

Love Beyond Love

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Introduction

God's greatest gift to us is His Love. He opens His heart and teaches us to love and be loved. Jesus Christ is the revelation of His love, and He goes beyond all limits and barriers to reach us. As a way of personal introduction to *Love Beyond Love*, I want to share the brief story of how God went beyond all limits to rescue me when, for many years, my perceptions of His love were deeply flawed. These flaws resulted in an inability to love and value others as He loved and cherished me. In His mercy and grace, my story is how God pulled from the shadows the well-hidden secrets of a traumatic event from early childhood to bring a confrontation and reckoning to the emotional wounds of my past. My struggles became a substantial piece of how God's revelation of love healed this author's wounded life.

Because of my flawed and distorted views of love, there was self-inflicted damage in many relationships. Not only did I put at risk the integrity of my ministry as a pastor, but I left many good people wounded in my wake. Eventually, this kind of behavior catches up. It is called sowing and reaping. I was fast approaching a personal crisis - and I knew it. That crisis came, and when it did, I turned to God. During this time (and not by chance), I began reading the Christian Classic - *Confessions* by St. Augustine. *Confessions* (as you may or may not know) are the personal memoirs of St. Augustine's journey to a Biblical discovery of love and faith in God. I did not realize it then, but Augustine's intimate struggles would connect with me on many levels. (1)

As a young man, Augustine constructed some very twisted ideas of love and intimacy. Although a brilliant mind, he could not reconcile the two. Troubled and empty, at thirty-two, Augustine entered a period of emotional struggle and internal anguish. In a moment of self-awareness, he wrote, "*How could I know real love? I feared I was only in love with the idea.*" Augustine determined he could no longer go on in his condition. After years of searching through Manichaeism, astronomy, intellectualism, and the art of rhetoric, he quickly began breaking down. Had Augustine finally come to the end of his desperate search? Would he find the kind of love that was beyond his own? Looking for those answers, he was distraught and inconsolable.

While visiting his mother, Monica, Augustine goes into the garden and begins to pace and weep despondently. He throws himself to the ground beneath the fig tree in the garden center in a final act of despair. As Augustine lays crying out, God gives him a moment of revealed truth from Paul's writing to the Church of Rome.

Romans 8:3-11

"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but the Spirit, if in fact, the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you." NLT

Augustine experiences a miraculous self-discovery leading him for the first time in his life, in surrender to God - just as he was. He sees the never-ending love of Jesus as his only bridge to healthy and complete intimacy between two people. Thereby finding the way to overcome and manage the flesh's powerful impulses with something even more powerful - God's incomparable love. Rescued from depravity and the bondage of narcissism, Augustine's is a dramatic story of God's love going beyond man's love.

From the time of reading Augustine's account, I could not forget his words or his confession. I found myself projecting and comparing his story into my own life and ministry circumstances until I could no longer take it. One day alone in my office, I blurted out loud, *"Do I really love God and His people, or am I just merely in love with the idea of loving them?"*

The answer was that I loved the idea of loving others because it made me feel good about myself. However, the idea of letting others love me scared me to death. With this confession, I was now ready to admit this was not real love - especially God's. I vowed to uncover and expose this truth about me, so I intentionally and painfully engaged the long-overdue

process of confronting the weakest and most hidden areas of my life and character. Tackling head-on my resistance to God's order and authority, I did something about my endless curiosity and limited knowledge of God's timeless traditions and eternal truth. I had to ask brutally honest questions about my true feelings and ideas of love for myself, God, and others. I sorted through personal life experiences (good and bad) and then revisited what the Bible had to say about actively and honestly living life in His love. I did this without my concordance and word search resources; I wanted to find the truth, to ask the right questions, not just one more irrelevant answer.

I went out of my way to observe the lives of other people in ministry with similar circumstances. Then, to gain added perspective and maintain objectivity, I talked for endless hours with those I felt confident could be trusted to be honest with me. The process's culmination brought me to a clear realization; most of what I had done, said, and knew about loving and being loved to this point in my life was just not correct! At times, that in itself was overwhelming. After nearly twenty years of ministry (at the time), how could that be possible? Not only was it possible, but it was also my new reality. I quickly discovered that my "day to day" default for loving and being loved was nothing like Jesus loved. The closer and more honestly I looked at how Jesus loved without filtering it through my "Steveness" (life expressed through my personality, beliefs, and behavior), the more inept and insecure I felt. The process appeared to be going backward when I wanted to go forward. So in frustration, I prayed. I prayed to God with an honesty-straight forwardness, as I had never done before. Then sitting in silence, I journaled the process as I lived through it.

Finally, I believed, *"I was beginning to know (as they say) what I didn't know."* As I started to share these experiences with close friends and people in our community, they resonated and revealed a commonality. It was funny because I would write down what I was experiencing, and I would read it; then I would have to re-write it. Because I was starting to understand my version of the truth and ideas of love were still too limited for what God was revealing. Each time I confessed to someone the desire to love as Jesus' loved, I could sense something more emerging inside me – something with a different mind, heart, and understanding. I could hear the Holy Spirit saying, *"If this love thinks or acts like you, then it is not like Me; you don't want that love, and you don't have to keep it."*

The awakening and revelations I had longed for were happening, and I was breaking through into places where little things in subtle moments felt more about Jesus and less about Steve Isaac. It was like entering a new and unknown world, where He was first, I was last, yet I knew I was His priority. Imagine that.

Here is the first revelation,

"If my love for God, for myself and others, judged like me, could become angry like me, had pride like me, or controlled like me - then it was the kind of love that could never go beyond me."

That was a good start; it just did not seem to go far enough. However, it became possible for me to identify the self-centric forms of manipulation I had spent years disguising as love. With that in mind, identifying the uses of selfish manipulation led me to a second revelation.

There is a better way to live and to love than that.

I now believed that love was what Jesus was calling me to, a better way to love - a love that must go outside and beyond my limits and capabilities. To not only live in Christ but to love in Christ. All of it. Every relationship, no matter how close or casual, to use every opportunity to love others in Christ.

At last, I could be honest enough to admit to myself and others that my kind of love is just not enough - because it does not always go beyond me. And that is where I, like Augustine, found the journey to love beyond love. In Christ, God's love goes beyond my human capabilities and reasons for loving, beyond my human limitations, to empower and fulfill my life. However, love beyond love is not just my story - it is our story.

Romans 12:9–10

"Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. 10 Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other." NLT

So, as you read the perceptions and biblical principles of *"Love Beyond Love,"* I hope that you not only connect with my heart but, more importantly, with the beautiful journey of the community at Reunion, to find authentic and genuine love for your own life. We continue to discover the truth we seek, and that which we do not know is indeed found somewhere in the love of Jesus. I pray this opportunity together creates a hunger for

you that (at the very least) will move you to seek out a love for God that can help you learn to love far beyond the limits - of you. Love beyond your perceptions to bring you face to face with Jesus and His very intentional and unavoidable expectations. I believe it would be good for you to push the delete key on your past ideas and feelings about loving and being loved (they more than likely won't help you). Be open to any awkwardness and discomfort that comes with any change this journey will bring about in your life. I think if you have any confusion or curiosity about your understanding of how to love and be loved, it is probably time for you to be ok with being redirected to learning the Biblical ways of loving beyond yourself. I am confident that the real Love of Jesus will disrupt and captivate your world and reinvent within you a new one. But that is good, it is an excellent place to be, and I believe the process is worth every moment.



“To Carthage I came. There I put my ear to the cauldron and heard from within and all around a song of unholy loves. I did not love, but I loved the thought of love. And in the depths of my desires, I detested the fact that I could not love more. I looked for something to love in my love of loving. I hated safety and wanted no path that did not have its snares.”

...St. Augustine, Confessions

Chapter One: Love Beyond Love

What does the term "*love beyond love*" mean?

We open our heart, mind, body, and soul to loving God and loving others through Him, removing all distance and hostility, keeping us from those moments in life where Christ has intended for us to love and be loved.

The framework for this definition comes from within the response of Jesus when asked what commandments were most important.

Mark 12:29-31

"Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." NLT

In these words, there is a specific calling and direct command from Jesus to love the way He loved. His call asks us to go beyond our limited love ideas, to move outside of our personal feelings of hostility and flawed perceptions of love for Him, others, and ourselves. Jesus asks His followers to love as He loved (John 13:34, 15:12-17). For a Christ-follower, loving beyond love is intended to be a daily function of life – more than feelings, timely gestures, or good deeds. Love beyond love must be initiated by a passion for truth and activated by faithful obedience. Passionate obedience takes us beyond what we are thinking and feeling.

We share the love shared with us, open, intentional, and filled with genuine hospitality.

Often, American Christians will mistake this for some form of spiritual movement or cause, but it is not the same thing. Yes, it is true that each of those can be an essential part of getting the message and means of Christ's love "out there" to those who need it but there is more to loving as He loved than messaging and movements.

We can all agree that God has clear expectations for all Christians in sharing the message of His love through temporal means (Matthew 25). But God's plans for humankind do not stop there - they go beyond the limits of where we found them or can take them. This includes His expectations of loving beyond what is trending, or the branding and messaging - beyond those places where men begin and end. His expectations continue beyond those merciful beginnings and sad endings to an ongoing unknown journey of faith requiring a love capable of going beyond where we started - to get us where we need to go. God's commanded love is intended to go beyond our endings and beginnings.

His love for us becomes our better way to live and love. Our love for Him takes us beyond ourselves to becoming His version of ourselves.

We become more personal, more intimate, and enduring, more like Him. It is a journey, not an event, a journey of love that goes the distance, and then some. Some will debate this, but this love beyond all loves is more demanding and challenging than sharing a message, a measure of mercy, and a communal meal once a week.

Love beyond love in a "Jesus context" demands depth and substance that most often requires sacrifice and suffering. The love of Christ Jesus carries the weight of the world, when the world seems to be falling in on you. It is never as simple or shallow as just showing up on social media with tweets, likes, messages, shares, or posts and then immediately checking how many friends can make us feel good or better about ourselves. That process is self-serving and shallow. No matter how many times we click "like" for someone else, we are waiting for it to come back to us. If it does, we feel good. If it does not, we feel bad; we are stuck in our feelings. Jesus never intended for loving and being loved to be static or self-focused. His love is fluid, intended to flow selflessly through and beyond us, far away from our rather large appetites for just feeling good about ourselves. The love of Jesus goes beyond feelings of self to feeling for others. Which means, day-in-day-out, we are going to love and be loved by people who will reciprocate with our love - and people who will reject both us and our love. Regardless of how that makes us feel, we have the truth in Christ to bring us back to reality. *Just because what we are feeling is real does not make what we are feeling reality.*

As Christians, we learn to move forward toward one another, just as Jesus did. And He did so regardless of the reception of His love. The reality is that He created a welcoming space in and around Himself for people to love and live life together. By extending His love and grace, we can also create a welcome space for love and life together in Christ. In His love, Jesus put a template in place for us; we welcome life together for anyone who will hear or believe His message of love beyond love. And although it

is not without boundaries or expectations, that place is loving, and the space is welcoming. Without that reality, to love people the way Christians should love is not possible.

As each of us searches for God's real heartbeat and the mind of Christ Jesus, we learn it is His love that opens the door to a welcome place for all kinds of people. We will also understand that no one is shut out (more or less) from that place or space.

As Christ-followers, we extend to others what Christ extended to us.

John 13:34-35

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." NLT

What Jesus asked of us was that we give a sincere, non-pretentious, non-religious invitation for others to live and love together in Him. Pastor, theologian, and martyr *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* put it best when he wrote,

"Love for our neighbor and for one another should stretch widely across all space and distance; and should be equally distributed throughout every portion of it – in the same way the sun casts out light. Christ invited us to share the perfection of the heavenly Father by imitating His indiscriminate gift of that light (love)." (2)

Bonhoeffer confirms that we should love completely, not only completely, but entirely consistent with the truth we know about God's heart and character. In doing this, we can be in step with who God has called His

followers to be. We know from the teaching of Jesus and personal experience how He has personally reached out to us. We know that His love is indeed open to all and that it knows no limits. Jesus has called us to love people in the same way. It is also clear there can be no disconnect between preaching the message of Christ's love and how we are to live life with others in His love. At Reunion Church, the community discovered the need to go beyond ourselves with His love; even beyond men's religion, to make a home-place in Christ for all.

Now let's shift gears. As you may have already guessed, settling and sorting through our relationship in Christ is a big part of clearing the way to loving relationships with others. It is the same in discovering the purpose and meaning Christ has for our life. They are uniquely connected, and once settled, then the question for you and I is no longer – *Who are we, and what are we to do?* Rather,

How does Christ want to love His community and others through us?

Matthew 22:9-10

"Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find." 10 And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good." ESV

How far does He want us to go with His Love?

Psalm 103:17

"But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children." ESV

That is a powerful image. From everlasting to everlasting is forever - His love lasts forever. The thought of loving anyone or anything for that long is difficult for the human mind to comprehend. That is because most often we see loving God and others as a task to complete, a box to be checked, an award to be achieved. God's love is woven within the very fabric of His creation. We were made to love and be loved, and the fact is, we were made to love Him and others with the ability to go beyond our capability. That revelation is the genesis of love beyond love and is where we can see God's desire for everyone to have someone and someplace to connect.

Matthew 11:28-30

"Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." NLT

God does not want people to be without a place or to be shut out and disconnected from the community. What we are describing is not just a physical or visible place. It is that and much more. It is the DNA of the community's culture that will unmistakably define us as open to loving and being loved as Jesus loves. He gives us His "DNA" by freely and openly loving us, sending us people to love in the same way. This culture is shared and imparted as a gift. It creates the love and compassion needed

for being open to people and relationships in an environment that fills the human need for connection and belonging.

The community is a place of meaning where the Holy Spirit is always shaping and reshaping us while being surrounded and loved by God's people. In this place, we know that God is growing our roots deep down to be able to send out our new branches to love beyond love – just like Jesus loved. This growth shapes and forms us, and we continue learning while being stretched and trimmed by all kinds of personalities and people up close and personal. There is always the need for help in learning to grow this way - it is not easy! God sends new people into our lives to love and love us, helping the process along. He wants us loving beyond ourselves, moving towards each other, teaching and learning, training, giving, exchanging, and encouraging—the investment of love beyond love.

We are to equip ourselves in this way for the calling and leadership needed for the ever-changing road ahead. As we faithfully do this, we must remember it is a slow process; one that requires vision and the will to persist and patience to wait.

It is good to remind the community that God has birthed something extraordinary in them - divinely included in God's plans for a time and a place like this.

We also experience that God's timing for building and loving His kingdom in this way is seldom the same as ours. We do our part. We seek first God's Kingdom, pray His will be done, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, and then we love beyond love.

