

The Church as Tribe

Abstract: *Drawing upon Sebastian Junger's 2016 book Tribe, this article attempts to illustrate a correlation between the need for belonging which is experienced by members of today's Western postmodern societies and the mission of the church to fill that need. God's people are called to a lifestyle of love and acceptance, and to point people both inside and outside the church community to a new life of acceptance and health which may be found in relationship with each other and with God. That is not to say that love implies unqualified acceptance because God Himself calls believers to give up much to be a member of His family. This new "tribe" to which believers belong forms the foundation of societal change but only when members of that community give up themselves in the interest of promoting Christ. Each one's identity must be sacrificed to the calling of God, and in so doing each believer may be brought into a new family, a new tribe which reaches out with love to the larger community.*

Sebastian Junger's 2016 book entitled *Tribe*, both forms the basis for the current article and was one which made a deep impression upon the current writer. He begins his work by making a carefully crafted comparison between unhappiness, quantified by a number of factors such as suicide rate, mental health, depression, etc. and wealth or more broadly, modernity in its entirety. He demonstrates that until the coming of what might today be called "modern civilizations" or perhaps merely modern methods of agriculture and machines, hunter-gatherer societies worked and lived closely together. Every task they set about was not only to further the common good but was

accomplished by common effort. Each person contributed to the overall goals, simple as they were such as food, warmth, and basic survival. Junger illustrates that societies which are characterized by a distinct lack of modern tools and entertainment are also associated with incredibly low rates of suicide. This is demonstrated in Native American societies prior to the Industrial Revolution as well as in low-tech and aboriginal societies which have been studied with more depth in the 20th century. Conversely, a direct correlation can be made between high rates of suicide and poor mental health among societies which today enjoy the greatest wealth and convenience. He establishes his baseline position in stating:

The mechanism seems simple: poor people are forced to share their time and resources more than wealthy people are, and as a result they live in closer communities. Inter-reliant poverty comes with its own stresses – and certainly isn't the American ideal – but it's much closer to our evolutionary heritage than affluence. A wealthy person who has never had to rely on help and resources from his community is leading a privileged life that falls way outside more than a million years of human experience.¹

Thus what is required in a basic sense for people to be truly happy and enjoy higher levels of mental health and satisfaction is reliance upon a community, a tribe.

It is fitting for this discussion, although accidental, that the publishing house for Junger's book is called *Twelve*, because God's original plan for community involved the twelve tribes of Israel. The book of Genesis in the Bible begins with a telling of the story of creation, moves through the history of the population of the earth, and finally settles on one family that becomes the focal point of the narrative. When the people group that resulted from this family, who came to be called the people

¹ Junger, *Tribe*, 21.

of Israel or Israelites, were captive in the land of Egypt for many generations, they developed an initial sense of their own community. Upon their release from captivity, the Israelites move into the land promised to them by God, and divided that promised land into regions for each tribe. These eleven tribes of people, descended from and named for the sons of Jacob and Joseph, form a nation of peoples who relate to each other in community, from the smallest family, to sets of families or clans, to the tribes themselves who unite as a nation. The twelfth tribe is that of Levi who receives no inheritance of the land because their responsibility is the maintenance of the cult of worship of Yahweh which is integral to the entire nation. Walter Brueggemann calls this settling of the land “the very goal of God’s creation” and we can see from the beginning, God intended for people to relate in this way.²

God establishes a number of covenants along the way, committing to His chosen people in a series of special historical acts. Beginning at creation God establishes covenants with the first people, with Noah after the flood, and then again with Abraham who is the progenitor of the people of Israel. These acts culminate in two additional covenants as the people enter the land in the book of Deuteronomy. McKenzie and Graham reference these two covenants in terms of both God’s promise coupled with God’s requirement for the people’s commitment to the standard holy living He has outlined for the Israelites in their worship and daily lives. They consider these two covenants in Deuteronomy to represent “the corporate law that is part of the national covenant in Deuteronomy 12-26 and the code for individual conduct given at Horeb, which consists of only the Ten Commandments.”³ Thus God commits to the wellbeing of His chosen people and simultaneously requires them to follow

² Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 109.

³ Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham. *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 37.

