

# COMMUNITY IN MODERNITY

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by

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## COMMUNITY IN MODERNITY

### Introduction

One need not study modernity to know it. And yet, that is precisely why one must study it. Like the air we breathe, seldom do we take stock and examine that in which we live and move and have our being. And if we are not careful, we will indeed choke on that which purports to be life giving. This paper, then, may be akin to an experiment on the quality of our air. Are there hidden toxins? Is the invisible therefore harmless? Must we take evasive action? While no small irony may be exemplified in this particularly modern parable, the fact remains that we must know our culture so we can appropriately respond to it. As Christians, we are both to love the world (John 3:16) and to not love the world (1 John 2:15). This tension poses to us a dilemma: what parts do we love? what parts do we reject? For H. Richard Niehbur's analysis is basically correct: Christ does relate to culture. The question is how, and that answer is partly dependent on the *particular* culture. Hence, this study.

Specifically, this paper will examine the impact of modernity upon community, with a special focus on Christian community. With definitions of the aforementioned terms forthcoming, suffice it to say for now that modernity has been disruptive of secular and religious communities. This, then, leads to the heightened importance of that community which transcends age and epoch: the Church.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I will focus on the church local; that is, the specific and discrete expression of the church universal in time and place.

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<sup>1</sup>When discussing the universal Church, I do so with capital first letters. When discussing the local church, I do so with lower-case letters.

What is my main contention? Simply that the local church is the foundational (that is, primary, essential, and most important) source of community in every age, but especially so in the atomizing and anonymizing age of modernity.

In what follows, I will explicate a definition of community, examine pre-modern forms of community, explore the changes wrought by modernity, survey secular (that is, non-church related) attempts at community, survey Christian attempts at community, propose the distinctively Christian alternative (that is, the local church), respond to objections, and then summarize my argument.

### **Community**

What is community? While commentators are not reticent to offer their perspective on it, few actually venture to define it.<sup>2</sup> Helpfully, Wendell Berry writes, “A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.”<sup>3</sup> Berry’s poetics are not without their importance; for, just as art cannot be fully captured with propositions (“the sky was blue, the barn was brown,” etc.), so “community” is not easily captured in words. It is a lived experience, with words necessarily struggling to find their object of meaning. Nevertheless, after explaining the permutations and significance of community, I will endeavor to illustrate pre-modern forms of community. If it is like art, then the best thing to do is to paint a picture.

Space permits only a brief foray into my categorizations of community. First, I distinguish between “shallow” and “deep” community. These exist on a scale, as opposed to a

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<sup>2</sup>Here I enter into Socrates’ interlocutors’ dilemma. For there seems to be a category of words—community, courage, love—which humans use, yet find difficult to define.

<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Loss of the Future,” in *The Long-Legged House*, 2012 ed. (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), 71.

binary polarity, and reflect the varying levels of inter-personal relationships and substance cultivated within each community. Significantly, the various the “hubs” of a community (e.g. a neighborhood, a dog walking group, young mom get-togethers, book clubs, Harley-Davidson rides, chess clubs, etc.) can serve to unify the same community at various levels. To some, the neighborhood may be a significant source of rootedness. To others, it may be a mere pit-stop along a longer journey. Also, any *type* of community can be more or less effective at cultivating “deep” (or “shallow”) community. That is, while Harley-Davidson riding may not be an intrinsically relationally rich activity, it need not always be “shallow.” Alternatively, though a neighborhood may intrinsically lean towards total-life integration of neighbors (in light of its geographic restraints and boundedness), it may serve only as a casual network to those involved.

Second, I distinguish between “natural” and “supernatural” community. “Natural” community is any non-Christian community. Families, for example, are an example of “natural” community. They are not intrinsically bad, as families demonstrate. Given by God, “natural” community is a common grace that has nothing explicitly Christo-centric about it. This is contrasted with “supernatural” community, which is necessarily centered around Christ Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Because Christian community is founded solely on Jesus Christ, it is a spiritual and not a psychic reality. In this it differs absolutely from all other communities.”<sup>4</sup> This, in part, relates to Christian fellowship, and has to do with the unique communion that all Christians have with one another and the Triune God (1 John 1:3). These four traits—deep, shallow, natural, and supernatural—can intermingle in any number of ways. For example, while it is possible to have “supernatural,” “shallow” community, though this is by no means ideal. An example might be a church small group that never moves beyond discussing the latest weather or sports.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian in Community* (Princeton, N.J.: HarperOne, 2009), 31.

<sup>5</sup>One might contend this is “supernatural” in name only. The point is well taken. Yet my contention is simply that secular community can be more fulfilling and life-giving than supposedly Christian (“supernatural”)

Because every human is made in the image of God (discussed below), I take it to be a given that *every* human in every age yearns for “deep” community. It is a gift of God, and the relational bent is intrinsic to every person. But this desire is ultimately fulfilled only in “supernatural,” “deep” community. That is, any community that lacks Christ as the central, unifying force will necessarily fall short of the desired community. Before the fall, all community was “supernatural”, in that all community was God-centered. After the fall into sin, community is only an imperfect reflection of the communion between God and mankind, and mankind and mankind, that existed in the Garden. Still, this desire for community can be met at varying levels by “natural” relations, despite their intrinsic handicap.

And what does community—especially of the “supernatural” and “deep” kind—provide? I locate four essential outcomes: purpose, direction, belonging, and identity. First, purpose describes the meaning or reason for existence. It provides the central task to accomplish, and the reason for living. Why should I get out of bed in the morning? What is the ultimate goal of my existence? How should I orient my being? Community helps define these foundational questions. Second, direction implies the means by which this purpose is accomplished. In a world of infinite choice and variety, “the dizziness of freedom” is overcome as individuals find guidance and instruction from community. Think of “purpose” as the strategy and “direction” as the tactics. What am I to do with my life? Which options should I pursue, and which should I spurn? What is worthy of effort and attention, and what is not? Community helps guide and direct the individual to provide meaningful answers to these practical questions.

Third, an individual finds belonging when he or she recognizes the others in a community as similar; they are of one accord and in one collective. While modernity offers the world as potential community, it is the much smaller and much more local community which

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community, due to God’s common grace.

notices, appreciates, and depends upon the individual.<sup>6</sup> To whom do I belong? Who notices me? Who misses me when I am gone? All these are questions of belonging and answered by one's community. Fourth, when a community has a sufficiently strong ability to influence and shape its members, the individual comes to ultimately define him or herself in light of the community. That is, the sum of purpose, direction, and belonging is defining oneself according to those features. Who am I? What kind of person do I want to become? These fundamental questions are ultimately about identity and are shaped by the collective force of the community.<sup>7</sup>

Yet how does the community do all this? Through people, conversations, symbols, language, artifacts, institutions, calendars, rituals, presuppositions, and much more. In short, it is the entirety of the culture of the community that shapes the individual.

This presumes a certain theological anthropology.<sup>8</sup> Why do humans crave community? Fundamentally, we are relational creatures. This, of course, derives from our being made in the image of the Triune God. We are relational because he is relational. Thus, anthropology derives from theology proper. Eternally three persons, of one divine nature, God has eternally related (to himself). Community is not tertiary to God's agenda. Instead, it is foundational to both his essence and economy. From hence do we derive our relationality.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>David Wells insightfully comments, "Today we inhabit the *world*, not just our community, our small town, or our corner of the countryside." The problem with inhabiting the world is that we are quite anonymous and unimportant. From David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 33.

<sup>7</sup>For more on this, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup>For reasons of space, I can only briefly engage the theological discussion that has sought to understand the human from a relational standpoint.

<sup>9</sup>I am not unaware of the significant theological debate this perspective has engendered. But again, for reasons of space, I am not able to engage substantively. Simply put, I think that inasmuch as it is wrong to only consider God's nature, so too it is a distortion to consider only the Persons of the Trinity. Gregory of Nazianzus' comment is apt: "No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one." Quoted in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 463. For other works on the relationship between God, the church, and the relational nature of humans—but without a strong sense of institution—see Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?: An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 8–22; Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 55–58; Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the*

This relational element of our being is evident in God finding it “not good” that man was alone (Genesis 2:18). Apparently, loneliness is not the creational pattern. And when Eve was created, Adam found a helper and mate suitable to him, causing him to rejoice over her in song (Gen 2:23). Tragically, though, one of the primary effects of sin is the fracturing of relationships and, thus, community. Most fundamentally, sin offends and rejects a holy God (Gen 3:9-10). Secondly, sin estranges the sinner from fellow humans (Gen 3:12). Relationships that used to be marked by innocence, love, fidelity, and trust, became besmirched by defilement, selfishness, faithlessness, and distrust. In the first two chapters of Genesis we see that community is good, community is divinely-patterned, and community is fractured by sin.

