



THERE'S THE STEEPLE...

HERE'S
THE
CHURCH

BY GREG CAMPBELL

There's The Steeple... Here's The Church



*Selected Thoughts
On the Current Manifestations of The Church*

Greg Campbell
www.GregsHead.net

May this book inspire you to a deep and genuine, daily adventure
with our Father who can not love us more, and will not love us less.

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith.”
Heb 12:1 (NIV)

All Scripture quoted in this text taken from the New Living Translation, except where noted. The New Living Translation (NLT) Holy Bible. Copyright © 1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers.

Sections of text quote from the following resources:

So You Don't Want To Go To Church Anymore? by Wayne Jacobsen.
Copyright © 2005 Lifestream Press. Used by Permission.

Living In The Relational Church, by Wayne Jacobsen. Copyright
©1999 Lifestream Ministries. Published in BodyLife Periodical,
1999. Used by permission.

Thanks to my lovely wife, Jen, for her dilligent work in helping to proof read this text so that you would have to endure far fewer errors. She's good like that.

All material contained within this book is protected by Copyright Laws. Use of this material is encouraged, following a request sent to the author. Contact information is available at www.GregsHead.net

Greg's Head Publishing
PO Box 36
Palmyra, NY 14522

www.GregsHead.net

Contents...

Prologue

- 10 • Foreword
- 13 • Introduction

I. More Than A Time Or Place

- 21 • Redefining Church
- 25 • The Emerging Church
- 29 • A Bigger View Of Church
- 39 • Building The Kingdom
- 41 • The Borders
- 45 • Quantifiable
- 49 • CH??CH
- 54 • Institutions And Labels
- 58 • The Babel Syndrome
- 60 • Make Him King
- 64 • If You Build It...
- 66 • Evangelists
- 69 • Relationship
- 72 • Substitutes
- 77 • Focus
- 82 • Superior
- 84 • Information Exchange
- 88 • ¿Saber, ó Conocer?
- 92 • The Masses
- 95 • The World of Pretend
- 98 • Contrived

II. Do Unto Others...

- 106 • Help, or Harrassment? Freedom, or Indifference?
- 109 • Their Own Journey
- 112 • Let Them Go

- 114 • Jesus & Susan
- 117 • Agenda
- 119 • Games
- 121 • Agenda - Part II
- 124 • Aloof
- 130 • It's Who We Are

III. Freedom FROM Religion

- 133 • I'm Not That Religious
- 135 • Modeling Christian Faith
- 138 • This World
- 141 • The Sacred

IV. We're All In This Together

- 145 • Living In Perfect Harmony
- 154 • Clergy
- 156 • Ministering
- 159 • Sameness
- 163 • The Colors Of My Calendar

Epilogue

- 166 • Epilogue

Foreword

Summer 2006

Greg is definitely on a journey in uncharted waters and one of the things I love about him is his willingness to put that journey on paper, so the waters become a bit less uncharted for others who might follow.

There is a groundswell among God's family on the earth today that are spontaneously and simultaneously re-considering our unquestioned paradigms that assume we can vest the life of the church into man-made institutions. Are they working as well as we hope? The answers are surprising. Many are leaving them, looking for something better, or at least more authentic. Some are creating new, and in their minds hopefully better, institutions. Others have decided to stay and try to rehabilitate hardened organizations, hoping not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Greg has his eyes set on a city whose architect and builder is God. He freely admits he doesn't see it clearly, hasn't worked out all the implications, or isn't selling a final answer. These are the questions, insights, and observations of an honest pilgrim on an amazing journey. He looks from outside the illusion of safety and acceptance that religion tries to provide and is finding great joy in an ever-growing relationship that is secure enough, even if you have no idea what's coming next.

I love people who take the risk of that journey and appreciate those who are willing to share it so openly as Greg does. There is nothing more fascinating to me than a person's story, how God has taken everything they've gone through in the past with the challenges of the present and fashions for himself a son or daughter that can reflect his glory to the world. It's amazing stuff and if you're on this journey, too, you'll relate to Greg's struggles, laugh with his uncertainties, and nod in assent with his penetrating questions.

And hopefully you'll come away from it with a

clearer view of who God is, a more accurate view of the church as she exists in the world, and greater love for them both. I know nothing would please Greg, or the Father more...

*Wayne Jacobsen
Summer 2006*

INTRODUCTION

A Few Words Up Front...

Introduction

March 31, 2006

To introduce you to the content of this book, I feel I must first introduce you to me. Specifically, my journey over the past dozen years or so with a Father whose love most certainly compels me.

When I first began this journey in earnest, my heart was invigorated with the idea that God loved me, forgave me all I had done wrong, and was not only accessible, but even pursued me. I had known those things to be true in theory, but somewhere in my late teens, something clicked. I knew my God was real, and I could not get enough of him.

I was a student at the University of Buffalo in 1993-1994. I had been away for a year at Michigan State University, but after thinking it through with my parents, decided to stay home and save some money the following year. It wasn't a bad place, but I do believe I enjoyed my time at Michigan State a bit more. It was pretty cool to be on my own, and begin making my own choices, being responsible for my life. I also met some fantastic people from Campus Crusade for Christ, and continued my journey of discovery with God. Perhaps that was even helped along by the fact that I was certainly in the minority, and any choices I made to live as God says we should would be against the flow, to be sure. I think overall, it was good for me.

It was during this second year of school, however, that God really caught me. Perhaps it was the fact that there were fewer distractions. Perhaps I was just more ready for him, after a couple years of growing deeper with him. Whatever it was, I have vivid memories of an insatiable hunger for God, and very real encounters with him during this short period of time. It's when I began writing songs, which he would later use in ways I couldn't yet imagine. It was during this time that I was baptized (as an adult believer), along with my sister, and my dad. It was also during this time that, after protracted, lively discussions with Father, that I decided to go into "full-time ministry".

Actually, at this point, I had no idea what that meant. My conversations with God were something like this:

"I want to give you my entire life, God!" I would say, at his prompting in my spirit, "I want everything I do to help people know you the way I have now gotten to know you!"

"Good. Go for it. Right Now." was the reply.

"Now? But, I'm in school? I want to be a journalist..." There was some silence, so I would usually fill the void, "Well, what should I do? Just... go to Bible College where Jen is?"

"Yes." was his reply.

"But I don't want to be a preacher!!! Not at all! I don't want to dress up every week and give sermons, and whatever else they do."

I actually don't know what my specific aversion to the vocation was at that point, but I do recall passionately making my case that I did not want to be a preacher!

Well, after months of conversations like that, and many others, I finally listened to God's gentle prompting and decided to pursue a lifetime of just connecting people with Jesus. I had no specific goals or direction, except that I decided to enroll at Cincinnati Bible College in the fall of 1994.

T rue to my strong convictions, I was not pursuing in the slightest any sort of preaching career. Really, for my first year at the seminary, I pursued my studies (it really was a wonderful, in-depth delve into all things of God) and I wrote songs! I didn't have time to think about what sort of "ministry" I might do for God. It began to become a bit clearer that perhaps God could use my music to share his life in me with others. During my second year at school there, after leading a group of about 100 people in a few worship songs, a professor (and later a good friend) asked me if I had ever thought about campus ministry.

So, my career for God was taking shape. I figured

it would involve music in some way, as I continued to inexplicably produce song after song after song. And now, it seemed it would involve music, and campus ministry. I did an internship with a campus group at nearby Miami University in Oxford, OH. There was no official campus minister, so we two interns, and our professor friend were it. It was certainly a good experience, and it seemed like this might have been where God had been directing me now, these two or three years past.

As graduation approached, plans were in motion for me and my internship partner to take over full-time responsibilities as the campus ministers with that group at Miami University. But through a series of other events, and again lively and protracted discussions with God, I ended up heading back to New York, to work with a small church in campus and young adult ministry. They were looking to reach out to the universities around them and to connect with college students and other young adults. It wasn't a preaching job, and it seemed to be a great opportunity, so I took it.

I began in June of 1996, only a month after graduating with my Bachelors degree in Biblical Studies. I still had tons of passion for God! I knew him more now than ever, and better yet, I was armed with a much stronger knowledge of the Bible and all sorts of things I could teach to other people! I could not have been more excited to be there! (Even though I was only being paid \$100/week, and there was no set time that my income from this new, mostly-full-time position would increase. I was young! What did I care?!)

Before my arrival, the church staff consisted of one. Jon was the preacher, the janitor, the secretary, and anything else that needed to be done. I joined the staff at the same time as my college roommate, Scott. He was hired to do youth and worship ministry. So now, we were quite a team! Scott and I, fresh out of seminary, and Jon, the seasoned veteran. The building we met in was very, very small, and the office that we all shared matched proportionally. But that didn't matter, we would sit in that tiny office for hours just talking about life with God, and how to help people dis-

cover and live in that every day! It was wonderful.

It did not take long for me to notice that despite all that was wonderful, something was desperately wrong. Not at all with that church specifically — actually, I think they were doing what they were doing quite well, and with the best of motives. It was a more general “wrongness”.

I began to notice that numbers were very important. Many of the meetings that occurred monthly or even weekly, consisted of reports of numbers. Attendance, budgets, and forecasts or goals dominated the discussion. There was a strange machinery in place that, frankly, seemed out of place to me. Many of our staff meetings (the hours of discussion in the tiny office) turned to these topics, and deeper into who we are, and what we should be doing as “the church.”

What I saw was not the church. “The church is the body of Christ, the family of God,” I thought. “We’re just getting caught up in numbers, and meetings, and 5-year plans!” I knew something was wrong, but at 22 years old I was not completely able to put it into words. It just didn’t feel right. Our hearts were in the right place, but we seemed overly interested in the quantifiable results, and the programs that would best achieve those. The argument I put forth was that the church exists with or without those programs and activities. The response I got was, a large family needs to make business decisions. So, the bigger we get, the more we would look like a business. And, as far as the programs go, “We have to do something together, don’t we?”

A little more background. I grew up in the “church”. I have only fond memories of Sunday School, and kids’ church, and youth group later on. Oh! And do you remember the children’s sermon?? Those were great! Especially when they would use props! (I also liked getting the little children’s bulletin that you could color in and stuff... fantastic!) “Church” was a great part of my life. I loved every

time we got to be there. I never wanted to miss a Sunday morning, that I can recall. I even liked getting dressed up!!! I loved everything about “church”.

Certainly my first taste of being in “church leadership” was interesting, to be sure. But I must emphasize to you, the reader, that I do not count my time there as a waste, or in any way painful, or traumatic. I did not agree with the general philosophy of “ministry”, and something was definitely not sitting right, so I did continue to speak my mind. But, none of that was due to any sort of extraordinarily bad situation. I put my whole heart and being into what we did there, because I only wanted to connect people with the God I had come to know, and love.

As the years went on, God opened up more and more opportunities for us with our music, and we began to pursue them. I did shift to full-time worship minister with that same church, and through a series of events that were certainly not pleasant, my wife and I eventually decided to resign. Through another series of events, God moved us into full-time music ministry, where we traveled the country visiting all sorts of churches. Many denominations, many sizes, many flavors. The best part about this season of our life was seeing the diversity among The Body in a completely different perspective. It was no longer as fragmented as it seemed from our previous vantage point. There were Jesus followers all over the country who called themselves by different names, but loved the same One who loves me.

The Church became a whole lot bigger.

As we traveled, we saw first-hand many different configurations of the church. From your typical mega-church with perfect precision in everything they do, to a group of churches that met in homes throughout the week with no real centralized leadership. From a tiny group of people who met on Saturdays in a Presbyterian building, carrying on the tradition they had learned from what was once a cult, to very ornate, fancy buildings with reverant, organ-driven hymns

and traditions dating back hundreds of years. We were partakers of every sort of worship assembly you could imagine. Even a few, shall we say, “charismatic” experiences. Those were certainly lively!

So here we are. It may look different from what I expected, but I am living my whole life with, and for Jesus. He is with me in everything I do, everywhere I go. I do not necessarily get paid to help people connect with him (at least not always), but I still do see Him using me in that way. It's funny how he put that desire in me so long ago, and how many forms the implementation of that has taken. I think perhaps the most important thing I have learned is that he is the one who determines when, where, and for how long. He leads his church.

Over the past five years of our journey, we have discovered that the church is so much more than we let it be. It is not a denomination, or a worship style, or a carefully planned array of programs. Jesus did not intend for his Bride to be so limited. We are the living body of Christ to the world. His hands and his feet. He says let your light shine before men. And for so long, all we have done is let it shine inside of our nice buildings on Sunday mornings.

This book is most certainly not meant to condemn. Please do not receive it that way. I do not have all the right answers. I am still learning and growing each day as I follow my Father. He is revealing himself to me every day, and I am sure will continue to through eternity. I share these thoughts from over a dozen years of thinking about and experiencing the reality of God in our lives. The time or the place are not really important, since he is here with us right now, and always. Every bit of our lives is worship to our Father. When we are in Christ, we never cease to be part of the church. Not when we step out of the doors after a worship service, and not when we don't even enter the worship service.

You will most likely be challenged by some of what you read here. You may discover some of what I have

thought through resonates with some thoughts or feelings you've had, and if so, please test them to see if they are from God for you. If you think what I am sharing is not worth sharing at all, then please don't. Donate the book to your local thrift store and be on your way.

It is not my intention to change anyone's mind. I am not out to start a revolution. I am grateful for the people who have shared their thoughts and their journey through books and websites before me, and I am thankful that I can do the same. We are in this together, and certainly each of us has a journey to share.

I am grateful you have chosen to read this book, and I do pray as I type these words that God will reveal his deep, deep love to you as you read them. I pray that our eyes will be opened to the fullness of life he has for us, and how we together as the church can realize that even more than we are now. I pray for wisdom, and open ears to hear what our Father might be saying to you, through what he has been saying to me.

May you know him more. His Grace and His Truth.

And may our Groom continue to reveal to us the passionate love he has for his Bride, the Church.

SECTION ONE

More Than A Time Or Place

Redefining Church

November 2nd, 2005

In a conversation with friends recently, we found ourselves discussing various incarnations of the body of Christ and at one point I stopped to correct what I think is a fundamental error in our understanding of who we are as “the church”.

It was simple, really, and one might argue that it is mere semantics, and that I needn’t concern myself with such trivialities. But I must insist. The following may be one of our biggest misconceptions about who we are.

We have applied the word “Church” to a public gathering where many believers (and/or non-believers) gather to sing, listen to teachings, often participate in a ritual of eating and drinking small emblems of greater significance than their size would indicate, and usually there is some chance to present an offering to God from the bounty of our wallets. We, as a society, as a culture, and as “the church” call this event, “Church”. It’s pretty universal. That time, usually on Sunday mornings, is what we call “Church”.

To further complicate linguistic matters, we also call the entire 501c3 organization a “church”. The term can also be applied to the edifice in which said organization conducts meetings and other business. Sometimes we even apply the term to a larger organization, encompassing many other smaller organizations (otherwise known as a denomination) such as the Methodist, Wesleyan, Baptist, Episcopal or simply, Christian “Church”.

Are you confused yet?

We have applied the term “church” to such a variety of things, who even knows what the meaning of the word really is anymore?

I am not here to embark on some tireless, etymological debate on the Greek words used in the New Testament for “church”. My point is much simpler, and so, I believe, is the definition of “church”.

We have added so much to the essence of who we

really are as the church. From my reading of the New Testament, the church is not an event, or a location, but a people. We who trust our lives to Jesus are the church. We exist as the church not because of anything we do, but as we opt in with Jesus, we are added to his body and become a part of the Body of Christ, his Bride, The Church. We don't have to sign a membership agreement, or even go through a series of membership classes. Our "membership" in the church is an outcome of our relationship with Father.

The church, as I understand it would not cease to exist if there was no building to meet in. Nor, (and perhaps here is where you reach for your stone to silence the blasphemer) does the church cease to exist when we cease to meet for worship. What?! How can that be? *That is church!* Really? Is the bride of Christ simply a gathering of people to perform some predetermined (or even spontaneous) act of worship? I think not.

There are many things that we as members of the church can do together, and obviously, worship is one of them. (That in itself is a broad and perhaps abused term, that may precipitate further thoughts from Greg's head at a later date.) We can also study together, play together, grieve together, laugh together, serve each other, help each other, and anything else you can think of "together". The church is definitely meant to do life together, but none of those activities, should they cease, could somehow preclude us from being "the church". When we're in Jesus, we simply *are* the church. Period.

Does this make sense? I am not decrying our gatherings of any sort. We must. That is really one of the main purposes of the church — the "one anothering" that we can do when we are together. But we must understand that the church is not an event, and it is not a location, or anything associated with either of those.

We are the church. The body of believers whom Jesus has gathered. There are many manifestations of his body, and I am pretty sure these days that they are not the ones that we think they are. They are not housed by bricks,

nor do they brandish towering steeples. They are a body, whom the Head directs as he pleases.

Consider this from Ephesians, written to the people who had been considered outsiders by the Jews, who felt their lineage provided them special access to God:

Ephesians 2:19-22

So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. We are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We who believe are carefully joined together, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also joined together as part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.

Or these words of encouragement from Peter:

1 Peter 2:5, 9-10

And now God is building you, as living stones, into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are God's holy priests, who offer the spiritual sacrifices that please him because of Jesus Christ.

But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are a kingdom of priests, God's holy nation, his very own possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

*"Once you were not a people;
now you are the people of God.
Once you received none of God's mercy;
now you have received his mercy."*

We are a nation. Natural citizens born into new life offered through Jesus. He is our Head, and we are his members. We are not an event you can go to, nor a place you can visit. We are a living, breathing house of God. He dwells in his people... everywhere.

This really only matters because I think we need to reconsider how we use the word church. As we apply it more correctly, the life we live as the church might begin to focus more on the relational, family life it was intended to be, and less on the structures we have created to maintain that life. I read recently that a healthy church is focused on the Groom and not on the Bride. When we are only thinking about how to "do church" better, and not thinking about how to be Jesus' bride, we are missing the point of who we are.

We are the church. His beloved. That's better than any meeting, or building, or any other thing we could settle for.

The Emerging Church

December 22nd, 2005

Have you heard this term? It seems to be cropping up in many circles. I am not certain as to the totality of the meaning that phrase might encompass, but essentially, it seems to be the catch phrase for a new way of “doing church”.

It's not necessarily a generational thing, though it does seem to have some foundation in the genuine relational aspects desired by the generations after the so-called Generation X. It's not about the “Seeker-Driven” services made popular by the mega-churches, like Willow Creek in Chicago. It's primary focus, it would seem, is in equipping believers to live life every day with Jesus and to go out into the world and make disciples, like the Great Commission says.

That's all great! I am so for that! I love the fact that God is moving people's hearts to long only for him, and a familial relationship with his people that transcends any building, or meeting, or pre-planned program. The church is far bigger than any box we can build! And it's so much more than just planning great, encouraging, life-infusing programs and seminars that encourage people, but only leave them wanting more.

But. (You knew there was a but, now didn't you?)

When I heard the mission statement of an indie Christian band today that included a line specifically referencing “the Emerging Church”, I became a bit flustered. While I love the heart of what people (and I believe, God) are doing with the renewed vision for what the church can be, I was so deeply saddened at the recognition of yet another reality we are attempting to capture in a catch phrase.

We have seen the previously mentioned “seeker-driven” mentality, where the focus of believers is (correctly) on the people who have not understood the Good News of the gospel. That's great! We need to have eyes open to people around us who need to drink deeply of Father's love,

who may have never understood that before. But, once we had a name for it, it became a formula, and now thousands upon thousands of churches emulate each other in planning perfectly honed programs that focus on those in attendance who have not yet trusted their lives to Jesus.

We have also seen the various “worship” movements. The transition from hymns to “choruses” and now the full-blown modern juggernaut that is Christian Worship music. The infusion of life, and real, honest lyrics, and modern music that the culture can relate to (somewhat akin to the seeker services) is a great thing, and brings the reality of our Father to a new level. Some really great results have been produced through this modern wave of change. My wife and I have seen some of that first-hand. And yet, when it has taken on a name, (such as “the modern Worship Movement”, or “Worship Evangelism”, etc.) or been passed along in outline form at a convention of Christian leaders, or written in countless books — it takes its place as another attempt to bottle something that can’t be contained.

I do believe in the emerging church. I have seen it. We have toured the country (in our musical travels) and visited so many churches in so many forms. In many, if not all of those locations we have seen God doing one main thing. There is a general disdain not just for the old, or the traditional, but the institutional. There is a hunger for genuine relationships amongst believers. Various ways of achieving this have been proposed and even attempted. From changing the lighting or the furniture arrangement at a corporate gathering, to changing the name or the format of that gathering. In some cases, even the gathering itself was eliminated, and believers met at various times through the week in various places. However it is being fleshed out, the hunger in people’s hearts seems to be for an authentic, daily relationship with the living God, and with his people.

I know that I can’t personally stop us from taking another great thing God is working in his church and trying to package it. I can’t. I won’t even try. Perhaps though, as you read this, the hunger he is building in you might be stirred?

Perhaps you know exactly what I am talking about because our Father is drawing you to himself in a similar way. That doesn't mean you and I should try to trace our steps and prepare detailed instructions to pass along to others so that they too can follow our step-by-step directions to achieve similar results. And no, it doesn't mean we should give it a name!

Whenever we name something, I believe we have birthed a new entity, which, in the end, will only become a substitute for what we were initially hungering for — a relationship with the real Living God.

Consider these words from an online book I have mentioned before. This is from chapter twelve of So You Don't Want To Go To Church Anymore?:

That's what happens when an institution tries to do what it cannot do. By providing services to keep people coming, it unwittingly becomes a distraction to real spiritual life. It offers an illusion of spirituality in highly orchestrated experiences, but it cannot show people how to live each day in him through the real struggles of life.

... in the first days of a new group forming the focus is usually on God, not the needs of the institution. But that usually fades over time as financial pressures and the desire for routine and order subvert the simplicity of following Jesus. Relationships grow stale in routine and when the machinery siphons off so much energy just to keep it running, it will grow increasingly irrelevant.

I have seen this so, so often. Friends who give their entire lives to the furtherance of an institution because in so many ways it represents their own relationship with Father. It indeed, in a very subtle way, has become a substitute. Not by their own choice, or even usually, by their own admittance. But it has. All of their life and energy is devoted to

maintaining the systems they have created — whose noble purpose is to encourage people's relationships with God.

But no matter how noble the intentions to start, whatever system we might create — and whatever we may name it — always siphons the energy from us and ends up becoming our master. It demands our time, and energy, and commitment. Only God is deserving of that. And only he can fulfill the hunger in us — no system or institution or movement can satisfy that. Not one.

Organizing is not bad. Names are not bad. But in the end, there is only one name under heaven by which we can be saved. Only one name, of one person.

No, it's not Wesley, or Luther, or Presby. (There really is a Presbyterian minister named Presby. Really! I've met him!) It's not Mohammed, Buddha or Joseph Smith, either. It is not the Seeker-Driven or Purpose driven church that will save. It's not the Emerging church or the Missional church. It's not the House Church movement, or the Relational Church movement, and it's definitely not the Bowel Movement.

If you're looking for a name for your daily journey with God...

His name is Jesus.

A Bigger View of Church

December 22nd, 2005

So, after 2,000 years, how do you think he's doing?

That was a question posed in an article I read recently about living in the relational church. It was referring to the time where Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." The question was posed by the author of the article to various individuals and groups of church leaders across the country.

You can imagine their initial response.

From our house, you can look a few hundred feet up the road and see four, large, stone examples of how he's doing. Jesus is apparently good at building a completely splintered, divided, church that likes to erect cold, lifeless buildings in his honor. That's not to mention all of the gossip, back-biting, positioning and other games we play inside those edifices.

No, if that's your idea of what his church is, you'd have to start making up some excuses for his work. It's not looking so good here.

But that is just evidence to me that those structures, both physical and organizational, have nothing to do with the church Jesus said he was going to build. Yes, there are members of his church living and even thriving within the confines of those systems, but they are not the source of the Life. The structures are only doomed to fail. Good can come from them, but Jesus did not say I am going to commission a few people to build my church based on their gifts and talents and leadership skills. He said, "I will build my church." He will. That's not up to us.

