

DUST & STARS

OUR FAMILY OF FAITH

TO GOD'S HOLY AND FAITHFUL PEOPLE
WHO ARE UNITED WITH CHRIST
~EPHESIANS 1:1~

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Dust & Stars

Introduction

Recently I reconnected with a fellowship I had lost contact with some time ago. Due to my current circumstances, I have become isolated, and needed to reestablish relationships with other believers, and this group has just the ticket I needed!

As I was saying, due to my physical disabilities I began to feel isolated and alone, which is what caused me to return to this study. I better explain that. These thoughts were originally put together in the early-to-mid 80's, and my current isolation violated everything I once held as the preeminent issue in a victorious Christian's life. That is, of course, our *relationships*. So, I decided to rebuild the foundation on which I originally built my faith.

The name of this study is, "*Dust and Stars*," and I will explain the significance of that title, later. But I have to admit that this disquisition is very much in need of a re-write. It has become outdated and desperately in need of editing. I was attempting to show what was once foremost in my theology and teachings, had become lost in the midst of my crisis. If nothing else, I proved my belief that each of us possesses a deep need to relate and to draw close to others who share our values and dreams. My hope is that I can recapture a life I once held so dear.

Elton Trueblood, the author of, "*The Company of the Committed*," wrote:

“It is hard to exaggerate the degree to which the modern Church seems irrelevant to modern man. The Church is looked upon as something to be neither seriously fought nor seriously defended. A church building is welcomed, partly because it provides such a nice place for a family wedding; and, after all, most families expect weddings, sooner or later. A church is also a good place to send the children on Sunday morning—they might learn something helpful, and certainly the experience of being sent will do them no harm. The point is that such conceptions are wholly consistent with the idea that the Church has only marginal relevance. We do not expect, for the most part, to find the gospel centered in a burning conviction which will make men and women change occupations, go to the end of the earth, alter the practices of governments, redirect culture, and remake civilization.”

Trueblood wrote those words back in 1961. But his arguments still seem to ring true. I believe we should create a task force of committed men and women who, from the depths of their being, care for God, for His Church, and for other people! I hold that a “*valiant band for Christ*” (as Dr. Trueblood calls it) could revitalize the Church and transform society, as well.

Along with Trueblood's book, all those years ago, I fell in love with the writings of Ray Ortlund, specifically, his book entitled, “*Let The Church be the Church!*” That book was an incredible inspiration for me and gave me hope that we could achieve Trueblood's dream. The first chapter of Ortlund's book raised some intriguing questions regarding the Church. The first question was whether our churches were really part of *The Church* — or did they simply steal the label?

That, by the way, is a crucial question. I say that when the church becomes, *The Church*, it starts fulfilling the Lord's original intentions for His Church. Think about that because the body

of believers you gather with each week whether it is in someone's home or a building with a sign out front, must be cherished; and at times criticized, which hopefully brings reform. The Church of Jesus Christ, with all its blemishes, all of its divisions, and all of its failures remains our best hope of spiritual vitality. I don't care how bad you may think it is; life without a Church is far worse.

Take a look at your church. Some churches are simply evangelistic centers. All of their activity during the week and on Sunday mornings leads to the altar call! That is “*magic point*” and the focus of the entire life of the church — that exciting moment at five minutes to twelve every Sunday where someone walks down the aisle to make their commitment to Christ! Now don't get me wrong, that is good, there is nothing wrong when the church focuses on Evangelism — it is even important, and I would be disappointed if a church *never* reached out to draw people to find Jesus as their Savior. But (and you knew that was coming, didn't you?), I need to ask you, did God pre-ordain His Church primarily for that? Hmm, let's think about that.

Then again, some churches are, above everything else, mission centers. They have the thermometer up in front, and a map on the wall and the people hear a bunch of missionary reports from the pulpit. Okay, I openly acknowledge that every church is supposed to spread the Good News in every possible way, but was that the chief purpose for the Church?

Some churches are above everything else, information centers. Their primary objective is to pour out biblical material, and the buzzwords are teachings and teachers. The people come to fill their notebooks and their heads, and the ones with fat notebooks and full heads are the spiritual winners. (No, I did not say what you thought I said!)

Again, I have to ask, is that the function of The Church?

Other churches are primarily program centers. They serve as platforms — stages — with one extravaganza after another: “Man if you thought this Sunday was good, wait till next week! We're going to have a gospel magician, three singing groups, and a ventriloquist with a dummy who looks like Moses who will blow your mind!” How about that? Was that the eternal plan for Christianity to be equivalent to Christian “*show biz*?”

Some churches are fellowship centers, where the emphasis is on body life, relational theology, discipling, small groups, and the function of gifts. Again, don't get me wrong on this. Relationships are a great need that needs improvement in many churches. But still, was this the first goal when The Church was imagined “*before the foundation of the world*?”

Some churches are counseling centers or rescue missions or training schools. And once again, all of these are useful and necessary, and all may be part of what we are trying to do or be. However, the question remains: do these functions achieve the central purpose for The Church?

In each case, I would argue, no. The Lord ordained the Church for Himself. The Church's chief function, as also the individual believer's function, is to glorify our God and to enjoy Him forever. He must be the foremost priority of the church!

Look at what the Scriptures declare:

“May God, who gives you this endurance and encouragement, allow you to live in harmony with each other by following the example of Christ Yeshua. Then, having the same goal, you will praise the God and Father of our Lord Yeshua Christ.” —Romans 15:5-6

“God also decided ahead of time to choose us through Christ according to his plan, which makes everything work the way he intends. He planned all of this so

that we who had already focused our hope on Christ would praise him and give him glory” —Ephesians 1:11-12

“He is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, the first to come back to life so that he would have first place in everything” — Colossians 1:18

“That way the name of our Lord Yeshua will be honored among you. Then, because of the good will of Yeshua Christ, our God and Lord, you will be honored by him —II Thessalonians 1:12

“Through Yeshua we should always bring God a sacrifice of praise, that is, words that acknowledge him” —Hebrews 13:15

“You are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, people who belong to God. You were chosen to tell about the excellent qualities of God, who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” —I Peter 2:9

There is no doubt! The Church is for Christ! Well then, as Ray Ortlund declared, “*Let the Church be The Church!*” Everything it does is to focus on Him! *The members are to gather around Him! Their praises are to ascend to Him!*”

Once we begin to worship our Father, we will find obedience to what He says. As Ray Ortlund explained, “*Once we learn to worship, we will see that the Church is to reach upward, to reach within, and to reach out. But first, to glorify Him. Secondly, to build each other up in love. Thirdly, to evangelize the world.*”

Ray Ortlund continued, “*But the second- and third functions will fall into place only when the first is seen to be — and faithfully practiced as — first.*”

Now I could spend pages and pages describing how and why we can worship the awesomeness of God. Each of us needs to connect with our Heavenly Father. Oh, not through some superficial religious experience, but on an intimate level, But that is something you need to “*experience,*” instead of having it “*taught*” to you. My suggestion is for you to give yourself the opportunity to fall in love with your Father.

I believe we can find the perfect expression our Father's, heart:

I know you have a thirst, and I invite you to come and drink from me. I am the one who wants to comfort you. I bought you, and I will complete the work I began in you. I still delight in you and claim you as my own; I rejoice over you as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride. Although you have lost sight of me, I will never fail you or forsake you.

I know your manifold transgressions and pain; I know all of the mighty sins and frustrations you hold on to, yet my grace is sufficient for you. I have cast all your sins and pains behind my back; I have trampled them under my feet, and thrown them into the depths of the ocean! I have washed away all your sins and pain; I have swept them away like the morning mist, scattered them like the clouds. Oh, return to me, for I have paid the price to set you free.

You are troubled and worried about many things; trust me with all your heart. I know how to rescue my people from their trials. My Spirit helps you in your distress. Let me strengthen you with my glorious power. I have never withheld anything from you—I did not spare my Son but gave him up for your sake. If I have done this for you, can you not believe that I will provide for you everything that you need? March on, my dear one, with courage! Never give up. I will help you. I will uphold you.

When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.

I will never tire or sleep. I will stand beside you. I wish to hide you in the shelter of my presence. When you are troubled, I will go ahead of you, directing your steps and delighting in every detail of your life. When you stumble, you will not fall, for I promise to hold you by the hand. I will guide you along the best pathway for your life.

I will make you fruitful in the land of suffering, trading beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, praise for despair. I live with the low-spirited and spirit crushed. I will put a new spirit in you and get you on your feet again. Weeping may go on all night, but joy will come in the morning. If I am for you, who can ever be against you?

Look to me, and I will throw my arms around you, lavish attention on you, and guard you as the apple of my eye. I know you feel I have neglected you, but I rejoice over you with singing and great joy every time I hear your name. You cannot count all of my thoughts of you; they outnumber the grains of sand!

Nothing can ever separate you from my love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Your loneliness can't, and your confused thoughts can't. Your fears for today, your worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell that have sought to destroy you can not keep my love away.

You have sometimes said, 'The Lord has deserted me; the Lord has forsaken me.' But can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for a child she has borne? Even if that were possible, I would not forget you! I paid for you with the precious lifeblood of Christ, my sinless, spotless Lamb. No one will snatch you away from me. I have written your name on my hand. I will call you my friend. Why the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are valuable to me.

Give me your burdens; I will take care of you. I know how weak you are, that I made you of dust. Give all your worries and cares to me, because I care about what happens to you.

Remember, I am at hand. Come to me when you are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. I delight in you, and I can be trusted to keep my promises. Come and drink the water of life.

Your loving Father,
Yahweh

Take that to the bank and treasure it always. Let the Words soak in and draw you even deeper. My friend, to paraphrase A.W. Tozer, unless you find God in personal experience, you are no better off for having heard the truth. The Bible isn't an end in itself. It is simply a tool the Spirit uses to bring you to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of our God. You can enter into Him; you can delight in His Presence; taste and know the inner sweetness of your God Himself in the core and center of your heart.

Tozer went on to say,

“We pursue God because, and only because, He has first put an urge within us that spurs us to the pursuit. ‘No man can come to me,’ said our Lord, ‘except the Father which hath sent me draw him,’ and it is by this very prevenient drawing that God takes from us every vestige of credit for the act of coming. The impulse to pursue God originates with God, but the outworking of that impulse is our following hard after Him; and all the time we are pursuing Him we are already in His hand: ‘Thy right hand upholdeth me.’ In this divine ‘upholding’ and human ‘following’ there is no contradiction. All is of God, for as von Hugel teaches, God is always previous.”

The joyous reality is that once The Church focuses on worshiping our Father; we are drawn to His Church and the world outside the walls of The Church. This study is my call for us to allow God's family to dominate our lives. Even a casual observation gives me the impression this particular area has been too often misunderstood and neglected.

I have seen in the lives of many Christians a sense of incompleteness, dissatisfaction with what they had expected, compared with what they were experiencing. An emptiness; maybe a hungering would describe it better — a hungering for a real and meaningful Christianity. Maybe they are simply tired of the “*same ole', same ole'.*”

This hunger seems to be intensified by our natural awkwardness in relating with other people. Maybe it is our shyness, inhibitions, or just plain clumsiness in handling each other.

For example, before I married Patrice I had these wild and wonderful dreams of marriage. I readily admit that most of my visions of marriage were jaded by the television shows of my youth. I grew up watching *Ozzie and Harriet*; *Father Knows Best*; *The Donna Reed Show*; and *Leave It to Beaver*. Those families seemed to live out an honest and simple life. I envisioned marriage as being romps in the park and Sunday picnics; snowball fights in the winter; tumbling in the leaves during cool autumn days; lots of kissing and hugging.

I saw us forever desperately in love as we played house in our quaint little apartment. It came completely furnished and decorated, and I would strive in every way to meet my wife's needs, and my wife would always look totally happy, sexy, and cherished. I would be both strong and tender as I arrived home from work as fresh as when I left. I would always remember birthdays and anniversaries (not to mention the exact time we kissed for the first time or held hands. Although I can tell you the place!)

My wife, on the other hand, would be waiting at the door when I arrived so she could fall into my arms. Over her shoulder, I would survey a shining, polished house, and smell the aroma of dinner ready to be enjoyed — unless, of course, she playfully steered me into the bedroom first.

Ah yes. Somehow, the Bills always stayed paid. Trash never accumulated. Nobody ever vomited, burped, had bad breath, or passed gas. When we smiled, we never had food caught

between our teeth. (Although, one time when Patrice was kneeling in front of me as we enjoyed a bowl of chocolate pudding. I said something that made her burst out laughing — with a mouth full of pudding — that landed all over my face). [And yes, she laughed hysterically]. Laundry never piled up; diapers never got dirty, and children were perfect angels at all times. In fact, they came already trained and disciplined!

Imagine my surprise when I discovered how different things were! I mean we branded each other with our wedding rings and too soon got caught in a loblolly of the unforeseen. It was amazing to find how different the two of us were! Yes, we were still very much in love — but how could my wife be so different from what I envisioned, beyond all reasonable expectations? (Although, I am sure *I* was just as she imagined).

“*The first week I was married,*” one wife declared, “*I thought, 'What did I do this for? It was better at Mom's!'”*”

At the beginning of our marriage, I worked a midnight-to-8:30 am shift, while she worked a 9 am-to-5 pm shift. Because I was working in retail, and we were married one week before Christmas, I had to beg to get off for our wedding night! We didn't even have a honeymoon until four months after our wedding! (and yes, they gave me the day off for the ceremony, but I had to return to work the next night).

The point I am trying to make is that all of us have wild and crazy expectations of marriage, some that come sizzling straight off the pages of novels!

Of course, I have been facetious here. Married life for Patrice and I has been rich, as rich as I have known all of life to be. Maybe even richer in its complexity. As you can imagine, while raising twins plus two, we have experienced many struggles and hardships over the past years. Nevertheless, through it all, we have sought harmony.

What I am getting to is that I have noticed that in the Body of Christ we tend to experience the same things. We love to talk about and dream about relationships, but the reality is ours often seem to be self-serving, phony, disappointing, or at least just plain unappealing. As Karl Heim wrote:

The Church is like a ship on whose deck festivities are still kept up and glorious music is heard, while deep below the water-line a leak has been sprung and masses of water are pouring in, so that the vessel is settling hourly lower though the pumps are manned day and night.

Not a happy thought is it? However, if you look around, you will see Christians who are waiting for your input, lonely for your love, hungry for what you know about Jesus that they don't know. They need what you have to offer, and conversely, you need what they have to offer.

I realize that some Christians do not want connection with other members of the body of Christ. Oh sure, they say they want to commune with *Jesus*, but they deliberately isolate themselves from other believers. They want nothing to do with the body. Their only desire is to fellowship with the head.

There is the problem! A body does not exist with a single member. Can you picture a head with only an arm growing out of it? Christ's body cannot live with only a head, with no limbs or organs. His body consists of many members. We cannot live a successful Christian life without being united to His body, as well. Christian “*Lone Rangers*” do not survive.

We don't need just a *head*; we need the whole body! We are knit together not only by our need for Jesus but by our need for each other. Paul put it this way:

“No matter how significant you are, the most important part is what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own.” (I Corinthians 12:20-22)

I realize this is just one man's opinion, but I believe that our churches have a big problem. I am speaking of how many people want to be a *somebody* and too few who could not care less if they are unnoticed. Their only desire is to be faithful to the Lord and fulfill His will (and not their own).

If I fall asleep before the Lord's return, my prayer is that they can quote Acts 13:36: Nickolas “*served the purposes of God in his generation, then fell asleep.*” If I can fulfill the Lord's plan for my life — nothing more, nothing less — it will be enough.

Everybody wants to preach and teach, but nobody wants to sit and serve. That is what Paul was trying to get people to understand when he wrote that the eye is no more important than the ear — they simply serve a different purpose.

The hand is no more valuable than an eyelash. Both serve critical functions, but people can survive without either, right? Where is true humility, the humility that says: “The Lord is the Vine, and I am the branch. Without Him, I can do nothing! If He sees fit to use me, I will obey with great joy and enthusiasm. If not, I will obey with great joy and enthusiasm.”

I believe it was Broadman who said:

“There is no hierarchy in the gifts of God. The ministry of the church does not rest on status but for service. No gift that serves others is little. God uses both stars and candles to light his world.”

The issue with our Father is not who the stars are and who the candles are. Our Lord's only concern is that His light is coming forth. We are the ones hung up on the stars, forgetting that a star only shines at night — one designated time. Ah, but a candle can shine at any time and anywhere! When someone receives a particular gift and the title of Prophet or Prophetess, or Apostle or Evangelist, I have seen their eyes light up. Why the pride? It is only a gift you received. You didn't earn it. And it can be taken away, just as quickly! Chew on that one for awhile.

But what about members who are bruised and hurting? Paul emphasizes, “*There is an absolute necessity for the parts of the body that are considered weaker.*” (I Corinthians 12:22). Paul then adds, “. . . *and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty*” (I Corinthians 12:23).

He is talking about those in Christ's body who are unseen, hidden, unknown, anonymous. In God's eyes, these members have a great honor. And they are necessary for the whole body to work.

Granted, it took several years to get used to *being* served, but I can honestly say that I would much prefer to arrange the chairs before the service or clean the toilets than lead a service. If I am invited to someone's wedding reception, I prefer to stay after and help clean up. Shoot, it is even worse than that! We have taken two cruises, and it has always been difficult for me to have the waiters serve *me*. I felt like *I* should be serving the servers!

This attitude started many years ago. When I was much younger, I attended “*Camp Geneva*,” in Holland Michigan. It was a camp owned and operated by the *Reformed Churches of Western Michigan*.

One year, when I was in 5th or 6th grade, I met a reticent and welcoming fellow. I was moved by the calmness that seemed to rest on him.

During breaks and lunches, I would often sit with him. Amazingly, I still remember him after all these years. His name was Tim, but everyone else in camp only knew him as *TC* (Toilet Cleaner). That's right. He cleaned the toilets in the camp. Everyone considered that to be such a demeaning job, but Tim was able to perform his duties with a spirit of joy and peacefulness.

I remember asking him if it bothered him that no one would sit with him – or even talk to him – everyone else preferred to make fun of him. Whenever Tim walked by the other campers would call out, “*Hey TC*.” Every time I heard that it was like a punch in my stomach – and they weren't talking to me; they were calling out to Tim! I bet no one (except the people who worked with him) even knew his real name. To them, he was just *TC*.

When I asked him that about the insults, he just shrugged his shoulders and said, “*Nah, I'm comfortable with who I am in my Savior's eyes, and that is all that matters.*” Now, being a 10 or 11-year old at the time, his response moved me. In fact, when I came to Lord on October 27, 1979, I remembered what Tim told me, and it helped to shape who I am today!

Look, in our flesh, all of us would much prefer the praises of people. We want to put on an outward show. We don't want to worry about a shallow foundation of personal obedience and devotion to our Lord.

That passage from Paul is very important for all of us. Paul was saying, “It doesn't matter how poor your self-image may be. You may *think* that you do not measure up as a Christian. But the Lord himself says, *I need you. You are not just an important member of my body; you are vital and necessary for it to function!*”

The point for you is to expose yourself to the right people, at the right time, in the right places. That is the purpose of this whole study! I want to help you find those people and to show you how to put your lives together when you do.

I saw a list of ways the New Testament tells us to relate with each other as Christians. When you eliminate the repetitions, did you know they boil down to only 13? Look:

1. Suffering together. I Corinthians 12:26
2. Rejoicing together. Romans 12:15
3. Carrying each other's burdens. Galatians 6:2
4. Restoring each other. Galatians 6:1
5. Praying for one another. Romans 15:30
6. Teaching and admonishing one another. Colossians 3:16
7. Refreshing one another. Romans 15:32
8. Encouraging one another. Romans 1:12
9. Forgiving each other. Ephesians 4:32
10. Confessing to one another. James 5:16
11. Being truthful with one another. Ephesians 4:32
12. Spurring one another toward good deeds. Hebrews 10:24
13. Giving to one another. Philippians 4:14-15

The question at the bottom of the page said:

“Have I placed myself so deeply within a living, functioning local body that I myself am functioning in all these ways, and so living as a well-rounded, healthy, contributing member of the Body of Christ?”

Friends, we are expected to place ourselves deeply within a living, functioning local body and begin to give and take at deep levels.

Now don't let that phrase go by you too quickly. You must place yourself *deeply*. If you run off every weekend to vacation, or stay home some Sundays to catch a church by watching television, you will pay a terrible price! If you go church hopping or even show up but never interact with anyone, and think you have done it, you are again going to pay a terrible price.

Yes, I realize you need time away from it all, but if it becomes your habit, your fellow believers will move into each other, close the gap. They will learn to get along without you. It's like during heavy snow storms, and Government offices declare, “*Non-Essential*’ personnel do not need to come in.” I always feel sorry for them. How would it feel to be considered, “*Non-Essential*?”

Friends, I can assure you from my personal experience, there is no substitute for constant, faithful exposure to your local family of God.

That is your part. However, it is a two-way street. Your church has to be living and functioning, too! How can you tell if you are in the right church? It doesn't have to be large, and it will certainly never be perfect! Nevertheless, it must be alive and functioning. As Sam Shoemaker once said, “*You can't put a live chick under a dead hen.*”

I don't care how large or small your church is. If it is going to be the right place for you, it has to be a place where you can minister life and exercise your various gifts. It also has to be a place where they can minister to you. It has to work both ways! Don't wear yourself out trying to hang on because they *need* you (need you for what? To keep the pew warm?). If you cannot find enough life in the Spirit to pour back into you, then, get out of there! Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered *in My Name . . .*” not just gathered, He would be in the midst.

On the other hand, don't be too proud, too shy, or too busy to receive the life when it is there! Realize though, many church people have the true Gospel of Christ in their hearts; they are full of potential, but they are closed-up. They don't know how to love each other. They have to *learn* how to act out their love, just like *you* need to learn.

Look at Paul. He could have easily had been a loner. But whether it was easy or not, he made sure he made his way deeply into the lives of many other believers. Did you ever notice that in his letter to the Roman Church, he greeted specific people by name, at the risk of omitting many others? He identifies twenty-seven men and eight women.

He mentions Phoebe, a businesswoman traveling to Rome, who carried his letter for him. (As Donald Barnhouse wrote, “*The Reformation was in that luggage!*”).

He mentions Aquilla and Priscilla, a married couple in business together, who often traveled with Paul.

He mentions Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth. In 1929, archeologists uncovered a pavement that was inscribed to say, “*Erastus laid this pavement at his own expense.*” Evidently, Erastus was a Christian big shot.

He mentions Tertius, his scribe. In other words, Paul mentions big people, little people, women, men, and all kinds and probably all shapes and sizes. He became deeply involved in their lives. Paul knew them, and they knew him. In I Thessalonians he talks about how he

worked right by their side and cared for them as a father cares for his children or a mother tends to her babies.

We must love the Church! The grandparents, the children and those in their middle ages. We need to love the young people, the mystics, the pragmatics and the theologians. Yes, you also need to love and enjoy the simplest, the immature, and the profound. And don't forget the value of the visionaries and the plodders. As well as the faithful committee workers who make it happen and the laggards you have to cajole! Everybody! We must love the Church! Whether they want you to love them or not. Whether they take hold of you with both arms or hold you off at arm's length. We must love the Church!

When you do, you will find how multifaceted, richly diverse the Body of Christ is, and how it will stretch and challenge you in a thousand ways more than one person ever could. This my friends is what this study is all about!

I cannot explain the miracle of the Church, but I do know that we need all the relationships God will give us. Each believer represents a different facet of Jesus Christ. As we are baptized into a life of fellowship in the Spirit, we are plunged into Christ Himself. Doctrinally, we are baptized into Christ at the moment of our conversion. Experientially, you might say; we are baptized into Christ as we become daily immersed in our fellow believers.

Paul said this about it:

“From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”
(Ephesians 4:16)

We need to lay down our weapons. We need to take a vow as seriously as our marriage vows that we will love the church "for better and for worse until death do we part." Did you notice that verse above said it would not work unless each part did its job? We need to find the tools so we can forge meaningful and loving relationships in the Body of Christ. My hope is that this study will help.

My goal in these series of teachings is to motivate you to seek this type of lifestyle. This life of commitment and devotion is the life we are called to live. What may interest you is that each post began its life as an individual teaching, given over a four-year period in 1981 through 1984. Afterward, I noticed how they seemed to follow a similar, yet unintentional, train of thought. After time, it seemed right to put them together in one study. This is important to remember because as you read this study, you will find that I often repeat myself. I apologize, but I couldn't edit all of the repetition out.

How can I explain why I am covering this . . . hmm, here is an idea: Think of your city bus for a moment. Every bus has a sign on the front telling you where it is going. “*Downtown,*” “*East Main.*” It is alerting you to its destination. So to illustrate your church's focus, why not put a sign out front that says, “*Koinonia practiced here.*” That is the Greek word translated fellowship, communion, common. It can even be translated as, *communication*. As E.W. Vines Expository Dictionary explains:

“It identifies the idealized state of fellowship and unity that should exist within the Christian Church, the Body of Christ.”

I don't profess to have all the secrets uncovered yet. Many teachers have much better understanding of these truths than I do, and say it in a much more profound way!

For many of you, this will not be new; it may only serve as an urge to, as in my life, re-connect with a body of believers. I can recommend many other teachers such as Ray and Anne Ortlund, Ray Stedman, Juan Carlos-Ortiz, Charles Swindoll, Derek Prince, and others, who have inspired these studies. To quote Tozer:

“Although the fire within me seems small at times, I hope there may be some that can light their own candle from its flame.”

II Timothy 1:6 instructs us to *fan the flame of the inner fire*, and that is what I am attempting to do: fanning the flame of love and need for relationship in your life. Join me as we wander through these various thoughts and see what we can learn. Sit back and enjoy!

Let The Rain Fall

As I said in the Introduction, I am convinced there is a need — a pang of hunger — for real, honest, Christian relationships because, frankly, people are tired of playing church. They want the real thing. Look what J. B. Phillips said about the early church:

“It is heartening to remember that this faith [of the early Church] took root and flourished in conditions that would have killed anything less vital in a matter of weeks. These early Christians were on fire with the conviction that they have become, through Christ, literally sons of God. They were pioneers of a New Kingdom. They still speak to us across the centuries. Perhaps if we believe what they believed, we might achieve what they achieved.”

Remember the old song from B.J. Thomas, “*Raindrops are Falling on My Head?*” Maybe that is what is happening in The Church. Let me explain. Back in the early days, the Promised Land God gave to the Israelites was similar to Kansas: plenty of fertile soil, bountiful harvest, productive farmland.

Today, much of it is more like Arizona: dry and dusty. Although, God promises it will someday be just like Kansas again. You see, in Israel, there used to be two rainy seasons each year: the early rains and the latter rains. The first rains started in the fall, somewhere around November, with some preliminary showers. Then intermittent showers lasting two-or-three days each. These continued through December and the rest of winter. Then with the approach of harvest, heavy rains returned, and these were the latter rains of in-gathering. In other words, the early rains prepared the soil to receive the seeds, and the latter rains came just before harvest time.

Two rainy seasons a year were Yahweh's reward for good behavior (Deuteronomy 11:13-14) and made the place like Kansas. After all, Bethlehem did mean *House of Bread* and was part of the wheat and barley fields harvested so richly by Boaz and others. However, Yahweh kept warning the Israelites that if they continued in their willful sin, He would withdraw the spring rains (Jeremiah 3:3 and 5:24-25). They did. So He did.

Consequently, the land became a rocky, dry Arizona. The big difference will come when the Lord makes the newly ingathered Jews the center of His world of righteousness and justice (Ezekiel 34:11-13) and returns the land of Israel its spring rains (Ezekiel 34:26). That's when the earth will truly yield its crops (Ezekiel 34:27) just as He intended from the beginning. Israel will once again be good pasture for God's Jewish people (Ezekiel 34:14). Which has already begun!

Very soon, there is going to be a great world revival and a turning to God. The Jews are going to be the world's “Big-Shots” with everyone hanging onto them to learn about God. The prophet Joel tried to comfort Israel with this same prediction:

“People of Zion, be glad and find joy in Yahweh your Elohim.

Yahweh has given you the Teacher of Righteousness.

