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In Search of Community

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Among the evangelical Christians of Romania, the past three years spent among these people has left an indelible mark on my life. It may be over simplification to say that real community cannot be discovered without suffering that brings believers to look for resources outside themselves. No one, or few, look for suffering or persecution in order to live according to God's revealed purpose. We might think that an understanding and application of scriptural principles would lead to community even if our experience testifies to the difficulty of finding it.

Our reality confronts us with the fact that we often live our lives isolated from a helping/healing community; that we seek inner strength that is insufficient to help us; that we turn to outer resources that disappoint us. Our focus becomes self-centered to the point that we expect God not only to meet our needs, but to do so in a predictable, programmatic way. We want a life that is secure and smooth. Many turn to psychology to find solutions to crises or treatment for problems which are only symptomatic of a disoriented life out of fellowship with God and His people.

It does appear that history confirms that age-old observation that prosperity and its accompaniments are not always conducive to spirituality, and that dependence on God is sometimes weakened in times of abundance. This is not a necessary concomitant of prosperity as seen in the lives of

biblical and extra-biblical characters who have learned to use riches for the work and glory of God. Yet there will be a real struggle waged to live godly lives when we are so easily distracted and so often amused. Our leisure times, necessary as they are for moments of refreshing, easily lead to laziness and spiritual flabbiness. The truth becomes evident that “we worship our work, we work at our play, and we play at our worship.” Our sports crazed, hero-worshipping, consumer driven society leads us to seek satisfaction which is ephemeral, to satisfy appetites that have been created in us through publicity and crass commercialism. Superficiality substitutes for substance, and character becomes a rare commodity. “For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s” (Philippians 2:21).

In this paper I propose to examine the model of community found among believers in Eastern Europe, and offer some insights as to what we can gain from observation. We sense a lack of community in many of our American evangelical churches. At the same time, I want Western believers to realize that those who have escaped from the nightmarish decades of isolation and oppression should not be put on pedestals. The sincerity of their faith has not always been matched by a rootedness in the faith. Some visitors to these countries may return to their homes with an idealized view of their fellow believers based on perception rather than on fact. We can learn from each other. Their history can show us that suffering and being cut off from the larger community of faith does not necessarily produce real community but may lend itself more easily to the finding of community.

The Meaning of Community

Community might be tentatively defined as the interdependency of believers within the fellowship of faith where mutual love and encouragement flow freely and provide

spiritual assistance to the multiple needs, problems and crises faced by Christians. It also means that no Christian can expect to live out God's expectations for life and service apart from a constituted fellowship of believers; that is, the local church. It is my opinion that many American Christians have accommodated the spirit of this age and are more in step with secular, hedonistic living rather than in living an authentic Christian life. Their pursuits are so out of sync with Scripture that they reap the inevitable whirlwind of their passions. If the sins of society are so prevalent in our churches, then it is no surprise if the consequences of this misdirection inflict the people of God.

Much of the counseling being done for Christians appears to be little more than self-improvement for problems that are prevalent in American society and rare in many cultures that have experienced neither the measure of prosperity known in the United States nor the unsatiable search for leisure that characterizes many Americans. These feeble attempts to surmount difficulties provide only bandages that hide the root of the problem – a heart that is not satisfied with God nor with interpersonal relationships. The new terms that are invented to describe either imaginary or self-induced problems mask the reality of sin that produces disruption in relations with God and men. Many of the problems for which Christians seek counseling are no different from problems which unbelievers face. This does not mean that Christians are exempt from problems faced by unbelievers in a fallen world.

No one naively believes that becoming a Christian exempts someone from all difficult life situations but the reality of being "in Christ" does provide the spiritual resources to face them without resorting to secular psychology with its unproven assumptions and ever changing prescriptions. This should not be understood either as a rejection of psychology as a legitimate discipline of study in observing human behavior or as a denial of the reality that Christians may suffer problems for

which medical help is essential. Nevertheless, those problems that are behavioral or result from conscious disobedience to the Word of God should not be treated as needing therapy, but in need of true spiritual healing that comes from repentance and the repairing of broken relationships.

The Model of the Suffering Church

The suffering Church has often exhibited a closeness and intimacy in community within the local churches that many of us would envy. Their services are often punctuated with weeping and brokenness that is rarely seen in American churches where all such manifestations might be classified as emotionalism. This has not happened without a price being paid in a wounded soul that has often despaired of succor in this life. Yet at the same time it must be admitted that incomplete community and immature, though sincere, Christians may emerge from such periods as lived by those under the yoke of communism. This may seem paradoxical but strengthens the contention that the road to community might include suffering, but must be found in a vital relationship with Christ and a recognition of one's position in Christ and responsibilities to Him and His Church.

During forty-five years of communist oppression, the trials believers faced not only strengthened their faith, but also enabled them to value that which was truly important: a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and fellowship with other believers. Many of the counseling problems faced by believers in the West do not exist in many other parts of the world. Neologisms would have to be invented in order to describe such disorders. Certainly many Western problems are those associated with the breakup of the traditional family and financial distress from living beyond one's means. But even more than that is the failure to understand the larger purpose of what God is about in the world today and how we fit in.