I really like the article. We have mentioned this author before. Wayne Jacobsen really seems to be able to say what I have been thinking for a long time. Some things he says remind me of discussions I had with my fellow church staff mates when I first left Bible college and was working full time with a healthy, growing church. Even though we

were doing it so well, there were just major flaws I could see in the system. Our hearts were great, but the focus of our implementation just seemed to be slightly (or greatly) askew.

I would encourage you to read, if you are so inclined, the articles he has posted on this subject. He says it well, and perhaps will give you some food for thought. His articles are available at his website: **www.LifeStream.org**. Life with God is so much more than attending meetings or trying to woo our friends into joining us at them. The church is so much more.

Yes, his church is alive and well. We were privileged to meet another part of his body here just last night. I am praying that God would continue to connect us to the people he wants to connect us with. That he would build his church, and that we would follow his lead and be the part of his body he designed us to be.

It really is *his* church.

Mr. Jacobsen has given me permission to copy his article in its entirety here, so please enjoy “*Living In The Relational Church*”, by Wayne Jacobsen.

Living in the Relational Church

“So, after 2,000 years, how do you think he’s doing?”

I can’t resist asking that question whenever I’m studying Matthew 16 with a group of believers. There we find the only recorded instructions Jesus gave to his disciples about the church. “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” He didn’t ask them to do it. He didn’t give them a blueprint of an organization. He simply said he would build his church and it would be strong enough to withstand any assault by darkness.

So it only seems natural to assess how he’s doing. If he’s been at it for almost 2,000 years, what do we have to show for it? I’ve asked that of all kinds of people, even at pastoral conventions. When I do, you can feel the tension in the room. People shift awk-

wardly, a few chuckle nervously. They know better than to say he hasn't done well, but they also know the church is fragmented by division, scandalized by immorality, vilified for its arrogance, exposed by its misplaced priorities and far from replicating the ministry Jesus modeled for us in the Gospels.

We either have to conclude that Jesus hasn't done an exceptional job, or consider that there is a vast difference between what he calls church and what we do.

I used to be disillusioned by what I thought was God's church. Seeing his people lost in priorities that were far from his own and doing things in ways that seemed to benefit the institution more than extend God's kingdom in our lives or the world, I lamented the sorry state of the church.

Not anymore! In recent years I've come to realize that our religious institutions are not the church God sees. What God calls 'church' are all the people who know his Son as their Lord and leader. They are scattered over the whole world, growing to know him better and to demonstrate his character in the world. This is the bride God is preparing for his own Son. I've seen parts of her all over the world. Far from being weak, divided and corrupted, the church of Jesus Christ is growing in beauty, strength and power everyday. How is Jesus doing at building his church? Incredible! His people exist in every nook and cranny of the world, and they are finding ways to relate to each other that glorify his name, not cause people to disparage it.

What God Calls Church

To see it, however, you have to look past the institutions and buildings we call church and find those people who are living in him. Please don't misunderstand that statement. I am not speaking against those institutions as evil, only encouraging you not to confuse them with church. Yes, many people frequent them who are part of God's church and are growing to know him better. That's not at question, but to see

God's work in the world, you have to look beyond the groups that call themselves church and see the bigger picture—all those God is calling to himself throughout your city and the world.

If not, we'll confuse our religious systems with the church and miss the great thing God is doing in preparing himself a bride. We must be careful to call church what God calls church, or we'll end up saying things that don't make any sense.

For instance, I was with a young couple recently. A few months before, they had simply had enough. Tired of the backbiting, bored by being a spectator on Sunday mornings, wearied of being manipulated to do more for God, and burned-out on too many responsibilities, already they told me they had left the church.

"How could you do that" I asked. "The church is not something you can leave, unless you've left Jesus."

Of course they hadn't and they only meant that they had left organized religion in hopes of finding a more authentic expression of his life than the group they were in. But that is a very different thing than leaving the church. Let us be careful with our terms. When religious organizations co-opt the term, 'church', it is easy for us to get confused, thinking that's what they really are. But they are not. They might be gatherings of people who are part of the church, but in and of themselves they are not the church.

The church of Jesus Christ could never be contained in any organization, and in fact, the way he works makes it impossible to fit in the most skillfully constructed structures.

Lone Rangers Need Not Apply

You've probably heard people say such things, who proved to be lone-rangers, never seeming to thrive in the life of Jesus. But that is a long way from who God's people really are. Just as institutions can't be the church by declaring it so, neither can individuals.

Who is the church in the world? Is it not those who live the same confession Peter offered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”? You are part of the church as you live under the Head, following him as your Lord and leader. You can’t be the church by following someone else who is doing that, you have to do it yourself.

And following him will not lead you to independence. How can it? God is a community and wherever he is known, real community will emerge among his people. Father, Son and Spirit have dwelt in true community for all eternity, knowing the sheer joy and wonder of sharing life, love and glory with themselves. You can’t touch his love and not find it drawing you toward others God puts in your path.

As brothers and sisters begin to connect with each other in real fellowship, they will soon discover that what they know about God is always in part, as if through a darkened window. But in fellowship among believers who are growing to know him better, there is a fullness of wisdom and revelation. That’s why Paul said in Ephesians 1 that the church is “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

Imagine any singular group of people fulfilling that incredible promise! The reason why our view of God is often limited, is because institutions are only able to pull people together who see the same thing in the same way. Their view through the darkened glass never gets any clearer, they only grow more convinced that what they see is more accurate than what anyone else sees.

God’s kind of community, however springs up among people who are pursuing a vibrant friendship with the Living God. For I’ve thought the life of God flows to people through our so-called church structures. But it isn’t so. Life does not exist in the church, it is only in Jesus.

Those who gather then to get fed or pumped up to get through another week miss what relational church is all about. We can only find life in him and once we find it there, our connection with other believers allows us to share that life together. ‘Church’ cannot

ever be a substitute for knowing him. We can't follow him by conforming to the religious system in which we find ourselves and why would we want to. He's offered each of us the joy of knowing him every day.

Institutional Dynamics

That's why a growing personal relationship is critical to relational Christianity. It can only begin as people are equipped to know the living God and follow him. Having a growing relationship with him, will teach you how to relate to other believers. It doesn't flow the other way around, and years of trying to make it do so have only disillusioned those who really want to know God better every day.

Gene Edwards was right when he says the model for church life is found in Jesus' relationship with his disciples. He never taught them how to have a 'service' or how to construct an organizational flow chart. He didn't tell them that church life was about attending a meeting, conforming to a group ethic, or regimenting people's lives by the most well-intentioned program.

Instead, he taught them how to relate to God as Father and each other as brothers and sisters. The language he used with them (and indeed the language Paul uses in his letters) was not the language of institutions, but the language of family.

Because most of what we call 'church' today operates on institutional dynamics, many believers today have no idea what God has designed church life to be. Institutions must focus on creeds, programs and procedures that attempt to get people to conform to the 'way we do things here.' Usually a group of top-heavy leadership draw the most attention and people are encouraged to submit unquestioningly to their insights and counsel.

Institutional dynamics encourage people to promote an image, and does not free them to be real. Gossip and one-upsmanship games abound as people try to find their place often at another's expense. The same things you see in the corporate world are

the basis of life as an institution. And if you ever leave an institution, you will often be ignored. Many people who have left religious institutions have commented that they felt like they ceased to exist even for people whom they had considered close friends.

Family Dynamics

Life as a family, however, is built on an entirely different set of methods and goals. In a healthy family people are not cooperating to achieve an end, they are simply learning to relate to each other in love. In a healthy family diversity is not only allowed, it's cherished. People don't relate to each other through lines of authority, but by functional gifting. If someone's car started to make strange noises on the way over, they feel no compulsion to ask the older brother to attend to it. They will already know who in the family has the most 'car-sense' and seek their help.

Healthy families don't press people to conform, but let people grow together at their own pace. They have the freedom to disagree without separating into multiple families. They share together in each other's journey, serving with their gifts, offering insights and abilities where they are helpful, and supporting each other no matter what they go through.

Many believers today are finding fresh encouragement in the 'one anothering' Scriptures that the New Testament encourages believers to do for each other. They are discovering that teaching, counseling, serving, offering hospitality, sharing confessions, praying for needs, admonishing the selfish, and all the rest are not things we hire a staff to provide for us, but what the body was meant to do for each other. As we live in Jesus together he passes out gifts among the entire body, that each can give and each receive from God through others. That's why some have said that there is more 'church' going on in the parking lots on Sunday morning than is allowed to happen in the morning service.

If you've ever experienced real spontaneous, fellowship among a group of believers, you don't need

me to tell you how rich it is. The joy of journeying together, of not having to pretend, of having people support you in your weakness and affirm you in your gifts is reward enough. And yes, a lot of that can go on among believers who gather in institutional environments, but it isn't always there.

The important thing is that you recognize family dynamics when you see them and embrace them wholeheartedly. Conversely recognize hurtful, institutional dynamics which have nothing to do with God's kingdom and take your distance from them guiltlessly.

As much as Paul encouraged believers to get together in ways that encourage your life in God, he also told them to be free to walk away from environments that become destructive to that life. If you sense him leading you away from such a group, don't be condemned either by them or yourself. You will not be leaving the church at all, he may only be preparing you to find it in a more authentic way than you ever dreamed.

Finding Body Life

So where do you go to find relational church life? Why? to Jesus, of course! That may sound simplistic, but where else can you go? Trust Jesus to provide the fellowship he wants you to have. Remember, his church is built on those who are learning to trust him.

You might discover the freedom to live relational church right where you are. Don't worry about whether or not everyone else shares your same perspective, simply look for opportunities to share life with people hungry to know him more fully.

You may find, however, that some institutional structures actually devour those who hunger to follow God freely and he might call you out. Many people leave one broken institution, only to dive into another or start a new one on their own. Let me encourage you to slow down and don't do anything until he clearly speaks to you.

Watch for the people he begins to connect your life with, some may be lifetime friends, others new acquaintances. Don't hurry to start anything, learn to recognize what he is doing in your area to provide meaningful connections between believers that are hungry to know him--his honesty, his grace and his life! He has people who will share the journey with you and encourage your growth without manipulating you to conform to their expectations.

Where you find that in your own locality may differ greatly from how someone else finds it in theirs. It might be in a Sunday morning gathering, with a neighbor up the street, in a home group, or with people God spontaneously brings across your path. However it comes, you'll find that church life could never be a once- or twice-a-week event. It happens every day as we live our lives in him and share that with others.

As you've read in these pages before, there are lots of ways Jesus calls his believers to share his life together. In our next issue we'll look at what it means not "to forsake the assembling of yourselves together" and detail some of the ways God invites people to share his life together.

I know it can be discouraging, looking for a depth of body life that it seems too few hunger for today. But Jesus would not have stirred your passion for it, if he didn't have a way to meet it. It just may not come in the way you're expecting it. So don't focus so hard on any one thing, that you miss the other doors he opens for you. Tell him how much you hunger to know an authentic body life that matches what he shared with his disciples. Ask him to connect you with people who share a passion to live in the dynamics of family.

Then enjoy whatever connections he begins to make. Don't force it into your mold, or feel the need to make a group out of it. Just learn what it is to relate to brothers and sisters, even in groups of twos and threes, that lets Jesus be at the center. Love others in the same way God loves you and you'll see the church Jesus is building all around you and all over

There's The Steeple... Here's The Church

the world.

It will astound you!

*After all, he's been doing that for 2,000 years.
He's actually amazingly good at it!*

BodyLife is published periodically by Lifestream Ministries and is sent free of charge to anyone who requests it. For those with email we recommend our web-based version so that we can hold down costs and get it to you much more quickly. This is especially important for international subscribers.

© Copyright 1999 Lifestream Ministries. Used by permission.

Building The Kingdom

March 29th, 2005

They couldn't get it right when he was walking in sandals right next to them, and we still struggle today.

I read a newsletter today that included the following sentence.

"It's amazing to see how the Lord is using [this college]'s alumni to build His kingdom."

Somehow that just opened my eyes to something I don't think a lot of us see. This "kingdom" that is being referred to there is a visible, tangible, measurable kingdom. One of numbers, and results. One that you can point to and say, "Look at God building His Kingdom!" But what we're really talking about is, "Look at how many people have made this decision, or changed this behavior in their lives. Or, even better, look at our super-cool new facilities and our amazing staff who have a tremendous strategy for mobilizing our church for growth and outreach into our community!

Is that really God's Kingdom? Do we really build his Kingdom? *Really?*

My mind says no. I am writing this after a brief search of scripture, but there are no New Testament verses containing both the words "build" and "kingdom". The Old Testament references were to the temple, "build" God's house and establish Solomon's "kingdom". (2 Samuel 7:13) There are obvious connections to Jesus in this verse as well, a foreshadowing of what God really wanted to do in Jesus, but again, there's no building of that kingdom either. It will be established forever. Not built.

The disciples and all of the followers of that day wanted to help Jesus "build" his "kingdom", too. They envisioned a strong leader who would vanquish their powerful Roman suppressors and establish his kingdom forever (much like that 2 Samuel reference from above). He evaded their attempts to make him king, as they understood it, on several occasions. He spoke of the "Kingdom of God" and

the “Kingdom of Heaven” many times, and never once was their a reference to *building* this Kingdom.

Because... it already exists.

There is no building to do. His Kingdom is forever, and just is. It is not a kingdom of territories and boundaries and walls. Not a kingdom with social hierarchies where lords rule over vassals and servants submit their lives to the King. The Kingdom simply is. It can not be defined by us. Jesus mostly attempted to reveal it through his parables. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”

And, in my opinion, the kingdom is not what we perceive it to be today, either. We see our successes in getting people to attend our programs, and even bigger victories when they not only regularly attend, but begin serving in those programs to assist in bringing others to attend. That’s not the Kingdom. That’s the same as what all the people around Jesus wanted. A visible, measurable “kingdom”.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8) God’s Kingdom is not being built with every victory we claim. It’s not something measurable. It’s the reality of Him. It’s Him. Jesus often claimed, “The Kingdom of God is near.” There is a sense of something yet to come, but I think he also meant it’s nearby... like, *right there*. Attainable, knowable, but not shaped by borders as they might have had in mind. It is a knowledge of the world as it was designed to be, by its Creator — by its King.

Let’s not follow paths already trod. When Jesus was here, they tried to make him King, as they understood it. We now proceed with our plans to “build his kingdom”, and they appear much like the plans of old. In fact, the truth is, we do not build his kingdom at all. His kingdom has been established. Our joy is to live in it and not watch his kingdom grow, or attempt to help it grow, but to enjoy the freedom of life in Jesus, cultivating our relationship with *him* and loving the people he puts around us.

That is his Kingdom.

The Borders

April 26th, 2005

Every nation has borders. Stakes claimed to a certain region of earth. Boundaries to keep their stuff in and your stuff out. Every kingdom has a line of demarcation that delineates where you are in, and where you are out of that provincial territory.

The same would seem to be true of the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus talked about a Kingdom quite often while he was here, likening it to several familiar things and happenings through stories he would tell along the way. The two terms kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven seemed somewhat interchangeable coming from his lips. Whichever phrase he chose, he definitely spoke of a kingdom.

At that time, the Jewish people were under the reign of a foreign empire. Rome had extended its borders far beyond where they have currently receded. Everyone answered to Rome. You were under their authority, but special privileges were given to those with Roman citizenship. Everyone else could be expendable.

Into this climate, insert a Messiah. Not just during that season, but for centuries, the Jewish people had interpreted the words of Prophets regarding a coming Savior to mean victory for their people. Peace and prosperity for those whom God has chosen. And as their lives were dominated by the Caesar at this time in history, it was easy to latch onto the hope that God would crush their oppressors via his anointed Messiah.

Jesus came speaking of a Kingdom. They listened, and nodded, and shouted. They tried to “make him king” Luke records, but Jesus slipped away. They heard the words they wanted to hear and were trying to make him the king they wanted him to be. They did not understand his kingdom.

I think today we still struggle with this. We are not trying to make him king in the same way. I have not seen any “Jesus for President” bumper stickers, or any mobs at

the White House calling for a coup to replace George W. with Jesus. Nothing like that. But, we do have our own ideas of what the Kingdom is.

Often, I will hear people talking about our borders. Who is in, and who is out. In some minds, our borders are very certain. They assert that Jesus made sure we knew that you were either in, or you were out. He is the King, and he says so. Unfortunately, many of these same people may be quite surprised when the masks are removed and we stand with Jesus someday. There may be people in different camps than they had previously assigned them to.

And you will hear a preacher speaking of decisions that need to be made. You need to cross the line. You need to make a decision. You need to be in, or stay out. (They don't say that, that's implied.) There is a very clear line of demarcation. For some it's baptism. For some it's a sinner's prayer. For some it's a more nebulous "asking him into your heart", or "trusting Jesus", "making him your personal Lord and Savior". Those things are all well and good. The "Sinner's Prayer" is not in the Bible, but a neat little collection of ideas from scripture in an easily presentable package. All part of living with Jesus.

But I don't think Jesus was looking at the lines.

I don't think Jesus approached every person with Border Goggles on, that display all pertinent information on current spiritual position of subject within view. "Subject is currently OUT of the kingdom. Employ conversion tactics." No. Jesus did not seem to treat anyone as though they were in or out of the kingdom. To me, it even appears as though Jesus' Kingdom was not anything like one of ours. The emphasis is not on the borders or the boundaries. It just is. His Kingdom simply *is*. It's reality. It's almost like Jesus was trying to get us to see how life really is, taking off our blindfolds so we could really see how he made life to be lived. As though we are already *in* the kingdom, we just don't see it. We're missing it.

I am not advocating an "everyone gets to go to heaven" understanding of the kingdom. Jesus did tell a story of

lines when he spoke of wheat and chaff, sheep and goats. This is another source of our line drawing. I do not fault the Christian line-drawers through the centuries, or even today. There is very good reason to see and draw lines. But I am beginning to think the lines are different than we present them to be.

We want clearly marked lines in time where we know if we did this we are in, and if we did not, then we are still out. I think Jesus wanted us to get away from that sort of thought pattern. It's not about doing, or achieving. It's about knowing. About loving. About living. The people who were made righteous by faith in Hebrews 11 were those who had some sort of relationship with God. They were far from perfect. They weren't even necessarily trying to be. They did however know and trust God.

Life should not be consumed by getting people across the line. We are not the Kingdom INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service). Letting the legals in and keeping an eye out for illegals. (We are in all fairness a lot nicer than the INS in that we *want* the illegals to become legals. But, the analogy still sort of applies.) Jesus was not (that I am aware of) ever really concerned with this. He wanted people to know that God loved them. He told them to love God and love each other. He lived life to the full, and wanted that for everyone. He was so great at helping people see their self worth. He spent most of his time with the people that others hated. The tax collectors, prostitutes, disabled and diseased. Those were Jesus' companions.

Was there some ritual they completed to enter his kingdom? Did he require something of them? The only thing that he required was that they follow him. Know him. Listen to him. That's what Father said when Jesus was baptized. "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." He has words of life. He is the Word of Life.

We keep looking at life with our old Border Goggles. We see lines, and "ins" and "outs". We strive to use every opportunity to keep people in or move them to the decision line if they are not yet within the fold. If we could take off

our Goggles, perhaps we'd see that the borders are much different than we think. And that the main thrust of life is not to point out the borders and get people on the right side. Perhaps the best thing we can do is help people see the Kingdom reality that Jesus spoke of. The Kingdom of God is near. Right here. It's not a place, but a way of life.

People fight over borders. Territory is to be lost or gained. But we are not territory. We are children of the King. Rather than spread the word about borders, why don't we just help people understand their true identity and begin living life to the full as the children of the Father they were created to be?

It's not about our entry into the kingdom. It's about living each day with our King, our Father, and knowing him more each day. About forgiving, and being forgiven. About sharing all that he has given us. It's about knowing the freedom of his grace and his love. About loving people like he loves us.

Without borders.

Quantifiable

August 24th, 2005

Last week I was chatting with a friend online who was writing up a report for some sort of governing board for their church. In ways similar to us, she has been challenged by the way we “do church” these days. She is still however, the pastor of a semi-traditional church, so there are obviously more issues to deal with than we have had to at the moment. She mentioned she was trying to present some of the things God was working in her and their church and still present a report that was close to what was expected. That was a challenge as well. When asked if I could give it a look, I was definitely curious to see how she might tackle it.

As I read, the main thing that stuck out to me amongst the reports of the great stuff God was doing in and around them was the numbers. Everything was numbered. This many people were at this event, we had this many events, and so on. The emphasis was not necessarily on the quantity, but it was a strong presence throughout the report.

And this week, as I was updating my website, I noticed that sometime soon I would be writing the 500th blog. Five hundred. That’s a lot of writing. What a cool tool the internet is for people to communicate and share information and ideas. So, with that benchmark approaching, I tried to think how I would celebrate it. What could I do to commemorate the occasion? How could I make it special? What in the world would the topic of my 500th blog be?!?

How about, our fascination with numbers?

You see, David had a similar fascination. When God had brought him from the young boy who would be king, through a long, hard stretch of time where not only was he not king, he was on the lam from the current king — who wanted to kill him! But through all of that, God was faithful. God was a refuge for Dave. He had peace even when his world was insane. God began to give him visible victories. He became famous, even as a fugitive, for his victories in

battle, and how God was so evidently with him.

Eventually, he became king over a very powerful nation. It seemed nothing could stop David and the entire Kingdom of Israel from doing anything they wanted. Their army was nearly invincible. David sure felt invincible. He was feeling so great about himself and his power that he had his chief army guy take a complete census of all their troops.

Well, being the good listener that he was, Joab reminded David that God had said *not* to take a census of the troops, but David was pretty sure it was a good idea, and made him do it anyway. Joab should have listened to his gut, as David's pride and obsession with numbers got a good number of the Israelites killed by a plague. Not good.

You see, God also says that we're just like that. Men look on the outside, but God looks at the heart. Samuel said that about David, actually. (1 Samuel 16:7) Everyone looked at Saul, a tall, handsome, strong man and thought, "Now, there's a leader!" But God, looking at the world the way he does, saw scrawny little David, with the big heart, and big Kingdom eyes and said, "Now that's my leader!"

He just sees it so differently than we do.

Recently my boys and I were reading in Mark where Jesus says the yeast of the Pharisees is a dangerous thing. It's kind of cryptic, that little section, but I think I get it. He was talking about the Kingdom, and specifically referring to what had just happened in their recent past. First he fed 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread and two fish. That fed everyone and produced 12 baskets of leftovers. Then he fed 4000 people with 7 loaves of bread and a few small fish. That fed everyone and produced 7 baskets of leftovers. As Jesus was talking with his friends in the boat about the yeast of the Pharisees, he quizzed them on these numbers. I think it was because they still didn't get it.

It's not about the numbers.

See, those numbers don't add up. You can't end up with more than you had to begin with after using way more than you ever could have possibly had in the first place. That

just doesn't happen. That is the way of God's kingdom. With God, all things are possible. Through faith in him, nothing is impossible. The numbers in the kingdom are irrelevant.

But not in our kingdom. We want to see results! We want to know what the average attendance was for the months of July and August so we can chart the per capita giving over that time table vs. the budget needs and actual expenses. We need to know which programs reach the most people so we can maximize our results and streamline our efforts. There are only so many resources to go around, right?

Wrong. So completely and totally wrong.

I am not saying that we should not be wise with our money and our possessions, and yes, our time. We do in a way have limited resources, and it takes wisdom and self-discipline to manage our limitations. But God is not limited. And if he is doing something, in his Kingdom, numbers are irrelevant. Completely.

I don't know how we could ever not look on the outside. It's not just applicable to our church attendance, or the strength of our kings. Racism and other forms of favoritism come from our tendency to measure by the outside, visible, quantifiable things we see. The measurable world definitely exists, and is a gift from God, but it can be such a barrier to a healthy understanding of the true Kingdom. The true Kingdom incorporates these things together into a world where God is in control, and does things that are not possible. He's more than we could possibly imagine.

