

# **FAMILY: DIVERSE, DYSFUNCTIONAL, DIVINE**

*"Why the Church Must Rediscover Family to Survive"*

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*Why the Church Must Rediscover Family to Survive*

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## INTRODUCTION: THE LONELIEST PEW

The sanctuary holds four hundred people. This Sunday morning, three hundred and twelve are present. The worship band plays with professional precision. The lighting creates an atmosphere of contemporary reverence. Coffee stations in the lobby offer six different roasts. The pastor's sermon is polished, practical, delivered with just the right mix of humor and gravitas. By every measurable metric, this is a successful church.

And nearly everyone in the room is profoundly alone.

I've spent twenty years as a firefighter and another decade as a chaplain and pastor. I've walked into burning buildings and sat beside hospital beds. I've held the hands of the dying and counseled the marriages of the living. But nothing prepared me for the crushing loneliness I would encounter in the American church—not in empty pews, but in full ones.

Last month, a woman in her mid-fifties approached me after a service. She'd been attending this church for seven years. "Pastor Jeff," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, "if I died tonight, would anyone here notice by next Sunday?" She wasn't being dramatic. She genuinely didn't know.

I wanted to assure her that of course they would notice. That this was family. That she mattered. But as I looked around at people filing out, earbuds already in, eyes on phones, rushing to beat the lunch crowd at their favorite restaurant, I couldn't lie to her.

"I don't know," I said. "But that's exactly what we need to change."

## THE PARADOX WE REFUSE TO NAME

There's a terrible irony at work in the modern church. We gather in larger numbers than ever before. We have more programs, better technology, slicker presentations, and more sophisticated ministry strategies than any generation in Christian history. We've professionalized pastoral care, systematized discipleship, and optimized everything from parking to worship flow.

And we are dying of isolation.

Recent studies show that chronic loneliness in America has reached epidemic levels. But here's what should terrify us: church attendance doesn't correlate with lower loneliness. In fact, some research suggests that people can feel *more* lonely in religious settings than in secular ones, because the gap between what they expect (community, belonging, family) and what they experience (anonymity, performance, isolation) creates a unique kind of grief.

We come expecting family. We find a religious conference that meets weekly.

We come hungry for connection. We get a motivational speech and a worship concert.

We come carrying burdens too heavy to bear alone. We leave with them carefully hidden, having learned that authenticity is uncomfortable and vulnerability is weakness.

This isn't just disappointing. It's deadly.

I've buried too many people whose deaths could be traced, at least in part, to isolation. The elderly man who fell in his apartment and lay there for three days before anyone noticed. The middle-aged woman whose depression spiraled in secret until she couldn't see a way out. The combat veteran whose PTSD went unaddressed because he couldn't admit weakness in a church that celebrated strength.

All of them attended church. All of them slipped through the cracks. All of them died alone in a community that called itself family.

## **WHAT HAPPENED TO US?**

The early church had a word for what we've lost: *oikos*. It's the Greek term for household—not just the building, but the entire extended family unit that lived, worked, ate, celebrated, mourned, and did life together under one roof. When the New Testament writers described the church as the "household of God" (Ephesians 2:19, 1 Timothy 3:15), they weren't being metaphorical. They were describing a lived reality.

These early Christians were "continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42, NASB). Notice that word: *continually*. This wasn't a Sunday gathering. This was a daily, integrated, *oikos*-centered life. They shared meals. They shared resources. They shared their very lives.

"All those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart" (Acts 2:44-46, NASB).

Try to imagine what that looked like. Not a worship service, but shared breakfast. Not a small group that meets every other Thursday, but neighbors who saw each other daily. Not carefully curated Instagram posts about #blessed community, but actual economic interdependence where your need became my responsibility and my surplus became your provision.

This wasn't utopian idealism. This was normal Christianity.

Somewhere along the way, we traded oikos for individualism. We embraced the American dream of self-sufficiency and baptized it as spiritual maturity. We turned "personal relationship with Jesus" into a license for privatized faith. We made salvation individual while ignoring that sanctification is communal. We can quote John 3:16 but have forgotten Acts 2:42.

And now we're reaping the whirlwind.

## **THE TWIN PANDEMICS**

Two diseases are ravaging our world, and both have infected the church.

The first is obvious: the breakdown of the biological family. Divorce rates hover around 50 percent. Single-parent households are the norm in many communities. Children grow up without fathers. The elderly are warehoused in nursing homes, separated from the very families they raised. Geographic mobility scatters siblings across continents. The multi-generational household that was standard throughout human history is now a rarity.

We are a nation of orphans and exiles, even those of us with living parents and intact families. We've lost the *experience* of embedded, multi-generational, covenantal family life.

But the second pandemic is less obvious and more insidious: the church has adopted the culture's individualism and consumerism as its operating system.

We church-shop like we're buying cars, looking for the best features, the right fit, the programs that meet our needs. We approach faith as consumers, not as family members. Our commitment lasts exactly as long as our preferences are satisfied. We'll drive thirty minutes past three churches to get to one that has the right worship style, the right demographic, the right teaching—never asking whether God might have placed us in proximity to those other churches for a reason.

We want the benefits of community without the cost of commitment. We want belonging without accountability. We want to be known without being vulnerable. We want family reunions without family dysfunction.

It doesn't work that way. It never has.

## **THE THESIS OF THIS BOOK**

Here's what I believe with every fiber of my being, forged in the fires of pastoral ministry and informed by my own journey through brokenness:

**The church has adopted culture's individualism while the family God designed lies in ruins. We will not survive—we cannot be the church Christ died for—unless we rediscover what it means to be the household of God.**

Not a building. Not a service. Not a program. Not a demographic. A household. An oikos. A diverse, dysfunctional, being-made-divine family.

This isn't about nostalgia for some imagined golden age. The early church was messy. Read 1 Corinthians sometime and try to convince yourself they had it all figured out. They fought about theology, struggled with sexual immorality, sued each other, created factions, and got drunk at communion. Acts 2 is beautiful, but it's immediately followed by Acts 3-28, which is considerably less tidy.

But here's the difference: they worked through their dysfunction *together*. They didn't church-hop when things got hard. They couldn't—there was only one church per city, and it met in multiple homes. They were stuck with each other, for better or worse, and in that stuckness, the Holy Spirit formed them into something that turned the world upside down.

We need that again. Desperately.

## **WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THESE PAGES**

This book is divided into six parts, each exploring a different facet of what it means to be God's family:

**Part One: The Broken Mirror** examines how family has failed—both biological and ecclesial—and how that failure has created the crisis we're in.

**Part Two: Diverse by Design** returns to Scripture to recover God's original blueprint for family, rooted in the very nature of the Trinity.

**Part Three: Dysfunction as the Path** acknowledges that we bring our brokenness to the table and explores how conflict and difficulty are actually the means of our transformation.

**Part Four: Divine Transformation** unpacks what it means to be adopted into God's family and formed through relationship with other ragamuffins like ourselves.

**Part Five: Practical Ecclesiology** gets specific about what family-centered church actually looks like in structure and practice.

**Part Six: The Future Family** casts vision for where we're headed—the ultimate family reunion at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Throughout, we'll wrestle with hard questions: What does covenant community look like in a consumer culture? How do we create space for the difficult people God places in our

lives? When is it faithful to leave a church, and when is it abandonment? How do we practice the "one another" commands in an age of individualism?

I won't pretend to have all the answers. I'm a ragamuffin pastor writing to other ragamuffins, a broken person trying to point toward the God who redeems our brokenness. I've failed at family—biological and ecclesial—more times than I can count. I carry scars from churches that wounded me and guilt over churches I've wounded. I'm in reconciliation with my own daughters, living with the consequences of my failures as a father.

But I also know this: God specializes in broken families. He always has.

### **A WORD FROM BONHOEFFER**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was martyred for resisting the Nazis, wrote something that haunts me: "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others."

Not for itself. Not for its programs or its building fund or its reputation in the community. For others.

A family that exists only for itself is not a family—it's a club. An exclusive association. A closed system that eventually suffocates in its own self-interest.

But a family that exists for others—that opens its table, shares its resources, welcomes the stranger, embraces the outcast, and pours itself out in service—that family becomes the very body of Christ in the world.

This is what we've lost. This is what we must recover.

Not because I say so. Not because it would be nice. But because the alternative is death.

The church in North America is declining. Young people are leaving in droves. Those who remain are increasingly disconnected. We can blame culture, secularism, moral relativism, or whatever other forces we like. But until we acknowledge that we have become something Christ never intended—a collection of isolated individuals attending a weekly event—we will continue to hemorrhage life.

### **THE INVITATION**

This book is a call home.

Home to the family of God. Home to the messy, beautiful, frustrating, life-giving reality of doing life together. Home to covenant community that looks more like Thanksgiving dinner with your dysfunctional relatives than a slick church service with strangers.

It won't be comfortable. Family never is.

It won't be convenient. Covenant never is.

It won't be perfect. We're all broken people being healed together.

But it will be real. And it will be what we were made for.

God created us diverse—different gifts, different backgrounds, different personalities, different ways of seeing the world. Sin made us dysfunctional—fractured, selfish, wounded, and wounding. But God is transforming us into something divine—His household, His family, the bride of Christ.

Diverse. Dysfunctional. Divine.

That's who we are. That's who we're becoming.

The question is: Are you ready to come home?

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*"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household."*

— Ephesians 2:19 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 1: THE DEATH OF OIKOS

The email arrived at 2:47 AM. I know because I was awake, staring at the ceiling, wrestling with God about a conversation I'd had earlier that day.

"Pastor Jeff," it began, "I need to tell someone, and I can't tell anyone at church. My husband left three months ago. I've been pretending everything is fine. I park around the corner so no one sees that his car isn't in the driveway anymore. I bring the kids to Sunday school and smile and say we're blessed. But I'm dying inside. And I don't know who at church would actually care if they knew the truth."

She'd been attending for six years. Served on two committees. Volunteered in children's ministry. Knew dozens of people by name.

And had no one she could be honest with about her life falling apart.

This is what the death of oikos looks like. Not dramatic or sudden. Quiet. Invisible. A woman sitting alone in the dark, typing her confession to a pastor she barely knows because she has no family—biological or ecclesial—to carry this burden with her.

We've lost something ancient and essential, and most of us don't even know what to call it.

## WHAT WE'VE FORGOTTEN: THE OIKOS

The Greek word *oikos* (οἶκος) appears 114 times in the New Testament. We usually translate it as "house" or "household," but those English words don't capture what the ancients understood.

Oikos wasn't just a building or a nuclear family unit of parents and 2.5 children. It was the entire extended household—multiple generations living under one roof or in close proximity, along with servants, workers, sometimes business partners, and anyone else bound to the family by blood, marriage, obligation, or choice. The oikos was the fundamental economic, social, and religious unit of ancient society.

When a Roman or Greek heard "oikos," they envisioned:

- Three or four generations living together
- Grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren
- Unmarried aunts and uncles
- Servants and their families
- Apprentices learning the family trade

- Sometimes freed slaves who remained attached to the household
- Anyone the family had taken responsibility for

The oikos ate together. Worked together. Worshipped together. Made decisions together. Shared resources. The boundary between "family" and "household" was permeable. If you were part of the oikos, you belonged—fully, completely, with all the rights and responsibilities that entailed.

This is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Ephesians: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household" (Ephesians 2:19, NASB).

He wasn't being poetic. He was describing a lived reality the Ephesian church would immediately recognize. They weren't just individuals who happened to attend the same religious gatherings. They were *family*—bound together in the oikos of God with all the intimacy, obligation, and permanence that implied.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT OIKOS

Look at how the early church actually functioned, and you'll see oikos everywhere:

### **Household Conversions:**

When the Philippian jailer believed, "he was baptized, he and all his household" (Acts 16:33, NASB). When Lydia responded to Paul's message, "she and her household were baptized" (Acts 16:15, NASB). Cornelius gathered "his relatives and close friends" to hear Peter (Acts 10:24, NASB). Faith wasn't individual; it was familial. Conversion meant the entire oikos entered the covenant community together.

### **House Churches:**

The church met in homes—not because they couldn't afford buildings, but because the home was where oikos happened. Paul greets "Prisca and Aquila... and the church that is in their house" (Romans 16:3-5, NASB). He mentions "Nympha and the church that is in her house" (Colossians 4:15, NASB). The church in Philemon's house (Philemon 1:2). These weren't small groups or Bible studies. These were full expressions of church, gathered in the space where daily life happened.

### **Household Codes:**

When Paul and Peter wrote instructions for Christian living, they organized them around oikos relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants (Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1, 1 Peter 2:18-3:7). Why? Because the household was where discipleship happened. Faith was formed at the family table, in the daily rhythms of work and rest, through the friction and intimacy of people doing life together.

### **Economic Sharing:**

"All those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need" (Acts 2:44-45, NASB). This wasn't communism. This was oikos economics—what's mine is ours, because we're family. When Paul took up a collection for the Jerusalem church, he appealed to household generosity: "On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper" (1 Corinthians 16:2, NASB). Individual prosperity existed to serve collective need.

### **Mutual Responsibility:**

Paul instructed Timothy: "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8, NASB). The oikos wasn't optional. Caring for family—biological and ecclesial—was a fundamental expression of Christian faith.

This is what the church was: an extended household, a reconstituted family, an oikos gathered around Jesus as the elder brother who brought many sons and daughters to glory (Hebrews 2:10).

## **WHAT HAPPENED: THE WESTERN REDUCTION**

Somewhere between the first century and the twenty-first, we shrunk the family.

The forces are complex—industrialization, urbanization, capitalism, individualism, mobility. We moved from farms to cities. From extended clans to nuclear families. From multi-generational households to isolated units. From embedded communities to autonomous individuals.

The Western nuclear family—mom, dad, 2.3 kids, a dog, and a white picket fence—is a historical aberration. For most of human history, across most cultures, that model would have been unthinkable. Impossible. Unnatural.

And yet we've made it the standard. The ideal. The "biblical" family.

But it's not biblical. It's barely even functional.

The nuclear family was designed for an industrial economy where men worked outside the home and women managed domestic affairs. It assumed economic stability, geographic rootedness, and supporting institutions (churches, schools, community organizations) to provide what the isolated nuclear unit couldn't.

Most of those assumptions no longer hold.

Now both parents work (if both are present). Economic instability is the norm. Geographic mobility scatters extended family across the country. Supporting institutions have collapsed or become commercialized. The nuclear family, always fragile, is now breaking under pressures it was never designed to bear.

The statistics are staggering:

## **THE STATISTICAL CATASTROPHE**

### **Divorce and Single-Parent Households:**

- Approximately 40-50% of first marriages end in divorce
- 60% of second marriages fail
- 73% of third marriages end in divorce
- Nearly 25% of children live in single-parent households
- In some communities, that number exceeds 50%

### **Geographic Dispersion:**

- The average American lives 18 hours (by car) from their mother
- Adult children live an average of 200+ miles from their parents
- Only 20% of Americans live in the town where they grew up
- Family reunions require airfare and vacation days, not just walking across the yard

### **Loss of Multi-Generational Connection:**

- Less than 20% of American households include three or more generations
- The elderly are increasingly isolated from family systems
- Children grow up without meaningful relationships with grandparents
- The wisdom of age and the energy of youth rarely intersect

### **The Rise of the "Therapeutic Self":**

Sociologist Philip Rieff and others have documented the shift from "communal man" to "psychological man"—a person whose primary concern is not duty to family or community but personal fulfillment and emotional well-being. Psychiatrist and researcher Robert Putnam, in his landmark book *Bowling Alone*, documents the collapse of American community structures. His conclusion is devastating: **"We have become a nation of lonely individuals."**

We bowl, but we bowl alone. We work, eat, shop, and even worship alone. The very fabric of communal life has unraveled.

### **The Church Data:**

- 65% of churchgoers say they don't have a close friend in their congregation
- The average church tenure has dropped from decades to 3-4 years
- Church shopping is normalized; commitment is seen as optional
- Small group attendance remains around 40%, meaning 60% of church members have no formal connection point beyond Sunday services

We've become a nation of isolated individuals who happen to attend the same religious events.

## **THE WOUND THAT SHAPES US**

Here's what we need to understand: broken families don't just make us sad. They fundamentally shape how we relate to God, to others, and to the church.

Attachment theory—the psychological research pioneered by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth—has shown that our earliest relationships create templates for all future relationships. The way we bond (or fail to bond) with primary caregivers creates patterns that persist into adulthood.

### **Secure Attachment:**

Children who experience consistent, responsive, loving care develop secure attachment. They learn that relationships are safe, that needs will be met, that they are worthy of love. As adults, they trust more easily, commit more readily, and navigate conflict without catastrophizing.

### **Anxious Attachment:**

Children who experience inconsistent care—sometimes responsive, sometimes neglectful—develop anxious attachment. They're never sure if love will be there, so they become hypervigilant, performance-oriented, desperate for approval. As adults, they bring this same anxiety into every relationship, including with God and His church.

### **Avoidant Attachment:**

Children who learn that their needs won't be met, that vulnerability leads to pain, develop avoidant attachment. They shut down emotionally, become self-sufficient, refuse to depend on others. As adults, they're the "lone rangers"—fiercely independent, allergic to community, convinced that needing others is weakness.

### **Disorganized Attachment:**

Children who experience abuse or severe trauma develop disorganized attachment—they both crave and fear intimacy simultaneously. As adults, they sabotage relationships, push people away while desperately wanting connection, and are especially vulnerable to spiritual abuse and manipulation.

Now here's the devastating reality: **the church is full of people carrying these attachment wounds, and we're replicating dysfunctional family patterns instead of healing them.**

The anxiously attached person shows up at church desperate for approval, performing for God and others, terrified of rejection, burning out in service to earn love they already have but can't feel.

The avoidantly attached person attends but never connects, keeps everyone at arm's length, refuses to need the body of Christ, and eventually drifts away citing "hypocrisy" or "not being fed."

The disorganized person bounces from church to church, drawn to charismatic leaders but wounded when those leaders inevitably fail, reenacting the trauma cycle over and over.

And the church, rather than becoming the healing community where secure attachment can be formed, often reinforces the wound.

## **FROM BROKEN HOMES TO BROKEN CHURCHES**

I see it every week in my chaplaincy work and pastoral ministry:

### **The Inability to Trust:**

When your father abandoned you, how do you trust a heavenly Father? When authority figures abused their power, how do you submit to church leadership? When promises were broken in your family of origin, how do you believe covenant community is possible?

### **The Inability to Commit:**

When every relationship you've known has been conditional—"I'll love you *if* you perform, *if* you succeed, *if* you make me happy"—how do you understand unconditional covenant love? You church-hop at the first sign of conflict because that's what you've always done in relationships. You keep one foot out the door because you've learned that everyone eventually leaves.

### **The Consumer Mentality:**

When you've never experienced sacrificial, other-centered love, you can't imagine being part of a community that operates that way. So you approach church like you approach

everything else—as a consumer seeking services. "What can this church do for me? Does it meet my needs? Is the worship style right? Are the programs good? Do I feel comfortable?"

Notice the pronouns. I. Me. My. Mine.

That's not family language. That's consumer language.

In a healthy family, the question isn't "What can you do for me?" but "How can we serve each other?" The commitment isn't conditional on satisfaction; it's covenant based on belonging.

But we don't know how to think that way anymore because we've never experienced it—not in our biological families and certainly not in our churches.

## **THE GOD WHO HATES DIVORCE**

"'For I hate divorce,' says the LORD, the God of Israel" (Malachi 2:16, NASB).

This verse is often wielded as a weapon, used to shame divorced people and keep them trapped in abusive or dead marriages. That's a tragic misuse of Scripture.

But the verse reveals something profound about God's heart: He hates divorce because He understands what it does to us. God isn't interested in preserving institutions for their own sake. He cares about the damage that broken covenants inflict on broken people.

Divorce—whether marital or ecclesial—tears the fabric of what God designed. It wounds children. It fragments communities. It teaches us that commitment is conditional, that covenant can be abandoned when it becomes difficult, that family is disposable.

And we carry those lessons into every relationship, including our relationship with the church.

I know this personally. I'm in reconciliation with my daughters, Amy and Beth, because my failures as a father wounded them deeply. The breakdown in our relationship taught them things about family, about men, about commitment that I now spend my life trying to heal. My sin has consequences that ripple through generations.

But here's the hope: God specializes in redeeming broken families.

The Bible is full of dysfunctional households that God uses anyway. Abraham's family is a disaster. Jacob plays favorites and creates rivalry among his sons. Moses is raised by Pharaoh's daughter. David commits adultery and murder. The genealogy of Jesus includes prostitutes, foreigners, and scandals.

God doesn't wait for perfect families to accomplish His purposes. He takes our diverse, dysfunctional messes and transforms them into something divine.

But we have to stop pretending the brokenness isn't there. We have to name what we've lost. We have to grieve the death of oikos before we can resurrect it.

## WHAT DIED

Let me be specific about what we've lost:

**We've lost intergenerational wisdom.** Grandparents and grandchildren rarely live in the same zip code, much less the same household. The young reinvent every wheel, unaware of what their elders learned through hard experience. The old feel useless, their wisdom unwanted in a culture that worships youth and novelty.

**We've lost economic interdependence.** We pride ourselves on self-sufficiency. Needing help is shameful. Receiving charity is degrading. We'd rather go into debt than ask family for assistance. We've turned mutual aid into a sign of failure rather than the normal rhythm of oikos life.

**We've lost daily proximity.** We see our church family once or twice a week for a few hours. We see our biological family at holidays and special occasions. The rest of life happens in isolation. We don't know each other's rhythms, struggles, joys. We're strangers who happen to share a last name or a church directory.

**We've lost covenantal thinking.** Everything is contractual now. Conditional. Transactional. "I'll be part of this community as long as it serves me. I'll maintain this relationship as long as it makes me happy. I'll stay at this church until I find something better."

**We've lost the experience of being known.** Truly known. Seen in our weakness and loved anyway. Caught in our sin and held accountable. Celebrated in our victories. Mourned with in our losses. Known in the way family knows—not just the curated version we present on Sunday morning, but the 2 AM meltdown, the Thursday morning struggle, the Saturday night loneliness.

This is what has died. This is what we're grieving, whether we have language for it or not.

## THE WAY FORWARD

I don't have easy answers. I wish I did. But I know this: we cannot rebuild oikos using the tools of individualism and consumerism. You can't create family through programs. You can't manufacture intimacy through events. You can't systematize covenant.

What we can do is acknowledge the loss. Name the grief. Confess that we've traded our birthright for a mess of pottage.

We can stop pretending that the Western nuclear family is God's ideal and start imagining what it would mean to be the household of God—diverse generations, different backgrounds, messy relationships, real commitment.

We can stop church shopping and start putting down roots. Stop consuming religious goods and start contributing to a community. Stop protecting our autonomy and start risking vulnerability.

It won't be comfortable. Re-learning family never is.

It won't be quick. Healing takes time.

It won't be perfect. We're all too broken for that.

But it will be real. And it will be what we were made for.

The woman who emailed me at 2:47 AM? She's in a small group now. Not a polished program, but five people who meet weekly to eat, pray, confess, and carry each other's burdens. When her husband's abandonment became public, they didn't shame her. They surrounded her. They helped with car repairs and childcare. They sat with her in the dark and reminded her that she's not alone.

It's not oikos—not yet, not fully. But it's a start.

It's what happens when a few broken people decide that maybe, just maybe, God meant it when He said we're no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household.

Maybe we can learn what that means again.

Maybe the death of oikos doesn't have to be the end of the story.

Maybe resurrection is possible.

But first, we have to be willing to name what died.

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*"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household."*

— Ephesians 2:19 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 2: THE CONSUMERIST CONGREGATION

The couple sat across from me in my office, explaining why they were leaving the church. They'd been members for eighteen months. Active. Engaged. Seemed committed.

"It's just not the right fit anymore," the husband said.

"The worship style has changed," the wife added. "It's not meeting our needs."

I asked what they meant. What needs weren't being met? What had changed?

"Well," she said, glancing at her husband, "the new worship leader does more contemporary songs. We prefer the hymns. And the sermons have been... heavier lately. We're just looking for something more uplifting."

"Have you talked to the worship leader?" I asked. "Or to me about the sermon content?"

They looked at me like I'd suggested something inappropriate.

"Oh, we wouldn't want to cause trouble," he said. "It's fine. We've just found another church that's a better fit. Their worship is more our style, and they have better programs for the kids."

"So you're leaving because of music preference and programming?"

"It's not just that," she said, defensive now. "We just don't feel like we're being fed anymore."

I wanted to ask: When did you become a customer instead of a member? When did church become a service you consume instead of a family you belong to? When did "not being fed" become a valid reason to abandon community?

But I didn't. I'd learned that once people start using consumer language, they're already gone. Their bags are packed. They're just informing me of a decision that's already been made.

So I said goodbye, wished them well, and watched them drive away to their new church—the third one in five years.

### FROM MEMBERS TO CUSTOMERS

Eugene Peterson, the pastor and scholar who gave us *The Message*, said it plainly: "The church has become a department store where people come to get their religious needs met."

Not a family. Not a body. Not a household of faith. A department store.

And we're not members. We're customers. Shoppers. Consumers browsing the religious marketplace looking for the best product at the lowest cost.

The language we use reveals the shift:

We don't *commit* to a church; we *try it out*. We don't *join*; we *attend*. We don't ask, "Where has God called me to serve?" We ask, "Which church meets my needs?" We don't evaluate based on "Where can I contribute?" but "What can I get?"

Church shopping has become normalized, even celebrated. We drive past multiple churches to find the one with the right demographic, the right worship style, the right amenities. We download apps that let us compare churches like we compare restaurants—checking out the "vibe," reading reviews, looking at photos of the facilities.

And churches have adapted. We've become vendors competing for market share.

**We advertise.** Slick websites. Professional marketing. Demographic research. We position ourselves for specific niches: "The church for young families." "Authentic worship for seekers." "Traditional values in a contemporary setting."

**We brand.** Logos. Color schemes. Consistent messaging. Many churches spend more on branding consultants than on benevolence. We want to be relevant, attractive, competitive.

**We promise value.** "Seven weeks to a better marriage." "Financial freedom through biblical principles." "Discover your purpose." We sell solutions to problems you may not have known you had.

**We remove friction.** Multiple service times so you can fit church into your schedule. Online giving so you don't have to carry cash. Digital connection cards so you don't have to talk to anyone. Express checkout at the door. We've made it possible to attend church for years without ever being known or inconvenienced.

I understand the impulse. I've led churches. I know the pressure to grow, to stay relevant, to compete with Netflix and travel sports and a thousand other options for people's Sunday mornings. I know what it's like to watch families slip away to the new church down the road with the better children's program.

But we've lost something essential in the translation from household to marketplace.

We've lost *membership*.

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEMBERS AND CUSTOMERS

In a healthy body—Paul's metaphor for the church in 1 Corinthians 12—members don't shop around. Your hand doesn't leave your body to join a different one because it prefers

how the other body gestures. Your foot doesn't transfer to another body because it offers better walking opportunities.

Members belong. Permanently. Organically. Necessarily.

"For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, NASB).

Notice: "we were all baptized into one body." Not we chose which body looked most attractive. Not we sampled several bodies and selected our favorite. We were baptized—incorporated, made part of, organically joined.

"For the body is not one member, but many" (v. 14). The diversity isn't a bug; it's a feature. We're not supposed to all be the same. The whole point is that different members with different functions work together.

"If the foot says, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body" (vv. 15-16).

You don't get to opt out because you don't like your function or wish you had a different role. You're part of the body whether you feel like it or not.

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired" (vv. 17-18).

This is the verse that wrecks church shopping: *God has placed the members... just as He desired.*

Not your desire. His.

You don't get to choose where you fit in the body any more than your liver gets to decide it would rather be a kidney. God placed you. And the body needs you in that place, functioning in that role, connected to those particular people.

"And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (v. 21).

We're stuck with each other. The parts we find difficult, inconvenient, or unpleasant? We need them. We can't say, "I have no need of you" and transfer to a body made up entirely of eyes.

But that's exactly what we try to do. We church-shop until we find a congregation that mirrors our preferences, confirms our biases, and makes minimal demands. We create echo chambers of sameness and call it church.

And then we wonder why we're not growing. Why we're not being challenged. Why we're not being transformed.

## **PROGRAMS OVER RELATIONSHIPS**

I once consulted with a church that was struggling with declining attendance. The leadership was genuinely perplexed. They had excellent programs—world-class children's ministry, dynamic worship, relevant preaching, small groups for every demographic.

"We're doing everything right," the senior pastor said. "But people still leave."

I asked if I could interview some folks who'd left recently. He gave me a list. I started making calls.

The pattern emerged quickly: every person who'd left felt unknown.

"I attended for two years," one woman told me. "I volunteered in the nursery. I went to a small group for a while. But when my mom died, I don't think anyone noticed I was gone for three weeks. No calls. No texts. Nothing. What's the point of being part of a church where no one knows you're missing?"

Another man: "It felt like a factory. Show up, consume the product, leave. I wanted community, but everything was so programmed, so scheduled, so... corporate. There was no space for actual relationship."

A young couple: "We kept waiting for someone to invite us to dinner. To their home. For real life. But everyone was busy with church activities. We were busy with church activities. We never actually knew anyone."

This is the paradox of the program-driven church: we're incredibly busy doing church things, but we're not actually doing life together.

We have small groups, but they meet every other week for ninety minutes with curriculum and discussion questions. Structured. Managed. Time-limited. Not the messy, spontaneous, daily rhythms of oikos life.

We have fellowship events, but they're catered and scheduled and optional. Not the shared meals, shared work, shared life of the early church.

We have ministry teams, but they're task-oriented. We work side by side without necessarily knowing each other's stories, struggles, or joys.

Don't misunderstand—I'm not against programs. Structure serves a purpose. Organization matters. But when programs replace relationships, when we substitute scheduled connection for organic community, we've lost the plot.

The early church didn't have programs. They had life together.

"Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart" (Acts 2:46, NASB).

Day by day. House to house. Meals together. Not "the second Tuesday of the month from 7-8:30." Daily. Organic. Woven into the fabric of ordinary life.

That's what we've lost. And you can't recapture it with better programming.

### **ANONYMITY AS PREFERRED POSTURE**

Here's something I've noticed over twenty-plus years in ministry: many people *prefer* anonymity.

They like the idea of community, but they don't actually want to be known. They want the appearance of connection without the risk of vulnerability. They want to belong without being seen.

This is why megachurches work for so many people. You can attend for years and remain completely anonymous. Slip in, slip out. No one asks uncomfortable questions. No one knows you lost your job or your marriage is failing or you're struggling with addiction.

It feels safe.

And it is safe—safe from judgment, safe from gossip, safe from the messiness of actual relationship.

But it's also safe from transformation.

Because you cannot be healed in isolation. You cannot grow in sanctity without accountability. You cannot experience the fullness of God's love mediated through broken people if you never let anyone close enough to see your brokenness.

James wrote: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed" (James 5:16, NASB).

Confess to one another. Not confess to God in private (though that's important too). Not confess to a professional counselor (though that may be necessary). Confess to one another—to the people who know you, who do life with you, who are committed to you.

Why? "So that you may be healed."

Healing happens in community. In being known and loved anyway. In having someone look at the worst parts of you and not run away. In experiencing grace mediated through human hands and voices.

But you can't experience that from the back row, anonymous and hidden.

I think about the woman who touched Jesus' garment in the crowd (Mark 5:25-34). She wanted to be healed secretly, anonymously. Just touch the hem, receive the blessing, slip away unnoticed.

But Jesus wouldn't let her stay hidden. He stopped. "Who touched Me?" He made her step forward, tell her story publicly. And then—only then—did He pronounce her healed and sent her in peace.

She wanted blessing without belonging. Jesus insisted on both.

We want the same thing. We want God to fix our problems without having to admit we have them. We want the benefits of community without the cost of vulnerability. We want to be known by God without being known by His people.

It doesn't work that way.

The consumer church enables our hiddenness. Come. Consume. Leave. No questions asked. No vulnerability required. No transformation expected.

The household of God demands something different: "If we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7, NASB).

Walking in the light—being seen, being known—is the prerequisite for fellowship. And fellowship is the context for cleansing.

We've reversed the order. We think we need to get cleaned up before we can have fellowship. So we hide our sin, pretend we're fine, maintain the facade.

But John says it's the opposite: fellowship—real, vulnerable, honest community—is where cleansing happens.

We've built churches where anonymity is not just permitted but preferred. And we're dying of isolation in crowded rooms.

## **INDIVIDUALIZED SALVATION WITHOUT COMMUNAL SANCTIFICATION**

Ask most evangelicals, "Are you saved?" and they'll tell you about a moment. A decision. An individual transaction between them and God. "I accepted Jesus as my personal Savior on March 15, 1997, at a youth camp."

There's nothing wrong with that testimony. Salvation *is* personal. The gospel *does* require individual response. Jesus calls each of us by name.

But somewhere along the way, we took "personal relationship with Jesus" and divorced it from His body. We made salvation radically individual and forgot that sanctification is radically communal.

Listen to how the New Testament describes salvation:

"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35, NASB). Not love for Jesus in private. Love for one another in public.

"We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14, NASB). The evidence of salvation isn't a prayer you prayed; it's love for the family.

"Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2, NASB). You can't bear burdens alone. You need someone whose burdens you bear and someone who bears yours.

"And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25, NASB).

Stimulate one another. Don't forsake assembling. Encourage one another. All corporate. All communal. All requiring actual relationship.

John Stott, the British theologian and pastor, said it plainly: "**There is no such thing as a 'lone ranger' Christian.**"

Yet that's exactly what we've created—a Christianity that can be practiced alone. A faith that requires nothing from others and offers nothing to them. Salvation as a personal fire escape from hell, with no expectation of transformation in community.

We've reduced discipleship to information transfer. Attend the class. Read the book. Listen to the sermon. Fill your head with correct doctrine.

But discipleship in Scripture is formation in community. It's life-on-life. It's watching someone follow Jesus and learning to imitate them. It's being in close enough proximity that their faith rubs off on you and your failures can't stay hidden.

Paul could write to the Corinthians: "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1, NASB). He wasn't being arrogant. He was describing how discipleship works—through relationship, observation, and imitation.

To the Thessalonians: "For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children" (1 Thessalonians 2:9-11, NASB).

They watched him work. They saw how he lived. They knew him intimately enough to witness his devotion and uprightness. He related to them as a father to children—not a lecturer to students, but family doing life together.

That's discipleship. And you can't do it in isolation.

But we've created a Christianity where you can be "saved" and never be known. Where you can be "mature" and never be challenged. Where you can be "growing" and never be accountable.

We've settled for individualized salvation without communal sanctification. And we wonder why people stay stuck in the same sins, the same patterns, the same immaturity year after year after year.

Because you can't mature alone. Iron sharpens iron, but only when iron meets iron. You need friction. You need people who love you enough to tell you the truth. You need community that sees your blind spots and cares enough to point them out.

## **THE SELF-HELP GOSPEL**

Last year I was browsing the Christian section of a bookstore (yes, they still exist), and I couldn't tell the difference between the Christian self-help books and the secular ones. The titles were interchangeable:

- "Your Best Life Now"
- "The Purpose Driven Life"
- "Become a Better You"
- "The Power of Positive Thinking"
- "Battlefield of the Mind"

All focused on you. Your potential. Your purpose. Your power. Your improvement.

Jesus was conspicuously absent, or if present, He was presented as a life coach helping you achieve your dreams, a therapist helping you feel better about yourself, a guru offering secrets to success.

Not Lord. Not King. Not the one who demands you take up your cross daily and follow Him to death.

We've turned the gospel into a self-improvement program. Ten steps to a better marriage. Five keys to financial freedom. Seven habits of highly effective Christians.

And people eat it up because it's what we want: **blessing without belonging, comfort without commitment, a Savior who makes our lives better without requiring that we die to ourselves.**

But that's not the gospel Jesus preached.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it" (Luke 9:23-24, NASB).

Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Die daily. Lose your life.

That's not a self-help message. That's a call to radical self-abandonment. And it's incompatible with consumerism.

The consumer church promises you'll get something. Jesus promises you'll lose everything—and find that it's gain.

The consumer church centers on meeting your needs. Jesus centers on His glory being displayed through your sacrifice.

The consumer church asks, "What's in it for me?" Jesus says, "What will it cost you to follow Me?"

I've watched this play out in heartbreak ways. People come to faith with a consumer mentality, looking for Jesus to improve their circumstances. And sometimes He does—there are real blessings in following Christ.

But then the cancer comes. Or the layoff. Or the betrayal. Or the unanswered prayer. And because they came for the benefits rather than the King, they leave when the benefits don't materialize.

"I thought God was supposed to make my life better."

He is making your life better. He's conforming you to the image of Christ. He's killing what needs to die and resurrecting what needs to live. He's dismantling your false gods and teaching you to worship Him alone.

But that process doesn't always look like blessing. It often looks like a cross.

### **THE COST WE WON'T NAME**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from Nazi Germany, distinguished between cheap grace and costly grace:

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

"Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life."

The consumer church peddles cheap grace. Jesus offers costly grace.

And you can't have costly grace in isolation. You can't take up your cross alone. You need people to walk with you to Golgotha. You need community to help you carry the weight when you stumble. You need brothers and sisters who understand that following Jesus means death—death to self, death to comfort, death to control.

I think about my years as a firefighter. When we went into a burning building, we went together. Never alone. Because alone, you die. The smoke disorients you. The heat overwhelms you. You lose track of the exit. You panic.

But with your crew, you survive. Someone has your back. Someone knows where you are. Someone will come for you if you go down.

The Christian life is walking into a burning building. And the consumer church says, "Here's a map and some protective gear. Good luck."

But Jesus says, "I'm going in with you. And I'm bringing the family."

We need each other. We cannot follow Jesus alone. We cannot carry our crosses in isolation. We cannot die to self and be resurrected without community.

But the consumerist congregation doesn't teach that. It teaches self-sufficiency. Self-improvement. Self-actualization.

And we're dying—spiritually, emotionally, relationally—because we're trying to follow Jesus by ourselves.

## THE COUNTER-NARRATIVE

There's a small group in my church that meets Thursday mornings at 6 AM. Seven men, ranging in age from late twenties to mid-sixties. Different backgrounds, different careers, different life stages.

They don't have curriculum. They don't follow a program. They just show up, drink terrible coffee, and tell the truth.

About their marriages. Their kids. Their struggles with pornography. Their fear of failure. Their battles with addiction. Their doubts about God. Their dreams and their disappointments.

They confess. They pray. They challenge each other. They carry each other's burdens.

One of them lost his job six months ago. The group didn't just pray about it—they helped him network, updated his resume, covered some bills until he found work.

Another one's marriage was falling apart. The group didn't just sympathize—they held him accountable, challenged his selfishness, walked alongside him through counseling, celebrated when breakthrough came.

A younger guy was about to make a terrible financial decision. The older guys didn't just advise—they lovingly confronted his foolishness and helped him see what he couldn't see alone.

Nobody's getting paid. There's no official church program. No pastor oversight. No evaluation metrics.

Just seven men who've decided they can't follow Jesus alone.

That's church. That's body life. That's what we were made for.

Not a department store. Not a religious service. Not a self-help seminar.

A family. Messy, honest, committed, costly.

And it's transforming them in ways a thousand sermons never could.

Because you can't consumer your way to Christlikeness. You have to die your way there. And you need family to help you do it.

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*"For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ."*

— 1 Corinthians 12:12 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 3: ORPHANS IN THE HOUSE

The young man sat in my office, twenty-three years old, fresh out of college, eager to serve in ministry. He had all the right answers, knew his theology, could quote Scripture with ease. But something in his eyes didn't match his words—a hunger, a desperation, a searching.

"Tell me about your family," I said.

His face went blank. "What does that have to do with ministry?"

"Everything," I said. "Tell me about your dad."

The mask cracked. His jaw clenched. "He left when I was six. Haven't seen him since. But I've dealt with that. I've forgiven him. It's in the past."

"What made you want to go into ministry?" I asked.

"I want to help people. Make a difference. Show them they matter." He paused, then added quietly, "I want to be the person I needed when I was younger."

There it was. The wound he didn't know he was carrying. The absence he was trying to fill. The validation he was still seeking from a father who'd never come back.

He wasn't alone. The church is full of orphans—people carrying father wounds, mother wounds, family trauma they've never named. They show up Sunday after Sunday, looking for something they can't articulate, seeking a home they've never known.

And often, tragically, the church re-traumatizes them instead of healing them.

## THE FATHERLESS GENERATION

The statistics are staggering:

### Father Absence in America:

- Nearly 20 million children (1 in 4) live without a biological, step, or adoptive father in the home
- 57.6% of Black children, 31.2% of Hispanic children, and 20.7% of white children live in father-absent homes
- Children in father-absent homes are four times more likely to be poor
- They're more likely to struggle in school, engage in criminal activity, abuse drugs and alcohol, and repeat the cycle of absent fathering

**The Spiritual Impact:** Research consistently shows that father absence correlates with:

- Lower religious participation in adulthood
- Difficulty trusting authority figures, including pastoral leadership
- Distorted images of God (distant, punitive, absent, or conditional)
- Higher rates of anxiety and depression
- Struggles with identity and self-worth
- Difficulty maintaining committed relationships

And here's what should terrify us: **the church is full of people carrying these wounds, and we're often completely unaware.**

They sit in our pews. They serve on our teams. They lead our small groups. They smile on Sunday morning while carrying a hole in their souls shaped like the father they never had.

I know because I've been on both sides of this. As a pastor and chaplain, I've counseled hundreds of people whose father wounds manifested in their spiritual lives. As a father, I've inflicted wounds on my own daughters that they'll carry for years.

The reconciliation process Amy, Beth, and I are walking through has taught me something humbling: **the damage we do in families echoes in every relationship thereafter, including and especially in how people relate to God and His church.**

When your earthly father was absent, how do you trust a heavenly Father who promises never to leave you?

When your earthly father was abusive, how do you approach a heavenly Father who disciplines those He loves?

When your earthly father was distant and critical, how do you believe in a heavenly Father who delights in you?

When your earthly father's love was conditional—based on performance, achievement, or compliance—how do you receive unconditional grace?

You don't. Not easily. Not without significant work and healing.

And the church, rather than becoming the redemptive space where that healing happens, often reinforces the wound.

## **WHEN CHURCH FEELS LIKE HOME (THE WRONG KIND)**

Sarah grew up in a chaotic household. Alcoholic father, codependent mother, constant yelling, walking on eggshells, never knowing which version of Dad would come through the door.

She found Christ in college, got involved in a local church, and finally—*finally*—felt like she'd found a safe place. A spiritual family. People who cared.

Until the senior pastor had a moral failure. The elders handled it poorly—secrecy, damage control, protecting the institution over the wounded. The church split. People took sides. The yelling started again.

Sarah told me later, "It felt exactly like home. The chaos, the secrets, the choosing sides. I thought church would be different. But it was the same dysfunction with Jesus language."

She hasn't been back to church in five years.

This is what happens when orphans enter a dysfunctional church family: **we recreate the only family dynamics we know.**

The overfunctioning firstborn becomes the overcommitted volunteer who can't say no, who performs for approval, who burns out trying to earn love that should be freely given.

The scapegoat becomes the person who always causes problems, who unconsciously sabotages relationships because being rejected for being "bad" feels more familiar than being loved for being yourself.

The lost child becomes the person who attends for years without anyone knowing their name, who slips in and out unnoticed, who disappears and nobody asks where they went.

