *It takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 1984), Kindle Edition, 72.

Prior to becoming a member of this new community, one’s identity is linked to human sinful nature—to Adamic relationships—which ultimately lead to death. But, by the miracle of conversion, the old identity gives way to the new one in Jesus. We become joint-heirs with Jesus and find our significance and our *raison d’etre* in this new identity.

It is important to recognize that this new identity is wrapped up with being a part of the new community through the experience of new birth. As John Zizioulas explains, “The hypostasis [underlying essence] of ecclesial existence is constituted by the new birth of man, by baptism . . . As the conception and birth of a man constitute his biological hypostasis, so baptism leads to a new mode of existence, to a regeneration (1 Peter 1:3, 23) and consequently to a new hypostasis.”⁴ This new essence is not bestowed upon us individually; it is experienced as one is embedded in the group of people whom Christ rescued from Adam’s condemnation (Romans 5:15-21).

How is my identity in the new church community that is created by Jesus different from my identity in the old community “created” by Adam?

TUESDAY

All for One and One for All

Individualism is touted as one of the great freedoms in our society, but the gospel is emphatic

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⁴John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1997), 53.

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in stating that the essence of humanity, as it is of divinity, is experienced in community (see Genesis 2:18-25; John 17:20-23). We find meaning and strength in one another. We can appreciate the words of Ellen White when she wrote, "The church, enfeebled and defective though it be, is the only object on earth on which Christ bestows His supreme regard."⁵ God knows that the church is essential for the growth of each member, for character development, for strength against the evil one and for encouragement of one another.

The Apostle Paul, when he met the Lord on this way to Damascus, was not encouraged to go off on his own to some secret place to commune with God. He was brought immediately into contact with the church and with believers who would nurture, build, and protect him (Acts 9:22). And what a positive force he became in the church!

Billy Chapel was still pitching for the Detroit Tigers at age forty. In one game, as he took the mound for the start of the eighth inning, he said to the catcher, "I don't know if I have anything left." The catcher replied, "Just throw whatever you got . . . The boys are all here for you . . . We're going to be awesome for you tonight." Chapel's first three pitches were balls; one more and the batter would walk. The next pitch was a strike. The following pitch was hit so hard by the batter that it looked like a game-wrecking home run, but one of the outfielders made a spectacular catch, followed later in the game by a heroic grab by the catcher, a long throw from third and a diving stop at third. The catcher was right. The boys were all there for Billy, and Billy and the

⁵Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Bk 2, 3rd ed. (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 2006), 396.

entire team had a remarkable win that night.

What a fitting analogy of the Christian community! (See Romans 12:10; Galatians 5:13; 1 Thessalonians 3:12). When I have thrown all that I've got, I should expect the "boys and girls" to be there for me—to help me with my weaknesses, to fight for me when I cannot fight for myself, to bear me up when I am about to fall. With God helping me, I am going to give my all for "the boys and girls!" It's all for one and one for all!

What practical things can you do to support the other members of the Sligo community and help them understand that you are there for them?

WEDNESDAY **Competing Identities**

Most human beings belong to several different communities and, consequently, have multiple identities. It is natural that these identities compete for pre-eminence in our lives. As Christians, we should not allow culture, nationality, family, achievements, failures, or possessions to assume priority over our identity as the members of the Body of Christ. Problems arise for Christians when they allow other identities to become more prominent in their lives.

There are areas of the world where cultural practices are considered more important than gospel principles. Christians freely participate in rites associated with death, the initiation of pubescent girls, and other rituals, with the excuse

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that they are fulfilling their traditional responsibilities and following in the footsteps of their ancestors. In developed countries, such as the United States, there is a tendency to look at such practices with disdain and disgust. However, we also have cultural practices that are not congruent with Christian principles. Two that come easily to mind are pervasive materialism and rampant individualism.

When Mother Teresa first visited the United States, she was asked by a reporter whether poverty in the United States was as glaring as in her native Calcutta. Mother Teresa responded by saying that she had not seen much poverty of the body in the United States, but had never seen such poverty of the soul and such terrible loneliness. We have “a worldview that says that since we are created as individuals we must live as independently as possible in order to be fully human.”⁶ This viewpoint is in direct contradiction to the fact that we have been created to discover and express our humanness in one another. The Apostle Paul clearly teaches that in the new community that Jesus established, the kingdom principles should control culture and nationality (Galatians 3:26-29).

In Mark 3:31-35, Jesus teaches that in the new community that He came to establish, kingdom relationships are the relationships that really matter. They take precedence over blood relationships.