I love that! That's exciting! I don't want a world I can completely predict! Science has always fascinated me, and I love it, but I also love that we don't and can't know everything. You can't get 12 baskets of leftovers after feeding 5000 people 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. You can't. But God can.

The Kingdom is not quantifiable. It can't be measured as we measure. It shouldn't be. God doesn't want us to, or need us to. The Pharisees took pride in their achievements, and that little bit of yeast spread through the whole

There's The Steeple... Here's The Church

batch of dough and ruined their whole understanding of the kingdom. It's not about us, or what we do, or what we have done. It's not about quantity.

It's not even about 500 blogs.

It's about Him, and Him only. Focus on knowing and loving him, and all the rest falls into place.

Oh wait... I think I have heard that before....

People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

Matt 6:32-33 (MSG)

CH??CH

May 30th, 2005

The marquee in front of a local church reads:

CH??CH
WHAT'S MISSING?
U R!
JOIN US FOR WORSHIP

It at least gets a chuckle from me every time we pass. You gotta love those clever little sayings on church marquees across the nation.

But yesterday, it made sense to me. It wasn't just a clever enticement to the lost and forlorn who need to "come to church" and find Jesus. It was true. For all of us.

This wasn't a new revelation. I had understood before that God intended the church to be relational, not institutional. There are no commands to create a structure or any sort of hierarchy (almost exactly the opposite is true of the latter) but there are plenty of times we are reminded to "one another". Love one another, bear with one another, encourage one another, share one another's burdens. The new testament is replete with relational "commands".

(Footnote: I am trying to figure out recently why we are so eager to know and follow God's "commands". It seems to me that God actually wants us to move beyond obeying him out of fear and move toward following him because we love and trust him. We heard someone recently describing the idea of "fearing God" and how that applies to a New Testament believer. In the Psalms it says "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God." And then in the New Testament it says "Perfect love casts out fear." We had a discussion in a small group over this, and then recently heard

an interpretation that likened it to growing up. You start out with a healthy fear of the awesome and terrifying Creator of the universe, but as you learn to trust him, and his love for you — His perfect love — your fear is gone, and you “obey” him out of love. No longer are they “commands” to “obey”, but words of life that give you joy to know even more. Read more on this idea in Psalm 119. It’s all about the joy of God’s “commands”. End of footnote.)

With that understanding of body life, I noticed how much the structure of our main gathering denies us any chance to really do that. From the schedule that must be kept, to the seating arrangement (rows facing forward), to the purpose for gathering (directing our attention to the mostly non-participatory program being carried out on the stage), to even the hurried leaving time at the end. Almost everything we do is tailored to an event that does not encourage or even allow for relational connections, and so, they don’t happen.

I was longing yesterday to just stop singing and talk with people, get everyone excited to be there... and then sing. I noticed so many happy faces who were enjoying joining their voices with ours, but I noticed a number of others who looked like they wished this singing part was over. They were there because it’s what you do. From that quick observation I couldn’t tell if they were there because of someone else’s will or of their own will, but their faces did not seem to reveal a true joy in their hearts.

So, I pressed on, and finished my part each time, though my heart longed to just stop and interact with people. If you have ever seen me do anything in front of people, you may have noticed that I am not your typical public presenter. I love to interact, and take any chance I can to do that. But, as the song leader, often you just have to get on with the songs as they are a timed piece of a timed service, so my interactive options are slightly limited.

Then, as we listened to the sermon for the day, I noticed that on several occasions I just wanted to respond

to something that was said. Sometimes with a question, sometimes with a supporting comment. But I just wanted to respond. And not just me. I wanted to hear from other folks in the room. How great would that be if we were all in some sort of setting where we were really doing this *together*?

But we're not!!! Do you remember the stern warnings as a kid? "Shhhh! Be *quiet*! Here, have a tic tac." (I added that last one in there. I don't remember if that was verbatim what we were told or not, but my sister and I did consume many of those potent little breath fresheners as kids, while attempting to sit quietly in our Sunday morning pew.) We are taught to be reverent by being quiet. By just sitting and listening. By being a passive participant. The whole structure is so sad! So limiting to what we could be. We could be the church. The body of those who have been saved. Each body part contributing to the whole. All being led by our head, Jesus. And that could be so much more if we weren't so loyal to our denominational boundaries as well, but that's an issue for another day.

The one last observation I had is our focus on the visitor. Not only are we denying ourselves a great chance to "one another" the other believers, but we are perhaps overly careful with our words and the structure of our services to "include" the first-time visitor or occasional attendee. We are cautious to remind them that offering is not for them — they don't need to put anything in. We fear they would be offended, not understanding why we give. We explain communion to everyone, making sure they know they are welcome to partake if they are believers. Yesterday a few things were explained in the sermon as being for the regulars (I forget the word that was used), and if you have questions, to talk to someone after. None of these in themselves is a bad thing, but it just betrays our true focus. Most of the gathering is at least conscious of the visitor, and often focused on the visitor. But the purpose of the church gathering was to "one another" believers.

Church is not a time, a meeting, a building, a gathering, or any sort of measurable thing. The church is the

plural of the individual believers. We are part of the church as soon as we are part of Jesus. No man can decide when you are in or out. So, no set of qualifications determines when something is a church or not. You don't have a list of items that must be met before you can be called a church. You don't even need a gathering to be a church. *However...* the church exists as a reality of Christ's body on earth, and a main purpose of it is the one anothering that happens in a gathering. So why are we denying ourselves this primary purpose?

One more observation. At the end of a long morning of two services and rushing here and there, I found myself (and most everyone else) packing up at a rapid pace and trying to exit the building as soon as possible. I asked myself as I was doing that, why am I not trying to "one another" right now? If I think that is so important, even our primary purpose for gathering, why am I not doing it? Why do we all need to leave so fast after the services are over? And I realized, it's because we *were* together for a long time, and now it's time to go. We were there for hours! As were many others. Kids need to eat/sleep. Adults are tired as well. It's just time to go. And we all lament as we leave the fact that we never get to spend much time with each other.

U R definitely missing from church today, but not as the marquee suggests. Your mere attendance at the gatherings we call church will not resolve that focal issue. We just need to get our focus off of what we call "worship" and as we gather together one anothering in every way scripture says, God will be "worshipped". And the church will be stronger as believers are built up by mutual sharing of life, one to another.

Ideally, the church exists beyond a Sunday morning gathering. The church exists in a neighbor helping out a neighbor in a time of need. The church exists in a family providing a meal for another who can't. The church exists in random gifts of money (like a Gas Card we received from some friends earlier this week!) The church is the embodiment of Jesus (Christ's Body) in the world today. They will

know we are his disciples by our love. That's it. Not what T-Shirts we wear, or where we park our cars and our rear ends on Sunday mornings. Not even by how much knowledge we gain from all of the sermons or Bible Studies we ingest. They will know us by our love. Our real love for each other, as we "one another" with other believers, and as we love those whom God has placed in our path.

That's the church. And I hope U R in it.

Institutions and Labels

April 14th, 2005

I had an interesting moment with a friend the other day. The moment came during (and after) a conversation with him regarding how we see the same events very differently. It was not all that meaningful, or deep, but it definitely struck a nerve or something in me.

We were speaking of a pair of events where I happened to be, and some people from his church happened to be, and he called them [This Church] gatherings. My jaw dropped when I read those words (it was an Instant Message conversation) as I could not believe that he called these two non-event events “[This Church] gatherings”. They had nothing to do with [This Church]. But, he felt any time a person who is associated with [This Church] is in the same place with anyone else from [This Church] it is a [This Church] gathering.

I was incredulous, and proceeded to passionately argue my viewpoint that we do not need these labels. They only serve to divide. The events in question were a gathering in a home for a homeschool book presentation, and a day when I was helping move some friends from one house to another. They were informal, life events. No one need stake claim to them.

I mentioned how we had been going through an eighteen-week parenting course with some friends a while back and the church that several of them were part of decided to list our meeting as one of “their” small groups. We were not started by them, or connected to them in any way, but when I inquired, I found they had a similar mindset: “[That Church]’s people are meeting in a small group setting, so, it’s a [That Church] small group!”

Why must we slap on such labels? Why do we have to call any gatherings of people by some made up name? For instance, we have stopped calling our Tuesday nights with friends a “small group”. We do not get together on Tuesdays to feed the existence of an institution dubbed, “Small

Group". We get together as often as possible because we like to be together! Tuesday is the night we have freed on our calendars to make sure we get to see everyone once a week. Every other week we do something fun with our kids and the opposite week we get baby sitters so the adults can have some adult time.

Now, this event began as a structured small group meeting as part of [Another Church]. But, over time, it evolved into more than that. We are all part (a big part) of each other's lives. We are, in my mind, a church. Though, to be consistent, I do not label it as such.

There is nothing wrong with an institution. The structured life of what we know as church is helpful in many ways. The draw back of an institution is that by its nature it is impersonal and for the masses. It must be regulated by rules and procedures. It has many labels, to properly assign things to their times and locations. As helpful as those things are in operating and growing an institution, I do not believe they are able to contain the Kingdom.

God's Kingdom goes beyond institution. It is incredibly personal, and so, different for each individual. It is, as we know and proclaim, about an everyday relationship with our Savior. It is a Father inviting his children to come along with him today, "Let me show you what this day has for us." It is not bound by times or places, or practices. It is a reality. Not something that can be captured by labels or words. Jesus always referred to the Kingdom of God or of Heaven with stories, saying, "The kingdom of God is like..." And in John, he said that the Spirit is like the wind, never knowing where it came from or where it's going. It can not be contained.

But still we try.

And not just with the church. We homeschool our kids, mostly because we don't like the institution that has been established to teach our kids. The institution of public education is for the masses. It is impersonal. It makes a futile attempt to teach kids academically and morally, while placating the unending variations of morality taught in those kids' homes. It can't work. It does, as I am a product of the

Institution, and not that messed up by it (am I??) But is it ideal? No way. Not even close.

For us, we prefer the hands on, family feel of two loving parents who know their kids the best, and can help them understand their world the best since we also love them the most. We think similarly that the church functions best when those who have walked with Jesus a bit longer “teach” the folks God puts around them (their spiritual “kids”). Not by scheduling meetings, and sending out clever postcards. Mentoring happens with the people who are *part* of you. Your three closest friends. How much more are you going to care about one of your three best friends than someone you by way of a title or an office have been given charge over, though perhaps you only see them across a room on Sunday mornings?

The heart behind a lot of the procedures in the institution of the church is to help everyone stay close to Jesus. But, our best plan to maintain that is so feeble compared to just letting the folks whom God has placed in their lives really love them. We assign the title of elder or pastor or minister or deacon or even “lay leader” to folks, and charge them with caring for the flock, as if a title will somehow make them care more, or even perhaps just more effective as they do. The title is meaningless. Some folks have been gifted by God to “pastor”, to love people and care for them. But all of us have been called to bear each others burdens, to encourage and admonish. Not *everyone* we meet, but “each other”. The people we spend time with. In a close, open, loving relationship, that naturally flows from doing life together. In an institution, it is a procedure to maintain the integrity of said institution. Never in as many words, nor in the hearts of those carrying it out, but nevertheless, true by default.

I am tired of labels. I am tired of structuring our life together. I just want to live. I want to love people. I want to know my Father more than I think possible right now. I am trying in all of this to not turn around and label the labelers. That is hard. But with Jesus help, I might start to look like him.

That's a label I wouldn't mind bearing.

The Babel Syndrome

April 11th, 2005

While discussing the chapter, **Focus**, with my wife, we found ourselves discussing the importance of worship. Expressing your heart through music to God. (That is our most common understanding of “worship” these days, I’d say.)

We mentioned how meaningful that has been for us at times, and just fun, too! God made music to help us express ourselves more than mere words are able to do. We spoke of how worship can even be just a couple people using just their voices to express their hearts to God.

But from there, we thought, perhaps add a guitar for flavor. But then, you really need to have someone who can really play. That enhances the whole experience when it’s actually good music. So, then once you have a good guitar player, or some good vocalists, the next step is always a few more instruments. Eventually a **BAND** is formed! And with a band, you definitely need to rehearse! So, someone has to lead the band, and rehearse the songs, arranging a layout of each song, of course. And then, once you have arranged this musical portion, you probably need to get someone to oversee the whole flow of the time that we are together, perhaps even plan some other pieces of the worship time — art, drama, even video for the tech savvy...

Do you see what happened? From the simplistic offering of heart-felt worship — a heart expressed to God — to an organized mega church in three simple steps! It’s not always as quick as the steps above, but it’s what I have now deemed the Babel Syndrome.

Do you remember the story? The people of the world had one common language. They were united in their effort to achieve all they could be. There was arrogance and pride in their hearts. They were not living to know their Creator, they were trying to reach him on their own. They wanted to build a tower to the heavens. God knew this was not good for them, and so confused them by giving them all different

languages. Their organization was thwarted.

It is our way. We take everything that is good, and we want to improve. We want to make it the best it can be, and that takes organization. Administration. Planning. Building. Structure.

The bane of humanity is our desire to be in control. To manipulate our surroundings to produce the finest we can produce. By itself that is not bad. Striving for excellence is to be commended. But what happens is our focus drifts off of the offering and onto our achievements. We take the joy of spontaneous expressions to our Creator and package them into something that ends up receiving (in effect) our worship. Worship could be defined as our time, our effort, our focus, our energy.

It becomes our tower of Babel. Our greatest accomplishment. Our driving force. Just a thought, but seems to fit a lot of the stuff we do. We are always striving for bigger and better. What improves on something? To add more, of course! If we had two guitarists last week, let's add drums this week. If we had drums last week, let's add a stand-up bass and cello. Always improving by pulling out all the stops, and making the tower bigger.

Obviously, this does not stop with worship. We know we need to "fellowship" so we create small groups. We create a structure by which we can ensure maximum participation in such groups, so as to produce maximum fellowship. Even our church buildings are a result of this syndrome. We justify exorbitant spending on such edifices by extolling them as tools to reach more people, or just to handle all of the families that God has already blessed us with.

We are always trying to build bigger and better, instead of relishing the simple life of knowing and living with the Creator. Sharing the joys and pains of life with those he has surrounded us with, and not trying to herd them in any way into any pattern of living we might think "best" for them.

It is our way. From Babel to now.

Make Him King

July 5th, 2005

Do you remember when Jesus had to escape the clutches of his adoring fans? Great crowds of people were attracted to the greatness of this man, and enamored by all his care and loving attention to the downtrodden and otherwise societally ignored. His teaching was so amazingly true and authoritative. It seemed like he really knew what he was saying, far more than any of the other teachers of that day.

And so they wanted to help him succeed. They wanted to increase the scope of his influence. They wanted to make him King.

“Jesus saw that they were ready to take him by force and make him king, so he went higher into the hills alone.”

John 6:15

It had probably been a very exciting day. Crowds gathered to hear what he would say, and see what he would do on this day. What new teachings would be proclaimed today? What amazing healings might be performed this day? The crowd was abuzz with anticipation.

And Jesus did not disappoint.

There is no record of what he taught or really anything that he said on this occasion. It simply says that, “Jesus soon saw a great crowd of people climbing the hill, looking for him.” When he noticed the throngs, he did not stop to share some sage wisdom with them. He did not elevate himself above them and share words of encouragement or chastisement. He simply wanted to feed them.

And feed them he did. We know the story. Two fish and five barley loaves fed five thousand people with twelve baskets to spare! Amazing! Inconceivable! But, it happened. Showing God’s care for our stomachs, as well as our souls. It showed that he also provides in huge abundance, not

just “what we need”. Everyone had their fill and there were twelve baskets left over!!! Amazing.

But the thing I noticed was what happened afterward.

Though Jesus had made no attempt to bring attention to himself or his healings or his teachings or anything of the sort, that is what the crowd wanted to do. They did not see a loving God caring for and providing for them, they saw a marketing opportunity. And they jumped on it. Probably almost literally.

Jesus noticed that they were ready to “take him by force”. What in the world??! What would possess them to do such a thing? This great teacher who was so gentle and understanding to even the most down and out soul in the crowd, and they felt they needed to use coercive force to make him see things their way?

Crazy. But, we are definitely a little crazy.

They knew Jesus was a “sure thing”, so they were willing to do whatever they could — maybe even *whatever it takes* — to promote him to the masses. To take him to the next level.

Problem is, he wanted no part of that. None. He left quick when he caught wind of their little scheme.

What was so wrong with it? If someone in the crowd had the power or connections to take him to the next level, why would he not want that? And this was not an isolated event. There is another time or two where the crowd wanted to “make him king” and he quietly slipped away. Why would Jesus not want such a position?

Only thing I can think is the timing, or the motivation.

Recently, a friend of ours had a great idea. She is a linguist, and offered to translate a great book into Spanish. The response she got puzzled me a bit. The author replied, “You should check to see if this is something God is leading you to do, or just a good idea you have.” I wasn’t sure what to think of that. I understand on the surface, and know that it’s great to make sure God is leading, but, who’s to say the

great idea was not from God?

So, after wrestling with that a bit, I found myself having a different great idea for that same author. He is now an acquaintance of ours, and just a great, smart guy. I have some expertise in the web design and even audio avenues, and I might be able to take him to the next level. And while I was making these grandiose plans for him, I was stopped by the thought of what he had told my friend.

“Is this from God or just a good idea you have?”

I do not know our author friend's reasoning behind that question, but when I applied it to my situation, I thought of Jesus escaping the well-intentioned (I think?) crowds who wanted to make him king. Perhaps that was my motivation? Maybe I was trying to make my friend king?

It reminded me of something I had written recently regarding our strange desire to constantly build bigger and better. Not sure the full ramifications of these ideas, but they appear to be linked, and also to not be completely in synch with the heart of God. God destroyed the Babel tower, and Jesus left quick when they tried to make him king.

What is God's aversion to our plans? Why do our attempts to climb the ladder of success make him cringe? I am very sorry, but I do not have an answer. I am intrigued by the thoughts God has been leading me to, but I still need some wisdom from him.

Until then, I will continue to listen for his voice, and follow his leading in my life. If he asks me to do something big and crazy, then I know it will be great. If I have a great idea, I want to make sure it is his leading, and not just my own crazy idea. It will never work if that's the case.

What an awesome thing to know that he will lead. That we can listen for his voice and know that the outcome will be great. I am learning that it's easier than I think. I have always thought that silence meant I was not good at hearing his voice. I think I am learning that sometimes God does not speak. Sometimes he just wants us to wait, and trust. When he speaks, I have always known it. It's in the silent times that I get restless, and wonder where he is leading.

I will continue to seek his guidance, and I am going to try and rest in his answer, or his silence. I love him, and I know he loves me. So, when my ideas are met with apparent silence, I will wait for his better timing or ideas. I will not try to take him by force and make him king. Nor anyone or anything else that I might feel the urge to increase the scope of their influence.

He doesn't really need my help with that.

If You Build It...

July 5th, 2005

How long does our stuff last? Just a thought before I hit the hay tonight.

How long did that fire for studying the Bible with God in the mornings last? How long did you keep praying for those missionaries every day? How long could you keep doing the good you wanted to do, or not doing the bad you didn't want to do?

In our personal lives, fires come and go. The passion ignites, and for a time drives our desire to build something good. To do something with our lives.

At times, that translates to something outside of ourselves. Sometimes we have a good idea, and we run with it. Say perhaps a Bible study with friends. Every Wednesday night. We gather, we read, we study, we share, we can't wait till next week. And then, after several good weeks, something else comes up and one person can't make it, but the meeting goes pretty well. Then, after a few more absences, and an unspoken restlessness — like something's not quite right, something has "changed" — eventually, the whole thing just falls apart.

This happens with most everything we try to put together. I play basketball with some guys on Wednesday mornings. Started out with me and another friend on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We were there each of those days. Every week. But, that changed to Thursdays. In the meantime I added Wednesdays with some other guys. Last year, that was *great!* We were there all the time. Playing hard. This year? I have been at the gym by myself on quite a few Wednesday mornings. Sometimes the other guys just don't show up, sometimes they are busy elsewhere. Not really an issue, just a furtherance of my point.

If you build it... it will fall apart.

Whether it's a basketball schedule, a Bible study, a small group, a church, a program, a sports league, an annual convention... eventually, it will die. Some things main-

tain their existence a bit longer, but is it really worth it for the church of ten people to continue to expend time and money to maintain a building to meet in every Sunday? Is it really necessary to get a preacher to speak to them every week?

You see, for some reason we don't understand that things are for a time. Solomon spoke of this in Ecclesiastes. "To everything there is a season..." It's true. And the grand orchestra conductor is not me. Nor you. It is our Father who guides and directs all things in perfect harmony. Perfect unison. He knows what is next, and for how long.

I feel like I am in a different chapter of life right now. I don't think that I was building something that crumbled. I think God is changing our circumstances for a new chapter. The old is not thrown away, but built on. The new is still not my idea, but something that He is leading, and providing.

I am not trying to make universal statements of truth tonight, just observations.

When we build it, it will usually — perhaps even *always* — fail. But, on the contrary, when *He* builds it, it is beautiful and freeing and life-giving, and succeeds wildly (even if only for you).

And then we move on.

Life changes. He does not. Help me God to not place my trust in the things I build, but to watch and follow you as you build into and around me the things that you want to.

Evangelists

August 22nd, 2005

I have noticed recently that some in the corporate world have taken to calling their sales reps “Evangelists”. At first I chuckled at this idea, thinking it was rather appropriate. The first thoughts that come to mind when you think of an evangelist paint someone who is passionate about the product they are selling, who love talking to people about it, and even structure their entire lives around propagating their product to the masses in any way they can imagine. Evangelists are typically associated with Christianity, as over the years, Christians have sent out folks (or just hired some to come and speak at their weekly gatherings) to preach the good news, the Gospel (which in Greek, the language of the New Testament, is *Evangelion*). Just like any useful product, a well-satisfied customer is often the best person and most likely to pass it on to the masses.

Well see... the problem is... the Gospel is not a product.

The term was interesting, and applicable to corporate sales, only because for so long, *we Christians* have gotten it wrong. We are not peddling a product, or a service, or anything remotely tangible. We have appeared as though that has been the case. We have presented life with Jesus as Twelve Steps To A Great Life. But, that's not what the Kingdom is all about.

Life with Jesus is just that. Life. You can't package it up. You can't lay out the perfect plan to follow so that you can have it. You can't sell it, promote it, market it, label it, franchise it, brand it, advertise or really even pass it along. Just like I can't pass along the relationship I have with Jen to anyone else, I can't do that with Jesus. He and I have a unique relationship that you can't have with him. Sorry... but it's true. He wants a better one than that with you. If you try to do life with him the way I do, it probably won't work. It might for a while, but you're just living a copy. He knows every intimate detail about you, and wants to relate to you

personally and intimately. Sharing every bit of life with you, not just a few moments here and there, and a special dress-up occasion on weekends.

I know those words sound harsh, but at times it's just so frustrating to me. We have messed it up so much that people in the business world think that they should call themselves evangelists. They sell a product. They offer a service. And, from all appearances, so do Christians. And, with zealous conviction, they keep pounding people until they convert. Until they buy in to The Product. And what we end up with then are usually CEOs running boards of directors who maintain an ever growing enterprise moving ahead with five and ten year goals and all sorts of quantifiable results and charts and stats on where they are successful, and where they are not.

How sad. How off the mark.

The kingdom is not quantifiable. It's not measurable or knowable in that way. The kingdom is so much more. So different. But the plain truth is, we're not peddling a commodity. We are living in the reality of life in Jesus. Real life, not something we make up and re-package every few years or so. Real life with ups and downs. Real life with a real God.

You can't put him in a bottle, or a box. And when we try, we only look foolish.

Or, like corporate America.

See, today we offer people a one-step salvation. You hear the good news (the Gospel, the Evangelion) and you receive it, and then you take possession of eternal life. It's a product that's for sale, for free. (Mostly free... usually at that point, you need to connect with some organization and give a lot of your personal resources to that organization's efforts). But after that exchange (the offer, you accepting, and then you possessing) it's over. You're good. On to the next client.