The family hero becomes the super-Christian who has all the right answers, whose life looks perfect, who's hiding addiction or depression or a crumbling marriage behind a facade of spiritual maturity.

We don't just bring our theology to church. We bring our trauma. Our attachment wounds. Our family-of-origin patterns. Our desperate need for a father who won't leave, a mother who won't abandon, a family that won't reject.

And God, in His mercy, promises exactly that: "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation. God makes a home for the lonely" (Psalm 68:5-6, NASB).

But we mediate that promise to each other. The orphan encounters God's fatherhood through the church's family. And if the church is dysfunctional, if pastoral leadership is

authoritarian or absent, if the family is toxic, we don't experience God making a home for the lonely. We experience more homelessness.

## **PASTORAL AUTHORITY AND THE FATHER WOUND**

Here's a pattern I've seen repeatedly in my chaplaincy and pastoral work:

People with father wounds have one of two responses to pastoral authority—they either idealize it or demonize it. Sometimes both, swinging between extremes.

**The Idealizers:** They put pastors on pedestals. Project onto them everything they wanted in a father—wisdom, strength, protection, approval. They become dependent, unable to make spiritual decisions without pastoral input, desperate for affirmation, crushed when the pastor is unavailable or disappointing.

I've had young men follow me around like puppies, seeking constant approval, fishing for validation, needing me to affirm every decision. Not because I was particularly special, but because I represented the father they never had.

And when I inevitably failed to live up to the projection—because I'm human, broken, limited—they were devastated. Some became angry, feeling betrayed. Others just moved on to the next pastor, repeating the cycle.

**The Demonizers:** They resist all pastoral authority. Question everything. Challenge constantly. Refuse to submit to leadership. Not because the pastor is doing anything wrong, but because authority itself triggers the wound.

Their father misused authority, so all authority is suspect. Their father was hypocritical, so pastors must be too. Their father demanded obedience without relationship, so they'll resist any leadership that asks for trust.

I've had people in my congregations who fought me at every turn—not because they disagreed with the direction, but because being led by a father figure felt dangerous. Better to maintain control than risk being hurt again.

**The Oscillators:** Worst of all are those who swing between both—idealizing the pastor one moment, demonizing him the next. This is the pattern of disorganized attachment, and it's exhausting for everyone involved.

They'll praise you effusively, then criticize you viciously. Trust you completely, then suspect you of manipulation. Seek deep connection, then push you away when you get close. Not because they're malicious, but because their nervous system learned that closeness and danger are synonymous.

The tragedy is that **healthy pastoral leadership could help heal these wounds**. A pastor who is present but not intrusive, who provides guidance without control, who offers unconditional positive regard while maintaining appropriate boundaries—this kind of leadership can slowly, over years, help someone learn what healthy authority looks like.

But it requires enormous patience. And wisdom. And the willingness to be misunderstood, projected upon, tested, and challenged—not reacting defensively, but responding with steady, consistent, fatherly love.

Most pastors aren't trained for this. I wasn't. Seminary taught me theology and homiletics, not trauma-informed ministry. I had to learn by failing, by wounding people unintentionally, by discovering that good theology doesn't heal attachment wounds.

Relationship does. Consistent, safe, boundaried relationship over time. The kind of relationship that looks a lot like... family.

### **THE SEARCH FOR VALIDATION IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES**

When you grow up without secure attachment, without a father who delights in you for simply being his child, you spend the rest of your life searching for that validation.

You achieve. Perform. Strive. Prove your worth through accomplishment because worth was never given as a gift.

You seek approval from anyone who'll give it—employers, romantic partners, friends, and yes, church leaders. You become a chameleon, shapeshifting to please whoever's in front of you, because you never learned that you're acceptable just as you are.

You measure your value by what you contribute—your gifts, your service, your usefulness—because you learned that love is transactional. You're loved because you're valuable, not valuable because you're loved.

And the church, God help us, often reinforces this pattern.

We celebrate the high achievers. We platform the talented. We honor those who serve, who give, who produce. We create hierarchies based on giftedness and contribution.

Meanwhile, the person who's simply *present*—who doesn't teach or sing or lead, who just shows up faithfully, who loves quietly—gets overlooked.

The message sent (even if unintended): **Your worth is in what you do, not who you are.**

I've watched young worship leaders nearly destroy themselves pursuing excellence—not for God's glory, but to fill the void where paternal approval should have been. I've seen

volunteers burn out serving in five different ministries because they couldn't say no, couldn't disappoint, couldn't risk being seen as less than fully committed.

I've counseled women who stayed in emotionally abusive relationships because at least they were wanted, at least someone chose them, even if that someone treated them terribly. Better to be used than to be alone.

And I've watched men become workaholics, success addicts, achievement junkies—climbing every ladder, winning every competition, building empires of accomplishment to prove to a father who's either dead or disinterested that they're worthy of love.

The search for validation is insatiable because we're looking in the wrong place. We're asking people to give us what only God can give. We're seeking horizontal approval to fill a vertical void.

D.T. Niles, the Sri Lankan theologian, said it perfectly: "**We are all beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.**"

That's the church—beggars, all of us. Hungry. Searching. Trying to fill holes we don't know how to name.

But here's the miracle: when we stop pretending we're not hungry, when we admit we're beggars, when we tell each other honestly where we've found even a crumb of bread—that's when community becomes redemptive.

Not when we perform our spiritual maturity. When we confess our hunger.

## ATTACHMENT STYLES AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Understanding attachment theory has revolutionized how I do ministry. It's given me language for patterns I saw but couldn't explain, tools for helping people I didn't know how to reach.

Here's the basic framework:

**Secure Attachment** develops when caregivers are consistently responsive, available, and attuned to a child's needs. The child learns: *The world is safe. People are trustworthy. I am worthy of love. My needs matter.*

Securely attached people approach relationships—including relationship with God and church—with relative ease. They trust without being naive. They commit without being desperate. They're comfortable with intimacy and autonomy. They can give and receive love without anxiety or avoidance.

**But most of us aren't securely attached.** Estimates suggest only about 50-60% of the population has secure attachment, meaning 40-50% of people sitting in our churches carry insecure attachment patterns.

Let me describe what that looks like spiritually:

### **Anxious Attachment: Performance-Based Faith**

Anxious attachment develops when caregiving is inconsistent—sometimes responsive, sometimes neglectful. The child never knows if their needs will be met, so they become hypervigilant, overly attuned to relational cues, desperate for reassurance.

**In church, this manifests as:**

- Constant need for affirmation from leaders
- Performance-based spirituality (if I pray enough, read enough, serve enough, God will love me)
- Interpreting any correction as total rejection
- Fear of disappointing God, which drives either frantic activity or paralysis
- Difficulty accepting grace because it feels too unstable, too conditional
- Reading negative intent into normal interactions ("The pastor didn't greet me—he must be upset with me")

I had a woman in my congregation who emailed me after every single sermon asking if she'd understood correctly, if she was doing enough, if God was pleased with her. No amount of reassurance satisfied her. She needed constant validation because she'd never learned that love could be stable and unconditional.

Her theology was solid. She knew intellectually that grace is free. But her nervous system didn't believe it. So she kept performing, kept striving, kept exhausting herself trying to earn what she already had.

### **Avoidant Attachment: Isolation and Self-Sufficiency**

Avoidant attachment develops when caregivers are consistently unavailable or rejecting. The child learns: *Needs are dangerous. Depending on others leads to pain. I must be self-sufficient.*

**In church, this manifests as:**

- "I don't need community. My relationship with God is private."

- Difficulty receiving help or admitting weakness
- Suspicious of intimacy, even with God ("I pray, but I don't feel close to God, and I'm fine with that")
- Leaving churches when relationships get too close or demanding
- Intellectualizing faith rather than experiencing it emotionally
- Pride disguised as independence ("I don't need anyone")

These are the lone ranger Christians John Stott warned about. They attend church but never connect. They believe correct doctrine but resist transformation that happens through relationship. They'd rather be right and alone than vulnerable and known.

I've watched these folks for years. They're competent, intelligent, often theologically sharp. But they're unreachable. Not because they're bad people, but because closeness feels threatening. Vulnerability feels like weakness. Needing others feels like failure.

And the tragedy is, they're missing the very mechanism God designed for their sanctification: one another.

### **Disorganized Attachment: Spiritual Abuse Vulnerability**

Disorganized attachment develops in contexts of abuse or severe trauma—where the caregiver is both the source of comfort and the source of fear. The child learns: *I need you, but you hurt me. Closeness is terrifying, but distance is unbearable.*

This is the most painful and dangerous attachment pattern.

#### **In church, this manifests as:**

- Intense desire for spiritual family combined with fear of being hurt
- Attraction to charismatic leaders followed by catastrophic disappointment when they fail
- Susceptibility to spiritual abuse (confusing intensity with intimacy, control with care)
- Push-pull dynamics in relationships (craving closeness, then sabotaging it)
- Difficulty trusting God (experiencing Him as both rescuer and threat)
- Repeating patterns of entering communities, being wounded, leaving, then desperately seeking new community

These are the people most vulnerable to cults, to authoritarian pastors, to toxic church environments. Because their template for love includes pain, they often can't recognize healthy relationships. Kindness feels suspicious. Gentleness feels weak. But intensity, demand, even abuse can feel like love because that's what they learned.

I've sat with survivors of spiritual abuse whose stories make me weep. Pastors who isolated them from family and friends. Leaders who demanded absolute obedience and punished questions. Churches that used shame, manipulation, and fear to control people's lives.

And almost always, when we dig into their history, there's disorganized attachment. Abuse in the family of origin made them vulnerable to abuse in the family of God.

### **The hope:**

Here's what I've learned through years of ministry and my own therapy: attachment patterns can change. They're not destiny. Secure attachment can be earned through consistent, safe relationship over time.

This is why church matters so much. Why family is so critical. A community of people committed to being present, responsive, consistent, and safe—over years, not weeks—can literally rewire someone's nervous system.

Anxious attachment can learn that love is stable.

Avoidant attachment can learn that intimacy is safe.

Disorganized attachment can learn that closeness doesn't equal danger.

But it takes time. Patience. And a church that's willing to be family, not just a religious event.

## **THE GRIEF WE DON'T ACKNOWLEDGE**

There's a loss that people with family trauma carry that's rarely acknowledged: **the loss of what should have been.**

If your parent dies, people give you permission to grieve. They bring casseroles. They send cards. They say, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

But if your parent was present but absent—physically there but emotionally unavailable—who acknowledges that loss? If your father was in the house but never knew you, never saw you, never delighted in you, who validates that grief?

If your family was intact on paper but toxic in reality, who mourns with you for the childhood you deserved but never had?

Nobody. Because the loss is invisible. The wound has no scar. The grave is unmarked.

So you carry it alone. This unacknowledged grief. This mourning for a family you never had, a father who never showed up, a mother who couldn't protect you, a home that never felt safe.

And you enter church carrying this grief, and nobody knows. You smile. You serve. You sing the songs. And inside, you're hollow.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4, NASB).

But you can't be comforted if you can't mourn. And you can't mourn if no one gives you permission to name the loss.

### **The church should be the place where we give each other permission to grieve.**

Not just dead people. Dead dreams. Dead relationships. The families we should have had. The fathers who should have shown up. The mothers who should have protected. The siblings who should have been safe. The childhoods that should have been innocent.

We need to mourn these losses. Out loud. In community. With people who won't minimize or spiritualize or rush us toward resolution.

"Just forgive and move on."

"God works all things for good."

"At least you have a heavenly Father."

These are true statements used to silence grief. They're comfort for the comforter, not the mourner. They're ways of making ourselves feel better about someone else's pain.

Real comfort looks different.

It looks like sitting with someone in their grief without fixing it.

It looks like acknowledging the loss without minimizing it.

It looks like giving someone permission to be angry at their father, to rage at the injustice, to feel the full weight of what was stolen from them.

### **Because only after we mourn can we heal.**

You have to feel it to heal it. You have to name the wound before it can be bound. You have to acknowledge what died before resurrection can happen.

## **CHURCH AS RE-TRAUMATIZING SPACE**

I need to say this plainly: **many churches are traumatizing people, not healing them.**

Not intentionally. Not maliciously. But the impact is the same.

### We re-traumatize when:

- Leadership is authoritarian, demanding submission without relationship
- Mistakes are punished publicly but success is expected privately
- Vulnerability is used against people (you confess a struggle, it becomes gossip)
- Grace is preached but perfectionism is practiced
- People are valued for what they contribute rather than who they are
- Questions are treated as doubt and doubt as sin
- Leaving is framed as betrayal rather than sometimes being necessary

I've had people tell me about churches where:

- Pastors screamed from the pulpit about members' sins (with names)
- Leaders demanded access to bank accounts to verify tithing
- Families were instructed to shun members who left the church
- Dating required pastoral approval, including control over who you could pursue
- Women were blamed for men's lust and forced to dress "modestly" while male behavior went unaddressed
- Therapy was discouraged as evidence of weak faith

These aren't aberrations. These are patterns I see repeatedly. And they're devastating to people whose family of origin was already traumatic.

**Because the pattern feels familiar, it feels like home—and they stay far longer than they should.**

### CHURCH AS REDEMPTIVE SPACE

But church can also be the healing place. The family that does it right. The space where orphans find home.

### We become redemptive when:

- Leadership is servant-oriented, leading through relationship and example
- Mistakes are met with grace and growth, not shame
- Vulnerability is protected and honored

- We acknowledge our own brokenness before demanding others acknowledge theirs
- People are valued for bearing God's image, period
- Questions are welcomed as part of faith development
- We release people with blessing when they need to leave

I think of that Thursday morning men's group I mentioned earlier. Seven guys, multiple attachment styles, carrying various wounds.

They've created safety. Slowly. Over years.

The anxious guy learned he doesn't have to perform. They love him even when he's struggling, even when he fails, even when he's just present and not contributing anything.

The avoidant guy learned he can need people. When his son was hospitalized, they showed up. They didn't ask permission. They just came. And he wept—not just about his son, but because he'd never had anyone show up for him like that.

The guy with disorganized attachment learned that closeness can be safe. They've held his story—his abuse history, his addiction, his fears—and they haven't weaponized it. They've proven, week after week, that intimacy doesn't equal danger.

This is church. Not perfect. Not professional. Just a handful of beggars who found bread and are sharing it with each other.

### **"God makes a home for the lonely."**

Sometimes He does it through supernatural intervention. But mostly He does it through His people—imperfect, wounded, ragamuffin people who've decided to be family to each other.

Who see the orphan and say, "You belong here."

Who see the fatherless and say, "We'll be your family."

Who see the grief and say, "We'll mourn with you."

Who see the wound and say, "We'll help you heal."

That's the church we're called to be. Not an institution. Not a program. A home.

For the lonely. For the fatherless. For the orphans who've been wandering, looking for somewhere to belong.

Welcome home.

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*"A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation. God makes a home for the lonely."*

— Psalm 68:5-6 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 4: IN THE BEGINNING... FAMILY

I once asked a room full of seminary students: "What was the first thing God said was 'not good' in creation?"

Hands shot up. "Sin!" "The Fall!" "Satan!"

"No," I said. "Those came later. What was the first thing God looked at in creation and said, 'This is not good'?"

Silence. Confused faces. One brave student finally ventured: "The darkness?"

"Read Genesis 1 again," I told them. "God creates light and calls it good. Separates waters and calls it good. Makes land appear and calls it good. Creates plants and animals and calls it good. Creates man and calls it very good. Everything is good, good, good, good... until Genesis 2:18."

I opened my Bible and read: "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him'" (Genesis 2:18, NASB).

The first "not good" in all of creation wasn't sin. It was solitude.

God looked at Adam—perfect, sinless, in right relationship with his Creator, walking with God in the garden—and said, "This is not good."

Why? What was wrong? Adam had God. He had purpose. He had paradise. He had meaningful work naming the animals. He had everything except one thing: another human being.

And God said that was not good.

This should fundamentally reorient how we think about community. We don't need each other because we're broken (though we are). We don't need each other because we're sinful (though we are). We don't need each other to make up for some deficiency in God's provision (as if He's insufficient).

We need each other because **that's how we're designed**.

Before the Fall. Before sin entered the world. Before shame or hiding or blame-shifting or murder. In the garden, in paradise, in perfect communion with God, it was still "not good for man to be alone."

Community isn't plan B. It's plan A. It's written into the fabric of creation itself.

And the reason for that goes back even further than Genesis 1. It goes back to before the beginning, to the eternal nature of God Himself.

## THE TRINITARIAN FOUNDATION

Here's a truth that should blow your mind: **God has never been alone.**

Not before creation. Not during creation. Not after creation. Never.

God exists eternally as three persons in one essence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Before there was a universe, before there were angels or humans or anything else, God existed as perfect community.

The Father loving the Son. The Son glorifying the Father. The Spirit proceeding from both. An eternal dance of mutual love, honor, and self-giving. Perfect relationship. Perfect unity. Perfect diversity.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote: "**The Trinity is a divine family of love.**"

This isn't just theological abstraction. This is the foundation of everything.

When God says, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Genesis 1:26, NASB), who is God talking to? Himself? That would be strange. The angels? They don't create; they're created beings.

No—God is speaking within the Godhead. Father to Son to Spirit. The eternal community conferring about creating beings who would bear their image.

**Notice the pronouns: "Let Us... in Our image."**

Not "Let Me make man in My image." Us. Our. Plural.

And then: "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27, NASB).

Wait—which is it? Him or them? Singular or plural?

Yes.

Humanity is created as both individual and collective. The image of God includes both the person (him) and the community (them). We image God not just as isolated individuals, but as people in relationship—male and female, diverse yet united, one flesh yet two persons.

We reflect the Trinity.

Just as God exists as one essence in three persons, humanity exists as one race in many persons. Just as the Trinity is diverse yet unified, we're designed to be diverse yet unified. Just as the Trinity lives in perfect, self-giving, other-oriented love, we're called to love one another.

## **We are hardwired for community because we're made in the image of a God who is community.**

This is why isolation is so painful. It's not just emotionally difficult; it's ontologically wrong. It contradicts who we are at our core. We're trying to be something we were never designed to be: alone.

### **NOT GOOD TO BE ALONE**

Let me be clear about what Genesis 2:18 is and isn't saying.

It's not saying Adam was incomplete without Eve, as if human beings are deficient until they marry. Paul addresses that clearly in 1 Corinthians 7—singleness is a gift, a complete calling, not a lesser state.

It's not saying Adam was lonely for God, as if divine relationship is insufficient. Adam had perfect communion with God. He walked with God in the cool of the day. God spoke to him directly, gave him purpose and work. The relationship was perfect.

So what was "not good" about Adam being alone?

### **Adam was the only one of his kind.**

Think about it: God creates the animals and brings them to Adam to name. And "for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:20, NASB). Adam sees the animals—male and female, each with a counterpart, each with community within their kind. But Adam has no counterpart. He's singular. Unique. Alone.

He has relationship with God (vertical), but no relationship with another human (horizontal). He has the Creator, but no co-creature. He can worship, but he can't collaborate. He can obey, but he can't partner.

And God says, "This is not good."

Not because God is insufficient. But because Adam is designed for something more than solo existence. He's designed for community with his own kind. For partnership. For the kind of relationship that happens between equals, between those made of the same dust.

**This reveals something profound about how we're made:** We need both vertical relationship (with God) and horizontal relationship (with each other). One doesn't replace the other. Both are essential.

The Super-spiritual person says, "I don't need people. I have God." That sounds holy, but it contradicts Genesis 2:18. God Himself said it's not good to be alone.

The secular person says, "I don't need God. I have relationships." That sounds reasonable, but it misses that human relationships are meant to point us toward and flow from divine relationship.

We need both. And when we have both, we fulfill our design.

### **EZER KENEGDO: THE HELPER WHO CORRESPONDS**

"I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18, NASB).

For centuries, this verse has been used to subordinate women. "Helper" sounds like assistant, subordinate, lesser. Eve as Adam's sidekick. The supporting actor. The second-class citizen.

But that interpretation collapses when you look at the Hebrew.

The word translated "helper" is *ezer* (אֶזֶר). It appears 21 times in the Old Testament. Twice it refers to Eve. The other 19 times? It refers to God.

"God is our help and shield" (Psalm 33:20).

"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD" (Psalm 121:1-2).

*Ezer* doesn't mean subordinate. It means powerful rescuer. Necessary aid. Vital support. The kind of help you desperately need when you're in danger and can't save yourself.

The second word is *kenegdo* (כִּנְגֹּדו)—"suitable" or "corresponding to" or "opposite to." It's the idea of facing, matching, corresponding. Someone who is equal but different. A partner who complements but isn't identical.

Together, *ezer kenegdo* means something like: **a powerful helper who corresponds to him, who faces him as an equal, who is like him yet different.**

Not lesser. Equal. Not subordinate. Partner. Not assistant. Counterpart.

Eve isn't created to serve Adam. She's created to complete the image of God with him. Together—male and female, different yet united—they reflect the plurality-in-unity of the Trinity.

This matters for how we think about church family.

**We don't all play the same role.** That would be uniformity, not unity. The eye and the hand are different, but both necessary.

**We don't exist in hierarchy based on gifting.** Teachers aren't more valuable than servers. Leaders aren't more important than members. Different roles, equal worth.

**We need each other desperately.** Not because some of us are weak and need help (though we do), but because we're designed to function *together*. We're ezer kenegdo to each other—powerful helpers who correspond, who face each other as equals, who bring different gifts to create something none of us could create alone.

## THE FIRST FAMILY AND ITS PURPOSE

So God causes Adam to fall into deep sleep, takes a rib, fashions Eve, and brings her to Adam.

Adam's response is poetry: "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23, NASB).

Finally. Correspondence. Someone like him. Someone made of the same stuff. Someone who shares his nature while being beautifully different.

And then this: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, NASB).

Wait—what father and mother? Adam doesn't have parents. Eve doesn't have parents. Why this language?

Because **God is already looking forward**. Already anticipating multiplication. Already envisioning the families that will come from this first union.

The purpose of the first family unit wasn't just companionship (though it was that). It was multiplication. Expansion. Filling the earth with image-bearers.

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28, NASB).

Not just biological reproduction (though that's part of it). But the multiplication of community. The spread of relationships. More and more people living in the kind of interconnected, other-oriented, diverse-yet-unified community that reflects the Trinity.

The family wasn't an end in itself. It was the vehicle for spreading God's image throughout creation. For multiplying the experience of community across the earth. For creating networks of relationship that would display God's relational nature.

**This is what church is supposed to be:** the continuation of that original mandate. Not biological reproduction, but spiritual multiplication. Creating family systems that reflect God's nature and invite others in.

When we isolate, when we insist on independence, when we reduce church to individual spiritual consumption, we're not just being antisocial. We're contradicting the very purpose for which we were made.

We were made to multiply community. To spread relationship. To create families—biological and spiritual—that image the Trinity.

## **DIVERSITY AS DIVINE INTENTION**

Notice what diversity exists in Genesis 1-2, before sin enters the picture:

### **The Diversity of Persons in the Godhead:**

Father, Son, Spirit—distinct persons, different roles, perfect unity. Not three gods, but one God in three persons. Diversity within the unity of the divine essence.

### **The Diversity of Gender:**

Male and female. The first and most fundamental human diversity. Not better or worse. Not superior or inferior. Different. Complementary. Together completing the image of God in a way neither could alone.

### **The Diversity of Roles:**

Even before the Fall, Adam and Eve have different functions. Adam is created first, names the animals, receives the command about the tree. Eve is created from Adam, brought to him, joins him in the work. Different roles, not different value.

### **The Promise of Generational Diversity:**

"Be fruitful and multiply" implies parents and children, eventually grandparents and grandchildren. Different ages. Different life stages. Different perspectives that come from different seasons of life.

All of this is pre-Fall. All of this is God's design, not a result of sin.

### **Diversity isn't a problem to be solved. It's the plan.**

Too often, we treat diversity as something to overcome. If we could just get everyone to think alike, worship alike, approach things alike, we'd have unity.

But that's uniformity, not unity.

**Unity is diverse people choosing to be one.** It's different parts functioning together as a body. It's the Trinity—three distinct persons in perfect oneness.

**Uniformity is sameness.** It's cloning. It's the elimination of differences in pursuit of false peace.

Psalm 133:1 captures the beauty: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!" (NASB).

Not "in uniformity." In unity. Unity that allows for, even celebrates, diversity.

I think about my years as a firefighter. A fire crew is diverse by necessity. You need the veteran who's seen everything. The rookie who's young and strong. The driver who knows every street. The medic who can save lives. The officer who can make decisions under pressure.

Put five identical firefighters on a truck, and you're in trouble. You need different strengths, different perspectives, different skills.

When the alarm goes off, that diversity becomes unity. Everyone has a role. Everyone knows their part. Everyone depends on everyone else. Different functions, one mission.

That's what church should look like.

Different ages. Different backgrounds. Different gifts. Different perspectives. But one mission: imaging God, making disciples, being family.

When we try to create uniformity—everyone the same age bracket, same income level, same political views, same worship preferences—we're not creating the body of Christ. We're creating a club of people who happen to like the same things.

That's not family. That's affinity group.

**Family is diverse people choosing to belong to each other anyway.**

## **THE RELATIONAL GOD**

Let me bring this back to the foundational truth that changes everything:

**God is not a solitary deity who created us because He was lonely.**

That's actually a heresy—the idea that God needed creation. As if the eternal, self-sufficient, all-glorious God was somehow deficient without us. As if our existence adds something to God that He lacked.

No. God is complete in Himself. The Father, Son, and Spirit exist in perfect love, perfect joy, perfect communion. They don't need us.

But here's the staggering truth: **They wanted us anyway.**

Not to fill a void in God, but to invite us into the fullness that already existed. To share the love that the Trinity has always experienced. To expand the circle of communion that has existed from eternity.

Creation is overflow. Grace is overflow. Salvation is overflow. Not God scrambling to meet His own needs, but God inviting us to partake in His abundance.

And because God is relational—because love and community are at the core of who God is—He created us relational. He made us in His image, which means He made us for relationship.

### **You cannot image God alone.**

You can possess individual attributes that reflect God—rationality, creativity, moral agency. But you cannot fully image God in isolation. Because God Himself is not isolated. God is community.

This is why the commandments Jesus gives are fundamentally relational:

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40, NASB).

Vertical love (loving God) and horizontal love (loving neighbor). Both essential. Both commanded. Both revealing the relational core of reality.

When we reduce Christianity to "me and Jesus," we're not being biblical. We're being Gnostic. Treating salvation as escape from the material world and other people rather than redemption of our relationships with God and each other.

### **WHAT WE'VE FORGOTTEN**

We've forgotten that community isn't a nice addition to Christianity. It's central to Christianity.

We've forgotten that we're made in the image of a relational God, which means we're made for relationship.

We've forgotten that "it is not good for man to be alone" applied in paradise, so it certainly applies in this broken world.

We've forgotten that diversity isn't a result of the Fall; it's part of God's original design.

We've forgotten that unity doesn't mean uniformity; it means diverse people choosing to be one.

We've forgotten what Adam knew instinctively when he saw Eve: **"Finally! Someone like me but not just like me. Someone who corresponds to me, faces me, partners with me."**

That's what we're all searching for. Not clones. Not yes-men. Not people who think exactly like us.

Partners. Ezer kenegdo. People who are like us in essential ways (image-bearers, family members, siblings in Christ) but different in beautiful ways (gifts, perspectives, experiences, personalities).

People we can do life with. Bear burdens with. Celebrate with. Mourn with. Be family with.

This is what we've lost. This is what we need to recover.

Not because it's a good idea or a helpful program. But because it's written into the fabric of creation. Because it's who God is. Because it's how we're made. Because it's the plan from the beginning.

### **THE INVITATION BACK TO DESIGN**

In the next chapters, we'll explore what happened to this design (sin fractured everything) and how God is restoring it (redemption recreates community). We'll see how the church is meant to be the new humanity, the renewed family, the reconstituted household of God.

But for now, I want you to sit with this truth:

**You were made for community because you're made in the image of a God who is community.**

Your need for connection isn't weakness. It's design.

Your desire for belonging isn't neediness. It's the image of God in you crying out for what you were made for.

Your loneliness in isolation isn't failure. It's your soul recognizing that something essential is missing.

When God looked at Adam—sinless, perfect, in right relationship with his Creator—and said, "It is not good for the man to be alone," He wasn't critiquing Adam. He was describing reality.

You are not made to be alone.

Not spiritually (you need God).

Not personally (you need people).

Both. Always both.

The Super-spiritual person who says, "I just need Jesus" is wrong. God Himself said you need more than Him.

The secular person who says, "I just need good friends" is wrong. Human relationship was designed to flow from and point toward divine relationship.

You need both. And when you have both—when you're walking with God and doing life with His people—you're finally living according to your design.

You're imaging the Trinity.

You're fulfilling Genesis 1:26-27.

You're becoming what God intended from the beginning.

Not alone. Never alone.

In community. In family. In the diverse, unified, beautiful mess of people who are learning to love like the Father, Son, and Spirit love.

That's the design.

Now let's explore what happened when sin entered the picture—and how God is putting the pieces back together.

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*"Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'"*

— Genesis 2:18 (NASB)

*"God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."*

— Genesis 1:27 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 5: THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE

My daughter once asked me a question I wasn't prepared for.

We were working through our reconciliation process, sitting across from each other in a coffee shop, navigating the difficult terrain of past wounds and present healing. She'd just told me about something that happened in her childhood—a moment I'd missed because I was at a church leadership meeting.

"Dad," she said, "why was everyone else's family more important than ours?"

I didn't have a good answer. The truth was complicated and painful: I'd given the church family priority over my biological family. I'd served "the household of God" while neglecting the household God had given me first.

That conversation haunts me because it reveals a distortion we've created in modern church culture: **we've separated "church family" from "biological family" as if they're competing commitments rather than integrated realities.**

But Scripture doesn't separate them. In the biblical world, household and faith were inseparable. Your family was your primary faith community. Your home was where discipleship happened. The people you lived with were the people you worshiped with.

When the Bible talks about "the household of God," it's not speaking metaphorically. It's describing an actual lived reality that the original readers would have immediately understood.

Let me show you what I mean.

### ABRAHAM'S HOUSEHOLD: FAITH AS A FAMILY SYSTEM

When we think of Abraham, we usually think of him as an individual—"the father of faith," the one who believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. We focus on his personal relationship with God, his individual obedience, his solo journey.

But that's not how the text describes him.

Genesis 14 gives us a glimpse into the reality of Abraham's household. When his nephew Lot is taken captive, Abraham responds: "When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit" (Genesis 14:14, NASB).

**Three hundred and eighteen trained men. Born in his house.**

This isn't just Abraham and Sarah and baby Isaac wandering around with a tent and some sheep. This is a massive extended household—servants, their families, generations born into Abraham's household, trained warriors who owe allegiance to the family patriarch.

Abraham's household was essentially a mobile village. When God spoke to Abraham, He was speaking to the head of this entire community. When Abraham believed, he led his household in that belief. When Abraham made covenants with God, the household was included.

Look at Genesis 17, when God establishes the covenant of circumcision:

"This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised... And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants" (Genesis 17:10, 12, NASB).

The covenant sign wasn't just for biological descendants. It included servants, those bought with money, foreigners integrated into the household. **If you were part of Abraham's oikos, you were part of the covenant community.**

This is how faith worked in the Old Testament: **household-based, multi-generational, integrated into the fabric of daily life.**

### **THE PASSOVER MODEL: HOUSEHOLD CELEBRATION**

When God established the Passover—the foundational salvation event of the Old Testament—how did He structure it?

By household.

"Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, 'On the tenth of this month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers' households, a lamb for each household'" (Exodus 12:3, NASB).

Each household. Not each individual. The family unit was the basic building block of covenant community.

"Now if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his neighbor nearest to his house are to take one according to the number of persons in them" (Exodus 12:4, NASB).

Even here—if your household was too small, you combined with another household. You didn't celebrate alone. You didn't have a personal, private Passover. You gathered with family, shared the meal, told the story together.

And who was included? "All the congregation of Israel" (v. 6). But what constituted that congregation? Households. The nation of Israel was a federation of extended families, organized tribally, structured around the household unit.

The Passover instructions continue: "You shall observe this event as an ordinance for you and your children forever" (Exodus 12:24, NASB).

Multi-generational. The parents experienced it. The children participated. The story was told and retold. Faith was transmitted through the household system, at the family table, in the context of shared meals and shared memory.

"And when your children say to you, 'What does this rite mean to you?' you shall say, 'It is a Passover sacrifice to the LORD who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt'" (Exodus 12:26-27, NASB).

The children ask. The parents answer. The household becomes the vehicle for theological education, spiritual formation, covenant transmission.

**This is oikos faith.**

### **JOSHUA'S DECLARATION: HOUSEHOLD COMMITMENT**

One of the most quoted verses in evangelical Christianity is Joshua 24:15, usually pulled out of context to make a point about individual decision:

"Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (NASB).

We love the individual choice part: "choose for yourselves." We emphasize personal decision, individual commitment, private faith.

But notice what Joshua actually says: **"As for me and my house."**

Not "as for me, personally, privately, individually." Me and my house. My household. My family. The entire extended unit under my leadership and care.

Joshua isn't separating his personal faith from his household's faith. He's declaring a household commitment. He's saying, "I'm the head of this family system, and I'm leading us—all of us, together—to serve the LORD."

This would have made perfect sense to the original audience. Of course faith is a household matter. Of course the patriarch leads the family in covenant obedience. Of course children and servants and extended family members are included in the declaration.

But we've individualized it. We read it as, "I, personally, have made my choice. Now you all need to make yours, individually, privately."

That's not what the text says. And it's not how faith functioned in the biblical world.

## **DEUTERONOMY 6: THE HOUSEHOLD AS DISCIPLESHIP ENGINE**

The most comprehensive picture of Old Testament household faith comes in Deuteronomy 6:

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (vv. 4-5, NASB).

This is the Shema—the central confession of Jewish faith. But notice what immediately follows:

"These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up" (vv. 6-7, NASB).

**Faith transmission happens in the household, in the ordinary rhythms of daily life.**

Not at the temple once a week. Not in a religious school separate from home. At home. In the house. While sitting, walking, lying down, rising up. Morning and evening. Coming and going. In the normal flow of family life.

"You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (vv. 8-9, NASB).

The home becomes saturated with reminders of God's word. The household space itself is sanctified, marked, dedicated to covenant faithfulness.

This is integrated faith. Not compartmentalized religion that you practice at church and forget at home. Not spiritual activity separated from daily life. Faith woven into the fabric of household existence.

Parents teaching children. Grandparents telling stories. Shared meals becoming teaching moments. Work and rest and play all infused with awareness of God's presence and commands.

**The household was God's primary discipleship strategy in the Old Testament.**

Not programs. Not professionals. Not institutions. The family. The home. The daily interactions between people doing life together.

## **WHEN THE HOUSEHOLD SYSTEM FAILED**

But we need to acknowledge the shadow side. The Old Testament household system was often broken, dysfunctional, oppressive.

Abraham's household included Hagar, the servant Sarah used as a surrogate and then abused and expelled. Isaac's household was fractured by favoritism—Isaac loved Esau, Rebekah loved Jacob, and the family nearly destroyed itself through deception and rivalry. Jacob's household was a disaster of competing wives, traumatized sons, violence, and betrayal.

The household model could perpetuate injustice. Women and children had little agency. Servants and slaves could be exploited. The patriarch's authority could become tyranny. Multi-generational faith could become religious obligation without genuine relationship.

And when the household system worked well, it worked *really* well. But when it failed, it failed catastrophically—passing down not just faith but trauma, not just covenant but curse, not just blessing but bondage.

By the first century, the household system was still intact structurally, but spiritually it had become rigid, exclusive, nationalistic. Being born into the right family, the right tribe, the right nation was everything. Bloodline determined belonging. Ethnicity determined access to God.

The oikos had become a cage.

And into this context came Jesus.

### **JESUS REDEFINES FAMILY**

Jesus' teaching about family is, frankly, disturbing if you read it carefully.

"If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26, NASB).

Hate your family? That seems to contradict everything we've just established about household faith.

Or this: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household" (Matthew 10:34-36, NASB).

Jesus brings division in families? He sets family members against each other? How does this square with "as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD"?

Or this scene: "Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, 'Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You.' Answering them, He said, 'Who are My mother and My brothers?' Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, 'Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother'" (Mark 3:31-35, NASB).

Jesus redefines family. He relativizes biological bonds. He places discipleship above kinship.

Scot McKnight, the New Testament scholar, writes: **"Jesus relativized the biological family."**

He didn't eliminate it. Didn't demonize it. But He subordinated it to a higher loyalty, a deeper bond, a more fundamental family: **the household of God constituted by doing the Father's will.**

This was radical. Scandalous. Dangerous.

In a culture where family was everything—your identity, your security, your economic survival, your social location—Jesus said, "Following Me takes precedence. And following Me creates a new family that transcends biology."

Look at how Jesus builds this new family:

**He calls twelve disciples**—reconstituting Israel, creating a new household with Himself as the head. They leave their biological families (fishing businesses, tax offices, homes) to follow Him. They become brothers to each other, learning to live together, eat together, travel together, carry each other's burdens.

**He sends them out in pairs**—never alone, always in community, practicing interdependence from the beginning.

**He teaches them to pray "Our Father"**—not "My Father," but Our Father. Shared access. Corporate identity. Family language.

**He eats with sinners and outcasts**—creating table fellowship with people excluded from proper Jewish households. Tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans. He brings them into family, gives them belonging, treats them as honored guests.

**He creates new family bonds at the cross.** This moment is often overlooked but it's profound. Jesus, in His final moments, looks at His mother Mary and the disciple John and says:

"When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' From that hour the disciple took her into his own household" (John 19:26-27, NASB).

Jesus creates a new family bond. Mary becomes John's mother. John becomes Mary's son. Not biologically. Not legally. By Jesus' word, in His authority, as an act of creating family where there was none before.

This is the new oikos. Family constituted not by blood but by the blood of Christ. Not by ethnicity but by faith. Not by biological birth but by new birth.

**Jesus didn't abolish the household model. He transformed it.**

## **THE EARLY CHURCH AS HOUSEHOLD**

When the church is born at Pentecost and begins to spread, how does it organize itself?

According to households.

Look at the conversion accounts in Acts:

**Cornelius:** "Now send men to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here... So Cornelius called together his relatives and close friends" (Acts 10:5, 24, NASB). Peter preaches, the Holy Spirit falls, and the whole household is baptized.

**Lydia:** "A woman named Lydia... was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay'" (Acts 16:14-15, NASB). Household baptism. Household hospitality. The church meeting in her house.

**The Philippian jailer:** "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household... and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household" (Acts 16:31, 33, NASB). Again, household conversion. Household baptism. Household faith.

These aren't isolated individuals making private decisions. These are heads of households bringing their entire oikos into the covenant community. Servants, children, extended family—all included.

**And where does the church meet?**

In houses. In the oikos.

Paul greets "Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus... also greet the church that is in their house" (Romans 16:3, 5, NASB).

He sends greetings through "Nympha and the church that is in her house" (Colossians 4:15, NASB).

He writes to Philemon about "the church in your house" (Philemon 1:2, NASB).

The church didn't meet in a separate religious building. It met in homes. In the space where people already did life together. The household became the church, and the church functioned as household.

This wasn't just a practical accommodation because they didn't have church buildings yet. This was theological. Intentional. The oikos was the basic unit of church life.

## **ACTS 2: THE HOUSEHOLD PATTERN**

The most complete picture of early church life comes in Acts 2:

"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (v. 42, NASB).

Teaching. Fellowship (koinonia—deep sharing, partnership). Breaking bread. Prayer. The elements of household life.

"All those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need" (vv. 44-45, NASB).

This is oikos economics. What's mine is ours. Your need is my responsibility. We share resources because we're family.

"Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people" (vv. 46-47, NASB).

### **From house to house. Daily. Shared meals. Integrated life.**

This wasn't a worship service. This was family doing life together. Eating together. Praying together. Teaching and learning together. Sharing resources. Caring for needs.

They met in the temple (the public, corporate gathering), but the real action happened house to house—in the intimate space of the oikos, where you can't hide, where you're known, where life is shared.

Think about what "breaking bread from house to house" means practically:

You know whose kids are sick because you were at their house yesterday.  
You know who lost their job because you shared a meal with them last night.  
You know who's struggling in their marriage because you're in their home regularly and can sense the tension.  
You know who's grieving, who's celebrating, who needs help, who has surplus to share.  
You know because you're there. Daily. Not as guests for a scheduled meeting, but as family doing life together.

## THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

Paul makes the household language explicit when writing to Timothy:

"I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15, NASB).

The household of God. The oikos theou. Not a metaphor. The actual lived reality of church.

This is why Paul's instructions about church leadership use household management as the qualification:

"He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)" (1 Timothy 3:4-5, NASB).

The logic is clear: **leading the church is like leading a household.** If you can't manage your oikos, you can't lead the church, because the church is an oikos.

When Paul describes church discipline, he uses family language:

"Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Timothy 5:1-2, NASB).

Fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters. Family. That's how you relate to each other. That's how you correct, encourage, rebuke, restore. As family.

When he addresses economic responsibility, it's in household terms:

"But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8, NASB).

Your household includes biological family, but in the New Testament context, it also includes your church family. The believing community is your oikos. Caring for them isn't optional charity; it's fundamental obligation.

## WHAT WE'VE LOST

Let me be honest about what this creates in me: grief.

Grief for what we've lost. Grief for what we've settled for. Grief for the gap between the biblical vision and our current reality.

**We've lost daily proximity.** We see our church family once or twice a week for a few hours. We don't share meals daily. We don't know the rhythms of each other's lives. We're strangers who happen to attend the same events.

**We've lost economic sharing.** "All things in common" sounds like communism to us, not community. We're fiercely protective of private property, personal finances, individual resources. The idea of selling possessions to meet someone else's need feels extreme, radical, cultish.

**We've lost household integration.** Our homes are private spaces. We gather in specialized buildings designed for religious activities. We've separated the sacred (church) from the secular (home), when the biblical model integrated them.

**We've lost multi-generational faith transmission.** We've professionalized spiritual formation—Sunday school teachers, youth pastors, children's ministry directors. Parents outsource discipleship to the church staff instead of doing it at home, in daily life, from house to house.

**We've lost the small scale.** House churches were inherently limited in size. You can't fit 500 people in a home. But that limitation was a feature, not a bug. It kept community intimate, relationships real, needs visible.

I'm not romanticizing the early church. They had problems—read 1 Corinthians. They struggled with division, immorality, theological confusion, personality conflicts, favoritism.

But they struggled *together*. In proximity. As household. And that proximity, messy as it was, formed them into the people who turned the world upside down.

## A CONTEMPORARY GLIMPSE

I know a family—I'll call them the Johnsons—who've tried to recover some of this household model.

They bought a larger house intentionally. Four bedrooms, but they only have two kids. They use the extra space to host.

On any given week, there's a college student living with them temporarily. Or a single mom escaping domestic violence. Or an elderly church member who can't live alone anymore but doesn't want a nursing home.

They eat dinner together every night—whatever's in the house, whatever combination of biological family and extended household members. They pray together. They read Scripture. They talk about their days.

They've created a mini-oikos.

It's not perfect. It's often inconvenient. Privacy is limited. Conflicts arise. Different people have different standards for cleanliness, noise levels, personal boundaries.