### **Pre-Modern Community**

To us moderns, it is difficult to consider the communal nature of pre-modern life. Perhaps we are tempted to disdain the lack of technological and cultural sophistication of non-moderns.<sup>10</sup> But imagine, if you will, waking up in the morning, not according to your individual iPhone alarm, but to the common rising of the sun, or (more likely) the daily rhythms of family life before the sun has yet crested the tree-tops. Perhaps the scurry of feet down the hall, the clanging of pots and pans, the opening of barn doors, or the rooster’s crow would serve as your daily welcome.<sup>11</sup> From thence, the cacophony of voices would only rise. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbors, the household help, perhaps half a dozen children, and farm animals all conspired to rob the individual of space and isolation. Home life was communal life.

The hours of the working day offered no respite from the communal nature of village living in pre-modern times. Whether farming, cobbling, smithing, or carpentering, work was

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*Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 331–36; Peter R. Holmes, *Trinity In Human Community* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006), 1–3.

<sup>10</sup>C.S. Lewis would chastise the reader for “chronological snobbery.”

<sup>11</sup>Such domestic and non-urban scenes are deliberately favored, instead of a cosmopolitan picture due to the overwhelming majority of humans who did *not* live in cities in pre-modern times. It is a distinctively modern shift that has seen such a dramatic turn to the urban.

intensely relational. There were no anonymous customers or merchants; customers were neighbors and neighbors were fellow citizens. You would buy your neighbor's pork and he would buy your shoes. Your children and wife would be intimately acquainted with his wife and children. You would notice their attendance at Sunday services; you would especially notice their absence. George Homans writes of the communal nature of early American frontier:

In practice, especially in the early days of the settlement, an individual household would hardly have survived if it had not been able to rely, in certain tight spots, on the help of neighbors. Suppose a man wanted the frame of a barn raised, or had lost his plow oxen through no fault of his own... Then the man's kinsmen and neighbors would get together to put up the frame or plow the field. Though there was no money payment for the work, the farmer was bound to provide food and drink in plenty for everyone that helped.<sup>12</sup>

The point is simple enough. With austere living conditions, along with the limited size of pre-modern villages, relational living was the only mode of existence. Isolation meant death and therefore did not exist. Work was always relational and communal in nature.

So while David Wells has noted the bifurcation of modern life along private and public lines, it was not always this way. While anonymity marks our current business, town, church, and neighborly relations, these are modern disturbances into an otherwise communal and integrated existence. Jacques Ellul comments, "In traditional societies, the social and the whole economic aspects of life were inextricably meshed into a social whole. But in a technical society the two aspects are strictly separated."<sup>13</sup> Unified beings led unified lives, not siloed into various parts.

Larry Hurtado likewise notes the integrated nature of pre-modern life when he writes, "In the Roman Empire what moderns call 'religion' was virtually everywhere, a regular and integral part of the fabric of life... There was really nothing like the modern notion of a separate, 'secular' space of life free from deities and relevant ritual."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> George C. Homans, *The Human Group*, 2010 ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1951), 342.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1964), 126.

<sup>14</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 47.

If, then, all of life's personal dealings were *personal*, it followed that communal life was *communal*. One's local church was usually marked by decades of attendance, steady family involvement, and thorough acquaintance not only with the rector, but also fellow parishioners. The political life of the community was likewise local and relational. In democratically run regions, candidates were known throughout town, as were their families and individual histories. One's character was hard to hide after dozens of years of living, worshipping, doing business, child-rearing, and civic engagement in the same place, with the same people.

While this could be stifling, it was not all bad. Homans comments, "Formerly, when a New England family convoked a 'bee' (that is, a meeting for working in common), it was for all concerned one of the most pleasurable times of the year. The work was scarcely more than a pretext for coming together."<sup>15</sup> Because work was communal, and community required at-least mildly enjoyable relationships, work was enjoyable. And due to the limited geographic mobility of most citizens, the extended family played a large role in the process of child-rearing. Parents alone were not responsible. Neighbors and relatives, church members and town residents, all conspired to aid the parents in raising children. And by elder family members' involvement, values were inculcated and passed on to the next generation. Ellul well summarizes the scene when he writes, "The individual found livelihood, patronage, security, and intellectual and moral satisfactions in collectives that were strong enough to answer all his needs but limited enough not to make him feel submerged or lost."<sup>16</sup> Man lived in community.

### **Modernity and Community**

But this is no longer the case. Life began to change drastically with the advent of the (so-called) Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, and ensuing globalization. Peter Berger writes,

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<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 50. An interesting analysis would examine church size in light of this principle. Are there church sizes that are practically too large? Or too small? Can there be mitigating factors?

“Modernity can most succinctly be defined as the changes brought about by science and the technology created in the last few centuries—an ever-accelerating process, with consequences affecting ever more areas of human life.”<sup>17</sup> First, note that modernity has been around for centuries. But second, note that it is “ever-accelerating,” increasing exponentially. This is due to the drastic effects that recent technological innovations have wrought. While modernity has been around for centuries, our particular iteration of modernity—known as “late-modernity”—has only been around for decades.<sup>18</sup>

Modernity is a result of modernization, which is the process by which nations, cities, and populations modernize.<sup>19</sup> This change is usually evident by the transfer of a nation-state’s<sup>20</sup> economic production from rural to urban. Berger traces one of the key impacts of modernity to the de-institutionalization, and thus individuation, of society. While institutions were erected to provide guidance and stability to the masses (giving the masses what Arnold Gehlen calls “fate”), their dismantlement multiplies “choice” for the individual. With institutions no longer in place to give “fate,” the individual is forced to make new choices. Significantly, this dismantling is the result of pluralism. And this pluralism is a result of modernity. One rather trivial example pertains to school-children’s break around December 25 every year. In pre-modern, pre-pluralistic Western society, the answer would be clear: Christmas. Yet after modernity, pluralism,

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<sup>17</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston, MA: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014), 5. Helpfully, Berger notes the physical and tangible catalysts for change. That is, it would be a mistake to assume only that philosophical, political, and technological *ideas* brought about these changes. Nevertheless, the significance of such writings and ideas should not be underestimated and subsumed entirely under the influence of technology and physical objects.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this accelerating change, see Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

<sup>19</sup>This, of course, is closely akin to secularity and secularization. “Secularization theory,” which posited that with increasing modernization came increasing secularization, has fallen on hard times recently. With Berger, I agree that it is an outdated notion, and I find his thesis convincing: the primary result of modernity is pluralism, not secularism. Space precludes further discussion, but for more see Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*.

<sup>20</sup>And it usually is *nation-states* that modernize. For as modernization increases, it places economic pressures on governments to streamline trade, reduce tariffs, eliminate violent conflict, and decrease borders. This process, whereby nation-states globalize, is driven by capitalism, one of modernity’s closest allies.

and de-institutionalization—when most children and their parents do not identify as Christian—there no longer remains an obvious reason why December 25<sup>th</sup> should lead to vacation. The institution of Christmas break has been dismantled by pluralism and modernity. This is what modernity is and what modernity does.

Yet why is community so hard to find in modern societies? This strikes to the heart of this paper. It is because the *essence* of modernization is atomization and dis-unity. Ellul writes:

Traditional societies were center upon human needs and instincts (for example, in family, clan, seignory). Modern societies, on the other hand, are centered on technical necessity and derivatively, of course, in human adherence. Man, in modern societies, is not situated in relation to other men, but in relation to technique; for this reason the sociological structure of these societies is completely altered.<sup>21</sup>

With community no longer the center of society, it is radically displaced by the obsession with efficiency and production. Everything else—including community and religion—are subservient to this goal; thus they are vulnerable to its whims and desires. Elsewhere Ellul contends, “The most recent sociological studies (even those made by optimists) hold that technique is the destroyer of social groups, of communities (whatever their kind), and of human relations. Technical progress causes the disappearance, as Jerome Scott and R.P. Lynton put it, of that 'amalgam of attitudes, customs and social institutions which constitute a community.'”<sup>22</sup> When society organizes around technique (e.g., jobs, production, proficiency, economic output, etc.), community is sacrificed at the altar of efficiency. As an example, consider how employees routinely move across the country (world!) for the best job, regardless of family, church, or community ties elsewhere. The pursuit of the most efficient and effective job has severed the ties of community.

And this is no isolated phenomenon. For David Wells writes, “This yearning for connection, for community, is an experience that almost everyone has in Western, modernized

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<sup>21</sup> Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 305.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

societies, not only those whose family bonds have been disrupted or broken.”<sup>23</sup> For one cannot arrive at modernity and *all* its blessings, without modernity and *all* its curses. Thus, forming and maintaining a vibrant community in the midst of a modern society requires concerted and deliberate action, to know when to engage and when to pull back. Rod Dreher notes, “With so many forces in contemporary culture pulling families and communities apart, we can’t assume that everything will work out if we just go with the flow...Orthodox Rabbi Mark Gottlieb says that Christians living apart from mainstream culture need ‘raw, roll-up-your-sleeves dedication to create deep structures of community.’”<sup>24</sup> If some of the benefits of modernity are to be retained, while rebuffing the disabilities of modernity, exceptional effort is required.

