

PERSPECTIVE



JANUARY 2017



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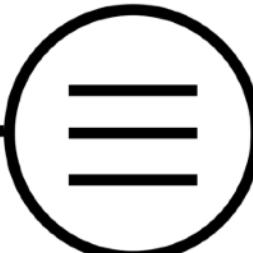
CHRIST



*Before
Comm-
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Put Christ Before Community

You can learn a lot about a church from its website. Not long ago I researched a church in another state and it was evident this congregation really cared about community. From the small groups it offered to the pictures of smiling people drinking coffee together, this church clearly worked hard to make connections. After watching a few of the online interviews, it was obvious they valued friendship.

Sadly, it wasn't obvious they valued Christ. I'm not sure they *didn't* value him. In fact, I assume they probably did (they're a church after all!), but it wasn't plain to me that they cared most about proclaiming, exalting, and walking in a manner worthy of Christ.

There may be reasons the website was so Christ-less. Perhaps they hired a company that didn't understand the gospel to create their online presence. Maybe the church decided to create a "seeker-friendly" website. Or maybe, and I think this is the most likely reason, they assumed the centrality of Christ and chose to focus instead on one of the most pressing needs of our age, a sense of community.

A community is an organized group of individuals united by a common trait. That trait could be a love of fly-fishing, Harry Potter novels, or political activism. There is something powerful, fulfilling, and comforting about meeting up with people who share a similar interest. Community tugs at the shackles of loneliness. With suicide rates in the United States at a 30-year high, churches ought to emphasize themselves as hubs of community, right? Yes and no.

COMMUNITY IS IMPORTANT

There is no doubt that within the pages of the New Testament we find sweet pictures of profound community. There was a "day by day" quality to the *koinonia* of the early church (Acts 2:42-47). The church did more than gather on Sunday. New believers spent time in one another's homes, breaking bread and sharing life.

Paul promoted this model of the church-as-family. When writing to the church in Thessalonica, he remarked how much he loved them, and how thankful he and his party

was to have shared with them not only the Word, "but also our own very selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess 2:8).

The apostle modeled what his Savior taught him. Jesus exhorted the disciples to practice community. After humbling himself and washing their feet—a way of communicating intimate care and concern—Jesus said, "you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). And in case they didn't quite understand his point, he followed up with a new commandment, "that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). Jesus valued community. Building community in our church is very important. Over the years, I have seen Christians caring for each other at Mount Vernon, putting the interests of others before their own, and generally sharing their lives. There are so many examples: believers plagued with cancer being driven to chemotherapy treatment by brothers and sisters in Christ. Couples learning how to care for children with special needs so that tired parents can have a night out. Families opening up their homes to welcome singles on a weekly basis.

Actions like this matter. Community is biblical and important, but it's not the whole story.

COMMUNITY IS NOT ALL-IMPORTANT

Community is the natural fruit of Christ-exalting worship. Community is not what we are to aim for; Christ is. When we find Christ (or, rather, when he finds us), community naturally follows.

Take Acts 2, for example. A desire for fellowship did not bring the early disciples together. Rather, the objective truth of the risen Messiah kept them in Jerusalem and made them eager to receive the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42). Paul willingly shared his whole life with the Thessalonian believers. These believers were not united because of Paul's love for them or their love for each other. It was the gospel that came to them, "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:5).

When Paul exhorted Timothy to faithfulness in ministry, he never told him to build community. Instead, he urged his disciple to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2). And when Paul cut to the heart of his own ministry, he put it simply, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone

with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Col 1:28).

Paul never pits Christ and community against one another (of course not!), but he does prioritize Christ. Community is hugely important, but not all-important. Paul knew, like his master Jesus, that wherever Christ is proclaimed, community is created.

Keep your eyes fixed on Christ, and community is sure to follow. Relationships are deeper and richer when our ultimate confidence is in Christ and not one another. When you live as if another person can meet all of your needs, you will be regularly disappointed. This is because you are asking them to do something no person can ever do—provide you the happiness you so desperately want. But when it's clear to you that Christ is your confidence, someone is freed up to be merely your friend, and not your god that you rely on to meet all your needs.

KEEP CHRIST THE FOCUS

I want community. As a pastor, one of the things I love to do most is push people into one another's lives. God made us to need each other. He made us to live together as a family of faith. This is why I so often quote Hebrews 3:13, "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." As Paul Tripp wonderfully put it, we are to be instruments in the redeemer's hands, instruments of grace in each other's lives.

But we must ensure Christ remains our focus, otherwise true community unravels. So how do we do that? How can a local church keep Christ front and center?

It starts by ensuring the Word is taught and preached whenever we meet together as a church. The Bible is the Word of Christ. Where the Word is rightly taught, Christ is rightly proclaimed. This is obvious when we gather for our main services, but it should be taking place whenever we gather as a church.