But the kids are learning something profound: **family isn't just biology. It's chosen commitment. It's hospitality. It's making room for the stranger, the broken, the needy.**

And the people they host? Many have come to faith in that household. Not through a program or an evangelistic presentation. Through experiencing family. Through being included, cared for, seen, valued. Through encountering what the household of God is supposed to look like.

This is what we're called to recover. Not necessarily the exact form (not everyone can host people in their homes). But the spirit. The integration. The commitment to being family, not just attending church.

## THE INVITATION

The biblical household model calls us to reimagine church.

Not as an event we attend but as a family we belong to.

Not as a service we consume but as a household we're responsible for.

Not as isolated individuals who happen to share a building on Sundays but as brothers and sisters sharing life daily.

This requires sacrifice. Privacy. Autonomy. Control. Convenience.

But it offers something we're desperately hungry for: **belonging. Real, intimate, daily, messy, beautiful belonging.**

The kind of belonging where your need becomes my responsibility.

Where your joy becomes my celebration.

Where your burden becomes one I help carry.

Where your children become part of my extended family.

Where my home becomes a place you're welcome anytime.

This is the household of God. This is oikos faith. This is what Scripture describes and what we're called to embody.

In the next chapter, we'll explore what it means that God has *placed* us in this household—not randomly, not accidentally, but intentionally and specifically. We'll look at 1 Corinthians 12:18 and grapple with the scandalous truth that you don't get to choose your family. God does.

But for now, let the vision settle: Church as household. Faith as family. Relationship as the medium of transformation.

It's what we were made for. It's what we've lost. And by God's grace, it's what we can recover.

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*"I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth."*

— 1 Timothy 3:15 (NASB)

*"Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart."*

— Acts 2:46 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 6: PLACED BY THE SPIRIT

There's a man in my church—I'll call him Tom—who drives me absolutely crazy.

He talks too much in meetings. He dominates conversations. He's always got an opinion, usually delivered with absolute certainty, often about topics he doesn't fully understand. He interrupts. He mansplains. He's oblivious to social cues that everyone else stopped listening ten minutes ago.

I've tried everything. Gentle redirection. Direct conversation. Having others talk to him. Nothing changes.

And here's the thing: Tom isn't going anywhere. He's been at this church for fifteen years. He's committed, faithful, generous. He loves Jesus. He serves consistently. He's just... exhausting.

A few years ago, in a moment of pastoral frustration, I complained to my wife: "I wish Tom would just find another church that's a better fit for him."

She looked at me with that expression that means I've said something particularly stupid and asked: "What if God placed Tom in your church specifically because you need to learn to love people who annoy you?"

I wanted to argue. But I couldn't. Because she was right.

And because of what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired" (1 Corinthians 12:18, NASB).

Not "as they desired." Not "as I desired." **As He desired.**

God placed Tom in my congregation. God placed me in Tom's life. And neither of us gets to opt out just because it's uncomfortable.

This is one of the most challenging—and most transformative—truths about the household of God: **You don't get to choose your family.**

## GOD'S PLACEMENT, NOT OUR PREFERENCE

Let's sit with 1 Corinthians 12:18 for a moment because it wrecks our entire consumer approach to church:

"But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired" (NASB).

**Three critical words: God. Placed. Desired.**

Not: "You shopped around and found the body that best fit your preferences."

Not: "You chose where to belong based on programming and worship style."

Not: "You selected a church that aligned with your demographic and comfort level."

### **God placed you. According to His desire. His sovereign choice. His purposeful arrangement.**

This runs counter to everything we've been taught about church selection. We're told to:

- Visit multiple churches before committing
- Find the "right fit" for our family
- Choose based on preaching style, music preference, children's programs
- Leave if our "needs aren't being met"

But Paul says God does the placing. God makes the assignments. God determines where each member belongs and what function they serve.

Think about what this means:

**The difficult person in your small group?** God placed them there. Not accidentally. Not because they slipped through the screening process. God put them there, next to you, for His purposes.

**The church that's not quite what you wanted?** Maybe God placed you there precisely because it's not what you wanted. Maybe your comfort isn't His highest priority. Maybe your transformation is.

**The people who are different from you—different age, different background, different political views, different worship preferences?** God placed you together. Intentionally. For the common good.

This is either terrifying or liberating, depending on how you look at it.

**Terrifying** because you can't escape to a more comfortable community. You're stuck with these people. You can't church-hop your way to perfect compatibility.

**Liberating** because you're free from the exhausting search for the ideal church. You can stop looking for the perfect fit and start accepting God's placement. You can trust that where you are is where you're meant to be—at least for now.

## **THE SCANDAL OF CHRIST-ASSIGNED RELATIONSHIPS**

Jesus said something similar to His disciples: "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain" (John 15:16, NASB).

The disciples didn't choose Jesus. They didn't submit applications and go through an interview process. Jesus walked by and said, "Follow Me." And they did.

But more scandalous: **they didn't choose each other.**

Think about the Twelve. Jesus deliberately chose people who would never have chosen each other:

**Simon the Zealot**—a revolutionary who wanted to overthrow Rome by force.

**Matthew the tax collector**—a collaborator with Rome, getting rich off his own people's oppression.

These two men, under normal circumstances, would have been enemies. Matthew represented everything Simon despised. Simon represented the chaos and violence Matthew had opted out of.

But Jesus put them in the same small group. Made them brothers. Forced them to do life together, travel together, eat together, sleep in the same spaces, depend on each other.

**Peter**—impulsive, loud, passionate, always talking.

**John**—contemplative, quiet, reflective.

Different personalities. Different processing styles. Different ways of following Jesus.

**Thomas**—the skeptic, always questioning, needing proof.

**The other disciples**—who must have been frustrated by his constant doubts.

Jesus put them all together. Fishermen and tax collectors. Zealots and collaborators. Thinkers and doers. Believers and doubters. Young and old.

**And He said, "This is your family now. Learn to love each other."**

That's the scandal. We don't get to curate our spiritual community. We don't get to select only people who think like us, vote like us, worship like us, irritate us minimally.

God does the selecting. And He often puts together people who clash, who grate on each other, who have to work hard to get along.

Why? **Because transformation happens through friction, not comfort.**

You don't grow when everyone agrees with you. You grow when someone challenges your assumptions, questions your blind spots, sees the world differently and makes you reconsider your perspective.

You don't mature in sanctification when everyone is just like you. You mature when you have to extend grace to someone who's difficult, when you have to forgive someone who's wounded you, when you have to love someone who's genuinely hard to love.

**God places us with difficult people because we're all difficult people.**

### **LEARNING TO LOVE THE UNLOVELY (BECAUSE WE ARE)**

Here's what I've learned through twenty-plus years of ministry and my own painful journey of reconciliation with my daughters:

**Everyone is someone's "difficult person."**

I think Tom is exhausting. But I guarantee there are people in my congregation who find me exhausting. My intensity, my pastoral directness, my impatience with small talk, my tendency to turn every conversation into a theological discussion.

I'm someone's Tom.

You are too.

There's someone in your church who finds you annoying. Who wishes you'd be different. Who gets frustrated by your personality quirks, your communication style, your pace, your preferences.

This is humbling. And necessary.

Because when we recognize that we're all difficult in different ways, we stop dividing the world into "easy people I want to be around" and "difficult people I want to avoid."

We're all a mix. We all bring gifts and baggage. We all contribute value and create friction. We all bless and burden the body.

**And we all need grace.**

The grace I need from people who find me difficult is the same grace I need to extend to people I find difficult.

The patience I want when I'm being obtuse is the patience I need to show when someone else is being obtuse.

The forgiveness I crave when I mess up is the forgiveness I need to offer when others mess up.

This is what Paul means by "bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2, NASB). Not tolerating in a begrudging, teeth-gritted way. But genuinely *bearing*—carrying the weight of each other's weaknesses, personality quirks, rough edges.

Why? Because we're family. And family doesn't get to pick and choose who belongs based on who's easy to love.

### **BONHOEFFER'S WARNING**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his profound little book *Life Together*, wrote something that stopped me in my tracks:

**"The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community."**

Read that again. Let it sink in.

We all have a dream of what Christian community should look like. A vision of the ideal church, the perfect small group, the harmonious family of God.

In my dream, everyone is:

- Emotionally healthy and self-aware
- Theologically sound but graciously flexible
- Committed but not needy
- Vulnerable but not dramatic
- Different enough to be interesting but similar enough to be comfortable

It's a beautiful dream. It's also completely fictional.

And Bonhoeffer says if I love that dream—if I'm more committed to my ideal than to the actual people God has placed in my life—I'll destroy the real community God is building.

Because real community includes Tom. And the anxious woman who needs constant reassurance. And the young guy who asks the same questions every week. And the older couple who resist any change. And the single mom who's always late and stressed. And the intellectual who questions everything. And the simple-faith person who's suspicious of intellectualism.

Real community is messy. Frustrating. Inconvenient. Challenging.

**And it's exactly what God intended.**

Bonhoeffer continues: "Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."

It's already real. Already created. Already here. Not in my idealized dream form, but in the actual, flawed, difficult people God has gathered.

My job isn't to create the perfect community. My job is to **participate in the community God has already created**—which means loving actual people, not idealized versions of them.

This requires death. Death to my preferences. Death to my comfort. Death to my vision of what church should be.

And it leads to resurrection. Resurrection of something I could never create on my own. Resurrection of the diverse, dysfunctional, being-made-divine family that bears God's image precisely because it includes all of us broken people learning to love each other.

## **INTERDEPENDENCE, NOT INDEPENDENCE**

Paul's body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 is brilliant because it shows the absurdity of independence:

"For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body" (vv. 14-16, NASB).

You don't get to opt out because you don't like your function. The foot doesn't stop being part of the body just because it wishes it were a hand. The ear doesn't cease belonging because it's not an eye.

You're in the body. You belong. Your preferences don't change that reality.

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" (v. 17, NASB).

A body of all eyes would be monstrous and useless. A body of all ears would be equally broken. **Diversity isn't a problem to solve; it's essential for function.**

"But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be?" (vv. 18-19, NASB).

Unity doesn't mean uniformity. If we were all the same, we wouldn't be a body—we'd be a tumor, cells reproducing without differentiation, growth without function.

"But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (vv. 20-21, NASB).

This is the verse that destroys our independence. **You cannot say to another member, "I have no need of you."**

You can't dismiss the person who's different from you. You can't exclude the member who makes you uncomfortable. You can't say, "This church would be better without so-and-so."

Because God placed them there. And apparently, you need them—even if you don't understand why yet.

Maybe especially if you don't understand why yet.

### **YOU NEED PEOPLE YOU DON'T LIKE**

Let me be provocative: **You need people in your church you don't particularly like.**

Not abusive people—we'll address boundaries and church discipline later. But people who are simply difficult. Irritating. Different in ways that create friction.

You need them because:

**They reveal your idols.** When someone annoys you, it's often because they're violating an unacknowledged expectation. They're not performing according to your script. They're disrupting your comfort. And that reveals what you're really worshiping—maybe control, maybe predictability, maybe the idol of your own preferences.

**They expose your impatience.** It's easy to be patient with people who are easy. It's easy to be kind to people who reciprocate. But the difficult person shows you the limits of your sanctification. They reveal where you're still operating in the flesh, still demanding your own way, still centered on yourself.

**They force you to practice actual love.** Love that only extends to lovable people isn't love; it's preference. Love that includes the unlovely, the difficult, the irritating—that's agape. That's the love God shows us. That's the love we're called to show each other.

**They teach you to see as God sees.** God looks at you—with all your quirks and flaws and rough edges—and says, "I love you. You're My child. You belong in My family." He doesn't love you because you're easy or impressive or delightful. He loves you because you're His.

The difficult person in your church? God loves them the same way He loves you. God delights in them the same way He delights in you. God placed them in the body as carefully as He placed you.

Learning to see them through God's eyes changes everything.

### **DIFFERENT ROLES, EQUAL VALUE**

One of the most damaging lies in the church is that some roles are more valuable than others.

We elevate the visible: preachers, worship leaders, teachers. We celebrate the impressive: those with dramatic testimonies, powerful gifts, obvious results.

We overlook the invisible: the person who sets up chairs, the one who visits the sick, the prayer warrior nobody knows about, the single mom who faithfully brings her kids week after week.

But Paul says: "On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable" (1 Corinthians 12:22-23, NASB).

The weaker members are **necessary**. Not nice to have. Not helpful in a supporting role. Necessary. Essential. The body can't function without them.

The less honorable members deserve **more abundant honor**. Not equal honor. More honor. Because we tend to overlook them, God calls us to intentionally elevate them.

Think about your physical body. Your pancreas isn't impressive. You can't see it. Most people don't even know what it does. But try living without it. Your liver doesn't get applause, but it performs over 500 vital functions. Your kidneys work silently in the background, filtering your blood, maintaining your electrolyte balance, doing work you never think about until they fail.

The body honors the hidden organs. We protect them. We prioritize their needs. Because we know we can't survive without them.

The same should be true in the body of Christ.

**Ephesians 4:11-16** describes different roles: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers. But notice the purpose: "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (v. 12, NASB).

These roles exist to equip others. To empower the body. Not to create a hierarchy of importance, but to release the whole body into function.

"From whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (v. 16, NASB).

### **Every joint supplies. Every individual part. Proper working of each.**

Not just some. Not only the impressive parts. Every single member contributing according to their design, their gifting, their placement by God.

**Romans 12:3-8** reinforces this: "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (vv. 3-5, NASB).

Don't think too highly of yourself. Why? Because your gift isn't more valuable than another's. Your function isn't more important. God allotted faith, distributed gifts, placed members according to His wisdom.

Then Paul lists gifts: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, showing mercy (vv. 6-8).

**Notice: service is listed alongside prophecy. Giving is listed with teaching. Showing mercy gets the same attention as leading.**

No hierarchy. No ranking. Different functions, equal value.

"There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, NASB).

**Same Spirit. Same Lord. Same God.** Different gifts, different ministries, different effects—but all from the same source, all equally valuable, all necessary for the body to function.

## **THE TRUTH I NEEDED TO LEARN**

Remember Tom, the guy who drives me crazy? Here's what I've learned through him:

**Tom is faithful.** He shows up. Every week. Every event. Every service opportunity. Rain or shine, convenient or inconvenient. He's there. How many people can I say that about?

**Tom is generous.** He gives sacrificially. I know this because I've seen his giving records as pastor. He makes a modest income, but he tithes faithfully and gives above that to meet special needs. He's never asked for recognition. He just gives.

**Tom cares deeply.** He visits people in the hospital. He checks on those who've missed church. He remembers birthdays. He prays for people by name. He's not just showing up; he's paying attention.

**Tom has gifts I don't have.** He's excellent with technology. He's patient with elderly folks who need help. He's willing to do tedious tasks that would bore me to tears. He fills gaps I can't fill.

My problem isn't that Tom is deficient. My problem is that Tom is different from me. He processes differently. He interacts differently. He expresses care differently.

And God placed him in my church—not to punish me, but to **complete** what's lacking. To provide what I can't provide. To love people in ways I can't love them.

I don't have to become Tom's best friend. I don't have to enjoy long conversations with him. But I do have to:

- Honor him as a brother
- Recognize his value in the body
- Protect him from my frustration
- Learn what God wants to teach me through him
- Trust that God placed him here for good reasons

That's not tolerance. That's family.

## **WHEN GOD'S PLACEMENT FEELS WRONG**

I need to acknowledge the hard question: What if God's placement feels genuinely wrong? What if the church you're in is toxic? What if the "difficult person" is actually abusive? What if staying means harm?

This is where we need nuance. God's sovereignty in placement doesn't mean we're trapped in unhealthy situations.

**Sometimes leaving is faithful obedience.** If a church is teaching heresy, practicing abuse, enabling sin, or creating danger—leaving may be the right response.

**Sometimes staying is faithful obedience.** If a church is simply imperfect (which all are), if people are simply difficult (which all are), if you're uncomfortable but not unsafe—staying may be where growth happens.

The question isn't "Is this hard?" The question is "Is this harmful?"

Hard is often where God does His deepest work. Harmful is where we need to set boundaries or leave.

How do you tell the difference?

**Hard challenges your preferences.** Harmful violates your dignity.

**Hard stretches you.** Harmful breaks you.

**Hard asks for growth.** Harmful demands compliance with sin.

**Hard creates friction.** Harmful creates trauma.

If you're being spiritually abused, manipulated, controlled, or endangered—leave. Get help. Find safety. God doesn't ask you to stay in abusive systems.

But if you're simply annoyed, uncomfortable, or stretched—that might be exactly where God wants you. That might be His placement working as designed.

**We'll explore this more deeply when we discuss church discipline and healthy boundaries in later chapters.** For now, know this: God's placement is real, but so are situations where leaving is the right and godly choice.

## THE BEAUTIFUL DIFFICULTY

Here's what I'm learning to embrace: **The difficulty is part of the design.**

God didn't place us with difficult people by accident. He didn't make a mistake when He put the introvert and the extrovert in the same small group. He didn't overlook the personality clash when He brought the liberal and the conservative into the same congregation.

He knows what He's doing. And what He's doing is sanctification through community.

The easy community wouldn't change me. The comfortable church wouldn't challenge me. The curated group of people exactly like me wouldn't reveal my blind spots, expose my selfishness, or teach me to love beyond my natural capacity.

But Tom does. And the anxious woman does. And the questioning skeptic does. And the enthusiastic extrovert who exhausts my introverted soul does.

They're all gifts. Difficult gifts. Uncomfortable gifts. Gifts I wouldn't have chosen for myself.

But gifts nonetheless. From a God who loves me too much to leave me as I am. Who places me with exactly the people I need—not to make me happy, but to make me holy.

Not to give me my dream community, but to build the real community that bears His image.

Diverse. Dysfunctional. Being made divine.

One difficult person at a time.

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*"But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired."*

— 1 Corinthians 12:18 (NASB)

*"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain."*

— John 15:16 (NASB)

*"And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"*

— 1 Corinthians 12:21 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 7: SIN BROKE EVERYTHING (INCLUDING US)

The elder board meeting had been going for two hours. We were discussing a difficult personnel decision, and tensions were high. Different perspectives, different priorities, different visions for how to move forward.

Then Mike, one of our longest-serving elders, said something that changed the temperature in the room:

"You know what? I think we need to just admit something. We're all bringing our own baggage to this conversation. I know I am. My father was fired from a church staff position when I was a kid, and it devastated our family. So when we talk about letting someone go, even for good reasons, I feel it in my gut. I'm probably not as objective as I should be."

Silence. Then another elder: "My dad was a pastor who refused to fire an abusive youth worker because he was afraid of conflict. Kids got hurt. So I probably err on the side of acting too quickly."

One by one, we went around the table. Each elder named the wound, the family pattern, the broken place they were bringing to the discussion.

We didn't solve the problem that night. But something shifted. We stopped pretending to be objective, wise, spiritually mature leaders who had it all figured out. We acknowledged what was true: **we were broken people trying to make a decision about a broken situation in a broken church in a broken world.**

And once we named that reality, we could actually help each other. We could say, "Hey, I think your family wound is making you overly cautious here" or "I notice you're reacting strongly—is this triggering something from your past?"

We became a community of wounded healers trying to lead other wounded people toward a God who specializes in putting broken things back together.

That's what this chapter is about: **acknowledging that sin broke everything, including us, and that our dysfunction isn't a disqualifier from community—it's the reason we desperately need it.**

## THE FALL AND FAMILY FRACTURE

Let's go back to the beginning. Back to the moment everything shattered.

Genesis 3 is horrifying not because of the serpent or the fruit or even the disobedience itself, but because of what happens immediately after. Watch how quickly perfect relationship deteriorates:

**Before the Fall:** "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25, NASB).

Naked—physically, emotionally, spiritually. Fully known, fully seen, fully accepted. No hiding, no shame, no fear of rejection. Perfect intimacy. Perfect trust. Perfect vulnerability.

This is what we were made for.

**After the Fall:** "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings" (Genesis 3:7, NASB).

The first response to sin? **Covering. Hiding. Creating barriers between themselves and each other.**

They're still married. Still the only two humans on earth. Still perfect for each other in every biological and complementary way. But now there's distance. Shame. The awareness that being fully known might mean being rejected.

Then God shows up: "They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8, NASB).

**Hiding from God.** The relationship that was perfect—walking together in the garden, talking freely—is now characterized by fear and concealment.

God calls out: "Where are you?" (v. 9).

Not because God doesn't know. Because Adam needs to acknowledge where he is—physically hidden, spiritually broken, relationally fractured.

Adam's response reveals how quickly sin corrupts relationship: "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself" (v. 10, NASB).

Fear. Shame. Hiding. The perfect intimacy is gone.

And then comes the moment that defines human relationships ever since:

**The blame-shifting begins.**

"The man said, 'The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate'" (v. 12, NASB).

Read that carefully. Adam doesn't just blame Eve. He blames God ("the woman whom **You** gave") and Eve ("**she** gave me") while minimizing his own agency ("and I ate" as if he was a passive recipient).

Three relationships destroyed in one sentence:

- His relationship with God (blame-shifting to the Creator)
- His relationship with his wife (throwing her under the bus)
- His relationship with himself (refusing to own his choice)

Eve follows the pattern: "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (v. 13, NASB).

It's the serpent's fault. I'm the victim here.

**This is the original family dysfunction.** And every family since has replicated it:

- Hiding our true selves out of shame
- Fearing rejection if we're fully known
- Blaming others rather than owning our sin
- Creating distance to protect ourselves
- Losing the intimacy we were designed for

## **CAIN AND ABEL: THE FIRST BROTHERS**

Genesis 4 shows what happens when dysfunction passes to the next generation.

Cain and Abel bring offerings to the Lord. God accepts Abel's and rejects Cain's. We could discuss why—the quality of the offering, the heart behind it, the theological implications. But what matters for our purposes is Cain's response:

"Cain became very angry and his countenance fell" (Genesis 4:5, NASB).

God intervenes with pastoral care: "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it" (vv. 6-7, NASB).

God is offering Cain a way forward. Do well. Master sin. Don't let anger control you.

But Cain can't hear it. The wound is too raw. The comparison too painful. The jealousy too consuming.

"Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him" (v. 8, NASB).

**The first murder is fratricide.** Brother kills brother. The first blood spilled on earth is family blood.

When God confronts Cain—"Where is Abel your brother?"—Cain responds with the second great family sin: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (v. 9, NASB).

After blame-shifting (Adam and Eve) comes denial and deflection. "I don't know. Not my responsibility. Why are you asking me?"

God's response is devastating: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground" (v. 10, NASB).

**The earth itself cries out at what family has become.** The ground that was meant to receive seed and produce life now receives blood and produces a cry for justice.

And Cain's punishment? "You will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth" (v. 12, NASB).

### **Exile from family. Alienation from community. The loss of belonging.**

This is what sin does. It takes people who were made for connection and makes them wanderers. It takes those designed for family and makes them fugitives.

## **THE GENERATIONS OF DYSFUNCTION**

The rest of Genesis reads like a catalog of family dysfunction:

**Noah**—righteous man, saved humanity, then got drunk and exposed himself. His son Ham saw his nakedness and told his brothers, creating a family rift that led to a curse (Genesis 9:20-27).

**Abraham**—lied about Sarah being his sister (twice), creating dangerous situations. Slept with Hagar at Sarah's insistence, then let Sarah abuse her and drive her away. Sent Ishmael into the wilderness with minimal provisions (Genesis 12, 16, 21).

**Isaac**—repeated his father's lie about his wife. Played favorites with his sons. Was so passive that his wife had to orchestrate a deception to ensure the right son received the blessing (Genesis 26-27).

**Jacob**—manipulated his brother, deceived his father, was himself deceived by his father-in-law, played favorites with his wives and sons, created a household of rivalry and resentment that led his sons to sell their brother into slavery (Genesis 25-37).

**Joseph**—was arrogant about his dreams, which contributed to his brothers' hatred. Later, when he had power in Egypt, he played cruel mind games with his brothers before revealing himself (Genesis 37-45).

**Moses**—raised by Pharaoh's daughter, hidden from his birth family, murdered an Egyptian, fled to the wilderness, married into a foreign family. Led Israel but was forbidden from entering the Promised Land (Exodus 2-Deuteronomy 34).

**David**—committed adultery with Bathsheba, murdered her husband, was a negligent father whose sons raped, murdered, and rebelled against each other and him. His family was characterized by violence, sexual sin, and political intrigue (2 Samuel 11-1 Kings 2).

**Every single patriarch—every major family in Scripture—is profoundly dysfunctional.**

This isn't because the Bible is uniquely interested in scandalous stories. It's because **sin broke the family system at the fundamental level, and every family since bears the marks.**

There are no perfect families in Scripture. None. Not one model household we can point to and say, "That's the ideal. Do it like they did."

Because they're all broken. All fractured. All limping along, trying to love each other despite the damage, carrying wounds forward into the next generation.

## **WE BRING OUR BROKENNESS TO THE TABLE**

Here's what we need to accept: **When we come to church, we don't leave our brokenness at the door. We bring it with us.**

Every single person who walks into a church building is carrying:

- Family-of-origin wounds
- Attachment injuries
- Trauma (acknowledged or unacknowledged)
- Sin patterns (visible or hidden)
- Emotional dysregulation
- Relational dysfunction
- Unhealed grief
- Unresolved anger
- Shame they've never named

**This isn't an exception. This is the norm.**

Paul captures this reality perfectly: "For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want" (Romans 7:19, NASB).

This is the apostle Paul—writer of half the New Testament, church planter, theologian, martyr for the faith. And he's saying, "I can't get it right. I want to do good and I keep doing evil. There's a war inside me, and I'm losing."

If Paul struggled with this internal fracture, what makes us think we won't?

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, NASB).

All. Not most. Not some. **All.** Every person in your church has sinned. Every person falls short. Every person brings brokenness.

The question isn't "Are there broken people in my church?" The question is "How honest are we willing to be about the brokenness that's already here?"

## THE PRESSURE TO PERFORM

The tragedy is that many churches create cultures where you can't be honest about your brokenness.

You're expected to:

- Have your life together
- Project spiritual maturity
- Hide your struggles
- Perform holiness
- Pretend your marriage is fine
- Act like your kids are thriving
- Display victory over sin
- Demonstrate financial stability
- Radiate joy regardless of circumstances

And if you can't maintain the performance? You feel like a failure. An impostor. A fraud who doesn't belong.

So you hide. You put on the mask. You smile on Sunday morning and fall apart on Monday. You serve in ministries while your own life is crumbling. You give spiritual advice you can't follow yourself.

This is exhausting. And it's deadly.

Because **you cannot heal in isolation**. You cannot overcome sin patterns alone. You cannot address addiction, depression, relational dysfunction, or spiritual crisis without safe people who know the truth and love you anyway.

But if church is a place where honesty equals disqualification, where vulnerability equals weakness, where confession equals loss of respect—then no one will be honest, vulnerable, or confessional.

And we'll all suffer in silence, alone in our dysfunction, convinced we're the only ones struggling.

## **THE HOSPITAL, NOT THE MUSEUM**

There's a saying often attributed to various sources: "**The church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners.**"

Think about what that means.

**Museums** display finished works. Perfect artifacts. Things of beauty behind glass. You don't touch. You don't interrupt. You observe from a distance, admire, and move on.

**Hospitals** are messy. They smell like antiseptic and sickness. There's blood. There's pain. People cry out. Machines beep. Nurses rush. Doctors make difficult calls. Nobody looks their best. Everyone is in some stage of injury, illness, or recovery.

But healing happens there. Not in the museum. In the hospital.

The church should be a hospital. A place where:

- We can bring our wounds without shame
- We can name our sickness without judgment
- We can receive treatment even when it's painful
- We can recover slowly, with setbacks, without being rushed
- We're surrounded by other patients who understand
- We have skilled practitioners who know how to help

Instead, too many churches function like museums:

- "Look how holy we are"
- "Admire our perfect families"

- "See our moral excellence"
- "Marvel at our spiritual maturity"
- "Don't touch anything; you might break it"
- "Keep your distance; we're on display"

And the sick, the broken, the struggling? They walk past, peer through the glass, and think, "I don't belong here. These people are fine. I'm too broken for this place."

So they stay away. Or they come and hide. Or they fake it until they can't anymore and then they leave, convinced they're the problem.

But here's the truth: **The people in the museum are just as broken as the people outside. They're just better at hiding it.**

### **THE MYTH OF THE PERFECT CHURCH FAMILY**

Let's demolish the myth once and for all: **There is no perfect church. There never has been. Not even in Acts.**

We romanticize the early church. Acts 2:42-47 is beautiful—devoted to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, sharing all things in common, eating with glad hearts.

But keep reading.

### **Acts 5: Ananias and Sapphira**

The first major sin in the church isn't external persecution. It's internal deception.

Ananias and Sapphira sell property but keep back some of the proceeds while pretending to give it all. They lie to the community. They perform generosity while operating in greed.

Peter confronts them: "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land?... You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3-4, NASB).

And they die. Both of them. Struck dead for dishonesty in community.

This is terrifying. But it reveals something crucial: **The early church had to deal with dishonesty, greed, performance, and deception from the very beginning.**

The perfect church described in Acts 2 had major sin problems by Acts 5.

### **Acts 6: The Overlooked Widows**

"Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food" (Acts 6:1, NASB).

**The church was failing the vulnerable.** Justice issues. Ethnic tensions. Neglect of those who should have been cared for.

And this is while the apostles—the men who walked with Jesus, who were filled with the Spirit at Pentecost—are leading the church.

If the apostolic church struggled with justice and ethnic reconciliation, why do we expect modern churches to have it figured out?

The apostles' response is instructive: They don't deny the problem. They don't spiritualize it away. They don't blame the complainers. They acknowledge the failure and restructure to address it (appointing deacons to ensure fair distribution).

**They dealt with dysfunction by acknowledging it and making changes, not by pretending it wasn't there.**

### **Acts 15: The Jerusalem Council**

Theological conflict threatens to split the church. Do Gentile converts need to be circumcised and follow Jewish law?

"The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate..." (Acts 15:6-7, NASB).

**Much debate.** Not gentle discussion. Not peaceful dialogue. Debate. Conflict. Strong disagreement among the leaders about fundamental theology.

Paul describes this conflict more vividly in Galatians 2. Some were teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul says he "did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour" (Galatians 2:5, NASB). He fought. Resisted. Refused to compromise.

This is the early church—theological conflict, sharp disagreement, having to navigate what's essential and what's not.

### **Galatians 2: Paul Confronts Peter**

This one is stunning. Paul, the former persecutor, publicly rebukes Peter, the lead apostle:

"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the

Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision" (Galatians 2:11-12, NASB).

**Peter—the rock, the one Jesus built the church on—was acting like a hypocrite.** He ate with Gentiles when it was comfortable, but withdrew when the conservatives showed up. He compromised the gospel out of fear of what others would think.

And Paul called him out. Publicly. "I opposed him to his face."

This is apostolic leadership. These are the men filled with the Holy Spirit, empowered to do miracles, writing Scripture under divine inspiration.

And they're having public conflicts, rebuking each other, navigating hypocrisy and fear and compromise.

**If the early church—led by apostles, birthed in the power of Pentecost, described in glowing terms in Acts 2—was this dysfunctional, what makes us think our churches should be perfect?**

### **SPURGEON'S WISDOM**

The quote often attributed to Charles Spurgeon (though its exact origin is unclear) captures this reality: **"If you find a perfect church, don't join it. You'll ruin it."**

The logic is simple: If there's a perfect church somewhere, the moment you join, it's no longer perfect. Because you're broken. Sinful. Dysfunctional.

And so is everyone else.

The search for the perfect church is a search for something that doesn't exist. It's chasing a fantasy. It's loving Bonhoeffer's "dream of community" rather than the real community God has placed you in.

Every church is broken because every church is made up of broken people.

The question isn't "Can I find a church without dysfunction?" The question is "Can I find a church that acknowledges its dysfunction and deals with it honestly?"

### **ACKNOWLEDGE RATHER THAN DENY**

Here's what I've learned in my years of pastoral ministry and personal failure:

**Dysfunctional churches don't acknowledge dysfunction. Healthy churches do.**

The difference isn't that healthy churches have less sin, less conflict, less brokenness. The difference is that healthy churches:

- Name the dysfunction when it appears
- Address problems rather than hide them
- Create space for honest confession
- Practice repentance and reconciliation
- Accept that growth is messy and nonlinear
- Give people permission to be broken while they heal

Dysfunctional churches:

- Deny problems exist
- Blame those who point out dysfunction
- Protect the institution over the vulnerable
- Demand performance and hide failure
- Spiritualize rather than address real issues
- Shame people for struggling

I think about my own failures as a father. The breakdown in my relationship with Amy and Beth didn't happen because I was a uniquely terrible father. It happened because I prioritized ministry over family, because I was emotionally unavailable, because I didn't deal with my own wounds and so I passed them on.

**The path to reconciliation began when I stopped denying and started acknowledging.**

When I stopped saying, "I did my best" and started saying, "I failed you."

When I stopped defending myself and started listening to their hurt.

When I stopped performing the role of good father and started being an honest, broken man trying to repair the damage I'd caused.

**Healing happens in honesty, not in hiding.**

## **WHAT DYSFUNCTION TEACHES US**

Here's the paradox: **Our dysfunction is part of God's plan.**

Not the sin itself—God doesn't cause sin. But the brokenness we carry, the struggles we face, the failures we experience—God uses all of it.

Our dysfunction teaches us:

**Dependence.** When we acknowledge we can't fix ourselves, we're finally ready to depend on God and each other. Self-sufficiency is the enemy of transformation.

**Humility.** When we stop pretending we have it together, we can receive help. Pride keeps us isolated. Humility creates community.

**Compassion.** When we know our own brokenness, we're gentle with others' brokenness. The self-righteous condemn. The broken show mercy.

**Authenticity.** When we stop performing, we can be real. And real is where relationship happens. You can't connect with a mask.

**Grace.** When we experience how desperately we need grace, we become grace-givers. The forgiven forgive. The healed help heal.

Paul understood this: "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NASB).

**Power is perfected in weakness.** Not despite weakness. In it. Through it. Because of it.

God's power shows up most clearly when we stop pretending we're strong and acknowledge we're broken.

## **PERMISSION TO BE BROKEN TOGETHER**

So here's what I want to give you: **Permission to be broken.**

Permission to struggle. Permission to fail. Permission to bring your dysfunction to church and not have it all figured out.

You don't have to perform holiness. You don't have to project maturity. You don't have to hide your sin or pretend your life is fine or act like you've got your marriage, your kids, your finances, your mental health all under control.

You can be a mess. You can be in process. You can be failing and trying and failing again and still trying.

Because that's what everyone else is doing, whether they admit it or not.

The church isn't a collection of people who've arrived. It's a hospital full of patients in various stages of treatment, all of us limping along, all of us carrying wounds, all of us desperately needing the Great Physician and each other.

**Sin broke everything.** Including us. Including the church. Including the family of God.

But here's the hope we'll explore in the coming chapters: **God specializes in redemption.** He takes broken things and makes them beautiful. He takes dysfunctional families and slowly, painfully, graciously transforms them into something that bears His image.

Not by denying the brokenness. By acknowledging it, bringing it into the light, and healing it together.

That's the path forward. Through the dysfunction, not around it.

But first, we have to stop pretending we're not broken.

We have to tell the truth.

We have to be the hospital, not the museum.

And we have to trust that God can work with broken people—because broken people are the only kind there are.

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*"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

— Romans 3:23 (NASB)

*"For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want."*

— Romans 7:19 (NASB)

*"And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'"*

— 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 8: CONFLICT AS SACRED GROUND

I'll never forget the phone call.

It was 11 PM on a Tuesday. A young couple from my church—married less than two years—were in my office, sitting as far apart on the couch as physically possible. Arms crossed. Eyes averted. The tension was so thick I could feel it.

"Tell him what you told me," the husband said to his wife, his voice tight with anger and hurt.

She started crying. "I don't want to do this."

"Well, we're here now."

I let the silence sit for a moment, then said, "Before we go any further, I need to ask you both something. Why are you here? What are you hoping happens tonight?"

The husband spoke first: "I want her to admit she was wrong. I want her to apologize. I want to win this fight."

I turned to the wife. "And you?"

"I want him to understand why I did what I did. I want him to see my side. I want to be right."

I sat back. "Okay. Here's the problem. You both came here to win an argument. And if that's your goal, I can't help you. Because if one of you wins, you both lose. The marriage loses."

They looked at me, confused.

"But," I continued, "if you came here to win your spouse back—to restore the relationship, to understand each other, to rebuild trust—then we have a shot. So let me ask again: Do you want to win the argument, or do you want to win each other?"

That question changed everything.

Because **conflict in the family of God—whether marriage or church—isn't about winning. It's about restoration.**

And restoration is sacred work. Holy ground. The very work of God Himself.

## MATTHEW 18: THE FAMILY PROCESS FOR RECONCILIATION

Jesus gives us the clearest picture of how to handle conflict within the household of God in Matthew 18:15-20. This passage is often treated as a discipline procedure, but it's actually a family reconciliation process.

Notice how it starts: "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother" (Matthew 18:15, NASB).

**Your brother.** Not "the person who wronged you." Not "the defendant in a spiritual court case." Your brother. Family language. Relationship language.

And the goal? **"You have won your brother."** Not "you have proven you're right." Not "you have won the argument." You've won back the relationship. You've restored the family bond. You've brought your brother home.

This completely reframes conflict. The point isn't justice or vindication or being right. The point is reconciliation.

### **Step One: Go Privately (Preserving Dignity)**

"Show him his fault in private."

#### **Private first. Always.**

Not on social media. Not in the church parking lot where everyone can hear. Not in a group text. Not by telling other people first to build your case.

Private. Just the two of you. Face to face.

Why? Because **privacy preserves dignity.**

When you confront someone publicly, you put them in a defensive position. They have to save face. They have to protect their reputation. The issue stops being about truth and becomes about image management.

But private confrontation says: "I care about you more than I care about being right. I care about our relationship more than I care about public vindication. I'm giving you the chance to respond without an audience."

This is hard. Really hard.

Our instinct when we're hurt or offended is to:

- Tell others to get validation ("Can you believe what they did?")
- Build a coalition of support before confronting
- Make sure others know we're the victim
- Protect ourselves by going public

But Jesus says: Go private first. Give them the dignity of a personal conversation. Give them the gift of being able to respond without pressure.

I've seen this work beautifully. A woman in my church felt hurt by something another woman said in a Bible study. Instead of gossiping or withdrawing, she called her: "Hey, can we grab coffee? Something you said the other day stuck with me, and I want to talk about it."

They met. She explained how the comment landed. The other woman hadn't meant it the way it was received. She apologized. They prayed together. The relationship was strengthened, not damaged.

### **Conflict handled privately often leads to quick reconciliation.**

But what if the person won't listen?

### **Step Two: Bring Witnesses (Establishing Truth)**

"But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed" (Matthew 18:16, NASB).

Notice: This isn't about bringing your friends to gang up on the person. The witnesses aren't there to take your side. They're there to:

- Establish the facts (what actually happened vs. what you perceived)
- Provide objectivity (removing emotion and assumption)
- Witness the conversation (holding both parties accountable)
- Help facilitate reconciliation (not just confirm guilt)

The witnesses should be mature believers both parties respect. People known for wisdom, not for taking sides. People committed to truth and restoration, not to defending one person against another.

I've served as a witness in several of these conversations. It's uncomfortable. Often, both parties are partially right and partially wrong. The offended party has legitimate hurt but may have misinterpreted intent. The offending party did something harmful but may not have meant it maliciously.

The witnesses' job is to:

- Help each person hear the other
- Clarify miscommunication

- Identify where sin actually occurred
- Call both parties to repentance where needed
- Point toward reconciliation

This step escalates the seriousness while maintaining focus on relationship. It says: "This matters enough to involve others. But we're still trying to win you back, not condemn you."

### **Step Three: Tell It to the Church (Communal Accountability)**

"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church" (Matthew 18:17, NASB).

This is the step everyone fears and almost no church practices correctly.

"Tell it to the church" doesn't mean announcing someone's sin from the pulpit. It means bringing the matter before the leadership or, in some cases, the congregation, for corporate accountability.

Why? Because **the whole family has a stake in reconciliation.**

When one member refuses to be reconciled, it affects the whole body. The church has both the right and the responsibility to address persistent, unrepentant sin that's damaging the community.

But notice the progression: private → small group → church leadership/congregation. Each step gives more opportunity for repentance and reconciliation. Each step maintains the focus on winning the brother back, not casting them out.

"And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17, NASB).

This sounds like exclusion. And functionally, it is—the unrepentant person is removing themselves from fellowship through their refusal to be reconciled.

But here's the hope: **How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?**

He ate with them. He invited them. He pursued them. He never stopped loving them or hoping for their return.

So even in this final step—where someone is treated as outside the community—the door remains open. The family never stops hoping, praying, and longing for restoration.

**The goal, from beginning to end, is winning your brother.**

**The Authority of Collective Discernment**

Jesus continues: "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18, NASB).

This is corporate authority. When the church acts in unity, guided by the Spirit, following this process, heaven backs the decision.

And then: "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (vv. 19-20, NASB).

**Jesus is present in the process.** When we gather to pursue reconciliation, He's there. When we work through conflict according to His design, He's in the middle of it.

**Conflict handled this way isn't just practical—it's sacramental. Christ is present. Transformation happens.**

#### **EPHESIANS 4: SPEAKING TRUTH IN LOVE WITHIN FAMILY**

Paul gives us the texture of how conflict should sound and feel within the family of God:

"Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:25, NASB).

**Lay aside falsehood.** No more pretending. No more hiding behind niceness. No more saying "I'm fine" when you're not. No more avoiding difficult conversations.

**Speak truth with your neighbor.** Not about them to others. With them. Directly. Honestly.

**Why?** "For we are members of one another." We're connected. What affects you affects me. We can't afford dishonesty because we're family, and family needs truth.

Then Paul addresses anger—the emotion most present in conflict:

"Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity" (vv. 26-27, NASB).

**Anger isn't sinful in itself.** Jesus got angry. God gets angry. Anger is a legitimate response to injustice, harm, betrayal.

But anger can become sinful when:

- We let it control us rather than inform us
- We use it to wound rather than to address wrong
- We hold onto it, letting it fester into bitterness

- We give it room to become resentment, revenge, hatred

"Don't let the sun go down on your anger" doesn't mean you have to resolve everything in 24 hours. It means don't go to bed nursing your anger, rehearsing your grievances, building your case. Address it. Don't let it rot.

Because unaddressed anger gives the devil an opportunity—a foothold, a beachhead, a place to work his destruction.

Paul continues with practical instructions for how we speak in conflict:

"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear" (v. 29, NASB).

**Unwholesome word**—literally "rotten, putrid." Words that tear down, destroy, poison.

**Only what is good for edification**—building up, constructing, strengthening.

**According to the need of the moment**—appropriate to the situation, timely, fitting.

**That it will give grace to those who hear**—even hard truth should be delivered as gift, not weapon.

Warren Wiersbe captured this balance perfectly: "**Truth without love is brutality, and love without truth is hypocrisy.**"

If you speak hard truth without love, you're just being cruel. You're using honesty as permission to wound.

If you claim to love someone but won't tell them truth, you're lying. You're protecting yourself from discomfort while they continue in harm.

**Real love speaks truth. But it speaks truth for the hearer's good, not the speaker's satisfaction.**

Then Paul gets to the heart of conflict resolution:

"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (v. 32, NASB).

