

LESSON ONE

CONNECTIONS: Introduction

By Bob Young

[Note: These seven lessons can be used as sermons, in Bible classes or as a small group Bible study series.]

Strong churches are places of authentic relationships. One has observed that the church should be “the safest place on earth.” For that reality to exist, the church must return to authentic spiritual community with Christ and others. One of the problems with small groups is that a small group is a number of bodies in a circle facing inward. Small groups without the ability to look outward will find souls turned away rather than souls attracted.

Strong churches are places of genuine community. That a church is growing as a faith community is the irreducible minimum. Such growth must be spiritual, relational, and emotional. The numerical growth will follow. At the community table in the church there is no fast food. There should be no expectation of immediate results nor desire for immediate gratification. Growing in community takes time, just as one cannot lose 10 pounds in 48 hours.

A helpful text for this study series is Philippians 3. Paul desired to know various facets of the life and experience of Christ (3:8-10) so that he could extend himself onward and upward (3:10-14). Eugene Peterson described such a life as “a long obedience in the same direction.” The focus is on connections that help us grow, even as Peter urged his readers to grow: 2 Peter 1:5-11.

The transformed life is not something one pursues on one’s own or by oneself. Spiritual growth occurs in the context of community. We turn our souls to one another to become what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “bringers of the message of salvation” to one another. This is essential before we can take the message to others. Henri Nouwen writes that believers become people “who know and are known, care and are cared for, forgive and are being forgiven, love and being loved.”

This series suggests five dynamics that will help us find the reciprocity and mutuality of meaningful relationships and connections in the context of the faith community. Here are five practices essential to authentic relationships.

How do Christians connect with one another? In this series, we will mention five things that support healthy interpersonal and spiritual connections between Christians. These are also the things that will help the contemporary church reach out to non-Christians in the spirit of Jesus. Consider these things: (1) we connect through the kind of unconditional love that makes us like Jesus, (2) we connect through celebration, especially the celebration of worship; (3) we connect as we come to know one another and share our lives, (4) we connect through service, and (5) we connect as we communicate with one another, especially through nurturing talk. These include at least the following concepts.

BEING LOVED and LOVING

Care giving, nurturing, unconditional love, agape, experiencing the nature of genuine love, the context of the koinonia

BEING CELEBRATED and CELEBRATING

Affirmation, worship, leitourgia

BEING KNOWN and KNOWING

Genuine concern, mutuality, reciprocity, self disclosure and transparency, community, fellowship, koinonia

BEING SERVED AND SERVING

Humility, ministry, diakonia

BEING TAUGHT AND TEACHING

Truth-telling, nurturing communication, “the truth in love”, edification and evangelism, kerygma, didaskalia

LESSON TWO

CONNECTIONS: How to Connect—Beginning at the Beginning with God

By Bob Young

Introduction

I received an email from friends in Ecuador. They just began “Intercambios de Comunidad” program and are now meeting in public library. The phrase means Community Connections. How and where will we connect with our community? We must study the nature of authentic relationships. Authentic relationships are the foundation of community—loving, serving, celebrating, knowing, and teaching or nurturing.

The study of God and his person prove that God’s nature is communal. The obvious response to God’s communal nature is that his people will build community.

Observe three things: (1) God exists in community, (2) when God was incarnate, in Jesus Christ, his model of community and transforming relationships cannot be ignored, (3) Jesus prayed for and taught the necessity of oneness for all Christians. The genuine church must move toward that vision.

The God of community

1. While we may not understand all that is involved in God’s nature, plurality, trinity, there can be little doubt that the “community gene” is passed down to God’s creation. We thrive in connections—families, social groups, work groups, marriages, friendships....
2. The beauty of genuine community is that it transcends culture. Why do people of different cultures come together in community? Because people need other people. Imprisonment is based on the pain of being behind bars, away from relationships, away from the community of normal life.

Jesus demonstrated community in his ministry

1. Emmanuel, God with us. He chose disciples, why? Because he also needed community.
2. Lone rangers are alone rangers. The church can never be optional. We were formed for community. The church is not a spiritual buffet bar, existing only to feed our families. One does not measure the tastiness of the entrée to determine which church to attend. Life transforming community is part of the plan.

Discipleship is about seeking oneness. Remember Jesus’ prayer in John 17: That they may be one as we are one...,

You may say, all of that theory or theology is fine, but how does it work out practically? Consider these words from Bonhoeffer, Life Together: “*Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.*”

Let me tell you how it works out. We know who we are; we receive our identity from others. Others provide the mirrors in which we develop our own spiritual identity and vitality. We were designed for dependence, not for independence. Actually, the better concept is interdependence.

