



THE CHRISTIAN & SUPPORT GROUPS

THE CASE FOR SHARING OUR PAIN

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When they attend a support group for the first time, people are often quiet, wondering if this is really for them. Perhaps at some point, someone says something that resonates with them, and they nod their head slightly in affirmation or look at a spouse, sensing – maybe for the first time – they are not alone in their pain. And so it begins.

I am continually surprised by the power of empathy or the ability to understand and share the feelings of others and how this gives people hope and strength.

I was once cynical about support groups, like those who believe we should give people some steps and tell them “work the plan.” Like them, I wondered, aren’t support groups just people sitting around complaining about their problems?

And then I experienced the strength and healing that occurs when we open up to others and say, “I understand what you are going through, because I’ve experienced it, too.”

The New York Times columnist, David Brooks notes the success of 12-step programs has prompted investigation into why they succeed. In discussing Alcoholics Anonymous, the oldest and most widespread of 12-step programs, he observes how counter-cultural they really are.

“In a culture that thinks of itself as individualistic, A.A. relies on fellowship. The general idea is that people are not captains of their own ship. Successful members become deeply intertwined with one another – learning, sharing, suffering, and mentoring one another. Individual repair is a social effort” (*Bill Wilson’s Gospel*, *The N.Y. Times*, June 29th, 2010).

Is this not a picture of the church as represented in the New Testament, long before the invention and development of the 12 steps? Is this not what Paul is describing in the sixth chapter of Galatians? Is this not the type of community mirrored in Acts 2:42-47, Colossians 3:12-14, James 5:16, and Hebrews 10:24-25?





The type of fellowship in support groups – ranging from those dealing with substance abuse to sexual abuse – teaches that individual repair can be a social effort. The scriptures often mention fellowship, transliterated, “koinonia.” It has a sense of living out the gospel by sharing burdens and sorrows, in much the same way one might share a meal with one who is hungry. It is sharing in the pain of someone, like Christ sharing in the sin and suffering of humanity, by imitating the sacrificial giving of himself throughout his life and most keenly on the cross. Yet, strangely, and wonderfully, this giving away, leaves us not with less but with more—more healing, more wholeness, and more peace.

Paul describes growth in Christ for the believer who shares in the power of the resurrection and the fellowship (koinonia) of his suffering (Philippians 3:10) and becomes Christlike. In the book of Hebrews, fellowship is linked with praising God with words and deeds, as acts of worship; *“And do not forget to do good and (koinonia) share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased”* (Hebrews 13:16). Sharing your painful experience with someone can be an act of worship of Jesus and a source of healing.

This process is also seen in Romans 8:28, as *“...God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* A difficult, even tragic experience can be used by God to help others if we are

willing to “koinonia,” share with others. In addition, we can help a brother or sister carry a burden by sharing our own difficult experiences: *“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ”* (Galatians 6:2). One can easily picture a person burdened by their own addiction, or the addiction of a loved one, and helped by another to carry their burden by sharing their own story and offering comfort. I believe this fellowship (koinonia) is also what it means to rejoice with those who rejoice and to mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:18).

Unfortunately, many miss out on the power of sharing their troubles, because of the stigma of having a problem. The first inclination of too many Christians is to hide their faults and problems. Sometimes it seems the more active people are in church, the less likely they are to share about significant problems in their lives or the lives of their loved ones. My church was immeasurably blessed by leaders that stood up during congregational prayer and expressed thanks for a child’s sobriety and their own.

Conversations that share our pain sacrificially bring healing, because they give hope and strength. We realize, “I am not alone!” We realize by giving, we receive (Acts 20:35). We claim our lives as more than a destructive event, an addiction, or a loss. Our sharing becomes a radical act of faith: *“Greater is he who is in me than is in the world (1 John 4:4).”*