He has sent the autumn rain and the spring rain as before . . .

“After this, I will pour my Ruach on everyone.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your old men will dream dreams.
Your young men will see visions.
In those days I will pour my Ruach on servants,
on both men and women.
I will work miracles in the sky and on the earth:
blood, fire, and clouds of smoke.
The sun will become dark,
and the moon will become as red as blood
before the terrifying day of Yahweh comes.

Then whoever calls on the name of Yahweh will be saved.
Those who escape will be on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem.
Among the survivors will be those whom Yahweh calls,
as Yahweh has promised” —Joel 2:23, 28-32

The amazing thing is that 10-days after Jesus' ascent to heaven, on the day of Pentecost, the early rain of the Holy Spirit revival descended. It was great! Three thousand people accepted Jesus, and in those powerful moments, the Church was born. Peter stood up and deliberately linked what was happening with Joel's prophecy.

What the Lord has done is what He does so often: He blended two events into one, and you cannot separate them except through hindsight. It has taken over 2,000 years, but we now have occasional showers of the Holy Spirit. Little glimmers of revival have fallen here and there, some of them quite noteworthy, to be sure, but nothing like what is coming!

The Bible predicts an even greater outpouring compared to what happened after the ascension of Jesus. That one only affected one city, *Jerusalem*. This one will influence the whole world (Matthew 24:14). The first outpouring affected a *few thousand* people. The latter revival will affect *untold billions* (Isaiah 45:22-23). Sure, it was an authentic rain, but small compared to the spring rain that will come, the rain that we are on the brink of right now!

Throughout the Bible, Yahweh manifested Himself in the earth as fire and lightning, cloud, wind and rain. However, never all four at the same time! He will in this hour! Tell me, what is it called when you have rain and clouds and wind and lightning? It is a storm! A flood of spiritual power is coming. Yahweh is about to manifest himself as a cyclone of sweeping spiritual power.

D.M. Patton wrote,

“Vastly more was wrapped up in the descent of the Holy Spirit than the Church has yet experienced, or than the world has yet seen; and the Spirit himself thus reveals that while the Christian centuries are 'the last days' and Pentecost began the wonder, we today, standing in the last of the last days, are on the edge of a second and more tremendous upheaval of the Holy Spirit.”

I should say so! What is exciting is that there has never been such a renewed interest in the lifestyle of the early Church or such zeal in patterning after it as there is today. We are tired of playing church, the dead formalism. We are worn out from the crusting over of tradition and pomp and rote. We are eager to recapture the simplicity, and reality of authentic Christianity, and I am convinced that Jesus wants his church back.

In this study we are going to look very carefully at chapters 2 through 7 of the book of Acts, particularly Acts 2-4. In there we have a description of the believers in the first fullness of the Holy Spirit, living as He led them without any outside interference.

It was pure in-the-Spirit-living. None of those early believers were perfect. They were people just like us. They had diapers to change; noses to wipe; jobs to work, bills to pay and everything else we face. They were merely blessed to live during the drenching of the *early* rains of the Spirit. How much more of a blessing will it be for us, in the *latter outpouring*?

Every time I read the story of the early church and read the testimonies of men and women of that time, I long to identify with them. I long to be a part of the same people movement which rediscovers authentic Christian lifestyles. So hang on, folks, we are going to get wet, 'cuz right now we are just getting started.

Life in the Church

Earlier, I mentioned Acts 2-4 as being a central focus for our study. So let's look at it to see if we can catch the spirit of the early Christian lifestyle.

“They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and the Apostles did many wonders and miraculous signs. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone, as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47)

I know you had read that probably many times before, but did you notice the body life? I think this is a lifestyle we could recapture today. It doesn't call for communes or any special circumstances. The only requirement is a commitment to experience all that the Lord has for us.

Imagine 3,120 brand new believers living out such a radical life together. They *devoted* themselves. (Catch the intensity of that). These were real people just like you and me. They still had jobs to hold down, still had to clean their homes, wipe the babies' noses, pay the bills and do everything that normal people have to do. However, they wanted to be together, so they got together. They began living by a new set of priorities.

Look at the kind of life these Christians were living: First, they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teachings. That was everything the Apostles had seen Jesus do and heard Him say. Eventually, they got it all written down; now we call it the New Testament. Maybe our equivalent would be a Bible Study.

Second, they devoted themselves to the fellowship. That was simply being together for the joy of being together. They probably figured there was no sense drawing their stimuli from non-Christians who have nothing to contribute when they could be absorbing more and more of the life of Christ from within their Christian friends.

I don't think this was a deliberate cut-off from the world to be exclusive. My guess is that the fellowship of those early believers was the strong base from which they reached out to others. The result was that the Lord “*added to their numbers daily those who were being saved.*” Obviously, there is far more power for evangelism in this close-knit community than we find today. Although we say it is to win them for Christ, we have diluted our spirits by too much exposure to the world.

Third, they devoted themselves to breaking bread together. I'm sure this meant Communion, but I think it meant other meals too. I can see Thomas sharing a message with a roomful of new believers in someone's home. They were singing, clapping hands, praying, laughing, sharing their trials and listening to Thomas teach. Suddenly, someone slaps their forehead. “*I don't believe it! Look how late it is. I didn't even notice. The kids must be starving.*”

Everybody looks shocked and frustrated. The hostess says, “*Tom, just keep talking, and I'll put something together.*” Another woman speaks up. “*How great! I couldn't resist hoping we would go overtime, and I packed some bread and vegetables for us, just in case.*”

That's right! I believe that in the beginning the meals just happened that way. Since they added so much to the fun and close feelings, besides extending the time, they began to plan to have meals prepared.

The fourth ingredient in their life together you find *the prayers*. In the Greek, there is the article “*the*” in front of it. It is the same word as in Acts 3:1 where it says “*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of the prayers.*” In other words, the prayers were the stated times for worship in the temple, and all the believers went together.

What is interesting is that in the Middle East a devout Muslim will stop whatever he is doing and unrolls his prayer rug, genuflects with his forehead to the ground, and this is done seven times a day!

In Israel, there used to be a daily morning and evening sacrifice, and the Jews prayed at three appointed times during the day: the third, sixth, and ninth hours. One translation of Acts 3:1 states that Peter and John went up to the temple at the *ninth* hour of prayer. In Acts 10:9; we read that Peter went up on the housetop to pray at about the *sixth* hour. Most of the temple leaders did not know Jesus as their Messiah, but the believers went to the temple because their Savior had regularly gone (Luke 4:16).

They also saw that the habit of faithful “*church attendance*” as a righteous habit, and by going, they spurred each other toward good deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25). Yes, there were spontaneous meetings around the Lord in homes, which were great. However, there were also the stated, regular public meetings — whether they felt like it or not!

Obviously many former activities had to go for the early Christians. They *eliminated* and *concentrated*. They continually devoted themselves to these new priorities. We need to check our lifestyles to see if we have removed the clutter from our lives. The reason is to give us, and those around us who want to go *hard* after God, an opportunity for Bible Study, fellowship, eating together, and to the regular services of the church. I will explain this more as this essay continues, but please understand that if you have joined the Family of God, you must learn to fellowship and grow with other believers. It should be a natural outgrowth of your faith.

The problem we run into is that millions of believers are mere “*back-seat*” Christians. They are willing to observe a performance that the professionals put on (and are ready to criticize or to applaud), but they are not willing to even consider a genuine participation!

The fundamental weakness of the contemporary Church is that many members refuse to become *deeply* and *intimately* involved with each other. Millions claim to have some *connection* to a Church. They declare that they *attend* church. But it is not a connection of *involvement*. Their participation is superficial. We might wonder why they bother? Wouldn't it be more fun at the beach?

But that is not the way it was with the early church. As I showed you earlier, they were closely “*knit*” together. They were involved with each other on an intimate level.

But it doesn't stop there: it wasn't just their lifestyles that were affected. Their money and their possessions were also affected (that is the sure proof that their hearts were changed). They “*began selling . . . and sharing . . . as anyone might have need*” (Acts 2:45).

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had . . . There was no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the Apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need” (Acts 4:32-35)

That is amazing! Here was Bartholomew, who was laid off his job. Tertius started thinking, "Hmm, Just when he was growing so well in Christ the devil wants to discourage him. 'Father, now I understand why you gave me that tract of land I've been holding on to. If I sold it, it would certainly tide Bart over until he gets a new job, and everything could start getting better. Praise the Lord!'"

You see, when we start giving, we are demonstrating our love. Because we demonstrate our love, we are loved. Giving to each other stimulates love within the body. Now do not think only of financial gifts (which during our current times, is certainly a big part of our needs). But when the Holy Spirit comes in power within a body, the claims of the group become higher than the claims of the individuals. This concern for the group is always true in times of revival and times of our God's special blessings on a group.

Coincidentally, in a recent Charisma News, Joseph Mattera discussed some of the contrasts between American Christianity and biblical Christianity, and in one of his points he wrote:

Much American preaching today focuses on 'our rights in Christ' to be blessed. However, in Scripture, the emphasis regarding finances has to do with being blessed by God to be a blessing by bringing God's covenant to the Earth (Read Deuteronomy 8:18; II Corinthians 9:10-11). Jesus promised material blessing only in the context of seeking first His Kingdom (Matthew 6:33)

In the Old Testament, the Israelites gave up their jewelry to build the tabernacle! When Moses first gave the call for the offerings, he simply said, "Anyone who is willing to bring an offering or skilled in some kind of trade, come and build the tabernacle" (Exodus 35:5-19). That was the key: their "willingness." And then it goes on:

"Everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the Lord and they continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning" (Exodus 35:20- 36:3)

Amazing! The people were willing to give to the point, I might add, that Moses had to tell them to stop bringing their offerings because they had too much! Can you imagine your Pastor standing in the pulpit some Sunday and say, "Whoa folks, we love all of the gifts you have sent, but we need to slow it down. We simply have *too much!*"? No, I can't either, but wouldn't that be great to see in our churches today?

True Christianity is more than a verbal explanation of life. It is a *way* of life. A twenty-four-hour a day, demanding, challenging, courageous way of life. I like what Steve Camp has to say about the demands of our Christian lives:

"There's safety in complacency but God is calling us out of our comfort zones into a life of complete surrender to the cross. To live dangerously is not to live recklessly but righteously and it is because of God's radical grace for us that we can risk living a life of radical obedience for Him."

Unfortunately, many people these days are accepting Christianity as an *explanation* of life. They are not willing to accept it as a *way* of life. Many supposed "*Evangelical Christians*" live lives that are no different from those of the world. We make too much of their intellectual assent.

Christ is not calling us to accept His *explanation* but to practice a *way* of life. That is radical. That is tougher.

You cannot live an isolated life. You must *mesh* your life as closely as possible with other believers. No snobbery. No privileges. Altogether, sharing the same ideas (the Apostles doctrine), the same friends (fellowship), the same practices (breaking of bread), and the same religious habits (public prayers).

Several years ago I listened to a young couple talk about the passage that says if you have two coats, to give to him who has none. Well, they realized that they were now over the median income of the other church members, so they were a *two-coat* family now, and that gave them the responsibility of caring for the others.

They also remembered that while the husband was in college, they were the ones with *no-coat*; and many times believers would slip them money or put a bag of groceries in the back door. Consequently, they increased their giving within the church, but were also looking for the ones who needed their help. What a beautiful attitude!

Others have reached out to my wife and me with assistance during our times of difficulty. People have left groceries for us as well. During times of severe financial need, we received several thousand dollars from different brothers and sisters.

Now, Patrice and I, in turn, continue to reach out to help other families with groceries, or money or simply a shoulder to shed their tears. Sometimes our service is something as simple as letting college student use one of our cars for a trip home or providing leftover carpeting to cover the floor of a single mother's bathroom. Our rule has always been that if we *see a need*, then the Lord must want us to do something about it. The funny thing is that we never consider whether we can afford it. Our Brothers need, is all that matters, and somehow our Father has always provided the means.

Just in case you were wondering, we got that idea from *The Living Bible*, which paraphrases Romans 12:13 this way:

“When God's children are in need, *you* be the one to help them out.”

Patrice and I have always taken that quite literally! It doesn't say to call the Pastor or the Elders of the church. It doesn't say anything about calling the ministry team. It calls for *you* to help them. In Charles Swindoll's small booklet, *For those that Hurt*, his number one recommendation is to get your eyes off your *own* problems and begin to help others out of *their* problems! Great principle!

Sharing in the family of God is the perfect sign of authenticity. I love it when we can get so comfortable with each other that we can think, “*Hey, this sweater doesn't fit me very well anymore, I think Scott could use it.*” It's not about who's richer and who's poorer as we use the word charity these days: it's charity in its old usage —just pure love in the Body!

In many fellowships, it is a common practice to supply meals for a family with a new baby or for someone who had major surgery or any situation that needs the extra help. Sometimes, the women get together and clean the house if the mother is laid up for some time. Other times you find shared babysitting between couples. The list goes on and on. The bottom line is if there is a *need*, there is a way to *meet* that need.

As I pointed out, the first sign our God is at work in a fellowship or a church is when they begin to care for each other, whether it is financially or physically or emotionally. When we start

to ignore our own problems and attend to the needs of our brothers and sisters, it is a clear sign we have the Spirit of God in our midst.

The point I am trying to make is that those of us in the family of God need to learn to “*hang loose*” with our possessions. In fact, there were many Old Testament laws to legislate this kind of attitude. For instance:

- You weren't to charge interest on a loan to a fellow Israelite, only to a foreigner. (That meant someone that did not know the Lord.) Deuteronomy 23:19-20.
- If you requested payment on a loan, you were to stand outside a fellow Israelites house. That way you wouldn't seem too pushy. Deuteronomy 24:10-11.
- When you harvested your crops, you weren't to pick clean. Instead, you were to leave some fruit on the tree, or leave your fallen wheat on the ground. This would allow for the care of the needy and the stranger Leviticus 19:9-10.
- You were to pay salaries immediately, and pay any debts as soon as you had the money. You weren't to hold it when you had it. Deuteronomy 24:15.
- You could always eat freely from any neighbor's property what you could carry in your hands. You just couldn't bring your baskets Deuteronomy 23:24.

The list goes on. The point I am trying to make is that there was certainly a strong sense of ownership — and even pride and respect of ownership. At the same time, the edges were to slop over, and nobody was to be upset or uptight about it. They were to learn to be generous and loose with each other because our Father is that way with all of us.

The whole reason those laws had to be spelled out is that if they weren't, no one would obey them. This kind of attitude doesn't come naturally — in fact; it is quite hard on our flesh. However, these principles are now written on our hearts! We have a higher calling to live!

We are to consider ourselves stewards over all that we have, not hoarders.

We have a lot to learn about this area of stewardship in very practical, nitty-gritty ways. It is impossible to get close to everybody in our church or try to meet everybody's needs. The point is that we should be close enough to some, that when payday is three days away, and they have run short of cash, we know it and take care of it.

Let's look at Acts one more time and see if we can wrap up on the early Christian lifestyles.

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” --Acts 2:46-47

Notice the two places their lives were centered. In the temple courts (we might say church) and in their homes. Everybody can fit in the church, and small groups could fit in their homes. Their lives included both.

It also says that they met daily. (And we think we are spiritual if we meet twice a week!) Now don't forget that they were just like us! They were busy people before the Holy Spirit came into their lives, but now that eternity had come into view, it was a matter of eliminating things that no longer mattered anymore.

Let me give you an example how this works out. When Patrice and I were leading a fellowship at Western Michigan University, there was a particular young man I continually tried

to include in events and gatherings. But he always had the same excuse: not enough time. He had his studies and work (which, coincidentally, was the same for every member of the group, but they didn't have any problems meeting together). Oddly though, when he met an attractive Coed, considerable interest was created within him. Suddenly he had plenty of time! What happened? Well, he fell in love. Maybe we need to fall in love with each other.

Verse 46 says that this lifestyle made for gladness because it was self-less. The believers were, in essence, saying "I will disciple you; love you; teach you; laugh with you, and cry with you; I will eat with you; worship with you; and whenever you have a need, I will take care of you." That is the attitude all of us are called to accept!

This kind of lifestyle also made for singleness — or sincerity — of heart. There was both unity and open reality, because it also said, "I expect you to disciple me; to love me; teach me; laugh and cry with me; eat with me; worship with me and care for me. We are in this together."

No wonder it says that the "Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." It was contagious!

Alas, that was all a long time ago. The former rains diminished and quit. The world became spiritually dry. The DARK AGES ensued.

Then a monk named Martin Luther rediscovered the meaning of faith. "The just shall live by faith!" he read, and faith was reborn. Raindrops began to patter all around the world.

Then, a century or more ago, believers rediscovered the meaning of hope. The Lord's return was the big news and the big study. Out of that missions sprang to life; study editions of the Bible; Bible schools; Bible conferences; camp meetings; para-church movements; and so on. More showers here and there!

This generation of believers is rediscovering the meaning of love. We are reaching for and finding each other. There are new longings of unity; organizational unity by some, maybe, but deeper than that by many. Denominational walls are breaking and falling. Ecumenical communities are growing. Multi-denominational movements are on the rise.

We have rediscovered Faith, Hope, and now Love is being rediscovered. And the greatest of these is Love!

Right now we are too rigid and organized when we try to copy the early church: "*Be regular Sunday morning and evening . . .*" "*Get into small groups . . .*" Still, that is better than doing nothing!

We still need to study the early church. We need to try to recapture the spirit of their together lifestyle, and we need to pray to make it happen! Then make it *daily* and make it *accountable*.

You cannot have any of this "*Well, I went to the cabin this Sunday, but I was with you in the Spirit.*" These people's bodies were continually with each other! I heard one sister who worked a second shift on Saturday night — then drove 63 miles every Sunday say, "*I believe if you get your bod' to the place of blessing, all the rest will follow!*"

I visited a church in North Dallas and had the opportunity to meet one family that made a two-hour journey twice a week, just to attend that church. Their reason?: "*The Church that's alive is worth the drive!*" Well, you are one deciding factor whether your church will be alive. We used to say, "I don't *go* to church, I'm the church *going!*"

Everybody keeps talking about the last days. Are these the last days? Is Jesus going to return soon? Are the latter rains of revival beginning to fall around the world? You would have to be deaf, dumb or blind not to think so. Find out for yourself what is happening in Africa, Israel, South America, Korea, Indonesia, all over the United States, the former Iron Curtain countries,

China, Cuba, Ecuador, and in countries with a predominantly Muslim following. As people of Narnia testified, "*Aslan is on the move . . .*"

Whether you are in the right geographical place or not doesn't matter. Revival can come to you — personally. It can also come to your church or family. I met one sister at that church in Dallas, and after talking to her for just a few minutes, it was evident that she was on fire with a Holy Zeal that was certainly contagious. I discovered that she accepted Christ as a teenager in her native Norway when a revival was sweeping the land. She described how people talked about Jesus continually on the streets, in the markets, in homes. She explained how they were continually fellowshiping with each other and hard to break up the church meetings because nobody wanted to quit. (Sounds like the place I would like to be).

I asked if everybody in Norway became a Christian in those days. I mean, was it sort of a blanket thing? (It sounded like a logical question at the time). She said, "*Oh no! Some people hardly knew it was happening.*" She explained how most of the big state Cathedrals went right on with their dry, empty services with a dozen old ladies and hundreds of empty pews.

Even during the three great awakenings in the United States, many never knew it was happening. Some even stepped out and openly criticized and condemned what was going on around them! You will find that happen any time the Lord begins to move. That's why the Lord had to tell Jeremiah, "*Hey, whether they listen to you or not, it is not your concern.*"

Then the Lord showed me how a gusher of rain could make water pour down the side of a mountain. If it strikes a big rock, it just divides and goes around it. The rock cannot stop the water from rushing down the hill, but it will just sit there, as unmoved as though nothing was happening.

(Interestingly, through the continual pounding of the water, the big stone is eventually washed away through erosion. Forgotten and irrelevant).

Each of us can be just as that big rock. There can be a great revival going on right in our midst, see the joy of God's love and walk away from it the same as before, entirely unmoved and unchanged. Maybe that is why the Bible says "*Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts*" (Hebrews 4:7).

There is indeed new life all around the world. There is excitement about Jesus. There is a hunger to get back to the original Christian lifestyle. It is a new day! Don't be one of those rocks. Don't let Yahweh's revival pass by you!

Why the Church?

The reason I began this re-write was that I have a personal need to re-establish the roots of my faith that have become eroded. They were once the foundations of my faith and under-girded all that I believe. So in a way, this is healing for me.

As I explained, back in the early-to-mid 80's I wrote what I still consider the greatest explanations of those beliefs. The first study was the Story of Job. That study was by far the most personal discoveries I had made (before or since). I had read the book of Job many times, but the Holy Spirit amazingly opened Job's story as never before.

My second writing was on the Song of Solomon. In my mind, you cannot read Job's story without also reading the Song. For me, the two are united, spiritually in the most amazing way.

Then there is my third study, Dust and Stars. As I explained in the introduction, these began as individual messages that seemed to flow together. It wasn't until later that I realized I should combine them into one study.

I poured my heart into those three studies as I have ever done before (or after). They define succinctly what I believe and what the Lord has shown me. I wish I had the power to make them

a required reading of every believer. I even declared (naively I might add), “Lord, I have completed these studies, and frankly, can't imagine anything I could possibly add. I have completed my work.” Well, He didn't seem to agree, but still, those studies are the most important writings I have produced before.

This chapter I entitled “*Why The Church?*” because it was a question I asked myself when I began this series of teachings. You see, I once heard a speaker preach from Psalm 127:1 “*Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.*” His exposition was that the verse said, “*first the house, then the city,*” and he deduced from that, “*first the family, then the church.*” His teaching came during my period of renewal, and my heart was crying out, “*Heresy! Heresy!*”

I admit that I have received a bunch of criticism for what I am going to present to you. However, if you will bear with me, maybe we can see through new eyes. You see, I contend that the Church is to be second in priority only to God Himself. Look at the first three chapters in Ephesians, and you will find at least four reasons to support this theory of mine.

- It pre-existed in the heart of God before the world began (Ephesians 1:4). No other institution that God has ordained can make that claim.
- The Church is Christ's gift to the Father (Ephesians 1:11, 18). Think about that a moment. What does our Heavenly Father get out of sending His Son to die on the cross? He gets us! And, hallelujah, He thinks that's a treasure!
- The Church is Christ's body (Ephesians 1:22-23). The Church is His “fullness,” His completion. In a truer way than Eve ever completed Adam, we complete Christ. He has put in His plan an absolute necessity for us. In a genuine sense, the Church isn't an organization, but rather an organism.
- The Church is convincing evidence to the universe that our God is merciful, good, and wise (Ephesians 3:9-10); and this demonstration is throughout all space and time (Ephesians 3:20-21).

I repeat: our God has never said any of these things regarding any other institution! Including the family.

Now I realize the Church may sometimes appear to be a rag-tag affair without much rhyme or reason. But only because we are looking at the tapestry on the wrong side, with all its yarn ends showing. What we see is a tangled mix of knotted colored thread that has no rhyme or reason, no beauty, and no image. We have to begin to see it from God's perspective. That is where we see the perfect image of Christ on the earth.

So we cannot bad mouth the Church. We cannot put any activity or group, not even any para-church movement, above the Church. The Church is Christ's Body!

Do not judge that statement too quickly. I understand there is a big difference between the visible church and invisible. I know the local First Church on the corner downtown is probably a mixture of true believers and fakes. But it is for that precise reason we do not have the eyes to see which is which, we need to treat the whole visible church with respect!

Throughout the history of the Church, battles waged between this council and that have divided us. We had our guns trained on what were probably our brothers and sisters, instead of on Satan, our true enemy. One day God's angel will sickle out the tares from the wheat, but in the

meantime, we have to be careful how we handle even the visible Church. You may not decide to attend a certain one, that is okay, but you do not have to take pot shots at it.

Think about how Christ identifies with The Church. Here was Saul, on the road to Damascus, and Jesus stops and says, “Yo, why are you persecuting me?” Paul thought he had only giving Christians a hard time, but then he said: “Who are you, Lord?” Jesus answered, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

You better realize now that when you harass a brother, you are harassing Jesus. When you speak roughly about a brother, you are speaking roughly about Jesus. When you touch His disciple, you are touching Him! Ray Ortlund said,

“We may want to learn to worship, but we won't learn worship until we learn unity. When we treat the Lord's people with tenderness and reverence, we adore Him, worship Him, treat Him well, too!”

Now I realize that all this is good for us to meditate on and even discuss, but what are we suppose to do with it? Well, I can find at least four ways to demonstrate this precious priority:

First, we need to guard and handle with care our *oneness*. That is what Ephesians 4:2,3 instructs us to do: With complete humility, gentleness, and patience, we are to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. We don't base our fellowship on how Godly the other Christian is, but rather on what Christ has done for *both of us*. (Does that liberate any of you?)

Acts 2:4 says *all the believers* were filled with the Holy Spirit. That is totally unifying. There is nothing exclusive or discriminatory about it. So when we share the Spirit of Christ and concentrate on Him, differences shrink down or even melt away. It is when we settle on secondary things that we bicker and argue. Too many occupy themselves with the details regulating our lifestyles; or liturgies, ceremonies, and church customs. Some argue about secondary doctrinal issues, or with affairs of government, political parties, national issues, etc., etc.. But we are supposed to be drawn and held together by the Spirit on the basics: God, sin, death, sacrifice, love. We must stay solidly on those basics to maintain unity.

Let me illustrate this for you. When Patrice and I lived in Kalamazoo, Michigan, every Tuesday night during the summer was a concert of the Kalamazoo Symphony. I remember one night sitting on the grass, listening to the orchestra. Looking around I saw there were probably hundreds of us, very diverse in our lives and philosophies, there were probably Republicans and Democrats, Catholics and Protestants, people of faith and people of no faith, yet still, we were brought together to enjoy the same thing. That is what we are supposed to experience in our churches. Christians need to minimize their differences and be caught up together in their worship of Jesus Christ.

The second way to demonstrate our priority of the Church and one critical way is to repair any rift that comes along in the Body (Ephesians 4:31-32).

I'm still disappointed over the split of those former partners, Barnabas and Paul, in Acts 15:39-40. Paul and Barnabas were traveling and preaching, and picked up Barnabas's cousin John Mark (Colossians 4:10) to go along with them. Later when the going got tough, Mark deserted. Barnabas could forgive him and later wanted to sign him up again, but Paul said “No way!” The debate got so hot that Barnabas took Mark and went off to preach. Paul took a new partner, Silas (Acts 15:36-41).

Beginning in Acts 4:36, Barnabas was great. He was the one who first accepted Paul's conversion and introduced him to the rest of the Church. What happened that he lost his head? After the fight, we never hear about him again unless it is the sad little note about him in Galatians 2:13. History also tells us that Barnabas began to follow false teachings — the Gnostic Gospel and deemed a heretic — but John Mark re-joined Paul and wrote the Gospel of Mark.

The issue wasn't doctrine, but personality. The issue wasn't who was right. I suppose if you get right down to it, Paul was the hard guy. Paul was so dedicated there was no way he could stand for Barnabas's relative, Mark, to be less dedicated. Our little saying, "If Christ is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all" can make us harsh and unforgiving, even critical at times. Acknowledging Christ's Lordship is a growing commitment to Christ, but it is also not up to you to make the determination.

It is not easy being a member of the family of God. As they say, "You can pick your friends, but you are stuck with your relatives." You cannot have a close relationship without occasionally getting hurt. You discover that in your natural family. We need to be careful that we don't become too fussy, divisive and critical. My wife family is very large, and one of the most surprising things I learned is sometimes, they can be in-your-face, which can lead to heated arguments. However, afterward, you can go to the movies together or give each other hugs.

Proverbs 14:4 says, "an empty stable stays clean, but there is no income from an empty stable." If you are not running into conflict at times, maybe it is because there is no contact. Think of it this way; the only way to reduce friction is to eliminate contact. Even our most profound convictions are not infallible. We have to leave room for everyone's opinions, although we remain faithful to our own. Unity is so important it must be highly prized, sought after, and maintained! I realize many issues can stand without discussions. There are absolutes to our faith. However, there are times when our conflicts are not on the absolutes, but on side issues.

