
Introduction

The New Testament is a radical book. Its central character had nothing to do with religion as usual. He made scandalous claims, called for sweeping changes, and created a disturbance almost every where he went. But the radical nature of his message is not found in calls for protests or in advocating the value of violence. To the contrary, it is found in his call to welcome the kingdom of God that is breaking into this present age with a call to take love for God and love and responsibility for one another, along with the idea of community, to a dramatically new depth. It is also found in speaking prophetically against religion that is self-focused, autonomous and narcissistic.

To enter the kingdom and become a disciple of Jesus in NT terms was always to become part of the church of God, the *ekkle-sia* in Greek. The word refers to the community of people who are called together to live together for a special purpose. Unfortunately the English word “church” (which comes from Latin words that refer to the house of a master or lord) does not really communicate to most people the idea of community or fellowship. Accordingly, in many people’s minds they can belong to a church and still live life as separately or independently as they please. This was never God’s plan.

Call to Involvement

From the very earliest days of the church’s existence following the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2), it is clear that this was going to mean being involved in one another’s lives

in the deepest and most far-reaching ways. As we read NT letters to these communities we increasingly see that this involvement was not just to meet our need to socialize or have friends, but *it was to be transformational in nature*. The way these relationships were conducted was to be used by the Spirit of God to bring about changes in people's lives so that through this connection and dynamic with one another, they would grow and develop and mature into the likeness of Jesus, no less.

“Be transformed,” Paul writes, “through the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2), but the verses that follow in that same chapter make it clear that such transformation was not something that would occur as one solely meditated on God and his truth in isolation. It would come where his people lived out God's message in relationships and community as those who belonged to one another (v5) and as those devoted to one another (v10).

Dynamic Relationships

“One another” (one word, *allelon*, in Greek) is a phrase that occurs thirty-seven times in the NT letters in the New International Version (NIV) and is used almost exclusively in these letters to refer to the things that should, and in a few cases should not, characterize relationships among believers. When looked at together, and in context, these passages give us a comprehensive picture of dynamic relationships in which disciples of Jesus are accepted, loved, encouraged, challenged, helped and built up. They show us that the body of Christ is a place where there is to be confession, forgiveness and an eagerness to bear one another's burdens. A close look at these texts makes it clear that God sees these relationships as crucial to the fulfilling of his purposes and the fulfilling of our destiny. There is nothing peripheral or secondary about the concept of “one another.”

Beyond this, numerous other principles are given to us for building and enhancing relationships even though the phrase “one another” may not be used. Arguably, Paul’s letter to the Philippians was entirely about relationships (see appendix 1), though in that letter he uses *allelon* only once.

Our goal in this book is to show that walking with one another is central to our walk with God and means being involved in meaningful give and take in one another’s lives.

Not a Common Understanding

As we begin this study, it is important to recognize that we are swimming against the tide of religious tradition and sometimes even well-known highly respected religious teachers. We were struck recently to see that such esteemed thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas and even John Calvin saw some kind of dichotomy between our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. They saw the former being far more important than the latter, so much so that each believed that fellowship with one another would play a minor role, if even that, in eternal life. Calvin somewhat stunningly put it this way: “To be in Paradise and live with God is not to speak to each other and be heard by each other, but is only to enjoy God, to feel his good will and to rest in him.”¹

Combine some of this classical teaching with Western individualism and you get a view of Christian practice that is far from the New Testament’s view. Did you ever see an old movie where deep sea divers were dropped into the depths in heavy suits with big round helmets? Each diver was given air through a tube that entered his helmet and was connected to the air supply at the surface.

Many years ago I heard someone say that when you see

1. John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum* 33.227.

Christians taking the Lord's Supper today it is much like this deep sea scenario. It is as though each person is in his or her own isolated chamber with a line going up to God. In contrast to NT teaching (1 Corinthians 11:17–34), there is little sense of connection to one another. This comment made about the Lord's Supper could be made about many people's Christian experience in general.

I have had many conversations with people who seldom miss a church service or a mass, but when asked who they are involved with in a deep way in that assembly, they usually admit there is no one. Even if they have some relationships, they are often far from what we will see in the passages we will examine.

Like everything else about following Jesus, these crucial relationships will not happen without repentance. We must recognize that we are desperately in need of a major mind change, and we must be prepared to receive the kingdom as a little child, allowing Jesus to lead us some places we never thought we would go (and maybe are even fearful of going).

While these relationships will certainly cost us something—and sometimes a great deal, we pray you will see this book as an invitation to a richer life and to an opportunity to show the world the glory of God in a special way.

Our Friendship

The two of us first became acquainted with one another after Steve was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1994. Steve was aware that Tom had been living with MS for some time, and the two of us began to communicate by phone, with Tom in Boston and Steve in Dallas. Our first actual meeting was on African soil when we both attended a leadership conference in Johannesburg, South Africa. Though we continued to stay in

touch, ironically, we would not see each other again until we were both attending a meeting in Jerusalem in 1997.

As God would have it, the Browns moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in 2002, and the Joneses also moved to that same area in 2005. Our relationship continued to grow, and this book grew out of a series of classes on this topic that we taught in the summer of 2007 in the Greater Nashville Church.

As we jump into this necessary and exciting subject, we want to be clear: we make no claim to being some kind of “relationship gurus” or even to being especially good at relationships. We are writing out of a conviction that this is the real stuff of discipleship and life in the kingdom of God. We are committed to growing and learning about how to improve the depth and quality of our relationships till the kingdom comes in all its finality and fullness.

Making It Real

We want this book to be as practical as possible. At the end of each chapter we will include questions for you or, even better, for your group to discuss. To get started, take a minute to think about the following:

1. Write down the name of the person with whom you have your best relationship in this church.
2. On a scale from one to ten, with ten being the very best, how would you rate your relationship in terms of openness and spiritual depth?
3. On a scale from one to ten, how do you think they would rate your commitment to the relationship?
4. Write down the name of someone with whom you know it would be good for you and for them to have a better relationship.