1 Peter 4:8–10

"Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay. 10 God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another." NLT

As followers of Jesus, we are open to connecting with people through what essentially is an invitation to walk with us on the journey of life and faith. Along the way, we experience many extraordinary circumstances and settings where a genuine sense of God's Spirit is at work among us. His presence is the confidence needed for a journey of this magnitude with others. The shared experiences of loving beyond love inspire and give the necessary insights to continue with those we genuinely love. There is real spiritual growth in those shared experiences. Observing change within us is one of those good things that naturally encourages us to push even deeper into our faith, even when love seems too overwhelming. Still, there are those times in relationships and community when everything positive comes to a dead stop. With no movement, loving is tough and can be painful, which is confusing for many Christians. The confusion creates questions and periods of doubt that often cause us to feel like giving up on loving difficult people under challenging circumstances. But remember, love beyond love requires steady movement and growth towards Jesus. Just because there is no visible change with the ones we are trying to love through difficulty, it does not mean there is no movement. Keep moving - move toward Jesus.

Because this is so important to understand, we should continually filter what we feel through grids of biblical truth that help us maintain focus and clear the path toward the mind, heart, and command of Jesus to love.

When we become distracted by feelings of discouragement or weariness while loving individuals under challenging circumstances, it is God's truth that stabilizes us and keeps us moving in the right direction. By turning to God's truth (Jesus), the Holy Spirit provides assurances and confirmation to lead us back to the true path of love beyond love, despite what we do not know, what we cannot control or do not see.

Along with this renewed movement, we can experience an unseen momentum that sometimes carries us forward even when closing down from evident frustrations, difficulties, and disappointments. We learn through these experiences. Experiences wherein our perceived gains or losses of momentum are useful for loving and being loved in God's Kingdom. We continue to be faithful at loving beyond love, as Jesus asks us. If this sounds like work, remember that the calling to a community where the priority is to love God and one another does not just quickly happen. There is a lot of "stuff" to work through. By openly looking at the things we have just talked about, we begin to work through a good deal of who we are to be Christ. From our being comes our doing. So for now, we will talk about who we are to be in Christ.

Part of belonging to Christ means we have a specific mission to teach and impart God's truth to those who will gather with us. Fulfilling that mission requires equipping those we are called to (another part of the journey to loving beyond love). Training is what Jesus did for those He actively loved and those who desired to love beyond themselves. A genuine and sincere Christian community should have both an expectation and opportunity for discipleship training and equipping. Everyone participates, not just the paid or professional staff; discipleship is a shared mission.

We reconcile that most of the traditional or the popular culture-sensitive growth models for Christian church ministry do not fit with what God has for His home here among us. However, we do not believe we are right and others wrong, or that we are just a gathering of believers going through the motions. We are a community that believes in the call to follow Jesus, with a strong sense of worship and learning as we live and love together in Him. Many good people believe in Jesus, but not all good people follow Him. We want to follow Jesus and lead others to follow as well. Because of that, we know that ultimately many discover they are not willing to love beyond love, to truly open themselves to a life together (even figuratively) with anyone that does not think, look or act like them. To love as Jesus loved would mean wrapping one's arms around all of it, believing, following, and creating space for living the life of faith together. This is who we are in Him - all *of* Jesus, all *for* Jesus. Not all Christians want to think or love in that way and that is unfortunate because His way for us is truly something quite inimitable. We fully invest ourselves in what we have believed to get there, to be *all-in*. Just as Jesus the Messiah was *all-in* for us we reciprocate in love to be *all-in* for Him.

Hebrews 10:5-7

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; 6 with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am - it is written about me in the scroll, I have come to do your will, my God.'"

As far as being *all-in* and learning who we are to be in Christ, we have adopted five equipping actions from the first Church of Jesus.

Acts 2:42-47

"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. 43 A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. 44 And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. 45 They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. 46 They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—47 all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people." NLT

We commit (like the first Church) in mutual covenant to *worship together, serve together, learn together, pray together, and break bread together.*

Equipping actions such as these are at the core of who we are in Christ - resulting in understanding what we do in Christ. We are aware that millions of other Christian homes and communities are on the same spiritual path worldwide. They are experiencing the same pulling force of the Spirit and the same passion for the real message of Jesus - to love beyond themselves and love beyond their micro-world. Like us, they are trying to figure it out, and like Jesus, making an open and welcome spiritual home place for all. Knowing that many others like us exist is liberating and faith-building. It is encouraging to discover we are not alone on this journey, and that we walk with others who have heard God's call to love beyond love.



“Yes, praise God, love abides! Then whatever the world may take away from you, though it be the most cherished, then whatever may happen to you in life, however you may come to suffer in your striving for the good that you will, if people turn indifferently away from you or against you as enemies, if everyone disowns you or is ashamed to admit what he owed to you, if even your best friend were to deny you—yet if in any of your strivings, in any of your actions, in any of your words you truly have had love as your confidant, take comfort, because love abides. What you know with love as your confidant is recollected to your comfort—oh, more blessed than any achievement any human being may have accomplished, more blessed than if the spirits had been subject to him, more blessed to be recollected by love! What you know with love as your confidant is recollected to your comfort. Neither things present nor things to come, neither angels nor devils, nor, praise God, your own troubled mind’s fearful thoughts will be able to take it away from you, neither at the stormiest and most difficult moment of your life nor at the last moment of your life—because love abides.” (3)

...Sören Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*

Chapter Two: A Biblical Home-Place

Despite a community's preferences, the Church of Jesus Christ is never just traditional nor non-traditional. The Church should value and celebrate Biblical and historical tradition, and welcome and enjoy the freedom and freshness of non-traditional expression. It is not Biblical that we measure and identify the Church's success or mission through either of those templates. To the people we open ourselves to love, none of that matters - they are looking for a home-place. They respond to God's love in us and our ability to welcome their love in return - that is Biblical. Loving God and one another is what should define and identify us as a community of the Church. Still, we must figure out that loving beyond love is the only way to create a biblical home-place for those seeking and needing the presence of Jesus. A biblical home is a place of rest, nourishment, growth, stability, identity, worship, sharing, responsibility, and love. It is a place where the presence of Jesus leads us to love beyond love.

John 13:34-35

"So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. 35 Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." NLT

Quite candidly, and for the record, at Reunion, we have never felt explicitly called to any church model other than the traditional New Testament Church of Jesus. Yet, anyone familiar with the community at Reunion would agree that who we are and what we believe and practice connects us (through love) at some level with both the traditional and non-

traditional, and the historical and modern day Christian Church. We are glad for that connection, but when all is said and done, it is our Biblical and historical values and common calling to serve one another with the love of Jesus that defines us. Let me explain it this way, and then we can move on. Much of the movement and shared values in the community at Reunion are consistently biblical and very traditional. But, without a doubt, we welcome new expressions and methods to creating relationships with seekers and those in need who come our way. We also believe that the life-creating gospel of Jesus is entirely relevant to rapidly changing cultures. The bottom line is this; we sincerely want to be identified by our hearts' intent and the pursuit of loving in the ways and commands of Jesus. So the ministry template at Reunion continues to be the New Testament Church as described by Luke, in The Acts of the Apostles. The template created by first-generation disciples was a spiritual home place for all who believed. Because this template is vital to our community's spiritual DNA, it is certainly worth reading again and again.

Acts 2:42-47

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the Temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and

having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." ESV

By following the New Testament template, we not only make the Church, a biblical home place for believers, but we can serve and love extended communities and neighboring Churches as well. By praying and serving with and for them (regardless of their style or denomination), we are a source of strength, a witness of love, and influence for God's kingdom. Neighboring Christian churches are not a threat or competition. They are part of the Church of Jesus and are needed to encourage us in ministry areas where we might lack. It is how a biblical home place loves beyond love. Though roles and preferences may differ, the Church must love beyond itself to be the real presence of Jesus. The apostle Paul described it like this:

1 Corinthians 12:14-31

"Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But, in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those

parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are un-presentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." NIV

A Reunion leader once described the ministry as "saving the saved." That description was accurate, in that many at-risk sheep (displaced, disenfranchised) are welcomed, loved, and restored, knowing that our love and ministry must extend beyond what is familiar and comfortable to us. Personally, there have been many confirmations throughout the years of God's calling to love and pastor spiritually homeless and lost sheep. In that sense, the ministry of Reunion has always been consistent. We have made a place for a large group of lost or at-risk sheep in our community. They are here to love and be loved; to become healthier, stronger, and eventually help lead here. We openly love and welcome them into communion and fellowship, with the entire community graciously sharing in this ministry. The real test of a community's virtue and validity is loving and being loved by people whose "at-risk" circumstances and stances are sometimes uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Loving until it opens our hearts - loved until it changes our minds about who they are.

The ministry of love beyond love cannot merely represent just a pastor's calling. Yes, there is usually a founding or head Pastor, who serves and

leads accordingly in that role. But God calls all into the ministry of building the community of a biblical home-place. A calling not only to itself but to the entire living breathing body of Christ - to all followers passionate to love as Jesus loved - beyond Himself.

Philippians 2:1-5

"Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? 2 Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. 3 Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. 4 Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. 5 You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had." NLT

The community reflects the journey of common calling, shared experiences, and each member's complimentary gifts. God uses these essential connections to accomplish His will in each of us – to create the home-place filled with the genuine love and hospitality of Jesus. There is a healthy place for both similarities and differences, as long as they remain central to Christ's common calling; to love beyond ourselves. That is the one thing that must continually be discovered and rediscovered.

What helps that discovery process is to frequently recite and re-clarify to one another our shifting and growing similarities and differences in ministry. Communication is a healthy process and key to maintaining relationships in shared ministry. It is a process that helps awareness and

appreciation for the ever-changing needs of people in our world and local communities. The commitment to revalue and reinvest in one another ensures a spiritually healthy home-place continually being formed and reformed. It is a Christian community open to loving and being loved in Christ.

We now live in a radicalized and agnostic millennial era. The first era in history to be controlled and empowered by a "*global technopoly*." Instant global access and virtual gratification have tethered entire cultures and societies to one monopolizing force - technology. The algorithms of targeted demographic marketing drive this *technopoly* through multiple search engines and social media platforms. The power to know and control thought, emotion, and redirect several billion people's physical and emotional appetites is used and abused through automated keywords with the stroke of a keyboard. Ours is now a racially and politically polarized world with distinct and diverse social/economic cultures and micro-cultures. Beliefs are consistently inconsistent and subject to change with how each moment makes one feel about oneself. Accountability is scarce, and commitment to faith, and the Church has been down-graded to fit any given moment's convenience and feelings. "*The place to stay they say is gray*" - neutral and subjective. But that is a contradiction, our culture is anything but neutral and subjective. We are deeply divided and polarized. In reality, this means one can have an opinion without being invested or accountable to anyone other than oneself, spewing but never allowing for feed-back. The Neo-American culture masks itself (sometimes literally) through identity politics, hate-speech, race-baiting, moral subjectivity, and

gender-neutrality. Some would describe this as intellectually and emotionally "woke" to civil, social, moral, and genetic freedoms. In reality, it has little to do with intellectual enlightenment and everything to do with the human appetite for having what we want when we want it, regardless of the cost or consequence to conscience or community. The *global technopoly* creates, determines, and virtually feeds the appetite. This behavior is the very definition of *nihilism*. The Latin word *nihil* means that human values are baseless, that life is meaningless, that absolute knowledge is impossible, and that moral standards do not exist. Nihilism is the cultural reality and challenge of the present-day Christian Church.

How does the Church provide community and home-place for that?

You will not like this answer, but it is true. The Church cannot; only the love of Christ can. His love going through us beyond the Church, ourselves, and our limits to loving those we believe unlovable.

Until now, most Church strategies have targeted only the strategically desired demographics from among the undesirable ones. Although there seems to be nothing wrong with this on the surface, something has not been quite right about it, especially when looking at what it means and the consequences it brings.

A strategically desired demographic would mean the economically stable, age-advantaged, family-centric, the emotional and socially intelligent. The results for this strategy have been extremely successful, producing hundreds and thousands of active and vibrant mega-church plant

campuses across our great country. However, outside of the strategic demographic would be our most vulnerable and at-risk: the young, the graying, the wounded. From a biblically correct and love beyond love context, the optics and reality of this are not acceptable. Although appearing right and smart in many ways, the desired demographic strategy may not be very Biblical and wise. Taking a closer look at the template (intentionally or unintentionally) reveals the welcome of some and the rejection of others. That is not a Biblical home-place.

Is this what Jesus tasked His Church to do?

The ones rejected are usually those whose life circumstances and lifestyles are not a good fit with the implementation and the ROI of the vision or mission. This philosophy solely targets the demographic's needs that can most quickly and capably help achieve compliance, rapid growth, financial viability, and desired amenities.

Frankly, the love beyond love of Jesus for people always represented a much slower process of growth than the one that has become the American Church template of success. The love beyond love ministry example of Jesus costs everyone involved more than just money. It is more frustrating long before it ever becomes fulfilling and misunderstood before it is likely to be understood. The example of Jesus is all about prioritizing God's expectations of us above our expectations of Him.

Luke 14:28:33

"But don't begin until you count the cost. Who would begin constructing a building without first getting estimates and then checking to see if there is

enough money to pay the bills? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of funds. And then how everyone would laugh at you! They would say, 'There's the person who started that building and ran out of money before it was finished!' "Or what king would ever dream of going to war without first sitting down with his counselors and discussing whether his army of ten thousand is strong enough to defeat the twenty thousand soldiers who are marching against him? If he is not able, then while the enemy is still far away, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace. So no one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me." NIV

Sadly, in America, the strategic research and target demographic template has too often become the final default for identifying the preferred and non-preferred for their churches. Until the millennial era. Let me explain this in terms of technology in order to make a hard truth more palatable. The attempts of the American Church to meet the needs of the strategically desired demographic in the era of the millennial has planted a virus in the Church's hard-drive or biblical grid of truth. This virus attacked and deleted essential files needed for teaching Biblical truth and *Christological* discipleship (sanctified-surrender, self-sacrifice, selfless-service). The millennial has been strategically taught from elementary to university, "how you feel determines who you are, what you believe, and what you can do." Technology then strategically targeted its entire messaging and marketing to emotion-driven connectors: unlimited availability and free access to digital imaging and live stream video with virtual anonymity. Google, not the Bible, answered every question, cured every curiosity, fed every appetite. Because the moral and ethical absolutes of a Biblical

worldview now represent the greatest threat to secular progressivism's technological freedoms, Christianity must be dismantled, discredited, and no longer exist. Again, the Church must ask itself:

How do we provide a physical community and home-place to an increasingly hostile culture controlled by virtual reality?

How do we protect the physical community and home-place without Biblical truth?

The answer is not to re-imagine the Church of Jesus as a virtual reality by surrendering control of its freedoms to gather and speak. The answer is to physically gather the Church and re-affirm the Bible as God's absolute word and the believer's grid of truth. The Church must become more of a reality than it has ever been before. We must become more free and untethered to man's mechanisms and devices than we have ever been in our history. Alive and present; open and welcoming, loving with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Here is a reality for the Church to process.

