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## CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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Since I first believed in Jesus I have always desired to live as part of a fully devoted, fully committed community of disciples. My heart has longed to live in fellowship with lovers of Jesus and those completely given to His purpose. Jesus did not create us to be isolated and alone (**Gen.2:18**). He created and saved us to be part of a community, to ***“continue steadfastly in the ...fellowship” Acts 2:42***. This is a people who are ***“saved from a perverse generation” (Acts 2:40)*** to become part of God’s ***“chosen generation” 1 Peter 2:9***. This is a separate group of people to the world. The Christian community is to be a model of the kingdom of heaven on the earth. It is to show forth a new way of life for the world to encounter.

### Not “going” to church but “being” the church

As Christians we are not called to live our own lives, keep to ourselves and then every Sunday “go to church”. The shift must come from “going to church” to “being” and “functioning” as the church. When we live in the mindset of “going to church” it becomes something we do rather than who we are. We separate our lives into “church activities” and “other” activities. When we live like this we see the “Church” as an institution in our understanding and practice rather than a family in which we belong and for which we live.

**Malachi** prophesied that before the ***“great and dreadful day of Yahweh...he [Elijah] will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers...” Mal.4:5-6***. This speaks of a family not an organisation. This speaks of heart relationships. This speaks of a Christian community.

### Jesus lived in a community

Jesus did not live a lonely life. In fact it seems the only times He could find to have alone were when He would spend all night in prayer while all the disciples were sleeping! Jesus constantly lived in a community of Himself and twelve disciples and often in a community much larger as He had trained and sent ***“seventy others also” Luke 10:1***. Jesus taught the disciples how to live as a community. He modelled the lifestyle to them. The community was His family, ***“Who is My mother and who are My brothers!” And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples...” Matthew 12:48-49***.

### The apostles lived in community

On the day of Pentecost a community of one hundred and twenty suddenly became a community of three thousand one hundred and twenty in a matter of hours (**Acts 2:36-41**). Because Jesus had shown and taught the apostles how to live in community, they knew how to lead these souls into Christian community. They demonstrated the lifestyle they had learned from Jesus and brought all the new believers into it, ***“they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” Acts 2:42***. The result of this lifestyle was that ***“Now all who believed were together” Acts 2:44***. Notice that the believers were ***together***. They were not separate, living isolated lives. They

were *together*, demonstrating practical love even having *“all things in common”* (v.44). Oh, what a picture of heaven breaking through into earth!

### **The community is a testimony of Jesus**

The way this community functioned was such a testimony to those outside as the *“Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” Acts 2:47*. They were added into the life of the community. The “life” of the community was Jesus. He was in the midst of such a community that was :

- *“continuing daily with one accord in the temple* – how often do you meet for times of teaching and prayer in the buildings that God has given for you to use?
- *and breaking bread from house to house*, - do you encourage the saints to have the Lord’s Table in their homes and invite others to partake with them?
- *they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart*, - when was the last time you had other brothers and sisters in Christ to your place to share a meal? Do you enjoy the company and friendship of the believers?
- *praising God* – when you have brothers and sisters in Christ in your house do you make a point of honouring and praising God together?
- *and having favour with all the people” Acts 2:46-47*. A community functioning like this will experience favour in the community due to the blessing they will be to everyone around! Do you have a vision to develop such a community?

### **The Body is to function in love**

God’s goal for us can only be achieved through us being together. The apostle Paul saw a mature body arising in which *“every part does its share, causing growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” Ephesians 4:16*. Paul saw a mature body able to *edify itself in love*. This is the goal. To see a community functioning in the love of God. This is a place where the gifts of the Spirit are operating through love *“for the profit of all” 1 Corinthians 12:7*. This is happening house to house and within the daily working of the community, not just in “church meetings” but whenever two or three gather together in Jesus’ name. Every part is contributing, walking in the Spirit, *“each of you having a psalm, having a teaching, having a tongue, having a revelation, having an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” 1 Corinthians 14:26*. It is a community of brethren looking to contribute and build up the whole.

### **The love of God manifests in community**

It is only as a community that we can manifest the love of God because the love of God can only manifest in and through relationships. The world is looking for the love of God. It is found in the Christian community. When we remain isolated and alone we cannot edify anyone in love and so cannot demonstrate the love of Messiah. It is only with *“all the saints”* that we can *“comprehend...what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge” Ephesians 3:19*. We need to learn to live as a community, demonstrating practical, real, self-sacrificial, serving love toward each other. *“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” John 13:35*.

## Great power and great grace

In Acts 4:33 it is written, “*And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.*” When we read this verse by itself we can tend to glorify the apostles and think it was just the apostles who were great. However, the context comes from verse 32, “*Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things that he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.*” The apostles were flowing in ministry out of the community that they had raised up. The apostles functioned in *great power* and *great grace* because they were sent from a Christian community that was functioning in the resurrection power of Jesus and was receiving the grace that transforms the inward character of those who believe.