The third way to demonstrate the high priority of the church is by accepting each other as we are (Ephesians 5:1-2). The Church has a beautiful fragrance about it. We are to love each other — period! We don't love because of worth, or looks, or wealth or spirituality.

When you begin to love someone, it could be your mate or a very special friend; you reach a point in that relationship where you discover the truth about that person. It becomes uncomfortable. You discover and touch tender areas. You become vulnerable. All of us have that proverbial hidden *can of worms* or *skeleton in the closet*.

That is a real fear many of us have. Many years ago I read a secular book by Eugene Kennedy that addressed this issue entitled, "*If you really knew me, would you still love me?*" Kennedy's book dealt with a fear many people have. Some have been very successful their entire life in covering up those sensitive areas with walls of steel, through resistance and avoidance. They are willing to open themselves to that point, that tender spot, that place of vulnerability because it is safe; it is easy. But it is also superficial. We may even be those who are only willing to know someone else up to that point, and that is unfair.

We need to love right on through that sensitive area. We need to learn to love right to the end; refuse to let go, even though you know everything about that person. Refuse to let go! You also have to allow someone to love you beyond that tender area.

One of the things that brought me to the Lord was my need to be that open — yet still accepted. I had lived my entire life behind a facade, a lie. My personal theme song was The Who's, "Behind Blue Eyes." No one knew the truth about me. I was miserable; I was so afraid that if people truly knew me, the real me, they would never accept me.

I finally found a relationship that was secure; someone who loved me, not the *imaginary* me, but the real, flesh and blood me! So I bore my soul to her. I confessed the lie that I had lived for over ten or fifteen years. It was the hardest thing I had ever done in my life! (but it was that repentance, and willingness to be honest that finally opened my heart to the Lord).

Because of that renewed sense of freedom, I continued to open up with other people with whom I felt a sense of security. I was quite amazed to find that most of them continued to accept me and support me. They never threw me aside or rejected me. (Except the first one, the one I thought would be the only one to stay. She was so offended, she dumped me forever).

When I finally surrendered my life to Jesus, it was without reservation or second thoughts. I made a commitment to follow Him. But there was a time when I began to remember my “*old life*” and began to imagine, “How could the Lord could use me?” I was a loser, and I knew it.

It was at that time that I began attending a small group of college-aged folks and one sister I had never met before came up to me and never took her eyes off of mine. With a clear anointing, told the story of a woman in Luke 7 who came to Jesus and anointed his feet with her tears (read Luke 7, the whole chapter is great). Then this sister looked at me and said, “I don't know you, but the Lord wants you to know, 'I forgive your many sins — because you love me much.'” Wow!

Through all that pain, I learned how the kind of love that is fragile, is also empty and worthless. It only loves to that point of pain, then quits. Unfortunately, that is the love many Christians have seen demonstrated. They have learned through past experiences that “if they knew what I did” they could never face their fellow believers again.

Fortunately, there are those who are willing to go crashing right on through that threshold of pain, to where they actually known by others. Those are the ones who openly confess that they are not perfect mothers; that sometimes they scream at their children; that they drink; or swear. They openly confess their addiction to pornography, or smoke cigarettes when no one is around. Maybe they masturbate or have committed adultery, or are homosexual. They live their lives in secrecy instead of allowing the revealing love of Jesus to liberate them.

There are all kinds of hidden things going on in the lives of Christians. Why do you think James told us to confess our sins to each other? Because we are supposed to be nosy? NO! We confess our sins for others to pray for us so we may find deliverance. For goodness sakes! The Lord is not building His Church from the best the world has to offer. He is taking those who are messed up — the foolish of the earth.

All of us have made poor choices and bad decisions. A wrong decision can cost you your marriage, job, friendships and even your peace of mind.

However, if you are willing to admit you have messed up, you are a prime candidate for an encounter with Jesus. In fact, He specializes in ministering to messed-up people. One of the many things I love about Jesus is that He *gravitates* toward those who are typically ignored, ridiculed, hated and rejected. They are the ones who need a Savior.

“Sing with joy . . . Make your praises heard, and say, O Lord, save your people . . . See, I will gather them from the . . . ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return. They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble . . .” (Jeremiah 31:8, 9).

“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed” (Hebrews 12:12).

I occasionally see a bumper sticker that says: “*Christians aren't perfect; they are just forgiven.*” I used to think a backslider wrote it, but I missed the truth there. It isn't a means of *excusing* our failures and sins, but merely acknowledging that we need the Lord's grace and the support of our brothers and sisters!

The fourth and final way to demonstrate the high priority of the church is by adapting and fitting in with each other (Ephesians 5:21). It is so important for us to become Inter-dependent! Notice that the Macedonians first gave themselves to God and *then* to Paul and company (II Corinthians 8:5). Paul did the same thing: after he had given himself to Christ, he submitted himself to other Christians (Acts 22:10-16).

Everybody in our God's family is to submit to everybody else. That is what makes it hot in there. It takes courage to plunge into the life of the Body. We cannot be loners anymore. We cannot do what we want to do when we want to do it. We are to be responsible for each other.

Everyone is submitting to everyone. From our love, respect, reverence, and fear of Christ, we will subject ourselves to one another. Now it sounds real “*religious*” and all, but what does it mean? Does it mean that we will be mindless people, act like doormats and let everyone push us around or tell us what to do? NO! We have a strange view of submission and subjection because often this is how we understand submission. But the concept is simple: we are going to *yield* to others.

Maybe it would help to replace word “*yield.*” Try “*relinquish*” instead. We are to *relinquish* to one another out of reverence for Christ. The new life in Christ *relinquishes* to the interests of others. The old-self gives commands. The old, sinful self only looks out for its own interests. But if there is something that is good for another person, we will relinquish our own interest to advance *their* interests.

Usually preachers will jump over this verse and dive into Ephesians 5:22 where wives submit to their husbands. I don't understand the confusion. This should not be an issue because Paul had already commanded everyone to yield to everyone else. Paul is simply pointing out that even wives yield to husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24), husbands yield to wives by loving them as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25-33), children yield to parents (Ephesians 6:1-3), parents yield to their children's interests by training them in the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), slaves yield to masters (6:5-8), and master yield to slaves (6:9).

It is a Universal Law that everyone is to yield to each other. This is what it means to live as a Christian. Yes, it sticks in my craw as well. But we are not to live an autonomous life and act independent of the interests and needs of others. Your heart is to yield your needs and to relinquish your requirements, to those brother and sisters around you.

Understanding Dust and Stars

I just gave you four ways we need to act as though The Church is our highest priority and how we are to function but don't you wonder why we have failed to make it work that way? That is a great question. I guess it is time for me to explain what I mean by "*Dust and Stars*."

In Genesis 13:16, when Abram chose his land and decided to settle in it, Yahweh promised him, "Abram, I will make your descendants as the *dust* of the earth."

Genesis 15:6, states that Abram "believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness." The remainder of our faith rests on this foundation verse. However, along with this statement, the Lord also said, "Abram, your descendants will be as plentiful as the *stars*." Huh? What's that all about? Well, the double promise is repeated in Genesis 22:17 when the Lord says; "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the *stars* in the sky and as the sand (*dust*) on the seashore."

Even a casual student of the New Testament understands that Abraham received a double line of descendants. First, you have the Jews, Abraham's earthly descendants by their natural heritage, as numerous as *dust*. Then, you have all the believers, Abraham's heavenly descendants by spiritual heritage, as numerous as *stars*. [Hence, *Dust and Stars*] That's right. Abraham ended up with two great families! Unless we keep these families separate, we will get into all kinds of problems, but the beautiful thing we have in common is the same father, Abraham.

The entire Old Testament is a story of the development of Abraham's physical descendants, the Hebrews. Their family structure was strictly natural. They were born into their immediate family, and into a particular clan with a common paternal ancestor. The clan within the tribes, all ascended from twelve brothers. The tribes within the nation Israel were all physically related.

In that setup, the natural father was also the spiritual head of the home. He was answerable for the sins and successes of the mother and the children. He provided the information for census taking and teaching his family about the things of the Lord.

Now the New Testament does not *remove* the former but introduces a *new* order. And "*showed that the first promise was outdated. What is outdated and aging will soon disappear*" (Hebrews 8:13). It is the story of Abraham's *spiritual* descendants. It is the story of those who have believed in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Yahweh counts it to them as righteousness, as he did their spiritual father, Abraham. There are no natural fathers, clans, or tribes here. No one is *born* into it by natural birth; we must be "*born again*" into this family because it is a *spiritual* family.

The differences between the Old and New Testaments are striking. Even the meanings for identical words change. The word family is used around 200 times in the Old Testament, and it always means a physical or natural family. However, in the New Testament that all changes. Luke 2:4, still in the culture of the Old Testament and the law, uses the word family in referring to a physical family for the last time, saying that Joseph was of the house and family of David. After that, it is gone. The word family does appear twice more, in Acts 3:25 and in Ephesians 3:15, in the first instance, referring to mankind in general (all the families of the earth) and then, even broader, the whole family in heaven and earth.

From the cross on, you won't see a mention of physical families in the Bible. Yes, there is a mention of households, including servants, house-guests, anybody living under a single roof, but never physical families in the strict sense that the Old Testament used the word.

The term used is a father, and that is around 600 times in the Old Testament, and it practically always refers to a physical father. Seven times God is poetically called father (Jeremiah 3:4,19;

31:9; Deuteronomy 32:6; Isaiah 63:16; Malachi 1:6), but the Israelites never thought of Him that way. On the other hand, the word father occurs about 300 times in the New Testament, and it almost always refers to Yahweh.

It was a wonderful new concept of Him!

Brother occurred around 200 times in the Old Testament and always referred to a physical brother. Then in the New Testament, it occurs nearly 100 times and nearly always means brother in the Christ. Children in the Old Testament meant physical offspring. In the New, it takes on the tender meaning of spiritual children, as in Ephesians 5:1 and in I John.

The New Testament is a family book, but it is a spiritual family that comes into prominence. It is newer, higher, and eternal! Jesus' life is the pivot on which the Old and New Testaments swing because He came to introduce the world to concepts they had never thought of under the law. He continued to support that precious, God-given physical family; he defended the sanctity of marriage (Mark 10:9) and rebuked the Pharisees for avoiding taking care of aging parents (Mark 7:10-13). However, Jesus was also introducing a higher order of family life than had ever been thought of, one we have never fully understood, but must begin to discover.

First, take a look at Jesus when he was twelve. He had disappeared, and after searching for him, his parents found him in the temple sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions. His mother rebuked him; "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been worried sick looking for you!" But his answer put them at a little distance, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you realize that I had to be in my Father's house?" Ouch! Luke even goes further when he says "they didn't understand what he meant" (Luke 2:48-50). I should say not! Their Old Testament minds only knew of one kind of father, like Joseph.

Although, the next verse makes it clear that he was still subject to his parents at that age because he left with them. Yet, He already began to demonstrate in His thinking some higher kind of priority than he could give to an earthly father and mother.

Here is where you will have to bear with me. Sometimes the Word of God gets a little too hot to handle unless you keep your heart open. We have to remember that Jesus always taught in a powerful, revolutionary way. We don't seem to mind if it only hit the Pharisees' pet ideas; we just don't want him to hit ours! However, to teach higher truths about the new spiritual family that was emerging, Jesus taught by contrast. He said it a little stronger than you or I would ever dare, or think was appropriate.

In Matthew and Luke Jesus says that he came to set members of physical families against each other. He even added that anyone who loves his father or mother or his son or daughter more than him is not worthy of him (Matthew 10:34-37). In Luke 14 he says it even more daringly; "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he can not be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Now that is harsh!

So what can these words possibly mean? I mean the person who said them is the very personification of Love! Don't get mad at me; I didn't say it. In fact, I don't think I would have to guts to say anything that strong if he hadn't said it. Okay, just stick with me, and we will begin to see what the Lord is trying to get over to us.

Look at Jesus' personal example with his natural family. After his first recorded rebuff as a twelve-year-old, we see him next confronting his mother at his first public miracle when he says to her, "*Dear woman, why do you involve me?*" He wasn't angry at her because immediately afterward they went home together (John 2:4, 12)

A short time later, when he is preaching, someone calls out from the crowd, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” He could have just smiled and nodded and gone on with his sermon, but he calls back, “Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:27-28). (Ouch! How did I get into this?) However, hopefully, we can begin to see through the fog and realize that our all-wise, all-loving Lord Jesus Christ seemed to be giving priority to his spiritual family over his physical family.

Look what we have next, Jesus is preaching again, and someone says to him, “*Your mom and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to you.*” He replied, “*Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven (catch that relationship, too) is my brother and sister and mother*” (Matthew 12:47-50).

Why do we have these rebuffs? Why does Jesus seem to deliberately give attention to his spiritual family at the expense of his physical family? Well, I can think of two possible reasons. One, because his time was short and he had to pour everything he could into strengthening the believers, and particularly the twelve apostles, who would be the foundation pillars of the whole church to follow.

Second, because he loved his especially chosen, God-given physical family so deeply that he knew a lifestyle of total obedience to God was ultimately, the only way to win them! They never needed his time for time's sake, sitting home playing tiddly-winks in the sunshine of Nazareth to prove himself a good brother and son of the family. They needed to see a life lived wholly for God, and that would be the power they could not resist!

They did resist for a long time. Mark 3:20-31 and John 7:5 tell us that during his three years of ministry, they did not believe in him. As a matter of fact, Mary and Jesus' brothers (James and Jude) tried to get him and take him home because they thought he had gone mad and were afraid he would be put to death. They doubted his divinity. That must have hurt, however (and this should give hope to many of you), his unswerving, visible godliness eventually won their hearts!

I hope we have begun a renewal of our understanding of The Church and how the Lord seems to be building another entity, a special group that He wants for himself.

Now, let's talk a look at the upper room following the ascension of Jesus and notice who was praying and waiting for Pentecost:

“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and His brothers” (Acts 1:14)

Wow! When the time came to be counted, there they were!

Now notice who became traveling preachers, going everywhere with the New Gospel of Jesus Christ! Paul wrote; “*Don't we have the right to take our wives along with us like the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Peter do?*” (I Corinthians 9:5)?

Jesus gave himself to his Father as his highest priority and then to his spiritual family in all of those meaningful and eternally significant interactions. Jesus' brothers found the power of that life irresistible, and even they reached for what they saw in him.

Think about Jesus' mother, too. She had been told thirty years before by the prophet Simeon that “*a sword will pierce your own soul*” (Luke 2:35). When her son was dying on the cross, that was obviously the sword piercing her, but Jesus' words must have given the sword a twist. He said, “*Dear woman, here is your son!*” and then to John standing by, “*Here is your mother!*” (John 19:26-27). He was making the final break in the physical relationship between Mary and himself!

Why was Jesus turning his mother over to a new son? Dr. Russell Bradley Jones, in his book *Gold from Golgotha*, says:

“The word that grieved Mary so when it was spoken proved, by times interpretation, to be a blessed word indeed. Mary discovered that she had been led from a natural union with Jesus to a mystical union with Christ. She gladly took her place among his sincere worshipers. It was not a special place, it was not on a platform; it was with the 120, as a simple believer!

“She found that the salvation relationship is higher than the family relationship. She learned that it was better to have him as her Savior and Lord than to have him as her son.

“In a very true sense, she discovered that her former son had made better provision for her as her Savior than he could have made as her son. Heavenly mansions and eternal life are hardly to be compared with a few fleeting years in John’s home.”

Look at the disciples. They had to follow the example of Jesus, and it must have seemed painful for the moment.

Take Peter. We know he had a home and a wife and mother-in-law (Luke 4:38). Biblical scholars tell us that during the first half of Jesus' ministry, the twelve probably still lived at home and only joined him on public occasions. Then there came that last year and a half when the Twelve went on the road with him. That must have seemed harsh and maybe even unreasonable. We might tend to think today of our twisted priorities that it just would never be spiritual for Jesus to call a man to leave his family to serve him, even for roughly eighteen months!

When Patrice was pregnant with our twin boys, I stayed across the State, in Ann Arbor, at her parent's home, for several months as I investigated a church called *Emmaus Fellowship*. We had visited the church twice before, and I was impressed with the leadership of the church. Patrice and I were becoming convinced the Lord was drawing us there which is why I was staying with her parents during my investigation (plus, I worked for her father while we decided whether to make a move to Ann Arbor). During this time, we only saw each other on the weekends, and with her being pregnant it was tough for both of us (especially her), yet we knew it was the will of the Lord.

I shared that story with a small group of believers I had been meeting with, and some were shocked that I would even presume the Lord would instruct me to leave my wife for those few months. The only thing I could say was that I knew the voice of my Lord, and He never seemed to disapprove of our decision.

Peter must have been feeling this deeply at one point, himself and commented, “*We have left all we had to follow you!*” Jesus” responded,

“No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life” (Luke 18:28-30)

I realize I may be stepping on some toes here and even kicking over some of your sacred cows, but you will have to hang on with me and see what the Lord can show us.

I want you to notice that the promise here is for the exchange of a physical family for a spiritual family; of a few, for multitudes. It is an exchange of a temporary family for an eternal one. For a family that may inherit a few dollars in the bank, for co-heirs with Jesus Christ in of all God's glory? As Jim Elliot wrote, "*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose.*" Maybe at the moment that did not seem like much of an exchange to Peter, but he was willing to be obedient. After a few month's separation, God gave Peter back a wife who was also a new sister in Christ and who was constantly at his side in his preaching and traveling (I Corinthians 9:5).

Can you imagine what Peter would have missed if he had put his wife first and refused to travel with Jesus? Remember the fellow in Jesus' parable who rejected the invitation to dinner because he had just gotten married and didn't feel he could come? Jesus said,

"I tell you the truth; not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet" (Luke 14:20, 24)

It is somewhat frightening to think of all Peter would have lost, and Peter's wife too.

I hope you are beginning to see things in proportion. The Lord did not *reduce* (or eliminate) the value of our biological family in his Father's economy. The human family is His invention, and it is far more precious to Him than it is even to us. However, we should see an even higher, more glorious order; the newly created spiritual family, the *ecclesia*, "*the called out ones.*" He hasn't *lowered* the physical; he only *elevated* the spiritual, and we desperately need a vision of that elevation!

My aim is to get you to understand the importance of The Church, and yes, how our Lord has elevated the spiritual family, even above our natural family.

We just saw Peter's experience and how this new spiritual family impacted his life. Now, take this even further, and look, at Paul, or Saul, which was his given name. Soon after the birth of the spiritual family, Saul began to persecute the church. But, on his journey to find some more believers, Jesus meets him and literally knocks him off his "*High Horse.*"

As a result of that encounter, he was saved, and his life was never the same. Three days later he meets Ananias who lays hands on him and says "*Brother Saul . . .*" (Acts 9:17). *Brother . . . ?* How strange, how tender, how new! Unless Saul had biological brothers, probably no one had ever called him that before. It obviously meant something to him because when he retold the story of his conversion, he *repeated* what Ananias had called him (Acts 22:13).

From here on the message was, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Whether they came by ones or twos or by fives, they became part of a beautiful new and eternal family — of spiritual aunts and uncles and grandparents and sons and fathers!

As the old Pastor joke goes, "a man walked up to his Pastor and said that he had a new revelation that Paul's dad was one of the men crucified with Jesus." Obviously, the Pastor was quite confused and asked him how he knew that? "Well, Paul said, 'My old man was crucified with Christ,' so I knew one of them had to be his dad." No, no, that wasn't the old man he meant.

Now, consider Timothy! He was a young man with a grandmother and a mother who were believers (II Timothy 1:5), but a dad who apparently wasn't (Acts 16:1). Are we going to say, "Poor Timothy! He will never amount to much; he didn't have a good father-image?"

No, that is a crime against God's grace and His ability to prove Himself! I don't care what kind of father you had. It doesn't have to affect how you relate to your Heavenly Father! The

scriptures say that your biological father derived his title from God, so if you want to understand what an actual father is, don't look to your natural father, look to your Heavenly Father!

Quit trying to explain all of your problems on your past. You have a new life, so live it to the fullest! Paul took Timothy right to his side as his son and became his spiritual father (I Timothy 1:2). He had him circumcised; he kept him beside him on trips; he called him “*my son*” and led him in the ways of the Lord. When Paul faded off the scene, Timothy was one of the leading lights of the early church!

Sure, Timothy's Earthly dad may have been a spiritual loser; we don't know. If he was, that was his decision. We hope he eventually converted, but there is no record of it. Nevertheless, Timothy was not hindered in any way because he belonged to that noble spiritual family. The *purpose* of our spiritual family is to heal all the hurts and fill in all the cracks created by the imperfect physical family; to turn out whole people — people who can love their physical families better than ever before.

The term “*dysfunctional families*” has become the all-inclusive justification for our weaknesses and failures. The truth is when you are dealing with imperfect people, to begin with, there is no such thing as a “*functional*” family, is there? I know what people are like, and I have heard the testimonies of many who have come out of the worst type of family histories you can imagine.

I have heard stories of sexual abuse, physical abuse, alcoholism, emotional distress, absent parents, abusive siblings, and the list goes on. Yet, through God's power, the transcendent power of the Holy Spirit and the support of God's people, these individuals have become whole and healed.

Our Father has built within each of us hope that our future will be *better* than our present, and certainly better than our past and that we can still become what we long to be. Why did He build this hope into us? So we could become anxious and depressed because we don't measure up? No! Because He wants us to discover how strong His big hands are, to change us, and to change our family. Then He will get all the glory! Jesus is masterful at taking the dung from our lives, and by His *Transcendent Power* turn our worst memories into our greatest victories!

Modern secular thinking is just the opposite. It tells you that you are the product of the way your mother buttoned your coat, and how she wiped your nose. That is just the way you are, and there is nothing you can do about it. You are now called the *Adult Child* of whatever sin and can be analyzed to understand yourself better, but you cannot *change*.

Well, I am here to tell you straight out: that is Satan's lie! He spreads around that story because he wants to keep all of us fixed in position, thinking we cannot get out.

When you were a kid, did you ever play the game *Freeze*? The kids run like crazy, until the one who was “*it*” suddenly yelled, “*Freeze!*” Then you were “*frozen*” in that position. Today, Satan is busy shouting “*Freeze!*” to all the believers. And he is doing his darnedest to get people to stay their ugly old selves, discouraged from thinking they could ever be different.

Satan looks at you squirming around, trying to make sense of your life and tells you, “It's the way your momma raised you, You're '*in cement*,' and there is no way out.”

Paul Tournier admits the problem. In the book “*The Strong and the Weak*,” he wrote,

“[I]t is as difficult to help a strong man to see his weakness as it is to assist a weak man to regain confidence . . .”

He goes on to say that God's grace will do it:

“Since we are at one and the same both strong and weak. Grace also at one and the same time convinces of wretchedness and saves us from despair — it breaks and restores us.”

The Grace of God! The Power of God! The Love of God! The Favor of God, unearned and undeserved — that enormous miracle power can change and remake and remold our cement. Jeremiah said it this way:

“I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping is as seemed best to him.

“Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'Can I not do with you as the potter does? Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand.'” —Jeremiah 18:3-6

The loving, gracious hands of God are strong enough to rework *any* life. Even yours. Paul promises that when someone becomes a Christian, he becomes a brand new person inside. He is not the same anymore. A new life has begun! (II Corinthians 5:17) One translation says that he has become “*a new species of being*” — something that never existed before!

God reshaped Augustine after having a well-deserved reputation of sleeping around with the girls. A story goes that one day, as he was walking down the street, one of his old girlfriends spotted him.

“*Augustine!*” She called. Augustine did not answer; he just walked faster. “*Augustine,*” she called again, “*it is I!*” Augustine began to run, as he called back to her, “*But I am not I!*”

Augustine's clay, the original material, was the same, but God had reworked him into an entirely different shape, a new pot. That is what He intends to do for you! First He imparts that new life and then uses other brothers and sisters to help bring change in your life.

Not only did Paul function as a spiritual father, but he was also a brother to spiritual sisters like Phoebe (Romans 16:1) and men like Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25). He was like a son to Rufus' mother, who he said was a spiritual mother to him (Romans 16:13).

Each of us has many roles to play, and we must learn to play them all. We are told never to rebuke an older man harshly, but *exhort* him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity (I Timothy 5:1-2).

There have been many teachings over the years about the churches being the Body of Christ. We are instructed to think about hands, feet, eyes, and mouths. We have sought to discover our gifts and function with them. That is one picture of the Church, and an important one and we praise God for the rediscovery of this Truth.

However, that concept is not the whole story. If that is how we think, we have left many single adults standing awkwardly around the scene without family. We have single moms being ignored and overlooked. We have teenagers from non-Christian homes who have no spiritual parents to guide them.

They get all their wisdom from their TV and radio; a bunch of “*Timothy's*” without “*Paul's*”! And folks, I have been there! I asked the Lord into my heart when I was in 7th or 8th grade, but no

one ever told me I was supposed to do something with my new faith. I know what it is like to be a “*Timothy*” without a “*Paul*.”

Yes, we have to reach people with the Truth of Jesus, but we also need to lead them in the ways of Jesus; to disciple them. We have lonely widows, and widowers and other former wives and husbands floating around like second-class citizens because we mostly think about physical families and make our churches couples-oriented and physical-family oriented.

Maybe what we are doing is functioning like *Dust* instead of *Stars*! We could be trying to force the New Testament scene to fit the Old Testament pattern of fathers, families, clans and tribes. If we are, then hooray for the rare and lucky physical families who fit the bill, whose members can all answer to the spiritual roll call, too. We gear our churches to meet their needs.

Unfortunately, that is not the *ecclesia*! The called-out ones come from every possible broken family situation. And nothing will change until we see ourselves as functioning first as a spiritual family. Once we accomplish that, we will we all draw together and meet each other's needs.

I love how The Voice interprets Romans 12:4-5:

"For in the same way that one body has so many different parts, each with different functions; we, too — the many — are different parts that form one body in the Anointed One. Each one of us is joined with one another, and we become together what we could not be alone."

Despite the efforts of many groups and churches, this certainly cannot be organized, but it must be taught! We must learn it well. Then let the Holy Spirit make it happen! It comes out of a deep understanding and realization that the Body of Christ is to be second in priority only to God Himself, and to a deep commitment to each other.

Examining the Dust

I realize everything I have discussed so far could be difficult to swallow for some. So we have to be careful not make up our minds too quickly. For instance, I think that when Jesus, who was the very essence of love, talked about hating our physical family, it must have been for the sake of contrast. Rather than putting down our biological family, he was in truth, lifting up a new relationship in such a forceful way that we would never forget.

God loves our physical family. He is the one who started the human race off with a family; the family was his idea of how to incorporate tenderness, responsibility, training, discipline, and all the rest into the human scene.

When Adam's descendants fell into gross sin, God brought the flood and then started in again with a new family: Noah, his wife, their three sons and their wives.

When Noah's descendants defiantly built the tower of Babel, God scattered all of them and started with a new family: Abraham and his generations. This Hebrew race was His most spectacular and most visible family, with the most care built in for their spiritual and physical preservation, through the giving of the law. Then Christ came along with strong words saying in essence that we should not pin all our hopes on that physical family.

I do not believe the Lord meant to *destroy* it, by any means. He has continued to affirm and use the family. However, He has superimposed on it a mystical, eternal, spiritual family that has finally become His true family — the one He has been anticipating since time began. The God of creation will now call himself their *Father*, and they will be His *children*. Even Jesus, His Divine Son, isn't ashamed to call them *brothers* (Hebrews 2:11-12), and all of them will receive the family Spirit!

Their inheritance will not be just physical property; they have received every spiritual blessing in heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3). Their greatest need will be unity! The Trinity will make them one in just the same way that the Godhead is one! (John 17:11).

So, Jesus spelled out the beginnings of a new family plan. When he taught them to pray, he said, "*Our Father!*" That was an unknown concept to think of God in that close personal way.

They did not crucify Jesus because he did miracles; they crucified Him because he had the audacity to refer to God as his "*Father*." Then in I John we are told that now are we *sons* of God, what we will be like when Christ appears we don't fully understand, but we do know that we will be just like him!