Essential life needs are met in the context of true community.

STRENGTH for the storms of life

What is the absolutely worst thing that ever happened to you? May be several possibilities, but one thing clearly stands out for me. In a time when I needed strength, I found it in community. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 offers an insight: Two are better than one...if one falls down, his friend can help him up." We can help one another carry loads that are unbearable. Galatians 6 tells us to carry our own burden within our power; depend on others when the burden is unbearable.

It was Thanksgiving Day, 1993. Our house was decorated for Christmas. It was a little over two years after my mother's stroke. My mom and stepdad did not arrive on time, was my concern a premonition? The phone call: come to the hospital. I had barely gotten there when all of the elders were also there—on a Thanksgiving afternoon. That is the nature of community—family, friends, communities of faith. Not just church but community. How can we help?

When we wrestle with God, seek to make sense of the senseless, seek to understand the incomprehensible, reassurance and help come from the Lord, through community. In trauma we learn what it means to weep with those that weep. The body of Christ extends real, personal hands to those in pain.

It is not only our story; it is the story of multiplied heroes of faith: David and Jonathan, Elijah and Elisha, Naomi and Ruth. Without Priscilla and Aquila or Onesiphorus to encourage him, how might Paul's story have come out?

It is not surprising that the Bible tells us to invest in community. Leviticus 19:18 Jesus quotes: love your neighbor as yourself, to fulfill the royal law (James 2:8).

WISDOM for the decisions of life

Where should we go, what should we do, how shall we follow God? The answers are often complex, but they are best answered in the context of community, supporting, encouraging, guiding, and loving.

This is the uniqueness of this church. I cannot begin to describe you the richness of wisdom shared by the leaders and members of the churches where we have served have blessed the life of Jan and me. We pray; we ask; we seek; we converse. God has bountifully demonstrated the value of decisions made in the context of community. In our own life, we see numerous decisions made in the context of God's community, decisions which have blessed our life and led us to the present moment. (These illustrations are from our experience; share illustrations from your own life or from the group.)

- May 1970, seeking our first preaching job, Corb Manning: "I know a place that is looking"
- June 1972, visitors at services, recommendation by Raymond Kelcy, wonderful opportunity for personal and spiritual growth in Tulsa t Fifteenth Street
- May 1974, York College lectureship, invitation to move to Michigan, confirmed by Maurice Hall
- August 1976, moved to Holmes Road, again in context of community
- June 1987, to Fort Gibson (Mom's stroke and death, would not have moved...)
- May 1995, OVU, contact from Sermon Seminar, missions involvement, new chapter
- Fall 2001, we will move back to the center of the country, to McAlester in 2002
- My dad died, June 2005, Jan's dad died, December 2006.

- Bailey McBride in fall 2005: sad, you moved back to be near your dad, now deceased. My response: but God has confirmed the wisdom of the community in leading us
- 2008, left OC, to serve again in McAlester
- 2010, answering God's calling to mission and ministry
- 2012, Park Plaza

ACCOUNTABILITY and ACCEPTANCE for the challenges of life

We need friends to hold us accountable; we need friends to help us know acceptance when we change. We read the Bible to become like Christ, to gain insights, but even that strategy fails when we avoid genuine community. James 1:23-25: friends help us remember who we are. As iron sharpens iron, a friend sharpens a friend (Prov. 27:17). It is not always comfortable, but it is essential. Such sharpening, a rare gift of life change, won't happen unless we are willing to get close to one another.

The beginning of conversations about spiritual things, about spiritual accountability, begins in connections, exchanges, in life shared with friends. Down at the church house, but not only down at the church house. How can we describe the beauty of exploring together the purifying and enlightening power of such connections (1 John 1:7).

Community is the context in which lasting transformation occurs. To really change, to let go of my past, my problems, my difficulties, I need acceptance and care. The church is uniquely suited, more than any other entity, to offer that kind of neighbor love in the spirit and imitation of Jesus. Does this sound like an inflated claim? Consider the world in which we live.

→Talk to people about their families, and families are divided. Lots of people experience more pain than love and acceptance in their families. Divorce, abuse, overwork, financial stresses, problematic family dynamics.

→Talk to people about their work; that is not where people find acceptance and care. Lifelong security in a job is a thing of the past, global competition, downsizing, workplace violence.

