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Wrestling with Community

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There is a lot of talk in the circles I run in of what it really means to live "in community" with other Christians. To most people, I think community means getting together for Sunday school, maybe having lunch at O'Charleys after church, or sitting in the same pew around the same people on Wednesday nights. There is nothing wrong with all of that, but I think living "in community" might require a bit more.

I believe when we begin to wrestle with what it means to live in community, we are wrestling with what it would look like to be honest, vulnerable and transparent with other believers. To be really forthcoming, as much as I hope for that type of community and work toward it in my own life, sometimes the idea scares the heck out of me. I think it is there, in the tension of my own struggle, that I recognize the real issue: If the Church is going to stay relevant and engaged in our culture, we need to figure this community thing out.

This past weekend found my wife and I burning the midnight oil with old friends from Nashville, people we have known and loved for over ten years. It was one of those evenings of ageless conversation around the kitchen table. When people who have shared the same story can struggle, celebrate, laugh at old jokes, dream new dreams, talk about who they are and what they want to become with endless honesty and very little pretense. Everything seemed right and holy from the laughter of our children playing in the background, to the soundtrack of college favorites smoking like incense into the mood of the room, and the graceful way each of our stories blended to affirm each other's subtle transformations-our journeys toward being the people God intended us to be. It was a memorable evening.

And so with that familiar mixture of heartache and thankfulness, we saw our friends to the road the next day and began reflecting on the time we had spent with them. There is something powerful about that type of community experience, and unfortunately it rarely happens in a church setting. We attend a rather large church that is working hard to involve its members in home-based small group meetings; I know it is something that has been a struggle for our pastoral staff. After visiting with our friends, I became fixated, wondering what it would take to experience that depth of community with a small group of people who barely know each other. Can it even happen?

The people we worship with are also a part of our story, a greater story that is timeless and runs deeper than we can know; a story that truly defines us not just for who we are or who we have been, but for who we are becoming. I find that the intimate sharing with our old friends comes from a familiarity and trust built through years of knowing-but it pales in comparison to the eternal story that we share with our fellow believers. What could happen if through prayer and commitment we allowed those we worshipped with, maybe those we were starting a new small group with, that same level of trust and intimacy? I believe that is the type of transparency the Gospel is calling us to-the kind that reflects the true meaning of brothers and sisters in Christ.

My prayer in this struggle to build community is that the greater story we all share, the one that says, "In the beginning was the Word..." would be the story that draws us together, that gives us the strength to offer grace, the trust to be honest, the commitment necessary to build lasting community with other believers. In real terms, to love the people in my community group as if I had known them for ten years. To recognize that we are people of an eternal story, we are old friends.

Ultimately, the key to intentional Christian community begins with intentional transparency.

