

change is a community project

In the previous chapters, we focused on individual change and growth in grace. But this process is not simply an individualistic one. It happens best—and primarily—within community.

Let me share one woman's story of her family's involvement in a small group that meets in their home. She speaks frankly about the work involved, along with the deep joy and satisfaction they have experienced over five years in the same group. What she says is central to understanding the importance of relationships if we are going to grow in godliness.

My husband and I have been a part of the same small group for the past five years.... Like many small groups, we regularly share a meal together, love one another practically, and serve together to meet needs outside our small group. We worship, study God's Word, and pray. It has been a rich time to grow in our understanding of God, what Jesus has accomplished for us, God's purposes for us as a part of his kingdom, his power and desire to change us, and many other precious truths. We have grown in our love for God and others, and have been challenged to repent of our sin and trust God in every area of our lives.

It was a new and refreshing experience for us to be in a group where people were willing to share their struggles with temptation and sin and ask for prayer.... We have been welcomed by others, challenged to become more vulnerable, held up in prayer, encouraged in specific ongoing struggles, and have developed sweet friendships. I have seen one woman who had one foot in the world and one foot in the church openly share her struggles with us. We prayed that God would show her the way of escape from temptation many times and have seen God's work in delivering her. Her openness has given us a front row seat to see the power of God intersect with her weakness. Her continued vulnerability and growth in godliness encourage us to be humble with one another, and to believe that God is able to change us too.

Because years have now passed in close community, God's work can be seen more clearly than on a week-by-week basis. One man who had some deep struggles and a lot of anger has grown through repenting of sin and being vulnerable one on one and in the group. He has been willing to hear the encouragement and challenges of others, and to stay in community throughout his struggle.... He has become an example in serving others, a better listener, and more gentle with his wife. As a group, we have confronted anxiety, interpersonal strife, the need to forgive, lust, family troubles, unbelief, the fear of man, hypocrisy, unemployment, sickness, lack of love, idolatry, and marital strife. We have been helped, held accountable, and lifted up by one another. We have also grieved together, celebrated together, laughed together, offended one another, reconciled with one another, put up with one another,...and sought to love God and one another. As a group we were saddened in the spring when a man who had recently joined us felt that we let him down by not being sensitive to his loneliness. He chose to leave. I say this because, with all the benefits of being in a small group, it is still just a group of sinners. It is Jesus who makes it worth getting together. Apart from our relationship with him..., we have nothing to offer. But because our focus is on Jesus, the group has the potential to make a significant and life-changing difference in all our lives.

...When 7 o'clock on Monday night comes around, I eagerly look forward to the sound of my brothers and sisters coming in our front door. I never know how the evening will go, what burdens people will be carrying, how I will be challenged, or what laughter or tears we will share. But I always know that the great Shepherd will meet us and that our lives will be richer and fuller because we have been together.

...I hope that by hearing my story you will be encouraged to make a commitment to become a part of a small group and experience the blessing of Christian community within the smaller, more intimate setting that it makes possible.¹

Living in the Tension

In this testimony, we see the importance of redemptive friendships in the process of change. We also see the ongoing tension between what we gain and what we must endure for these relationships to work. The movie *About a Boy* captures this tension well. In it, a single man is trying to come to terms with his freedom as a single person and his longing for a meaningful relationship. As the story begins, his character is musing about his predicament:

In my opinion, all men are islands. And what's more, now's the time to be one. This is an island age. One hundred years ago, for instance, you had to depend upon other people....Whereas now, you see, you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies and more importantly, the right attitude, you can be sun-drenched, tropical, a magnet for young Swedish tourists....The sad fact is, like any island dweller, from time to time, I had to visit the mainland.

As the movie unfolds, he moves toward a meaningful relationship, forgoing the freedoms he enjoyed while single. The story portrays humanity's deep longing for relationships, and concludes that they are worth pursuing.