→The neighborhoods are not neighborhoods any more—often we do not know the folks who live next door. The loneliest people in the world live in the midst of millions. People are too busy to make friends next door.

→Isolation is the reality of our world; many are resigned to it, no longer expecting to find true community. Imagine their surprise, were they to walk into this building, or our homes, or our meetings, or our communities, or our connections, our exchanges, and find genuine love. John 15:12-13. Jesus really does expect us to lay down whatever we have, however we need to, whenever requested. It is the nature of the Christian community.

In this series, we will talk a lot about us—the church. This is not because we want to be self-centered or selfish, but because we have a Christ-mandated potential for community. We cannot compete with other entities, perhaps even other churches, for entertainment value. Where can we best be visible for what God is calling us to be?—in community! All churches experience conflicts, but the church is mostly a place where most people have a reasonable promise of finding healthy, functioning, accepting relationships.

Love the Lord....Love your neighbor as yourself. That love provides strength, wisdom, accountability and acceptance. Everyone needs connections.

LESSON THREE

CONNECTIONS: Being Loved and Loving

By Bob Young

Larry Crabb: *The Safest Place on Earth*, is plea for the development of authentic, safe, spiritual communities with Christ and other believers. We must change our way of thinking about church, thinking about spirituality, thinking about self to achieve this kind of spiritual community, connection, and change.

“We’ve got to move to another level; we arrange our bodies to focus on a common point or goal, but our souls are sitting in the pews facing away from one another.” Even in Bible classes: with bodies in a circle, souls turned away.

There is no fast food at the table of community. We must learn to eat and drink deeply, to enjoy the feast, to linger over the meal. We must avoid the cultural tendency to want it all immediately, there is no immediate gratification. We want results without work, but the need is seen in Eugene Peterson’s phrase, a long obedience in the same direction.

Paul understood this: Philippians 3. Peter knew the process: 2 Peter 1:5-11. This is a matter of developing connections, community is a progression, we must see the role of love. Only when we learn to turn our souls toward others can we be genuine bringers of salvation to others. Henri Nouwen writes about becoming people who know and are known, care and are cared for, forgive and are being forgiven, love and are being loved.

Five concepts undergird effective community. They usually develop in a certain order in healthy relationships. They begin with personal experience and expand to include more and more people. These five concepts in order are:

- Being loved and loving—strength, wisdom, acceptance, accountability in the context of community; I learn that I matter and that others matter
- Being celebrated and celebrating—celebration of self, based on self-worth, creation in God’s image, celebrating God in worship.
- Being known and knowing—self-disclosure
- Being served and serving—self-giving
- Being taught and teaching—accountability that nurtures the soul

The beginning point is based on understanding God’s developing relationship with his creation, agape love, extended unconditionally. When we are loved, we can love (1 John 4:7ff). We want to know one another before we share brotherly love. Agape love thus precedes brotherly love.

BEING LOVED

Building community begins with being loved. Parents love children, churches love new members, mission groups love new members...

When I am loved, I learn that I matter. I learn my value. John 15:13, no greater love.... 1 John 3:17ff.

Agape love is love for who I am and not only for what I can do.

This is the bold, compassionate love of 1 Corinthians 13. When we experience this kind of love, we are empowered to love others.

In church, we often ask people to love before they are loved. We have a need, you have a pulse, we have a match! Elders are first pastors-shepherds, then guides-superintendents-overseers. The elder calls: is the first thought “Good! My caring, compassionate shepherd” or is it “I wonder what he wants now.”

Genuine community begins with love received from Christ, then shared. Evangelism is the process of loving someone enough to share with them Christ’s love. Mission is love-driven. It is not motivated by guilt, demand, law, or command.

Church is a safe place because we create an environment that invites relational integrity and safe spiritual growth and transformation. We are, in the words of Nouwen again, wounded healers.

Being loved lets me draw nurture and strength from the community, through the ever-present Christ in his community.

LOVING

When we have been loved, we can love. Many cannot love because they’ve never really known love: the love of God, the love of Christ, the love of others. Being loved leads to loving, and that mutuality connects us in deep, meaningful relationships. When that occurs, you have the beginnings of authentic community.

To connect in any other way fosters the veneer of sociability without genuine fellowship or community.

LESSON FOUR

CONNECTIONS: Being Celebrated and Celebrating

By Bob Young

The challenge is clearly stated in a book by Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*. [Illustration: young lady, physically abused in adoptive family, suspicious of all, now mother, concerned about who she can leave her new baby with.] How can we communicate that church is a safe place, especially in world where the news indicates that churches are not always safe places?