For example, each December we gather together on a Wednesday night for our annual Carols and Cocoa event. Though Atlanta weather is not always hospitable to cocoa, a night of singing about the incarnation is a welcome reprieve from the hustle and bustle of the holiday season. But that evening is about more than singing. The Word is always read and we are always exhorted to put our faith in Christ. Why? Because as wonderful as the "community" that night represents, we

know the author of our community is Christ, and he must be proclaimed.

Beyond our public meetings, we strive to speak of Christ warmly and often in our personal conversations. It's relatively easy to gather as the body of Christ and listen to sermons, sing Christ-centered lyrics, and engage in Christ-exalting prayers. But what you really value, what is front and center in your life, comes out in your conversations throughout the week. There is always time to discuss college football, politics, and the latest fashion trends. But we all face the danger of neglecting to naturally talk about Christ as well; how he is changing you, and how much you need him.

Our focus is to be on Christ when we are gathered as a church and when we are scattered as a church. Only in this will true community ever be realized.

WHEN COMMUNITY FALTERS

As I write these words, I'm aware of some in our own congregation who feel disconnected. They work hard to make Christ the center of their lives, but they lack that "sense of community" we so earnestly desire. David prayed, "how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (Psalm 133:1). But fellowship of the church is not as "pleasant" to them. They are struggling.

Recently, *Christianity Today* reported some statistics on why people start looking for other churches. Lots of reasons were given, from moving out of the area to disagreeing with the pastor. Only two percent of respondents indicated they were looking for another church because they "wanted more community." I'm convinced the actual number is much higher. It's easier to say you are leaving the church because you are dissatisfied with the worship experience than to admit you are leaving because you don't have friends. It's hard to tell others you are lonely.

What should you do if you aren't experiencing the kind of community you want?

- Pray for your church faithfully. Pray that the body of Christ you are part of would grow in this area. Churches fall short. No church is perfect. So before you go, pray your church would be so filled with the love of Christ that it would overflow into the many personal relationships within the church.

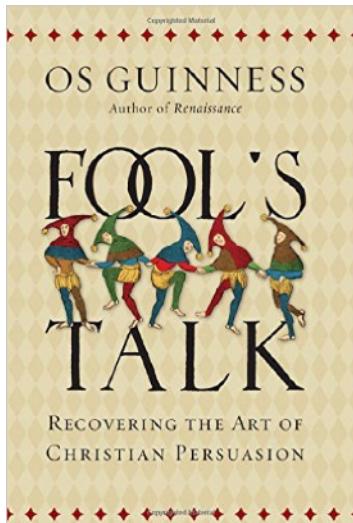
- ♦ Examine yourself. Are there patterns of behavior in your own life that serve as obstacles to the community you desire? Maybe your work schedule makes the kind of face-time needed to live life together difficult. Maybe you're prioritizing certain hobbies over gathering with the body of Christ. Maybe, for whatever reason, you've kept people an arm's distance away—refusing to let them really get to know you. Before you go, consider how you could make a greater effort to create the community you want to see.
- ♦ Seek solace in Christ. True community is never found by looking for it. It can only be found by pursuing Christ. He understands loneliness better than any of us. Christ hung alone, deserted by his friends, bearing the shame of sins he never committed. Christ knows what it's like to be ignored, abandoned, and overlooked. People are inherently disappointing. Christ is perfectly fulfilling. Let your seasons of loneliness point you to the sufficiency of Christ. We all need community. We just need Christ more.

~Aaron Menikoff

Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion

Written by Os Guinness

Bookstall Price \$16



In *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion*, Os Guinness provides a helpful resource for equipping Christians to persuade others to believe the truths of Christianity. He writes, "This book focuses on a narrower issue and simple problem: *We have lost the art of Christian persuasion and we must recover it*" (17, original emphasis). By Christian persuasion, he means "a way of communicating that is prominent in the Gospels and throughout the Scriptures...the art of speaking to people who, for whatever reason, are indifferent or resistant to what we have

to say" (18). Through the "foolishness" of the cross, the world's wisdom, strength, and superiority is shamed and subverted (72).

Fool's Talk also advocates the need to "reunite evangelism and apologetics, to make sure our best arguments are directed toward winning people and not just winning arguments, and to seek to do all this in a manner that is true to the gospel itself" (18). That is where *Fool's Talk* is one of the more unique resources recently published. It is very much a book about apologetics but not one that explores the debated issues (17) but the Christian character of the apologist and the apologetic style one uses to persuade others (see chapters 6-9).

