

The 3 C's of Church Life...

...and why it's so important to understand them

by Steve Hixon



Way back when I was a kid, we had what was affectionately known as the "3 R's" of elementary education. Along with apple pie and Wonder bread, these 3 R's (OK – pop quiz – what are they?) were considered to be some of the non-negotiables of life. What would happen if they were neglected? Well, kids would grow up not really being able to function very well in our society.

In a similar way, there are 3 C's that I think are crucial to understanding a church and its life. In fact, a church that neglects one or more of these is in trouble. Likewise, over-emphasizing one above the others will make the church wobbly, sort of like a 3-legged stool that has a balancing problem. So – if you're part of a church, especially Fellowship Bible Church, let's take a closer look at these key concepts...

1. The church is a community

•The metaphor is ... a family

•Core values: love, loyalty, mutual support

•Spiritual gifts needed: pastor-teacher, encouragement, mercy, helps



Although I grew up going to a mid-western church, I really didn't become a true believer until August, 1971. (The details of that are another story.) About a month later, I was sitting at a lunch table, and the guy across from me said something about a relationship with Jesus. I just about jumped out of my chair in delight. Another Christian! A brother! Someone who'd had the same experience that had just recently changed my life! The other people at the table gazed at the two of us in dull surprise, as if to say, "Excuse us, but this is America. Aren't we all Christians here? What's the big deal?" They couldn't

relate, but to me it was a big deal. I was experiencing authentic "koinonia" – **fellowship** * – with someone I had never met before. It blew me away, and it began to dawn on me that there might be thousands of people all over the world just like this guy – people who had experienced this personal relationship with Jesus. And because of that, they were suddenly my brothers and sisters in a way that my natural family could not really compare with.

Jesus explained it when some of his followers told Him that his mother and brothers were outside, wanting to talk to Him:

He replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:48-50)

Luke records in Acts 2 a similar experience of intense, emotional koinonia in the life of the early church. Just think – the little, rag-tag group of about 120 (see Acts 1:15) suddenly swells to 3000+ in a single day! We're gonna need a bigger room! Hey, this thing might survive after all! The life of their risen Lord was their common bond, experienced through the newly indwelling Holy Spirit. And this is how they responded:

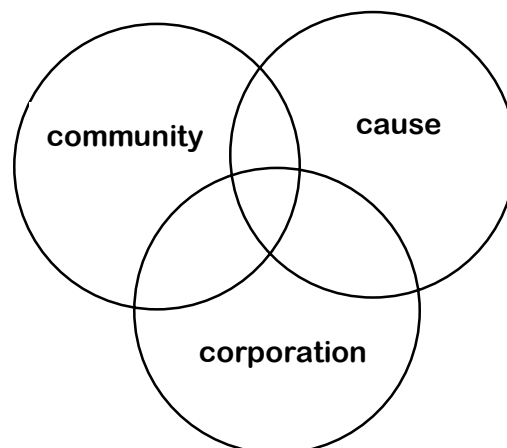
"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

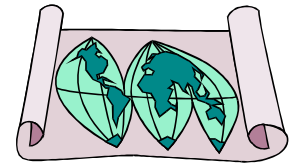
* fellowship

(Greek *koinonia* – "that which is in common")

That heavenly love that believers have for one another, called *agape*, a word that seldom appears in classical Greek. This fellowship is deeper and more satisfying than any mere human love.

(NIV Bible Dictionary)





"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

Lest they wondered if they'd heard correctly, this mission statement was repeated by Jesus in Acts 1:6-8.

"So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The early church felt like a family. Now, it was a very young, a very immature family, and it had a lot of growing up to do, but that family atmosphere was to prove one of its greatest strengths for survival, and one of the unmistakable characteristics that would make it attractive to the Roman world.

The church is still a family, and God still wants us to experience a depth of "koinonia" that the world – and not even natural families – can provide. And God still wants to use that sense of connection to speak to a connection-less world. So a church without a sense of family is definitely incomplete, and not experiencing the fullness God meant for it to be. In fact, this aspect of the church-as-a-Biblical-community was the essence of the church renewal movement of the early 1970's, out of which FBC was born. This is why one of FBC's key Values is "authentic relationships." An emphasis on the "one-another" commands is crucial to the development of authentic, growing relationships, and a church that is committed to fostering this kind of community is on the right track.