Virtual means to simulate. Simulate means pseudo, artificial, or not real. The Church of Jesus cannot just simulate the love of Jesus. Jesus is the Church's foundation, but His love was and always will be the Church's foundation and builder. The Church must love beyond love.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 13

"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I had the gift

of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. 3 If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing." NLT

"Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love." NLT

John 13:34-35

"So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. 35 Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." NLT

Romans 12:9

"Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good." NLT

We must risk everything to be physically, spiritually, and emotionally present and available to love. Open to all demographics and all people groups. We love beyond ourselves, loving beyond love. The Church must create a spiritual and physical home-place for all. High risk, undesired, broken, embittered, disenfranchised, lesser-than, and unlovable. The Church does not provide ROI (return on investment) or risk-management for the Kingdom of God - not our assignment. The entirety of the Church's time, talent, and treasure must be extended to love beyond love. Like many other communities, Reunion discovered that creating a spiritual home-place with a physical presence is who God called us to be, and so

we surrendered ourselves to it. When we commit to a shared covenant to love as Jesus loved, it is evident that we do not love only the people with the means or capabilities to make the Church what we want it to be. Jesus told the Pharisees,

Matthew 9:12-13

"Healthy people don't need a doctor — sick people do." Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices.' For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough." NIV

When we respond and act out of love beyond our limits, we do not judge, condemn, marginalize, label, or write people off as an undesired market-demo. To even come to a person solely on how they can benefit us is wrong, for that matter. We all know that is a contradiction to how Jesus wanted us to love and connect with people. We are called and created to love, designed to love and be loved by a diverse people, to extend the grace extended to us. To go beyond what we thought possible with them - to share the home-place shared with us. When we forget (which is our tendency), we are reminded by the Holy Spirit to generously love and give to others as we invite them to live with us together in Christ and God's grace.

The Church cannot righteously fulfill its calling to love beyond love as a virtual Church. Do not misunderstand. The use of technology to teach, disciple, inform, and create interest is valuable and necessary. However, virtual relationships are simulated relationships and are not real in the most essential aspects. Virtually loving and being loved is simulating loving and

being loved. Ultimately it is not genuine. The Church must not come under the controlling influence of a *global technopoly* set on deconstructing the gathering Church. If the Church does so, the same technology it uses to stay open can shut it down. Internet and network entities hostile to the Church and the Gospel of Jesus control live streaming platforms.

No, to create and provide a spiritual home-place for all, the Church must physically gather in Christ's unity, peace, and faith.

Without welcoming people into an open and hostile-free home-place, there is no real possibility of leading them forward into true life together in Christ. And there is no real possibility for the genuine and sincere community, bringing us back to where the love beyond love story began. For the Church to create a biblical home-place, we must talk about people who have been described by the American Church as the "difficult" or "non-preferred" demographic. According to Jesus, these are vulnerable and at-risk people who need a biblical home-place with a spiritual presence. The young, the graying, and the wounded. We can and should describe these three groups as at-risk believers because of their unique connection to the Church, and yet the uncertainty and instability of their place within it. We can identify these groups as *Young-Believers, Graying-Believers, and Wounded-Believers*.

The Young-Believer

The young-believer is the adolescent and teen who have grown up in the Church. Young-believer is part of the populous who is the most sought after demographic of the global digital marketplace. The idea behind the push is to establish a virtual connection with the coming generation. The energy and effort of secular media and technology are focused on

controlling *what and who* is next, not the frustration of changing what is now. Whoever controls that market share controls the ability to influence the future and indoctrinate nearly three generations. Control of the present generation of teens can pre-determine an entire nation's thinking and behaviors for a third of a century. The template for this is nothing new. In Germany, 1926, The Nazi Party established *Hitler-Jugend* (Youth). Within nine years, *Hitler-Youth* boasted a membership of 5.4 million teens, and the *National Socialist Party* had seized all academic and religious education of Germany's children and youth. Adolph Hitler said, "*If the older generation can not get accustomed to us, we shall take their children away from them and rear them as needful to the Fatherland. He alone who owns the youth, owns the future.*" (4), (5)

In present-day American education, our State Universities and higher education are thirty years into the open deconstruction of Judea-Christian ideology and the indoctrination of progressive and radical socialism. Technology serves as the central vehicle used to drive the anti-Christ messaging. Secular media networks and platforms have rebranded and redefined the American Christian Church for the young-believer. It is not flattering. The rebranded Christian Church is now culturally known to our young-believers as the "*hate-religion*," referring specifically to the gender-specific language and the traditional sexuality of male and female roles represented in Biblical beliefs.

At many levels, the American Church has responded with technology and virtual strategies of its own. Youth ministries have effectively embraced digital gaming centers, video messaging, and virtual discipleship through *YouTube* and other video streaming channels. Social networking services

such as *Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, SnapChat, and Instagram* have kept Church youth ministry technologically relevant, but not always Biblically sound.

Most Church's have developed attractive opportunities for young families with kids through recreational/sports leagues and performing arts programs that far exceed those in the public school programs. The growth and expansion numbers of private Christian education in the last thirty-years are staggering. Christian schools are flourishing, and sprawling Church campuses have waiting lists for their activities, programs, and events.

What is the Church missing?

First is acknowledging that something indeed is wrong and that we may not have been the smartest people in the room for the last three decades. *Second* is having the courage to become the Church that Christ has called us to become. With those two priorities in place, we can look at retaining and reclaiming God's prized workmanship and make these Biblical truths come to life in young-believers.

Ephesians 2:10

"For we are his masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." ESV

Proverbs 22:6

*"Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it."* ESV

Psalm 8:1–9

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. 2 Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. 3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? 5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, 7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. 9 O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" ESV

We do not necessarily need the research of *Barna Group* to see the mass exodus of young-believers from the Church and into a complete crisis of faith. The godless world's deception pulls our young -believers away from the truth of their faith and connection to the Church. The answer to the departure and subsequent turmoil of belief has not been amenities, activities, and programs. Though there are credibility and effectiveness in using technology and social media platforms to disciple and teach essential themes such as self-image, self-value, and selfless service to others - there is more to impart. And though the Church's virtual messaging and use of *YouTube* channels can re-enforce the importance of Biblical principals such as *image-bearing* and becoming *agents of cultural change*, the Church must go even beyond. Beyond amenities, programs,

and technology, to create and offer a Biblical home-place and establish a life-long faith and generational community.

Barna Group research has shown that a person's worldview is most often in place when they reach 13. If that worldview is not Biblical, then the Church and God's Kingdom will most likely lose them. We have already established the Church is doing a good job teaching and providing resources and opportunities. Again, the key to this goes beyond programs, resources, and amenities. The key is in the foundational understanding and extended practices of love beyond love. Here is the Biblical example within the context of young-believers. (6)

Psalm 36:7-9

"How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. 8 They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. 9 For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light." ESV

Mark 10:13-16

"And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. 14 But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. 15 Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." 16 And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them." ESV

What we hear is that the place for our young-believers must be in the shadow of God's wings, nourished and nurtured in the abundance of His

house. Our young-believers must have time in the presence of Jesus to experience His love and the impression of His touch. As young-believers learn to love and value being in the presence of Christ, they will learn to love and appreciate His Church. The responsibility for this is two-fold. Both Church and parents must assume full responsibility and integrity in fulfilling what Jesus called "*entrance into God's kingdom.*" The two-fold partnership of parent and Church is the biblical template for navigating our young-believers' faith crisis and establishing the Church as a generational and life-long home-place. Young-believers must trust they have been told the truth by the people they love most - family and Church. The door to discrepancy and doubt opens when parents and the Church do not make their home a place for young-believers to witness and experience the life-creating love and touch of Jesus.

This home-place requires love beyond what parents and the Church want to give and demands we live and lead to what young-believers need to have. The family and Church do not trend or compete with the alluring intrigue of an anti-Christ world. That will never happen. The Church and family must fall in love with loving Jesus, creating a home-place for His presence and touch and not a virtual one. The simplicity of children with Jesus and the profound connections of love beyond love.

Hebrews 2:13

"And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Behold, I and the children God has given me." ESV

Graying-Believers

Graying-believers are the people group most challenging for today's Church to navigate. This challenge is nothing new; ironically, it is age-old. The biblical home-place for the graying-believer has become unavailable and nearly extinct in the American Church. The extinction is visible to the Church through the tension and struggles between the emerging young and departing old. How does the aging and declining demographic graciously and intentionally find its place to train, mentor, impart, and release leadership and authority? How does a younger and determined demographic respectfully make a place of honor to receive valuable training and mentoring needed for responsible leadership and authority? In creating the biblical home-place amid this challenge, the Church's answer is by responding and celebrating relationships with love beyond love. Love beyond barriers of age, relatability, and personal convenience.

Deuteronomy 5:16

"Honor your father and mother, as the Lord your God commanded you. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the Lord your God is giving you." NLT

Leviticus 19:32

"Stand up in the presence of the elderly, and show respect for the aged. Fear your God. I am the Lord." NLT

Making a biblical home-place for the graying-believer is one of the fundamental challenges for the current Church. First, the American Church of Jesus must resolve; *"Are graying-believers valued, loved, relevant, and do they have a place"*? Second, the Church must humanize and love the

aging-believer beyond seeing them as an undesired or fading target demographic that does not attract young families. The Church must love and value the graying-believer beyond any resentments and insecurities, beyond any perceived inconvenience or any age bias that may exist. The Church must love enough not to marginalize and make irrelevant the potential of one of its most significant and remarkable resources. We must love and value enough to seek understanding.

Who are the Graying-Believers?

They are the ones who invested their lives in the Church, and it's vision, mission, and ministry. Though certainly not perfect, they are the ones who have done it all and given it all; time, talent, and treasure. Graying-believers have served in leadership, tithed, and given their money to missions, building projects, and the best years of their lives to the Church. Many have now outlived their founding Pastors and spiritual leaders only to watch the very churches they built become something they no longer recognize. Graying-believers are the ones who have been pushed out or left out by new Pastors and younger ministry leaders less inclined to listen to the advice, preferences, or wisdom of a people group presumed on their way out.

1 Timothy 5:1

"Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father..."

ESV

Though they may become defensive, data shows that they have not made a home-place for past generations' graying-believers in their zeal and determination to establish their version of a home-place for the next generation. Perhaps Church leaders do not want to deal with the residual of control and a legacy of accountability that the graying-believer represents. Just a thought.

Certainly, roles and responsibilities have and must continue to change organically for a healthy Church, but not at the unhealthy expense of disregarding and shutting out those who have sacrificed and served. Consequently, the house that graying-believers built is no longer their home. This rejection creates the hurt and bitterness behind the negative feedback and criticism from an aging, frustrated, and even frightened group. Faced only with the loss of their independence, mobility, influence, and health, they often become embittered about their sacrifices and the lack of respect and opportunities to be acknowledged and heard.

Many of the graying-believers understand that succession is needed. In context, the graying-believer knows the old must eventually die so that the new can emerge and live. Reconciling this reality is much more complicated than simply knowing it. Many still have a great deal to offer and impart as teachers, elders, mentors, ministry advisors, and wise counselors. There are desires and a passion among graying-believers for serving and contributing to remain meaningful and relevant. This desire for relevancy is often misunderstood and interpreted as the ego and stubbornness of aging people trying to hold on when they need to let go. In reality, it is the desire they have to continue loving beyond love at an age and season in life where they are finally un-hindered enough to be entirely available to serve and love selflessly.

We must reverse the sad and disturbing current trends to ignore and marginalize the graying-believer.

What should a shared home-place with graying-believers be?

The biblical home-place for the graying-believer is foremost, a place where love goes beyond the limits of age and appearance. It is a place where the graying-believer has a meaningful reason and role in ministry. The community seeks their wisdom and values time learning from their lessons and stories from the past. The graying-believer cannot be marginalized and kept out of planning and praying about the Church and its future. The Bible is direct about the place and needs for the graying-believer in the Church. Without them, we cannot be the presence of Jesus to our community.

Proverbs 20:29

"The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair." ESV

Acts 2:17

"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams..." ESV

The Wounded Believer

Wounded-believers are the people group that saddens, invokes compassion, and at the same time, frustrates and consumes today's American Church. The reasons for this are not simple but undoubtedly straightforward. First, let's acknowledge and define that wounded-believers believe in God and have some connection or relationship with the Church. Wounded does not mean one does not believe, nor sin the only thing capable of injuring the human mind, emotion, or spirit. Secondly, we should not assume the Church is naive to the ministry and care of its wounded-believers. The Church is not a replacement psychiatrist, psychologist, trauma-specialist, or a behavioral treatment center. However, Christ calls the Church to minister healing, hope, and love; to include a biblical home-place in the presence of Jesus for the wounded and sick. Thirdly, the Church needs the love it can receive from the wounded-believer community. Loving and welcoming into a shared home-place, the wounded-believer is how the Church learns the fullness and dignity of loving and being loved. The love of the wounded-believer is essential to the Church in learning who God has called us to be.

The truth is that ministry to wounded-believers is not a quick-fix made possible by breakthrough conversations, helpful books, or essential support groups. The complexities of ministry to wounded-believers can be overwhelming to the under-qualified pastors and understaffed leaders in most American Churches. Or, worse yet, a frustrating nuisance to the prideful pastor and leader seeking to protect the optics of "*Pleasantville*."

Who are the Wounded-Believers?

The wounded-believers are the precious ones who suffer from the pain of grief and loss, the trauma disorders of abuse and violence, the spiraling and isolating effects of mental illness such as manic or bipolar depression, personality disorders, schizophrenia, delusion, and panic or fear-based anxieties. Wounded-believers are also the ones who struggle endlessly with compulsive addictive behaviors such as alcohol, drug, food, gambling, and sexual addictions; self-loathing behaviors such as self-harm, self-degradation, obsessive-compulsive, and self-indulgent narcissism. Sadly, the cyclical cruelty of these emotional injuries and mental illnesses are only the tip of the iceberg for the wounded-believer. When we cannot fix, the Church and its leaders are often disappointed, frustrated, and even embarrassed. The inability to "fix" creates a sense of failure that hangs over the ambition-driven ministry that can be perceived or processed as incompetence, unqualified, or lack of faith and spiritual power. This sense of failure does not match the narrative of being unblemished or "we've thought of everything for everyone" type success. And, when the ROI reaches the tipping point, then the biblical home-place for the wounded-believer is definitely at risk. No one says anything usually, but there is no longer the genuine welcoming attention or obvious connection paths. Too often, the response of the Church is to provide designated ministry support groups isolated far away from the visual profile and thriving home-place of the mothership. The neglect or lack of priority for the wounded-believer must stay front and center of our ministry sightline and conversations. As we look forward and talk about ministry relevance, the Church must see clearly and talk seriously about the Biblical home-place for these dear people.

The Church must embrace the Biblical mandate as instructed by the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 12.

Romans 12:4–5, 9-16

"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.

10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Out do one another in

showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the

Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

Never be wise in your own sight." ESV

The wounded-believer is not going away regardless of the uncertainty of their place in the Church. The Holy Spirit draws them to the home-place - the Church, by even the slightest hope for help, relief, and love. As experienced and expressed through our current culture's hate and hurt hostility, the physical and emotional trauma for wounded-believer is only intensifying.

In truth, that very well could be the understatement of the ages! The body of Christ is the Biblical home-place for the wounded-believer, making the Church not only the complete expression of diversity but revealing the love beyond love manifesto of Jesus to our socially and politically divisive

culture. Making a home-place for the wounded-believer to experience Jesus's presence matures the Church's faith and spiritual understanding. Using the term community rather than home-place, listen to *Jean Vanier*, author, and founder of the world-renowned *Le' Arche* communities, address the issue. (7)

"A community is not an abstract ideal. We are not striving for perfect community. Community is not an ideal; it is people. It is you and I. In community we are called to love people just as they are with their wounds and their gifts, not as we would want them to be. Community means giving them space, helping them to grow. it means receiving from them so that we too can grow. It is giving each other freedom; it is giving each other trust; it is confirming but also challenging each other. We give dignity to each other by the way we listen to each other, in a spirit of trust and of dying to oneself so that the other may live, grow, and give."

