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Biblical Relationships: Crucial Building Blocks for the Church

In the midst of the barkers and booths along the ministry mid-way, confusion can abound about priorities for the church. Tired traditions, like bad habits, die hard. It takes mental discipline to get through these mazes. Remembering that our bearing is always in the Scriptures (“Do not go beyond what is written,” 1 Cor. 4:6b), we have attempted to establish the reality of who we are in Christ as a body of believers. Paul has exclaimed, “For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28d). The essence or character of the Body of Christ is unity—a oneness—a likeness of being that discards worldly distinctions. Based on that oneness, which is strategically rooted in the character of our God (Deut. 6:4; Eph. 4:4-6), we stretch ourselves out in ministry commitments. These commitments include prizing our diversities, or grace gifts in the body, and promoting individual maturity and corporate growth—in love.

BACK TO THE BASICS

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. Such is the situation with Christian ministry in the church. First, we size up the project, *then* we break out the tableware. Checking our blueprint

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for ministry, we do well to look first at the Author of the blueprint and the guidelines He set down for accomplishing the task.

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt. 22:34-40).

Talk about a crash course in Old Testament introduction! Jesus, having demonstrated before the Sadducees His ability to interpret with power and clarity the truths and acts of the Old Testament, was confronted by a master in legal and rabbinic interpretation. The Pharisee's inquiry was seemingly genuine and sincere, for Mark records that he approved of Jesus' reply and consequently was not far from the kingdom of God (Mark 12:32-34). Actually, Jewish theology was not entirely off target. It taught that God was entirely unique and without comparison (Mark 12:32; cf. Deut. 4:35; Deut. 6:4). Yet saying and believing, knowing and doing, were mutually exclusive for the tradition-bound Jew. It followed carefully from the uniqueness of the character of Yahweh that allegiance and affections must result. Saying leads to believing and to loving. In this the Jew was deficient.

LOVING THE LORD

Believers as lovers. Few concepts have greater implications. We are commanded to "love the Lord you God with all your heart, soul, and mind." Again this is agape love. It is a willful love, a determined love, a generous choosing of the interest of another over oneself. In this case it is loving the Lord—the Lord your God.

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Having seen the blueprint, we love the Author. Hearing the Word of God and receiving the Incarnate Word as Savior results in guided affections.

Note two important concerns. First, this is your Lord. Of the whats and hows, this is the what. He is Lord not merely known but personally embraced. This action cannot be accomplished as a static theological concept. The whole of the 613 Old Testament commandments is summarized in the preoccupation of a true worshiper of the one and only living God. Love is not a term of affection cast adrift in the sea of religious enthusiasm. It is rather lashed to the lover of the true God. It is intimately related to the Source of intimacy. These are scenes of endearment; they are glimpses beyond the courtyards of pretense and Pharisaism into the chambers of the devout. Nothing less is the message of the law and the prophets.

The second follows from the first. This love, or willful affection, is by means of every fiber of a believer's being. This is the how. Heart, soul, and mind. Affections, will, and intellect. This is integrated intimacy. It is a devout and true believer whose preoccupation with his Lord increases and constantly takes over new territory in his life. The Old Testament barometer for this whole-person commitment was obedience.

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? (Deut. 10:12-13).

Fearing, walking, and serving are forms of obedience. No wonder this first and great command was planted in the context of obedience that resulted in prosperity and blessing from the Lord (Deut. 6:1-2).

To this point we have seen love as directional. It is a dimensional relationship with its first-dimension being the vertical focus

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of a believer toward his God and Lord in a wholehearted love and obedience.

LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

But Lord, you don't know my neighbor! I mean we call our neighborhood "the valley of the shadow!" The local Little League team is nicknamed "The Piranhas!" They devour everything in their path between home and the ball diamond!

"And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." Many believers long for idyllic fields of ministry. If only most of their time could be spent in the books. They could emerge from their study just long enough to wax eloquent on the latest nuances of lapsarianism and synergism. Yet this example was never the teaching of the model of our Lord. He said the key teaching from the Old Testament commandments is that men are to be genuine lovers: lovers of God *and* lovers of men. In the trenches of a world system controlled by Satan, in the foxholes of homes that promote values contrary to Scripture, and in relationships with men and women blinded by sin, we are to live out our love for the Lord.

