

The Call to Biblical Community

Psalm 133

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I have decided to take a break from our Acts series for the next seven weeks. Providentially the last three passages in Acts have perfectly tied in with some of the re-adjustments that Rodney and I have felt that needed to be made. But I think there is more that needs to be said. On the back of your outlines you will find the Ten Pillars of Dominion Covenant Church. Those have not changed. This chart was made up early in the church's history in order to maintain balance in our ministry. It's so easy to focus on one or two of the pillars and to neglect others. But *having* the chart and *following* the chart are entirely different matters. And so we are just thinking through ways in which we can ensure that we are indeed a healthy congregation, and that I am giving balance in your diet.

You can see at the top of the page that the mission statement for our church over the last seven years has been "Covenanted Families promoting and enjoying the dominion of King Jesus over every area of life." I think our church does quite well at *promoting* His kingship. But do we really *enjoy* His kingship in absolutely everything that we do? I think that I do, but I don't want to take that joy for granted. Our purpose statement under the Gospel has been, "To see our members so secure in God's grace, so knowledgeable in God's law, and so confident in His promises, that they are freed from self-doubts to joyful service." You will see the words joy, enjoying, joyfully and enjoyed coming up in various purpose statements. Under Christian life it says, "To bring individuals and families to joyfully and more consistently live their lives coram deo in the power of the Spirit and to God's glory." Our goal is not to have a grin and bear it Christianity. We want our members to experience the joy of the Lord which (the Bible says) is our strength. That joy motivates us, undergirds us and strengthens us in our work. But there is a context for that joy. God tends to bring this joy and comfort in a covenant context. And part of that context is community relationships.

We have added home groups to our schedule not because we are mandating that everyone be a part of them. There are many ways to enter into community. But we do believe that home groups – especially the new way that we are doing them, has been beneficial for true fellowship and community. You can talk to the Denekeses, Foxes, Dykstras and Elliott's for their evaluation of how well *they* think it has been working. But what I will be talking about today is broader than simply home groups. But you might

want to have in the back of your minds the question: “What would it be like to be part of a home group that takes the Biblical principles of community seriously?” Psalm 133 is a call to true community. It’s not going to say everything that we will say in this series, but it will serve as an introduction.

I. The Irony Of This Call To Unity (title)

David starts by saying, **Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!** When I was growing up I sometimes struggled with how to relate to others in the body. Temperamentally I am basically an introvert and was extremely shy in earlier years. Mixing it up with other people was not my idea of fun. I thoroughly enjoy it now, but it was much more difficult for me back then. And there are probably some of you who have a vague suspicion that you probably don’t need community. That’s just a recipe for discomfort. And there may be many reasons for that. When I was in seminary, study groups were all the craze. And everyone was trying to get me into their study group to help them. The idea was that we would all benefit from sharing the work load of note taking, summarizing and drilling each other for tests. The reality was that I could get from A-Z ten times faster by myself than with a group and I only rarely and reluctantly entered a study group. And some of you may have the same feeling when it comes to growing in Christ, accountability, mutual ministry, etc. You might feel that the “mutual” in mutual ministry is a real stretch in meaning and that you could more productively grow if you did it by yourself than if you did it with others. Or, there may be any number of other reasons why this does not seem to be a pressing concern. I can appreciate that. But today we are going to look at why David believes that it is good and it is pleasant to have this kind of true community.

And actually, there is an irony in the title of this Psalm. It is called “A song of Ascents. Of David.” It is true that David had achieved unity after many, many years of having a divided nation. For seven years he was king over only the southern tribes. Now they were united. They all had a common goal toward which they were working. But he had no illusion that there was uniformity. There are many people who mistakenly identify uniformity with community and fellowship.