The Biblical home-place is not only compelling to the wounded-believer; it is the lifeline of hope and healing. The Church is the home-place that Jesus intended for the wounded-believer - period.

As we take our eyes off ourselves and look out beyond ourselves, we can see that there are good and precious people of all kinds who identify themselves as believers yet carry the weight and trauma of the wounded. In Christ, we are their home-place. That is love beyond love.

1 Thessalonians 5:14,

"Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone". NLT

The point of all of this is in knowing our role. Christ is the healer - we are the help. The Church may bristle at that or even choose to ignore it. Either way, it is still true. Just a little humility would allow us to see the significance of our role in extending the life-giving love of God. The biblical home-place is the Church, and the Church is the place for God's people; young, graying, and wounded. We are the people – and we are the place where the person and presence of Jesus can be experienced and found. With this understanding, we can be the place of belonging for people just like the ones Jesus loved and walked with when He was on earth. We should remember how He loved them all and how He spoke to all, making sure they knew there was a place for them to grow and to change the disappointments of the life they knew. When Jesus said, "come," He included the ones both in and beyond the Church - the strong and the weak.

Isn't it crazy after all these years, many Christians and many churches still struggle with which ones they should love, or who to make a place for within the community of Christ? And after all, is that even our choice? Shouldn't our home indeed be a place for all those that Jesus calls to it?

Psalm 127:1

"Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain." ESV

We do not want our labor to be worthless. The truth is that everyone needs a place of covering and recovering, a home. The place to connect when

who we are and where we are is not fitting anywhere else. We all need a place to grow up, grow whole, and grow old in Christ. A place where open and healthy relationships can be formed and can flourish. The Church home should be where all people and families of all age groups can love and be loved; a place as we said to grow and change, and a place where we all can experience life together in Christ. The Biblical home-place.



“A community is only truly a body when the majority of its members is making the transition from “the community for myself” to “myself for the - community,” when each person’s heart is opening to all the others, without any exceptions. This is the movement from egoism to love, from death to resurrection; it is the Easter, a passage, the Passover of the Lord. It is also the passing from a land of slavery to a promised land, the land of inner freedom.

A community isn’t just a place where people live under the same roof; that is a lodging house or a hotel. Nor is a community a work team. Even less is it a nest of vipers! It is a place where everyone – or, let’s be realistic, the majority! – is emerging from the shadows of egocentricity to the light of a real love.

Love is neither sentimental nor a passing emotion. It is the recognition of a covenant, of a mutual belonging. It is listening to others, being concerned for them, and feeling empathy with them. It is to see their beauty and to reveal it to them.” (8)

...Jean Vanier “Community and Growth”

Chapter Three: Changing

(Isaiah 57:14-19)

"And it will be said: "Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people." 15 For this is what the high and lofty One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. 16 I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me — the breath of man that I have created. 17 I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. 18 I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, 19 creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near, "says the LORD. And I will heal them." NIV

A great deal of what needs to change in us is behavior related. To start, we have to recognize that most of our wrong behavior is just the result of how wrongly we think. Wrong thinking produces wrong behavior. This statement is not merely a secular idea, but rather it is a biblical truth - a truth that we simply can't ignore because it asks us to change things we do not want to change. As Christians, we should be "all about change." Let me explain; Christians should begin to change because they genuinely want to grow in grace and understanding of their faith.

2 Corinthians 5:18

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." NLT

So, it is safe to say that if you don't want change in your life, you more than likely wouldn't see the need or desire to become a Christian. But, come on, all of us know we need to change in some way or another; and in Christ, God has given us the perfect vehicle for that change to take place. We need to know first that we can change because of Christ; second, we never have to stay the same from the moment we come to Him. In Him, we are in a constant mode of being formed and reformed by the truth that He reveals to us through His written Word. The process of change is what Christians should correctly identify as the Holy Spirit's work in us. The work of the Spirit in us is essential and critically significant in knitting our lives together in Christ. But let's get back to the idea that "wrong-thinking produces wrong behavior." If this is true - and it is, then it is also true that "right-thinking produces right behavior." So, we must be open to a change in thinking wrongly, which is one of the great benefits of the Holy Spirit and the power of God's Word working in us.

Ephesians 4:22-24

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." NLT

Romans 12:2

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will." NLT

When we know as Christians that our objective is to become agents of change, we can then, without fear or anxiety, welcome the personal changes God wants to make in us. He makes these changes in us as we learn His truth, as His Spirit leads us, and as we learn to love each other obediently. Let's describe a spiritual process of two simple ways in which our thinking changes:

First, we must desire to know what we do not know. We value knowledge of who God is.

Second, we accept the call to do what we have not done. We value purpose in doing God's will.

However, (as we said earlier), none of this happens without the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us to reveal to us the word of truth. As we engage ourselves in the process of learning biblical and spiritual truth, our minds and our thinking begin to change. At that point, we can see the avenues of change God has made for us, and then we truly start to have a realistic expectation of changing our old and wrong behaviors. But as long as we continue to think in the same old way - nothing new will ever happen. Sure we can target certain things and mark them for change, which can be liberating in itself, but what we need is to be made new in our minds' attitude. When this happens, there is no longer a need to justify or trivialize our bad habits and wrong behaviors. We can see and expose

them for what they are and begin the work of change. This process helps us not undermine the progress and growth we always talk about - but never seems to happen. With a new mindset to regulate our attitude, we make quicker adjustments to correct our responsive or in the moment behavior. We no longer see ourselves headed for one more futile attempt at change only to be followed by miserable failure. The new attitude and new thinking (in Christ) moves us away from continually trying to correct symptoms and missing the root or core problem. With a healthy attitude in our minds, we can distance ourselves from selfish "myopic" mindsets and deceptive "victim" mentalities. It gives us a way to overcome the madness of continually identifying ourselves with our learned behaviors and bad habits, and difficult circumstances (this is who I am).

We have to hear this, "we do change for the better once we allow the Holy Spirit to challenge our old attitudes, mindsets, and ugly behavior - allowing Christ to lead us in the right direction."

The hope in that truth is that change can be real and ongoing, not just a temporary feel-good experience that picks us up only to be plopped right back down into our old way of thinking and then followed soon after that by our same old patterns and learned behaviors.

With this new attitude and mindset, we can change (for the better) how we treat and love others. This change is a breakthrough for those who have damaged and strained many valued relationships.

We can change hurtful and harmful habits and addictive-compulsive behaviors by committing ourselves to a new way of thinking in Christ and a new way of doing things according to His word. It is not merely just saying, *"I think this way or that way now – or, I do things this way now."* It

is a spiritual journey we choose to take so that we may seek God's truth and goodness within our lives every day. We think new thoughts; spiritually healthy and emotionally balanced. We process our mindsets, attitudes, and emotions through a Biblical 'grid of truth.' From the 'grid of truth,' we learn new and better ways to live and love, and then go about loving and living in them, not apart from or just alongside them.

The dynamics of genuine change for Christians must take place at many levels – never just one. Real change requires peeling back (like an onion) layer after layer of learned deceptions and harmful experiences that have birthed deceptive mindsets and toxic responses. Too often, as Christians and Christian communities in despair, we have relied on merely a change of heart (emotion) to achieve needed change in our circumstances, and we are disappointed when what we experience is only temporary. Or the flip side becomes true. When we (in our pride) attempt to intellectualize the change we need and are not honest enough about who we are (motives of the heart) or the circumstances we find ourselves. The problem with merely going through an intellectual shift is that we do not always see the need for faith in God or allow His Spirit to complete or finish the change needed. There is an apparent disconnect between knowing and being. Even more importantly, *knowing* who we are supposed to be is not the same thing as *being* who we are supposed to be.

By now, we can see that emotional experiences are not reliable enough and that relying on our intellect alone often becomes the very obstacle that keeps us from coming to the point of experiencing true change. God, by His Spirit, is working in our mind to teach and influence our intellect and our thoughts. Thereby allowing for a critical shift in our mindset to change

the attitude with which we process our thoughts. The crucial change in perspective comes not only in realizing we need it but as we seek a revelation provided by the Spirit of truth in Christ. Be aware that He must also be allowed to heal those emotions and feelings within us that have time after time been deceitful and unreliable to us. Jesus understood this as He commanded His disciples, *"love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength."* By obeying this one command, Christ makes provision for us to find what we seek and receive what we need in Him. This provision is a complete change for mindsets, attitudes and behaviors. Real change must occur at every level in our human makeup, mind, body, and spirit. If not, then that change is too often incomplete, and we are left to struggle and doubt if the kind of change we need can ever happen in us. Again, we start to think and believe wrongly and then in error verbalize defaults such as, *"this is just who I am"* or *"this is just the way God made me."* When the Biblical grid of truth is, *"this is not who God made me to be; this is who I have allowed myself to believe that I am."* In reality, it is what we or someone else have spoken over and over again, creating real feelings in us, but not a God purposed truth and reality. At that point, we have allowed ourselves (in our wrong thinking and behavior) to become or believe what is told or felt.

But God has made us in His likeness and image, and the Biblical grid of truth tells that humankind did not get it done the way He wanted it done, and so Christ came to do what we in ourselves could not do. He came to complete the metamorphosis of the mind, body, and soul of humankind in and of Himself. Here at this point, we will find the final component of real and genuine change in a Christian's life.

God made a specific promise to us that would enable us to finish the change processes in our lives. He promised that He would send the "Comforter" the Holy Spirit, and from the promise of the Holy Spirit, we would receive the power to change. The power to transform all that is wrong in us today into all that God intends for us to be tomorrow! We will talk more specifically about the role of the Holy Spirit in our last chapter. For now, we must begin to see ourselves in that ongoing and fluid role of change, always knowing the Holy Spirit is in us, working on us to form and reshape us just the way He intended. With this taking place individually, then within the Church community, we have new vantage points to see the ways of love beyond love. Once this happens, we all can realistically look to change from the causes and effects of the same old sinful world. We change, and now we can move forward.



“She listened and knew for the first time she was hearing all of love there was. Her eyes swam when he was finished. She sobbed and sobbed in shame. “Forgive me, Father-Spirit, for I am sinful and undone ... for singing weary years of all the wrong words ...”

The Singer touched her shoulder and told her of the joy that lay ahead if she could learn the music he had sung.

He left her in the street and walked away, and as he left he heard her singing his new song. And when he turned to wave the final time he saw her shaking her head to a friendship buyer. She would not take his money. And from his little distance, the Singer heard her use his very words.

“Are you betrothed?” the buyer asked her.

“No, only loved,” she answered.

“And do you pay for love?”

“No, but I owe it everything.” (9)

...Calvin Miller, "The Singer Trilogy"

Chapter Four: Follow - Love - Walk in Grace

(John 13:34-35)

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." NIV

(Titus 3:3-8)

"At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. 8 This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone." NIV

To make substantial eternal truths such as following, love, and grace even approachable and doable for us, we need to revisit a couple of fundamental and common truths that we agree are the core of who God has called the Church to be.

One - Christ calls us to Himself

Two - Christ calls us to one another in Him

Three - Christ calls us to walk in His grace

The call to Himself is to follow. The call to one another is love. The call to walk in these is grace. In these three truths alone, we can see the necessity for us to love each other and, of course, to extend love to those who are out beyond us. We can also see the need to live in the freedom of His grace while mindfully offering the same to one another. In answering the calling of Christ, we prioritize learning the value directly related to God's intended purpose for our life. This value is followed by knowing what it means to live in that calling as related to our behaviors and responses to one another. The point is that we will never be able to rightfully answer God's calling in our life without the genuine love and extended grace of God. We see these callings as the model that Christ has given us to follow (loving God, neighbor, self). This truth is invaluable. These truths must be consistent with who the Church is and what we are to do with who we are.

"We love God and teach His truth; we care for one another through fellowship, communion, and prayer."

As we said earlier, the initial calling He gives to all Christians is to follow Him. He calls us, and we come to Him. Jesus immediately begins the call for us to love one another; we show our love by extending grace to walk together. It is there that the caring Christian community finds fellowship, communion, and prayer. By obeying, we can see the meaning and

purpose of the life our soul naturally seeks. When we are obedient and responsive, we can discover His ultimate plans for our life and the immeasurable value He places on us and those around us. In answering His call, we find a genuine Christian community. His call is a call for life together in Him. For Christians (though most do not see it), a life lived together in Christ is the best He has for us in this world. His best for us is made possible only in Him. Unfortunately, because many do not see this, they live with the void it creates, missing out on the beautiful journey of life together in Christ with the ones He has gathered around them.

What does that mean?

We refer again to Christian theologian and writer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who answers this way,

"It means, first, that a Christian needs others for the sake of Jesus Christ. Secondly, it means that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that from eternity we have been chosen in Jesus Christ, accepted in time, and united for eternity." (10)

That, my friend, is the genuine Christian community - accepted in time and invited in eternity. The Christian community's call is to follow, love, and walk together in grace. In Christ, we belong to one another, and we belong to Him – now and forever. Life together in Him is what Christ has called each one of us to. Just like His disciples, He calls us to follow Him, to love one another, and to extend the invitation to walk together in His grace.

The struggle comes in hearing this truth, but not listening. Or, maybe we have heard, but chosen instead to ignore Him. *Most of us do not listen when we do not like what we are hearing.* Sound familiar? Many of us are alike in that we reason with God that the other areas of our lives are complicated enough and do not want our walk of faith to be demanding and difficult.

Why should the place He calls us to worship, and the people He calls us to love be so difficult or challenging as well?

Is this honestly surprising to us? His word does warn and encourage us, "In this world you will have trouble but do not be afraid for I have overcome the world." And He did ask, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick"? Eventually, we must learn to set aside the personal protests and personal preferences for our lives - and faithfully trust in His unfailing love and extended grace for us. Christ wants to bring about a kenosis (self-emptying) in us. He loves us, so we learn to listen to Him and His calling for our life obediently. From that act of devotion, eventually, there comes an abundance of grace, displayed in genuine spiritual gifts, natural talents, and strong faith. These abundant graces empower us to achieve the apparent task (the calling), to love each one called to a life together in community (both good and bad).

Despite the visions and dreams of prime-time pastors, high-profile campuses, and trending ministries, there is still but one call - to follow. There is always but one task - to love. There is only one means - grace. Everything else is nothing more than self-promoting twists, reboots, or the reimagining of what that means. And quite honestly, if we are not

successful at those three things, anything we might do above and beyond that is really of little or no consequence in God's eyes. Christ bids us follow, and we either love one another and walk together in grace with Him, or we walk alone apart from Him.

The calling to follow, love one another, and walk-in His grace is a practical application for the day-to-day living of Christian faith. It is for generating active faith that impacts everyone and everything around us in positively powerful ways.

