Corporate Identity and Solidarity in the Bible

Article for Unit 2

It's the way far too many sins are rationalized: I'm only hurting myself! This emphasis on the individual is extremely dangerous, not only because Paul said we should not abuse God's grace, but also because focusing solely on oneself runs counter to the worldview offered by Scripture. Christians in the western hemisphere often operate with an individualistic mind-set centered on themselves. Individualism in itself is not problematic inasmuch as Scripture certainly teaches individual responsibility, but it is problematic if overemphasized and not balanced by an identification with our faith community (the Church), which the Bible clearly emphasizes.

Covenant and Community

Israel's covenant with God was foundational not only to its religion, but also to its self-understanding. Israel's existence as a nation derived from the covenant between God and His people; Israel was a covenant community. It was Israel, as a corporate body, that became a kingdom of priests in Exodus 19:6, not a subset of individual Israelites.

As a holy nation, Israel was to reflect God's character (Leviticus 19:2) because God dwelt within Israel's midst. In Leviticus' theology, this holiness was threatened by impurity. When Israel became impure through sin, it was not a minor issue involving only a few people. Rather, impurity, as the antithesis of holiness, was a serious problem because Israel could not be holy and impure simultaneously. This is why the sacrificial system was needed: it removed the people's impurity.

According to Exodus 34:6-7, sin affects both sinners and their descendants. Why? Because sin was a corporate problem. While the Old Testament law usually punished the individual (see Exodus 22:18-20; Deuteronomy 24:16), sin could have drastic consequences if left unaddressed—not only consequences for the sinner but also for those infected by that person's impurity.

This is how 2 Kings explains the fall of the kingdom of Judah. The person held responsible was Manasseh, who was so sinful that God said he would wipe out Jerusalem (2 Kings 21:13). Even after Josiah's revival, the narrator tells us that God's anger still burned against Judah because of Manasseh's sins (2 Kings 23:25-27). Later, during Jehoiakim's reign, Judah's destruction was explained as God's punishment for Manasseh's sins (2 Kings 24:1-4).

Surely, there were some Israelites who abided by the covenant; but it was Israel as a whole that became impure because of the people's apostasy. This is why Daniel, whom Scripture portrays as a very righteous person, confessed to rebelling against God in Daniel 9. He was not only confessing personal misdeeds, but also stood in solidarity with his people by confessing the community's sin and asking for mercy.

Another example of the community being punished for one person's sin is found in Joshua 7. After defeating Jericho, Israel attacked Ai but was defeated because God was not with them. This was because Achan had sinned by keeping some of Jericho's contraband treasure. Thirty-six Israelites died in battle because of Achan (Joshua 7:4-5). Later on, when he was identified as the guilty party, it was not only Achan who was punished but also his family—they all bore the guilt of Achan's sin.

Family and Community

Achan's story sounds odd to readers who are unaccustomed to the idea of communal identity, but it is not so odd when set in its historical and social context. The Israelite family was an interconnected unit, which meant that Achan's sin spread throughout his household. This interdependent view of the family was foundational to Israel's society, which had three levels: tribes, clans, and households. The household, organized under the father, was the smallest and the most basic unit of Israelite society.

The family consisted of a husband, his wife and sons, his sons' wives, his unmarried daughters, and his male and female servants. The father was the family's head, but he was not the king of his own private castle. Rather, he depended on the members of his family just as they depended on him. For example, women did much more than rear the children; they also tended gardens, took care of small animals, produced clothes, and were responsible for preparing and preserving food. These last few tasks were complex and required a technical knowledge without which the family could not survive. Consequently, the common assumption that women were the husband's property needs to be balanced with the observation that the husband was very much dependent on his wife since he was unable both to work in the fields and to perform the tasks around the home (which he may not have known how to do, even if he had the time).

Israelite parents were also in many ways dependent on their children. Younger children performed duties around the home, older sons tended flocks away from the house and older daughters learned the tasks described above from their mothers. The family had a strong sense of community; it worked together and (hopefully) prospered together.

Family was also closely connected to Israel's relationship with God; fathers were responsible for teaching their children what God had done for Israel (see Exodus 12:26 ff.; Joshua 4:6 ff.; Deuteronomy 6:20-24). Additionally, the firstborn son, who would receive the father's inheritance
and one day lead the family, was consecrated to God (Exodus 13:12-15). In claiming the firstborn for himself, God also asserted His claim over Israel's next generation; they were His holy people—redeemed and sustained by Him.