In 1 Chronicles 11-17 David gradually gets all Israel to work together towards the same goal, and because of their focus on God’s presence, there is a tremendous sense of community. They are committed to each other, they belong to each other and they are having beautiful fellowship. But let me assure you that there were more differences in Israel at that point than there are in most churches today. During David’s reign there were such

differences of perspective among the tribes that a church split threatened to occur at least five times in his reign. Whenever the people became frustrated over lack of uniformity, community was lost. Whenever there was genuine community, their lack of uniformity was either covered by love or actually became an asset. And we will look at how differences become a tremendous asset in a different sermon.

So the irony in this title points us in the direction of what community is not. First, it is not having similar personalities. You could not get more different personalities than David and Joab. They rubbed each other the wrong way all the time. Do you remember what David is constantly telling them? “What do you and I have in common, you sons of Zeruah?” Yet because of their union with Christ, their common basis in Scripture and their common goal, those differences became an asset. David simply would not have survived without Joab. Joab, as rough as his edges were, was indispensable. So community is not found in having similar personalities, perspectives and abilities.

Second, community is not found in having identical interpretations of Scripture. We pray toward, and work toward more and more unity in the truth. But if we had to wait till we all see eye to eye, then we would never have community. We will look at Ephesians 4 next week, Lord willing, and in that chapter we see that our growth in the truth assumes that we are already brought into community by the Lord Christ *before* we grow into truth.

Third, community is not found by linking up with people who are as mature as we are. We are committed to each other not because we are holy, but because each one is loved in Christ and belongs to Christ. If we had to wait till people achieved a certain level of maturity before we felt community with them, then community would always be broken up every time one of us matured a little more.

II. The Character of the Community to which we are called (v. 1)

A. Described as a Unity

1. It is Good – This is the objective evaluation of God.
 - a. This is God’s evaluation
 - b. It reflects the goodness of God’s nature
 - c. It is therefore an objective goodness (it is true whether we feel it or not).

Let’s define community from verse 1. First, it is described by that word “unity.” **Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!** Scripture knows nothing of solitary Christianity.

When we were born again, we were born into a fellowship of community. That was not so with Adam. He was made as a solitary creature, and though perfect, God said, **“It is *not* good that man should be alone.”** Now think of that. If it was not good for Adam to be alone, how much more so is that true of us? David cried out to God with longing in Psalm 42 when he was not able to experience fellowship in the visible community of believers. It distressed him. Lack of unity is not good. Here he says that unity is very good. **How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.** The goodness is a declaration of God. It is objective. It is reality, whether you feel it is good or not. It is God’s opinion. So unity is an objective goodness. And it reflects the way God is. God is not a reclusive hermit. He is triune – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He has always had the fellowship of community before there was a man. And the church of Jesus Christ must reflect that. There is none good intrinsically but God alone. But unity reflects that goodness.

2. It is Pleasant – the subjective (but inerrant) evaluation of David
 - a. Why do we not always have this subjective response?
 - b. The subjective must line up with the objective.

But the word “pleasant” reflects the subjective side of David which more and more needs to line up with God’s objective standard of goodness. God made us to get together, to talk together and to work together. So the question is, if that is true, why do I feel isolated? Why do I resist this call to community? Why do I *not* find it pleasant always? And the answer is that you are a sinner and as a sinner you tend by your sinful nature toward isolation – toward the very opposite of what God’s nature is. God’s nature has community, but sin rebels against that. Now we can’t totally avoid this urge towards community because we are made in God’s image. And so, you may desperately want community and yet do all kinds of things to avoid it and to destroy it. That’s the irrationality of our sinful nature. But true community is still good, and the more holy we become, the more pleasant unity becomes. Our subjective desires line up more and more with God’s objective standard of goodness. So the first part of the definition of community is that it means “unity” versus isolation.

B. Described as “to dwell together.”

1. Also good and pleasant

The second part of the definition is the phrase, “dwell together,” or more literally “live together.” We are talking about physical togetherness. It’s not just a philosophical agreement. The Scriptures describe Christians

as witnessing together, praying together, working together and worshipping together. When you look up all of the one another passages in the Bible you see that there was constant contact that they had with each other. There is no community without proximity. If you think that coming to a worship service late and then leaving early is community, you have missed the whole concept. God says it is good and pleasant to dwell together; to be in each other's presence. So why do I not always feel good? Why do I want my space? Why do I want privacy and feel that the closer we get the more I get stepped on?

