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Mental health professionals are now recognizing a truth taught throughout the Scriptures—emotional healing and spiritual growth occur primarily in the context of interpersonal relationships. People who run away from uncomfortable or downright painful relationships almost invariably repeat the cycle of dysfunction with the next person or the next generation (or the next church) down the line. Those, on the other hand, who stay and courageously engage with others are the ones who grow in their self-understanding and in their abilities to relate to God and to their fellow human beings. Community is, in a word, redemptive.

None of this is terribly novel. We all know it to be the case. Why, then, do we constantly sabotage our most intimate relationships, seek help from others only after the damage is irreversible, and continue to try to find our way through life as isolated individuals, convinced somehow that God will be with us to lead us and bless us wherever we go? Why are we increasingly unable to stay in relationship, stay in community, and grow in those interpersonal contexts, which God has specifically provided for our eternal well-being?

Some might attribute the relational crises characterizing our churches solely to individual sin and selfishness. Sin and selfishness, however, have been around since Adam. Why the radical increase in relational breakdown in our society and in our churches today? Something bigger is in the works, and it has to

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do with the unique orientation of modern Western culture, especially contemporary American society. Ours is a culture which insists to its own destruction that the dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment of the individual deserve a higher priority than the well-being of any group (natural family or church body) or relationship (friendship or marriage) in an individual's life.

The incessant failures of marriage after marriage, along with the repeated unwillingness of persons to stay in the local church in order to grow through relational conflict, are only superficially due to individual sin and selfishness. Our culture has powerfully socialized us to believe that our individual happiness and fulfillment must take precedence over our relationships with others in our families and in our churches. And it is precisely the influence that this radically individualist worldview exerts upon American evangelical Christians which best explains our struggle to keep relationships together in the body of Christ. The tune of radical individualism has been playing in our ears at full volume for decades. We are dancing to the music with gusto. And it is costing us dearly.

If you are in a position of church leadership, you likely share my frustration with the foolish and destructive choices our people make as they interact with others in the body of Christ. We teach and preach the truth, our people learn the truth, but so many of us, leaders and followers alike, make utterly selfish and wrongheaded choices in the most important area of our lives—our relationships with significant others.

I count myself fortunate to serve as a co-pastor in a vibrant Christian church, where we consistently emphasize the inviolable maxim that genuine spiritual growth occurs primarily in the context of community. We have in place an extensive support and accountability network to help our people grow in their abilities to relate to others in a healthy way at home and in the church. Our fellowship is average in size. Some two hundred adults, along with their children, attend on a given Sunday. But not a month goes by in which I am not summoned to intervene in some kind of interpersonal crisis at Oceanside Christian Fellowship. Sadly, much of the pastoral intervention we do has little lasting effect upon the health of the relationships involved. In spite of the counsel and support we offer, people typically insist on going it alone along their own individualistic, highly destructive pathways.

Robert's Story

Robert is a bright man in his forties with a highly charged emotional love for Jesus Christ. He loves to sing in church, and his passion for worship infuses those around him with a desire to know God more deeply. Unfortunately, Robert's family background has set him on an apparently irreversible course toward relational destruction. After a failed marriage, Robert lived with his brother for more than a decade, spending hours each week involved in various charitable causes. The brother's death brought to the surface a host of family and financial crises. Robert's grief process was intensified due to the enmeshed relationship he had shared with his family for many years. He was dangerously despondent. It was clear to me, as his pastor, that Robert needed outside help in order to gain a proper perspective on himself and the world around him. Robert's financial problems were only the latest in a history of such fiscal fiascoes, suddenly intensified by a squabble with his surviving siblings over their brother's estate.

Robert is loved and highly appreciated by a number of people in our church family, and our leaders sincerely desired to do something tangible to help Robert get on his feet again, both emotionally and economically. We offered to meet his most pressing financial needs immediately. We knew, however, that our assistance would truly benefit Robert if—and only if—accompanied by several non-negotiable conditions.

