

COMMUNITY

CONTROL-ALT-DELETE

In the last section we built a foundation for community, establishing a biblical conviction for the necessity of community as an expression of the image of God that has been restored through the cross. We determined the importance of community within the ecclesiology of the church and the importance of ownership related to the mission of God. Now I want to turn our attention to community groups themselves.

What are community groups in light of these convictions? At this point I want us to be able to clean the slate and rebuild our understanding of community groups on these principles and convictions. Our previous experiences in small groups can limit our imagination of what community can be. So let's dream for a minute that we never sat in that uncomfortable circle and answered icebreaker questions. How would we live in community if we started from scratch? What would be different about community built upon the foundation we laid in the previous chapters?

The purpose of this chapter is to paint a clearer picture of what community inspired by the Holy Spirit can look like. I want to challenge you to think differently about what community groups are and how they might manifest in your church. This is an exercise in how we view community and how we define it. I want your picture

of community groups to be bigger and your expectation of what God might do through them to be greater.

When attempting to appreciate art, we often need to look at the piece from different angles. Understanding the intent of the artist requires not only understanding the piece itself but also knowing how it exists in history and context. My hope is that as we take a look at community groups from new angles, God would reveal more to us about his expectations for community. Let your appreciation for this gift grow. Hit control-alt-delete on your default picture of small groups, and let's start looking at them differently.

VISION VS. REACTION

As we begin, we want to be visionary rather than reactionary. We want to develop a clear vision for community groups from our convictions and build communities toward that goal. In other words, let the vision determine the expressions of community.

This seems like a simple concept, but most community group ministries are built in reaction to a particular need of the church. For example, if the pastoral care is lacking within the church, then groups often become care focused. After all, addressing acute needs in the church through community groups is an effective strategy. Here is the problem: experience shows that when community groups are designed around a particular need, they often fail to adjust when those needs change.

For example: A new church plant is drawing in a young, unchurched congregation. Being small, the need for fellowship and mission is satisfied at the congregational level. The highest need at the community level is theological understanding. In this case, the reactionary strategy is to build groups which are predominantly Bible studies in order to meet the acute need of the church at this time. This is perfectly fine for now, but what happens when the church grows? When fellowship and mission can no longer be done effectively as the corporate church, community groups need to adapt. When this doesn't happen, people start to feel disconnected from the church, and they begin to feel like an audience rather than members of a fam-

ily, Mission becomes something the church (as an institution) does rather than what the people live out. You end up with members of the church who are biblically astute but don't apply their knowledge to loving one another or reaching the lost.

This is why it is important to start with a vision and build communities that align with it. Having a bigger picture of where you are going and what God wants for your church will allow you to adapt to acute needs while at the same time help you build more well-rounded community from the start. Moreover, if we begin with a picture of community that is formed out of the image of God and who we are in light of the cross, then we are sure to meet the particular needs of the church. This will provide transformational community at every stage of growth and will keep us from getting stuck on one particular need.

PRODUCT VS. PURPOSE

In order to have a vision for community, we need to understand the purpose of community. In my experience with community group ministry, I have heard many purposes for joining community groups, including but not limited to: belonging, making big church feel small, learning the Bible, pastoral care, fellowship, friends, closing the back door of the church, evangelism, and so on. Each of these purposes has merit and can be argued as essential to the church. I would suggest, however, that these "purposes" are in fact the product of community rather than its ultimate goal.

Why is this significant? Let me give you an example. When I was playing basketball in junior high, I went into the game off the bench as we were inbounding the ball. As I came off a screen, I found myself wide open under the basket. My teammate passed me the ball and I made an easy layup. The only problem: we were lined up under our opponent's basket. The point: it is increasingly difficult to score points for your team when you are aiming at the wrong basket. In the case of the church, our goal is to produce disciples of Jesus who worship him and exalt his name. If we aim at a product such as belonging as the purpose of community, we can achieve that goal without pointing to Jesus.