Throughout Jesus' ministry, he repeatedly referred to God as his own Heavenly Father. Then after his resurrection, he told Mary to go to my brothers and say to them, "I ascend to *my Father* and *your Father* and *my God* and *your God*" (John 20:17).

Romans 8:15 reaches the highest pinnacle of it all when it says we are even allowed to cry out, *Abba* — Daddy! — Papa! When that finally sinks in your mind is going to go tilt! Even today little Middle Eastern children run out of their tents or houses to meet daddy, crying, "Abba! Abba!" It is such an easy name to say; you don't even need any teeth!

Remember the old Virginia Slims ads, saying "We've come a long way, baby!"? Well, they ain't seen nothin' yet! In the Old Testament, your *dad* was Daddy. Hopefully, you obeyed him, but you could hug his knees, you could pull his hair, and you could pinch his cheeks. But God? You were not even allowed to say His name; it was the Tetragrammaton—YHWH, I AM, with four consonants and no vowels. Hopefully, you obeyed Him because if you didn't, there was Eternal Judgment. But call him by a family name? I don't think so.

The fascinating thing is that He has not changed, but He has opened a new understanding of his desire for us to enjoy. Jeremy Taylor said it very well:

“He hath changed the ineffable Name into a Name utterable by man, and desirable by all the world; the Majesty is arrayed in robes of mercy, the Tetragrammaton or Adorable Mystery of the patriarchs is made fit for pronounciation and expression when it becometh the Name of the Lord“s Christ.”

Don't ever take for granted how great it is to have Yahweh as your Father — your very own Abba! No matter how limited your natural father was, you are not cheated; you don't have to be stunted. You have the best of all possible Fathers. You have The Father!

Jesus never undermined the underpinning of the physical family; he defended the holiness of marriage, and he emphasized the absolute urgency of material care, especially the care of older parents (Mark 7:10-13). I Timothy 5:4 repeats the same instructions about being financially responsible for parents. Timothy goes on to make the matter clear: “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially those of his own household, he had denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (I Timothy 5:8). Jesus said that if you didn't pay your parents bills, you were “Hypocrites . . . (God says) 'In vain you worship me'” (Mark 7:6-7). Ouch!

The New Testament certainly infers important things about the physical family. It says that all of our social relationships are a starting point for learning how to behave with each other. A household consisted of those under the same roof, including servants. I would think today it would also mean college dorm roommates, singles sharing an apartment, etc., etc. These households are the laboratories where our relationships are purified in obedience to God.

However, in the three places in the New Testament discusses the physical family, the social institutions are lumped together; Husband-wife relationships, parent-child and master-slave (I Corinthians 7; Ephesians .5:22-6:9; Colossians 3:18-25). The New Testament doesn't see any of these relationships as God's highest order for us on earth. These verses merely say that we are probably already in one or more of these relationships; so behave within them in Christ-like ways! That is simple enough, don't you think?

Certainly, all of us are painfully aware of the shaky state of the physical family in the world today. There is only minor support outside of the church to maintain a strong family tie (and not enough in The Church). God has loved the physical family ever since he invented it in the Garden of Eden. He has defended it. He has given it status. He has made it one of the great underpinnings of society, in the same way, that government serves as an underpinning of society. In the last days before Christ's return, society will experience tremendous strains that will undermine the family because, among other things, men will despise authorities (II Peter2:10) and be disobedient to parents (II Timothy 3:2).

Christians have to be careful not to bad mouth social institutions. God has given these as anchors and stabilizers for rebellious societies. We must submit to our governments, pray for our leaders, and teach our children to respect the laws and authorities (Romans 13:1-7).

We must also zealously protect and defend the physical family! It is also God's glue to hold society together. Marriage is sacred. Parents must be obeyed. More than other families, Christian families must be shored up and encouraged in every possible way.

The relationship between husband and wife is a picture of that of God with Israel, or of Christ with the church. No wonder God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16).

Still, no single Christian adult has to think they are not part of this heavenly representation on earth. They are not Christ's wife, but his very Body! Did you catch the difference? There is no higher privilege.

Now, when we consider the weak condition of the physical family today, we thank the Lord for all the books, seminars, radio broadcasts, and any other teaching aids and family counselors to help it. However, does it seem that with all our aides, the family is still shakier than it should be? Could it be that the Body of Christ has not learned to function very well as a spiritual family first after all, and *that* is why Christians are so unsupported that they can not perform very well at home?

There is far more in the New Testament on how to function within the spiritual family than within the physical. God had to write it that way for a reason. The brothers and sisters are to love each other with all purity and yet all familial tenderness. The older men are to be surrogate fathers where needed, and the older women, extra mothers to the younger women (Titus 2:3-5). I don't doubt for a moment that if Christians did these things well, the church would be full of living models to teach how to be physical spouses, parents, daughters, and sons at home.

All of us are so untaught in how to treat each other; Distracted by our lonely pursuits; Numb to each other's private pain; Desperate to know and to be known, to have someone, or just a few, who really care.

In an article from Focus on the *Family Magazine* (February 1990), entitled "*A Father to the Fatherless*," writer Terri S. Speicher shared where the support came to their family after her husband died, and she was left to raise four boys on her own.

First of all from her family:

"The men in the family are 'available.' Uncle Dick takes on all youthful challengers to the title as 'Scrabble King' during . . . reunions. One Uncle Bob rules the basketball court; the other Uncle Bob takes my boys individually on family ski vacations. (Their grandfather) gives loving guidance and encouragement during his visits and frequent telephone conversations."

She stated that their other Grandfather prays for the boys daily. The wisdom and experience of those grandfathers and uncles play a critical role when she needs to get a man's perspective on a boy's problem.

There is also the support from the church: Youth pastors, Sunday school teachers, and Christian camp counselors. In fact, right after their father's death, two volunteer youth workers took the day off from their regular jobs to be with the boys. They listened to their pain and helped them get ready for the memorial service. Friends had taken the boys to football games or dropped by their house to play Ping-Pong or backyard basketball. Support from neighbors and friends, schoolteachers and coaches, the list went on.

The point, of course, is that all of us need to seek out the help when it is there. Sometimes it is there, but we are so protective of our privacy that we ignore the offers of help. Then again, what if the support from the family isn't there? Or what if the Schoolteachers are not as supportive as those in Mrs. Speicher's experience?

Well, yes, I admit that many times it isn't as available and convenient as it was for Terri Speicher. Maybe the family lives far away or may simply not have the emotional ability to offer the help. Maybe she was in a unique situation. But it has to be taught and encouraged. The Church has to learn to move closer to help.

What do strangers look for in a new church? They want one that is friendly. So, the Pastor tries to get his people to smile and shake hands with visitors, but it isn't easy with some. They hardly do it with each other; why should they with someone they don't know? So most Christianity turns out seeming so anesthetized, so cold, so drugged.

I guess these series of teachings are a cry, a scream, a shout, FUSE! FUSE! Put away whatever is dividing you! Sign a pact with your blood! Place yourself deeply together, regardless of the awkwardness or pain! Until we can do that, there is no hope of reaching the world because our own people are not being loved.

Living with Stars

We have examined our priorities, and even seen how our Father is still working with our physical families — our *Dust*. Now let's see if we can gain a greater understanding of the Church we have chosen to join — the *Stars*. I say that because if we can catch the vision of how we are to function as God's ultimate family, the Holy Spirit will do the rest. Day by day, as opportunities arise He will fit us into our roles and fulfill his desires.

When Jesus promised Peter a hundred times as many mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, as he had given up, he was looking toward a rich new family that would satisfy Peter's needs better than his household family ever could.

Think about it. Because of the support and input of his physical family, Peter had grown to be a seasoned professional fisherman with undoubtedly a sense of responsibility and many other excellent qualities. Praise God for his provision of physical families, with all that nurturing and support and stimulus they provide! They can be a springboard for great attainment in this world.

However, what about all the other influences that came into Peter's life after he came to Jesus. For three years Peter received input from Jesus and the other disciples; became the man to discover that Jesus was the Son of God; had the honor of representing the Twelve in preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14); through his experience with Cornelius Peter learned that the whole Gentile world was waiting to be opened up for the Gospel (Acts 10). Then, we heard about Peter being thrown into prison, and what do all the brothers and sisters do? They spend the night praying for him! (Acts 12); How about the time when he was being a hypocrite and was confronted by Paul -- in front of everyone? (Galatians 2:11-14); or when he was later considered one of the three pillars of the mother church in Jerusalem? (Galatians 2:9).

What I am trying to say is that Peter was so intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally stimulated and motivated by spiritual brothers and sisters that he wrote two of our greatest pieces of literature. Imagine a simple fisherman from up-country Galilee writing like this about silver, seeds, and stars:

“You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” —I Pet. 1:18-19

“You have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding Word of God” —I Pet. 1:23

“So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the morning star arises in your hearts” —II Pet. 1:19

Peter's wife must have been amazed to hear her ex-fisherman husband preach like that, and to read his writings! I am sure she was behind him, supporting him, encouraging him.

I saw the evidence of this in the life of a dear friend. When I first met him, he had come from England to lead the worship in our church. Our first introduction to him was through the wonder and skill of his guitar playing, but those around him became aware that there was much more to him. Years later, I had the opportunity (and pleasure) of readings his writings and discovered lots

of wisdom, insight, and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. What brought that out? It was obviously the work of the Holy Spirit, but it was also the support, input and encouragement of brothers and sisters — and also from his wife (who is a tremendous “*prayer warrior*”!)

Every one of us needs someone close to nudge us (sometimes even push us) forward. It was through my wife's enthusiasm, and encouragement back in the early 80's that I finally put these thoughts together. Peter's wife knew she did not provide all the influence to stimulate all that in him, nor had his parents back in Galilee.

It would be amazing to discover how many problems in the physical family would be resolved or at least alleviated if the spiritual family was functioning. For instance, a deep prayer life with (and accountability to), some close members of the spiritual family can help make your relationship with your physical family what it should be. That means our personal accountability can keep us from all sorts of personal traumas, sins, habits, etc.

Juan Carlos Ortiz illustrates how this can happen:

Here is Eddy, and he is meeting with a few brothers and says, “Guys, my father-in-law died recently, and he had a big dog that he loved. We had to bring my mother-in-law to live with us, and of course, she had to bring the dog along with her since it reminds her of her husband.

“The trouble is our apartment is too small for a dog. So we argue about it. I say the dog has to go. My wife says, 'Poor mom; she is old. The dog reminds her of daddy. Please let him stay.' We are getting nowhere — I don't even know if I want to keep living there anymore.”

One of the brothers says, “Listen, Eddy, I can help you. I live on the outskirts of town, and I have a big piece of land. Let me take care of the dog for you. You can bring your family out sometimes to see the dog.”

But then someone else jumps in and says, “No Eddy, maybe the Lord sent the dog to your home to teach you something. Listen, you are certainly the head of your home, but the head isn't just someone who gives orders to everybody. The head is someone who brings solutions, who thinks out what it will take to resolve a situation. How can a dog be worth all that trouble? He is tearing the whole family apart, and he's not even a person.”

Then someone else says, “Listen, maybe the dog shouldn't be in the apartment — maybe you're right. But maybe the Lord wants you to learn to love that dog anyway. Come on, Eddy, you're losing your wife, you're making your mother-in-law unhappy. The problem isn't a dog — it's you.”

Eddy says, “Oh, no. I can't!”

“Don't worry,” they all say, “We're going to pray for you that God will give you the Grace to accept the dog. Come here and sit in the middle of the room.” They all gather around and lay hands on him to pray. “Father give him victory over the dog. Make him love his wife and his mother-in-law. Please help him . . .”

After a time of prayer, Eddy starts to weep. Finally, he says, “Okay, I think I can do it now.”

“All right,” they say, “Now on your way home, stop in the store and buy the dog a new toy. If you don't have the money, we'll give you some. You have to learn to love the dog. You're working out a solution to the problem in your home.”

However, what Eddy doesn't know is that his wife was with a group of women. She was also telling the story of the dog.

They were saying, "Listen, he is the head of your house, and you have to submit to him. Even your mother must submit to him now.

"If he says the dog goes, the dog goes. Why don't you see if you can find another place for the dog to stay, and you and your mother can still go see him once or twice a week?"

"I never thought of that," she says. "He is the head, and we have to obey him. I'll talk with mom."

She goes home and convinces her mother to give the dog away. About that time, Eddy walks in with a new toy for the dog!

My friends, there is no way you can accomplish that in a Sunday service where everyone smiles at each other, but never relate.

I realize that example is a little hokey, but despite that, I hope you caught what Ortiz was trying to say. The Church needs to work as a "*healing agent*" in our families. It needs to gather together and unite and interact with each member.

I realize that is nice sounding, but there is a lot of talking these days which pits The Church against the family — a cruel thing to do, like trying to make two friends into enemies. This kind of talk makes the church the spanking boy every time. It implies that it is spiritual to refuse to usher, sing in the choir or teach a Sunday School class. Why? So we can sit home in front of the television with our feet up and munch potato chips?

That is dangerous and twisted thinking. Let me illustrate this a little differently for you. Patrice and I used to have two Golden Retrievers, and before we bought them we went to see them at the breeder's house, I still remember seeing them in a playpen in the basement. That enclosure was their whole world, and those tiny pups snuggled against their mother for warmth, food, love—everything they needed.

They had no idea that they were entirely dependent on a larger family, the human family — the owners of *Derspinna Farms* — who were the ultimate source of the provision of all their needs.

If you have a physical family that is supportive and healthy, then snuggle close together for the warmth, food, and love that is provide there. Although, you need to recognize that your actual source of Godly love, warmth, nourishment, and togetherness should come from the larger family, an eternal family.

Throughout the New Testament, the emphasis is for us to use our gifts to nourish the Body of Christ and to draw our nourishment there. So all the adult singles, young people without Christian parents, and those married to a non-Christian spouse will feel just as cared for, loved and nourished as anyone else in God's family will. When we are loved, fed and prayed for, the lacks and needs of our physical family relationships are met.

Another thing to consider, you cannot shut up married couples together trying to represent all of God to each other. That will put too much pressure on both of them. To tell a husband that his words are the voice of God to his wife is going beyond biblical truth and is more responsibility on him than he can stand. Then, because he doesn't measure up to God, the wife gets frustrated.

One time, a wife came to Patrice and me with a sad tale: She had a Christian husband who was a good man, but just quiet and not much of a leader. She had always been the one who led the children in family devotions until she heard some preacher on the radio say that her husband

was supposed to be the *High Priest* in the home. (That is straight out of the Old Testament, but even there it would be wrong; there was only one High Priest). As a result, she quit leading the family devotions, waiting for her husband to do it. For the past year, their family had been without any open Bible reading or prayer in the home; the kids had gotten scattered and rebellious and hard, and she was frantic. What should she do?

I turned to II Timothy 1:5, where it said that Eunice aggressively transmitted her faith to her son. Probably Grandmother Louis had plenty to say, too. So Timothy's Greek father didn't provide any guidance? So? Whatever we know about Jesus we are responsible for passing on to others, and that certainly includes our children.

I told her to go home, open the Bible again, and pray with her children! She should also alert any other Christian adults her children happen to like to help steer them to the Word and prayer. I also encouraged her to corral any of their peers who were turned on to Jesus! In general, I wanted her to get the whole spiritual family functioning, rather than dumping the entire responsibility in the lap of one man — who might be secretly wringing his hands over feelings of guilt and inadequacy and defeat!

Finally, I had her turn to Ephesians 5:33 in the *Amplified Version*. Here it tells her to “*admire and cherish her husband, before him and before others,*” for all the right things that he is, and not to try to force him to be what he is not.

Yes, the husband is the head of the home, but if he isn't accepting his responsibility, then *someone* has to care for the family. If I were able to counsel the husband, I would certainly address his responsibility toward his family. However, I would still hope that he and his wife would be able to function as a team, not trying to compete with one another.

I realize that I have covered a tremendous amount of information that hopefully left you challenged and caused you to search the Scriptures on your own. But sometimes people ask me where the family *does* fit into this ideal list of priorities that I have been discussing? That is trying to fit apples with oranges because of the physical family, as important as it is, is still a social institution. Soon we would have to set up a list of priorities that also included master and slaves, bosses and employees, governors and citizens, etc., etc.

Still, if your family members are Christians, they are the closest, most precious inner circle of Priority Two. If they are *not* Christians, they are the closest, most precious inner circle of Priority Three. What I am saying is that if your family members are not Christians, priority two must still be priority two.

We can see this example from Jesus' earthly family. Our unsaved family's greatest need is to observe a life that is on fire for God, unswervingly given to Christ and his people and his world. We have to draw all the comfort, motivation and guidance we possibly can from God's family, to show us how to handle those we long to bring into it!

Besides, I know that your family is important to you, but if they don't know Jesus, they are in darkness, right? What fellowship does light have with darkness? None! I know several people who were forced to discontinue all contact with their parents and siblings, although it was with great pain and hesitation because it was too much of weight and frustration. Every time they were together they left angry, hurt, or depressed. After awhile it was not worth the trouble and pain.

Now, they did not make a big announcement explaining that they would never again see them. Don't be foolish. No announcements were made, they simply quit attending the gatherings. When invited, they politely apologized and explained they had other plans. And no, they weren't lying. They *did* have other plans!

We tend to “*fantasize*” about our natural families. We have these romantic images created of what our family is “*supposed*” to be like, and most of the time the reality does not measure up. Does that leave you shortchanged, somehow?

NO! The Body of Christ is to fill in the holes the world has created in our lives. I asked one minister how he and other ministers that he knew, raised their “*preacher's kids*” who did not rebel and grew up loving the Church and spending their lives ministering to it. He said, “I have to say that it has been the Grace of God, in spite of many mistakes we have all made that made our children turn out as they have.

“But I know the reason *our* kids love the church is that *we* love the church! They are growing up feeling that where the Body of Christ is, that is where the action is, where the fun is. We take them along as often as possible because we want them exposed to all those wonderful people. Many saints are helping raise our children. They are truly loving aunts, uncles, and grandparents; they are an extended family.”

We shouldn't be asking, “*How much time do I give my family, and how much time do I give the church?*” Instead, we should follow Joshua's example: “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!*” (Joshua 24:15) Bring your wife and children and go together as often as you can to the church and Christian homes as in Acts 2, give all you can together and to receive all you can together. You are to draw your physical family into the spiritual family, and I hope that soon they will be members of both!

Acts 2:41 says that they baptized *three thousand* new believers, and the next verse says that they, the three thousand, were “*continually devoting themselves*” to the new Christian lifestyle, daily in the temple and homes. Verse 47 states that the Lord added to their numbers daily. Maybe all three thousand accepted Christ as whole complete physical family units, perhaps not. But they came, *however*, they came, by ones, by twos, by threes. Amazingly, their lifestyle was so powerful that soon they were joined by *five thousand* more (Acts 4:4). It is possible that many of them came from their immediate families. Even the experts on church growth have shown that conversions spread most rapidly and efficiently through families. What our non-Christian physical families need most of all to see is a functioning, authentic Christianity. Then they are in a position to be converted too!

But not only converted. We are not keeping a scorecard on how many we win to the Lord. It is just that when God's people begin to obey his commandment to love one another (I John 3:23) our physical families are the beneficiaries in every way.

All of us want our physical families to be on fire for the Lord. The support and prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ can make this happen. We need to open our eyes to the remarkable family that God has placed us in, and who need to minister to us in this way.

Even beyond that, every member of the spiritual family of ours is struggling toward heaven and have the same longings to be spiritually great for themselves. They are also our family members who need our help and prayers.

Now, whatever you do, don't send me emails asking which you should do on Thursday nights, stay home with your family or go to prayer meetings. I don't want to give any specific guidance. No two cases would have the same solution anyway. Honest, the Holy Spirit is up to showing you what to do on Thursday nights! I am just trying to give a broad principle from the Word.

Brothers and sisters, we have belonged to each other since before the foundation of the world. We will belong to each other when the world no longer has a foundation. When heaven

and earth pass away, we will still be God's people. Our relationship together transcends all of our other relationships.

Inside of every one of the members of your spiritual family lives the Spirit of Christ. Look at them with spiritual eyes. Begin to remind yourself how important they are eternally, and how precious they are to God. Begin to treat them tenderly, guard your unity together. Discipline your mind to the mind of Christ and with humility consider others as more important than yourself (Philippians. 2:1-5).

They are co-heirs with you, along with Christ himself, of all eternity's vast blessings. They have more wisdom than you or I can dream, with the Holy Spirit residing within. Respect the older ones as fathers and mothers, and ask their advice. We need to feed and cuddle the babies and be patient and full of hope for their future maturity.

What It Is All About

I want you to picture this scene: A door shuts; a man goes out into the night. Without him, there are twelve men left in the room: Jesus and eleven of his disciples around a table. Together they have shared the bread and wine of the *Seudah Maphsehket*; the additional meal Galilean Jews ate before Passover began. But, there are profound things that could not be said until Judas left. Some truths the Lord will only give to the faithful when others are not around.

In John 13:31-16:33 we see Jesus giving his deepest and final truths to his eleven before he goes to the cross. The very first thing he says, as if it were the most important thing in his mind and he could hardly wait for Judas to leave to say it, is “*Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way, I loved you; you must love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples — when they see the love you have for each other.*”

Here were these men, so diverse in personality and thinking! One had been a semi-traitor, a collaborator with Rome, a tax collector; another was a red-hot Jewish Zealot. That was worse than putting together a liberal Democrat with a Reagan Republican! What would be the glue that would hold them together when he left? *Love*.

It took me quite a while to understand what love was, but after I had read several books from Juan Carlos Ortiz, I learned how to experience real love. Through his writings, I discovered that love is not one of the *virtues* of the Christian life. Love *is* the Christian life.

When we talk about eternal life, we always seem to think about its length. We never seem to think about its quality. If eternal life only means never-ending life, then hell is a form of eternal life, isn't it?

However, the quality of eternal life that Jesus gives is *love*. To borrow the imagery of Ortiz, Love is the *Oxygen* of God's kingdom. There is no life without it. Love is the only eternal element. The other things like tongues, gifts, prophecies, wisdom, knowledge, Bible reading, prayer, will all end. The only thing that will go through death into the eternal is *love*.

I will go even further than that and say that love is the *proof* of our salvation. Some people think the proof is in how we dress, whether we smoke or whether we do or do not do many other things. They may be important, but not as important as love.

Listen to what John says:

“To you whom I love I say, let us go on loving one another, for love comes from God. Every man who truly loves is God's son and has some knowledge of him. *But the man who does not love cannot know him at all, for God is love*” (I John 4:7-8)

John also says we are aware that we have passed out of death into life because we *love the brethren*. He who does not love abides in death (I John 3:14).

Since I am on a roll, I may as well stick my neck out even further. If we loved the way God wants us to love, we would not have to depend on the commands of the Bible so much. Because, as Paul tells us, love is the *fulfillment* of the law (Romans 13:10). This is what the new covenant is all about: I will put My law *within* them, and on their heart, I will write it . . . (Jeremiah 31:33).

When you generate love from the *inside*, it solves all kinds of problems. The fruit of the Born-again human Spirit is love, as well as joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Why do we preach so much? We preach because

we want to build love and these other qualities in the hearts of Christians. However, if love were growing as it is supposed to grow, we wouldn't need so many sermons. Love isn't *one* of the elements of the Christian life; it *is* the element. Love is the life itself!

Some people frustrate themselves by always seeking the gifts instead of the fruit. Although we appreciate the gifts, we must be careful where we put the emphasis. Jesus never said, "You will know them by their *gifts*." He said, "You will know them by their *fruits*" (Matthew 7:20).

Gifts don't indicate spirituality because gifts on a person are no different from gifts under a Christmas tree. On Christmas day, they are beautiful with all their ribbons and wrapping paper, but on December 26 all the glitter and color is in the garbage. So you cannot say much about the gifts. The gifts do not indicate what kind of tree it is.

Only the fruit will tell you what species of tree you have. If the apples are good, you can say you have a good apple tree. So, we cannot excuse ourselves for not having love. If we are full of the Spirit of God, the natural thing is for us to be loving.

Now let's see how we can bring all I have been teaching together. As I showed you, Jesus said that he had a *new command*, and we haven't hit on that yet.

The Old commandment was the minimum degree of love. It was love with limits. It depended on our love for *ourselves*. It meant loving my neighbor so long as I am not in danger. But Jesus said, "A *new* command I give you, that you *love one another . . .*" You won't find it recorded, but I bet when Jesus said that, the disciples shouted back, "Hey, we already know about that."

So Jesus continued, "*As I have loved you.*" Ooh. Now that was new. The Old Commandment said, "Love your neighbor *as you love yourself*," the new commandment said, "Love your brother *as I have loved you.*" Now that will require much more from us.

How did Jesus love us? Did he love us as he loved himself? No, He loved us more than that. He gave his life for us. In this kind of love, self disappears. We must love and love and love until forever. (Even if it costs us our lives!) This is much more than giving half the plate of food. It is giving the whole plate, and ourselves as well.

This is the type of love Jesus intends for the Church to offer. It is the love that is meant to rule our Christian community. I cannot love my brother as I love myself because self is gone. Remember Paul's statement? "It isn't *I* who lives, but Christ *in* me. And this life I now live, I live by faith in Him."

Everyone knows John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)

Have you already memorized that? Well, did you ever notice I John 3:16?

We understand what love is when we realize that Christ gave his life for us. That means we must give our lives for other believers"(I John 3:16)

The Apostle John has again come up with a very simple test for us. Do we know what love is? It is very easy to tell; you do not need the gift of discerning spirits or anything. Just ask yourself whether you are willing to lay down your life for your brother. Stop and think of a specific brother in your congregation. Would you die for him? Seriously. Would you be willing to take the proverbial "*bullet*" for him?

The Lord taught this to me back in 1981 while I was traveling back from Texas and picked up a hitchhiker. When he saw my Bible lying on the dashboard, we started talking about the Lord, and I very quickly found out that he indeed believed in Jesus, and was in fact, one of my brothers.

He was exhausted and fell asleep as I drove us north. As he slept, the Lord began to open my heart toward this brother. I kept saying to myself, “If this was *really* my brother (referring to my physical brother, Dave) there isn't a thing I wouldn't do to help him.” I picked this hitchhiker up in the south where it was warmer, and as we crossed the Mississippi River, I realized that it was much colder where we were heading. It was early October, and he wanted to go to Chicago.

As he slept, I kept repeating, “If this were *really* my brother . . .” and the Lord said, “He *is* really your brother.” I replied, “Yes Lord, I understand that, but if he were *really* my brother (again referring to my physical brother). “But, He *is* your brother . . .” “yes, I understand that, but if . . .” (sometimes I am a little slow to catch on).

My conversation with the Lord went on for a few minutes, and finally, it hit me what He was saying! He *was* my brother! He was my brother as much as or more than my physical brothers. That's when I finally saw my full responsibility to this hitchhiker. I wasn't familiar with Chicago, and he said I could drop him off at a rest stop near the city. So when I finally let him out, I gave him my leather jacket; my sleeping bag; and a couple of phone numbers of ministries that I knew in Chicago. I also gave him all the money I had on me at the time that was about fifty-five dollars, and since he was about my size, I gave him some pieces of clothing out of my suitcase.

I am not sharing this to show how Holy (or gullible) I am, but rather to illustrate the reality of what the Lord is calling us to. Some may call me a sucker for falling for this guy's needs. Maybe even a fool, but that is okay. First of all, he never asks me to do any of those things, but also Jesus was taking the foolish things in the eyes of the world and confounding their wisdom. (Some may think I am a “*nut*,” but that is okay, too. At least I am screwed onto the right bolt!)

What I learned is that our God is building a new community. We are going to be like a city on a mountain, an example of a community that loves one another. We are to love one another as Christ has loved us. Now that could completely throw us except for the fact that God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Romans 5:5). In fact, one translation says that we cannot round up enough containers to hold everything He generously pours into our lives. Our Father never requires anything of us that he does not first make the power available to do it. So grab some “*buckets*” and begin to slosh His love around those we meet.

