

When the Church Was a Family

Recapturing Jesus' Vision

for Authentic

Christian Community

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Chapter Eight

DECISION MAKING IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

*He replied to them, "Who are My mother and My brothers?"
And looking about at those who were sitting in a circle around
Him, He said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! Whoever
does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother."*

(Mark 3:33-35)

Nick and Tina (not their real names) attended a church where I served in the late 1980s. They came to see me on a Wednesday evening in mid-October, having just finished their weekly ministry in our children's department. The couple had met at a church softball game a couple of months earlier. Now they wanted to get married in December. I did the math. Nick and Tina would have just four months together from acquaintance to the altar. The way that Nick and Tina wrestled with this major life decision helpfully illustrates what can happen when the church family functions as God intends it to.

I knew the couple's background, but I asked them to tell their stories again, together and in my presence. Both Nick and Tina had been divorced, and Nick was a single parent doing his best to raise a young son and daughter alone.

The match-up had much in its favor. Nick was a responsible, caring father. And I sensed that Tina would be a great mother. Perhaps most important, Nick's kids loved Tina already, and it was quite clear that the affection was mutual. Things seemed solid spiritually as well. Nick and Tina were deeply committed to Christ and to the ministry of His church. Finances would pose no obstacle to the health

of the relationship, since both of them held well-paying jobs. I saw a lot of positive signs.

Nick and Tina's past marital failures concerned me deeply, however, and their relationship seemed to be moving much too fast given the complexities of what would be a blended family arrangement. I told the couple that I wanted to discuss their situation with another pastor on our church staff so that we could pool our wisdom to help them make this important life decision.

My colleague was a trained family therapist, and I was not surprised to discover that Pastor Steve was as troubled as I was about Nick and Tina's rush to the altar. We put our heads together and formulated a plan. At my meeting with the couple the following week, I informed Nick and Tina that Steve and I would be happy to marry them in December—but not this December. Rather, the wedding would occur a year from December.

We wanted Nick and Tina to get into counseling and to nurture their relationship with one another over the course of a year, under the loving and guiding direction of one of our church leaders. I told Nick and Tina that we would then be happy to bless their union with a grandiose church wedding, assuming that no major obstacles arose during the year of intensive therapy.

As I shared our feedback, Tina's face began to redden, and her body language communicated to me in no uncertain terms that she was not at all happy with our feedback. Nick was troubled also. They wanted time to think it over.

When the couple left my office, I was not sure how it would all turn out. I caught their eyes on the way out the door and gave some final words of encouragement. I gently insisted that what we offered was God's best for Nick and Tina and for the kids. I hoped to discourage them from taking a shortcut by trying to find someone outside the church to perform the wedding.

I assured Nick and Tina that even if they ignored our input and rushed ahead with a wedding, we would continue to consider them part of our church family, and we would do our best to help them make their marriage work by providing postmarital, instead of premarital, counseling. I suppose I expected Nick and Tina to do the American individualistic thing and run off and get married in December.

Put yourself in Nick or Tina's place. How would you respond to such an apparently heavy-handed approach on the part of your church leaders? You are in your mid-thirties. You are madly in love. And you are absolutely convinced that the relationship is God's will for your lives. Then a church pastor tells you that you must wait another year to get married.

Decision Making in the Family of God

Nick and Tina's decision offers us a practical, real-life situation to consider in view of the strong-group surrogate family values that have surfaced in the course of this study. Recall the challenging redefinition of relational priorities that I introduced in the overview of Jesus' vision for community (chap. 3). As we saw, during His earthly ministry Jesus at times portrayed the natural family in a rather negative light. In some cases Jesus went so far as to present ongoing family loyalty and becoming a disciple as mutually exclusive options.

Jesus publicly disowned allegiance to His own blood family (Mark 3:31–35). He called James and John to leave their natural families (Mark 1:18–20). He commanded a man who wished to provide for his father's burial, in accordance with traditional Jewish family piety, to instead follow Him and “let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt 8:22).

Jesus warned His followers that as far as the natural family was concerned, He came not to bring peace but rather “a sword”—to set blood relatives so severely against one another that “a man's enemies will be the members of his household” (Matt 10:34–37). A fair assessment of the Gospel evidence uncovers as much anti-family sentiment as pro-family sentiment in the public ministry of Jesus.

