

Who Do You Love?

By Mark Bergin

Sometimes the most innocuous seeming things can be enemies of the Gospel. Take church sports leagues, for example. What could be harmful about a group of men or women from a particular church or multiple churches organizing together for some friendly games of basketball or soccer? Nothing, of course, unless such leagues represent a missed opportunity to befriend and connect with those outside the church. Why not gather a few Christian friends and join the city league, thereby dispensing the salt and light of Christian community among people yet to taste it.

The most common objection to this line of missional thinking? Christians need fellowship, that special, sweet interaction with brothers and sisters in the faith. And of course they do. But are many church-belonging believers truly starved for fellowship? On the contrary, we Christians are splitting our pants with perpetual all-you-can-eat fellowship buffets. We fellowship on Sundays with worship services and potlucks, on Tuesday nights with small group meetings, on Wednesday nights with Bible classes, and on Saturdays with softball tournaments or ski outings. We fill our social calendars with fellowship-laden dinner parties or coffee outings. The moms among us fellowship around their children's play dates, the dads around fishing trips or the church's open gym night.

Now, the fruit of all this fellowship is often glorious, self-sacrificing communities, places where people truly love each other and share each others' burdens. But the tragedy is that no one gets to see these beautiful communities except for the Christians who belong to them. And therein lies a massive problem. The church is meant to be God's primary vehicle of revealing himself to the world. He intends to use us to incarnate in the same way he once did in the person of Jesus. We are, in this strictly defined sense, the new Jesus.

So how then shall we live? Like Jesus, of course, out in the market place, interacting with the unconvinced, attending the parties of sinners. The rhythms of our lives must necessarily afford opportunity to build true friendships with people who don't believe. In fact, our life rhythms should fold non-Christians seamlessly into our church communities. And this is impossible if we spend the entirety of our lives in the bubble of Christian fellowship.

Jesus balanced both fellowship and mission perfectly. He spent time alone with his followers building a community of profound beauty, and he then took that community out in the world and put it on display. His ability to attain such balance hinged not simply on obedience to the call of his Father. Mission is not about sucking it up and holding your nose through the regrettable Christian duty of interacting with nonbelievers. Quite the opposite, Jesus truly enjoyed the company of sinners.

Could we say the same of ourselves? Do we enjoy the company of the unconvinced, the skeptic? What about the liar, the cheat, the promiscuous? Or the drunk or the vulgar?

There are plenty of those types in the citywide sports league I'm a part of. On a recent Saturday, after a few hours of games, I invited them all over to my place for barbecue. They brought too much beer and dropped far more f-bombs than I'm typically comfortable with. The conversation

often steered gutter-ward, and the name of Jesus crossed their lips as a common cuss. So be it. Should we expect redeemed behavior out of the unredeemed?

Despite all the crudeness and drunken revelry, these people remained image bearers of our Maker – that is to say, something of God echoed from them. And because of that reality, I could enjoy their company. We laughed. We told our stories. I talked about Jesus. And by evening's end, I called them friends.

Now, I can hardly wait for more Saturdays. The sports season has only just begun.

Calling it like I see it for Primetime America, I'm Mark Bergin.