2. The church is a cause

- The metaphor is ... a mission.
- Core values: reaching out, loving strangers, furthering the cause
- Spiritual gifts needed: evangelism, faith, exhortation

Jesus was a man with a mission; no one would deny that. For much of his 3-year ministry, the exact nature of that mission was somewhat of a mystery to others, even to his closest followers. But after the resurrection, it started to become crystal clear to the disciples, and soon to outsiders, that Christianity was a cause that sought to bring everyone into its fold. Not only was it a branch of Judaism, but it welcomed even the "unwashed" Gentiles into its membership.

Those who heard Jesus' marching orders in Matthew 28 could not escape the command to "make disciples" – and not just local Jews, but the *goyim* – (Jewish term for the "nations"). And not just a few nations bordering Israel – but "all nations". That pretty well covers it!

"In the early church all Christians were intimately and actively involved in the vibrant life of the body. Their witness to unbelievers coupled with their love for each other rocked the Roman world. And it must be so again."



Ray Stedman,
"Body Life"

John: "Excuse me, Peter, I couldn't hear very well. Did he say "Samaria"? Certainly he doesn't want us messing around with those losers!"

Peter: "I'm afraid that's exactly what he said. And get this – he also said we're supposed to go to the ends of the earth."

John: "No way!"

Peter: "Yes, way."

See? They still had that somewhat "ingrown" mindset – "Jesus, are you going to give us what we've been waiting for now?" They had very little concern for the whole world and the millions of people who had never heard of the kingdom – but a great concern for Israel – and especially those in Israel who really understood (namely themselves!). Have you ever felt that way? "God – I can't honestly say I give a rip about strangers, but I'd sure like for you to bless me!"

The disciples may have wished that they could simply remain a warm, fuzzy small group, waiting patiently for their leader to return and give them positions of importance in His new regime. But He had other plans – and drastically different ones, at that. He fully intended for these still-raw recruits to become His army, no less, as soon as they were empowered and indwelt by His Holy Spirit, who would show up just a few weeks later (see Acts 2). Yes – he wanted them to experience life as a family, but it wouldn't end there; he wanted to infuse them with a

passion for getting up every morning and saying, "God, who can I love into your kingdom today?" He also wanted them to know that in this process there would be forces working against them; but He has prepared for that as well – He provided His armor for their defense (see Ephesians 6:10-18).

The church is not just a family, as wonderful as that may be. It is also a cause – we are on a mission to take the message of God's transforming grace to the whole world. And the methods we use are not manipulative, forceful, or coercive, but loving and person-to-person. This mission is meant to be the heartbeat of every fully-devoted follower of Jesus Christ, and corporately the heartbeat of the church as well. The strength and encouragement provided by the relationships fostered in the family of God are meant to provide the morale for the mission. We are beloved children of the Father; we have brothers and sisters all over the world who have the same mission. Is there any greater rush in life than seeing a man, woman or child awakening to "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ"? Seeing the "light" come on in the eyes of another human being, whose life will never be the same? Could there be any greater mission in this life - for the individual believer or for the church as a whole? The church that does not see itself as a "cause" will wallow in self-centeredness, spiraling into its own activities, gradually losing its sense of purpose, becoming less and less the life-changing force it was meant to be.

3. The church is a *corporation*

- The metaphor is ... an organization.
- Core values: effectiveness and efficiency
- Spiritual gifts needed: administration, giving, helps, leadership, faith

Read the following passages. What part of the church's life do they tend to highlight?

"...for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." (1 Corinthians 14:33)

"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you..." (Titus 1:5)

"Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:36-37)

If people get uncomfortable with one of the circles, it is often this one. We tend to think of organization as somehow a necessary evil, with rules, goals and procedures. And yet we need to examine this thinking. After all, how many organizations do we deal with every single day? How many people are employed by organizations? When we come to think of it, organizations make up the backbone of our society. So how is the church like an organization?