The money would be Robert's, we informed him, if (Condition 1) he would see our staff therapist (at the church's expense) on a weekly basis in order to find short-term support and guidance in dealing with the loss of his brother; if (Condition 2) he would meet with a financial adviser who is a member of our congregation (again, *pro bono*) to come up with a fiscal gameplan to dig himself out of debt; and if (Condition 3) he would agree to attend church regularly and partner closely with others in some area of ministry.

What we requested of Robert was simple: relational accountability. We challenged him to quit trying to find his way through life as an isolated individual and to begin to listen, instead, to the guidance and accountability offered by his brothers and sisters in the family of God. Only then would Robert begin to grow up to become the healthy person God designed him to be. Robert declined our offer and rejected our advice. Like many

in our highly individualistic culture, he chose to chart his course and bear his pain alone, rather than integrate himself into the body of Christ through the vehicle of strong relational accountability. We seldom see Robert anymore.

Radical Individualism and a Church in Crisis

Robert's case is hardly unique. Robert's behavior, in fact, reflects a broad paradigm shift, which characterizes the evangelical church as a whole. American evangelicals have increasingly moved away from maintaining long-term commitments to their local churches. We have chosen, instead, to focus upon experiencing God at the individual level. We have become convinced, as George Barna recently observed, "that spiritual enlightenment comes from diligence in a discovery process, rather than commitment to a faith group and perspective" (*The Second Coming of the Church*. [Waco, Texas: Word, 1998] 18-19).

As our theologians will wisely remind us, we cannot compromise biblical truth in one area without affecting other doctrines, as well. The various truths of the Bible are profoundly and perfectly intertwined. We should not be surprised, then, to discover that our attempts to exchange the New Testament's community-centered approach to the Christian life for our culture's individualistic view of spiritual formation have, in turn, subtly skewed our conception of God. God has now been recast in the role of a divine therapist who aids the individual Christian in his or her personal quest for spiritual enlightenment and self-discovery. And Jesus, in the final analysis, has become little more than a "personal savior." So, if I am a product of my culture like Robert, above, I take my personal savior from church to church and from marriage to marriage, desperately hoping that I can somehow improve the quality of my life by escaping the immediate pain which often clouds the redemptive relationships that God has placed me in.

All of this, of course, blatantly betrays the central New Testament image of the church as a surrogate family of brothers and sisters. A person does not grow up by running from family to family. This is self-evident in our natural families, and we know it to be true of our church families, as well. Yet we offer few prophetic challenges to the subjective, individualistic distortion of biblical Christianity, which holds much of the evangelical church in America in its grip. On the contrary, the orientation of many of our ministries actually encourages our people to view their

walk with Christ in decidedly individualistic terms.

The one event preeminently identified with the word "church" in most congregations—the one by which the success of a local church is typically measured (the Sunday service)—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 most successful approach in evangelizing a whole generation of persons (baby boomers) who attend these large-group meetings is to communicate the gospel in such a way as to assure the seeker that the primary purpose for God's power and presence in her life is to help her to achieve her relational and vocational goals, to relieve her stress, to give her 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 American today often serve only to reinforce the individualistic orientation of the dominant culture.

Church leaders generally recognize the need to provide an environment which is more conducive to ongoing relationships, and, to their credit, many congregations offer small groups of some kind which meet on a regular basis. As Robert and Julia Banks perceptively observe, however, some of these programs actually perpetuate the "me-first" attitude of our people:

> Many small groups also foster the cult of individualism, since they tend to develop around felt needs. You attend to receive help with a particular problem or life stage. It is very easy for an attitude to develop that thinks in terms of "the group for me" rather than "me for the group." This is particularly so if the group is, or is perceived as, therapeutic in nature. When the group no longer meets your needs or expectations, you leave (*The Church Comes Home* [Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1998] 89).

