

**Home: Our Place in God's Family**  
**Part Two – And They Gathered Together**

**January 12, 2025**  
**By Pastor Ricky Stephen**

**Acts 2:42-47**

**The Man in the Mirror**

Have you ever woke up and seen yourself in the mirror and asked yourself: who is that?

The clothes we wear, the music we listen to, the food we eat, it's influenced by those around us.

Charles Taylor, a Catholic philosopher, argues our modern era believes the myth that we are "buffered" selves. There's a forcefield between us and the outside world and we can't be influenced or changed by what happens there. He says this is false, a myth, we're "porous," soaking in what surrounds us. That's why it's crucial to choose wisely who and what influences us. Some changes are harmless, like music preferences. Others are deeper, leaving us questioning our identity.<sup>1</sup>

So, if you want to change, to become someone else, the best way is to surround yourself with people who are what you'd like to become.

Paul says our goal is to become mature, reaching the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). God has given us the Church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—to shape us into His image (Eph. 4:11-12).

If we want to be like Jesus, we need to be with people who are like Jesus.

**No Salvation Outside the Church?**

The phrase "no salvation outside the church," coined by 3rd-century Bishop Cyprian, has often been misused, but it holds some truth when examined biblically and practically.

First, **Jesus came to form a people, not just save individuals.** Salvation isn't solely about personal entry to heaven; it's about belonging to a reconstituted community. From Genesis to Revelation, God's work is about bringing people together.

Babel in Genesis 11 results in the scattering of people and the confusion of their language. Abraham is presented as the response of God to this problem, later becoming Israel—the nation called to be a light to the nations. When Jesus comes, he reconstitutes Israel around *Himself*. Eventually, after His death, resurrection and ascension, the Spirit comes on His believers to help them to speak in the tongues of other nations. This is the undoing of Babel's curse and the reunification of humanity.

Second, **we are shaped by those we're around.** Our habits, character, and identity are profoundly influenced by community. Spiritual growth comes from imitating others who are being formed by the Spirit. Just as family traits pass down, our spiritual "family" molds us.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age*. Summarized and paraphrased by James K.A. Smith in *Desiring the Kingdom* and Alan Noble in *Disruptive Witness*.

Jim Wilder notes about character:

"[Character is] our embedded automatic responses to our relational environment, our instantaneous behaviour that flows naturally from our heart."<sup>2</sup>

These automatic responses are trained through our relationships. We act, faster than we think, based on our idea of what 'our people' do in these situations.

Programs like Alcoholics Anonymous succeed by emphasizing community: attend group, have a sponsor, and change your identity through relationships.

The Church operates much the same way.

If we want to be like Jesus, we need to surround ourselves with people who are being transformed into His image. That's what salvation through the Church looks like.

### **Why LifeGroups?**

If you're new to church, you might notice how much we emphasize being together. It's biblical and practical—God designed community to make us like Him.

After Pentecost, Acts 2:42-47 describes the early church: devoted to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, prayer, and sharing meals. They met in large gatherings at the temple and smaller gatherings in homes, living like a family. This snapshot inspires how we "do community" at Summit Drive, especially through LifeGroups.

LifeGroups are intentional gatherings of 8–16 people, often meeting in homes, to study scripture, share life, pray, and sometimes eat together. They help us develop deep relationships that shape our character, especially for those without nearby family or struggling to find connection.

The vision for LifeGroups isn't a clever slogan—it's lived out in moments of care and connection. When a hospitalized member tells Pastor Dave their group has everything covered—that's it. When Michelle and I were new in town, and our group celebrated our birthdays—that's it. When Pastor Trish felt called to ministry, and her group prayed and encouraged her to apply as Pastor of 60+—that's it.

LifeGroups are where we become like Jesus by being around people who reflect Him. The same Spirit that moved the early church moves in these gatherings today.

If you feel called to help create these spaces, let's talk. The need is great, and you can make a difference.

### **Three Blockages to Community**

Three common blockages to community in small gatherings are lack of time, unmet preferences, and resistance to vulnerability. Here's how to navigate them:

#### **I. Who's Got the Time?**

Time is finite, and no one else can manage it for you. For some, external factors like caregiving or illness limit their time; take what opportunities you can. Justin Whitmel Early's *The Common Rule* suggests even one hour of intentional conversation weekly can nurture community.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Jim Wilder and Michael Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church*, pg. 115

For others, time management is the issue. If Jesus is central to your life, prioritize community to grow in your faith. If we claim Jesus is the center of our lives, our calendars are a brutally honest indicator of how serious that claim is.

## **II. Not my Preference, Not my People**

They tell us that healthy long-term relationships are the cornerstone of health, longevity and happiness.<sup>3</sup>

Of the big five personality traits: openness, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism, there is a master trait for thriving in long term relationships.

Agreeableness.<sup>4</sup>

This is the ability to consider others' feelings in how we are in the world. To let some stuff go. To put the relationships first.

In our polarized world, we often withdraw from those who don't share all our perspectives, preferences, or politics. If we have that tendency, my encouragement is to meditate on Paul's words in,

Ephesians 4:2-6:

<sup>2</sup> Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. <sup>3</sup> Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Breaking of fellowship should only ever be done over central issues. These things should be considered with humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance.

## **III. I Don't Do Feelings**

There is no intimacy without vulnerability.

A danger I've witnessed amongst community as Summit Drive is an unwillingness to let people into the real difficulties of life. Paul tells us:

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ."

I have personally seen how appropriately sharing things that are struggles, burdens or disappointments bring a group together. If you struggle with thinking of the benefits of being known you'll receive by doing this, perhaps consider how sharing your burden gives your brother or sister an opportunity to fulfill the law of Christ.

## **Conclusion: Being Jesus to One Another**

Galatians reminds us that we "fulfill the law of Christ" by carrying each other's burdens, just as Jesus carried ours. Community isn't just for personal growth; it's a chance to let others be Jesus to us.

---

<sup>3</sup> See [https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>4</sup> See [https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-school-walls/202406/love-and-the-big-5-personality-traits?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-school-walls/202406/love-and-the-big-5-personality-traits?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

When we hold onto our burdens and go it alone, we deny the body of Christ the opportunity to embody His love. Sharing struggles allows others to exercise their God-given abilities and maturity. In community, imperfect people become the hands, feet, and heart of Jesus to one another. Don't deny this gift—embrace it and fulfill Christ's law.

---

## **Discussion Questions**

### **Open Up**

Were there seasons of your life where you changed dramatically because of the people you were around? What was that like?

### **Discuss**

1. When have you noticed yourself reacting in a way you didn't like? Who might you have learned that reaction from?
2. With all the difficulties and struggles facing the church today, what keeps you connected with it?
3. How have you made community a priority? How could you do even better?
4. How do we learn to 'let things go' to better be present to community in a way that is humble and gentle?
5. What are the things we shouldn't 'just let go' to keep community? What shouldn't we 'let go'?
6. How does knowing that sharing burdens with others helps them 'fulfill the law of Christ' change your view of vulnerability?

### **Prayer**

Take this opportunity to share something that is appropriately vulnerable and that you want prayer for. A good prompt is: one thing I'd like to change about myself is \_\_\_\_\_.