

# THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

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*One of the rarest things in the cosmos is a soliton — a chronically solitary particle which remains unaffected even when it collides with another. God only made a handful of solitons in the entire universe. Humans are not one of them. 1*

*They call this church?*

Growing up as a child, it so happened I was the son of the church accompanist. This, among others things, meant I could not watch the final 10 minutes of *Lassie* late on Sunday afternoons. Somehow in the inscrutable providence of God the beginning of Sunday afternoon choir practice always coincided with the ending of *Lassie*. At the time I resented this. In time, God would help me get over it.

Needless to say, I got plenty of church growing up. Mom dutifully towed me there for every religious event imaginable --- choir practice, special music rehearsals, Christmas pageant preparations, training union, revivals (*twice* a year), youth meetings, business meetings, planning meetings, committee meetings and meeting meetings. I was there for everything. I believe I earned near a small bucket full of those little gold attendance pins and that without even a sweat. Going to church that much, one might think I would have graduated from childhood with a rich abundance of memories about all the time invested there. Strangely enough, I did not. In fact, despite all those years I spent dwelling under a steeple, there are really only three memories which still remain so clear in my recollection about church. 1) the day the evangelist came to town claiming that the second coming would happen using flying saucers (without question, the *best* sermon I heard as a kid) 2) the great times I had playing on the front lawn of the church with my best friend Mark, the pastor's son and 3) the night the church told Pastor Lassiter and his family to leave. This is where most of my memories of church as a kid come skidding to a halt. It was that painful Wednesday evening when the church secretary stood and publicly read a letter to Pastor Lassiter ordering that he move out of the parsonage and find employment elsewhere. I never learned all the details of what precipitated this firing. My mom told me it had something to do with church camp. Pastor Lassiter wanted to go to camp *A* while the deacons wanted to go to Camp *B* and so forth. You can probably imagine what that evening was like. There was little that was pleasant about it. You can probably also imagine what the people were like that evening. There was little pleasant about them either.

The tensions were high, the emotions seething, the words were harsh and I knew---- I knew I was about to lose my best friend. I was crushed. It would be the only time I can ever remember crying in church as a child. To this day, God is still helping me get over this.

Ask many people today what they think of when they think of church and they may well tell you a story similar to the one above. So many times, the church has become little more than a place where painful memories are born. I recall talking once with a person who had essentially given up on church and quit attending all together. I asked him, "Why did you give up on the church?" He said to me, "Pastor Chuck, I know I was wrong in my part of this whole affair. I asked them to forgive me. I tried to find my way back." Then he said this, "But what I learned is, the church is the only place I know of that shoots its wounded. I was the wounded one. They would not let me back in."

### *The Hard Realities of Relationships*

It should go without saying that the church of Jesus Christ will never be a place where people are perfect and problem-free. The church has never been such and it will never be so this side of eternity. A poignant biblical reminder of this is found in Galatians 2 in Paul's strident public rebuke of Peter at Antioch. In this story Paul senses that Peter is two-faced with regards to table fellowship with gentiles. When Peter first arrived in Antioch, he freely ate and had table fellowship with his gentile brethren, making no scruples concerning adherence to Jewish dietary laws. However when a visiting delegation sent by James of Jerusalem arrives in Antioch, Peter stealthily withdraws (the word used here means almost 'slithered' ) from table and stops dining with his gentile brothers. Paul sees in this behavior of Peter more than mere hypocrisy. What is at stake for him is the fortune of the entire gentile mission itself. If Peter's actions go unchallenged, it would effectively mean that the gospel was no longer based upon faith in Christ alone but upon "works of the law" (vv.15-21). So Paul brazenly rebukes Peter publicly, "before them all" (v 14).

People will ask, "Did it really have to come to this?" "Did it *have* to be a public rebuke?" "Was there not a better way, a kinder, gentler way for Paul to have dealt with this?" "Did Paul's actions violate the principle of graduated discipline spelled out by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17?" One further intriguing question is, "What was the ultimate outcome of this confrontation? Did Peter and Paul ever finally reconcile their broken relationship?"