**Forgiving each other just as God forgave you.**

How did God forgive you? While you were still sinful. Before you cleaned up your act. While you were His enemy. At great cost to Himself. Completely. Finally. Without keeping a record of wrongs.

That's how we're called to forgive each other.

Not after they've sufficiently groveled. Not when they've proven they've changed. Not partially, keeping a mental file of offenses just in case.

### **Completely. As God forgave us in Christ.**

This doesn't mean we trust immediately. Trust is rebuilt over time through demonstrated change. But forgiveness is a gift we extend regardless of whether it's earned.

## **THE CORINTHIAN MESS**

If you want to feel better about your dysfunctional church, read 1 Corinthians.

Paul is writing to a congregation that is an absolute disaster:

### **Sexual Immorality (1 Corinthians 5)**

"It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife" (1 Corinthians 5:1, NASB).

A man is sleeping with his stepmother. And the church's response? They're arrogant about it. Proud of their "tolerance." Boasting in their "grace."

Paul is horrified: "You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst" (v. 2, NASB).

The church should be grieving. Instead, they're celebrating their open-mindedness.

Paul instructs them to remove the man from fellowship—not as punishment, but as consequence and, hopefully, catalyst for repentance: "I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5, NASB).

The goal? **That his spirit may be saved.** Even in discipline, even in removal, the goal is restoration.

### **Lawsuits Among Believers (1 Corinthians 6)**

"Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?" (1 Corinthians 6:1, NASB).

Church members were suing each other in secular courts. Taking family disputes public. Airing dirty laundry before unbelievers.

Paul is appalled: "Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" (v. 7, NASB).

**Why not rather be wronged?** This is radical family thinking. Better to absorb loss than to destroy relationship. Better to be cheated than to drag your brother through public shame.

### **Divisions and Factions (1 Corinthians 1)**

"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10, NASB).

They're divided into competing factions:

- "I am of Paul"
- "I am of Apollos"
- "I am of Cephas"
- "I am of Christ" (even making Jesus a faction!)

They're treating church leaders like sports teams, creating rivalry and competition within the body.

Paul's response: "Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (v. 13, NASB).

**This is absurd. You're one family. Stop dividing into tribes.**

**And Yet...**

Despite all this—the sexual immorality, the lawsuits, the divisions, the arrogance—Paul still calls them:

**"Saints"** (1 Corinthians 1:2)

**"The church of God"** (1:2)

**"My beloved brethren"** (15:58)

**"Sanctified in Christ Jesus"** (1:2)

He doesn't write them off. He doesn't say, "You're too far gone. You're not really church."

He says: **You're family. You're dysfunctional family, but you're still family. And family doesn't give up on each other.**

Then, right in the middle of this letter addressing all their dysfunction, Paul writes the most beautiful description of love in Scripture:

"Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7, NASB).

Read that in context. Paul is describing the kind of love that can survive the Corinthian mess.

**Love that bears all things**—even sexual scandal.

**Believes all things**—even when people disappoint.

**Hopes all things**—even when the church is fractured.

**Endures all things**—even lawsuits and divisions.

This isn't naive love. This isn't enabling love. This is the tough, enduring, long-suffering love that families need when they're broken.

**This is the love that makes conflict sacred instead of destructive.**

## **WHEN CONFLICT GOES WRONG**

I need to be honest about how conflict can go terribly wrong in churches:

**When we avoid it entirely.** Peace-at-all-costs churches sweep everything under the rug. "Don't rock the boat." "Keep sweet." "Just forgive and move on." Problems fester. Wounds deepen. Eventually, the whole system becomes toxic.

**When we weaponize it.** Some churches love conflict. They use Matthew 18 as a weapon to attack, not restore. They practice "speaking truth" without love. They're brutal, not honest.

**When we make it public too quickly.** Posting about your conflict on social media. Gossiping to build support. Making private matters public before following the process. This destroys trust and makes reconciliation nearly impossible.

**When we refuse reconciliation.** Some people collect grievances. They want to be right more than they want to be reconciled. They nurse their hurt, rehearse their victimhood, and reject every attempt at restoration.

**When leadership abuses the process.** Authoritarian leaders use Matthew 18 to silence criticism. "You haven't followed the proper procedure" becomes a way to avoid accountability. Victims of spiritual abuse are blamed for not confronting "properly."

I've made most of these mistakes. I've avoided hard conversations until they exploded. I've spoken truth without sufficient love. I've been more interested in being right than in restoration.

And I've been on the receiving end of conflict done poorly—confronted publicly for private matters, gossiped about, excluded without process.

**Conflict is dangerous. It can heal or harm. The difference is in how we handle it.**

### **WHEN CONFLICT GOES RIGHT**

But I've also seen conflict handled beautifully, and it's transformative:

**The elders who confronted me about my workaholism.** They came privately, lovingly, honestly. They said, "We're worried about you. We see you burning out. We care about you more than we care about what you produce for this church."

I was defensive at first. But they were patient. They kept loving me. They gave me time off. They restructured my responsibilities. They literally saved my ministry and probably my life.

**That's conflict done right.**

**The couple who admitted they were struggling in their marriage.** They came to the church, asked for help, submitted to counseling and accountability. It was messy. There were setbacks. But the church surrounded them, supported them, walked with them through two years of hard work.

They're still married. Stronger than ever. And they're now the couple other struggling marriages come to for help.

**That's conflict done right.**

**The small group that had a falling out over politics.** Instead of splitting up or avoiding the issue, they committed to working through it. They read Scripture together. They listened to each other's stories. They learned to disagree while remaining family.

They're still together. Still love each other. Still disagree about politics. But they've learned that family transcends political tribe.

**That's conflict done right.**

### **THE SACRED OPPORTUNITY**

Here's what I've learned: **Conflict is where discipleship actually happens.**

You can attend church for years and never really grow. You can serve on committees, participate in Bible studies, give generously, and remain relatively unchanged.

But you can't work through real conflict with another believer without being transformed.

Because conflict requires:

- **Humility**—admitting you might be wrong
- **Courage**—speaking truth when it's uncomfortable
- **Patience**—giving time for change
- **Forgiveness**—releasing debt you're owed
- **Self-examination**—seeing your own sin, not just theirs
- **Love**—choosing relationship over being right

These are the fruits of the Spirit. These are the marks of Christlikeness. And you don't develop them in isolation. You develop them in friction, in conflict, in the hard work of staying in relationship when it would be easier to leave.

### **This is why conflict is sacred ground.**

God uses it to form us into His image. To teach us to love like He loves. To show us grace in action. To build the family He's creating.

The question isn't whether we'll have conflict. We will. We're broken people in close proximity doing life together. Conflict is inevitable.

The question is: **Will we see conflict as opportunity or obstacle?**

**As sacred ground or dangerous territory?**

**As the place where transformation happens or the place where relationships die?**

If we run from conflict, we stay immature. If we engage it poorly, we cause harm. But if we engage it according to Jesus' design—privately, lovingly, patiently, with the goal of restoration—it becomes the very place where God does His deepest work.

It becomes sacred ground. Holy ground. The place where we learn to love like family. Like Jesus. Like God.

And that's worth the risk. Worth the discomfort. Worth the hard work.

Because on the other side of conflict rightly handled is deeper relationship, stronger community, and transformation into the image of Christ.

That's the family God is building. Diverse, dysfunctional, and through the sacred work of conflict, being made divine.

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*"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."*

— Matthew 18:15 (NASB)

*"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."*

— Ephesians 4:32 (NASB)

*"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."*

— 1 Corinthians 13:7 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 9: THE GIFT OF THE DIFFICULT

There's a woman in my church I'll call Susan who has made my life significantly harder for the past three years.

She's not abusive. She's not malicious. She's not even particularly difficult compared to some people I've dealt with in ministry. But she's... a lot.

She emails me multiple times a week with questions, concerns, observations about the sermon, suggestions for improvement, theological questions, and updates on her life that don't really require pastoral response but get one anyway because I'm trying to be a good shepherd.

She corners me after services to continue conversations we've already had. She volunteers for everything but follows through on about half. She has strong opinions about worship style, small group curriculum, the color of the new carpet in the fellowship hall, and pretty much everything else.

She's exhausting.

A few months ago, after a particularly long email thread about why we should change our communion practice, I vented to my wife: "I wish Susan would just... I don't know... move. Or find another church. Or develop a hobby that keeps her busier."

My wife looked at me with that expression that means I'm about to be pastored by the person I'm married to: "What if God gave you Susan specifically to teach you patience?"

I wanted to argue. But she was right.

Because here's what I've discovered through Susan: **I'm impatient with people who don't process quickly. I'm dismissive of concerns I consider unimportant. I'm condescending toward those I consider less theologically sophisticated. I prioritize efficiency over people.**

Susan exposes all of that. Every single week.

**She's sandpaper on my rough edges. And I hate it. And I need it.**

Because iron sharpens iron, and sometimes the sharpening hurts.

## IRON SHARPENS IRON

"Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17, NASB).

This sounds nice until you think about what sharpening actually involves.

**It's friction. Heat. The grinding away of dullness. It's violent, not gentle.**

When a blacksmith sharpens a blade, sparks fly. Metal is removed. The process is loud, abrasive, hot. If the blade could feel, it would hurt.

That's what happens when iron sharpens iron. When people sharpen people.

**The difficult person in your life—the one who grates on you, who challenges you, who reveals your immaturity—is doing the work of sharpening.**

They're not trying to hurt you (usually). But the friction is necessary. The rough edges of their personality against the rough edges of yours creates the abrasion that removes what needs to go.

Think about who sharpens you most:

**Not the people who always agree with you.** They make you comfortable, but they don't make you grow.

**Not the people who think exactly like you.** They confirm your biases but don't challenge your blind spots.

**Not the people who are easy.** They're pleasant to be around but don't push you toward maturity.

**The people who sharpen you are the ones who:**

- Challenge your assumptions
- Question your methods
- See things differently and make you defend your position
- Irritate you enough that you have to examine why you're irritated
- Demand patience you don't naturally have
- Require grace you don't naturally give
- Force you to practice the fruit of the Spirit instead of just knowing about it

I think about Peter and Paul. These two men could not have been more different.

**Peter:** Impulsive, emotional, uneducated fisherman who walked with Jesus for three years. Spoke first, thought later. Made bold declarations followed by spectacular failures.

**Paul:** Educated, intellectual, trained in the Law under Gamaliel. Calculated, careful with words, systematic in his thinking. Came to faith later but contributed half the New Testament.

Put them together and you get friction. We see it in Galatians 2 when Paul publicly rebukes Peter for hypocrisy. We see it in the different emphases of their writings. We can imagine the tension in their interactions.

But **they needed each other.** Paul needed Peter's heart and passion and connection to Jesus' earthly ministry. Peter needed Paul's theological precision and missionary zeal and ability to articulate the gospel to Gentiles.

They sharpened each other. Not always comfortably. But necessarily.

**God uses difficult people to sanctify us because the easy ones won't.**

## **WE CANNOT MATURE IN ISOLATION**

James writes: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4, NASB).

**Consider trials joy.** Not tolerate them. Not endure them grimly. Consider them joy.

Why? Because trials produce endurance. And endurance produces maturity. And maturity is the goal.

But here's what we miss: **Many of our trials come in the form of difficult people.**

Not cancer (though that's a trial). Not job loss (though that's a trial). Not natural disasters or accidents or tragedies.

**The trial that's most consistent, most formative, and most likely to be in your church is the difficult person God has placed in your life.**

The person who talks too much. The one who's always negative. The one who resists change. The one who asks the same questions every week. The one whose personality clashes with yours. The one whose communication style frustrates you. The one whose needs feel bottomless.

**That person is your trial. And God says: Consider it joy.**

Not because the difficulty itself is joyful. But because **what the difficulty is producing in you is the very thing you need to become who God is calling you to be.**

You cannot become patient in isolation. You need someone who tests your patience.

You cannot become loving in isolation. You need someone hard to love.

You cannot become humble in isolation. You need someone who reveals your pride.

You cannot become gracious in isolation. You need someone who requires grace.

**The difficult person isn't an obstacle to your spiritual growth. They're the instrument of it.**

Henri Nouwen, the Catholic priest and spiritual writer, said it perfectly: "**The same Christ who leads us into community also leads us through it.**"

Jesus doesn't just call us to community and then abandon us to figure it out. He walks us through the difficulty of community. He uses the friction, the conflict, the irritation to form us into His image.

**The difficult person is Jesus' gift to you.** Even when it doesn't feel like it. Especially when it doesn't feel like it.

## **THE PERMANENCE OF COVENANT VS. THE CONVENIENCE OF CONTRACT**

Here's where this gets really challenging: **In a consumer culture, we treat church relationships like contracts. But God designed them as covenants.**

**Contracts are:**

- Conditional ("I'll participate as long as you meet my needs")
- Transactional ("I give this, you give that")
- Performance-based ("If you fail to deliver, I'm out")
- Temporary ("Good while it lasts, but not forever")
- Self-protecting ("I reserve the right to exit when it's no longer beneficial")

**Covenants are:**

- Unconditional ("For better or worse")
- Relational ("We're bound together regardless of what we get")
- Grace-based ("Your failure doesn't end our commitment")
- Permanent ("Till death do us part")
- Self-sacrificing ("I give myself for your good")

**Marriage is a covenant.** You don't divorce your spouse when they get sick, when they're difficult, when they disappoint you, when the relationship gets hard. You made a covenant. For better or worse. In sickness and health.

**Church should be a covenant.** But we've turned it into a contract.

"This church no longer meets my needs" → Contract language.

"I'm not being fed" → Contract language.

"I found a better fit" → Contract language.

"We're just going to try out a few churches" → Contract language.

All of it assumes that church is a service we consume, and we're free to switch providers when we find a better deal.

But Paul writes: "not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25, NASB).

**Not forsaking.** Not abandoning. Not leaving when it gets hard.

The word translated "forsaking" (ἔγκαταλείπω - egkataleipō) is the same word used when:

- Jesus quotes Psalm 22 from the cross: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46)
- Paul says, "Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:10)

It means to abandon, desert, leave behind. Strong language. Serious language.

**We're not supposed to desert the assembly.** We're supposed to encourage one another—which requires commitment, presence, relationship over time.

But let me be very clear about something, because I've seen covenant language weaponized to trap people in abusive situations:

**There's a difference between covenant commitment and codependent bondage.**

## **WHEN LEAVING IS APPROPRIATE VS. WHEN IT'S AVOIDANCE**

I need to address this head-on because it's where so much damage happens: **Not all leaving is forsaking. Sometimes leaving is the most faithful thing you can do.**

Let me give you categories:

### **When Leaving is Appropriate (Even Necessary)**

## **1. Abuse**

If a church is abusive—spiritually, emotionally, physically, sexually—you should leave. Get out. Get safe. Get help.

Abuse looks like:

- Leaders who demand unquestioning obedience
- Manipulation through guilt, fear, or shame
- Isolation from family or friends outside the church
- Financial exploitation or control
- Sexual misconduct or grooming
- Covering up abuse to protect the institution
- Using Scripture to justify mistreatment
- Making you feel crazy for questioning (gaslighting)

**This is not difficulty. This is danger.** And God does not ask you to stay in danger.

## **2. Unrepentant, Serious Sin in Leadership**

If church leaders are living in persistent, public, unrepentant sin—especially sexual immorality, financial corruption, or abuse of power—and the church refuses to address it, you may need to leave.

Not at the first whiff of scandal. Not based on rumor. But when it's confirmed, serious, and being covered up or ignored.

## **3. Heresy**

If a church abandons core Christian doctrine—the deity of Christ, the resurrection, salvation by grace through faith, the authority of Scripture—you should leave.

Not over secondary issues (worship style, eschatology, church governance). But over essentials. If a church stops being Christian in any meaningful sense, you're not forsaking the assembly—you're leaving a gathering that's no longer the church.

## **4. God's Clear Leading to a New Place**

Sometimes God genuinely calls people to leave a church for positive reasons: moving to a new city, planting a new church, joining a ministry in another context, answering a specific calling.

This isn't consumer church shopping. This is obedience to God's direction.

## **5. Chronic, Unaddressed Dysfunction That's Causing Harm**

If a church is deeply unhealthy—characterized by constant conflict, leadership chaos, gossip as culture, inability to address problems, patterns that damage people—and there's no willingness to change, leaving may be wise.

Not after the first conflict. Not when you're just uncomfortable. But when the system is toxic and you've tried to address it and there's no movement toward health.

### **When Leaving is Avoidance (Probably Not Appropriate)**

#### **1. Discomfort**

"This church is making me uncomfortable" is not a reason to leave. Discomfort is often where growth happens.

#### **2. Preference**

"I don't like the worship style/preaching style/demographic/programs" is consumer thinking, not covenant thinking.

#### **3. Conflict**

"Someone hurt my feelings/disagreed with me/made me angry" is not a reason to leave. That's when Matthew 18 should kick in.

#### **4. Boredom**

"I'm not being fed/challenged/stimulated enough" often means "I'm not actively contributing and engaging."

#### **5. The Grass is Greener**

"That other church looks better" is almost always an illusion. Every church has problems. You just don't see them from the outside.

#### **6. Avoiding Accountability**

"They're too nosy/asking too many questions/holding me accountable for my behavior" might mean the church is actually functioning as family should.

### **The Hard Middle**

Most situations aren't clear-cut. Most of the time, you're dealing with:

- Imperfect leadership (but not abusive)

- Some dysfunction (but not toxic)
- Personality conflicts (but not irreconcilable)
- Disappointments (but not betrayals)
- Frustrations (but not dealbreakers)

**This is where covenant commitment matters most.**

This is where you work through rather than walk away. Where you engage conflict rather than escape it. Where you contribute to change rather than complain about problems.

This is where the difficult person becomes the gift. Where the friction produces the sharpening. Where staying is sanctifying.

**WORKING THROUGH RATHER THAN WALKING AWAY**

I think about my reconciliation journey with my daughters. There were moments—many moments—where it would have been easier to give up. To say, "This is too hard. The wounds are too deep. Let's just accept that we'll have a distant relationship."

**But you don't get to divorce your children.** They're your family. Forever. The relationship might be broken, but it's not breakable in the sense of severable.

So you stay. You work. You endure the hard conversations. You sit with the pain. You acknowledge the damage. You take responsibility. You listen to their hurt. You show up even when they don't want you there. You keep reaching out even when they pull away.

**Because that's what family does.**

The same principle applies to church family—with appropriate nuance for the differences between biological family and chosen community.

**You don't leave the first time:**

- Someone hurts your feelings
- The pastor preaches a sermon you disagree with
- A decision goes a direction you didn't vote for
- A program you liked gets cancelled
- Someone annoys you
- Your preference isn't honored

- You have to wait for something
- Leadership makes a mistake

**You engage. You communicate. You contribute to solutions. You forgive. You give grace. You bear with others as they bear with you.**

Because "we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves" (Romans 15:1, NASB).

And because "just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Colossians 3:13, NASB).

And because "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8, NASB).

## **LEARNING TO LOVE LIKE FAMILY**

Let me be specific about what family love looks like in the context of difficult people:

### **1. Unconditional (Agape), Not Transactional**

**Transactional love says:** "I'll love you if you change. I'll be kind if you're kind back. I'll invest if I see return."

**Agape love says:** "I love you because you're my brother/sister, not because you've earned it. My love isn't contingent on your performance or my satisfaction."

This doesn't mean you have to like everyone. You don't have to be best friends with the difficult person. But you do have to love them—which means:

- Wanting their good even when they're irritating
- Treating them with dignity even when they're difficult
- Praying for them even when they frustrate you
- Serving them even when they don't reciprocate
- Forgiving them even when they don't apologize

**That's agape.** And it's not natural. It's supernatural. It's only possible when you remember how God loves you.

### **2. Long-Suffering (Makrothumia)**

The Greek word *makrothumia* (μακροθυμία) literally means "long-tempered" as opposed to short-tempered. It's patience that endures over time, especially with difficult people.

"Love is patient" (1 Corinthians 13:4, NASB).

Not just tolerant. Not just grimly enduring. **Patient**—giving space for growth, allowing time for change, not demanding immediate transformation.

**Long-suffering says:**

- "I'll give you room to be immature while you're growing"
- "I won't give up on you after the third conversation"
- "I'll keep showing up even when progress is slow"
- "I'll wait for you to catch up rather than leaving you behind"

This is how God treats us. He's patient with our slow growth, our repeated failures, our stubborn resistance to change.

And we're called to extend that same patience to each other.

**3. Bearing With One Another (Colossians 3:13)**

"...bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Colossians 3:13, NASB).

**Bearing with** (ἀνέχω - anechō) means to hold up, to endure, to support despite difficulty.

It's not just tolerating. It's actively supporting. It's carrying weight that isn't yours because the other person can't carry it themselves right now.

**This looks like:**

- Making space for someone's quirks because that's who they are
- Overlooking minor offenses because they're not worth addressing
- Absorbing someone's bad mood because you know they're going through something
- Accommodating someone's limitations because they can't help it
- Extending grace when someone is consistently difficult because love doesn't keep a record of wrongs

But notice the balance: "bearing with" is paired with "forgiving each other."

**Bearing with doesn't mean enabling.** It doesn't mean never addressing problems. It doesn't mean accepting abuse or perpetual immaturity.

It means giving grace in the process. Allowing for imperfection while still expecting growth. Supporting while also challenging.

#### 4. Love Covers a Multitude of Sins (1 Peter 4:8)

"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8, NASB).

**Above all.** This is the priority. This is what matters most.

**Fervent love** (ἐκτενῆς - ektenēs)—stretched out, intense, earnest. Not casual or half-hearted. Deep, committed, active love.

And this love "covers a multitude of sins."

Not covers up—as in hiding or enabling. But covers—as in protects, overlooks, doesn't broadcast, doesn't weaponize.

**When someone wrongs you:**

- Love doesn't immediately tell everyone
- Love doesn't use it as ammunition later
- Love doesn't define the person by their worst moment
- Love doesn't keep bringing it up
- Love doesn't use it to justify your own sin

**Love covers.** It deals with sin directly (Matthew 18), but it doesn't expose unnecessarily, shame publicly, or hold grudges permanently.

This is how God treats us. He doesn't broadcast our every failure. He doesn't define us by our worst moments. He doesn't keep bringing up what He's forgiven.

And we're called to love each other the same way.

#### THE TRANSFORMATION IN ME

Remember Susan, the woman I started this chapter complaining about?

Here's what I've learned through her—reluctantly, slowly, with significant resistance:

**Susan is faithful.** She shows up. She serves. She cares. She might be exhausting, but she's present. How many people can I say that about?

**Susan is teachable.** When I actually engage her questions instead of dismissing them, she listens. She's not arguing; she's learning. My impatience made me hear arguing when she was actually seeking understanding.

**Susan sees things I miss.** Because she processes differently, she notices different things. She's caught errors in sermons. She's identified pastoral needs I overlooked. She's asked questions that made me think more deeply.

**Susan is lonely.** All those emails? She's reaching out because she's isolated. All that volunteering? She's trying to belong. All those questions? She's trying to connect.

**I don't need to change Susan. I need to love Susan.**

And in the process of learning to love her—imperfectly, inconsistently, but genuinely—I'm becoming more patient, more compassionate, more understanding, more Christ-like.

**She's the gift I didn't want. And she's exactly what I needed.**

Because "the same Christ who leads us into community also leads us through it."

He led me to Susan. And He's using Susan to lead me more deeply into His love.

## **THE COST AND THE GIFT**

Let me be honest: **This kind of love is expensive.**

It costs:

- Your preference for comfort
- Your desire for efficiency
- Your need to be right
- Your protection of your time and energy
- Your pride and self-sufficiency

**It's easier to leave.** To find a church where everyone's like you, where conflict is minimal, where you're comfortable.

**But easy doesn't transform you.**

The difficult person transforms you. The covenant commitment transforms you. The staying when you want to leave transforms you. The loving when it's hard transforms you.

**That's the gift hidden in the difficulty.**

Not that difficulty itself is good. But that God uses it to produce in us something we desperately need and couldn't develop any other way.

So the next time you're tempted to leave because someone's difficult, ask yourself:

**Am I leaving danger or avoiding sanctification?**

**Am I fleeing abuse or running from growth?**

**Am I being faithful or just seeking comfort?**

If it's danger, flee. Get safe. Get help.

But if it's just difficulty—if it's just someone who grates on you, challenges you, requires patience and grace—consider the possibility that God placed them there for a reason.

Not to punish you. To perfect you.

Not to make you miserable. To make you mature.

Not to test how much you can endure. To teach you how to love.

Because iron sharpens iron. And the sharpening, though painful, is producing in you the very image of Christ.

**That's the gift of the difficult.**

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*"Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."*

— Proverbs 27:17 (NASB)

*"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance."*

— James 1:2-3 (NASB)

*"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."*

— 1 Peter 4:8 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 10: ADOPTION INTO THE FAMILY

I remember the exact moment I realized I'd been living like an orphan.

I was sitting in a counselor's office—something I'd resisted for years because "pastors help others; they don't need help themselves"—trying to explain why I was so exhausted, so driven, so incapable of rest.

"Why do you work so hard?" she asked.

"Because the church needs me. People depend on me. There's so much to do."

"But why do you need to be the one doing it?"

I stumbled. "Because... if I don't, it won't get done. If I stop, things fall apart. If I rest, I'm not valuable."

She let that sit for a moment, then asked quietly: "Who told you that your value depends on your productivity?"

Nobody had told me that explicitly. But somewhere along the way—in my family of origin, in my church culture, in my own broken theology—I'd absorbed the lie that I had to earn my place. That love was conditional on performance. That belonging required constant proof of worth.

**I'd been adopted into the family of God, but I was still living like a slave trying to earn a position I already had.**

The counselor leaned forward. "Jeff, what if you're already loved? What if you already belong? What if your Father delights in you not because of what you do for Him, but because you're His son?"

I wanted to believe it. Theologically, I knew it was true. I'd preached it countless times.

But I didn't *feel* it. I didn't *live* it.

And that gap between knowing I was adopted and living like an adopted son was destroying me—and by extension, damaging my family and my church.

**Because how you understand your identity in God's family determines how you function in the church family.**

## THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

Paul writes to the Romans: "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba!'

Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:15-17, NASB).

There are two spirits—two ways of relating to God, two identities, two operating systems:

**The spirit of slavery** → fear → performance → insecurity

**The spirit of adoption** → intimacy → belonging → security

Let's start with what we've been delivered *from*:

### **The Spirit of Slavery**

Slavery in Paul's context meant:

- No rights, only obligations
- No inheritance, only labor
- No security, constant fear of punishment or being sold
- No relationship with the master, only service
- Value based entirely on productivity
- Identity determined by function

**This is how many Christians—and entire churches—operate spiritually.**

We relate to God as slaves:

- Afraid of His punishment
- Performing to earn His approval
- Anxious about our standing
- Valuable only when we're useful
- Never quite secure in His love

And we replicate this in church:

- Afraid of being rejected if we're honest about struggles
- Performing spirituality to maintain reputation
- Anxious about whether we measure up
- Valuable only when we serve
- Never quite belonging, always on the outside looking in

**This is the orphan spirit.** Even when we're technically in the family, we live like outsiders trying to earn a place at the table.

Paul says we haven't received this spirit. We've been delivered from it.

### **The Spirit of Adoption**

Instead, we've received "a spirit of adoption as sons."

The Greek word is *huiiothesia* (υἱοθεσία) - literally "placing as a son." This was a specific legal term in Roman culture that Paul's readers would have immediately understood.

**Roman adoption was radically different from modern adoption:**

#### **1. Complete and Irrevocable**

When a Roman citizen adopted someone, that person became their child legally, fully, permanently. All previous family ties were severed. All debts were cancelled. The adoptee received a completely new identity and a new name.

Adopted children had the exact same legal status as biological children. There was no distinction. No second-class citizenship. No provisional period. No trial membership.

**You couldn't be un-adopted.** Even if you failed, disappointed, or rebelled, the legal status remained. The relationship might become strained, but the position was irrevocable.

#### **2. Full Rights and Privileges**

Adopted children received:

- Complete inheritance rights (equal to biological children)
- The family name
- Access to family resources
- Protection under the father's authority
- Representation in the father's business and social standing

#### **3. Chosen, Not Born**

This is crucial: biological children didn't choose their parents. But adopted children were *chosen*. The father looked at someone outside his family and said, "I want you. I choose you. You will be my child."

**This makes adoption more intentional than biological birth.**

When Paul uses this metaphor, he's saying: **God didn't just tolerate you into the family because He had to. He chose you. He wanted you. He looked at you—in your sin, your brokenness, your unworthiness—and said, "Mine."**

## **ABBA! FATHER!**

The result of this adoption? Intimacy.

"By which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15, NASB).

**Abba** (Ἄββᾶ) is the Aramaic word for father—but not formal or distant. It's intimate, personal, familial. Think "Papa" or "Daddy."

This was shocking language. Jews didn't address God this casually. God was holy, transcendent, set apart. You approached Him with reverence and fear, not familiarity.

But Jesus taught His disciples to pray "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9). And now Paul says that the Spirit enables us to cry "Abba!"—the same intimate term Jesus used in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).

**We relate to God as Father, not as taskmaster. As Papa, not as distant deity.**

This changes everything:

**Slaves fear making mistakes.** Sons know that mistakes won't end the relationship.

**Slaves hide their failures.** Sons confess them, knowing they'll find grace.

**Slaves perform to earn approval.** Sons rest in approval already given.

**Slaves relate to the master through service.** Sons relate to the father through love.

**Slaves can be dismissed.** Sons belong permanently.

## **THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT**

"The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16, NASB).

This is profound. **It's not just that God declared you His child legally. The Holy Spirit confirms it internally.**

There's a witness—a testimony, an internal assurance—that you belong. That you're loved. That you're His.

This isn't presumption. This isn't arrogance. This is the Spirit's work, bearing witness with your spirit.

But here's the tragedy: many Christians never experience this witness. They know they're supposed to be children of God. They've been told they're adopted. They believe it intellectually.

But they don't *feel* it. They don't *live* in the reality of it.

Why? Often because:

- **Childhood wounds block intimacy with God as Father.** If your earthly father was absent, abusive, or distant, "Father God" can feel threatening rather than comforting.
- **Church culture reinforces performance over belonging.** If your church community operates like slaves rather than sons, the Spirit's witness gets drowned out by messages of conditional acceptance.
- **Unhealed shame keeps you in hiding.** If you're carrying guilt and shame, you can't receive the testimony that you're loved as you are.

The orphan spirit is loud. It shouts: "You don't really belong. You're not good enough. One mistake and you're out. Perform or perish."

The Spirit's witness is often quieter. It whispers: "You're Mine. You're loved. You're safe. You belong."

**We have to tune our ears to the right voice.**

### **HEIRS OF GOD, FELLOW HEIRS WITH CHRIST**

Paul continues: "and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (Romans 8:17, NASB).

**If children, then heirs.**

In Roman culture, heirs received everything. The family wealth, the family business, the family name and reputation, the family legacy.

We're not just God's children. **We're His heirs.** Everything that belongs to the Father belongs to us.

And we're "fellow heirs with Christ"—we inherit together with Jesus. What's His is ours. His standing, His righteousness, His relationship with the Father, His glory.

This is staggering. We're not second-class children getting leftovers. **We're co-heirs with the Son of God, inheriting the full riches of the Father.**

But notice the qualifier: "if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him."

**Sonship isn't just privilege; it's participation.** We share in Christ's sufferings now, and we'll share in His glory later. We're adopted into a family with a mission, and the mission involves the cross before the crown.

But even suffering is different when you're a son rather than a slave:

**Slaves suffer in fear**, wondering if they've displeased the master.

**Sons suffer in confidence**, knowing the Father is working all things for good (Romans 8:28).

**Slaves suffer alone.** Sons suffer with Christ and with each other.

**Slaves suffer without hope.** Sons suffer with the promise of glory.

### **GALATIANS: NO LONGER SLAVES, BUT SONS**

Paul develops this theology further in Galatians:

"But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God" (Galatians 4:4-7, NASB).

### **The Fullness of Time**

#### **"When the fullness of the time came..."**

Adoption wasn't Plan B. It wasn't God scrambling to fix a broken creation. It was planned from eternity, executed in the fullness of time—the exact right moment in history.

God sent His Son, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law. Jesus entered our slavery to bring us into sonship. He took the position of a slave so we could receive the position of sons.

#### **This is the great exchange:**

Jesus became what we are (slave, under law, subject to curse) so that we could become what He is (son, heir, beloved of the Father).

### **Secure Identity Enables Risky Community**

Here's where this becomes practical for church life: "**Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts.**"

The Spirit of sonship isn't the reward for good behavior. It's the foundation that enables new behavior.

**You don't become a son by acting like one. You act like a son because you already are one.**

And this changes how we do community:

**Insecure people can't be vulnerable.** If your place in the family is conditional on performance, you can't risk being honest about your struggles. You have to maintain the appearance of having it together.

**Secure people can be honest.** If you know you belong regardless of your performance, you can admit when you're struggling. You can confess sin. You can ask for help. You can be real.

**Insecure people compete.** If there's limited approval to go around, everyone's a threat. You compare, you compete, you tear others down to build yourself up.

**Secure people collaborate.** If there's unlimited love and acceptance, someone else's success doesn't threaten you. You can celebrate their gifts, honor their contributions, serve their good.

**Insecure people hide.** If intimacy feels dangerous, you keep relationships at surface level. You protect yourself from being fully known because being known might mean being rejected.

**Secure people risk intimacy.** If you know you're loved unconditionally, you can let people see the real you—the broken, struggling, imperfect you—because being known doesn't mean being rejected.

**This is why secure identity in Christ is the foundation for healthy community.**

Churches full of insecure people performing for approval create toxic cultures of competition, comparison, hiding, and judgment.

Churches full of secure people resting in their adoption create cultures of honesty, grace, celebration, and transformation.

## **EPHESIANS: PREDESTINED TO ADOPTION**

Paul goes even deeper in Ephesians:

"He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:5-6, NASB).

### **Predestined to Adoption**

**"He predestined us to adoption as sons."**

Before the foundation of the world, before you existed, before you did anything good or bad, God marked you for adoption.

This wasn't:

- Based on your potential
- Dependent on your performance
- Conditional on your behavior
- A reward for your righteousness

**You were chosen for adoption according to the kind intention of His will.**

Not your will. His will. Not your desire. His desire. Not your merit. His mercy.

### **The Kind Intention of His Will**

The phrase "kind intention" (εὔδοκία - eudokia) means good pleasure, delight, favor. **God adopted you because it pleased Him to do so.**

Not because you deserved it. Not because He had to. Not to fill some void in Himself.

**Because He wanted to. Because it delighted Him. Because He chose to love you.**

This is scandalous grace. Offensive to our sense of fairness and merit. Humbling to our pride.

We want to contribute something. To earn it at least partially. To say, "I deserved this because..."

But adoption is pure grace. **You contributed nothing except your need.**

J.I. Packer writes in *Knowing God*: "**We are not just forgiven sinners, but adopted sons and daughters.**"

Forgiveness removes our guilt. But adoption gives us a new identity. Forgiveness says, "You're not condemned." Adoption says, "You're My child."

Forgiveness is legal. Adoption is relational.

Forgiveness deals with the past. Adoption secures the future.

**We're not just tolerated; we're treasured. Not just pardoned; we're permanently placed in the family.**

### **To the Praise of the Glory of His Grace**

Why did God adopt us? "**To the praise of the glory of His grace.**"

The ultimate purpose of our adoption is God's glory. That His grace would be praised, celebrated, marveled at for all eternity.

When people see rebels transformed into sons, orphans brought into the family, slaves freed and adopted—they see grace. And they worship.

Robert Farrar Capon, in his beautiful (if provocative) writings on grace, said: "**Grace is the celebration of life, relentlessly hounding all the non-celebrants in the world.**"

Grace doesn't stop. It pursues. It hounds. It relentlessly offers life to those who think they're dead, family to those who think they're orphans, celebration to those who think they're condemned.

**That's the adoption gospel.**

### **LIVING AS ADOPTED CHILDREN**

So what does this mean practically? How do adopted children live differently?

#### **1. We Stop Performing for Approval**

**Orphans perform.** They're constantly trying to prove they belong, earn love, justify their existence.

**Adopted children rest.** They know they belong. Love isn't something to earn; it's something to receive and return.

This doesn't mean laziness. Adopted children serve—but from a place of love and gratitude, not fear and insecurity.

I served in ministry for years out of the orphan spirit. Driven by the need to prove myself. Terrified that if I stopped performing, I'd be exposed as a fraud. Unable to rest because rest felt like failure.

That kind of service is exhausting. And it's toxic—to you and to those you serve.

**Service from security is sustainable. Service from insecurity is slavery.**

## **2. We Risk Vulnerability**

**Orphans hide.** They can't afford to be fully known because rejection would confirm their deepest fear: that they don't really belong.

**Adopted children can be honest.** They know that being known doesn't lead to rejection. The Father already knows the worst about them and loves them anyway.

This transforms community. When people feel secure enough to be honest about their struggles, church becomes a hospital instead of a museum.

But it requires leaders who model vulnerability. Who admit their own struggles. Who create cultures where honesty is honored, not punished.

## **3. We Celebrate Others' Success**

**Orphans compete.** If there's only so much approval to go around, everyone else is a threat.

**Adopted children celebrate.** If love and acceptance are unlimited, someone else's success doesn't diminish yours.

I've watched churches torn apart by competition between staff members, between ministries, between small groups—all because insecure people were fighting for the limited resource of approval.

But in a family where everyone knows they're loved, there's no need to compete. We can genuinely celebrate when a brother or sister succeeds because their win doesn't mean our loss.

## **4. We Extend the Family**

**Orphans are territorial.** They protect what little they have. They create insider/outsider dynamics. They're suspicious of newcomers.

**Adopted children are hospitable.** They know there's always room at the table. They invite others in. They extend the family because they remember when they were outside and someone invited them in.

Churches operating from security are evangelistic not out of duty but out of overflow. "Come experience the family I've found. Come know the Father who adopted me. Come home."

## **5. We Endure Difficulty Differently**

**Orphans interpret hardship as punishment or abandonment.** "God must be angry with me. He's withdrawn His love. I must have done something wrong."

**Adopted children interpret hardship as discipline and formation.** "My Father is working something in me. This is hard, but He's with me. He's shaping me into who I'm meant to be."

"For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives" (Hebrews 12:6, NASB).

Discipline isn't rejection. It's proof of sonship. Only children get disciplined. Strangers and slaves get discarded or punished. But sons get formed.

### **THE RAGAMUFFIN IDENTITY**

Brennan Manning, whose theology deeply influences my understanding of grace, spoke often about the "ragamuffin gospel"—the good news for the broken, the messy, the disqualified.

**Ragamuffins are those who know they have nothing to offer except their need.**

We're not impressive. We're not put-together. We're not qualified by any human metric.

But we're adopted. Chosen. Beloved.

Not because of who we are, but because of whose we are.

**This is the identity that sets us free:**

Free to fail without being defined by failure.

Free to struggle without losing our standing.

Free to be honest without risking rejection.

Free to need help without shame.

Free to be weak while being loved.

Because **our identity isn't in our performance; it's in our position.**

We're not slaves trying to become sons through good behavior. **We're sons learning to live like who we already are.**

### **THE TRANSFORMATION THIS ENABLES**

When a church understands adoption—really understands it, lives in it, operates from it—everything changes:

**Worship becomes response, not performance.** We're not singing to earn God's favor.

We're celebrating the favor already given.

**Service becomes overflow, not obligation.** We're not serving to prove our worth. We're serving because we're already valued.

**Giving becomes generosity, not duty.** We're not tithing to maintain our standing. We're sharing from abundance because we've been given everything.

**Discipleship becomes formation, not information.** We're not just learning about God. We're being formed into the image of the Son, learning to live as adopted children.

**Community becomes family, not institution.** We're not maintaining an organization. We're being the household of God.

**Conflict becomes opportunity, not threat.** We're not fighting to protect our position. We're working through family dysfunction because that's what families do.

This is what the church is meant to be: **a community of adopted children learning to live like who we are.**

Not perfect. Still broken. Still struggling. Still growing.

But secure. Loved. Belonging. Family.

Because grace relentlessly hounds all the non-celebrants until they realize they're invited to the party. Until they understand they're not slaves anymore. Until they know they're sons and daughters of the Most High God.

**That's the adoption gospel.**

And it changes everything.

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*"For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'"*

— Romans 8:15 (NASB)

*"Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God."*

— Galatians 4:7 (NASB)

*"He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace."*

— Ephesians 1:5-6 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 11: FORMATION IN COMMUNITY

Three years ago, I sat across from a man I'll call David who'd been attending my church for six years. He was faithful, served regularly, knew his theology, appeared to have it all together.

We were having coffee because he'd asked to talk. I assumed he wanted to discuss a ministry opportunity or had questions about a sermon.

Instead, he said, "Pastor Jeff, I need to tell someone the truth. I'm addicted to pornography. Have been for twenty years. My wife doesn't know. Nobody knows. I can't keep living like this."

I asked him the obvious question: "You've been in this church for six years. Why are you just now telling someone?"

His answer broke my heart: "Because I didn't think anyone here would still love me if they knew."

Six years. In a church where we preached grace, talked about the gospel, emphasized God's unconditional love. And this man believed—had every reason to believe based on what he'd observed—that honesty would lead to rejection.

**He attended church for six years without being formed, because formation requires vulnerability, and he didn't feel safe enough to be vulnerable.**

This is the tragedy of so many churches: **We gather regularly but remain strangers. We attend services but avoid transformation. We're in the same building but not in each other's lives.**

And transformation—real, deep, lasting change into the image of Christ—doesn't happen in isolation. It happens in the friction, intimacy, and accountability of community.

## ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT, NOT PASSIVE ATTENDANCE

The writer of Hebrews gives us a critical instruction: "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24, NASB).

**"Let us consider..."** This is active, not passive. Thoughtful, not automatic. Intentional, not accidental.

The church isn't something that happens to you while you sit in a pew. It's something you actively engage in, participate in, contribute to.

**"How to stimulate one another..."** Not just yourself. Not just your spiritual growth. How to provoke growth in others.

The Greek word translated "stimulate" is *paroxysmos* (παροξυσμός)—the root of our word "paroxysm." It means to provoke, to incite, to stir up.

This is the same word used in Acts 15:39 to describe the "sharp disagreement" between Paul and Barnabas that caused them to separate. It's intense language. Forceful language.

### **We're called to provoke each other toward love and good deeds.**

Not enable comfort. Not maintain status quo. **Provoke**—stir up, challenge, push, call forth what's dormant.

This requires:

- **Knowing people well enough** to see what they need provoked toward
- **Caring enough** to risk discomfort for their growth
- **Having permission** to speak into their lives
- **Being in relationship** that can handle the friction

You can't provoke strangers. You can't stimulate people you see once a week for ninety minutes. You can't "consider how to" when you don't know anyone's actual life.

### **This is why passive attendance produces passive Christians.**

You show up, consume a worship service, go home unchanged. Week after week, year after year. Comfortable. Unchallenged. Unformed.

But when you're actively engaged—when you know people and they know you, when you're in each other's lives enough to see what needs stirring up—transformation becomes possible.

### **THE GYMNASIUM OF SANCTIFICATION**

The early church father Chrysostom called the Christian community "the gymnasium of virtue"—the training ground where character is formed through practice and discipline.