The first step is rejecting modernity’s atomizing and anonymizing assumptions. Only when these are clearly identified and combatted will communities be enabled to survive and thrive in an anti-community age. Wells comments, “What has happened is that modernization--the rearrangement of our societies around cities for the purpose of production, consumption as a defining factor in life, the omnipresence of technology, and our enlarged means of communications, has cut most of us loose from the communities that used to define our world and in which we were anchored psychologically.”<sup>25</sup> These are the blessings of modernity—a myriad of quality jobs, lack of serious want, technological innovation, and powerful communications technologies. Yet with them comes the curse—we are severed from the communities that grounded and defined us. Therefore, to bring back our communities, part of the requisite effort will be denying job-advancement opportunities, saying no to new technologies, and engaging with those physically around us.

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<sup>23</sup> Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York, New York: Sentinel, 2017), 124.

<sup>25</sup> Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 32.

Commenting on modernity, Berger writes, “The situation [of *de*-institutionalization] is also *individuating*. The individual is thrown back upon himself or herself, to choose and decide and keep to the course decided upon.”<sup>26</sup> Faced with innumerable of options, and no longer constrained by institutions, the individual becomes an *individual*; her choices are her own and most likely differ from those of her neighbors, friends, co-workers, and family.<sup>27</sup> But these options begin to take their toll. Noting the existentialist dilemma such freedom presents, Berger writes, “De-institutionalization forces individuals to undertake the difficult and anxiety-provoking task of building their own little world. They need help.”<sup>28</sup> Now, every decision is excruciatingly open. Thrown into the world without direction, the individual looks for guidance in vain.<sup>29</sup> “What, then, is going to happen to us? The simple answer is that we will have to find in ourselves, entirely by ourselves, what we once were given from outside of ourselves [by family, craft, and community].”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the subjective turn inward is complete and Kant’s Copernican Revolution is fulfilled as the subject completely defines reality.<sup>31</sup>

Yet this break with any external, objective authority or source of meaning is not merely an unhappy side-effect of modernity. No. In fact, this autonomous individualism is *the essence* of the modernizing project. David Wells writes, “Then it was that Enlightenment

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<sup>26</sup> Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*, 14.

<sup>27</sup>Existentialist philosophy lurks in the shadows here. Kierkegaard’s “dread/anxiety” accounts for the “dizziness of freedom” that human’s experience by living in the infinite as finite creatures. Similarly, Heidegger’s proposal of “thrown-ness” highlights the given-ness of so much of life and our attempts to break from this pattern.

<sup>28</sup> Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Wells aptly states, “We today, postmodern though we may be, are more unconstrained, more emancipated from everything except our own selves than were the proponents of the Enlightenment.” From David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2008), 72.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>31</sup>Jonathan Leeman writes, “With this famous turn to the subject, the individual became the adjudicator of all reality. Yahweh was dismissed.” From Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 65.

thinkers demanded to be freed from all external authority in order to make up their own minds. They demanded to be freed from God, religious authority, and the past.”<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, the effects of modernization proved more wildly successful than its proponents could possibly have intended. For moderns have been freed not only from God, religious authority, and the past, but every potential source of purpose, direction, belonging and identity. Yet this has left us rootless, drifting and atomized. Society has become a (very) loose amalgamation of individuals in parallel existence, whose lives rarely intersect.<sup>33</sup> Like confetti, we all co-exist in physical proximity to one another, yet without any meaningful interaction.<sup>34</sup>

Wells also notes the effect of the private-public bifurcation of modern life when he writes:

What shall we say of community? It has, for most people, disappeared. The town, or even neighborhood, once provided this, and a person's private and public worlds overlapped. Today they do not. Then, people were known by others in both their worlds, both in their circles of friends and by those with whom they worked...[Now] we live in one world one way and in another world in a different way.<sup>35</sup>

While the individual used to be united by the common life he shared with those around him, today he is divided. He partly lives in the universe of private life. And he partly lives in the universe of public life. He is no longer an integrated whole, but a divided individual.

The cause of this isolation is due to specialization and technique. It is more efficient to have workers and citizens as non-unified beings, and so it is exploited by those who benefit from

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<sup>32</sup> Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Wendell Berry provides a chilling account of our contemporary urban centers, and the loneliness that pervades them. “The modern city, then, is in the fullest sense of the word a crowd, a disorderly gathering of people. Loneliness is on the rampage in it—so many separate lives pursuing their own ends among and through and in spite of the lives of all the others. And the disease that is destroying the community is destroying the families and the marriages within the community. A community is not merely a condition of physical proximity, no matter how admirable the layout of the shopping center and the streets, no matter if we demolish the horizontal slums and replace them with the vertical ones.” From Berry, “The Loss of the Future,” 71.

<sup>34</sup> Wells uses a similarly analogy in *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 109. There, he follows the lead of William Donnelly, by insisting that our *experiences* are like confetti. My contention, which is slightly different, is that our *lives* are like confetti.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

beings solely focused on the task at hand.<sup>36</sup> Why is this bad? “The loss of community that bound together public and private had played a role in our loss of accountability.”<sup>37</sup> Without community, and the unified person that can thrive therein, there is no accountability, responsibility, trust, or ownership in the public realm. Wells concludes, “Anonymity, for example, is an inescapable part of living in our highly complex, technologically driven, competitive Western societies.”<sup>38</sup> What happens when modern persons are forced to bifurcate their lives? Anonymity in the workplace and in society, as their personal lives are hidden from public view.

Again, it must be highlighted that such atomization and anonymity are not merely optional detractions of modernity. They form the essence of the process of modernization, for “as capitalism took root, it required that the society reorganize itself around the processes of production and distribution of goods, services, and information...We find ourselves dislodged from the world, cut loose from life, our connections becoming ever more fragile and tenuous.”<sup>39</sup> Capitalism demands efficiency and efficiency requires anonymity.

To repeat, you cannot have the benefits of modernity without its strains and stresses. To have modernity is to have capitalism. Yet this makes capitalistic society necessarily becomes

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<sup>36</sup>One might also note the secularizing aspect of this division. If one’s religious and moral opinions must be left at home, what remains of public engagement? There emerges the “naked public square.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 158. He continues, just as acutely and chillingly as Berry, “We live overwhelmingly in cities, many of them large, where we are mostly unknown to those we rub shoulders with on the street. We are lost in our governmental bureaucracies where we are only a social security number. We are lost in the corporation whose upper reaches are oblivious to us except as a name to whom a paycheck is sent. We buy from people across the counter who do not know who we are. We call plumbers and electricians to our homes for repairs and they have no idea who we are, nor do we know who they are. We share the highway with strangers. We are called at night by telemarketers who feign familiarity with us by using our first names but in fact are just reading off a list, or maybe having a computer do it for them. We read the newspaper and know personally not a single one of the people mentioned. In these and thousands of other ways, every day, we are reminded that we live anonymous lives. We are known to very few of those with whom we come in daily contact. From that angle this is a cold, inhospitable world that is totally, entirely oblivious to our uniqueness.”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 63.

anti-communal. For as economic production attains to primary place of priority, other outcomes are diminished; community suffers as anonymity reigns.

David Wells aptly summarizes the modern predicament, when he writes:

We are those, for example, who are carried by the economic tides from job to job, from place to place. We are those whose families have been dispersed like confetti in the wind, part blown in this direction, part in that. What is the bottom-line effect of it all? What is the psychological impact? It is loneliness. Loneliness is the modern plague. This is the plague of being disconnected, of not being rooted, of not belonging anywhere in particular to everything in general. It is the affliction of being alone, of being unnoticed, of being carried along by an indifferent universe. Commitment—actual commitment, real bonds, a real sense of belonging, not just the *idea* of commitment—has become a precious stone, rare, much sought after and, when found, treasured.<sup>40</sup>

Though economically prosperous, socially upwardly mobile, and materially abundant, the modern man suffers the reward of his own success. That which was the goal, breaking free from any external sense of meaning, has instead become the tyrant.

### **Secular Responses to Modernity's Anti-Communal Nature**

In light of such intractable loneliness in modern society, is the quest for community legitimate or realistic? As discussed above, humans are inescapably relational beings. We are wired by God for community. We are wired for one another. Thus, it makes sense that many have sought to ameliorate the individuation effects of modernity. Wells notes, “That we experience so little sense of belonging, and have no natural communities of which we are a part, is probably what explains the fact that 40 percent of Americans regularly attend a small group.”<sup>41</sup> It is plain that not only Christians are afflicted by loneliness; non-Christians too have been affected. In this section I move to examine non-Christian (or, “natural”) attempts at community in modern society. Importantly, these need not be anti-Christian attempts. Some have been pro-offered by

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Indeed, Wells later writes, “I understand the yearning for community. Its loss had been one of the great casualties of the modern world. And the yearning for its recovery is very real and very deep” (61).

professing Christians. However these responses have been put forward as deliberate, non-theological rejoinders to modern isolation.