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His laws on simultaneous national and individual levels. Deuteronomy 26.16-19 outlines this promise of wellbeing for following God's expectations:

The Lord your God commands you this day to follow these decrees and laws; carefully observe them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have declared this day that the Lord is your God and that you will walk in obedience to him, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws, that you will listen to him. And the Lord has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.⁴

Thus the people of God were called to relate to each other and to the wider world in a way which is characterized from the beginning by worship of Yahweh and adherence to His commands. They are to be separate from the nations surrounding them and set apart to God, which is the very definition of holiness.

This calling continues into today, for the Israelites as the people of God, far from being superseded, have been expanded to include all nations. The expansion of God's people which now includes far more than a single nation, is called the church, which Wayne Grudem defines simply as "the community of all true believers for all time."⁵ What began with a single family culminates in God's plan for redemption for all people everywhere. Where Israel was called to holiness in right living

⁴ All quotations from Scripture will be from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise specified.

⁵ Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 853.

with each other and with their neighbors within a prescriptive environment of worship of the one true God, all believers are now called to the same. This does not represent a deviation from God's original plan, but rather a fulfillment of it. Christ stated He came not to dissolve the laws given in the Hebrew Bible, but to bring them to their highest level of completion.⁶ In the Septuagint, the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew term *qahal* which means gathering or assembly of people is *ekklesia*, the Greek word used in the New Testament to refer to God's people, the church.⁷ This is why the author of the book of Hebrews considers the witnesses of the distant past to all be looking forward to the time when Christ would fulfill the law and establish God's church in the world.⁸ Grudem again says:

Therefore, even though there are certainly new privileges and new blessings that are given to the people of God in the New Testament, both the usage of the term "church" in Scripture and the fact that throughout Scripture God has always called his people to assemble in worship of himself, indicate that it is appropriate to think of the church as constituting all the people of God for all time, both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers."⁹

We see that God has established a new community of believers which spans the globe. The place where God's people thrive has moved beyond a geographic location where the original people of God lived among their tribes. In welcoming all people from all nations, a new tribe has been formed, the tribe of the church. Millard Erickson states: "The Church is one of the few visible forms of a corporate relationship among believers."¹⁰ It is this

⁶ Mat 5.17.

⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, footnote to page 853-4.

⁸ Heb 12.1.

⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 854.

¹⁰ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 1035.

corporate relationship which we wish to explore here, for it is certainly true that anyone can worship God, anywhere, on their own. A gathering is not a requirement for worship and likewise no gathering can accompany any individual on a daily basis. Yet it is within the corporate gathering that the greatest blessings of God are felt and each individual experiences the benefits of a tribe.

Just as God established an expectation of obedience and a promise of blessing when the people of Israel were given their promised land, so His blessings extends to His people, the church, today. Paul, speaking to a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile believers makes the noteworthy claim that all believers today share in the blessings which God promised in the Hebrew Bible to the Israelites. Quoting the book of Isaiah he states: “We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.... As God has said, ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’”¹¹ God’s blessings, promised to his original people, have now been extended to all believers, those who form the worldwide church of God today.

Even so, and just as with the tribes of Israel, these blessings do not come without a call for adherence to the standards of the community. Every tribe has such benchmarks by which its participants are measured and the Christian church is no different. Jesus Himself indicated the base standards to which His followers would be held:

A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’

¹¹ Acts 13.32-34.

“All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.¹²

Christ in this story does not demand for the young Jew to continue to practice the vast list of religious and community standards which are outlined in the Old Testament legal code. These laws reach their highest expression in the person of Christ Himself.¹³ Rather He requires the moral laws which remain in effect for today’s believers. These are the requirements for membership in the tribe of church today. But there is one more thing, and it is not giving up money as might be the expectation from this tale. It is giving up what one believes about oneself, giving up one’s identity in anything other than Christ. The young man speaking to Jesus could not accept a new community because he could not give up what was most important to his identity, his wealth. This is why the message of the Gospel still needs to be preached, because it is not easy to accept the requirements of God’s community in a post-modern society. Brueggemann in *Embracing the Transformation* states: “The central metaphor for this proclamation is the coming of God’s governance that displaces, nullifies, and delegitimizes every other governance.”¹⁴ God’s requirement is that adherents to His community must give up themselves and identify not as individuals apart from Him, but as children of God. A new loyalty is required, one that results in forgiveness and building up of the body of Christ, that is, the church. This

¹² Luke 18.18-23. See also Donna Wallace, “The Glory You Gave Me,” D. Min Dissertation submitted to George Fox University, 2012. Here, opening with the story of the woman caught in adultery and Jesus’ incredible response in the face of the societal pressures on this situation, Wallace demonstrates the establishment of a new standard which Christ has brought to the world.