In following Jesus, there is no mistaking the call to one another. Meaning that we come alongside those, He calls us. In doing so, we value that person with love and grace both publicly and privately (apparently this was important to Christ as well, "this is my command, that you love one another.")

How do we righteously answer His call to follow and obey His command love?

How do we walk with one another in both love and grace?

It is a life lived in community with others supported by the Biblical principles expressed in the life of Jesus Himself. We call these *community life principles*.

Sincere Love

Care and Concern

Respect and Dignity

Truth and Honesty

An Attitude of Forgiveness and Hope

Responding to each other outside the boundaries of these basic principles would be considered for Christ-followers as wrong behavior. Certainly not in the true spirit of Christ (without love and grace). As people who are very serious about our calling to Christ and the Christian community, we should be more than willing to commit ourselves to live publicly and privately with these five principles. Right thinking tells us that this is Christian behavior as God expects of us - and living together like this in Christ gives us a shot at "saving our saved" and being able to reach those hurting and searching people out there beyond the Church. Community life principles are the Holy Spirit's genuine work and will establish the Church as a place of calling, love, and grace. The home-place we all know that it is supposed to be.

The sad truth is not many in our world no longer care about treating people with the virtue of love and grace. The result is the loss of community. But for us, the community life principles must become our compass. The compass leading the community of Christ as we live and love, and come and go. It tells us how to improve our character and grow in grace while extending grace to each individual with genuine, loving-kindness. In dealing with the vulnerability of a person's heart and spirit, we must be careful. Only love and grace can get us there. It tells us when we can begin to move forward when to step back or aside, and it is grace that keeps us just the right distance and headed in the right direction once we get going.

Proverbs 3:1-12

"My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, 2 for length of days and years of life and peace they will

add to you. 3 Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. 4 So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man. 5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. 6 In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. 7 Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. 8 It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. 9 Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the first-fruits of all your produce; 10 then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. 11 My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, 12 for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." ESV



*“Trust, grounded in faith and hope, reaches an unprecedented level in the experience of infinite love. It is useless to protest that such a concept is too big for us. Of course it is too big for us. The **kabōd** Yahweh, the absolute glory of God, is revealed in Jesus as absolute love, and we can only be brushed by it. Nevertheless, we are made for that which is too big for us. We are made for God, and nothing less will ever satisfy us.” (11)*

...Brennan Manning, "Ruthless Trust"

Chapter Five: The Gift of Attention

Let's start this chapter with a conversation about the Biblical and relational responses of the Church to one another. We have already identified groups or individuals in the Church community who may be feeling disenfranchised, distraught, isolated, and struggling with the hard and ugly issues of life and how we respond with them. This conversation focuses on the community's need for healthy and responsive relationships as a Biblical and choice practice. Relationships and responses within the community and its leaders must be Biblical, always reflecting the love beyond love of Jesus. That is the ministry, and that is community. Relationships and responses to one another must then be attentive and compassionate, welcoming everyone (including the wounded) to a genuine sense of walking together. The community life principles we shared are a great starting point and certainly an excellent standard of behavior to which we continue to reach one another. However, the Church community must agree when at all possible, no one gets shut out!

How do we get there?

First, we should never intentionally let personal agendas or ideas hinder the Holy Spirit's work in anyone's life, including our own. By committing ourselves to be attentive and inclusive at critical times, we offer a wonderful gift to one another in a very Christ-like way. Life-giving awareness - the kind of attention that sees, listens, and connects with love to someone.

Secondly, we remove obstacles keeping others from any spiritual and emotionally healthy movement towards the community. Make sure not to repeat mistakes that have hindered in the past. It is the life-giving attention of love that finds, sees, listens, and connects with those needing to find their way into the community. In Church ministry, there are many unintentional errors along the way. Errors in judgment, slights, and oversights, such as overlooking someone or missing a significant moment vital to them or the Holy Spirit. Those unintentional ministry errors cause hurt, damage trust, and create distance with people needing love and attention but instead leave them feeling overlooked or shut out.

Again, it is often our lack of spiritual understanding and wisdom that keeps us from learning to love beyond love with the life-giving attention we are describing. As pastors and leaders, we know many helpful and hopeful words that encourage a struggling person in a difficult place. Most of the time, reassuring words of encouragement is a good thing. But what happens when words fail us or mean nothing to the person or persons hearing them because of their circumstances or what they are feeling? The need to forge ahead, searching for profound words to share may not be the best course. Indeed, the intentions at that moment are right and good.

But is that what real compassion or healing is? Words? Are words (encouraging or not) the best that love can give, or is there something better and beyond them?

When with our good intentions, we plow ahead trying to fix or make everything better for someone with well-meaning but shallow words, we

display a lack of wisdom and genuine love. Sometimes what is needed starts with *just a pause for silent prayer*. Sometimes it is just as simple as making appropriate eye contact, and nothing more. We have all heard it said (and it is true) that "*just being there*" is what is most important. But the key for us as the Church community is, of course, Christ Himself, and from that critical connection learning to respond as He would to those He said for us to "*love as we love ourselves*."

How do we come to another person empty of ourselves and full of the love of Christ?

In that instance of inadequacy, when we realize we can only love, that we cannot judge, hate, or fix - that is the moment we are empty of ourselves and can come to another human being in Christ. To be full of the love and grace of Christ is to be devoid of ourselves. When we offer another human being the same love and grace that has filled us, we offer Christ, emptied of ourselves. We have given the best we have to give to one another. Each one knows they have been seen and heard and have a place. They have our attention.

Not that our role is unimportant or insignificant but to understand that our best responses to one another are in Christ through us. It means that when Christ calls us to others, He, above all, is essential. In the community, this process is continuous and fluid, the door is open, and the fullness of what "loving our neighbor as ourselves" can begin to happen. We are free and able to look inside to see the heart of another and sincerely ask, "*how are you doing*"? Our responses towards others now are more than just something we Christians are "*supposed to say*." Those around us are not

invisible! When we see and hear one another, we are, as we said, giving a gift that gives life to each individual and the community. Life-giving energy acknowledging that not only do we exist to one another as human beings, but we express real concern for who we are and how we are doing. It is enough concern and enough of Christ in us to stay together - in a genuine relationship and community. There is a healthy belief that no one gets shut out, and all obstacles and concerns are faced together.

Let's take a moment to direct this conversation towards loving relationships and responses with someone in difficulty, suffering, or affliction. Using the same life-giving principles of love, grace, and attentiveness, we lose the sense of uncertainty and awkwardness. We are coming to the suffering and afflicted in Christ, not ourselves, so we no longer have to panic over what seems like moments of endless silence, agonizing over the right things to say. We can stop trying to diagnose illnesses and interpret feelings as though the health and well-being of those in need all rest upon our shoulders. We freely love and are loved by those who do not need to be alone during the time of their greatest need. Christ modeled this response for us as the right one to opening the door for love to come in - for love to heal.

As human beings, we discover that love can come to us in many ways, but the greatest love - God's love, comes to us only in Christ.

Using His example in response to the suffering and afflicted, there is no exploitation of hurting souls. In Christ, we do not dehumanize people regardless of their circumstances. We see no one person or persons as pitiful or victims, but as someone to love at the very moment of attention. There are many gifts that Christ came to earth to give to us – but this is the

one gift that He asks us to give to one another. When we learn to love this way, we learn to see one another differently. How we perceive and view one another is critical and gets us to this chapter's practical application and heart. Here are some examples of how we can incorrectly see those in the community and comparison how we should see them.

If I look through you – I don't see you.

If I look past you – I see something or someone more important than you.

If I look down at you – I see myself as better than you.

If I over-look you – I have forgotten about you.

If I look away from you – I don't want to see you.

If I look straight into your eyes, I see inside you - I can love you, and you are welcome to love me too.

The "look inside" is called the gift of attention, and Christ gives that gift to all people. He provides this gift with just when it is needed most. He gave it to the leper when no one else would touch his unclean and contagious body, to Zacchaeus, the taxman, despite knowing that everyone hated him. Jesus gave the gift of attention to not only His friends but also to strangers, such as the five-time divorcee and the promiscuous woman caught in adultery. Jesus gave the gift of attention to anyone not heard or seen in life. He stopped in the middle of crowds, or when whatever else might be going on to look deep inside the heart and soul to give the gift of attention. When needed most, the door would be opened for love to come in. Learning this response from Christ is most important for Christians seeking real community with others. When Jesus paused to give the gift of

attention, it is an interruption by the Holy Spirit for someone who needed it. We can best describe that interruption this way.

Pausing from whatever we are doing to make someone or something else more important when it is most important to them.

Apart from Christ's heart of love and grace, this Spirit-led interruption is commonly called a distraction. To experience the effectiveness and joy of loving people with the gift of attention, we must learn it is the devil that distracts us from people – it is the Holy Spirit that interrupts us for people. As Christians seeking Biblical community, we need to understand and recognize the difference between the two. Discerning those Spirit-led interruptions leads us to those life-giving moments when the gift of attention opens wide the door to love and be loved. It is certainly appropriate to ask the question,

*"Is the devil distracting me **from** this moment, or is the Holy Spirit interrupting me **for** this moment"?*

Finding the answer to that question will provide the wisdom to whom and when the gift of attention is most needed. As Christians walking together in community, we know the answer is found only in Christ. To Him, everyone was important, but not everybody got His attention. So as the community of Christ, we start and end with the heart and mind of Christ. Everyone is loved (no one gets shut out), and the gift of attention is for all that the Spirit of God leads. None of us would want to be the one shut out - so we begin to open ourselves up to loving all that the Holy Spirit leads in

our path and pray they come by they need it the most. As challenging as it may seem, there are no exclusions for the people we might perceive as annoying, unlikable, or not spiritual enough. The gift of attention is not about us - it is about others. People get shut out far too often, and many times just at the very moment they need to be pulled in. What we perceive or like and dislike about another person is not the Christ-like criteria for giving the gift of attention. The requirement is giving someone the same love and attention given to us.

To fully understand the far-reaching impact of the gift of attention, we need to revisit chapter two: *The Biblical Home-Place*. We took a candid look at the individuals and groups who have become invisible and frustrating to the evangelical American Church. Those at-risk believers who seem to drop off our radar when they asked questions we did not want to answer, disagreed with our politics, or became what we did not want them to become. They became helplessly aged, hopelessly ill, embarrassingly divorced, disgustingly addicted, suspiciously unemployed, and unable to pay their bills. We can add to that list the ones in the community whom we become unreasonably angry with (or they with us), deciding then they are now a non-person in our life or the life of the Church community. We believe there are many justifications and the right reasons for distancing ourselves from any people or groups mentioned above. None of it is righteous in the heart and eyes of God. The community of Christ must explore why.

Why do people become invisible and unheard to the Church at those times when we know they need us most?

Could it be something we have not, or do not want to consider? The answer is yes. The community they need disappears when all the pain, anger, fear, and embarrassment of the wounded or struggling believer surfaces. When the Church and community see and feel the struggle and difficulty if we do not understand, we naturally want to distance ourselves, fearing we might be inviting. We don't always see this as distance - but it is how they see it. Because we pull back, the struggling and wounded believer becomes even more isolated from the community's love and grace. If the Church is distancing from the difficulty of difficult people, imagine what the one needing the gift of attention must be feeling? For Christians everywhere, this distancing is a formidable barrier that we must have a breakthrough. It is challenging because the distance we are speaking, of course, is not only physical but spiritual and emotional as well. We have to pray that we see people in their condition – pause to listen to them - look inside to see their heart - move compassionately to them in love and grace. When we come to a struggling or suffering individual in Christ, He shatters that barrier for us and uses the gift of attention to bring the kind of love needed. The power of the Holy Spirit eliminates the distance between their condition and our will to extend ourselves in love and grace, bringing us close to them just at the time it is most important. Their struggle or fear is no longer the barrier to getting close.

We get a complete picture of the gift of attention and how it applies to the Biblical principles of love beyond love when looking more closely at Jesus responding to the people in His community - and those He welcomed in. As Jesus gave the gift of attention, we can see how those who received Him were pulled into the love and grace of community, no longer feeling

shut out. In these real-life examples, we can see the attentive love of Jesus at its best. Jesus walked among the people, and in doing so, He extended a natural invitation for relationship. He physically, spiritually, and emotionally came to people, and then, they came to Him. Looking closely at Christ, we can discover how the gift of attention builds the kind of love and faith needed to see the people we have not seen, hear the people we have not heard, and welcome those we have not included.

It takes faith to see what we cannot see. It takes love to see what we do not want to see.

We witness how Christ raised hope within people to keep them moving forward when they had been shut out and all but given up. He did all this by simply giving them the gift of attention. To each one, the hope was something different. For some, His attention was the hope leading to the path of freedom. To others, it was the chance to begin again or the opportunity to become a welcomed member of the community.

The Gospels give us a clear portrait of a very practical and loving Christ - not only walking with men but praying with them. His walking people were not just a transportation method or a suitable means of getting from one destination to another. But instead for Him, it was about being with people in their environment and their condition. By walking with people, Christ could close the distance between Himself and their place in life. In the same way, His praying with people was more than just another religious act of pride and self-righteousness. His praying with people was the attentive way to connect with those He prayed for and with. His walking and praying with people was the way to loving the ones who seemed to

others as beyond loving. Jesus walked with people where they were, and whatever the condition, and from the moment He prayed, they would not remain the same. For anyone seeking community and comfort in Christ, His example is the way for us to share the gift of attention and open the door to love and grace precisely at the time when it is most needed. We walk with one another and pray with one another; the templates of Jesus show the way. His way was with the people, for the people.

To see His way, we need to go no further than the people who came each day to the temple to worship and hear His teaching. There were also the river people and the market-place people. Of course, people in the grain fields, those by the sea of Galilee, travelers on the road, night-life and tavern people, and so forth. Jesus even gave the gift of attention to a criminal while they were both dying on a cross. Truly amazing.

However, there are two or three instances that fully capture what is most remarkable about the gift of attention and what it can mean to someone's life. The first is a woman (Luke Chapter 8) who suffered for twelve years with a bleeding disorder. She finds herself in a large crowd of people trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he walks through her town. Everyone is talking about the miracles they have heard Jesus performed. On His way across town to visit a very sick young girl, Jesus passes through the crowd in the street. And as He pushes through, the overlooked and afflicted woman in an act filled with faith and determination reaches out and touches the bottom of Jesus' clothing. Jesus feels her touch and is interrupted by the Holy Spirit right there amid the crowd's noise, pushing and shoving, and the many voices and distractions. In a moment that seemed as if time had stopped, Jesus connects to the woman with a

response so intense it startles everyone. "*Who touched Me,*" Jesus asks as He turns to give her the gift of attention. He looks into her eyes and says, "*Thugateros tharseo pisteos sozo*" or "*Daughter, your faith has made you well.*" Jesus recognized the Holy Spirit's interruption and paused to give her the most incredible gift all at the very moment she needed it most. Jesus also gave this type of attention to a bedridden man who, for most of his life, been lying by a pool called Bethesda (John Chapter 5). The man lies there by this pool because of the miraculous possibilities he knows are there – but his illness keeps him from taking advantage of them. Jesus had come to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. He enters the city at the 'sheep gate' and passes by the Pool of Bethesda nearby. Jesus is interrupted when He sees the paralyzed man lying there. He stops and asks, "*Theleso hugiees ginomai?*" or "*Do you want to become well?*" Most would consider this question foolish considering this was an afflicted man who had lived a lifetime having been looked past and looked down on. However, Jesus' question and attention were intentional and anything but foolish. Again, we sense a moment paused in time, and an interaction filled with such intense focus that it seems as if no one is there but Jesus and this one man. The man answers, "*Yes I want to get well, but when I try to get into the pool others get there before me.*" Jesus looked into his eyes and said to him, "*Take your bed, get up and walk.*" Now, because it was the Sabbath, both Jesus and the man have a decision to make. Jesus must decide to send him on his way, knowing that the miraculous news will bring a back-lash of hatred from His harshest critics - and the healed man must choose to gather his things and leave the place that had been his home for nearly forty years. After all, what other life did he know? Despite the circumstances, they both decide to go on. Jesus slips back

into the crowd and on to the feast, while the man leaves the pool to experience new life. In Christ, this is what the gift of attention does for us. It gives us the courage to make thoughtful and hopeful decisions regarding others and our future and the experience of a new life.