At another level, though, meaningful relationships are often avoided. They require work, sacrifice, humility, and selflessness. While the idea of loving another person taps into something inherently human, it also exposes our sinful self-centeredness. In *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Changes Lives*, Tod E. Bolsinger observes:

More than any before us, an American today believes "I must write the script of my own life." The thought that such a script must be subordinated to the grand narrative of the Bible is a foreign one. Still more alarming is the idea that this surrender of our personal story to God's story must be mediated by a community of fallen people we frankly don't want getting in our way and meddling with our own hopes and dreams.²

At one level we want friendships. At another level we don't want them! In creation, we were made to live in community, but because of the fall, we tend to run from the very friendships we need. Quite often, our longing for them is tainted by sin. We pursue them only as long as they satisfy our own desires and needs. We have a love-hate relationship with relationships!

The Bible recognizes this profound tension, but still places our individual growth in grace in the context of the body of Christ. The Scriptures call us to be intimately connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our fellowship is an essential ingredient for lasting change. The work of redemption involves our individual relationship with Christ alongside our relationships with others.

Friendships and Personal Change

Have you ever heard someone say, "You've made your bed, now lie in it"? As Christians, we know that nothing could be further from the gospel. This statement says, first, "Your problems are irreversible, so you are stuck in

your own mess.” And second, “You are totally on your own.” In other words, don’t expect help from anybody! If things are going to change, you had better find a way to fix them yourself.

Joe was single, lonely, and very angry with people who had been part of his life. He always felt used by others and had become very cynical about the possibility of meaningful friendships. He felt especially betrayed by Christians who shunned him because of several socially unacceptable habits.

Joe was not doing well spiritually. He had cut himself off from other people, and yet he had a deep desire for someone to understand him. Whenever he sought help with his problems, he was given sound biblical counsel about how he needed to think, believe, and respond to his problems—how he needed to change as an individual.

Joe lived within a profound tension. He did not like other people, but he had made human companionship his primary object of worship. He would avoid others and yet complain that others did not care for him. Well-intentioned helpers saw his relationship idolatry, and mistakenly avoided calling him to a community of friends who could help him grow. It was like saying, “Because you have made an idol of food, don’t eat!”

Joe was understandably confused and bitter. He needed help. He needed to change and take responsibility for his responses to life’s problems. But he also needed a community of friends where he could find hope and encouragement, along with challenging, honest, and loving accountability. Sadly, he was not being encouraged to pursue such redemptive friendships.

What does Joe need? He needs to know that when Christ brings us into the family of God, we are never alone again, no matter how much of a mess we have made of our lives! Yet many Christians latch onto the hope of personal change in a starkly individualistic way. Many helpers fail to move struggling people into the rich context of redemptive relationships. Instead, they cling to the arid individualism of our society. They have a “Jesus and me” mind-set as they battle sin and seek to become more like Christ. At first we might think, *Why not? After all, getting involved with people is complicated and time-consuming. Who needs it? I could be reading my Bible and praying! Spending time with other people is not very efficient!*

But God has a bigger—and, quite frankly, messier and less efficient—plan. As we saw in the testimony at the beginning of this chapter, change is something God intends his people to experience together. It’s a corporate goal. What God does in individuals is part of a larger story of redemption that involves all of God’s people through the ages. You, Joe, and every other believer are already part of the story and part of the family. That is the context in which personal change takes place. Change within community is counterintuitive to the way we often think, but Scripture clearly presents it as God’s way of making us more like Christ.

Living in Community Like God Himself

Have you ever wondered why living in community is so important? Your immediate response probably emphasizes the personal benefits of good friendships. While these are valuable, the most important reason for community is the reality that God himself lives in community! Does that sound strange? It shouldn’t. God lives in community with himself! Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in perfect harmony, love, and unity. We begin our discussion about the importance of community where all good theology begins: with God. When we do, it radically alters the way we think about relationships. They become God-centered and not people-centered.

