

Healthy church 4: Encouraging and Serving One Another

Introduction

“Picture all the elements of community in your church: your main weekly gathering, the Lord’s Supper, small groups, accountability relationships, conversations after church, and so forth. Now picture the Spirit of God and His supernatural power rising up and then departing from your congregation [like the Spirit departed from the Jerusalem temple in Ezekiel’s vision]. What happens?

- Do some people immediately feel like they no longer belong? Or do they continue coming to church for mostly the same reasons they did before?
- Do some friendships instantly dissolve because no bond remains? Or do they survive because they were based on something other than the gospel in the first place?
- Do you notice a conspicuous change in the conversations people have in your small groups? Perhaps a new reluctance to engage in difficult talk about each other’s lives? Or was the self-sacrifice in these relationships never dependent on God’s Spirit to begin with?
- Do you begin to see a flood of requests for pastoral counselling because members are no longer bearing each other’s burdens? Or have people always seen the pastoral staff as the “professionals” they call on in time of need?

“I would hope that our churches would dissolve into chaos the moment God removed His supernatural power.” (The Compelling Community, by Mark Dever & Jamie Dunlop, pp35-36)

Our topic today is Spirit-empowered encouragement and service of one another.

We’re currently considering the Bible’s vision for a healthy local church: what it is that the Lord wants Immanuel to be and to become. Thus far we’ve seen that:

1. The church is the “gathering” together of God’s people. He saves and gathers one vast church invisible, consisting of every Christian in every time and place. That universal church is mirrored in little local gatherings, and every Christian ought to be a committed member of a local church.
2. The local church reveals the glory of the Gospel in its relationships. For, diverse people (who in other circumstances would have nothing to do with each other – and indeed may detest each other!) are gathered together in union with Christ and with each other.
3. In our last session we saw each local church has a responsibility to partner with other churches – locally, regionally, and globally. And we saw the wisdom of formally joining together with other churches in denominations – for accountability and encouragement.

For the rest of this series we’ll be returning to the internal life of our local church. Today we’re considering the theme of encouragement and service.

I’ll PRAY, and then read Acts 2:42-47.

Acts 2:42-47, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

1. Church members: Devoted to being together

In Acts 2:42 we meet the word translated in English as “devoted.” Friberg’s Analytical Greek Lexicon tells us that the Greek word (*proskarterountes*) means: “to diligently occupy yourself with... pay persistent attention to... hold fast to... cling to... persevere in... spend much time in... continually dwell in.” It is a strong word.

These first disciples were devoted to “the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Consider that list of four items. We’ll return later to the two in the middle. For now observe the disciples devotion to the Bible and to prayer: they clung to, spent much time in, and were persistently attentive to the Lord – as they fed on His Word the Bible and depended on Him in prayer.

But there’s something else to which they were “devoted.” The same word is in verse 46, although our English translations obscure it. It’s hidden in that word “attending.” Literally, this verse reads something like: “Daily... devoted to being together... they were in the temple.”

We’re taught that the very first Christians (converts from Judaism, in the city of Jerusalem) continued to gather in the temple for church, until they were kicked out. But they didn’t just “go to church.” They were devoted to being together. They were as devoted to gathering as they were devoted to the Bible and to prayer – which was the heart of what happened when they did gather together.

Consider how the Christian is to feel about and commit to the gathering of God’s people: God wants us to diligently occupy yourself with... pay persistent attention to... hold fast to... cling to... persevere in... spend much time in... continually dwell in... the gathering together of the people of God.

Here at Immanuel we have 4 regular “gatherings” in the life of the church:

- The gathering of God’s people for church on Sunday morning
- There’s also our Sunday School programme, the monthly Church Prayer Meeting, and our Fellowship groups.

We try to place the Bible and Prayer at the centre of those gatherings: that we might pay persistent attention to and continually dwell in those two “means of grace” (and we’ll think in a later session why and how the Bible and prayer are to be the heart of our church’s life).

But then we’re asked: are we devoted to those gatherings – to being together as God’s people? You can’t say you love the people of God unless you are devoted to gathering with them. Is that my heart’s attitude? Does my life and diary reflect that?

Sometimes a Christian *can’t* gather – for legitimate reasons – and the Lord knows that. We might think of the Roman slave who had to go work. Or what are sometimes called “works of necessity.” But the word “devoted” shines a light into our hearts and diaries (and asks questions of our approach to career, holiday, children’s sports). It’s the very opposite of a casual or consumerist attitude to church.

