

Community of Worship

Colossians 3:15-17

Scripture

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (NIV)

Main Idea

Background

Colossians 3 is another one of those instances where Paul is moving from the truth of the gospel to the reality it creates in community. Since each of us is united to Christ by faith, we are being transformed into His image (3:10). Everyone joined to Christ is a part of a new humanity where old distinctions fade away; where Christ is everything and in everyone (3:11). This community becomes a new alternative "society" where a new way of life is learned and lived. This life is described in 3:12-4:6. At the heart of this new community's life is the worship of God (3:15-17). That's the part we'll focus in on.

Focus

The central thrust of this study is to explore how we, as a community, can worship God together and encourage each other to worship God in all of life.

Starters

- When you hear the word worship, what are the first things that come to your mind?

Discussion

Q1: The word "rule" in verse 15 literally means "act as arbiter". Why do we need an "arbiter" in our hearts to keep peace in community? And why is it important that it is the peace of Christ, not just plain old peace?

A1: This is a two-part question. Allow time for discussion and reflection on the first part and then move onto to the second.

1) We are in need of an arbiter in our hearts because our hearts often are filled with bitterness, jealousy, pride and anger. When someone wrongs us or when we develop a harmful attitude toward another person, we need someone to step in between us and arbitrate. In conflict, it is most often the case that both parties share some level of guilt. Both are often more willing to point out the guilt in the other than to own up to their own contribution to the conflict. Here's where we need an arbitrator to get us behind this stand-still. Most conflicts do not get behind this impasse and go on unresolved. Relationships are broken, trust is not restored and Satan has the opportunity to do even more damage to the parties and, many times, to the church.

2) It is Christ himself – the One who is our peace (Eph. 2:14) – who we need to arbitrate in our hearts. Peace as an abstract ideal ("peace in the Middle East, give peace a chance") is often appealed to but seldom achieved. Peace as an idea does not have the power to melt the pride in our hearts or to diffuse bitterness. Peace as a concept cannot replace hatred with love or ill-will with forgiveness. Jesus can. The One who gave himself for us to cleanse our record of wrongs and reconcile us to God – He is the only One who can change our hearts. He can melt our pride and shine His light on the ugliness of our sin by the power of his love and holiness.

Biblical scholar FF Bruce sums this call to peace well: "Strife inevitably results when men and women are out of touch with him who is the one source of true peace; but there is no reason why those who have received the peace which Christ established by this death on the cross should have any other than peaceful relations among themselves." (FF Bruce, Colossians).

Q2: Verse 15 says, "since as members of one body you were called to peace". Look up Matt. 5:23, 24). Jesus said that our calling to peace with one another is directly related to our worship of God. Why do you think peace in the body of Christ is so important to God?

A2: Matt. 5:23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

There are a number of good answers that may be given to the second question. The main point here is to let the reality sink in – that, in one sense, God values peace in the body, in His community over acts of worship. This is why – our acts of worship can become empty if we are not living out the forgiveness and peace given to us in the gospel. This is true even if we are not at fault! Jesus' example calls a person who remembers that someone has something against him to take initiative for that person's sake.

God means for the body of Christ to be the real life, flesh and blood picture of the peace of the gospel. God's community is designed to show the unbelieving world what a community at peace really looks like.

Our forgiveness and reconciliation with God is meant to overflow into our relationships within the body of Christ. Jesus taught on many occasions that a true understanding of our being forgiven will result in our own ability to forgive and become peacemakers. If it isn't, then something is wrong and needs to be addressed, according to Jesus, with urgency.

Q3: Paul says that Christ's word should "richly dwell within you" (the "you" is plural, meaning "among you" – as a community). Why do you think God means for us to learn and apply His word in a community (teach and admonish one another – v16)? And what kinds of things would help make our engagement with God's word rich and deep when we gather as a community group?

A3: In both parts of this question, listen for and draw out people's barriers to a rich engagement with God's word – i.e. "there's so much I don't understand", "I sometimes get bored reading the bible", "I don't know where to start"... Help encourage the group if they share these struggles by reminding them from the passage that God's word is meant to be learned in community. No one person is adequate to learn and teach the word of Christ – the whole community is needed. We not only have our present community to help us, but we rely on the church of the past who has faithfully sought God's riches in His word.

