



In The Beginning

What if our theology could get up out of our armchairs and into the real world? That would be something worth talking about. This is The Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

*Father, we've forgotten
that you've called us together
to bear each other's burdens
and worship you as one.*

“Community loneliness - that might be the great evangelistic opportunity of our time, the great wound in the world that needs healing.”

“Mixing our faith with a political party is like mixing ice cream and horse manure. It doesn't do much damage to the manure, but it really messes up the ice cream.”

“It's very early. It's very primal. It's very deep within the human community, is that we are people who do not want to be alone.”

“I'd love to see us stand more in solidarity with one another, not looking down on one another, but together finding that level ground at the foot of the cross of Jesus and sharing in the hope of the resurrection.”

*One church,
One light,
One body,
Found in Christ.*

Introduction

Jesse Penner: You're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. I'm Jesse Penner.

Andrew Dyck: And I'm Andrew Dyck. Hey, Jesse. What's the first reference to baseball in the Bible?

JP: I don't know.

AD: Genesis 1:1 in the big inning.

JP: [Groan] [Laugh]

AD: I know the groan is more appropriate than the laugh.

JP: To whoever stuck around...

AD: We set a new record for clicks off of a podcast.

JP: Yeah, exactly. I'll be very interested to look at the analytics of this one. We are jumping back to the beginning, which makes Andrew's joke – I don't know if you can call it a joke, Andrew's attempt at a joke, very apropos. We are going to the beginning of the Bible and this actually starts, just to give you maybe a little bit of a roadmap here for where we're headed, over the next few episodes we're going to be kind of taking a theological tour through Scripture and trying to get a sense of the big picture of God's design for community as we see it laid out in the Bible. And there is no better place to start, I don't think, than the beginning of the book. Genesis 1-3 really does an incredible job of laying out what God's intentions for creation are, what his plan and purpose is for us, and what our relationship is to him.

It sets up everything for the rest that follows afterwards. And so it's a good place to kind of get our theological footing on what it is that God thinks about community.

AD: Design is the operative word here. I mean, if you are building or creating anything, you've got a blueprint, you've got a plan, you have a design, and all of creation, and in particular human beings, have been designed by God in a very particular fashion and so it really would be out of order for us to begin to dig too deeply into any understanding of community without really going to those blueprints, without going to that design. And the first few episodes, we've alluded back to the very beginning, and now we are going to explore it more deeply and more fully with our panel of guests.

JP: We have four guests that are joining us today. Dr. Betty Pries is going to join us. Dr. Megan Larissa Good, who you heard on the first couple of episodes, as well as Dr. Patrick Franklin and Dr. Beth Stovell. Those four are going to really begin to explore this question of what we learn from the first few chapters of Scripture, from this creation story, about what our call is in the context of community.

We're going to start off here with Dr. Betty Pries. Betty Pries has over 28 years of experience in mediation and coaching, and she's the co-founder and CEO of Credence and Co and the author of the book *The Space Between Us: Conversations about Transforming Conflict*. I had a chance to sit down with Dr. Pries and asked her the question, what clues do Genesis chapters 1 to 3 give us to better understand God's intentions for community? Here's her response.

What clues does Genesis 1-3 give us to better understand God's intentions for community?

Dr. Betty Pries: Yeah, this is a very interesting question. Also a very big question. When I think about Genesis 1-3, one of the things that I am aware of is that those chapters include two different creation stories and sort of being aware of those two different creation stories helps us to understand, I think, a little bit about community.

The first chapter, which is all of chapter one, is especially interesting to read in comparison with the other creation stories that were popular among Israel's neighbours at the time that it was written or created. Genesis one reminds us that the world is good, and in

contrast to some of the other creation stories that were common in that time in history where creation was bad, this was a real innovation. And to see and to say that God saw and it was good, God saw the earth and it was good. God saw creation, people, and it was good. And that poetic structure “and God saw that it was good,” and God saw that it was good,” it's almost like a song and it's just such a beautiful word of affirmation for the beauty of the world.

And then, of course, we launch into Genesis two and three, which remind us that the world is broken and there is much pain in the world. And it feels like, in a way, these two passages or these two stories, if we take them together they speak to our experience of the human community.

The world is good and the world is broken. Both of these things are true at the very same time, aren't they? And in a way, I think that these two truths, it's good to see them as a both-and rather than as an either-or. We can be tempted to see the world as all broken or all good. But I don't think that's the intention and there must be some wisdom as to why the people who put these stories side by side did what they did. They could have ditched one of those two stories, but they decided to keep both of them because the world is both good and broken. The other thing that I find so heartening, especially in the first of those two creation stories, is that that first creation story ends with this idea that human beings were created in the image of God.

