

Conversations for Change
Article 5
The Church as Family

Let me begin by establishing a few of the key theological truths that set the foundation for the church as a family of believers. After you read each one, ask yourself what some of the practical ramifications should be in order for us to live out these truths week-in and week-out.

1. ***There is a sense of community placed in the hearts of all true believers.*** The Apostle Peter says that a sense of brotherly love is one of the goals grafted into the heart of every believer who has been purchased by the blood of Christ. Christians live for certain things. One of the things we live for is a kind of brotherly affection. Look at Peter's words: "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth *for a* sincere brotherly love, love one another from a pure heart, since you have been born again..." (1 Pet. 1:22-23). Our brotherly affection is both the result of salvation and a goal of salvation. You cannot love others without salvation and part of being born again is that you might pursue brotherly love.
2. ***True Christians love to fellowship with God's people.*** This is what the Apostle John was referring to when he said, "that which we have seen and heard (namely, Jesus) we proclaim to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (1 John 1:3-4). John's joy in Christ is brought to completion only as his fellowship with Christ is broadened to include fellowship with other believers. But notice, he equates an increase of fellowship in the Gospel with an increase in joy. We ought to be the happiest people on earth when we come together.
3. ***A dire need for accountability and safeguard is built into the heart of a New Covenant member.*** This is precisely what the writer of Hebrews is after when he writes, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:12-13). We all struggle with sin and we all lose perspective. God knows we are weak and sinful people. He has provided this community of believers, the church, to strengthen us. If you think of yourself as a lone-ranger Christian who simply needs himself, his Bible and perhaps his horse, you are not thinking as God thinks.
4. ***Growth in sanctification occurs in the context of relationships.*** Consider the words of Hebrews: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:24-25). This passage is the clearest in the entire NT regarding the nature of a church gathering. When we come together, it is for the purpose of mutual encouragement. But the encouragement has a goal, namely stirring each other up for love and good works. When we meet together we are striving with all our

might to make each other more obedient to Christ and more loving toward each other.

5. ***True believers have a sense of commitment and devotion to one another.*** The analogies of body and building, when speaking of the church, demand this. There is a sense of mutual responsibility placed in the heart of each member of the body. Paul says in Romans, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (12:3-4). We belong to one another. I am supposed to care for you as I care for myself and vice versa.

With these truths established, a sense of commitment and devotion is essential when joining a particular fellowship. And when we add to these foundational truths all of the “one another commands,” we find that a great deal of the NT’s commands are aimed at believers living in relationship with other believers, hence, “one another.” All of these commands are enjoined upon believers not because they have joined the same local church but because they are members of Christ’s body. However, in order for most of these to be carried out effectively, there has to be a sense of deep-seated commitment and devotion to Christ’s body. That is, there has to be some kind of a relationship that can only be fostered by familiarity and trust. Christians in America far too easily and far too quickly run from issues and frustrations either out of a preference for ease and comfort or from fear rather than really rolling up their sleeves to fight for the sanctification and purity of Christ’s church.

With all this established, let me give some practical guidelines that should govern the public gatherings of Christ’s people.

1. ***The church gathering should be Scriptural.*** This point does not need a great deal of development. The church gathering needs to be centered on the teaching of Scripture. We should seek to be a people who bleed the Bible. *The leadership exists to see to it that every member is being equipped for life and ministry*

“...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:11-16).

And while that sounds simple, it is easily misunderstood.

First, the equipping ministry of the church’s eldership means that every person is growing in his ability to handle the Word. They are becoming efficient at speaking the truth of God’s Word into their own lives as it shapes their worldview, heals their hurts and counsels their decisions. We need to become adept at preaching the gospel to ourselves.

Second, since we exist in relationships, we need to be equipped to minister to those God has put in our lives. In fact, the clearest definition for “ministry” is effective and efficient administering of the Word of God in word and deed. That means that ministry is not about programs but people. You do not need to have a program in order to serve; you need a relationship. We all have them. No one should ever leave a church saying, “There is no place for me to minister here.” If

there are people, there is opportunity for ministry. Get into another person's life so that you can live and speak the Word.

2. ***The church gathering should be relational.*** The most effective ministry happens in the context of a strong loving relationship where trust is established. In relationships where love and trust have been patiently cultivated, individuals feel the freedom to share their souls knowing they will not be judged but ministered to. That means that the church gatherings need to be such that relationships are fostered and strengthened. The only way for this to occur is for the church to be real! There can be no room for hypocrisy or pretense. Paul says, "Let love be genuine" (Rom. 12:9). Paul is saying that we are not allowed to wear masks or to be hypocrites. If we are going to make real progress in relationships, we have to be real. "Put away falsehood and let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, because we are members one of another" (Eph. 4:25). We are members one of another. I can't depend on you to help me if you are not being honest with me about who you are, where you are and what you struggle with. Get Real!

