



In the Church (<http://byfaithonline.com>)

Created for Community

Paul Tripp, Issue Number 17, October 2007

The old Beatles song says, “All of those lonely people, where do they all come from?” One way or another, many around us are choosing to live alone. “I think it’s the best way to live,” said James, 35, a musician who after years of living with others spent a morning hunting for a small apartment for himself. “If you want to make a mess, you can make a mess. If you want to paint the walls a certain color, you can do it.” Privacy, James explains, has a special value in the big city, where people spend their days surrounded by other people. Lured by the opportunities of work and culture in the big city, more and more people are living alone. Earlier this year, *USA Today* reported that 354,336 people—in Manhattan alone—live by themselves. That means single person homes accounted for 48 percent of all households.

This culture of isolation is not restricted to the city. It represents a wide-ranging cultural shift. Norman Rockwell’s classic 1948 painting, “Freedom from Want,” shows an extended family gathered around a table to celebrate a holiday feast. The room is filled with joy as a perfectly-prepared turkey is placed on the table. Fast-forward 59 years to today. While lack of food is still a problem, in Western culture you are much more likely to find want of another kind. More and more Americans are starving for significant relationships. The *American Sociological Review* recently published a study that should disturb us all. This study reports a dramatic drop in the size of people’s core network of confidants. Confidants are those people near you to whom you talk about the important issues of your life.

This study also says that the average American has just two close friends, compared with three in 1985. Those reporting no confidants jumped from 10 to 25 percent. And the number of people who reported a healthy circle of four or five friends has plunged to about half of what it was. People also report that their friends seem to be those who they live with. This implies that peoples’ wider social connectedness or extended community is shrinking as well. There is no doubt that our cities, with all of their shared public spaces, have become lonely places, and that our isolation from one another has increased no matter where we choose to live.

Clearly, isolation is not new. But here is something that may be unique in our culture—an increasing hesitation to commit ourselves to relationships that necessitate humility, love, mutuality, sacrifice, forgiveness, and accountability. And yet, if programs like *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and *Grey's Anatomy* are any indication, people are still intrigued by committed, long-term relationships.

The Best Way to Live?

Is our musician, James, right? Is it easier and better to live alone?

Even the culture around us documents the side effects of relational isolation. When people live alone, kids fail to thrive, crime rises, people harden, politics coarsens, and generosity and mercy shrivel. None of this should surprise us.

There are things that we know, as believers, that should cause concern as we examine the trends of our culture. First, we know that people are created for community. We are made in the likeness of a God who not only is committed to community and calls us to community, but is *Himself* a community. He did not structure us to live in isolation and autonomy. He created us to live in two essential communities: a loving, worshipful, and dependent community with Him, and a loving, serving, interdependent community with one another. We will never be what we are supposed to be or do what we were created to do while living in isolation from worshipful friendship with God, and mutually-serving friendship with others. We are people who carry a deep gratitude because, by God's grace, we have not been left to ourselves, but have been welcomed into God's family of love and grace.

Battling the Kingdom of One

Yet with all of our gratitude, it is important to recognize that there is something powerful inside each of us that drives us away from these two essential communities. That thing is sin. In its fundamental form, sin is anti-social. A verse in 2 Corinthians 5 captures this well: "And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves . . ." He died for my sin—which causes me to shrink my life down to the size of . . . my life. Sin causes my thoughts and motives to be dominated by a powerful triad of self-focus: my wants, my feeling, my needs. Where sin reigns community struggles.

Think further with me. Sin is not first the breaking of rules. Sin is first the breaking of relationship. When I love God above all else, I gladly keep His law. When I love myself above all else, I will step over God's boundaries again and again.

So our problem with community is not just the result of the cultural influences that surround us. Our primary problem with community exists inside of us. Sin causes us to lose sight of the grand purposes of the kingdom of God while we expend all kinds of effort to build tiny little kingdoms of one. So, even when we are in relationship with others, we try to co-opt them into the service of our kingdom purposes.

But sin not only turns us inward, it also makes us susceptible to two seductive lies. Each of these lies was first told in the disastrous conversation in the Garden of Eden. The first lie is the lie of autonomy. This lie says that you are an independent being with the right and ability to live life as you choose. We all want to think that our lives belong to us, but they don't. If we have been created, then our lives do not, in fact, belong to us. Our lives belong to the One who has made us. He alone has the right and power to define for us how we should live.

Yet, you can see how seductive this lie is if you watch the actions of even the youngest child. She wants to choose her own way. She does not delight in the protective authorities that God has placed in her life. She wants to be the center of attention. She wants to decide for herself what is right and wrong. She does not find joy in sharing and serving. She looks at her siblings as obstacles and threats. She does not say to herself, "How thankful I am that I have such wise parents who require me to eat this beautiful carrot when sadly I was about to choose that unhealthy candy!" No, she fights for her independence and protests when she is called to submit.