¹³ Mat 5.17.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Embracing the Transformation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 39.

implication from this metaphor is that all participants in the church give up their own individual preferences and worldview, instead taking on a new identity as Christ followers, who work to show the love of God in the world.

Two ways in particular demonstrate how the church as community is uniquely situated to show God's love: first is identifying those who struggle with mental health issues and second is holding to God's standards on sexual sin. Both of these ministries will become a natural result of the starting point of love and acceptance of a fellow person, and as Junger alludes, are key purposes of community. E. Mansell Pattison states: "A major concern in primary prevention is for the social and cultural attitudes which determine behavior. The church has long been one of the major social institutions that has defined how people should see themselves and direct their behavior."¹⁵ This places not just clergy, who are the focus of Pattison's chapter, but all members of the church community in a unique position of being called to recognize signs of mental illness and provide the resources necessary for healing. Dewey Mullis claims: "It is imperative that pastors speak openly about mental health - their own trials or in general. Fear of speaking on tough or taboo topics in church is profoundly counter to the church's objective of being a safe and welcoming place for peace-seekers and those in need of care."¹⁶ This transparency becomes a facet of the meta-ethic of the New Testament and, while not all members of the church community are trained to face the challenges of those struggling with their psychological health, the community of love and new identity as children of God generates the environment for those persons to both grow and receive the care they require.

¹⁵E. Mansell Pattison, "An Overview of the Church's Roles in Community Mental Health" in Howard J. Clinebell, ed. *Community Mental Health: The Role of Church and Temple* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1970).

¹⁶Dewey Mullis, "The Invisible Congregant: The Church's Relationship with Mental Illness", 2018, from the Moravian Church In America, accessed 22 January 2021, <https://www.moravian.org/>.

Just as mental health is a difficult topic in church so is that of dealing with sexual sin and gender identification. A reluctance within the church to address this issue will be obvious to the very audience we wish to attract to God's love: those who engage in sinful sexual activity or identify in differently gendered ways. Addressing societal issues is not to somehow infer the church must blindly accept individuals whose values do not conform to the teaching of God's word. Sexual impropriety is sin, homosexuality is sin, and transgender identification is sin, as evidenced by a Biblically based theology of the body. Andrew Walker wisely demonstrates the dichotomy facing the church when he says: "First, Christians welcome all into the grace of the gospel, because our gospel is applicable and available to all (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). So, first and foremost, we must offer genuine love to our gender dysphoric [or homosexual] neighbor (Mark 12:30–31). But as Christians, we're also required to confront new challenges with biblical truth."¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoffer considers there to be no two ways of being a disciple; it is all or nothing. He says: "The call of Jesus Christ means either that we are the salt of the earth, or else we are annihilated; either we follow the call or we are crushed beneath it."¹⁸ What he is saying is that not only is the church called to be a witness to Christ-like ethics, we also are mandated to never bend to the expectations of those who would say we must accept sinful actions. We can and *must* love others and invite them into relationship with God, without accepting the immoral baggage they bring with them. Damaged sexual identities are a result of the original sin with which all people are born in this world. God does not make a person gay, nor does He create them with gender dysphoria. Sin fractures the perfection God intended and introduces damaged aspects of humanity, especially

¹⁷ Andrew T. Walker, "The Christian Response to Gender Dysphoria," The Gospel Coalition, 09 September 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-christian-response-to-gender-dysphoria/>. Brackets added.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 2018)

human sexuality, into the world.¹⁹ God does not accept sin, in fact His holiness repels it. Christians today must be very conscious of the truths of sexual sin and how they affect individuals, just as they must recognize mental health concerns. We are called to love those persons as God loves them, without being forced to accept their identity. The difficult task is this: God calls *all* of us to give up our prior sexual identities which are scarred by sin in order to live within a salvific relationship with Him.