And I wonder, how would our conflicts be different if we remembered that? How would our communities be different if we remembered that, if we allowed this to be a foundational belief that we are created in the image of God, including the person I'm not going along with right now, that might be really transformational. And sometimes I find it helpful to remember, and I'm borrowing from another author here when I say this, that there's a difference between being made in the image of God and behaving in the likeness of God.

We don't always behave in the likeness of God, but that doesn't mean we're not made in the image of God. And those two things, again, like these two stories can sit side by side with one another. We can be made in the image of God and not behave in the likeness of God and these two things can be true at the same time.

And if I could just jump in here with a little anecdote. Years ago, I was reading in a book and the author was referring to an old Jewish rabbi whose name I'm forgetting, but he said that you need to have two pockets and a stone in each pocket. And when you lift out the stone from one pocket, that is the stone that tells you “I am beautiful and then the world was made for me and I am amazing” and so forth. Then you lift the stone out from the other pocket, which is, “I'm not so good after all and there's lots of brokenness in me, and I'm kind of a contributor to the pain in the world.” And both of these things can be true at the very same time.

And we need both of those hands. We need both of those pockets. Both of those truths stand side by side.

AD: You met Meghan Larissa Good in the first two episodes of this season, but as a way of a reminder, Dr. Good is lead pastor at Trinity Mennonite Church and the theology chair of the Jesus Collective. She is also the author of several books, including *Divine Gravity: Sparking a Movement to Recover a Better Christian Story*. This is her answer to the question, what clues do Genesis one to three give us to better understand God's intentions for community?

Dr. Meghan Larissa Good: I always get all fired up talking about Genesis. It's my favorite book of the Bible and I feel like the whole story is there if you know what to look for. But the opening of Genesis gives us these two, I guess, narratives on two dominant relationships. One is the relationship between people and God, and the other is relationship between people and each other.

So the story starts with this initial exploration of the relationship that humans have with God. One of the things that's really striking about that creation story in Genesis is if you compare it to other creation stories that are coming from the same era and part of the world, in most ancient creation stories, you have a narrative where the gods create the humans to do their dirty work.

It's like the gods have a task they don't want to do. They make some the people and then they cast those people off to do the labour and occasionally make an offering to keep the gods happy. And in the book of Genesis, you have this very different kind of story where God makes humans from freedom, like needing nothing, there's no deficit in God that is needing to be filled in Genesis.

So God makes humans with no particular need and then immediately moves into the neighbourhood with them. And you have this narrative unfolding where God forms animals and trots them out to see what the human will say. So you have God and humans as the image bearers of God shaping the world together.

At one point in the story God is walking in the garden and calls out, where are you? And I think people often hear that question, where are you, with the kind of guilty association like this is a surprise inspection, but really, it's a greeting call between friends that are used to spending the evening together. Right.

God is expecting Adam and Eve to be there because this is a shared life. So you have that initial narrative of the kind of community that is designed to exist between God and humans. And then you have a clear, interesting statement from Genesis that it's not enough, that the companionship of God is not the only sort the human needs, and that the first thing that's not good in creation is one human being without another human being.

And that's a very interesting, I think, theological statement, because this initial human has God, this human has animals, but there's still a sense of there's a need for another person like myself. In the language of Genesis, someone of the same substance, an equal. God is above humanity. The dog is below. Like, we need somebody beside.

So you have a narrative in Genesis where God makes another from the side of the human, an equal, and that is needed for the fullness of humanity to be expressed. And then in the story that that love between those two overflows into three. And I think you could argue that as the beginning of human community when you get to that point of three.

But it always strikes me there's two different pieces specifically called out. One is the sameness of this community. Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone, there's something held in common. And another is difference, male and female. Like an element of difference that together gives you a fuller vision of divine complexity. And both of those are critical elements of the formation of this new human community and an expression of the image of God.

AD: Our next guest is Dr. Patrick Franklin. He is an experienced pastor and church planter who serves as the president of the Canadian Scientific Christian Affiliation and an associate professor of theology at Tyndale University. This is what he had to say about the importance of the beginning of Genesis and our understanding of God's intention for community.

Dr. Patrick Franklin: It's a great question because I think when we think about community, Christians often want to jump straight to the New Testament and think about the church.

But I think when we do that, we actually miss out on the reason for being of the church. And you really have to go all the way back to Genesis to begin to see what's going on. In the initial chapter, we have a picture of harmony, essentially. And this is very much I mean, you can see it in the text itself, but it also helps to know something about the ancient context.