French thinkers of the mid to late twentieth century were perhaps the most incisive and devastating in identifying the problems of modernity. Wells writes, “[(Post)modern writers] all see that our Western societies are made up of complex, interdependent systems—capitalism, democracy, cities, communications systems, transportation systems, state bureaucracies, and corporate structures--that, as they work together, create a context in which the soul withers.”<sup>42</sup> These complex and interdependent systems were necessarily atomizing, anonymous, and therefore community destroying. Yet, after deconstructing these modern institutions and their deleterious effects, the French academics failed to put forward a realistic counter-proposal. Instead, novels such as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* reveled in the despair and nihilism brought about by the anonymity and meaninglessness of modern society.<sup>43</sup> Community was “found” in the common sense of dread, malaise, and anxiety that pervades society.

On the American side, popular entertainment became the most common antidote to the trials of modern life. Community is found in amusement and leisure. *Seinfeld* became the characteristically adroit and sarcastic show that was confessedly about nothing at all. The independent, optimistic spirit of America, while not succumbing to the despair of the Europeans, had turned into a shallow abandonment of anything substantive. “Now we were no longer serious enough to do anything but smirk.” Commenting on the contrast between French and American reactions to this cultural nihilism and rootlessness, Wells writes, “The difference is less in the conclusion at which people arrive than in how they experience their world...And yet, whatever

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>43</sup>For example, “If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens.” From Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being: A Novel* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 5.

the primary experience of the outside world is, that world itself is seen to be empty and the human being is seen as having been disconnected from meaning, as adrift, as ultimately directionless.”<sup>44</sup> These were perhaps the most passive responses to modernity’s anti-communal bent. The Europeans embraced it and the Americans ignored it. In what follows, we will briefly survey the attempts to *confront* it.

First, due to the high premium that modern society places upon work, is it possible to build community on vocation? No, for modernity distorts the purpose and expression of work. Instead of viewing work as a good gift of God (Gen 2:15), modernity has sponsored an obsession with efficient production that is anathema to meaningful community. Part of modernity’s sting, via capitalism, has been both the idolatry of work and the dislocation of man from a meaningful vocation. Paradoxically, the modern man views his job as simply a means to pay the bills and makes an idol out of his work. These are both distorted views of work.

Not only is work viewed wrongly, but vocation has been stripped of personality, through the bifurcation of the modern world into private and public spheres. Noting the importance of unified work, Ellul writes, “Indeed, the individual cannot be 'absent' from his work without great injury to himself. Work is an expression of life. To assert that the individual expresses his personality and cultivates himself [only] in the course of his leisure...is to accept the suppression of half the human personality.”<sup>45</sup> Thus isolated from one’s person, work is unable to satisfy man.

Work is also impotent to support community because of the essentially transient and temporal nature of the current marketplace. The recent college graduate will have, on average, seven occupations by her early forties, with the average employment lasting 2.8 years.<sup>46</sup> Ellul

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<sup>44</sup> David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 188.

<sup>45</sup> Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 399.

<sup>46</sup>“Employee Tenure in 2016,” by Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified September 22, 2016,

comments, “Men are shifted unceasingly from job to job, never attaining a true calling; they are vocationally downgraded by technique. But a vocation is a major part of life and culture. Under these circumstances even a pervasive culture rapidly disappears.”<sup>47</sup> Employees are treated like parts, shipped by management across the country as the need arises. The modern man never exists in one place long enough to belong there. The modern man is thus faced with a dilemma.

Ellul writes:

Only two possibilities are left to the individual: either he remains what he was, in which case he becomes more and more unadapted, neurotic, and inefficient, loses his possibilities of subsistence, and is at last tossed on the social rubbish heap, whatever his talents may be; or he adapts himself to the new sociological organism, which becomes his world, and becomes unable to live except in a mass society.<sup>48</sup>

The modern economy demands a decision be made. And in light of the severe and de-humanizing demands of modernity, acquiescence and adaptation is no easy task. But whether a man remains or adapts, the society writ large has abandoned the communal nature of work in favor of technique; as Ellul points out, his resistance is futile. Vocation, which was once a key element in man’s communal engagement, is no longer stable enough.

Second, consider the use of social media and the constant communication that seems to dominate contemporary life. Surely this offers some buffer to the isolation and atomization of society? On the contrary, Wells contends:

We are the Wired Generation living in a mostly electronically mediated world...and while we are surfing the Internet, e-mailing, watching television, or playing video games, we are doing it all alone. We are wired, but we are also more lonely and have fewer confidants than

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accessed May 16, 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/tenure.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 274. For more, see p.215 about the necessity of a transient workforce in the modern economy.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 334. What does this adaptation look like? “The milieu in which he lives is no longer his. He must adapt himself, as though the world were new, to a universe for which he was not created. He was made to go six kilometers an hour, and he goes a thousand. He was made to eat when he was hungry and to sleep when he was sleepy; instead, he obeys a clock. He was made to have contact with living things, and he lives in a world of stone. He was created with a certain essential unity, and he is fragmented by all the forces of the modern world” (325).

ever before. The Putnam thesis of the 1960s is correct: we are in touch with everyone potentially, but we know and are known by almost no one in particular.<sup>49</sup>

If that was true in 2008, how much more so in today's smartphone driven society? For, as Thomas Friedman cogently explains, 2007 was perhaps the most technologically significant year since the year of Gutenberg's printing press (1440).<sup>50</sup> The problem with social media is the genius of an antidote; it is strong enough to ward off the real thing, but too weak to make any impact. In the same way, social media gives the illusion of community, often deceiving its users most severely, while inoculating them from true relationships and community.

For example, Netflix, Hulu, Facebook, Instagram, and the myriad of other social media platforms have not enhanced neighborly relations. One does not hear of community get-togethers for TV show watching.<sup>51</sup> And, by definition, even if such groups became prevalent, they would not cultivate the kind of "deep community" that is capable of combatting the isolation and anonymity of modernity. Or, consider the isolating effects of pornography. Not only do such online interactions change the manner and mode in which the individual treats others in society, but sexual fulfillment is now found in him or herself alone. The most relational of all acts has been made into a solitary one. The lesson is simple: social media, and the online technologies that enable and empower such connectivity, do not serve to truly connect us in any meaningful way. If they contribute at all to this community conundrum, it is only to confuse people into thinking they have community, when they are really quite starved.

Next, consider the various clubs, local organizations, school boards, and social groups that have formed in modern societies. Interestingly, these mediating institutions were some of the

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<sup>49</sup> Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*, First Edition edition (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 19–35.

<sup>51</sup>It should also be noted that TV and social media have had an individuating and atomizing effect, especially in the last few decades. Whereas past generations of families gathered around the single radio or television set, families are now liable to turn to their own devices, accounts, and rooms to consume their media. The abundance of entertainment technologies has not brought families together, but torn them apart.

strengths, which England and France did not possess, that Alexis de Tocqueville noted in his definitive *Democracy in America*. Commenting on these voluntary associations, Joseph Bottum writes, “Worried about the decline of American community—and they were demonstrably right to worry—such writers as Robert D. Putnam (in *Bowling Alone*) and Amitai Etzioni (in *The Spirit of Community*) sought new ways to claim the benefits that come from what Alexis de Tocqueville once called the nation’s “intellectual moral associates.”<sup>52</sup> Strong social groups have been relatively important in the past; Tocqueville and Putnam demonstrate that ably. Could these organizations play a similar role today?

Sadly, they cannot. First, we now occupy not merely modernity, but “late-modernity.” Though the human conditions is not different, and modernity’s basic orientation is still towards technique, the speed of modernity is accelerating. The year 2007, and the massive technological changes it wrought, cannot be undone. Commenting on these organizations, Berger notes:

Modern society has developed an array of agencies to provide such help. Gehlen called them *secondary institutions*; they fill the gap left over from de-institutionalization. They offer the individual different programs to cope with various contingencies. Since they lack the taken-for-granted quality of the old primary institutions, they are more fragile and less reliable.<sup>53</sup>

In many ways, these secondary institutions are designed to function exactly as their primary institution predecessors. They are meant to give purpose, direction, belonging, and identity to those who abide.

Yet they differ in one crucial respect: they are no longer taken-for granted; they are optional. Thus, the social ties that bind the individuals are necessarily breakable. Due to the contingent nature of joining one of these groups or institutions, it is as easy to leave as to belong. In such a case, belonging necessarily becomes less meaningful. So while these organizations can offer a community of a certain kind, their voluntary nature prioritizes the individual over the

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (New York, NY: Image, 2014), 41.