A gymnasium isn't comfortable. It's:

- Strenuous (pushing your limits)
- Repetitive (the same exercises over and over)
- Sometimes painful (muscles tear to rebuild stronger)

- Communal (you work out together, spot each other, encourage endurance)
- Progressive (gradually increasing difficulty)

**This is what community should be: the space where we train in righteousness.**

Not a spa where we're pampered. Not a museum where we admire finished saints. A gym where we're actively being formed.

And formation in a gym requires:

- **Coaches** who push you beyond what's comfortable
- **Partners** who hold you accountable
- **Equipment** that creates resistance (and difficult people are often our resistance training)
- **Consistency** over time, not occasional effort
- **Visible progress** and setbacks

I think about my Thursday morning men's group again—seven guys, different ages, different backgrounds, committed to each other's formation.

We don't just meet to talk about theology. We meet to challenge each other:

"You said you were going to have that hard conversation with your wife. Did you?"

"I noticed you've been working late every night this week. What are you running from?"

"You keep making excuses for not addressing your health. What's really going on?"

**This is paroxysmos.** Loving provocation toward growth.

It's uncomfortable. Sometimes it creates tension. But it works. Because **you can't hide in community that knows you.**

And hiding is the enemy of transformation.

**THE "ONE ANOTHER" COMMANDS**

The New Testament contains approximately 54 "one another" commands—instructions that are inherently communal, impossible to obey in isolation.

Let me walk through some of the most significant ones:

**"Love One Another" (John 13:34-35)**

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35, NASB).

**Notice: This is how the world identifies disciples—by love for one another.**

Not by doctrine (though that matters). Not by moral behavior (though that matters). Not by worship excellence or program quality or building size.

**By how we love each other.**

This is terrifying. Because our family dysfunction, our conflicts, our failures to love well are on public display. The watching world sees how we treat each other and judges the validity of our faith accordingly.

But it's also clarifying. If we're not loving each other well, we're failing the most basic test of discipleship. All our theology, all our ministry, all our religious activity means nothing if we don't love one another.

**"Serve One Another" (Galatians 5:13)**

"For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13, NASB).

**Freedom in Christ isn't freedom to do whatever you want. It's freedom to serve.**

Slaves serve out of compulsion. Sons serve out of love.

The world says freedom means no obligations, no responsibilities, no one making demands on you. The gospel says freedom means you're no longer enslaved to self—you're free to give yourself away in service.

**Service looks like:**

- Using your gifts for others' benefit, not just your own satisfaction
- Meeting needs you didn't create and aren't responsible for
- Giving time, energy, resources without expectation of return
- Putting others' interests ahead of your own convenience

And this can only happen in community. You can't serve one another in isolation.

**"Bear One Another's Burdens" (Galatians 6:2)**

"Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2, NASB).

**Burden-bearing is the law of Christ.** This is how we fulfill His command to love.

But you can't bear burdens you don't know about. And people won't share burdens if they don't feel safe.

This requires:

- Vulnerability from the burdened (admitting you need help)
- Availability from the burden-bearer (being present and willing)
- Capability (sometimes practical help, sometimes just presence)
- Perseverance (burdens aren't usually resolved quickly)

I think about a couple in my church whose teenage son attempted suicide. They were devastated, overwhelmed, barely functioning.

Their small group didn't just pray. They showed up:

- One couple took their other kids for a week
- Another handled meals for a month
- Someone went with them to the hospital every day
- Others covered their responsibilities at work
- The whole group committed to not just crisis support but long-term walking with them through counseling and recovery

**That's burden-bearing.** Not just sympathy from a distance, but actual sharing of weight.

And it's only possible in community where people know each other well enough to see the burden and are committed enough to help carry it.

### **"Confess to One Another" (James 5:16)**

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16, NASB).

**Confession is the pathway to healing.**

Not just confession to God (though that's essential). Confession to each other.

Why? Because:

- **Sin thrives in secrecy.** What we keep hidden maintains its power over us.

- **Healing happens in community.** Being known in our worst and still loved breaks the power of shame.
- **We need accountability.** Confessing to someone means they can check in, ask hard questions, hold us accountable.
- **Prayer for one another is powerful.** There's something uniquely effective about brothers and sisters praying over confessed sin.

But this only works in relationships characterized by:

- Safety (confession won't be weaponized or gossiped)
- Grace (you'll be loved, not judged)
- Commitment (the relationship won't end because you're honest)
- Reciprocity (everyone confesses, not just one person)

Remember David, the man I mentioned at the beginning who struggled with pornography for twenty years?

After he confessed to me, I asked if he'd be willing to confess to a few mature men in the church who could walk with him. He was terrified, but he agreed.

Three men committed to meet with him weekly. To ask hard questions. To check his phone. To pray with him. To be available when he was tempted.

It's been three years. He's had setbacks. But he's also had unprecedented freedom. His wife knows now. His marriage is being restored. He's being discipled in holiness through relationship.

**That's the power of confession in community.**

**"Pray for One Another" (James 5:16)**

This isn't just "I'll pray for you" as a polite way to end a conversation. This is **actually praying for each other, with each other, over each other.**

Prayer that requires:

- Knowing what people are actually facing
- Being present enough to pray with them, not just about them
- Following up to see how God answered
- Continuing to pray even when answers are delayed

The most formative prayers aren't the eloquent public ones. They're the desperate, honest, sometimes messy prayers we offer for each other in the trenches of real life.

## **BONHOEFFER'S WISDOM**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*: "**Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.**"

Read that again. Let it sink in.

**We don't create community. We participate in community God has already created.**

This is liberating. It means:

- The success of community doesn't depend on us getting it perfect
- We're not responsible for manufacturing spiritual intimacy
- We can rest in what God is already doing
- Our job is simply to show up, be present, participate

But it also means:

- We can't opt out and expect community to exist without our participation
- We have to engage with the actual people God has gathered, not our ideal version of them
- We have to trust that God knows what He's doing in placing us together

**Community isn't a program to perfect. It's a gift to receive and a calling to live into.**

## **ACCOUNTABILITY AND VULNERABILITY**

Let me be honest about something: I hate the word "accountability."

Not because the concept is wrong, but because it's been so distorted in church culture.

For many people, "accountability" means:

- Someone checking on your behavior
- Exposing your sin to shame you into change
- Giving someone permission to police your life
- Creating hierarchical relationships where one person has authority over another

**That's not biblical accountability. That's control.**

Real accountability is mutual, reciprocal, and rooted in love.

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6, NASB).

**A true friend wounds you when necessary—not to hurt you, but to heal you.**

They tell you:

- "I'm worried about how much you're drinking"
- "You're being dishonest with your spouse"
- "Your anger is out of control"
- "You're avoiding the hard thing you need to do"
- "This pattern I'm seeing is destructive"

These "wounds" hurt. But they're faithful. They're given in love, for your good, because the friend sees something you can't or won't see.

**The enemy, by contrast, gives "deceitful kisses"—flattery, enabling, telling you what you want to hear rather than what you need to hear.**

We need friends who love us enough to wound us. Who care more about our transformation than our comfort.

But that requires:

1. **Knowing and being known**
2. **Safe people, not just safe topics**

### **The Necessity of Knowing and Being Known**

You can't hold someone accountable if you don't know their life. And they won't let you know their life if they don't trust you.

**Accountability requires intimacy.**

This means spending time together—not just in structured meetings, but in life:

- Meals together
- Working on projects together
- Recreation together

- Praying together
- Being in each other's homes
- Knowing each other's families
- Sharing ordinary life, not just spiritual highlights

The Thursday morning men's group I keep mentioning? We've been meeting for five years. We know:

- Each other's struggles (past and present)
- Each other's marriage dynamics
- Each other's work stress
- Each other's kids' names and challenges
- Each other's patterns and triggers
- Each other's dreams and fears

**This depth of knowledge didn't happen in six weeks. It happened through years of consistent presence.**

And that knowledge creates the foundation for accountability. When someone sees a pattern, they can name it. When someone notices a change, they can ask about it. When someone's struggling, they can intervene.

### **Safe People vs. Safe Topics**

Many small groups operate on the principle of "safe topics"—we can discuss theology, share prayer requests (carefully edited), talk about general struggles (nothing too specific), and maintain pleasant relationships.

**But safe topics don't produce transformation.**

What we need are **safe people**—people with whom we can discuss unsafe topics.

Safe people are:

- **Trustworthy** (they don't gossip, don't use your honesty against you)
- **Gracious** (they respond to confession with compassion, not condemnation)
- **Humble** (they're honest about their own struggles, creating reciprocity)
- **Committed** (they won't abandon the relationship when things get messy)

- **Wise** (they know the difference between challenging and shaming)

With safe people, you can talk about:

- Your actual sin, not just vague struggles
- Your marriage problems, not just "please pray for us"
- Your doubts and questions, not just your certainties
- Your failures, not just your victories
- Your brokenness, not just your spiritual progress

**The irony is that unsafe topics with safe people create the safest space possible—where transformation can actually happen.**

### **Ecclesiastes: The Power of Two or Three**

"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, NASB).

**Two are better than one.** Not because you're deficient, but because you're designed for partnership.

**If one falls, the other lifts him up.** You need someone watching, someone who notices when you fall, someone strong enough to pull you back up.

**Woe to the one who falls alone.** This isn't just practical wisdom; it's a warning. Isolation when you fall is dangerous. Potentially deadly.

**Two keep warm together.** There's a comfort, a strength, a resilience that comes from companionship that you simply can't generate alone.

**Two can resist an attack that would overpower one.** The enemy exploits isolation. He picks off the lone sheep. But together, we're stronger.

**A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.** When Christ is the third strand—when two or three are gathered in His name—there's a strength that transcends what either could produce individually.

**This is why we need each other. Not as a nice addition to an otherwise sufficient individual faith, but as essential to surviving and thriving as followers of Christ.**

## FORMATION THROUGH FRICTION

Let me be honest about what formation in community actually feels like: **it's uncomfortable.**

The people God places in your life to form you will:

- Challenge perspectives you're comfortable with
- Ask questions you'd rather avoid
- See patterns you don't want to acknowledge
- Call out sin you're hiding
- Push you beyond your comfort zone
- Refuse to let you stay stuck
- Love you enough to make you uncomfortable

I have a friend who's been walking with me through my workaholism. He notices when I'm overcommitted. He asks why I'm taking on more when I'm already maxed out. He challenges my need to be needed. He calls out when I'm finding my identity in productivity rather than in being God's son.

**I hate those conversations.** Every single time, my first response is defensiveness.

But I need them. Because left to myself, I'd work until I destroy my health, my family, and my ministry—all while convincing myself I'm serving God.

**The friction he creates is forming me into someone healthier, more balanced, more whole.**

Formation isn't just about adding spiritual disciplines. It's about being challenged, confronted, called higher by people who love you enough to make you uncomfortable.

## WHAT FORMATION IN COMMUNITY LOOKS LIKE PRACTICALLY

Let me get specific about what this actually looks like in practice:

### 1. Regular, Consistent Gathering

Not occasional. Not when it's convenient. **Regular**—weekly, bi-weekly, whatever rhythm works, but consistent enough to know each other's lives.

The Thursday morning group meets every week. Same time. Same place. We protect it like we protect doctor's appointments. Because if formation only happens when it's convenient, it doesn't happen.

## **2. Intentional Vulnerability**

We start every meeting with check-ins: "How are you really doing? What's hard right now? What do you need from us this week?"

Not performance updates. Not spiritual highlights. **Real life.**

And we've learned to push past the first answer: "I'm fine" → "Really? You look exhausted" → "Okay, actually I'm not fine..."

## **3. Permission to Challenge**

We've explicitly given each other permission to ask hard questions, to challenge patterns, to call out inconsistencies.

This isn't a license to be brutal. It's an invitation to be honest.

"Can I ask you a hard question?" has become our code for "I'm about to say something you might not want to hear, but I'm saying it because I love you."

## **4. Practical Support, Not Just Spiritual Talk**

When someone's struggling, we don't just pray (though we do that). We ask: "What do you need? How can we help?"

And we follow through:

- Covering a shift at work
- Watching kids so a couple can go to counseling
- Helping with a move
- Bringing meals during crisis
- Lending money (without expectation of repayment)
- Showing up physically, not just offering thoughts and prayers

## **5. Celebration of Growth**

We intentionally notice and celebrate when we see change:

- "You handled that conflict so differently than you would have a year ago"

- "I've noticed you're setting better boundaries with work"
- "The way you talked about your wife today—that's different. That's growth"

**Affirmation of transformation encourages more transformation.**

## THE FEAR THAT STOPS FORMATION

I need to address the elephant in the room: **Most people are terrified of this level of intimacy and accountability.**

They're afraid:

- Their sin is too shameful to confess
- They'll be judged and rejected
- Their honesty will be weaponized against them
- They'll be gossiped about
- They'll lose their reputation
- People will love them less if they really know them

**These fears aren't irrational. They're based on experience.**

Many people have been burned by churches that:

- Used confession against them
- Gossiped about struggles
- Shamed people for honesty
- Created hierarchies of spiritual maturity
- Rejected those who admitted struggle

**If you've been wounded by toxic "community," the fear of vulnerability makes perfect sense.**

But here's the tragedy: **fear of vulnerability keeps us trapped in the very sin and brokenness we desperately want freedom from.**

David (the man struggling with pornography) spent twenty years in isolation, shame deepening, addiction strengthening, intimacy with God and his wife eroding—all because he was afraid of what would happen if he told the truth.

When he finally risked honesty, he found grace. Love. Support. Accountability that led to freedom.

**The fear was real. But it was based on a lie: that honesty leads to rejection.**

In healthy community, **honesty leads to acceptance. Vulnerability leads to deeper connection. Confession leads to healing.**

But it requires churches to create cultures where that's actually true. Where people are safe to be broken. Where formation happens through grace, not shame.

## **CREATING CULTURES OF FORMATION**

If you're a leader—pastor, elder, small group facilitator—you have immense power to shape culture.

**Culture is shaped by what you model, what you celebrate, and what you tolerate.**

**Model vulnerability.** Share your own struggles (appropriately, not seeking pastoral care from those you lead, but being honest about your humanity).

**Celebrate honesty.** When someone risks confession, affirm their courage. Thank them for trusting the group. Respond with grace.

**Don't tolerate gossip.** Shut it down immediately. Make it clear that what's shared in community stays in community.

**Address shame.** When you see someone being shamed for honesty, intervene. Protect the vulnerable.

**Create structures for accountability.** Don't leave it to chance. Build it into small groups, discipleship relationships, leadership teams.

**Teach biblical community.** Preach on the "one another" commands. Cast vision for formation in community. Help people understand that transformation doesn't happen in isolation.

## **THE GIFT ON THE OTHER SIDE**

Here's what I've learned through years of messy, beautiful, uncomfortable community:

**The discomfort of being known is worth it for the freedom of being loved anyway.**

When someone knows the worst about you and still chooses relationship, still calls you brother or sister, still believes in your transformation—it breaks the power of shame.

When someone challenges you and you realize they're doing it because they care, not because they're trying to control you—it creates safety to grow.

When someone carries your burden and you experience the relief of not carrying it alone—it teaches you what the body of Christ is supposed to be.

**This is divine transformation—becoming who we're meant to be, together.**

Not isolated individuals pursuing personal holiness. A family being formed into the image of Christ, sharpening each other, bearing each other's burdens, confessing to each other, praying for each other, loving each other.

Bonhoeffer was right: We're not trying to create an ideal community. **We're participating in the reality God has already created.**

And as we participate—vulnerably, consistently, courageously—we're transformed. Not just individually, but collectively. Into the family God always intended.

Diverse. Dysfunctional. And through the sacred work of formation in community, being made divine.

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*"And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds."*

— Hebrews 10:24 (NASB)

*"Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."*

— Galatians 6:2 (NASB)

*"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed."*

— James 5:16 (NASB)

*"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion."*

— Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 12: THE TABLE AS SACRED CENTER

Last Thanksgiving, my wife and I decided to do something different. Instead of the traditional family gathering with just biological relatives, we opened our table to anyone who didn't have somewhere to go.

The result was a beautiful mess: twelve people who'd never met before, ranging from a college student whose family lived overseas to an elderly widow whose children couldn't visit, a single mom with two kids, a couple going through a painful separation, and our family.

Before we ate, I asked everyone to share something they were grateful for. The college student started crying before she could speak. "I'm grateful I'm not alone today. I was dreading being by myself."

The widow reached over and squeezed her hand. "Honey, you're with family now."

**That moment—around a table laden with turkey and mashed potatoes and too many pies—was more church than many Sunday services I've attended.**

Because something happens at tables that doesn't happen in sanctuaries. Something sacred. Something formative. Something that cuts through pretense and creates family in a way that programs and worship services can't replicate.

**The table is where strangers become family.**

## BREAKING BREAD TOGETHER: THE DAILY RHYTHM

The early church understood something we've forgotten: **the table is the center of community life.**

"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42, NASB).

Four elements of early church life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer. And breaking bread isn't just listed—it's central.

Then Luke describes what this looked like practically:

"Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47, NASB).

**Day by day.** Not weekly. Not on special occasions. Daily.

**From house to house.** Moving through the community, sharing meals in different homes.

**With gladness and sincerity of heart.** Joyful, authentic, without pretense.

**And the Lord was adding to their number.** There's a direct connection between their shared meals and the growth of the church.

Why? Because **when people see a community that genuinely loves each other, that shares life and food and laughter and tears, they want in.**

The early church didn't grow primarily through evangelistic crusades or sophisticated programs. They grew because they ate together. Daily. In homes. With joy and honesty.

**And people were drawn to what they saw around those tables.**

### **The Eucharist as Family Meal**

We've professionalized and sanitized communion. Turned it into a ritual. Made it solemn and serious (which it is) but forgot that it's also a meal (which it was).

### **The Eucharist is family dinner.**

When Jesus instituted communion, it wasn't in a church building with specialized communion wafers and individual cups. It was at Passover—a family meal, celebrated in homes, with real food, around actual tables.

"When the hour had come, He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him. And He said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer'" (Luke 22:14-15, NASB).

**"I have earnestly desired..."** Jesus wanted this meal. He longed for it. Not just to establish a ritual, but to share this moment of intimacy with His family.

Then He took bread, broke it, gave thanks, and said, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me" (v. 19).

And after the meal, He took the cup: "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (v. 20).

**This wasn't a solemn ceremony separated from daily life. This was integrated into the Passover meal—bread and wine consumed in the context of eating, conversation, fellowship.**

The early church continued this practice. They didn't separate communion from their regular meals. When they gathered to eat—which was daily—they broke bread in remembrance of Jesus.

"When you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk" (1 Corinthians 11:20-21, NASB).

Paul is correcting abuse, but notice what he's correcting: **they're treating the Lord's Supper like a regular meal where some eat first and others go hungry.**

The problem isn't that they're eating an actual meal. The problem is that they're not sharing equally, not waiting for each other, not acting like family.

**The solution isn't to separate communion from meals. It's to make their shared meals truly communal—everyone eating together, no one excluded, rich and poor sharing equally.**

William Willimon captures this beautifully: **"When we come to the table, we come as beggars, not as consumers."**

We don't come to communion (or to shared meals) as customers evaluating a service. We come as hungry family members, all of us needing to be fed, none of us having earned our place.

**The table is the great equalizer.** At the family dinner table, the CEO and the unemployed, the educated and the uneducated, the mature believer and the new convert all sit together. All hungry. All in need. All receiving.

## **THE RADICAL HOSPITALITY OF JESUS**

If you want to understand Jesus' ministry, pay attention to who He ate with.

**Jesus was constantly criticized for His table fellowship.**

"The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:34, NASB).

His enemies didn't call Him a heretic first. They called Him someone who eats with the wrong people.

Why was this so scandalous? **Because in Middle Eastern culture, sharing a meal meant sharing life.** You didn't eat with people you considered unclean or unworthy. The table defined boundaries—who was in, who was out, who belonged, who didn't.

Jesus obliterated those boundaries.

**He ate with tax collectors**—traitors who collaborated with Rome and got rich exploiting their own people (Matthew 9:10-11).

**He ate with sinners**—people whose lifestyles made them religiously unclean (Luke 15:1-2).

**He ate with Pharisees**—the religious elite who despised His other dinner companions (Luke 7:36-50, 14:1).

**He ate with the poor, the sick, the marginalized**—people no respectable rabbi would associate with (Luke 5:29-32).

And in doing so, **He demonstrated what the kingdom of God looks like: a table with room for everyone.**

#### **Luke 14: The Great Banquet**

Jesus tells a parable about a man who throws a great banquet. He invites the respectable people—his social peers, the ones who should come. They all make excuses.

So he tells his servant: "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame... Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled" (Luke 14:21, 23, NASB).

**The kingdom banquet is filled with people who have no business being there.** The ones who can't repay. The ones with nothing to offer. The ones the respectable crowd rejected.

Before He tells this parable, Jesus gives practical instruction:

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14, NASB).

#### **This is radical hospitality.**

Not entertaining people who can reciprocate. Not hosting those who enhance your social standing. Not inviting only those who are like you.

**Invite the ones who can't pay you back. The ones who have nothing to offer except their presence. The ones the world overlooks.**

This isn't just about being nice. **This is about reflecting the character of God**, who invites sinners to His table not because we deserve it but because He delights in sharing His abundance.

## **Emmaus Road: Recognized in the Breaking of Bread**

One of my favorite post-resurrection stories is the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

Two disciples are walking, grieving, trying to make sense of Jesus' death. A stranger joins them—Jesus, but they don't recognize Him. He walks with them, explains the Scriptures, their hearts burn within them.

But they still don't know it's Him.

Until this moment:

"When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him" (Luke 24:30-31, NASB).

### **They recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread.**

Not in His teaching (though that warmed their hearts). Not in His appearance. In the familiar gesture of breaking bread and sharing it.

**There's something about the table—about shared food, about blessing and breaking and giving—that reveals Jesus in ways other experiences don't.**

Why? Because:

- The table is intimate—you can't maintain distance while eating together
- The table is vulnerable—you're admitting need (hunger)
- The table is equalizing—everyone eats, everyone needs food
- The table is participatory—you're not spectating; you're partaking
- The table is memorable—our most formative experiences often happen around tables

**Jesus is present when we break bread together.** Not just in formal communion, but in the ordinary act of sharing meals with intentional presence and gratitude.

## **Breakfast with the Risen Christ**

After the resurrection, Jesus appears to His disciples while they're fishing. They've caught nothing all night. He tells them to cast their nets on the other side—and they catch so many fish they can't haul them in.

They realize it's Jesus. Peter jumps into the water and swims to shore.

And what does Jesus do? **He makes them breakfast.**

"So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast'" (John 21:9, 12, NASB).

**The risen Christ—victor over death, Lord of creation—cooks breakfast for His friends.**

He doesn't give them a theological lecture. He doesn't scold them for abandoning Him. He doesn't immediately commission them for ministry.

**He feeds them.**

Because that's what family does. You feed each other. You care for physical needs. You create space for relationship around the simple act of sharing a meal.

And it's after breakfast—after they've eaten together, after the intimacy of the table—that Jesus restores Peter. "Do you love Me? Feed My sheep" (John 21:15-17).

**The restoration happens at the table.** The commission comes after the meal. The family is knit back together around breakfast.

## **THE MINISTRY OF PREPARATION**

Here's something I've learned through years of hospitality: **Setting the table before people arrive is an act of love.**

When you take time to prepare—to clean the house, set the table, cook the food, create space for people—you're saying: **"I was expecting you. I made room for you. You belong here."**

This is different from:

- "Come over if you want" (casual, no preparation)
- "Let's grab fast food" (efficient but impersonal)
- "Meet at a restaurant" (convenient but no intimacy of home)

**Preparation communicates value.**

I think about Jesus preparing breakfast for His disciples. He didn't wait for them to arrive and then say, "Oh, you're hungry? Let me figure something out."

**The fire was already laid. The fish was already cooking. The bread was ready.**

He prepared. He anticipated their need. He made space for them.

This is what hospitality looks like: **the work that happens before anyone arrives.**

## Practical Applications for Today's Church

Let me get specific about what the table-centered community looks like in practice:

### 1. Regular Shared Meals

Not potlucks after church services (though those are fine). Regular, intentional meals in homes where:

- The host prepares (doesn't make everyone bring something)
- There's time to linger (not rushed)
- Conversation is prioritized (not background to entertainment)
- Everyone eats together (not buffet-style grazing)

My wife and I try to have people to our table every week. Sometimes it's planned.

Sometimes it's spontaneous. But the rhythm is consistent: our table is open.

And we've discovered that **more formation happens over dinner than in any Bible study we've led.**

### 2. Open-Table Communion

I'm part of a movement to recover the early church practice of communion as actual meal, not just ritual.

Once a month, our small groups gather for a full meal. We eat together—real food, not just bread and wine. And in the context of that meal, we pause, break bread, share the cup, remember Jesus.

**It feels different than institutional communion.** More intimate. More like family. More like what Jesus intended.

### 3. Hospitality to Outsiders

Following Jesus' instruction in Luke 14, we intentionally invite people who can't reciprocate:

- International students who have nowhere to go for holidays
- Elderly folks from church who'd otherwise eat alone
- Single parents overwhelmed by life
- People new to the area who don't know anyone

- Neighbors who don't have church family

**The table becomes evangelism.** Not because we preach at them, but because they experience family. They see love in action. They taste grace (literally and figuratively).

#### 4. Teaching Table Skills

Many people in our culture don't know how to host. They're intimidated by the idea of having people over. They think it requires:

- Expensive food
- Perfect house
- Martha Stewart skills
- Extroverted personality

So we teach: **You don't need a perfect house or gourmet skills. You just need a table, some food, and a willingness to share your life.**

We've had potluck dinners where we teach people:

- How to set a welcoming table
- How to cook simple, affordable meals that feed a crowd
- How to facilitate conversation (ask open questions, listen well)
- How to create an atmosphere of belonging

#### 5. Creating Rhythms, Not Events

The key isn't occasional hospitality. **It's rhythmic hospitality.**

Some families in our church have "open table" nights—same night every week, anyone can come, no RSVP needed. They cook extra and whoever shows up is welcome.

Others rotate hosting small group meals—each family takes a turn opening their home.

Still others have "dinner church"—a weekly gathering where the entire service happens around a meal. They eat together, read Scripture together, pray together, break bread together.

**The point is consistency.** When hospitality is rhythmic rather than occasional, it becomes formative rather than just nice.

### THE BARRIERS WE'VE CREATED

Let me be honest about what gets in the way:

### **1. Busyness**

We're too scheduled, too rushed, too fragmented. Meals together require time—not just eating, but lingering, conversation, cleanup.

**But what are we too busy for? The very thing that creates the family we're longing for.**

### **2. Consumerism**

We eat out because it's easier. We grab fast food because it's convenient. We microwave meals individually because we can't coordinate schedules.

**But convenience is the enemy of community.** The easy path doesn't create the intimacy we need.

### **3. Perfectionism**

People don't host because they think their house isn't nice enough, their cooking isn't good enough, they're not entertaining enough.

**But hospitality isn't about performance. It's about presence.**

The best meals I've had in people's homes were often the simplest—spaghetti, salad, garlic bread. What made them memorable wasn't the food; it was the company, the conversation, the sense of being welcomed.

### **4. Individualism**

We've lost the art of communal eating. Everyone eats at different times, in different rooms, often while staring at screens.

**But we're designed for table fellowship.** We need the face-to-face, the passing of food, the rhythm of shared meals.

### **5. Lack of Modeling**

Many people grew up in homes where family meals weren't prioritized. They don't have a template for what table-centered life looks like.

**This is where the church can step in—teaching, modeling, practicing hospitality until it becomes natural.**

## **THE TRANSFORMATION THAT HAPPENS**

Let me tell you about a couple I'll call Mark and Lisa.

They'd been attending our church for a year. Faithful. Involved. But something felt off—they were present but not connected.

I invited them to dinner. Just our family and theirs. Nothing fancy. Burgers on the grill.

Over dinner, Lisa started crying. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just... nobody's invited us to their home in so long. We didn't realize how isolated we've been."

They told their story: moved for Mark's job, left family behind, tried multiple churches, attended but never connected, slowly became convinced that maybe they were the problem.

"Being at your table tonight," Mark said, "feels like coming home."

We kept inviting them. They started inviting others. Their home became a hub of hospitality in our church community.

A year later, Lisa told me: "Learning to open our table changed everything. We're not just attending church anymore. We're being the church."

**That's what happens at tables. Strangers become friends. Friends become family. Family becomes the household of God.**

### **SETTING THE TABLE AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

I want to end with a practical challenge: **What if setting your table became a spiritual discipline?**

Not just when you're having people over, but as a regular practice:

#### **Set the table with intention.**

Place the plates, the silverware, the napkins as an act of preparation. You're creating space for people to belong.

#### **Pray while you prepare.**

"Lord, bless this food and these people. Use this meal to knit us together. Make our table a place where You're present and recognized."

#### **Light a candle.**

A simple gesture that says: This meal matters. This time is sacred. We're not just refueling; we're communing.

#### **Turn off devices.**

Phones away. TV off. Distractions eliminated. This time is for each other.

**Give thanks together.**

Not perfunctory blessing, but actual gratitude—for the food, for each other, for the privilege of sharing this moment.

**Linger.**

Don't rush. Let the conversation flow. Let laughter come. Let silence be comfortable. Stay at the table even after the food is gone.

**Clean up together.**

The meal isn't over when eating stops. Cleaning up together extends the fellowship, creates more space for conversation, teaches service.

**JESUS' EARNEST DESIRE**

Remember what Jesus said before instituting communion: "**I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer**" (Luke 22:15).

Jesus *desired* the table. He longed for it. He looked forward to sharing this meal with His family.

**What if we approached our tables with the same earnest desire?**

What if we longed to gather around food with our church family? What if we anticipated shared meals the way Jesus anticipated Passover?

What if our tables became the center of our community life—the place where:

- Formation happens
- Reconciliation occurs
- Belonging is established
- Jesus is recognized
- Family is created

**This is the invitation: Make room at your table.**

For the people you know and the people you don't.

For the comfortable and the uncomfortable.

For those who can reciprocate and those who can't.

For family—biological and spiritual.

**Because the table is where strangers become family.**

And the family of God—diverse, dysfunctional, being made divine—is formed around tables where bread is broken, wine is shared, and Jesus is present.

As William Willimon reminds us: **We come as beggars, not as consumers.**

All of us hungry. All of us in need. All of us receiving grace we didn't earn.

**That's what happens at the table.**

And it's what the church is meant to be.

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*"Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart."*

— Acts 2:46 (NASB)

*"When you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you."*

— Luke 14:13-14 (NASB)

*"When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him."*

— Luke 24:30-31 (NASB)

*"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."*

— Luke 22:15 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 13: MULTIGENERATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

I was sitting in a coffee shop last month when I overheard a conversation at the next table. A young man, maybe mid-twenties, was talking to someone who appeared to be his grandfather.

"I wish I'd known you when I was growing up," the young man said. "All the stuff you know, the wisdom you have—I could have used that when I was making all those stupid decisions in my teens and early twenties."

The older man shook his head sadly. "Your mother and I weren't on good terms back then. By the time we reconciled, you were already grown."

"But I still needed you. I still need you now."

I had to look away because I was tearing up. That conversation could have been me and Amy or Beth—the years lost, the wisdom not transmitted, the relationship fractured during the very years when it mattered most.

**We live in a culture that segregates generations.** And the church, rather than resisting this cultural pattern, has amplified it.

We've created separate services for different age groups, separate programs, separate spaces, separate everything. We've organized ourselves so efficiently by demographic that a seventy-year-old and a twenty-year-old can attend the same church for years and never have a meaningful conversation.

**And we wonder why we're losing both the wisdom of age and the energy of youth.**

## TITUS 2: THE HOUSEHOLD MODEL

Paul's instructions to Titus reveal what the early church understood about intergenerational community:

"But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine. Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. Likewise urge the young men to be sensible" (Titus 2:1-6, NASB).

Notice the structure: **Older teaching younger. Not programs teaching people. Not professionals teaching consumers. People teaching people. Life on life. Generation to generation.**

### **Older Men as Models**

"Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance."

Paul isn't describing a curriculum. He's describing character. **Older men aren't called to be experts; they're called to be examples.**

Temperate—self-controlled, not given to excess.

Dignified—worthy of respect, serious about life and faith.

Sensible—wise, discerning, grounded.

Sound in faith, love, perseverance—tested and proven over time.

**These aren't qualities you learn in a classroom. They're forged through decades of following Christ through trials, failures, and victories.**

The older man's role isn't to lecture about theology (though that might be part of it). It's to embody what a lifetime of faith looks like. To show younger men what mature masculinity looks like when it's been surrendered to Christ.

### **Older Women Teaching Younger**

"Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind."

**Notice: older women teach younger women.**

Not through seminars and programs (though those can help). Through relationship.

Through proximity. Through modeling life.

The content isn't abstract theology. It's intensely practical:

- How to love your husband (especially when it's hard)
- How to love your children (especially when you're exhausted)
- How to be sensible, pure, kind (character formed over time)

**This kind of teaching requires relationship.** You can't learn to love your husband through a podcast. You need to see an older woman who's been married for forty years navigate

conflict with grace, speak of her husband with respect, maintain intimacy through difficult seasons.

You can't learn to mother well from a book alone. You need to watch an experienced mom handle tantrums with patience, prioritize what matters, let go of what doesn't, find joy in the chaos.

**Wisdom is caught more than taught.**

### **The Household Across Ages**

The structure Paul describes isn't age-segregated programs. It's the **household of faith functioning as an actual household**—multiple generations in relationship, each contributing according to their stage of life:

- Older men modeling maturity
- Older women teaching younger women
- Younger women learning to be wives and mothers
- Young men learning self-control and purpose

**Everyone has a role. Everyone is needed. The generations are integrated, not isolated.**

This is how families worked for most of human history. Grandparents, parents, children all in proximity. The young learning from the old. The old finding purpose in investing in the young.

**The household didn't need programs because the structure itself was the program.**

Psalm 145:4 captures this vision: "**One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts.**"

Faith is transmitted generationally. The stories are passed down. The older generation praises God's works to the younger. The younger generation receives the faith and will one day pass it to their children.

**But this only happens when generations are in relationship.**

### **2 TIMOTHY 2:2: FOUR GENERATIONS**

Paul gives Timothy a vision for multiplication through generations:

"The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2, NASB).

Count the generations:

1. **Paul** ("things which you have heard from me")
2. **Timothy** ("you... entrust these")
3. **Faithful men** ("to faithful men")
4. **Others** ("who will be able to teach others also")

**Four generations in one verse.** This is how the faith was meant to spread—not through mass evangelism alone (though that has its place), but through personal discipleship that multiplies.

### **What You Heard From Me**

"The things which you have heard from me..."

**Paul is passing on what Timothy heard.** Not just information, but the lived faith he witnessed. Timothy didn't just read Paul's letters; he traveled with Paul, watched him plant churches, saw him suffer, observed how he handled conflict, learned by proximity.

This is **apprenticeship**, not just education.

Timothy knew Paul's:

- Doctrine (what he believed)
- Methodology (how he ministered)
- Character (who he was when no one was watching)
- Suffering (how he endured hardship)
- Faith (what sustained him through trials)

**You can't get this from a distance.** You need proximity. Time. Relationship.

### **Entrust to Faithful Men**

"...entrust these to faithful men..."

Paul doesn't say "entrust to talented men" or "entrust to charismatic men" or "entrust to educated men."

**Faithful men.** Those who can be trusted. Who will steward what they've received. Who will pass it on rather than hoard it.

Faithfulness is proven over time. You can't determine in a week whether someone is faithful. You need to watch them:

- When things are hard
- When no one is watching
- When there's no immediate reward
- When they're tempted to quit

**Older generations have the perspective to identify faithfulness.** They've watched enough people come and go to know the difference between flash and substance.

### **Who Will Be Able to Teach Others**

"...who will be able to teach others also."

The goal isn't just to transfer information to the next generation. **The goal is to create teachers who will create teachers who will create teachers.**

This is exponential growth. If I disciple one person per year for forty years, I've discipled forty people. But if I disciple one person who disciples one person who disciples one person—multiplying generationally—the impact is exponentially greater.

**But this only works if we're intentionally investing in the next generation with the expectation that they'll invest in the generation after them.**

## **THE LOSS OF SPIRITUAL PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS**

I need to be blunt about what we've lost through age segregation:

### **What We Miss Without Elders**

**Young people without elder influence miss:**

#### **1. Wisdom that only comes through time**

There are some things you can't learn from a book or a peer. You need someone who's been through it:

- How to navigate a difficult marriage (not theory, but practiced reality)
- How to raise teenagers (from someone whose kids are now adults)
- How to handle career transitions, financial stress, health crises
- How to maintain faith through decades, not just the honeymoon phase
- How to face mortality with peace

#### **2. Warning about pitfalls**

Older believers have scars. They've made mistakes. They know where the dangers are.

A young pastor full of zeal and ideas needs an older pastor to say: "I tried that. Here's what I learned. Here's what it cost me. Here's what I'd do differently."

**But we've created a church culture that idolizes youth and innovation.** We think the newest is best. We dismiss "that's how we've always done it" without asking if there's wisdom in what's been preserved.

### **3. Permission to slow down**

Young people are driven, ambitious, insecure, trying to prove themselves.

Older people can say: "You don't have to accomplish everything in your twenties. Pace yourself. It's a marathon, not a sprint. I learned that the hard way."

**But without elders, young people burn out** because no one gave them permission to rest, to wait, to develop slowly.

### **4. A long view of God's faithfulness**

When you've only been a Christian for five years, you haven't seen God's faithfulness over decades. You haven't watched Him sustain you through multiple crises. You haven't experienced His provision over the long haul.

But someone who's walked with God for fifty years? They have stories:

- "I lost my job in the recession of '82, and here's how God provided"
- "My daughter rebelled for ten years, and here's how God brought her back"
- "I went through cancer twice, and here's what I learned about suffering"

**These stories anchor faith.** They give younger believers hope that God will be faithful to them too.

### **What Elders Miss Without Youth**

**But it's not just young people who lose. Older believers need the younger generation too:**

#### **1. Purpose and legacy**

Many older adults feel useless after retirement. Their value was in their career, and now that's over. They wonder if they still matter.

**Investing in younger generations gives purpose.** Being a spiritual parent or grandparent creates legacy. Knowing that what you've learned won't die with you is profoundly meaningful.

I've watched retirees come alive when they start mentoring young adults. Suddenly they're needed again. Their experience has value. Their life matters.

## **2. Energy and vision**

Young people see possibilities that older people have stopped seeing. They have energy older folks have lost. They dream bigger because they haven't been beaten down by decades of disappointments.

**Elders need that injection of hope.** They need young people asking "Why not?" when they've been saying "It can't be done."

Joel 2:28 captures this beautiful reciprocity: "**Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.**"

Not "old men dream, young men don't." Not "young men see visions while old men are irrelevant."

**Old men dream dreams.** They're still engaged, still imagining possibilities, still active in God's purposes.

**Young men see visions.** They have fresh perspective, see what's not yet visible, push toward what could be.

**And they need each other.** Dreams without vision can be backward-looking. Vision without dreams can be rootless. Together, they create something powerful.

## **3. Challenge to stay relevant**

It's easy for older believers to get stuck in their ways, rigid, unwilling to change.

Young people challenge that: "Why do we do it this way? Is there a better way? Can we try something new?"

**Sometimes the answer is yes, sometimes no.** But the question itself keeps older folks from calcifying. It forces them to examine assumptions, explain traditions, consider alternatives.

## **4. The joy of watching growth**

There's a unique joy in watching someone you've invested in mature, succeed, surpass you.

Paul experienced this with Timothy. He could say with pride: "I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare" (Philippians 2:20, NASB).

**That's the reward of spiritual parenthood**—watching your spiritual children grow into faithful servants who carry on the work.

## THE AGE-SEGREGATED CHURCH MODEL

So how did we get here? How did we go from the multigenerational household model to complete age segregation?

### The Rise of Age Segregation

#### 1. Youth culture (1950s-60s)

Post-WWII America saw the rise of "teenagers" as a distinct demographic. Youth culture emerged. And the church responded by creating youth programs.

The logic was sound: reach young people where they are. Speak their language. Create space for them.

**But we went too far.** Instead of integrating young people into the church family, we separated them into their own silo.

#### 2. Consumer model (1970s-80s)

The megachurch movement brought sophisticated programming. Target demographics. Niche ministries for every age group.

Again, the logic was sound: meet people's specific needs. Provide relevant content for each stage of life.

**But the result was fragmentation.** The seventy-year-old and the twenty-year-old never interact because they're in completely different programs.

#### 3. Professionalization (1990s-2000s)

Churches hired specialists: children's pastor, youth pastor, young adults pastor, seniors' pastor.

The logic: trained professionals are more effective than untrained volunteers.

**But the unintended consequence:** spiritual formation became the job of paid staff rather than the responsibility of the whole community. Parents abdicated discipleship to professionals. Older believers stopped investing in younger ones because "that's what we pay the youth pastor for."

## What We've Lost

### 1. Natural mentoring relationships

When you segregate by age, you eliminate the natural opportunity for older to mentor younger. The high schooler never interacts with the seasoned saint. The young mom never receives wisdom from the grandmother.

### 2. Diversity of perspective

Age-segregated groups become echo chambers. Everyone sees things similarly because they're at the same life stage. No one challenges assumptions because everyone shares them.

### 3. The family dynamic

Church stops feeling like family and starts feeling like a collection of affinity groups. You're not in a household with all ages; you're in a demographic silo with your peers.

### 4. Continuity of faith

When older believers aren't investing in younger ones, faith stops being transmitted generationally. Each generation has to figure it out on their own, reinventing the wheel, making the same mistakes, lacking the wisdom that previous generations paid dearly to acquire.

## RESTORING INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY

So how do we restore what's been lost? Let me offer some practical steps:

### 1. Structural Changes

**Integrate worship:** Don't create separate services for different ages. Gather the whole family together. Yes, this means compromise—music that isn't perfectly targeted to one demographic, preaching that speaks to multiple generations. But the benefit is worth it: everyone worships together, learns together, belongs together.

**Mixed-age small groups:** Instead of college groups, young professionals groups, empty nesters groups—create groups that span generations. A group with twentysomethings, fortysomethings, and seventysomethings looks like a family.

**Mentoring programs:** Formalize what should happen naturally. Pair older believers with younger ones. Not just for "accountability" but for genuine friendship, investment, life-on-life discipleship.

### 2. Cultural Shifts

**Honor the elderly:** Stop treating older adults as irrelevant. Give them platforms. Ask for their wisdom. Celebrate their years of faithfulness.

I make it a point to regularly invite older saints to share their stories in our services. Not just "testimony time" but substantive teaching from their decades of walking with Christ.

**Expect young adults to engage:** Don't let twenty-somethings only hang out with twenty-somethings. Challenge them to build relationships across generations. Make intergenerational engagement an expectation, not an option.

**Model it from leadership:** Our elder board ranges from early thirties to mid-seventies. We learn from each other. The young bring energy and fresh perspective. The old bring wisdom and caution. Together we're better than we'd be separately.

### **3. Practical Opportunities**

**Shared meals:** Remember the last chapter—the table is where relationships form. Create opportunities for different ages to eat together. Host dinners where you intentionally mix ages.

**Service projects:** Work together on practical tasks. When the youth group and the seniors work side by side on a service project, relationships form.

**Shared interests:** Find common ground. The seventy-year-old who loves woodworking can teach the twenty-year-old. The young adult who understands technology can help the senior navigate their phone. Shared interests create connection.