By the way, there is a third type of love that the Lord desires to work into our lives. It is the same kind of love the Trinity has. It is a love for mature people. It is an eternal kind of love. It is a type of love that is never offended and builds complete unity. The Trinity type of love makes three to be one. Jesus prayed that this degree of love would be in us. He prayed,

“Father, I have made You known to them, and I will continue to do that so the love that you have had for me may be in their hearts—and that I may be there also.”

So the love that the Father has for Jesus is *in* our heart? Wow! Obviously today, we are not one. We are in many different groups. We are Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals of many kinds, Nazarenes, Salvation Army, Episcopalians, and Plymouth Brethren, Baptists of many

kinds, Catholics, Lutherans, and on and on the list goes. There are over 300 different denominations! However, The Lord of The Church is regrouping us. He has already begun. He is not using our categories, however. He has only two groups — those who love one another and those who do not. Ouch! Yes, it is that simple.

So how does this look? On the Discover Channel, I was watching a middle-eastern shepherd tending sheep and found it interesting to see someone try to move a flock of sheep. They all head in the same direction; they become one body. However, I learned that if you try to do the same thing with goats, they all begin to butt each other and fight with each other.

In the Church, it is very easy to tell a sheep from a goat. You do not need the gift of interpretation or discernment or anything. You just talk to the person one or two minutes. If he loves, he is a sheep. If he fights, he is a goat (and I have met a few of those).

How did Jesus separate the sheep from the goats? By whether they had given water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, companionship to the sick and the prisoners, and so forth. He called the people who had shown love to their brothers “*blessed of My Father*” (Matthew 25:34). The others were called the opposite, the “*accursed ones*” (v.41).

The Lord is doing more than regrouping his people. He is uniting them. Let me explain this with another beautiful illustration from Ortiz. He used potatoes to describe what the Lord was doing. Each potato plant in the garden has three, four, or five potatoes under it. Each potato belongs to one plant or another.

When the harvest comes, all the potatoes are dug up and put into one sack. They are regrouped and put into one bag. Oh, but they are not yet united. They may say, “*Oh praise the Lord! Now we are all in the same sack.*” But they are not yet one.

They must be washed and peeled. Now those potatoes are even closer yet. “*How sweet is this love among us!*” they say. That is not all. They must be cut in pieces and mixed. Now they have lost a lot of their individuality. They think they are ready for the Master now.

Still, that is not what our God wants. What He wants are *mashed* potatoes. Not many potatoes — one mashed potato. No potato can stand up and say, “*Here I am! I am a potato.*” The word must be “*we.*” That is why the Lord's Prayer begins, “*Our Father, which art in heaven . . .*”

Along with this, I want to take a sidebar and say that I often meet ministers who proudly announce their presence and proclaim their ministry. As if it all revolves around them.

Brothers, the fastest way to lose my interest is for you to focus on what *you* are accomplishing. You need to seek to edify — to build up — “*The Church*” and forget about “*your*” ministry and start thinking about “*His*” ministry. You are just one in a thousand gifted teachers and preachers. I discovered several years ago that I might have a particular calling and gift, but if I think too highly of myself, He can easily remove me and find someone else. I discovered firsthand that He will draw us into a “*wilderness*” to tame us and teach us.

(Sorry. I had to get that off my chest).

Several years ago, a Pastor friend and I were having dinner. He was new to the area and Pastoring a new church, with new faces. He loved the church and the people in it, but he still confessed, “*I want to tell you the truth that the church scene to me these days is just one blur of potlucks and committee meetings. Frankly, it is a drag. There are plenty of times when I want out.*”

I guess I could understand his dilemma; I felt that way sometimes, too. But then we started talking about marriage, and how you start off with such high ideals and eventually, inevitably, some morning you wake up, look across at the lump in the bed, with their mouth open, and you think, “*I'm married to this?*” At that point, love becomes an act of the will, and of conscious

obedience to God. “*I am committed to her (or him), and that is that! I choose to continue to love, and love with all my being.*” The emotions and ideals will come later — and I promise, they will be there again.

Being born again is a wonderful and happy experience. However, eventually, inevitably, every Christian wakes up to the yuck feeling! At that point loving the Body with all our hearts, becomes a conscious act of the will — a commitment *no-matter-what*.

Beyond that, the Christians in Acts 2:6 had potlucks, and in Acts 15:4 they had committees, and we need to see these things through spiritual eyes. What are potlucks and committees, but opportunities for people to rub off on each other — people who have Jesus Christ inside. When they interact, a mystical thing begins to happen. Ten years later, after all the potlucks and committees, with the ingredients of love and laughter, of pain and patience, of hard times and difficulties and misunderstandings and fighting our way back again to each other — after and through all that, looks of glory begin to grow on our faces.

Hey, did you ever think, it is just hitting me as I write, surely committee and committed are from the same root word. (Hey! those of you who are devout Grammarians, tell me if this is true). Either way, I love the thought. You have to remember that the Christian's sanctification comes from two influences: Internally, from the Holy Spirit, and externally, from the Body of Christ.

As Elton Trueblood wrote,

“The endurance of our faith (referring to our Christian faith) is that of Ezekiel, that no matter how dry the bones may be, breath can come into them and they can live. This has been demonstrated many times in both Jewish and Christian history. When the great Timothy Dwight took over the presidency of Yale College not one student would admit publicly to faith in Christ. When Dwight ended the presidency twenty-two years later, in 1817, the entire intellectual climate of the college had changed: it changed because Dwight did something about it.”

I saw in the fifth chapter of Ephesians that we are to imitate God's love. So I started wondering how Christ loved us, and I saw at least five ways that he demonstrated his love toward us:

First, He loved those who were his own in this world, and he loved them to the end (John 13:1). Now that is leaving the illusionary façade — the “*ooey-gooey*” feelings behind and loving through all the hard times. Our problem is that we give up too quick. We don't love to the end. Jesus loved us, loves us, and will continue to love us regardless of our love for him, with everything he has even his very own life.

Second, he loves us with *servicing* love. He said that he didn't come to be served, but rather, to serve. No, I don't understand that either, but in John 13 we see that he humbled Himself to do slave work as a demonstration of his love. Which reminds me of the refrain of a song I heard years ago and it goes like this:

Think of it Lord, You gave him seas and sands;
and there he is with a towel in his hands!
Think of it Lord, You gave him sands and seas;
and there he was, down on his knees!

The third demonstration of his love is that it is a *personal, intimate* love. He called his disciples to be with him, as King Jim renders it his last earthly words were, “Surely I will be with you always” (Matthew 28:20). His love is a love that moves in close. He doesn't stand across the street with a megaphone and tell us, “I love you!” Like a husband who was trying to comfort his wife by telling her, “Hey, I told you I loved you when we got married! If it changes, I will let you know!” No, no! Our Lord continually demonstrates His love for us.

Many years ago I pastored a group at *Western Michigan University*. We met at 9:00 every Wednesday night. It grew from a group of about four people to almost 60. We called ourselves the “*Company of the Committed*” (I later found a book by Elton Trueblood by the same title). For a group of college students to gather every Wednesday night at 9:00 till whenever it ended, they had to be committed — or crazy.

Anyway, one night we met and I was supposed to lead the teaching, and I had no leading what to share. So after worship, I opened it up to everyone, “*Hey, what is Jesus doing in your life?*”

One-by-one, like popcorn popping, people stood up and shared what Jesus was doing in their lives. Some were real simple like, “*The Lord help me pass last week's test in Psychology,*” or something like that. Others gave testimonies that were more profound. But sitting in the group was a girl who had visited our group several times without participating in sharing at all.

Whenever I had seen her in previous weeks, like Joe Btfspk, she walked around with a dark cloud hanging over her head. I could not discern what the problems were, and I kept asking the Lord how I could help her, but I never received any direction or guidance regarding her. But suddenly, after several people stood and gave their testimonies, she interrupted everyone saying, “*I'm sorry, but you people are talking about this 'Jesus' as if he was your best buddy or something, and I can't take that.*”

Well, there was an opportunity I was asking the Lord to open for me! So I asked her,

“Do you believe that Jesus loves you?”

“Oh, sure. God loves everyone . . .”

“Ah, that's not what I asked you. I asked, does Jesus love *you*?”

“Oh sure . . .”

I walked over and knelt in front of her and as I held her hands, said, “No, please hear me. Does Jesus love *YOU*?”

I repeated this five or six times when she finally broke down in tears and admitted, “*No, there is no way he could . . .*”

All around the group, 60 some students were at that moment praying for her . . .

By the end of the night she was in tears and surrendering her life to the Lord.

Now that would be a great story in itself, but when she returned the following week the dark cloud had disappeared and she was almost floating on the clouds. The night before our prayers the previous week, her brother had received the Lord and began praying for her. Obviously the Lord heard his prayers!

Hallelujah! Many of us hold hidden fears and pain that only an outpouring of God's Spirit can heal.

Fourth, his was *unconditional* love. Jesus loved you; Jesus loves you; Jesus will always love you — period! Jesus loves you in spite of you! There is no iffy-ness about his love. It isn't based on performance; it is based on Grace.

I think this one truth is the greatest obstacle for many believers. We have such a works mentality. Jim Elliot, who has been one of my great heroes for many years, wrote this in his journal:

“I note that my jotting of a year ago seeks a time when I shall forget all my failure. Psalm 107 has wrought much peace of heart in this regard. Just today, I was thinking of how God loves in spite of all my sin and has promised to bring us to the „desired haven.“ He will perform until the day. What matters then the resident Adam? What care for my bloating pride? What concern for attacking lust whose inner fifth-column betrays me to that enemy so often? Perfect love casts out fear, and this blessed rest—in knowing He loves through all these things—makes them seem too worthless even to be thought upon. I know them. God knows them. I confess them. He forgives them. Oh that I might praise Him worthily!”

Isn't that great? I know them . . . He knows them . . . I confess them . . . and He forgives them. It is just that simple!

The awesome thing about all this is that all these demonstrations of love are to be our examples to imitate! Actually the Greek word is even stronger than that, we are to *reproduce* these into our lives.

The fifth demonstration of his love is the fact that it is a *responsible* love.

“Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her. Christ gave himself to make her holy, having cleansed her through the baptism of his Word—to make her an altogether glorious Church in his eyes. She is to be free from spots, wrinkles or any other disfigurement—a Church holy and perfect” (Ephesians 5:25-27)

In other words, He loves with a goal in mind, and he is going to stick with us until we are everything that he intends us to be! That is true tough love. That is how we are to love each other!

We are to be responsible for each other's growth and improvement. We have to care. We have to stick with each other until it happens. In a divided world, believers must demonstrate how God can put people together. You cannot be right in your doctrine and wrong in your living!

Hallelujah! In all of these aspects of love, it must be audible and visible! We need to demonstrate this life. Why do you think Paul actually had to tell the Christians to greet one another with kisses — pure, holy kisses? (Romans 16:16). Paul told them because those people were inhibited, just like us. They were cynical, wary, and shy. Paul knew that shyness would degenerate into coolness—and soon we have a cold church. “*Go on,*” prods Paul, “*kiss each other!*”

Years ago, when we were leaving my parent's home we gave my mom a hug, and I stretched out my arms to my dad, and he said, “*Awe, I don't do that kind of stuff . . .*” “*Ah, dad, that's okay, I do!*” and I gave him a hug. Most of you have never met me yet, but if we ever do meet, you better expect a “*high-five*” and a big hug.

Listen to some words that Charles Swindoll wrote in the book *Dropping Your Guard*:

“Churches need to be less like national shrines and more like local bars . . . less like untouchable cathedrals and more like well-used hospitals, places to bleed in rather than monuments to look at . . . places where you can take your mask off and let your hair down . . . places where you can have your wounds dressed.

“It's like my Marine-buddy, recently turned Christian, said, as he lamented the absence of a place of refuge:

“„. . . the only thing I miss is that old fellowship all the guys in our outfit used to have down at the slop shoot . . . we'd sit around, laugh, tell stories, drink a few beers, and really let our hair down. It was great!

“But now I ain't got nobody to tell my troubles to, to admit my faults to. I can't find anybody in church who will put their arms around me and tell me I'm still okay. Man it's kinda lonely in there!”

Stop and think. Where does a guy go when the bottom drops out? Who do Christians turn to when stuff that is embarrassing or a little scandalous happens? Who cares enough to listen when we cry? Who affirms us when we feel rotten? Who will close their mouths and open their hearts?

Moreover, even when we deserve a swift kick in the pants, who will embrace us with understanding and give us time to heal without quoting verses? Without giving us a cassette tape of some sermon? Without telling a bunch of other Christians so they can “*pray more intelligently*”?

I know married couples who won't go to anyone within their church, even their pastor, for counseling because they are afraid of the lack of confidentiality, and discretion.

Charles Swindoll goes on:

“We need more shelters for storm victims. It's okay if they look like churches on the outside, as long as folks do not act 'churchy' on the inside. Most hurting people I meet are fed up with 'churchy' Christians. What we need is that special something many people find in a local bar. Put on your shock boots and see if you agree with the following comparison between the bar and the church.

“The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It's an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality, but it is a permissive, accepting and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets and they usually don't tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know someone else, and be known by someone else, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers.

“With all my heart I believe that Christ wants His Church to be a fellowship where people can come in and say, 'I'm sunk!' 'I'm beat!' 'I've had it!'

“What if your wife is an alcoholic? Or your son recently told you he is a practicing homosexual?

“Let's say your husband just walked out . . . or what if he is sexually abusing your two daughters? Or you?

“Who can you turn to if you were just fired? . . . Or you just got out of jail? . . . Or your 15-year-old daughter told you last night that she is pregnant? . . . Or you beat your kids and you're scared—and ashamed? . . . Or you can't cope with your

drug habit any longer? . . . Or you need professional help because you are near a breakdown?

“Do you know what you need? You need a shelter. A place of refuge. A few folks

who can help you, listen to you, introduce you, once again, to . . . 'The Father of Mercies, the God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction' (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Christianity may be 'like a mighty army,' but we often handle our troops in a weird way. We are the only outfit I have ever heard of who shoots their wounded. That is what my Marine buddy was afraid of. He had had enough of being shot. Frankly, so have I.”

As I said, all men will know that we are Jesus' disciples by the steadfastness of our commitment to each other; by the way, we serve each other so selflessly; by our intimacy with all purity; by our sacrifices for each other, our words of encouragement and affirmations. By these, all men will know! It won't be by our impressive church buildings or by our charming personalities. Not by our up-to-date techniques or our command of the scriptures!

With everything we have covered it should be obvious that the greatest sin of Christians today is the sin of withholding love. When people in the world see authentic, biblical love within God's family, they will believe.

Dr. Francis Schaeffer makes this powerful comment:

“In the midst of the world, in the midst of our present dying culture, Jesus gives a right to the world. Upon His authority he gives the world the right to judge whether you and I are born-again Christians on the basis of our observable love toward all Christians.

“That is pretty frightening. Jesus turns to the world and says, 'I've got something to say to you. On the basis of my authority, I give you a right: You may judge whether or not an individual is a Christian on the basis of the love he shows to all Christians . . . !

“In other words, if people come up to us and cast in our teeth the judgment that we are not Christians because we have not shown love toward other Christians, we must understand that they are only exercising a prerogative which Jesus gave them.

“And we must not get angry. If people say, „You don't love other Christians,' we must go home, get down on our knees, and ask God whether or not they are right to have said what they said.

“We must be very careful at this point, however. We may be true Christians, really born-again Christians, and yet fail in our love toward other Christians. As a matter of fact, to be completely realistic, it is stronger than this.

“There will be times (and let us say it with tears), there will be times when we fail in our love toward each other as Christians. In a fallen world, where there is no such thing as perfection until Jesus comes, we know this will be the case. And, of course, when we fail, we must ask God's forgiveness. But Jesus is not saying that failure to love all Christians proves that we are not Christians.

“Let each of us see this individually for ourselves. If I fail in my love toward Christians, it does not prove I am not a Christian. What Jesus is saying, however,

is that if I do not have the love I should have toward all other Christians, the world has the right to make judgment that I am not a Christian.”

Being A Balcony Christian

When I was much younger, I loved going to plays. I would often sit in the balcony so I could throw popcorn down on the people below. But incidentally, I also learned that when you sit in the balcony, you are very distant and uninvolved with the acting.

When I was in High School, the shoe was on the other foot because I was often down *on* the stage acting in plays. Although, I must confess that whenever I went to the theater and sat in the audience, I would critique the acting up on the stage.

Oh, don't look at me that way. Preachers do the same thing. When we are sitting in meetings, and someone else is teaching, we will silently think, “*Boy, I would say that a little differently,*” or “*I would throw in this verse about now.*” (Hey, even teachers of the Word of God can be carnal sometimes).

The sad thing is there are many Christians who do that at church. They want to “sit in the balcony” and watch the action going on down on the stage. Oh, they *see* a lot, they even *know* a lot, and then spend their time discussing the performing Christians (the ones who are actually doing the work).

Don't be shocked or embarrassed about that because it doesn't end there. Christians freely critique and criticize other ministries, ministers and folks “*on the streets*” doing the Lord's work, instead of getting their hands dirty.

The point I am attempting to make is that this also applies to fellowship. It is not something we simply *discuss*; it is something we *do*. Christians today know so much at a discussion level! What we need are “*doers* of the Word.” Isaiah 1:19 says “the willing and the *obedient* will eat the good of the land!” Until you start doing it, you will never be able to see how good it is.

How do you think this would work in a marriage?

“*Well, honey, I almost stopped and bought you some flowers on the way home. I meant to, but traffic was too busy, and it was way out of the way.*”

Sure you were willing, you had a very good idea — but it is the willing and *obedient* that make a happy wife. You need to follow through with your willingness.

There is a note in my *Scofield* Bible I wrote several years ago that says, “Christian experience is not something that is going on *around* the believer, but something that is going on *within* the believer.”

Larry Tomczak, the founder of *The People of Destiny International Apostolic Team*, wrote an article entitled, *Taking Action, Living Adventurously*. Tomczak's article was published in the *Last Days Magazine* in the fall of 1989. I want to quote one section from that article:

“Many young people perceive Christianity as cold, lifeless, and boring. British Bible teacher Terry Virgo tells of a newly saved young man who, seeing a church nearby, sadly asked, 'Now that I'm a Christian, do I have to go into that building?' A common cry against religion goes up from today's youth: 'I want action, man, not boredom!'

"God agrees! And that's why He is stirring His people to action. An explosion of authentic, Biblical, action-oriented Christianity is just around the corner as the Church enters the last decade of this century.

“. . . for too long we've been over-equipped and under-challenged. Now it's time to make our mark for the Kingdom of God. Let's shake off apathy and indifference and take action like Jesus did.”

Right on! That was written several years ago, but has anything changed? Maybe our first question should be, *“How? How can I live this stuff out? There are over 400 people in my church, how can I love them all deeply and equally?”*

Obviously, you can't. But it will still require a serious commitment on your part to love as many as you can! A covenant-type of commitment, just like in Acts 2:42-46. John Calvin commented on the fact that the *King James Version* says, *“all those which believed were joined together,”* and that the Greek says joined into the same, or into one, *“which may be expounded of the place, as if he should have stated that they were wont to dwell together in one place.”*

In other words, psychologically, they felt like family. And, families have a common pot of money! There is certainly ownership in the family (read Acts 5:4). We talk about *“Jonathan's room”* or *“Christopher's bike.”* Nevertheless, there is an overall bank account.

People have often laughed at those first Christians about this. Even in Calvin's day, they joked over the early Christian having *“all things in common”* and wondered if that included wives. That may make for a good laugh, but the truth of it was a powerful reality.

Even a non-Christian such as an entertainer, or a sports figure, who strikes it rich will take care of his brothers and sisters, or buy his mother a better house. If *he* understands about the importance family, how much more should we? When some of us strike it rich, shouldn't we share with Christian brothers and sisters or parents nearby who are struggling financially? James 2:15-16 says that this proves that our Christianity is more than lip service, that it is authentic.

But beyond all this life together in a local Body, there is still an itch that we have not scratched yet when we hear the question, *“How can I love them all deeply and equally?”*

When I was Pastoring that fellowship I mentioned earlier at *Western Michigan University*; I thought it was a written law some place that leaders must love everybody equally in the group. Someone advised me, *“Don't have any close friends because that would be playing favorites, and they would see how “human” you really are and would no longer benefit from your ministry.”*

Well, I didn't listen to them. I tried to be a good politician and hug everybody and smile, but I had the awful feeling I was missing someone. To make it worse, I saw that Paul wrote, *“We felt so strongly about you that we were determined to share with you not only the Good News of God but also our lives. That's how dear you were to us!”* (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Paul didn't shrink from sharing his emotions with his flock. When he looked back on the Thessalonians, he said, *“Oh, what an affection I had for you. How dear you were to me.”* Those are words of intimacy. How could that be?

So how do I love everybody? You can't. And if I had followed the teachings of those ministers who said I should never have any close friends, I would have gotten lonelier and lonelier. Fortunately, there were those who moved in to be special friends with me, several who are still dear friends after all these years. We *“hung out”* together; we camped together; we laughed together; we shared our lives together. We loved each other in ways I could never offer to everybody else, much as I wanted to.

Now I know that the policy was not supposed to work because it is unbiblical. The Scriptures are full of stories of close friends, and leaders had them too. Moses had Joshua; Elijah had Elisha. David had his band of thirty men, with three in the inner circle, and then an even closer

relationship with Jonathan. Jesus had three within twelve, and seventy beyond those. Paul had Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Luke, Epaphroditus, and much more.

Let me share with you what seems to be the “*ABC’s*” for relational fulfillment in our lives:

A. First, you need Accountability to a few other Christians.

I realize that for some, the concept of freedom is to be free from everybody. But that is both lonely and ungodly. Parents need to realize that if they want their children to be accountable to them, then they must learn to be accountable to others. Ephesians 5 says that Christians are all to be subject to one another and then proceeds with specific relationships: Husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves (employer with employees). Colossians 1:28 says that our goal is to be able to bring each other to maturity in Christ, and I Corinthians 12:20-21 says that everybody needs everybody else for this to happen! Quit being so independent. You know who you are, and the Lord is telling you to quit. Your time of being a Lone Ranger (or Rangerette) is over!

If you belong to God's family, you need to say, “*Hold me to my commitment! Don't let me go! I need you!*” It is too easy to break away when someone ruffles your feathers! When someone does something you don't approve of, or they say something that offends you, you leave and never get that relationship resolved. Shame on you!

“But you don't know what they did!” You're right; I don't. But I also don't care. You must resolve that problem now. Jesus told us quite plainly that if we *don't* forgive, He *won't* forgive us (Matthew 6:15). Wow!

Just remember: forgiveness is not just a one-time act. It has to become a way of life, and it is meant to bring us into every blessing in Christ. I remember something Jesus said that Matthew recorded:

“You are familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I am challenging that. I am telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that” (Matthew 5:43-47)

Before Jesus said that, he stated:

“What I'm saying is, grow up. [Hey! That's not nice]. You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you” (Matthew 4:48)

I know it is not easy to hear, but according to Jesus, forgiveness isn't a matter of picking or choosing who we will forgive. We can't say, “*You* have hurt me too much, so I do not forgive

you.” Jesus tells us, “*If you only love those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much*” [no offense to those of you who are corrupt tax-collectors] (Matthew 5:46).

The point is, it doesn’t matter who the target of your grudge happens to be. If we hold onto that anger and unforgiveness, it is going to lead to bitterness that will poison every aspect of your life. Unforgiveness brings on spiritual famine, weakness, and a loss of faith, afflicting not just us but everyone in our circle.

Over the years, I have seen and heard many terrible stories of devastation in the lives of those who hung onto their unforgiveness. On the other hand, I have also seen the glorious power of a forgiving spirit. Forgiveness transforms our lives and will cause the windows of heaven to open. It begins when we accept forgiveness from our Heavenly Father and extends to filling our cup of spiritual blessing to the brim with abundant peace, joy and rest in the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ teaching on this subject is very specific, and if you want to move in this wonderful realm of blessing, then heed and embrace his words.

“In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can’t receive forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God’s part” (Matthew 6:14-15)

Make no mistake: God isn’t making a bargain with us here. He is not saying, “*Because you have forgiven others, I will forgive you.*” We can never earn God’s forgiveness. Only the shed blood of Christ merits forgiveness of sin.

Our Savior is saying, “Full confession of sin requires that you forgive others. If you hold on to any unforgiveness, then you have not confessed all your sins. True repentance means acknowledging and letting go of every grudge, crucifying every trace of bitterness toward others. Anything less is not repentance.”

I think this goes hand in hand with his Beatitude: “*Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy*” (Matthew 5:7). His point is that we forgive others so that we can move into the blessings and joy of sonship. Our Father will then pour on tokens of his love. And when you forgive, you are revealing the Father’s nature to the world.

Are you having trouble with all this discussion on forgiveness? Then pray about it:

Father, you know quite well how I have been dealing with this. I simply cannot forgive that person for what they have done . . . Please don’t make me do that. But I know that is what you require of me. So, I will obey you. As an act of obedience I forgive _____ (put their name in here). Now, as an act of faith, I ask you to give me the Grace to forgive them. I can’t do it on my own. For this day forward I will never again talk about what he/she did to me – nor will I even think about it. Thank you, Father

We need to make this desire for real Christian life our all-consuming quest. A quest is a pursuit — a search. Webster adds, even more color to it than that; “. . . A chivalrous enterprise in medieval romance usually involving an adventurous journey.” That sounds exactly like what I have been preaching!

Okay, let's move on.

B. We need Brokenness.

Proud, stiff people don't bend. It was considered a sin for the people of Israel to be stiff-necked! David held out for a whole year after his sin with Bathsheba before writing Psalm 51, where he confessed

“the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalms 51:17)

Up until that fresh brokenness, it must have been hell for David (Psalms 32:1-4)

When you refuse to be broken, you will become stiff, proud and afraid. You will never be accountable to others, and you will never get any help for yourself. I don't know who said it first, but “*there is no person so alone as a person who is alone in their sin.*” If you think about it, that is a silly place to be when forgiveness is only a confession away!

However, don't try to break each other. Being broken and exposed is strictly a voluntary thing. But if you will “*humble yourself before the Lord, He will lift you up.*” Although, being broken before God is not enough. We must also be broken before each other.

Reading the story of Mary anointing Jesus with her perfume (Mark 14:3) made me think of us in our relationships with each other. Here comes Mary with her alabaster vase of perfume. Breaks it and pours the contents on Jesus, and the scent filled the room! (see John 12:3)

Many times *we* are like that alabaster vase. We come to church all dressed up and shiny, but with our “*contents*” undisclosed. Yet, the third chapter of Colossians says that we have the “*unmistakable scent of Jesus.*” I know that some of us do indeed have unmistakable scents, but this is different. We are to have the unmistakable “*scent of Jesus!*”

Consider that a moment. We have the irresistible personality of Jesus inside of us right now. But when we come to church and keep him shut in, contained, the air is full of nothing. But as I pointed out, John 12:3 said that once Mary broke her vase “*the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*” We need to break our vases. We need to become more like a bag of grapes than a bag of marbles.

Certainly, it is awkward. Yes, it is hard to be broken. I freely admit that it is easier to keep up a façade of spirituality. But once Mary broke the vase, all the contents were gone forever. But then Jesus said, “*She has done a good work on me.*”

“The high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, the Holy One . . .” [Lord, that's where I want to be] “. . . says this, I live in that high and holy place where those with contrite, humble spirits dwell; and I refresh the humble and give new courage to those with repentant hearts” (Isaiah 57:15)

There is nothing more obnoxious than to hear someone boast of their achievements. Where is their modesty? Where is the spirit of men that say, “*I can do nothing without my Lord?*”

C. Cleansing.

Hosea 14:2 says, “Take words with you, and return to the Lord. Say to Him, 'Forgive all our sins . . .’” As our kids were growing up, Patrice and I always had them say “I'm sorry,” any time

they hurt or offended someone. Why? Because being sorry without saying so isn't being very sorry, don't you think? In the family of God, learning to say I'm sorry, and to stay cleansed in all our relationships with each other, is essential. Sometimes we accept Grace too cheaply. We let too many little things go unconfessed and unrepented.