If the church is going to be the safest place on earth, we need a plan for developing authentic, safe, spiritual communities with Christ and other believers. We must change our way of thinking about church and self in order to become a genuine spiritual community characterized by connections and communion. Too many church activities are “bodies in a circle, souls turned away.” The kind of change we need to experience will not occur immediately. There is no fast food at the table of community. Eugene Peterson describes “a long obedience in the same direction.”

Five concepts that undergird effective community

<u>Action</u>	<u>Expressed in...</u>	<u>Builds....</u>	<u>Lesson....</u>
TO BE LOVED AND TO LOVE			
Care-giving	love and care	self-esteem	I matter (others matter)
TO BE CELEBRATED AND TO CELEBRATE			
Affirmation	celebration	self-worth	I have value
TO BE KNOWN AND TO KNOW			
Acceptance	intimate connections	self-disclosure self-confidence	I am part of a community
TO BE SERVED AND TO SERVE			
Humility	service and ministry sacrifice	self-giving self-commitment	I can contribute
TO BE NURTURED AND TO NURTURE			
Accountability	truth-telling	self-awareness	I am honest

The challenge summarized: We are seeking to become a church that....
cares deeply
 celebrates vibrantly
 connects intimately
 commits sacrificially
 communicates honestly

In the previous lesson, we discussed the pressing need for love in the community of believers, and the general absence of love in the larger community blocks of our world. We too often ask

people to care for others before they are cared for. How many have felt taken advantage of down at the church house? How many feel they give more than they get? How many say that church is only interested in what I can give....

The same principle applies to celebration and worship. We expect people to understand worship before they understand basic Bible truths. Three things undergird celebratory worship as described in the Bible: (1) we are created in God's image. (2) our nature as God's creation gives us dignity and worth so that we legitimately celebrate self. (3) our response to God's gracious action in our lives leads us to the celebration of God in worship.

I grew up in churches that sometimes left the impression that the grumpier you were, the holier you were. We had lots of preachers in the little church in Kansas where I grew up, seemed to have one thing in common—not having much fun. Too much fun was equivalent to “sin in the camp.” That was my impression growing up.

This little church also encouraged the young men to a high level of involvement. We led singing, led devotionals, read Scripture, and assisted in various ways. We were affirmed with encouragement, gratitude, and words of praise. That encouragement gave us hope—maybe someday, if I keep practicing, I can be a preacher. But there were always some with a less optimistic view—“remember, we're all just dirt!” Melvin Gibson: would you like some criticism? Really? After all, too much affirmation might give us the big head. Let's not let this affirmation, confirmation, self-worth, self-value thing get out of hand.

The church that has not learned to love and celebrate will struggle to develop the kind of connections that build community. I don't know what “celebration” means to you—hands raised, amen, hearty singing, kneeling prayers, humble hearts, good words, generous thank you. The church that follows Jesus is about celebration.

The Bible doesn't equate gloominess with holiness. Jesus and Paul and a host of other New Testament persons celebrated—at weddings, in homes, successes. Jesus taught in parables about wedding feasts... Such celebrations are reminders that God is gracious, redemption is real, and Christ is at work in us. Celebration is a biblical concept. The OT Jewish feasts were celebrations. The angels rejoiced at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2), the angels rejoice in salvation (Luke 15:10), you and I are invited to the great hallelujah wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). Paul urged the Philippians to rejoice, again and again.

Jesus celebrated—he turned water to wine at a wedding, he exulted with followers who discovered the kingdom of God firsthand (Luke 10:21-24). Here is deep joy; contagious love for people: care-giving first; rejoicing second. The joy-robbing Pharisees, full of pretension and self-righteousness did the opposite. They angered Jesus. Joy overflowing—that is the phrase.

Remember Jesus' words from the Upper Room: John 15:11, 16:20-24. Paul: rejoice with those that rejoice (Romans 12:15). Such rejoicing is a part of our singing (Col. 3:16). Why doesn't the contemporary church celebrate more?

We have not learned the way of celebrating one another; we do not know how to celebrate God. Put some members in the middle of the group, and speak words of affirmation. Take photos of what we are doing, paint pictures, write affirming letters, give gifts, sing praises. We live in an affirmation-deprived society. When was the last time you went to work on Monday and the boss said, so good to see you, I've missed you all weekend, your contribution, caring

attitude, promptness and work efforts are superb. I just can't imagine this place without you. I sat there watching football this weekend and all I could think of was how your presence brings light to everyone else. Why, you are virtually irreplaceable, it is a dark day when you are not here. Happens every Monday, right?