Passages like these, along with the strong-group orientation of the world in which Jesus lived, suggest that Jesus demanded of His followers a radical exchange of loyalties. The issue for Jesus was not simply commitment to God versus commitment to our natural families. Rather, Jesus challenged His disciples to transfer their primary family allegiance from one group (the natural family) to another (the family of God).

In a social setting where each and every person found his identity in the group to which he belonged, a call to leave one's primary group—the family—in order to follow Jesus would make sense only if following Jesus meant joining His group. As Jesus said of His followers, “Here are My mother and My brothers! Whoever does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:34–35).

The result of all this is that we can no longer drive a wedge between commitment to God and commitment to God's family, as we do when we prioritize our lives according to the traditional lines of thinking that characterize modern evangelicalism:

(1st) God — (2nd) Family — (3rd) Church — (4th) Others

Jesus and His followers viewed things quite differently. For the early Christians, loyalty to God was tangibly expressed in loyalty to God's family. According

to biblical thinking, commitment to God cannot be divorced from commitment to God's group, and our priority list should read something like this:

(1st) God's Family — (2nd) My Family — (3rd) Others

Now consider Nick and Tina's important decision in light of these two very different ways of prioritizing our relational lives.

Nick and Tina's Big Decision

A week or so after the couple left my office, I received a call from Nick. He was a broken man. He said that our counsel was a "tough sell" for Tina, but that he had convinced her to receive the input and assent to the guidelines provided. Nick acknowledged that he had already experienced the chaos that results from trying to live life—and make marriage work—apart from the relational accountability provided by God's family. This time Nick wanted to do it right. He wanted more for himself, he wanted more for Tina, and he desperately wanted more for his children.

By God's grace, Nick recognized in our counsel the hand of God reaching out and offering him another chance to make marriage work. Nick had tried to do family on his own before. He had learned the hard way that a family functions best in the relational context of the larger surrogate family of God. Now he was ready for a change.

Tina soon got with the program too. Their counseling went so well, in fact, that I married Nick and Tina in June, just eight months after our initial encounter. And the marriage really "took." Nick and Tina face their challenges just like any other couple, but now, more than 15 years later, they remain faithfully married and they have done a wonderful job raising their two kids to love and serve Jesus.

Nick and Tina put God's group—the guidance and support they received through church accountability—at the top of their priority list. They took the biblical approach. This is why they were able to say no to their strong emotional desires in a family-related decision. They put the wisdom offered by God's family ahead of any feelings they had concerning the immediate future of their own natural family.

Consider the alternative. What if Nick and Tina had done the opposite? What if they had taken the standard evangelical approach and somehow convinced themselves that they could separate their commitment to God as a couple from

commitment to His group? Recall the list of relational priorities with which our own church culture is so familiar:

(1st) God — (2nd) Family — (3rd) Church — (4th) Others

Working from this list, Nick and Tina could have reasoned just like so many other couples do when they are faced with the same dilemma: "How dare the church [3rd] tell us what to do! We each have a personal relationship with God [1st]. And God is in our relationship with one another [2nd]. We can ignore Pastor Joe's and Pastor Steve's advice [3rd] without being unfaithful to God [1st]. After all, family [2nd] is more important than church [3rd]. We need each other, and the kids need a mother. Let's just get married in December."

Fortunately, Nick and Tina did not respond like this to the input of their church family. The interesting thing for this particular couple is that the outcome may have been the same in either case. Now I do not want to minimize the peace, security, and joy that Nick and Tina enjoyed as a result of holding their wedding at their home church and having the union blessed by their church leaders. The affirmation of a loving church family constitutes a key ingredient in a meaningful wedding ceremony, and it serves as a solid foundation for a lifelong marriage also. But Nick and Tina had so many things going for them as a couple that I suspect they would have had a successful marriage even if they had not listened to Steve and me and waited those extra months.

Yet life in the family of God is not just about Nick and Tina—or any one individual or couple for that matter—and it is absolutely crucial to grasp this point. The payoff for making right decisions goes far beyond the boundaries of the lives of those immediately involved. As it turned out, Nick and Tina's decision to put God's family first in their lives influenced other people in our church family in ways the couple could never have imagined.

As a singles pastor I officiated at well over a hundred weddings for couples who had met in our various groups. Along the way I inevitably encountered situations similar to Nick and Tina's. And now, thankfully, I had a referral to give.