Several years ago, I was given a sheet of paper with a list of things to spark my memory during my daily prayer time. It was simply called, "Examination of Conscience." Its purpose was to serve as a reminder or, to sensitize my heart to my Father's heart and my hidden sins. On the left side of the sheet were the sins, and on the right side were God's desire, and I was to confess my sin and repeat His view of that sin, and then admit, or acknowledge, those sins to receive His forgiveness.

Is that necessary? Possibly. It does help to stimulate particular aspects of our life that we may not consider being a sin, but when we see it through the lens of Scripture, it will open our eyes (and yes, sensitize our heart).

So, to bring it all together, if we wish to learn to relate to each other we must first, long for Accountability; secondly, we need a Broken spirit, and finally, we need Continual Cleansing!

You are probably saying "That's great Nickolas! But what do I need to do?" Glad you asked. Keep on reading my friend.

Dancing With The Stars

Okay, it has taken several chapters, but I have established some solid groundwork. Now it is time to build on what we have learned and get specific about our responsibilities. Our first job is to make sure that we are in the Family of God.

Have you been born again? Have you come to God, seeing your sin and need for forgiveness, then accepting the forgiveness which He offers through the gift of salvation by His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ?

As I said, that is your first step. If you neglect that, you will be lost in the rest of this study.

I realize that my recommendation may seem too simple, too easy, but it is critical to enter your new life. Receiving forgiveness the minimum step that places you in the Body of Christ.

You might be intrigued by all this talk about relationships and love, but, you will never experience them without God. Nothing but His love will put you over--and it is only through the life of Jesus that you can experience it.

Once you have taken that first step, you need to do several outward things as visible signs of an inward change (Acts 2:42). You need to find the right church, be baptized publicly in front of its members, and put your name on its membership roll. And yes, I also realize this is not the true invisible church, but it is the visible one, comparable to the Church at Philippi or the Church at Thessalonica, through which the Holy Spirit does his work during this age.

Don't skip this one! I can't tell you how many times I have heard someone say, "*Well, I don't need a church. I can worship God on my boat or out in a field.*" Yeah, yeah. I realize that, but do you? When was the last time you worshiped God while mowing the lawn or lying in a hammock at your cottage?

You have to understand that the Church isn't about people streaming to a shrine. It is not about people making up an audience for a speaker. Quite simply, it is laborers reaching out to their confused and seeking brothers and sisters with something so vital that, if it is received, will change their lives.

I am continually hearing people complain about "*this*" church and "*that*" church, and believing they are all a complete waste of time and energy; all filled with fakes and hypocrites. They see them as "*money producing corporation that churns out programs; that it is, "Impotent and weak."*"

That may be true, in some cases, but it is so easy to dismiss this dislike for the church as simply being another symptom of original sin. When we merely point out the problems but don't seek solutions, we are best to remain silent. But that doesn't help. either.

In Paul's eyes, there was nothing dull or tiresome about following Christ. His Lord had a plan that was being carried to completion, and Paul and all the faithful in Christ were part of that plan! It included redemption, adoption and the obtaining of an eternal inheritance in the heavenly places.

According to the Scriptures, our God's purpose has now been openly revealed (Ephesians 3:10,11). It was the knowledge that they were part of an eternal plan that imparted unquenchable enthusiasm to the early Christians. They burned with holy zeal for Christ and felt that they were part of an army that the Lord was leading to ultimate conquest over all the powers of darkness. That was enough to fill them with endless enthusiasm.

Now most will agree with everything I just said, but turn around and tell me that they don't need a "*church,*" to make it happen. And that my friends, is the problem. Too many a trying to

“*make it on their own.*” I have always asked, “What is *my* part in that plan? What role do *I* play? Am I *willing* to seek Him and find the answer to those questions?” I finally realized that I had to become involved in a fellowship of other believers who desire Christ above all else. Why don't you find *your* place in that Army!

The Bible tells us, “*Don't forsake gathering together.*” Why is that? Because that is God's avenue of making you accountable, involved, broken, and cleansed. Lone Rangers don't survive long on the battlefield of life. You need to be worshiping your God with a group of fellow travelers, people of a like mind and heart.

Okay, so how do you find the right one? Well, that is a tough question. Obviously, you have to do it through prayer, but there are a few other things to consider. First, realize that no visible church is going to be perfect, and the Lord's plan is for you to see some faults — and join it anyway. As one man has said, “*If your church has more than two people in it, you'll have problems.*”

You can go to a shopping center or the movie theater or even to a ball game, but the church is something that demands an entirely different human relationship, the relationship of belonging. If someone is truly involved, truly *belonging* to a church, they are just as much a member of it when they sit at their desk in a business or house as when they are in a pew at a meetinghouse. The point is that the *relationship*, if real, is *continuous*, regardless of time and place and performance. That is one way God brings maturity to us.

Nevertheless, there are some basics we need to look for in a church. For instance, I John 4:1-3 tells us to be careful, so we don't fall into doctrinal error. We need to find a church that holds to Christ as the Eternal Son of God, the Savior from our sins through His Death, Resurrection and the True head of the Church.

Proverbs 16:25 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end, it leads to death,” and the only way to keep a church doctrinally correct is loving teaching and preaching the Bible, so look for that. When the preaching is all philosophy and psychology, and small group discussions are what everybody thinks, look out! The Bible needs to be in their hands; it needs to be used and marked and loved and most importantly, *lived*. I hate seeing Bibles where they have never broken the binding! Shoot, one of my favorite Bibles is held together with duct tape!

Now beyond truth, there needs to be Grace. Jesus was full of both (John 1:14). A church can hold to the absolute Truth, but be totally dead, and not even know it. They can even be totally belligerent in the way they hold to the Truth!

Anytime I visit a church; I first look for a sense of worshiping the Lord during service. Do the people have a look of “*awe*,” or are they merely honoring Him with their lips, when their hearts are far from him? Don't be fooled by all the fancy sound systems and professional sounding bands. There must be *True* Worship. When [if] they raise their hands, is there a tear in their eyes and a cry in their voice? Or, are they bored and just performing their weekly religious duty?

You need to see sincerity in their worship, or are the people putting on a show, trying to work up a purely emotional response? Who are they trying to impress, you or the Lord? Do the people mention the Lord's name in their conversations? Do you see new Christians being born again? Look for signs of life! As I left one church, a visitor witnessed all of the children coming out of their classrooms and said, “Oh, my! That is a sign of life!” There also has to be evidence of maturity. Do the members outgrow the Pastor?

What do I mean? Well, back in the “*old days*,” the days when there was a one-room schoolhouse, the first-graders helped the kindergartners; the third-graders helped the first and second-graders, and that is what you should expect in The Church. Established believers should be opening their homes to younger believers to the faith.

Do you witness sincere worship? In the early church, trusting God meant more than a teary-eyed testimony about “*the time I came to trust the Lord*.” No, it meant believing that even if obedience to God required great suffering, He was trustworthy to bring a person through it.

An early Church leader, Clement, declared,

“A person who does not do what God has commanded shows he really does not believe God.”

When the early Christians claimed to trust the Lord, yet refused to obey Him, it was a contradiction (1 John 2:4). Their Christianity was more than a verbal exercise. It was an active, living faith. As one early Christian expressed it, “We don't *speak* great things — we *live* them!”

One mark of the early Christians, something that distinguished them from all others was their childlike, literal obedience to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. They didn't feel they had to understand the reason for a commandment before they would obey it. They just trusted that God's way was always the best way. Clement asked, “*Who then is so irreverent as to disbelieve God, and to demand explanations from God as from men?*”

They trusted Him because they lived in awe of His majesty and wisdom. One Christian author put it this way:

“God is greater than all our perceptions — He is infinite, immense. Only He truly understands His true greatness; our hearts are too limited to really understand Him. We are making a worthy estimation of Him when we say that He is beyond estimation . . . Anyone who thinks he knows the magnitude of God, diminishes His greatness.”

How many of us can make such a declaration? I have seen churches that are on both sides of the fence. Some totally immersed in very practical, nuts and bolts type of ministry. You know, feeding the poor, involved in missions into the inner city . . . But remain weak in the area of spiritual warfare.

Others, on the other hand, are strong in prayer and spiritual warfare, but their lives are lived out in a purely theoretical sphere and have no heart for the poor. They may be solid in their doctrine and understanding of the Word of God, yet poor in a very personal and sacrificial ministry of assistance to those in need.

If, in your search for a church, find the Lord leading you to a particular fellowship, *join them* . I mentioned this before, but *be baptized* (if you haven't done that yet. I am not referring to something your parents did for you as an infant. But baptized as a declaration of your faith), and get your name on the membership list. Yes, that is important! Don't have your membership back in good ole' Pottersville just because they buried your ancestors there. Take your stand with the local body, which says, “*I am one of you, I belong to you. I want to submit to you and share your life in Christ.*”

Once you make that decision, stay with it! Don't run off when someone does something or says something you don't like. Get the relationships settled before you leave. Too many people

are carrying with them the grudges and hurt from other relationships and never get them resolved. And, every week, support them with your tithes and offerings.

A friend of mine brags that he has been “kicked out of some the *best* churches in town.” If you have run into the same problem, I will tell you, exactly what I said to him: “Maybe, (my friend's name) you need to examine your own heart. The problem might not be *them*.” Look, if they *were* indeed flaky, then look for a church that isn't all goofed-up. But when you find it, become involved and let them see a life of faith lived out!

I remember Larry Tomczak, an evangelical teacher, stating that he remained in the Catholic Church — despite having significant difficulties with many things they taught — because he was able to touch so many lives with what God had done in his life.

Think about marriages, again. Most people recognize that marriage is a bold adventure, but you generally don't enter into it with the benefit of an escape clause (certainly there are exceptions, but hopefully you can catch my example). The essence of most marriage vows is their unquestionable quality. A man takes a woman not as in a contract, under certain specified conditions, but “*for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and health.*” The commitment is unconditional and for life. The fact that some people fail in this regard does not dismiss the intention of the noble undertaking.

In the Christian Community my wife and I once considered joining, many members entered into a *Covenant* with the other believers. They did not enter into their commitment lightly, it required much prayer and counsel, nor did they *break* that agreement without much prayer and counsel. The Covenant stated that:

“In order for us to respond to what God is doing among us and to be the people he is calling us to be, we give our whole lives to Him, to follow His Son, Jesus, and to live lives as true disciples, through prayer, study of His Word, worship, evangelism, and hospitality. [But most importantly], To consecrate our lives to Him not as individuals but as members of (our particular community).”

So, in a very real sense, we were committed to the *body*, to a *specific* group of believers.

Ray Ortlund wrote that as the Pastor of a small church, he became so dissatisfied with the lack of “*Life and vitality*” in his church; he made a covenant-of-sorts with his people. At the end of what could have been his last sermon, he said that he needed people to commit to each other to pursue Christ, or he had to leave.

Many ended up leaving that church because frankly, they weren't looking for commitment, but rather entertainment; the ability to fulfill their weekly religious obligations. However, amazingly, several people signed up! That small number of members were evidently *waiting* for the opportunity to commit.

Okay. So after you make this commitment to your fellowship, you need to immerse yourself as deeply as you can into the life of that local body. Worship right among them — not by radio or television at home; not even sitting out in the Narthex (even if you can hear it over the speaker). That is not the point of “*going to church.*” You need to be shoulder to shoulder, sharing others reactions to it all, and letting them share yours. They need to hear you sing! (Even if it is off-key). They need to catch the intensity of your worship. (Someone noticed that I always sit in the first row when I'm in a service, and they figured it must be because I was so spiritual. lol. That was until I explained that I sat in the front row, so no one had to hear me singing. I was just trying to save someone from having to *bear that cross* during the service).

Even beyond this, you need a congregation of a few dozen who can get to know who you are. A group who know your name, and you know their names. You see each other at parties, Bible classes, and church events. Sunday mornings you greet each other with hugs and small talk. They help you know you belong, and you help them to know they belong! During the week you call each other and stop over to each other's homes.

The most common criticisms I often hear, are, "They are so closed, just a bunch of cliques." "I feel like such an outsider." "They are so cold." and on and on.

I always wonder what steps those complainers took to get involved? What did they do to become a vital part of the fellowship? Did they discuss their feelings about the group to anyone within that group, or just with people outside of it? It is so easy to put the blame on someone else. What are you going to do? You need to give of yourself.

Now, after you have fulfilled all this congregational stuff, you need at least one cell in your life. That is so important I had better spend more time on it.

Those Little Stars

So far we spent a lot of time looking at our relations within BIG Stars; Our congregational level. But even if your church is small, you need to find a few people that are special; closer; more intimate. However, if you attend a large church, this is particularly the case.

Seriously, how can you share your life on an intimate level with a hundred people? That's the point; you can't. Yes, you can enjoy them and have fun with them during worship or special gatherings or parties. But for those every-day struggles in your life and the dreams you have or goals you have set for yourself, you need intimacy. You need close-knit believers who will offer the correction you need and will receive the correction you suggest. A small group of believers can help you with all those *nitty-gritty* daily affairs in your life that need support and prayer and guidance. For all of those things and more, you need a smaller group of about four to eight people.

A large group is fine for a Bible Study or Bible teaching situations which are *informational*. But in cases that are intended to be *formational*, sharing of lives (which takes time and intimacy), you need a smaller group.

It is good to be stretched to love at least four people deeply at one time, and those kinds of interpersonal relationships will help you grow. However, I would not recommend over eight because some members begin to become anonymous and don't find support in the group.

So how can you find a few others who are hungry to grow, you may ask? Without sounding simplistic — Pray!

Finding and matching people is the Lord's work, and he is certainly willing to help us. Maybe after you have prayed, you feel drawn to take the initiative and ask certain people to join you. Maybe after you have prayed, others will ask you. The point is prayer.

The Lord is the great administrator of the Church and knows just how to organize this for the greatest spiritual effectiveness. He also knows you and your needs best. He can find the ones you need to cause that growth to take place within your life. I have been in churches that tried to orchestrate who would be in what group and it failed. Let the Lord build the group, not the leaders.

In Luke 6:12, we see that Jesus also prayed before he picked his disciples and started his small group. Now prayer did not guarantee that everybody in the group was going to be perfect and ideal: if you remember, Judas was one of the twelve. So, up front, I assure you that all of the members may not turn out to be saintly saints. But if you form a group through prayer, each member will be the right one!

Now, when Jesus picked the twelve out of all his disciples, Luke 6 describes the way Jesus' lifestyle was going to look relationally, for the rest of His life. Look at verses 17 and 18:

He went down from the mountain with the twelve and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of other people . . . who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases . . .

If we were able to look at this scene from a helicopter, we would see Jesus in the middle, ringed with concentric circles. The closest around him were the Twelve. In a circle around them, were the multitude of his other disciples of whatever temperament; and outside of that ring were

all the rest of the curiosity seekers and believers of one degree or another. Then verses 19 and 20 go on to say “*the people all tried to touch him . . . and looking at his disciples, he said . . .*”

Do you see the difference in the relationships? Certainly, there was healing and help in the touch of Jesus, but the word disciple means learner. Jesus touched the crowds, but he taught the disciples. He deliberately turned to them and gave them his time, attention, teaching, and intimacy.

Notice how special their place was;

“Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd were going along with him.” (Luke 7:11)

You get the feeling of concentric circles again. As the days moved along, the crowds came and went, and even, probably the disciples came and went (John 6:66); but soon Luke is more specific:

“After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another . . . the twelve were with him” (Luke 8:1)

Luke 8:4 says that when a large crowd gathered, he taught them by parables, but verse 9 says that privately to the Twelve he explained what the parable meant. One sister explained his pattern this way:

“I think he did it that way because of the want-a-be's in the crowd who wanted to be associated with them but did not really buy into his Truth [or maybe they were curiosity seekers]. Only the true believers were privy to the Truth.”

Good point!

Luke 9:1 says that soon he gave special powers and authority to the Twelve, and both Luke 8:51 and 9:28 show that by now he was singling out three of the twelve for the deepest times of all with him.

We now know Jesus' messages very well, we can recite John 3:16 at the drop of a hat. But we are just beginning to realize his method. Jesus did many things for the multitudes, but more and more, he invested his time in a few. We need to catch that and begin to imitate it.

What qualities did the Twelve have that made Jesus choose them? (And obviously, the follow-up to that would be for us to look for the same qualities when we pray over who we should get close to).

Well, one thing that I see is that they were *available*. For instance, there was Levi (or Matthew as most of us know him): “Jesus saw a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax office. Jesus said to him, ‘*Follow me!*’ So Levi got up, *left everything, and followed him*” (Luke 5:27-28).

I don't think it meant that Levi no longer had any earthly possessions after this. When it says that he left “*everything,*” I believe that it only meant that he had a new master who would take charge of everything Levi owned. Am I reading something into the text? I don't think so. His first

act as a follower of Jesus was to use his house to throw a big party. (where he introduce all his friends to Jesus — all the other tax-gathers and the whole bunch!).

I admit that you will find many Christians who are not available for small groups. They may have great personalities, and you will always enjoy them and feel warm toward them, but maybe they are just not loose enough from this world's system to commit themselves to you at close range. Maybe they are insecure or in a "*funk*." At least, not now. Don't break your heart over them, or wear yourself out trying to get them involved. Also, don't criticize them or look down on them. Give them time. Just cut 'em some slack. You do not know the true condition of their heart.

Jesus' disciples were also *teachable*. That is what makes a disciple; we already know that the word means "*learner*," and he is willing to be one. He can't give the impression of already knowing everything! You have probably met them, but some Christians are always teaching you; their communication just goes in one direction. That never allows for a *give-and-take* you should find in a sharing situation.

Jesus' disciples also had what I call *heart*! You have to look for heart in people. Whenever you mention the Lord, you see a little sparkle in their eyes. Something lights up; you have a feeling you could communicate around the Lord together. Neither one of you has to know a lot, but the Lord gives you the sense that it would work. Heart means everything. More than looks or education, gifts, anything, although it is nice to have some things in common, look for a longing to know God better!

Now I just gave you some tips on finding believers you can join with to grow and pursue the Lord. Now, when you get this group together, you are making a Disciple. Yippee! If that bothers you, remember they are also making a disciple out of you. A group like this is where the spiritually younger seek out the older and say, "*Please teach me and let your lifestyle rub off on me. I want to learn from you.*"

Often small groups are just supportive fellowships, where more-or-less peers get together and say, "*You teach me what you know about Jesus, and I will show you what I know. Where you are strong, and I am weak, you help me. Where I am strong, and you are weak, I will help you so that we can grow together.*"

When God's family is truly functioning, the holes, scars, weaknesses and broken parts of the physical family are filled in, healed, mended and completed. When the body is working properly, we can live full, balanced lives, with all the richness of relationships that we need.

My friends, if we don't want our faith understood as a retreat from life, but as an effort to transfigure a life, then we need each member doing its part. Every man and woman must work together where they are exposed to the problems of every-day life: in their jobs, in their neighborhoods, and in their homes. In his booklet, "*Life Is Commitment*," J.H. Oldham wrote,

"It is through its lay members that the Church makes contact with the life of the world."

Right now names may be popping into your head. Are they people you would love to get together with and share the Lord? Get away in a time of concentrated prayer and if He seems to indicate that this group is right, either they will ask you, or you will ask them. Either way, it will happen, and it will work.

But let's get back to making disciples. Jesus' last words to his Twelve were,

“I am leaving you, so you turn around and disciple others, just as I have made disciples of you. See that they are baptized, and teach them everything you have learned from me” (Matthew 28:18-20)

And that is what the Twelve went out and did, and the result is that we have the Church today. But notice that he said, “*Teach them everything I have taught you.*” The point is, my responsibility is to share all that I have learned. To pour my life into the life of someone else, and they pour theirs into mine.

Jesus never told us to, “*Go out and evangelize.*” He said, “*Go make disciples.*” Not all of us are evangelists, but all Christians must make disciples. He never said, “Go have occasional crash programs and retreats.” Those just wear out the saints, and the results can be almost nil. No. Little-by-little, line-upon-line, and precept-upon-precept, Christians are to disciple each other. Then, more particularly, the more mature are to disciple the less mature, and the ones who know little are to learn from those who know more, and in this way, the whole family of God acts out its roles and grows in Him (II Timothy 2:2).

New believers start out as children. They learn from many fathers and mothers, at close range, with time enough to let the learning relate to their daily lives and get it all worked into their lives. Eventually (hopefully soon) they will be parenting others. No, this isn't easy. That is why the ABC's I presented are all important. They may be the big shots in business or have years of maturity and knowledge in many areas, but to humble themselves enough to be accountable to others, and to be broken in spirit, won't be easy.

Consider Paul. Sometimes we think of him as a very young man when he met Christ. Scholars tell us he was probably in his forties. He was a respected Pharisee and more; a member of the exclusive Sanhedrin (like our Supreme Court). In Paul's career as well as in his personality, Paul was in cement. He had become hardened into his loves and hates. Then he meets Jesus! By instant blindness, he is made physically dependent on others. For three days, they lead him by the hand like a little child. Then he is delivered into the hands of a big brother in God's family, Ananias, to whom he is to submit for counseling and instruction. Paul is a brand new baby Christian, a little brother in Christ.

Or maybe we can look at Nicodemus, another religious heavy. He had been an authority for many years; others went to him for instruction. When he came to Jesus, he made himself vulnerable. He came humbly, as a learner; he asked for it, and he got it! John 3:10-11 may have been the first time anyone had rebuked him since he was a boy. *The Interpreter's Bible*, commenting on this passage, says,

"There is no credit in a bovine (cow-like) creature who just doesn't understand what he is getting into, but a man of true courage will gather up his fears, his awkwardness at the unfamiliar, and come to Jesus, anyway!"

That is how people are born-again into God's family. Grown men, able women, influential people recognized for their skills and status, have to have the courage to step over into God's family and play a brand-new role; they are a new little brother or little sister with a whole lot to learn.

A friend of mine, also a Pastor, had been leading his church for several years and rarely if ever, heard from his father. Then one weekend, totally unexpectedly, his father showed up at the church and sat through the entire service — gave his life to the Lord — and for several years

afterward, sat under the teaching of his son. That's right. He began as the father of my friend and became a brother-in-Christ and a “disciple” of his son. Freaky, huh? How humbling must it have been for a father to submit to his son?

Bill Bright, the founder of *Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru)*, told a story about a time when he was explaining how he had been a believer for 30 years or so and had grown to know the Lord, to experience his wisdom and love. But after he finished, a woman came up to him and very lovingly explained that she was 74 years old, and had come to Jesus when she was 12 years old and said: “Sonny, you don't know anything yet!”

Isn't that great? Each day we will grow more and more in our relationship with Jesus, and we will never be able to say we know all there is to know! Do you remember when Jesus called a little child over, set him in the middle of the group and said,

“I can guarantee this truth: Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:3-5)

So first we see that a person mature in the family of this world has to be willing to be born again and open up his mind, heart, eyes and ears to a new world. He has to play a brand new role, that of a baby brother, and be willing to go to the places where he can learn, and where he can ask foolish questions. If he wants to grow, he must be prepared to submit to teaching and to being loved and cared for and advised. For some, that can prove to be a stumbling block.

However, the parents and big brothers and sisters in God's family must be willing to assume their roles. They must give him plenty of time, feeding information, tenderly rebuking, pointing out Scriptures, and respond to life in front of him so that he can learn how Christians react to the events of life. They must do and be everything that is needed to bring that spiritual baby to maturity, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

That all sounds nice, but if Christians never develop the vision on how the members of the family of God function, they won't see each other with spiritual eyes. They will never see a newly converted big shot as a new baby brother. They will simply see him as a big shot, and he will be encouraged to talk too much and not listen enough. They may be intimidated by the new believer's status in the world, but if that happens, that new believer will be cheated and his growth stunted.

I have told this story before, but it perfectly illustrates how this might occur. Several years ago, I attended a *Men's Breakfast*, at “*Domino Farms*,” the world Headquarters of Domino's Corporation. in Ann Arbor, MI. Tom Monaghan, the founder (and at that time, a President) of Domino's Pizza, would occasionally attend that breakfast. After one breakfast, I walked up to him and politely shared a word with him. I explained a sense I had, that very soon he would face extreme financial difficulties and that the Lord wanted him to prepare his heart and focus on *Him* alone. (The message went a little further, but that was the gist of the Word).

While I was sharing that message, two of the leaders of the Breakfast interrupted us and apologized to Mr. Monaghan for my rude announcement. However, Mr. Monaghan smiled and thanked me. Sadly, several months later, Mr. Monaghan did experience tremendous financial problems, and, as a result, was forced to sell many of his holdings, such as the Detroit Tigers; Drummond Island; and several other properties, just to “*stay alive*” financially – and guess what? Many articles and commentators criticized and made fun of Monaghan. Before the financial

crash of his empire, he was Ann Arbor's favorite citizen. But afterward, they ignored any request he made of the city officials. Go figure.

What I witnessed in that encounter is how the leaders of the breakfast were intimidated by Mr. Monaghan's presence. They were more honored that he attended the breakfast than concerned that the Lord wanted to speak to him.

I have also shared how I initially gave my heart to Jesus in the eighth grade. I was attending a church camp in Holland Michigan, and my decision to accept Christ was sincere and completely open. The problem is that I never had anyone come to teach me about my new found life! No one began to disciple me! As they say, I was left to my own devices.

Once I entered High School, I suffered many heartaches, pains, and struggles that I should never have experienced! If only someone had taken me under their wings and cared for me, taught me, helped me! Oh, how desperately I needed someone. But there was no one to show me the way. I was a “*Timothy*” without a “*Paul*.” I since vowed to always seek out those “*Timothy's*.”

Those of us who have walked sincerely with the Lord must open our hearts to the responsibilities we have to care for the new believers. Most of the new believers don't even know that they *need* help, so we need to patiently and tenderly watch over their growth.

In God's family, we play completely different roles from those the world knows. It is essential that we understand them and that we function within them, to help each other grow strong in Christ. The world is full these days of new babies in the family of God. But so few of the other members of the family have realized and assumed their responsibilities.

I will be talking more about this need to grow because we have so many people involved in ministry who have no discipline or training, of their own. I am not talking about seminaries or Bible Schools! Those things are nice, and possibly have their place, but they only develop your mind and do nothing about a person's character or Spirit. An old proverb states, “*They die by degrees.*” (Those with ears to hear, I hope will take heed).

For now, realize that there is a little girl or a little boy down the street who has just received Jesus as Savior. It could have happened in a Child Evangelism class or a Sunday school, or like me, at a camp, and this child's parents are not yet Christians. Tell me, who is going to support and encourage this child's faith? Maybe you know an adult who likes you and is just beginning to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. What are you going to do about it?

Remember that passage in the 18th chapter of Matthew? Jesus' parting words told us to go disciple others, teaching them everything that he has taught us (Matthew 28:16-20). If all you know is John 3:16, then, by-golly, go and teach that! Whatever you have learned, you are responsible for sharing. You don't need a whole bunch of knowledge or Bible verses memorized, all you need is God's life and love in your heart. Simply share what you have received and learned!

That is what happened immediately after Peter's sermon in Acts 2. Later it became Paul's lifestyle, and he told his disciples to do the same:

“(Timothy), everything that you have heard me preach you should, in turn, entrust to reliable men, who will be able to pass it on to others” (II Timothy 2:2)

Sharing our faith, building new disciples, is basic biblical Christianity. No Christian service can substitute for this; not directing the church choir, not ushering, not cooking church dinners, not even writing Christian books.

Building disciples is foundational; it keeps you in touch with God and with people, and keeps you bringing the two together. It keeps you growing in Grace; your personality is challenged and stretched. It keeps you growing in knowledge; you automatically keep learning God's Word. It is God's plan for your life.

Have you been a Christian for a while, and learned a few things? Then you are responsible for acting out your role as a spiritual father or mother in God's family. Gather those around you who have heart, who are available, and who are teachable, and say, "Hey, how would you like to meet once a week for a little Bible study, and to share our lives, say, through next June? Would that be possible?"

Or are you a young Christian who doesn't know much yet? You are responsible for acting out your role as a child in the family. Go to someone you respect and say, "I really want to learn more about the Bible and the Christian life. Would you take me on for a while and disciple me?"