The church should be different. The church is for celebrating God's presence and goodness. We celebrate one another because we see God's goodness in one another, Gal. 1:24.

When we are celebrated, we learn how to celebrate with others. When people pray for me, I learn how to pray for others. When people surround me with love, I know how to do that for others. When people care and love and write and touch, I can do that for others.

When we are celebrated, we can celebrate. The celebration that is central in our life is our celebration of God's goodness in our life. We sing, we say thanks, we respond in love, we are generous, and most of all, we surround the table in a memorial feast he has instituted as a memorial.

Genuine community begins with love received from Christ, love shared in care giving. Evangelism is the process of loving someone enough to share with them Christ's love. Genuine community is built in the affirmation of celebration—we are celebrated, and we learn to celebrate with others, and to celebrate God.

Church is a safe place because we create an environment that invites safe spiritual growth and transformation. We are loved lovers, we are celebrated celebrants, we are wounded healers. We draw nurture and strength from the community through the ever-present Christ in his community, the Christ who loves us, the Christ who celebrates our salvation with the angels.

Conclusion

To connect in any other way other than God's way fosters the veneer of sociability without genuine fellowship or community.

Only when we have been loved, we can love. Many cannot love because they have never really known love: the love of God, the love of Christ, the love of others. Being loved leads to loving, and that mutuality connects us in deep, meaningful relationships. When that occurs, you have the beginnings of authentic community.

Only when we have been celebrated can we share in the celebration of others, only then can we genuinely worship.

Here's the challenge: if we are interested in building a genuine church, we must instill authenticity in our relationships and activities: care giving love, affirming celebration, accepting relationships, humble service, truth-telling. Such is risky—people will take advantage, some who come will not understand, the odds are stacked against us in an unspiritual world, it is a long-shot at best. But it is the only way, take the lead in building a new kind of community, where souls face one another.

One writer says: the church is called to be faceful. We are only faithful when we receive and reflect the face of God. We are only faithful when we face one another.

Today we conclude with a focus on celebration—we want to celebrate your victories, big and little, great and small. Write a reason for celebration, and we will pray with gratitude.

Perhaps you need to make a change in your life before you can celebrate. Come to Jesus, change direction, connect with a church family that cares and celebrates. If you are struggling with the celebration, if you need help in changing your own life into a life of celebration and positive affirmation, this church will lovingly care, and jubilantly celebrate when new life and new beginnings are unveiled.

We will circulate to pick up your celebration notes, and you are also welcome to bring them, or to come to Jesus for salvation, for washing, for newness, for renewal.

LESSON FIVE

CONNECTIONS: Being Known and Knowing

By Bob Young

Connections that Build Community

We will be a church that....

- cares deeply*
- celebrates vibrantly*
- connects intimately*
- commits sacrificially*
- communicates honestly*

Five Principles

Loving: care-giving, Christ-likeness

Celebrating: affirmation, leitourgia

Knowing: authenticity and acceptance, koinonia

Serving: humility, diakonia

Communicating: accountability that nurtures, kerygma, didaskalia

Intimate connections depend on authenticity. Acceptance is not possible without authenticity. It will eventually disappoint. These two ways of connecting—being known and knowing—demand transparent self-disclosure. [Illustration: if you know who I am, you might not like me anymore.]

Loneliness is an epidemic in our society. Have you ever felt lonely? What causes loneliness? One answer: lack of intimacy, lack of relationships.

Most of us want to know others deeply and be known by them. We crave relationships. Deep down, we want people to know who we are, to care about our story, our pain, our dreams, our hopes, our fears. Friends who ask questions and really listen are like water to a parched soul. No one can achieve intimacy unless people seek to know and to be known. Julie Gorman: *True community is more than being together. A person does not develop trust in others simply by being in a group where members study together, pray together, and share a common group leader. Trust involves relatedness. Relatedness is more than presence although that is the beginning. To relate, one must know, and to know one must work at being open to trust.*

Human beings have a great longing within to have meaningful, deep relationships. Do you know where that desire came from? God!

Jer. 24:7: I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their hearts.

Rom. 12:9 (Message): Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. God made us for heart-to-heart relationships. But it is easy to fake it.

We may wear masks for many reasons, but one reason is supreme: Fear. Think about the masks you wear—at work, at home, with the family, with friends, down at the church house.