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Western Christians have much to learn from these believers in the areas of prayer, personal piety and courage in the face of suffering, deprivation, and personal loss. One can only admire their fortitude and perseverance throughout the somber decades of Communist tyranny. Christians that have visited these formerly closed countries have often testified of experiencing spiritual renewal, a new perspective on life and a gratitude for the blessings that they have enjoyed. Someone once said that, "when the flame of gratitude goes out on the altar of a man's heart, that man is well nigh hopeless." A lack of gratitude, especially in a secular society where what counts is what one possesses, results in complaint and then strife as people begin to doubt God's goodness and fairness in His treatment of them and provision for them. When we see that God has blessed us in many ways that make us the envy of the world, then we dare not lift our voice in protest.

The experience of believers from other nations can become a model for American Christians to enjoy a newfound thirst for living the Christian life in the fullness intended by God and to see that a life worth living is one that seeks to serve well rather than seeking to be well served. Real joy and fulfillment comes in serving Christ and others. The spiritual vacuum in our souls can never be filled with ourselves.

One must not paint a utopian picture of spiritual giants in these countries or see a necessary evil in progress and modernity. The answer for American churches is not to turn its back on progress and freedom. Some may say that the lack of technology in these backward nations, the lack of amusements and other distractions, has helped produce the fertile soil upon which community can happen. This would lead to the false conclusion that poverty and piety go together. The forced isolation of believers did not lead to only salutary results. There was also the development of doctrinal teachings that were deficient if not heretical.

The perception has sometimes been that believers in former Soviet bloc countries were more spiritual than their counterparts in the West because of their suffering. It is true that they were both victims of their circumstances and children of their time. But community built on circumstances and not on the sure foundation of Scripture will inevitably fail. The Romanian believers have demonstrated a community that sometimes is limited to the four walls of their churches. They have become introspective and not outward looking. What they have and experience among themselves is real and wonderful, but does not reach out to those outside the community.

One of the great challenges for believers in Romania is that their sincere faith needs to be complemented by a mature faith in order to develop holistic community that is founded on sound doctrine, not merely on a set of historical circumstances that brought and kept them together. The answer for true community cannot be found in poverty and suffering although it may be one of God's remedies. Sound doctrine must undergird the search for community, or else community will be undermined and destroyed once poverty and suffering no longer are a part of one's historical construct.

Among the dangers of the new openness of many formerly closed nations are attitudes that are carried by foreigners, including missionaries, to these people. Our goal as missionaries is not to change the culture of the target group, nor to impose Western Christianity, but rather to address those areas where culture or tradition have produced deviations from the biblical norm. As Hesslegrave remarks, "for better or for worse...[missionaries] are *agents of change* in accordance with the commands of Christ" (Mt. 28:20).¹ This springs from the desire to help our fellow believers to discover or reclaim the precious truths that have not yet penetrated their culture. At the

¹ Hesslegrave, David J., *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 115.

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same time we must be aware that we are there not only to teach but to learn. It may seem trite to affirm that there are times that I have felt that I have received more than I have given. We offer to them the knowledge of how they can have a better life. They often show us how to live better.

The Finding of Community

How can community be found in modern America? Must it be through the suffering, theological isolation and stagnation that occurred in many countries? While the achievement of community among the suffering church is commendable, is that model the necessary one for the evangelical church in the West? Certainly God in His providence can bring America to the place of repentance and renewal that might be found only along the path of oppression and tyranny. Tertullian has said that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Although many Americans see themselves as God's chosen people, Scripture offers no guarantees of security for the protection and preservation of the nation. Even Israel, God's chosen people, forfeited the privileges of the covenants through disobedience and failure to carry out God's purpose in wanting to be made known through a redeemed people whose lives have been transformed. As with Israel, any particular church that fails to carry out its mission forfeits the right to exist.

I would propose that the way true community will be found in the church's engagement in the purposes and priorities of God as a missionary church that is both forward-looking and other-centered. We may be amazed at what will be accomplished in our personal lives as we fall in step to God's larger purpose of bringing glory to Himself through redeeming individuals from every people group on the face of the earth. Christians whose sole purpose in life is their own security, satisfaction, and significance will always live lives of

frustration which are essentially meaningless, for they have little or no impact made on the world around them. When they begin to understand that God's priority is not their comfort, their health, or their pleasure, then they will be able to take the first step to entering into God's heart for the world. We can begin to understand that our problems, magnified out of all proportion to their true importance, pale in comparison to the problem of those who are without Christ and who desperately need to hear our voice.

Many are calling today for the "un-selfing" of America. Conditions have only worsened since Alexis de Toqueville's observation made over 150 years ago that each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object: namely himself.² Many believers live the American dream all the while oblivious to the world's nightmare. They fail to see God's larger purpose in life. How many come to the end of life's journey, look back and realize that no impact was made; no lives were changed through them as instruments of God's power? The only way to escape from the emptiness of life is to engage in the worldwide mission of God, to understand that God has saved us "to show forth the praises of Him who has called them from darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). Christians cannot live autonomous lives, disconnected from the Church and her mission. They need to ask themselves serious questions about who they are in God's world and plan, and what God is calling them to be and become. We then can see the world as it really is, alienated from God and desperately in need of hearing our voice; a voice of hope and comfort.

There is no substitute for a life of corporate and personal prayer, fellowship with believers and reaching out to those around us. The Lord Jesus calls us to, "go unto Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach." (Heb. 13:13). We are called to follow Him, not the fads and fancies of our day. Our

² This quotation is from memory.

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perspective must be one that realizes that, “only one life will soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.” When we enter the world above, in the sense that we begin to understand the heart of God, we will reach out in love and mercy to those around us and begin to share in this joyful experience with fellow believers. We will understand that even though we may have needs to be met, our greatest need has been met in coming to know the Son of God in a personal way.