

# EQUIP

*Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*  
(Eph 4:15–16)

*This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.*  
(Martin Luther)





# Introduction

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## WHAT SHOULD COMMUNITY GROUPS LOOK LIKE IN OUR CONTEXT?

Randy Frazee, in his book *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community*, writes:

Princeton's Robert Wuthnow has found that small groups mainly "provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding members together asserts only the weakest of obligations. Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticize. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied." In *Overcoming Loneliness in Everyday Life*, two Boston psychiatrists ... suggest that ... groups "fail to replicate the sense of belonging we have lost. Attending weekly meetings, dropping in and out as one pleases, shopping around for a more satisfactory or appealing group—all of these factors work against the growth of true community."

Tim Keller unpacks this quote further by noting:

Christians expect to find community by attending church services and coming to a small group. As the quote above points out, however, it is possible to hold a weekly small group meeting without adding the elements that create real community. Because of our idols and the habits of our heart church events simply become places that individuals "focus on themselves in the presence of others." It takes deep reflection and costly commitment to live in community.

Keller is saying that there is a very real possibility that we could form and participate in a community group without adding the elements that will actually create real Christian community! So let's take a minute and with Keller's help—drawn from his excellent *Gospel in Life* study—let's think about what a Christian community really is.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY?

This question has three primary answers:

### 1. THE PEOPLE OF GOD—THOSE WHO ARE CREATED BY FAITH THROUGH HIS GOSPEL

A Christian community consists of those who have repented and believed and have a common experience of the gospel, which is a message of grace. The controlling biblical metaphor for this is the "assembly" at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:4–5, 6:6–7; 1 Peter 1:22, 2:9–10).

### 2. THE BODY OF CHRIST—THOSE WHO ARE MEMBERS OF ONE ANOTHER IN HIS LIFE

A Christian community, secondly, consists of people who deliberately share life together. The controlling biblical metaphor for this aspect is that Christians are God's "family" and "household" (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Peter 4:17; Rom. 12:10). A family shares all of life together, eating, living, and working together. The other controlling metaphor is "the body," another powerful way of saying that Christians are not an aggregation of individuals but a coherent organism, with each member playing his or her part and deeply, integrally connected to the rest.

### 3. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE SPIRIT—THOSE WHO ARE A MODEL OF HIS FUTURE

Thirdly, a Christian Spirit-filled community is an alternative society that models distinctive ways to do everything in life. One of the controlling biblical metaphors for this is the church as a "city on a hill" (Matt. 5:14), whose visible behavior shines out and shows the world the glory of God. In the future, God is going to unite and heal all things under the lordship of Christ (Eph 1:9–10; Isa. 11:1–9). In Ephesians 1:13–14, Paul writes that the Spirit is a "deposit guaranteeing" that future restoration. Currently, the church is to model what that future society under Christ will look like. We are to model the transformation that the gospel makes to every area of life.

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<sup>1</sup>This and all of the following material is taken directly from *The Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything* by Tim Keller—an eight-week video-based study of the gospel and how to live it out in everyday life.

# Nine community-building practices—a biblical survey

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Paul says that in Christ's body, "each member belongs to all the others" (Rom 12:5). This goes deeper than the modern concept of being a "member" of a club, because the Greek word he uses, *melos*, was the common word for a part of the human body. Paul is saying, "You are the limbs and organs of one another. You are the eyes, arms, and heart of one another." We are profoundly interdependent. The implications of this principle are spelled out practically in dozens of "one another" passages in the New Testament epistles. The following are nine "community-building practices"—specific behaviors that build Christian community.

*The first three practices are all about affirming one another—about how to be friends.*

## **Practice 1—affirming one another's strengths, abilities, and gifts**

- Romans 12: 10 – "Honor one another"
- James 5: 9 – "Don't grumble against each other"
- Romans 12: 3– 8 – Confirm the gifts of one another

## **Practice 2—affirming one another's equal importance in Christ**

- Romans 15: 7 – "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you"
- 1 Corinthians 12: 25 – "Have equal concern for each other"
- 1 Peter 5: 5 – "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another"
- James 2: 1 – "Don't show favoritism"

## **Practice 3—affirming one another through visible affection**

- Romans 16: 16 – "Greet one another with a holy kiss"
- James 1: 19 – "Be quick to listen, slow to speak"
- Ephesians 4: 32 – "Be kind and compassionate to one another"
- 1 Thessalonians 3: 12 – "Your love increase and overflow for each other"

*The next three community-building practices are all about sharing with one another—about how to be family.*

