

The Superorganism Nature of Bees

In a healthy beehive there are usually about 30,000 to 50,000 bees. There are nurse bees, guard bees, bees that move pollen and nectar around the hive, and bees that turn the nectar into honey. All the bees that stay in the hive are the younger bees while the older bees (3 weeks old and older, normally) are the ones we see flying to and from the flowers. The worker bees, all females, look identical to each other. The only bees that look different are the drones (male bees who do nothing useful in the hive) and the queen bee. In order to keep the hive strong, the queen has only one task and that is to lay eggs, between 1000 and 1500 per day, every day, all through the summer months.

Of all the bees in the hive, the queen bee is the most important. Beekeepers are not concerned if they see a few dead bees in front of the hive, but it becomes a serious matter if there is no queen bee in the hive because she is the one who ensures the survival of the colony. Even the bees know that, and their lives are focused on keeping the queen healthy and strong. In fact, it is not too far from the truth if we say that all the bees in the hive have the welfare of the queen in mind as they do their jobs. Sometimes doing their jobs requires sacrifice. If the hive is threatened, the guard bees will attack with their stingers, often losing their lives in the process. When it becomes cold outside, the bees huddle together with the queen at the centre, and the outer bees sacrifice their comfort to keep the queen alive. Even if the temperature in the hive drops to -40, the centre of the cluster of the bees in the hive remains near 30 degrees centigrade.

Imagine for a moment if the worker bees began to think only of themselves. If, when it became cold out, no worker bee would sacrifice her own comfort to keep the queen warm. The queen would die, and the hive would die with it. If a worker bee did not sacrifice her life for the queen when a skunk attacked the hive, the hive would be destroyed and the queen could no longer carry out her task of laying eggs. The hive would die.

In Ephesians 5:21 Paul says that we are to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ. He describes what that looks like using household relationships common in his time: wives and husbands, parents and children, slaves and masters. When applying this mutual submission to the marriage relationship for example, in his instruction to the husband, he says that if the husband is truly submitting himself to his wife, he will die for her, just as Christ died for the church. (Note that he does not state the same expectation for the wife.)

Recall that Paul is writing his letter to a church which was experiencing some division, division that was rooted in 2000 years of history. Jews and Gentiles did not think highly of each other, but when members of both groups put their faith in Jesus Christ, they found themselves worshipping together under one roof. Paul emphasizes that our faith in Jesus Christ is what joins us together so that we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, etc. and that we belong to one family. To help us live in that new situation, he calls us to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Our calling is to look after the needs of others, often at the expense of fulfilling our own desires and wants.

Although there are some differences between Jesus and the queen bee in the hive, the similarities are helpful and telling. As in a hive, all the worker bees focus their efforts on protecting the queen, so among believers all focus their efforts on honouring Jesus Christ. Because our focus is so entirely on him, we no longer focus on ourselves, and we become willing to give up our comforts and own personal wants and even our lives to ensure that Jesus is always glorified. So strong is our desire to glorify Jesus that we no longer want to glorify ourselves. We glorify him by joining each other in service to the Lord, ensuring that others are able to carry out their callings so that together all believers grow together and flourish. In glorifying Jesus, we submit ourselves to others so that they can glorify him as well.

This is the ideal toward which we strive. Without a doubt the church is not always known to be exemplary in its calling. Unlike in the beehive, if the bees fail to honour their queen with the result that whole hive dies, when we fail to glorify Jesus, God the Father remains gracious and restores us again. Bees don't get another chance; we do. But that doesn't mean that we should hold back with our commitment or compromise in our desire to glorify Jesus.

I suspect that most of the problems the church has faced over the centuries and faces today come from the fact that believers fail to live as bees. Far too often the church has focused more on its own survival and welfare while at the same time ignoring Jesus. In one example, a pastor presented himself as the one who could increase the number of people in attendance, but the elder board did not ask him how he intended to do that. It turned out that certain parts of the biblical message (the death of Jesus on the cross for our sin, for example) were minimized. While the numbers increased for a time and while the community seemed warm and welcoming, over the years, because Jesus was no longer central, the purpose for the church disappeared, and members who longed for the gospel began to move to other churches. As another example, while the pastor and elders focused on the gospel, the people had begun to focus their attention on some of the things that they liked to do. Sunday became fun-day, and the desire to glorify Jesus began to wane. Fun activities began to replace the act of glorifying Jesus in worship, and the church began to decline both in numbers and in witness to the community.

While God is gracious with his people, keeping the church alive, it is also true that sometimes local congregations fail when Jesus is no longer central. Like a beehive which has abandoned its queen and dies, congregations can die when they abandon Jesus. Let us never forget that in glorifying Jesus, we put ourselves aside as we submit to each other out of reverence for Christ. There is no room for selfish individualism among God's people just as selfish individualism will result in the collapse of a colony of bees.

But let us not fear, for while it may be in our human natures to want to glorify ourselves, the Holy Spirit continually returns us to our calling. As we focus our efforts on glorifying Jesus, we will discover that our Christian community is growing in mutual submission as well. And when that happens, we will be fulfilling our calling of making the gospel (honey) available to the world.

Pastor Gary