

GROWING TOGETHER

When people think about the Holy Spirit they often think about power. They think about the huge miracles. The power of the Holy spirit is effective not just for salvation but also transformation, a process that is slow and gradual. You can take ten gallons of gasoline, pour it on the ground and drop a lighted match and it will release a tremendous amount of power and energy. It makes a dramatic onetime impact. But there is another way to release the energy in that gasoline. Place it in the fuel tank of a car and it can take you many Kms. Explosions may be spectacular, but the sustained, controlled burn has staying power. You don't want to be a flash in the pan, you want to make a difference in this world over time. You don't want the Holy Spirit to just save you for heaven, you want Him to use His power to transform your life. You want Him to use you in this world for kingdom purposes.

Rom 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers

The third purpose of community is that it helps us to become like Jesus. While you're here on earth God wants to get you ready for heaven. He wants you to grow in character. He wants you to grow spiritually. The Bible teaches you cannot grow spiritually on your own. You have to have other people in your life. The goal of the 40 Days of Community is learning how to love each other. One of the ways we do that is when we decide to help each other grow.

1 Thess 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

How do you build people up and help them to grow? Let me suggest 4 different ways:

1. Affirming Their Worth

Everybody is looking for affirmation. People want to know that they are special and that they have value and worth. When you affirm someone you are being the hands and feet of Jesus. We are showing love. When we affirm people we represent our loving Father and we are showing the world what God is like. So how do you affirm others? Here are a few ways:

a. By showing Acceptance

Rom 15:7 Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God

Accepting people means that you understand and appreciate who God has created that person to be. It is seeing the best in others. Accepting people means that we welcome them and value them. Unfortunately the church can sometimes be a very judgmental place. Casting Crowns has a song:

A traveler is far away from home, He sheds his coat and quietly sinks into the back row
The weight of their judgmental glances Tells him that his chances are better out on the road
But if we are the body Why aren't His arms reaching?
Why aren't His hands healing? Why aren't His words teaching?
And if we are the body Why aren't His feet going?
Why is His love not showing them there is a way? There is a way
Jesus paid much too high a price For us to pick and choose who should come
And we are the body of Christ

Rom 14:10 You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat

Too often we judge people based on externals. A woman, between flights at an airport, went to the lounge and bought a small package of cookies. Then she sat down and began reading a newspaper. Gradually, she became aware of a rustling noise. From behind her paper, she was flabbergasted to see a neatly dressed man helping himself to her cookies. Not wanting to make a scene, she leaned over, pulled the cookies away from him and took a cookie herself. A minute or two passed, and then came more rustling. He had leaned forward and was helping himself to another cookie! This continued until they had come to the end of the package. She was so angry she didn't dare allow herself to say anything. The man took the last cookie, broke it in two, pushed half across to her, and ate the other half and left. Still fuming when her flight was announced, the woman opened her handbag to get her ticket. To her shock and embarrassment, there she found her pack of unopened cookies!

I pray that we seek as a church to be a body that welcomes everyone and doesn't judge people by externals. I also pray we will do this in our small groups. I pray that we will be open and accepting of everyone who would come.

When was the last time you looked at somebody and said, "I've noticed you're good at 'this'." It's easy to look at somebody and say, "You are bad at that." Anybody can do that. But when was the last time you put a little energy and effort into a relationship where you could look at somebody and say, "You are really good at that." That can change a person's life.

b. By Showing Attention

Attention goes further than just acceptance. You can accept somebody and still ignore them or overlook them. Attention is active. It is a choice we make. One of the greatest gifts of love is focused attention. You can affirm people just by looking them in the eye. Doing that says "I value you. What you have to say is important to me because you matter to me."

One of the things I choose to do before and after the services is to greet people at the doors. I know that not all pastors do that but I really place a priority on it. The reason is that it communicates love. Just looking someone in the eye and saying "have a great day. God bless you" is showing them your attention. It is an act of love. I pray all of us would get into that habit as well.

This is especially true in your small groups. We seek to make sure that no person dominates the conversation but that everyone feels that they have been listened to and appreciated.

c. By Showing Affection

This means physical touch. We've all read about babies and the 'Failure to Thrive' Syndrome. That means that little infants, if they are not stroked, if they're not caressed, if they're not touched as they grow up, they don't develop normally. Most people know that. What most people don't know is adults need it too. UCLA did a study a while back and discovered that to be a healthy, fulfilled, satisfied adult you need eight to ten meaningful touches everyday. This means handshakes, hugs or a pat on the back. You were made for being touched whether you are married or not.