## Power and grace in the community

The power and grace released by this community came through:

- accountable relationships – “*they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests...had said to them*” Acts 4:23 – Are you accountable to the brethren you relate with in the Lord?
- corporate prayer releasing God’s power – “*So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord...and when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness*” Acts 4:24,31 – Are you learning to pray in one accord corporately?
- a people who were full of faith – “*Now the multitude of those who believed*” Acts 4:32a – the community of Christ is made up of those who believe and trust in Jesus. Do you fellowship with people because they are “*from your church*” or because they *have faith in Jesus*?
- A people who “*were of one heart and one soul*” Acts 4:32b– this is an amazing thing. To have the same heart as a corporate reality. To even have *one soul* corporately. This is the reality of being the Body of Messiah where “*if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it*” 1 Corinthians 12:26. Do you see yourself as an individual or a member of the Body?
- A people stewarding, not possessing their goods – “*neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own*” Acts 4:32c – to be disciples we must be willing to forsake all we have and not be owned by any of our possessions (Luke 14:33).
- A people who use their goods for Jesus’ purposes and for the community – “*but they had all things in common*” Acts 4:32d. Are you willing to use your possessions for the Body? Even opening up your house for meetings and fellowship times?

It is through such a community that the apostles were sent and functioned in *great power* and *great grace*! We must realise that we can only release what we are functioning in at our home base. If the brethren at home base are functioning well in community, we will be sent with *great power* and *great grace*.

## Catch the little foxes

In developing Christian community we must also take heed of any little thing that would spoil the sweet presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the saints. Solomon wrote, **“Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes.” Song of Songs 2:15.** Sometimes we can see good fruit coming forth in saints and we see the community of believers functioning well. That is no time to rest as the devil is cunning to bring **“little foxes”** to try and bring disturbance to the **“tender grapes”** that are developing. **James** wrote that the tongue is a small member of the body but **“See how great a forest a little fire kindles” James 3:5b.** We must learn to guard the anointing of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the community by being careful with our tongue. Paul instructs us, **“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit” Ephesians 4:29-30.** As we guard God’s Presence in the midst of the Christian Community those tender grapes will be ready to pick and new wine, new emerging ministries, will come forth to benefit the whole.

## Overcoming the Accuser

Very often the *little foxes* that come to spoil the vine come in the form of accusations and criticisms. This can be of individual saints in the fellowship and against leadership. It was revealed to the apostle John that **“they overcame him [the accuser of the brethren] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives even to the death” Revelation 12:11.** We find in this verse three keys to guard the formation and development of community. The community overcomes by:

1. **“the blood of the Lamb”** – this is the blood of Jesus working corporately to cleanse us in our relationships and to keep us in true fellowship with one another. **“If we walk in the light as He is in the Light then we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” 1 John 1:7.** Notice the corporate reality of these verses. There is no fellowship with each other in Christ if we stay in darkness, harbouring criticism, bitterness and complaints. We must walk in the Light for the Blood to work in the whole community. When we do, the Presence of the Holy Spirit is apparent!
2. **“the word of their testimony”** – this is keeping a good confession of Jesus in our lives. It is keeping the **“confession of our hope without wavering” Hebrews 10:23.** This guards us from going the way of negativity. We are to keep a confession according to the Word of God, staying in the Spirit because the **“the Spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus” Revelation 19:10.** We are to resist the devil **“steadfast in the faith” (1 Pet.5:9)** speaking out the faith boldly.
3. **“not loving our lives even to the death”** – We are to keep an attitude of “what can I give”, not thinking “why am I not getting enough?”. The apostle Paul told the elders at Ephesus **“And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” Acts 20:35.** It is in giving that we become even more open to receive (**Luke 6:38**). It is in dying to ourselves to serve others that we find resurrection life and come to really know Jesus (**Philippians 3:10-11**). **“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” 1 John 3:16.**

## **The season we are in**

Since we at SHILOH base in Toowoomba recently moved into house churches we have been enjoying a deepening development of Christian community. This is really understanding the “fellowship” (*in Greek 'koinonia'*) we have in Christ. It is learning to function as family. It involves purposely planning times where all the saints can be together to enjoy each other and build each other up in Christ. It means planning outings together where we praise Jesus, speak the Word to each other and enjoy God’s creation and Presence together. It is providing opportunity to include those who live alone, or who are widowed, to be in the greater family of God and to enjoy wholesome, loving and healing relationships. **“We are accepted in the Beloved” Ephesians 1:6.** Everyone in Christ is accepted in the community. We were created for fellowship. Let’s learn to “be the church” and develop loving Christian community so that all will know we are Jesus’ disciples.