



feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading. (Isaiah 40:11)

November 5, 2013

Dear Church Family,

One of the reasons that we as American Christians struggle with corporate prayer is that we struggle with anything that is essentially corporate in nature. That is because we live in a society that is based on individualism. We emphasize individual rights and freedom because we believe that individual self fulfillment is the key to happiness. We think about identity primarily in terms of our individuality. We need to appreciate how different this is from other societies in which identity is based much more on finding a place in community and contributing to that community. This is not to say that individualism is all bad and community based societies are all good. There are flaws associated with both models.

However, we do need to realize how much individualism has affected our spirituality. We talk about this every year when we encourage everyone to get involved in a homegroup. While we tend to emphasize our individual, personal relationship with God, Scripture presents God as being more community minded. He provides the grace and strengthening we need not just through our personal relationship with Him, but also through others in our spiritual community. So we need to be in relationship with others to grow spiritually.

But even with this emphasis, notice that individual spiritual growth is at the center of an encouragement to be in a homegroup. Even when we consider the value of community, it is from an individualistic perspective. It is about what I need or gain from community, not the value of the community in and of itself. We are like athletes in an individual sport (running, swimming, gymnastics, etc) who realize the need for training together in order to reach our individual potential. Biblical spirituality is more like a team sport where the welfare and performance of the team is central.

God has always been about calling or establishing a people for Himself, not a group of individuals. When He called Abraham he said, "I will make you a great nation". Israel was to serve Him and display His character as a nation and it was judged for its failure to do that. Salvation history does narrow down to an individual in Jesus, but it then widens again into a people who will be His body. When we come to Christ, we not only enter into a personal relationship with God, we also become a part of Christ's body. We become a part of something that is very important to God that is bigger than ourselves.

In Acts, we see an extraordinary togetherness with the church at its birth (1:12-14, 2:46, 4:24, 5:12). This is an expression of God's desire for a unified body of disciples that will glorify Him in that unity (John 17:20-23). This unity or one body reality found expression in fellowship (including its economic life) and also in corporate prayer. With our individualistic lenses, we view prayer as primarily a private affair. But that is not how the early church viewed prayer. One scholar explains this difference with reference to the American church in general, "Prayer was much more central in the life of the church in the first century than it is today....The average Christian today considers prayer almost entirely a private activity, while the early church reversed that and thought first of corporate prayer and then of individual prayer... From the beginning, corporate prayer was the core of the early church's life." This makes sense when we take off our individualistic lenses and think in terms of becoming a part of a body, an entity that is in relationship with God. The practice of corporate prayer would then be as essential to the expression of the life of that body as it would be to the life of an individual believer.

And this is what we see in the Book of Acts. One example is in Acts 4 when Peter and John report back to the people that the chief priests and elders had threatened them if they continued to teach in the name of Jesus. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God (4:24). This type of corporate prayer came naturally to them.

Stuart, having just returned with Celia from the ASK Prayer conference in Nairobi, commented that the church in Africa naturally engages in corporate prayer. This is because they are more community minded. Corporate prayer does not come naturally to us. And that is why we are seeking to mature and improve in this area. Like the church in Laodicea (Rev 3:14-22), we will go to Jesus to help us in areas that we are weak. So we spent time on Sunday morning asking Jesus to give us what we lack to be the people of God that He gave his life to create. This was fitting preparation for our time of celebrating communion because we were doing what the Corinthian church was failing to do in the well known passage about communion in 1 Corinthians 11:17-33. We were eating of the bread and drinking of the cup while properly discerning the body of Christ of which we are all a part. May we continue to grow in this area of corporate prayer and develop more of an appreciation of the corporate call on our discipleship.

In Him with you,
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