For some people the only physical affection they get all week is at church when you say turn around and hug or shake hands with somebody or give somebody a pat on the back.

I understand the reasons why are afraid of touch. It can be abused. However it is important. When we lived in Kuwait it was a very touchy/feely place. Everyone would kiss and hug. I have to admit that I am very Canadian when it comes to this. I am not much of a hugger. The other pastors were. I had a reputation as being the non-hugging pastor.

E.g. Coming home the first time and meeting my family at the airport.

Let me do something a little risky. Everybody stand up right now and hug (in a nice way) a total stranger. I know there were two reactions to what we just did. Some of you are thinking, I'm never going back to that church again! And the smarter ones are thinking, "Next week I'm sitting by somebody cute. Pastor Steve do it again next week and I'll be ready."

d. By Showing Appreciation

We affirm each other's worth with appreciation. Appreciation means to raise in value. You hope the things you invest your money in will appreciate over time – become more valuable. Every time you appreciate somebody you raise their value to you and to others. When you appreciate your wife or husband you raise their value. When you appreciate your kids, you raise their value. When you appreciate your small group, you raise its value to you.

In Vermont an old farmer was sitting on the porch with his wife. He was beginning to realize how much she meant to him. It was about time--for they had lived together forty-two years, and she had been such a help, a very willing hard worker. As they sat together, he said, "Wife, you've been such a wonderful woman that there are times I can hardly keep from telling you." Don't be like that. Speak!

E.g. Johnny Lingo and the 10 cow woman.

1 Thess 5:12 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you

Take time before you leave today to thank the sound guys, ushers and musicians. You don't have to thank me because I know you appreciate me. Whether I hug you or not – I appreciate you. Find people to express appreciation to. Affirm their worth.

2. Praying for Their Growth

Col 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured

Epaphras impresses me because he took the time and was disciplined to always pray for people. He wrestled in prayer for them. Specifically he prayed for peoples' spiritual growth. We usually pray for peoples' needs – health needs and financial needs which is fine. However, we don't spend nearly as much time praying for peoples' spiritual growth. That our character will change. That is what will last. The bible is filled with great prayers for spiritual growth.

Eph 3:17 I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge -- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Who do you know that needs to understand God's love in their life right now? They may be struggling in some area. Bring them to mind and say, "God, show them Your love. Let them experience you in a fresh way today how much you really love them."

Rom 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit

Who wouldn't like more hope in their lives? Who doesn't need more joy or more peace in their lives. The foundation of it all is trust. You can pray "God, I know somebody who needs some hope. Help them to trust in You during this difficult time. I know somebody who needs some joy. Help them to trust in You so that their heart can be lifted up."

Pray for each other's spiritual growth. Make prayer a priority.

3. Admitting Our Mistakes

By admitting our mistakes we build community, intimacy and relationships faster than any other way. Be honest about your fears, doubts and hang-ups. Confession isn't confessing all of your deep, dark sins to everyone you meet. It is just being honest about what's going on in your life.

Eph 4:25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body

Confession means saying "I'm struggling with my faith today" or "I'm worried about this or that..." or "I'm feeling a little lonely right now." Why in the world would anybody do that? Why would anybody risk honesty? It's worth the risk. God says there are four benefits of being honest about our mistakes.

a. It Brings Emotional healing

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective

Confession is good for the soul. Emotional healing comes from being honest with other people about what's going on in your life. This passage does not say confess to a priest or pastor or counselor or even God. It says confess them to EACH OTHER. God made us in such a way that emotional healing comes not from just telling God (who already knows it) but from telling somebody else who doesn't know it. You don't have to tell everybody. In fact, I don't recommend that. You need to tell somebody, a small group of trusted individuals or a spiritual partner who can pray with you.

b. It Provides a Fresh Start

Prov 28:13 He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy

Confessing your sins gives you a fresh start. God wants to take the worst thing in your life, heal you of it, and then use you to help others in the same problem. There is nothing that has happened in your life that God can't use for good. But you have to be honest about it first. One of the most helpful things you can do in your small group is help people forgive themselves. They need somebody to say, You are forgiven. E.g. personal counseling.