<sup>53</sup> Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*, 14.

collective. Thus a community is never formed and only a crowd emerges. Modernity's impulse towards the autonomous individual has not been decisively resisted.

Finally, gangs are another example of an attempt to provide community in the modern age. Wells observes, "In some of our inner-city neighborhoods gangs have sprung up in the place of families. They are surrogate families for what is not there."<sup>54</sup> Devoid of familial continuity, geographical rootedness, and societal expectations, a kind of despair and nihilism pervades many inner-city neighborhoods. They also provide the missing element of coercive involvement which other secondary institutions lack. It makes sense that many young men (in particular) would turn to gangs for purpose, direction, belonging, and identity. Yet, I suspect, the violent nature of most gangs would dissuade most Americans from getting involved.

Some "natural" and secular attempts at modern community are more successful than others. Parent-teacher associations thrive in some suburbs, farmers' markets provide relative stability and interaction to consumers and producers, and modern communications technologies—and the social media that goes with it—can provide glimpses of deep community. My contention, however, is that these non-Christian attempts are insufficient to provide a lasting bulwark against the onslaught of modernity's atomizing and anonymizing forces. To various Christian positions we now turn.

### **Christian Response to Modernity's Anti-Communal Nature**

Modernity is a rootless and essentially nihilistic atmosphere. Society is groping for meaning and a sense of community but flailing in its own absorption of and addiction to modernity. Modernity has come with its blessings (prosperity, peace, health, etc.) and its share of curses. Therefore, to reject the hazards of modernity, the Church must be willing to reject some of the benefits of modernity. It is impossible to attain all the blessings of modernity with none of

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<sup>54</sup> Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 66.

its detractions, because the benefits are explicitly built upon the foundation of its curses. But before we can consider a pre-modern, biblical, and counter-cultural model, we will first survey modernistic attempts by the Church to provide meaning and community.

First, consider the recent obsession of local churches to adopt small groups. They have sprung up in liberal, conservative, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches. They flourish among fundamentalist, seeker-friendly, attractional, emergent, neo-reformed, and mega-churches. Their ubiquity is matched only by their diversity. Small groups gather around young marrieds, new parents, boomers, millennials, singles, retirees, horse-back riding, ethnicity, and seemingly every other conceivable trait.

While I do not wish to dismiss small groups entirely, I do wish to question and consider their all-encompassing use in local churches. I agree with Jamie Dunlop when he writes, “[Small groups] only scratch the surface of what God intends to create in your church through community.”<sup>55</sup> Why? First, when community groups gather around a particular affinity, it conceals the radically unifying and community-shaping power of the gospel. Dever and Dunlop call this kind of togetherness “gospel-plus community.”<sup>56</sup> When singles gather exclusively with other singles in the church, or retirees are organized to interact only with other retirees in the church, they do not highlight the supernatural and unifying power of the gospel. Why? Because these groups would naturally exist, and require no power from God.

This is contrasted with “gospel-revealing” community. Dunlop states, “In gospel-revealing community, many relationships would never exist but for the truth and power of the gospel—either because of the depth of care for each other or because two people in relationship have little in common but Christ.”<sup>57</sup> This does not preclude singles from ever spending time with

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<sup>55</sup> Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

other singles, or young moms getting to know other young moms. For “While affinity-based relationships also thrive in this church, they’re not the focus. Instead, church leaders focus on helping people out of their comfort zones to cultivate relationships that would not be possible apart from the supernatural.”<sup>58</sup> God’s power is evident in gospel-revealing community as opposed to gospel-plus community.

Second, consider the impact that such affinity groups have on the Christians within such groups. Because they are necessarily organized according to interest, age, or some other commonality, believers are robbed of the wisdom, experience, and guidance of Christians who are different. For example, young believers need the wisdom and steady hand of those who have walked through life’s trials. Conversely, older saints often need the vitality and energy of those younger in the faith. Put another way, when you assemble all the ears together, or all the eyes, or all the toes, you neglect the blessing of the other members of the body (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). God has assigned and assembled the body in his inscrutable wisdom, and churches do great harm when they unnecessarily divide and separate the body.<sup>59</sup>

Third, most community groups provide insufficient community due to their voluntary nature. Assuming a group meets every week for two hours, it is insufficient to gather for 104 hours per 8,760 hours (1 year). Most are more sporadic than this. Furthermore, many people change small groups frequently. This might be due to moving across town, personal preferences changing, one’s job schedule shifting, or other members leaving. This highlights the turnover of modern society, as existing relationships are broken, and new ones perpetually begun. At other times, members simply might not attend. For, as with the secular small groups and secondary organizations, they are *voluntary*. Secondary institutions are, by definition, unable to coerce (socially, spiritually, or physically) involvement. This makes leaving them easy. And the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 22–23.

<sup>59</sup>This also provides reason for *not* isolating the church youth group. The children of Christian parents do not need to be isolated from the rest of the body, but exposed to it and involved in it. Much harm has been done by churches attempting to cater to the needs and desires of unregenerate teenagers.

knowledge of the ease in which a relationship may dissolve perpetuates a level of anxiety and insecurity for those involved.

Fourth, the heart of the small group weakness is that they possess no authority or structure. While this may not be immediately or apparently harmful when things are going well, the absence of such formal features is very apparent when difficulties arise. See below for more on the significance of organizing Christians into more than an amorphous gathering. While church small groups move in the right direction—regular gatherings around a spiritual and communal purpose—they are not sufficiently rooted to meet the challenge of late-modernity. Modernity’s forces of isolation and anonymity are too strong to be resisted by this half measure.

Next, consider the deleterious effects and unhelpful message sent by multiple church services (or campuses). Here, local churches attempt to gather and assemble the people according to certain preferences and traits. Perhaps the 9:30AM service is known for its abundant childcare. The 11AM service is known for the brief preaching. And the 2:30PM service is known for its contemporary music. What has happened in each case? Similar to the community groups, the church has been bifurcated along life stages, musical preferences, and convenience. Instead of gathering together—as one body—the church is split. While churches attempt to justify such divisions according to the homogeneous unit principle, this philosophy of ministry finds no biblical precedence. In fact, it seems quite the opposite of Paul’s instruction in Ephesians 2 and 3.

A third modern Christian attempt at community is through the exclusive use informal gatherings. This aims at the same kind of spiritual fellowship that community groups desire, albeit with less structure. And, like in small groups, there can be real blessings that ensue from non-regular, sporadic, and informal Christian meetings. Genuine Christian fellowship—the kind of “supernatural,” “deep” community that was mentioned earlier—can happen here. Yet, akin to the problem with small groups, these informal and irregular gatherings cannot be the sum, substance, and core of Christian community. While such get-togethers provide helpful times of friendship and fellowship, they lack the structure, authority, and consistency required to exist as

legitimate and long-lasting community. Again, they are too voluntary to withstand the overwhelming assaults of modernity's isolating impulse.

Unlike the local church, there is no formal structure. While this may be appealing to many millennials, and all those spurned by abuses of authority, hierarchy is helpful in organizing the lives of individuals. Who is to lead? Who is to follow? Who is a member? Who is not? Structure provides all this. Leeman rightly comments, "The church exists to place 'fellowship' inside an authority structure."<sup>60</sup> Yet these informal gatherings possess none of the blessings of structure. Such sporadic meetings also possess no authority. This is, perhaps, the draw of such a model. But hear the words of Dever and Leeman. "It would seem that rejecting authority, as so many in our day do, is shortsighted and self-destructive. A world without authority is a world where desires have no restraints, cars have no controls, intersections have no traffic lights, games have no rules, lovers have no covenants, organizations have no purpose, homes have no parents, and people have no God. Such a world might last for a little while, but how quickly it would become pointless, then cruel, and finally tragic."<sup>61</sup> Authority is good, and Christians display the glory of God when they rightly administer, and submit, to it.

Finally, such sporadic meetings lack the regularity that Christian community requires. The New Testament pattern is gathering on the Lord's Day (Rev 1:10; Acts 20:7). Even as Jews would weekly gather in the synagogue for worship and edification, so Christianity adopted this model early in its history. Weekly gatherings, across the globe and across Church history, are the norm, and Christians break this precedence at their peril.

A fourth Christian attempt at community in modernity is activism. While this is most closely associated with evangelicalism and its political involvement, both liberal and conservative churches often organize their communal life around activities. Perhaps it is

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<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Leeman, "Introduction - Why Polity?," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Jonathan Leeman and Mark Dever (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, "Preface," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), xviii.

protesting the nearby abortion facility, cleaning up local parks, serving the neighborhood, feeding the homeless, evangelizing the lost, flying across the world for mission trips, or innumerable other activities. Pastors and churches consider good deeds to be a unifying force and seek to build community through these natural areas of service.