What personal conflicts might we face when we seek to align our conduct and beliefs with the biblical community values as opposed to those of the surrounding culture? How can we resolve such conflicts?

⁶Bolsinger, 42.

THURSDAY

Lessons on Community from the Lord’s Prayer

Most Christians are familiar with *the Lord’s Prayer* (Matthew 6:9-13). However, a better title for *the Lord’s Prayer* might be *the Disciples’ Prayer*, as it outlines how as followers of Jesus we should approach God in prayer. The Lord’s Prayer helps us understand that although there is merit in personal prayer, God also expects us to approach Him as a community of faith. Thus, the prayer begins with, “Our Father” and uses plural pronouns when referring to Christ’s followers: “Give *us* today *our* daily bread. And forgive *us our* debts, as *we* also have forgiven *our* debtors. And lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us* from the evil one.” It is evident that as a part of the Body of Christ, I cannot be so focused on meeting my own needs and pursuing my own dreams that I become oblivious to the needs and interests of those around me. The conduct of the four starving lepers in 2 Kings 7:3-11 provides a practical example as to why we should not feel fulfilled and comfortable when our needs are met while the needs of the other members of our community are not. The Lord’s Prayer reminds us that we stand or fall together. We are all part of a circle.

According to Michael Brewer, “The larger we make the circle included in the words ‘our’ and ‘us’ in the Lord’s prayer, the truer we are to its intent. Ultimately, it is meant to be prayed on behalf of all creation; but it especially includes all of humanity . .

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⁷Michael Brewer, *The Social Forms Implied in the Lord's Prayer*, <http://www.thechristiancommunity.org/features/essays-and-articles/the-social-form-implicit-in-the-lord%E2%80%99s-prayer/>. Accessed November 13, 2017.

⁸Ibid.

⁹John Donne, "No Man is an Island," <https://web.cs.dal.ca/~johnston/poetry/island.html>.

.. And through its inclusion of humanity it brings to expression the picture of how the structure of human society is built.⁷ Rephrasing the Lord's Prayer into a personal supplication is unthinkable, according to Brewer: "[T]he phrase 'My father, who art in the heavens' is already repugnant, but 'Give me this day my daily bread' is even more so."⁸ We cannot recite the Lord's Prayer in the way it was intended by Jesus and be oblivious to the needs, fears, and anxieties of those in our community. Each of us has a persona larger than our individual selves—any community of which we are a part.

What personal conflicts might we face when we seek to align our conduct and beliefs with the biblical community values as opposed to those of the surrounding culture? How can we resolve such conflicts?

FRIDAY Summary and Application

John Donne's "No man is an island" musings from the 17th century have stood the test of time and are as true today as they were when originally written. Donne wrote that "every man / is a piece of the continent, a part of the main," and he explained that "any man's death diminishes me, / because I am involved in mankind."⁹ It was Donne's suffering from a life-threatening illness that led him to search for a wider significance in personal and natural events and to write these lines. In that search, he concluded that human beings are all interconnected, finding meaning and fulfillment only as that

interconnectedness is explored and pursued. Each one of us has a responsibility to something bigger and greater than ourselves. It is called humanity. That humanity may be in our home, on our street, in our workplace, or in our church.

The church, without question, is the most significant community, and it is where the new human identity that Jesus established resides and where the reality of a community knitted together by Christ's love is displayed. When the early church spoke of *koinonia* (1 Corinthians 1:9; Philippians 1:5; 1 John 1:3), members were expressing a concept akin to spiritual intimacy. The church was not merely a place, a set of social activities, or a repository of shared beliefs. It was a living, breathing organism that bound members together in shared experiences, shared resources, shared sufferings, shared joys, and shared hope.

If the early church is to be an example to us today, *koinonia* or fellowship is not essentially about participating in an occasional potluck. It is about sharing our lives with other members of the community. No one can be a Christian as an isolated individual. Each person finds his or her Christian identity in a common life together.

God brought into existence a human race, not simply a collection of individuals, giving them a whole network of relationships, and with collective as well as individual privileges and responsibilities. Under the old covenant, he established a special covenant relationship with a people . . . Under the new

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covenant too, he has a people, joined to him by faith in Christ . . . Christians are shown not simply to have an individual relationship with God, but membership in a community with as much sense of common interests as was the case in Old Testament days.¹⁰

How would you describe, in your own words, the relationship between community and personal identity?

What changes do you need to make in your life in order to become an active and productive part of the community called the church?

¹⁰G.W. Grogan, *The Old Testament Concept of Solidarity in Hebrews*, http://tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/TynBull_1998_49_1_10_Grogan_OTSolidarity.pdf. Accessed November 13, 2017.