These aspects of meta-ethic provide a place of mutual love, trust, and comfort when and only when the members of the worldwide church invest in one another as God has called them to do. The world today is rife with divisive ideologies which members of the church must not only strive to overcome, but must also counter in presenting a new ideology, that of identity with Christ. Citing a number of studies, Narbona, Pujol, and Gregory indicate that people feel powerless to control their lives, seemingly swept along by society, modernity, and convenience. They write, “As a consequence, those with simple answers encapsulated in ideologies such as nationalism, fundamentalism, populism or indeed other forms of activism, could find resonance.”²⁰ The church provides a place of comfort which every member must work to maintain. Far from siding with divisive political ideals, the church must rather emulate the love of Christ who calls us to take up our own cross and follow Him. This level of sacrifice brings with it not just giving up our selves, but our beliefs. We must come to recognize what

¹⁹ David Bennett in *A War of Loves* writes being gay is how he was born and it is not a choice. However, he goes on to show God did not make him gay, being born gay was a by-product of original sin, which damaged his sexuality in contravention to what God intends. While this indicates an assumption of nature over nurture, that is, being gay is how one is born as opposed to a lifestyle choice, Bennett goes on to conclude that while *being gay* is not a sin in itself, acts of homosexuality are sin according to Scripture. Thus Bennett chose a life devoted to avoiding fulfilling his same sex attraction sexually and is a committed celibate. David Bennett, *A War of Loves* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018).

²⁰ Juan Narbona, Jordi Pujol, and Anne Gregory, “The fragile tenets of trust,” *Church, Communication and Culture*, (2020) 5:3, 293-297.

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Christ was saying in his statement that “whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”²¹ Here He is calling His followers to give up their own identities in accepting and taking on this new identity as Christ followers.

So we see that for Christians, our devotion to our newfound church tribe spills over in love and care for our fellow citizens of the world. Brueggemann goes on to encourage his readers:

The invitations of Moses, of Isaiah in exile, and Jesus, the invitation of the whole Bible, is to change the foundational loyalty of our life and to engage in this new loyalty that heals, liberates, and reconciles....The central affirmation of every missionary sermon is that the power of deathliness has no more authority or claim over us. We are free for the loyalty appropriate to our life in the world.²²

The Israelites in the promised land were expected to live out an impossible set of laws, and when they failed to live in adherence to those standards, were required to bring a sacrifice to God. Today in the church, as in the ancient land of Israel, we are also required to make a sacrifice. Where Christ’s work on the cross has taken the place of the old laws and a new set of laws is in place for our lives, the requirement remains for His followers to sacrifice themselves to be in communion with Him. We must consider our very selves to be dead, so that Christ alone can live in us.²³

Only by sacrificing our own identities and accepting a new identification with Christ and His church can His followers establish a new community. The Apostle Paul was the greatest missionary and preacher of the first century. He established a new standard, one which was characterized by a new ethic

²¹ Mat 10.39.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gal 2.20.

which grew out of relationship. Earle Cairns writes: “Paul’s ethical system grew out of this personal union of the believer with Christ by faith. This vertical relationship is to be balanced by a horizontal relationship in which one is united with fellow believers by Christian love expressed in moral life.”²⁴ This in fact becomes a meta-ethic, for the believer cannot fulfill their requirements to society without fulfilling their requirements to their immediate community. This demands the giving up of ourselves, because in our sin nature every person is inherently self-serving.²⁵ Christ calls us to sacrifice our very selves, our personal identities, and to take on a new identification as His church. Once we identify in this way, Christ followers are enabled to live in the way that they could not previously, a way which is characterized by love for others, selflessness, forgiveness, gentle words, and all the other fruits that come from having God the Holy Spirit living within us.

To return to Sebastian Junger, he makes the observation that when people are disconnected from community, as we tend to be in this postmodern world, the baser elements and inherently self-serving aspects of humanity come to the forefront. He correctly states, “A fundamental lack of connectedness allows people to act in trivial but incredibly selfish ways.”²⁶ He goes on to note: “Acting in a tribal way simply means being willing to make a substantive sacrifice for your community – be that your neighborhood, your workplace, or your entire country.”²⁷ People are desperate for community, for mutual support and common goals. Church can meet this

²⁴ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 69.

²⁵ Donna Wallace goes on to point out “that the failure of the North American Church in loving our neighbors (those we have decided are not ‘us’) is largely due to our own misplaced identity. This means that even our best intentions to love are broken.” Wallace, “Glory.” 4, parenthetical statements original.

²⁶ Junger, *Tribe*, 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

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need, but only church as an expression of the person of Christ, who loved us so dearly that He sacrificed His own life. The message of the church must be that if one can give up themselves and accept Christ's sacrifice they can live as members of this new tribe, a tribe which embodies love for each other and for the world.

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