It is also very much about evangelism. Anyone wanting to be better equipped in evangelism will be helped by reading chapter 5, "Anatomy of Unbelief." Guinness recognizes that no one becomes a Christian merely through intellectual arguments because unbelief twists the truth (85). Why? Because the Bible describes unbelief as "*hardening, twisting, blindness, deafness, unnaturalness, lies, deception, folly, rebellion and madness...* At the heart of sin and disobedience, Paul says, is a flagrantly deliberate and continuing act of violence to truth" (85, original emphasis). The biblical exposition Guinness then provides is some of the most helpful theology for evangelism and discipleship.

With its theological, historical, and philosophical content, *Fool's Talk* can be a slow read, one that takes time to process. But anyone who wants to be more equipped in evangelism and apologetics will find it is well worth his or her effort.

— RECOMMENDED BY BRAD THAYER

Excerpts from
the Book

1

"If Jesus is the supreme fool bearer, God is the supreme fool maker. He simultaneously shamed and subverted the vaunted wisdom, strength and superiority of the world through the cross—shaming and subverting the world's wisdom through folly, the world's strength through weakness and the world's superiority through coming in disguise as a nonentity."

—The Way of the Third Fool, p. 72

2

"The indissoluble link between prideful self-love, aversion to truth, self-deception and hypocrisy is one of the great themes of the Bible—for example, the drumbeat repetition that 'the way of a fool is right in his own eyes' (Prov. 12:15). Sinful minds therefore claim both self-righteousness in terms of truth and self-righteousness in terms of goodness."

—Anatomy of Unbelief, p. 90

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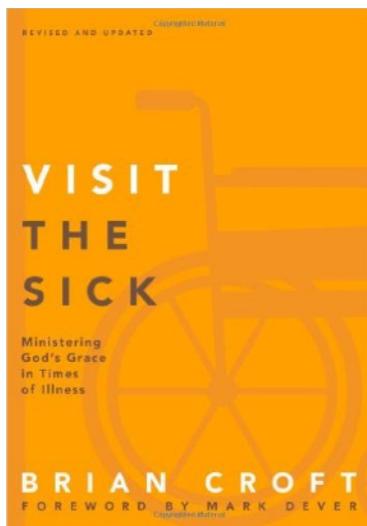
"On the other hand, we Christians must seek to communicate in a way that is shaped by the One who sends us, and therefore by the pattern of the incarnation, the cross, and the Holy Spirit. The uniqueness of the message we share requires a corresponding uniqueness in the manner with which we share it. The style of our communication will therefore always be crucial to the substance, and it too must be shaped by the very truths that we proclaim."

—The Art of Always Being Right, p. 174

Visit the Sick: Ministering God's Grace in Times of Illness

Written by Brian Croft

Bookstall Price \$12



One of the consequences of the Fall is sickness and death. We see and hear of affliction every day. As Christians, how are we to respond to this? In his book *Visit The Sick*, Brian Croft states that one of the essential tasks in life is visiting and caring for the sick within our churches. It is a God-honoring task and he wrote this book to encourage the church to recapture this practice. The busyness of life in the twentieth century caused the church's priorities to change, and we tend to think that this task is only for pastors. Croft wants us to see that visiting the sick is

a job for all Christians.

To encourage us to do this, he guides us through the biblical evidence for visiting the sick, then considers the theological, pastoral, and practical considerations. In chapter one he reminds us that God is sovereign over sickness and healing, and he calls his people to care for the needy and afflicted. He considers sickness in redemptive history and gives us specific Scripture passages where God has called his people to care for the sick. From there Croft goes on to the theological considerations and pastoral considerations that bridge to the practical considerations in the remaining chapters. He gives us biblical teaching and wisely helps us to apply it to visiting the sick in the practical considerations.

I highly recommend this book for all Christians. It will encourage you to love the souls of the sick—those who can be forgotten in our congregations.

— RECOMMENDED BY DANE ULETT

Excerpts from
the Book

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“God will not only sanctify the sick through sickness, but he will also teach and encourage the healthy through the same means.”

