



Building  
Community  
Together

New Testament Images of the Church



**Foundations for Christian Community**

Ephesians 2:11-22

I will never forget the first time I was in an earthquake. The calm, quiet evening suddenly was rattled as the earth shook beneath my feet. The house I was in made strange groaning noises. And what seemed to be minutes of instability turned out to be seconds of shaking.

Life encourages us to find stability. Secure jobs erode in an uncertain economy. Friends move away. Even churches shift in their vision and direction. So how can we establish relationships that are built on a solid foundation?

The Church, Paul says in Ephesians 2:11-22, has been built on a solid foundation, able to endure great trials and challenges. From her earliest days, the Church had to face the challenges of how people from different ethnic backgrounds (Jew and Gentile) would fit together. Without a common culture, religious background, or class, something would have to hold these diverse people together. Early on, the apostles had agreed that some of the cultural distinctives of the Jewish heritage would have to go (see Acts 15).

**Group Discussion**

Describe a time where you thought you belonged to something stable but it failed to live up to expectations. What elements contributed to the challenges?

**Read Ephesians 2:11-22**

Describe the relationship between Jews and Gentiles prior to their encounter with Christ (vv. 11-12).

What differences cause challenges in our church?

What is the 'dividing wall of hostility' (vv. 14-15)? How was this division broken down (vv. 13-17)?

How does Christ's death reconcile believers one to another?

Because the cross of Christ brings us together and unites us as one new person in place of the two, how should we maintain the unity of the Spirit (see Eph. 4.1-3)?

Paul moves from describing Christians as citizens to members of one household to interconnected stones. How do each of these images help us to understand our unity in Christ? How are these comparison true?

What are the building materials in vv. 20-22? Why are the individual materials important?

The foundation of the apostles and prophets can represent the Scriptures. Why are the Scriptures foundational to our Christian community? How should the Scriptures bring us together?

Who is the resident of this building (v.22)? What does this resident cause this building to become (v. 22)? How should this truth affect your attitude toward the church?

Christian community means that we are interconnected. How can you become a more functional part of this dwelling place of God that is being constructed (v. 21)?

## Respond

Take some time to pray as a group for our church to grow into the kind of spiritual temple described in Ephesians 2. Pray that your own involvement will further the growth.

## A Welcoming Community

Philemon

I was serving as an intern in an inner city church in Winnipeg when Jim showed up looking for a meal. He had been on the run from some guys who were looking for him for money. He had a lot of baggage from his past, and he looked worn and rough.

But God's powerful grace changed the course of Jim's life. A well-established, respectable man in the church named Jake befriended Jim. He took him out for coffee, had him over for supper, worked with him to find adequate housing, and even spruced up Jim's resume, vouching for him as one of his references.

Some, however, couldn't get past the gruff exterior, the clenched fist that was quick to swing, or the stained clothes that Jim wore. But Jake saw something else that only eyes of faith could see. As a result, Jim became a believer and a crucial part to that inner city fellowship.

### Group Discussion

Describe a situation where someone welcomed someone very different from themselves. How did they welcome them?

### Read Philemon

What is Paul's goal in writing this letter?

In other letters, Paul could be quite forceful. What is Paul's tone toward Philemon (vv. 8-9)?

What encouragement does Paul offer to Philemon (vv. 4-7)? How does he pray for Philemon?

What does Paul appeal to Philemon to do (v. 10)?

'Onesimus' means 'useful.' Once, he had been useless because he had stolen from Philemon and run away. What now made Onesimus useful (vv. 10-12)?

Paul says that while he was in prison, he became a father to Onesimus. What does this relationship imply? What change happened to Onesimus (vv. 10-12, 16)?

Despite his conversion, Paul was concerned that Onesimus would not be fully accepted back into the church. Why?

What change of status has taken place in Onesimus (v. 16)?

How does Paul persuade Philemon to reconcile with his brother (vv. 12-22)?

What kinds of people are unlikely candidates for acceptance in our church?

Martin Luther comments that "Even as Christ did for Us with God the Father, this Paul also does for Onesimus with Philemon." How does Paul use his position for Onesimus's advantage (vv. 17-18)?

How can you support those whom our church may overlook, pass judgment on, or reject?

### **Respond**

Pray for those who are overlooked or struggle to be included in our church. Make plans to invite someone out to your group, for a meal, or to an event. Consider those who are overlooked in our community who need to be welcomed with the love of Christ.

**Get Involved!**

1 Peter 4:1-11

Apple products love to make you the center of the technological experience. From iPods, iPads, iMacs, iAds, iTunes, iPhoto – the “I” is the most important part of the experience! One writer has described this generation as “Generation Me.” Centered on the self, my personal experience becomes paramount, but it is insufficient for building a community of believers who know and grow in God’s grace together.