Jesus didn't work that way with people. He spent a good deal of time with the same people, teaching them about the Kingdom by living life with them everyday. A very

different model from what we are accustomed to. I think the evangelists early on might have done a similar model. They made disciples (Matthew 28) by spending time with people, helping them see God's Kingdom and learn to walk the rest of their life with him — a relationship with the Creator.

If you consider yourself an evangelist, please think about how you are presenting yourself, and your message. Are you offering a product, a neat set of ideas, beliefs and behaviors that can be reproduced and passed on to the next person... or are you living life with a real God, and allowing his life in you to spill over to other people, so they can experience him in a fresh, personal, and real way just as you have?

I'll take the latter.

Relationship

July 14th, 2005

I was listening to an audio recording the other day called “Introduction to Relational Christianity”. The title seemed cool as God has been moving both Jen and me to a deeper understanding of his church as a family, made up of organic relationships, not a place or time or meeting or any sort of infrastructure. So I listened, and heard a bunch of stuff I agreed with, and some things I had already been thinking of, and even some stuff that I hadn’t thought of. It was all good stuff.

And then I finally heard it. I think I have been missing this, even though as I type this right now I am chuckling at the thought that I could have possibly thought anything else.

Relational Christianity is all about relationships... with God.

Now, you might be saying, “Duh!” But, let me explain. I think how I have been missing that is that for a long time, I have been on the side of “the church” that does all the programming, that puts on the stage presentation, that plans the meetings, talks details, money, staff and volunteer numbers, and reports on people’s lives as though it was the daily Stock Market watch. Not that this is necessarily bad, just feels to us like the wrong focus, and at least in our case — it is.

So, my natural inclination of late has been to avoid all things structured as far as life with other believers and just try to live daily life with the people God has placed around me. I have a special connection with the believers whom he has placed in my life, we are on the same journey. And the others are not the target of my evangelistic cross-hairs... they are people just like me, who will know the love of our Father through my life shared with them in whatever ways God allows. I don’t need to try to get them to “go to church” (which, by definition, is not actually possible) — I just need to share the love I have been given. In whatever ways mani-

fest themselves each day, each moment.

So, as you might understand with me, I have been focusing on the relationships we have with *each other* rather than the key to the whole thing.

When I heard it, I just kinda laughed at myself. For perhaps my whole life, but definitely for the past fifteen years or so, I have understood that Christianity is a relationship and not a religion. I know the Creator. He is my friend. I understand that. I don't need to say any incantations, or do any dances, or offer any sacrifices — I have direct access to him through Jesus' death on the cross. That was a magical moment in history, where God created a direct, high-speed connection between each of us and himself. (And there are no faulty lines!) So, I know that. And have for a while. And that is the core of who I am.

But, I have been trying to live out "church" in a relational model, focusing on making relationships with other believers work rather than just living my everyday relationship with Jesus. Everyday, I get to do everything with someone who listens to me, knows me, and wants to be there with me. Every day. Every place. Crazy.

So as I draw closer to him (just by spending time with him, by doing life with him) I will begin to experience "relational Christianity". Even cooler than that realization is, I already *am!* This is what I do! So, I have been recently longing for something I already have!

That is too funny.

I am still trying to understand ways to relate to people who are living in the system we have created and called the church. Friends and family who live out their relationship with God through various meetings and schedules and regular practices. None of those are bad in themselves, but they are for me... (perhaps like Romans 14, the meat offered to idols?) and so I am still trying to sort through all of this stuff and just live in the freedom of relationship with my Father.

I hope you are too. I hope you are not doing dances for him, or anything that is empty ritual. Rituals don't have

to be empty, but they can often deteriorate to that. Where the practice takes the place of the relationship. God is real, and living, and though he is “the same yesterday, today and forever” he remains a dynamic individual, who wants to walk with us in the garden again. The veil has been removed (when Jesus died on the cross) and we have unrestricted access to him. I hope you are experiencing that today.

Relational Christianity is all about Relationship. With God the Father through Jesus our brother and Holy Spirit who lives in us.

I hope you know how insanely lucky we are.

Substitutes

May 14th, 2005

I am not certain if he still is, but at one point my father-in-law was on a diet. His cholesterol was higher than his doctor wanted, and so he was directed to make changes to his diet. I remember lots of funny stories of the stuff he was eating then instead of what he used to enjoy. But the one thing I remember most was that the new items did not measure up. There was the light mayo, not even a close facsimile according to his frequent commentary on what it reminded him of. And the reports of what light salad dressing felt like in his mouth were not exactly ringing endorsements. There was not much about the substitutes that my father-in-law could recommend.

Substitutes are just that. They are a second-rate, fill-in, use-'em-if-ya-hafta replacements for the real deal. They do not measure up, though they may purport to do so. They are only a copy of the genuine artifact.

Yet so often, we are captivated by them.

Generally, we can steer clear of the diet colas, and the sugar-free ice cream, and the generic brands of everything under the sun that offer us the slogan, "Compares to..." but often doesn't come through on its claim. But there are many other substitutes that would have our attention diverted from the real thing.

Sin, in its simplest form perhaps, is a substitute. We can see that. Lust, adultery, pornography, and other sexual deviancy are a substitute for the intimacy God intended between a husband and a wife. It is even symbolic of our intimate relationship with him. We are the bride, he the groom. So any substitute for that diminishes the reality of his closeness and relationship with us. Stealing is a substitute for trusting God's provision. You can sure load up on the good stuff just by taking what you want — especially since God won't give it to you.

On down the line we see many others. Lying is a substitute for truthfulness, damaging the openness and trust

in relationships. Slander is perhaps a substitute for feelings of inadequacy in our own life, our own worth. Slander tears down others to where we feel we are. If you look at any “obvious” sin, we can see that it is a substitute for something far greater that God intended for us.

But how about the good stuff? Can the good things God has given us be a substitute for the better? How about the good things we do for him? I once heard a phrase that was reminding the listener to not settle for “good”, when there’s “better”. But we do.

We love the blessings he has given. We love the house, the toys, the money, the friends, the family, the job, the skills. We love all of those things, and each of them or even all of them together can end up stealing the “better” from us.

Love of our stuff can get us so focused on its ability to please and protect and provide for us that we miss the reality of God’s care and provision for us. Jesus said don’t store up treasure where it rots, but store it up in the eternal things. Things that can’t be taken away. Things that matter. Things that are “better”.

I love food! I love to make it, I love to eat it, I love to share it. If I had endless resources, I believe food would become a substitute for at least my relationship with people, and maybe even with God. Maybe even a substitute for life?!

I do like food....

Sometimes you can get so wrapped up in your job that you have no time for family, or for God. Sometimes you can swing the other way and pour yourself into your family, only to find that they will fail you. In some way, they will fail you.

I love my wife. She is the person I adore the most. We have been friends for more than half of my life now. I have always respected her and loved to hear what she has to say. I am not always good at living that out, or showing that to her. But, I do. I have seen in her that she feels the same way about me. I know she loves me, and has shown

me over the years that this is true. But sometimes there are rocky moments in our relationship. At times I find myself craving her love and approval even more than I do from my Father. I work hard to restore our relationship, perhaps partly motivated by a desire to have a substitute in place of the real thing. My true value is not in what another Creation thinks of me, but what my Creator has already proven he thinks of me. Sometimes even my relationship with my wife can be a substitute for a deeper relationship with the One who formed me.

You see, even the greatest of gifts from our Father — the ones that we should cherish and enjoy — can become substitutes for what he truly created us to be. Everything was made through him, and by him, and for him (Colossians 1:16). That includes me. I was made for him. Scripture also says that I am not my own, that I was bought at a price. That does not imply slavery, as some think. God also assures us that we are no longer servants, but friends (John 15:15, Romans 5:1-10). But it does imply that I have a purpose. God made me for a reason. And I should accept no substitutes.

Sometimes our substitutes can even take the form of a “relationship” with Him. Such a nebulous, indefinable thing, a relationship with an invisible God. How do you live that out except to begin a pattern of things that act as a “substitute” for a relationship... in a good way? Doesn't prayer and quiet time foster a relationship with Father? Doesn't serving him in my church, and spending time with other believers — serving him by serving them — doesn't that strengthen my relationship with Him? Yes! Of course it does! He wants us to spend time with him, and to know him, and to serve him by serving others. Those things can of course take on a variety of forms, but all are very good things that draw us closer to him.

For a while. And then, the things that drew us close, begin to draw us apart. Not noticeably, or intentionally. Not at all. But ever so slowly, the form which led in the end to a relationship with our Father begins to become the end in itself. It changes from being a means to the end, to being

the end. The routine sets in, and we end up serving, and reading, and praying and even sitting quietly “with him” just to do all of those things instead of in order to be with him. Unknowingly a slight adjustment happens and the form becomes a substitute for the real thing.

Sometimes it seems to me that we have made what we call church to be that. We have worship times, and service projects, and this group and that group, and retreats, and weekend events, and social gatherings, and classes, and series of lessons, and training seminars, and this ministry and that. We have programs and plans and goals and visions and all kinds of things that cleverly and skillfully draw us closer to the heart of God. We hire the best people. We build large buildings that are perfectly designed to usher people straight to the Throne of God. We seek his blessing on our endeavors and put him at the focus of all we do.

And, I truly believe that is our motivation. We love him! We so want to give back to him and to share him with everyone we possibly can! But what I have seen happen too often is that we are not bringing people to a full and open, one-to-one relationship with their loving Father. Rather, we are bringing them to a structure whereby they may know more about that relationship, and tell others as well. Perhaps, by all of our great effort to know Him and to help others to do the same, we have created the ultimate substitute?

A substitute is no more than that. It is an inferior replacement for the intended reality. I have metal in my mouth where teeth were supposed to be. My wife wears glasses to correct for what her eyes are supposed to do. Sometimes I even watch Arena Football, when I was clearly meant to watch only the *real* stuff.

It's easy when it's diet cola, or light mayo. We know those aren't real, and they aren't the “better”. My father-in-law will certainly attest to that! Sometimes we do begrudgingly have to accept those. But it's much harder when we lapse unknowingly into a substitute that by all appearances seems like the real thing. Over the course of time, though,

There's The Steeple... Here's The Church

it has become a substitute for the true fullness of life as the one whom God has chosen to direct all of his love toward. The one whom he has invited to walk alongside for eternity. The one for whom he laid down his life.

There is definitely no substitute for reality.

Focus

April 10th, 2005

We are off this weekend — not singing anywhere — and even have a break from the kids, while they are with Grandma. So, sometimes when a free weekend presents itself, we will enjoy the quietness and solitude of home when we would otherwise be “working” on a weekend, leading worship in various locations. Today, though we both really wanted to join our friends at Cross Creek Church in Palmyra. When we heard songs that they often do playing on our iPod, we thought of them. We thought of how long it has been since we have seen many of them, since outside of Cross Creek, our lives do not connect. We just had a longing to be there.

So, thanks to a last minute phone call with a friend this morning where we were reminded of the new meeting times, we made it! And it was great to see everyone! It had been a long time, but we got a sentence or two in with most of the folks we know. At least a handshake and a genuine, “Hello.” It was wonderful.

As I was preparing for that this morning, looking forward to seeing everyone, I remembered a brief conversation with a pastor friend of ours. We were talking about how I personally get the most out of any times where I get to connect with friends, other believers who are there for the morning meeting. We catch up on life, what God has been or is doing in their life. How the family is doing, what’s new... all of that sort of stuff. A real connection that seems hard in between the scheduled goings on, and is impossible as I sit quietly on my duff placing my attention on the happenings in the front of the room.

When I mentioned that was what meant the most to me, he quipped with a sarcastic smile, “Why don’t you just go join the moose lodge?!” He was not telling me I should leave, just revealing the focus that he places on our large group gatherings. They are the time we come to learn, to “worship”, and to focus on God — not each other. It’s a vital

piece that we do it together, as the family of God, but it's not the focus.

That is where I beg to differ. I think that "worship" is not a time or a place (as Jesus told the Samaritan woman in John 4) but something we do with every breath. (A popular song uses just those words, "With ev'ry breath I'm praising you...") So my main reason for going to a large group gathering of believers then is not to worship, since that is something I do every day, all the time, anywhere.

But what about the teaching? Surely that is a reason to attend such a gathering? Absolutely! While I do not deny that so much can be learned from the great teachers who can present clear and understandable truths about the Kingdom from their study and their experience and walk with God, that still is not my main focus for attending such a meeting. Again, I submit that throughout the remainder of each week, my mind and heart are filled with great thinkers' thoughts on the Kingdom be they in books, web pages, MP3s, radio programs... what have you. There is such a wealth of great teaching available to anyone and everyone today that the Sunday morning gathering is certainly not my primary source of such teaching. And, aside from all of the "expert" teaching we receive from the so-called "professionals", I enjoy learning from my neighbors, the way they interact with my Father. I enjoy listening to God's voice through the experiences of friends who may not think themselves teachers, but by sharing their lives with me take on that very role in my life.

So again, at least for me, the reason for attending such a meeting is not to worship — that happens all week long, all the time — nor is it to "be fed" as we like to call it. It is not for the teaching, as again, there is no shortage of that in my life.

Is it perhaps the specialness of the place? No. I mentioned that already, too. Jesus said that worship is not a located thing. There is no place we can go to be closer to him as he now resides in us. In us! We are the temple of the Holy Spirit! That is too deep to go into here. Perhaps

another time.

So that leaves me with... the other believers! The reason that I want to attend such a meeting has nothing to do with anything that is planned. Though that is always nice — and helpful — I could get that anywhere. The reason for me is to connect with other believers — especially ones I would not otherwise connect with. To share some piece of our current journey together. To feel and see the bigness of God's family. So much larger than me. So much larger than my small group of friends. He is real and central in so many lives other than my own. And I love to know Him through them.

Unfortunately, if this is the main reason for Christians gathering in large groups, you'd never know it. The focus certainly seems to be on the events planned for that day. Even today, I was told when to stand, when to sit, and what would be happening next. Nothing out of the ordinary. That's what we do. But, if the greatest thing we have as we gather is each other, it does not seem like that element is being emphasized or facilitated in any way, does it? Do we make that a priority in our gatherings?

Some churches do this well. While maintaining a priority on the up-front events, they carve out a decent amount of time for people-connecting. Cross Creek is one such group. There is a time in the middle to get some coffee and just say hello to everyone. Theirs lasts perhaps 5-6 minutes. There has been a church or two along our path who has taken as much as 15 minutes for such an event. That's great! But again, usually it is much less than 10% of the time we are together. Usually *much* less. Often there is a bit more time in the parking lot, or the lobby after the scheduled portion of the meeting is over, but too frequently, everyone has other things they need to get on to.

Please do not think I fault only those responsible for planning the church gatherings. I do not presume that they have so much influence over an entire culture. Certainly a good portion of the blame for a misplaced focus rests on those who "attend" these meetings. Arriving late (due to

rousing and preparing a family of small children at such a time of the day, no doubt...) and getting everyone to their respective rooms, entering the main room just in time to sing the last song with everyone. Then sitting through the remaining portion of the show, taking notes and attempting to hear God's truth for their personal life packed into about 45 minutes of one hour. As it's over, the rush to pick up the kids ensues. After collecting them all, their tiredness, and crankiness overtakes your desire to connect with other believers, and you rush out the door to get home, or to do whatever else might be planned before you can go home.

Life these days is certainly a rush. That's why we try and pack so much into a "worship service". We "only have an hour a week to reach them". That is the mentality in some circles. At least from the leadership position. Perhaps there is an equally sad mentality from the seats. "You only have one hour to reach me, God... so say something meaningful... and quick!"

So while we go expecting to give to God, and him to us, we miss the joy of community. We miss perhaps the greatest part of "the church". Not the building, the time, the meeting, or the organization. The people whom God has called to himself. From out of the world, into His Kingdom. The Believers. The Saints. The Called Out Ones. His Church.

Acts 4:32

*All the believers were of one heart and mind,
and they felt that what they owned was not
their own; they shared everything they had.*

Everything was about the oneness. Everything was about the togetherness. They loved being together. They shared everything. All the time. Acts 2 says they even went to the temple everyday to worship (as was their custom). They ate together, prayed together, shared meals together... even shared money. Life was about being together. And why not? The rest of the world hated them. The persecu-

tion was on a level that we can not comprehend in 21st century America. We have not, and perhaps will not experience such hardship. So to join together was an oasis in the desert. It was the living water of Jesus — his very body — together as one. How could they come together but once a week and then only to sit and listen to a presentation, with minimal participation, organized and performed by a select few? Where was the sharing of everything there?

No. Their focus was not on the schedule of a planned meeting. It was on each other. On their joys, on their hardships. On their shared journey with an amazing Father. That is where I find joy — even in as little time as is allotted for such — that is where I find joy when gathering with other believers.

Perhaps that is just me being the way God made me? Or, perhaps our focus is slightly shifted. What if we re-focused? What if our gatherings were not as much about the individual and God, but more about his children encouraging and exhorting each other? Wouldn't that be as much (or more?) worship than listening to a carefully and wonderfully crafted hour of events?

Well, at least that's how it looks through my lens.

Superior

July 25th, 2005

Sometimes, whatever “truth” God is teaching us at the moment can be a super dangerous weapon, revealing itself in our attitude toward other people. Knowledge can “puff up” as the Bible says, and boy is that true. Even when we don’t try, if we learn something it tends to make us (involuntarily) “look down” on people who think differently. Or, at least we can come across this way.

I thought of this as I was pondering how I might come across to some people as “aloof”. Perhaps as God continues to reveal to me a “better” way for me to live with him daily, I can present that truth in a way that makes people feel like I am condemning their way of doing things. Now, obviously there is a place for confrontation, and perhaps even condemnation. Jesus did plenty of condemning of the self-righteous Pharisees who proudly touted their righteousness, that was only a front anyway. But I think for the most part, God wants to reveal truth to people in a more loving way than a confrontation, or a superior, my-way-is-better attitude.

All of this has just made me reconsider the way that I carry myself, especially around other believers. I love to share the things God is teaching me, but I am asking him to show me how to do so in a way that makes people excited about their own relationship with their loving Father. I know he can, and I look forward to him working that in me over the next days, weeks, years... decades?

Sometimes, I can be a bit slow...

I write this to encourage you. There are some great things that God has revealed about himself to you. Some ways you know him differently than I do. He wants you to live in those and share those with others. But somehow, the mindset of superiority that can creep in must be constantly replaced by a love for him and his children that surpasses that. If you have any stories to share about how he has worked something like that in and through you, stop by my

website and leave me a comment or e-mail! I would love to hear some stories of how God is working in your life and how he has revealed himself to you!

Information Exchange

June 5th, 2005

I learned a lot this weekend. I think that was the goal, but it seemed like the stuff I was learning would have been considered peripheral. To me, it seemed important.

BOOKS

You may or may not know that I love books. Love them. We have quite a collection here in our house. All kinds of books, beautifully displayed on bookcases and shelves made by my Dad. We love the library, where we get books on loan for two to six weeks. We love library sales, and book sales even more! Fun! *Bags* of books for only a dollar or two! Wow!

Well one thing you can find at conventions is books! Rows and rows of them. All at discounts up to 90% off! Quite a deal! That was definitely a fun part of the weekend, but as we browsed, the line from Ecclesiastes coursed through my brain...

...Of making many books there is no end...

Ecc 12:12

Solomon realized that everyone has something to say, and always will. There will never be a book drought. And I think his revelation was fresh in my mind this weekend as I saw the vast array of commentaries on a vast array of subjects. The part that seemed especially interesting to me was seeing books by the same title, aimed at a different segment of the population. One book was released multiple times for different audiences: Men, Young Men, Your Sons, and perhaps more, though that's all I can remember. We are very good at marketing, are we not?

As I thumbed through a few books, I just kept having the sensation that all this was meaningless — almost as the writer of Ecclesiastes did. All of this was very interesting to

me, as I had a refreshing of my deep passion for writing earlier this week. What a strange balance! I love to write, and only long to do that... and yet I was seeing the futility of releasing my written thoughts into the massive sea of already written commentaries. Is it just adding to the noise?

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

Another thing that I love to do is sit and listen to someone who has a lot of experience or knowledge in a field in which I have some interest. I love to watch documentaries on the History Channel, National Geographic, all those. And again, this is something that conventions provide in abundance.

But this was another realization moment for me.

As we were listening to a speaker share from her heart some of the things that God had taught her, I realized that our western ways of information exchange are sorely lacking. I loved listening to what God had done in her life, but that is where it stopped. And, due to the layout of the room, and how the information was being presented, I am led to believe that is where it should stop. We are the pupils, she was the instructor. We present experiences as truths that should be applied to every person in every place at every time. Not on purpose, I don't think. I believe that is an inherent shortcoming of the one speaker to an audience setting.

There are a couple reasons it did not work. First, the subject matter. We have tried for centuries to learn from the life experiences of other Christians (famous speakers, authors, and mostly our pastors who share their thoughts on life with God from their pulpits weekly). And listening to the wisdom and experiences of fellow believers is invaluable! But it is in the application of these ideas that we falter. We attempt to sketch them out just as they have been presented and lay them perfectly on top of our lives so as to gain the same blessing that the speaker has in their life. This does not always work because our Father is so personal.

He has made each of us — *every one of us* — unique. Completely unique. And so, his interaction with each of us is... unique. What works for one person in their walk with God may work for someone else, but probably won't. So what we end up doing is feeling a strange sense of guilt because what the smart and "successful" speaker said is not working for me. Must mean I am a bad Christian! *No!* We're not supposed to live the lives that others have lived. We are meant to live with our Creator. Each step and each breath. Every move we make we make in him. We have one shepherd — Jesus. We are to heed his call, and follow his ways, and be like *him*. We can learn from our brothers and sisters in God's family, but we should not assume that the way God chose to reveal himself to them, or work in their lives will also produce the same results in ours. They will not.

So we have this "expert" presenting ideas, while the masses listen and absorb, and prepare to put into action. As I sat there absorbing, I thought, "I wish I could interact!" I just wanted it to be me and Jen and the speaker, and perhaps 5 or 6 other people. To learn from what she had experienced, and at the same time interject thoughts, ideas, and questions from my journey. To encourage her, and to widen the picture of who God is and how He works in our lives.

Isn't that how we are made to function as the body? Sharing our knowledge and experience and wisdom with one another? "One Another-ing?" But we have this classroom structure to all of our information exchanges. We feel like more can be said if one person who has prepared their thoughts is speaking and the rest are listening. Couldn't we gain even more if we all shared what we each were learning from Father, and didn't try to give everyone else a pattern for catching God's blessings? Instead, couldn't we help them know him more through our lives lived together with him?

Seems like that's mostly what Jesus did. He spoke to large groups, but that was only a fraction of his teaching time. Most of his time was spent living life with his twelve disciples. He explained truths more deeply to them. To the masses he spoke in parables. Jesus was much more con-

cerned with loving people and touching their lives personally. A much more intimate information exchange.

Although I love to write books, and some may take any book I write that seems authoritative and try to lay the outline of it on top of their lives, and expect God to act in the same ways, such will not ever be my intent. I know God is much too vast for me to contain in any book. No matter how thorough.

So I will continue to write, and share truth with the masses, as there is value in that. But I will long for the information exchange between a handful of people learning from each other, relationally.

Wouldn't that be great?

¿Saber, Ó Conocer?

August 23rd, 2005

Following up on the last chapter, *Information Exchange*, I have noticed that it seems everywhere I look, the more noble goal, the thing to most strive for in life is knowledge. We paint scientists and teachers and other fact-based professions as the most honorable, and wisest professions. And then there is our obsession with experts. As a society, we would much sooner trust a person who spent decades of their life in a classroom, than we would a person who has been a close friend for years.

Knowledge reigns supreme.

And we see this even in the church. The place where the wisdom of the world should have no hold, but in fact it does. Our entire concept of church is much more like a university than a family. In my opinion, this should not be. The church is not an educational institution. Jesus did not set up 90-minute classes offered Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings in the Temple courts. He didn't establish the School of Jesus, or Nazareth Christian Academy. He just loved people, and revealed truth about life through stories, and through life lived with a few close friends. You'd think if knowledge were indeed supreme, Jesus might have been more intentional about it.