And while these good deeds are of course commendable, they can hardly exist as the fundamental basis for community. These relationships may present opportunities to serve, give back, and bless others, but they lack the ability to provide the more substantive elements of community. For, as I have been repeating, they are voluntary events. This makes leaving the group easy, and meaningful community hard. Second, they are usually irregular events. This too inhibits the ability to provide a rhythm of community in the lives of the activists. And from a spiritual perspective, it fails to orient individuals around the gospel or each other; rather, it might be construed as another modern phenomenon of efficient production of spiritual goods. For these reasons activism is incapable of providing purpose, direction, belonging, and identity. The best kind of community—“supernatural” and “deep” community—is centered on Christ, and provides, in turn, purpose, direction, belonging, and identity. And for that, we turn to the local church.

### **Christian Community Throughout the Ages: The Local Church**

David Wells summarizes the problem of modernity succinctly as he writes, “Today, we are neither rooted nor do we have much sense of belonging. We are in fact the uprooted generations, the disconnected, the drifters, the Aline. We are being blown around by the windstorms of modernity. Our roots in families, place, and work have all withered or been cut off.”<sup>62</sup> While the Church has offered various responses to modern predicament, they have often done so while still under buying into modernity as a whole. Whether small groups, informal

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<sup>62</sup> Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 66.

gatherings, or activism, they have been largely modern responses to a modern predicament. Therefore, to find a more enduring and stable solution, we must recognize that the solution will largely be non-modern. I assert that the enduring, God-given, and most helpful Christian community is the local gospel church. To do that end, we now examine the time-less essence of the local church, before considering how a biblical model for the local church applies to modern society.

### **What is a church?**

God’s plan for Christian community, regardless of time or space, is the local church.

The New Hampshire Confession of Faith defines a local church thusly:

A visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by His laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His word; that its only scriptural officers are Bishops or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.

First, note that the congregation is associated by covenant. This is what binds the assembly together. And this seemingly alien practice is quite old and traditioned. Historically, “Baptists have stated forcefully and repeatedly that the covenant idea is essential to the nature, definition, and constitution of a church.”<sup>63</sup> A church without commitment is not a church; thus, a church requires a covenant. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert write:

When a group of Christians decides to become a church, they covenant together to take on certain responsibilities. They take on the responsibility, for example, to make sure the Word is preached regularly among them, to make sure the ordinances—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—are regularly practiced, and to make sure that discipline is practiced among them.<sup>64</sup>

Covenant is central to the biblical concept of a local church.

Furthermore, the covenant is “in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel.” This entails that the covenant which binds—making the local church a *non*-voluntary association—is rooted

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<sup>63</sup> Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1990), 97.

<sup>64</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2011), 232.

in a prior commitment and fellowship in the Gospel. The covenant does not take divided people and make them one; rather, it takes spiritually united people and makes their unity visible. What is the source of this unity? “The Gospel.” The good news of Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. This message is what saves individuals and, simultaneously, forms a new people. This is the true, spiritual unity that underlies the outward, covenantal unity.

Second in the New Hampshire’s definition, note the importance of the ordinances. As members are united in gospel and bound by a covenant, the church is demarcated by the Lord’s Supper and baptism. For it is in the ordinances that the New Covenant is affirmed<sup>65</sup> and the people of God are made manifest. Jonathan Leeman writes, “All agree that the ordinances publicly identify, recognize, or affirm the members of the universal church on earth...The ordinances are the beginning of polity.”<sup>66</sup> The ordinances not only affirm an individual’s salvation. They also “show us where a church is, and a church shows us who the Christians are.”<sup>67</sup>

This is significant because it is through the church, by means of the ordinance, by which the communal people of God are known. To again quote Leeman, “To administer baptism or the Lord’s Supper is to make an authoritative pronouncement: ‘Based on your confession of the gospel, you are with Christ.’”<sup>68</sup> Conversely, to withhold the ordinances from an individual is to not affirm their salvation. Church membership, and therefore church discipline, find their

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<sup>65</sup>“The Supper evokes the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 where Yahweh promised to establish a new covenant with his people and write his law on their hearts and minds.” From Thomas R. Schreiner, “The Lord’s Supper in the Bible,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government in an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 135.

<sup>66</sup> Leeman, “Introduction - Why Polity?,” 4.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

physical outworking in baptism and the Lord's Supper. For the church is evident, not simply by who shows up on Sunday mornings, but by who partakes in the ordinances.

This is how the local church is different than a group of Christians. Leeman writes, "To unite a group of previously unattached Christians or members of the universal church into a local church is to 'polity-ize' them. It is to place individual Christian relationships inside of the binding identity and rule structure we call the local church."<sup>69</sup> More concretely, he continues, "a local church is created when a group of Christians gather together, someone explains the gospel, everyone agrees to it, and they mutually affirm one another's agreement through the ordinances."<sup>70</sup> These things are accomplished initially through the church covenant and the statement of faith. United in the gospel, bound by the covenant, the assembly worships through the right preaching of the word and the right administration of the ordinances.

Once these are established, the congregation is continually identified through church membership. This tells the world *who* is united, bound, and identified. Church membership is important because "it is inescapable for anyone claiming to be a Christian. Salvation itself plunges a believer into God's community, under God's Fatherhood of his family, the church."<sup>71</sup> In short, a local church is a group of Christians united in the gospel, bound by a covenant, and identified by the ordinances.

### **The local church as community**

In the above section, I have endeavored to briefly describe the essence and organization of a local church. It is a community of Christians, founded on the gospel, bound by a covenant, and made manifest through the Lord's Supper and baptism. How, then, does the local

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>71</sup> John S. Hammett and Thomas White, "The Why and Who of Church Membership," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Jonathan Leeman and Mark Dever (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 173.

church serve as God’s remedy to the lack of community in modernity? First, I will highlight the significance of a church covenant in our age of voluntary association. Second, I will note the importance of church discipline to identify who is and is not a member. And third, I will note how church membership provides the necessary and sufficient category for modern individuals to build their lives around.

Remember, community is important because it grounds us and socially locate us; it gives to us purpose—a reason for existence—and direction—the way we accomplish our goals. Community grants to us a sense of belonging—those whom we fit with—and helps shape our identity—most fundamentally, who we are. How, then, does the local church provide all this?

First, local churches have historically rejected the voluntary character of “secondary institutions” that flourish in the West. They do this by means of the church covenant. Requisite for joining a church, those under the covenant partake in certain responsibilities for the other members. Hammett and White write, “Church members must accept the responsibilities that come with a covenantal type of commitment to one another.”<sup>72</sup> Because Christ compels the believer to be joined to a body, and joining a body entails caring for the body, Christians are compelled to love and care for one another.

Stanley Grenz writes of local church members, “Their shared commitment to be disciples of the Lord entails a commitment to one another. The church-constituting covenant is a mutual agreement to walk together as the people of God.”<sup>73</sup> This is especially significant when attempting to dissolve the bonds that tie members together. Analogous to a marriage, it is more difficult to leave a church than to leave a community group (or, a dog-walking group). Why?

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 177–78.

<sup>73</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1994), 613–14. Hammett continues, “A covenant also makes concrete the commitment the church asks of prospective members. And it provides a basis for accountability and a rationale for the exercise of church discipline, should discipline become necessary.” From John S. Hammett, “The What and How of Church Membership,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government in an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 192.

Because you have covenanted to one another, and both parties have to find the grounds of dismissal to be adequate. Unlike the secondary institution, which puts the authority squarely in the lap of the individual, the local church is balanced by respecting the individual and the community.<sup>74</sup> While the impetus of *joining* is wholly found in the individual, the rationale for *leaving* must be affirmed also by the collective.

This is remarkably significant because it breaks with the primary narrative of modernity; namely, that the individual must be autonomous and free from all external demands or restrictions. Whether the restraint of parents, religion, geography, or even one's humanity, modernity is on a never-ending quest to free the individual. Not so in the local church. For Christ commands his people to submit to him through the church, and to do so willingly. If modernity prides itself on the lack of commitment, especially to authoritative institutions or communities, the church stands in stark contrast to this perspective. Instead, the church makes no apologies for being a necessary institution for the Christian. It is not optional.

Insofar as secular and Christian secondary institutions allow joining the group to be easy and trite, likewise belonging to it will be insignificant. Membership is only as meaningful as the degree of commitment required.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, by making entrance both necessary and demanding, membership within a local church becomes meaningful. This contributes to the belonging that local churches offer to their members. Make no mistake, the local church is able to rebuff some of the isolation and atomization of modernity—that is, its “curses”—only through the rejection of the “blessing” of individual autonomy. You cannot dually possess committed community and individual autonomy.

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<sup>74</sup>It is for this reason that churches often do not allow individuals to simply “leave” the church. That is, they must submit a letter of resignation, and that resignation must be accepted by the church (or her officers). In fact, a member can be disciplined from the church (excommunicated) if he or she fails to provide sufficient grounds for his or her departure.