Sometimes, it is nothing short of a *miracle* that we’ve got ourselves into the company of God’s people on any given Sunday. We don’t always know the terrible spiritual journey it may have been for a brother or sister to get themselves to church (and maybe we should find out). Sin, the world, the devil conspire against us. Personally, I’m so glad that my job requires me to gather with God’s people! I need to be there. And other people need me to be there. And that’s true for us all.

Two of my heroes remain a pair of teenagers called Pete and Phil. I read the Bible with them many years ago, when they were 14-15 yrs old. They were at Youth Group every Monday night. Then we taught about church and the importance of “gathering” with all of God’s people. From that day on they were at church every Sunday as well as every Monday – even in exam season, even though one of them came

from a non-believing family. I asked them one day how it was that their commitment to church was greater than many adults. They answer? They reverse engineered their entire week so that they could do Sunday church and youth group on Monday. It meant they didn't go out so much, and had to work harder at school work during the week and on Saturday. There was no hint of pride as they shared this, and no sense that it was anything other than normal. And 10+ years on you can imagine what useful servants they are now to the Lord.

A healthy church contains members who are devoted to being together. (See also Hebrews 10:24-25). But what is the purpose behind the Christian's devotion to other church members?

2. Church members: Devoted to one another's Christian growth

Back in Acts 2:42 there two words deliberately sandwiched in between "teaching" and "prayer." These first Christians were also devoted to "the fellowship and to the breaking of bread."

The word "fellowship" (Greek: *koinonia* – sometimes translated as "partnership") is an important New Testament term. It is the loving, purposeful, committed, energetic, and sacrificial working together – for the cause of the Gospel.

We met it in our last session when we considered local churches being partners together – even in different continents. The same word applies to relationships within the local church. We are to be devoted to the "partnership" or "fellowship" of believers – seeking to spur one another in the shared enterprise of Christian growth.

That includes many things:

(a) Meeting needs – practical and relational:

That's what is implied in that phrase "the breaking of bread." It doesn't mean holy communion (that would refer to bread *and wine*). It's talking about shared meals.

And it overflows into the things listed in verse 45: selling possessions and giving the proceeds to church members who were in need. (Note: this is not a basis for socialism, which is state enforced redistribution of wealth. This is a Spirit-prompted free will offering).

A church could have a hardship fund as we do. And the early church did formalise its practical care for those in need (we see that later on in Acts 6:1-7 and 1 Timothy 5:9-10). But what we read of here is much more than a fund or a list of widows.

Jesus gives us a picture of this in Mark 10:29-30...

Mark 10:29-30, "Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

Following Jesus means a cost. And the biggest cost can be relational: you might lose brothers, sisters, mother, father, children. And Jesus doesn't say: "That sucks... wait for the new creation." He replaces that loss *now* (and throws in persecutions too). This isn't some horrible prosperity gospel promise. It's talking about how the *church* is to provide what has been lost.

What about those for whom the Christian life could be potentially isolating such as a Muslim convert? Or a man or woman converted out of a gay lifestyle (the word of God gets inside them... it becomes bigger than they are... they're won to Christ... but at the cost of singleness and celibacy). Or a brother or sister for whom following Jesus means saying "no" to an intimate relationship that would displease Him. Or a single

man or woman (maybe never married, maybe divorced or widowed, who is learning contentment on their own). Or maybe the Christian who's married to a non-believer (it can be so isolating, so painful).

Through the church, there *should* be many families for them too. A Muslim convert or someone who's left a homosexual lifestyle ought to be able to say: I have MORE family / community / intimacy than I did before.

It means reaching out to those who are different to us (remember James 2, Romans 12:16). It means offering "hospitality" – one of the most beautiful words in the Bible. Scripture doesn't say exactly what hospitality consists of, and it will be different for different people. But it ought always to be a concrete expression of love. One of the Bible words for "hospitality" is *philoxenia* – "love of strangers" [Rom 12:13, 1 Tim 3:2, Tit 1:8, Heb 13:2, 1 Pet 4:9]. That's a pretty helpful pointer to what it's about.

That kind of love isn't easy. It requires sacrifice (1 John 4:10-11, Galatians 6:2).