We need to make two trade-offs if this kind of genuine love is to occur. First, we need to trade the polish of public ministry for the awkward and risky. Jesus told the Pharisees that they love to pray to be seen by others (Matt. 6:5-7). Whatever kind of praise they get from that kind of a heart motive is all the reward they will ever receive. How sad. Don't sing, teach, preach, or pray, etc. so as to impress or paint a false picture about your walk with God. God knows! Embrace the authentic and the awkward.

Secondly, we need to trade-off the unnecessary busyness of life and the "ministry" (so-called) for real Christ-centered relationships. Do you have time for people? Do you have time for relationships that encourage you in your walk with God? Do the relationships you currently fill up your life with enhance your love for others and good works? Can you say with Paul:

⁵ For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. ⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸ So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. ⁹ For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹ For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹² we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Thess. 2:5-12, ESV)

As Paul invested himself in the lives of believers in Thessalonica, he did it without being motivated by their praise (v.6), or what they could do for him (v.5). Instead, he invested his life in people, driven by a deep-seated affection, and

desirous for them to be in his life (v.8). He was ready not only to share the gospel, but even his very life. How sacrificial are you with other church members? Are you accessible? Will you interrupt your schedule for them? This is the way I want us to speak of our devotion to the people of our church. Let's foster this kind of genuine relationship.

3. ***The church gathering should be informal.*** This point is related to the previous one. By "informal" I mean casual. When Americans put on formal attire, for example, they act in a formal way. They get quiet and reserved. Formality belongs to places where interaction is discouraged. You are not expected to talk when you go the symphony. You are expected to be reserved when you go the funeral. **BUT NOT WITH THE CHURCH!** This is not the place for being reserved and smug. If it helps to take off the tie – take off the tie. "Dress for the occasion" is a good motto. But understanding the occasion is paramount. The church is for interaction. Dress for it.

By "informal" I really mean non-professional. You are not coming to a concert. You are not coming to hear some great and special orator. You are coming to a family meeting. This is the place for fellowship and camaraderie. This is the place for interaction and sharing. This is the place for laughter and tears. You are coming to friends. This is not to say that the church gathering is without order (1 Cor. 14:26-33) or direction. There is most certainly a need for order and direction. But we dare not squeeze out relational progress because we have re-defined church to be a program or an event. Church is not an event we attend but a group of people we live with.

4. ***The church gathering should be conversational.*** By conversational, I mean interactive. The leadership of the church exists in a relationship not only with the individual members of the congregation but with the congregation as a whole. This means that when the elders instruct the congregation as a whole, there needs to be the same kind of interaction as there would be if they were instructing you as individuals. Here is where we will use caution so as to maintain order and direction. We can say more about this later. But suffice it to say that there needs to be a dialog between the teacher and the congregation.

But at the same time, the congregation is in relationship with one another. This has been established. Yet there needs to be one point of emphasis added here. We all know that the congregation exists in relationship as individuals and that there will always be individuals who can minister more effectively to you than can others. However, the individual members of a local church exist in relationship with the congregation as a whole. That is to say that Christ has gifted each member so that the individual can minister to the body as a whole. This point is extremely under-emphasized in evangelicalism. It has led to a breakdown in the church.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul emphasizes the place of "coming together" as a church. It is true that all believers everywhere make up the one true church of God. But when the believers of a certain region gather together, they comprise the church in Corinth. But when speaks of the "whole" church gathering (v.23)

and “when you come together” (v.26), he means that the individual gifts are designed to serve the whole. This means that the church gathering on Sunday needs to be aimed at far more congregational participation and interaction so that we can minister to the whole with our giftedness.

Summary:

I believe it is paramount for us to exist in the context of relationships. It is time for us to set aside the professionalism of performance and enter the awkward and the authentic realm of relating to each other as brothers and sisters in a family, the family of God.

I believe it is time for us to stop the trend that relies on paid professionals to do the work of ministry and allow the Holy Spirit to work in our family. He has gifted each one of you to serve his church. We need to allow for more interaction and sharing.

I believe it is time for us to come out from behind the façade of formalism and enter the world of mutual love and communication where we foster a spirit of genuine interaction emptied of pretense and judgmentalism.

There are implications that need to be discussed for a host of items like the definition of preaching and the place of teaching, music and singing, business meetings, constitutions and by-laws, governance, eldership, decision-making, growth groups, nursery, the place of children, etc.