One fear preachers often experience is fear of the grief experience when relationships end. "We are not going to be friends with the preacher because it hurts too much when he leaves." To build true intimacy or community requires love; to lose that love demands grief. At times Jan and I are a bit jealous of people who have just stayed in one place always, but then we are reminded that we have friends around the world. Some fear the grief.

But....the primary reason we are not always real and authentic in our relationships is the fear of rejection. Although wearing masks may help us guard against rejection, we will never experience intimate connections while we are hiding behind masks. When I refuse to reveal my deepest identity, I do not allow others access to who I really am. As a result, I am consumed by the impression I leave on others more than I am by developing an open relationship. We think legalistically: what should I be feeling, rather than what I am feeling.

Jesus targeted the Pharisees who appeared to be alright but were a mess on the inside (Matt. 23:27-28). Prov. 26:23 NLT: Smooth words may hide a wicked heart, just as a pretty glaze covers a common clay pot.

We erect barriers to intimacy. Removing barriers to intimacy means rejecting self-sufficiency and disposable relationships, wanting more than a "hotel" church. We live in a society where relationships are tenaciously superficial and unrelentingly transitory.

To allow others into our lives is the greatest gift we can give. It represents trust, and hope and love. This requires self-disclosure, opening the window to the soul. We ought to get in some practice since this will be the reality of eternity: 1 John 3:1-3.

The key to authenticity is to take off your mask. The key to being authentic in our relationships is finding the courage and strength to take off the masks and expose the real person inside. When we take off our masks, we may expose relational scars, scratches, the evidences of past battles. Taking off the masks means that we have to know God's forgiveness, and know how to forgive ourselves, so we can be real with others.

Where is authenticity? Where is the real world? This spiritual reality we call church is the real world: being real, living in light, fully known and knowing, genuine sharing.

Three "take aways":

Genuinely care about others.

Find your identity in Christ.

Be authentic and sincere.

In such knowing we reweave the bonds of community in our spiritual lives, offering every person who enters these doors the gift of knowing and being known. I want to know you; I want you to know me.

LESSON SIX

CONNECTIONS: Being Served and Serving

By Bob Young

Connections that Build Community

We will be a church that....

- cares deeply
- celebrates vibrantly
- connects intimately
- commits sacrificially
- communicates honestly

Five Principles

Loving: Acceptance

Celebrating: Affirmation

Knowing: Authenticity

Serving: Humility

Communicating: Accountability that nurtures

Humorous story of author who wanted to write a book, “Humility and How I Achieved It” I would love to use another word—it sounds so harsh. I must humble myself, humiliate myself, lower myself. We want another word. We want a word other than slave—so we use servant. Slave is really more accurate. We are slaves...to God, to Christ, to one another. We are indentured, we are committed, we are self-giving. The needs of the Master are supreme.

Service is at the heart of Christianity. Service is at the heart of Christian leadership. A Christian leader who will not serve is not fit to lead. Christian leadership comes when one is the servant of all, Luke 22:22-26. Jesus is our example in service (Mark 10:45; Mt. 20:28). We hear the words, but we fall prey to cultural or secular wisdom rather than biblical wisdom from God.

We want to be noticed. Serving is so nothing, serving so often goes unnoticed. On the opposite hand, not serving others stands out like a sore thumb.

Some have ruined their influence because they are too good to serve. “You won’t see him lift a finger when it involves anything but teaching. Remember when we needed help with those chairs; he just stood there sipping his Coke. Maybe it was below him. Maybe he just doesn’t do chairs.” What good is a leader who just doesn’t do chairs? What good is a Christian who just does not do--period?

In a world more focused on rights than responsibilities, the Christian that commits sacrificially, to God and to others, is outstanding. We do not have the option of selecting only those serving options we enjoy. In God’s army, “selective service” is not an option.

Consider our example in service, 1 Pet. 2:21-24; Jesus would do chairs. Actually, Jesus did feet. We are not very good at doing feet. Jesus put on the towel, grabbed the basin, and did feet. John 13:1, he showed the full extent of his love.

This is the foundation of what we are striving to be as church.

- o We love enough to extend care—we care deeply.
- o We love God and worship him, and we affirm one another. We celebrate joyfully.
- o We love enough to disclose self and become authentic. We know intimately.
- o The full extent of our love is shown in our humble service, sacrificial commitment.

Humility is self-sacrificing. John 13:1 is likely a reference to the cross, but it includes Jesus' humble service, his supreme love.

