

**Prework**

**Live the  
Gospel**

# Intro

In week 3 of our CG Leadership Training, we'll be talking about how we Live the Gospel together in community group. This component of our church's mission focuses on how we live according to what we learn about God and his ways. This is discipleship in its most full-orbed aspect; it includes the whole of life, our thoughts and words and deeds. Individually, this encompasses how we work and play, how we treat others and ourselves, how we understand our past and try to anticipate our future. In community group, we Live the Gospel primarily through sharing our lives together.

Below you'll see three sections that will prepare us for our next session together:

1. Life Together
2. Intentional Community
3. Stewarding Conflict

## Life Together

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany at the height of Nazi power. The Regime had taken control of the state-run church to support their ideology with religious rhetoric, and most Christians who protested this either fled the country or went into hiding. Bonhoeffer was not among them. Though he had left Germany years prior to minister internationally, he returned to help set up secret seminaries to train pastors for ministry in the midst of a war-torn society. While running these seminaries, Bonhoeffer wrote a summary text of the residential, shared-life approach in his seminary published under the title *Life Together*.

That brief history contextualizes a crucial underpinning of Bonhoeffer's work: for him, Christian community was utterly vital to living a faithful Christian life. Here he was, hiding out with fellow believers confronted with the real risk of losing their lives due to their obedience to Christ—this threat made precious to him what many of us take for granted. He writes, "It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren."<sup>9</sup> *Allowed to*. Not required to, or should, or can. *Allowed*.

If we're honest, many of us believe Christian community is less of a grace from God and more of a perk, an obligation, or even a burden. Here in modern-day America, we tend to treat community as a source for meeting our own ends, a way to secure company, acceptance, accolades, or benefits. We try to climb our social environment

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<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (Harper Collins, 1954), 20.

like a ladder; we treat our neighbors like extras in our life's movie; we fear others as a liability on our happiness; we live for lighthearted social times but desperately avoid conflict or suffering. The median American disposition is, on the whole, contrary to true Christian community.

Reflecting back to our Big Story of the Bible, we can easily see these American assumptions for what they are: belief in a false gospel. Much of our cultural context tells us community really exists to serve our own purposes because it believes that, most essentially, life is about you. But Christians follow a savior who centralized not love of self but love of God and love of neighbor (Matt 22:37-40), a savior who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). Our social environment is characterized by surrounding yourself with those who agree with you and shunning those who don't, but Christians walk the hard road of clinging faithfully to Christ while loving and praying for their enemies (Matt 5:44). And while the American Dream preaches self-sufficiency as a virtue, Christians believe that dependence is a human feature, not a flaw, and that God supplies for our every need in the midst of our weakness (2 Cor 8:9).

One of these deep-set needs is the need for one another. The Christian is dependent on other Christians for encouragement and support, for being built up in the faith, and being reminded of the loveliness of Christ through the Word. Bonhoeffer puts it strikingly:

God has put the Word into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.

And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation.<sup>10</sup>

What Bonhoeffer captures here, and what we see in the pages of Scripture, is a freeing truth: on your own, you are insufficient. Our insufficiency is core to the truth of the gospel. Jesus fulfilled the obedience you could not fulfill for your sake, died for

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<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, 22-23.

disobedience in your place so you didn't have to, and was raised to new life to demonstrate how one day he will raise you up too. But rather than wallowing in the sorrow of our insufficiency, we get to rejoice that God has saved us by his free grace and supplied us with everything we need for life (2 Pet 1:3). Part of this supply is the body of Christ, who is fit together so that we, as a collective whole, grow up in health and love (Eph 4:16).

As we'll talk about in this week of our leadership training, this shared life requires intentionality both inside our regular group meetings and outside them. Spending time together will, quite obviously, take time, a precious commodity in our society. It will take prioritization, problem solving, and putting others before yourself. It will also take grace, knowing that the forgiveness we have in Christ extends to the times we fail in Christian community.

While no good thing in life comes without effort, we get to rejoice that the real effort of making believers into a new family has already been done by Jesus. As Bonhoeffer writes:

Because God has already laid the foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what he has done for us. We thank God for giving us brethren who live by His call, by His forgiveness, and His promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what He does give us daily.<sup>11</sup>

We don't have to create this fellowship; we receive it. In Ephesians 2, Paul describes how the work of God makes us alive together with Christ alongside others as newly adopted members of God's family: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19). This is not to say that Christian community is effortless; we simply just don't start from scratch. Or, as Tim Keller once pointed out in a sermon, Christian friendships are not just made but found.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Keller, "Spiritual Friendship" sermon from March 1, 1998, accessible online at [gospelinlife.com/sermon/spiritual-friendship/](http://gospelinlife.com/sermon/spiritual-friendship/)

## Exercise 1

Think of a Christian community that is/was very formative in your life. What are some of the things that make/made it so important for you? Jot those down below.

## Intentional community

Odds are, the community you thought of above was produced by some gathering environment and/or gathering rhythms. High school and college friends are made when folks are crammed together into classes and dorms; spontaneous friendships happen when neighbors happen to walk their dogs at the same time of day. However, this might make it seem like community just happens to us, but let's look at two examples to the contrary.