The last example is from John's gospel (Chapter 4). As Jesus sits resting on the edge of the historic Jacob's well, He asks a woman from Samaria for a drink of water. This moment should be etched in our minds to remind us forever what the gift attention can do, how the ever-compelling love of Christ closes the distance between us and the condition of men and women. And in doing so, making the overlooked and looked down upon someone visible and valuable in His Kingdom. From the first word, the gift of attention closes the distance between Christ and this wounded woman in many ways. There is a cultural distance, a religious distance, a moral distance, and a gender distance. Finally, there was an emotional distance created by the humiliation and pain of five failed marriages. Everything about this woman was a red flag signaling, "*stay away – damaged goods*"! Labeled by her community a lesser-than, she had moved into the shadows to stay unseen and unnoticed. Until the day she saw Jesus sitting on the edge of the well resting and waiting patiently to be interrupted. It wasn't just that she needed attention; it was that she needed the right kind of attention. And the woman at the well found it that day as Jesus gave her the right gift when needed most. The freely given gift of attention became the love she had sought for her entire life but had never been able to find. It was the gift of attention so honest and yet so profoundly welcoming that it revealed a hidden condition in her not visible to people who did not know her. Once the love of Christ had closed the distance between the

two, she could then hear the truth, and it was the truth that would set her free. Years of failure and looking for love in all the wrong places had eventually and painfully closed her off from finding the truth. The gift of attention restored this for her in the form of God's indiscriminate non-condemning love. Just the way it was needed – when needed most.

To conclude, the gift of attention and the extended invitation for relationship in the community of Christ, we look to the righteous practice of prayer. Another of my favorite authors Philosopher and Humanitarian, Simone Weil, once wrote, "*Prayer is the absolute unmixed attention between God and humankind.*" (12)

When we pray in Christ's love for someone, it is a pure expression of the gift of attention. It is pure because it is the one interruption where heaven and earth pause to give the person we are praying for the attention they need in the precise moment they need it most. We can call this a dynamic spiritual action, a spiritual action with significant enough potential, and promise to put our entire trust and faith. And one that must be practiced faithfully by the community of Christ. Prayer is the key that unlocks the door to a relationship in Christ with people who need Him. The Church community prays the prayer of faith, believing for one another. This prayer closes any distance between Christ and the conditions and circumstances of those for who we pray. It changes personal hostility towards those we fear or do not understand in the process.

The community must not see prayer as the tool we use to make others become what we want - but rather the tool God uses to make us become what He wants.

We do not pray for people to control or fix them – we pray to learn how to love them as Christ has loved them (love beyond love). We have to get it straight. In John's gospel, chapter 17, Jesus prayed for believers, and then He prayed for unbelievers. He prayed for His friends, and He prayed for His enemies. He prayed for the lost, the sick, the spiteful, but He prayed for those who knew the truth that they might not lose their way and that their joy might remain full. He finished His prayer in praying that His disciples keep a right heart and that they might be able to love the way the Father had loved the world through Him. We can never expect to love one another the way Christ loved without faithfully praying for people in this way. As the gift of attention opens the door showing the love of Christ - prayer is the open door leading to a relationship in Christ and caring for the people we love. As each one looks to love beyond love, we continue praying for and praying with everyone and anyone we can. It is the open door that leads us out there to love beyond ourselves.



This chapter, Gift of Attention, is dedicated to the inspiration and profound simplicity of the late Brennan Manning. Brennan was indeed an original thinker who trusted Christ completely, not only in his momentous successes but also in his utter failures. His life and words will always be

precious and personal to me. Thank you, Brennan Manning, for the gift of attention.

Chapter Six: Life Together

(Colossians 3:11-17)

"Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. 12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." NIV

From the illuminating light that is the life of Christ, we can see the power of the gift of attention and the endless possibilities for love that become available when that gift is completed in Christ and shared in prayer, which is, by the way, what God intended all along! In the previous chapter, Gift of Attention, we described several life-changing moments that took place while Jesus was naturally interacting with people. We must understand they were not merely random or coincidental moments meant to last only for that moment. These were intentional moments of attention given to men and women as a gift of God's unstoppable and unconditional love for His creation. The intent in each instance was not merely for someone to

have a little moment with God (*like everybody gets fifteen minutes of fame*), but rather for anyone anywhere or anytime encounter the love and attention of Jesus. And in that loving encounter, be re-invented or redirected to begin a new life in Christ.

We know that God comes to us in Christ – and that we come to Him in the same way, and in Christ, we have a life together. The reason for this is love, not the temporary or in the moment love, but eternal love without end. This worth repeating; with Jesus, it was never about people who came together just for the meal, the miracle, or the moment. Although important (*i.e., gift of attention*), it was more about people who've found love for God and one another and eternal life together in Him. God wants to be with us, and He is with us through Christ His Son. And, that is the way He has chosen for us to have a life together with one another – in Christ's love. That is why we can say that the intention was not merely for people to have a moment with God. He seeks for us to have a life together in Christ, not just a series of random or coincidental situations and circumstances that never connect us to our destiny in Him. For example, it was never God's plan to build His Church around a weekly one-hour worship gathering where people barely exchange glances with one another. We cannot remain in Christ and live consciously or unconsciously disconnected from one another. To be in Christ is to love and be loved as Christ loved, to connect as Christ connected to us. This connection creates a community with other people for living life together in Him. The community prioritizes a way of life with time shared in fellowship, communion, and prayer. It is not time spent or taken from us. It is time

shared, invested, and freely given - time that creates love, hope, and new life.

Everything outside of that is not the life God intended. Many forms of love are expressed and experienced outside of the love known and best expressed in Christ, but not the love God intended. The ancient Greeks used *eight-core words* to correspond with the most common forms of love expressed and experienced.

Eros (romantic, passionate love)

Philia (affectionate love)

Agape (Godly, selfless, universal love)

Storge (familiar love)

Mania (obsessive love)

Pragma (enduring love)

Philautia (self-love)

God revealed His love (*agape*) in the person and presence of Christ Jesus. Every expression or experience of love absent of Christ is pseudo-love (a form of love - but not complete or wholesome outside of God's love). Love experienced and expressed outside of Christ is a love that we can purposely or conveniently use to keep ourselves hidden or distant from relationships with people we do not want to love. The same is true of those whom we perceive will not love or want a relationship with us. There is no better way to keep people at a distance than to use various forms or manipulations of love to categorically or conditionally love them. By intentionally distancing ourselves, we can control relationships by creating "*spiritual or emotional moments*" this is pseudo-love. In this way, we

appear on the surface to be a community and to love all people, but we are just creating an illusion - because the love we share is not real love in the sense of Christ's love. It is not the love of Jesus because it does not go beyond our control and comfort. Accepting the illusion as though it is true when we know it is not - is a deception. It is a deception of the worst kind - self-deception.

This practice is convincing evidence that we do not have life-together with those people within the model or template of Christ. We are creating only an illusion or just an image of life together. A genuine community of loving and being loved is achieved only in Christ – the indiscriminate and unconditional love of Christ. In His love, there is no distance - no unfilled or hostile spaces between us. The Church cannot replicate love beyond love through intellect, pity, or performance – it is done only in Christ. As followers of Jesus, we do not have the Biblical freedom to place conditions on Christ's love for people categorically, nor sort through them by religion, race, socio-economics, personality, and spiritual profiling. That practice is a gross misrepresentation of God's grace and indiscriminate love. The apostle who best expressed this was Paul when he wrote to the Church in Colossae,

"Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

What is Paul saying here?

Well, of course, only what was already told by Jesus. Look again at his text, verses 12-14 in particular.

Colossians 3:12–14

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

ESV

Patience, gentleness, kindness, compassion, and humility are all virtues used to love others in some form or another. However, if the expressions of love we use with people (even though they be virtuous) allow us to categorize and place conditions on who and how we are to love, it is not God's love, and Christ is not in it. When we allow ourselves the liberty to identify and marginalize people through any criteria other than the love of Jesus, it becomes, as we said before, only a form of our love and not the fullness of His love. In this way, we cannot experience or find real life-together in Christ.

Doesn't it strike you as a little odd after His resurrection, there is no mention or reference from Jesus to His disciples about their betrayal and desertion of Him?

His silence in this regard is truly unique. The first signal of His indiscriminate love and intention for continued community and life together with the disciples is heard just down the road from the tomb on the morning of His resurrection when He says to Mary Magdalene, "Go tell my

brothers" (Matthew 28:10). The intentions and heart for a continued community show up in Paul's conversion and revelation of Jesus. In his letter to the Corinthian Church, this revelation appears, *"love keeps no record of wrongs."*

If we respond to this truth by saying that God does not expect us to seek life-together with just anyone and everyone, we miss the point altogether. We overlook what is at the core of His truth and eventually end up just existing in this world, shut off, and shut out from the very life and meaning that we seek from it. In judging and rejecting the love and relationship of community that God has intended, we can find ourselves distanced but not separated from Christ.

Matthew 7:1-2

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (NIV)

Therein lies the distance from others and the absence of Christ's love. When we put that distance between ourselves and others, we put it between ourselves and Christ.

Matthew 25:34-40

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you

came to me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'" ESV

Even then, His Spirit comes (in grace) to close that distance for us, so we, too, must come in Christ to those who push us away or those we pushed away. Under challenging circumstances with difficult people, we learn in Christ to make our love real. Knowing the heart of God and His intentions for us on this central issue of life together is of great advantage to all those seeking to love others the way Christ loved us. It allows us to dream and believe and have faith in a way that Christ did. We can dare to ask,

What are the possibilities of Christ's love?

What are the possibilities of loving and being loved?

St. John of the Cross expressed some of those possibilities when writing his experiences in complete isolation and darkness during nine months of imprisonment. In his book *"Dark Night of the Soul"* he wrote,

"When the love of Christ does come it pierces ones soul. The soul looks then upon great things as little, on many as few, its long service as short, by reason of the fire by which love is burning. It is with the soul as it was with Jacob, who served seven years for Rachel and they seemed but a few days, because of the greatness of his love." (13)

A love such as that is overwhelmingly powerful and beyond our capabilities alone. And it is a love of that magnitude that confronts us with enormous possibilities as individuals seeking community and a place in Christ's Church. In the Church, we are faced not only with the radical reality of Christ's love but as His followers what to do with it. In the beginning, we sense enormous and completely engulfing love; we know the Father, His Church, and this new life through Christ. But then that love grows and changes and comes to us in a way that bids us reach out for others and experience life together in Him. While this new life is happening, we very seldom recognize what is taking place. If we stay faithful to His call, in the end, we discover God's great miracle of grace given us for life together in Him and with others. As we grow in grace and truth, we can know why it happened.

What does life together mean in a loving community mean?

First, know that we are not suggesting the Church as a physical community of Christians living together. That is the easy way out, with significantly more danger of losing sight of Christianity's biggest challenge, which is to share the love and light of Christ with the lost and unloved of our world. The early followers of Jesus did not live in a physical community setting - they practiced the love beyond the Christian community's love principles. A physical (live-in) community is not the specific calling for most of the present-day Church. We have families, occupations, interests, and obligations to which we are responsible. But having those responsibilities does not let us go our way, ignoring Christ's most critical

command to love one another in ways that go beyond ourselves. It does not mean that we settle only for whatever time and opportunities are left. However, it does mean that we prayerfully prioritize our time and attention with what is most important to God and then to our families' needs. Once that is done, we continue to seek life-together with those whom the Lord calls together. In Christ, we realize the spiritual implications of life-together in deepened relationships nurtured with the love we give and the love received.

In Christ, we do not fall into love; we are called into it.

We choose to love, learn to love, and receive love, then as we grow, the Holy Spirit unites shared faith and common calling to Christ and a healthy community. One in which we all can love, worship, and serve in the kingdom of God. Life together in Christ means that we commit to learning biblical truths, live by valued principles, and work faithfully at honest and loving relationships in Christ. What we are describing is the New Testament Christian Church described to us in *(Acts 2:42-46)*.

At this point, it is probably appropriate to just lay all the cards on the table. Throughout this entire book, we have re-enforced the Biblical premise that the Church of Jesus Christ must love the way Christ loved. In actuality, it goes much deeper. *Soren Kierkegaard*, called by many "*the father of Christian existentialism*," describes two types of Christians; "*those who imitate Jesus Christ and a second, much cheaper brand – those who are content to admire Him.*" To imitate Him is to love others in Him and to move forward to seek life-together in Him. One of our ministry leaders

recently heard a pastor say, "*Christians cannot expect the miracles of the New Testament Church without living together in community such as the New Testament Church.*" That is a bold and insightful truth. The apostles and those gathered in Pentecost's upper-room received a revelation of that truth - genuine community and life together in Christ. Real community and life together came in the days, weeks, and months that followed Pentecost as they obediently followed their calling. They had finally forsaken all to follow and to love and be loved by others in Christ. What followed them were the miracles that would help establish and secure the gospel of Christ to the unbelieving world as credible and divinely genuine. The modern Church in America is at the precipice of great difficulty. Agnosticism culturalism and intellectual relativism openly attack Biblical views, values, and Christian faith. This attack has caused fear and panic among far too many Church leaders. It is time for the present-day Church in America to get the same revelation the early Church received on Pentecost.

The Church need not over complicate the term and meaning of life together in Christ. Life together in Christ is profoundly as simple as loving God - loving one another - together loving others in Christ. When we faithfully walk together in the simple call to love and be loved as Christ has loved us, the miracle of community happens. That miracle comes from the power of loving Christ and one another and is why we seek Christ first and not miracles. Look once again to Luke's recollection of those first days after Pentecost.