### **4. Family Adoption**

Some of the most beautiful intergenerational relationships I've seen happen when people without biological family nearby "adopt" each other:

- The young couple without parents in the area who are adopted by an older couple as "spiritual kids"
- The single mom whose church family steps in as grandparents to her children
- The college student who becomes like a grandson to the elderly widow

**These aren't programs. They're organic relationships that church communities can encourage and facilitate.**

## **MODELS THAT WORK**

Let me share some examples I've seen work:

## **The Timothy Project**

An older man in our church started what he calls "The Timothy Project." He identified young men in their twenties who showed potential for leadership and invited them to meet monthly.

They gather for breakfast. He doesn't have a curriculum. He just shares his life:

- Stories from his forty years in business
- Lessons from his fifty-year marriage
- Wisdom from decades of walking with Christ
- Warnings about pitfalls he fell into

The young men ask questions. They share their struggles. They receive counsel.

Three years in, several of those young men are now discipling even younger men. **Four generations, just like 2 Timothy 2:2.**

## **The Titus 2 Women**

A group of older women started meeting with younger women. Not a formal Bible study. Just life together:

- They cook together (older women teaching younger to prepare meals)
- They craft together (creating while talking)
- They pray together (for marriages, children, struggles)
- They laugh together (shared joy across generations)

The younger women learn:

- How to navigate difficult in-law relationships (from women who've done it for decades)
- How to maintain intimacy in marriage through different seasons
- How to discipline children effectively
- How to balance work, family, ministry
- How to walk with God when life is hard

**This isn't information transfer. This is life transfer.**

## **Grandparents' Group**

We have families in our church whose parents/grandparents don't live nearby or aren't believers. We also have older adults whose kids/grandkids live far away.

We created a matching program: families needing spiritual grandparents, older adults wanting to invest in the next generation.

The relationships that have formed are beautiful:

- "Grandpa Joe" attends dance recitals for his adopted granddaughter
- "Grandma Ruth" babysits so the young couple can have date nights
- The kids call them grandma and grandpa, without qualifier
- The older adults have purpose, the young families have support

**This is church functioning as family.**

## **Sunday Dinners**

Several families in our church have committed to hosting Sunday dinner every week—and to always include people from different generations.

They invite:

- The college students who'd otherwise eat alone
- The widows and widowers
- The young couple with babies who are exhausted
- The high schooler whose home life is chaotic

Every week, different combinations, but always intergenerational.

**Around those tables, discipleship happens naturally.** The seventy-year-old shares wisdom. The twenty-year-old brings energy. The kids play together. Relationships form. Family is created.

## **THE CHALLENGE TO DIFFERENT GENERATIONS**

Let me speak directly to different age groups:

### **To the Young**

**You need elders.** Not just peers. Not just cool young pastors. You need people who've walked with God for decades.

Seek them out. Ask questions. Listen to their stories. Learn from their mistakes. Let them speak into your life.

Don't dismiss them as irrelevant or out of touch. They have wisdom you desperately need.

### **To Middle Age**

**You're the bridge.** You're being mentored by elders and mentoring the young.

Don't get so busy with your career and family that you neglect both relationships. You need the older generation's wisdom, and the younger generation needs yours.

**You're at the peak of your influence. Use it to connect generations.**

### **To the Elders**

**You're not done.** Retirement from career doesn't mean retirement from ministry.

The next generation needs you. Your experience, your wisdom, your perspective, your prayers, your stories.

Find young people to invest in. Don't wait for them to seek you out—many don't know they need you yet. Be intentional. Pursue them. Invite them into relationship.

**Your greatest legacy isn't what you accomplished; it's who you invested in.**

### **MY REGRET AND MY HOPE**

I mentioned at the beginning that I failed my daughters during critical years. I was so busy building ministry that I neglected the ministry of being their father.

Now, as I work toward reconciliation with Amy and Beth, I'm learning what I should have known all along: **the most important discipleship happens in the context of relationship over time.**

I can't go back and redo their childhood. Those years are gone. But I can be intentional about being present now. About investing in their lives. About being the spiritual father I should have been.

And I can help create church communities where what I failed to do is happening naturally—where spiritual parents and grandparents are investing in the next generation, where young people are receiving the wisdom of age, where the household of faith functions like an actual household.

**This is my hope:** That we recover the beautiful, biblical vision of generations praising God's works to each other. Old and young together. Wisdom and energy. Dreams and visions. All ages needed. All ages valued. All ages in relationship.

**Because the family of God—diverse, dysfunctional, being made divine—spans generations.**

And when we live that way, we reflect the heart of God who calls Himself "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"—three generations in covenant relationship.

That's who we're meant to be.

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*"One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts."*

— Psalm 145:4 (NASB)

*"The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."*

— 2 Timothy 2:2 (NASB)

*"Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions."*

— Joel 2:28 (NASB)

*"Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior... teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women."*

— Titus 2:3-4 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 14: RETHINKING CHURCH STRUCTURE

I still remember the meeting where everything changed for me.

It was 2012. I'd been senior pastor for eight years. The church had grown steadily—from 150 to almost 400. We'd hired staff, expanded programs, built a new worship space. By every metric the church-growth experts measured, we were successful.

But I was dying inside.

The elder board had called a strategic planning meeting. We spent three hours reviewing data: attendance trends, giving patterns, program participation rates, demographic analysis of our community.

Then someone asked: "How many people in our church would you say are actually being discipled? Not just attending, but genuinely growing in Christ through intentional relationships?"

We sat in uncomfortable silence.

Finally, one elder said quietly: "Maybe thirty? Forty at most? And that's generous."

We had nearly 400 people attending. We had programs for every age group. We had small groups, Bible studies, serving opportunities, mission trips, everything the church-growth books said we should have.

**But we'd built an impressive religious organization while failing at the fundamental task of making disciples.**

That night, I went home and couldn't sleep. I kept thinking: *We've optimized for growth but forgotten what we're growing toward. We've created a religious country club where people attend events but never become family.*

The next morning, I started reading Acts again. Not as a pastor looking for sermon material, but as someone desperate to understand what church was supposed to be.

**And what I saw wrecked me.**

Because the church described in Acts looked nothing like the church I was leading.

## FROM PROGRAMS TO PEOPLE

Here's the fundamental shift that needs to happen: **Church isn't something we attend; it's something we are.**

But we've created structures that make church an event rather than a way of life.

Consider the typical church member's engagement:

- Sunday morning: 90 minutes
- Small group (if they attend): 2 hours every other week
- Maybe one serving role: 2-3 hours monthly

**Total weekly engagement with church family: 2-3 hours.**

The rest of life—the other 160+ waking hours each week—happens in isolation from the believing community.

We show up for programmed events, consume religious goods and services, then return to our autonomous lives.

**This is not the church of Acts 2.**

### **The Attractional Model**

For the past fifty years, the Western church has operated primarily on what's called the "attractional model":

**The logic:**

- Create excellent programs and worship experiences
- Market them to the community
- Attract people to come to the church building
- Once they're there, convert and disciple them

**The strategy:**

- Professional-quality music and preaching
- Programs for every demographic
- Impressive facilities
- Convenient service times
- Minimal barriers to entry

**The metrics:**

- Attendance numbers
- Giving totals

- Program participation
- Building expansion

I'm not saying this is all bad. There are benefits:

- Excellent teaching can reach many
- Quality worship can facilitate corporate gathering
- Programs can meet real needs
- Buildings provide space for community

**But here's the problem: we've optimized for Sunday morning while neglecting the other six days.**

We've created consumers rather than contributors. Spectators rather than participants. Attendees rather than family members.

The attractional model asks: "How do we get people to come to church?"

**But the biblical model asks: "How do we equip people to BE the church wherever they are?"**

### **The Incarnational Alternative**

Jesus didn't say, "Build impressive buildings and people will come."

He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19, NASB).

### **Go. Not come. Go.**

The incarnational model doesn't wait for people to show up at the building. It embeds believers in neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, communities—living as salt and light, creating pockets of kingdom presence everywhere they are.

**The church isn't a place you go; it's a people you belong to, scattered throughout the world.**

This is how the early church functioned:

- They met in homes (not special religious buildings)
- They shared daily life (not just weekly services)
- They were embedded in their communities (not separated into religious enclaves)
- Everyone participated (not just paid professionals)

**The traditional quote captures it perfectly: "The church is not a building, it's a people."**

But we've functioned as if the opposite is true. We've invested millions in buildings and programs while underinvesting in people being equipped to live as family and make disciples.

### **SMALL ENOUGH TO CARE, LARGE ENOUGH TO SHARE**

There's a fundamental tension in church structure: **intimacy requires smallness, but mission requires multiplication.**

You can't know 400 people deeply. You can't share daily life with hundreds. You can't have the kind of mutual accountability, vulnerability, and formation we've been describing in a crowd.

**But you also can't accomplish significant mission with just twelve people.** You need critical mass for resources, gifting, sending capacity.

So how do you maintain both intimacy and impact?

### **The House Church Model**

The early church solved this by being both large and small simultaneously:

**Large:** "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47, NASB). Thousands became believers. The movement was growing rapidly.

**Small:** "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house" (Acts 2:46, NASB). They met in homes for daily fellowship.

**The temple** = large corporate gathering, teaching, worship, celebration

**House to house** = small, intimate, daily life together

They didn't choose between large and small. **They did both.**

Corporate gatherings created a sense of being part of something bigger than any individual household. House churches created the intimacy necessary for formation, accountability, and genuine family.

### **The Microchurch Movement**

In recent years, there's been a resurgence of what's being called "microchurches"—small, intentional communities (typically 3-15 people) that function as church, not just as programs within a larger church.

#### **Characteristics of microchurches:**

- Meet in homes or third spaces (not church buildings)
- Led by ordinary believers (not paid clergy)
- Centered on shared life (not just programmed meetings)
- Participate in mission together (not just internal fellowship)
- Multiply when they grow (rather than getting bigger)

I've watched several of these form in our church over the past few years:

**The Thursday morning men's group** I've mentioned is essentially a microchurch. Seven guys doing life together, meeting weekly, carrying each other's burdens, holding each other accountable, eating together, praying together, serving together.

**A group of families** formed around shared meals and parenting support. They eat together weekly, their kids play together, they pray for each other's marriages and children, they share resources and childcare.

**A cluster of neighbors** started gathering for "dinner church" every Sunday evening. They rotate houses, share a meal, read Scripture together, discuss and pray, break bread together. It's communion and community integrated.

**These aren't programs our church staff created.** They're organic expressions of people saying, "We want to be family, not just attend church."

And here's what's remarkable: **the formation happening in these small communities far exceeds what happens through our Sunday services and programs.**

Why? Because:

- **Frequency:** They gather multiple times per week, not just once
- **Intimacy:** Small numbers allow for deep relationships
- **Participation:** Everyone contributes; no one is passive
- **Accountability:** You can't hide in a group of seven
- **Mission:** They serve together, not just as individuals

### **Small Enough to Care**

The magic number seems to be around 12-15. That's:

- Jesus and the Twelve

- A family dinner table
- A small group that fits in a living room

**At this size:**

- Everyone knows everyone
- Everyone participates
- No one gets lost
- Needs are visible
- Accountability is natural
- Vulnerability is possible

**Larger than this, and you start losing intimacy.** You can't know everyone deeply. People slip through cracks. Quiet folks get overlooked.

But this creates a problem: what about mission? What about resources? What about the benefits of being part of something larger?

**Large Enough to Share**

This is where the network model comes in. **Multiple small communities connected in a larger movement.**

Our church is experimenting with this:

- Multiple microchurches (10-15 people each)
- Connected to each other through shared leadership and resources
- Gathering corporately monthly for worship, teaching, celebration
- Supporting each other's mission initiatives
- Sharing financial resources for things small groups can't fund alone

**The microchurches provide intimacy. The network provides impact.**

A single microchurch can't support a missionary. But ten microchurches together can.

A single microchurch might not have the gifting needed for a specific ministry. But across ten microchurches, the gifts are present.

**This is how the early church functioned:** house churches networked across a city, supported by apostolic leadership, gathering occasionally in larger spaces (like Solomon's portico or rented halls).

## ACTS 2:42-47 REVISITED

Let's go back to the foundational passage and really look at what the early church prioritized:

"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42, NASB).

### 1. Apostles' Teaching (Didache)

**Teaching was central.** Not entertainment, not inspiration (though those can be good), but substantive instruction in the faith.

The apostles taught:

- The story of Jesus (life, death, resurrection)
- The meaning of Jesus (atonement, kingdom, new creation)
- The way of Jesus (how to live as His disciples)
- The Scriptures (Old Testament reinterpreted through Christ)

**This wasn't TED talk-style presentations.** It was transmission of a way of life, grounded in truth about who God is and what He's done.

Modern application:

- Don't underestimate people's appetite for substantive teaching
- Don't dumb down theology in pursuit of relevance
- Make space for questions, dialogue, wrestling with truth
- Teach not just to inform but to form

### 2. Fellowship (Koinonia)

The Greek word *koinonia* (κοινωνία) means far more than "hanging out after church."

It means:

- Partnership
- Sharing

- Participation
- Communion
- Deep connection

**This is the life-sharing we've been describing throughout this book.** Not acquaintanceship. Not casual friendship. Deep, committed, costly sharing of life.

"All those who had believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44, NASB).

**Together.** Not occasionally. Not just Sunday morning. Together in daily life.

**All things in common.** Not just spiritual stuff. Everything—resources, struggles, joys, burdens, meals, homes.

### 3. Breaking of Bread

We explored this in the last chapter, but it bears repeating: **the table was central.**

Not just communion as ritual. Actual meals. Shared food. Daily breaking bread together in homes.

"Breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart" (Acts 2:46, NASB).

The table was where:

- Relationships deepened
- Stories were shared
- Jesus was remembered
- Community was formed
- Outsiders were welcomed

**You can't replicate this with a coffee and donut fellowship after service.** You need actual meals. In homes. Regularly.

### 4. Prayers

**Corporate prayer and personal prayer. Praying together and for one another.**

Not just the pastor praying while everyone listens. Everyone praying. For each other. With each other.

"Continuing with one mind in the temple" (Acts 2:46)—corporate gatherings included prayer.

"The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16)—personal, mutual prayer for specific needs.

**Prayer was the atmosphere in which everything happened.** Not a program or a slot in the schedule. The constant background of community life.

## 5. Economic Sharing

"And they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need" (Acts 2:45, NASB).

This makes us uncomfortable. It sounds communist. Impractical. Naïve.

But it's what family does.

When your brother loses his job, you don't say, "Good luck with that." You help. When your sister's car breaks down, you don't say, "That's tough." You fix it or help her get it fixed.

**The early church operated as an economic household.** Not that everyone gave up private property (Acts 5:4 makes clear that Ananias's property was his own). But that resources were shared freely to meet needs.

**Modern application doesn't mean selling everything.** But it might mean:

- Creating benevolence funds for members in crisis
- Interest-free loans within the community
- Skill-sharing and bartering
- Shared tools, equipment, vehicles
- Generosity that goes beyond tithing to the institution

## 6. Daily Togetherness

"Day by day... from house to house" (Acts 2:46).

**The rhythm was daily, not weekly.**

This is the hardest part for modern Christians to wrap our minds around. We're busy. We have jobs, kids, obligations. How can we possibly gather daily?

**But what if we reframe it?** What if instead of adding "church activities" to our already-packed schedules, we integrated church family into the life we're already living?

- You're making dinner anyway—invite someone to join you
- You're going to the park with your kids—text another family to meet you there
- You need help with a project—call a brother from church instead of hiring someone
- You're running errands—bring along a sister who needs company

**Daily togetherness doesn't mean daily formal meetings.** It means integrating believing community into the ordinary rhythms of life.

### **EQUIPPING THE SAINTS: EPHESIANS 4:11-16**

Paul gives us the purpose of church structure in Ephesians 4:

"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12, NASB).

**Notice the purpose of leadership gifts:** "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service."

**Not:** Leaders do the ministry while members watch.

**But:** Leaders equip members to do the ministry.

### **Not Pastor-Dependent but Member-Activated**

The traditional model creates dependency:

- Pastor preaches → people listen
- Pastor visits → people receive care
- Pastor counsels → people get help
- Pastor leads → people follow

### **But what happens when the pastor leaves? Or gets sick? Or burns out?**

The whole system collapses because it's built on one person (or a small staff team) doing the work while everyone else consumes.

### **The biblical model creates activation:**

- Leaders teach → members teach others (2 Timothy 2:2)
- Leaders care → members care for each other ("bear one another's burdens")
- Leaders counsel → members speak truth in love to each other

- Leaders lead → members participate in decision-making and direction

"Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13, NASB).

**The goal is corporate maturity.** Not just individual spiritual growth. Not just the pastor being mature. **All of us together growing up into Christ.**

### **Every Member Functioning**

"From whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16, NASB).

### **Every joint. Every part. Each individual.**

The body doesn't grow through the pastor working harder. **It grows through every member functioning properly.**

This requires structures that:

- **Identify gifts** in every member (not just the talented or trained)
- **Deploy gifts** for the common good (not just in church programs)
- **Develop gifts** through practice and mentoring
- **Release gifts** by removing barriers and giving permission

**1 Peter 2:9 makes this explicit:** "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (NASB).

**A royal priesthood.** Not a clergy class serving a passive laity. **Every believer is a priest.**

Every believer has direct access to God. Every believer can intercede. Every believer can teach. Every believer can serve. Every believer can minister.

**We don't need more pastors doing ministry. We need pastors equipping everyone to do ministry.**

### **WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE PRACTICALLY**

Let me get specific about what rethinking structure actually means:

#### **1. Smaller Corporate Gatherings, More House Churches**

Instead of one service with 400 people, what if we had:

- Monthly corporate gathering (teaching, worship, celebration)
- Weekly house churches (15-20 people, shared meals, life together)
- Daily informal connection (coffee, work projects, kid playdates)

**Benefits:**

- Maintains the "large" for celebration and teaching
- Creates "small" for formation and accountability
- Builds "daily" for integrated life

**2. Every-Member Ministry**

Instead of a few people on staff doing most of the ministry, what if:

- Teaching was shared among multiple gifted teachers (not just the pastor)
- Pastoral care was decentralized to small group leaders
- Counseling happened through mature believers trained in biblical care
- Worship was led by teams of musicians (not professionals)
- Mission was undertaken by microchurches (not just church-wide programs)

**Benefits:**

- Distributes workload (prevents pastor burnout)
- Develops gifts in the whole body
- Creates ownership rather than consumerism
- Reveals that ministry isn't just for "professionals"

**3. Simplified Programs**

Instead of programs for every demographic doing different things, what if:

- We eliminated most separate programs
- We integrated generations in common activities
- We focused resources on equipping for life-on-life discipleship
- We measured success by depth of relationships, not breadth of programming

**Benefits:**

- Reduces complexity and overhead
- Frees people's time for actual relationships
- Focuses energy on what matters most
- Creates intergenerational community

**4. Leadership as Equippers**

Instead of pastors doing the work, what if:

- Pastors spent most of their time equipping others
- Small group leaders were trained and released
- Mentoring relationships were formalized and supported
- Every member was helped to identify and deploy their gifts

**Benefits:**

- Multiplication rather than addition
- Sustainable growth through distributed leadership
- More people experiencing the joy of ministry
- Less dependence on paid staff

**OBJECTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Let me address the concerns I know many will have:

**"But we need excellence in teaching and worship!"**

**Response:** Excellence isn't the same as professionalism. Some of the most powerful worship I've experienced has been in living rooms with mediocre musicians who love Jesus. Some of the best teaching I've received has been from unpolished laypeople who know Scripture and live it.

That said: there's still a place for corporate gatherings with prepared teaching and thoughtful worship. Just not as the only or primary expression of church.

**"What about reaching the lost?"**

**Response:** The attractional model assumes people will come to church to encounter Jesus. **The incarnational model sends Jesus-followers into the world to make disciples.**

Which is more effective? The early church didn't have buildings or programs, and they turned the world upside down. They were embedded in their communities, living as salt and light.

**"This sounds like we're abandoning Sunday morning services."**

**Response:** Not abandoning. Re-centering. Making corporate gathering one expression of church life, not the only one. Maybe even making it monthly rather than weekly, freeing people for more daily engagement.

**"How do you fund this without tithes from Sunday attendance?"**

**Response:** The early church had no buildings to maintain, no staff to pay. Resources went to helping the poor and supporting missionaries.

If we simplified structures, reduced overhead, focused on people rather than programs, we'd need far less money—and what we did need could come from people who are genuinely invested, not just attending.

**"This requires huge cultural change."**

**Response:** Yes. It does. And change is hard. But **is what we're currently doing working?** Are people being formed into Christ-likeness? Are we creating family or religious consumers?

The question isn't "Is this change hard?" but "Is this change necessary and biblical?"

## **MY JOURNEY**

I told you at the beginning about the 2012 meeting that wrecked me. Let me tell you what happened next.

I didn't blow up the church structure overnight. But I started moving incrementally toward what I'm describing:

**Year 1:** Started a pilot house church with a few families willing to experiment. We met weekly for shared meals, studied Acts together, tried to live what we were learning.

**Year 2:** Launched three more house churches. Reduced Sunday morning programming. Started teaching about every-member ministry.

**Year 3:** Shifted our budget away from programming toward equipping. Trained small group leaders in pastoral care. Released people to experiment with microchurches.

**Year 4:** Restructured staff roles from "doing ministry" to "equipping others." Created networks of house churches connected to the larger body.

**Year 5 (now):** We have about 15 microchurches, ranging from 5-15 people each. We gather corporately once a month. Most "ministry" happens through these small communities, not through centralized programs.

**Has it been messy?** Absolutely. We lost people who wanted traditional church. We made mistakes. We had to learn as we went.

#### **But here's what's happened:**

- More people are being genuinely discipled
- Leadership is distributed, not dependent on me
- Relationships are deeper
- Mission is more organic (embedded in communities, not programmatic)
- My work-life is sustainable (I'm equipping, not doing everything)
- We actually look more like the church in Acts

#### **THE INVITATION**

I'm not saying every church needs to do exactly what we're doing. Context matters. Gifting matters. There's no one-size-fits-all model.

**But I am saying:** We need to rethink structures that create consumers rather than disciples, attendees rather than family, programs rather than relationships.

#### **The church is not a building. It's a people.**

And if we structure ourselves as if church is an event we attend rather than a family we belong to, we'll keep producing the same results: religious activity without transformation, busy programming without discipleship, crowded services without genuine community.

#### **What if we had the courage to reimagine?**

What if we prioritized people over programs, relationships over religious activity, formation over information, being scattered as salt and light over gathering in religious enclaves?

What if we actually tried to create what Acts 2 describes: devoted to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, sharing everything in common, daily life together?

**It won't be easy. It won't be efficient. It won't look impressive by church-growth metrics.**

But it might be what God intended. It might be what the world needs to see. It might be the family we're all longing for.

And that's worth rethinking everything to create.

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*"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."*

— Acts 2:42 (NASB)

*"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ."*

— Ephesians 4:11-12 (NASB)

*"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession."*

— 1 Peter 2:9 (NASB)

*"From whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."*

— Ephesians 4:16 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 15: COVENANT COMMUNITY VS. CONSUMER CHURCH

The couple sat in my office, married for eighteen months, already contemplating divorce.

"We're just not compatible," the husband said. "We have different communication styles. Different ideas about money. Different expectations."

"Did you know any of this before you got married?" I asked.

"Some of it. But we thought love would be enough. We thought it would get easier."

I leaned forward. "Let me ask you something. When you stood at the altar and said 'for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part,' did you mean it?"

They looked uncomfortable. "We meant it at the time."

"What changed?"

Long pause. Then the wife said quietly, "It's harder than we thought. And we have an out. Nobody expects marriages to last anymore."

I see this same pattern with church commitment.

People join churches the way they join gyms—enthusiastically at first, then gradually disengaging when it gets hard, finally canceling their membership when they find a better option or lose interest entirely.

**We've treated covenant community like a contract service.** And in doing so, we've lost something essential about what it means to be the family of God.

### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONTRACTS AND COVENANTS

Let me be very clear about the distinction, because it matters profoundly:

#### **Contracts**

**Conditional:** "I'll do X if you do Y. If either party fails to perform, the contract is void."

**Transactional:** Based on exchange. I give this, you give that. The relationship exists to serve mutual benefit.

**Performance-based:** You maintain standing by fulfilling obligations. Failure to perform results in penalty or termination.

**Exit strategy:** Every contract has defined terms for ending the relationship. Exit is not just permitted but often straightforward.

**Self-protecting:** The primary concern is protecting your interests. The contract limits exposure and defines boundaries.

**Examples:**

- Employment agreements (you work, they pay; if either stops, relationship ends)
- Service contracts (you pay, they provide service; dissatisfied? Cancel)
- Business partnerships (defined contributions, defined returns, defined exit)

**There's nothing wrong with contracts.** They serve important purposes in appropriate contexts. But they're not how family works.

**Covenants**

**Unconditional:** "I commit to you regardless of your performance. Your failure doesn't void my promise."

**Relational:** Based on bond, not benefit. The relationship exists for its own sake, not just what each party gets from it.

**Promise-based:** You maintain standing through commitment, not performance. Failure is expected and covered by grace.

**Enduring commitment:** No exit strategy. The relationship is intended to be permanent. You work through problems, you don't walk away.

**Self-sacrificing:** The primary concern is the other's good. You give yourself for the relationship, even at cost to yourself.

**Examples:**

- Marriage (for better or worse, not "as long as both parties perform adequately")
- Parent-child (you don't divorce your kids when they're difficult)
- Biblical covenant (God's commitment to Israel, God's new covenant through Christ)

**Quote often attributed to various sources captures it:** "Covenant is not about being perfect. It's about being present."

Covenant doesn't demand flawlessness. It demands faithfulness. It's the commitment to stay, to work through, to love through the hard parts.

**Church: Covenant or Contract?**

Here's the uncomfortable question: **Which model describes most people's relationship with their church?**

Be honest. Do people approach church membership like:

**Marriage** (covenant, permanent, working through difficulty)?

Or **gym membership** (contract, conditional, canceling when dissatisfied)?

In my experience, most people—though they'd never say it this way—treat church like a contract:

"I'll attend as long as:

- The preaching meets my needs
- The worship style suits my preferences
- The programs benefit my family
- The people are compatible with me
- My volunteer commitments don't become too demanding
- No one offends me or makes me uncomfortable"

**The moment any of those conditions aren't met, they're shopping for a new church.**

This isn't covenant. This is consumerism with religious language.

## **HOW WE GOT HERE**

Before I go further, I need to acknowledge how we arrived at consumer church culture. It's not entirely the fault of individuals. **We've created systems that encourage it.**

### **1. The Megachurch Consumer Model**

Large churches often function like religious department stores:

- Come shop our programs
- Choose what fits your needs
- Consume what benefits you
- Switch departments (services, campuses, small groups) as preferences change
- No one notices if you leave because you're anonymous anyway

**This makes church a service you consume, not a family you belong to.**

## 2. Church Shopping as Norm

We've normalized something that would have been unthinkable for most of Christian history: **shopping for the church that "fits" you best.**

Drive past three churches to get to the one with:

- Your preferred worship style
- Your age demographic
- Your political leaning
- Your theological tribe
- Your aesthetic preferences

**This treats church as preference, not placement.** Remember Chapter 6? God places members in the body. But we've decided we get to choose based on what suits us.

## 3. Low-Commitment Membership

Many churches make membership virtually meaningless:

- Attend a class or two
- Sign a card
- Get added to a database

No meaningful commitment. No accountability. No expectation of participation. No covenant.

**So people "join" churches the way they join Amazon Prime:** convenient benefits, easy exit, no relational obligation.

## 4. Pastor as CEO

When the pastor is framed as the provider of religious services and the congregation as consumers evaluating those services, **the relationship is inherently contractual.**

"The pastor works for us. If we're not satisfied with his performance, we'll find a new one."

This is employer-employee, not shepherd-sheep. Contract, not covenant.

### WHAT COVENANT COMMUNITY LOOKS LIKE

Let me paint a picture of what genuine covenant community actually requires:

## **Mutual Submission (Ephesians 5:21)**

"And be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ephesians 5:21, NASB).

**Mutual submission.** Not hierarchy. Not some submit while others rule. **One another.**

This means:

- I don't always get my way
- I consider your needs and preferences, not just mine
- I yield my preferences for the good of the community
- I allow others to speak into my life, challenge my decisions, question my choices
- I submit my gifts to the body's discernment about how they're best used

**Consumer church says:** "I'll submit to leadership if they're leading where I want to go. If not, I'll find a church that aligns with my views."

**Covenant community says:** "I've bound myself to this body. I'll engage in discernment, speak my perspective, but ultimately submit to where we collectively sense God leading, even if it's not my preference."

## **Shared Resources (Acts 4:32-35)**

"And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them" (Acts 4:32, NASB).

**Not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own.**

This doesn't mean forced communism. It means **covenant generosity**.

"There was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35, NASB).

**The goal:** no one in need. **The means:** everyone sharing freely.

Modern application:

- Your surplus meets my need
- My skill serves your crisis
- Our resources are available to each other

- Giving to church isn't just institutional budget; it's family support

**Consumer church says:** "I tithe to the church (maybe) and that fulfills my obligation."

**Covenant community says:** "Everything I have is available to my family in Christ. If you need it and I have it, it's yours."

I've seen this beautifully lived out:

- The electrician who wired a single mom's house for free
- The family who gave their car to a young couple whose vehicle died
- The group who pooled money to cover medical bills for an uninsured brother
- The community that paid off a widow's mortgage

**This is covenant economics.** What's mine is ours because we're family.

### **Collective Discernment (Acts 15)**

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 shows covenant community making decisions together:

"The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up..." (Acts 15:6-7, NASB).

**Much debate.** Not a CEO making unilateral decisions. Not a pastor dictating direction. **The community wrestling together.**

Eventually they reach a decision: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28, NASB).

**The Holy Spirit and to us.** Divine leading and communal discernment.

This requires:

- Everyone having a voice (not just leaders)
- Honest disagreement without division
- Wrestling with Scripture together
- Patience with process (not demanding immediate resolution)
- Trusting that God leads corporately, not just individually
- Submitting personal conviction to collective wisdom when appropriate

**Consumer church says:** "I'll stay if the leadership makes decisions I agree with. If not, I'll find a church that aligns with my views."

**Covenant community says:** "I engage in discernment, voice my perspective, and trust the Spirit's work in our collective wisdom—even when I disagree with the outcome."

### **Ruth's Covenant**

The most beautiful picture of covenant commitment in Scripture might be Ruth's words to Naomi:

"Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me" (Ruth 1:16-17, NASB).

**"Where you go, I will go."** Total commitment. No exit strategy. No conditional clause.

**"Your people shall be my people."** I'm adopting your family as my own.

**"Your God, my God."** I'm binding myself to your faith community.

**"Thus may the LORD do to me... if anything but death parts you and me."** A covenant oath. Only death ends this commitment.

**This is the kind of commitment covenant community requires.** Not romantic or naïve, but serious, costly, permanent.

### **MEMBERSHIP THAT MEANS SOMETHING**

If we're going to recover covenant community, we need to make church membership mean something again.

Here's what we've implemented in our church (imperfectly, but intentionally):

#### **1. A Covenant, Not a Card**

Instead of "sign here to become a member," we ask people to enter into a written covenant that includes:

##### **I commit to:**

- Regular participation in corporate worship and small community
- Financial support according to my ability
- Use my gifts for the common good

- Submit to loving accountability
- Engage in conflict according to Matthew 18
- Extend and receive forgiveness
- Share my life and resources with this family

**The church commits to:**

- Teach Scripture faithfully
- Care for members pastorally
- Exercise discipline when necessary for protection and restoration
- Use resources wisely for mission and member care
- Create space for participation and discernment
- Walk with members through suffering and celebration

**This is covenant.** Mutual promises. Serious commitment. Not easily made or easily broken.

**2. Process, Not Event**

Membership isn't instant. We ask people to:

- Attend for at least 3-6 months (know what you're committing to)
- Participate in a membership class (understand our covenant, theology, structure)
- Join a small community (you can't covenant with an institution; you covenant with people)
- Meet with elders (we want to know you and you want to know us)
- Publicly commit during a service (making covenant in the presence of witnesses)

**This filters out consumers.** If you're just looking for religious services, this process feels like too much. If you're looking for family, it feels appropriate.

**3. Expectations, Not Just Benefits**

We're explicit about what membership requires:

**Participation:** Not just attendance, but active engagement. Your gifts are needed. Your presence matters.

**Generosity:** We expect financial support, but also skill-sharing, time-giving, resource-sharing.

**Vulnerability:** You can't be anonymous. We need to know you—your struggles, your joys, your needs, your gifts.

**Accountability:** You give us permission to ask hard questions, challenge patterns, speak truth in love.

**Commitment:** You don't leave at the first sign of difficulty. You work through conflict, engage in reconciliation, stay when it's hard.

**This isn't for everyone.** And that's okay. We'd rather have 50 people genuinely covenanted than 500 people casually attending.

#### 4. Discipline as Love

Covenant includes discipline. Not punishment, but correction and protection.

If a member is:

- Living in unrepentant sin
- Creating division
- Refusing reconciliation
- Abusing others
- Teaching false doctrine

**The community addresses it.** Following Matthew 18. With the goal of restoration, not exclusion.

This sounds harsh until you realize: **Families discipline.** Parents correct children because they love them and want them to mature.

**Covenant community does the same.** Not to shame or condemn, but to protect the person, protect the community, and restore relationship.

#### WHEN LEAVING IS FAITHFUL VS. ABANDONMENT

Now I need to address the other side with equal vigor: **Not all leaving is abandonment.**

**Sometimes leaving is the most faithful thing you can do.**

I've seen covenant language weaponized to trap people in abusive, toxic, dangerous situations. **This is not what covenant means.**

Let me be very clear about when leaving is appropriate—even necessary:

### **When Leaving is Faithful Stewardship**

#### **1. Abuse**

If you or your family members are being abused—spiritually, emotionally, physically, sexually—**leave. Get safe. Get help.**

Abuse includes:

- Leaders demanding unquestioning obedience
- Spiritual manipulation through guilt, fear, shame
- Isolation from family/friends outside the church
- Financial exploitation or control
- Any form of sexual misconduct or grooming
- Cover-ups of abuse to protect the institution
- Gaslighting ("you're crazy for questioning this")
- Using Scripture to justify mistreatment

**Covenant does not mean staying in danger.** God does not require you to submit to abuse. You are not abandoning covenant by protecting yourself and your family.

**Leave. Tell someone safe. Report to authorities if crimes have occurred. Get counseling. Heal.**

#### **2. Unrepentant, Serious Sin in Leadership**

If church leaders are living in persistent, public, unrepentant sin—especially:

- Sexual immorality
- Financial corruption
- Abuse of power
- Patterns of lying and deception

**And the church refuses to address it** (covering it up, making excuses, attacking those who raise concerns)—you may need to leave.

Not at the first whiff of scandal. Not based on rumor. But when it's confirmed, serious, ongoing, and being protected by the institution.

**Covenant doesn't mean enabling sin.** Sometimes the most loving thing is to say, "I cannot participate in a community that protects abusers and refuses accountability."

### **3. Fundamental Theological Compromise**

If a church abandons core Christian doctrine:

- Denying the deity of Christ
- Rejecting the resurrection
- Teaching salvation by works
- Rejecting biblical authority
- Embracing heresy

**You should leave.** This is no longer a Christian church in any meaningful sense.

Again, not over secondary issues (worship style, eschatology, church governance). **Over essentials.** The fundamentals of historic Christian faith.

### **4. God's Clear Leading to a New Place**

Sometimes God genuinely calls people elsewhere:

- Moving to a new city for work
- Being sent out to plant a new church
- Joining a mission field
- Answering a specific vocational calling

**This isn't consumerism. This is obedience.**

The difference: You're leaving *for* something (God's clear call), not *from* something (discomfort, conflict, preference).

### **5. Chronic Dysfunction That's Harming You**

If a church is deeply, systemically unhealthy—characterized by:

- Constant, unaddressed conflict
- Leadership chaos and instability

- Patterns that damage people
- Refusal to address problems
- Culture of gossip, suspicion, fear

**And you've tried to address it** (following Matthew 18, speaking with leaders, engaging the process) **and nothing changes**—leaving may be wise.

Not after the first conflict. Not when you're just uncomfortable. **But when the system is toxic and you've done what you can and it's harming your family's spiritual health.**

### **When Leaving is Likely Abandonment**

#### **1. Preference and Comfort**

"I don't like the worship style."  
 "The preaching doesn't suit my taste."  
 "I prefer a different demographic."  
 "The service times aren't convenient."

**These are consumer reasons, not covenant reasons.**

#### **2. Conflict and Offense**

"Someone hurt my feelings."  
 "I had a disagreement with leadership."  
 "People aren't friendly enough."  
 "Someone said something that offended me."

**This is when Matthew 18 kicks in.** Go to the person. Address it. Work toward reconciliation. Don't just leave.

#### **3. Unmet Expectations**

"This church doesn't meet my needs."  
 "I'm not being fed."  
 "There's nothing for my kids."  
 "I thought it would be different."

**This is consumer language.** The church isn't a vendor failing to deliver services. It's a family you're part of. What are you contributing? How are you serving? Are you being the church or just consuming it?

#### **4. Avoiding Accountability**

"They're too nosy."

"They ask too many questions."

"They won't leave me alone."

"They keep bringing up my sin."

**This might actually mean the church is functioning as it should**—as family that knows you, cares about you, and won't let you self-destruct unchallenged.

If you're leaving to avoid accountability, **you're not leaving a bad church. You're avoiding growth.**

## 5. Grass is Greener

"That other church looks better."

"Their programs are more impressive."

"I hear great things about their pastor."

"My friends go there."

**Every church has problems.** You just don't see them from the outside. The grass isn't actually greener; you just haven't gotten close enough to see the weeds.

### The Question to Ask

Before you leave a church, ask yourself honestly:

#### Am I leaving because:

- **I'm in danger?** (Leave)
- **The church has abandoned biblical Christianity?** (Leave)
- **God has clearly called me elsewhere?** (Leave with blessing)
- **The system is toxic and won't change?** (Consider leaving after addressing it)

#### Or am I leaving because:

- **I'm uncomfortable?** (Stay and grow)
- **I'm in conflict?** (Stay and reconcile)
- **My preferences aren't met?** (Stay and contribute)
- **I'm avoiding accountability?** (Stay and submit)
- **I think something better exists?** (Stay and invest)

**Covenant means staying when it's hard.** But it doesn't mean staying when it's harmful.

## THE GRIEF OF NECESSARY SEPARATION

Let me speak to those who've had to leave churches for faithful reasons. Because **leaving hurts, even when it's right.**

I've walked with people through this:

**The woman who left because the pastor who molested her as a teenager was protected** by the church leadership. She did the right thing. But she lost her faith community, her support system, her spiritual home.

**The family who left because the church embraced prosperity theology** that contradicted core gospel truth. They were right to leave. But their kids lost their youth group, their friends, their sense of belonging.

**The couple who left because the leadership was authoritarian and abusive**, using "submission to authority" to control members' lives. Leaving was faithful. But it meant walking away from relationships built over years.

**This is grief.** Real, deep, legitimate grief.

You're not just leaving a building or a program. You're leaving:

- Relationships
- Shared history
- Community identity
- Spiritual home
- Belonging

**And it hurts.**

If you've had to leave for faithful reasons, please know:

**Your grief is valid.** Don't minimize it. Don't spiritualize it away. Mourn the loss.

**You didn't fail.** Sometimes the most faithful thing is to separate from what's become unfaithful.

**Healing takes time.** Don't rush into a new church. Process. Grieve. Get counseling if needed.

**Not all churches are like that.** The abuse or dysfunction you experienced isn't universal. Healthy communities exist.

**God hasn't abandoned you.** Even when His people fail, He remains faithful.

## **CREATING COVENANT CULTURES**

If you're a leader, how do you create a culture of covenant commitment while also being a safe place?

### **1. Model It**

Live covenant before you expect it. Leaders who:

- Stay when it's hard
- Work through conflict publicly
- Submit to accountability
- Share resources generously
- Commit long-term

**Model what you're asking others to embrace.**

### **2. Teach It**

Don't assume people understand covenant. Teach:

- The difference between contract and covenant
- Biblical examples of covenant community
- What membership means and requires
- How to engage conflict redemptively
- When leaving is appropriate vs. abandonment

**Make covenant theology explicit and regular.**

### **3. Practice It**

Create structures that embody covenant:

- Meaningful membership process
- Written covenant that's renewed annually
- Small communities where covenant is lived
- Processes for addressing conflict and discipline

- Support for those in crisis
- Generosity systems for sharing resources

**Don't just talk about covenant. Live it structurally.**

#### **4. Protect People**

Make clear that covenant never means:

- Tolerating abuse
- Enabling sin
- Trapping people in unsafe situations
- Demanding perfect performance
- Using guilt to prevent necessary departure

**Healthy covenant includes boundaries, accountability for leaders, and permission to leave when faithful.**

#### **THE BEAUTY WORTH FIGHTING FOR**

Let me end with why this matters so much:

**Consumer church is killing us.** The constant church-hopping, the superficial commitment, the treating people as disposable, the lack of genuine formation—it's producing spiritual orphans who attend religious events but never experience family.

**But covenant community—real, costly, committed, mutual covenant—creates the conditions for transformation.**

When you know you can't leave, you work through conflict.

When you know you're committed long-term, you invest deeply.

When you know you're bound together, you carry each other's burdens.

When you know this is family, you stop performing and start being real.

**That's where formation happens.** That's where healing occurs. That's where the church becomes what it's meant to be.

Not perfect. Still broken. Still struggling.

**But committed. Present. Covenanted.**

Diverse. Dysfunctional. And through the power of enduring commitment, being made divine.

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*"And be subject to one another in the fear of Christ."*

— Ephesians 5:21 (NASB)

*"And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them."*

— Acts 4:32 (NASB)

*"Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God."*

— Ruth 1:16 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 16: PRACTICES OF DIVINE FAMILY

Last month, I got a call at 6 AM from a man in our church I'll call Robert.

"Pastor Jeff, I need to tell you something before anyone else finds out. I've been embezzling from my company. Small amounts at first, then more. I got caught yesterday. I'm being fired today, probably prosecuted. My wife doesn't even know yet. I'm terrified. And I need to confess."

We met at a coffee shop an hour later. He was shaking, could barely look me in the eye. He told me the whole story—the financial pressure, the small justifications that became big lies, the shame that kept him silent, the spiral that ended in catastrophe.

When he finished, he said: "I know I don't deserve grace. I know the church will probably want me to leave. I've destroyed everything. But I couldn't keep this inside anymore."

I reached across the table and put my hand on his shoulder. "Brother, you're going to face consequences—legal ones, financial ones, relational ones. But you're not going to face them alone. And you're not leaving this family. We're going to walk through this with you."

He broke down sobbing. "Why? Why would you do that? I'm a thief. I'm a fraud."

"Because," I said, "that's what family does. We confess our sins to each other, we forgive each other, and we carry each other through the consequences. You're not defined by your worst moment. You're our brother. And we don't abandon family."

**That conversation—and the messy, costly, beautiful process that followed—is what this chapter is about: the practices that make us family instead of just religious associates.**

Not theoretical practices. Real, lived, difficult, transformative practices that distinguish covenant community from consumer church.