I don't know if your listeners would be familiar with John Walton's work about the functional ontology of the opening chapters of Genesis and what he means by that is that in the ancient world, what it means to be is not simply to pop into existence, but it's to have a place in a functioning whole where there's a sense of harmony and everything's kind of working smoothly. So when God says, every day "it is good," and then finally "it is very good," that's not just merely a moralistic statement. It's also a statement of "this is going well, it's functioning well, it's beautiful even, we're seeing harmony, we're seeing God's design." So I think that's the first picture we get.

And in the middle of that, we also get the notion of the image of God, right? And there's lots that could be said. Much ink has been spilled on image of God. But a key notion is that the image of God in the Israelite context is a radical idea. It basically says that the Israelites, but not just them, all people on the earth bear the divine image. So they're sort of like, you know, icons in a temple or idols in a place in a temple. And on the basis of that image, they have dignity and value, and they have a role in the earth to steward the earth and to rule it together in order to glorify God and serve his purposes.

So it's not a self-serving thing like it is in Egypt, for example, where Pharaoh is the divine image and Egypt is the big conquering empire and everybody else exists to be slaves and

servants. It's very different in the context of Genesis. And so I think that's a really neat clue at the beginning of the Bible about the harmonious intention that God values every person.

They all have their place. When we serve the Lord, we're directed outside of ourselves to serve him and one another.

AD: I appreciated what Dr. Franklin had to say about the importance and the nature of this harmonious relationship that we have as part of God's design for community and just wanted him to follow up and expand a little bit more on what he means by this. Here's what he had to say.

PF: Now we could go on to talk about the man and the woman being created for each other, different from each other and yet like each other and both given the commission to rule together and to honour the other. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his writing about creation and fall, talks about the importance of freedom in that, that we are created to be free for God and free for the other. So that's another piece of the social harmony that you find.

We often define freedom in terms of pure autonomy in the West. You know, freedom from you. Freedom for myself. That's actually what Luther and Bonhoeffer talk about when they talk about fallen freedom. So you move to Genesis three, and there's a sense in which Adam and Eve, they grab hold of this central place that belongs to God alone and when they come to each other through God, they find harmony.

When they usurp God's place, it's like, I'm God. You're not. And then all others, including God, the other person creation itself becomes a bunch of objects to serve our own sovereignty. And so Luther and Bonhoeffer both talk about the heart curved in upon itself. So freedom becomes radically freedom for self instead of freedom for the other. And it's a kind of captivity.

It's freedom but really, it's slavery. And so that's a problem that the church has to end up fixing, that the creation of the church means being turned back outside of ourselves again and reoriented to each other in Christ.

AD: I was able to interview Dr. Beth Stovell and ask her the same question about what clues Genesis 1 to 3 give us about the nature of community.

Dr. Beth Stovell has been involved with a variety of ministries over the years and is an Old Testament professor and the Chair of General Theological Studies at Ambrose University. Here's her response to this question.

Dr. Beth Stovell: Yeah, when we think about Genesis one to three, a few things come to mind. I mean, first of all, we start with thinking in terms of Genesis one and the creation of human beings in the image of God. And so as we talk about what does it mean to be community, one of the things that is from the very beginning is that we are all, as human beings, part of this broader community of those who are image bearers.

And because we are image bearers, that affects how we treat every person. We treat people, whether they are Christians or not, as people who hold God's image. And I think that that is a really profound way of thinking about what community means, that whether we think in terms of the community as a Christian community, or we think beyond that, community as what God is formed by making all of us humans together, that extension of the image of God is a really profound thing that keeps us from treating others as though they're not human or as though they're lesser-than.

As we get to Genesis two, we see the idea of Adam and his creation. After his creation, and God says it's not good for man to be alone. This is interesting dynamic of *adam* and *adama*. So the word for Adam can also mean like a human being and is connected to the idea of the land or the earth itself.

And when you talk about that, one of the things I say often when I'm teaching about it, is that this isn't simply a men need women comment. This isn't about marriage. This is really about humanity. We need each other. One of the things that's been shown through studies, there were babies that were in an orphanage and they had a really high death rate and they were like, well, what do we do?

And so they started to take these infants and hold them and just have a regular time every day for each of them that they get held. And they stopped dying. And so this idea that we physically, in who we are, in both our emotional, our spiritual, our mental, but also our physicality, we need each other. That is built into us.

And so I think thinking about community and that need for each other, sometimes combats our typical individualism, that sense that, I'm just me and I just need me. Actually, we need each other deeply. And it's from the very beginning of creation that we see that. And so I'd say that that's an interesting dynamic when we then look at Genesis three, because in Genesis three, we see alienation from each other.

So Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and it's just a circle of blame. They hide from each other. They cover themselves when they were able to be naked before. And that sense of I am with you and I see the image of God in you and I am unafraid, or I am unashamed, has gone.

And so what we think about is we think about renewed community throughout the rest of scripture. It's actually coming back to that space where we are not ashamed to be before each other, to be close to each other, and to be close to God. And so I think that that's another piece of what we mean when we talk about community development.

JP: As I listen to the responses that we received from our four guests today there's a few kind of big themes that I think we can pick up on out of what they talked about. One of the very significant things that I heard running through these responses is simply the acknowledgment of the goodness of creation. When we look at the intention behind what God did, it stands in contrast to maybe how people who are a bit more humanist or

naturalist think about the creation of the world. Certainly when we think about how atheists sort of process existence and its meaning.

Here we have something that stands against that and says, this isn't meaningless. This isn't an accidental thing. This isn't happenstance. There is, I think, earlier you used the word blueprint. There's a blueprint here. There's intentionality behind what God created, and what God created was good, and that's actually a really significant word.

AD: It's an important word. It's a big picture into what type of blueprint we're talking about. And it makes it stand out against some of the other ancient understandings of creation and maybe even stand out against some of our own more contemporary understandings of how things are, the way that they are and what the meaning is behind that.

And in this idea and conversation about goodness, it really stuck out to me, it was meaningful that the first time something wasn't good was when man was alone, when there was not another human being to be in relationship with. And so this was before the fall. This was part of the blueprint of goodness. God, in the midst of this creative act, recognizes that there needs to be not only a relationship between God and human beings, but also expressed now in relationship with human beings together.

And so if we are looking at design and blueprint, there's no room to argue that we need each other. We are designed to be together with each other. That's part of what makes this good. And without it, we miss some of the goodness.

JP: Right. I think it's maybe specifically Patrick Franklin, who talked a bit about goodness, the goodness of creation, not only being sort of a moral value that we apply to it, that it was right or that it was good instead of evil, but that it's good in that it works well, it's achieving what it was meant to achieve. And he sort of addressed it there.

I think immediately from the beginning, what we see are two vectors for relationship, right? There's our relationship with God, but there's also a relationship with each other. And both of those things are presented as fundamental, sort of non-negotiables for creation and for our purposes, humanity to sort of unfold as it is meant to be.

AD: And yet, if we are looking at the full scope of Genesis one through three, we see the initial goodness and then we see what was lost through the fall, through the introduction of sin into this world, and so much of which God had designed to be good, and wholly and completely good, has now been tarnished or broken or bent in some capacity, not only our relationship with him, but also that same community and relationship with one another.

And so now it's not as good as it could have been or was designed to be. Now it is not as harmonious and operating exactly like it was designed to be. There's a knock in the engine, as it were, with this way that we are designed to be together. And so it's a bit of a beautiful passage with a tragedy that happens so close to the outset that that has to also colour our

understanding of how community is expressed and maybe misrepresented or misunderstood or misbehaved today as we move forward in this episode.

JP: Coming up next, we're going to be taking a step even further back than the beginning, if that were possible. We're going to be taking a look at things before creation, at God himself, at the Trinity, at God as a picture of relationship before anything else existed. This is a concept that has fascinated theologians throughout sort of our history and before that as well and it's something that we continue to wrestle with today.

The Trinity is one of the most difficult things to pin down, but it also serves as a fundamental piece of how we understand a co-loving, relationship-oriented, communal God. And it has huge implications once again for how we understand our call towards community. We sat down with these same guests and asked him the question, how does our understanding of the Trinity impact how significant a community is within our theology?

How does our understanding of the Trinity impact how significant a community is within our theology?

JP: I asked Dr. Betty Pries this question, how does our understanding of the Trinity impact how significant community is within our theology? This was her response to that question.

BP: That's a very interesting question. And partly it's interesting because in truth, most of us don't really have a theology of the Trinity. I think most of us in the church are confused by the Trinity and not quite sure what to make of it.

So a metaphor that I find helpful is this metaphor of a waterwheel and one *person* – and I put the word person in italics or in quotation marks just to understand these three different parts of the Trinity, but one person of the Trinity spills into the other, who spills into the other, who spills into the first like a water wheel would.

And they kind of they spill and one spills into the other skills into the other such that you could say that none is complete without the other. These three persons of the Trinity, none of them is complete without the other. Each one needs the other in order to be complete. And some would say that theologian, some theologians would say that the human community is actually meant to mirror the Trinity.