This kind of service is not valued in our world. We do not see it in the mirror as often as we would like. When a leader models servanthood, group members follow suit.

Here is what is even harder for lots of Christians: being served. We count visits. We must learn the art of receiving. Acts 20:35. It is not easy to receive. People want to do for you. [Illustration: Ed Tarrant, learn to receive, but don't expect it as a given.] Why is it so hard to be served? Because we are saying that we too are needy, we too are dependent, we too are imperfect. Our pride denies it.

Peter at first refused to let Jesus wash his feet. We put on humility like a garment, Col. 3:12. A good place to serve is to those who cannot return the favor. Call in the poor and needy from the byways. Poor, orphans, widows, strangers. POWS. These are POWS held captive by life's tragedies and trials. Giving to them is nothing like what we normally experience or expect. It is not giving and receiving, it is all giving.

We are not good at this. [Illus: I hope they'll place membership.] For someone with a bunch of problems, we are not so enthusiastic. This kind of sacrificial service requires that we discover needs and then serve and love, even when someone else cannot give back.

We want to hear the words—thank you for serving. But that is not for this life. It is for another time. Well done. James says it is the essence of pure religion: 1:27.

Authentic relationships develop when we move toward loving, celebrating, knowing, and serving. When we learn to accept one another (Rom. 15:7), affirm one another, be authentic, and humbly serve. These are life-changing words. I will serve—no strings attached.

This sets the stage for the final item in our study—truth telling and accountability. This is the next lesson. As we close, let me observe that we tend start at the last step and wonder why it doesn't work.

In caring and celebrating and connections and commitments, we turn our souls toward one another. We cannot "not". In these connections, we care, affirm, find authenticity, and find help. And when the uncomfortable matters come—accountability, nurturing, and admonitions, we cannot turn away. We are hooked. We are a part of the tapestry of God in this place.

LESSON SEVEN

CONNECTIONS: Being Nurtured and Nurturing

By Bob Young

Connections that Build Community

We will be a church that....

- cares deeply
- celebrates vibrantly
- connects intimately
- commits sacrificially
- communicates honestly

Five Principles

Loving: Acceptance

Celebrating: Affirmation

Knowing: Authenticity

Serving: Humility

Nurturing: Accountability

Introduction

Being a Christian is not always comfortable. Religion: comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable. The deeper we go, the harder it becomes. Caring and celebrating come easy. Connecting, committing, and communicating are harder.

Authentic relationships develop when we move toward loving, celebrating, knowing, and serving. When we learn to accept one another (Romans 15:7), affirm one another, are authentic, and humbly serve. These are life-changing words. I will serve—no strings attached. This sets the stage for this final study—truth telling and accountability. We tend start here; we start at the end and wonder why it doesn't work. We haven't bothered to care, we haven't learned to celebrate, we are barely connected, hardly committed and certainly not committed sacrificially—but we expect people to hear our words.

There is no bridge across which the gospel can travel—the process we use is more like hurling hand grenades. Maybe if one explodes close enough to someone, it will get their attention. In our world today, the gospel travels across the bridges of relationship.

[Illustration: Jerry Smith. New Christian moves to new community, rural, closed. He became Christian because of relationships, but there are none to sustain him now.] This must be understood in the context of our changing society, culture, communities and world. Formerly, there was time to learn, to grow, to develop. In a mobile society, the relationships that made the initial contact possible are quickly broken and not replaced.

That is why the church must start with caring, celebrating, connecting, and commitment before it can expect communication. That is why we do the same with every person who comes among us. I could have used the word teaching, preaching, telling, evangelizing—but it is nurturing. It is disciple-making. It is more than talking—it is communication, but we are using that word in its breadth, deep, intimate, communication. Soul-talk. Soul-mates.

In caring and celebrating and connections and commitments, we turn our souls toward one another. We care, affirm, find authenticity, and find help. And when the uncomfortable matters come—accountability, nurturing, and admonitions, we cannot turn away. We are hooked. We are a part of the wonderful tapestry of God in this place.

Truth-telling is not easy. Most of us would rather have a root canal than enter the potential chaos of admonishing. It is not easy; it is always hard (Phil. 4:2). We have our version of truth that we want to hear and share. We don't want to hear "new" truth nor uncomfortable truth. [Examples: lost people matter to God; turning irreligious people into full devoted followers of Jesus.]