In the last of sixteen sermons on 1 Corinthians 13, Jonathan Edwards says:

God is the fountain of love, as the sun is the fountain of light. And therefore the glorious presence of God in heaven fills heaven with love, as the sun, placed in the midst of the visible heavens in a clear day, fills the world with light. The apostle tells us that “God is love”; and therefore, seeing he is an infinite being, it follows that he is an infinite fountain of love. Seeing he is an all-sufficient being, it follows that he is a full and overflowing, and inexhaustible fountain of love. And in that he is an unchangeable and eternal being, he is an unchangeable and eternal fountain of love.

There, even in heaven, dwells the God from whom every stream of holy love, yea, every drop that is, or ever was, proceeds. There dwells God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, united as one, in infinitely dear, and incomprehensible, and mutual and eternal love.... And there this glorious fountain forever flows forth in streams, yea, in rivers of love and delight, and these rivers swell, as it were, to an ocean of love, in which the souls of the ransomed may bathe with the sweetest enjoyment, and their hearts, as it were, be deluged with love!³

Everything each person of the Trinity is and does is always in union with the others. We were made in the image of this glorious God. Is it any wonder, then, that this deep longing for intimacy and relationship is woven into the fabric of our nature? Human beings long to connect because that is what they were made for. With the entrance of sin, this longing was corrupted and easily becomes idolatrous. Because of sin, we long to find all of our hope or relationship in other human beings. If we don’t get what we want out of those relationships, we often do hurtful, sinful things. Our approach to relationships is often self-centered.

But God is a redeeming God who does something utterly amazing to reconcile us to himself and others. The gospel opens the door to friendships where we can be conformed into the very image of Christ. When talking about this new community, the church, Paul clearly has this in view. In Ephesians 4:1–6, Paul turns from talking about our great salvation in chapters 1–3 to the new human community we have been brought into. He begins to instruct the church about the practical outworking of the gospel in everyday life and relationships:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:1–6)

In light of the great grace of God, Paul calls members of this new community to enter into relationships with their Christian brothers and sisters in humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. He urges the church to be vigilant to keep the unity of the Spirit; he does not tell them to create it, because it is already a fact. When you trust in Christ, you are immediately welcomed into fellowship with the source of love, the triune God, and with his family, the church. In light of that, spare no effort to make sure your relationships reflect the unity and love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It all begins, continues, and will end with God at the center.

Paul grounds this call to community in the redemptive work of the Trinity. Notice how the word *one* is used in verses 4–6. Each use is attached to a member of the Trinity. There is one Spirit at work in one body. There is one Lord through whom we have one hope, faith, and baptism. There is one Father who is over one family, the church. All of the blessings are ours because of what the Trinity has done in creation and redemption.

Let's reflect on what the Trinity has done to make us one body, united to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Genesis 15, we find an odd story loaded with redemptive significance.

He also said to him [Abram], "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."

Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites." (7–21)

What is going on in this strange encounter? Abram is struggling to believe God, so God helps him. He tells him to cut some animals in half. That night, a smoking firepot and a blazing torch pass between the animal halves. God was saying, "If I do not keep my promise to you, may what happened to these animals happen to me!" This is called a self-maledictory oath. God is saying, "If I don't keep my end of the bargain, may I be ripped asunder!" Over two thousand years later, God the Son hung on a cross, crying out, "My God! My God! Why have we been ripped asunder?" God allowed what should have happened to us to happen to Jesus. We were the ones who failed, yet the triune God was torn asunder so that we might be united to him and to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The perfect love, unity, and joy that existed between the Father, Son, and Spirit were demolished, for a time, for our sake.

This is the ground on which we build all relationships. Every time you are tempted to shun another believer, remember that the Father, Son, and Spirit were torn asunder so that you might be united. When you sin or are sinned against, you are to move toward your sibling in Christ aware that Father, Son, and Spirit were torn asunder so that you might be reconciled! If we approached relationships in the body of Christ with that in view, it would transform our friendships. In Ephesians 4, Paul says that to the degree you do this, you will be "built up" (12), "become mature" (13),

“[attain] to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (13), and “grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (15).

