



“It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians... between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and sacrament.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, [Life Together](#)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s work [Life Together](#) is both a simple and profound treatise on Christian community. The reason is simple—for Bonhoeffer, these weren’t theories to be understood, but a way of life to be practiced. From June 1935 to November 1937, during the build-up to what would become World War II and the rise of Hitler to power in Germany, Bonhoeffer operated the underground seminary for the Confessing Church. This church was to stand for the truth of the Gospel and the power of the Scriptures against the ascension of the Third Reich. In order to train seminarians, Bonhoeffer and the dozens who were enrolled at the seminary at any given time shared a common life. This was the “life together” out of which *Gemeinsames Leben*, or *Life Together* was born.

It’s important to note at the outset that Bonhoeffer’s work wasn’t built on theory, but on practice. The same will be true for this booklet. The goal of this short teaching series, as well as this practice guide, is not to transfer more information. Rather, the goal is the real, and often messy, practice of Christian community lived out practically among brothers and sisters in Christ. The ideal way to engage these truths is within a small community who can journey with you. You’ll find that this practice guide, while engaged individually, will be best utilized by an individual in community. Therefore, while there are certainly individual parts of this practice, you are also encouraged to engage them with your Discipleship Partner(s) as well as your Community Group. If you aren’t involved in either of these relationships, you’re encouraged to find a small group to journey with during for at least the duration of this series.

The specific exercises in this booklet will stretch over the next five weeks and will tie directly to the teachings from Sunday morning. You can find the teachings at www.yorkalliance.org/sermons. We believe that it is impossible to gain the life of Jesus without practicing the lifestyle of

Jesus; and Jesus intentionally chose to live in community. Community is also one of the vehicles God uses to create real change in us, partnered with teaching and practices and habits, under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. That’s the heart of this guidebook.

I have tried to cite specific ideas and quotations where appropriate. Beyond those citations, these exercises have been developed in reliance on several sources: [The Second Mountain](#) by David Brooks, [True Community](#) by Jerry Bridges, [Living in Community](#) by Christine Pohl, [When the Church was a Family](#) by Joseph Hellerman, the “Community” practice on www.practicingtheway.org, and, of course, Bonhoeffer’s [Life Together](#). Each of them is worth the time for further study, but Bonhoeffer’s work stands out as uniquely important among the group.

The weeks will be laid out as follows:

- Week One: Jesus’ Call to Community
- Week Two: A Community of Honor
- Week Three: The Church as a Family
- Week Four: The Trinity and Living Hospitable Lives
- Week Five: Committing to Community Over Preference

Community, somewhat uniquely among the disciplines, is an easy concept to romanticize and to truly believe that we are engaging when reality couldn’t be further from the truth. Parker Palmer, in his excellent little pamphlet [A Place Called Community](#) says: “While we honor community with words, the history of the twentieth century has been a determined movement away from life together.” When we take the time to truly engage the call of the Scriptures, the model of the Jesus, and the history of the church, we can’t help but recognize that what passes for community today is often, at best, a cheap substitute. Palmer goes on to say: “We can take a first, crucial step away from romance about community by recognizing that it is a value in conflict with other values we hold—and that in our decisions, community usually loses out.” I can affirm this to be true in my own life, and I know the same is true for many of you as well. The true practice of community will require sacrifice, discipline, and forfeiting our “right” to our own preferences. However, community is also the vehicle that God has ordained to shape us as apprentices of Jesus and to display Him to the world. For the apprentice of Jesus, community is not optional—it’s vital.

Week One: Jesus' Call to Community

"As only Christ can speak to me in such a way that I may be saved, so others, too, can be saved only by Christ himself. This means that I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love. The other person needs to retain his independence of me; to be loved for what he is, as one for whom Christ became man, died, and rose again, for whom Christ bought forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Thus this spiritual love will speak to Christ about a brother more than to a brother about Christ."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

One of the most surprising realities of the inner-most community of Jesus, His disciples, was their diversity. Bookended by Matthew the tax collector (who would have been seen as a traitor and aligned with the Roman oppressors) and Simon the Zealot (who was part of a revolutionary sect using covert violence and murder to overthrow the Romans), the disciples were, to use Scot McKnight's term, a fellowship of differents. Things didn't seem to get better in their time with Jesus either; one of the last recorded interactions with the disciples prior to Holy Week was an argument about who was the greatest among them.

Which makes Jesus' actions in John 13 even more surprising. This wasn't a community that, on the surface, was "worth" serving, particularly as the God of the universe. They don't seem to be the best and brightest in Israel at the time. And yet, Jesus was committed to them, loved them, and served them. What is more, He calls us to do the same.