And what that means is that each one of us spills into the other. Or another way of saying it is that none of us is complete alone. Of course we know this. We've been made to be limited. Unless you're a person that I don't know yet. But all of the people that I've met in this world are limited in some fashion, and we need each other in order to thrive.

Whether you're very detail-oriented, or very big picture oriented or this or that, whatever it might be, we need a diversity of skill sets in order to thrive, in order to be whole. We are not smart alone. We are not wise alone. We're always smarter in community. We're wiser in committee. We're meant to be in community.

And some people would say that the Trinity, as opposed to being something that's flying up there, which is sometimes how we see it, is actually a structure embedded very much into what it means to be on this planet and what it means to be a person.

And the structure of Trinity speaks to this community of co-creation, essentially, that these three persons of the community, these three beings in the Trinity relate to one another in a way that they co-create the world together.

The other way that I think about Trinity is – I was at a conference once where the leader was making a passing remark and he was on his way to another topic, but he said, “well, you know, God is formlessness, Jesus is form and the Holy Spirit is transform.” And then he was off but I kind of stopped there and thought about this for a long time. Let's just think about this for a moment. God is formlessness, Jesus is form and the Holy Spirit is transform. How does that what does that mean if we really allow those words to speak to each other? We know that God is formlessness. We don't behave that way necessarily, but we know God says, “don't put me in a box.” We know Jesus form. He's human. And one of the things that we know about this formlessness and form is that, if you just allow formlessness and form for a moment, formlessness without form has a hard time moving in the world, but form without formlessness has no breadth and so formlessness and form need each other.

And the Holy Spirit is like this great alchemist who brings formlessness and form into wholeness with one another. It's another way of thinking about the Trinity, but it's one that has inspired me to think about how we participate in formlessness and form? How are we walking alongside Jesus and following Jesus into that form in relationship to formlessness and God breathes in us and through us to give us life and we embody God's characteristics into the world. And it's the Holy Spirit that brings these two together.

I find that another way of thinking about Trinity and its impacts on our community, our sense of community, because these two, formlessness and form, need each other to be whole and we can't do this without an incursion of the Holy Spirit that brings these two together.

AD: Meghan Larissa Good had many great things to say about how our understanding of the Trinity impacts the significance of community.

MLG: Now this is a real epiphany for me, I think at one point in my faith we talked so much about Jesus in my Anabaptist tradition growing up that the Trinity wasn't always an overt part of the conversation. Worshiping with traditions that talked about it a lot more, it was really kind of striking to me the moment I began to understand how important this is to our picture of not just who God is, but what it means to be human. That ancient Israel had a revolutionary religious insight, that God is one, that there's only one God, which was completely revolutionary in a world where gods were everywhere.

Christianity had a second revolutionary insight that the one God is also three, the very nature of God is bound in community. I like to say the heart of God is a party already in session, right? That's the story that we are walking into as humans. And I think I used to

have an image of God before the creation of the world, just kind of floating alone in a sea of dark, and it was such a depressing, lonely image of poor God, without humans just kind of drifting along and in isolation. In reality, the doctrine of the Trinity says God is love. Love isn't static. It needs a place to flow between. And so the threeness of God creates space for a flow of love between persons.

So God before creation isn't alone in the dark. God is delighting and being delighted in. God is filling and emptying. The early church fathers said that God was dancing, and that creation itself, I think, was born more like a child from an overflow of passion, not from some kind of need or deficit like other ancient stories said. And if that's the image of God, if that's who God is, this eternal flow of love moving back and forth, of self-giving moving back and forth, it's obvious that we humans can't become fully in the image of God alone.

We can't enter that self-giving flow by ourselves, which I think is such a huge realization to have at a time when many people are being becoming disillusioned by community, becoming disillusioned by the church and walking away in disappointment. I can totally understand becoming disillusioned. Community doesn't always live up to its promise, but the reality of a Trinitarian God, I think, is there's no way to grow in God or in love all by yourself.

It requires relationship, it requires community. Your rightness doesn't do the job. It's the negotiation of self-giving that happens in community that is the core of what the project of maturing an image of God is. And more than that even, I think we could say in light of the Trinity, that this the modern romantic ideal in the west of two people completing each other also isn't what we're talking about, that a Trinitarian community is a circle.

It's a moving circle of interconnection and giving and taking and naming and being named, that is the process of becoming like a Trinitarian God. Well, even at a much smaller and more practical level, I think in the midst of this kind of modern quest for everyone is seeking their own identity that we often find out who we are the best in relationship with what is other than us, right?

Like I come to know myself in contrast in some ways to know what gift is uniquely mine to give and what gifts are uniquely others to give and I think I've learned far more about myself from that relationship with what is other than me than I ever would have on my own.