So troubling was this story to the early church fathers that some finally concluded that the Peter of Galatians 2 could not possibly be Peter the apostle. Some thought, "How is it possible for two such great and holy men as

Paul and Peter to hold such strong personal disagreements? How could men as sanctified as Paul and Peter come to words as hard as these? This could not possibly be Peter, the great apostle and pillar of the church!” The problem these fathers were having was they did not appreciate one humbling reality about this thing called ‘church.’ As long as there are people in the church there will always be problems in the church.

### *The Hard Work of Relationships*

However a problem’s inevitability does not mean a problem’s acceptance. In fact, it is the practical reality of people-problems that call us to be vigilant in the labor of nurturing fulfilling relationships. Successful relationships in Christ demand hard work!

Henri Nouwen once commented:

*Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.  
Often we surround ourselves with the people we most want to live with,  
thus forming a club or a clique, not a community. Anyone can form a club;  
it takes grace, shared vision, and hard work to form a community. 3*

Such is the sentiment of this well known yet often misunderstood passage of scripture:

*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence,  
but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;  
for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

(Phil 2:12-13)

What does Paul mean when he says we are to “*work out our salvation?*” Of course one thing he cannot mean is that people can be saved through any kind of works righteousness. Just ask Peter about that. He learned this lesson the hard way! We know salvation is based upon faith in Christ plus nothing. Instead, the solution to this passage is to understand the “work” referred to in 2:12 within the context of Paul’s larger appeal for healthy relationships found in 1:27-2:5.

*“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . . If then  
there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing*

*in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*

*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*

Philippians 1:27; 2:1-5

It is in the context of relationships that we are told to *work out* our salvation. Paul further underscores this intent, closing with the final relational imperatives of verses 14-15.

*Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.*

Gordon Fee writes of this passage:

*{This} text is dealing with how saved people live out their salvation in the context of the believing community. What Paul is referring to therefore is the present ‘outworking’ of their eschatological salvation within the context of believing community at Phillipipi.” 4*

The “work” then to which Paul refers is that hard and difficult task of building, nurturing and maintaining relationships as sisters and brothers in Christ. Work such as this befits our salvation. A problem’s inevitability does not equal our acquiescence to problems. Instead, it calls us to the sweat and toil of forging meaningful, personal relationships in Christ.

The scriptures help us in this work by describing for us what redeemed relationships look like in practice. It draws for us three descriptive pictures of healthy relationships in the church.

### **The Church as the *People of God***

When the church is described as God’s *people*, it emphasizes two things:

*The priority of people and relationships*

*Belonging to a Community of Faith*, has as its most basic foundation one simple biblical principle. The church is *a people*. At first glance this may appear straight forward enough. Yet there is a way in which dead-religionism tends to almost indiscernibly pull us away from such simple realities. Consider for instance the little expression we often use: *'to go to church.'* "It's time to go to church!" we say. Of course this little phrase is innocent enough. Yet in New Testament times, language such as this would have surely left the early disciples scratching their heads in confusion. "How can one *go* to church?" they would have asked. "The church is not a place where one can go. The church is a people." Biblically speaking it is impossible to go to church. The only option we have before us is to *be* the church not to *go* to one. Yet the popular language may unwittingly reveal the true core around which our values orbit. When the church is seen primarily as a place then *places* become primarily important. But when the church is seen primarily as a people then *people* become primarily important.

The woman at the well, like most people of her day, was a person who was very much into places. She said to Jesus:

*"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim  
that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem"*

(John 4:20)

But Jesus would have none of that. Tall holy mountains and sparkling religious cities were not core values of God. So Jesus responds to her by speaking not of sacred kinds of places. Instead he speaks of sacred kinds of people:

*Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship  
the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks"*

(John 4:23)

The gospel is not about a God of places. The gospel is about a God of people. And so in the church, people are always priority.

This is why churches must never allow *things* to take precedence over people. Church programs, building campaigns and ecclesiastical extravaganzas are not the centers around which a church builds its existence. Too often, churches rely upon such things in order to sustain themselves. Of course the only things usually sustained in circumstances such as these are the programs, the campaigns and the events. However, when setting budget priorities of the church, we should always first ask questions such as, "What can we do this year that will build

up our people and enhance their relationships? What is it we must accomplish this year that will bring our people into a more intimate relationship with God and with each other? In what ways are the busyness and worthless demands of our church programs and structures working against the building of people-to-people relationships in Jesus Christ. As one writer put it:

*The church is never a place but always a people;  
never a fold but always a flock;  
never a sacred building but always a believing assembly.  
The church is you who pray not where you pray.  
A structure of brick and marble can no more be a church  
than you clothes of serge and satin can be you.  
There is in this world nothing sacred but man,  
no sanctuary of man but the soul. 4*

The church as the People of God means first of all that in the church, people are always priority.