When retaining people becomes our goal, we inadvertently communicate that our purpose is to grow the church rather than glorify God. We become more interested in building the church rather than advancing the kingdom. We lift up the church rather than the name of Jesus.

As well, when fellowship, care, or belonging becomes the focus of our communities, we elevate people and their needs over the kingdom. In doing so, we create people who begin to believe the purpose of the church is to meet their needs. In essence, we create consumers.

Jesus tells us that we know a tree by its fruit and that a bad tree cannot produce good fruit.¹ If we produce disciples who are navel-gazers or are obsessed with the growth of the church at the expense of the gospel, then the tree is bad. Trying harder won't make it produce fruit. We need a healthy tree. Every time we elevate the fruit of ministry above the purpose to glorify God, we turn the fruit into an idol. The fruit becomes our focus and we settle for less than Christ glorified. As C. S. Lewis has said, "We are far too easily pleased."² Lewis was observing our propensity to settle for sin and its false promises.

More acceptable but no more futile is being satisfied with the peripheral blessings of God rather than enjoying God himself. Man has always had a bent toward worshiping created things rather than the Creator.³ This is the definition of idolatry. We must, therefore, be careful that we do not inadvertently encourage one another to seek the blessing rather than the Author of the blessing by making the product of community its purpose.

At the end of the day, our purpose in community is to receive the grace of God and respond by imaging him and lifting up the name of Jesus. As we discussed in chapter 2, if community is about imaging God for his renown and his worship, then community groups must be in the business of creating disciples. In Pastor Bill Clem's forthcoming book *Disciple*, he rightly describes Jesus as the prototypical image bearer living a life devoted to the Father's work and accomplishing that work through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was more than an example, securing our redemption through his death and resurrection, yet he provides a picture of what we could be as

disciples who walk in the Spirit. Additionally, by building a disciple-making movement, Jesus becomes not just our example of being a disciple, but he is also our example for being a disciple maker. Jesus left a legacy of people transformed by his presence even centuries after he ascended. In this way he provides a picture of a church that is committed to being disciples who make disciples.⁴ Using Jesus's life as our template, Clem identifies four defining characteristics of a disciple that emerge from being image bearers of God: finding our identity in Jesus, worshiping God, community, and mission. As image bearers we express our identity in Christ through worship to God, community with one another, and mission to the world around us.

The purpose of describing the life of a disciple is to make sure we have a clear picture of what we are trying to accomplish as the church. There are so many causes competing for our resources that having this picture has kept us at Mars Hill Church focused on making disciples. Here is a brief summary of the aspects of a disciple's life and how they apply to community:

IMAGE OF GOD (*IMAGO DEI*)

We are image bearers of God, created in his image to proclaim his greatness to the rest of creation. This is who we are, not what we do. This means that we have intrinsic value as his image bearers and that we were created for a purpose—to acknowledge the glory of our Creator.⁵ It is from the image of God and the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross⁶ that we express our identity as disciples of Christ through worship to God, community with the body of Christ, and mission to the world.

IDENTITY

Our identity is in Christ. This means that we define ourselves in the same way that God does: by what Jesus has done on the cross.⁷ We are not defined by what we have done or by what we do or by the things that we have. Jesus has atoned for our sin,⁸ clothed us in righteousness,⁹ and adopted us as sons and daughters.¹⁰ This is our identity. As a community, this means that Jesus is our King and Savior. He is our

highest affinity, the Bible is our highest authority, and the Trinity is our example for how we live together in community.

WORSHIP

We are worshipers. We are created as instruments of worship intended to behold the glory of God and praise the name of Jesus.¹¹ Therefore, our greatest joy comes when we do what we were created for: worship Jesus. We worship through song, gratitude, prayer, and the way we live our lives.¹² As a community, this means that we worship together and encourage one another to "proclaim the excellencies" of Jesus.¹³ Our life together is a proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and a corporate act of worship.