## **Practice 4—sharing one another's space, goods, and time**

- Romans 12: 10 – "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love"
- 1 Peter 4: 9 – "Offer hospitality to one another"
- Galatians 6: 10 – "As we have opportunity, let us do good"

## **Practice 5—sharing one another's needs and problems**

- Galatians 6: 2 – "Carry each other's burdens"
- 1 Thessalonians 5: 11 – "Encourage one another"
- Hebrews 3: 13 – "Encourage one another daily"

## **Practice 6—sharing one another's beliefs, thinking, and spirituality**

- Colossians 3: 16 – "Teach and admonish one another"
- Ephesians 5: 19 – "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs"
- Romans 12: 16 – "Live in harmony with one another"
- 1 Corinthians 1: 10 – "Agree with one another"

*The last three community-building practices are all about serving one another—about how to be servants.*

## **Practice 7—serving one another through accountability**

- James 5: 16 – "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other"
- Romans 15: 14 – "Instruct one another"
- Ephesians 4: 25 – "Speak truthfully"

## **Practice 8—serving one another through forgiveness and reconciliation**

- Ephesians 4: 2 – "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love"
- Colossians 3: 13 – "Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another"
- Galatians 5: 26 – "Don't provoke or envy one another"
- James 4: 11 – "Do not slander one another"
- Matthew 5: 23– 24; 18: 15 – Reestablish broken relationships with one another

## **Practice 9—serving one another's interests rather than our own**

- Hebrews 10: 24 – "spur one another on toward love and good deeds"
- Romans 15: 1– 2 – "Don't please yourself but please others"
- Galatians 5: 13 – "Serve one another"

## Ten community-building methods

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Here are ten practical ways to help in everyday conversations—especially when we are stuck or hurting, which is most always.<sup>2</sup>

- 1) Do you **move conversations one step deeper**?
- 2) Do you **move towards others** and **know them well enough to pray with them**?
- 3) Do you listen? What do you listen *for*?
  - Are you always scanning for the work of the Spirit? (**The person reflects God.**) A grace-hunt more than a sin-hunt? What is the Spirit doing in the person's life?
  - Do you pick up on troubles? (**The person sufferers.**) Troubles come in the form of sin, suffering or both. Do you know how to love those who suffer? Do you feel like you have to give an answer? The thorny matter of advice. Do you handle other people's trouble with care—like fine china?
  - What if the person is confessing sin? (**The person sins.**) The thorny matter of confrontation or rebuke...
- 4) Are you **personal**?
- 5) Do you **follow up**? Think of what you do as following up—keeping track of the person's story.
- 6) Another way to summarize in a few words what we are doing? **Listen until you are moved.**
- 7) When we become leaders, does our model of ministry imperceptibly begin to change from a talk over coffee? The tendency is to become an expert, but we must guard against this. Who are we? Brother, sister, friend, becoming a friend, sinner, strong in weakness, shepherd, guide. **Think “we”** and walk alongside as a friend.
- 8) When in doubt, **edit yourself.**
- 9) In your desire to know the person, are you mingling your conversation with words of **encouragement** and **comfort**?
- 10) **Be slow to give advice.** Advice is “speed-counseling”. Something may emerge out of Scripture, but what makes it advice is that it is a narrow application of that Scripture. Advice tends to not be strong on listening, and certainly isn't strong on compassion. Advice is simply waiting to identify the problem, and once it identifies the problem it is off and running on a possible solution. For the advice-giver, compassion is just extra time that impedes efficiency. It doesn't tend to be personal; it isn't moved by what the other person has to say. There tends to be a lack of entering into the other person's world and seeing it through their eyes. Rather, advice says “This is what I would do in your situation.” It tends to put the relationship at risk a bit, because when you start receiving from another person, especially a close friend, it suddenly feels as if the relationship has taken a hierarchical turn. The person giving the advice is the expert, who's speaking down to the student who's intended to receive the advice. Advice does not say “That's a great question. Tell me what you're thinking. I know you've thought about this. You wouldn't ask the question if you weren't thinking about these things.” This is a theological concept. You have been thinking about this, and you have the Spirit of Christ in you! Simply put, first ask “What have you done?” and “What are you thinking about doing?” When in doubt, move in a collegial direction and speak ‘we’.

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<sup>2</sup> This material is taken, with some minor alterations, from a course entitled “Helping Relationships” taught by Edward T. Welch and presented by the CCEF School of Biblical Counseling ([www.ccef.org](http://www.ccef.org)).