Belonging to God’s Family

When we place our trust in the work of Father, Son, and Spirit to make us acceptable in his presence and revoke our own attempts to make ourselves acceptable before God, he graciously forgives our sins. He also adopts us as his children. So often, the blessing of adoption is seen only through an individualistic lens: I am a child of God. This is true, but your adoption goes beyond an individual blessing. You have been adopted into a new family. The blessing of adoption is both individual and corporate. When my wife and I adopted our fourth child, he not only got a mother and father, but three older siblings! He became an important part of a larger social group, his family.

When the apostle Paul was discipling new believers, he repeatedly reminded them that there was help in Christ and in Christ’s people. This is reflected in Ephesians 2:14–22, where Paul tells them that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

What is God seeking to produce in his people? He intends us to be people who are moving toward each other in community. He removed all the barriers so that we can be people who hope, love, worship, and serve together. It is very important to him.

It is impossible to read this passage and come away with the idea that Christianity is a “just me and God” religion. Have you ever heard someone say, “Yes, I am a Christian, but I don’t go to church. Why do I need that

when I have the Lord?” Or, “What is most important is my personal devotion to Christ, not the church.” The Bible never separates the two. Our salvation connects us to God and his people. It is not an either-or but a both-and arrangement. It is not just in heaven that we will be united around the throne of God. Our personal relationship with Christ unites us to believers now!

Notice how Paul brings this out. He says that God has “destroyed the barrier to create in himself one new man.” We are “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” We are “being built together to become a dwelling place in which God lives.” We can’t become the Christians we are meant to be by being alone with God. This is not God’s intent. What we become, we become together.

We tend to read the Bible through such individualistic lenses that we need to be encouraged to see the strong social themes that are throughout the entire Bible. In the Old Testament, God clearly says, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” The “you” is plural. When Paul and other New Testament writers address the body of Christ, their words are most frequently directed to the church as a whole. In Romans 12:1–2, a passage that is often applied only to the individual Christian, Paul urges the church to “present your bodies [*somata* (plural)] as a living sacrifice [*thysian* (singular)].” Isn’t it interesting that he calls all the individuals who make up the church to present themselves corporately before God as a living sacrifice?

How does this vision impact you? Does it surprise you? Intimidate you? Annoy you? Encourage you? How much does your life currently allow you to develop relationships that are deep enough to help you grow and change? What are some common obstacles that hinder redemptive relationships from developing in our lives? Consider the following list and ask yourself if any of them apply to you:

- The busyness of life, keeping relationships distant and casual.
- A total immersion in friendships that are activity- and happiness-based.
- A conscious avoidance of close relationships as too scary or messy.
- A formal commitment to church activities, with no real connection to people.
- One-way, ministry-driven friendships in which you always minister to others, but never allow others to minister to you.
- Self-centered, “meet my felt needs” relationships that keep you always receiving, but seldom giving.
- A private, independent, “just me and God” approach to the Christian life.
- Theology as a replacement for relationship. Knowing God as a life of study, rather than the pursuit of God and his people.

Do any of these apply? Think about your closest relationships: your spouse, parents, children, or small group. What needs to change so that you can form more meaningful relationships with the people who are already in your life? American culture may idolize the Lone Ranger and Superman as heroes who right wrongs and ride out of town alone, but that solitary approach to life and change is utterly foreign to Scripture. In fact, the Bible sees it as weakness rather than strength! The person of character, according to Scripture, will have genuine friendships and be a genuine friend. After all, isn't that the essence of the second great commandment to "love your neighbor"? When we are adopted into God's family, we have many new brothers and sisters to love!