The legal expert who had posed the questions concerning the greatest commandment had a personal problem. We are not told exactly what it was, except that it concerned matters of "inheriting eternal life" and that he became increasingly convicted as Jesus spoke. Consequently, he tried to justify himself by retreating to the arena he knew best—the one of debate over definitions and theological precisions.

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, eat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he

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passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:29-37).

The legal expert must have squirmed inwardly during Jesus' telling of this story. Just as the priest and Levite had skillfully maneuvered past the beaten traveler, so he had dodged the basic issues of life and godliness of these great commands. Likewise, he had attempted to divert attention from the real issue at hand to matters of theological esoterism. But the story was clear. Clearly, the Samaritan, dread the thought, had been the true neighbor. Neighborliness had nothing to do with religious garments, titles, or bloodlines. It was defined as "the one who had mercy on him."

If we are neighbors inasmuch as we are givers of mercy, then our neighbor is one whose need we see and whose need we can meet. Willful or determined affection toward the Lord must issue in consistently similar behavior toward those around us. The Scriptures, and our Lord, have no commendations for those who restrict their worship of God to vertical and private matters of affection alone. There is a wonderful and privileged duty in learning of our Lord and taking that knowledge and gospel to those around us in contexts of friendship and expressions of mercy.

Now we see that love is multidimensional. The second dimen-

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sion is the horizontal focus of a believer toward those around him—a commitment to loving others, being givers of mercy, and above all placing the interests and needs of others above ourselves (the model of *agape*).

Loving our neighbor as applied to other believers. Jesus gives careful guidelines for greatness—Christian ministry as it is applied to relationships within the body—to a group of followers who were competing to be the most favored.

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he said. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom" (Matt. 20:20-21).

Reasonable enough. Concern for status, for rank. The remarkable thing about this request is that the disciples had just received promises of great status and place in the kingdom as co-regents over the tribes of Israel (19:28). But, was that position worthy enough for one who had given up so much to follow the Messiah? Thus the not-private-enough private request.

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:24-28).

Greatness and spiritual status, in Christ's eyes, are seen strictly in terms of servanthood and faithfulness (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5; 4:1-2). The

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dual concerns of model and motive are answered. Our model is “the Son of Man [who] did not come to be served, but to serve,” and our motive is grounded in the atonement done on our behalf as He gave “his life as a ransom for many.”

In our ministry midway, no prize attracts quite like the prize of success. This offer, beckoning to the believer from almost every booth, is held out as the ultimate in ministry rewards.

Ah, the sweet smell of success. Heads turn. People notice. Things happen. Success. Everyone knows what it is. It is achievement. It is what we wear, what we drive, the size of our group or building, the clout of our bank account, the career status we push to achieve. Whether the memo comes from the corporate headquarters of Amway, IBM, or Xerox, the message is the same: Believe in yourself, love yourself, and be successful. Ambition becomes the elixir that allows someone to get ahead—even if he has to step on a few other people. Ambition means literally “to canvas for promotion.” This heady wine, promoted by our world system, has blurred our perspective on ministry and life, has distorted family units, and has blurred our understanding of the church.

When this message of success comes from corporate America, that is no surprise. The surprise comes when the same message begins to slip, with increasing persistence, into the words and counsel of believers and Christian leaders. Whatever may be the generally accepted business principles for our free-enterprise system, we must not transfer those same principles into the theology of Christian ministry. To the saint who has the bearing and courage to remember Christ’s guidelines in Matthew 20, he finds standards based on real spiritual activity for measuring true success.

Loving our neighbors applied to unbelievers. Remarkably, Christ did not distinguish neighbors on the basis of regenerated status. Simply, if in our passing by we see someone in distress or need and we have the opportunity and means to help, then that is enough. We are to give aid.

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The Jews had an extensive legal code for distinguishing between the Gentile and Jew. All Gentile newborns were considered unclean. It was a violation of Jewish law to help the pagan Gentile in any way or to rescue a Gentile from danger. Jewish physicians were not to help Gentile women who were in personal danger in childbirth. Jews were not to associate with, or keep company with, Gentiles in any social setting. In short, there was bitter hatred between the Jew and Gentile.