Nick and Tina's experience was ultimately such a positive one that they soon gave me permission to give their phone number to other couples who had been told by the church to "cool their jets" and to readjust the timetable for their race to the altar. What Nick and Tina could tell these young men and women was that God does work through His people to guide and direct in a way that benefits both the group and the individuals involved. Several of these couples heeded Nick and Tina's advice and they waited. At least one of them split up during the premarital counseling process, and a potentially disastrous marriage was avoided.

Nick and Tina would likely have had a good marriage even if they had rejected our counsel. But because they put God's group first at a crucial point in their own relational pilgrimage, the couple soon found themselves in a position to minister wisdom to others in the church. Nick and Tina put God's family before their own family timetable, and the fruit remains—in their lives, in the lives of their children, and in the lives of several couples who have heard and heeded their advice. This is how God often works when we put His family first, where it belongs, on our priority list.

The lesson to be learned from the story of Nick and Tina is that big decisions are best made in community, in the context of the church family—especially big family decisions. Sadly, many of us choose to ignore this principle and isolate our families from the context of relational accountability—and input on decision making—offered by the people of God. But we do so at great risk when it comes to the relational health and spiritual development of those we most dearly love and cherish. It really does take a village to raise a child or to nourish a marriage. But only a special, supernatural kind of village will do: the surrogate family of God.

Recall, once again, Malina's striking description of a strong-group approach to church family life:

The person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a church family and responsible to the church for his or her actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. . . . The individual person is embedded in the church family and is free to do what he or she feels right and necessary only if in accord with church family norms and only if the action is in the church's best interest. The church family has priority over the individual member.¹

Modern evangelicals will surely struggle with the idea that we ought to be responsible to God's family for our individual "actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general." Nick and Tina's decision was not an easy one for them to make. But as we have seen in both the New Testament and in later church history, the above description is much more than a conceptual abstraction from the pen of a cultural anthropologist. It quite accurately reflects the way in which the early Christians conceived of their relationship to their local church families.

An example is the story of the acting instructor from third-century North Africa. Marcus found himself answering to the church for his whole vocational and financial future. Marcus was teaching acting. The church said, "Quit your job." And the church family offered the material resources necessary to alleviate the financial hardship that could result for Marcus should he decide to fully fol-

¹ B. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 19.

low Jesus. Marcus was, in short, responsible to God's family for his individual "actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general." So were Nick and Tina. God honored Nick and Tina and their church for the couple's commitment to strong-group family values.

The "Cobus" Group and Wise Decisions

I was fortunate enough to be first a member, then the pastor, of a college group that operated as a church-within-a-church. We called ourselves "Cobus" because both college students and business people in the 18-to-25 age bracket filled our ranks.

The church itself was a fairly typical suburban congregation. We held our services in a large auditorium, with the result that a lot of people showed up only on Sunday and had little or no interpersonal connection with others in the church. At the church-wide level, people did not experience a whole lot of community in the New Testament sense of the word.

Cobus was another story entirely. We averaged around 50 to 60 members during the years I was involved with the group, and the participants were highly committed to God and to one another. We spent hours and hours sharing life together as we met on Sundays, interacted in midweek small groups, and traveled as a group on weekend outings. During my first 15 years of ministry, this college group was the closest thing I experienced to the New Testament church. In many ways, Cobus operated like a strong-group surrogate family.

The college years are, of course, a time for making big decisions. During my tenure with the group I saw literally hundreds of life-changing decisions made by Cobus persons. Time and again, young people would meet with me, or with another adult sponsor, in order to wrestle through major life decisions together. Group members also spent a lot of time interacting with their peers when choices loomed large.

Numbers of collegians sought advice about the kind of job that might fit their particular gifts and temperament. Others just out of college discussed with us the direction that their romantic relationships were taking. "How do I know if she's the one, Joe?" Again and again, these young adults involved their spiritual shepherds—and their peers—in the process of decision making.

Chapter 1 addresses the major decisions facing young people in Western society today:

- **Vocation** What am I going to do with my life?
- **Spouse:** Who am I going to spend my life with?
- **Residence** Where am I going to live?