COMMUNITY

We are the body of Christ created in the image of God, who exists in community.¹⁴ The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have eternally existed in relationship with one another as one God in three persons.¹⁵ God is a relational being who created us as relational beings so that we could image him.¹⁶ As a community, this means that we are to reflect the goodness of God and preach the gospel through our lives together. This means loving one another, forgiving one another as Christ forgave us, calling one another to confession and repentance for the purpose of reconciliation, and challenging one another to lives that glorify God.¹⁷

MISSION

We are missionaries created in the image of a sent and sending God. God sent his Son, Jesus, into human history to reconcile himself to us.¹⁸ God is in the business of gathering more worshipers to himself. As his disciples, our mission is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus so that more image bearers would come to a saving faith and worship God.¹⁹ As a community, we are called to live lives together that reflect God's goodness, mercy, and grace, showing the world around us the saving and transforming love and power of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we are called to live our lives intentionally and mis-

sionally, not only loving our brothers and sisters, but also engaging with and loving our neighbors. We do this because we are commanded to,²⁰ and so that hopefully our neighbors will see the glory of God being lived out in our lives, stirring their hearts to answer God's call for their own salvation.²¹

By keeping our eyes on the vision of being disciples in community, we remain focused on Jesus, following him and enjoying the fruit of being his disciples. If, however, our leadership is reactionary, we risk making disciples that are underdeveloped in some areas of discipleship. This happens when the need we are addressing only requires one or two of the three expressions of our identity. For example, when we focus on care and Bible study, we develop disciples who don't know how to apply their knowledge to reaching the lost and sharing with others the love they have for one another. In contrast, we want to be a people who, being reconciled to Jesus and one another, exhibit all three expressions out of our identity in Christ.

WHO WE ARE VS. WHAT WE DO

In taking the time to describe the life of a disciple, we must be careful not to build our identity on doing these things, but rather understand these expressions as who we are. We have been conditioned to find our identity in what we do. However, Scripture tells us that we are children of God adopted through the grace of Christ, through whom we derive our identity. My identity is not what I do; I do *out* of my identity. Worship, community, and mission come out of who I am as a disciple of Jesus. This then is a response to what Jesus has done for us. It is in receiving his grace that we get to *be* disciples.

That being said, if this is our picture of a disciple, it is also our picture of a healthy community. A community group is just the aggregate of its members. If a group is missional, it is because the members of that group are missional. If a group is not, this is indicative of a deficiency in the participants of that group. In this way, community groups are great barometers of how well the church understands the gospel. If they have been transformed by the gospel, then it will show in the community life of the group.

With this in mind, let's take another look, as we did in chapter 1, at the great picture of community in 1 Peter 2. In context, Peter is describing how we as believers ought to conduct our lives in light of what Christ has done on our behalf.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.²²

Just as we did with our description of a disciple, Peter begins with our identity. He gives us four ways to understand whom we are rooted in, who Jesus is, and what he has done. We are a "chosen race," reminding us that we have been set apart and are predestined to follow him.²³ We are a "royal priesthood," reminding us that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we no longer need a mediator between God and us.²⁴ We are a "holy nation" through the imputed righteousness of Jesus, and we are a people of God's "own possession."²⁵

Everything we are called to be comes out of what God has already done. What a beautiful picture of God's love. We have been born again through the resurrection of Christ. We are new creations that are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness.²⁶ God is jealous and unwilling to share possession of his people with sin. I always picture my kids when I read this verse. I love kids in general, but I have a passionate love for my kids. That's how I see this rolling off of Peter's pen. We are God's kids!

All four aspects of our identity are rooted in Jesus and, significant to our topic, are plural in nature. These are corporate identities of a race, priesthood, nation, and people. As the church, we need to recapture our sense of community and connectedness to one another. Peter reminds us that we are indeed a people, not a collection of

individuals. Community groups are a people who understand their identity in Christ and have a corporate or communal understanding of that identity. This means that we are committed to one another and to our collective growth in Christ.