To make sure you never grow stagnant you should always be learning from those who know more than you do, and you should always be teaching those who know less. All of us are forever responsible for being sons, brothers, fathers, daughters, sisters, or mothers. It all depends on the spiritual level of the one to whom we are relating at the moment.

Leading Those Little Stars

I have been spending all kinds of time talking about relationships and living as a family. I spoke about BIG Stars and LITTLE Stars, and how we live within our Stars. (Ooh, sounds rather esoteric, doesn't it?) Well anyway, once we start a little star, we need to discuss how we need to organize and lead those groups?

If we are going to examine the role of leadership in all of this relationship stuff, we need to discuss the importance of Christian leaders exemplifying this commitment to body life, themselves. Then, you need to examine the structure of *government* within a church body.

First, it is important for the lives that the leaders model be consistent with the Scriptures they so fervently proclaim. As we have already seen, Jesus ministered to the masses, but he gave most of his time privately to the Twelve, and out of the Twelve he seemed to provide close attention to an inner circle of three.

In the book of Acts, it was not unknown men who emerged to take leadership in the new church; it was the Twelve. Out of the Twelve particularly Peter, James, and John, came the three to whom Jesus had given the most intimate attention.

How did Jesus disciple this select group of men? Repeatedly, he withdrew from the crowds to spend time with his inner circle.

Mark 3:7: “Jesus withdrew with his disciples . . .”

Mark 3:13: “Jesus went up into the hills and called to him those he wanted . . .”

Mark 7:17: “After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable . . .”

Mark 9:28: “After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately . . .”

Mark 9:33: “When he was in the house, he asked them . . .”

So, if we are going to follow Jesus' example, Christian leaders should see their ministries grow in direct proportion to the quality time they have poured into an inner circle of disciples. Think of Miss Henrietta Mears. She was a dynamic leader of Christian education at the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood. The young men she disciplined (some even living in her home) have multiplied her ministry many times over. Such of the ministers, such as Bill Bright, Dick Halverson, Louis Evans, Jr., Don Moomaw, Don and Ted Cole, Bob Munger, and much more.

One man wrote:

“The life of Henrietta Mears is a marvelous demonstration of what one person can do to change the world when that person puts her life in the hands of God and makes His will her will.

“Henrietta Mears wanted to go to Japan. Instead she found herself called to train leaders and to nurture the spiritual growth in thousands who could go in her place to penetrate the world with the Gospel of Christ.

“This wonderful Christian woman has become a world traveler for Christ — speaking at Sunday school conventions and conferences all over America and

ministering to missionaries everywhere. Where she has not been, the young men and women she has won to work for Christ have surely gone, or the literature of the Gospel Light Press which she founded has reached souls for Christ.

“As Director of Christian Education at the First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, California, she has served in developing the Sunday school from 400 to 6,500. From here grew her work with young people (she teaches 600 college-age men and women) and the Sunday school lessons now distributed throughout the world. Still another activity of Henrietta Mears is the Forest Home Christian Conference Center, which she founded and where tens of thousands have found strength and guidance for their lives.

“God will lead you and give you the desire in your heart for the one place He wants you to fill,' promises Henrietta Mears from the experience of her fruitful life. You must begin your Christian life, your Christian ministry, where you are, she advises, and let God lead from that moment on. May God use this book about Henrietta Mears, as He has used her life, to lead men and women into Christian living and service — to lead you.”

To illustrate the point, here is an excerpt from a letter from one of her *spiritual* sons in seminary:

“Just the other day a friend took me aside and asked me to tell him very frankly about Miss Mears. As in the past, I confessed an almost uncritical and naive love for and loyalty towards this woman who has meant so much to me and to my closest friends. All of us here at Princeton from Hollywood rise up and call her blessed at every remembrance.

“It was because she yielded to the Christ whom she loves above all else that we met Him, that we are here today training for the ministry. Interestingly, there are over a dozen here right now who could specifically point to her as their 'mother' in the faith. There are also here approximately another dozen and a half, who are direct, spiritual descendants of Dr. Robert Munger, her own 'son in the faith.' And this is just one year's class!

“I learned yesterday from a graduate of 1952 that during his stay here there were roughly comparable numbers from the two churches just mentioned. This 'spiritual blood-line' extends back to the very first year of her Christian ministry”

Some of you believe you must be a Seminarian before you can preach. I believe that is hogwash! The Holy Spirit of the instructor, and we must rely on Him! I am convinced that the effective pastor, counselor, or Christian administrator is also to be a Christ-like discipler. His love, faith, love for God — even through struggles, weaknesses, frustrations and failures — must continually be rubbing off on hand-picked people close to him, people who will in turn influence others.

Paul certainly understood this:

You've heard my message, and it's been confirmed by many witnesses. Entrust this message to faithful individuals who will be competent to teach others (II Timothy 2:2)

Now, discipling is a general term that has many levels of meaning. Preaching the Word on Sundays, Sunday school teaching, Bible class teachings are all *forms* of discipling, but certainly not at a very intimate level. Pastors and other church leaders need to give themselves to ministering to large crowds if they have the gifts to do so, but no one should be exempt from discipling small groups. Only as the leaders set the example can they expect the church members to follow.

First, Christian leaders need to recognize their families are their primary disciples, their closest, most intimate small group. If a Christian a husband sees his wife and children as merely his wife and children, he will treat them as any non-believer does: He will see that they are properly clothed and schooled and marry the right people.

On the other hand, if a Christian husband sees his wife and children as his chief responsibility among those he is discipling, he will realize he has a limited amount of time (perhaps less than twenty years with each child) in which to live intimately with them. His acceptance of this responsibility is how he can reproduce godliness in the next generation. Then he will carry out Matthew 28:19 in their lives, making sure they are baptized and teaching them everything Jesus has taught him.

If we see our family in this light, family devotions will take on a fresh motivation. Teaching our family to tithe, worship, having their own quiet times, and witnessing to the unsaved — everything will become part of the total picture of discipling. And the commitment and perseverance that they will learn within this special inner circle when things are rough will carry over into the larger circle — the church as a whole — when things get rough there.

But discipling for Christian leaders should not stop with their families. It is also important for them to take the lead in discipling small groups outside the family circle. On rare occasions, you might have a Moses-and-Joshua, or an Elijah-and-Elisha type of discipling, one-on-one. For me, it is Nickolas-and-Lyle. But mostly it will be within the context of a small group.

Jesus concentrated on a few, selected them carefully, and built them together into a loving unit. When he commanded them to love one another, in the same way, that he loved them, they could understand very well all the patience, care, and commitment that would be required!

The bottom line of discipling is *love*, and small groups are God's perfect laboratories for working out that love in everyday relationships.

Whatever you do in life, don't do it solo! Do it in the company of brothers and sisters in Christ! It is the New Testament pattern, and it is what keeps the body of Christ whole and loving and self-corrective. To attempt to unify people on a theological basis — on a doctrinal creed — is a pipe dream. You have everybody agreeing on three and a half years, and then somebody changes his mind and thinks seven years, and everybody becomes all shook up because it threatens the unity of the group.

We only have unity because we have a common life. One of the greatest hindrances to directed unity is that people think they can have it by prescribing a certain form of church government or creed. But you only get unity of spirit by having the Spirit. And only Jesus ministers the Spirit to the church.

Our unity is Christ's, not ours. We don't work it up; he sends it down. We are his; therefore, we are one. *He* is our common life. As Ephesians 4:4 says, when we know Jesus, we are a throbbing, living, vital organism. That is biblical teaching, and when we experience any break in fellowship, it should shock and repel us.

In the introduction to our study, I shared how every Tuesday night during the summer my wife and I would attend a concert of the Kalamazoo Symphony. As we were sitting on the grass, listening to the orchestra, I realized that there were probably hundreds of us, very diverse in our lives and philosophies. There were probably Republicans and Democrats, Catholics and Protestants, people of faith and people of no faith, yet we were still brought together to enjoy the same thing. That is what we are supposed to experience in our church. Christians need to minimize their differences and be caught up together in their worship of Jesus Christ.

When I was in high school, I saw a football player make a sudden move during a game and throw his knee out of joint. He was in so much pain; he slithered across the grass! He was taken to the hospital where they reset his knee. I will never forget seeing the agony on his face when one member of his body was out of joint with another member.

That is how we must feel in the body of Christ! When a hurt comes, “*tell it not in Gath!*” Don't let outsiders know. It is a family matter. Preserve, guard and keep the unity of the Spirit! Ephesians 4:13 says that we are to be built up “*until we all reach the unity of the faith.*”

If you are a teacher, don't teach alone. You need those around who are ministering to *you* so that you teach in fellowship with others. They know what you are teaching; they know what you are saying. They know your difficulties; they know your strengths and particular traits.

If you are a pastor, Acts 2:14 says “Peter stood up *with the Eleven*, raised his voice and addressed the crowd.” I used to scratch my head wondering how Peter could preach *with* the Eleven.

Well, when a pastor preaches, it should never be the sound of a single voice; he is not there to say whatever he pleases. It is to be the United Alleluia of the entire church. He is not only speaking *to* them — but *for* them, on their behalf, correctly reflecting their doctrines and their views. I am not saying that he is a people-pleaser. But there should be a common belief and common heart.

Christian leaders have a unique problem. The tendency, and what has become the standard practice in many churches, is for the pastor to come into the body willing to help, but never to unmask themselves enough to *be* helped! Big Christians (by Big Christians I mean those who have big responsibilities and are looked up to — big wheels) tend to operate in the body at the advisory level. What they are saying is, “*I don't need you, but you very much need me.*” Pastors and other Christian leaders can easily fall into the trap of functioning by always teaching other Christians what to do!

I was told that the “*Bible way*” of doing things is that “*The leaders cannot get too close to the people because then the people won't receive from the Pastor's ministry anymore.*” Oh, my gosh! That my friends is dangerous thinking. Unbiblical to say the least. I have seen it destroy more than one body.

The people have to learn that the leader is no different than they are. He is just flesh and blood, with weaknesses, failures, strengths and gifts. As soon as they try to place him on a pedestal, he better crawl off it as fast as he can.

Keep your relationships in the body two-way. *Let* others minister to you. Are you always on the side of *giving* correction, or do you allow a brother to correct you? It is important that we not only *give* advice but that we also *ask* for advice (and receive it).

Pastors, you need to be in at least one support group of which you are not the leader. As John Calvin said:

“No member of the body of Christ is endowed with such perfection as to be able, without the assistance of others, to supply his own necessities!”

It is no exaggeration to say that Christ's decision to select the Twelve was one of the most crucial decisions of the world. There is no reason to suppose that we should ever have heard of the gospel apart from this carefully conceived step . . .

Then Elton Trueblood shared this:

“Since Christ wrote no book, he depended entirely upon the faithfulness of the prepared group. Not all of them proved faithful, yet in the end, the method succeeded. The precious existence of the church is evidence that the method was fundamentally sound.” —from Elton Trueblood's book, *“The Lord's Prayer”*

Unity in the Body of Christ is God-made. It is unity based on the mystery of the glorious unity of the Father with his Son (see John 17:22). Through the interaction of God with his people at close range, we learn that we are truly members one of another. We learn to act out this unity. We learn to visibly and audibly love each other, to break down those barriers of pain and by the grace of Christ to fight our way to each other.

Sometimes it takes the physical act of getting down on our knees to pray to bring some of us to humility and oneness.

And at that point, there is added the glory of God!

The Smallest Stars

So far, we have discussed relating at a congregational level and a small group level. I now want to share my heart on friendships, friendships that last forever. We are going to examine how we can establish selective, godly friendships such as those described in Proverbs, where it talks about a “friend who is closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24).

When I have spoken about these types of relationships, before, I inevitably have couples tell me that passage was describing their spouse. No. As charming as that may sound, that is not what that Proverb was describing. I hope you do indeed have a deep friendship with your spouse. Ideally, you can indeed refer to your spouse as your friend, as well as your lover. Certainly, in a healthy marriage, I would expect that to happen. But that passage is referring to a much more significant friendship that transcends all other relationships.

Oh, I know, many believe this is referring to Jesus, which is partially correct. But the Messiah had not yet arrived when Solomon described a friendship that fascinated him. He could have witnessed this kind of friendship between his father, David, and King Saul's son, Jonathan. So for fun, I am going to look at that story. We will discover how their friendship started, how it grew, and how it continued, even after their deaths.

If you look at I Samuel 18:1 it says:

“Jonathan's heart was knit to the heart of David; they became one in spirit, and Jonathan loved him as himself” (I Samuel 18:1)

That is the perfect image of the type of friendship I mentioned! For example, Paul encouraged the Christians at Colossae to find out more and more how strong the bonds of Christian love are so that they would be “welded together by love.” Fascinating idea!

When you weld two pieces of metal together, they melt and literally become one piece along the seam. In fact, the seam becomes stronger and more durable than the original pieces of metal! Selah, (pause and consider that).

In the same way, when two lives come together with their mutual commitment to Christ as the cohesion, they can become one, and inseparable. In fact, that is the ideal for marriage!

I Samuel 16 is where you find the beginning of this relationship. It marks where Jonathan meets David. You know the story. Goliath comes down and taunts the army of Israel, challenging them to a battle between him and whomever they might choose. Then this young, unknown David comes, defeats Goliath, won the day—, and also wins Jonathan's admiration. Wow!

However, before that event, Jonathan himself, had quite a day. The Philistines were making raids on the Israelites. They were strong and threatening, and the complete safety of Israel was at stake. Every able Israelite was out in the hills and valleys in defense—even the King's son, Jonathan.

“Jonathan said to the young man who bore his armor, 'Come, let us go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised Philistines. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by a few’” (I Samuel 14:6).

Isn't that great! Jonathan says to his armor bearer, "Naturally the Lord is going to win the battle, whether by many or a few. Hey, just for fun, let's see if He does it by a few — *like two?*"

Certain things stand out about Jonathan right here. First, his spirit: he was bold for God, full of faith and courage. Those kinds of men are contagious. His armor bearer said, "*Do all that you have in mind.*" "*Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul*" (I Samuel 14:7). One translation says; "*as is your mind, so is mine.*"

I like that! He is saying, Johnny; I am yours. You say the word and we will go-for-it! As verse thirteen says, "*And they fell before Jonathan!*" Because of this adventure, he was everyone's hero, and all Israel loved him; in fact, when a problem arose between Jonathan and His father Saul, the people rose and said, "*Don't touch a hair of Jonathan's head.*" He was a real hero!

Jonathan was a Man! The thing that has always bothered me about Goliath's story, why did Jonathan allow him to come up those forty days and taunt Israel. After experiences like the ones he had, why would he let one man shake the cage of Israel so badly? We don't know, but maybe Jonathan comes back after this tremendous rout of the enemy and sees his father the King slipping back into his old depressions, disobedience toward God and losing control of the people — and Jonathan might have said, "*What's the use? Nobody cares.*"

But when he saw David — small unknown David — walk out of that valley with Goliath's head in his hand — David, just a young shepherd boy, a little guy, younger than Jonathan himself — I can imagine that a man with a heart like Jonathan's said, "*Whoa! How about that? There's my man! What a man!*"

I don't know about you, but I desperately need men around me who are Giant Killers. That is not my natural state, you know. As I explained in a previous post, for years, I saw myself more like Bilbo Baggins. Like me, he didn't like adventures and preferred to stay in his hobbit hole away from danger. It is said that he, "*like most of his kind, were well off, well fed, and best pleased when sitting by his fire with a pipe, a glass of good beer, and a meal to look forward to.*" That pretty much described me. But I don't want to be like that. I want to be a Giant Killer! That is why I need to have brave and courageous around me.

The truth is, many times it seems that most of us have an innate tendency to back off sometimes. We need brave, courageous, bold and fearless, godly men around to keep us moving in the right direction. The story of many Christians is that they start hot with God: "*Take it all, Lord. You can have anything I have.*" As a result, God blesses them, and soon they have it made. Then they want to keep it made and protect themselves. They no longer get out where they depend wholly on God. Frankly, I do not want that to happen to me.

Jim Elliot wrote to his brother and told him that he was praying for him to receive,

"A hallowed dare-devil spirit in lifting the biting sword of Truth. Consuming (him) with a passion that is called by the cultured citizens of Christendom 'fanaticism,' but known to God as the saintly madness that led His Son through bloody sweat and hot tears to agony on a rude Cross—and Glory!"

Now that is radical! To his sister, Jim Elliot wrote:

"Don't be disappointed at anything or over-elated, either. Live each day as if the Son of Man were at the door, and gear your thinking to the fleeting

moment . . . Walk as if the next step would carry you across the threshold of Heaven. Pray! The saint who advances on his knees never retreats.”

Boy, that fires me up! We simply have to be out on the cutting edge, or there is enough sin out there, that if we yield to it, we will be zeros. Paul told the Corinthians, “*If you think you've got it wired, watch out, or you might fall into the garbage can*” (Or something close to that).

That is why a godly friend or two is utterly essential! Not an option or reasonable suggestion. It is an imperative must! There must be friends who are courageous enough to exhort and rebuke us, and loving enough to encourage us.

With all our emphasis on The Body, I think we have hardly even discovered the possibility of what a Spirit-breathed, faithful friend can do in our lives. One brother shared with me his frustration. “I don’t know whether my brothers in my small group are committed to me or not. A month ago I shared with them three goals I wanted to reach: To establish a consistent daily quiet time, to stick to a diet that will take off fifteen pounds, and to adhere rigidly to a new budget that will discipline my wife and me not to overspend.”

He looked at me earnestly. “I can't make it without these guys. But four weeks ago I told them about these goals, and not one of them has asked me how I am doing. Not one has checked up on me.”

My immediate response was, “Tell them! They are responsible for you! If they have committed their hearts to you, your failure is their failure. You are in this together!”

The next morning was their weekly breakfast together. My friend laid it on the table. “Do you guys love me or don’t you? Do you care or not?” Ouch!

I saw him again a few days after that and asked how it went. He grinned, “Man, those guys were smitten. Almost every day since, somebody has called me—“Hey, you sticking to your diet? Have you had your quiet time yet today? No impulse buying, Buddy . . .”

There was a sense of great confidence in his eyes that wasn't there before we talked. “I'll make it,” he told me. My response was that their need to be responsible for him was just as important as his need to keep accountable to them.

Another time, many years ago, a very precious and dear friend asked me to be in agreement with him regarding a discipline he wanted to start. He wanted to begin waking up at 5:30 every morning for prayer. So we prayed, and it just happened to be when the Lord was starting to teach me what I am sharing with you now: how I was responsible for my friend.

So, every day for about a week or two, I called him at 5:30 to see if he was up. The first three days or so, he admitted that I got him out of bed but after that, he was up before I called. I would continue to call him occasionally just to keep him on his toes. Now realize that this was a commitment and sacrifice on my part. I wasn't trying to start a new discipline of getting up that early. But I was committed to my friend!

In my mind, getting up to call him was a little thing, but it must have impacted him. A few years later, I heard him speaking to some people and overheard him say something that is still with me after all these years. He said, “So many times when we ask for prayer or are attempting to establish a new discipline in our lives, it seems we are alone. Oh sure, they may pray for us, but usually not. But when I asked my friend to pray for me, he called to check up on me. That blessed me so much because I knew I wasn't alone. I knew that he had to force himself out of bed to call me. That encouraged me. He was there with me! It also made me examine my responsibility to follow up with anyone who asks me for prayer.”

Hey, I will tell you now, don't ask me to pray for you unless you are serious about it. I take it seriously. While I was editing this writing, a friend sent me a note (on Facebook), asking me to pray against his migraine. So I did. 30 minutes later we were chatting, and he told me the migraine was gone! ("Thank you Father") Hey! I just realized that he had made his request via email, so evidently, we don't even have to be in direct contact for our prayers to work!

My rule is that if the two of us are going to ask our Father for something, we are both in it together. As I told you before, several years ago I created a rule that if you call me or email me to pray about something, I will pray right then on the phone with you. In fact, I had been doing that for so many years; it was simply automatic. I didn't even think about it. That is until I needed prayer. When my wife was in surgery for cancer, I called one of my friends, and the moment he heard my request, he immediately began to pray. After he had prayed for me, I thanked him for doing that, but he said, "*Of course I would. You taught me that many years ago.*" (I did? As I said, it had become so second-nature for me; I did it without thinking. I just never realized anyone had picked up on it). But that is when I remembered that this brother was as close to me as anyone had ever been. For us, I was David, and he was Jonathan!

(Oh, that brings another side issue; we have to be careful because people are continually watching us—especially our kids. It is amazing how much my kids have picked up things from me—some good—some not so good).

So let's get back to Jonathan and David. I want you to see how their friendship developed. Chapter 18 of I Samuel says, "Jonathan's heart was knit to the heart of David, and Jonathan loved him as much as himself." One translation renders it; ". . . Jonathan loved him as his own life." It is interesting that I John says we are to love each other the same way.

Some people with evil intent picture a "*Brokeback Mountain*" thing. Nothing could be further from the truth. Proverbs 18:24 says, "*There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*" Proverbs 17:17 says, "*A friend loves at all times, and is born, as is a brother, for adversity.*" These describe a friendship that is stronger than blood.

It takes time to knit something; the process calls for skill, care, and patience, especially when you are dealing with something as delicate as a person's life. So, if we are going to have friendships in which our hearts are knit together with others, we must carefully select people that God gives us who will join their hearts with ours.

There are all kinds of people I would love to have my heart knit together with, but knitting takes time. The point is to look for those people whom because of circumstances you are naturally thrown in with. God says to us by the very example of Jonathan and David, "*Listen, become deep friends with someone, or with two, three, or four.*"

To this day, years after first becoming deeply committed to each other, at a moments notice I could call Lyle, Jeff, Miles, Dave, and a few others, and I know they would be there for me — and they know I would be there for them. We have so deeply committed our lives together that not even time or distance would take that away. In fact, we sometimes call simply for a "*buddy-checks.*" And more recently, I would add Anthony, Kathy, Serina, Jipu and a few others to that list of people I love and rely on — and they on me. We are, in essence, a safety net for each other.

Don't isolate yourself! Become involved, deeply involved with others. Isolation will eat your spiritual life away until there is nothing left of you. In fact, right now, take a few minutes thanking God for the people in your life who have encouraged you; who have shared the intimacies of life with you; who have "*strengthened your hand in God.*"

Like a car, you have a "*fuel tank*," and it is regularly being depleted by hardships, setbacks, and by certain people who drain the life from you. But there are also people who will fill your tank. They will breathe life into you. They remind you of how good God is. They call you to live up to the best you can be. Just being with them or talking to them on the phone, and you find your anxiety going down, and your hope and sense of trust and faith just go up.

Yes, give your appreciation to our Father for bringing this friend to you, but also take the time to thank them! They probably have no idea what a blessing they are to you. To them it is a "*labor of love*," and they probably never considered how it affects you, it simply brings them joy because they are there for you. You are a gift to them, as well.

So how many people it can be? I have no idea. I don't know what your capacity for loving is. Paul knit his heart together with many people. In Colossians when he prayed that Christians would be knit together in love because he had experienced it. Everywhere he went he had a young brother with him. As he wrote to this church and that place, he told how dearly he loved them; how Epaphroditus was willing to lay down his life for him and Timothy encouraged him in the Lord. The Body of Christ today must be knit together in the same way.

Wherever we are, we can be close to some other believers—some with whom we naturally knit our hearts with; some we have so committed ourselves to, they are ours, and we are theirs. Shakespeare's Hamlet spoke of them by encouraging us to "grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel!"

While Jesus was walking in our flesh, he had three very special friends. Then He had the twelve. He poured himself and devoted his time to them. Then he had the seventy who he trained and sent out. Then there were a hundred and twenty. He loved all of them. Yet, he was mainly woven into the fabric of the lives of three who were very special.

Today, of course, Jesus is risen, ascended, and is no longer limited physically or geographically. Now he can say to each of us, "*I will never leave you, nor forsake you. I will be with you always.*" The miracle of the resurrected, omnipresent One is that He is knit to us as the closest friend of all. As bone is knit to the bone, so is the Head perfectly fused to the body.

But the way we learn to express our love for the Head is the way we learn to express our love for somebody who is flesh and blood, with all the nitty-gritty working-out of love that that involves. As someone once wrote:

"To live above with saints we love, O Lord, that will be glory. To live below with saints we know, well, that's another story!"

So many times we want to put the working of our faith and the living out of our Christianity on an ethereal level. The problem is, our lives are lived on a very practical, down to earth, everyday existence. Daily dealing with our jobs, the children, paying bills, mowing lawns, buying groceries, living with our spouse, etc., etc., etc. Our lives are very practical.

Get your eyes off the worldwide missionary crusades and national Healing Campaigns and start living as good workers in your jobs, raising respectful, obedient children, as loving husbands or wives. Live out your lives in the respect and quiet obedience to our God.

Jonathan and David's friendship wasn't some ethereal, pink cloud of emotion. It began with a verbal agreement:

"Jonathan made a covenant -- a pledge of mutual loyalty -- with David because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was

upon him, and gave it to David along with his armor and even his sword and his bow and his girdle” (I Samuel 18:3-4)

Realize what Jonathan is doing here. Jonathan's father, Saul, was King of Israel. By all natural understanding and expectations, Jonathan was the heir to the throne. David was his subject. Nevertheless, Jonathan loved him so much that he took off his special robe and gave it to David. He took off his belt in which he had his wealth, and he gave that to David. In doing all this, he is saying, “*All I have is yours, David. Everything I have.*”

Have you ever said that to anybody (other than your spouse), “Everything I have is yours”? It is easy to be a loner, to protect yourself for yourself. There are all kinds of evangelical Lone Rangers out there. Of course, they love Jesus, but they don't love His Church too much. They cling to the adage, “*I love humanity; it's people I can't stand.*” That is incongruous, and it is sin. Real fellowship calls for a gutsy commitment.

Let me show you an exquisite scene concerning this friendship of Jonathan and David. David was forced to hide from Saul because Saul was seeking to kill him. Jonathan and David met alone so Saul would not find him, and Jonathan told David,

“Go in peace. We have promised by the Lord” [Now listen to this], “that we will be friends. We said, 'The Lord will be a witness between you and me.'”

They were bound together in God. The Lord was the cohesive factor. Call it Holy Ghost Glue if you like, but it goes even deeper than that. Their commitment went “between our descendants forever.” They not only bound their lives together, but they bound the lives of their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren and children beyond that. I can't think of anything more profound and binding than that.

Then we see the last time that these two friends will ever meet. They don't know it, but very soon, Jonathan is going to be killed in battle.

“David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph. He was afraid because Saul was coming to kill him. But Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh. He helped David have stronger faith in God” (I Samuel 23:15,16)

One translation says it a little better,

“(Jonathan) . . . strengthened his (David's) hand in God”

Isn't that great? How many times has Lyle strengthened my hand in God? Or I, his? How about you, have you found yourself strengthening the hand of someone close to you? There is such joy in being able to do that for a friend. I have had the joy of making several friends on Facebook—some I treasure deeply. Many times I have sought to strengthen their hand in God—and they have done the same for me.

As I said above, when my wife was in surgery for cancer, I called my Pastor and a couple of friends, asking for them to pray for Patrice, and they said they would, but when I called Lyle, he didn't say he would pray for her . . . he simply said, “Let's pray . . .” My Pastor didn't do that! My other friends didn't do that! But Lyle did!

I have a simple philosophy: When someone asks me to pray, I figure, why wait? Right now is a perfect time to pray . . . I remember recently praying for the daughter of a friend while standing by the shopping carts in a store. Did people look? Probably. But it didn't affect the prayers any.

Now back to Jonathan and David: "*David was afraid.*" That is where a friend must come in. Jonathan finds him and says "*Don't be afraid; don't ever forget that God has anointed you. Take heart.*" He "*strengthened his hand in God.*"

Isn't it great to be able to strengthen a friend's hand in God? I can't think of a higher honor than that. When I was pastoring that was my greatest senses of joy. Galatians 6:1 says that we should restore one another; we are to refresh one another; teach one another; encourage one another. The fifth chapter of Ephesians instructs us to speak to one another in Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Isaiah 50:4 says: "*The Lord has given me an instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary.*" Or, as the Amplified Bible says: ". . . *That I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary.*" I wish we could all learn to have such an instructed tongue.