## 2) *The witness of our relationships.*

The second thing the bible emphasizes when it speaks of the church as the people of God is the *witness* of our relationships. How we love each other has a profound impact on how the world sees and responds to God

From the beginning, God desired to take for himself a people set apart and distinguishable from all the other peoples of the world (Ex 3:7). He would call them by his name (Ex 3:15) and identify them by the special mark of circumcision. God would give to this people his Law (Ex 24). The purpose of the law was not for it to be some sort of kill-joy rule book keeping them under God's thumb. Instead, the Law was given so that in walking in his statutes they would know something of who he was (Ps 103:7). Thus, they were his own people (i.e., see Gen 49:29; Ex 3:7,10; Lev 26:12) destined and called by him to live and walk in his ways. What was seen in their lives and relationships reflected in a very visible and practical way who their God was (Ex 9:16). In this way then they were said to *bear* God's name (Jer 14:9).

The writers of the New Testament see the church as the true successor of Israel (Gal 6:16). The church is now God's people (Rom 9:25; Tit 2:14; 1 Pet 2:9,10). His law is no longer written upon tablets of stone but upon our hearts (Rom 2:29). We no longer live by ". . . *the old way of the written code*" (Rom 7:6). No longer is

circumcision the distinguishing sign of identity (Rom 2:27). Instead, we are now branded his own by the cross of Christ (Col 2:14). We have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit who is working out God's purposes in us (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; 4:30). We, just as Israel of old ". . . . *bear His name*" by the way in which we live out our lives and love one another (Acts 15:17; I Pet 4:16). What is seen in us reflects in very visible and practical ways the nature and character of the God we serve. Thus in the very act of loving one another we witness for Christ

Lost people today care very little about evangelistic verbiage. Hurting people are not impressed with mere words. Thomas Merton said:

*"People don't want to hear any more words. In our mechanical age, all words have become alike. To say 'God is Love' is like saying, 'Eat Wheaties.'" 5*

The world has had its fill of our religious Wheaties. What people are searching for is something that can nourish their lives, something real and wholesome. When we love one another and be who we are, *the people of God*, the world will then sit up, take notice and begin to get a glimpse of God.

Even though she had visited Grace Community only a few times, we all knew this about Tina--- Tina had some very real doubts about God. She never tried to cover this up. True seekers never do that. Relationally open and honest, Tina came among us and easily slipped into our hearts. And she lived among us as a somewhat curious observer searching for something.

Tina was single and on her own. She was a lifelong recovering alcoholic being raised in an alcoholic's home. Life had been difficult for her. It was hard enough for her to simply trust people. It was even harder for her to trust God. She thought:

*"I've been rejected all my life. I must not be worth much to anyone. How is it that a God would ever be interested in me?"*

*"People have let me down all my life. People let me down every day. Why would I ever want to depend upon God? "*

*“How can I confide my struggles and my fears to a God I cannot see when I cannot even confide in people plainly visible and closest to me?”*

*“How can I believe in a God who is supposed to be love when all I have ever seen are people who exhibit nothing but hate?”*

Thoughts such as these plagued her mind.

During the altar time one Sunday morning, Tina caught my eye from where she was seated. I could tell something was churning in her heart. She stood to her feet and quietly made her way to me at the platform. Clasp ing her hands in mine she whispered to me, “Chuck, I feel I’ve got to tell you something right now. I hope you won’t be too upset with me.”

“Sure Tina,” I said. “It’s OK. Tell me what’s on your heart.”

“I think I may like it here at Grace Community,” she continued. “You guys seem genuine. You appear to love and care for each other. I feel I may be able to be vulnerable here with my fears and hurts. And I love the music. I love all the singing. I *really* like it here with you guys.”

“Well wonderful, Tina. That’s great!” I said. “We know God has brought you here and we’re glad He did.”