The Delusion of Self-Sufficiency

But there is another lie that is equally seductive: the lie of self-sufficiency. This lie says that I have everything I need within myself to do what I am supposed to do. We all think we are more insightful and more capable than we actually are. We embrace the belief that we don't need wisdom from outside ourselves. That is why it is so hard for us to receive correction. It is amazing to watch a three-year-old argue with a 30-year-old. It's hard to imagine that he thinks he knows more than the adult that God has placed in his life, but he does!

But we are not self-sufficient in any way. We are constantly dependent on God and others in order to live. Self-sufficiency is a delusion. Hundreds and hundreds of people have contributed to what we know, to what we are able to do, to what we have become. And there is not a moment in which we are free of dependency on God for our very life and breath. We were made for community.

The lies of autonomy and self-sufficiency push us toward individualistic and private lifestyles. A friend expressed this better than he was aware. He said, "Do you know what I like about the suburbs?" When someone asks a rhetorical question like this, you listen carefully. My friend went on to say, "I like the fact that when I get in my car the garage door is still closed behind me. I open it when I am ready to drive away. I go and get what I need, and I don't get out of my car again until the garage door has closed behind me." He likes the fact that he lives in a suburb with no sidewalks, where people drive everywhere in their mobile isolation machines! He likes the fact that he is able to live a completely private and individualistic lifestyle.

We do tend to live with big barriers between our public personas and our private lives. We do tend to live in networks of terminally casual relationships. Most of the people we think we know we don't actually know. Yes, we know things about them, but would probably be shocked if we knew the struggles that regularly take place in the interior of their lives. Most of what we call fellowship is not fellowship at all. It is surface talk about things that don't matter that allows us to maintain our privacy. So the couple who has been fighting on the way to church hits the front door with a smile, the mother who is frazzled takes a few minutes to get herself together. And when we arrive for public worship, nobody tells, nobody knows, and nobody helps.

Essential Community

Yet relationship—community—is at the very heart of Christianity. We are not just forgiven; we are welcomed into God's family. We are invited into intimate personal communion with the Creator Savior King. It is only in communion with Him that we are able to be whole. In community with Him we find wisdom, truth, hope, forgiveness, grace, peace, reconciliation, strength, and righteousness. And as we are welcomed in communion with Him, we are called into community with one another. This community is one of His primary instruments of radical personal growth. He calls us to a lifestyle of mutual service. He calls us to love one another as He has loved us. He calls us to confess, teach, restore, forgive, love, encourage, confront, give, sacrifice, rescue, protect, and serve. And He warns us that this community is not a luxury for a few, but is essential for each one of us. He calls us to live as if we actually believe that our walk with Him is a community project.

Think about it. If you are married, your marriage was never designed to live in isolation from the robust resources of the body of Christ. If you are a parent, your parenting was never created to live outside the network of faith that is around you. Your life of work was never meant go on outside of the insight and direction of the body of Christ. We are designed to live in God-centered, grace-driven, honest, humble, lovingly intrusive, and perseverant community of faith. True spiritual health does not happen any other way.

Where does this leave us? First, we need to understand that true community requires humility. I need to humbly confess my need for others as I consider their interests more important than my own. True community also requires intentionality. There are decisions that you will have to make, there are habits you will have to break, and there are choices you will have to make to live in productive Christian community. Along with these, true community requires sacrifice. I will never enjoy the productive community that the body of Christ was designed to be without making specific and concrete sacrifices of time, energy, schedule, leisure, privacy, etc. And true community with others requires patience. I never get to be in community with perfect people. So community is messy and unpredictable. Yet, God uses this messiness to promote His grace in our lives.

What does all of this mean? It means that community requires Christ. It is only as His grace enables me that I can exit my claustrophobic kingdom of one, become excited about the expansive work of His kingdom, and live in the kind of productive relationships with others that I was created for, while I encourage others to do the same. I have become committed to praying these three prayers, and I encourage you to do the same: “Lord, I am a man in desperate need of help. Lord, I pray that you would send your helpers my way. And please give me the humility to receive the help when it comes.”

Isolation: An Opportunity to Minister

There is more—the isolation, loneliness, and relational fascination of the culture around us provide an exciting ministry opportunity. We are people who have been dramatically and graciously loved by God, and so we are committed to loving others as God has loved us. We know that isolation doesn't work. We know that when you attempt it, you not only damage yourself spiritually, you deny your very humanity. But how do we convince people around us of a better way? Not by lecture, criticism, and pronouncement. We convince them as we determine to do for them exactly what God did for us—we love them. So, rather than being a critiquing presence, we look for every opportunity to be a loving presence in the private places where we live, and in the public places where we work and play. When we do this, we not only welcome people to step out of their isolation and get to know us, but we also welcome them out of their alienation from God. For the love that we give others is not ours; it is His love, living is us and being incarnated for others to see, and that love is the most powerful transformational force in the universe.

Paul Tripp is the president of Paul Tripp Ministries (www.paultrippministries.org), whose mission is "Connecting the transforming power of Jesus Christ to everyday life." Tripp is the author of several books on practical issues of Christian living.