

Community

‘Community’ is the buzz word in Evans’ scheme.¹ He is an elder (the ‘lead minister’) in the Community Grace Church, Kempston:

Grace: The infinite love, mercy, favour, and goodwill shown to humanity by God. We are more deeply flawed than we can imagine, yet we are at the same time more deeply loved than we ever dared hope.

Community: Our primary responsibility is to love and care for the people we live amongst. Many of us live in and around the town which needs to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and see his love in action through his followers’ service.

Church: Those who trust in and follow Jesus. It is all about a community or family of Christians who love and serve him, and so are also committed to each other.²

Do not miss ‘Our primary responsibility is to love and care for the people we live amongst’. This is a very serious re-writing of Christ’s plain and solemn declaration:

One of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him: ‘Which commandment is the most important of all?’ Jesus answered: ‘The most important is: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength”. The second is this: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. There is no other commandment greater than these’ (Mark 12:28-31).

And Jesus came and said to them: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matt. 28:18-20).

¹ Evans uses the word over 60 times in his book.

² Kempston Grace website.

Community

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark. 16:15-16).

This difference should set alarm bells ringing right at the start of this chapter.

In the New Testament, the two communities which count are the church (the *ekklēsia*, the children of God, the assemblies of believers) and the world. And, in the New Testament, these two communities are utterly distinct and separate; chalk and cheese, oil and water, don't come into it:

We know that we [that is, believers] are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19).

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word... I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours... I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one... I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:6,9,11,13-18).

The churches of the New Testament were made up of believers, and only believers, men and women who had been converted to Christ from Judaism or pagan idolatry.³ Alas, even in the best regulated churches in those days, some false

³ It goes without saying that 'believing' was the absolute minimum qualification.

Community

teachers (false brothers) ‘slipped in’, ‘sneaked in’, ‘crept in’ to the churches ‘unawares’, ‘unnoticed’, intent on spying out the believer’s liberty in Christ (Gal. 2:4; 2 Pet. 2:1; Jude 4). But it doesn’t take rocket science to work out what the first believers would have thought about an unbeliever infiltrating himself among them. In addition to the passages just cited, the language used to describe them, their motives and actions, 1 Corinthians 5 is conclusive.

It is clear, therefore, that the early churches had to bear this in mind when a stranger might – might – on occasion, come into one of their assemblies (1 Cor. 14:23-25; Jas. 2:2). Although such a thing was (very probably) a rarity, they knew only too well that there was always the risk that any newcomer might be a spy or a false teacher. In addition, as the last two passages cited show, the believers were also subject to the apostolic rule that they had to watch their behaviour in the presence of the stranger – both among themselves, and towards the newcomer.

As for the unbelievers in question, self-evidently, even if they had been sincerely motivated, or just curious, before long they would have found the spiritual atmosphere of the *ekklēsia* too much to stomach, and would have quitted the assembly (1 John 2:19), unless they had been converted to Christ (1 Cor. 14:23-25).

Putting all this together, there is no evidence of any protracted ‘church attendance’ by unbelievers. Moreover, it is clear that believers would never have encouraged such a practice. There is not the slightest suggestion that the early churches actively sought or encouraged it. The notion that the early believers would have put on events to attract unbelievers to ‘attend church’ is ludicrous. The truth is, ‘church attendance’ is a Christendom concept from start to finish. It was unknown in the first days of the gospel. These are simple but stubborn and unmistakable facts. The church was for believers. The church and the world were separated communities (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:2). The church was what its name implied: *ekklēsia*, the called-out ones.

And of these believers, it is said:

Community

The Lord Jesus Christ... gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father (Gal. 1:3-4).

[God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Col. 1:13).

Rescued us from this world, this evil age, please note – not merely rescued us from damnation.

Consequently:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room

Community

for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay', says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head'. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:1-21).

According to the New Testament, the *ekklēsia* is the community which counts; it is certainly not the world; above all, it is not the world in the *ekklēsia*, or the *ekklēsia* and the world working together in a common project.

I see this superbly illustrated in Paul's letter to Philemon. Paul has to deal with the thorny issue of slavery – something which, despite the labours of William Wilberforce and friends, is still rampant in the world. Without digressing to examine Paul's letter in detail, is it not obvious that while the apostle steers clear of getting involved in the *mores* of Roman society, he brilliantly argues on the basis of spiritual love for a radical change in the life and attitude of the *ekklēsia* regarding slavery? Not the world – that is not his concern – but the *ekklēsia*. As he says when he writes to the Corinthians:

What have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you' (1 Cor. 5:12-13).⁴

It stands out a mile: 'community', for Paul, was the *ekklēsia*, not the world.