Then, out of that identity, we worship; we "proclaim the excellencies" of Christ.²⁷ Through Jesus we have been reconciled to God and to one another. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people through the mercy of the cross.²⁸ Therefore we ought to be a people who point to and worship Jesus consistently. If the group you call your community does not regularly point you to Jesus and remind you of his grace and mercy in your life, then it is not a gospel-centered community group. We are a people in awe of what Jesus has done and we worship him accordingly.

Out of that worship, Peter challenges us, in verses 11–12, to live lives that reflect the transformation that comes from the gospel penetrating our lives. Because we have been made a holy nation, we can live holy lives. Often at this point in the passage we begin to read from a personal rather than corporate viewpoint. We are accustomed to understanding sanctification in an individualistic manner. However, the context has been plural, written to the church, and remains so as Peter calls us to fight against our flesh. Because Christ has reconciled us and made us a people of his own possession, the church is oriented toward one another's corporate sanctification.

Emphasizing this point, Peter calls our fight against sin a "war." Now, contrary to any Rambo movies you may have seen, wars are not fought by individuals. Armies fight wars. John Piper has made the point that the church has been deceived into believing that we are in a time of peace while our enemy stays on the assault.²⁹ Our deception has lulled us into being unprepared and ill equipped for battle, leaving many of our number maimed or killed by ambushes of sin. Within our community groups we must remember that we are in a war against sin and that we fight together for the truth of who God is and what he has done.

Finally, out of our identity we understand the purpose of having a good reputation, as a community, with unbelievers.³⁰ We maintain a good reputation not so that we can judge the lost or so that we might

think highly of ourselves but so that the unbelieving might come to believe. Even if they malign our characters or slander our names, we must desire that they come to know God. We are called to be a community that is on mission with God. It is important to note that Peter describes a community whose good deeds are seen by nonbelievers. We must be a community that is seen loving one another and our neighbors. Don't miss this point. If no one ever catches us being Christians because we are holed up behind drawn curtains, then we are not a missional community.

So we see in this description of a Christian community that our corporate identity is in Jesus, and out of that comes worship, community, and mission, culminating in the glorification of God. This is our picture of a healthy community group. In sum, the purpose of community is to make and mature disciples of Jesus; everything else is the product of that purpose.

LIFESTYLE VS. EVENT

Key to being this type of community is to redefine community groups as a lifestyle rather than an event. When we see community as a series of events, we hold on to our individuality and see community in terms of what it offers us. If we are to live in community in the way that Peter describes, then we need rethink our lifestyle.

Peter's picture of community is one in which people consider one another, prefer one another, and sacrifice for one another. This will require a paradigm shift from the thinking that one's walk with Jesus is solely personal. It requires us to see ourselves as a people and not just a gathering of people.

The irony in our tendency to shrink from such a notion is that we were made for community, as we discussed in chapter 1. This means that when we experience this kind of community, it will fill the many holes we feel are disconnecting us from one another. If we pursue God because we have been reconciled to him through the cross, then why would we not pursue one another? We have been reconciled to each other through that same cross. We cannot call ourselves a community if we continue to compartmentalize our lives.

I am not advocating building a commune but rather consciously considering one another and including one another in the everyday moments of life. This can be done by simply inviting members of your community into the rhythms of your life that you typically do by yourself. If your family goes out for pancakes on Saturday morning, why not invite another family to join you? Maybe invite a newlywed couple from your group so they can experience the chaos of dining out with small kids. This is a simple act that may even seem mundane, but the blessing that comes from sharing your life with others is invaluable, and it is the difference between autonomy and community.

One of our leaders recently committed to making his group a lifestyle rather than an event. The group met as usual on Tuesday nights for dinner, prayer, and Bible study. To mix things up, though, he made a standing reservation at a local restaurant for Friday nights. It was a completely optional time to hang out. The group, being accustomed to typical small group events, didn't take to the idea right away. Yet despite some thin turnouts, the leader stayed committed to the extra time together. Eventually members of the group started trickling in to the restaurant on Fridays. It transformed their group.