2. Why do we not always experience this?

a. As sinners, our sense of community is perverted.

Let me suggest three answers. The first one we have already mentioned, and that is that you are a sinner and your sense of community is perverted. You should not redefine God's standard of what is good by what you subjectively feel. Instead you need to realize that God's declaration of "good" is the standard and that you need to grow into that. And we will give some tips on how to do that.

b. We may spiritualize togetherness rather than engaging in the practical, hands on work of Biblical Christians.

Secondly, you may be spiritualizing your identity with other believers. It's easy to have a theoretical unity with all believers, but that may have nothing to do with working with people, getting your hands dirty, and having to face up to the ugliness of our sin and the sin of others. Dwelling together sometimes results in sparks and dirt and always requires grace. But I tell you, when you experience that grace enabling you to embrace the unlovable, - Oh, the pleasantness of it!! We've been reading the missionary story, *Peace Child*, and it makes me get choked up when I read to the family the incredible changes that God's grace wrought in those head hunters. He brought isolated people's into community, and it expressed itself in very tangible ways.

c. We may be selective in the relationships we are willing to enter into.

Thirdly, you may feel isolated because you are selective in the relationships you are willing to enter into. I think that affinity groups are disastrous to Christian community because they set up an illusion of fellowship that is not based in grace but is only based on human commonalities. Now, there is nothing wrong with them in and of themselves. Quilting groups, businessmen groups, chess clubs and other affinity groups can have their place. But affinity groups have become a

substitute for genuine fellowship in community. The world can have affinity groups, but they do not have community. Community means living together; doing things together because of Christ's grace.

C. Described as brotherhood

1. We don't get to choose our brothers and sisters
2. But our relationship to Christ unites us with them.
3. Only brothers are in true community
4. Only brothers can experience true fellowship.

So the first part of good community is unity in Christ. Second, there is dwelling together because of Christ. Third, there is brotherhood because of Christ. There is no community without grace. When we were adopted into God's family, we did not get to choose our brothers and sisters anymore than we could in our own natural families. But God calls this family solidarity good and pleasant. Objectively God knows it is good for us and subjectively we can experience the pleasantness of it. So how come we sometimes find it hard to live with brothers and sisters in Christ? I think this is such a wonderful definition of community because even Christ's family was not ideal. They misunderstood Him and at one point called Him insane. Brothers and sisters don't all see eye to eye, yet there is a solidarity there that cannot be denied.

We need to remember that community is not based on the fact that we like each other. Brothers and sisters are not always nice people. They don't stop sinning the moment they begin believing in Christ. They do get nicer over time, but they don't suddenly become the wonderful friends that we wish they were. The truth is that they are often cranky and dull and irritating. We are tempted to reject community because of those frictions, but it is precisely within such a context that some of the most awesome displays of love and fellowship can be seen. And certainly it is within that context that the love and grace of Jesus Christ shines the brightest.

So far we have seen that three things are needed for healthy, good and pleasant community to happen. But it is at point C that we need to recognize that there is a distinction between community and fellowship. I've put two definitions at the bottom of your outlines.

Community – “the life and relationships that God has ushered us into by our union with Jesus Christ. We are ushered into the community of the Godhead and therefore are joined to community with each other.”

Fellowship – “our active and full *participation* in the life of God's community according to the family guidelines of His Word.”

So community is the context and fellowship is the activity of that context.

So, to pull together the strands of thought, Biblical community is not uniformity, maturity, interest or lovability. Instead, it is something that God has created and placed us into. The moment you are born again you are born into a community. You became a brother or a sister to other believers. We can value it and benefit or we can fail to value it and not benefit. But it is grace alone that makes the community. This is the third point of brotherhood. Community is a relationship and a life into which God has ushered us. We are family. It is by grace alone.