As noted earlier, we pay a tremendous emotional price for the freedoms in decision making that we exercise in our radically individualist society. God has not equipped us to operate as isolated individuals, especially where the most important decisions of our lives are concerned. God has created us for community, and it only makes sense to think that we will be healthier psychologically if we make important decisions in the context of a loving and caring church family.

This is hardly rocket science. After all, life works precisely in this way in our natural families. Because people from healthy families have a support network from which to tackle life's big decisions, they experience less stress and emotional heartache than those who must go it alone. We should expect the same to be the case in our church family.

There is another reason for making life decisions in the context of the broader church family. Not only will we experience less angst and emotional upheaval. We will also make better decisions—decisions that are better for us, and decisions that are better for the expansion of God's kingdom.

In my 25 years of church ministry, I have observed a general principle that I believe we can take to the bank when it comes to making major life decisions. I have blocked it off in the text in order to emphasize its importance:

The closer a Christian group approximates the strong-group, church family model that characterized early Christianity, the better the decisions that are made by the group's individual members and nuclear family units.

This is a rather bold statement, but it is true. Experience bears it out again and again.

The young men and women whose lives were deeply embedded in the Cobus group made great decisions—eternally meaningful decisions—again and again. Precisely because the group functioned in a way that approximated the New Testament model for the church as a family, the members generally made wise decisions that greatly benefited them as individuals and significantly contributed to the mission of God's group, the church, in the world today.

Community Guidance as a Way of Life

More than mere advice-seeking is at work here. It will not do simply to challenge American evangelicals, who otherwise live life as isolated individuals, to seek counsel from others only when they come to a defining fork in the road of life. In the strong-group church family model, input from others is a way of life,

not a resource to occasionally draw on as one of several items on a checklist that purports to tell us how to find God's will for our lives.

Many of our Cobus members were involved for years in the group, in an ongoing context of commitment, relational warmth, and interpersonal accountability. When these young people were faced with vocational and romantic options that would determine the very course of their future lives in the kingdom, the strong-group network was already securely in place to bear the life-giving fruit of eternally significant—and personally beneficial—decisions.

This is quite important because what I am advocating here is not an institutional program. To be sure, the context for wise decision making can be a formal one, like a meeting with a pastor to plan a wedding (Nick and Tina) or the calling of a "wisdom council" of church leaders to receive input for making an important decision (Pastor Martin below). More often than not, input comes in a less structured, much more organic way, as long-term relationships with brothers and sisters in the church family provide a natural context for speaking wisdom into one another's lives in a variety of settings.

This is not to say that our collegians invariably took the advice of their leaders and peers. Nor was our advice invariably good! But more often than not, God used His family to guide these young people to godly decisions in the vocational and romantic realms, decisions that continue to prove their worth even today.

The Fruit of Wise Decisions

More than a dozen people from this college group chose to enter full-time vocational Christian ministry. They are all over the world serving God in various capacities, from church planting to Bible translation. Their decisions to enter the ministry did not come as individual emotional responses to a sermon or to a highly charged camp message. The decisions were hammered out in the context of a community of peers and leaders who were well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the individuals. So far, only one couple has returned stateside to choose an alternative direction for their life's work. The rest have had the wisdom of their vocational decisions confirmed in the crucible of Christian ministry in some real tough places.

Moreover, just as in the case of our actor friend Marcus from North Africa, Cobus members put their money where their mouth was in support of the decisions made by fellow group members. To this day, former Cobus persons who are now on the mission field are supported to a significant extent by their brothers and sisters who belonged to that college group back in the 1980s. Joann and I send

monthly checks to a halfdozen missionaries who once belonged to Cobus. Others in the group who have remained stateside and have pursued secular employment give much more generously than we are able to give.

Not too long ago one of our Cobus missionaries stopped by to see me during furlough from his ministry with Wycliffe Bible Translators. I asked him about his financial needs and he replied, "Our support is at 100 percent." Much of the financial resources this couple enjoys can be traced to connections made during their college days. The Cobus group thus further exemplifies first-century surrogate family values, as members continue to share their material resources with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Finding a Life Partner

I performed wedding after wedding during my decade-long tenure with the Cobus group. For the most part, these young people made the wisest of decisions in choosing their life partners. They married other members of their Cobus family, and most of these marriages are still solid today, more than a decade later.