AD: Dr. Patrick Franklin also weighed in on how our understanding of the Trinity impacts the significant source of community within our theology. Listen to what he has to say.

PF: It's a great question. I think the Trinity is highly significant. We should note that there's a huge debate about this. You may be aware of the debate about the social trinity.

One of the problems is that what people can sometimes do is take for granted whatever view of church or politics or community that they have, and then read that into the Trinity

and then exposit that as if it's kind of flowed out of the Trinity and so ironically, you get people arguing very different visions of community based on the Trinity.

But I think I think one of the really good places to go on this is to go to the gospel of John. Basically chapters 14 to 17. And in chapters 14 to 16, there's a lot that Jesus is saying about the one he's going to send when he goes, the advocate, the Spirit. And there's this divine pattern that emerges.

Jesus says, you know, I'm going to send forth the Spirit. The Spirit is not going to speak on his own. Just as we've already learned, Jesus never speaks or does anything of himself. He always does and says what the Father is doing and saying. And he says, you know, this Spirit is going to come and indwell you and Paul writes a ton about the indwelling of the Spirit.

So the Spirit comes to be in us. And in that act of indwelling, the Spirit is going to place us in Christ, who's in the Father. So you have initially this divine circle of knowing it's intimate, it's almost exclusive, not because God doesn't want to share it, but because he's sovereign and he's transcendent and infinite, right? So you've got this amazing circle of knowing.

And then out from the Trinity comes the mission of the Son, and then the mission of the Spirit. The Spirit then dwells us, places us in the Son, who's in the Father. So it kind of gets summarized in John 17, where Jesus is praying for the unity of the believers, those who would come later. And he says, Father, I'm praying for them. And he says "just as I am in you and you are in me, may they be in us and so be one."

We learn that the source of our unity is not some social contract that we devise where we each mutually benefit from our own selfishness. And it's not a gathering of people with likes and preferences that are similar to each other. And it's not about people that have the same politics or whatever. It's really ultimately a joint partaking or a joint sharing in the spirit of God.

There's both an analogy and a dis-analogy. You know, Jesus and the Father share perichoretic unity. They are in one another. They co-inhere. We don't co-inhere in one another. That's where there's a disanalogy. What we do, though, is we co-inhere in the Spirit. And so the same Spirit that indwells you indwells me and makes us brothers and sisters or family in a way that goes way beyond and is much deeper than just being part of sort of like a voluntary club, spiritual club or something like that.

So I think that the Trinity in that sense, I don't just mean a doctrine of the Trinity, I mean the actual movement of the Trinity, into creation, drawing us up, is the final and ultimate source of what community really is for Christians. It's deeper than anything that we can name on the surface of things.

AD: I asked Patrick Franklin if this idea of Christian community is an ideal. Are we striving for something? Are we perhaps at risk of over-romanticizing this idea? And he had a very interesting response. You can hear it now.

PF: Yeah, just to go with that for a second, you said you want to go to some ideal or something. Actually, this goes in the exact opposite direction of an ideal because it's the actual work of God that we have to dig down into and recognize and what really else is our hope?

I mean, how can you offer forgiveness when somebody does something to you that's unforgivable? You can't really, you need the power of God, the Spirit of God. I think this is why Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, says the Christian community is not an ideal. It's a divine reality that Christ establishes, into which we are called to participate. And he actually ends up sort of castigating those who promote ideals of community because he says your ideals are always going to let you down and your ideals don't consist of real people that you've been thrown together with.

So now you've got to have your vision, your ideal, and you've got to weed out all the people that don't fit it right. But instead, God's rammed you together with these people because they're your brothers and sisters. And it's through this experience that you're going to actually be formed together as a community, because community is about formation. It's not just about something that happens automatically.

So, yeah, not an ideal. It's actually based on something that God has done. And we have to we have to intentionally draw into that and participate in it.

AD: When I was able to have a conversation with Dr. Beth Stovell, I asked her the same question about what she thought about the understanding of the Trinity impacting our understanding and our practice of Christian community in our theology today. And she had great insight in this as well. Here is her answer.

BS: Yeah. So, I think when you think about it from a biblical perspective, we see different parts of the Trinity or different Christians of the Trinity in action, engaging with the people of God throughout time.

So from the space of God's presence walking with the people as they walk through the wilderness, as we see father language in relationship to David, but then we see it in the New Testament relationship to Jesus. And in many ways, as we think about this sort of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one of the beautiful things we get in Scripture that then flows into our theology is this idea of what we refer to as perichoresis.