**The New Testament’s New Community**

The family remains an important component of community in the New Testament. However, there are significant changes to note. Firstly, we should recognize Jesus’ redefinition of family in Mark 3:20-34. When Jesus’ mother and brothers came to stop Jesus’ ministry, Jesus asserted that His true mother and brothers were those who did God’s will. In this radical redefinition of family, Jesus showed that biological relationships are of less importance than they had been previously. God’s people were no longer to be identified by their relationship to a biological father but by their willingness to follow Jesus’ Father.

Paul made a similar argument in Ephesians 2. The Gentiles, formerly excluded from God’s people (Israel), became members of God’s household through the work of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-19). The language here is reminiscent of kinship language from the Old Testament. The communal implications of being a family (such as supporting each other) that we saw in the Old Testament remain important for the New Testament’s understanding of family. Just as the members of early Israelite families met each other’s needs, so the early Christians met the needs of their new family (see, Acts 6:1-6; 2 Cor. 8:1-4; Phil. 4:15 ff.). The difference was that this new family was not biological; it consisted of those who followed God—Jews and Gentiles.

**Paul and Community**

Another place where knowledge of communal identity is essential for understanding the Bible is in Paul’s body of Christ metaphor for the Church. Paul used this metaphor to teach that the Church was composed of various members that needed to work as a unit if they were to meet their potential. Just as the parts of the body are interdependent on each other, so the members of Christ’s body are interdependent on one another (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

This metaphorical body was composed of individuals who had made choices for themselves. However, in Romans 12:1, the choice that Paul encouraged them to make was to offer their individual bodies as living sacrifices. In verses 4 and 5, these individual members were integrated to form one body in Christ in which the gifts given to each person complement the gifts of others for ministry, according to God’s design (Romans 12:4-6; see also 1 Corinthians 12:18-27).

For the early Church, membership in this body included all who were baptized into Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). This baptism itself was a communal activity—all who were baptized into Christ were baptized into His death (Romans 6:3). Christians are “buried together with” Jesus in baptism so that they might also walk with Him in newness of life (v. 4) because, in baptism, Christians identify with Christ.

Paul’s logic here only works if one is thinking communally, not individually. He understands Jesus as representative of humanity as a whole—just as Adam was representative of humanity (Romans 5:12-20). Through Adam, all humanity was exposed to sin and death; in Christ, all humanity is offered God’s grace. Paul interprets Jesus and Adam as representatives for humanity as a whole. William Greathouse and George Lyons have summarized Paul’s position well: “In Adam we potentially died in sin; in Christ we provisionally died to sin” (New Beacon Bible Commentary: Romans 1—8, [Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2008], 161). The reason that Christians can be united with Christ in baptism is because Jesus, like Adam, did not act on behalf of one man (himself) but on behalf of all humanity; He was the one Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world.

**Jesus’ Baptism**

The discussion of baptism above and its significance for Christians easily leads to the question of why Jesus was baptized. If John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4), why did the sinless one need to be baptized by John?

One reason that Jesus was baptized connects to corporate identity: though He was God, Jesus also was Jewish and stood in solidarity with His people. Jesus had not sinned, but He identified with those who had broken the covenant. John’s baptism was not solely for the forgiveness of sins, which the Levitical code said could be rectified through sacrifice. John’s baptism was also about preparing for the in-braking of God’s kingdom—for the arrival of the Holy One.

In Mark, John’s baptism for the forgiveness of sins was preparation for Jesus’ arrival. Following Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Him and drove Him into the desert for forty days (Mark 1:10-12). Afterwards, He emerged from the wilderness proclaiming that God’s kingdom had drawn near; the Holy One was among His people. This people was then redefined by Jesus (as was family—see above), the new people of God were those gathered around Jesus who did God’s will. Just as ancient Israel was defined as the covenant-community that constituted God’s kingdom of priests and therefore was required to be holy, so also in Mark was God’s new people identified by those who were close to Jesus and therefore holy. To be sure, this people would be made of individuals, but it is also these who corporately would become the new covenant people—the body of Christ.

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