

One (Belonging)

1/18/2009

1. In the opening comments about belonging, Pastor Steve described a dichotomy most of us experience. On the one hand, we have an intrinsic desire to be discovered (to belong; to be part of the group). On the other hand, we have a desire to hide and avoid belonging. Does that make sense to you? Why do many people have both?

Humans have a need for contact. It is known that babies who are never touched may die due to “failure to thrive” even though they are fed. They need physical contact with other humans. We adults have a need for physical and emotional contact with others to help us get through life. On the other hand, bad experiences from past interactions may cause us to close up and not want further contact. It may lower our self-esteem so much that we no longer feel comfortable around others. It just seems safer to remain hidden.

2. Pastor Steve then went on to suggest that being a part of a community can take us places and make us do things that we would not normally do (like root for the Michigan Wolverines when we are an Illini fan!). Is that a good thing?

It could be if the community with which we are participating is taking us in a positive, constructive direction. It is also how gangs work, getting their new members so deeply involved in evil that they feel it is a part of them and they can not stop.

3. In what way is getting involved with a church community different from getting involved with the Kiwanis, Lions, or Rotary clubs?

The clubs can do many good things for the community, but ultimately they are simply mechanisms for camaraderie and service opportunities. They are not there to change your life or worry about where you will spend eternity. They are not there to help prepare you to serve Christ by being Christ to others. Serving a meal on behalf of Christ is different than serving a meal just to be around your buddies. Both a good deeds, but the first one might make the difference of eternal life for the recipient.

Further, the depth of relationships is different. Most members of service clubs have a pretty superficial relationship with each other, since members come and go frequently. Church families tend to be closer than some blood relatives. They care for and nurture each other.

Finally, clubs often carefully select their members to keep the group homogeneous. A good church invites all comers and goes out of their way to make everyone feel welcome.

4. Read Ephesians 4:1-3, 15-16 and pick out words that are used to describe attributes of members of a healthy Christian community.

There are lots. Here are some you might see: v. 2 – humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance. V. 3 – diligence, unity of spirit. V. 15 – truthful, Christ is our head/our model. V. 16 – growing, building up, loving.

5. Now read Philippians 2:1-5 and compare the characteristics to those in Ephesians.

They are much the same: love, unity, humility, Christ as our model.

6. Finally, look at Colossians 3: 12-15 and compare the list of characteristics found there.

Again, very similar: v. 12 – compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience; v. 13 – forgiving; v. 14 – love and unity; v. 15 – peace of Christ rules in our hearts.

7. These three passages describe characteristics that are very familiar to us. Where else do we find a very similar list of characteristics?

The Fruit of the Spirit – (Gal. 5:22)

8. What would a church be like if its members exhibited these characteristics?

It would seem very nonthreatening and inviting to visitors, while being nurturing to its members. The only problem would be that this body of believers would be in a constant building mode, because they would have too many people wanting to come. This is exactly the type of community that everyone craves.

9. Pastor Steve ended by describing four different levels of belonging to a church. What were they and what were some characteristics that distinguished each?

a) Interest (Attraction/Seeking) – Checking it out; no commitment; attending as an observer; waiting for others to connect with us. To break out of this level, we need to take responsibility for our own spirituality; we need to initiate contacts with others; we need to get plugged in.

b) Fellowship (Association) – We switch from being an observer to being a participant. This may involve volunteering to do something or it may become more formal and involve vows and membership. As we get involved, we get invested. We submit to other people and begin sharing in what the group is doing. (We join the potluck.)

c) Community (Commitment) – We now make intentionally efforts to nurture other members. We begin disclosing to others within the community who we truly are (self-disclosure). This may be done more in smaller groups within the larger community (Sunday School class; small group), but it's still seen as a part of being a part of the community. Time for sharing our joys and concerns is a regular part of our interactions.

d) Communion – We consciously see our time together as a time share not only with each other but with God very present in the conversation. We clearly begin to take on the characteristics of the Triune God for each other (I Cor. 12:27). We love each other and God all at the same time. Our success comes from others and flows through us out to others.

10. Is a typical church made up of members predominantly at one of these levels?

A new church plant might have a majority of members in group (a) Interest, but a strong, well-established church should have members in all four groups and be actively nurturing everyone to grow and move down the ladder into communion with God.

11. Where is your church on this scale, and where are you within that community of God? What can you do now to help you get closer to a deep relationship with God and your fellow believers?

The answers to this one will vary all over, but the key is to begin thinking about how things should be and what it will take to get there. It is perfectly fine to be a seeker, but we don't want to stay there for the rest of our lives. Similarly, some churches go through periods when a large proportion of the membership is still figuring out what it means to be a Christian (that can be a great thing!), but it is important to provide opportunities for discipleship and growth that will move the body toward a deeper commitment to God and each other.