Peter writes to a group of believers who had been part of “Generation Me” but had now been made into a chosen race, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession (1 Pe. 2:9). In the face of opposition and difficulty, he doesn’t want them reverting back into “Generation Me.” His desire is for these believers to follow the path of the Saviour who didn’t come to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). The time is short, the return of Christ is imminent (1 Pe. 1:5-6, 2:12), so Christians need to think clearly about how they will live now.

**Group Discussion**

In what ways have you been tempted to live as though you were “Generation Me”?

**Read 1 Peter 4:1-11**

What is Peter’s main concern for Christians (vv. 1, 7)?

How does clear thinking about the present situation assist in praying (v. 7)?

What was the pattern of life for unbelievers (vv. 1-3)?

What had the preaching of the gospel done in these people’s lives (v. 8)? How was the gospel to continue to be at work in their lives?

What does love do in the community of faith (v. 8)? What is the difference between covering over and covering up sin? What happens when love is lacking?

What kind of offenses should we overlook?

What gifts have believers received (vv. 9-11)?

How do each of the gifts mentioned contribute to the unity of the church?  
Different people receive different gifts and different amounts of strength (v. 11). How should the differences of gifts and strength temper our zeal? How should these differences encourage us to prefer one another?

What are the purposes of these gifts (vv. 10-11)?

Do you know what your spiritual gift is? If you do know, how did you find out? If you don't, how might you discover your gift?

How will you seek to use your gifts to serve others?

### **Respond**

Take some time as a group to reflect on one another's gifts. Thank God for one another, the various gifts he has given to your group, and encourage one another in using these gifts to strengthen the community in our church body.

**Authentic Confession**

James 5:13-20

I knew a visionary leader in a thriving ministry who saw great success. And he fell into secret sin. Stricken with guilt, ashamed of his failure, he had hatched a plan to cover it up. Why should his sin keep him from continuing in such a fruitful ministry? He confessed his sin to God, thanked Him for this way of escape, and was grateful that no one had to know.

The plan didn't work – not because of logistics. But the logic failed. Any time this leader exhorted people to purity, holiness, and honest living, he was reminded of his own hypocrisy. Confession to God wasn't enough. So he decided he had to confess to another man, resulting in him taking an extended season away from the ministry.

**Group Discussion**

With what kind of person are you able to be open and transparent? Why?

What inhibits transparency within the church? How can we overcome these barriers?

**Read James 5:13-20**

What opportunities do trials, happiness, and illness provide (vv. 13-14)?

What is the connection between confession and corporate prayer (vv. 14-16)?

What example of righteous praying does James mention (vv. 17-18)? How does this example help us understand “the prayer of faith” (v. 15)?

What is the result of confessing to another and being prayed for (v. 15)?

Why is it important to confess sins to one another (v. 16)?

How does confession enlist the help of another?

What dangers are there in confession?

What are some helpful principles for confession that you have learned?

Why is there such urgency to be accountable (vv. 19-20)?

How can you grow to be more transparent with your fellow brothers and sisters?

## **Respond**

Break into groups – men with men, women with women. Consider reading a passage of Scripture such as Psalm 103 and remind one another of God's great mercy toward us in Christ. Take some time to confess areas of struggle. Pray for courage for one another. And pray for wisdom to know how to appropriately confess. Thank God for his kindness to you in Christ Jesus.

**Making It Right**

Matthew 18:15-35

I know men who have fought in wars. They withstood bullets and bombs. Tanks and torpedoes threatened them. With great sacrifice, they stood their ground as men of courage.

Yet in the presence of personal conflict, they cower. They run from someone looking them in the eye, and speaking to them in a way that is personal, direct, and emotional.

Everyone can recount an instance where they have misjudged another, mistaking their interpretation of events with the facts. And everyone can recount an instance where they have been misunderstood.

From the earliest days Jesus taught his small band of disciples principles about how to get along and work out disagreements. Building community requires us to keep short accounts and have relationships that reflect the reconciliation that God has made between himself and us through his Son.

**Group Discussion**

Describe a conflict that was resolved in a positive manner. What made it go well?

**Read Matthew 18:15-20**

What kind of situation is Jesus talking about?

What is the goal of facing relational difficulties (v. 15)? How does this goal reflect God's heart (vv. 10-14)?

Why should an offence be addressed alone (v.15)?

When should additional people be included to solve the dispute, and why (v. 16-17)?

Think of a time where you were approached about a situation. How did the experience go? What went well? What was difficult? What did you learn from that incident?

Why is prayer an essential part of the reconciliation process (vv. 18-20)?

## **Read Matthew 18:21-35**

After Jesus instructs his disciples about how they should approach someone who has done something wrong, Peter asked how often forgiveness should be extended. What is the progression of events in these verses?