Reread Colossians 1:28-29 and 3:15-16. When we fear conflict, we avoid truth-telling. What message have you spoken in your mind but never said aloud to a loved one? We worry about hurt and anger. We wonder if we have the right to tough talk. We wonder if it is more Christ-like to avoid conflict and disagreement. We have had all of the turmoil and toughness we can take.

So we live in an unspoken fog or cloud. Henry Cloud in his book, *Changes that Heal*, writes about the unspoken rules we use to guide our lives.

- Thou shalt not let anyone get emotionally close to you. Keep your distance.
- Thou shalt not tell the truth about how you are feeling. If you are hurt, keep it a secret.
- Thou shalt always like if it will keep the peace.
- Thou shalt not talk about any family matter outside the home, or any hurt that you sustain here. Breaking loyalty is an abomination.
- Tender feelings are an abomination.

Withholding truth robs people of opportunities for spiritual growth. Truth and truth-telling, honesty and candor are the foundation of authentic relationship. We will be honest with one another. Truly trusting one another means speaking and hearing the truth together.

Without the ability to grow by hearing the truth, our spiritual life and church life is shrouded in pretense, shaped by false assumptions, and filled with unmet expectations. Emotions retreat into the background or go into hiding, pain is medicated but never relieved, and the relationships we long for are just names on a long list of acquaintances.

Authentic relationships develop when we genuinely love (accepting, caring), when we affirm and celebrate, when we authentically connect, when we humbly commit, when accountability and communication occur, and we feel the warmth of Christian community spreading throughout the church. Ministry occurs, lives are touched in profound ways (not just superficially), and the church enjoys the favor of all the people (Acts 2:47). Acts 2:42-47 is a section of Acts 2 that we have largely ignored. This is truth-telling.

When Truth Meets Life

We are inundated with truth in the US. We have 400 English translations of the Bible. Books, study Bibles, websites, tapes, seminars. Yet the culture, even the Christian subculture, remains biblically illiterate. "To know and not to do is not to know."

We have an application crisis. President James Monroe: "The question to be raised in education is not what has the student learned, but what has the student become." What are

we becoming? We become because we are held accountable. The flip side of nurturing and communicating is accountability. Preaching is not good unless we do what is preached. [Illus: "I'd rather see a sermon..."]

This requires that we balance life and truth. We focus on truth, we focus on life, but we expect transformation so that lives are changed. Truth may be learned without life change: such is a travesty and tragedy.

Truth-focus

Know answers to questions
Focus on information—meaning
Focus: be right
Build community: Agreement
Goal: well-informed person

Life-focus

Know answer to problems
Focus on introspection—feeling
Focus: be real
Acceptance
Well-understood self

Change-focus

Know truth about God and me
Focus on becoming
Focus: be honest w/ God/others
Authenticity
Well-ordered heart

Common Activities or Holy Moments

Do we inadvertently usher the Holy Spirit out the door rather than inviting him to stay. Can we get beyond meetings as usual, Sundays as usual, expectation, hope, desire, the magnetic. All things are possible—can we find holy moments, spiritual transformation, and genuine community.

Here's the challenge: is your Bible class 'so-so' or 'so-what'?

Is your time here your story or God's story?

Are we talking to God or listening to God?

Are we satisfying ourselves or serving others?

We are in a race (Heb. 12:1-2). We have to decide whether we will have common meetings or holy moments. We are in a race to connect people to God; we are on a treasure hunt desiring to share the treasure with all we meet. We must lead people into encounters with God's spirit and word.

We must run persistently against all that would destroy community—divisiveness, fear, pride, self-interest. We will build community where truth meets life to produce transformation. This is a race against time. How long will we have meetings instead of experiencing moments? How long before we all see the goal: spiritual growth to love God and love one another.

[Illus: Mexico City Olympics, 1968.] Most remember Mark Spitz. But there is another, equally or more remarkable story. John Stephen Akwari, Tanzania, entered the far end of stadium, pain in every step, leg bloody and bandaged. The winner of Olympic marathon had been declared over an hour earlier, the stadium was almost empty. He crossed finish line, the small crowd that remained was appreciative. A reporter asked him: why not retire from the race since there was no chance of winning. "My country did not send me to Mexico City to start the race, they sent me to finish."

Too many Christian put on the uniform, go through the warm-ups, but never finish. This is a long journey, a long trek, an enduring obedience in same direction. Building a church is like running a marathon.

A few years ago in Tour de France, one of the leaders quit: "Rigor of the race destroyed the joy of competing." This work is rigorous, yes, but joyous. Hebrews 12:4: for the joy set before him.