Practice in Community

Have somebody read John 13:1-17. Discuss the following questions:

- What jumps out to you in this passage?
- Put yourself in the scene. How would you have felt if you were one of the disciples? If you were Jesus? Why?
- What are the barriers that get in the way of you serving others the way that Jesus served the disciples? Think about both external/circumstantial barriers as well as mental/emotional barriers.

One of the barriers to the healthy practice of community is poor communication within a group. There are often things assumed, things ignored, and things left unsaid. Being willing to speak the truth in love to one another can be a powerful way for a group to grow in depth.

Pete and Geri Scazzero, in their work on Emotional Health, developed what they call a Community Temperature Reading. It's made up of five components that help a community communicate with great insight and clarity. Spend roughly 5 minutes as a group on each one of the sections below. If your group is too large for everyone to engage in 5 minute increments, break into groups of 2 or 3 for each section.

- **Appreciations:** "I appreciate..." Take a few minutes to express some of the things that you appreciate about one another.
- **Puzzles:** "I'm puzzled that..." Instead of assuming bad intent, express a puzzle about your group, such as "I'm puzzled as to why you never text me back."
- **Complaints and Solutions:** "I notice... and I prefer..." This is a great way to express the frustrations that are bound to come within a group. For example: "I notice that our group always runs late, and I would prefer if we started on time."
- **New Information:** "It's important for you all to know that..." There are things happening in all of our lives, and it would help if the rest of the community was aware. For example: "It's important for you all to know that work is really stressful for me right now."
- **Hopes and Wishes:** "I hope that..." What are some of the things you are hoping for in the coming weeks and months? For example: "I hope to be able to travel to see my family soon."

Questions for Community:

- How did your family of origin share in each of the categories above? Does that impact the way you share now?
- Which area felt the most natural for you? What was the most difficult? Why?

Individual Practice

Between group meetings, consider a way that you could serve someone else in your group. It doesn't need to be anything profound—in fact, it very well may seem small and insignificant. However, take time to serve someone else in some way before we meet again as a group.

Week Two: A Community of Honor

"In a Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. Every Christian community must realize that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

Parker Palmer's statement, referenced in the introduction, bears repeating: "We can take a first, crucial step away from romance about community by recognizing that it is a value in conflict with other values we hold." As a society, much of what we value conflicts with the value of real Christian community. Competition and individualism are the twin engines that seem to run much of what's happening in the United States. Our current cultural moment is filled with polarization, shaming, cancel culture, and entitlement, all of which push strongly against how we are to live as part of the body of Christ.

Jerry Bridges in his book True Community makes a powerful statement: "All believers share a common life in Christ, whether or not we recognize it. We are in fellowship literally thousands of believers from every nation of the world." Bonhoeffer draws an implication from this same idea: "Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate." This is the basis for Paul's words in Romans 12. We are a community. We do belong to one another. We don't get to opt in or opt out of that reality... so, how will we choose to engage one another based on that fact?

Practice in Community

Have somebody read Romans 12:1-10. Discuss the following questions:

- What is the preceding argument that Paul is making in chapters 1-11 which he builds on in 12:1? (To what is the "therefore" referring?)
- What are some of the behaviors of the world that stand in the way of engaging community for you?
- What does "honest love" (vs. 9) look like?

- What are some ways that we honor one another? Why do you think that's so important to Paul?

One of the key ways that we honor one another is by truly listening to one another's hearts, passions, and desires, and engaging with them emotionally in accordance with their emotions. (Romans 12:15) For this practice, split your group either into gender specific groups, or if there are more than four of each gender, into same gender pairs or triads. When you get into your groups, you are going to ask the following question: *What is one thing that has been impacting you lately?*

For the one who is sharing:

- Be as open and honest as you feel comfortable.
- Try to be clear and brief so that the listener can paraphrase.
- Use emotion words as much as you are able. (i.e.—happy, disappointed, frustrated, excited, resentful, honored, etc.)

For the one who is listening:

- Give your full attention and listen without interruption.
- Do not offer advice or make any judgment.
- When they finish sharing, attempt to paraphrase what they just said. Start with "What I hear you saying is..." and then, when finished, ask the person "Is that correct?" and let them respond.

It would probably be helpful to set a timer (5-7 minutes is about right) for each person so that everyone has a chance to share.

Questions for Community:

- What was this activity like for you?
- Did you notice anything about how you tend to listen or how you tend to share your emotions?

Individual Practice

At least three times through the week, preferably sometime in the evening, reflect on the following questions:

- What was the most significant conversation I had today?
- Is there anything that I need to follow-up with or clarify from my conversations today?
- What steps should I take as I seek to honor those around me?

Week Three: The Church as a Family

“Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

The old saying goes: “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family.” The idea is that we can move in and out of friendships according to our preferences, but we’re “stuck” with the family we have, like it or not.