## Four deeper considerations for community-building methods

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- 1) **Consider your own heart and life story.** Can you make the connection between the details of your daily life and your relationship with the Lord? Your daily life—your work and relationships—gives you an accurate read on your relationship with Jesus.
  - How are your best relationships? Your worst relationships?
  - How are your spiritual disciplines?
  - How are you growing in your battle with sin? **Can you identify sin in your own life?**
  - Do you **ask for help**? Are you needy? I would like to give you a homework assignment for this coming week. Ask someone to pray for you.
  - Do you encourage other people to do things you don't do?
  - How are you growing in the way you turn to Jesus in the midst of suffering and hardship? In Hosea 7:14 the Lord accuses the Israelites in this way: *They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds...*
  - What are your weaknesses or common mistakes in everyday conversation?
- 2) What are you hearing? What should you follow?
  - Follow the events and, even more, the interpretation and impact of the events. “What was that like for you?” Rather than trying to be a fly on the wall, try to look at life through their window.
  - Follow the strongest emotions.
  - Follow the relationships, especially the hard ones.
  - Follow repeated words or key images and metaphors.
  - Follow references to Jesus. *Are there references? Does the person sound like a Christian?*
  - Follow what is perplexing, confusing, or inconsistent.
  - Remember, ethical assessments are not the same as pastoral ministry. When you've got someone firmly planted in a moral category, it's best to **ask one more question!**
- 3) Do you **notice small steps**?
- 4) Do you **recommend and agree on small steps**?

*The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters,  
but a man of understanding draws them out. (Proverbs 20:5)*

**Jon Bloom writes:** God blatantly entices us to seek happiness, joy, pleasure—whatever you want to call it—in him with verses like this: “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4), and “in your presence is fullness of joy, and at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). We’re supposed to want pleasure.

Why does God want us to want pleasure? Because it is a crucial indicator. Pleasure is the meter in your heart that measures how valuable, how precious someone or something is to you. Pleasure is the measure of your treasure.

Your treasure is what you love. Your greatest treasure is what you love the most. “For where your treasure is, there your heart [your love] will be also” (Matthew 6:21). You glorify your treasure by the fact that it’s the object of your pleasure. And that’s why God is not indifferent about your joy. It’s a big deal to him. Your pleasure in God is the measure of how much of a treasure he is to you.

## Fourteen heart-revealing questions

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How can we help each other become aware of our life agendas? Here are several heart-revealing questions we can ask ourselves when listening to each other. *Look for themes and patterns.* The Scriptures give us many windows into the heart and what functionally rules it. Here are a few examples. These questions are meant to help us examine personal heart themes of thought, motive, and desire so that we would begin to acknowledge the true treasure(s) of our hearts and how those treasures have shaped the way we have responded to God, others, and the situations of life. Prayerfully ask these questions as you listen carefully and humbly to each other:

1. When do they tend to experience fear, worry, or anxiety (Matt 6:19-34)?
2. Where have they struggled with disappointment (Prov 13:12,19)?
3. What are the situations in which they struggle with anger (Jas 4:1,2; Prov 11:23)?
4. Where do they encounter problems in relationships (Jas 4:1-10)?
5. What are the situations of life that they have found particularly difficult (1 Cor 10:13,14)?
6. Where are their patterns of avoidance? What things do they regularly seek to avoid?
7. Where have they experienced regular problems in their spiritual life or in their relationship with God (Ps 73)?
8. Where or when have they tended to doubt the truths of Scripture (Rom 1:25)?
9. What is their true agenda for others? What is their definition of a good relationship? What are their expectations for others? What silent demands do they make of the people around them (Jas 4:1,2)?
10. Where in their life have they struggled with bitterness (Eph 4:31, Prov 18:19)?
11. Where have they struggled with regret, being tempted to say, “If only...”?
12. In what experiences in the past do they struggle with letting go?
13. When do they tend to experience problems in their life of prayer and personal worship (Jas 4:3,4)?
14. Where have they tended to struggle with envying others? What have they tended to covet (Prov 14:30)?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This material is taken from the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*.

## Breakout discussion questions

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1. Of the nine community-building practices listed on page 2, share one of the nine that you sense that God has gifted you and/or you particularly enjoy. If you're having difficulty identifying one, invite the members of your group to identify the gifts, talents, and good fruit they see in your life, as described in this list.
2. Conversely, share one of the nine community-building practices in which you need to grow significantly. Give an example of what that might look like.
3. Of the ten community-building methods listed on page 3, which are you best at?
4. In which community-building method would you most like to grow? Give an example of what that might look like.