(b) Encouraging others

What is Christian encouragement? Here are two helpful texts:

Hebrews 10:24-25, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

Colossians 1:28, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

You can sum up Christian encouragement like this: "caring for someone else – usually speaking Bible truth with them – with the goal of their growth in godliness."

What do we need for Christian encouragement to take place? There are two indispensable ingredients:

- A willingness to reveal your own struggles.
- A willingness to listen and to help your brothers and sisters in Christ.

We're not meant to stumble on alone. We need each other. But without these ingredients there is no point in bothering. If you remember nothing else this morning please note these two points.

And how ought we encourage one another? Here are 3 tools:

- By speaking God's truth (perhaps something we've been learning or that you think would be good for them)...
- By helping a brother/sister to recall the Gospel (nb. It IS true that Jesus is always the answer!) ...
- And by looking for signs of God's grace at work in their life.

Of course, God's people are in different shapes and sizes. That's why 1 Thessalonians 5:4 says: "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all."

- "Idle" literally describes a soldier who won't obey their commander's orders. Where there's sin, we are to admonish. It envisages confronting sin, albeit patiently, because we're sinners too.
- "Fainthearted" speaks of a brother who feels his resources are too small. Encourage... come alongside to strengthen. Patiently.
- "Weak" can speak of physical weakness... or mental weakness... or spiritual weakness. Help. Patiently.

The expectation is that the body of Christ will contain sinful people, struggling people, weak people. Just like me and you. And there's an expectation that we will encourage each other.

(c) Dealing with sin Christianly

Sadly, the body of Christ doesn't always work like this. We sin against each other. We struggle with selfish hearts that don't want to reach out. Idols sometimes get in the way (e.g. the nuclear family becomes like a fortress, whereas the drawbridge ought to be down more than it's up). Or we're too busy to have time for people – we need to built in relational slack time. Or maybe we're building relationships on something other than the Gospel.

So, what do we do when it goes wrong? Perhaps you dislike another church member. Or perhaps you're discontent with something at church – and maybe you're right to be discontent.

You *could* respond wrongly, in a way that leads to grumbling (Phil 2:14-15), discord (Galatians 5:20) and distraction. Or pursue a better way – that leads to patience and contentment. But how?

- Pray for God's help and mercy
- Examine own desires, confess any sin
- See other believers how God sees them (and pray for them)
- Watch your words. Don't want to complain or grumble or gossip. Don't simply seek affirmation of discontent. If we're not confessing our own sin or looking to collaborate in someone else's spiritual growth we'd be best not speaking at all! So, speak the truth in love, and where we have a problem with someone address them directly.
- Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. (How wonderful that we have God's grace in our church! He forgives us when we mess up the life of our Christian community!)
- Lastly, see what blessings God HAS given you.

(d) Grow in commitment to the whole church

We've largely been talking today about our responsibility to care for other individuals within the church family. And of course we can't each exercise that degree of care for every individual. However, there are ways in which we CAN grow our commitment to the WHOLE church. Very briefly: we can (i) gather regularly with God's people at church; (ii) we can pray through the prayer list – praying for church members by name; and (iii) we can give financially to the church.

Conclusion

You can't organise or manufacture loving relationships. In fact, structured programs can make a Christian busy, but not necessarily cultivate loving, corporate growth in Christ.

This is something to note if you're new or new-ish at Immanuel. Yes, there are certain gatherings to which you should commit. But the best thing is to **start to invest in intentional, spiritual relationships**. That is, you decide to build relationships with other members with the deliberate aim of doing them spiritual good. You don't have to join a rota to do that, or get special permission. It's somewhat organic and often invisible and a little untidy.

The job of the pastor is to teach the Word faithfully... to encourage church members to study the Bible and live the Bible deeply... and then go and be the tools to love and grow the church.

- Maybe you find someone of the same gender and you meet with them. You study a Bible book, discuss a Christian book, or talk about Sunday's sermon.
- Or you start a prayer triplet: 3 men or 3 women... who meet every week or two... to share a little bit of the Bible... and to pray for evangelism and for personal needs.
- And it might start by simply asking, at the end of church on Sunday: "What did God teach you today in the sermon?"

God has people for you to love, and work for you to do!

"There is but one God, and they that serve him should be one. There is nothing that would render the true religion more lovely, or make more proselytes to it, than to see the professors of it tied together with the heart strings of love." (Thomas Watson)