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Gleanings

Living in Community



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In prior *Gleanings*, I shared about Billy's conversion to Christianity and how this led to a career conundrum, which he resolved with the help of a godly spiritual father. The spiritual father commissioned Billy to public service. Then with the additional help of godly advisors, Billy was able to gain clarity about the specific call of God on his life. The vision for his career contained two parts, both of which were challenges to the cultural norms of his day.

Challenging cultural norms is daunting for anyone in public life because it means opposing the will of the people, which, for an elected official, can signal the end of his or her public career. Billy was well aware of the risks of pursuing his calling and knew he could not fulfill his vision by himself. He needed help; he needed a supportive community.

The popular paradigm of Christianity in Billy's day was known as cultural Christianity. Cultural Christianity was nominal, which means it was not genuine. Cultural Christians were a large majority of the population. Cultural Christians attended gatherings of local church congregations on Sundays but disregarded any sound biblical teaching. Sound biblical teaching is the hallmark of genuine Christians who seek to regulate their lives in accordance with Scripture.

The cultural Christians of Billy's era disdained genuine Christians, whom they viewed as fanatics. Anyone seeking to live as a true follower of Christ was shunned. Billy was well aware of this risk. His vision was countercultural. It was so countercultural that there were threats on his and his family's lives.

Billy had been elected to public office when he was a cultural Christian and was concerned it would be disingenuous to remain in office after his conversion to true Christianity. As noted above, however, a spiritual father prayerfully commissioned him to remain in office. But Billy was still at risk of not being reelected.

Billy's life and career were on the line because of his stand for Christ and his conviction about his calling. He could not fight these battles alone; he needed encouragement, support, and wisdom. Given the pervasiveness of cultural Christianity in Billy's day, where was he going to find a community of true Christians who could help him walk out his calling?

Billy was not the only one who saw the need for encouragement, support, and wisdom from a true Christian community. One man was so persuaded of the need that he bought a large home with numerous bedrooms in a suburban community and invited true Christians to come and live with him. Other genuine Christians bought homes in the neighborhood. Soon there was a community of true Christians who could provide the encouragement, support, and wisdom that each of them needed to find and fulfill their respective callings. Billy joined this community.

Today, because of the ubiquitous presupposition that independence is a virtue, forming a Christian community would be difficult. A recent blog noted this reality.

We live in a strange paradox. Our cultural narratives are comprised of concepts like

"rugged individualism," "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," and "every man for himself." Independence is seen as the ultimate virtue.

(<http://blog.tifwe.org/stewardship-community-and-flourishing/>)

As long as independence is regarded as the ultimate virtue, there will be little to no inner-dependence. Inner-dependence is about learning how to discern the will and ways of God in the context of a God-ordained community. Clearly, inner-dependence is a virtue that is more biblically aligned than independence.

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Consider the following seminal traits of an inner-dependent community:

- **Encouragement.** The biblical admonition given to Christians is to encourage one another to love and good works. Love speaks of sacrificial living, which is God's way to live. The trait "good works" refers to doing everything in life according to the will and ways of God and, in particular, God's specific purpose for our individual lives. Note the following Scripture:

Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.
And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds [i.e., good works], not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
(Hebrews 10:23–25 NIV)

- **Support.** The account of the creation of woman in Genesis 2 makes it clear that neither man nor woman were designed to function independently; they were to support each other. The apostle Paul expanded on this idea in 1 Corinthians 12 where he expressed the vital role of support from other brothers and sisters in Christ. We all need support from others, support that will complement and complete us. Note the words of Scripture:

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Genesis 2:18 NIV)

- **Wisdom.** The skill that will enable us to efficaciously find and fulfill God's purpose for our lives comes through trusted advisers and commissioning agents. Note again the words of Scripture:

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.
(Proverbs 15:22 NIV)

Inner-dependent communities facilitate the will of God in our lives and therefore provide the requisite support to enable each of us to find and fulfill our life purpose.

Some may read this with a jaundiced eye. Perhaps they have known about or experienced unhealthy communities. Granted there are many examples of communities that claim to be Christian but don't operate biblically. Don't let misguided unhealthy communities block you from seeking to find and connect with a healthy community.

Connecting with a healthy community does not require you to physically live in the community. While physically being part of the community might be helpful and even preferable, you can be part of the community spiritually without being physically present. For example, Paul wrote the book of Colossians to his spiritual grandchildren whom he never personally met. Nevertheless, he labored in prayer and the written word for their growth and maturity in Christ (Colossians 1:24–2:10).

The spiritual connection to a community is the seminal aspect of living inner-dependently. Through this spiritual connection, you will find the requisite spiritual encouragement, support, and wisdom you need to find and fulfill your life purpose.

This was true for Billy. He found the encouragement, support, and wisdom he needed in the context of his community. He was encouraged in his journey of finding his life purpose. Various perspectives from community members supported him in seeing how to fulfill his life purpose. And he was emboldened by sage counsel from, particularly, the mature Christians in his community. Clearly, the inner-dependent community was critical in helping Billy find and fulfill his life purpose.

If you choose to embrace the inner-dependent community as a God-ordained context to help you find and fulfill your life purpose, Billy's experience can be your reality as well. May you have the grace to find an inner-dependent community and may you join it as a healthy, functioning member. And may you grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ and become mature as you find and fulfill your life purpose.

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