Now, even a quick study of the book of Proverbs, and the Psalms, and even Ecclesiastes and Job (we call them the books of Wisdom) shows how much emphasis the people of God and God himself placed on knowledge. When you read those books, and the verses that specifically mention knowledge, it's quite evident that knowledge is supreme over all else. It is better than the choicest gold, it will deliver the righteous, and knowledge and understanding come straight from the mouth of God. So, it's quite obvious that God places a premium on knowledge.

But as I continued to read, one scripture after another about knowledge, something struck me. I have grown up in this culture, and so I first think of knowledge as the stuff

of trivia — life deconstructed into lifeless fact and ingested and regurgitated by rows of mindless sponges soaking up so called “knowledge”. We have cheapened knowledge into what in Spanish is called Saber. (Yes, I know, that’s the verb...)

You see, in Spanish, there are two words for the verb, “To know.” (From whence cometh the noun, “Knowledge”.) The word saber means to know stuff. It means I know that my name is Greg. I know that I have three kids. I know that I live in Palmyra, NY. Yo sé. I have learned and can repeat to you those factoids.

The other word would also be translated “to know” but has an entirely different meaning, and a different use. Conocer means to know, and it is more intimate. It is how I know Jen, or my kids, or anything with which I am very familiar, especially people. Yo conozco a mi hijo, Ian. I know my son Ian.

In English, the word looks the same. I know the Bills won this weekend. I know my son, Ian. But in Spanish, if I said, “Yo conozco a mi hijo, Ian” and then said, “Yo sé mi hijo Ian” — using two words that could both be translated “to know”, I would end up saying very different things. The former would convey an familiarity with Ian, that I know him personally and intimately, that we have shared life together. The latter would be more correctly translated, “I know of my son, Ian.” It is detached, informational, intellectual knowledge. Personless. Lifeless.

And that’s exactly what we have sometimes. We have switched the words and forgotten to check the meaning. When we see that we need to strive for knowledge — when we understand that knowledge is the commodity we must seek — we are thinking the kind of knowledge that is taught in classrooms. So, we set up lectures and series of lessons, and we create study guides and study Bibles and study groups, and all sorts of tools to fill our minds with the “knowledge of God.” But Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians:

There's The Steeple... Here's The Church

“Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.”

1 Corinthians 8:1

And later, in 1 Timothy, he states:

“[avoid] worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’”

1 Timothy 6:20

Paul knew that there were different kinds of knowledge. One that builds up and should be sought after, and one that isn't even knowledge at all, and only serves to build up the ego of the person who possesses it.

Consider what Jesus said to a group of people who loved to learn about God and took pride in their knowledge of Him.

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.”

John 5:39-40

Jesus points out to these guys that even though they pour through the Scriptures, and read all about the One who is life, they refuse to actually come to *Him* for real life. They are satisfied with “saber” God rather than “conocer” God. I happen to give them more credit than we usually do in Christian circles. It's too easy to think of the Pharisees as ugly, grumpy old men who always walked around with a sneer on their faces, pointing and laughing at people for their spiritual inadequacies. I think they were mostly trying, but just did not understand the truth Jesus was getting at.

Jesus said, in the verse I probably quote the most of any that I know — John 17:3 — that “eternal life is to know you, the One true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”. That's it. Not know *about* him, or to know all the stuff

he said or did, or even to know what he wants us to do. Eternal life *IS* to *KNOW GOD*. Conocer. Not saber.

Hosea said it like this:

*“For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice,
And in the knowledge of God rather than
burnt offerings.”*

Hosea 6:6

God doesn't want us to know about him. He wants us to know him, and to be like him. We can never achieve that on our own, but as we hang out with him, and get to know him, it will be a natural outcome of our relationship with him. As we know him more (again, not more *about* him) we will be transformed in his likeness.

At nearly every Christian wedding we hear the famous cadence of love from the thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians. Love is this, love is that, love is not this, love is not that. But at the beginning of the famous part, Paul says very simply that if we have knowledge, but don't have love, it's worthless. (1 Corinthians 13:2) We say the words, but don't heed their meaning.

I am not saying that all of our learning and information dissemination infrastructure is devoid of love. Obviously, the heart of most every Christian leader is to impart (*out of love*) the knowledge that they have gained of God's insane love for us. The motive is not in question, just the method of delivery.

Perhaps in all our desire to have “knowledge” we forgot that there are two ways to “know”.

We can know about God, or we can actually know God. We can spit back facts crammed into our head in late night fact ingestion sessions, or we can breathe the familiarity that comes from daily life with our Maker. The choice seems simple to me. You get to choose how you define knowledge. You can pick what you will strive for.

So what will it be? ¿Saber, ó Conocer?

The Masses

April 7th, 2005

Last night we were leading worship at a local church and had a great time! The band were all good friends of ours, and good musicians. The songs were fun. The mood was pretty light. The room was full of people we love. It was great!

After our song set, we went out around back to sneak in and listen to the message, stopping in the lobby for dinner along the way, of course. That is always a hit-or-miss kind of thing, so we did get delayed a bit as we conversed with the various folks in the lobby over food and a leisurely stroll back to the main meeting room.

Once we finally made it, we caught up with the speaker in the middle of his message, and as always, it was great! Packed full of truth from scriptures, and good insights into those. A major theme of the portion we were able to hear was that God is so for us. The infinite God of the universe. is not only for us, but he is with us. The fact that such a being would think of us at all, let alone favorably, is a life-changing truth. A truth that God has taught me over the past several years, and that I try to share with every opportunity I have.

What struck me about all of this is that in the middle of a setting that burdens my heart greatly (the polished presentation of all these things)... in the middle of that, there was deep, life changing truth. There always is. Though I am often saddened with how much effort we put into the actual *presentation* of the knowledge of God, at its core, there is life giving hope. We are offered an invitation to drink deeply of the daily life with our Creator, who no longer calls us servants, but calls us friends.

So what I realized again last night was that we just have this thing with efficiency. We figure this stuff is so good, we want to reach as many as possible. And so, with all our might, we plan and organize, and schedule and rehearse, and build and build and build these elaborate structures

(both edifices and programs) to attract as many as possible. We encourage all who attend to invite more people. We plan various outreach events to draw even more people. We tailor the events (including worship services) to be “accessible” to everyone, especially those who might just be “kicking the tires, checking under the hood” of this whole “church” thing. We work so hard to reach the masses, so as to tell as many people as possible in as little time as possible.

It’s not all about the first moment of hearing and understanding the truth. The structures go deeper than that. The goal is to get people connected on a regular basis. To disseminate truth through the vehicle of large group gatherings. Giving the most people the best chance to hear what God is saying to them.

It all seems to make sense. Even as I type it, I think, “Yeah. What’s wrong with that?” But last night, I heard a line or had a thought or something that reminded me that Jesus did not try hard to build a structure from within which he could reach the most people. He did not primarily hold public gatherings where he could speak to the most people at once. Jesus’ plan seemed to revolve around close friendships. Make disciples he told us. I have been told that a disciple is one who learns whatever they are learning, and then in turn they “learn” that to someone else.

Where I think we have missed a nugget of greatness that God intended for us is in this sharing of Kingdom things with our closest friends. This ownership of the truth by each member of God’s kingdom. It is the life-changing truth that we have experienced and that we know. Not by passing along a sermon tape (or CD, or even MP3 as the case may be), or even by bringing someone to a large group gathering. Just by sharing life over a cup of coffee. Over a lunch meeting. At the park while your kids play. On an afternoon walk. In the comfort of your homes. Out at a bowling alley. At the local McDonald’s®. Not only do we miss the joy of those situations when we pour all of our effort into the structures for the masses, I think we even limit our effectiveness? I don’t like to use that word, but perhaps it’s true? Might God

be able to work more mightily through three friends who care about each other, who in turn each have three other friends, who each have three other friends, who each have three other friends... on down the line till each person has a vital connection with someone vitally connected to the Life Giver?

Perhaps.

I wish that we would not focus on the end result so much. On the apparent successes of mass production. While good does come of it, I think we are missing the most important piece of being friends with God — sharing that friendship with his other friends. Directly. Not like watching a movie together, where we sit in the same row next to each other, as we learn about God. But directly sharing our lives, the daily learnings from God, the struggles, the successes, the hum drum and the magnificent.

That is the goal of our structures, but it seems to be missing as so much of our life and energy is poured into feeding the structure. Making it bigger and better, so as to reach more people.

Maybe we could be better spent?

The World of Pretend

April 7th, 2005

There is a new fad these days in the world of audio. MP3 players are all the rage, and specifically, the iPod has become iconic. Everyone has at least heard the term. In fact, a new form of “broadcasting” a radio program is to record it and post it to the internet as an MP3 that people can listen to on their MP3 players — like the iPod — so it is called a *podcast*. I am quite addicted to these. It’s radio, but on your schedule. The other day I was listening to one of these podcasts and a phrase caught my attention. The speaker was a former pastor who has stepped away from “the paid ministry” and is now feeling more free, and more helpful to people than ever before. He spoke of his new paradigm in life saying:

“It’s no longer practice... no longer pretend. It’s real!”

My head nodded emphatically in agreement.

For a while now I have noticed that the whole world of Christianity as I know it has some level of “pretend”. It is in a way, imaginary. We have so closely united our life with Jesus to all of the things we call “church”, that to leave behind any of the practices of christianity is to leave behind some piece of Christ himself. From Sunday school to Sunday pot-lucks. From Wednesday night prayer meetings to Sunday morning worship. From singing in the choir to going on a short-term mission trip. We can even go down to individual practices of praying before meals, or having morning quiet time. None of those things by themselves are bad in any way. When they become the heartbeat of our relationship with God, or even more, when they replace our relationship with him, then we have what I recently heard someone refer to as “Churchianity”. The religion of the church.

The church is not a bad thing. The church, as it was designed by God is us, the believers — his bride. Jesus loves the church. But the church as we define it can be any number of things, as I have mentioned before. Could be a

building, or the state registered non-profit organization that owns and meets in those buildings. It could be the hour that folks meet together on Sunday mornings. ("Come on Mertle! We're going to be late for church!")

But for so long having our focus on the structure for the masses we have created an entire world unto itself. The world of the church. The world of pretend. There are customs and behaviors indigenous to this place. The natives seem to know them, and occasionally, there are seminars to explain such customs. But often, they are simply learned through time. Newcomers slowly pick up the new behaviors and make them their own. As with any culture, there is also a native tongue. Travelers can understand most of what is spoken, but many terms are unfamiliar. The banter seems quite familiar to the natives, however. There is an unspoken dress code, a sense that some things are not to be done at some times. Very much like any other group of people, we have created a culture unto itself.

I think that's too bad. I think that is what the speaker I mentioned before was referring to. We create this world in which we can do and say and think all the right things, and live out a well-performed Christianity. Life was not meant to be lived in a bubble. "Hide it under a bushel --- NO! I'm gonna let it shine!" In the world of pretend that's supposed to mean that we wear Jesus T-shirts and always say "Praise the Lord!" and, "Hallelujah!" That's not what it means! Jesus is saying you have the light. The Light of The World is in us! Why would we coup him up in this building, or at these meetings, or only with other Lamps? Live life! Let the light shine before all men that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven!

I want to know my neighbors. I don't want people to see in me someone who is a faithful attendee of Christian meetings. I want them to see a life filled with hope, and Light. A caring neighbor who listens, and is available, not running to the next planned gathering, or rehearsal for said gathering. I want to know the folks I see in the grocery store, and have some connection with them there at that moment,

or from previous connectings. I want to be available as Jesus was available.

Some years ago, I really felt like all that mattered in my life was telling people about the reality of God. It is in our little slogan on our website, our business cards, all our basic gear... even our trailer. It says, "Real Life. Real God." Nothing has been more important to me than sharing the truth that God is real and is part of every bit of our lives. And so I gave up my pursuits of a career in journalism, to follow a leading from God and give my entire life and doings to him. That has led me down some incredible paths. I can't wait to see what is next! All of my life has been, and still is completely for him.

But perhaps my focus has been on the wrong thing. I have poured my life into doing things for him, working on staff with a couple different churches, planning all sorts of events to share this life God is sharing with me. Maybe I have just been feeding the world of pretend? Helping people to confine their Light to the refueling station of "the church". Perhaps.

Can you tell I am sorting through some things at the moment? I don't want you to go away from this post feeling at all negative or mad. If you are.... just forget everything I said. This is definitely something God and I are dealing with. If it sparks something in you, as the phrase at the top did in me, shoot me an e-mail.

Wherever you are in your journey with him, be there. Don't get your light from other Lamps. Live in the Light of *THE* Light. Let him live in you, and teach you, and lead you. He is our source. Not the church. Not any pastor. Not any teacher. *HE* is the Light. *HE* wants a relationship with *YOU*. Really.

For real.

Contrived

July 17th, 2005

It's summer camp season again! People are giving up entire weeks of vacation to go spend a week at a remote, wooded location. The accommodations can range from a bug-infested, poorly ventilated (not to mention poorly decorated) bunch of shacks, and what we politely refer to as "cabins", to the more upscale, crowded, with bare-minimum amenities, outdoor hotels. (There are some nice camps.) And each of these camps is teeming with young people who are eager to spend a week away from home with their good friends whom they see annually at these familiar stomping grounds. The campers usually outnumber the staff at least 4 or 5 to one and they know it. There are the typical games at mail call time, where the campers with the most mail are humiliated in some fashion, but for the most part completely enjoy it. And don't forget the "Ride The Broom Around The Room" frivolity.

Yes, camp is a joyous time of year. For some.

(There is a reason that we are not there...)

But camp got me thinking again about what sorts of things we do together as Christians. Yes, we have camp weeks as a fun place to get together, and get away from the routine. And yes, some people really do enjoy the silly camp games. But really, the people who love camp love the opportunity that they have with so many kids at once who are away from all their normal distractions, and can really focus on a well thought out, and well put together program that reminds them of some truth from Scripture. And, overall, the basic truth that God loves them, and offers them real life through Jesus. That is why people are so willing to endure camp.

And, that's a good thing. People's lives are definitely touched in deep and even magical ways at camp. Some people are changed forever. God works through summer camp. But, more often you hear of the campers who come home from an exhilarating week of God-life, thrilled to share

that touch from heaven with all their friends and family back home, only to find out the rest of their world is not so thrilled to be touched. They did not share the entire experience, and so are reticent to go along for the joy ride. Inevitably, this leads to the overjoyed camper gradually diminishing in excitement over the next few days, until within a week or two at most, they are back to the same distracted life without God that they had before the intense week of “Heaven on earth” provided by the Christian camp.

Why does this happen? Is it the lousy folks back home who need to get a clue? Perhaps if they could just go to camp, they would get it too? Maybe it’s the camper who didn’t have enough conviction or fortitude to outlast the onslaught of their family and peer groups upon their return to “the real world”? Maybe we just didn’t pray hard enough?

It really could be any one of those things. But, more likely I think it is because camp is not real life. This one week of intensely scheduled God life, neatly packaged with all the trimmings, is not the real world. We even call non-camp life “real life”. We are practically admitting that life at camp is all “pretend”. Who wants to live a life of pretend?

The word that came to mind was “contrived.” Listen to these definitions!

Deliberately created rather than arising naturally or spontaneously; giving a sense of artificiality.

Create or bring about (an object or a situation) by deliberate use of skill and artifice.

Whoa. That’s fairly condemning. But doesn’t that nail it? Isn’t that exactly what we are doing? And camp is just an intense version of what we do every week for our Sunday morning gatherings. We put together great music, and relevant, dynamic speakers, along with carefully matched messages through drama and song and we make sure it all fits to within sixty or seventy minutes. And we do all of this while managing to create a comfortable environment

in which to take it all in with minimal distraction. Even our weekly gatherings for “fellowship” are scripted. Just like the first definition, we leave no room for life to happen “naturally or spontaneously”.

Spontaneous does not by default negate any sort of planning. I don't think we should get the idea that if we plan anything it is automatically not helpful. That maybe if we lived spontaneously in the moment, things would be better. That's not really what that definition suggests.

Spontaneous does not give us any control. But it *is* alive. And if led by our Father, it is amazing! I love it when I have a thought of a friend, even someone I have not had in my thoughts for months, and I call them or stop by or email and find out that at that very moment, they could use a friend. God is so like that. He lives in the now. He knows the future, and exists in the forever past, but he lives in the now! It's exactly how Jesus did life. Spontaneously. He was always available for whoever was there.

And it was real. It connected. It was not contrived.

See, the most important thing is not that events or situations are not planned out, but just that they are not planned out *by us*. The beauty of living life following God's lead is though the moment may be “spontaneous” to you, it has been carefully crafted by our Father. “For I know the plans I have for you,” he says. If we trust his lead, and are available to follow, how much better would that be than something we have contrived, or planned? Contrived is much safer than spontaneous, but following our Shepherd's voice when he calls will lead to so much more than we could ever plan for.

People, please don't think I have everything figured out. I am just a fellow pilgrim traveler on this journey. Each day God reveals something wonderful about himself, or me, or his creation, and I get to live it with him and his people. As much as I am able I want to be available for him. If I fill my calendar with stuff to do *for* him, I can definitely miss that opportunity. Not that good things won't happen, I just miss *him*. He's bigger than my own plans and short-sightedness,

but I so want to catch him the first time.

It all comes back to how much we trust God. Everything does. How much can we trust him with the work of changing people's hearts? Can people know about his love for them without us making it easier for them? Don't we need to create an environment where they can more easily hear the truth that they so desperately need to hear?

Everything that we do as Christians definitely comes from a wonderful heart to share what we know with others. Often it is even motivated by deep love for them. Sometimes it is motivated by guilt or obligation, but that's a topic for another day. The motive behind such contrived moments is certainly a noble one.

But it is still contrived.

And the result, as can be expected, is an artificial one. One that lasts only for a time. Until the next week, when we are together again. Until the next year when we are together again at camp. Until the next God-fix. So many people say that is why they need to attend a weekly offering from a local group of Christians. It charges them up for the week. They need to refill.

How sad! Jesus offers us Living Water, where we will never thirst again. We have complete access to him *every day* and everywhere. All the time. Unhindered. Personal, private connection with our Father, through Jesus. And his Holy Spirit lives right in us, working in us to transform us by renewing our mind. How much we are missing when we rely on a weekly or yearly dose of God to keep us going. He offers us so much more.

But, we continue to produce Christians dependent on the contrived. Dependent on an artificial substitute for what they really need — a relationship with the real and present God. Instead, we offer them a neatly packaged version of him, complete with a script to take home with you.

I am not trying to belittle any individual or group of individuals. I speak as one who has done these very things. I was really good at it, actually. I could put together some pretty amazing programs. An hour or a weekend that would

flow together seamlessly, leading us all on an amazing journey of thoughts and emotions that revealed at just the right moments the heart of God for us. The truth that he has revealed in scripture, offered in a relevant, and easy to digest package. And it worked! People genuinely connected with the living God. For a moment. In that place. For a time.

It was contrived. It was pretend. When they left, it was over. Perhaps it lingered for even a day or two. But with no basis in reality, it was only something for a compartment of our lives.

No, I am not saying this in condemning judgment. I am offering perhaps an emperor-is-naked kind of truth. We give so much, pouring our lives into these incredible systems and structures we have created to “make disciples”, but in reality we are only feeding the system. We create people who are reliant on the system for their weekly dose of God. Even when we preach relationship from the pulpit, we deny our own words by the very environment we have created to convey them.

Summer camp is nice. It's fun. And people who like bugs should do it. But it's not real life. What we create there is contrived. It will not last. The only thing that will last is a real relationship with a real God who is a real part of every moment in our lives. Every one.

That is reality. That is where God wants to meet us.

Contrived: Addendum

Based on thoughts from July 28th, 2005

OK... so I have heard from several people on this idea of what we call “christianity” being contrived, and I figured I need to clarify what I am saying. (Perhaps that is not possible, but I thought I might try.)

One thing I mentioned to a friend in the course of our e-mail conversation was that it seems to me that when issues arouse such strongly held opposing ideas, often that may indicate that there is no right or wrong answer. That perhaps God has left this issue open to individual choosing?

Just a thought. I know it's not universally true, but there may be some wisdom in it. God has definitely given us freedom to be different. And perhaps on issues where there is such a clear divergence of opinion, it is the way he designed it to be.

In an e-mail I received this week, contrived was equated with "created", and spontaneous with "reactive".

"I wonder then if from God's view His actions are contrived including His great plan of salvation and Christ's teachings to become "Christlike". If that premise has truth then when we want to be Christlike as a Christian and follow His way, are we truly being contrived in our actions or are they in God's view a spontaneous reaction to His plan?"

Now, while I understand where this sentiment may have come from, it is entirely not what I am talking about.

The only thing I am calling contrived is where we deliberately plan some event in order to invoke a spiritual connection and/or response from all of those in attendance. All of the pieces are cleverly arranged to help people think or feel a certain way. It's like a TV show, just with better content. (Perhaps a live theater presentation would better describe it, though not necessarily today. We were at a weekend event recently where a good portion of the teaching was done by way of a prepared video. It was kinda cool.)

So, please understand me again. I do not think that the contrived will produce evil. I do not think that it is evil. I (personally) think there may be a way that produces more freedom in individual lives, but that's all I am saying.

(Remember, this started when I was talking about camp, and how it's a whole week of make-believe. And how the camp planners and organizers and people who carry out the plans all say near the end of the week that this feeling won't last. When you go back to "the real world" you have to try harder, do something different. But really, that feeling is just contrived. It is a result of the direct efforts of an

entire world created to achieve that one purpose — moving people's hearts and minds toward a certain understanding of who God is.)

One more time. I don't think that people who want to have a structured daily life with God are living contrived lives. I don't think that if we put any planning into anything that it is by that effort now "contrived". I am mainly speaking to the stuff that we do from the stage. Whether it be music, drama, or teaching. Or anything.

And, once more, the definitions:

Deliberately created rather than arising naturally or spontaneously; giving a sense of artificiality.

Create or bring about (an object or a situation) by deliberate use of skill and artifice.

So please don't think that if you have a vibrant connection with God and you attend such gatherings once a week and/or once a year that I think in any way that your relationship with God is contrived. I think if that is all you do, it might be. But if you can describe your connection with God as a relationship, and especially a thriving, vibrant one, then all the rest of the stuff is bonus.

Just enjoy every day in him. You don't have to perform for him, or for anyone else. He loves you because he made you and you are worth his own life. Simple words because we have heard them before, but they are profoundly true.

Please do not be offended, or feel like if you feel differently than me that you are wrong or in any way less than me. You are not. If he wants you to see life similarly to me, God will work that in your heart. Not me. I am just happily following God on a journey to know him better, and equally happy to share my thoughts as I process them along this journey.

I am glad you've joined me. I'm looking forward to more.

SECTION TWO

Do Unto Others...

Help, or Harassment? Freedom, or Indifference?

February 2nd, 2005

I have been trying all day long to process some thoughts floating through my head. Perhaps by airing them out here, I might figure something out that way.

I have mentioned before that I have a friend who has been raked through the coals for a few poor decisions he made (that he admits), and even more so for several that were labeled poor by his accusers, but are definitely in more of a gray area. Well, he is still dealing with fall-out from a series of clashes with his immediate family-of-God regarding all of that, and interestingly enough, so am I.

You see, I am confused. I thought I had figured out another piece this morning. I was just pondering the whole idea again of excommunication, and how silly that is. At least, silly in its most commonly played out form in the church today. It usually entails giving a brother or sister the “cold shoulder” until they right their ship and do things the way you see fit. I am not sure that is what Paul meant when he said “hand them over to Satan”. (Though that phrase is definitely strange.) I don’t see Jesus treating anyone that way.

And then I realized, I think I am treating his accusers that way. (At least the organization of accusers, if not the individuals.) I am still just baffled at what they call love. It makes no sense to me how they can not see it my way — and for a while, I have not had much contact at all with them. They hurt my friend. They are acting stupid (according to my standards) and so, I don’t want anything to do with them.

Isn’t that what I am accusing them of doing?