Others chose instead to go outside the group and operate on their own in their search for a mate. Sadly, those collegians who married outside the Cobus group experienced a higher rate of failed marriages than those who found a mate within the group. And the trend is not limited to those who married outside the faith. Even those who married believers from outside the group have tended to find themselves in less-satisfying or less-healthy relationships. A number of these marriages have already ended in divorce. In contrast, Cobus members who chose their spouses within the group have generally experienced genuine spiritual and relational life in their marriages.

The closer a Christian group approximates the strong-group church family model of early Christianity, the better the decisions that are made by its individual members. Cobus was a living demonstration of this principle. The group was in many ways similar to the New Testament church. And lasting, life-giving commitments to God's kingdom and to significant others were made by Cobus members who chose to receive the input of God's family when they came to the crossroads of life's key decisions. My wife Joann and I can testify firsthand to this truth. We are a Cobus couple who first met in the group and who have now been serving Jesus, happily married, for more than 28 years.

The Paths of Jerry and Kristen

As Cobus leaders, Joann and I occasionally saw the contrasting paths of spiritual (and relational) life and death illustrated in the experiences of members of a single family. A brother and a sister attended our group whom I will refer to as Jerry and Kristen. Jerry was highly committed to the group and deeply engaged with his peers and with our Cobus staff in his pilgrimage as a young Christian. Jerry opened up his life to us in the context of the relational accountability that the group provided.

We had the opportunity to help Jerry make those key life decisions that invariably face a young collegian. Jerry proceeded to marry a young woman who was a solid Christian and who, most importantly, had similar convictions about her commitment to church family life. Jerry's biggest relational decision was made in the context of the Cobus family, and Jerry and his wife Claire continue to enjoy a quality Christian marriage nearly two decades later.

But Kristen, Jerry's sister, never really came under the care and shepherding of her peers and leaders in Cobus. She attended the larger Sunday meetings and enjoyed our activities, but she seldom involved herself on an intimate level with others in the group. A traditional assessment of Kristen's spiritual condition would perhaps conclude that she was not as committed to God as her brother Jerry.

As you have learned in the course of this book, commitment to God cannot be separated from commitment to God's group. And it was the latter—Kristen's reluctance to live out her Christian faith in the context of relational accountability—that proved to be her undoing. Most telling was the fact that Kristen's dating relationships usually involved men from outside the Cobus group. These relationships were invariably disappointing.

The friendships that my wife Joann and I established back in the 1980s with young people in that Cobus group continue even today. Amazingly enough, after nearly a decade of trying to make life and relationships work apart from the input and guidance of God's family, Kristen called Joann on the phone. She set up an appointment to seek Joann's advice on a marriage prospect.

Kristen's hindsight vision was 20-20. She saw the fruit of group accountability in her brother Jerry's life. So now, nearly a decade later, Kristen wanted it for herself. She came for counsel from Joann. Kristen's dilemma was not an uncommon one. She had become involved with a man who, due to work demands, suddenly had to relocate from southern California to Atlanta. Kristen's question was a simple but profoundly important one: "Should she move to Atlanta and join her prospective spouse?"

Joann is a highly skilled listener with genuine gifts of wisdom and insight, and she saw too many red flags to encourage Kristen in her desire to move out of state. Except for the meeting with Joann, Kristen was still operating in total isolation. She showed up in church now and then, but Kristen had no ongoing connection of personal accountability with any Christian community.

But Kristen was in a great position to begin to develop meaningful relationships in the context of God's group. She had been raised in the church that she occasionally attended, and there were many opportunities to develop a network of supportive friendships should she choose to do so. Kristen's parents, both committed Christians, also lived in southern California. Both her potential church family and her natural family beckoned Kristen to begin to profit from the benefits of making decisions in a strong-group setting. A move to Atlanta would only isolate Kristen further from the very benefits that God's group could bring into her life.

Joann also discovered that the track record of Kristen's boyfriend was, at best, unknown. He may have been a superb young man. But because he had lived his own life pretty much in isolation from the family of God, his true character would only be revealed later, in the crucible of marriage, after the big decision had already been made.

This situation was a recipe for deep marital disappointment, as Joann and I have discovered again and again. So Joann gently but firmly counseled Kristen to stay in southern California and to get involved with other Christians in a responsible network of church-family accountability. If Kristen's relationship with her prospective husband were solid, Joann informed her, it would survive a temporary geographical separation.