God means for us to learn and apply His word in a community:

1) because we can only understand it in community – no matter how smart or savvy we are at interpreting the bible, no one person is able to comprehend the depth of God's word. Because we are sinful and finite, we cannot grasp the word of God on our own. Our own sinful thoughts, thought patterns, preconceptions, and desires negatively effect our reading of the bible. Our limitations (not necessary sinful) also show us our need for community. We simply can't know all there is to know about the bible by ourselves.

God has also given certain people in the church the gifts of teaching, wisdom and understanding. We look to these gifted people as guides in our pursuit of understanding the Scriptures. People who think they can figure out the bible by themselves usually end up splitting churches or starting cults.

2) because we can only live it out in community – the central command of Jesus, love one another, can only be applied in a living, breathing community of people. Love God and love your neighbor is a package deal (as we saw in study 1). Our love for God is expressed not only in acts of worship toward Him, but in acts of service and love to our neighbor. Can we really say we understand God's word if we aren't living it in community?

The second part of this question is designed as a brainstorming question. Often small groups and bible studies make the study of Scripture central, but they are often dry, boring and short on life change. The Scriptures are full of the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3) as they point to Christ but we often feel like we are missing out on these treasures. So allow your group to explore the dynamics of how we approach God's word and some of the barriers we have in understanding it and applying it in all its richness.

Q4: How important is corporate singing to you in your own pursuit of worshipping God? How does singing help the word of Christ dwell more richly in us and our church?

A4: The first part of this question is simply a time for people to share from experience. Singing is one of the key ways in which we worship – personal and corporate. Singing is really not a separate element of worship but one of the ways we engage in the different aspects of worship. We teach, we celebrate, we praise, we thank, we confess, we beseech, we lament all in song. Singing is a way we express ourselves before the Lord with heightened attention and emotion. It's important that we all learn to engage in singing for these different purposes. Our corporate worship should include all these (and others I forgot) in our times of singing.

Scripture presents corporate singing as one of the main ways we worship God together as a corporate body. Singing is also presented here, and elsewhere, as one of the main ways truth is taught by the church. Here we see the wedding together of theology and doxology – doctrine and worship. When properly done they should feed into each other. Singing has a way of sinking things deeper into our hearts. Singing also enables us to express our hearts before God in ways more rich and varied than mere speaking.

Q5: Verse 17 says that whatever we do, we should do it as worship. How can we worship Jesus doing what we do Monday-Friday (whether it be working, raising children, or both)? Help each other brainstorm how our workplaces and homes can become places where we worship Jesus.

A5: The idea that we should glorify God in everything or do all in the name of Jesus are often left as unreachable ideals. But we were made to worship God with every ounce of our being and every minute of our lives. Most of us are in the habit of going to work or doing our daily routine without turning our hearts to God in worship. So, we need the help of others to see how our actual work is a part of building God's kingdom and we need others to help us gain new habits and practices that remind us to work and live every moment in the presence of God for His glory.

Encourage people to think about how their actual work might be a part of building the kingdom of God (see below for help on this). Worship at work and home is meant to be more than just trying to share the gospel with your co-workers or neighbors (although we could all use encouragement there). We are meant to live each moment as worship.

Really try and help your group be creative and come up with practical ideas for helping each other worship at work. It may be helpful to remember that our mission from God is two-fold. Each of us finds purpose in God's original mission for humanity and his mission for the people he redeems from sin. Sometimes these twin purposes are called the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission.

1) We were created to image God in our work and labor – work was created to be good. Our original mission was to fill the earth and rule over it in a way that reflected God's creativity and

rule. 2) We were redeemed to join God's mission in reclaiming the lost and broken by calling them to repentance and faith in light of the gospel. Both of these help us understand what it means to build the kingdom of God and how our lives fit into that big picture.

Prayer

Being thankful is mentioned three times in this passage. Thankfulness is at the core of what drives us to worship. Using the outline below share 2 things you are thankful for with the group (one for each category):

1) Concerning Who God Is

2) Concerning What God has done (as told in Scripture OR in your life)

Instead of asking God for things in our prayer time, let's spend time as a group worshipping Him with thanksgiving for who He is and the great things He has done.

Optional: Close your group time by singing a song of praise.