

FRAGILE COMMUNITY

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To just come right out and ask somebody what they think you smell like might be offensive to them (or to you—if they give you a candid answer). But most people care deeply about what others think of their particular odor.

Americans spend zillions of dollars every year on perfumes (Obsession—\$50 for 4 ounces) and cologne (quality gentlemen's foo-foo sells for about \$10 an ounce, too). But those products just fix you from the neck up. Deodorants, special soaps, body splashes and powders, breath mints and mouthwashes are also big ticket items for the socially conscious.

If you need a good excuse to buy products that make you smell pleasant, here it is. There is now a new branch of scientific research called "odor engineering." So far the researchers have tried odor engineering only in the work place, but their findings are remarkable.

According to the publication *Communication Briefings*, one Japanese firm reported that air scented with lavender cut keystroke errors by 21 percent. Jasmine-scented air reduced errors by 33 percent. And lemon in the air was even better—this cut errors by 54 percent. They also determined that lavender reduces stress, jasmine relaxes and lemon stimulates. Odors do make a difference.

This gives new significance to a Scripture that has always intrigued me. *"For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life"* (2 Corinthians 2:15, 16).

The odor engineers have not done any research as to what happens to people when true believers come around and gives everybody a whiff of Christ. But Paul said this odor does make a difference. Believers, with the knowledge and life of Christ, emit (figuratively speaking) the very smell of Christ's sweet sacrifice (note Ephesians 5:2). We cannot buy it in a bottle. It does not ooze out of our pores. It comes out in our attitudes, actions and words.

That sweet smell affects everybody around us. So it might not be a bad idea to ask yourself, "What do I really smell like?" If you love Jesus Christ your life smells good. And you will naturally make a difference in all those around you.

The Christian community has an aroma!

Grove Street was lined with lovely mature trees, manicured lawns, and three churches—all right next to each other. The three churches were each built in different styles and shapes, but they each posted a sign out front, proudly displaying the name of the church. The three churches were named First Community Church, Second Community Church, and Third Community Church.

One day the pastors of these three houses of worship all happened to meet on the sidewalk in front of their churches. Said one pastor to the others, "Maybe we need to define what we mean by *community*."

Over the last several weeks, I have offered a definition of the Christian community drawn from the pages of the Bible. By way of review, here are the four things we have learned so far:

The Essence of Christian community

- The Triune God (our Model)
- The people of God

The Nature of Christian community

- Community must be received (new birth).
- Community must be built (discipleship to Christ).

The Components of Christian community

- Everyone has a role
- Everyone contributes something (to build or to disrupt)

The Structure of Christian community

- Dynamic (constantly changing)
- Measured by quality of relationship
- Characterized by fruit of the Spirit (love, harmony, service)

Today, I will discuss with you the fragility of the Christian community and the dangers to which it is commonly subjected.

The community itself is not fragile, for Jesus said, *“I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it”* (Mat 16:18). But the balance within the community is fragile.

How many of you have ever looked for the “perfect church”? If you’re looking for the perfect church, I have this to say: I hope you never find it. Why? Simply because the moment you step into it, it will cease to be perfect.

That’s not a slam against you, but it reveals two important truths:

1. The completeness of any church is about the balance of all its parts, and balance is always a tenuous thing, for which frequent adjustments must be made, because even the best people experience changes, which threaten the balance.
2. No individual can be complete within himself; we all need community to reach our completeness in Christ.

So, as soon as you step into the Christian community, you upset it—not in a dangerous or damaging way—you change the dynamic of the group and everybody has to adjust.

Now, that’s a good thing, because the community is growing—as it should be—and it’s potential is increasing, just because you’ve arrived.

But the ripple you created, just by entering the pool, is going to impact everyone. And everyone’s response is going to impact you and everyone else. This is the way the Christian community works.

Consequently, it is fragile, for there exist wolves in sheep’s clothing, there are weeds among the wheat, and there are pitfalls and snares scattered along the path.

Today, let's talk about the enemies of the Christian community. Typically, there are three: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

I am pleased to announce that Jesus has already dealt with the devil and the world.

As for the devil, Jesus first confronted him during the wilderness temptations (Matthew 4, Mark 1, Luke 4), where He soundly overcame Him with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

Peter testified, "And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." (Acts 10:38)

And Jesus Himself reported, "I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning!" (Luke 10:18)

Paul even wrote to the church in Rome, *"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under **your** feet."* (Romans 16:20; my emphasis)

And as for the world, Jesus said, *"Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33) And also, *"Everyone who has been born from God has won the victory over the world. Our faith is what wins the victory over the world."* (1 John 5:4)

When we trust in Jesus Christ, it's already two down and just one to go!

Our toughest problem is not "out there" but in here—in our flesh. It's the old life and the old ways that want to continue or regain their rule over our lives. This is not only an individual challenge, it's a church challenge.

You see, it's the unique interplay (interdependence) of the parts of Christ's body, the church, that make it a thriving community. *"[God] makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love."* (Ephesians 4:16)

Each part... doing its part... helps the other parts...