Kristen wanted the benefits of group input, but she was ultimately unwilling to integrate Joann's wise counsel into the process of decision making. She chose instead to ignore the advice and move to Atlanta. Several years have gone by now, and I recently heard that Kristen has returned to California with the scars of an unhealthy and failing marriage. Her brother Jerry, on the other hand, continues to enjoy a thriving relationship with his wife of 14 years.

Jerry and Kristen came from the same solid Christian home. They had the same relational opportunities during those formative Cobus years. Their radically different experiences in the relational arena can likely be attributed to a single factor: the degree to which they were willing to submit their individual desires and aspirations to the guidance and input provided by God's group. Jerry chose for the group, and he prospered. Kristen chose to go it alone, and her heart has been broken again and again.

Calling a Wisdom Council

Much of the advice-giving and wisdom-seeking that went on in the Cobus class occurred in rather informal ways as we interacted with one another on a regular basis during our years together as a group. Some churches adopt a more intentionally structured approach to communal decision making. A friend named Michael Martin pastors a church a few miles down the road from my church. Michael has devised what I consider a brilliant idea for helping to turn the church family model from an abstract concept into a tangible reality in the lives of his people. When individuals in Michael's church face heart-wrenching decisions, they are encouraged to call a wisdom council.

It works like this. On one occasion a single mother in Michael's church was forced to make a tough decision about her son, a decision that would significantly shape the young man's future for years to come. The boy's teacher and school administrators had informed the woman that her son would benefit academically from being held back a year to repeat sixth grade.

But there was a trade-off. The boy would suffer socially from such a move. School officials implied that the decision was a bit of a "toss up," and they left our single mother with the daunting responsibility of deciding which way to go. Mom asked Michael to call a wisdom council.

The council has standing members, including Michael and several deacons. Individuals who might bring particular insight to the situation under review fill out the rest of the group on an *ad hoc* basis. In the present case, Michael invited people in the church with backgrounds in education and psychology, as well as another single parent or two.

No formal structure is employed. The group simply shares a meal together and openly discusses all the pros and cons associated with each option, so that an informed decision can be made with the kind of wisdom that can only come from community input. And then they pray together.

I do not recall the specific outcome of the situation outlined above. But we can assume that mother and son both went away assured that all options had been considered and that their church family would be there to support them whatever the decision and whatever the outcome. This, after all, is how the church as a family works.

Transitioning to a Family-Oriented Church Model

Much has been written in recent years about creating community in the local church. The good news is that we do not need to create community. Indeed, we

could not do so even if we wanted to. God has already created His community by saving us into His eternal family. We already are, for better or worse, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our problem is that we do not often enjoy the kind of community that we sense we should as people who are family in God's eyes. To reframe the issue in theological terms, our relational reality falls far short of our positional reality, where the horizontal aspect of the Christian life is concerned. Indeed, given the present state of some of our churches, recapturing Jesus' vision for authentic Christian community may seem like a nearly insurmountable challenge.

I find it immensely encouraging to remember that this is God's project, not ours, and to remind myself that the Holy Spirit truly longs to knit us together in community as God intends it. God is more than ready to come alongside those who are willing to do the hard work of living life as the new covenant family of God. More often than not, we simply need to figure out how to get out of God's way in order to let Him do His community-creating work in our lives.

What follows are some suggestions for putting the church family model into practice. Contextualization of the family metaphor differs from congregation to congregation in the modern world, and I offer the following observations and directives with a good deal of reservation, since actualizing the surrogate family values that we have encountered in the course of our study constitutes a way of life—not another set of church programs. The kind of change I am advocating will not occur without a significant degree of intentionality, so it is vital to consider, at least in general terms, how we might establish and cultivate New Testament church family values and behaviors among our people.

Churches of less than 200 members may be able to live out the family model as a single group. Larger churches will need significantly to retool their ministry priorities to facilitate such a social reality. But it seems to me that those of us in church leadership must begin the change process by critically evaluating both the content of our teaching and the various social contexts in which this teaching takes place.

The Content of Our Teaching

Right thinking constitutes the foundation for life change, and solid teaching is needed about the New Testament model of the church as a family, including specific instructions detailing the biblical responsibilities of brotherhood. The time is past for preaching and teaching that serve only to reinforce, rather than to challenge, the unbiblical assumption that Christianity is to be conceived of as

some sort of an individual path to spiritual enlightenment or, worse yet, a commodity to be consumed.