This concept makes is all the more fascinating that one of the primary biblical metaphors for the community of faith is the metaphor of family. Jesus calls us to engage the church as though it’s our family, and as we “stick it out” through the challenges of community, we will be shaped by others into the image of Jesus. Joseph Hellerman makes this powerful observation:

“People who remain connected with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in self-understanding, and they mature in their ability to relate in healthy ways to God and to their fellow human beings. This is especially the case for those courageous Christians who stick it out through the often messy process of interpersonal discord and conflict resolution. Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life.”

Real community, like family, is often filled with friction, challenge, and inefficiencies. It seems like there must be a better way. However, Jesus calls us into the “crucible” of community, and then uses it both to change us and to change the world.

Practice in Community

Have somebody read Matthew 12:46-50. Discuss the following questions:

- What comes to mind when you think about the Christian community as your family? Is that a positive or negative metaphor for you? Why is that?

- Have you ever chosen to “stick it out” with your community even though you wanted to check out? Describe that process.
- What are some ways that you would be willing to rely on (or impose upon) your family, but you wouldn’t be willing to do the same with your community? Are there examples of the opposite?

One of the characteristics of healthy families is that they are a safe space for us to express emotions. For some of us, that wasn’t true of our family of origin, but God’s intention is that it would be true of our Christian community. The following exercise is first a journaling exercise, and then you will have an opportunity to debrief with the group. *Note: If you read ahead and feel it would be better for your group, you could certainly engage this practice in gender-specific groups.*

First, take a few moments of silence. Get comfortable, put away phones, and eliminate distractions. Ask someone to pray to invite the Holy Spirit to help us engage our emotions. Then, ask each question below out loud, and give people 4-5 minutes each to journal their answers:

- What are you angry about (past or present)?
- What are you sad about? (i.e., disappointment, failure, loss, etc.)
- What are you anxious about?
- What are you glad about?

Questions for Community:

- What was this activity like for you?
- Take a few minutes and share some of what you journaled in response to these questions.
- Growing up, how did your family express each of these emotions?

Individual Practice

Before you wrap up the group, divide up into same gender pairs or triads. Over the course of the week, reach out to the other(s) in your group as you experience one of the four emotions above. It can be as simple as a text message but can also be a phone call or in-person connection. The goal is to learn to express these emotions to others in your community and not to simply process them individually.

Week Four: The Trinity and Living Hospitable Lives

“Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

Perhaps the most beautiful and mysterious aspect of Christian community is that our community is modeled after the eternal community of the Godhead. While Genesis 2:18 certainly speaks to the husband/wife relationship, “It is not good for man to be alone” is speaking about far more than marriage. The intent of God from the beginning was to invite His children into the loving community of the Trinity.

In the language of the YAC Values, this means that community must be *authentic*. The eternal community of the Godhead is never pretentious, never false, never hypocritical, and never anything but completely honest. It’s the authenticity of the community of the Godhead that creates space for the pure love that is shared fully between persons. One of the often-overlooked aspects of humanity being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) is that we, too, are created to give and receive love. However, far too often, Christian community lacks the authenticity and transparency that can create the environment for that love to thrive. When someone pretends to be someone they aren’t and then are loved within that community, they subconsciously recognize that the person that is being loved doesn’t actually exist. A community that pretends fails to fulfill the most important characteristic of the Trinitarian community: love.

Practice in Community

Have somebody read Romans 12:11-21. Discuss the following questions:

- What are some ways that communities can be less than honest with one another?
- Are there kinds of people that you struggle to love well? How might engaging people like that within real community change that?

- When faced with conflict, or the potential of conflict, do you tend to fight (move towards the conflict), flight (avoid the conflict), or freeze (stay present but disengage)? Why do you think that is?

Engaging in healthy conflict is one of the most important and difficult skills to develop when honestly engaging in community. Pete and Geri Scazzero, in Emotionally Healthy Relationships, list 7 Steps to a Clean Fight. For the Community Practice tonight, you are going to pair up with someone (same gender) with whom you do not have a problem, and practice this. Once in pairs (triads if necessary) call to mind a frustration that you have with someone. No need to tell your partner any specifics about the situation. Then, play-act the process with one another. See the below example of someone who is perpetually late:

1. Ask for permission and state the problem. (You)
Example: Do you have a minute? I’ve noticed that you’re often late to meetings that we have.
2. State why it is important to you. (You)
Example: Being on time is something important to me because I think it shows respect for the others you are with.
3. Fill in the sentence: “When you... I feel...” (You)
Example: When you are late, I feel like you don’t value me.
4. State your request clearly, respectfully, and specifically. (You)
Example: I’d like to ask for you to be on time when we meet.
5. Consider the request and state your level of agreement. (Listener)
Example: Thanks for sharing this with me. I had no idea that you saw my lateness as a lack of respect for you or for others. I will make a concerted effort to be on time, but because of how late I often need to work, I may still be late sometimes.
6. Agree to the request or offer an alternative. (You)
Example: I understand. Maybe if you can just send a text when you know you are running late, that would help me feel valued.
7. Review the agreement now and then again in two weeks. (Both)
Example: My understanding of what we just talked about is that you will make more of an effort to be on time, but when you’re going to be late, you’ll text me. Can we talk about this again in a month to see how that’s going?