Sometimes we conjure up an image of the 1st-century church existing in a pure, idyllic setting, with no need for structure, administration or leadership. But one look at the Corinthian church and the idea of purity goes out the window! There was always a desperate need for good leaders. And later, when Christian groups gained the freedom to use buildings and actually own property, the need for structure, good leadership, and accountability became acute. The handling of money and distribution of goods to those in need, which we see even as early as in the Acts 2 passage and just a little later in Acts 4 with Barnabas, requires administrative gifts. In fact, even in Jesus' small group someone was designated the accountant – Judas!

So from the very beginning, administrative gifts (see Acts 6), accountable leadership, delegation of authority and responsibility, handling of finances and property, thoughtful structure – all of these things were needed to provide a healthy, safe environment for spiritual growth.

What about today? Well, the church may have a warm, family feeling, and be absolutely dedicated to reaching the world with the message of the gospel, but if the inner workings of the church leadership are chaotic, the church will suffer. To be a church recognized by our local governments, churches today must actually submit "articles of

"It's helpful for me to consider the human body. The body, a living organism, is at the same time perhaps the most well-organized mechanism there is. This must be true of the body of Christ as well."

Ed
Hales



incorporation” which simply spell out the purpose and structure of the church and how it intends to be run. Good administration by wise yet humble servants is a blessing in a church just as it is in a well-run organization. Clear structure, good communication, wise personnel policies, healthy financial practices, accountable leaders – all of these add up to a mature and effective church.

Philip Yancey puts it well:

“With respect to goals, churches tend to fail in two ways: they become obsessed with them or they ignore them completely.”

Philip Yancey

“Organizations, such as the army, government, and big organization, follow one set of rules. Organisms, such as living things, families, and closely-knit small groups, follow another. The church falls somewhere between the two and attracts criticism from both sides. Organization people accuse it of poor management, sloppy personnel procedures, and general inefficiency. Organism people complain when the church begins to function as just another institution and thus loses its personal, “family” feel. I have concluded the tension between organism and organization is unavoidable and even healthy. I would feel uncomfortable within a church that tilted too far toward either model. We must strive to be efficient and yet compassionate, unified and yet diverse, structured and yet flexible.”

<i>If we neglect...</i>	<i>we tend to become like this...</i>
Community	cold, non-relational lack of heartfelt worship no demonstrable love little sense of belonging or family
Cause	no heart for outreach stagnant, ingrown no sense of being part of something bigger than ourselves little growth from new believers
Corporation	immaturity, little accountability “nothing gets done” unclear goals, chaotic random, uncoordinated activity

<i>On the other hand, if we over-emphasize...</i>	<i>we can tend to become like this...</i>
Community	a “holy huddle” fear of, or coldness to, outsiders ingrown, proud
Cause	over-zealous, hard driving the flock instead of leading & nurturing lack of supportive relationships
Corporation	dry, sterile, overly-cautious failure to see God’s hand in new things fear of risk trusting in structure & tradition instead of the Spirit

Summary

Well, hopefully by now you can see that a church is made up of these three essential things: community, cause, corporation – kind of like a 3-ring circus! A healthy church pays attention to all three, and God has graciously bestowed spiritual gifts upon people so that they function well in at least one, if not more, of these areas. It takes hard work, intentional choices, and lots of prayer if we are to become a life-giving, well-balanced church. And while one area may appeal to you more than the others, here’s the challenge: are you willing to support and encourage those whose gifts operate best in the areas you find less appealing?

Finally, what happens if we neglect one or more of these things? Let’s take a look:



Recommended Reading:

Life Together, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
When All Else Fails, Read the Directions, by Bob Smith
Body Life, by Ray Stedman
Biblical Eldership, Alexander Strauch
The Purpose-Driven Church, by Rick Warren
The Local Church: Why Bother?, by Philip Yancey

Jim Dethmer, “*Are You Moving in the Right Circles?*”, Leadership Journal, Fall 1992
 Mark Galli, “*The Local Church: What’s the Point?*”, Discipleship Journal 1992, issue 69
 Philip Yancey, “*The Church as Platypus: How do You Lead that Odd Combination of Organization and Family?*”, Leadership Journal, Summer 1986