“But Pastor Chuck,” she said, “I do have though, just one *very* big problem with Grace.”

“Oh? Let’s talk about it Tina,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Well,” she said “It has to do with this . . .uh *Jesus* thing. I still have a problem with this *Jesus* stuff. You guys are always talking about *Jesus* this and *Jesus* that. I just can’t bring myself to believe in a God. I can’t believe all this matter about Jesus dying for me . . . loving me, knowing me, wanting me. I really would like to believe it all. I really *want* to believe it. But I just can’t.”

I said to her, “Tina, I want you to know how proud I am of you. Jesus doesn’t mind all of these doubts you’re carrying. Because where you’re at right now --- right up here this morning with all your concerns and all your questions --- this is right where God wants you, Tina. You keep searching for him. We’ll keep loving you. And in time, I know what’s going to happen, Tina.”



“What’s that?” she asked.

I smiled.

How exciting it was in the months that followed to watch the ways in which God creatively poured his love into her life through the relational love of believers. Tina became even more deeply involved and connected with the lives of the believing people and families of the church. Her Fridays and Saturdays were occupied with eating out, shopping and just plain having fun with the other singles of the church. At every church service, Tina was there receiving the guidance and encouragement of the church family. One family in particular took Tina under its wing of daily prayer before God. They were there for her whatever the need. At every Bible Study that was available, Tina could be found there energetically prepared with practical questions about the problems she had encountered in her life that week. No one took these questions defensively. No one scolded her for being a pagan nuisance. No one saw her challenges as negatives. Instead we saw her questions as opportunities given by God to love her.

It was at the Annual Women’s Retreat that year where God forever resolved the *Jesus thing* for Tina. It was in that divinely orchestrated setting of retreat, among loving God-sent friends, that Tina finally turned over her doubts and her heart to Jesus Christ. Today, she is a real trophy of God’s love. A faithful and committed leader on the Grace Community Church worship team, she herself now leads her own Weekly Bible Study of a dozen women who are all now, together seeking more of this *Jesus thing*.

One can only guess, how many people there are in the world today whose problem with this *Jesus thing* is really far more a problem with this *church thing*. The problem they are having may have more to do with us than with him. Our witness for God and our relationships one with another are inseparable realities. We cannot say we want to be powerful witnesses for God and yet somehow neglect the concerns of Christian relationships. Investments in evangelism without the complimentary investments in loving, caring relationships yield questionable returns.

### **The Church as *Fellowship***

In the New Testament, the word *fellowship* refers to two things. First, it speaks of that which we share together as believers in Jesus, namely our common participation in the Spirit of God (II Cor 13:14; Phil 2:1,27) and our communion with the Son of God (I Cor 1:9). But it also speaks secondly, to something created among us *as* we share together in this life of the Spirit and of the Son. That something which is created is called *intimacy*. The

essence of biblical fellowship is relational warmth and intimacy among believers, filled with the Spirit and loved by the Son.

Bill Hybels talked about this when he said:

*"I know how you're created. You are created to yearn to be in an inner-circle of friends that you trust and that you love, a group of people that you can know and be known by, love and be loved by, serve and be served by, celebrate and be celebrated."*

*So you're all built with the desire to be in those kinds of relationships where you can take the masks off, you can be real and supportive with each other and walk through life closely and do life together. Jesus taught that, that's the yearning of everyone's heart. 6*

The two summary passages of Acts 2 and 4 paint for us an incredible picture of a church that experienced the intimacy of Christian fellowship.

*All who believed were together and had all things in common;  
{45} they would sell their possessions and goods and  
distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

(Acts 2:44-45)

*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. {33} With great  
power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace  
was upon them all. {34} There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time  
those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales {35} and put  
it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.*

(Acts 4:32-35)

An intimate church is a church where a premium is placed on the sharing of people's deepest feelings and emotions. There is a hunger to know more and to delight in the uniqueness of one another. An intimate church is one that provides a safe place for people to be honest and vulnerable with each other.