Remind people that God loves to give second chances. God never ever gives up on you. He's not finished with you.

The story of "Wrong Way Riegels" is a familiar one, but it bears repeating. On New Year's Day, 1929, Georgia Tech played UCLA in the Rose Bowl. In that game a young man named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for UCLA. Picking up the loose ball, he lost his direction and ran sixty-five yards toward the wrong goal line. One of his teammates finally ran him down and tackled him just before he scored for the opposing team. The play demoralized the UCLA team. At half-time the UCLA players filed off the field and into the dressing room. As others sat down on the benches and the floor, Riegels put a blanket around his shoulders, sat down in a corner, and put his face in his hands. A football coach usually has a great deal to say to his team during halftime. That day Coach Price was quiet. No doubt he was trying to decide what to do with Riegels.

When the timekeeper came in and announced that there were three minutes before playing time, Coach Price looked at the team and said, "Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second." The players got up and started out, all but Riegels. He didn't move. Coach Price went over to where Riegels sat and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half will start the second." Roy Riegels looked up, his cheeks wet with tears. "Coach," he said, "I can't do it. I've ruined you. I've ruined the university's reputation. I've ruined myself. I can't face that crowd out there." Coach Price reached out, put his hand on Riegels's shoulder, and said, "Roy, get up and go back out there. The game is only half over." Riegels finally did get up. He went onto the field, and they won the game. All of us have run a long way in the wrong direction. Because of God's mercy, however, the game is only half over.

c. It Stimulates God's Power to Change

James 4:10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up

When I'm humble, I understand and receive God's grace. God's grace is the power to change. If you try to hide your mistakes and forget them you are not going to get any better. I'm not perfect. You're not perfect. Nobody's perfect. So who are we kidding? We just need to be honest about it. Everybody blows it. Nothing shocks me anymore. There is no sin that you could name that I haven't heard.

d. It Produces Deeper Fellowship

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin

Here's the myth. We think that if we're open about our fears, about our hang-ups, about our imperfections, about our secret faults that people are going to think less of us. The opposite is true. Actually the more honest you are, the more people want to be with you and like you. What is more attractive to you - Deceitfulness or honesty? Honesty is. What we don't like are people who fake it, pretend they're perfect, try to hide everything. That's not attractive at all. If that's what attracts you to others, don't you think that if you're more honest they'll be attracted to you? They will.

4. Encouraging Their Commitment

1 Tim 4:7 Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. 8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come

How do you stay in training for a godly life? You stay in small group and you get a spiritual partner. You get a training partner. It's always easier to work out when you're working with somebody else. Nothing effects your life more than your commitments. Tell me what you're committed to and I'll tell you what you're going to be in twenty years. Because you are becoming whatever you are committed to. Your commitments shape your life.

We are a purpose driven church. That means that everything in this church is committed to and organized around helping you fulfill God's purposes for your life. What are those purposes? They are summed up in four priorities:

- To love Jesus through Exalting (worship)
- To love other believers through Embracing (fellowship)
- To grow in God's Word through Equipping (discipleship)
- To serve in ministry and mission through Extending (mission)

One day, a world renowned pianist was coming to a certain town to perform. A loving mother heard about this concert that was to be held and she saved up her money so that she could afford a front seat for her little son whom she so dearly loved. Her son loves to play the piano, and she wish to encourage her son by taking him to the concert. On that night, the packed hall waited in anticipation. Suddenly, the mother realized that her dear son who was sitting beside her a minute ago was missing. Immediately an announcement was made signaling the grand entrance of the maestro. The spotlights came on and the poor mother had a fright of her life when she found her little boy on the stage, sitting at the grand piano that must have enticed him.

The entire audience gasps in horror when the little boy started pounding on the keys to the tune of "Twinkle twinkle little star....." The security guards immediately rushed up the stage to remove the boy, and before they could reach him the maestro waved his hands telling them to leave the little boy alone. The maestro walked gracefully towards the little boy who was so engrossed playing the piano. He bend down and gently whispered to his ears "Keep on playing, don't stop" Leaning over, the maestro reached down with his left hand and began filling the bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the other side and improvised the tune into a delightful song. Together, the grand master and the little boy held the crowd mesmerized.