We can also teach our people much about New Testament community through our worship ministries. Paul used the expression "our Lord" 53 times in his letters. He wrote "my Lord" only once. It's all in the pronouns! And pronouns are a powerful teaching vehicle where worship is concerned.

Given our cultural environment, it is only to be expected that much of our contemporary worship music continues to be produced by people who are quite unaware of the influence of Western individualism on their work. The result is a multitude of wonderful songs that reflect on our personal relationship with Jesus but tend to ignore the connection between God and His people as a group.

We would do ourselves well, I think, where copyright laws and "singability" permit, to replace a lot of the first-person singular pronouns in our worship songs (I, me, my, mine) with their corresponding plurals (we, us, our, ours). There is something about congregational singing that weaves biblical truth deep into the tapestry of our lives in ways that nothing else is able to do. We should take advantage of the power of corporate worship to teach our people that the church is a family.

As the pastor-teachers of God's family, we must lovingly immerse our people in the eternal truth that the Christian faith is preeminently a community endeavor to partner with God to further His kingdom program. And we must teach our people how to live as brothers and sisters in community together.

Reconsidering the Social Context

But teaching our people about the church as a family will not suffice to alter deeply ingrained patterns of behavior. We must also reevaluate the social contexts of church life, the ways in which our ministries are executed. The priority most churches place upon the success of the Sunday service subtly but powerfully communicates the message that this impersonal, once-a-week social environment is quintessentially what "church" is all about. After all, this is where most church leaders count heads, and this is where we collect the money.

As a result, the one event preeminently identified with the word "church" in most congregations finds our people seated side-by-side, facing forward, with little or no interpersonal interaction with persons to the right or to the left. A fellow sitting next to me in Sunday church might have lost his job—or his spouse—that very week. Tragically, however, I would never know it.

We have discovered, moreover, that a highly successful approach to evangelizing a whole generation of people (baby boomers) who attend these large-group meetings is to assure our listeners that God desires to meet their felt needs. Now it is certainly the case that God often does meet us at our point of need. But a teaching ministry that overemphasizes this reality runs the risk of promoting an individualistic, anthropocentric view of the Christian life. We give our people the wrong impression that God's primary objective in our lives is to help us achieve our relational and vocational goals, to relieve our stress, to give us joy and peace all at the personal level.

The result is that both the context (the Sunday setting) and the content ("God wants to meet my needs") of church as we know it in America today often serve only to reinforce the individualistic, consumer orientation of the dominant culture. As long as this remains the case, our people will continue to think that they are truly going to church on Sunday morning, and our teaching on the church as a surrogate family will fall on deaf ears. We are reminded once again that what we do inevitably speaks much louder than what we say.

I have discovered in my congregation that surrogate sibling relations are better "caught" than "taught," so it is essential to provide for our people the kind of social settings in which church family relations can be experienced firsthand. We must provide environments where people can actually experience the church as a family, and we must assure our people that this relational context is what "going to church" is all about. Here is the meat and potatoes of true Christianity. Sunday is just the gravy. Such an approach will involve a significant shift in priorities for most congregations, but it is absolutely essential. Simply promoting a small group program as a second option during the week is not enough. These relational settings must become central to the values of our church culture.

You might try what I did on a Sunday morning some time ago. I preached a sermon entitled "Why Sunday A.M. Is Not Church" in which I compared early church family values and practices with the way that we do church on Sunday morning. The application was challenging but quite straightforward. I proceeded gently but firmly to inform my people that many of them—some of whom had attended on Sunday for years—had never been to church! Then I encouraged them to begin going to church, that is, to start attending one of our home-group settings where they could cultivate the kind of surrogate sibling relationships that God intends for His children to enjoy with one another.

Some months later, I gave a presentation about Christian community at a gathering of our church's top-level leadership team of 20 or so people. I still recall the

rather horrified look on the face of a member of our stewardship committee (these are the precious people who track Sunday attendance and Sunday giving at our church) when I informed the group that, if I had to choose, I would rather have our people attending a home group than sitting in our Sunday morning service.