While “practice” like this can feel forced, it’s an important way for us to get better at facing conflicts and engaging community in a healthy and honest way. Conflict has the potential to draw groups together and deeper in intimacy (when handled well) and to divide groups and break off relationships (when handled poorly).

Questions for Community:

- What was this activity like for you?
- Do you feel like you’re ready to engage the person you had in mind with this issue yet? Why or why not?

Individual Practice

The Scazzero’s work in developing 7 Steps to a Clean Fight can be immensely helpful interpersonally, but there are times where we need to prepare ourselves *personally* before we engage in that kind of a loving confrontation. Pete and Geri have also developed what they call “The Ladder of Integrity,” which is a personal tool that can be used to have a heart that’s prepared to engage in this type of conversation.

Take some time this week to journal through a non-volatile issue that’s been bothering you. It may be the same as the one you play-acted in community, or a different one. Use the sentence starts below from “The Ladder of Integrity” to journal through the issue. Make sure to hit each step as you journal. (For those who are visual learners, the “ladder” would have Step 1 at the bottom and Step 10 at the top.)

1. Right now the issue on my mind is... (possibly add in: I’m anxious in talking about this because...)
2. My part in this is...
3. My need in this issue is...
4. My feelings about this are... (possibly add: What my reaction tells me about me is...)
5. The issue is important to me because... and I violate that value when...
6. I am willing/not willing to...
7. One thing I could do to improve the situation is...
8. The most important thing I want you to know is...
9. I think my honest sharing will benefit our relationship by...
10. I hope and look forward to...

Space for journaling:

(If, after working through the ladder on your own, you feel that you have good clarity on this issue and are able to respectfully share what’s going on inside of you, what you value, and what you hope for the relationship with the other person, consider having that conversation with them.)

Week Five: Committing to Community Not Preference

“The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both. He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

Christian community isn’t glamorous. It isn’t always “fun.” Practicing community can feel laborious, frustrating, and even painful. But there’s another thing about Christian community: it’s necessary. Jerry Bridges says it clearly without pulling any punches: “None of us has the spiritual wherewithal to ‘go it alone’ in our Christian lives.”

For many of us, it’s the ideal of community that gets in the way of the true experience of community. We expect joy, support, heart-sharing, laughter, a sense of fulfillment, and answers to all of our deepest needs and desires. What we most often get is a meeting that has a bit of drudgery in the moment, but one that will bear incredible fruit when practiced with regularity over months and years.

Practice in Community

Have somebody read Philippians 2:1-11 Discuss the following questions:

- Do you consider Christian community to be vital to your spiritual health? Why or why not?
- What are some personal preferences that you know need to be set aside for you to be able to engage community well?
- How does the model of Jesus in community help you as you seek to engage in community?

Healthy Christian communities tend to engage a few rhythms and habits within their communities. There isn’t a complete list anywhere, but both in Scripture and throughout church history, there are seven rhythms that are often practiced by healthy communities:

- Celebration
- Bearing Burdens
- Confession of Sin
- Hospitality
- Eating Together / Communion
- Prayer and Worship
- Generosity

Questions for Community:

- Go through each rhythm on the list, and work to create a concise definition of it as a group.
- What are some practical ways that you might practice each of these rhythms? Think about how an evening with your group would go if you completely devoted it to one or two of these rhythms.
- As you go through that list, what rhythms do you think our community does well? Why do you think that?
- Of these seven rhythms, which one would you be excited for our community to explore further?

With the information above, consider really pushing into a few of these rhythms as a community over the next few weeks/months. Talk through who in your community would be gifted to lead/facilitate the practice, and then schedule it. Some will take more preparation than others, so have grace with each other as you plan and walk through these rhythms. Then, ask one final question:

- What is one thing that you’ve learned about Christian community over the last month?

Individual Practice

As you come to the end of this study, consider your life in community. Do you have a Discipleship Partner? If not, consider starting a relationship like that. Are you engaged in a Community Group? If not, now is a great time to step in. Look at www.yorkalliance.org/community-groups for info.