Jesus was so amazing. How did he sit with the people that everyone knew were sinners, and the people he knew were even more messed up — the self-righteous — at the same time? Remember??? He ate at the tax collectors’ houses. Bad PR move. He was also sitting at a table of Pharisees — having a meal with them, like good buddies

— when a prostitute came and showered his feet with expensive perfume. At every time, in every place. Jesus was always comfortable, and treated everyone equally.

The part I think I understood more clearly today was that we really need to let people make their own choices. I think it is our responsibility to encourage each other, and admonish and teach. But it stops there. We can't call, or IM, or e-mail or even worse, ignore or look away until the object of our wrath turns from their evil ways. Even if he knew someone was in a destructive pattern of behavior, Jesus did not try to fix people.

Some have given me the example of the woman caught in adultery and brought to Jesus as a way of saying Jesus was tough on sinners. "Even in his grace, he made sure to command a sinless life from here on out," they claim. Yes, he told her, "Go, and sin no more." But did he check up on her? Did he require that she assign herself to a more spiritual accountability partner?

And what about the guy we call the rich young ruler? He came to Jesus desperately seeking the truth. Jesus knew he was on the wrong path — trying to earn it for himself — and he let him stay there! He didn't say, "Alright... Ha Ha! Just kidding about that 'sell all your stuff and give it to the poor' business. Come on back here, ya big lug! We'll straighten you out." His timetable is just not the same as ours. We work so hard to fix people's issues right now... and he doesn't.

I think perhaps "hand them over to Satan", and "treat them like a tax collector" (from 1 Corinthians) means to let them make their choices. Even if you don't agree with someone, let them reach the end of their own decisions and trust their Father to be with them, and to help them. Trust Holy Spirit to convict and bring new life. Isn't that right?

We have such a hard time doing that. Letting people hurt themselves. How irresponsible of us to just let God deal with them.

My question today was, if we hound someone until they surrender and see it our way, is that help, or harass-

ment? On the contrary, if we just let everyone go their own way, and let God do the disciplining (which I personally think is right) is that freedom as God intended, or just plain indifference?

I have certainly not come to the end of this. I have no idea. As it stands, I will stick with grace. It is not my position to judge someone for their poor choices, or enact some sort of punishment — including, but not limited to banishment from my presence, or my friendship. I can find no examples of Jesus doing that. He just lived life with his Father, and shared His love with all whom he met. All. No favoritism. No selection process. Jesus was a friend to all. Friends and enemies.

That is where I want to be. Now, how do I get there?

Their Own Journey

June 21st, 2005

Perhaps the thing God is teaching me the most at the moment is to respect the choices and decisions and lifestyles of other people. To really allow them to choose what they think is best for their lives. Whether it is meaningless like the insane compulsion to use inferior computers when Apple computers are obviously far superior and so readily available at GregsApples.com for a low, low, bargain-basement price... :-)

Or, the deeper stuff of life, too.

We are clearly all very different. Difference displays God's diversity. His bigness, in that he contains all of who we collectively are in one entity. He is clever, he is witty, he is thoughtful, he is wise, he is spontaneous, he is organized, he is gentle, he is strong, he is all of that and more than we know. All in one. He made us all a unique combination of pieces of himself.

But we are not always good at embracing the differences. Usually, we want to snuff them out. Our first inclination at the sight of something different is to want to correct it. To make it better. Right? When I see my kids doing something that I would not, or that I think is wrong or even a waste of time, I want to tell them not to do it. Or, to do it differently. Of all of the people I might influence, I probably have the most say in my kids lives. But I have done that with other people as well. I have a really hard time holding back my ideas for what Jen should be doing, or how she should be thinking, or spending her time. She would appreciate me learning to use a leash on my words, but as of yet I have not mastered that.

A bunch of the things we do as "the church" (as it is understood in popular culture) are intended to conform people to a way of thinking that is held by a small group of people in leadership, or a single leader, or even perhaps the majority. There is a code of right behavior, and we are all encouraged to align ourselves accordingly. Without thought of

(or allowance for) a difference of opinion, or even a different interpretation on how one might live out a life with Jesus.

While those words may paint a slightly darker picture than you may perceive, they do mirror reality in that we are not very good at letting others experience their own journey with their Father. There are “ways you do things” and we often find ourselves at least thinking that people should be righting their ship accordingly, if not telling them to their face. (Or, as is often the case in “the church”, telling many other people how we think the stray sheep should be doing it.)

We are very into controlling.

Perhaps it's because we have so little control in our own lives? Since we can't really control what happens to us, or even, it would seem, what we ourselves do, then the next best thing would be to tell someone else what to do, right? If you can by guilt, authority, or some other means of manipulation get them to do what you think is right, then you have some semblance of control in your own life, right? Not really. It too is only an illusion.

The idea of releasing control is especially frightening in the setting of “the church” as there are standards to uphold and to which we must visibly conform. When someone who has lived a life full of habits and behaviors that diverge from the standard — from the code of right behavior for a follower of Jesus — then they need to be carefully monitored so they will be brought up to code. Their lives will *then* be an appropriate witness of the power of God, being conformed to the likeness of all the other members. Right?

Nope.

“Do not conform any longer ... but be transformed...”

Interestingly enough, the word Paul chose to avoid was “conform”. He says we should be “transformed” by the renewing of our minds. Allowing God to do a work in us that conforming to a set of rules, or code of ethics, or standard of behavior could not do in us. We can't do it for ourselves, and we can't expect it of other people.

You may be at a point in your journey where the rules are helping you tremendously. You have never known boundaries before, so the clear fences of right and wrong actually produce freedom in you. In my book, *A Journey Shared*, there is a story about "*The Heart*" that likens it to the scripture where a runner is free to run in the path of God's commands. He has a direction, a boundary. But that may not be where your brother or sister is.

You might be at a point where you grew up following all the regulations, serving a God who monitored your every move and either approved or disapproved. There was no middle ground. For you, learning of God's grace and his deep love for you has set you free from the bondage of performance. You are realizing the depth of his mercy and grace and enjoying your freedom from the fetters of religion. But that may not be where your brother or sister is.

Whether it is in the depths of our relationship with God, or a casual confrontation regarding the schedule for your house for the week, there will most certainly be differences. The hardest part of the journey for me right now is not only accepting them, but loving the freedom of others to choose differently from me. Even if I am right, and they get hurt, or hurt others (as long as they are not feeling "free" to *kill* someone or something) ... I want to know the freedom of stepping back and letting others have their Journey with Father. Freedom to choose, to learn, to live, and even to fail as he leads them in their journey.

I am definitely becoming more "pro-choice".

(And no, I'm not talking about a political disposition...)

Let Them Go

January 14th, 2005

While talking with a friend tonight, I think I realized anew a trait of humanity that does not really mirror our Father. On the surface it is not a bad thing. Quite the opposite. But I always wonder when our ways are very clearly not His, perhaps we should take a look at our “ways”?

We are obsessed with fixing stuff. When things go wrong in our lives, or the lives of our brothers and sisters, or others who are close to us, we want to do anything we can to help. And why not? Love your neighbor as yourself, right? Don't we try and do everything we can to fix our lives when something goes wrong?

Perhaps there is the first mistake.

Life is so much about trust, and most often our first response to adversity is not to stop and listen to what God would have us do, but to roll up our sleeves and tackle the issue head on. Sometimes the blow is too devastating for an immediate response, so then we just reel back and lose any sense of forward direction. Again, we are not trusting our Father to be with us, and take us forward — to go with us there.

When someone we know is in trouble, even by their own choice, the response is quite similar. We want to take matters into our own hands and help them get back on the right track. We offer advice, help straighten out bad thinking, admonish them... and all with an urgency brought about by the discomfort we have with suffering.

I am not saying that I am immune to this. I know I do this very thing. It is hard to watch someone whom I love be beaten down by life, or worse yet, by their own persistently bad choices.

But God does. God allows us so much more room than any of us give to each other. The Father let his wild son have his full inheritance, knowing very well that his son would get hurt. This son, whom he later runs to meet, re-

ceives the largest welcome-home party imaginable. This after having made horribly pitiful choices, wasting half of his father's wealth.

And he let him go.

That is crazy love. That is so crazy, I think I get it, and it *still* doesn't make sense. It is so hard to let someone suffer. To not step in and fix stuff. But God does not always fix stuff. Sometimes the greater good, the greater freedom and joy can come from the lower depths of our bad choices.

The ultimate freedom was in the son returning to his father after he had finally hit the bottom. That can not have been easy for the Father. He loved his son. But the greatest good is not always in the immediate fix. Sometimes loving someone really means letting them fail.

So, does that mean we allow our brothers and sisters to wallow in sin? Until they completely destroy their lives? No. If a brother is in sin, restore him gently. We ought to encourage each other to live in the light, since we are new creations — the old has gone the new has come. But once we encourage, once we admonish, once we have lovingly confronted someone in a behavior or mindset that will hurt them or others, *we must allow them to choose*. We can not make their choices for them, even if we try. God does not miss anyone's poor choices. He knows all things. Nor does he want for anyone to suffer eternal condemnation due to poor choices. Even still, he does not always step in and fix stuff.

The greatest love allows the greatest freedom. True freedom produces the greatest love.

As hard as it may be, sometimes we just have to let them go.

Jesus & Susan

October 27th, 2005

A little while back, we met a lady named Susan. She boldly approached us — who at the time were strangers to her — on our city sidewalk, and asked if we could help her and her husband purchase \$10 in groceries for that day. She had received no help from the local churches (which I told her was to be expected, as they are organizations, and not as able to help individual people with such needs) and she didn't know what to do.

Well, it happened on that day that my wallet actually contained cash. I had gotten some out of the bank for our upcoming trip to Buffalo. We have had problems paying our bills recently, so as the clear thought to give them one of my two twenty-dollar bills resided in the front of my mind, I wrestled vigorously with it. But, in that brief, albeit lively conversation with God in my head, I decided that perhaps he had arranged the timing of this meeting. We never have any cash on us. It's quite rare. But this time we did, and they needed it, so we helped them. We stayed and chatted a bit, and found out a little about each other, and in the end, they invited us over to share a meal after her husband got paid the following Friday. We accepted, and moved on, pondering the events that it seemed God had just arranged.

Well, Susan and her husband forgot we were coming to dinner, so we ended up just spending a little time hanging out, getting to know each other. It was slightly awkward, but it was alright. They definitely do not have what most would consider a "normal" life. They are both slightly different than the general populous, both in physical and mental capacities. But they are children of our Father, whom he loves. And it was nice to get to know them a bit.

A week or so later, I came across Susan again, on a walk to the post office. This time, she asked if I could give her a ride into Rochester to hook up with some friends. She said she and her husband were having a hard time, and she needed to get away for a while. I was admittedly in a hurry,

but did not just want to brush her off. Somewhat grudgingly I stopped my brisk walk and we chatted for a few minutes, and we both came to the conclusion that she just needed to talk with her husband about what was bothering her. So, she went home to do that.

That's the last I have seen of Susan. But recently she came to mind again. And my first impulse was that we should go over and check on them. Make sure they are OK.

And then I remembered that oh-so-familiar, free enterprise, marketing genius phrase... WWJD?

I wondered, did Jesus ever deal with people who need a little extra time or help in life? And immediately, I concluded, "Yeah, he did. A lot! He was always helping people whom society might leave behind." But, then I had a strange realization. I could not recall any time that Jesus went back to help someone he had once connected with. The only people he regularly spent time with were his disciples, and Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Other than that, we have no record of Jesus keeping tabs on someone, or helping them make the right decisions in life, and "checking up on them".

And that's when I realized that perhaps we are not doing WJWD as much as we think. Perhaps we do a disservice to people who we deem as "high maintenance" by continuing to provide "maintenance"? Jesus was great at helping people with their immediate problem, and then allowing them to continue their lives making their own decisions. That is how we have been built. We are equipped to fully choose our own path. Good, or bad.

We are not left alone in that. We should encourage and support each other — in good and bad. (Not support people's bad choices. Support people who may have made, or perhaps even are *going to* make a bad choice.) And Holy Spirit is with us — in us — so that we are not left to journey alone.

But, we are still capable of, and perhaps designed to make our own choices. That's something I am not sure we

as the church have been so good at doing. Even broader than the church, many people feel government organizations should step in and make sure everyone is taken care of, and/or doing things the right way.

Well, I think we might be better off letting people live their lives. Enabling people to choose, good or bad, which way they will go.

It seems like that's what Jesus did. He didn't try to conform anyone to his way of thinking. He offered the true kingdom perspective, and he helped people with their immediate needs, but he did not become a care taker for anyone. He allowed people to make their own decisions for their own lives.

I like Jesus. He's cool.

I don't know if you know a Susan too, but perhaps we can be more help to each other by treating people as Jesus did. No favorites. No one he stepped in and checked in on regularly. He just loved people, and pointed them in the right direction — toward Father — and allowed them the freedom and the joy of the journey.

I'm still processing all of this, but these are some of the things I learned from our path crossing with Susan.

Agenda

November 29th 2005

The other day I was reading something about caroling in the newspaper. It was a little holiday article in the local paper about being ready for carolers, and how to best welcome them, should they visit your home. Then, next to that, there was another little piece on how to organize a caroling party.

And I thought, "That would be fun!"

I started to think about what it would take to get something like that going, and who among our circle of friends would be willing to do such a thing. There would be many details to coordinate, so that everyone could participate and enjoy themselves thoroughly.

And I thought, "I guess that's a good thing about the 'church'..."

But then it occurred to me, that while we can manage and organize groups of people in institutional settings, we also are quite good at attaching some sort of agenda to the proceedings.

If indeed a church were to organize a Christmas caroling party, you can almost bet that there would be some sort of ulterior motive along with the "holiday cheer". Be it a smile, and a nice catch phrase, "God loves you, and so do we at First Church on the Corner!" Or, perhaps more aggressive interrogations... uh... conversations... about where/ if the resident of the domicile "goes to church." Or, there is always the old stand by: Gospel Tracts.

Nice.

It's not just in caroling. In our society, Christians are not welcomed into peoples' lives because they have an agenda. Whether getting people to church or to heaven, there is an agenda. In *everything* we do! From the obviously planned "Bring a Friend Day", to the more subtle "game nights", or "open gym" or any of the webs we disguise as social events — everything we do is for some alternate, "higher" purpose. We can't just enjoy life together!

Evangelism, the way I know it, at least, is not really about the other people. It has become about us. It's not about showing kindness to someone, and letting them know they are loved and accepted by God more than they could imagine. It's usually about changing their lives to match ours. Getting them to attend functions sponsored by the "church" or even just getting them to do all the things we think make us a Christian. (Reading the Bible, praying, going to church, just being a nice person, etc.)

But Jesus never "evangelized" with any expectations. He told people who were asking (or listening) about the Kingdom of God, and then he just hung out with people. He spent time with people. *Listen carefully now...* Not so that he could tell them the "important stuff". He spent time with people *just because he loved them*.

That's so important. Most Christians throw a "so that" into their relationship with others. (Be they friendships, or a relationship with Joe Stranger.) Jesus didn't have a "so that".

Just be real. Just be you, and relate to people as you are. Don't try to get them to be something else, or do something you think they need to. Let God and them sort out what they will do. You just love them, hang out with them. Just be real.

Oh, that frustrates me so much! And the sad thing to me is, some of you, my fellow believers, who are reading this will say that I am overblowing this — that not everyone has an "agenda". No? I do beg to differ. It is in every piece of corporate life, and then what we call "outreach". Our love is selfishly motivated to see results in people that we think they should produce.

How sad.

So, I may still get some friends together to walk around our neighborhood and sing. But that's all we'll be doing. Just, having fun singing. Not "building community". Not "reaching lost people with the 'Love of Jesus'". Just, *being* a community. Having fun, *living life* together. No agendas.

Just... life.

Games

November 30th, 2005

Following up on the previous chapter, *Agenda*, I thought it might be necessary to reveal something very basic to my personality. Very simply, I sure don't like games. I'm not talking about the Milton Bradley variety. I mean people who try to manipulate others by their words or actions. That really bothers me. I just want straight up, honest relating to each other.

We play games at work. With our co-workers, and especially with our bosses. We play games in dating relationships. We play games at school. We play games "at church". We are constantly playing little games to manipulate our relationships with others to work in our favor.

What it comes down to, I think, is that we are not content in ourselves. We are not secure enough in who we are, so we must constantly create and present a persona that is "more acceptable" to the people we do life with. We try to meet the expectations that we expect are expected of us. It's such a crazy loop to which we all (myself included) fall victim.

All we need to do is be real. "We're all in the same boat. On the same sea. Just tryin' to get from here to there." (Lyrics from a song I wrote.) But it's true. We don't have to pretend to be something we're "supposed to be". Just be you. You are great the way God made you to be. Your flaws are weaknesses in you that allow more room for His greatness. Let him fill it, and know that you are not the only flawed person on the planet. I am too. You are. We are.

I despise the agendas we have for the people in our lives because it's another form of game playing. It's focused on us, and our perceived needs (or even, what we perceive others to need) instead of simple, honest relationships with people. It's hiding behind a "purpose" because perhaps we're uncomfortable being completely raw and open, and available. It's not easy, but I keep thinking that the fruit from such a lifestyle is so much sweeter.

There's The Steeple... Here's The Church

We don't need to play games with each other. Just
be who you are.

Period.

Agenda: Part II

December 18th, 2005

This weekend, we were singing at Wal-Mart in the near-by town of Newark, NY. I happen to be friends with the general manager of that store, and he sets us up in the front of the store to sing Christmas tunes for a couple hours on a busy holiday Saturday. This was the second year we have shared our music in this way.

Last year we discovered that Wal-Mart has some pretty strict rules regarding other organizations or groups coming in and promoting themselves in any way. We thought then that we might perhaps make some sales with a small little display right near us. Holiday shoppers who liked the music could get a CD. Seemed good. But, if you want to sell something at or even near Wal-Mart, you must go through their central office in Bentonville, AR, and they will put the product in *every* store. (Which was not going to happen for our happy little CD.)

So, we asked the managers if we could just put up a little poster that told people who we were, and showed that we have CDs, and then gave our web address. Nope. That was no good either. At one store, they let us post the sign, but placed a big strip of paper over the pictures of our CDs! (They mean business!)

But this season we already knew all of that, so we approached it as just a “fun time”. We decided to do it again, even with nothing for us to gain. Wal-Mart was not paying us, we couldn’t sell any CDs, and we can’t even tell anyone we have CDs!

So, there we are, two people sitting on stools with a guitar and a music stand... singing Christmas songs. Smiling, happy, and singing. We got lots of smiles. Kids loved to stop and watch. But the best part of the day was watching the several people who walked by with a bit of an inquisitive look on their faces trying to figure out why we were there. What did we want from them? Who were we representing?

Nothing! Nobody! We’re just singing!

But that's not possible! We must want something????

Nope.

And that reminded me of what I wrote a couple chapters ago where I was frustrated by people's agendas. I was especially speaking of Christians, and their hidden agendas in forming relationships with people, or in the public events that are planned with ulterior motives. But an international friend of ours pointed out that having an agenda for everything was a very cultural, American thing. Boy was that evident at Wal-Mart on Saturday!!! Everyone expected we wanted something from them, or were promoting something. But, we weren't!!! Crazy!

In the past, we have. We were wanting to promote basic so perhaps either people would buy a CD, or we'd make a connection to do another concert. But not this time. We really had no expectations. Also, often, I will schedule events in order to make money that day, through sales or some sort of payment. But, not this time. There was no chance for that. And, perhaps most noble, in the past, I would consider the "agenda" for such a day having any opportunity to speak with people or sing to people about Jesus and how great he is. But, not this time. We really just went to sing, and put a smile on people's faces!

That's so hard to fathom in our culture, I think. There are so many advertising schemes that come across as offering something for nothing, but there's always a catch. There is always some sort of agenda. That's just the way it is. So, when we appeared to not represent anyone, or be selling anything, it certainly brought some strange looks. But, many people got past the anomaly and just enjoyed the music and the smiles! Awesome.

Bonus of the day? One of the store managers thought it was so cool what we did, that he gave us a Wal-Mart gift card! Dude. That was cool. It's just great to be freed of expectations, or, perhaps insert the word "Agendas", and to just enjoy the moment. If you can do that, everything else is bonus!

It was a great time at Wal-Mart, and I think God was continuing to show me the freedom of living life without an agenda.

Aloof

July 24th, 2005

We had some friends over tonight. It was a blast! They are really fun people, and we all enjoy being together. We are all currently going through a parenting video course together, but we have connected at various points of life before this. We are not doing the course in the month of July for various reasons, so we planned a few get togethers to just keep in touch, and, because we love to be together.

So tonight, after some fun group activities like kick-ball (you should have seen the play I made at first to get one of the opposing moms out!) and a few hilarious relay races (it's pretty funny to see a couple grown men competitively running a 40-yard dash balancing an egg in a spoon as they run!) we just sat at our dining room table, continuing an enjoyable evening together.

At this point, one from our group noticed that this month Jen & I celebrate our engagement of 8 years. It's kind of an involved story of what date and how that all happened, and that's where the evening got interesting. As I was explaining how we never dated, and how God had brought us together through some very interesting circumstances, and how he had worked all of this stuff for our good, I was completely blindsided by the words of a very forthcoming and sometimes fairly blunt friend.

(Friend, if you are reading this I mean that in the nicest way. I think God uses that to give people pause and to allow them to think of things in a manner they probably would not have chosen. Like me! So, thanks!)

Now, when the words were first uttered, I was astonished that someone would label me as "aloof". I think I am quite the opposite. I love to just be real, and honest, and open. I want to relate to people where they are, to love people by listening and connecting, and just being available — in no way judgmental or condemning. I think Jesus has worked all of that into my heart by my being the recipient

of those very things in my own life. Not that I am perfect in those things — far from it — but I can definitely see him working those in me. So, I was just stunned.

And all at once curious.

I told some more of our story, and then probed a bit to see what she really intended to say. I couldn't really believe she meant "aloof". And, after a quick check of the dictionary, she completely recanted and said that was not at all the word she was thinking of. She asked everyone to just erase that from memory. Not at all what was intended.

But I could not. I am still puzzled by not just that one word, but her description of what she sees in me (mind you, we have not shared all that much life together, and so another part of me is amazed that she has formed such an opinion of me, especially how she further describes me below). She described what she called "aloof" as being so detached — "in a good way" — that everything is always alright. No matter what comes my way, I am OK with it. No matter what people might say about me, I am not bothered by it. I forget the exact words, but I think she said I am different from anyone else on this planet. (Which, literally is true... not just for me, but for everyone. But, that's beside the point.) And part of my "aloofness" gives an impression of arrogance (which, she said is not really arrogance, but... sort of.)

Even crazier than this is the person who *does* know me the best (aside from God), and who loves me the most, confirmed some of what this friend was saying tonight!

OK, so... *that* makes me think I need to look into these things.

And I have. It's 3:00am and I have been spending the past three hours listening to tapes of good talks on understanding the reality of God's kingdom in my life internally and around me. The title of the first talk I chose to listen to is, "A Soft Place To Land". A soft place to land refers to the gentleness, and kindness, and understanding that emanated from Jesus that just drew people to him. They knew they could share anything and everything with this man, because

they were completely accepted, not condemned or judged, and even better, they were understood. The speaker told stories from his own life of how that was not the case for him. In fact, a group of friends in his life told him one night that before he went through some incredibly tough circumstances in his life, he had been the arrogant “answer man”, and therefore unapproachable. He was, perhaps... aloof.

As I pondered his words, and those spoken by my friend, along with the subtle confirmations of my wife, I definitely questioned whether I am a soft place to land. I so long to be that I can't even think of the word to describe that desire. I only want to be the things I described above. I have a song called *Because* that perfectly speaks the heart of who I want to be.

*I live because he lives
I love because he loves
I forgive because he forgave me.
I am because He is and I will be forever more
Livin' everyday because of grace*

*I will always remember how you treated me
Forgiving everything I owed you, even though
I was guilty
How could I ever think to hold a grudge?
I have no choice but love like I've been loved
I have no choice but love like I've been loved*

Words & Music by Greg Campbell
Copyright © 1999 basic music ministries

Everything that comes from me is a direct result of what he has done in me. I do what I do because I have received that from him. Even more so, I trust him because of his incredible track record of never once failing. Never has he failed to love me, to provide for me, or to demonstrate in some way to me that I am completely loved. I don't always feel it in the moment, but I have seen it enough, and experienced it enough to know that it is true, and real, and

forever.