And this enables us to answer the vital question: How should the *ekklēsia* 'do' community? The New Testament tells us:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us... Finally, all of you,

⁴ I fully acknowledge that Paul is speaking of judgment, but as I showed in the chapter 'The Fundamental Flaw', Evans uses 1 Cor. 5 to justify believers mixing not only with the world (which is right, as salt and leaven), but in the church, the *ekklēsia* (which is wrong). See Evans pp190-191.

Community

live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For: 'Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil'. Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened'. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil... Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling... Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian,⁵ do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And: 'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?' So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good (1 Pet. 2:12; 3:15-17; 4:9,12-19).

Do everything [as]... blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which

⁵ This should be pronounced as 'CHRISTian', the clear emphasis being laid upon 'Christ'.

Community

you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life (Phil. 2:14-16).

And this, of course, stems directly from the words of Christ:

You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16).

Let me make this personal. Notice that men have to see our good deeds and so magnify God. *This does **not** mean they come to the activities we put on for them, enjoy them, so that, after we have formed a deepening and lasting relationship with them, we can then evangelise them!* Not at all! Rather, we must so live before the world that we take away all ground, any ground, for their criticism of us, even compelling them to recognise that believers have what they and their culture do not:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35).

All this should be done in hope that our good deeds among ourselves (not in providing charitable and cultural services for *the world* with the idea of forming a relationship with *unbelievers*) might point them to Christ.

Let me give you an example of the kind of instruction the apostle gave the early churches, what he wanted them to do, and how they should go about it:

In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us. Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching

Community

about God our Saviour attractive. For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach (Tit. 2:7-15).

Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities [among themselves] and not live unproductive lives (Tit. 3:14).

In short, believers can and must engage in charitable acts, among themselves in particular, but never as part of a design to bribe sinners to come to church.

Evans' thesis flies in the face of all this. And how! Evans:

Kathy Keller... says this: 'Redeemer [Church] was founded on the principle that "we are not a church for ourselves, but for people who don't like church"'.⁶

Alpha is the most recognisable evangelism course 'brand', and over 3 million have attended it in the UK since its inception in the early 1990s. That is quite an achievement! Add up all the attendance for other courses as well, and it may have been in the period 1998-2005 that 150,000 extra people started attending church as a result of a course. Wonderful! But [the] conclusion... is candid: [the fact that] '...twice as many die every year as are converted through courses *constitutes an urgent call to evangelism*'.⁷

In a book about church size and growth [that is, his, Evans', book], let the last lesson be: **Don't talk numbers; talk people having life and eternity transformed.**⁸

⁶ Evans p215. What a disgraceful comment! I demand scriptural proof for such a far-reaching claim.

⁷ Evans p217, emphasis his. Note 'attending church' and 'evangelism' are treated as virtually synonymous.

⁸ Evans p218, bold type his.

Community

Take that last. How about sinners being converted and now living lives to the glory of God?

I think the case is made. Evans' view of 'community' is at variance with the New Testament. Moreover, his way of approaching the 'community' involves methods unknown and unwanted in the New Testament. For these two reasons, it is clear that Relationship Evangelism is unscriptural.

Let me summarise. There are two communities – the *ekklēsia* and the world. Believers must engage in deeds ministry. This is fundamentally an in-house concern. Yes, believers are to do good to all, but primarily and overwhelmingly this ministry must be carried out within the *ekklēsia*, among the believers (Gal. 6:10). There is a connection between the believers' deeds-ministry and evangelism: when the world witnesses the *ekklēsia* engaged in deeds ministry, when it sees love in action among the believers (John 13:34-35), and when it is moved to question them about it all (1 Pet. 3:13-17), it is then that the evangelism conversation starts. Let me be clear: this is not the be-all-and-end-all of evangelism; I am confining my remarks to the connection between deeds ministry and the community. But what I have set out *is* that connection – the scriptural connection. Evans' thesis – that the church sets up deeds ministries for unbelievers to attract them to church to evangelise them – has no scriptural warrant. The idea should be poleaxed forthwith.