Acts 2:42-47

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." NIV

The Acts of the Apostles give complete insight into how life together in Christ should look. It is a life that has an order of priority and progression to it. The importance is Christ; the right of passage is to love. Seeking God's kingdom is first; loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength is first, followed by our expectations of God's timeliness and supernatural intervention on our behalf. Any order not prioritizing Christ and His love makes life together and pleasing God improbable and impossible. With conflicting priorities, our expectations of God become selfishly one-sided and unrealistic and does not work for Him. The difficulty for millennial American Christians has been the subtle rejection of objective truth and objective authority. From early childhood, most were taught by example that you must first watch out for yourself and how you feel; do not trust people or people of authority that challenge your feelings or make you accountable for your behavior. That philosophy is not Biblical and is a recipe for relationship disaster. In that way of thinking, one does not sacrifice or extend oneself in relationship with others. That does not

match up with the heart and call of Christ to love beyond love. Christian author Brennan Manning wrote,

"We are all continually being swept into the obsessive pursuit of three basic human desires; security – pleasure – power." (14)

The desires Manning speaks of are not evil, but they can quickly become so when pursued outside or independent from Christ. Most human desire becomes "*myopic*" thinking, often characterized by self-gratifying and even narcissistic choices when left unquestioned and untouched by Christ. Some of that thinking has helped make some areas of our life successful, but it may also be why we fail in the most important ones.

Much of the thought from the *independent lifestyle* or *just floating along* in a detached social belief system does not work within the framework of the genuine loving community of Christ. And, after years of practicing non-trusting relationships, even Christians find it hard to hear the commanding words of Christ, "*Love one another as I have loved you.*"

It is easier to love who we want - the way we want - and when we want.

But to live that way, one must continually categorize and place conditions on the key relationships in life. That cannot be so for Christians – not according to Christ. Many of the cultural/social ideas and philosophies that we currently pick and choose from to navigate our lives are not compatible with Christ's radical daily demands. Those ideas are a direct result of a secular worldview's influence in our lives. When the Church is confronted by the thought of real-life together in Christ with the

expectation of loving difficult people, doing difficult things - many Christians see only the inconvenience and cost involved with such a demand. Too many millennial Christians say no when there is an expectation of personal sacrifice and commitment and begin to look for greener, less demanding pastures for their spiritual experience. Eventually, the call to love beyond love confronts every Church. Each community must either become a religious organization or ask the Holy Spirit to lead their people into a loving community and life together in Christ.

The Church needs to run from religion as fast as it, not aimlessly or angrily but righteously. Religion has only an ideal and illusion of the Christian community and life together for those involved. We, the Church, run from religious illusions and ideals. Life-together in the community does not come to us in surreal or self-serving objectives, but only in selfless pursuit of Christ and His Church. When illusory ideals do not go our way, the tendency is to call the community and life together with others a failure. In the same way, when people we love fall to sin – we (because of our religious and illusory ideals) often identify or see them as failures. It is easy to justify opening the door to the bus and throwing them to the curb. But, in Christ, when those within our community fall to sin - they can not be seen and treated as failures but as greatly valued brothers and sisters in Christ. It is not about throwing these poor people to the curb. At this point, it is all about making sure they don't open the door themselves and jump. In the community, we quickly come alongside the brother or sister who has fallen, pulling them in closer to love and protect from the enemy trying to destroy them. We pull them in, so the Word of truth is heard - and that love, correction, and healing can begin. Love such as this ignites the Holy

Spirit's corrective process and the working of un-measurable grace deep within the one who has fallen. Here is the instruction from the apostle Paul to Galatia's churches in chapter six, verse one - *"you who are spiritual can restore him gently."*

Paul's original Greek text might shock you. *"Humeís hoi pneumatikoi katartízete ton toiouton en pneumatic prateetos."*

The translation in proper tense and correct context goes like this,

"You who are filled with the Spirit of love, carefully breathe life into him."

Love beyond love breathes life into the lifeless. Those in the community who practice the gift of love should carefully and humbly use the love of Christ to restore the fallen to re-newed life-together in Christ. This kind of love forgives the sinner - and eventually leads them to godly sorrow and repentance over their sin. It is also a love that inspires a measurable behavior change. Here is how *Deitrich Bonhoffer* puts it.

"God has already laid the only foundation for our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. We thank God for giving us other Christians who live by God's call, forgiveness, and promise. Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the common life, is not the one who sins still a person with whom I too stand under the word of Christ? Will not another Christian's sin be an occasion for me ever anew to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Therefore, will not the very moment

of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches me that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting." (15)

Life together in Christ must be understood as the "extraordinary grace" that it is. In extraordinary grace, we seek God's truth together - not as a noble exercise of intellectual and spiritual stimulation, but as the Word of God in Christ, which stimulates a change process within us. This change stirs within everyone in the community an increasing desire for a new and holy life together. It is a life formed in the very image of Jesus. C. S. Lewis says, "*the desire is not to be "made good" but we desire to be "made new."*" Paul the apostle called this process "*a new creation in Christ.*" Christ is the Word of truth.

As followers of the word of truth, we are made new in Christ and no longer remain that detached, distant, or demanding individual who has been our own worst enemy and, at times, an enemy to others who are seeking life together in Christ as well. Within that new image, we are indeed led by God's Spirit to participate in Christ by sharing our love with a community of others in worship, prayer, fellowship, communion, and service. Often in the Christian community, we are self-moved and self-motivated rather than Spirit-moved and Spirit-motivated (*remember "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life"*). Brennen Manning said,

"Our sense of self comes from our base desires of security – pleasure – power"; we are only acting in ways intended to win the approval of others, to beat others, to avoid the criticism of others, or to escape rejection from others." (14)

Bonhoeffer added to that thought when he wrote,

"Satan's desire is to turn me in on myself to the extent that I become enslaved and become a destructive force in community. The thrust from Jesus Christ is the opposite – to enhance my freedom so that I can become a creative force of love. It is the spirit of self-centeredness and selfishness versus the spirit of openness and self-sacrifice for the good of others." (15)

The cynical and selfish force that hurts and wounds others reflects what is old and needs to be left far behind. When the old finds an opening to raise its ugly head, we must faithfully resist and confront its presence with openness and honesty. **How?** Well, certainly not in the same old spirit or in the same manner it confronts us.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation."

The answer is; the community of Christ is made new and filled with new life built on specific and humble foundations of love towards God and one another. We can resist and confront that old spirit with the new-life resources we have been given by Christ and His community. As simple and as dated as these foundations may be, they remain God's way for us to build up one another and find the love we seek in Christ Jesus. These foundations are crucial to overcoming the harmful and hurtful behavior of the old and selfish persons we used to be. As Christians living life-together in Christ, we look for these loving foundations to help connect within the community. The Christian community first forms itself in Christ and then around one another through these eternal and divine foundations of love to become Christ's body. These faithful expressions are not religion - but God's way to life-together in Christ. The practical and Biblical way to identify these foundations looks like this.

Worship Together – John 4:23, 24

Pray Together – Ephesians 1:16-23

Learn Together – Colossians 1:9-14

Break Bread Together – Acts 2:46, 47

Serve Together – Ephesians 4:11-16

These were the foundations of faith practiced daily by the early Christian Church. The fruit of those foundations is still evident today. Critics might argue that the early Church is no longer a relevant model for today's millennial world – an all-access *technopoly* filled with diverse and complex societal dynamics and insights. But that argument is skewed with the

influence of secularized and anti-Christ thinking. The anti-Christ thinkers argue there must be more than blind faith, or the foolish belief and trust in a God who is not around to satisfy humankind's wishes and will. They protest that having faith in an all-knowing, all-loving, all-or-nothing God is naïve, claiming that absolutely nothing is absolute. However, it is the absolute experience of Christ's love that moves us to follow when we are called to a life together in Him. So we must be objective and single-minded to answer the radical demands of His calling. Because the objective we seek is not merely a visionary idea but a genuine and absolute reality, we have every reason to have great hope in our journey's outcome and our final destination. There was but one objective for the community of those early Christians, *"to know Christ... and to make Him known."* They gathered themselves around the resurrected Son of God to worship, pray, learn, eat, and serve together. In the process, they grew in grace and the love of Christ. In Him alone, they lived a profound life together, and the rest is, as they say, history. Led by the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples made known the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world, and just as He had told them, it eventually cost all of them their earthly lives. But not before they had met their objective and had reached their destination. Theirs undoubtedly was not an irrelevant and meaningless history. Instead, it was one that led its hundreds of thousands of followers into a world-changing journey. A faith journey that moved them ever forward into the future and eternal reward and rest. A forever home and life-together in the presence of God the Father, the Creator of heaven and earth.



This chapter entitled Life Together, is dedicated to the courage and unbending theological insights of writer, pastor, poet, and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Though his life was short-lived, his legacy of truth, courageous conviction, and brilliant writing live on and continue to influence millions towards the kingdom of God.

Chapter Seven: Submission and Surrender

Biblical submission is a humble attitude where obedience is rendered within a relationship, whether it be to God, authorities, co-workers, spouses, or family members. With the right heart and good attitude, submission is spiritually healthy and helps maintain balance in mutual relationships.

Biblical surrender is the willingness to deny oneself all possessions or personal status to gain and grow in righteousness and relationship to God. Jesus Himself provides the template and purpose for the practice of surrender, giving foundation to the Church for community and fellowship. The way for us to God is in complete surrender to Christ, not merely submission. He asks that we surrender ourselves to Him and submit to the authority of His word and one another, but there are essential differences between the two. This chapter focuses on those essentials and Biblical understanding of how one can submit yet not surrender, but one will most certainly submit when surrendered. To love beyond love and live life together in Christ - we offer ourselves fully surrendered to Him. Submissions made without a surrendered heart are not good enough. This revealed truth is vital to the present-day Christians and the community of Christ. We have frequently quoted Christian author Brennan Manning who valued the process of surrender for the follower of Jesus this way,

"The surrender of our self, allowing God to be God, provides the keys to living in the kingdom."

The surrender of our self, and the uncertainty and vulnerability that exists there are almost more than one can wrap their mind around. Let's start with just one question.

What does self-denial of that magnitude involve?

We start by remembering that Jesus tells us, "we lose ourselves to find ourselves." According to Him, the Biblical context of losing ourselves is a good and necessary thing - not a bad thing. The loss of self makes way for the Holy Spirit to transform our lives and for us to find our true selves. It forces us to search our hearts to expose any Christ-less security, ungodly pleasure, and any power imitating the real thing. Paul wrote to the Philippians,

Philippians 3:1

"I consider all things nothing more than rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

The goal is to gain Christ; to gain Christ, we must surrender ourselves to Him. When we do not wholly surrender to Him, our human nature uses various submission levels to imitate surrender. Seeing the potential imitation and limits of submission in this light causes us to seek the ultimate thing - surrender. Seeking God in Christ, whole-heartedly always begins to create a necessary and healthy distance from any identifiable bondage to our flesh. Unchecked human desire and the resistant will of our flesh is the enemy of complete surrender to Christ. We can understand then what Paul meant when he wrote to the Galatians,

Galatians 5:1

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

The surrender we describe is not the dogmatic *"give up all - or burn in hell"* that many suppose it to be. No, what God wants from us is the great discovery that comes when we finally have realized the end of ourselves. At this point, for anyone willing to trust in God, this discovery is the beginning of the new creation in Christ Jesus. It is the "extraordinary grace" that God is. He could take from us what He wants - instead, He patiently waits and takes what we give him.

If we discover, in the course of following Christ, that we have surrendered all, then, in the end, we will have it all. If we merely submit to avoid complete surrender giving Him only portions, well, you do the math. But make no mistake, the awareness that we are *"all-in"* children of God, able to righteously live and love with others in Christ as His sons and daughters, lifts a tremendous burden and pressure off us.

Surrender eliminates the pressure of living each day controlled by our emotions, obsessed with meeting our own needs driven by our flesh's desires. We no longer have to live as victims when we believe others have not met our expectations or fulfilled our needs the way we wanted them fulfilled. Listen again to Paul,

Galatians 2:20

"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" ESV

We find the self-affirmation we seek when we obediently and instinctively look only to Christ Jesus, and Him alone for the sense of who we are.

Complete surrender will ultimately heal us from the emotional suffering of addictive desires. As Manning says,

"The manipulative games we play can stop... the money game, the security game, the male-female game, the power game, the intellect game, and so on."

Surrendered fully to Christ, we can present ourselves to one another as, *"Here I am. I come to you in Christ; it's all I've got, and I offer it all to you"* In this way, we can come to one another in humble self-awareness as Christ comes to them; we can freely be present, without fear of rejection or thought of one's usefulness to us. We present ourselves to one another in righteous honesty. When relationships with other Christians happen outside of moral honesty, they falter, and when they do, we see the disappointment, frustration, and anger that comes from failed and unmet expectations. When left unchallenged, these feelings soon become real bondage often kept hidden in the shadows. At some point, we must come forward by faith into the light and renounce the bondage to all darkness in our lives, untethered from the emotional attachment to those things keeping us from complete surrender to God's work in us. In good conscience, we live in that freedom and triumph over the obstacles and excuses that we have formed to protect our weakness rather than in honesty and humble righteousness expose them. That is a complete surrender for the Christ-follower.

As Christians, we often speak of the need for submission to God. We think immediately of the passage found in the writing of James, the apostle.

James 4:7

"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

As we said earlier, there are essential differences between Biblical submission and surrender. One generally describes submission as the conscience acceptance of reality. There is yielding on the surface, but there can often remain a tension and anger that can even represent a small seed of rebellion that still exists when there is no genuine act of surrender. That is provisional, not actual. For example, we say that we accept who we are but do not accept it to the point that we willingly think and act from it. That is only a half-hearted acceptance and provisional submission. You could call it many different names; compliance, acknowledgment, resignation, or concession, but in the end, it is not complete surrender. If there is unmistakable evidence within us of reservation and quiet doubt, then we are not there yet. It is something like, "Ok, I'll submit." All the while thinking to ourselves, *"But you will never force me to do anything about it."* *Sound familiar?* If it does, then that is the problem, which is the difference between complete surrender and provisional submission.

Surrender is different. It says, *"This is who I am, so this is how I think, speak, and act."* Complete surrender to Christ takes submission to His word and one another to a whole new level, a level of transparency, transformation, and completion. There are no reservations, doubts, or provisional options there.

Submission is only something - Surrender is always everything.

Complete surrender to Christ is the moment when our forces of resistance have shut down and stopped working. The moment when we discover that we cannot help but respond to the call of the Holy Spirit. Dr. Harry Tiebout, writes,

"The emotional state of surrender is a state in which there is a persisting capacity to accept reality." (16)

For the Christian, the ability to surrender is a gift from God. Once again, we describe it as an extraordinary grace. Because we are performance-oriented, it is difficult for us to understand that despite how eager and motivated we are to achieve surrender, our motivation and eagerness alone do not reach it. Surrender does not come merely through the personal endeavor. Often the key to surrender is not what we are doing – but what we need to stop doing. Dr. Tiebot goes on to say,

"With respect to the act of surrender, it is an unconscious beginning to the end of our own conscious resistance, not willed by the patient even if he should desire to do so." (16)

It is fair to ask, *"How does this all-important surrender happen if the intensity of our desire is not the answer, then what is?"* First and foremost, we must see our complete surrender to Christ as a process that has a very distinct beginning but is not necessarily defined by a one-time event. It is the fruit and evidence of our continued spiritual growth in Christ. It is discovering the value of the continuance of non-provisional submission in

the name of Christ's love until we surrender entirely to Him. In prayer, healing, and the Christian community's strength, we seek Christ for this surrender. From this place, we grow in love - we grow in grace, we learn to be faithful and diligent to live and persevere in Christ – at peace with ourselves to seek His will and not our own. The result of this process is not just another submission but rather a sweet and complete surrender.

