

# Creating Authentic Community: Utopian Dream or Do-able Reality? How Jesus' Apostle Paul Can Help Us

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by

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## **Part Three: *God Transforms Individuals and Empowers Them to Live in Health-Giving Community***

1. Saul/Paul had been taught as a child that the Hebrew concept of God had always included this God's special relationship with human beings, with God's people.

1.1. That is, by nature and among human beings, God is "community-forming power"

1.2. The big question of Paul's generation was: who was in, and who was out?

1.3. When he was a Pharisee, he believed that he was doing God's will when he drew clear boundaries between those who were "in" and those who should be kept "out."

2. When Paul became a Christ-follower, he embraced Jesus' redefinition of purity that refocused attention on the positive quality in human relationships that had been stressed in "The Ten Commandments."

2.1 He no longer concerned himself about the purity of food, or the bloodline of any person, or whom he ate with, or the holiness of the Jerusalem Temple, or the religious status of anyone, or impurities associated with women's bodies, or that of uncircumcised men.

2.2. This critical rethinking opened the door to Paul's entering any place, and interacting with anyone without regard to ethnicity, gender, social status, or questionable reputation.

2.3. Based on his own practice, Paul could write: "You are all one in Christ Jesus: there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28).

2.4. Paul was convinced that Christ-followers had been given a new identity that trumped all other circumstances in life---whatever happened to you personally, good or bad (1 Corinthians 7:17, 20, 24).

3. As a result, the letters that he wrote to the Christ-followers in congregations that he had founded provide significant help for us in living authentic lives as Christ-followers today.

3.1. He challenges us to build on the positive relations that we developed with our siblings in our biological families to use as models for our interactions with our new "in Christ" sisters and brothers (see handout for session 2 in this series)

3.2. He assures us that the true God seeks without ceasing to fill us with the "fruit of the Spirit" (agape-love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control--Galatians 5:22). That is, the Spirit continually "leans" on us to transform us into first-rate members of an authentic community of human beings. God's Spirit is the "gentle wind at our back," steadfastly seeking to direct us into positive relationships with each other.

4. If we invite the Spirit to work in us, the practical consequences that Paul encourages us to expect, as he continues in his letter to the Christ-followers in Galatia, include:

- expressing ourselves humbly rather than arrogantly (5:25b)
- avoiding provoking others to anger
- shutting down our envy of others
- carrying each other's burdens ("and so you will fulfill the law of Christ" -- 6:2)

- taking pride in ourselves, without comparing ourselves to others
- carrying one's own burdens as best one can.
- not becoming weary in doing good (6:10)

5. Paul's powerful turning upside down of the "body" metaphor (1 Corinthians 12:12--27): God gives greater honor to those conventionally regarded as socially inferior (see Paul's turning the status system upside down back in 1 Cor. 1:18--2:5)

5.1. This metaphor had a widely-recognized social and political history. It was used to justify a concept of community based on everyone's accepting a distinctly unequal, hierarchical social structure as both natural and necessary.

5.2. Menenius Agrippa, A Roman senator in the early Republic, became famous for his use of this metaphor in his speech in which he sought to persuade the dock workers, who have gone on strike *en masse* for better pay, to return to work (reported by Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 2).

5.3. Menenius believed that those persons at the economic and social top of this social structure were the only ones worthy of honor and obedience.

5.4. Paul brilliantly turns the metaphor on its head to emphasize God's special concern for those who were thought to be unworthy of honor or respect.

6. Here is the body-image "take away" for us: "By giving greater honor to the inferior member, God has so arranged the body that there be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12:24--26). (Note this application of "not envying others" stated in Gal. 5:26). (See Paul's similar admonition in Romans 12:15 to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.")

6.1. We reveal whether we think of ourselves as an authentic, health-giving community at the "Communion Service." It is the "Lord's Table," not ours. (1 Cor. 11:17--34). "To discern the body" means to recognize all Christ-followers, however poor socially or economically, as honorable members of the body. Not to do so is to humiliate those who have nothing and to despise God's community. Not to do so leads to weakness, illness, and even death in the community.

6.2. God measures the real strength of the strong by their ability to help those who are weaker and by their willingness to do so.

6.3. Paul's description of his own behavior: "When I am (appear to others to be) weak, then I am strong (with Christ's power)---see 2 Cor. 12:9--10.

7. Paul invites all Christ-followers to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2), which he assures us can lead to the following health-giving qualities in our relationships:

7.1. Making it a habit to seek to outdo each other in giving honor to each other (12:10).

7.2. Helping meet the needs of those in "in Christ" ("saints"=every Christ-follower. v.13)

7.3. Creating a lifestyle that includes reaching out to strangers (hospitality, v.13).

7.4. Blessing those who give us a hard time (v.14).

7.5. So far as it depends on us, living peaceably with everyone (v.17)

7.6. If our enemies are hungry, we should figure out a way to feed them (v.20)

8. Paul's vision for the future of human life: well-functioning family-structured communities with only God filling the authoritative and nurturing roles of the traditional father. In this new understanding of "family," Christ-following biological fathers become "older brothers," and Christ-following biological mothers become "older sisters."