It seems surprising that such a simple gesture would be that significant, but the change was dramatic. They went from being a Bible study to being a community. They began to meet before Sunday services so they could worship together as a community. They began to prefer spending time together. Suddenly they were excited to invite nonbelievers to their group because it was a source of life. The most amazing thing was that they saw four of these new folks come to know and worship Jesus in a span of three months. When they began to live in community as a lifestyle, it began to give them life, and they wanted to share that experience with others. The gospel became real and tangible, and those around them saw it and gave glory to God.

LIFE GIVING VS. LIFE TAKING

This brings us to another essential characteristic of gospel-centered community groups and the goal of this book. Since community is

a blessing of God, a community group should be life giving to its members. Unfortunately, many of our experiences have been different. Community groups are often seen as obligatory and life taking. We secretly hope the kids will be sick so we can stay home. We know if we go, then Sally is going to dominate the conversation with the same issues that we've heard for the last three weeks, and insensitive Rob is going to miss the point and start lobbing verses at her. As this drags on, Jim is going to try to prove he is the smartest guy in the room by parsing a Greek verb and quoting dead Puritans. Then, just when time is running out, we will go through prayer requests for each other's aunts' cats that are suffering from angina. My only prayer will be that it ends soon so I can go get one more piece of banana bread and get home to my TV. This is not a picture of community. Yet many of us have settled for this experience because we don't know better or because we consider it a modern form of self-mortification.

So let me give you permission to avoid the "circle of awkwardness." When we get together over a meal, why do we fill it with idle chatter about the local sports team and *American Idol* and then transition to "spiritual" time in a drum circle? What if we reclaimed the dinner table for meaningful conversations about what Jesus has done and how the Holy Spirit is leading us today? We don't have to be in a circle to talk about conviction, repentance, and the excellencies of Christ. When we relegate these conversations to specific times of "care and share" or Bible study, we are effectively compartmentalizing our lives. We are propagating the belief that these conversations and convictions should not spill over into unsanctioned times. We condition people to make a mental separation between spiritual and practical matters. When should our talk not be salted with the gospel? I am not saying that every conversation has to be an exegesis on propitiation. There are times for small talk and banter about our favorite sports teams. But if we talk about Jesus only during Bible study, if we pray only in that circle, if we cannot articulate the gospel's influence on our view of politics, business, sports, and entertainment, then we are not living transformed lives. We are still compartmentalizing the gospel.

That is if we truly understand the gospel. Let's not miss the most glaring problem. If groups are not giving life, the cause may be as simple as people not knowing how to speak life and truth to one another. In order for our groups to be life giving, we must understand the power of the gospel and believe it. I have made the mistake of assuming that the people of my church really understand the depth of what Jesus did on the cross and how that affects every aspect of our lives. This is why we preach the gospel every Sunday. We have no need for a new message because the gospel never gets old. But preaching it every Sunday does not guarantee saturation. Developing life-giving groups requires equipping them to apply the truths of the gospel to the trials, hopes, joys, and relationships of life.³¹ As they learn to speak life, they will begin to experience life. Think of the gospel as the water that makes life grow. No gospel, no life.

I have run into so many people who have stopped participating in community groups because they were life taking. What a tragedy! This is not what God intended for his church. Community is a life-giving blessing from God. John Piper, speaking of church membership and the participation of the church, put it this way, "[Community] is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. More than most of us realize, it is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's mercy to us. I urge you not to cut yourself off from this blessing."³²

Therefore, if our community groups are not life giving, we must ask why. If community is naturally life giving, then we must be doing something to thwart it. Take the time to understand why, and take permission to rethink your group so that it becomes a place that is life sustaining, faith strengthening, and joy preserving.