Yet this is not simple. Being involved with people is time consuming, messy, and complicated. From our point of view it is inefficient, but from God's point of view it is the best way to encourage growth in grace. Our value system collides with God's, but his means for bringing about change in us is best. That means we will have to make time for these kinds of friendships to emerge and grow. We will have to be realistic too. Close relationships make it more likely that you will sin against someone or that someone will sin against you. There will need to be times of confession and forgiveness. There will be times when you will need to serve someone, even though you feel you lack the resources. There will also be times when you will be served! That may not sound like a challenge, but if you are proud, it is the last thing you want!

These are the very reasons why community is such a big part of God's plan to transform us into the image of Christ. Living in community pushes us to die to ourselves. There will be times when loving others and allowing others to serve and love us will feel like death, but this is the pathway to real life in Christ. The more we understand our own hearts, the more we see that it takes a work of God's grace to transform self-absorbed individuals into a community of love. Being in redemptive relationships shows us our need for change and helps bring it about!

Being Loved as a Family

Ephesians 3:14–21 highlights God's way of grounding an individual Christian's growth within the body. For years, I read and taught from this passage focusing primarily on individual change and relationship with Christ. I failed to connect the Christian's personal life and sanctification to the larger body of Christ. But Paul is vigilant to see Jew and Gentile living in community, even though there could not have been a more radical notion than the idea of Jew and Gentile being on equal footing with God and each other! The tension that existed between Jew and Gentile in the first century was more profound than the ethnic and racial divisions that exist in America

today. In view of this tension, Paul constantly applies the message of grace to individuals, but individuals who are in fellowship with one another. This perspective should keep us from reading Ephesians 3:14–21 through the lens of individualism.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

As Paul prays, he wants the Ephesian believers to grasp the nature of God's love for them in Christ. His prayer certainly reflects his desire for individuals to know God and understand his love, but this knowledge and "power through his Spirit" come to a group of individuals living in communion with God and in community with one another.

Look at the language Paul uses. Do you get a sense of how big the love of Christ is? Can you imagine what it would take to really tap into it? The love of Christ is so wide, long, high, and deep (infinite, in other words) that we cannot see this love or experience it all by our finite selves. We need strength from God to comprehend it and we have to grasp it "together with all the saints" (18). It is much like a jury that relies on twelve different minds to come to a full understanding of the truth. When we are in meaningful relationships with one another, we each bring a unique perspective and experience to our knowledge of Christ's love. One person has been rescued from a menacing addiction. Another has been brought through deep suffering. Still another has been sustained by God's grace in a difficult marriage. The list goes on. When we gather to share our stories, we see a different aspect of the diamond that is the love of Christ. Together, our understanding and experience of God's infinite love becomes fuller, stronger, and deeper. Not only are we strengthened in our individual growth in grace, but the entire body is built up by a fuller sense of the power and hope of God's grace! The Christian life is not less than individual, but it is so much more.

Paul's prayer is that the Ephesians would, together, be rooted and established in love. It is the only way they can be filled with all the fullness and

power of God. As isolated individuals, we cannot reach the level of maturity God has designed for us. It only happens as we live in a loving, redemptive community where we celebrate the many facets of the gospel. When we look ahead to Ephesians 4, we see that Paul follows his prayer with all sorts of practical instructions on how to pursue and preserve the unity of this community. Our personal transformation must be worked out within the family of God. The gospel is not only more clearly perceived and experienced within community; it is the basis for the community!

If, as we see in Ephesians 4:4–6, God himself lives in community, could we expect him to want anything different for us? If his redemptive plan caused him to enter our world and get close to us, should we be surprised that he calls his children to do the same with each other (4:1–3)? The things we do to enjoy deep fellowship with God and each other are the very things that make us less self-centered and more like Christ. It is the change he is after!