That is what I want people to know. When the speaker I was listening to tonight learned from his friends that he had not been a “soft place to land” until he went through some nasty trials of his own, I just wondered if people see me that way? Do I really offer God’s grace to people, and the incredible work he has done in me, or do I offer them what a life can look like if you try really hard, and hone the skills and talents to be good that God has placed in you at birth? Do I help people see the on-going work of growing everyday because of grace, or do I show off a special in-born ability to choose the right, therefore somehow elevating myself to some level of unapproachability simply due to my public track record of holiness?

Ouch. I sure hope that I am not so confident in what God has done in me that I have forgotten to reveal the source of all of the goodness in my life. And not just here, with my words, but by every fiber of my being and every action that I choose or every reaction that reveals the contents of my changed-by-Jesus heart.

Another thought I had tonight was that perhaps I have become an answer man, as the speaker alluded to. His friends said no one whose lives were broken ever approached him because he always had an answer. Everything fit together perfectly in his world. So, only those whose lives were going alright at the moment felt comfortable being around him. But after God softened his heart and revealed to him a deeper understanding of the love that the Father has for him, people were able to approach him more. Not because of the circumstances directly, but because he was a different person. He was approachable and didn’t have all the answers. He wasn’t trying to fix people.

Sometimes I do that. I think Jen can attest to that! We have been married now almost 8 years and in that time, there have been at least a few times when I have in some way communicated that to Jen. I love her completely, and only want her to know that. But at times, I see something that I know is right, and I let her know it. Even if she dis-

agrees. And let me tell you, that hasn't worked yet! Eventually, with many more words, and obviously more than words. When she understands from me that there is no arrogant, condescending judgment, but only a "broken reed he did not crush" kind of gentleness will she even hear anything I am saying.

And this is Jen we're talking about. She has plenty of chance to know that I love her. She knows me the best and spends the most time with me. And *she* feels like I am sometimes a bit arrogant. How must others perceive me?

Even though the word has been rescinded, the overall effect has remained, and I think it has challenged me in a good way to think about how I treat other people. I do not need to "try harder" to "do the right thing". Perhaps, almost the opposite. Perhaps people do not know me as approachable? Perhaps I really am not a soft place to land? Though that is my heart's deepest desire, besides knowing Jesus more each day, I only want to reflect his passionate love for me, his mercy and grace, and his gentleness and understanding. As he has been for me, so I want to be for others.

But again, I focus on doing. Even in my best intentions, I still want to do something for God or others. I think perhaps this is what God is working in my heart. A lot of things come back to that. Lately I have been trying to figure out what God wants me to do in my life. Not a career move, that's not what I'm talking about. Just how he wants me to live out my daily life with him. I am learning to trust him in all things, physical and spiritual. I am learning to relate to him more personally and in everyday kind of ways. I am really learning to not always have the right answer — to let people know him and follow him in their own ways, as he leads them. That's a hard one. And perhaps is the "aloofness" that my friend was referring to.

All of these words on a page about a word that was mistakenly spoken. But, the more I thought about it, perhaps there is something there. I look forward to God revealing more about that to me. There will be more opportunity to know and trust him through that. I love that he is so gentle.

I love that even in my worst failings, and greatest weaknesses, he does not point fingers and let me know how I should have done better. Rather, in deep love and even humility (this from the King of all creation!) he gently nudges me toward a life lived out in the fullness of his love, and in the righteousness he has given me. Not in anything I have accomplished or have mastered in my own strength. I trust his goodness, and his proven love for me. He is my hope, my life. I want to know him.

If you have perceived me as aloof or arrogant, I do sincerely apologize. I ask your forgiveness as I continue to grow on this journey of learning to accept and live in the complete love of a perfect Father. How I long to be perfect as he is, but he is teaching me that I can not, nor does he expect that. He wants to draw me into his love, and through that effect change in my life from inside a trusting heart outward to a gentle, humble love expressed to every soul he brings into my life.

I long for that, and look forward to how he grows that in me even tomorrow.

May you know today the fullness of his love for you, and live in that love completely, wherever he may have you.

It's Who We Are

April 3rd, 2005

We joined another group of Christians this morning for singing and learning together. The morning went pretty much as usual, but as we were plugging along, I noticed something again. Nothing earth shattering, but I just wanted to write it down here.

The sermon today dealt with our mission. The title was "Owning The Mission". In general, the point was that our main mission, our purpose, as Christians and as the church is evangelism. That is what God most wants for us to do. The speaker told lots of great stories and Scriptures that helped support her point.

And all the while, I was building my argument against it! I was thinking, "The *main* thing he wants from us is to Love God and Love People... Jesus said it!" You may know that I have been thinking a lot recently about how we can live out our relationship with God more than just in the things we do, but in a way how we think. Our worldview. Just being a Christian instead of doing Christian things. So, with all of that background, I was ready to refute this, "Evangelize-Or-Suffer-Guilt" message with all sorts of Scriptures of my own.

As my brilliant argument was coming together, I had a thought.

"Wait," I thought, "Perhaps it is just that God wants to use her in this way (and even the people he has put in her path of influence). And maybe he is wanting to use me in another way — in the relational, loving sorta way. *Perhaps* these are two aspects of the same thing?"

I had to smile. I mean, I know that. God has made us all unique. Each of us has been specially created to be who He made us to be. To affect those around us in the way he has designed. The apostle Paul was a gung-ho missionary dude. Heading out to every nook and cranny, looking for opportunities to help people. James, Jesus' brother was no less visible in the early days of the church, but remained in

Jerusalem. We hear less from others, but they were no less important, or certainly no less “Christian”. Perhaps God was using each of them in different ways?

See, I think in the end, the mission really *isn't* about what we do. It's about knowing and loving and being known and being loved by our Father. I am willing to admit that I am skewed toward the way God has made me. But I also believe we are easily swayed toward the notion that we have to *do* something. When, in fact, the best stuff happens when we are not even trying. God can use us most it seems when we are spending our energy getting to know him, and working on the things he is doing in our lives. Then the others around us get the benefit of seeing a life being changed on the inside by a loving Father. Sometimes God uses our words. More often (I think) he uses our lives, our actions.

So, for a moment today, God reminded me how silly I am. Instead of fighting for truth, I need to love the diversity of God's people and celebrate the many ways He works through His body.

We all do.

SECTION THREE

**Freedom
FROM
Religion**

I'm Not That Religious

February 20th, 2005

☞ "I'm not that religious..."

Have you heard people tell you this before? I have. If you are a Christ-follower I'll bet you have as well. Usually if people know that we have aligned ourselves with Jesus in some way, they often will offer that disclaimer.

One recent weekend past, I met a fellow named George. I was setting up to do my thing, singing some of our songs. And George was hanging around and chatting, and offering the occasional help. He was a cool guy. He later told me he was 78. I asked how long he'd been part of the church there, and he said sheepishly that he was not, that he was there with his wife.

I sang there two days that weekend, and continued to have conversations with George. I forget now what the specific trigger was, but at one point I said something about life in Jesus that made him state matter-of-factly, "I'm not that religious." My somewhat cryptic retort to such a phrase is usually, "Neither am I." (That usually gets a funny look.)

I am not. I do not observe rituals or practices or traditions (except fun ones!) that in any way might curry favor with God. To my knowledge, he is not like that. I don't even think you have to "go to church" on Sundays! (GASP!!) It's not about religion. It's not about what we do, or any attempts to maintain a pure and holy facade.

He is my holiness. *He* is my purity. I have none without him.

My life is about knowing and living with the One True God. I have often quoted John 17:3 here, so I will not again, but Jesus said it himself. And he lived it. Life is about knowing the One who gave it. Not really about serving him. (It's not about *serving him*???) He said, I no longer call you servants, I call you friends.

If you happen to be reading this and have ever felt that you were less "religious" than your pious neighbor... GOOD!! Now, if you also felt that made you less worthy of a

relationship with God... you could not be more wrong.

Jesus said he has not come to call the righteous, but sinners. His love is for you. And for me. Anyone pretending to be righteous will probably miss that. Those of us who know we are “not that religious” can experience the freedom of a relationship with Love.

So, drop the heavy weights of religion if you are carrying them, and take Jesus' yoke upon you. And he will give you rest.

Modeling Christian Faith

June 18th, 2005

I was reading an article today that made me wonder why it is so hard to break out of the cycle of activities that so many people see as the things that define us as Christians. The article commented on a mother who would read a chapter of Proverbs to her kids at breakfast, and how their family would always attend a weekly corporate worship service. I'm sure that more was inferred when the article states, "Now, having modeled Christian faith before her children..." There had to be more. Because, is that really it? If you pray, and read your Bible, and "go to church", is that how we display our faith to our children and to the world?

I want my kids to see that I have an everyday relationship with Father as real as I do with them. I talk to him, I share stories about him, I talk about how he might be currently leading our family in important decisions. I want them to see how we give of any money we might have to help friends who are in need. I want them to see how we care for people, call them, visit them, or even just hang out with folks. I want them to see how everything we say and do is "modeling our Christian Faith".

Don't you? Do you want your faith to be encapsulated in the things we deem "spiritual"? Did Jesus? Was the extent of what he taught, "Be good, read your Bibles, pray, and make sure you 'go to church'?" Was that it? Didn't he teach us that the Kingdom is so much more *ordinary*? More common. It's like a farmer who scatters seed. It's like a mustard seed. It's like, and it's in every part of life. Whether you eat or drink, do it all for his honor. Every part. Do we really want to relegate a life of faith to the sections that are "spiritual"?

I believe that is a heresy. I may be labeled a heretic for saying that, but historically, I think it was already called a heresy. It's more accepted today. Separating the "spiritual" from the "carnal". The Gnostics did this. (Please pardon my dusty historical archives. I studied this over ten years ago in

a Greek History class at SUNY Buffalo, so the exact facts will be a bit stale perhaps.) They believed that the spirit was good and the flesh was evil. Anything that was for the flesh therefore was sin, while anything of or for the spirit was godly. This was a heresy. Jesus was not afraid of our flesh, he wore it. He made us body and spirit. We are both. With a soul mixed in for good measure. To deny that is lunacy, and perhaps heresy.

So today we keep ourselves from R-rated movies, we don't drink, we don't smoke, we don't listen to anything that isn't labeled "Christian" by the music industry (who is making a killing by promoting such "labels"). We don't swear, we don't hang out with anyone who does those things — except of course under the auspices of "ministering" to them.

"You have died with Christ... so why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as 'Don't handle, don't eat, don't touch'?"

Colossians 2:20-21

Paul said we don't live by restrictions or rules anymore. We can certainly choose to restrict ourselves for the benefit of others (Romans 14), but for our benefit (or for God's) we don't live by those rules anymore.

Why then do we act as though we still do?

God wants to do life with us, and us with him. He wants us to plug into him and live every moment with him. Our Christian life does not fit inside the neat and tidy boxes we create. That is where we come close to, or sometimes cross over into the boundaries of religion. Religion is not life giving, freeing, and grace-filled. But kingdom life is.

I want to model *that* for my kids, and for my neighbors, and for my friends. I want my family to know that I love God and I love people. That's what Jesus said he wants from us, and that's what I intend to give. I read my Bible. I do something similar to what most Christians would call praying. I can even be found at the occasional corporate "worship service". But that in no way defines my faith. It's

even somewhat superfluous. It's fun. It's good. But it's not what I want my kids to think life with Jesus is all about.

"No, O people, the LORD has already told you what is good, and this is what he requires: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

Micah 6:8

"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. And, love your neighbor as yourself."

Luke 10:27

So if reading my Bible, and praying, and going to church is how I can be a model of Christian faith. Doing what those verses says must make me a super model!

I wanna be a super model!

This World

April 3rd, 2005

1 John 2:15-16

Stop loving this evil world and all that it offers you, for when you love the world, you show that you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only the lust for physical pleasure, the lust for everything we see, and pride in our possessions. These are not from the Father. They are from this evil world.

Over the past few days, these verses have been brought to mind — not directly, save perhaps on one occasion. Rather, things I have heard made me remember them, or things I was thinking about led me back to them.

Those are good Christian verses, aren't they?! Hate the world! It's only bad!! A real Christian doesn't like anything about the world. And from reading those verses, I would have to agree. That is what it says.

But my paradox meter was red-lighting again.

PARADOX!!! PARADOX!!! WARNING!!! DOESN'T MATCH PREVIOUS INFORMATION!!! PARADOX!!!!

One of the phrases from Jesus' lips that I have most latched on to in life is "I came to give them life, and life to the full." (John 10:10 — NIV, I believe.) I love that Jesus wants us to live here and now to the fullest. He made it. He called it good. Life here is meant to be enjoyed, and God is meant to be worshipped through it and in it. Not apart from it.

So I do. I love life. I am a very optimistic person. Life is full of joy! Let me show you...

I love to cook!

I love to eat!

I love to play video games with my boys!

I love board games!

I love movies!

I love books!

I love to make web pages!

I love Apple Computers!!! (But, who doesn't?)

I love going for walks in Palmyra.

I love Palmyra!

I love our house!

I love driving for long times! (Really... I do!)

I love Star Trek!

I am currently a fan of Quantum Leap, The Incredible Hulk, and the old Fat Albert cartoons.

I love DVDs!!! Special Features!!! Need I say more???

I love pizza, ice cream, candy, and other stuff that's bad for me.

I love fresh fruit and veggies and salads and cheese and other good stuff for me.

I love playing basketball with my friends.

I love making lists of things I love!

Obviously, I could keep going. Is that bad? Am I wrong? Do I love the world, and so the love of the Father is not in me? I hope not.

So, we come to my paradox. There are moments when I see my love of "this world" stealing time from me and my Father. I know that stuff can definitely get in the way of relationships. Then there are other times that I think he made this world to be enjoyed. Does that mean anything that we have ever made is bad, and only the stuff he made is good? (Like, walks through the woods, eating great food, etc.) Not sure yet.

When we use the word lust, it immediately conjures up bad stuff in our minds, right? Usually associated with sexual perversion in some way. But here John uses it in a few different ways. The "lust for physical pleasure" perhaps meaning sexual, and even more — like good food, even working out for your "physical pleasure"? The "lust for everything we see, and pride in our possessions." Seems to me to refer to materialism. Loving our stuff. He then says, "These

are not from the Father. They are from this evil world.” *All* of them? Which ones? Everything?

I completely understand that our joy in life — the life to the full — has absolutely nothing to do with our possessions. We can still have a completely full life without any of our stuff. Jesus said, “Don’t treasure your stuff here. Treasure the things of heaven. Eternal things.” But does that really mean we are to find no joy in our stuff? Is it only evil?

Paul says, “Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial.” I believe, as with everything in life, there is somehow a balance to be struck. Where that is, I am uncertain. But I do not think that God wants us to run and hide from TV shows. Nor does he want us to never play a video game again. Perhaps he wants that for you, but that sort of blanket rule-making has led to some pretty nasty legalistic fights. “Don’t play cards! Don’t dance! Don’t wear make-up! Don’t wear shorts!”

(Sidenote: Did you know that when my wife first matriculated at our Bible college, she was not allowed to wear shorts. Shorts were not allowed. Really. Seriously.)

We make up rules, so we can avoid the evils of “this world”. All rooted in verses like the ones from 1 John. But perhaps the truth is in the balance. Jesus was accused of loving the world too much — being a drunk and a glutton. But he also said (as the Word of God through John) that we should not love this world.

Please show me, Father, how I can know you more through this paradox. Let me see your beauty — your greatness — in this apparent dichotomy. Let me live more fully as I understand you more.

The Sacred

March 3rd, 2005

Last night I was struck again at just how little I understand the concept of “sacred”. As far as I can tell, I hold nothing as sacred. No persons, places, or things. (That’s a noun! Wasn’t that from School House Rock?) Yes, you are correct, not even God.

Now before you stone me, let me clarify.

I know that God is the Supreme Being. He was, and is and is to come. He has no beginning or end, he is omn-everything. He is far beyond my comprehension in every way. And I certainly understand the premise of the phrase “fear of the Lord”. He is most certainly Holy, and different, and *THE* One True God.

That said, my disconnect has come from knowing how this One who is so far beyond me has given up everything (Philippians 2) to come to my rescue (Luke 19:10) but beyond that, he wants to be *my* friend. (Romans 5) Not my supreme master. My friend.

God is not impressed by rituals. Or rites. Or postures. Or any of that stuff. The writer of Hebrews talks about the futility of sacrifices and other such rituals. They are powerless. Meaningless. But on the other hand, Paul also cautions that if one man considers a certain day holy, let him. It’s not for you to determine what others should consider sacred or not.

Ouch.

I am often guilty of at least wanting to impose my “superior” conclusions on life on all of those around me. I have thought long and hard, analyzed, and come up with the perfect conclusions to all of my ponderings. For me. And only me. God helping me, I will try and remember that, and hopefully *you* will too as you read all of my rambling thoughts in this book. This book is the written expression of the journey Father is taking *me* on. Perhaps knowing me, and my journey, is part of yours. But as a friend of mine likes to say, if it “sticks in your craw”, test to see whether it is from

our Father, or not. If it is, he will help you adapt. If it's not, just shrug your shoulders and say, "That boy's weird!" And move on.

End of footnote.

I was reminded last night of my disdain for any thing remotely "sacred" when I determined *not* to pray before going out on stage to lead in worship. Really. It got to be the customary 3-5 minutes before we were to begin, and I started toward the back to gather to ask God's blessing on what we do, and to ask Him to make it more than we could on our own. All good things, but I was struck by the timing of it, and how we always do it that way.

I do. I am not accusing anyone else. It's almost like a magic incantation. I want God's power to course through the event we have planned for Him, and if I ask Him just before it happens, it will help me remember why I am doing it, and it will perhaps make the effects of the prayer more powerful. I don't really believe that, but it might appear that way to the casual observer.

That is why I would absolutely not pray before meals for a long time. When I first went to Bible college that was my practice, as it is for most Christians. I grew up praying before I eat. (You get a stomach ache if you don't, right?) But as I saw many of my classmates bring their lunch trays to the cafeteria tables, and in one motion aim their rear end for the seat, bow their head and close their eyes. As their body continued to the seated position and came back up again, the ever so slight delay made it look as though their shock absorbers might need some adjusting. From my vantage point, all I could see was the empty, ritualistic rite of doing the proper thing at the proper time. Not a loving, ongoing, real relationship with God.

I admit now that perhaps that was a bit judgmental of me, but the results were not necessarily bad. I was forced to see the rituals that I was observing. The places were I was doing without thinking in my relationship with God. So, I chose to pray any and all times, *except* before meals. For a time. We do pray before we eat pretty often now. Some-

times we'll pray as we are eating. I don't even like to call it "praying" because that sounds too religious. Too sacred. It's definitely a good time for us to talk with God as a family. But, as part of my non-sacred self, it is definitely no longer a habit.

All of these things that have a "sacred" feel to them are not bad by themselves. What definitely frustrates me is when we slip into religion with God. He does not want our sacred and holy worship. I wrote about this in my book, Life In The Rear-View Mirror, in a chapter called "*I Call You Friends*". Jesus was the embodiment of God, and what God did when he was with us was hang out. He spent quality time with people. Twelve close friends, and then everyone else who crossed his path. He was not interested in rites and rituals, though he was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness". He was mostly accused of the opposite by those in charge of "the sacred" of that day.

So, I'll admit it. I am religiously challenged. But, I think that's ok. And if you like the practices that some might call "religious" or "sacred", and if they draw you closer to our Father... great! I don't think I can really relate, but that's OK! That's your journey!

I guess my point is, don't let the ritual take the place, or get in the way of your relationship with God. He split the curtain, there is no more separation. (Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45) There are no magical steps to earning favor with God, or unleashing his power. He does that. And it says in Galatians 4:7 that "everything he has belongs to you." Just because you are his child.

Life with God is definitely a relationship, not a religion. Not a set of practices, incantations, recitations, etc. There are no holy places, times, days, etc. (See note above if you believe there are.) The most high God has invited us to be *his* friends.

I accept!

SECTION FOUR

**We're All
In This
Together**

Living In Perfect Harmony

August 14th, 2005

Last night I had a conversation with a friend about some of the choices we have made recently in how we live out our relationship with Jesus. Our close friends know how we have struggled recently with the current (and long-standing) set up of the “church”. How it frustrates us that we have tied our weekly programmed gatherings into the essence of who we are as the church, and things of that nature. This friend disagrees with our conclusions, and just wanted to ask me about some scriptures, in a slightly confrontational way. (Not bad confrontation. No malice was evident, only concern for a friend.)

Well, we went around a few times on a few scriptures, and ideas and practices that some would consider essential, others might not. We definitely had differing conclusions on similar scriptures. Again, we did not throw punches, but there did not appear to be any reconciling of our intellectual differences.

And to my friend, they seemed important. Very important.

So I tried to make a break in the conversation and get us out of the loop of arguing our different vantage points on truth, and try to come to some agreement. Even an agreement to disagree. We agreed to continue the discussion at a later date. That was at least a good step I think.

I still believe that if we argue “truth”, it will only cause relational friction. I have a few friends who are at least skeptics, and on many days they are more like atheists who need to speak their mind to God. (Which is at least a little ironic.) But what I have noticed is that when viewpoints are in such stark opposition, the arguing is mostly just wasting time. No opinion will be swayed by such banter. No “truth” will be settled by an argument. I really believe that nothing can be gained in such a confrontation.

(Note: That is not to say there is no place for confrontation. If there is a person whom you love who is clearly

doing something that will harm them, there is a place for direct and unpleasant confrontation. It most likely will not resolve the issue at that moment, but can certainly lead to better choices down the road. If, as in everything, it is done “in love”. Real love. Not just, “I say this in love” love.)

It has become obvious to me that the only way the give and take can happen in relationships is when differences are 1)

accepted and 2) discussed when not in conflict. If there is any hint of “I’m right, you’re wrong” then no relational progress will be made. And again, the emphasis should be on relational progress and not on intellectual, factual “truth” progress. In my opinion.

So after that conversation, I just realized how incredibly different we were. (At least, in the specific area of life we were discussing.) And actually, how badly I had responded. He brought a few things into the conversation that I personally think are silly, void of meaning practices, and, unfortunately, I laughed as he brought them up. I was only thinking of me at that point (I was slightly on the defensive, I suppose, too) and I reacted as though he were not a person capable of being hurt. I hope he was not, but I realized after he left (very much to my chagrin) that I had reacted very unlovingly to some things that he holds to be very important.

As I thought about it more — both my reaction and the issues he raised — I recalled a chapter in the letter Paul wrote to the church in Rome about the very thing we were discussing. And, again, my reactions in that conversation.

I read it today, and I was blown away by the applica-

**THEY ARE
RESPONSIBLE TO
THE LORD, SO
LET HIM TELL
THEM WHETHER
THEY ARE RIGHT
OR WRONG. THE
LORD’S POWER
WILL HELP THEM
DO AS THEY
SHOULD.**

ble truths I found. I need to quote large chunks of scripture below. Please do read it all, and I will add my comments as we go.

Romans 14:1-4

Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it is all right to eat anything. But another believer who has a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who think it is all right to eat anything must not look down on those who won't. And those who won't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn God's servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord's power will help them do as they should.

Oh wow. I have read this before, and in Bible college, it was a good source of humor to say that, "Vegetarians have weak faith!" That's obviously not the point, and the comment was made in jest, but funny how even in jest we were criticizing, as Paul is warning us not to do.

Two things. One, don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. And two, to whom do we belong?.

First, as I mentioned to my friend, I really don't think arguments over what is right or wrong will really go anywhere. God has given us much more freedom than the institution of the church is able to allow for. An institution, by nature, must have some set of guidelines or principals to adhere to that separate it from any other organization, and society at large. Otherwise, it would have no reason to exist. So there is a bit of conformity necessary for its very existence. But that is not so of Jesus' body. We do not conform to the pattern of this world, but we are transformed by him.

Therein lies the other, deeper truth.