But points A and B indicate that this community is declared “good” by God and experienced as pleasant by us only when we work at two things: unity and dwelling together. So points A and B are basically talking about fellowship – what makes community good. Because we can never lose our salvation, we can never be totally out of community – we will always be brothers and sisters. But when fellowship is not present, the community is neither good nor pleasant. So if community is the family of believers, fellowship is our active participation by which God and His people share their lives.”

III. The Source of the Community to which we are called (vv. 2-3a)

Let’s move on. Verses 2-3 give us the source of this kind of community: **It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion...**

This is a picture of how beautiful community and fellowship is to God. It smells wonderful like the perfumed oil that the High Priest was anointed with. In fact, it is precious just like that oil is precious. It glistens like the dew of Hermon. It refreshes like that dew. It is something that should be valued, not something that should be yawned at and dismissed as being unimportant. No, God values it.

The second feature that we see is that “it” (the pleasant, good kind of unity) comes down from heaven just like oil anoints from above as the bowl is emptied on top of Aaron’s head, and it comes down just like dew drenches the trees and the earth. Another way of saying this is that it is a product of grace, not something that we produce. It comes from above. Both the dew and the oil are symbols of the Holy Spirit. So it is a product of the Holy Spirit. Scripture speaks of it as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It is not something we make. It is a gift, not an achievement. Even though we have a part to play in fellowship, our part is to put ourselves under the dew of God and to put our heads under the oil of heaven.

The third feature here is that the oil flows from the head down to the body. Aaron was a symbol of Jesus, our High Priest. Just as Aaron's head received the oil, Jesus received the Spirit without measure. His head was covered. And Jesus in turn gives of this Spirit to His body. This means that if we are to receive fellowship, it must flow from Christ the head, just like that oil was dripping all the way down to the bottom of the skirts of his robe.

But that implies that our fellowship will take on the characteristics of the fellowship that Father, Son and Spirit have. Paul says **For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?** (2 Cor. 6:14) There can't be. But because we are united to the head, the oil that has drenched the heads flows down onto us and characterizes us, and ushers us into the fellowship of the Spirit. 1 John 1:7 says that when we approach the law by God's grace, we find the law no longer a judge, but a sweet helper that ushers us into more and more fellowship. He says, **if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.** The body of Christ begins to take on the smell of that perfumed oil more and more as it slowly drips its way down. Receive the oil of the Spirit. Be drenched with the dew of heaven.

How do we do that? Well, John mentioned walking in the light as one means. But Scripture talks about all of the means by which we can more fully enter into that fellowship. Church worship is one means. Exhorting one another is another means of entering into fellowship. Talking to one another; providing for one another monetarily; praying with each other, expressing encouragement and all the other one anothering Scriptures that you can think of. In effect, those are means by which we get out of our house, and we camp on Mount Hermon and get wet with heaven's dew. In one sense, both of these images involve getting out of our comfort zone and into the flow of the Spirit.

IV. God has Given Community and Fellowship for Our Joy (v. 3b)

The last point that I want to make is that God has given the community and the fellowship for our joy. Verse 3 goes on to say, **For there** [that's the mountains of Zion; that's the church that's walking in fellowship; that's his community that is dwelling together in unity; "for there"] **the LORD commanded the blessing – life forevermore.** God has called us into an eternal fellowship which will never end. But this is incredibly a sharing in the eternal fellowship that Father, Son and Holy Spirit have had with each other for all eternity. In John 17:24 Jesus said to the Father, **You loved Me before the foundation of the world.** John 1:1 says, **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word**

was God. It speaks of fellowship. Acts 2:28 speaks of the joy Jesus experienced in God's presence before the world existed. John 1:18 says of Jesus, **He is in the bosom of the Father.** That means that He is being embraced to the Father's chest. This was the inter-Trinitarian delight that was filled with glory and joy. And 1 Corinthians 1:9 says that we have been called into the fellowship of the Son.

This life everlasting has four characteristics.

