

A Community in Jesus

On the notice board outside its regular meeting place, a Christian fellowship displays this sign: 'To be Jesus in the Community'.

I think I know what they mean. They want to 'do what Jesus would do' in the community, involving many different aspects of extending care and friendship to all around, and of course they hope that their friends in the community will take note that they are believers in Jesus and, at the very least, realise that this has made a difference. Ideally, of course, that realisation would lead on into asking more questions and hopefully some at least would come to faith in the Lord Jesus for themselves.

For some time, I have felt vaguely uneasy about this notice but could not quite put my finger on the problem. Something didn't seem quite right . . . But what was it?

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First of all, the idea is based on real truth. As the Lord Jesus himself prayed in **John 17:18**, "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world." In fact, much of that whole chapter focusses on the role of the Church in a world where Jesus is no longer physically visible. In a very real way, we are the only 'Jesus' that the world can actually see at work, so the Church already **is** 'Jesus' in the community, no aspiration needed. Like it or not, the public view of Jesus is very much a reflection of the public view of Christians. As I say, like it – or not!

I was still worried by two factors, though:-

1) It is a public notice. Some encouragement for believers to realise the truth of the last paragraph would not go amiss from time to time, helping us to remember that the world judges our Lord by those who claim to be his followers. But, even though this notice is chiefly aspirational, to put it out to the public at large somehow feels like boasting. As if we were saying 'Watch us and you will see Jesus at work.'

2) It is a group notice. There are other Christian groups in the area. Does this notice imply that this group is aiming to 'be Jesus in the community' but that the others are not, or may not be? Especially being printed as a 'motto' directly under the name of the fellowship, it does make it look very specific to that named fellowship. If it is a true aspiration at all, surely it applies to all Christian believers and not just to this named group?

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A few days ago, I began to see that my main problem with this aspiration is that it seems back-to-front! Just change one word and rearrange the phrase – and a much better aim emerges: **To be a Community in Jesus.**

Immediately, this takes the notice out of the public sphere and into the realm of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ – ALL of them in the locality, not just one specific group, and sets the priority where it needs to be. Perhaps my fresh understanding was triggered by reading this a few days earlier:

"But regardless of its outward form, the Christian community as a community should understand that *its* first relationship is not horizontal, but vertical. The Christian community is made up of those who are in a personal relationship with God, and then the community as a *unit* is to strive to be first of all in a relationship with God. Its first job is not towards the lost, though it has a task there. The first thing the Christian community should do is to stand as a *community* in a living, existential, moment-by-moment relationship to God." (Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ch. 3, p.70.)

Schaeffer goes on: "Community relationship to God does not come mechanically . . . It is something that must be consciously and continuously sought after. The individual, and then the group, must consciously look to Christ for help, consciously look to the leadership of the Holy Spirit not only theoretically but in reality, consciously understanding that every relationship must first be towards God before it has meaning out towards men. And only after the vertical relationship – first individually and then as a group – is established are we ready

to have horizontal relationships and a proper Christian community. It is a long way to come. But there is no other way to achieve authenticity.”

Perhaps here is a key: “It is a long way to come.” Most believers would probably recognise what Schaeffer says as being true, but might easily add “in an ideal world”, as if to justify our shortcuts and our desire for quickly visible results. But he has also pinpointed the unacceptably high cost of those shortcuts: the loss of authenticity.

If our presence and activity in the wider community lack authenticity, they fail. That failure may not be immediately apparent, but it will all come to light in the end. Strangely, the watching world seems to have a much clearer perception of what is fake than many Christian believers do. Failure, human weakness, good intentions – all these are readily recognised and forgiven. But as soon as we try to pretend to be what we are not, the spectators (quite rightly) write us off as hypocrites and give us the big ‘thumbs down’.

It is a common criticism of Christian groups that they are merely inward-looking, and I might seem to be advocating more futile introspection. Not so! But when the authenticity – and therefore credibility – of our life and message is at stake, we do well to take as much time as is necessary to make sure that we stand on solid rock and not on the shifting sand of mere human aspiration.

So, if we truly desire to be ‘Jesus in the community’, to see his love and power flowing through us in a genuine way that brings permanent results, it is going to be ‘a long way to come.’

Perhaps the longest road **seems** to be the one to unity. In reality, it is amazingly short. Too much has been said and written about the need for Christian believers to be united, and sadly most of it has concentrated on organisational ‘unity’. Denominations have sometimes merged, various bodies have been created to foster unity, leaders and members have been encouraged to ‘get behind’ initiatives which aim to promote more contact and co-operation between believers.

It is perhaps predictable that the larger, hyper-organised labels would fail, chiefly perhaps because of their very nature as organisations. Sadly, local initiatives all too soon fall into the same snare. Starting by having a simple local label under which we could all function together, we have too often created another (if local) monster which has its own identity and demands loyalty to its own separate activities. The simplicity of the shared ‘vertical’ relationship which leads to an authentic ‘horizontal’ one has been lost in the rush to form another institution, give it another label and claim ‘successes’ for it.

It is much easier to start one of these schemes than to stop one. Just try suggesting that one of these groups should close down and cease operating, and see what a barrage of objections and criticism greets you!

We don’t need any of these schemes. We don’t even need to ‘get united’. Perhaps what we need most urgently is a clear vision of what is already ours in Jesus, including the fact that he has already made us one. Each one of us who has that vertical relationship with him **has already been joined** to each other one with that same vertical relationship. The road is short indeed! All the necessary groundwork has been done. We just need to see the divine facts, acknowledge them and act on them. It’s called faith.

The man-made labels that divide us are just that: man-made. The life that joins us is from our Father, eternal and unshakeable. Why do the labels seem more important, somehow more powerful? Is it perhaps that we have equated ‘spiritual’ with ‘imaginary’? How much of the content of our faith is merely theoretical, fine words (all scripturally correct, of course!) ? Is that why it is easier to ‘just get on with being Jesus in the community’ and push to the back of our minds the divine imperative to be a community of people who are joined to each other because we are first and foremost joined to the Son of God?

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