

The Community of Christians

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiples sources)

Introduction

- A. Problem: The loss of younger Christians and the unsaved children of Christians to the world. Reasons?
 - 1. Is it the teaching in the local church or the lack thereof?
 - 2. Parental guidance, influence, or lack thereof?
 - 3. The education establishment, entertainment industry, peer pressure?
 - 4. Whole host of other factors?
- B. Consider another possible reason for this.
- C. Interesting study group: the Amish
 - 1. Overall, relatively unchanged since 17th century.
 - 2. Focus on simplicity and traditions, separate from the world at large
 - 3. Teenagers given opportunity to experience the world at large to determine whether to be part of Amish community or the world.
- D. What do they decide?
 - 1. According to statistics, 90%+ choose to remain part of the community. (*Steven Nolt, A History of the Amish, p. 284-285*)
 - 2. That leaves about 10% who do not choose to be part of the community.
- E. Why such a high percentage remaining Amish?
 - 1. They don't like technology? Surely most Amish would rather not work as hard as they do.
 - 2. They don't like us? They don't seem to mind non-Amish when we visit or conduct business with them.
 - 3. Is it because they are brainwashed?
- F. More startling than the current rate is what the rate used to be.
 - 1. In reality, Amish in 1900 were almost non-existent.
 - 2. Amish in Europe died out in nineteenth century, either migrating, becoming Mennonite, or returning to state churches.
 - 3. Between 1850-1920, well over half of all Amish began to move away from their traditions, eventually becoming Mennonite.
 - 4. The actual rate of teenage departure was much higher in the past.
 - 5. 1930s: 21% left (*ibid, 284*)
 - 6. 1700s: more than 60%; not one Amish family in America had all of their children stay faithful to their traditions. (*p. 74*)
- G. While there may be some internal factors in play here, can we really think that the issue is only within the Amish?
 - 1. Why is it that when most denominations and churches of Christ (except for those using various unauthorized social programs) are losing youth, while the Amish are keeping most of their youth?
 - 2. Why is it that someone who was raised Amish would not want what all of us have, but instead, prefers his own lifestyle?
- H. The answer is community.
 - 1. What would prompt a teenager to reject all of our technology, "fun," and society, and consign him or herself to a life of hard service?
 - 2. He finds community with the Amish that in America we no longer enjoy.

3. As the Industrial Revolution has progressed, we have allowed our technologies to isolate us from our fellow human beings.
4. We have traded community for technology that enables us become even less community oriented.

I. COMMUNITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. Community is present from the beginning of the church - Acts 2:42-47
 1. The brethren were "together."
 2. The brethren "devoted themselves" to the Apostles' doctrines, prayer, Lord's Supper, and koinonia (association, joint participation, community)
 3. Little wonder that they were glad and joyful.
 4. Result: encouragement and numerical increase.
- B. 1Cor. 12:12-28 - Image of the church as a body.
 1. Body has individual parts working together for a common purpose.
 2. Likewise, the church is a group of individuals working together for common purposes and for its own common good -- community.
 3. The church must rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn, strengthen the weak and maintain the strong.
 4. This cannot be some hazy corporate concept -- it must be played out in the interaction between all individual members.
 5. The church cannot function this way until each individual member decides to do so.
- C. Gal. 6:1-2; James 5:19-20
 1. Idea of restoration and preservation in bearing one another's burdens.
 2. Implicit in this is a relationship where this state is possible.
 3. Societal superficialities indicate that nothing is wrong...
 4. ...but those in close relationships know when things are wrong.
 5. We all know that we all suffer difficulties, and that none of us are always "good" or "alright."
 6. The question is: are we willing to invest ourselves in one another so as to have those kinds of relationships?
 7. Withdrawing fellowship from some is ineffective when there was little association in the first place. There is no sense of loss.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

- A. Community is easily overlooked as unimportant, but yet it must remain critical.
- B. This is especially true in our isolated world.
 1. Where can people turn for community today?
 2. Social groups and clubs are fading.
 3. Homes divided by divorce or full of people who rarely see each other.
 4. Families are often spread across the country.
 5. Elderly end up in nursing homes or other assisted care facilities instead of cared for by the family in the home.
 6. Even company loyalties are a thing of the past.
- C. Unfortunately, our society has sacrificed community on the altar of technological progress.

1. It should not surprise us in the midst of prosperity and leisure to see unhappiness, depression, and suicide rates rising.
 2. People feel isolated, alone, vulnerable. Without a support network to give them a sense of security, and to give them a sense of purpose by giving of themselves for the wellbeing of others within it.
 3. We have elaborate social systems (welfare, Social Security, etc.) to take the place of what used to be family and community functions.
- D. Should we blame technology and progress?
1. Technology is morally neutral. It can be used however it is directed.
 2. In this matter, by neglect, it is permitted to do harm. This condition is not inevitable.
 3. In fact, I believe that the selfish desire to distance ourselves from others existed first, and technology has simply made it easier to do.
- E. We can maintain some essential communities regardless of circumstances.
1. The earthly family
 2. The spiritual family
- F. Furthermore, we can see that a strong spiritual community can survive time and technology.
1. If the Amish willingly choose their lifestyle over what the world offers,
 2. Then Christians can choose to maintain the extended family and the family relationship that is the local church.
- G. If we as Christians in a local church do not function as a strong community, but are just like everyone else, what makes us distinct?
1. If we provide no more community within the church than denominations or world at large, we shouldn't be surprised when our young leave.
 2. If we act little different from denominational, liberal, or even some conservatives do in terms of community, why should we really expect anyone to desire to be part of our family?
 3. People from outside visit and investigate churches for the purpose of finding community, another name for a place to belong, a place to be in fellowship with others, to find a place where they can have their needs addressed, and where they can invest their energy, time, and assets for others with whom they share the community.
- H. One remaining essential point: Growing families are messy; so are growing churches. Newcomers have children unaccustomed to sitting in a pew and will make noise; non-members have not learned the same principles of modesty practiced by long term members. All of them are new to worship services or young in the faith and in the early stages of learning. They are to be thanked for attending, praised for taking the risk and making the effort, and helped and upheld while they learn (by the way, criticism and disparagement are not helping and upholding). They took the initiative to change their lives by coming to church services. The very least we can do is be patient with them while they are learning, and be very welcoming toward them for trying. The Lord's church is a lifesaving station on a stormy, rocky coast; it is not an exclusive country club in some sort of religious HOA neighborhood.
1. 1Thes. 5:14; Col. 3:12; Eph. 4:2