So this is the idea of the three persons interacting with us through the Holy Spirit. And so all three persons we experience as the Holy Spirit is with us. And when we think about what does that mean, sometimes we talk about that individually, like the Holy Spirit is with me, and therefore I have Jesus and the Father with me.

But actually, through Scripture, we have that in plurals. So you is often in Paul's writings and in the Gospels, it's often you, and in Texan I'd say y'all, it's actually you plural rather than you singular. So the Holy Spirit is with you, and that's you plural. And so as we think

about this idea of the Holy Spirit, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit interacting with us, engaging with us, that happens in community as well as individually.

And that sense that we continue the work of the Holy Spirit and of Jesus in our lives today also informs what it means to be community. So if we think about what we hear in the book of Acts, for example, we hear how Luke's gospel flows into Acts because Jesus, who is in Luke's gospel, the Holy Spirit is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus.

Sometimes we say Acts doesn't end as a book. It continues with us. And that sense that we as community are continuing to live out the way of Jesus. And so it flows into the different aspects of how we see ourselves as the community that continues the work, the ministry of Jesus that he began on earth.

AD: I really appreciated how Beth Stovell highlighted the plurality of the you's that we find in all of these descriptions of us as image bearers and in our relationship with the Trinity. So follow that up I asked her what difference does it make when we understand image bearing as corporate or communal instead of just individual? Here's her response.

BS: So I would start by saying, I do think that when we think about the Old Testament and New Testament, those cultures were far more collective cultures. They were cultures that thought in terms of community rather than in terms of individualism. It doesn't mean that there weren't impacts individually to what they said, but largely they're thinking in terms of communities rather than in terms of individuals.

If we think more in that collective space and that communal space, we start to notice things in Scripture like, weep with those who are weeping, and rejoice with those who are rejoicing. Like the ways in which worship reflects communal experience and relationship with each other and is an outpouring of that sense that together we are before God, not just individually, just me and Jesus. And so I think about how that affects what worship looks like in community, how it affects what activity looks like in community. It also shifts what I think is sometimes almost like a commercial way of thinking about the church.

The church is the thing where I get the thing I need rather than the church as place where I care for others and I am engaged with others because that's the work of Jesus. And so that sense that I'm part of the work of Jesus, and that's what I'm expecting to be when I'm in a community. And that means I see other people and I look for the needs of others as a part of how I think about what it means even to be within the church.

I sometimes talk about this in just really practical terms, and one of the things we teach; my husband and I've taught for many years, is prayer ministry. And one of the things we talk about is you need to be watching. And it's not in a creepy way, watching other people, but in a real way.

Are you noticing the needs around you? Are you aware of who is struggling or who is rejoicing? We can't rejoice with those who are rejoicing and weep with those who are weeping if we never pay attention. And so I think that there is a sense where that

communal nature of it actually helps us to pay attention to each other in a way that attentiveness shows what we care about.

What we're attentive to is what means something to us. And so that attentiveness to each other is an outflowing of that sense of us, of we, rather than just I and me.

JP: This is one of those episodes or one of those questions that makes me grateful to be on this side of the microphone. The Trinity is tricky. When I think about leading baptism classes in our church, working with people through sort of the basic, cornerstone pieces of theology, what it is that we believe, the Trinity is always a place where we get bogged down a little bit in trying to wrestle with and understand sort of the mystery and the nuance of a very complicated thing. You know, you talk about three-leaf clovers and you talk about water and ice and gas and you try and kind of grab on to any sort of analogy you can to begin to wrap your mind around this.

But I appreciate it so much how our responders here were not only able to shed light on ways of thinking about the relationship within the Trinity but actually take that and begin to apply it practically to how it is that we live out community in our churches today.

AD: I hear you, Jesse. I feel like the Trinity is one of those theological concepts in which you're just trying to dodge heresy all the time.

I feel like we've often come to understand the Trinity by basically understanding what it is not and acknowledging what the guardrails are of when this deviates too much from what is revealed in Scripture and all those analogies that you mentioned, those are helpful, but they also break down at certain times too. And so there is a mystery here, but it's a mystery that, again, has been revealed in some way through God's Word, as he just lets us know more about himself.

And so I am with you. I'm very grateful for this panel of guests and their courage and ability to productively talk about the Trinity and the nature of this three-in-one God that we have a relationship with, and then that invites us into this relationship with not only him but also spilling out into one another.

And there were a number of different implications of this, how the three-in-one relationship with God, now we are invited into that, but now it's extended even further out into what we have been defining as community.

JP: There's this sort of perpetual motion that exists within the concept of the Trinity, within this sort of self-relationship of God that spills out into God's relationship with us and actually becomes, in many ways an engine or a driving force around how it is that we relate with people outside of us.