Yet Christ cut across those barriers. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the mercy-giver was a Samaritan. The non-neighbors were the Jewish religious leaders. In all ways Christ was saying that giving aid as an expression of loving my neighbor as myself is based simply on need—considering each man as worthy and worth helping. No distinction is made based on race, gender, socio-economic status, or creed.

As if to reaffirm this emphasis, Paul continues those thoughts in his writings.

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Gal. 6:9-10).

Extending ourselves to the needs of others, whether it is in the context of someone caught in a sin (6:1-2) or harvesting the results of patterned living (6:7-8), is consistent with the commands and teaching of our Lord. Anyone who makes a claim to be a lover of the Lord carries with him the responsibility for extending that same affection to those around him.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CHURCH

The two-fold emphasis of our Lord in Matthew 22 and the cor-

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responding responsibilities of believers to believers and believers to unbelievers leads us to a basic conclusion. There are three basic relational concerns for the church:

- First dimension—relationship between a believer and God
- Second dimension—relationship between a believer and a believer
- Third dimension—relationship between a believer and an unbeliever

The first dimension, representing “loving the Lord you God,” is vertical and two-way. The second and third dimensions, representing “loving your neighbor as yourself” are horizontal and also two-way.

FIRST-DIMENSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The first-dimensional relationship is between a believer and God. It is established on the basis of Christ’s work on the cross for us. Once a person trusts Christ as Savior, the work of the cross is complete in redemption. The work of reconciliation is accomplished.

Yet that is only the beginning. For the Old Testament saint, the beginning was God’s sovereign work in choosing Abraham, and through him making a nation that mirrored His character and work in the world. Yet a whole code of instruction, namely the Law of Moses, was also laid out to give that saint the boundaries by which he could walk in obedience to God. That was, and is, fellowship with God. Fellowship is a mutual sharing between two parties (cf. 1 John 1:5-10). This progressive fellowship, or friendship, first between God and Abraham and then the children of Israel, reflected God’s desire for a mutual and reciprocal relationship between Himself and those made “in His image and likeness.” In Christ’s words, that

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represents the believer who is drawing deeply and regularly on the truth of “loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind.”

SECOND-DIMENSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The second-dimensional relationship is between a believer and another believer. Its basis is again the work of Christ. Two brothers are now members of the Body of Christ and equally heirs together of the grace of God. Hence, because of union in the Body of Christ, there is no qualitative distinction between them.

Since the church is made up of many individual believers, the corporate body of believers creates an even more involved interplay of multiple relationships. Christ’s expectation was for His disciples to follow His model and preoccupy themselves with serving others rather than being served. That commitment to agape love within the Body of Christ creates fellowship between believers as well as fellowship between believers and God (1 John 1:1-4).

As the Body of Christ functions in genuine ministry, relationships grow and Christ’s instructions concerning “loving your neighbor as yourself” are accomplished. Suffice it to say that without this fabric of interrelationships within the Body of Christ, the reverse effect begins to happen. The life usually expressed in a maturing local assembly becomes lifeless. This cannot help but have a negative impact on whatever relationships and contacts exist between believers and unbelievers in the third dimension.

THIRD-DIMENSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

We know it is hard to accept, but believers are supposed to have relationships with unbelievers. That is the third-dimensional relationship of ministry. With-ness leads to witness.

God begins that reaching out by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11) as He draws men to Himself (cf. John

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6:44). The God-ordained blend of divine work combined with relationships being developed by a believer toward his unbelieving neighbor results in the salvation of many.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Christ was concerned about both vertical and horizontal relationships in life. This became the fulfillment of the whole of the Old Testament and the summation of ministry as taught by the Lord Jesus Christ:

A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another (John 13:34-35).

The ability of the disciples to love one another had a direct bearing on the ability of *all* men to identify them and their Lord.