My intention here is not to disparage small groups. I believe that the home-group movement, properly conceived, offers a promising potential corrective to our individualistic worldview and, in turn, a promising potential encouragement to lasting, healthy relationships in the body of Christ. Small groups can provide the

context in which to experience community as God intends it. But this small-group environment must be constructed on the bedrock of solid biblical ecclesiology. The church today must once again become a family in the New Testament sense of the word.

Insights from Early Christianity: When the Church was a Family

No image for the church occurs more often in the New Testament than the metaphor of family. References abound to believers as siblings ("brothers" and "sisters") and to God as the "Father" of his people. And no image offers as much promise as "family" for recapturing the relational integrity of first-century Christianity for our churches today. Kinship in Mediterranean antiquity was understood differently, however, than we conceive of family today, and it is important for us to be aware of these differences in order to properly appreciate what the New Testament writers had in mind when they pictured the church as a surrogate family. In the balance of the article I will touch upon what I consider to be the two most significant differences between family then and now, drawing application where appropriate to the New Testament idea of the church as a surrogate family of brothers and sisters in Christ.

Sibling Solidarity: I Am *My Brother's Keeper*

Perhaps the most counterintuitive (to us) aspect of Mediterranean kinship has to do with the family relationship that ancient people valued the most. In our social world, a person's spouse ideally functions as (a) her central locus of relational loyalty and (b) her main source of emotional and material support. Correspondingly, most Americans expect their closest relational bond to be the bond of marriage, and we build our families around that marriage relationship. What is so familiar to us, however, was not true of ancient society, where family was built not around marriage but was, instead, based on blood.

In the New Testament world, a person viewed as family those persons with whom he shared a common patriline—a bloodline traced from generation to generation solely through the male line. Due to the patrilineal nature of the Mediterranean family, only a father could pass family membership down to the next generation. A mother could not. A male therefore regarded as immediate family (a) his father (from whom he had received his blood), (b) his brothers and sisters (with whom he shared his blood), and (c) offspring of both genders (to whom he passed on

his blood).

Females, like males, viewed fathers and siblings as blood kin (the technical term is "consanguine"). Since, however, a mother could not pass on membership in her patriline to the next generation, her children technically belonged not to her family but, rather, to the patriline of her husband. And because a husband and wife had different fathers—and therefore belonged to different patrilines—married persons in the world of the New Testament generally expressed primary relational allegiance not to a spouse but, rather, to members of their family of origin. Marriages were contracted with a view to enhancing the honor or wealth of the extended patrilineal kinship group. The relational satisfaction of the couple involved was seldom a key consideration.

This blood-based orientation to kinship, therefore, directly informed the nature of family relationships. Among persons belonging to the same generation in the world of Mediterranean antiquity, the closest family tie was not the contractual relationship between a husband and wife. It was the blood relationship between siblings. As is now generally recognized by students of ancient family systems, the tightest unit of loyalty and affection in the New Testament world was that shared among a group of brothers and sisters. The emotional bonding modern Westerners expect as a mark of a healthy husband-and-wife relationship was normally characteristic of sibling relationships. As an anonymous Jewish writer exclaimed, "If I do not love my brother, who shall I love?" (Jubilees 35:22).

I trust you are beginning to see the value of this cross-cultural examination of family systems for New Testament ecclesiology. Understanding the centrality of the sibling bond in the Mediterranean world has the potential to revolutionize the way in which we read the "brother and sister" terminology that occurs so often in the New Testament and, by extension, to revolutionize the quality of our relationships in the family of God today.

Passages extolling the virtue of sibling solidarity abound in ancient literature. One writer aptly reflects the family sensibilities of his contemporaries in Jewish Palestine when he offers the following list of relational priorities:

> My soul takes pleasure in three things and they are beautiful in the sight of the Lord and of men: agreement

> between brothers, friendship between neighbors, and a wife and husband who live in harmony (Sirach 25:1).