It's the sort of nuclear reaction that starts at the core of who God is and works its way out through us as image bearers of that Trinitarian God in this mysterious way.

AD: And all of this is really only possible because it is an act of God. This is his character and this community and relationship we have with him and enjoy with him and have an enjoy with others is all from him, not just from him as the source, but his activity.

He is the source and also the force that would bring us together and keep us together. And so I also was really challenged about shying away from this as some sort of human endeavour that we just try to create or to protect this community. And sure, we have things we can do, which is why we're talking about it and want our listeners not to respond to this in some way.

But thank goodness that it is up to God to do this, that He has chosen to do this and that He continues to do this in our midst, because if it was left up to us, then this would be a losing battle, as it were.

JP: I think you could put it this way, Andrew. This big inning was a real home run.

AD: Oh, thanks for that. I'm glad you brought that up.

JP: A closing song for this episode is Dakota Hymn by Steve Bell. The words for this song are taken from an old hymnal that was used by the Dakota people over 100 years ago. Some of the lyrics, I think, speak really, really well to some of the deep truths and mysteries that we've been covering here today in this episode.

This is the first verse:

Many and great oh God are Thy things
Maker of earth and sky
Thy hands have set the heavens with stars
Thy fingers spread the mountains and plains
Lo, at Thy word the waters were formed
Deep seas obey Thy voice
Grant unto us communion with Thee
Thou star, abiding One

Here's Steve Bell.

Dakota Hymn, Steve Bell

Many and great oh God are Thy things
Maker of earth and sky
Thy hands have set the heavens with stars
Thy fingers spread the mountains and plains
Lo, at Thy word the waters were formed
Deep seas obey Thy voice

Grant unto us communion with Thee

Thou star, abiding One
Come unto us and dwell with us
With Thee are found the gifts of life
Bless us with life that has no end
Eternal life with Thee

A Thought to Leave With

AD: Well, Jesse, there's a bit of a challenge in this episode. We talked about some very big ideas that happened a very long time ago and the nature of God as three-in-one that have been an eternal idea. And so how do we boil this down? What have we learned today that would help us just go about our lives as followers of Christ differently because of the lessons learned from Genesis one to three and the Trinity?

JP: That is a big question. And especially when we get into some of these sorts of topics, it can get pretty heady, pretty theological, and so it's good to think about how it is that we can ground ourselves in practical lived-out truth out of this.

Something really practical, I think, is to simply take moments during our time to acknowledge God as the engine or the source of community within our lives. That our desire for community is a God-given thing, that our need to be a part of something larger than ourselves is actually a part of being created in God's image.

And so to simply take moments. I like the concept of little micro-prayers that you can offer up through the day. And possibly it is a good thing to add into our lives, to take moments during the day and simply say, God, you are community in yourself. Give me a love for community, give me a love for the people around me. Help me to bear your image in the way in which I invite others into my life. And I'm self-giving in the way that I interact with the people around me.

AD: Well, thanks, Jesse. I think those are great thoughts to leave us with. And of course, you as listeners also will have many other ideas in mind of how you can live out this truth of who God is and what that means for us and those around us. Thanks for listening.

Conclusion

JP: Yeah, one thing I should mention is if you ever do have thoughts or ideas or things that you want to share with us, we certainly are open to that sort of thing. We do have an email address which is info@thearmchairanabaptist.ca. And so if you ever want to get in touch, if you've got thoughts about an episode, if there are ideas for you that have come out of this, please feel free to share that with us. We love to hear how it is that you have been receiving these things, so don't be shy.

AD: Yes, all compliments and good ideas can be addressed to Andrew Dyck and all criticisms and other comments can go to Jesse Penner.

JP: Except for anything about that crazy baseball joke at the beginning of this episode. We're about to derail here. Why don't you close us out?

Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast, and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference. You can check us out online at www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca, and find us on iTunes, Spotify and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today. We spoke with Betty Pries, Meghan Larissa Good, Patrick Franklin and Beth Stovell. Our intro song is *Making Us One* by Shades, and our closing song today was *Dakota Hymn* by Steve Bell.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr. Our producer and audio engineer is Jesse Penner, and our administrative assistant and social media manager is Betty Ramones.

I'm Andrew Dyck, and I'm Jesse Penner and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist.

We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay as merely food for thought, but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Join us next time as we go from the beginning to the end. Next week's episode is called *At the End*, and we'll take a look at how our view of the end times changes our perspective of community. See you next time on The Armchair Anabaptist.

Edited for clarity.