In the church I pastored, individuals and families always came to a deeper awareness of the grace of Christ when they experienced it through the community of believers. I recall one family that was struggling spiritually. They went through a season of suffering that brought a dozen or more brothers and sisters in Christ to their aid. They were also aware that the church was praying for them on a regular basis. As this family rubbed shoulders with individuals, families, and the entire congregation through their trial, their faith was strengthened. Their presence on Sunday mornings ceased to be routine and their involvement in worship grew. At one time, I had wondered if they would make it through the service without becoming bored. But after their experience of community, they were much more engaged when songs were sung, testimonies were shared, and the Lord's Supper was celebrated. They even started remembering the sermons!

Some time later, I asked them what had made the difference. Without hesitation, they described how they had seen the grace of Christ in those who had helped them. It was a combination of seeing the gospel lived out practically and the personal relationships that had been formed. On several occasions, their friends had shared stories of how God had strengthened them in the midst of a trial. They also prayed with the family. God had caused this family to become dependent upon the body of Christ and, through it, they had come to grasp, together with their fellow Christians, the depth and beauty of the gospel. Such friendships are clearly one of the primary ways God causes us to grow.

Purified as a Family

We have seen that God places us in a redemptive community to change us into the likeness of Christ. We understand the love of Christ more fully when

we look at it with other believers. Another component of Christian growth involves saying no to what is harmful and yes to the things that produce life and godliness. Here, Christian friendships not only help us see something (the love of God); they also help us do something (obey God). Both are important and must be kept together as we think about the Christian life. Christian friendships do not simply help us bask in the sunshine of God's grace; they also help us to roll up our sleeves and strive after holiness.

In Titus 2:11–14, we see the community of faith as a place where we are encouraged to pursue a life pleasing to God.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

This is another passage that first appears to present God's grace to individuals, who are then commanded to use that grace as a way to privately "clean up their act." But as the passage describes the final goal of God's grace, it says that Jesus gave himself to us "to purify for himself a people...eager to do what is good" (14). The ultimate goal of God's grace is an active, healthy, unified body of believers, a full-fledged family freed from sin and its slavery. It is this people, purified and zealous for good works, that is God's precious inheritance.

Just as in Ephesians, Titus 2 includes instructions for corporate living. We need each other's help as we learn to say yes and no to the right things! Paul calls believers to live in a way that helps others to be built up as well as built together. We must be built up because divisiveness is a terrible thing. It is damaging when people quarrel and sow seeds of dissension, and Paul warns against it. But the body of Christ must also be built together. It is deformed and disabled when people never fully join and participate in the first place. In a similar way, the apostle Peter, in 1 Peter 2:4–5, 9–10, uses rich Old Testament language to describe the corporate nature of our sanctification:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,

that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Peter speaks of individuals as “living stones” who are “being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.” Like Titus, he issues a corporate call to individuals who have been ransomed by God from a lifestyle of slavery to sin and darkness.

The corporate nature of our growth in grace is highlighted in many places in Scripture. In Romans 12:1–8, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:7–16, and 1 Peter 4:10–11, Paul and Peter speak of the diversity of gifts. First Corinthians 12 is especially important, because Paul talks about the many different gifts while using the metaphor of the physical body. Each believer receives gifts from the Holy Spirit to be used “for the common good” (7). We are to live as unique and vital parts of Christ’s body, connected to serve, and be served by, the rest of the body (12, 14). No one part should think of itself as useless, especially when compared to more prominent or “glamorous” parts (15–27).

Think about the gifts God has given you. How are they meant to serve other members of the body as they seek to honor Christ? What gifts do you need from others to help you do the same thing?

When we don’t think about our gifts in this corporate way, the very gifts that are given to bless the community are used to divide it. I remember a situation where a church was located near a trailer park. Over the years, the church had struggled to reach out to this community. In a congregational meeting, the pastor encouraged the congregation to make a new commitment to serve the people there. One person stood up and said that past efforts had failed because the church lacked organization. Another person said that the church had failed due to a lack of knowledge regarding the people’s practical needs. Still another said that the church lacked evangelistic zeal.