<sup>75</sup>For example, when I walk into the grocery store, I am in some sense a “member” of that set of people that are within the store. Yet, because it is so easy to enter into and leave that group, my membership is meaningless. Conversely, because entering into marriage takes a longer process, and leaving a marriage is also laborious, my membership within a particular marriage is made more committed and stable.

Second, church discipline serves to cultivate genuine community by increasing the “cash-value” of membership. If no demands were placed on members, the significance of that membership would decrease significantly. Yet by enforcing the terms of the church covenant and expelling unrepentant offenders, the church preserves the uniqueness of membership. Put another way, while the church covenant makes joining a church difficult, and thus makes membership meaningful, church discipline makes being expelled from the church easy, thus also making membership meaningful.

Church discipline also serves to cultivate genuine community by preserving the unity of the church. By removing hypocrites and false confessors, a local church is protected from divisiveness and preserves the tie of the Gospel that binds. This unity, of course, is necessary for the preservation of the purpose, direction, belonging, and identity of the group. Hammett and White describe the function of discipline as “regulat[ing] the boundaries of membership, primarily by warning and restoring those in danger of wandering beyond those boundaries, or when restoration is rejected, by recognizing that some have wandered so far they can no longer be recognized as members.”<sup>76</sup> Discipline is oriented to the straying individual, and it disallows incongruent members to remain. Yet Hammett also observes, “The corporate benefit comes in the effect of discipline upon the body’s integrity and health.”<sup>77</sup> Church discipline is not only for the sinner who is warned of damnation, but also the body benefits as it too witnesses the consequences of sin. Without church discipline, the gospel no longer unites, the covenant no longer binds, and the ordinances become unimportant.

And not only is the church warned of potential error, it is also purged of the actualized sin of the transgressor. F.F. Bruce notes, “If some incipient sin manifests itself in their midst, it must be eradicated at once; if it is tolerated, this is a sure way of falling short of God’s grace, for

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<sup>76</sup> Hammett and White, “The Why and Who of Church Membership,” 165.

<sup>77</sup> Hammett, “The What and How of Church Membership,” 184.

the whole community will then be contaminated.”<sup>78</sup> Church discipline preserves the body from falling into the divisive error of the unrepentant sinner, and thus cultivates the unity of the whole. Like a doctor removing the infected limb, so too the church removes its members that threaten the health of the body.

While the drama of church discipline is essentially anticipatory—the church has no actual authority to revoke salvation, but merely to affirm or not affirm it—the individual is faced with a stark reminder that he is not the ultimate authority in life. While the modern world reinforces the supremacy and authority of the individual through the incredible proliferation of choice, and the voluntary character of life, local church discipline reminds all involved that God is sovereign. And he has set down in his word what it means to confess and live out gospel truth.<sup>79</sup> Church discipline fundamentally opposes the spirit of modernity, which is *autonomous* (“self-law”) individualism. Instead, discipline reminds the individual and the church that they are under God’s *nomos*.

Third, local church membership serves as the hub around which the life of the church revolves. That is, the church community is fundamentally oriented on the church as a whole, and not any particular or discrete segment of the body. How is the church identified? Through the continuing participation in the Lord’s Supper, where the members affirm and renew their covenant with one another, and with the Lord. For it is in the right preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the elements that the church worships corporately, and proclaims their unity in Christ. All these elements unify and solidify the members as one community.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 365.

<sup>79</sup>The role that church discipline plays in preserving and defining the people of God, as evident in church membership, will be explicated below.

<sup>80</sup>Commenting on the role that eighteenth century architecture had on a group’s corporate identity, the author of *When Church Became Theater* writes, “Being able to watch one another during worship created the feeling of what Rudolph Arnheim calls a ‘corporate body,’ a group that held an awareness of itself as a group with shared interests and experiences. Here was an unprecedented religious situation, in which the design of Christian space fostered congregants’ sense of themselves as worshippers and of their centrality as a group to worship itself.” From Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture*

As was previously mentioned, a local church cannot have meaningful membership without deliberate discipline. Hammett and White observe, “Together membership and discipline enable a church to identify itself.”<sup>81</sup> The point is simple enough: if membership is too easily granted, and discipline is applied to no one, membership quickly loses its significance. But when discipline is applied, as evident in the administration of the ordinances, a local church is visible.

### **Meaningful Membership**

Thus identifiable, the church can viably become a “supernatural,” “deep” community. United in the gospel, bound by a covenant, and identified by the ordinances, the church can provide purpose, direction, belonging, and identity to the body and its constituent members in the modern world. This is the thesis of my argument. I will now examine how it is that meaningful membership—built upon gospel-shaped covenant and gospel-informed discipline—can provide meaningful purpose, direction, belonging, and identity.

First, membership gives purpose because it orients the lives of believers to the Great Commission. A Christian is never without mission; he or she always has a purpose, or task, in which he or she is involved. As DeYoung and Gilbert write, “The mission of the church—as seen in the Great Commissions, the early church in Acts, and in the life of the apostle Paul—is to win people to Christ and build them up in Christ. Making disciples—that’s our task.”<sup>82</sup> Because disciple-making is the primary task of the church, it follows that one of the main tasks for individual believers is disciple-making.

Again, why is purpose such a rare and important commodity today? Because modernity is essentially nihilistic. That is, there is no evident purpose in modern life. Wells compares the experiences of our lives to confetti; random, with no apparent unity or center, and

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*and Worship* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 151.

<sup>81</sup> Hammett and White, “The Why and Who of Church Membership,” 165.

<sup>82</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 63.

no direction.<sup>83</sup> In the flurry of modernity's diversity, speed, change, and confusion, there is no ultimate *telos* to life. Yet for the Christian, this is never so. While one's job may be insignificant, one's family distant, one's neighborhood anonymous, and one's possessions meaningless, the Christian always possesses a purpose for his or her existence. The Christian always has a reason to get out of bed in the morning. And because Jesus has assigned the task of disciple-making to the Church, the individual Christian thus locates his or her evangelism and discipleship necessarily within the church.

It is through the preaching of the gospel, the living-out of the covenant, and the participation in the ordinances that the church member is regularly reminded of his or her purpose in life. As a member in a local church, each Christian has purpose.

Second, the local church also provides direction to its members. While disciple-making is foundational to a Christian's priorities, the question remains as to how this will be accomplished. In any age this is a dilemma; in the modern one it is a downright crisis. For one of modernity's curses is the confusing and innumerable options available at every moment, of every day, for nearly every decision. This openness and undecidedness is evident in both the trite and weighty matters of life. From selecting a cereal to buying a car to finding a spouse, options abound, but direction is notably—painfully—lacking. In the absence of institutional “fate,” the individual is thrown back on his or her own “choices.”

And this applies, of course, to both “secular” and “sacred” decisions. Should he go to this university? Might she move across the country for this job? Should he go on this missions trip? Or evangelize that community? Or pray for this unreached people group? Should she give to this organization? As the options are endless, so too is the “dizziness of freedom” that moderns feel. But for the Christian in a local church, he or she finds direction from the life of the whole church.

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<sup>83</sup> Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 109.

For example, a new Christian knows who to look for when advice or wisdom. Instead of hoping their boss or a fellow restaurant patron will provide meaningful counsel, she can turn to her pastor or other godly woman in the church. Or, Christian parents are guided to move their growing family to a neighborhood populated by other church members. While numerous neighborhoods might be suitable, the membership of the local church provides practical guidance and direction to their decision making. Or, a Christian single knows to whom she can give her open evenings for much needed free baby-sitting. Or, a home-bound senior knows who to pray for because the church directory helpfully lists all the members of his church. In a multitude of ways, local church membership provides direction because it cultivates *specific ways* in which Christians can love and serve one another. The local church provides particular and practical means by which to fulfill the Great Commission and make disciples locally, regionally, and globally. Armed with purpose, a Christian gains practical direction in fulfilling this mission through the local church.

Next, the local church also provides a sense of belonging. While modernity is characterized by rootlessness, anonymity, and indifference to one's existence, the local church is indelibly marked by each member. Why? Because they have a space to utilize the gifts God has given them for the edification of the body (1 Cor 12). This, of course, builds on the sense of purpose and direction that the local church provides. Because there is a task to accomplish, and because there are particular ways to accomplish this task, the individual finds a community that notices their absence or presence. Whether serving in nursery, as a greeter, as an elder, or Bible study leader, Christians are compelled by the love of Christ to serve within the confines and structures present in the local church.

And as the individual Christian fulfills these God-enabled tasks, he or she does so alongside other believers. Together, they reflect the love of Christ to the church and the broader community. And belonging is evident when individuals are missed when absent. Not just sentimentally, but in the life and sustenance of the community, does the community feel the presence or absence of the individual?