### CONFESS AND FORGIVENESS

James writes: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16, NASB).

**Confess your sins to one another.**

Not just to God in private (though that's essential). Not just to a priest or pastor. **To one another.** To the family. To the people who know you and do life with you.

Why? "**So that you may be healed.**"

Healing doesn't happen in secrecy. It happens in community. In being known at your worst and loved anyway.

### **Why Confession is So Hard**

Let's be honest about why most Christians don't practice mutual confession:

#### **1. Shame**

We're terrified that if people knew the truth about us, they'd reject us. The addiction we're hiding. The sin we're repeating. The doubts we're carrying. The failure we can't escape.

**Shame says:** "If they really knew, they wouldn't love you."

#### **2. Judgment**

We've experienced or witnessed churches where confession led to gossip, condemnation, exclusion. Where honesty was punished rather than supported.

**We've learned:** "Don't be vulnerable. It will be used against you."

#### **3. Pride**

We want people to think we're doing better than we are. We cultivate an image of spiritual maturity, moral uprightness, having it all together.

**Pride whispers:** "You can't admit weakness. You have a reputation to maintain."

#### **4. Self-sufficiency**

We've bought the lie that we should be able to handle our struggles alone. That needing help is weakness. That confession is admission of failure.

**The culture says:** "Strong people don't need others."

### **Why Confession is Essential**

But here's what Scripture teaches and experience confirms:

#### **1. Sin thrives in secrecy**

The things we keep hidden maintain power over us. As long as the addiction stays secret, it controls us. As long as the sin is unnamed, it grows.

**Light exposes. Darkness conceals.**

"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9, NASB).

## **2. Confession breaks the power of shame**

Shame's power is in making us believe we're uniquely broken, uniquely sinful, beyond grace.

But when you confess and discover you're still loved, still accepted, still belonging—**shame loses its grip.**

Robert expected rejection when he confessed embezzlement. He got compassion, support, commitment to walk with him through consequences.

**That breaks shame's power.**

## **3. We need others to hold us accountable**

When you confess to someone, they can:

- Ask how you're doing with it
- Check in on your progress
- Call out patterns they see
- Pray specifically for your struggle
- Help you create guardrails

**You can't do this for yourself.** You need someone outside your head seeing what you can't see.

## **4. Confession creates authentic community**

When I'm honest about my struggles, I give you permission to be honest about yours.

When you confess sin and I respond with grace, you learn the community is safe.

When we drop our masks and see each other's brokenness, **we become real family instead of pretend saints.**

### **Creating Cultures of Grace**

For confession to happen, we have to create cultures where it's safe.

#### **What makes confession safe:**

## **1. Leaders model it**

When pastors and elders are honest about their struggles (appropriately, not seeking pastoral care from those they lead), it normalizes confession.

I've shared from the pulpit about:

- My struggle with workaholism
- My failures as a father
- My tendency toward anger when criticized
- My ongoing battle with pride

**Not to shock people. To show them: You can be honest here. Brokenness doesn't disqualify you.**

## **2. Grace is the default response**

When someone confesses, the first response should be:

- "Thank you for trusting us"
- "You're loved, not condemned"
- "How can we support you?"
- "Let's figure out next steps together"

**Not:**

- "How could you?"
- "I'm disappointed in you"
- "You need to step down from ministry"
- "I'll be praying for you" (translation: I'll be judging you)

## **3. Confidentiality is sacred**

What's shared in confession stays in confession unless:

- The person is in danger
- Someone else is in danger
- The person gives permission to share

**Gossip dressed as "prayer request" destroys trust and makes confession unsafe.**

#### **4. Focus on restoration, not punishment**

The goal of confession isn't to shame or punish. It's to heal and restore.

Yes, there may be consequences. But consequences are different from condemnation.

Robert faced legal consequences for embezzlement. He lost his job. He's making restitution. But the church didn't add condemnation—we added support.

**We helped him find legal representation. We covered some expenses while he was unemployed. We walked with his wife through the betrayal and shock. We created accountability for his recovery.**

#### **Forgiveness as Family Practice**

Jesus taught: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:12, 14-15, NASB).

**This is sobering.** Our forgiveness from God is connected to our forgiveness of others.

Not because we earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. But because **being forgiven should make us forgivers.**

If you've experienced grace, you extend grace. If you've been forgiven an unpayable debt, you forgive the smaller debts others owe you.

Bryant McGill wrote: "**There is no love without forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness without love.**"

**Forgiveness and love are inseparable.** You can't genuinely love someone while withholding forgiveness. And you can't genuinely forgive without love.

#### **What Forgiveness Is and Isn't**

##### **Forgiveness IS:**

- Releasing the debt (you don't owe me anymore)
- Choosing not to use the offense against them
- Letting go of bitterness and revenge
- Trusting God to handle justice
- Opening the door to reconciliation

### **Forgiveness IS NOT:**

- Pretending it didn't happen (minimizing)
- Trusting immediately (trust is rebuilt over time)
- Removing all consequences (forgiveness doesn't eliminate natural results)
- Allowing ongoing harm (forgiveness can include boundaries)
- Forgetting (you remember, but you don't rehearse)

**I can forgive my daughters for the pain of our fractured relationship while acknowledging it takes time to rebuild trust.**

**The church could forgive Robert for embezzlement while still maintaining boundaries about financial responsibility.**

**Forgiveness opens the door. Restoration walks through it. But restoration requires both forgiveness and changed behavior over time.**

### **The Hard Cases**

Some situations test our commitment to forgiveness:

**Repeated offense:** "How many times do I forgive? Seven times?" Peter asked. Jesus said: "Seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22, NASB). Unlimited forgiveness. Not because the offense doesn't matter, but because that's how God forgives us.

**Deep betrayal:** Abuse, adultery, profound breach of trust. Forgiveness is still required, but reconciliation may not be possible or wise. You can forgive and still maintain boundaries.

**Unrepentant offender:** Jesus says, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother" (Matthew 18:15, NASB). Forgiveness is offered. But if there's no repentance, full reconciliation can't happen. You release them to God's judgment while maintaining your own heart in a posture of grace.

**The point:** Forgiveness is always our responsibility. Whether the other person receives it or responds to it is theirs.

### **GENEROSITY AND MUTUAL AID**

Paul writes to the Corinthians about the collection for Jerusalem:

"For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality—at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality; as it is written, 'He who

gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack'" (2 Corinthians 8:13-15, NASB).

**By way of equality.** Not that everyone has identical amounts, but that **no one has too much while others have too little.**

Your abundance supplies their need. Eventually, their abundance supplies yours. **This is family economics.**

#### **Acts 4: The Vision**

"And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them... For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:32, 34-35, NASB).

**"Not a needy person among them."**

That was the goal. That was the measure of whether they were functioning as family.

Not "How impressive are our programs?" Not "How big is our building?" **"Is anyone in our family going without while others have excess?"**

They achieved this through radical generosity:

- Private property wasn't eliminated, but it was available
- Those with land or houses sold them when there was need
- Resources were pooled and distributed
- **No one claimed exclusive ownership; everything was potentially shared**

#### **Modern Applications**

I'm not advocating for communism or forced redistribution. The early church's generosity was voluntary, Spirit-prompted, relational.

But I am saying: **If we're family, we share resources.**

**Here's what this looks like practically:**

##### **1. Benevolence Funds**

Beyond tithes to the institutional budget, create funds specifically for member needs:

- Medical bills
- Unexpected expenses
- Job loss support
- Emergency housing
- Vehicle repairs

When a member has a crisis, the family responds with tangible help, not just "thoughts and prayers."

## 2. Skill-Sharing

The electrician offers his services to members at cost or free. The accountant does taxes for those who can't afford it. The lawyer provides legal counsel. The mechanic fixes cars. The contractor does home repairs.

**Your skill isn't just your livelihood. It's a gift you share with family.**

We have a "skill exchange" directory in our church. People list what they can offer and what they need. Plumbing, childcare, lawn care, computer help, tutoring, counseling, whatever.

**The assumption:** We help each other before we pay strangers.

## 3. Resource Sharing

Tools, equipment, vehicles, space—if you have it and someone needs it, share it.

- The family with the big van lets other families use it for trips
- The member with the pickup truck helps people move
- Those with extra bedrooms host people in transition
- Tools are borrowed freely rather than everyone buying their own

**This requires trust. Things get damaged. People don't always return items promptly. But that's the cost of family.**

## 4. Hospitality

Your home is for the family. Your table is open. Your guest room is available.

This might mean:

- The college student lives with you for a semester

- The single mom escaping abuse stays while she gets on her feet
- The missionary on furlough has a place to land
- The struggling family gets a week at your vacation cabin

**Your home isn't just yours. It's a family resource.**

## 5. Interest-Free Loans

"If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:34-35, NASB).

When a member needs financial help, **the church can provide interest-free loans** (or gifts if the need warrants it).

We've helped people:

- Avoid predatory payday loans
- Make car down payments
- Cover security deposits
- Pay unexpected medical bills
- Bridge gaps between jobs

**Not enabling poor stewardship. But preventing brothers and sisters from drowning in debt when we have the means to help.**

## 6. Radical Giving

Some members have significant resources. Instead of hoarding wealth, they use it for the family:

- Paying off medical debt for multiple families
- Funding mission trips for those who can't afford it
- Providing college scholarships
- Covering adoption expenses
- Supporting church plants

**This is Barnabas selling his field** (Acts 4:36-37). Using personal resources for communal good.

## **The Heart Behind It**

None of this works if it's obligation rather than overflow.

Paul makes this clear: "Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7, NASB).

**Cheerful.** Joyful. Willing. Not resentful or forced.

### **Why can we give cheerfully?**

Because we're secure in God's provision. Because we trust that our abundance is from Him and for His purposes. Because we've experienced grace and want to extend it tangibly.

**And because we know: someday we might be the one with need, and this same family will be there for us.**

## **The Cautions**

### **1. Don't enable**

Generosity doesn't mean funding someone's irresponsibility. If someone refuses to work (and is able), Paul is clear: "If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either" (2 Thessalonians 3:10, NASB).

**Help those genuinely in need. Don't enable those choosing laziness.**

### **2. Maintain boundaries**

You can be generous without being a doormat. You can say no. You can set limits. Generosity should be sustainable, not self-destructive.

### **3. Avoid codependency**

Some people have a pattern of crisis. Always needing rescue. Never taking responsibility. **Generosity can become enabling if it prevents them from experiencing the consequences that might lead to change.**

### **4. Protect the vulnerable**

Make sure generosity flows toward the truly needy, not just the loudest voices. The single mom who's quietly struggling should receive help before the entitled person who demands it.

## **CELEBRATION AND LAMENT TOGETHER**

Paul instructs: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15, NASB).

**Both.** Not just one. Both.

Family shares in both joy and sorrow. We don't celebrate alone or grieve alone. **We do life together.**

### **Creating Space for Celebration**

Western culture has privatized celebration. We celebrate individually, maybe with close family, but not communally.

**But Scripture shows corporate celebration:**

**Jewish festivals** (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles) were communal. The whole community celebrated together, remembering God's faithfulness, rejoicing in His provision.

**Wedding feasts** lasted a week. The whole village participated. Joy was shared.

**Harvest celebrations** brought the community together to thank God and share abundance.

**The church should recover corporate celebration:**

**Baptisms** should be celebrations. Someone entering the family! A new believer! A prodigal returning! **Throw a party.**

We do a meal after every baptism. The person being baptized shares their story. We celebrate their new life. We welcome them officially into the family.

**Weddings** should involve the church family, not just invite them as spectators. This couple is becoming part of the fabric of our community. We celebrate and commit to support their marriage.

**Births, adoptions, life milestones**—when a family has a baby or adopts a child, the church celebrates. We bring meals, we help with childcare, we throw baby showers, we welcome the new addition to our extended family.

**Ministry milestones**—when someone completes seminary, gets ordained, goes to the mission field, we celebrate their calling and send them with blessing.

**Life transitions**—graduations, new jobs, retirement, anniversaries. These aren't just private achievements; they're family celebrations.

### **Creating Space for Lament**

But we're equally called to weep together.

### **The church should be the safest place to grieve.**

Not the place where you have to pretend everything's fine. Not the place where you paste on a smile and say "I'm blessed!" when you're dying inside.

**The place where you can say:** "I'm not okay. I'm grieving. I'm broken. I need you."

**Job's friends** (before they started giving terrible advice) did it right: "They sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (Job 2:13, NASB).

**They sat. They were present. They didn't rush to fix or explain. They entered the grief.**

**That's what family does.**

### **What Lament Looks Like**

#### **1. Acknowledging loss without minimizing**

When someone experiences:

- Death of a loved one
- Miscarriage or infertility
- Divorce or betrayal
- Job loss or financial ruin
- Diagnosis of serious illness
- Wayward children
- Devastating disappointment

**Don't rush to the silver lining.** Don't spiritualize with "God works all things for good" (true but unhelpful in the moment). Don't minimize with "At least..."

**Just acknowledge:** "This is terrible. This is painful. I'm so sorry. I'm here."

#### **2. Creating rituals for grief**

Jewish tradition has sitting shiva—seven days of mourning where the community comes to the grieving family, brings food, sits with them, lets them talk or be silent.

**What if the church did this?** When someone dies, the family doesn't grieve alone. We organize:

- Meals for weeks
- Practical help (lawn care, cleaning, errands)
- Presence (people stopping by, sitting, listening)
- Space to remember (sharing stories about the deceased)

### **3. Permission to not be okay**

Too many churches communicate: "Real Christians have joy always. If you're struggling, your faith is weak."

**But the Psalms are full of lament.** Nearly half are songs of sorrow, complaint, questioning, anguish.

**God gives permission to grieve.** We should too.

### **4. Long-term presence**

Most people show up for the funeral. The first week. Maybe the first month.

**But grief lasts longer.** Much longer.

**Family stays.** Six months later. A year later. On the anniversary. During holidays. **We don't disappear when the initial crisis passes.**

### **The Church Calendar as Family Rhythm**

The traditional church calendar creates rhythmic space for both celebration and lament:

**Advent** (waiting, longing, anticipation)

**Christmas** (celebration, joy, incarnation)

**Epiphany** (revelation, light, mission)

**Lent** (repentance, fasting, preparation)

**Holy Week** (suffering, betrayal, death)

**Easter** (resurrection, victory, new life)

**Pentecost** (Spirit, power, birth of the church)

**Ordinary Time** (daily faithfulness, growth)

**This rhythm teaches us:** Life includes both joy and sorrow. Celebration and lament. Victory and suffering.

**And we walk through all of it together.**

### **Ecclesiastes: A Time for Everything**

"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance... A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing... A time to be silent and a time to speak... A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, NASB).

### **A time for everything.**

Family recognizes this. We don't force joy when sorrow is appropriate. We don't enforce mourning when celebration is fitting.

### **We discern the season someone is in and enter it with them.**

If they're rejoicing, we rejoice with them—fully, genuinely, without envy.

If they're weeping, we weep with them—without rushing them, without fixing, just presence.

### **That's family.**

## **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

These aren't separate practices. They're integrated rhythms of family life.

**Confession and forgiveness** create honesty and healing.

**Generosity and mutual aid** create economic family.

**Celebration and lament** create emotional family.

Together, they form the fabric of divine community.

**The family that confesses together** stays authentic.

**The family that shares resources** ensures no one goes without.

**The family that celebrates and grieves together** does life together, not just religious activities.

This is messy. Costly. Time-consuming. Inconvenient.

### **But it's what makes us family instead of religious strangers.**

It's what transforms diverse, dysfunctional people into a divine family that reflects the character of God—who confesses His love for us, who generously gives us everything we need, who rejoices over us and laments when we stray.

### **We become like Him by practicing these rhythms together.**

And in doing so, we become the family we were always meant to be.

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*"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed."*

— James 5:16 (NASB)

*"For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality—at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need."*

— 2 Corinthians 8:13-14 (NASB)

*"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."*

— Romans 12:15 (NASB)

*"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven."*

— Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 17: WHEN THE FAMILY FAILS (DISCIPLINE AND RESTORATION)

I've had to tell three people in my pastoral career that they were no longer welcome in our church community.

Each time, I wept.

The first was a man who was sexually abusing his daughter. We discovered it, reported it to authorities, and told him he couldn't return until he'd completed treatment, faced legal consequences, and had professional evaluation confirming he was no longer a danger.

The second was a woman who was systematically spreading lies about our pastoral staff, creating division, and when confronted through the Matthew 18 process, became increasingly hostile and refused any accountability.

The third was a young man whose drug addiction led to stealing from church members. We walked with him through multiple relapses, multiple treatment attempts, but he kept returning to using and stealing. Eventually, we had to say: "We love you. We'll help you when you're ready. But you can't be part of this community while you're actively harming people."

**These were the hardest conversations I've ever had.**

Not because I enjoyed exercising authority. Not because I wanted to exclude people. But because **sometimes love requires boundaries. Sometimes protecting the vulnerable means removing the threat. Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is say "no more."**

This is the chapter no one wants to write and no one wants to read. But it's essential.

Because **family without discipline isn't family—it's chaos.**

And discipline without the goal of restoration isn't discipline—it's just cruelty.

### MATTHEW 18:15-20 REVISITED: THE GOAL IS ALWAYS RESTORATION

We covered this passage in Chapter 8 when discussing conflict. But it's worth revisiting with a specific focus: **every step exists to win your brother back.**

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother" (Matthew 18:15, NASB).

**"You have won your brother."** Not "you have won the argument." Not "you have proven you're right." **You have won back the relationship.**

The entire process is designed to create opportunities for repentance at every stage:

### **Stage 1: Private conversation**

Give the person dignity. Give them space to respond without public pressure. Many conflicts can be resolved here if both parties are humble and honest.

### **Stage 2: Bring witnesses**

If they won't listen privately, bring objective people who can help establish truth and facilitate reconciliation. This isn't about ganging up; it's about clarity and accountability.

### **Stage 3: Tell the church**

If they refuse the witnesses, the whole community needs to know because:

- They have corporate responsibility to call the person to repentance
- The community needs to be protected if the person is causing harm
- Public sin requires public accountability

### **Stage 4: Treat as outsider**

"If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17, NASB).

This sounds harsh. But ask the critical question: **How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?**

He ate with them. He invited them. He pursued them. He never stopped loving them or hoping for their return.

**Even exclusion isn't abandonment.** It's creating a boundary that hopefully leads to the pain of separation motivating repentance.

### **Church Discipline as Act of Love**

Josh McDowell famously said: "**Discipline without relationship breeds rebellion.**"

The inverse is also true: **Relationship without discipline breeds dysfunction.**

Healthy families discipline. Not to punish or control or shame. **To protect and guide and form.**

### **Parents discipline children because:**

- They love them too much to let them self-destruct
- They know consequences teach
- They understand boundaries create safety

- They want the child to mature

**Churches discipline members for the same reasons:**

- We love them too much to watch them destroy themselves
- Consequences can wake people up to the severity of sin
- Boundaries protect both the individual and the community
- We want them to mature in Christ

**But here's the critical distinction:** Healthy discipline always has restoration as the goal.

**Unhealthy discipline:**

- Seeks to punish
- Enjoys power
- Becomes harsh and excessive
- Focuses on the offense, not the person
- Creates fear and compliance
- Ends relationships

**Healthy discipline:**

- Seeks to restore
- Grieves the necessity
- Matches response to situation
- Focuses on the person's good
- Creates safety and growth
- Preserves relationship even through consequence

**2 Corinthians 2: Reaffirm Love After Discipline**

Paul addresses a situation where the Corinthian church had disciplined someone (possibly the man from 1 Corinthians 5). The discipline worked—the person repented.

Now Paul instructs them:

"But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you. Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which

was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him" (2 Corinthians 2:5-8, NASB).

#### **Key phrases:**

**"Sufficient for such a one is this punishment"** → The discipline accomplished its purpose. Don't pile on. Don't continue punishing after repentance.

**"Forgive and comfort him"** → Active restoration. Don't just tolerate their return; actively welcome them back.

**"Otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow"** → Post-repentance shame can be crushing. The person needs assurance they're truly forgiven and restored.

**"Reaffirm your love for him"** → Make it clear. Explicit. Demonstrative. They're not second-class citizens. They're fully restored family.

**This is the goal of all discipline:** That the person would repent, be restored, and know they're loved.

## **1 CORINTHIANS 5 AND THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE**

Paul addresses a severe case in Corinth:

"It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst" (1 Corinthians 5:1-2, NASB).

**A man is sleeping with his stepmother.** This is:

- Sexually immoral
- Incestuous
- Scandalous even by pagan standards
- Being tolerated by the church

**And the church is arrogant about their tolerance.** They think they're being gracious. Loving. Open-minded.

**Paul says they should be mourning.**

Mourning that sin has such a grip on this brother. Mourning that their tolerance is enabling his destruction. Mourning that their inaction is harming him and the whole community.

Then Paul gives shocking instruction:

"I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:5, NASB).

### **What Does This Mean?**

**"Deliver to Satan"** = Remove from the protection and fellowship of the church. Put outside the covenant community.

**"For the destruction of his flesh"** = So that he experiences the full consequences of his sin without the church's enabling support.

**"So that his spirit may be saved"** = The goal isn't punishment or exclusion for its own sake. **The goal is salvation. Restoration. Repentance that leads to eternal life.**

**Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is let someone hit bottom.**

As long as the church enables, protects, makes excuses, minimizes—the person can continue in sin without facing consequences.

### **But when you remove that protection:**

- They experience the full weight of their choices
- They can't hide behind "the church accepts me"
- The pain might motivate repentance
- They're confronted with the reality of life outside God's family

**This is severe.** Paul uses strong language: "Clean out the old leaven" (v. 7). "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves" (v. 13).

But notice: **The purpose is always redemptive.** Even in removal, the hope is restoration.

### **When Boundaries Protect the Vulnerable**

Paul also gives a practical reason for discipline:

"Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" (1 Corinthians 5:6, NASB).

**Unaddressed sin spreads.** What's tolerated in one becomes normalized for all.

If sexual immorality is permitted, others will rationalize their own sin.

If division is unchallenged, the whole community fragments.

If abuse is ignored, more people get hurt.

**Discipline isn't just about the individual. It's about protecting the community.**

This is especially critical when the sin involves:

### **1. Abuse of power**

Leaders who exploit, manipulate, or abuse must be removed immediately. Their position gives them access to vulnerable people. The community's safety requires swift action.

### **2. Sexual predation**

Anyone preying on children, coercing sexual activity, or using ministry position for sexual access must be excluded and reported to authorities. The vulnerable must be protected above the predator's reputation.

### **3. Financial exploitation**

Those stealing from the church or members, using ministry for personal enrichment, or financially manipulating people need to be stopped and held accountable.

### **4. Spreading poison**

People who systematically sow discord, spread lies, create factions—if they refuse correction, they must be removed before they destroy the community.

**In these cases, patience isn't virtue; it's neglect.** Love for the vulnerable requires boundaries against those who harm.

### **The Difficult Balance**

Here's the tension: **We're called to be patient, gracious, long-suffering... AND we're called to protect the vulnerable and maintain holiness.**

How do we balance these?

**Consider:**

**The nature of the sin:** Is it a struggle they're fighting or a pattern they're defending?

**The impact on others:** Is this private sin or public scandal? Is anyone being harmed?

**The person's response:** Are they repentant or defiant? Humble or arrogant? Working toward change or rationalizing?

**The community's health:** Is tolerance helping or hurting? Are we enabling or empowering?

**There's no formula.** Each situation requires wisdom, prayer, collective discernment, and willingness to act even when it's painful.

## **GALATIANS 6:1: GENTLENESS IN RESTORATION**

Paul gives critical instruction about how to approach restoration:

"Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (Galatians 6:1, NASB).

### **"Caught in Any Trespass"**

**"Caught"** suggests being overtaken, surprised, trapped. This isn't calculated, defiant sin. This is someone who's stumbled, who's trapped in something they may want freedom from.

**The response isn't condemnation. It's restoration.**

### **"You Who Are Spiritual"**

**Not "you who are perfect."** Not "you who have never struggled."

**"You who are spiritual"**—those who are walking in the Spirit, mature enough to handle this with wisdom and grace, humble enough not to lord it over the fallen.

### **This disqualifies:**

- The self-righteous who've never struggled with this particular sin
- The gossip who's excited to address someone else's failure
- The power-hungry who enjoy authority
- The harsh who lack compassion

**Restoration is for the mature, the gentle, the humble.**

### **"Restore Such a One"**

The Greek word is *katartizō* (καταρτίζω)—to mend, to repair, to put back in order.

It's used of:

- Mending fishing nets (Matthew 4:21)
- Setting broken bones
- Restoring something to its original condition

**The goal isn't to punish but to mend. To put back together what sin has broken. To restore function and health.**

### **"In a Spirit of Gentleness"**

**Gentleness.** Not harshness. Not severity. Not "I'm disappointed in you." Not "How could you?"

**Gentleness** that says:

- "I know how hard this is"
- "I've struggled too"
- "Let's figure this out together"
- "You're not defined by this moment"
- "There's hope for healing"

### **"Looking to Yourself, Lest You Too Be Tempted"**

**This is crucial.** You approach restoration with awareness of your own vulnerability.

**"I could fall into this sin too."**

**"I'm not above this."**

**"If not for grace, this could be me."**

This prevents:

- Arrogance ("I would never...")
- Harshness ("How could you be so stupid?")
- Lack of compassion ("Just stop sinning")

**And it creates:**

- Humility ("There but for the grace of God go I")
- Patience ("I know how hard change is")
- Grace ("I need the same mercy I'm extending")

### **Bearing Burdens While Holding Accountable**

Here's the paradox: **You bear someone's burden (v. 2) while holding them accountable (v. 5).**

"Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2, NASB).

"For each one will bear his own load" (Galatians 6:5, NASB).

**These aren't contradictory. They're complementary.**

**I bear your burden:** I help you carry what you can't carry alone. I support you. I walk with you. I don't leave you to struggle in isolation.

**You bear your load:** You take responsibility for your choices. You do the work of repentance. You can't outsource your sanctification to me.

**In restoration:**

**I bear burdens by:**

- Walking with you through consequences
- Providing accountability and support
- Praying for you
- Believing in your ability to change
- Not giving up on you

**You bear your load by:**

- Confessing honestly
- Taking responsibility (no blame-shifting)
- Doing the hard work of change
- Submitting to accountability
- Making amends where possible

## **THE LONG ROAD OF RESTORATION**

Let me be very clear: **Restoration is not a moment; it's a process.**

Genuine restoration from serious sin often takes:

- Months or years, not weeks
- Professional help (counseling, treatment, therapy)
- Accountability structures
- Demonstrated change over time
- Rebuilding of trust
- Making amends to those harmed

## **Robert's Story (Continued)**

Remember Robert, who embezzled from his company? Let me tell you the rest of his story.

### **Immediate consequences:**

- Lost his job
- Faced legal prosecution (convicted, sentenced to probation and restitution)
- His wife considered leaving (she stayed but the marriage was severely damaged)
- Financial devastation

### **The church's response:**

- We didn't remove him from membership
- We did temporarily remove him from any financial roles
- We assigned three men to walk with him through the process
- We helped him find legal representation
- We supported his wife emotionally and practically
- We helped with some expenses while he was unemployed
- We prayed with him and for him weekly

### **Robert's response:**

- Full confession and responsibility (no excuses, no minimizing)
- Entered counseling to address the issues that led to stealing
- Submitted to complete financial transparency and accountability
- Worked multiple jobs to pay restitution
- Apologized publicly to the church
- Began working to rebuild trust with his wife
- Attended a financial recovery program

### **The process:**

- It took two years before he was considered for any leadership role
- It took three years before the restitution was complete

- It took five years before his marriage was truly healthy again
- He still meets weekly with an accountability group

### **The outcome:**

- Robert is now one of our most faithful servants
- He leads our financial recovery ministry for others struggling with money
- His marriage is stronger than it ever was
- He speaks openly about his failure and God's grace
- He's a living testimony to the power of restoration

**This is what restoration looks like:** Long. Painful. Costly. But possible. Beautiful. Redemptive.

### **The Elements of True Restoration**

Based on Scripture and experience, genuine restoration requires:

#### **1. Genuine Repentance**

Not just regret about consequences. True sorrow over sin. Change of heart and direction.

"Godly sorrow produces repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10, NASB).

#### **2. Full Confession**

Naming the sin specifically. Taking full responsibility. No minimizing, no excusing, no blame-shifting.

"He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion" (Proverbs 28:13, NASB).

#### **3. Submission to Process**

Accepting consequences. Submitting to accountability. Doing whatever it takes to change, even when it's hard and humiliating.

#### **4. Demonstrated Change Over Time**

Not just good intentions. Actual different behavior sustained over months and years.

"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8, NASB).

## **5. Making Amends**

Where possible, making things right with those harmed. Restitution. Apology. Reconciliation.

"If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother" (Matthew 5:23-24, NASB).

## **6. Rebuilding Trust**

Understanding that trust is earned through consistency over time. Not demanding immediate trust but patiently proving trustworthy.

## **7. Community Support**

Walking with people who hold you accountable, support you through struggles, celebrate progress, and don't give up on you.

### **WHEN RESTORATION DOESN'T HAPPEN**

I need to be honest about the heartbreak: **Not everyone repents. Not everyone is restored.**

**Some people:**

- Refuse to acknowledge sin
- Minimize and make excuses
- Blame others
- Become defensive and hostile when confronted
- Leave rather than submit to accountability
- Continue in destructive patterns despite intervention

**When this happens, it's devastating.**

You've followed the process. You've been patient. You've extended grace. You've offered help.

**And they refuse it all.**

### **The Grief of Necessary Separation**

The woman I mentioned who was spreading lies and creating division? She never repented.

After the Matthew 18 process, after elder meetings, after multiple attempts at reconciliation, she became increasingly hostile. She accused us of being controlling, of persecuting her, of being false teachers.

Eventually, we had to tell her she could no longer attend our church.

She left angry. She spread more lies about us in the community. She contacted former members trying to turn them against us. She never admitted any wrongdoing.

### **And I grieve that.**

Not because I think we made the wrong decision. We didn't. She was causing real harm, and nothing we did moved her toward repentance.

### **But I grieve:**

- The relationship that's broken
- The sister who's still trapped in sin
- The division she's sown
- The witness damaged in our community
- The loss of what could have been

### **Paul experienced this:**

"Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching" (2 Timothy 4:14-15, NASB).

**Demas deserted Paul** "having loved this present world" (2 Timothy 4:10).

**Even Paul experienced people who wouldn't be restored.** And it hurt him.

**But he didn't let their refusal stop the mission.** He grieved, he warned others, and he moved forward.

### **Living with the Unresolved**

Sometimes we have to live with:

- People who won't repent
- Relationships that won't be reconciled
- Members who leave angry

- Division that won't be healed

**This is painful. But it's reality in a fallen world.**

**What we can control:**

- Our own hearts (staying soft, not bitter)
- Our process (following Scripture faithfully)
- Our goal (always seeking restoration)
- Our hope (trusting God can reach them when we can't)
- Our boundaries (protecting the vulnerable even while leaving the door open)

**What we can't control:**

- Whether they repent
- Whether they return
- Whether reconciliation happens

**We release them to God.** We keep the door open. We pray. We hope. **But we don't compromise truth or endanger others to keep people who refuse help.**

## **WARNINGS ABOUT DISCIPLINE DONE WRONG**

I need to address how easily church discipline goes off the rails:

### **1. Discipline Without Due Process**

Removing someone without following Matthew 18. Making accusations without evidence. Giving no opportunity for defense or repentance.

**This is abuse, not discipline.**

### **2. Discipline for Disagreement**

Using discipline to silence dissent, punish questions, or eliminate anyone who challenges leadership.

**This is authoritarianism, not discipline.**

### **3. Discipline as Punishment Rather Than Restoration**

Focusing on making the person suffer rather than helping them heal. Shaming publicly. Making examples of people. Enjoying power over them.

**This is cruelty, not discipline.**

#### **4. Discipline Without Compassion**

Being harsh, cold, superior. Approaching the person with judgment rather than grief. Lacking empathy or gentleness.

**This is self-righteousness, not discipline.**

#### **5. Discipline That Never Ends**

Refusing to restore even after genuine repentance. Keeping people in perpetual second-class status. Making them prove themselves indefinitely.

**This is unforgiveness, not discipline.**

**If you've experienced any of these, I'm sorry.** That's not how Jesus intended His church to function. **That's abuse wearing the costume of discipline.**

**Healthy discipline is:**

- Grieved over, not enjoyed
- Gentle but firm
- Following clear process
- Always hoping for restoration
- Celebrated when repentance happens
- Proportional to the offense
- Protecting the vulnerable
- Focused on the person's good and God's glory

### **MY RECONCILIATION AS MODEL**

My journey with Amy and Beth has taught me about restoration in ways pastoral ministry never could.

I damaged our relationship through:

- Absence during their formative years
- Prioritizing ministry over family
- Emotional unavailability

- Failing to protect them from harm

**They didn't want relationship with me for years.** And I deserved that. I'd failed them profoundly.

**Restoration required:**

- Full confession of my failures
- No excuses or minimizing
- Listening to their hurt without defending myself
- Accepting consequences (years of distance)
- Proving through consistency that I'd changed
- Patience with their process
- Professional counseling for all of us
- Rebuilding trust incrementally
- Celebrating small steps forward
- Not demanding forgiveness or relationship on my timeline

**We're still in process.** Some damage takes years to heal. But we're walking toward each other instead of away.

**This is what restoration looks like:** Humble, patient, costly, slow, worth it.

**And this is what the church should model:** We don't give up on people. We work toward restoration. We walk the long road. We celebrate every step.

Because that's what God does with us.

*"Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted."*

— Galatians 6:1 (NASB)

*"Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him."*

— 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 (NASB)

*"I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."*

— 1 Corinthians 5:5 (NASB)

*"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."*

— Matthew 18:15 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 18: THE FAMILY MISSION

Five years ago, a young couple in our church—I'll call them David and Sarah—approached me with an idea that sounded crazy.

"We want to move into the low-income apartment complex on the east side. Not to start a program or a church plant. Just to live there. Be neighbors. Build relationships. Be the church where people are."

I asked the obvious questions: "You have good jobs. You could afford a nice house in a safe neighborhood. Why would you intentionally move into poverty, into a rough area, into a place most people are trying to escape?"

Sarah answered: "Because Jesus didn't stay in heaven. He moved into the neighborhood. And if we're His family, shouldn't we do the same?"

**They moved in.** Rented a two-bedroom apartment in a complex known for drugs, violence, and poverty.

**And they started living as family.**

Not "doing ministry to" the people there. Living *with* them. Sharing meals. Helping with rent when someone lost a job. Tutoring kids after school. Sitting with the elderly. Being present in the ordinary rhythms of life.

Within six months, a few neighbors started joining them for dinner. Within a year, they were reading Scripture together, praying together, doing life together. Within two years, there was a community of fifteen people—mostly from the complex—gathering weekly for shared meals, teaching, fellowship, breaking bread.

**They didn't plant a church. They became family. And family multiplied.**

Last month, two families from that original group moved into another struggling neighborhood to do the same thing. They're not starting a program. They're living as sent family, creating new family wherever they go.

**This is what mission looks like when church is family:** Not professionals deploying programs, but households scattering as salt and light, reproducing the life of Christ wherever they land.

## MATTHEW 28:19-20: THE FAMILY SENT

Jesus' final instructions to His disciples—what we call the Great Commission—are fundamentally about family:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20, NASB).

### **Go Therefore**

**"Go."** Not "attract them to come." Not "build impressive facilities and wait for them to show up." **Go.**

The church isn't a destination; it's a movement. A household on mission. A family sent into the world.

Emil Brunner, the Swiss theologian, captured this perfectly: "**The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.**"

Fire that doesn't burn isn't fire—it's cold ash. A church that doesn't go isn't a church—it's a religious club.

**Mission isn't something the church does. Mission is what the church is.**

### **Make Disciples of All Nations**

**"Make disciples."** Not just converts. Not just decisions. Not just attendance. **Disciples**—people who follow Jesus, who are being formed into His image, who are learning to live as He lived.

**"Of all nations."** The Greek is *panta ta ethnē* (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη)—all the ethnic groups, all the peoples, all the cultural expressions of humanity.

**The mission is for everyone.** No one is outside the scope. No people group excluded. No ethnicity irrelevant.

And here's the critical piece for our purposes: **Disciples are made in the context of family.**

You don't mass-produce disciples through programs. You form disciples through relationship, proximity, life-on-life investment. Through being family to them and inviting them into the family.

### **Baptizing Them in the Name**

**"Baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."**

Notice the singular: "**the name**" (not names). One name. One God. Three persons.

**Baptism is initiation into the family of the Triune God.**

It's not just a religious ritual. It's adoption. You're entering the household. You're being marked as belonging to the Father, united with the Son, indwelt by the Spirit.

**And you're entering the human family that bears God's name—the church.**

When David and Sarah's neighbors came to faith and were baptized, we didn't just celebrate individuals getting saved. We celebrated **new family members being added to the household.**

They became our brothers and sisters. Part of our family. Permanently connected through the covenant of baptism.

### **Teaching Them to Observe All**

**"Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you."**

**Observe.** Not just know intellectually. **Observe**—practice, obey, live out.

This is **formation, not just information.** And formation happens through modeling and mentoring.

You teach people to observe Jesus' commands by:

- Living them yourself (they see how it's done)
- Inviting them into your life (they practice with you)
- Walking with them over time (formation is slow)
- Correcting and encouraging (like a parent with a child)

### **This is discipleship as family practice.**

Paul could say to the Corinthians: "I urge you to imitate me" (1 Corinthians 4:16, NASB). To the Philippians: "The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things" (Philippians 4:9, NASB).

**Learned, received, heard, seen, practice.** That's family discipleship. Life on life. Proximity. Imitation.

### **I Am With You Always**

**"And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."**

**This is the promise that makes mission possible:** Jesus is with us. Always.

Not just when we're in church buildings. Not just during religious activities. **Always.** In the apartment complex. In the workplace. In the neighborhood. In the difficult mission field.

**Because the family of God carries the presence of Christ wherever it goes.**

We're not bringing Jesus to people who are far from Him. **We're bringing people into the family where Jesus already is.**

### **ACTS 1:8: CONCENTRIC CIRCLES OF WITNESS**

Before His ascension, Jesus gave geographic scope to the mission:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8, NASB).

**Three expanding circles:**

#### **Jerusalem: Our Neighborhood**

**Jerusalem** was home. Where the disciples lived. Their immediate context. The people they saw daily.

**For us, Jerusalem is:**

- Our literal neighborhood
- Our workplace
- Our kids' school
- Our local community
- The people we encounter in ordinary life

**The mission starts here.** Right where you are. With the people you already know.

Not exotic. Not impressive. **Just faithful presence in your actual life.**

David and Sarah didn't move to Africa. They moved to the east side. **Their Jerusalem was fifteen minutes away.**

#### **Judea and Samaria: Our Region, Even Uncomfortable Places**

**Judea** was the broader region—still culturally familiar but requiring intentional going.

**Samaria** was the uncomfortable place—the people Jews didn't associate with, the half-breeds, the heretics, the ones good religious people avoided.

**For us, this might be:**

- The part of town we don't usually go to

- The demographic we're uncomfortable around
- The people different from us ethnically, economically, culturally
- The places we'd rather avoid

**The mission includes the uncomfortable.** The people who aren't like us. The places that require us to cross cultural barriers.

This is where the family of God demonstrates that we're not just a homogenous tribe. **We cross every human division because Christ has made us one family.**

### **The Remotest Part of the Earth: Global Engagement**

**"Even to the remotest part of the earth."**

The mission isn't just local. It's global. Every tribe, tongue, and nation.

**For us, this means:**

- Supporting global missionaries
- Going on short-term mission trips (done well, not as religious tourism)
- Partnering with churches in other countries
- Caring about unreached people groups
- Praying for the global church
- Giving financially to global mission

**But here's the key:** All three circles remain active simultaneously.

**We don't choose:** "We'll focus on local ministry and ignore global needs." Or "We'll send money overseas and neglect our neighborhood."

**The family is sent to all three circles at once.** Some members focus primarily on Jerusalem, others on Judea and Samaria, others on the ends of the earth. But we're all part of the same sent family.

### **THE FAMILY SENT, NOT THE ISOLATED INDIVIDUAL**

Here's where the family metaphor becomes critical for mission:

**We're not sent as isolated individuals. We're sent as family.**

### **The Problem with Lone Ranger Missionaries**

The traditional missionary model often looked like:

- Individual (or couple) called to the mission field
- Sent by home church but functionally operating alone
- Building relationships in new context but disconnected from sending community
- Isolated, unsupported, burning out at alarming rates

**This isn't the New Testament pattern.**

**Paul was always sent with team:**

- Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13)
- Paul and Silas (Acts 15)
- Paul, Silas, and Timothy (Acts 16)
- Multiple co-workers named throughout his letters

**Why? Because mission is too hard to do alone.** You need:

- Partnership in the work
- Encouragement when discouraged
- Accountability when tempted
- Different gifts complementing each other
- People who know you and can speak truth to you

**You need family.**

**The Power of Sent Communities**

What if instead of sending individuals, we sent communities?

**David and Sarah didn't go alone.** They invited two other couples from our church to move to the same complex. Six adults, five kids, living in proximity, doing mission together as family.

They:

- Share meals regularly (supporting each other, strategizing together)
- Pray together (interceding for their neighbors)
- Care for each other's kids (creating margin for ministry)

- Make decisions together (collective wisdom)
- Cover for each other when someone's overwhelmed
- Celebrate together when someone comes to faith

**This is sustainable.** Because they're not carrying the mission alone.

**This is effective.** Because their neighbors see not just individuals but a community. They see how Christians love each other, not just how they talk about Jesus.

**This is biblical.** Because it reflects how the early church functioned—households sent together, creating new households wherever they went.

### **Mission from Community, Not to Community**

**The attractional model says:** Come to our community (church building) and experience Christ.

**The incarnational model says:** We'll bring community to you and invite you into it.

When David and Sarah's neighbors experienced their first shared meal, they didn't experience a program. **They experienced family.** People who cared about them, welcomed them, made space for them.

**And that's what drew them to Christ.** Not impressive preaching (though teaching happened). Not excellent worship (though they prayed and sang together). **Family. Belonging. Being loved.**

**Jesus said:** "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35, NASB).

**Not:** By your theology (though that matters).

**Not:** By your moral superiority (though holiness matters).

**Not:** By your programs (though structure can help).

**By your love for one another.** By how you function as family. By the quality of your relationships.

**That's the mission strategy:** Be such a compelling family that people want in.

### **FAMILIES CREATING FAMILIES**

Here's where multiplication becomes critical:

**Healthy families reproduce.**

Not just biologically (though that can be part of it). But spiritually. **Families create new families.**

### **Multiplication, Not Just Addition**

**Addition** = We grow by adding people to our existing community.

**Multiplication** = We grow by creating new communities that create more communities.

**Addition is linear:** 100 → 110 → 120 → 130...

**Multiplication is exponential:** 10 → 20 → 40 → 80 → 160...

**The church was designed for multiplication.**

Look at Acts:

- Jerusalem church → Antioch church (Acts 11)
- Antioch church → churches throughout Asia Minor (Acts 13-14)
- Those churches → churches in new regions (Acts 16-20)
- Paul's churches → churches planted by his disciples (Timothy in Ephesus, Titus in Crete)

**Each community creates new communities.**

### **Paul's Model: Churches Planting Churches**

Paul didn't just plant individual churches and then micromanage them. **He planted churches that would plant more churches.**

To the Thessalonians: "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth" (1 Thessalonians 1:8, NASB).