CREATIVITY VS. CONFORMITY

So what do we actually do in a community group? Now that we have established that we are defined by who we are in Christ and not what we do, I am ready to discuss this topic. In Acts 2:42-47, we see a picture of the church living life in community. This gives us a nice picture from which to build our expectations for what community groups can look like:

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

What we see in this text is a list of things (that I will call elements of community) that marked the early church: study, fellowship, communion, spiritual gifts, care, generosity, mission, prayer, and worship. What we do not know is exactly *how* they did these things. We do not have a prescriptive picture of what this must look like, and in that we have freedom. Groups are unique expressions of the gospel lived out in community rather than cookie-cutter copies. Consider the elements discussed below to be like paints. We all use the same paint to produce a picture, but each painting will be a unique work of art. The way these elements are employed and experienced by a community group will be unique to the people, culture, context, language, and neighborhood. The goal is to see unique expressions of community that encompass these elements within the rhythms of the group rather than dictating a one-size-fits-all experience.

Though we may not study the Bible every time we get together, we are committed to its study and authority in our group. We may worship together on Sundays, pray on Tuesdays, and fellowship together on Thursdays. In other words, don't expect that every element of community will be expressed every time we gather, but that each element has its place in the rhythm of our group. Experiment with different rhythms and elements to develop community groups that are life giving and transformational. Below are some elements of community that can be incorporated into the rhythms of any community group.

BIBLE STUDY

The church in Acts dedicated themselves to the apostles' teaching.³³ A key element in our community groups is the study of Scripture. The Bible is the revelation of God and is authoritative in our lives. It is a gift of God's grace and is our opportunity to know him; therefore, the study of Scripture is a consistent rhythm of any group. At Mars Hill we prefer to see our groups follow the sermon series. This connects the proclamation of the Word on Sunday with the lives of our people during the week, producing the transformation cycle we discussed in chapter 2. As I've said before, this does not mean that Bible study is the primary purpose of groups. Rather, Bible study is one element used toward the purpose of making and maturing disciples of Christ.

CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

The communities in Acts celebrated communion with one another on a regular basis.³⁴ Implied by this rhythm is their culture of confession and repentance. The purpose of studying Scripture is to know God and how the good news changes everything. This transforms our lives as we respond to the gospel.

Because Jesus has atoned for our sin and removed its stain, we want our community groups to be marked by a culture of repentance. This is a response to the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit. Because our identity is defined by Jesus, we don't have to fear death or shame.³⁵ We can be open and honest about our struggles as we put sin to death³⁶ and confident in the compassion and grace of our Lord as it is expressed through our community. To see transformation in our community groups, we need to constantly remember what Jesus has already accomplished on our behalf and remind one another of that daily. Again, we are a holy nation, a people of his own possession;³⁷ therefore, as a community we cannot wink at sin but must lovingly correct beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors that are not honoring to God.

The purpose in reflecting God's patience and grace must always be reconciliation, not conformity. Reconciliation is the gospel. Conformity is religion. Therefore, the goal of a group is to point to

Jesus, the cross, and the resurrection as the only remedy for sin and to look to the Holy Spirit for the ability to walk in righteousness. We want heart change through the power of the gospel and not merely behavioral change. This requires that our community groups be saturated with the gospel to the place where it spills into every area of our lives. Don't assume that your community is there. If they don't understand the gospel, then they will never get to confession and repentance.³⁸

WORSHIP

The early church was continuously praising God in worship. As the image bearers of God in community, we must live lives of worship. The purpose of confession and repentance is to align our hearts with God so that we can rightly worship him. We confess and repent of idols to which we have given worship that only Jesus deserves. Worship of Jesus is the destination for confession and repentance and is a natural outflow of a community group. As a community we are to encourage one another toward constant worship, pointing to the works and glory of Jesus. This can take on many forms, from singing songs to enjoying a steak dinner, but it is a consistent part of any community group in response to the wonder of our God.

PRAYER

In addition, the early church was dedicated to prayer.³⁹ Prayer is a gift of God's grace to us—we have the opportunity to communicate with our Creator. We have the ability to converse with God, praising him, confessing our sin, asking for his provision, and listening for his response. When a couple is struggling with infertility, we get to seek God for peace and patience. When a friend gets a job offer, we get to praise God for his provision. When a family miscarries, we get to mourn with them and ask God for comfort. We cannot expect to be Spirit dependent if we are not committed to prayer as a community. Our community groups must be consistently seasoned with prayer. Within the rhythms of a community group, prayer can be spontaneous as the need arises, or it can be ordered and a regular expectation

of meetings. Regardless of how it manifests, prayer is an integral part of any community group as it reflects our dependence on our Father. If we are to be a people who walk in the Spirit, we must be quick to fall on our knees before the Father.