To achieve this sense of belonging, the link between church membership and discipline is again emphasized. Just as a church member finds belonging as part of *this particular* church, so church discipline solemnly reminds the collective church that *this particular* individual no longer belongs. This strikes at the heart of modernity's obsession with individual autonomy. When a church forcibly excludes a sinner from the Table, it is declaring who does and who does not belong to Christ. By making such declarations, it is forming a community of insiders and outsiders.<sup>84</sup> Though antithetical to post-modern ears, such a contrast helps to solidify the bonds of insiders. Even as belonging necessarily implies a sense of definiteness, a local church subverts this sense of belonging when it fails to restricting membership.<sup>85</sup>

Consider how, for example, the seamstress was integral to a pre-modern community's proper health and function. Without her, the community suffered. She belonged to that group of individuals. But with the advent of the modern department store, shopping (and working) became a much more anonymous affair. With the advent of the *multiplicity* of department stores, came a pervasive anonymity. And, with the advent of online shopping came total anonymity between consumer, producer, and retailer. When absent, no one is missed at the department store, or at Amazon; there is no sense of belonging. The customers, producers, and retailers are just as replaceable as an engine's parts. This is the anti-belonging modern culture. Yet in the local church, because God has fit the local body with different members for different functions (1 Cor 12:11-28), every member matters and every member belongs.

Finally, consider how church membership and identity are closely related. We receive our identity from social groups because they tell us who we are. One's identity is the ultimate definition of a person. It answers the most fundamental question of life, Who am I? And it is the

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<sup>84</sup>For more on the redemptive-historical precedence for this, see Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 63–68. Also, see James M. Hamilton Jr, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>85</sup>Interestingly, during Capitol Hill Baptist Church services in which the Lord's Supper is taken, the members stand and renew their covenant vows with one another, while non-members sit and watch. The exclusive nature of local church membership is prominently displayed in acts like these.

capstone of the preceding three elements; it builds on purpose, direction, and belongingness. For a community not only informs an individual's task, means of accomplishing that task, and defines a person's co-laborers, but it helps shape the very essence of the member. It tells outsiders, insiders, and the individual *who* the individual is. When a community has strict and important boundaries, one's status in regard to the community is heightened. Communities tell insider's to find their identity as an insider, and to rejoice in that identity.

So too in the local church. There, Christians find themselves as members of a particular body. They are the nose, perhaps. Or, maybe, the finger. In the local church, members find their role in the body. Yet their identity is not found as a "nose" or "finger." Rather, more fundamentally, they are a "member." Their identity is not found in their part, but as part of the whole. They are bound up with the collective. Their fate is tied to the well-being of the community. As Paul puts it in 1 Cor 12:26, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." One's existence is no longer centered on the self, but his or her identity is formed by the collective. All this is foreign to the modern preoccupation with turning inward for identity and meaning. Necessarily, a Christian turns outside himself for salvation; it is *extra nos*, in Christ.

And thus he is drawn to Christ's body, which finds tangible expression in every local church united in the gospel, bound by covenant, and identified by the ordinances. And when a local church does that, its members find life, purpose, direction, belonging, and identity therein.

### **Objections**

But how does the gathered, corporate church differ from small groups? Jamie Dunlop puts it well:

On the one hand, I want to raise the bar of what you envision church community to be. I appreciate small groups. But they only scratch the surface of what God intends to create in your church through community. Why? Of all the ways that the gospel changes this world,

the community of the local church is the most obviously supernatural. Its witness even goes beyond this world.<sup>86</sup>

Consider Jesus' promise to his disciples in Matthew 18; there, he promises to build his *church*. Small groups might be a legitimate aspect of church life. But they are not the totality of it and they are not assured victory against the gates of hell. Similarly, consider Paul's words in Ephesians 5:25, which states that, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The point is simple: Christ's love, protection, and commitment is fundamentally to his church, and not to small groups. Therefore, we should major on what Christ majors, and direct our attention to his bride.

But isn't this love for the universal Church? And if so, how does the local church expression of the Church differ from a small group? It seems that the local church and small groups are incomplete percentages of the church. While it is true that the local church and small groups both are not identified with the universal Church, the local church is the here and now expression of the heavenly and coming, complete and unified, Church. Unlike small groups, it is the appointed means of gathering "two or three" Christians in Jesus' name (Mt 18:20). Put another way, Christ has ordained the church to be *the* authoritative witness on earth. Jonathan Leeman writes, "the local body is an expression or an embassy for the eschatological universal body...the universal is present in the local."<sup>87</sup> Just as the invisible reality of faith is made manifest through the visible reality of repentance, so the invisible reality of universal Church membership is made manifest through membership in the visible local church. For it is the local church that foreshadows the end-times gathering of the universal Church, who assemble to worship the Lamb in unity and diversity (Revelation 5:8-10). Community group involvement is

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<sup>86</sup> Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 13.

<sup>87</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 209.

insufficient because, “in short, the nature of the universal church requires professing Christians to submit to the local church.”<sup>88</sup>

Furthermore, it is only the church—as opposed to community groups—which has been exclusively gathered around the gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, “I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ.”<sup>89</sup> As stated above, secular and Christian communities gather around all kind of “hubs.” Some incline towards being “deep,” and others “shallow.” But even Christian “community groups” can be founded on something other than the gospel. Perhaps they are segmented by age. Or, they assemble the newly-marrieds. Yet in a local church, the gospel is the glue. This is evident in the praying, singing, preaching, and seeing the Bible; as Dever states, the church is “the gospel made visible.”

Furthermore, as I have repeated, the local church provides the authority and structure necessary to sustain Christian community that small groups cannot provide. Commenting on the evangelical desire for community, Leeman writes, “What’s more striking for our purposes is the spat of books released in the last few decades by evangelical and so-called post-evangelical writers within or sympathetic to the emerging church or the missional church that echo this same call for less institution and more community.”<sup>90</sup> This is the error of those obsessed with small groups. I contend that modern Christians need *not only* more community, but more community *through* institution.<sup>91</sup> And I agree wholeheartedly when Miroslav Volf writes:

According to a view widespread in Protestant circles, the Spirit of God and church institutions stand in contradiction. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17); by contrast, institutions are perceived as mechanisms of repression. If this view was correct, then resolute “pneumatic anarchy” would be the only appropriate ‘structure’

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>89</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 25–26.

<sup>90</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 26.

<sup>91</sup>In this way, my proposal is in fact quite similar to Leeman’s. Happily, I was turned on to his book only after the thesis and substance of this paper had emerged, and I found us to be in near lockstep.

for a charismatic church. This view, however, is prejudiced, and anyone sharing it fails to recognize both the character of ecclesial institutions and the way the Spirit of God acts.<sup>92</sup>

This is the error of those who neglect and disdain the local church, often in favor of community groups.

But should churches even bother with institutional community? Surely preaching the gospel, evangelizing the lost, discipling members, and sending out missionaries is more important than church membership, discipline, the right administration of the ordinances, and cultivating this kind of “community,” right? To the contrary, Dunlop writes, “Far from being a ‘nice to have’ element of your church, community is core to who you are.”<sup>93</sup> And this task—of creating and sustaining a vibrant community—is sustained and protected by meaningful church membership, which is united in the gospel, bound by a covenant, and identified by the ordinances. Thus, membership, discipline, and the ordinances are in fact “core to who you are” as a local church.

Bonhoeffer chimes in, “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.”<sup>94</sup> This community is so significant because it is God’s ordained means for the sustenance of his people. Bonhoeffer continues, “The Christ in [a Christian’s] own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother’s is sure. And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation.”<sup>95</sup> Community is important because perseverance is important; and God preserves his saints through the local church community that they partake in.

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<sup>92</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 234.

<sup>93</sup> Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 13.

<sup>94</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

## Conclusion

Modernity is an atomizing, anonymous, and community-less state of affairs. The rise of communications technologies, cheap and effective transportation, globalization, pluralization, capitalism, cities, specialization, family breakdown, and other factors, have all contributed to the sense of rootlessness and drift that modern man experiences. David Wells notes, “Many years ago Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that the self gains its substance through its connection to family, community, and craft. This is not of course the whole story, but the point he was making is surely correct and important.”<sup>96</sup> Devoid of stable families, disconnected from meaningful craft, and disjointed from meaningful communities, the modern world has unleashed an anonymous, autonomous self. Beholden to none, yet belonging to none. Dominated by none, yet unknown by all.

In light of this liquid modernity—where everything is fluid and changing—the local church is God’s ordained means of salvation and community. For it is in the local church—united in the gospel, bound by a covenant, and identified by the ordinances—that a member gains purpose, direction, belonging, and identity. It is in this community that a believer is joined with others in the common task of making disciples, finds modes of expressing this goal, locates him or herself as a member, and ultimately defines the very essence and being of him or herself. May God raise up many of these churches.

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<sup>96</sup> Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 63.

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