Genuine spiritual formation depends upon such priorities. Consider the observations of Brad Cecil, a creative Christian leader from Arlington, Texas:

We studied transformation. We recognized that most of the transformative things in our lives are missing from the predominant model of spiritual formation in contemporary churches. . . . Relationships are perhaps the most transformative thing in our lives, especially in areas such as values and compassion. It is very hard to teach these concepts didactically. Instead, they are shaped through a long-term process of observation, understanding, and modeling. We realized that we were not transformed by listening to sermons, even when the messages were reinforced with drama, music, and PowerPoint. As a result, we placed our priority on sharing life together. . . . we switched from a large group pattern of church to that of a network of house churches.²

I do not believe that it has to be an either-or, as Cecil's comments might imply. Sunday worship and teaching combined with home-group relationships is a powerful prescription for vibrant Christian living. Ideally, I want my people together both on Sunday and during the week.

But please do not miss the main point in the above quotation. We are all quite aware that Sunday attenders generally do not become spiritually formed disciples of Jesus. Here Brad Cecil is right on target. We grow most significantly as we relate closely to one another as brothers and sisters in the family of God. If we want to return to the world of New Testament Christianity, the relational environments in our churches must take precedence over our larger weekly gatherings. We will just have to leave it to God to take care of the finances and the Sunday attendance.

From Pastor to Pastors

This brings me to a final charge, directed now to those of us who are (or who are training to be) vocational Christian ministers. Many of us receive great personal satisfaction from our Sunday sermons, and so we should, for it is a tremendous honor to speak on behalf of the King of the universe. But some of us overly depend on our public teaching ministries for a weekly shot of self-esteem, and our

² Cited in E. Gibbs and R. Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 258.

personal identities have become far too wrapped up in our role as the community's "Sunday sage."

Robust Sunday attendance and generous church offerings only compound the problem. For as a church grows, the preaching pastor will almost inevitably be affirmed in an institutional, managerial approach to ministry by a well-meaning group of elders or deacons whose ecclesiology and understanding of pastoral effectiveness are influenced more by the *Wall Street Journal* than by the letters of Paul.

It has been my observation that church leaders who spend the bulk of their week in the business world, and who have not been extensively exposed to New Testament ecclesiology, remain quite satisfied to view growth in Sunday morning attendance and the expansion of the church budget as the primary benchmarks of a healthy Christian community. As long as our key leaders remain so satisfied with so little, we will not recapture Jesus' vision for authentic Christian community.

The result of all this, ironically, is that the very leader—the preaching pastor—who can most convincingly persuade his people that Sunday morning is not church as God intended it often has the most at stake in clearly communicating that message. Our personal investment in the success of our Sunday services, and the affirmation we receive when things go well, tend to make it emotionally difficult for us as pastors to embrace the truth that our people need each other much more than they need us.

We must transcend these understandable but unhealthy feelings in order to do what is best in the long run for the people God has entrusted to us. We must preach community, and we must structure and present our church programs in such a way as to make those relational environments a first priority for the lives of our people.

Frankly, a positive step in this direction would be to engage in an extended fast from our ongoing diet of secular leadership books and principles. As one of our emerging church brothers insightfully quipped, "The business world is now quoting Scripture to help itself give leadership to its projects. Maybe it's time for the church to put down the management books and pick up the Bible to see what all the fuss is about."³

The responsibilities of senior church leaders go beyond encouraging church family relationships through appropriate teaching and programming. Pastors need community too—perhaps more than anyone. We pastors are not immune to the reality that spiritual formation occurs in the context of community. We

³ A. Jones, quoted in Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 208.

must pursue relationships with a handful of brothers in the congregation, first and foremost, for our own spiritual health. We pastors need caring brothers and sisters. And they need us.

But there is another reason that we as pastors need a group of close surrogate siblings in the church family. We ourselves need to be in community in order to model community life for our people if we truly want them to embrace church family values for their own lives. The American evangelical model of the CEO pastor who functions as a spiritual father to his congregation and as a business executive with his staff—but who relates to no one in the church as a peer brother in Christ—directly betrays the New Testament metaphor of the church as a family.

One who has no true brothers in the congregation will be unable authentically and credibly to challenge others to live together as surrogate siblings. A return to the church as God intended will begin, as is often the case, with a transformation of values and behaviors among those who lead God's people. We turn now to consider in some detail the structure and orientation of leadership in the New Testament family of God.