FAILURE: THE SEEDPLOT FOR GROWING STRONG LOVERS (John 21:1-17)

Now the thought that may sneak into the back of your mind in the midst of this discussion is, *What if I fail?* These are lofty standards. I can see, from Ephesians 4:15-16 as well as from Matthew 22, the necessity of cultivating my life according to the standard of love; first, as a lover of my Lord, and second, as a lover of others—my neighbor included. But what if I can't measure up. How does the Lord look at my failure in this regard? Believers in the Body of Christ for generations have asked these very same questions and have fled quickly to the life and lessons of the apostle Peter. In John 21, Peter was at the low point of his life, not long after his denial of the Lord. He had been at the forefront as a spokesman for the twelve, proclaiming the truth of Jesus as Messiah. Now, having denied the Lord, Peter had gone back to what he knew best—

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fishing. The Lord met the eleven disciples on the shoreline and, after eventual recognition, began to talk to and eat with His friends. After what must have included some awkward silences in their meal together (21:12), Jesus turned to Peter and began to inquire about his affections toward Him.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

This section of Scripture, in our judgment, is one of the sweetest and most tender. Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" The essence of that Scripture is lost in the English. But before we explain the nuance of the original text, we must encourage you for a minute with the English text. The difference between understanding the biblical message in the original language and in a good English translation, of which there are a number today, is like the difference between watching a television program in black and white and watching one in color. You may get a richer, more precise glimpse of the picture on the color set, but both television sets will have accurately portrayed the basic message of the program. So it is with reading the New Testament. We can appreciate the additional glimpse of Greek gives us into the meaning, but we can be confident that we can know the message of the Bible in a good modern English translation.

The first time Christ asked, "Peter, do you *agapao* me?" Peter responded, "I *phileo* you." Christ was asking, "Peter, are you willing to 'generously choose My interests over your own'? Can you extend yourself beyond the natural, brotherly affections of *phileo* to

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the willful and determined affections of *agapao*?” All Peter could do is respond, “*phileo*.” This happened a first and a second time.

But in the third question, which understandably caused Peter distress because of his three denials, Christ came down to the level of *phileo*. He said, “Simon, son of John, do you love (*phileo*) me?” Peter is able to respond at the level of *phileo* and the injunction comes, “Shepherd my sheep.”

Christ had pronounced a very careful principle concerning the progressive ability of believers in matters of becoming skillful lovers. The principle is this: Although God’s standard for ministry affections is *agape*, He is infinitely compassionate with us at the level of our struggle and more than willing to meet us at that level as we continue to obey Him. Our struggles and failures form the backdrop for learning how to reach out in faith and love to our Lord and to others. It also says that we are to get on with the work of the ministry, whatever our level of maturity and ability.

One final question. Did Peter learn the lesson?

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart (1 Pet. 1:22).

Again looking at this verse through the Greek we find different words for our English word *love*. Peter is saying the following: These believers have begun their spiritual pilgrimage by obedience to the truth that has purified them. Now, with a *phileo* love for the brothers, they are told to reach deeply and have *agape* love for one another from the heart. He did learn the lessons of John 21. He had learned that it is a regular, normal experience of believers to mature in their abilities to love the Lord and one another.

Do not get devastated by your failures, or slowed down by your inabilities, or sidetracked by wanting to be the favorite. By the grace of God, keeping moving. Keep making those conscious and willful decisions for *agape*.

CONCLUSIONS

Farmers understand the principal parts of farming: roots and fruit. Those two concerns, when added to proper soil preparation and planting, good irrigation and weather, and good care for the young plants from infancy to maturity will likely result in a good harvest.

We also have begun our spiritual farming project in this book. We have identified the need for starting right—getting our rows planted straight. If we understand who we are in Christ and what our basic ministry task is within the Body, we have started well. But we admitted the existence of weeds—competitors that challenge the reality of who we are in the Body.

Now the *roots* of our faith are in Christ, and as such they are defined in the words and concepts of life as He saw it. We discovered three major root structures designed to produce health in the Body of Christ. These structures are our relationship to God, our relationship to other believers, and our relationship to the world. God's concern is that our root system be strong and that we be growing and maturing in our abilities as lovers. He wants our affections to be monitored by the Scriptures in such a way that a fruitful harvest for the kingdom of God is assured.