He does it. It's his body. His church. He knows his servants, and he will lead them. This theme is present through this entire section of Paul's letter. Who are we to question the practices or beliefs of another brother or sister (that are not specifically against the revealed will of God for all of us) in any matter? Paul says they (we) are "God's servants." The owner is not the person in question. Nor can they, nor should they be controlled by other servants. The Owner is Jesus Christ.

Listen to this powerful line again:

They are responsible to the Lord, so let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord's power will help them do as they should.

Wow. What if we really lived that way? What if we really trusted God to take care of his own people? They are not responsible to you, or me, or any group of elders, pastors, apostles, or anyone else who cares to wield the authority of a title over them. They are personally responsible to the Lord, so let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord's power will help them do as they should.

I say this with such emphasis because I think this piece is so lacking from our corporate life together. Even our individual lives with God. We really don't believe he'll do it. We know he can, but in order to be responsible, and keep things going in a good direction, we have to make things happen. We can't trust God to speak truth into someone's life. We need to do it. And when the task grows too large, we arrange any sort of structure — rigid or not — to implement that "back-up" plan.

In short, we don't allow room for Holy Spirit to convict and transform people, we feel like we need to do that. Because he won't.

Well who do we think we are?

Amazing stuff. Please read on.

Rom 14:5-9

In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. Each person should have a personal conviction about this matter. Those who have a special day for worshipping the Lord are trying to honor him. Those who eat all kinds of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who won't eat everything also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God. For we are not our own masters when we live or when we die. While we live, we live to please the Lord. And when we die, we go to be with the Lord. So in life and in death, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose, so that he might be Lord of those who are alive and of those who have died.

Arguing from the same line of thinking, Paul partially turns his focus from food to a subject that hits much closer to home currently. He says that some Christians have a special day for worshipping. And he does not say this is good or bad. He says it just is. But what we do with that is where the good or bad arises. We should not condemn someone for not holding a certain day sacred, or worshipping on the day we do. Nor should we condemn someone who does have a "special day for worshipping the Lord." That line obviously hit home, as one thing that irks me about our current structure is the emphasis we place on Sunday. How we even call it both the Sabbath and the first day of the week, which are incompatible terms. (Sabbath was Saturday, while the first day was Sunday, and in our culture, I'd say the first day would be Monday.) But again, the details are not important. Paul says, "Each person should have a personal conviction about this matter." Whoa! Really? Is that how we live corporate Christian life today? I don't think so. I think because of the nature of a large institution, we require a bit of confor-

mity, that Paul says here is unhealthy to individuals and to the body.

Romans 14:10-13

*So why do you condemn another Christian?
Why do you look down on another Christian?
Remember, each of us will stand personally
before the judgment seat of God. For the
Scriptures say,*

*“ ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,
‘every knee will bow to me
and every tongue will confess allegiance
to God.’ ”*

*Yes, each of us will have to give a personal
account to God. So don't condemn each other
anymore. Decide instead to live in such a way
that you will not put an obstacle in another
Christian's path.*

I just want to point out again that Paul is emphasizing that we are not to call each other to a life according to *your* own conscience, but to *their* own conscience. He says we will each give a personal account to God. So, if I do something because you tell me to, even if that doesn't really match what I am thinking or hearing from God or my understanding of Scripture — if it goes against my conscience — then I will have to answer to God for doing something that I did not think was right.

But at least my helpful Christian brothers and sisters will think I am right. I look like them.

We do not own other people, or have a say in what is right or wrong for them. Nor do they. They answer personally, and directly to their Master and their Father.

Romans 14:14-19

*I know and am perfectly sure on the authority
of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself,
is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is*

wrong, then for that person it is wrong. And if another Christian is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be condemned for doing something you know is all right.

For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God. And other people will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

I think that's it. I think, as I mentioned at the top, that relationship is the key. Not an intellectual understanding of truth, but neither is it devoid of any absolute truth. It is the truth applied in love and lived out in relationship. As Paul says, aiming for harmony as we build each other up. I do like how he uses the words "aim" and "try". He knows we are all flawed. Every one of us. So complete harmony is impossible. But it should be our aim to only speak words of love that build up and encourage harmony among us.

It is interesting to note that Paul actually makes a definitive statement regarding the morality of what we eat or drink. He says he knows for sure from Jesus that everything is OK. And yet, that absolute knowledge of truth can not supersede relationship. The relationship is paramount. Not the intellectual truth.

Also, he reminds us that the Kingdom is not a matter of what we eat or drink — or what days we hold as special, or even what we do on those days, I suppose — he says it is a matter of living a life of goodness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Again, the focus is not on a factual truth, but a life of love toward one another directed by Holy Spirit — not requirements or restrictions placed on us by others.

Romans 14:20-23

Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, there is nothing wrong with these things in themselves. But it is wrong to eat anything if it makes another person stumble. Don't eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another Christian to stumble. You may have the faith to believe that there is nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who do not condemn themselves by doing something they know is all right. But if people have doubts about whether they should eat something, they shouldn't eat it. They would be condemned for not acting in faith before God. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.

I noticed that Paul specifically included drink wine in here. There is a taboo associated with alcohol among some groups of Christians in America these days. I wonder if the same was true in Rome in the first century? Well, Paul's truth then applies the same today. Jesus says there is nothing inherently wrong with any food or drink, but as he has led each individual, so must they choose. If it's wrong for you, don't do it. If it's wrong for the brothers or sisters you are with, don't do it. Food or drink — or your own freedom — is not worth the conscience of a fellow believer.

What an interesting chapter. It has given me pause again to consider my reactions to things spoken of, or done by the believers whose lives I come across. God is working in their lives, and who am I to say how they live out their relationship with him is either good or bad?

Please don't interpret the words in this book that way. That is not my intent. I do not want followers. I don't want to convince anyone that I am right about anything. This is a place where I get to work out stuff that Father is teaching and working in me, and I hope that by sharing it here, perhaps you may hear something from him as well. But it is certainly not intended to be taken at face value and applied to your life.

I am not your teacher. I am not your master. I am only a fellow servant, who longs to know and follow our Master, and our Friend. He is who I answer to, and so do you. Not anyone else who would presume to take his place. Listen to him, and follow him. Do as your conscience tells you to on matters where he has given us freedom.

Some might balk at that. In fact, I know they would. That, they say, will lead to anarchy. But it won't. Listen to Paul's claim one more time:

They are responsible to the Lord, so let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord's power will help them do as they should.

We rob each other of so much joy in directly following the Head, our Shepherd, our Master. He can, he does, and he will rightly lead us to Truth. To Him.

I supposed that is my challenge. To me, and to you. Let's allow each other to live out a life directed personally by Jesus. Let's use our words to encourage and build up, not to condemn a fellow believer when that is so clearly not our place.

You do not belong to me, nor do I belong to you. Together, we follow Jesus. And none other.

Clergy

February 20th, 2005

Did you know I am an ordained pastor? Well, I believe I would officially be called a minister by the group of churches who ordained me. It's true! One of my aunts even calls me Rev. Campbell. (In written correspondence.) If I was to take a pastorate somewhere, you might see on the sign out front...

FIRST CHURCH OF SOMEWHERE
PASTOR: REV. GREG CAMPBELL

Wouldn't that be odd???

There is a road in Florida where literally every third building is a church. That could be considered overkill. They definitely have that road covered.

But I was noticing, as we passed all the cleverly frocked marquees, that placed somewhere in plain view was (or were) the name(s) of the Main Dude. The senior pastor, minister, reverend, head apostle, or what have you. There was even a billboard advertising one church that had a photo of a glowing husband and wife team with the name of the church at the top and "Rev. _____ & _____ Smith" in big bold letters at the bottom. Even the church vans are not immune as one church proudly proclaimed the name of their pastor on the side of their moving billboard.

What are we doing? Why do we so long to glorify people? To place them on their high pedestals? To elevate them above ourselves so that we can feel privileged to follow?

Perhaps that is it? Perhaps we need to quasi-deify our leaders so that we can feel a greater desire to follow them. Perhaps it is even a prestige thing. To claim the name of some great leader as "our own".

Whatever it is, Paul addressed it in 1 Corinthians. The church had begun to proudly post the names of their pastors. "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow

Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas” or “I follow only Christ”. (1 Corinthians 1:12 NIV)

Paul’s question immediately following that verse asks, “Is Christ divided?” And of course, the answer is no. There is one body, one Head. But we are so good at lifting up and exalting our leaders. After these couple millenia, we not only follow men, but we segregate into larger denominations. Many with the names of men attached to them. Lutherans, Wesleyans (many follow this man, including many branches of Methodists), etc.

Paul even sends a sharp remark in the direction of the people we would think have it right when he says, “or, ‘I follow Christ.’” What’s wrong with that? Isn’t that the right answer? Yes, but when used as a delineator, no. That is Paul’s point. We are not to separate ourselves. We are one body. We all follow one Head. (And not divisively as though another faction who thinks otherwise is wrong.) From my reading of the New Testament, unity was a main concern of our Father.

I wish we could eliminate our names altogether. Our names are not needed. They are not important. In fact, you could even say they are dead. Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” I am no longer just Greg. I am dead. I am Christ-In-Greg.

There is one Name. Let’s stop pretending there are others and help everyone focus on that name.

Ministering

March 24th, 2005

God made us to relate. Relating is sharing life with other people. Sharing your successes, partying with the good news of life. Sharing a meal, a game night (we like those!), a movie night, a day in the park, or any sort of fun thing. Sharing the good things God is doing in you. Even sharing your possessions. That builds a foundation for sharing in the hard times. When a child dies. When a spouse cheats, or leaves. When a job is suddenly lost. We share those things too.

Now somehow over the past 2,000 years, the church has made that essential part of who we are as relational beings into a system. We have come up with all kinds of structures to create opportunities to relate, we have classes to learn how to relate (to believers, and especially to the lost), and pastors are paid to relate. It's their job to make sure others are relating well also. It's a business. The product: healthy people relating well with each other and with God. And we do a pretty decent job at turning out that product, without much deviance from the norm in each one.

We call that ministering. When you give it that spiritual sounding title, it makes it seem more important. Attaches "kingdom" value to it. We talk of "ministering" to someone who's hurting, or someone who is outside the lines we ourselves have drawn. It is an effort to accomplish some sort of visible result in someone's life. Or even just our own. The accomplishment is a feeling of satisfaction at allowing God to "minister" through us.

I myself am a perpetrator of such thinking. I have been in "paid" ministry for a long time. Granted, I have done it quite unconventionally, but still, I get paid to love people and "minister" to them. On some levels that is super cool. But mostly it makes me sick. I just want to love people because I do. No strings. No obligations. No attachments. No requirements. I don't think that I have those, but I know that we have created sets of expectations of our paid ministry

people. It's their job to "minister". Do you know what that does to them??? To their hearts???

This is not a job. We should not get paid to "minister". It is not a command from God. He leads by example. We love because we have first been loved. He loves me, so I love you.

I really don't think I have a problem with this, personally. (That sounded arrogant. It's not meant to be.) I think somewhere along the line God showed me this truth, and I got this one. There are some other things that I have not mastered, but this one managed to sink in. I do love people, not because I have to, but as an overflow from how much my Father loves me. My struggle remains in my being a "professional christian". I am moving slowly away from that, but not sure how to use some of the gifts God has given me, and completely leave the system of organized relating. That is certainly a work in progress, and ever shall be perhaps.

There is no magic in loving someone. No special way to do it. It doesn't count more with the ones loved, or with God, if we call it "ministering". That word, that idea, frustrates me so much.

Really, the problem is in our view of two worlds. The sacred and the secular. I really think Jesus lived in what we would call the "secular", but didn't think of it that way. He did not have the boundaries we do. He hung out at the synagogue, at the temple, with the religious dudes (whom we are quick to blast, but really would be equivalent to today's pastors, ministers, elders, and other church leaders) and he also hung out with the drunks and the whores and the other "dregs". Jesus knew one world — the Kingdom of God. It's all his. All of it.

We don't need special words. We don't put on our cape and fly around "ministering" to people. If we do, we're robbing them and ourselves of the deeper joy of living in God's love and grace, and sharing that with them. Listen to your Father, and love whom he wants you to, when he wants you to. And just get to know him. Do your job, whatever occupies your 9-to-5 life, always aware of how He is

There's The Steeple... Here's The Church

working in and around you there. And love the people he places in your path everywhere else.

There is no grand strategy needed. Just obedience and attention to his lead. His specific lead for you.

Sameness

June 3rd, 2005

My wife and I are spending the next two days with several hundred other homeschoolers from the state of New York. We even shed our parental responsibilities for those days (thanks to great friends and Grandma!), so as to focus completely on the acquisition of knowledge and supplies for schooling our children at home.

As we were sifting through the aisles and aisles of curriculum from such a wide variety of authors in such a grand assortment of styles, I noticed something. In almost every instance, the curriculum was promoting sameness. An idea, or system was being presented as a great way to convey knowledge, and marketed as such. Some curriculum even promotes the idea that promoting sameness is bad, but simply by the existence of such a curriculum, the authors ended up doing that very thing.

Before we came to this weekend, which happens to be one of Jen's most favorite events of the year, we were discussing my aversion to conventions. I really couldn't figure out why it bothers me so. But today I think I saw the bastion of similitude that conventions inherently possess, and realized that may be a large part of it.

I love that we homeschool. I love the idea of it, and the practice of it, and just about everything about it. So, it would follow, one could assume, that I would enjoy a gathering of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of like-minded people from all over my home state for the express purpose of gaining knowledge and resources to that end. That makes sense to Jen. She loves it.

But, not me.

I told her it's not so much the content, as evidenced above. I would probably be a little more excited about an Apple computer convention, but I'm still not really that enthusiastic about attending such an event — even with amazing content like that. (I really do love all things Apple...)

After one hour in the main vendor hall, it struck me. There is a drive in us for sameness. Sometimes it's in *us*: to match the behavior and ideas and other qualities of those around us. Sometimes we enforce our beliefs and world-views on others, hoping to enact some bit of sameness in the process. It is not usually a violent process, just, "the way it ought to be". This is quite prominent in the halls of faith. Most every public figure in the realm of Christianity (on any level) is attempting in some way to lay out a standard to which you should desire to conform. Often the standard is scriptural, but many times it is merely an interpretation.

The drive for sameness is the beat to which we all march. The books we read promote this. The curriculum at this convention says "Be like me!" The very culture of those in attendance here screams sameness. Many are dressed alike, speak alike, act similarly. It's not that homeschooling by its very nature merely conforms people to some rigid mold. I believe that is true in every group of people who are connected by a similar interest, or station in life. There is an inherently greater degree of sameness than with the general population, thereby creating an appearance of conformity. You can even see this in the groups whose similarity is that they are trying to not conform, as we observed with a group of skaters the other day, who looked and acted just like skaters we knew some 15 years ago when we were in high school. And, actually, the homeschoolers are quite non-conformist as well, by the nature of the similarity that defines their group.

Even in difference, we find sameness.

The Bible says we are sheep. Sheep follow the sheep in front of them. They do what the others do, careful to not get out of step with the rest. In so many ways, that is just like us. I often see myself as the proverbial black sheep, as so often not by will but simply by who God made me to be, I find myself choosing or thinking exactly opposite from everyone else around me. I am still a sheep, though. Just the black one.

So why am I so turned off by sameness? Why the

compulsion to be different? Just ask Jen. Almost every choice that comes up in life, we choose differently. (We do both enjoy a good Star Trek episode now and then...) But somehow, I love variety in life. I love doing things differently.

We know that God is the same yesterday, today and forever, right? So, it can't be that bad to be the same? Right?

I think perhaps that God is so amazing that while being the same, he is different. We already know that he is three persons in one. That within himself he is three distinct persons — more than just multiple personalities! God is so vast in his own nature that he is actually three separate persons. We also know that all of us are created in God's image, yet are totally and completely unique. None of these things is just like the other. To me, that reflects the vastness of our Father's character. One of his Image Bearers can not house the enormous variety within his Being. But altogether, we begin to exhibit a reflection of him to the world. All together in our differences.

God did not make us robots to attain some perfect standard of conduct that he has predetermined for every one of his creatures. He has created us all uniquely. There is some drive in us that loves similarity and longs to be like everyone else, or at least associate with like-minded people. And sometimes, that leads to either not being who we really are, or just playing games to be who others think we should be. Sometimes that leads to a sense of obligation and duty that God never intended for us. Sometimes that leads to conventions that celebrate sameness and encourage it all the more.

Sometimes that leads to me freaking out.

I'll get over it. But I think that I learned something more about me today. Something in me can not conform. I don't think out of pride or rebelliousness or anything of the sort. I think it's just a core part of who I am. Perhaps a piece of God's nature reflected in me. Perhaps his spontaneity is evidenced in me, his love for variety and creatively ap-

There's The Steeple... Here's The Church

proaching every situation differently. You can not help but see his love for variety in the universe that he has created!

Whatever it is, I am glad to be God's messenger of difference.

Does that make me his "Variety Show"?

The Colors Of My Calendar

July 18th, 2005

I was just adding another item to our calendar today and I noticed a decided shift in the overall color scheme.

I use a program that comes with Mac OS X called iCal. In that application you can assign specific colors to the various categories that events on your calendar might fall into. I do. And in the past, our calendar has been very red (the color I chose for basic/ministry events). But I was just noticing that the red has diminished quite a bit, and the blue, which represents our personal schedule (dinners/gatherings with friends and family, fun activities, and even our parenting class that we're leading) has increased dramatically.

I don't mean that we are doing more. In fact, I believe there is much more white space than previously occupied those tiny little squares. What I mean is, it seems that our priorities have shifted, or at least the labels we choose have changed.

Our calendars are filling up with all things relational. I work in the daytime, and help people through my graphic and web design skills. Then our evenings and weekends are no longer repleat with meetings or rehearsals or services. Instead, they are free for small, or even large group relational connections. Even just time as a family, taking a walk to a park or something.

The colors on my calendar seem to indicate we really are shifting from "doing ministry" to having relationships with the people God has put around us.

Don't misunderstand. I am completely aware that ministry devoid of relationship does not really exist. You can't really do ministry without people. But the focus inevitably (at least for those in leadership) drifts to the details of the event, rather than the personal and meaningful connection with the heart and soul of another brother or sister. And the calendar, with all its many colors reflects where our hearts are.

(This thought for today is perhaps most condemning

of me, not anyone else.)

Many of our relationships used to be intertwined very closely with our employment, or our “ministry”. Yes, we were relating, but that was our job. That’s a precarious line all church staff must tread. Pastors “check in” with members of their congregation as part of their 9-to-5 responsibilities. Youth ministers spend time with the kids at their houses, at school, at their sporting events to maintain relationship, yes... but also as a part of their duties. It’s always an interesting thing when tax season comes around and we label our relational activities as “work related” miles, or other expenses.

But it’s true! We have created a business of relating to people! Yes there is relationship but it’s also diminished because it’s through the lens of a business. Just as I discussed in an earlier chapter in this book, it is somewhat contrived, and that creates a “sense of artificiality”.

Oh what a mess.

We are enjoying this very interesting shift in the way God is working in us, and through us. It is fascinating. I love that I get to write out and share my thoughts here. Please feel free to comment. And please don’t feel stepped on. I don’t intend any judgment or condemnation or belittlement of anyone reading this. I am only sharing what I see from my perspective these days as God opens my eyes to many wonderful things.

Including the colors of my calendar.

EPILOGUE

**And In
The End...**

Concluding Remarks

April 1, 2006

As I finished putting this book together, I couldn't help but think that I had missed something. I tried to go back over each chapter in my head, wondering if I had said all that I hoped to communicate through a few thousand feeble words. I want so much to convey the astounding freedom that we have in the quite undeserved love of our Father. I want to communicate that we as the church could be so much more! I don't want to attack, or belittle the things that so many brothers and sisters cherish (as did I in the not too distant past). I only want to offer what I believe we Christians already know and teach, but perhaps are just not living out.

A phrase from Scripture comes to mind quite often when I ponder the current forms of the Church. "A form of godliness, but denying its power." To me it seems that could define the church, and the lives of many believers today. We have created a facade that would pretend to offer us life with Jesus, when in fact it is only a set of ethics to which we must adhere. It's only a meeting to attend. A job to be done.

The kingdom of heaven is so much more. It's here, now. Jesus has made it possible for us to know him and the Father by his Holy Spirit right *inside* us. He is always with us. Through good, and bad. This is the nature of the church. In reality, it's not something we have created to propagate truths passed down through generations. We have turned it into that. But the church is the living, breathing, body and bride of Christ. It's much more real than we have allowed it to be.

I don't know if the words on these pages have stirred you or not. If they have, it was not the words that stirred. It was your Father. He loves you, just like he loves me. He has communicated that to me through many means, and I am hopeful that you heard his voice through this book. It is not my intention to tear down anything with this book, only

And In The End...

to liberate and help open our eyes to the greatness of what we have, and perhaps what we're missing.

Live today in the freedom of God's love and grace. Know he loves you, and longs to be with you. His love is perfect, and compels us to love as we've been loved. May you know the greatness of living life as the church with others similarly loved.

*Grace and Peace to you, The Church.
Greg Campbell*

"The Church is so much more than we let it be."

Over the past five years of our journey, we have discovered that the church is so much more than we let it be. It is not a denomination, or a worship style, or a carefully planned array of programs. Jesus did not intend for his Bride to be so limited. The church is not defined by what we do, but who we are. We are the living body of Christ to the world. His hands and his feet. He says let your light shine before me. And for so long, all we have done is let it shine inside of our nice buildings on Sunday mornings.

Every bit of our lives is worship to our Father. When we are in Christ, we never cease to be part of the church. Not when we step out of the doors after a worship service, and not even when we don't enter the worship service in the first place.

You will most likely be challenged by some of what you read here. It is not my intention to change anyone's mind. I am not out to start a revolution. I am grateful for the people who have shared their thoughts and their journey through books and websites before me, and I am thankful that I can do the same. We are in this together, and certainly each of us has a journey to share.

I am grateful you have chosen to read this book. I do pray, even as I type, that God will reveal his deep, deep love for you as you read these words. I pray that our eyes will be opened to the fullness of life he has for us, and how we together as the church can realize that life even more than we are now. I pray for wisdom and open ears to hear what our Father might be saying to you, through what he has been saying to me.

May you know him more. His Grace and His Truth.

And may our Groom continue to reveal to us the passionate love he has for his Bride, The Church.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg is married to his best friend, Jen, and father of four great kids. Along with his writing, he also owns a web and graphic design business. Greg and Jen travel the country sharing their music in various locations. His other books include: *A Journey Shared* (2005) and *Life In The Rearview Mirror* (2006).

Visit Greg at
www.gregshhead.net

"MANY CHURCHES TODAY VALUE WHAT AMERICA VALUES - NUMBERS, ORNATE BUILDINGS, AND ENTERTAINING PROGRAMS, TO NAME A FEW. GREG CAMPBELL HAS REMINDED THE CHURCH TO VALUE WHAT GOD VALUES - LOVING GOD AND LOVING PEOPLE."

- JOSH ... CINCINNATI, OHIO

"GREG CAMPBELL'S THOUGHTS ON LIFE WITH JESUS ARE CHALLENGING AND FREEING TO THE SOUL. HIS HONEST AND HEARTFELT DISCUSSIONS ON BODY LIFE ARE REFRESHING. A GREAT READ FOR ANYONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO UNDERSTAND WHY THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH IS MISSING THE MARK FOR MANY CHRISTIANS."

- DAVE ... WILLIAMSVILLE, NEW YORK

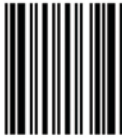
"GREG WRITES ABOUT MODERN, FIRST-WORLD EVANGELICALISM WITH THE PASSION OF A BROTHER AND THE CONVICTION OF A REFORMER. WHETHER OR NOT ONE AGREES WITH CAMPBELL'S VISION OF 'CHURCH', ONE CANNOT HELP BUT BE ENGAGED BY THE QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGED BY THE OBSERVATIONS HE RAISES"

- MIKE ... ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

ISBN 1-4276-0130-5



51195



9 781427 601308

Suggested retail price: \$11.95