**The Thessalonian church was less than a year old, and they were already spreading the gospel throughout their region.**

How? Because Paul modeled it for them. He showed them:

- How to make disciples
- How to form community
- How to send people out
- How to trust God's Spirit to lead

**Then he released them to do the same.**

## **2 Timothy 2:2: Four Generations**

We've mentioned this passage before, but it's worth revisiting in the context of mission:

"The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2, NASB).

### **Four generations:**

1. Paul
2. Timothy
3. Faithful men
4. Others

**This is the multiplication model.** Paul doesn't do all the ministry. He disciples Timothy. Timothy disciples faithful men. Those men disciple others.

### **And each generation reproduces.**

### **Apply this to church planting:**

1. Established church
2. Church plant led by someone from the established church
3. Church plant from the church plant
4. Another generation of multiplication

**In four generations, you go from one community to exponential impact.**

### **Modern Microchurch Movements**

There's a growing movement of microchurch multiplication that embodies this:

### **The pattern:**

- Start with 3-15 people gathering regularly
- Focus on discipleship, community, mission
- When the group gets to 15-20, multiply (don't just get bigger)
- Send out 5-8 people to start a new microchurch
- Original group continues, new group forms

- Both groups multiply when they reach capacity

**I've watched this happen in our context:**

David and Sarah's community grew to about 18 people. Instead of trying to accommodate everyone in one gathering, they sent out two families to start a new community in a different neighborhood.

**Now there are two communities.** And both are growing. And both will multiply again when they reach capacity.

**In three years, they've gone from:**

- 1 community (6 adults)
- To 2 communities (12 adults)
- To 4 communities (24 adults)
- **Potentially 8 communities in year four**

**That's multiplication.** And it's sustainable because:

- No buildings to fund
- No professional staff to hire
- Leadership is distributed
- Everyone participates
- Focus stays on discipleship and mission

### **The DNA of Reproducing Communities**

What makes a community capable of reproducing?

#### **1. Sent Mindset**

From the beginning, the community understands: **We exist to multiply.**

Not to get as big as possible. To multiply. To send. To create new communities.

**This is built into the culture:**

- We celebrate when people are sent out (not mourn the loss)
- We train everyone to lead (not depend on one person)
- We expect multiplication (not resist it)

- We measure success by sending capacity (not retention)

## 2. Simple, Reproducible Practices

If your church requires:

- A seminary-trained pastor
- A worship band
- Specialized facilities
- Significant budget

### **You can't multiply easily.**

But if your community is built on:

- Shared meals
- Scripture reading and discussion
- Prayer
- Confession and accountability
- Service and mission
- Anyone can facilitate

### **You can multiply anywhere.**

## 3. Decentralized Leadership

Instead of one leader doing everything, leadership is distributed:

- Multiple people can teach
- Anyone can facilitate discussion
- Everyone participates in care
- Decisions are made collectively

**This means:** When you send out a group, they already have the leadership capacity to function. You're not waiting for someone to be "qualified."

## 4. External Focus

Communities focused only on themselves don't multiply. **They become ingrown and protective.**

But communities focused on mission—on reaching their neighborhood, serving the marginalized, inviting outsiders in—these communities naturally overflow.

**They grow not by trying to grow but by loving their community well.**

And when they grow, they multiply rather than becoming unwieldy.

## **5. Expectation of Sending**

From day one, new members are told: "**We're going to send you out someday.**"

Not "We hope you stay forever." But "We're investing in you so that you can be sent to create new community."

**This changes the dynamics:**

- People expect to eventually lead
- They're learning, not just consuming
- They're being equipped to go, not encouraged to settle
- Multiplication is normal, not traumatic

## **PRACTICAL MODELS OF MULTIPLICATION**

Let me give you some examples of what this looks like in different contexts:

### **1. Neighborhood Microchurches**

**Model:** Move into the same neighborhood (or nearby). Gather regularly for meals, Scripture, prayer. Intentionally engage neighbors. When the group grows, multiply into another neighborhood.

**Example:** David and Sarah's east side community. Now multiplied into four neighborhoods across the city.

### **2. Workplace Mission Communities**

**Model:** Christians working in the same company or industry form a community. They meet for breakfast or lunch weekly. They pray for coworkers. They demonstrate the gospel through their work ethic and relationships. They invite coworkers into community.

**Example:** A group of nurses at our local hospital. Started with three believers. Now twelve people meeting weekly, half of whom have come to faith through the witness of the original three.

### **3. Campus Microchurches**

**Model:** Students gather in dorms or apartments. Shared meals, discussion of Scripture, prayer, mission to campus. When they graduate, they multiply the model wherever they go.

**Example:** Four students started a weekly gathering their freshman year. By senior year, it had multiplied into three separate communities. All four original members have now planted microchurches in the cities where they work.

#### **4. Diaspora Communities**

**Model:** Immigrants from the same country or region form community. They maintain cultural connection while integrating into the local church. They reach other immigrants. They eventually multiply both within their ethnic community and cross-culturally.

**Example:** A group of Nepali families in our area. Started as one family. Now three communities, one specifically reaching other Nepali immigrants, one mixed with Americans and Nepalis, one being sent back to Nepal as missionaries.

#### **5. Recovery Communities**

**Model:** People in recovery from addiction gather for support, accountability, and discipleship. As they experience healing, they reach others struggling with addiction. They multiply into new recovery communities.

**Example:** Started with five men in recovery. Now eight recovery-focused microchurches across our region, reaching dozens who would never attend traditional church.

### **THE ROLE OF THE LARGER CHURCH**

Some might ask: "**If you're multiplying microchurches, what's the role of the larger congregation?**"

**Great question.** Because we need both.

#### **The microchurch provides:**

- Intimacy (you're known deeply)
- Daily community (frequent contact)
- Participation (everyone contributes)
- Mission (embedded in context)

#### **The larger congregation provides:**

- Teaching (depth and breadth beyond what small group can offer)

- Celebration (corporate worship with the broader family)
- Resources (funding what small groups can't)
- Connection (networking multiple communities)
- Accountability (oversight and protection)
- Training (equipping leaders for multiplication)

**In our context:**

- Microchurches meet weekly (or more)
- Larger congregation gathers monthly for corporate worship, communion, teaching
- Leaders from microchurches meet regularly for training, accountability, vision
- Resources are shared across the network
- Multiplication is celebrated corporately

**This is the both/and:** Small enough for intimacy, large enough for impact.

**THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE**

I need to emphasize: **None of this works without the Holy Spirit.**

We can create structures. We can develop strategies. We can implement models.

**But only the Spirit creates life. Only the Spirit transforms hearts. Only the Spirit builds the church.**

Acts 1:8 begins: **"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."**

**Then** you'll be witnesses. **Then** you'll go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth.

**The power for mission is not our cleverness or effort. It's the Spirit's presence and power.**

**This means:**

- We depend on prayer (not just planning)
- We follow the Spirit's leading (not just our strategic vision)
- We trust God's timing (not force growth)
- We celebrate what God does (not what we achieve)
- We remain humble (knowing we're just vessels)

**When David and Sarah moved to the east side, they didn't have a five-year plan.** They had a simple commitment: **Live there. Love people. Follow the Spirit.**

And the Spirit brought people. Opened hearts. Created community. Multiplied impact.

**That's how mission works:** We position ourselves. We're faithful in small things. We love well. **And we trust the Spirit to do what only He can do.**

## **THE VISION FORWARD**

Imagine if every church:

- Saw itself as a sending community, not just a gathering
- Equipped every member for mission, not just consumed religious services
- Multiplied communities instead of just growing attendance
- Measured success by sending capacity, not retention
- Released people to plant microchurches in their neighborhoods, workplaces, schools

**Within a generation, the church could look radically different:**

Not megachurches trying to attract crowds to buildings, but networks of microchurches embedded in every neighborhood, transforming communities from within.

Not professional clergy doing ministry while members watch, but every believer activated for mission, creating family wherever they go.

Not isolated individuals trying to live out their faith alone, but covenant communities doing life together and inviting others in.

**This is the future family:** Diverse, dysfunctional, being made divine. **And multiplying.**

Creating new families. Planting new communities. Spreading the gospel. **Not through programs, but through presence. Not through professionals, but through the people of God being who they're called to be.**

**Family on mission. Sent together. Multiplying exponentially.**

**That's the vision. That's the hope. That's the future God is creating.**

And it starts with simple obedience: **Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach. Multiply.**

As Emil Brunner said: **The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.**

**We are the family of God, set ablaze by the Spirit, spreading wherever we go.**

Not because we're impressive. Because **we carry the presence of Christ, and that presence transforms everything it touches.**

**That's the mission. That's who we are. That's where we're going.**

Sent family. Creating family. Until the whole world is filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

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*"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you."*

— Matthew 28:19-20 (NASB)

*"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."*

— Acts 1:8 (NASB)

*"The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."*

— 2 Timothy 2:2 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 19: A FORETASTE OF FOREVER

Last year, I officiated the funeral of a woman I'll call Margaret. She was ninety-three, a member of our church for forty years, a grandmother to dozens (biological and spiritual), a woman who opened her table to anyone who needed family.

At the reception after the service, her grandson stood to share a memory. He told about Sunday dinners at Margaret's house—how she always made too much food "in case someone drops by," how the table could expand to seat twenty, how strangers became family over her pot roast and mashed potatoes.

"The last coherent thing Grandma said to me," he continued, his voice breaking, "was this: 'Honey, I can't wait for the supper. The real one. Where the table is big enough for everyone and nobody has to leave hungry!'"

He paused, composing himself. "She meant the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. She talked about it all the time. She said every meal she ever served was practice for that one. Every person she ever welcomed to her table was a foretaste of the family we'll be forever."

**I lost it. Had to step away and collect myself.**

Because Margaret understood something most of us forget: **What we're building now—this messy, broken, beautiful family called the church—is preparation for eternity.**

The diverse, dysfunctional family being made divine isn't just for now. **It's a glimpse of forever.**

## REVELATION 7:9: THE ULTIMATE DIVERSE FAMILY

John describes his vision:

"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (Revelation 7:9-10, NASB).

Let me unpack what this tells us about the eternal family of God:

### **A Great Multitude Which No One Could Count**

**This is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham:** "I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore" (Genesis 22:17, NASB).

Uncountable. Innumerable. **A family so vast that only God knows the full number.**

Every person throughout history who has trusted in Christ. Every believer from every era. Every saint who's gone before. Every soul redeemed by the Lamb.

**We're not a small, exclusive club.** We're an innumerable multitude spanning millennia, cultures, contexts. The family of God is bigger than we can imagine.

### **From Every Nation and All Tribes and Peoples and Tongues**

**This is the diversity we've been exploring taken to its ultimate expression.**

Not just:

- Different ages (multigenerational)
- Different personalities (the difficult and the easy)
- Different gifting (the eye and the hand)

But:

- Every ethnicity that's ever existed
- Every language that's ever been spoken
- Every culture that's ever developed
- Every tribe and people group

### **The most diverse family imaginable.**

African and Asian. European and Middle Eastern. Indigenous and immigrant. Ancient and modern. Rich and poor. Educated and uneducated. Urban and rural.

### **All there. All family. All worshiping together.**

Think about what this means: **The person who drives you crazy at church now? You'll be with them forever.** The difficult brother? The sister who grates on you? The member whose theology differs from yours on secondary issues? The person from the political tribe you can't stand?

### **All family. For eternity.**

But here's the miracle: **It won't be painful anymore.** Because we'll all be fully sanctified. The dysfunction will be gone. The sin that creates division will be eradicated. The brokenness that makes us difficult will be healed.

**We'll be the family we were always meant to be:** Diverse but unified. Different but one. Many but together.

## **Standing Before the Throne**

**Together.** Not isolated in private heavenly mansions. Not separated by ethnicity or era or denomination.

**Together. Before the throne. Worshiping as one family.**

This destroys the idea that heaven is solitary. N.T. Wright, the British New Testament scholar, says it plainly: "**Heaven is a community, not a solitary existence.**"

We're not going to heaven to finally be alone with Jesus, free from the inconvenience of other people.

**We're going to heaven to be fully, finally, eternally family with everyone who belongs to Christ.**

## **Clothed in White Robes**

**The white robes represent righteousness.** Not our own (we have none), but Christ's righteousness given to us.

**Everyone wearing the same thing.** No designer labels. No status symbols. No markers of wealth or poverty, importance or insignificance.

**In eternity, there's no hierarchy based on earthly achievement.** The megachurch pastor and the unknown widow. The famous theologian and the simple believer. The wealthy donor and the poor recipient.

**All clothed in Christ's righteousness. All equally family. All equally beloved.**

## **United in Worship**

**"They cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"**

One voice. One song. One focus.

**Not competing worship styles.** Not arguments about hymnals versus contemporary music. Not divisions over liturgy.

**Pure, undistracted, unified worship of the Lamb who was slain.**

This is what we're practicing for every time we gather. Every time we sing together, pray together, lift our voices in praise—**we're rehearsing for eternity.**

The diversity remains (every language, every cultural expression), but the division is gone.

**Unity in diversity. The dream fully realized.**

## REVELATION 21:1-4: GOD DWELLING WITH HIS PEOPLE

John continues his vision:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away'" (Revelation 21:1-4, NASB).

### A New Heaven and a New Earth

**Not escape from creation, but renewal of creation.**

We're not going to a disembodied spiritual realm. We're going to a renewed, restored, perfected physical reality.

**The new earth.** Actual ground. Actual cities. Actual embodied existence. Everything God created, remade without the corruption of sin.

**This matters for family:** We won't be ethereal spirits floating in clouds. We'll be resurrected bodies in a physical world, **living in community**, doing life together.

### The Holy City Coming Down

**Notice the direction:** Not us going up to heaven. Heaven coming down to earth.

**God's dwelling place merging with ours.** The sacred and the ordinary united. No more separation between heaven and earth.

**This is the ultimate household:** God's house and our house becoming one house.

### The Tabernacle of God Among Men

**"Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them."**

The Greek word is *skēnē* (σκηνή)—tent, dwelling place, **tabernacle**.

This echoes:

- The tabernacle in the wilderness where God's presence dwelt with Israel
- The incarnation: "The Word became flesh, and dwelt [literally 'tabernacled'] among us" (John 1:14)

**Now, eternally, God tabernacles with humanity.**

Not visiting occasionally. Not present in a temple or building. **Dwelling. Living. Residing. Among us.**

**This is the ultimate oikos.** The household of God and the household of humanity united. One family. One home.

**They Shall Be His People**

**Plural.** Not "each individual will be His person." **Peoples. Communities. Families.**

**We belong to God corporately, not just individually.**

And notice: **"God Himself will be among them."**

Not sending angels or prophets or priests as intermediaries. **God Himself.** Direct access. Unmediated presence. Face to face fellowship.

**This is what we were made for.** What Eden was. What the tabernacle pointed to. What the incarnation initiated. What the church anticipates.

**Full, permanent, perfect communion with God in the context of family.**

**No More Tears, Death, Mourning, Crying, Pain**

**"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes."**

Notice the tenderness: **God Himself wipes away tears.** Like a father with a child. Gentle. Loving. Personal.

Every tear from:

- Grief over lost loved ones
- Pain of broken relationships
- Sorrow over sin and its consequences
- Suffering from illness and aging
- Heartbreak from betrayal and rejection

**All wiped away. By God's own hand.**

**"There will no longer be any death."**

No more funerals. No more goodbyes. No more loss. The ultimate enemy defeated forever.

**"No longer any mourning, or crying, or pain."**

Think about what this means for family:

- No more grief over prodigal children who never returned
- No more pain from fractured relationships that couldn't be healed
- No more mourning over those who left the faith
- No more crying over dysfunction that wouldn't be resolved
- No more separation from those we love

**Everything that makes family painful now will be gone.**

**"The first things have passed away."**

Not forgotten (we'll remember, but without pain). **Passed away.** Gone. Over. The old order replaced by the new.

### **All Things New**

\*\*\*"And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new'" (Revelation 21:5, NASB).

**Not "making all new things." But "making all things new."**

**Redemption, not replacement.** Renewal, not destruction.

Your story isn't erased—it's redeemed. Your relationships aren't deleted—they're perfected. Your family isn't abandoned—it's completed.

**Everything broken is being made whole. Everything corrupted is being purified.**

**Everything dysfunctional is being made divine.**

### **THE MARRIAGE SUPPER OF THE LAMB**

Earlier in Revelation, John describes another vision:

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, 'Write, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb""'" (Revelation 19:7-9, NASB).

### **The Wedding Metaphor**

Throughout Scripture, God's relationship with His people is described as marriage:

- Israel as God's bride (Hosea, Isaiah, Ezekiel)
- The church as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5, 2 Corinthians 11)
- Heaven as the consummation of the marriage

**This is intimate, covenantal, permanent, joyful language.**

Not employer-employee. Not master-servant. **Husband and wife. Groom and bride.**

**The ultimate relationship. The deepest bond. The most profound union.**

**The Bride Made Ready**

**"His bride has made herself ready."**

The church—the family of God—being prepared for full union with Christ.

**How is she made ready?**

**"Fine linen, bright and clean... the righteous acts of the saints."**

Not our own righteousness (we have none). But **the righteous acts that flow from being in Christ**, empowered by the Spirit, lived out in community.

Every act of love. Every moment of faithfulness. Every sacrifice for another. Every time we chose obedience over comfort. Every instance of forgiveness extended. Every burden borne. Every meal shared. Every tear wiped. Every brother or sister loved.

**All of it—woven into the wedding garment of the bride.**

**This is why what we do now matters.** We're preparing for the wedding. We're making ourselves ready. We're being formed into the bride worthy of the Groom.

**The Marriage Supper**

**"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."**

**A meal. A feast. A celebration.**

Not a lecture. Not a worship concert. **A family dinner. The biggest, most joyful, most abundant family reunion ever.**

Robert Webber, the liturgical theologian, captured this beautifully: **"The Eucharist is the rehearsal dinner for the wedding feast of the Lamb."**

**Every time we take communion, we're practicing.** Every time we break bread together, remembering Christ, anticipating His return—**we're rehearsing for the main event.**

### **The Ultimate Family Reunion**

Think about who will be at this table:

**Abel and Abraham.** The first martyr and the father of faith.

**Moses and David.** The lawgiver and the king.

**Isaiah and Jeremiah.** Prophets who foretold the Messiah.

**Peter and Paul.** Apostles who spread the gospel.

**Mary and Martha.** Sisters who welcomed Jesus.

**Augustine and Aquinas.** Theologians who shaped doctrine.

**Luther and Calvin.** Reformers who recovered the gospel.

**Your grandmother who prayed for you.** Your friend who led you to Christ. Your spiritual mentor who discipled you.

**Every saint from every era. Every believer from every nation.**

**All at one table. All family. All celebrating the Lamb.**

And somehow—in the miraculous expansiveness of eternity—there will be room. The table will be big enough. The feast abundant enough. **Everyone who belongs to Christ will have a place.**

### **The Table We've Been Practicing For**

Remember Margaret and her Sunday dinners? **She was right.**

Every meal we share now is practice for that meal.

Every time we:

- Welcome the stranger to our table
- Make room for one more
- Share food with the hungry
- Break bread in remembrance of Christ
- Celebrate together as family

**We're rehearsing for the Marriage Supper.**

**We're learning:**

- How to welcome
- How to share
- How to celebrate
- How to be family

**So that when we arrive at the final feast, we'll know what to do.**

We'll have been practicing for a lifetime.

### **THE ALREADY AND THE NOT YET**

Here's the tension we live in: **We're already God's family, but not yet perfected.**

**Already:**

- Adopted as sons and daughters
- Seated with Christ in the heavenly places
- Members of His body
- Citizens of heaven
- Part of the eternal family

**Not yet:**

- Fully sanctified
- Free from sin
- Living in the new creation
- Seeing face to face
- Experiencing the full joy of the Marriage Supper

**This tension shapes how we live:**

**Hope That Sustains**

When current family life is hard—when conflict arises, when people disappoint us, when we fail each other—**we have hope that this isn't forever.**

**The dysfunction is temporary.** The brokenness is being healed. The difficulty will pass away.

**One day, we'll be the family we were meant to be.** Not because we finally got it right, but because God will complete what He started.

"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6, NASB).

**He who began making us family will complete the work.**

### **Patience in Process**

**Because we know what's coming, we can be patient with what is.**

Yes, brother John is difficult. Yes, sister Sarah grates on you. Yes, the church is messy and broken and frustrating.

**But they're your eternal family.** You're going to be with them forever. So you might as well learn to love them now.

**Patience comes easier when you have an eternal perspective.**

This isn't the final chapter. This is the messy middle. The process of becoming. The formation through friction.

**We can endure the dysfunction because we know it's temporary and purposeful.**

### **Investment in What Lasts**

**Knowing that family is eternal should change our priorities.**

#### **What lasts?**

- Relationships (they continue into eternity)
- Character formed in community (we're being made like Christ)
- Love given and received (1 Corinthians 13:8—love never fails)
- Souls brought into the family (they're eternal)

#### **What doesn't last?**

- Buildings and programs
- Reputations and accomplishments
- Wealth and possessions

- Comfort and convenience

**So we invest in what lasts.** We prioritize relationships over programs. We choose formation over information. We value people over things.

**Because people are forever.**

**Joy in Anticipation**

**We don't just endure until heaven. We celebrate in anticipation of it.**

Every glimpse of what's coming is cause for joy:

- When we see genuine love between diverse people
- When reconciliation happens after conflict
- When someone is restored after discipline
- When the community carries someone through crisis
- When we gather around the table and sense Christ's presence

**These moments are foretastes.** Previews. Down payments on the full inheritance.

**And they make us long for more.**

Like someone who's tasted a sample of an incredible meal and can't wait for the full banquet—**we've tasted enough of eternity to hunger for the fullness.**

## **HOW THE VISION CHANGES HOW WE LIVE**

This isn't just beautiful theology to contemplate. **It's transformative truth that should change how we do family now.**

### **1. We Welcome the Stranger**

**Because in eternity, there are no strangers.** Everyone's family.

So we practice now: Opening our tables. Welcoming the outsider. Inviting the lonely. Making room for one more.

**Every stranger welcomed is preparation for the great multitude we'll be part of.**

### **2. We Reconcile Quickly**

**Because we're going to be together forever anyway.**

Why let resentment fester? Why hold grudges? Why avoid the difficult conversation?

**If we're eternal family, we might as well work through conflict now rather than carrying it to eternity.**

### **3. We Invest in Formation**

**Because who we're becoming matters eternally.**

The character being formed now continues. The love learned now lasts. The Christ-likeness developed now is perfected then.

**So we submit to the painful process of sanctification in community.** Not because it's fun, but because we're being prepared for eternity.

### **4. We Share Generously**

**Because in eternity, there's no mine and yours—it's all ours.**

Practice now: Sharing resources. Meeting needs. Economic mutuality. Generosity without calculation.

**We're learning the economy of heaven: abundant provision for all, no one in need.**

### **5. We Worship Together**

**Because worship is our eternal occupation.**

So we practice now—even when the music isn't our style, even when we don't feel like it, even when we'd rather stay home.

**We're rehearsing for the eternal worship we'll offer before the throne.**

### **6. We Stay When It's Hard**

**Because family is permanent.**

You don't divorce your siblings because they're difficult. You work through it.

**Covenant commitment now prepares us for eternal relationship.**

### **7. We Hold Hope**

**Because we know how the story ends.**

No matter how broken the church seems now, no matter how dysfunctional our communities are, **we know what we're becoming.**

**A bride without spot or wrinkle. A family united in worship. A household where God dwells forever.**

**That hope sustains us through present difficulty.**

## **THE GRIEF AND THE GLORY**

I need to acknowledge: **Not everyone makes it to the final feast.**

Some we've loved will choose another path. Some we've prayed for will reject Christ. Some we've invested in will walk away.

**This is the grief we carry.** The incomplete reunion. The empty chairs at the eternal table.

**But the hope is this:** God is just and merciful. He knows every heart. He draws all who will come. And we trust that the Marriage Supper will be both perfectly just and perfectly joyful.

**Those who are there will be there by grace.** Including us.

And somehow—in the mystery of God's providence and perfect justice—**the absence of some won't diminish the joy of those present.**

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Even the tears of grief over those who aren't there. Somehow, in ways we can't understand now, **God will make all things right.**

## **MARGARET'S VISION**

I keep thinking about Margaret and her Sunday dinners.

For forty years, she set a table every week. Sometimes five people came. Sometimes twenty. Always enough food. Always room for one more.

Rich and poor. Young and old. Believers and seekers. Family and strangers.

**All welcome at her table.**

She wasn't a theologian. Didn't have a seminary degree. Couldn't articulate the doctrine of the new creation or exegete Revelation 21.

**But she understood what mattered:** The table is where family happens. And we're practicing for the table that matters most.

**Every pot roast was preparation.** Every welcomed stranger was anticipation. Every shared meal was rehearsal.

**For the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.**

**For the feast where the table is big enough for everyone.**

**For the family reunion that will never end.**

That's the hope. That's the vision. **That's where we're headed.**

Diverse (every nation, tribe, tongue). No longer dysfunctional (all things made new). Fully divine (God dwelling among us).

**The family we're becoming. The home we're heading toward. The feast we're practicing for.**

**And one day—maybe soon, maybe later, but certainly—we'll be there.**

Together. All of us who belong to Christ. All God's children. All one family.

**At the table.**

**With the Lamb.**

**Forever.**

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*"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."*

— Revelation 7:9 (NASB)

*"And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.'"*

— Revelation 21:3 (NASB)

*"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."*

— Revelation 19:9 (NASB)

*"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."*

— Revelation 21:4 (NASB)

## CHAPTER 20: LIVING INTO THE ALREADY-NOT-YET

Last week, I watched two men shake hands after a small group meeting.

This might not sound significant to you, but for me, it was miraculous. These two—I'll call them Tom and Marcus—had been close friends for fifteen years. They'd served together in ministry, vacationed together, stood up in each other's weddings.

Then three years ago, a business partnership between them imploded. Accusations flew. Lawyers got involved. Both felt betrayed. The friendship shattered.

Marcus left our church. Tom stayed but became bitter, suspicious of everyone. The community grieved the loss of both the friendship and Marcus's presence.

Two years ago, Marcus started attending again—different service, careful to avoid Tom. A year ago, some mutual friends convinced them to meet with a mediator. Six months ago, they began the painful work of reconciliation.

Last week was the first time they'd been in the same small group. The tension was thick. But at the end of the night, Tom extended his hand. Marcus took it. They didn't embrace. They didn't pretend everything was fine. But they shook hands.

"We're not there yet," Tom told me after Marcus left. "I still have anger to work through. He does too. But... we're trying. That's more than I thought we'd ever do."

I watched them both drive away, grateful but also painfully aware: **they're not there yet.**

The relationship is being restored, but it's not fully restored. The trust is rebuilding, but it's not complete. The wounds are healing, but they're not healed.

**They're in the messy middle. The already-but-not-yet.**

And this—this tension between what is and what will be, between what's been accomplished and what's still being worked out—**this is where all of us live.**

## THE TENSION OF TRANSFORMATION

Paul captures this perfectly in Philippians:

"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6, NASB).

**Two realities held together:**

**He began** → Past tense. Already started. The work has commenced.

**Will perfect** → Future tense. Not yet complete. Still being finished.

**Until the day of Christ Jesus** → Ongoing process. Continues through time until consummation.

### **Already Adopted, Not Yet Glorified**

**We ARE adopted.** Present reality. Romans 8:15—we've received the Spirit of adoption. We're sons and daughters NOW.

**We WILL BE glorified.** Future hope. Romans 8:30—"these He also glorified" (past tense in God's eternal perspective, but future for us experientially).

### **This creates tension:**

We're secure in our position (adopted, sealed, permanent family members), BUT we're still being transformed (sanctified, formed, made into Christ's image).

We have the Spirit as down payment (2 Corinthians 1:22), BUT we await the full inheritance.

We're seated with Christ in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6), BUT we still struggle with sin and suffering on earth.

### **This isn't contradiction. It's process.**

### **Already Family, Not Yet Perfected**

**We ARE the church.** The body of Christ. The household of God. The family NOW.

**We WILL BE the glorified bride.** Without spot or wrinkle. Perfected. Made holy. THEN.

### **This means:**

Right now, the church is simultaneously:

- Holy (set apart by God) and sinful (still carrying brokenness)
- United (one body) and divided (struggling with conflict)
- Loving (called to love one another) and failing (hurting each other)
- God's temple (dwelling place of the Spirit) and construction site (being built up)

### **We're the family of God, but we're not the finished family yet.**

This explains why church is so beautiful and so frustrating. Why community is so life-giving and so painful. Why we experience both deep connection and profound disappointment.

**Because we're in process.** Between the beginning and the end. Already saved but not yet glorified. Already family but not yet perfected.

## **Grace Is Not Opposed to Effort**

Dallas Willard, the philosopher and spiritual formation teacher, said something that changed how I understand sanctification:

**"Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning."**

**This is crucial for living in the already-not-yet:**

### **WRONG UNDERSTANDING:**

- Grace means passivity → "God will do it all; I don't need to try"
- Effort means earning → "If I work hard enough, I'll make myself holy"

### **CORRECT UNDERSTANDING:**

- Grace empowers effort → "Because God is at work in me, I can work with Him"
- Effort doesn't earn → "My striving doesn't save me, but cooperation with grace transforms me"

**Applied to family:**

**We don't earn our place in the family.** That's pure grace. Adoption, not achievement.

**But we do participate in our formation.** We choose to stay when it's hard. We practice forgiveness. We confess sin. We show up to community. We submit to accountability.

**Not to become family (we already are), but because we're family (learning to live like it).**

**Paul says:** "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13, NASB).

**We work** (effort, participation, cooperation)

**Because God works in us** (grace, power, enablement)

**Both/and. Not either/or.**

## **HOPE THAT SUSTAINS**

Living in the tension is hard. The already-not-yet can be exhausting, discouraging, frustrating.

### **How do we persevere?**

Paul addresses this in Romans 8:

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:18-21, NASB).

### **Present Suffering**

**Paul doesn't minimize suffering.** He acknowledges it's real. The present time includes:

- Pain and hardship
- Disappointment and loss
- Conflict and brokenness
- Illness and death
- The groaning of creation under the weight of the curse

**In church family, this looks like:**

- Relationships that don't heal
- People who leave angry
- Conflicts that wound deeply
- Leaders who fail
- Communities that fracture
- The slow, painful work of transformation

**Paul doesn't say, "Just be positive!" or "Don't focus on the negative!" He says: Yes, there's suffering. Real, present, painful suffering.**

### **Future Glory**

**But—and this is critical—the suffering is temporary and the glory is eternal.**

**"Not worthy to be compared."** The ratio is so disproportionate that present suffering, as real as it is, pales in comparison to future glory.

**Think about it mathematically:**

Let's say you live 80 years (most of it carrying some form of suffering). That's 80 years of the already-not-yet.

**Compared to eternity?** It's not even a rounding error. It's a millisecond in an infinite timeline.

**And the glory being prepared?** Revelation 21-22. No more tears. No more death. No more pain. God dwelling with us. Perfect family. Complete healing.

**This doesn't erase present pain.** But it provides perspective. Context. **Hope that the story doesn't end here.**

### **Creation Groaning**

**"For the creation was subjected to futility... the whole creation groans and suffers"**  
(Romans 8:20, 22, NASB).

**Everything is groaning.** Not just us. All of creation.

The earth groans under pollution, climate change, natural disasters.

Animals groan under predation and suffering.

Our bodies groan under aging, illness, decay.

**The church groans under the weight of its own brokenness.**

**But the groaning isn't meaningless.** Paul uses the metaphor of childbirth:

"And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:23, NASB).

**Childbirth groaning** = painful but productive. Leading somewhere. Bringing forth new life.

**Our groaning isn't despair; it's labor pains.** Something is being born. The new creation is coming. **The pain has purpose.**

### **Waiting with Perseverance**

**"But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it"**  
(Romans 8:25, NASB).

**Hope** = confident expectation of what's promised, even though we don't see it yet

**Perseverance** = patient endurance, continuing faithfully despite difficulty

**This is the posture of the already-not-yet:**

We hope (knowing what's coming).  
We wait (acknowledging we're not there yet).  
We persevere (continuing faithfully in the meantime).

#### **Applied to church family:**

**We hope** that this broken community will one day be perfected.  
**We wait** for the full redemption, the complete healing.  
**We persevere** in loving each other, forgiving each other, bearing with each other—because we know it won't always be this hard.

#### **The Spirit Helps Our Weakness**

**"In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words"** (Romans 8:26, NASB).

**This is the secret to surviving the already-not-yet: We're not doing it alone.**

**The Spirit helps.** The Greek word is *synantilambanetai* (συναντιλαμβάνεται)—to take hold together with, to assist, to come to the aid of.

**Picture:** You're carrying a heavy load. It's crushing you. You can't make it. Then someone comes alongside, gets under the load with you, lifts with you. You're still carrying it, but you're no longer carrying it alone.

**That's the Spirit.** Getting under the load with us. Helping us carry what we couldn't carry alone.

**Even in prayer—when we don't know what to say, when our pain is too deep for words—the Spirit intercedes.**

**This means:**

When we're exhausted from trying to love difficult people: **The Spirit strengthens us.**

When we're discouraged by slow progress: **The Spirit renews our hope.**

When we're ready to give up on community: **The Spirit sustains our commitment.**

When we don't know how to navigate conflict: **The Spirit gives wisdom.**

**We're not white-knuckling our way through the already-not-yet. We're carried by the Spirit through it.**

#### **THE PRACTICES THAT SUSTAIN**

Living faithfully in the tension requires intentional practices. Let me suggest a few:

### **1. Remember What's Been Done**

**Fight forgetfulness.** Our default is to focus on what's not yet and forget what's already.

**Regularly rehearse:**

- You ARE adopted (security)
- You ARE forgiven (no condemnation)
- You ARE family (belonging)
- The Spirit DOES dwell in you (power)
- Christ HAS secured your future (certainty)

**This isn't denial of present struggle. It's anchoring in completed truth so you don't drown in incomplete process.**

### **2. Hold Loosely to Outcomes**

**We're responsible for faithfulness, not results.**

You can't control:

- Whether people repent
- Whether relationships heal
- Whether the church grows
- Whether your efforts "succeed"

**You can control:**

- Your obedience
- Your faithfulness
- Your love
- Your perseverance

**Rest in God's sovereignty.** He's perfecting the work. Your job is to cooperate, not complete it.

### **3. Celebrate Small Wins**

**Don't wait for perfect before celebrating progress.**

When reconciliation takes a step forward (even if it's not complete): **Celebrate**.

When someone grows in maturity (even if they're not yet perfected): **Celebrate**.

When the community loves well in one instance (even if they fail in another): **Celebrate**.

**These small wins are evidence that the work continues. That the already is real. That the not-yet doesn't negate the progress.**

#### **4. Lament Honestly**

**Don't spiritualize away the pain of the not-yet.**

When relationships are broken: **Lament**.

When people leave: **Grieve**.

When sin causes harm: **Mourn**.

When progress is slow: **Express frustration**.

**The Psalms give us permission.** Nearly half are laments—honest cries to God about present suffering.

**Lament isn't lack of faith. It's honest faith that acknowledges what is while trusting what will be.**

#### **5. Stay in Community**

**The temptation in the already-not-yet is to isolate.**

"If it's this hard, why bother?"

"I'll just focus on my personal relationship with God."

"Community isn't worth the pain."

**But isolation intensifies the not-yet.** Alone, you have no foretaste of the already. No experience of family. No embodiment of what's coming.

**Stay. Even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard.**

Because the difficulty is forming you. The friction is transforming you. **The family—messy as it is—is the crucible where the already becomes more real and the not-yet becomes less painful.**

#### **6. Keep the Vision**

**Regularly remind yourself where this is headed.**

Read Revelation 21-22. Imagine the Marriage Supper. Picture the family perfected.

**This isn't escapism.** It's orientation. Keeping the end in view so you don't lose heart in the middle.

**Athletes train with the finish line in mind.** Students study with graduation in sight.

**Christians persevere with eternity in view.**

**The vision of what we're becoming sustains us through the process of becoming it.**

### **TOM AND MARCUS: LIVING THE TENSION**

Let me return to Tom and Marcus because their story embodies the already-not-yet:

#### **Already:**

- They're in the same room without hostility
- They're willing to pursue reconciliation
- They can shake hands
- They're attending the same small group
- Steps toward trust are being taken

#### **Not yet:**

- The hurt isn't fully healed
- Complete trust hasn't been restored
- The friendship isn't what it was/will be
- Awkwardness remains
- Years of damage take time to repair

#### **They live in this tension every week:**

Some gatherings go well. They have a decent conversation. They laugh at the same joke. Evidence that healing is happening.

Other gatherings are tense. An unintentional comment triggers old wounds. The weight of what was broken hangs heavy.

#### **And they have to choose:**

**Will they focus on the not-yet** (what's still broken) and give up?

**Or will they celebrate the already** (what's being restored) and hope?

**Will they demand immediate restoration** and quit when it doesn't happen fast enough?  
**Or will they trust the process** and persevere through the slow work of reconciliation?

**Will they try to force the outcome** through their effort alone?  
**Or will they cooperate with what God is doing** and let Him complete the work in His timing?

**Dallas Willard's words sustain them:** Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.

**They can't earn restoration.** No amount of trying harder will immediately erase three years of pain. No perfect performance will undo the betrayal.

**But they can cooperate with grace:** Keep showing up to small group. Keep being civil. Keep proving trustworthy in small things. Keep apologizing when they mess up. Keep choosing forgiveness even when feelings haven't caught up.

**Not to earn each other's friendship. But because they're brothers, and brothers don't give up on each other.**

**And they trust:** The God who began this work of reconciliation will complete it. Maybe not on their timeline. Maybe not the way they envision. But He's faithful to finish what He starts.

**That hope sustains them through the already-not-yet.**

## THE INVITATION

We've covered a lot of ground in this book. Let me distill it to the core invitation:

**Come to the Table**

**You're invited.** Not because you've earned it. Not because you're qualified. Not because you have it all together.

**You're invited because you're family.**

The Father has adopted you. The Son has died for you. The Spirit has sealed you. **You belong.**

**Come to the table.** The one we gather around now in our broken, beautiful communities. The one we're practicing for—the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

**Bring your hunger.** Your need. Your brokenness. Your doubts. Your failures.

**All beggars are welcome.** That's the only qualification.

**Take Your Place in the Family**

**Stop spectating. Stop consuming. Stop waiting until you're "ready."**

**You have a place.** God placed you in the body. Not randomly. Intentionally. **You belong somewhere specific.**

**Find your microchurch.** Your small community. Your household of faith. The people God has called you to do life with.

**And once you find them: Stay.**

When it gets hard (it will).

When people disappoint you (they will).

When you're tempted to leave (you will be).

**Stay. Because that's what family does.**

**Your presence matters.** Your gifts are needed. Your story contributes. Your participation builds up the body.

**You're not optional. You're essential.**

**Receive the Difficult and the Divine**

**Stop looking for perfect community.** It doesn't exist. Not this side of eternity.

**Receive what God gives:**

The difficult person who irritates you? **They're your gift.** God's tool for your sanctification.

The messy community that frustrates you? **It's your family.** The people God placed you with for formation.

The slow process that exhausts you? **It's transformation.** The Spirit's work of making you like Christ.

**Receive it all:**

The difficult and the divine.

The brokenness and the beauty.

The dysfunction and the redemption.

The already and the not-yet.

**Because all of it—all of it—is shaping you into who you're meant to be.**

Diverse (you're not all the same).

Dysfunctional (you're not yet perfected).

Divine (you're being made like Christ).

**That's the family. That's the invitation. That's where you belong.**

**The Spirit and the Bride Say, "Come"**

The last invitation in Scripture comes from Revelation 22:

"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost" (Revelation 22:17, NASB).

**The Spirit says, "Come."** The third person of the Trinity inviting you into the family.

**The bride says, "Come."** The church—the family of God—welcoming you home.

**And the one who hears says, "Come."** You extend the invitation to others.

**This is how the family grows:** Those who've come invite others to come. Those who've found home help others find it too.

**And the promise:** "Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost."

**No cost.** Free. Grace. **All you bring is your thirst.**

Your need for belonging.

Your hunger for community.

Your longing for family.

Your desire for home.

**Bring your thirst. Receive the water. Join the family.**

**THE LONG OBEDIENCE**

Eugene Peterson wrote a book called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. That phrase captures what living in the already-not-yet requires:

**Long** → This isn't quick. Transformation takes time. Family is built over years, not weeks.

**Obedience** → Faithfulness. Doing what's right even when you don't feel like it. Staying when you want to leave.

**Same direction** → Consistency. Not bouncing from community to community. Not starting over repeatedly. Staying the course.

**This is what the already-not-yet demands:**

Not perfection. **Perseverance.**

Not immediate results. **Faithful presence.**

Not spectacular achievements. **Steady obedience.**

**Just keep showing up.** Keep loving. Keep forgiving. Keep confessing. Keep serving. Keep hoping.

**Day after day. Year after year. Until the work God began is complete.**

**Not because you're earning anything. But because you're family, and this is what family does.**

Family stays. Family works through hard things. Family doesn't give up on each other.

**Even when it's messy. Especially when it's messy.**

**Because we know:** This isn't the end of the story. The dysfunction is temporary. The perfection is coming.

**We're already family. We will be glorified family.**

**And in the meantime—in this beautiful, terrible, hope-filled meantime—we live into both realities.**

Celebrating the already. Trusting the not-yet. Persevering through the tension.

**Together. As family. Until that day when the already swallows up the not-yet and we're finally, fully, forever home.**

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## **EPILOGUE: A LETTER TO THE READER**

If you've made it this far, thank you. For reading. For wrestling with these ideas. For considering what it might mean to truly be family.

**Let me leave you with this:**

You're reading this for a reason. Maybe you're:

- Lonely in a crowded church
- Tired of religious consumerism
- Hungry for genuine community
- Wounded by past church experiences

- Hoping there's something better

**Whatever brought you here, hear this: You're not crazy for wanting more.**

The longing you feel for deep community? **That's the Spirit.**

The dissatisfaction with shallow church? **That's holy discontent.**

The hunger for family? **That's how you're designed.**

**You were made for this.** For covenant community. For household of faith. For family.

**And it exists.** Not perfectly. Not without pain. But really, truly, it exists.

**You can find it. You can build it. You can be it.**

Start small. Find two or three people willing to do life together. Share meals. Be honest.

Commit for a season. See what God does.

Don't wait for your church to restructure everything. Don't wait for perfect people. Don't wait until you're "ready."

**Just begin.** With whoever's willing. Wherever you are.

**Because the family of God—diverse, dysfunctional, being made divine—is being built one small community at a time.**

**And you get to be part of it.**

Not someday. Not when it's easier. **Now. In the already-not-yet.**

**Welcome home.**

— Jeff

*"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."*

— Philippians 1:6 (NASB)

*"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."*

— Romans 8:18 (NASB)

*"In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."*

— Romans 8:26 (NASB)

*"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost."*

— Revelation 22:17 (NASB)

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**THE END**

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**FAMILY: DIVERSE, DYSFUNCTIONAL, DIVINE**

*Why the Church Must Rediscover Family to Survive*