Why is there is such an importance to God's idea of surrender for Christians?

We believe in God the Father Creator of heaven and earth; we believe in Christ His only Son, and so on. However, just because we think we know what to say as a Christian about surrender, it does not mean we know how to surrender. That only comes in Christ and obediently following His call to us. Let's not kid ourselves; God's expectation of our complete surrender to Him is indeed demanding and unsettling, even offensive to some. But why should this surprise us? It is supposed to be demanding and unsettling. There is nothing about following Jesus Christ that indicates anything differently. *What is it about taking up one's cross and denying oneself that we do not understand?*

The demands He makes are unsettling. The unsettling results from Christ's calling as it begins to challenge our thinking, taking direct aim at our often stubborn and sometimes prideful will. Complete surrender to God in Christ is the renewing of ones thinking and crumbling of man's will. That is a monumental journey, but we must see that complete surrender is not the final frontier. Surrender to God and the calling of Christ is not some graveyard for the weak-minded and weak-willed. In reality, it is the place of

re-birth for all who need hope, believing there is more to this life than what we are presently have. It is the extraordinary grace of God that brings to us all that is new and right for our lives. Surrender is only a part of the process of being transformed and made new in Christ, but it is essential. It makes love beyond love not only possible but probable. The surrender that Christ wants from us is to complete a change in us that finally makes the difference in our lives and brings us to that place of genuine community with others that He has wanted for us all along.

Of course, the place He wants is life together, as described in our foundational passage of Acts 2:42-46. We cannot get to that Acts 2:42 place without our full surrender to Christ. The best example of this comes from the disciples of Jesus themselves. History tells us each disciple obediently and submissively answered his call to follow Jesus. However, each did not wholly surrender until after His death and resurrection. Until then, each had moments of doubt, anger, frustration, and resistance to Christ's mission or message. At one point, John confesses in his gospel (chapter 6) that Jesus gave them all an option to leave after they questioned his teaching (the partaking of His flesh and blood) because of its radical demands. Most of His disciples did go that day, and then there were only twelve of them. Ironically, the very moment they told Him they were going to remain, Jesus turned and said to them, "*one of you is a devil.*" Further evidence of their lack of surrender continued as they fled from Christ during His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Additional evidence was their conspicuous silence among the angry crowd as Christ was tried and judged before the Sanhedrin High Priests. And just days after His resurrection, as He remained among them, there were traces of

resistance from the doubter Thomas, who would not believe until he saw the scarred hands and touched the pierced side of Jesus. No, the reality is that they finally surrendered on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem's upper room filled with the Holy Spirit (active presence of God), surrendering all that they had and were. Nothing they had done brought them to this point of complete surrender other than their willingness to go on with life together, in the resurrected Christ. They loved each other beyond themselves. That is all they had left, love for Him and one another, and there was nothing else to give or do. They showed up that day to receive the promise of the Comforter. Everything lost or given up in terms of security, pleasure, and power to that point was given back. How? Why? The answer is in the prayer Jesus had prayed for them the night before His crucifixion. He prayed,

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. "

The will of the Father, the prayer of Christ, was that these men would come to a full surrender to His call, and in that surrender, would love one another as He had loved them. No more provisional submissions, half-hearted concessions, bitter resignations, or stubborn compliances – only surrender. In surrender came the perfect love of Christ, and they could

finally come together as one in Him, being of one mind and in complete unity. In the unity of the Spirit was the power to love the world and leave the mark of Christ Jesus as the beloved Son of God on all humankind's hearts. The apostle Paul would confirm this divine truth twenty-five years later as he wrote to the Colossians,

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." NIV

All the evidence we need as Christians to prove to us that the "love of God and one another" is our mission here on earth is in surrender. Complete surrender comes with the understanding of Christ's calling to follow Him as He follows the Father and to live our lives together in simplicity as dear children of faith in the unity of the Spirit. That is where we get it. Without that revelation, we are not even close to being on the same page, and love beyond love is nothing more to us than pages of words.



"It was granted to me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: how a human being becomes evil and how good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the

surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. That is why now surrendered, I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: “Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. I nourished my soul there, for there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.” (17)

...Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Chapter Eight: Reality of Pentecost

“Know that every man is either empty or full. For if he has not the Holy Spirit, he has no knowledge of the Creator; he has not received Jesus Christ the Life; he knows not the Father who is in heaven; if he does not live after the dictates of reason, after the heavenly law, he is not a sober-minded person, nor does he act uprightly: such an one is empty. If, on the other hand, he receives God, who says, I will dwell with them, and walk in them, and I will be their God, such an one is not empty, but full.”

...Irenaeus Of Lyons, “Collected Fragments from Various Writings”

Isaiah 61:3

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor." (NIV)

Acts 1:4-9

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." (NIV)

We have talked about the principles of change, how effective they can be, and just how vital a role they must have in our personal lives and the community's ministry. This type of change directs the Church and community to the Holy Spirit's promise and power that came to all believers at Pentecost. One of the things I am proud of is my spiritual origins and long-time heritage in Pentecostalism. So I want to be very clear on wording this not to be misunderstood or misinform regarding the real purposes and plans for the Holy Spirit's work in our lives and His Church.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are essential and are an active service to the body of Christ. Though it is Biblically clear that not all of those gifts are a priority or as publicly edifying to the Church at one time or another. The scripture teaches that the Spirit gives gifts in proportion to the need and circumstances as He (God) wills.

1 Corinthians 12:11

"All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills." ESV

The scripture also teaches us that the greatest of virtues is love. So great is love that it is the preferred priority in all situations, even above spiritual gifts. Love is always needed and appropriate.

1 Corinthians 12:31, 13:1-3

"But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. 1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." ESV

The Spirit's gifts are confirmed and validated in witness-bearing fruit that develops the Christ-like character needed to serve one another with integrity.

Galatians 5:22–26

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."

To become the body of Christ, the Holy Spirit fully equips the Church with the promise and power of His work in us. Without the Holy Spirit's active work and presence, we are just another religious organization doing religious business. We do not want to do religion; we want to love, as Christ has loved us. That is why we must demand of ourselves and one another to genuinely seek God for the reality of Pentecost and not settle for an emotively driven sideshow void of any real serviceable power for His Kingdom. The American Christian Church is part of the body of Christ, and as a part of His body, we should understand our role and do our part in His Kingdom. But to do this, we need the "real" power of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost) to get it done.

The real power of the Holy Spirit effectively brings about change in the lives of all who will follow Jesus. That change began when Jesus came here to earth and fulfilled His promise of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is essential though simplistic to realize that Jesus (God the Son) did not come to earth, and then the presence and manifestation of the Holy Spirit (God the Spirit) showed up thirty-three years later on the Day of Pentecost – they are One. When Christ is present, the Holy Spirit is present. To help us understand, we probably need to go back to something between Jesus and His disciples (post-Resurrection and pre-Pentecost). According to Luke's biography of Jesus, not long after His resurrection, Jesus said to his followers,

"Now I will send you the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven."

John's biography recalls that on Sunday night after the resurrection, He appeared to his disciples who were hiding in fear from the Jewish leaders in a remote location in Galilee. While with them, Jesus said directly to them,

*"Peace be with you. As the Father sent me so I am sending you."
Then He breathed on them and said, "Be filled with the Holy Spirit. If you forgive any ones sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them they are not forgiven."*

We also know from the passage in Acts chapter 1 that when Jesus visibly left this earth, He promised to send the Holy Spirit as His active presence so that all believers (at all times and all places) could finish the mission that He started.

Acts 1:5-8

"for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." ESV

Jesus knew His disciples could not accomplish His mission without Him. The initial promise of His Spirit was made to first-century believers so that they would continue to have His wisdom, courage, and power to deliver

and confirm the gospel message to the entire world. Pentecost fulfilled that promise, but the presence and manifestation of the Holy Spirit had been at work in them from the moment they met Jesus.

For those followers who gathered in the upper room, the power of the Holy Spirit that came that day would help them to close the gap between physically knowing Jesus and the spiritual community of people He had called them to be. As the one-hundred twenty prayed and worshipped in unity and faith, the promise of His Spirit was fulfilled among them, and those who gathered in the street below became witnesses to the manifested power above them. Those who witnessed were a blend of local unbelieving Jews, and hundreds of pilgrimage Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the "*Feast of Weeks*" the fifty-days of Passover to Pentecost. The supernatural witness they heard that day revealed to them the everlasting, eternal truth of the gospel and the love of the resurrected Savior Jesus Christ! They would return home to their communities throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond to share this revelation of love and hope and power of the Holy Spirit. No one who experienced or witnessed what took place that day could have gone on to do what they did in their power. They needed the active presence of the Holy Spirit to change, direct, teach and empower them so they could become witnesses to the world of what they had personally seen with their eyes and heard with their ears of Jesus Christ Himself. They would need the comfort and power of the Holy Spirit to endure the physical and social persecution of the hate-cultures who would pro-actively do anything to stop them from preaching the gospel of the resurrected Jesus.

At Pentecost, Luke's account in Acts reveals that the Holy Spirit's presence and fulfillment formed the new covenant community (The Church of Jesus). Because Pentecost's manifestations and message have such present-day relevance, the significance of those events is certainly worth another look.

Most would say that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost marked the birth of the Christian Church. The idea is credible and logical but not original, and, although Evangelicals often stumble on it, there is also nothing new to the belief that ancient Israel has (on again - off again) connections to the Church that emerged from Pentecost. Most often overlooked is Pentecost's kinetic reality - the new covenant community (the living and active body of Christ) that emerged from the upper-room that day, yet connected to the origins of an old covenant past.

For those in Biblical community, embracing the call to love beyond love in an unlovable world, Pentecost's reality *is* the connector of the past, present, and future for Christ's Church. There are significant parallels between the "old covenant community" of Israel and the "new covenant community" of Pentecost that, as we said, are worth a good look.

The continued parallelism of Israel's formation from a "diverse people" into "one people" jumps off the pages of Luke's account in what He perceived as the reality of what happened at Pentecost. The supernatural unifying of diverse language, in diverse people, from diverse cultures and beliefs into the unity of one faith, in one God, by one Spirit is the reality of Pentecost. The manifestations of the Holy Spirit that day were *fire, wind*, and speaking in *diverse tongues* (native languages). Historical Torah and Jewish literature have purposefully used all three (fire, wind, diverse

tongues) with symbolic significance and purposeful application. There is little doubt that Luke intentionally connects to this historical tradition of Israel to recount Pentecost's events. Here are some of the obvious ones.

The presence of God's Spirit leads Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt manifested within the "pillar of fire."

Exodus 13:21

"And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. 22 The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people." ESV

God's Spirit's presence diverges and manifests itself again on Pentecost with "tongues of fire" on the archetypical new Israel.

Acts 2:3

"And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them." ESV

The mysterious "violent wind" of God's Spirit dried and opened up the Red Sea waters.

Exodus 14:21

"Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." ESV

God's Spirit fills the upper-room with a mighty rushing wind.

Acts 2:2

"And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." ESV

Another key to the Biblical connection between ancient Israel and Christ's new covenant community revealed at Pentecost is its original language. The words *ruach* (Hebrew) and *pneuma* (Greek) both have the double meaning of *wind* and *Spirit*.

The Biblical symbolism of speaking and hearing in different dialects is also diverse, directly connecting to the confusion of languages at Babel.

Genesis 11:7–9

"Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth." ESV

The Holy Spirit's manifested presence at Pentecost revisits, negates, and provides a new covenant response to the complications of Babel's confounding languages. As much as Babel divided and prevented community, Pentecost united and provided for the new community

through the Holy Spirit's power of the revealed understanding of diverse language. As Paul wrote to the Church in Colossae (3:11), "*in Christ, there are no barbarians or slaves,*" meaning crude cultures, uncommon practices, and offensive languages. That is to say, in-Christ, every human-made ideology and expression that divides people are overcome by the manifested power of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecost outpouring brings understanding, unity, shared purpose, and common cause to the new covenant community and the Church of Jesus.

Pentecost signals the universal commonality of the gospel message and mission and the new nature of the people formed from it. Diverse language once used to divide and scatter is now used to unite and gather—the reality of Pentecost.

Regardless of the Holy Spirit's upper-room manifestation, the followers of Jesus did not limit the Pentecost experience to a single event or an isolated incident as we do today. Just as there is no cheap grace, there is no cheap Pentecost. So it is crucial to know that they did not go to the upper-room looking just for another miraculous experience; they had already witnessed many miracles. They went looking for and waiting on the specific promise, following the instruction Christ had given to them. They did not leave the upper-room talking about how awesome it was to speak in a foreign language previously unknown. They were not sitting around in the temple days later telling embellished dramatic stories about how an "unbelievable" windstorm hit that day, or even how amazing the cloven tongues of fire above their heads looked. No matter how spectacular, those events were merely more validating signs to the unbelieving Jews. Consider that the disciples had recently watched Jesus

die and then had seen Him resurrected from the dead. They did not need additional spectacular signs and wonders to get further buy-in.

The reality of Pentecost was not about supernatural manifestation – though there certainly was! The reality of Pentecost is about the fulfilled promise of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring unifying life, hope, and healing to the world. Each of the one-hundred and twenty left the upper room, knowing Jesus had fulfilled His promise of the Holy Spirit. He did not forsake them, and He would never leave them. They knew they had received the real power Jesus promised them. Power that assured them regardless of the diverse and difficult circumstances, or the potential cultural and language barriers, they would be able to go and do what Christ had asked them to do.

And what did Jesus ask them to do?

He had asked them to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He also told them to teach these new disciples to obey all the commands He had given them. If you remember correctly, the most important command of Jesus was for His followers to love God and then love each other just as He had loved them. He added, "*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*"

Love beyond Jerusalem, love to the nations, love beyond language and culture barriers, love beyond rulers, authorities, powers, dominions, and principalities. Love beyond race and religion, and above all, love beyond

love. And that my friends are the unlimited capabilities and purposes of the Holy Spirit's power and the reality of Pentecost.



"The drama of the incarnation journey to Pentecost does not conclude with a final act that neatly wraps up the loose ends of the story and draws the curtain. Rather it ends with an open future for those involved. Pentecost is a commencement in the same sense that we use the word to describe a graduation. It is simultaneously climax and beginning. It concludes with the assurance that this is not the end but the beginning. Christ is not dead or absent in some far-off spiritual realm. The kingdom he announced is not set aside to some future millennium but enters a new era of fulfillment. His ministry is not concluded but universalized through his new body. Surely this is part of the good news"! (18)

...C. Norman Kraus, "Pentecost"

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- (1) *"Confessions"* by St. Augustine
- (2) *"Life Together"* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- (3) *"Works of Love"* by Soren Kierkegaard
- (4) *"The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich"* by William L. Shirer
- (5) *"For the Soul of the People"* by Victoria Barnett
- (6) The Barna Group Research (2016, 2019)
- (7) *"Community and Growth"* by Jean Vanier
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