First, it begins in time. The Hebrew literally is life until forever. Christ came not just to give us life in the future, but to give us life now – a life which continues forever. He said, **I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.**

Secondly, that life that starts now and will continue through eternity is called a blessing. God's desire is to bless and not to curse. He called us into community so that we could have joy. Psalm 16 ends by saying,

You will show me the path of life;

In Your presence is fullness of joy;

At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Life, joy and pleasures will be experienced through all eternity in our path of life. But that path of life has already started. Peter, in the midst of persecution, spoke of believers in his churches experiencing “**joy inexpressible and full of glory.**” If fellowship and community is one of the means of entering into that joy and life of God right now, then I want in. I want it.

Third, that blessing was commanded, not simply offered. And any time God commands, it is done. When He commanded, “Let there be light,” there was light. When He commands, “Let there be blessing” and there will be blessing. When we put ourselves on Mount Herman; when we submit our heads under the oil of the Spirit, the command of life more abundant is realized. And what is even more remarkable about this phrase is Who commands Who? Who does God command to give the blessing. And the answer is found in realizing where every blessing comes from. According to James, every blessing comes from God. So He commands Himself, as it were. He binds Himself to bless His people. What a wonderful thought, and what an encouragement to pursue the unity of the first two verses.

Fourth that command is ushered within a community of fellowship. It's no wonder to me that J. I Packer, in his book, *God's Words*, says that fellowship is not only a means of grace and a gift of grace, but that it is also a test of grace. In coming Sundays we will dig a bit deeper into the blessings that flow from community. But I want to close by encouraging you to seek God's blessing, and thank Him that He is interested in blessing you not only now, but for all eternity. Amen.

Children of God, I charge you to seek the blessing of Psalm 133 by seeking the community He describes.

2005 General Purpose Statements for Dominion Covenant Church

“Covenanted Families promoting and enjoying the dominion of King Jesus over every area of life.”

Focus	Ministry	Summary	Purpose Statement
Starting Point	Gospel	Grace alone, Christ alone, Faith alone, to God’s glory alone	To see our members so secure in God’s grace, so knowledgeable in God’s law, and so confident in His promises, that they are freed from self-doubts to joyful service.
	Law	Scripture alone	To press to our hearts the comprehensive claims of God’s Word, the sufficiency of God’s Word and its inerrant authority over all of life and to be more consistent in living out that law word.
Inward Focus	Strengthening the Family	‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ (Acts 3:25)	To reestablish the family as the core covenantal unit through which vital fellowship, community and love is displayed and enjoyed within the body. To also develop strong family leadership.
	Strengthening Church Community	"let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel." (1 Cor. 14:12)	To encourage families to truly enter into federal relationship with each other so that vital and committed fellowship, community and love does indeed happen within the body. To also develop strong servant leadership in the church.
Upward Focus	Christian Life	“that I might know Him and the power of His resurrection”	To bring individuals and families to joyfully and more consistently live their lives coram deo in the power of the Spirit and to God’s glory.
	Revival	Psalms 85:6 Will You not revive us again, That Your people may rejoice in You? Psalms 119:25 “Revive me according to Your word.	To avoid ministry in the flesh by continually turning our people’s hearts to the richness of God’s grace
	Worship	“worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23)	To bring our people to truly delight in God through vital God-centered worship that is consistently Biblical, that is empowered by the Spirit, and that celebrates the pre-eminence of Christ with joy, freedom, boldness and awe.
Outward Focus	Inter-Church Relationships	“That they all may be one” (John 17:21)	To cooperate with other evangelical churches where possible, to promote Reform where cooperation is not possible, and to pray for God’s blessings to rest upon His whole glorious bride.
	Missions	Matt. 28	To be involved in and support nation-discipling missions efforts that take seriously the greatness of the Great Commission as summarized in its four “alls” (“all authority” all nations,” “all things” and “all the days”).
	Reconstruction	“till He has put all enemies under His feet” (1 Cor. 15:25)	To make a lasting difference in the social fabric of our city living out God’s Biblical blueprints and promoting them at every level.