Proverbs 15:28 says the mind of the righteous studies how to answer. Proverbs 15:23 says: "*A man has joy in making an apt answer and a word spoken in the right moment—how good it is!*"

Just a side note, this idea of strengthening your friend's hand in God (or even correcting those in error), is a beautiful and delicate art. Although, it is one we have to learn if we are to be Christ's ambassadors. We need to learn to minister the true comfort of the Lord. And yes, sometimes they need to learn to believe their way through their times of trials. But you won't learn that by listening to your own reasoning.

If you are ever called to give counsel or comfort to a friend, don't waste your time consulting with flesh and blood, or going to the psychology books and recent programs from Oprah Winfrey. No, no! Draw your help from the counsel and immense wisdom of the Lord!

Well, since I started this, I better give you some guidelines about this stuff. The first rule of counsel is not to give it unless asked for it! Often we "*know*" just what to say, but the one suffering may not want to hear it. Even when we mean to give counsel out of love, they won't receive it. However, I bet if we were honest, our attitudes are often ones of spiritual superiority, thinking, "*I'm going to straighten him out!*"

Second, don't add to their guilt! You are there to bring wisdom and healing. You are there to speak a word in season to him who is weary. Proverbs 12:18 explains that "*there are those who speak rashly like the piercing of a sword, but [now hear this] the tongue of the wise brings healing.*" Proverbs 12:25 also states that anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down [oh, don't you know that!], "*But [I love that word! But!] an encouraging word makes it glad.*" I could go on and on, but I think the point is well made. Ask yourself why you are sharing counsel with someone. Is it for "*your*" benefit or *theirs*?

Okay, we better get back to our story: Do you remember where we were? David was afraid of Saul's threats, and Jonathan came to comfort him. Jonathan told David, "*Don't be afraid. My father won't touch you. You will become King of Israel, and I will be next to you. Even my father Saul knows this*"

What an amazing thing for Jonathan to say! Jonathan, who was physically next in line to the throne, was saying, "*My greatest joy is that you will be the King, and if I can just stand next to you, that will be enough.*"

Do you know how to support your friend in God? Wives, do you ever strengthen your husband's hand in God and encourage him to do whatever the Lord has set in his heart to do? Husbands, do you ever strengthen your wife's hand in God? What about those of you people of

God whose hearts are bound together, do you strengthen each other with the Word of God and with encouragement? “*You know Timothy's worth,*” wrote Paul, “*how as a son with a father, he has served me in the gospel.*”

I was sharing with one brother, as we began to see the Lord shaping our lives into this type of relationship and making a covenant between us. He said, “*I don't know if I can commit myself to you. I feel so weak, so small. I don't have anything to offer you.*” I simply said, “*Alright, this is the time for me to pour my life into you. There may come a time later when you can strengthen me.*” And those times have come over and over, as I had to adjust to raising twins plus two, a new job, leaving the ministry and working in a secular field, etc., etc., etc.

There is another brother, who after twenty-seven or eight years still brings great joy to my heart when we simply see each other for breakfast or at church. Over twenty years ago I left a position of leadership — a position that fed my ego well, because people would call me (sometimes late at night) for prayer; I was invited to speak at other churches . . . I was frankly somebody “*important.*” But then I moved across the state and became a “*nobody.*” No one asked me to pray for them, no one invited me to teach, no one knew, or for that matter, cared who I was or what my background was.

It was an extremely difficult for me to adjust to that. And my buddy John simply listened and shared when it was appropriate. He once asked, “*So how does it feel to be just another 'cog in the wheel?'*” Shoot, not too good, thank you John . . . but he was there for support and correction when I needed it most. I have no doubt at all that our Father brought us together at the most important time! In fact, to this day, whenever I see John my heart is open, and my countenance brightens.

But Jonathan said to David, “*I am strong now, but soon you will be. You will be King, and I shall just stand by your side.*” Gladly Jonathan hands over all the glory of position to David. What a wonderful demonstration of selflessness! “*I shall be next to you.*”

It is interesting that in the book of Acts, we find Barnabas taking Paul along with him. Everyone referred to them as “*Barnabas and Paul.*” Later it becomes “*Paul and Barnabas*” and even “*Paul and company.*” Barnabas seemed to step aside joyfully. *That is the Spirit of Jesus.*

After Jonathan had died, I wonder if David ever thought, “*Oh, Jonathan, man I loved, I feel you next to me. In a far different way than we thought, you will always be next to me.*” Hebrews 12 mentions the “*great cloud of witnesses around us.*” The Testimony of all those saints through the years continually surrounds us and encourages us to “*Stand firm! Believe God!*” (Thank you, Lord.)

I want my memory to linger with somebody. I want to stand by somebody when I am gone. One of my life purposes, if you will accept my using that term, is to leave a mark on others through my life, and my talents, which I hope will point them to God.

To leave a mark on others! Hmm, Interesting thought. A Hollywood party-goer I read about doesn't expect to. She said, “*The whole idea of life is living with enjoyment, as much enjoyment as you can from a very imperfect world. If you fail to look at your life that way, you can go right through it with absolutely a zero at the end—I mean, when you disappear, so what? You haven't left a footprint, a mark, or anything at all.*”

How hopeless! She is all dressed up for life, and nowhere to go! Contrast that with fitting your life into God's plan for you. Then only He knows how deep, how wide your mark will be on eternity!

One day a guy came up to Jesus, scuffed his toe in the dirt, and couldn't think of a great conversation-opener, so he said, “*Sir, where are you staying around here?*” Jesus spent hours with him and revealed to him the fact that he was the long-awaited Messiah (John 1:35-41).

That guy turned out to be Andrew, who went and got his brother Simon and introduced him to Jesus, and as Paul Harvey would say, “*And now you know the r-e-e-st of the story.*”

These two brothers ended up seeing thousands converted in one day, writing letters that became part of God's sacred word, and becoming two of the foundation stones of the eternal Church (Ephesians 2:20). Not to mention having their names written on the final Heavenly City of God (Revelations 21:14).

How is that for making a mark, when all he did was approach Jesus and asked an ordinary question? When you hook up with Jesus, you have gotten to where the action is, and only God Himself will determine what the eternal effects will be.

Anne Ortlund tells of a time when she lived for several months in a country that punishes its citizens with death if they deny the faith of their fathers and become Christians. One night they were taken secretly to have a private dinner with a young man of that land who loves Jesus with all his heart. She wrote:

“How handsome he was, and what an attractive personality he had! He sat on the floor across from us and said, 'I can never have a girl friend. I don't even think about a wife. I know before too long they'll get me.

“'But, oh,' he said, and leaned across so earnestly, 'my burning desire is to replace myself with several other Christians before I go.’”

That Hollywood party-goer didn't know what life was all about, but that young man did! I Corinthians 15:58 says, “Be steadfast . . . knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” Years ago I read a comment which I have kept all this time:

“A solid bar, five inches thick, actually bent under the pressure of my hand! I couldn't believe it, but a remarkable precision instrument convinced me!

“This set me thinking. Am I . . . exerting 'pressure' on the scene around me—a pressure measurable not by ordinary means, but real? My very little strength may seem not worth trying to exert. But not all that happens is visible to human eyes.”

I have a section in my notebook called *Disciples*. Several years ago I wrote at the top of the first page, “*Father, please, one hundred disciples in my lifetime?*” Then I jotted down several scriptures while I was praying over this aspect of my life. One is John 17:19:

“For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth” (John 17:19)

I have dedicated myself to this; I have set myself apart from lesser pursuits and denied myself other desires.

I have also copied II Corinthians 12:15:

“I will mostly gladly spend and be utterly spent for your souls.”

I want that to be my only attitude. It was obviously Paul's attitude and doubtless of thousands of other Christians through the centuries!

Even after death, the friendship of Jonathan and David continued, unbroken. The last chapter of I Samuel tells us about it:

“Now the Philistines fought Israel; and the men of Israel fled the Philistines, and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. “And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan. . .” (I Samuel 13:1-2)

When a man came from Saul's camp and David heard the news of their deaths, it says,

“David took hold of his clothes, tore them in two, and so did the men who were with him; and they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the Lord, and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by sword” (II Samuel 1:11, 12)

Then verse 17 goes on to say:

“David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan . . .”

“*Saul and Jonathan!*” Now that shows you the strength of spirit that David possessed, to speak so kindly of Saul who haunted him and threatened him most of his adult life! His word was, “*Touch not the Lord's anointed.*” David was a man who just would not speak evil of men. Look at the magnanimous spirit of David:

“. . . Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life, they were loved and gracious and in death, they were not divided . . . How are the mighty fallen in the midst of battle!

“Jonathan lies slain upon thy high places; I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan; you were very dear to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. “How are the mighty fallen!”

Friend, do you have a loving circle of friends where you can declare: “*When they live, you live; and when they die, in a sense, you die?*” Do you have friends who will love you and your children, and your children's children? If you don't have anyone like that, step out by faith. Live a little dangerously, and give your heart away. Find someone who will be a godly friend to you, who will strengthen your hand in God.

If the only thing you can talk about is where you went to dinner last, or what your golf score is, you are missing something. Those things are okay once in awhile, but you have to get deeper than that. You, God and that person have to link your arms together and say, “*We are going to go together. We love each other, and we are going to pray each other through and lift each other up.*”

Wow! So how true was David to his pledge of commitment?

Well he had made it to the top. The Philistines defeated Saul in battle and both Saul and Jonathan were killed. After the smoke of conflict had passed, he was no longer the king. Now

David had arrived. He had it made. Outwardly, he needed no one. All right, David, how about your pledge to Jonathan regarding his children? How good is your word?

This reminds me of a movie called *The Song of Norway*. It was a story of a man named Edvard Grieg, and his struggle to succeed as a composer. His friend had poured his life into him, sacrificing everything to help him. Then, the friend was dying, and he sent word to Edvard, “*Come see me.*” But Edvard was a big shot now, and there were concerts, receptions — and he never made it. So sad.

So what about David? Now that he is the big shot, what is he going to do? He had blown it many times in the past. He had many failures and setbacks.

“David began wondering if anyone in Saul’s family was still alive, for he had he had promised Jonathan that he would show kindness to them” (II Samuel 9:1)

David looked for anyone who could tell him about Saul's family. David found a guy named, Ziba, who remembered that Jonathan had a son, “*Yes, one of Jonathan's sons is still alive, but he is a cripple*”

Wow! Now I have to take one of my famous sidetracks. The first time I read this story, I was shocked that Ziba never offered a name, just the poor guy's pain. He was labeled by his misfortune.

So let me get personal. Have you ever been “*dropped*”? Oh, not dropped on the floor, but maybe dropped from the list. Dropped by a girl (or guy). Dropped by a team. Dropped by your closest friend. Dropped by your former spouse. Whatever it was, you now walk with a limp.

Max Lucado wrote:

People don't remember your name, but they do remember your pain. “Oh, he's the drunk”; “Oh, she's the widow”; “Oh yeah, she was the slut from High School”; “Yeah, he is a High School drop-out. Must have been drugs or something”; “Oh, he is an orphan. His parents died in that car accident, and he was raised by his Aunt and Uncle”; “You mean the divorced woman?”; “She's the single mom who always pays her bills late.” I think you get my point: you live labeled.

Jesus can heal us from all our labels from the past . . .

Even this son of Jonathan had a name. It was “*Mephibosheth.*” Sure, I might prefer the label instead of a name like that, too, but in an earlier chapter we find out what had happened. When word got out about the death of Saul and Jonathan, a nurse to Jonathan's house grabbed his five-year-old boy and fled. But in her haste, she tripped and dropped him, crippling him in both feet.

I should quickly explain that Mephibosheth's nurse was probably trying to save his life. It was customary that the new King go through and kill the remnants of the old King's family. It seems they felt it eliminated any hard feelings and risks of a counter-attack. (I can imagine it also made for regrets on being born into the family of royalty).

But something Cinderella-like happens. The king's men knock on his door. They loaded him into a wagon and carried him to the presence of the king. He probably assumed the worst and started praying for a non-snoring prison cellmate. But the servants didn't drop him off at the prison steps; they took him right to the king, himself.

“When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan (who was the son of Saul), came before David, he bowed deeply, abasing himself, honoring David.”

David spoke his name: *“Mephibosheth.”*

“Yes sir?”

“Don't be frightened,” said David. *“I would like to do something special for you in memory of your father Jonathan. To begin with, I am returning to you all the properties of your grandfather Saul. Furthermore, from now on you will take all your meals at my table”* (II Samuel 9:6-7)

Alright David! Bravo!

And Mephibosheth ate at David's table, just like one of the royal family

I love how Charles Swindoll described this scene:

Gold and bronze fixtures gleam from the walls. Lofty, wooden ceilings crown each spacious room . . . David and his children and handsome, is there, as is David's beautiful daughter Tamar. The call to dinner is given, and the king scans the room to see if all are present. One figure, though, is absent.

Clump, scraaape, clump, scraaape. The sound coming down the hall echoes into the chamber. Clump, scraaape, clump, scraaape. Finally, the person appears at the door and slowly shuffles to his seat. It is the lame Mephibosheth seated in grace at David's table. And the tablecloth covers his feet.

Now the feast can begin.

What's funny is how Mephibosheth first responded to the offer: *“Shuffling and stammering, not looking him in the eye,”* Mephibosheth said, *“Who am I that you pay attention to a stray dog like me?”* Isn't that how we first reacted when Yahweh called us to Himself?

From being *“a stray dog”* to living in the palace, from obscurity to royalty, from no future to the king's table. Quite a move for Mephibosheth, don't you think? It should also serve as a reminder to us, because he models our journey. God lifted us from the muck and mire and sat us at His table. We were the *“stray dogs”* that Yahweh took in. Now, *“We are seated with him in the heavenly realms.”* (Ephesians 2:6)

At one time Chile and Argentina were about to go to war. But instead they entered into a pact, a covenant of peace. To commemorate that covenant, they erected a huge statue called The Christ of the Andes. At the bottom of that statue are these words inscribed:

“Sooner shall these mountains crumble to dust, then Chile and Argentina shall break the peace they have sworn at the feet of the Redeemer.”

That's great! That is what we need to do within the Church. Jesus was willing to expose his heart to us, we need to expose our hearts with our brothers and sisters and make our own pact at the feet of the Redeemer.

Watching Our Stars Mature

Through all of these chapters, I have been taking you step-by-step making my point as clear as possible. I showed you what the church was, how the Church was created, all the way through to how we are to live *within* the Church. Now I want to turn to the writings of Lewis Bayly and a book written many years ago, in fact, back in 1611. The book is entitled: "*Practice of Piety: Directing a Christian How to Walk, that He May Please God.*" Yes, it is a long title, but an excellent read for those interested.

Now you might be trying to figure out what that book has to do with Dust and Stars? Well, nothing actually, but in the introduction there is an excellent quote from Bishop Blomfield. Give it look:

“The Church! Am I asked again, What is the Church? The ploughman at his daily toil — the workman who plies the shuttle — the merchant in his counting-house — the scholar in his study — the lawyer in the courts of justice — the senator in the hall of legislature — the monarch on his throne — these, as well as the clergymen in the works of the material building which is consecrated to the honour of God — these constitute the Church.

“The Church is ‘the whole congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered.’ The Church is so constituted under its Divine Head, that not one of its members can suffer but the whole body feels — nay, the great Head himself feels in the remotest and meanest member of his body: not the meanest member of the body can make an exertion in faith and love, but the blessed effects of it are felt, to the benefit of the whole, ‘which groweth by that which every joint supplieth, to the increase of itself in love.’” — Bishop Blomfield

Yes, that was written in an archaic old-English style, but it perfectly describes what the Church is, and what the Lord intends for it to be. You see, in my eyes it is impossible to be faithful to our faith outside the context of a Church. We need to become incorporated into the Body of Christ. We were never intended to be alone, floating away any more than an arm is to be disconnected from our body. We are only “*Christian*” in as much as we are connected to the body of disciples, following Christ.

I bet most of us are pretty nice people. However, if you are not accountable to someone, another person (or people) who are also seeking to honor their Lord, it is easy to license yourself pretty far. And frankly, I don't do very well on my own.

And in our study we have covered a lot of ground. We have seen the creation of the Church; the growth the Church; how Jesus views the Church; and how we are to relate to the Church — and how we can develop intimate and close friendships within the Church.

Now, I want to discuss the “*Structure of the Church.*” But before I do that, I need to ask you some things. With everything we have covered, have you made an effort to get involved in your church? Have you realized your need for involvement? Have you sought out deep and meaningful relationships — relationships that will draw you closer to the Lord? If not, why?

I do want your feedback on this, because I feel these issues are very important, in fact, critical to your faith. Do remember that song, “*People*”?

People
People who need people
Are the luckiest people in the world,
We're children, needing other children
And yet letting our grown-up pride
Hide all the need inside,
Acting more like children
Than children.

The song came from Barbara Streisand's hit, "*Funny Girl*," and it accurately expresses a need in the psyche of mankind — a need that The Church is intended to fill! But you have to make the first move. I have covered this aspect of our Christian life throughout this entire study, and I don't want you to miss it! My friend quit being a "*loner*," and start mingling; interacting; and relating to your brothers and sisters on your faith.

Now, I began to address this above, but when I looked into the role that leadership plays in all of this relating stuff, I looked at Ephesians 4:11-13:

"His 'gifts to men' were varied. Some he made his Apostles [or 'special messengers' which a greatly misunderstood ministry], some prophets, some preachers of the Gospel; to some he gave the power to guide and teach his people [some mistakenly combine the role of Pastors and Teachers]

Okay, that's all nice and dandy, but why? Why were the "*gifts*" given?

His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up until the time comes when, in the unity of the common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity — that measure of development which is meant by the "*fullness of Christ*"

Now there are many things we can see here. For instance, those "*gifts*," are "*given*." They can also be taken away (and I can personally testify to that). Once you begin to see yourself "*as the gift*," He may remove that "*gifting*," until you are mature enough to handle it.

But also, those verses make it appear as though we should take a fresh look at how we function as a Church. You see, we picture the guy up front every Sunday as our pastor, and he *may* be, but in most churches he is simply a guy who teaches us about the Bible and hopefully how to apply the Bible to our lives. But that is not a true *Pastor*. It certainly fulfills a need in the Church, and teaching the Word is certainly a form of discipling, but not at a very intimate level. The pastor's real job is to equip the other believers in order for "*them*" to mature in the faith.

Although, that is not how most churches function. The guy up front is simply entertaining the people, not *perfecting* them. That is the idea of the many activities of the church, to entertain, to maintain, to keep people involved. They are always on the look out for new ideas so they can maintain the people. They figure that if they can keep them in the grace of God until they die, they have succeeded.

However, that is *not* the ministry of a Pastor. No wonder the letter to the Hebrew church admonishes, "*By now you should be teachers. Instead, you still need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word. You need milk, not solid food*" (Hebrews. 5:12).

He must have been expecting something much better. He was expecting the laymen to eventually become the teachers. Instead, they remained pew sitters.

Ephesians 4 doesn't say that the apostles, and prophets and pastors are to *do* the work of service. It says they are to *equip the saints* to do that. An architect doesn't build buildings; he plans how others should do it. If the architect also had to lay the bricks and put the building together, he probably wouldn't get too many built, would he? As it is, he can "*build*" several at the same time!

We need to have leaders in the church today who can train other believers for the work of the ministry. We need leaders who can draw up God's blueprints and equip the believers to put the building together.

In addition, architects train other architects. Or, to go back to the language of the Bible, ministers bring forth ministers. Sheep bring forth lambs. Why shouldn't the sheep provide the milk for their lambs? This is the natural way. It is the key to multiplication.

The overall goal, according to Paul, is to "*arrive at real maturity — that measure of development which is meant by the 'fullness of Christ.'*" Our Father wants everyone to grow up as tall as Jesus. So Pastors must begin to reach for maturity themselves, first; then they will be ready to bring about the same growth in their sheep.

Paul goes on in verses 14-15,

“We are not meant to remain as children at the mercy of every chance wind of teaching [which we can see happening throughout the Church] and the jockeying of men who are expert in the craft presentation of lies. But we are meant to hold firmly to the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into Christ, the head.”

The progression is like school. When we get to first grade, we can teach others all about kindergarten. A year later, we could be teaching others about first grade, and the first graders are teaching others about kindergarten. We are no longer teaching the ABC's of the gospel — but that doesn't mean they have been forgotten. They are still being taught, but by others at lower levels. The growth continues.

When my children were younger, I noticed that the two boys would constantly pass along to their little sister things that they had learned. (Both good and bad). So explain what happens when a Pastor takes a vacation or is maybe invited to teach at another church? Well, they have to call another church or their Bishop or another form of leadership to find someone to replace him.

The fact is, every church should have a truck-load of people who are able to teach and to replace the Pastor. Jesus went to heaven satisfied because He was leaving behind twelve replicas (imperfect as they may have been) of Himself. The twelve members of His congregation didn't have to write to any bishop and say, "*Please send us another pastor because ours was just taken up in a cloud to heaven.*" After the Holy Spirit had come, they began to mature; they were ready to step into His shoes. How could Paul have been willing to leave this world if he had never made disciples of Timothy, Philemon, Epaphras, and others?

Whenever someone wants to go into the ministry, why do our modern churches have to send them to a seminary or a Bible School? Why? Because the church is not fulfilling its job, that's why. I was invited to teach in a seminary. Honest. But after reading some of their curriculum, it seemed clear that I would not "*fit in*" with much of what they were teaching. As I see it, if pastors were equipping the saints to do the work of service, as the Bible instructs us to

do, the seminaries would not be needed. God only has one agency on this earth, The Church. That is all He intended.

Sadly, even the church I attend hasn't gotten it, yet. I attend a Vineyard church and within Vineyard there is the *Vineyard Bible Institute* and the *Vineyard Leadership Institute*. Their stated purpose is to train people to start churches. That should be the natural outgrowth of any church — a local fellowship where your Pastor is teaching and training you for the work of the ministry.

Now I should make it clear that I am not against seminaries, Bible Schools, and the other para-church organizations. When you see someone struggling with a handicap, you don't kick their crutches out from under them, do you? Well, the Church is weak, and it needs crutches. In fact, praise the Lord for the crutches! But we shouldn't spend our time building crutch factories; instead we should be healing the Church.

I know some of you feeling like I am bashing Seminaries and Bible Schools too much, and I apologize if it seems that way. I just want to see our churches “*come to maturity*” in the faith, because when they do, we won't need all of those para-church institutions.

People often ask me about *my* training. Wondering which Seminary or Bible School I had attended and after a polite chuckle, I explain that I attended the same school as the Apostle Paul: the school of the Holy Ghost.

Well, that is my usual response (which will often irritate people), but like I just said, I have nothing against Seminaries or Bible Training Centers, they indeed fill a need in the Church; it is just not the direction the Lord has led me. I also do not believe the Lord has intended it for His Church. Although, we have to be careful not to take away the crutches from weak people. There is no reason to oppose the seminaries, the youth organizations, and the others; they are helping to hold us up. But when the Church finds healing, the crutches will drop away.

But be that as it may, take a look at Hebrews (and, like you, I have read this so many times I can't remember), but I was reading this recently and something jumped out at me. It is from the eighth chapter of Hebrews (this one from *The Message*):

"But Jesus' priestly work far surpasses what these other priests do, since he is working from a far better plan. If the first plan—the old covenant—had worked out, a second would not have been needed. But we know the first was found wanting, because God said, Heads up! The days are coming when I will set up a new plan for dealing with Israel and Judah. I will throw out the old plan I set up with their ancestors when I led them by the hand out of Egypt. They didn't keep their part of the bargain, so I looked away and let it go. This new plan I'm making with Israel isn't going to be written on paper, isn't going to be chiseled in stone; This time I'm writing out the plan in them, carving it on the lining of their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

[Now here's the part that hit me . . .]

“They won't go to school to learn about me, or buy a book called 'God in Five Easy Lessons.' They will all get to know me firsthand, the little and the big, the small and the great. They will get to know me by being kindly forgiven, with the slate of their sins forever wiped clean”

Isn't that cool? That same Holy Spirit is in *YOU!* One of His roles in your life is as a teacher — and His responsibility is to lead you into all the truth. Yippee! Start letting him teach you . . . then as Paul wrote in another letter, “*You can teach others about God's care and love for them!*”!

The Church will be able to heal itself once its leadership takes hold of this message. Paul explains a progression in I Corinthians 12:28:

“God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.”

It is easy to ignore the “*first . . . second . . . third . . . then . . . then*” until we begin thinking about growth. In fact, most people consider their ministry to be quite mature if it includes healing, administration, and tongues. But those are actually on the lowest rung of the ladder.

Think of it as a pyramid. The apostle was a man who also prophesied, taught, worked miracles and healings, helped, administrated, and spoke in tongues. Now maybe you can see why the family of God doesn't always run very smoothly. In most families, the first child is two or three years old when the second child comes along (unless you have the first two at the same time, like we did). When the third child comes, the second is a toddler and the first is almost ready for school. (Sure, sure, I am being general here, okay?) My point is that in the church, when the second child comes along, the first child is still a baby. The more children born into the church, the more diapers we have to change all at once.

However, if everyone is growing, shepherds and sheep alike, there is harmony. Look at Paul. He wasn't an apostle from the beginning. He was just a disciple who witnessed in the churches. He apparently first spoke in tongues when Ananias laid his hands on him (Acts 9). He kept growing. By Acts 11 and 12, he was a helper to Barnabas. Then came healing and miracles, and in Acts 13:1 he is listed among the prophets and teachers in Antioch — Then he was sent out as an apostle.

Every Christian's ministry should develop along this channel. But do you know what happens in the modern church? The Pastor stops somewhere along the way; they know how to speak in tongues, to administrate, to help, to have some healings, or even to teach — but then they stop moving. They become corks. The sheep grow and grow and start jamming up behind him, unable to grow further until he grows some more. They keep listening to his sermons, soon they know everything he knows, the people fill their notebooks and their heads, and the ones with fat notebooks and full heads are the spiritual winners. (No, I did not say what you thought I said!). They have nothing but a pressure chamber.

The pastor isn't a cork intentionally; he is a victim of the structure like everyone else. It has always been done that way. All of this is avoided, of course, if the pastor keeps on growing to apostleship and the sheep keep growing right behind him.

If a pastor is truly a father to his congregation, he can't be changed every two or three years. What family changes fathers every two years? Okay sure, maybe some of you wish you could have changed your father every two years, but that is not the way the Church is to function. Maybe our churches are more like clubs that elect presidents for a certain term and then elect someone else. But if we are a family, we stay together. The father keeps turning over responsibilities to his sons as they grow.

Eventually, the minister is ready to be sent out as an apostle, which is what happened to Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13. They had become master builders of the church; they had been through all the stages. Now they were ready to plant new churches.

In the modern upside-down church, who is sent out to plant new churches? The young men fresh out of seminary! They don't know what they are doing. They are supposed to be planting growing orchards, but they end up being more like fruit stands on the corner. It has to be supplied continually from the outside. It couldn't produce any life of its own. Every time they have to go somewhere, they have to call another pastor and say, "Please come and preach in my fruit stand because I am going on vacation."

Paul and Barnabas were equipped to plant growing, living orchards. They stayed a few months in each place and then moved on. After a couple of years, Paul said, "Let's return and visit the brethren in every city we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are" (Acts 15:36). They went back—and the orchards were still there and growing.

After Paul had been in Thessalonica, he wrote back to say,

"Not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you" (I Thessalonians 1:8, 9)

It's obvious, isn't it? Why, back in Antioch the Holy Spirit didn't say, "Set apart that nice young fellow who plays the organ." He said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul" — two of the principal ministers — "for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

Today we are all upside down. The successful pastor is the one who stays in one place every Sunday of the year for the longest number of years. In the primitive church, the successful pastor was the one who could cause his disciples to grow faster and better which would then allow him to move on to a new task. Not because he was kicked out, but because he could now leave that church in the hands of his sons and get out to other regions. He could always come home, as Paul came home to Antioch.

We must all grow up. We must leave our permanent childhood and absorb solid food until we are equipped ourselves and are equipping others to spread the Kingdom of God.