In New Testament times, a talent was a monetary unit equaling thousands of dollars. Ten thousand talents would equal billions of dollars. Why did Jesus use such an exaggerated total in his story?

How could someone forgiven from so much debt quickly turn on another servant owing so little in comparison?

What should our response be to God's mercy (vv. 32-33)?

How can we grow as a church in showing mercy?

## **Respond**

Pray as a group to know afresh the radical mercy and forgiveness of God. Confess to one another how you need help with showing mercy. Ask God to work in our church to love mercy (Micah 6:8).

## The Mark of the Christian Community

John 13:1-17, 34-35

Dutch art critic Hans Rookmaaker (1922-1977) once commented that only God's grace can help us live in a world that is full of sin and ungodliness. "Where things are loving, good, right, and true, where things are according to God's law and His will for creation, there is no problem. The Christian will appreciate and actively enjoy and enter into all the good things God has made. But where they have been spoiled or warped by sin, then the Christian must show by his life, his words, his action, his creativity what God really intended them to be. He has been made new in Christ....He has been given the power of God Himself by the Spirit, who will help him to work out his new life into the world around him."

In a world filled with brokenness, genuine, sacrificial love has been obscured. But Jesus, preparing to leave his disciples and go to the cross to die, tells and shows them what sacrificial love looks like. While his disciples fail to understand what Jesus is about to do, he makes it clear what true greatness looks like.

### Group Discussion

How does popular culture portray love? Think of a movie or song and what message it conveyed about love.

### Read John 13:1-17, 34-35

What thoughts are filling Jesus' mind (vv. 1-4a)?

Describe Jesus' actions in vv. 4-6 from the perspective of one of his followers, his disciples. Why was this situation so shocking?

Why did Peter object (vv. 6-8)?

How did Jesus reply (v. 9)? What did Peter fail to understand?

Consider Jesus coming to wash your feet. What might you say or do in response?

What is the purpose of this ceremony? What did it symbolize (v. 10)?

How did Jesus intend for the disciples to take his example and put it into practice (vv. 12-17)?

What might sacrificial leadership look like in your life? Give some examples.

What is the standard for Christian love (v. 34)?

What does our love for one another communicate to others (v. 35)?

Describe a time you saw sacrificial love in the church.

What acts of sacrificial love have you performed for one another recently? How can you wash another's feet this week?

## **Respond**

Pray that God will build your group's love for one another so that outsiders will recognize that you are followers of Christ.

No one expected the Master to do the humble task of a servant. What acts of service might be beneath you that would model sacrificial, humble servanthood? Follow Christ's example this week.

**Go Together**

Luke 10:1-20

Just mention the word *evangelism* and thoughts come flooding to mind. Some people think of that obnoxious loud-mouth; others think of the guy holding a sign on the corner of the street. Still others think of tacky tracts left on a restaurant table instead of a genuine tip. And some hope there is a big, no-pressure event planned where they can bring their friend so that a pro can close the deal.

Every Christian knows they should do evangelism. It's life-altering good news we have to share! Yet many Christians struggle with fear, guilt, uncertainty, and don't know what to do or how to do it.

**Group Discussion**

When you hear the word *evangelism*, what images come to mind? What are some reasons you may hesitate to share your faith with someone?

**Read Luke 10:1-20**

Jesus sends out seventy-two ahead of him to do the work of evangelism. What is the benefit of doing evangelism together (see Deut. 19:15)?

What is the promise Jesus gives us as we go (v. 2)? What is our responsibility?

What might Jesus' warning in v.4 suggest (see also Luke 9:1-6)?

Consider the responsibility entrusted to us (v. 16). How should this responsibility encourage us? How should it humble us?

What was the response of the seventy-two when they returned (v. 17)?

How does Jesus describe the results of their mission (vv. 18-19)?

Jesus cautions his followers against spiritual arrogance (v. 20). In what ways may someone fall into spiritual arrogance? How can we seek to remain humble servants?

Few people associate evangelism as a community activity. However, the New Testament portrays mission being done in pairs or as a group. In Acts, Paul had a missionary band that worked closely with him.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:8. What are we to share with unbelievers? How can we do this mission?

What role does *loving one another* play in mission (see also John 13:35)?

How can your group reach out to others in active witness?

How can your group work together to better share the work of evangelism?

What role can you play in a group setting to be evangelistic?

## Respond

Pray for people who do not know Christ. Pray for opportunities to share, for fellowship opportunities where Christian love can be shared, and for the wisdom and courage to speak about the good news of Jesus Christ.

Share some ways that you can bring unbelieving people into contact with small groups of our church family so that they can see Christ's love and hear the good news of Jesus.