

An Organized Religion or a Living Organism?

Many people have rightly developed an aversion to "organized religion." When spirituality is made to conform to an institution, it tends to suck the life out of our faith.

As believers in Jesus, we are called to have "unfeigned love of the brethren." Unfeigned love means not faked, but genuine love. Church bureaucracies and tradition-bound structures make it hard sometimes to really connect. But our own busy schedules, social media and society's emphasis on individual fulfillment also keep our eyes focused on ourselves. The result is loneliness and isolation, even when you're sitting in a crowd of people.

The first followers of Jesus were called to see through their own false walls of social status, race and nationality and then identify what was of ultimate, universal value. Jesus showed them that in His kingdom, they could be part of a community that included everyone from pious Jews to prostitutes, to hated Samaritans and even Roman legionnaires. All were welcomed. But first they needed to take off their "masks" and reveal who they really were - to God and each other.

Jesus addresses God as "Our Father..." instead of "My Father..." in the Lord's Prayer. He was assuming a community or family relationship among his disciples. In fact He radically redefined "family" to mean "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven" (**Matthew 12:46-50**).

Faith in Christ leads people together in a *koinonia* - a Greek word that means sharing of our lives with each other. To confess our faults one to another, to help bear each others' burdens, to admonish, build up and encourage one another— these all require lives that are radically intertwined.

To properly be the church, we've got to spend time together, really know each other. The lives of church leadership and members have to be mutually transparent and subject to accountability. This can only happen by living intentionally in community with others who are willing to open up.

The first Christians "had all things in common" (**Acts 4:32**). This isn't talking about communism, but about a willingness to be open and honest as well as to give to meet need. Among the brethren the ideal is, "He that had gathered much had nothing left over and he that had gathered little had no lack" (**2 Corinthians 8:15**). Once that sinks in, then the community can extend it's hand to the poor around it and even meet needs around the world.

But this community is a mystery. If we try to consciously "organize" it together - like many utopian communities of the past - it will fall apart. In fact, each local version of *koinonia* will look different.

But if our focus is on Jesus, then the Holy Spirit will bring us together and "knit our hearts together in love" (**Colossians 2:2-3**)

How much are we willing to sacrifice to intertwine our lives with fellow believers?