HOSPITALITY

We see the early church eating together and enjoying one another in fellowship.⁴⁰ This is the place where you can more easily invite new people to experience your community. Gospel-centered hospitality seeks to love people where they are while providing a safe place to introduce someone new to your group. Hospitality includes both the way we prefer one another and the way we open our doors to those who need to meet Jesus. The early church took care of one another and welcomed outsiders. Hospitality is our privilege and joy as ambassadors for the gospel.⁴¹

EXERCISE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

The Holy Spirit is in the business of exalting Jesus, and that is the purpose of our community groups.⁴² The community in Acts saw many manifestations of the Holy Spirit within their midst. Therefore, it stands to reason that we should be exercising our gifts in community and seeing the fruits of the Spirit used to edify the church. As the church is described as a body with all the parts important to its function, so as a community of believers we have the privilege of exercising our gifts for the sake of Jesus's name. When discerning the appropriateness of particular gifts in community, remember that the purpose of those gifts is to exalt Jesus.

MISSION

The last thing we see as a product of this community in Acts 2 is that God added to their number.⁴³ Mission is an essential element of any group as we engage with our neighborhood for the fame of Jesus and the advancement of the kingdom of God. As we receive the kingdom through the cross and resurrection, we get to share it with the lost. This is the outward focus of your group, to love people and share the

truth of the gospel through the witness of your lives together. This is the consistent focus of any community, in both prayer and action. We will dig further into what this looks like in the following chapters.

BLESSING VS. OBLIGATION

As we have been exploring the idea of redefining community, I hope I have given you a vision of what community groups can be. We have been reconciled through the blood of Jesus to be a community that exalts him. As we work from that vision, we can be a community that allows the gospel to saturate our lives and fulfill our purpose to make disciples and worship Jesus. Community groups that are steeped in the gospel will grow in their understanding of who they are in Jesus and will be more inspired to proclaim his excellencies and share the good news.

This picture of community is not a pipe dream. This is the experience God intended for us to have in community. He created us for it and made it possible by sending his Son to die on the cross. Through the resurrection of Jesus we are a community. We just need to be it. When our experience doesn't match up, it is not time to throw in the towel but an opportunity for us to call one another back to this vision. I know that building relationships within a community group can often feel obligatory. I think that is why Scripture often depicts the process of sanctification in terms of a battle. It is going to be work to glorify God in community. But when we understand community as an expression of our identity in Christ, we open the door for living out our faith in community in ways that give us life. We will begin to see ourselves as a people called to exalt our Father in heaven as disciples of Christ. In doing so we redefine what a community group is, aligning our definition with what God intended for us, namely, to reflect his glory through community as we make disciples of Jesus.

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NEIGHBORHOOD

A NEW APPROACH TO MISSION

In the last chapter we set our goal to develop community groups that honor God and exalt Christ. We want to be a community of people who submit to and worship Jesus through prayer, devotion to Scripture, and praise. We want to be groups who are joyfully obligated to one another for the sanctification of the church, while fully committed to the mission of going and making disciples for the glory of Christ because we have been reconciled through the cross. This can be summarized as community that images God through worship, community, and mission. While most people expect expressions of community and worship within a community group, the expression of mission is generally a pain point for most small group ministries. Mission is generally the most neglected aspect of community within the church today. As we discussed in chapter 3, ownership of the mission is often abdicated to the church as an institution or to designated "missionaries." I want to challenge our perceived limitations in regard to mission in community and show you how your group can get their boots on the ground in the mission of God.

Much has been written over the last decade on the idea of *incarnational ministry*. God entered into history to redeem us from our rebellion, and therefore we should, as his ambassadors, bring the gospel into culture rather than detach from it. *Incarnate* means to