It is in the context of fellowship that the work of building relationships happens. This is why the New Testament speaks so often of the importance of *one another*. We are sustained in our journey with God in the fellowship of *one another*. And so we are encouraged to love *one another* (Rom 13:8), honor *one another* (Rom 12:10), be devoted to *one another* (Rom 12:10), live in harmony with *one another* (Rom 12:16), accept *one another* (Rom 15:7), instruct *one another* (Rom 15:14), agree with *one another* (I Cor 1:10), serve *one another* (Gal 5:13), bear with *one another* (Eph 4:2), be kind and compassionate toward *one another* (Eph 4:32), submit to *one another* (Eph 5:21), forgive *one another* (Col 3:13), encourage *one another* (I Thess 5:11), live in harmony with *one another* (I Pet 3:8), be humble toward *one another* (I Pet 5:5), have fellowship with *one another* (I John 1:7). You can't miss it. On nearly every page of the New Testament everything that we are and everything that we do, happens in the context of intimate relationships.

Recently, I was preaching one Sunday at a small, rural congregation. Their aged beloved pastor of many years had recently suffered a stroke and I was called upon to supply the pulpit in his absence. In the several previous Sundays I had been with them, they told me many wonderful stories about their much-loved pastor. Every Sunday he was the first person they brought before God during congregational prayer.

My sermon passage was I Corinthians 13. The topic was the importance of love in the family of God.

*“Love is patient, love is kind. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres,”*

Slowly, I made my way through the sermon. I could see on their faces, both young and old, how captivated they were with this very simple little lesson on love. After finishing the sermon I closed with a brief prayer. The song leader made his way up to the platform to lead us in a closing hymn. But before I could make it to my seat he intercepted me in our crossing. Gently pulling me to himself he held me with a tearful embrace for a brief second or two. He then whispered in my ear, “Reverend Anderson, we really do love each another. It is all about love, isn't it?”

I can't remember what the exact title of the closing hymn was that Sunday morning. I do remember well though the silent topic that was on the hearts of that congregation. As they sang that closing hymn, they were all thinking of their pastor, themselves and the love they had for each other in the midst of one of the greatest trials they had ever faced together. That Sunday morning, we shared an intimacy which only God can give and which only believers can experience. The picture of the church we see in the bible is the picture of the church as a fellowship --- a place where we can experience the warmth of intimate, personal relationships in Jesus Christ.

## The church as the Body of Christ

When scripture describes the church as the *body of Christ*, it is primarily emphasizing the Spirit-endowed giftedness and ministry of the church, whereby we build up one another. So Paul writes:

*When you come together, everyone has a hymn,  
or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.  
All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.*

(1 Cor 14:26)

*Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him  
who is the Head, that is, Christ. {16} 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.*

(Eph 4:15-16)

It should be noted that the point of these passages is the love of people. It is not the love of religious busywork. The contemporary rediscovery of spiritual gifts in the church has been refreshing. However too many so-called *Spiritual Gift Inventories* tend to be little more than psychological profiles which help people merely find their *spot* in the church. When the goal of spiritual gift inventories is “spot discovery,” too often the practical end-result is either death-dealing religious busyness or turf-defending spot wars. “This is *my* spot by golly and no one is going to take it from me,” we so often hear. This is not what Paul had in mind when he speaks of spiritual giftedness. God grants to us the gifts of ministry because God desires for us to plunge into the lives of hurting people. Struggling people such as this need a personal touch from God that happens through you. This is the kind of body ministry Paul is referring to. It is the spiritual giftedness of I Corinthians 12 and 14 ministering the love, patience, kindness, trust and hope of I Corinthians 13. A church that is a body is a church where each member is attentive and committed to the other. It is a church where no need goes unnoticed, where each tear is shared and each individual burden is allotted to the whole.

The great preacher Fred Craddock writes of this when he tells of an occasion early in his ministry:

*Before I married and was serving a little mission in the Appalachians, I moved in my service down to a place on Watts Bar Lake between Chattanooga and Knoxville--- a little village. It was the custom in that church at*

*Easter to have a baptismal service. My church immerses, and this baptismal service was held in Watts Bar Lake on Easter evening at sundown. Out on a sandbar, I, with the candidates for baptism, moved into the water, and then they moved across to the shore, where the little congregation was gathered singing around the fire and cooking supper. They had constructed little booths for changing clothes, with blankets hanging, and as the candidates moved from the water, they went in and changed clothes and went to the fire in the center. And finally, last of all I went over and changed clothes and went to the fire.*