However, we're not very good at *interdependence*; we prefer independence. And that is where the break-down of community begins. Consider two examples:

During a tour with His disciples, *"John said to Jesus, 'Master, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he isn't in our group.'"* (Luke 9:49)

Just a short time later, *"the people of the (Samaritan) village did not welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. When James and John saw this, they said to Jesus, 'Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?'"* (Luke 9:53-54)

Such actions could not have fulfilled God's purpose. Jesus had told His disciples, *"I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be **one flock** with one shepherd."* (John 10:16; my emphasis)

Paul wrote: *“This is [God’s] plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.”* (Ephesians 1:10) If that’s the plan (and it is), and we are to be working out His plan in our lives, then certain independent traits must go. Which ones?

Clearly, those which Paul described as the “works of the flesh”: *“When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: sexual vice, impurity, and sensuality, the worship of false gods and sorcery; antagonisms and rivalry, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels, disagreements, factions and malice, drunkenness, orgies and all such things. And about these, I tell you now as I have told you in the past, that people who behave in these ways will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* (Galatians 5:19-21)

When you put yourself first, those are some of the common results. The alternative is not simply to put others first, but to *put Jesus first*. Do what pleases Him, what honors His name.

Why won’t such people “inherit the Kingdom of God”? Not because God is angry with them, nor because He wants to punish them. They will not inherit God’s Kingdom because they have *already forsaken* His Kingdom, when they preferred impurity, idolatry, implacability, and independence (four “I” words). You will always find “I” at the heart of sin.

Last week we looked at some of the amazing “one another” passages in the New Testament—our instructions for building community in the church. Today we’ll look at some more of those passages, but these are the “evil twin” passages to what we read last Sunday. Last week we heard the “dos” and this week we’ll hear the “don’ts.” Here are five (emphases mine):

*“**Owe nothing** to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another.”* (Romans 13:8)

*“So let’s **stop condemning** each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.”* (Romans 14:13)

*“You are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are **jealous** of one another and **quarrel** with each other. Doesn’t that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren’t you living like people of the world?”* (1 Corinthians 3:3)

*“But if you are always **biting and devouring** one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.”* (Galatians 5:15)

*“Get rid of all **bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander**, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.”* (Ephesians 4:31-32)

A missionary in West Africa visited a sick church member. Since the sick man's wife was also present, he asked them several questions, one being, if they lived in peace together. The man answered, "Sometimes I say a word my wife doesn't like, or my wife says or does what I don't like; but when we start to quarrel, we shake hands, shut the door, and go to prayer. So peace is restored again." This is a very good formula for us to follow, since we are surely apt to do or say something that others in our Christian community don't like, or others are apt to say or do something that we do not like.

How do you deal with such eventualities? To imagine that they will not come is foolishness. Quarrels are natural, but they are a work of the flesh, not of the spirit. To resolve them, you must involve the Holy Spirit. Talking

through them, alone, is insufficient, for a breach has been created and it leaves a residue of distrust. To pray together is wisdom.

And here are six more (emphases mine):

*“Don’t be **selfish**; don’t **try to impress** others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.”* (Philippians 2:3-4)

*“Don’t **lie** to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds.”* (Colossians 3:9)

*“Don’t **repay evil for evil**. Don’t **retaliate with insults** when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing.”* (1 Peter 3:9)

*“Don’t **speak evil** against each other, dear brothers and sisters.”* (James 4:11)

*“Don’t **grumble** about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged.”* (James 5:9)

*“And let us not **neglect our meeting together**, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”* (Hebrews 10:25)

A.W. Tozer (The Early Tozer: A Word In Season) summarized the matter this way:

“All sins are hateful to God, but not all sins are equally injurious to the community of Christians we call the Church.

“I hesitate to name the sins I have found most harmful to the life of the Church, for I do not find among them any of the old standbys which have served as whipping-boys for most of the evangelists since the days of Sam Jones (an eminent evangelist of the late 1800’s).

“The first one I would name is a bad disposition. By this I mean ill nature, churlishness, grouchiness in general. It is my opinion that this sin has caused more human anguish than any other on the blotter. Without it there would be never a quarrel, never a divorce, never a church split. To be forced to live in close association with an irascible grouch is hell enough for any man for one lifetime.

“Next I would mention a complaining spirit. This has the same effect in a church as a set of spoiled, fretful quadruplets would have in a home; it makes things all but unbearable. Little wonder that the Lord destroyed the murmurers from among the Israelites.

“Then comes selfishness. This manifests itself in a callous disregard for the rights of others. It is the exact opposite of that love which “does not seek its own way.”

“Next, stubbornness. This leads its possessor to stick to a point in blind unreason even if it ties up the work of God, divides brethren and ruins a church.

“Self-importance is another of the enemies of the Church of Christ. It would be amusing to see little men strut about in the holy place were it not that we are witnessing a particularly offensive demonstration of the sin that caused the fall of Lucifer and has brought about the disintegration of many a fine church.

“Harshness is next. Many a new convert has quit and gone back to Egypt after being wounded by some harsh-spirited Christian.

“Lastly, a gossiping tongue. This is probably the deadliest of them all. It spreads the infection through the body and, as far as possible, poisons every member.

“It would be interesting to know whether or not this list agrees with yours.”

In closing, *“one of the teachers of religious law... asked (Jesus), ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’*

“Jesus replied, ‘The most important commandment is this: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.” The second is equally important: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandment is greater than these.’” (Mark 12:28-31)

Following Christ isn’t just about believing the right things or living the right way—following Christ means developing an authentic community with Him and His people by the power of the Holy Spirit.