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Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

IT TAKES A VILLAGE • Will Walker

I've been running around like an ant looking for something that has at the same time been trying to find me: people in missional community. I need people and people need me, not because any of us are more important than the rest, but simply because there is no other context for our faith. Community is not a part of spiritual life; it is spiritual life.

"Community" is a buzzword these days, and for good reason. But buzzwords tend to lose meaning or change meaning, and often community means just another activity, something on the to-do list of the Christian lifestyle. This is how individualism undermines authentic faith.

Spiritual growth today is largely undertaken through self-help methods, which are characterized by our tendency to measure maturity by how much we do, how much we know, and how spiritual people think we are. The value we derive from such achievement is short-term at best, and it is ultimately undermined by the impression that one can accomplish spiritual maturity in isolation from other people. If we can grow on our own, even with God's help, then we have something to boast about before others. But if we need each other to grow, then our boasting is turned into humility. This is how community exposes our inadequacies and magnifies the power of the gospel as our only hope for personal and cultural transformation.

Facial Features

If you spend some time in a foreign country, Russia for example, where people don't speak English, you'll witness an interesting phenomenon: it's nearly impossible to show up in Russia and just start speaking with people and reading things. You'll find yourself quickly being shown up by three-year-olds (and probably laughed at). You'll be quite helpless, really, until you run into someone who can speak English or until you learn the word mojna, which in combination with the proper gesture means "that," "may I," or "I'm from America and I wish I could speak the language, but I can't, so can you please stop laughing and help me?"

The key difference, in this case, between a grown man such as myself and a three-year-old Russian boy is that he's been in a community of people speaking Russian for his entire existence, and I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the idea that a three-year-old is effectively smarter than me. Communication is just one of the many things we only can learn by being immersed in a community.

Community doesn't just provide the skill set for our existence; it also provides the context. Author Dan Allender puts it this way: "You can't see your own face." When I read this, I wondered how it was that Dan managed to fix his hair without a mirror. I decided to suspend judgment and read further. Good decision. It turns out that what he actually meant was that you cannot know yourself by yourself.

Here's the problem: we all have preconceived notions and biases that fight against reality. It actually is possible to look at yourself in the mirror and see something different than what everyone else sees. Think, for example, of someone who has an eating disorder – the reflection staring back never looks thin enough. The example may sound drastic, but similar distortions of reality affect each of us in some aspect of our existence. I tend to think either too

highly or too lowly of myself, depending on the day and the subject matter. Both of these mindsets are problematic because they cause me to act in ways that are out of line with reality.

We need other people to know us so that we can in effect know ourselves. Seeing ourselves through another person's eyes helps a lot, but that is still not enough. This other person has their own biases--various splinters in their eyes that create blind spots—but in the context of a community, these biases begin to balance out. It's a filtering process, really.

If someone tells me I have a beautiful voice, like an opera singer, I might believe them. But if fifty additional people tell me that my voice is terrible, I might start to question the first person's opinion. This person was either lying to me or has a curiously awful taste in music. A community's opinion helps guard against the lies of subjectivity.

Relationships with other people are at the core of your relationship with God. At the start, your community gave you a language with which to read and hear the gospel, and God used the experiences and conversations in your life to bring you to a point where you decided to give up your old life of sin and death for new life in Christ. As you mature in faith, community remains at the core. In conversation with other Christ-followers, in the reading and discussion of the Bible together, and in corporate prayer, you gain a more robust experience of God than you would ever have on your own. Multiple viewpoints tend to capture reality better.

Living a solitary life reflects a distorted reality. What's more, it rarely produces the kind of tension that leads to life change. In a "just me and God" relationship, the effects of a depraved character are often difficult to grasp. By contrast, in honest and below-the-surface relationships with other people, the effects of sin are evident. Grace stops feeling so cheap as we witness the real consequences brought about by our selfish ambitions. To think other people are unnecessary in our relationship with God is short-sighted at best, and a different gospel at worst.

That's not to say that God can't reveal Himself to someone apart from using other people. We should not think, however, that because such a solo pursuit is possible, going it alone is either normative or prescriptive.

Personal, But Not Private

When God said that Adam was alone in the Garden (the first thing that was "not good")[1], I take that to mean that Adam was in some way lonely. That is, I do not think God was the only One who thought something was missing. Some of the guys in my Bible study do not buy this. They like to disagree with me, plus they do not think that Adam could have been lonely before the Fall. "He had perfect fellowship with God," they say. I counter, "Loneliness is not a sin. Why can't there be loneliness before the Fall?"

You may have heard people say that we were created with a God-shaped void in our life. I read an argument recently that said we also were created with a human-shaped void in our life, a void that not even God Himself would fill. I haven't checked this out with smart people yet, but I think that when God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,"[2] He was at least partly, if not primarily, talking about community. Think about the Trinity for a moment… what do they do, how do they interact with each other? Just thinking of examples in Scripture, there is the baptism of Jesus when the Father says, "This is my Son whom I love, in Him I am well-pleased," and the Spirit descends like a dove.[3] At the transfiguration, the Father says about Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"[4] Reciprocally, Jesus says He can only do what He sees His Father doing.[5] Jesus also says that it will be better for His disciples when He leaves because the Spirit will come.[6] The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are always deflecting glory to one another and serving each other. It is a community that creates together and works together and loves one another. Wouldn't you like to have a group of friends like that, always trying to give each other credit and always serving the desires of one another in love? This is what God wants for us: "let us make man in our image, in our likeness," that we might experience and live in community as God is in community.

Jesus restated this desire just before He went to the cross: "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them… so that they may be one as we are one. That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you … that they may be one as we are one: I in them

and you in me."[7] This sounds mushy to some people. What about evangelism and mission? Keep reading: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."[8] The design of creation is for a human version of Trinitarian community. Mission comes later, after the Fall, and is actually just an expression of what a God-centered, human-shaped-void-filling community would do.

It makes sense, then, that restored relationship with God is a communal experience and not an individual accomplishment. Think about how this plays out in the way we pursue knowledge, for instance. When I learn independently, all you see is the finished product. Perhaps I was just born with such wisdom; perhaps I have an inordinate IQ. Whatever the verdict, you will think better of me for it, and the appearance, however it appears, will not be accurate. When I learn in community, you can view me in process: a process whose humbling ingredients include me not knowing something, tactics of denial, being wrong, asking dumb questions, and being overly passionate trying to convince you that I'm right. It's much better, in my opinion, to show up with the dispassionate product.

Our drive for independence glimpses the deformity of the Fall: God Himself living in community while we strive for self-sufficiency. I am not anti-knowledge; I think learning is the essence of discipleship. I'm just saying that the kind of learning that leads to meaningful change requires community. It's give and take, because while personal transformation requires community, a community is only as dynamic as the people in it. We are all in this together, each one of us needing what we must also give. A "me and God" approach is simply inadequate, inconceivable.

Endnotes
[1] Genesis 2:18, NIV
[2] Genesis 1:26 (emphasis added, NIV)
[3] Matthew 3:16-17, NIV
[4] Mark 9:7
[5] See John 5:19
[6] See John 16:7
[7] John 17:11, 21-23 (emphasis added, NIV)
[8] John 17:23 (emphasis added, NIV)

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