*Once we were all around the fire, this is the ritual of that tradition: Glenn Hickey, always Glenn, introduced the new people, gave their names, where they lived, and their work. Then the rest of us formed a circle around them while they stayed warm at the fire. The ritual was each person in the circle gave her or his name and said this:*

*"My name is Martha, if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing."*

*"My name is John, if you ever need anybody to chop wood."*

*"My name is Emma if you ever need anybody to baby-sit."*

*"My name is Scott if you ever need anybody to repair your house for you."*

*"My name is Beverly if you ever need anybody to sit with the sick."*

*"My name is Bill, if you ever need a car to go to town."*

*And around the circle.*

*Then we ate, and then we had a square dance. And at a time they knew--- I didn't know---- Percy Miller, with thumbs in his bibbed overalls, would stand up and say, "It's time to go." Everybody left, and he lingered behind and with his big shoe kicked sand over the dying fire.*

*At my first experience of that, he saw me standing there still. He looked at me and said, "Craddock, folks don't ever get any closer than this."*

*In that little community, they have a name for that. I've heard it in other communities, too. In that community, their name for that is 'church'. They call that 'church.'* 7

*Conclusion:*

It has been six months now since my family and I arrived at this our new church planting assignment. The move has been a hard one, especially in view of our recent resignation and departure from the church we had loved and ministered at for 15 years. I am not that old in the Lord, merely 25 years a Christian. But the best 15 years of my journey happened while I was a part of Grace Community. I know I was their pastor. Yes, they paid me a salary, occasionally called me “reverend” and I do believe they even gave me once a frozen turkey at Christmas. But I always called them my friends. And what wonderful friends they were. I understand today what it means to belong in a church where people are a priority. I have experienced in simple and practical ways what true intimacy can look like in real life. I have witnessed ministry that happened because people were willing to step out of the pew and get involved in the day-to-day struggles of others. Being part of a church like this is a joy that is comparable to few other things in our walk with God. How tragic the lives who never experience the precious love of Jesus Christ expressed through the secure embrace of those they love so dearly.

As I was driving my two young sons to school this past Monday morning, I noticed they were quieter than usual. After several minutes of hearing nothing but the hum of the heater fan, I reached over to the seat next to me and lightly placed my hand on my 12 year-old son’s leg. He continued to stare quietly out the window. After a moment, he turned to me and said, “Dad, I really miss the ole church. Don’t you?” On hearing this from the back seat, my eight-year-old boy eagerly unhooked his seat belt, scooted forward and joined in the conversation. “Me too dad, I miss it too. It was sooo fun there!” he said. And so we traveled down the road talking and laughing together in these delightful remembrances of the church. Soon we arrived in the parking lot at the school. We said a quick prayer together as we waited in line for the drop off. Then, I let them off and began my drive to the office. And as I drove, I thought to myself, “What wonderful, beautiful memories my children have of church. I’m really a lucky dad!” And I prayed, “Thank you God --- thank you for my kids. Thank you for your faithfulness. And above all, thank you for this thing called ‘church.’”

Questions:

- 1) In what ways can your church become more “relationally” focused in its planning and priorities?
- 2) Share some ways in which the relational health of your church positively affected your church’s evangelistic ministries.
- 3) What are the qualities that make for intimacy in relationships? Recount occasions when you have experienced true intimacy in your church or fellowship. What circumstances brought this about?
- 4) In what ways can *things* take precedence over people in church life? How can this be avoided?
- 5) In what ways is God encouraging you to grow relationally closer with other Christians? What are the things that may cause you to resist this calling?

1. Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1999), p 220
2. Henry Nouwen, quoted in Christianity Today Magazine, May 20, 1996, Vol. 40, No. 6, Page 80
3. John Havlik, *People Centered Evangelism* (Nashville; Broadman Press, 1971), p 47
4. Gordon D Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1995), p 235
5. Thomas Merton, quoted in Christianity Today Magazine, Vol. 41, no. 10.
6. Bill Hybels, *Easter 1998 Sermon on Tape*, 4-12-98, #M9815
7. Fred Craddock, “When the Roll is Called Down Here” *Preaching Today* #50