First, it takes effort to close the gap. With seats next to each other and weekly gatherings, the local church provides a gathering environment and gathering rhythms. And yet, perhaps you've had an experience where the gap between you and the stranger next to you on a Sunday morning feels rather large. We all walk into church gatherings with our preloaded approaches to relationships; for example, if you tend to talk to strangers in coffee shops and on the bus, you'll likely do that on Sundays. But the opposite is true, too. Inevitably it takes some expense of effort to bridge the gap, whether it feels easy or excruciating to you, to receive the community of God's people as Bonhoeffer described.

Second, it takes effort to extend or create gathering environments and rhythms. Perhaps some time in your life you've found the limitations of an environment or rhythm and pushed past them. You meet a friend in a class and decide to hangout after school; you run into a coworker in the employee kitchen and decide to go out to lunch together. Or you've encountered changes to the environment or rhythms that originally brought you together that require new approaches. If school brought you together, graduation threatens to throw you all to the wind. To maintain those relationships, we typically create some new rhythm or environment like monthly calls, yearly reunions, even just text threads.

In both examples you see the need for intentional action to bridge the gap and help create environments or rhythms that will create or cultivate relationships. This is a key aspect to community groups. They have a baked in environment (the host home) and rhythms (weekly Bible-study discussion) but merely doing this has limitations. First, we all have some tolerance for being around other people superficially. It's feasible for folks to come to a Bible study, chat for a bit, then go home without ever truly knowing another soul. Second, a community group gathering is only a handful of hours in the week, and all relationships take significant amounts of time to grow (again, think of that example you listed in Exercise 1).

## Rhythms and time

Maybe as you've been reading this you've wondered, how on earth will I have time to do everything I'm already doing plus all this other stuff with people? In their book *Everyday Church*, Tim Chester and Steve Timmis describe a genius solution to the problem: just add people to what you are already doing.<sup>13</sup> They suggest taking an inventory of all your commitments: things you do every day, things you do every week, and things you do every month. Then consider, which of those things could you do with others instead of by yourself? There was a CG leader at Vintage years ago who would take a member of her group grocery shopping with her every week because grocery shopping was something that had to happen, but not something that had to happen alone. This can include things like kids sports events, errands, yardwork, even vacation; consider challenging the default assumption that all these are best done alone.

Also, we'd suggest another step to Chester and Timmis's exercise: pruning. Consider, which of those routines are actually not necessary to your life? These routines or commitments squeeze out time you could otherwise spend more intentionally with others or to rest from all your other commitments.

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<sup>13</sup> Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission* (2012), 90.

## Exercise 2

- Take a moment to read Acts 2:42-47. How would you describe this early Christian community? What do you find commendable or convicting about it? What rhythms did they build together?
- How do you think that compares or contrasts with assumptions about friendship or community in the world around you?

## Stewarding conflict

This might seem like an abrupt transition but it's not; if we're going to talk about a community made up of sinners, we'll have to talk about conflict. The larger topic of which this is a part is how sin affects our community inside community groups. That includes suffering, grief, wounds and trauma, ways we've sinned against others and ways we've been sinned against. All of these are worth talking about, especially as they relate to caring for the folks in our groups. However, the one we'd like to address here is how to deal with conflict within the group since it can interrupt other attempts to care for and learn from one another.

Author Ken Sande has a handful of books on the topic of conflict, the flagship being *Peacemaker*. The phrase above, "stewarding conflict," is taken from the first chapter where Sande describes the discipleship benefits of dealing with conflict in a godly manner:

Conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, to serve others, and to grow to be like Christ. These opportunities, which are sometimes described as being faithful to God, being merciful to others, and acting justly ourselves, are commended throughout the Scripture...In the same way, Jesus teaches us to pay attention to “the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23). As you live out the gospel and make the Lord’s priorities your priorities, you can turn every conflict into a stepping-stone to a closer relationship with God and a more fulfilling and fruitful Christian life.<sup>14</sup>

And lest you think he’s too rosy about the topic in that last sentence, he’s quite clear that conflict is no easy path since “God’s highest purpose for you is not to make you comfortable, wealthy, or happy...he has something far more wonderful in mind—he plans to conform you to the likeness of his Son.”<sup>15</sup> And, as Jesus said, anyone who would follow after him must, like him, take up a cross (Luke 9:23).

## **Biblical insight**

Thankfully, when it comes to handling conflict, God has not left us to our own devices. The Bible directs the life of God’s people, as we already saw in Acts 2 and Romans 12. Here’s just a sampling of what the Bible has to say on the topic:

- “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” – Matthew 5:23-24
- A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. - Proverbs 15:1
- Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. – Ephesians 4:26-27
- Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. – James 1:19-20
- [Bear] with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, [forgive] each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. – Colossians 3:13
- If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. – Romans 12:18
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. – Matthew 5:9
- Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. – Galatians 6:1
- Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense. – Proverbs 19:11

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<sup>14</sup> Ken Sande, *Peacemaker*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Sande, 36-37.



- Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. – 1 Peter 3:8-9
- And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil. – 2 Timothy 2:24
- "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." – Luke 6:27-28
- Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. – 1 Corinthians 13:4-5
- Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. – Hebrews 12:14
- You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. – Leviticus 19:18
- What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? – James 4:1
- So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. – Romans 14:19

### **Exercise 3**

We'll discuss this more in our session, but for now, take a moment to read Matthew 18:15-17. What are some ideas or principles in the text for stewarding conflict between yourself and others? What about for stewarding conflict between two other people?