—Introduction, p. 17

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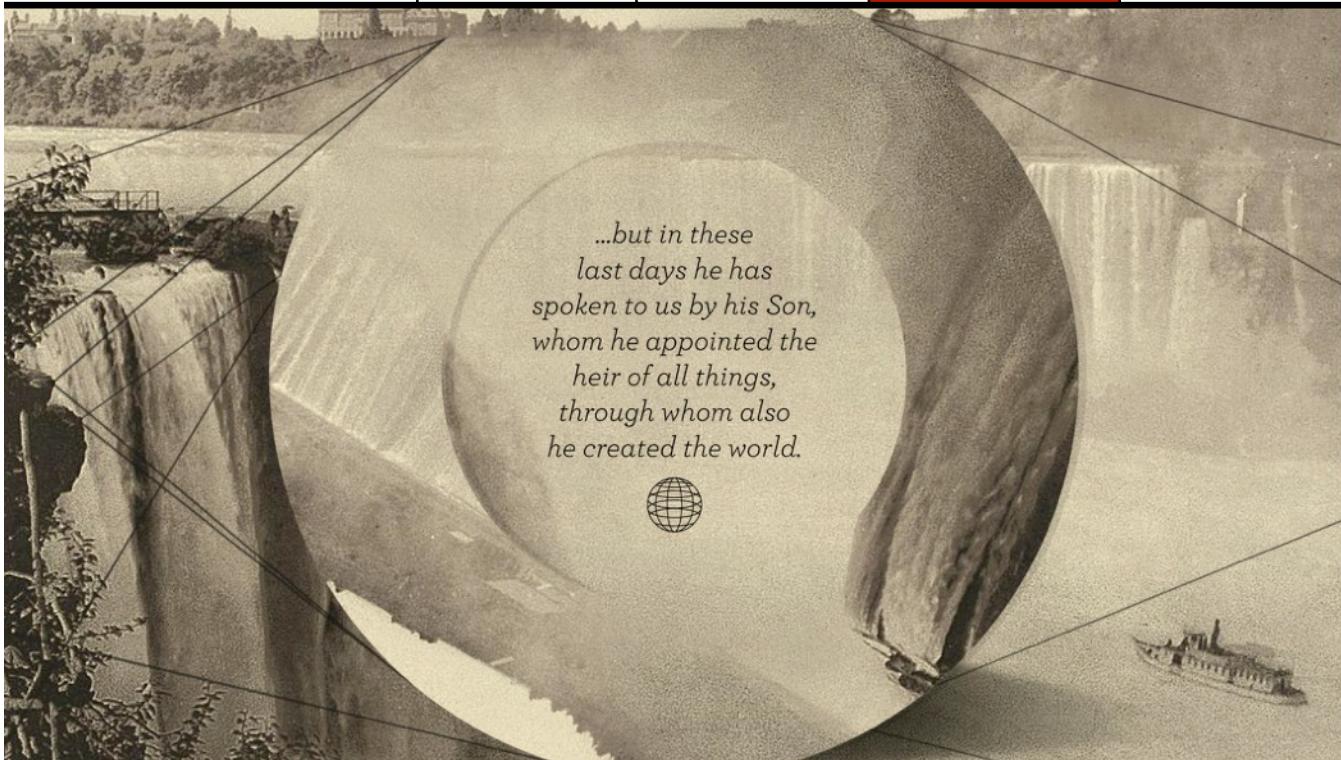
“If we truly believe that faith comes by hearing (Rom.10:17), we should never leave a hospital room or ward, nursing home, rehabilitation center or home of a sick person (or healthy person, for that matter) without praying the hope of God in Christ.”

—Theological Considerations, p. 35

3

“When we are deliberate about visiting the sick and afflicted in our churches, we can trust that a divine task is being done, souls are being loved and nurtured, we are being changed, the gospel is being revealed, and God is being glorified.”

—Conclusion, p. 56



Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

-Hebrews 1:1-2

Whenever someone is tempted to give up on something good, we instinctively warn them of the dangers of quitting and encourage them with the values of persevering. I enjoy playing guitar and DIY projects. But if I were tempted to quit my job do those things full-time, I hope someone would warn me of the dangers of lost provision for my family and encourage me with the value of the amazing gift of pastoring.

That's how the author of Hebrews addresses Christians who were tempted to abandon Christ and revert back to Judaism. All throughout the book, he warns them of future judgment if they abandon the faith and he encourages them with the supremacy of Christ.

He begins by reminding them of Jesus' supremacy as the revelation of God. The very fact that God would speak and reveal himself to his creation is utterly amazing. He was under no obligation to do so. Yet, because of his love for us and his desire to be glorified through his people, he

spoke. He did so "long ago, at many times and in many ways...by the prophets." But the fullest revelation of God is through Jesus. God's Son is God's definitive and final Word.

Brothers and sisters, to love and value Jesus is to love and value God's Word. The two can never be separated. We are a people of the Word (the Bible) because we love him who is the Word (Jesus).

As 2017 commences, go back to the basics and things of first priority—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk. 10:27). Pray that you would love and value Jesus, the fullest and final revelation of God, more than anything else.

— BRAD THAYER

NEW MEMBERS



Ashley Bennett



Beau Boyd



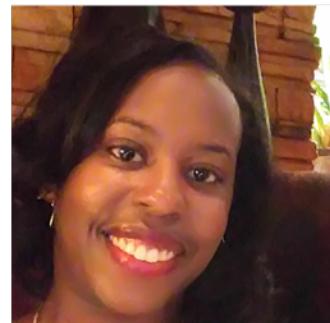
Megan Harrison



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