In each case, the person offering the criticism had the gifts to make the effort succeed! The person who saw a lack of organization had the gift of administration. The person who saw the lack of concern for practical needs had the gift of mercy. And the person who thought the church lacked evangelistic zeal had the gift of evangelism. What should have been a very successful outreach was short-circuited because they had not been using their gifts, the very gifts that were needed most. Instead, they had lapsed into an unhealthy criticism of what others were not doing.

About a month later, these three individuals got together and pooled their gifts of evangelism, mercy, and administration to spearhead a successful ministry to the residents of the trailer park. The lesson is obvious: we are better when we are together. Without a combination of gifts expressing the grace of

Christ, that very grace is shrouded in ineptitude and pride. Our gifts are for the common good, not self-aggrandizement. When we fail to see this, we find that our gifts actually create division within the body of Christ, instead of uniting us.

Are there places where your gifts are needed in the body of Christ? A better question is, Where are your gifts needed? One good way to determine your gifts is to ask yourself where you see weaknesses in the body. It is highly likely that you see these weaknesses because you are looking at the church through the lens of your gifts. Where you see weakness is probably the very place where God wants you to serve your brothers and sisters.

Have you ever seen what happens in a church when there is a death in a family? The pastor and others seek to comfort the family with the promises of Scripture. Other people bring meals, watch children, make phone calls, run errands, clean the house, drive the grieving family to the funeral home and help them make arrangements. Others give financial resources to cover unexpected expenses. Some assist with banking, budget, and insurance matters. Others simply come to weep with those who mourn. It is the body of Christ using its gifts to corporately express the grace of Christ.

Have you ever experienced the love of Christ in this multiplicity of ways? Wouldn’t you agree that God’s love and power are more fully revealed when the gifts are used in concert? Doesn’t it provide more hope for the future, more encouragement to trust the Lord, more strength to do and be what God calls us to be? Everything is more powerful when combined with the ministries of the rest of the body.

The Sacraments

Much could be said about the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as means of grace in the Christian life. They are the most tangible ways in which the things we have been discussing are displayed. These visible reminders capture both the individual and corporate nature of the Christian life while simultaneously placing the gospel at the center.

Think about the sacrament of baptism. When Peter preaches to the crowd in Acts 2, they respond to his call to trust in Christ by saying, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter responds, “Repent and be baptized!” He calls them to individual repentance and faith in Christ at the same time he calls them to commit to the body of Christ. As we saw in chapter 2, baptism is a picture of personal regeneration and cleansing as well as a call to enter the body of Christ. It centers on the grace of God while symbolizing individual spiritual cleansing and corporate identification with the church.

In the same way, the Lord’s Supper is both individual and corporate. Isn’t it ironic that individualism and self-centeredness are evident in both places

where the Lord's Supper is set before us? When Jesus was leading his disciples in the Last Supper, Judas was preparing to betray him and Peter would later deny him. James and John wanted prominence as his followers. When Paul gives instructions regarding the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, he is responding to incidents in which people are failing to love one another!

Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 also emphasizes its individual and corporate dimensions. In 11:28, he urges believers to examine themselves before taking part: "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread or drinks of the cup." This is a call to personal repentance and faith. In 10:17, he says, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." This is the corporate side. The sacraments and our participation in them serve as reminders that the Christian life is both individual and corporate. One without the other is not sufficient. It is not either/or. Though we are not given the option of separating them, we often do.

What is the point of all of this? God's work of change has relationships at the core. They are a necessary means and a wonderful goal. Humble community is not the icing on the cake of the Christian life. In a real way, it is the cake. Relationships of love are a means of personal growth, a mark of God's people being purified, and a clear argument to the world for the truth of the gospel.

When we pursue individual spiritual growth through redemptive relationships, we have a powerful combination that beautifies the bride of Christ as she prepares to meet her Bridegroom. As we continue to discuss the specifics of change in the following chapters, remember the relational emphasis that the Bible sets in high relief. It is a reminder of where we need to grow, and how much we need God's grace to see it happen. We must not take the change process out of the context in which God has placed it. We grow together!