Notice that "agreement between brothers" occupies first place in Sirach's list. The Bible also bears witness to this enduring cultural value. Jesus, for example, places the act of leaving one's siblings at the forefront of the relational sacrifices made by some of his followers:

> Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no-one who has left home or *brothers or sisters* or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, *brothers, sisters,* mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:28-30, my italics).

The same priority is reflected somewhat differently in a passage from Matthew. In Matthew 10:21, Jesus lists the inevitable relational chaos that will result from his call to radical discipleship. Since the most important relationship in Jesus' world is the bond between blood brothers, it only follows that discord between siblings constitutes the worst family tragedy imaginable. This is precisely what we find at the beginning of Jesus' list: "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death." It might help to recall, at this point, the numerous Old Testament narratives that describe various incidents of brother betrayal (Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and so on). Such stories captured the imagination of their readers precisely because ancient persons felt so strongly about the need for harmony among siblings.

A final excerpt, from the Jewish book of Jubilees, vividly reflects ancient convictions concerning the solidarity—and inviolability—of the sibling bond. The anonymous author of this second-century B.C.E. rewrite of the book of Genesis portrays the patriarch Isaac offering a final charge to Jacob and Esau:

> Among yourselves, my sons, be loving of your brothers as a man loves himself, with each man seeking for his brother what is good for him. . . .and each one will love his brother with compassion and righteousness and no one will desire evil for his brother from now and forever

> all the days of your lives so that you will prosper in all your deeds and not be destroyed.

The passage concludes, however, with some pretty severe consequences for someone who betrays a brother:

> And if either of you seeks evil against his brother, know that hereafter each one who seeks evil against his brother will fall into his (God's) hands and be uprooted from the land of the living and his seed will be destroyed from under heaven. And on the day of turmoil and execration and indignation and wrath, (then) with devouring burning fire just as he burned Sodom so too he will burn up his land and his city and everything which will be his. . . .and he will not be written on high in the Book of Life. . . I am exhorting you, my sons, according to the judgment which will come upon the man who desires to harm his brother (*Jub.* 36:4-11).

Sentiments such as these, then, provide the background for interpreting the meaning of the sibling terminology used in early Christian literature. Substitute "brother(s) in Christ" for "brother(s)" in the above excerpt, and you will begin to get an idea of the kind of relational loyalty that Jesus and Paul envisioned for those early Christian congregations.

From Theory to Practice: Brotherly Love in Action

Sibling solidarity, as the ancients understood it (and as the early Christians envisioned it and often practiced it in their churches), included a whole complex of associated expectations and responsibilities. Siblings shared material resources with one another, and a person's brothers and sisters provided the first line of defense against the ever-present threat of economic hardship (Acts 2:43-47; 1 John 3:17). To fail to share in times of need was to betray a brother after the analogy of Cain (1 John 3:10-17). Brothers and sisters also challenged one another to take responsibility for actions which were inappropriate among persons who viewed themselves as family (Matthew 18:15-20). Siblings were, nevertheless, ever-willing to restore a repentant brother to normal family relations (Matthew 18:21-35).

The world of the New Testament was a social environment, moreover, in which a male generally sought revenge for every interpersonal affront or injustice, in order to defend his public

honor—except in dealings with siblings, where honor was always *extended* but never *defended* (Romans 12:10). It was a shameful thing, therefore, for a brother to seek compensation for some real or perceived fraternal offense through litigation in the public courts. As Paul admonished the family of God at Corinth, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this *to your brothers"* (6:7-8).

Finally, siblings in antiquity enjoyed a strong sense of emotional bonding. In the New Testament, we see this most clearly in the connections that Paul experienced with his brothers and sisters in the family of God. Paul claims, for example, to have the Philippians in his "heart." He longs for them all "with the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:7-8). Later in the letter he exhorts, "Therefore, my beloved *brethren* whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved" (4:1).

At another point in his ministry, Paul sent to Timothy to Thessalonica to inquire about the well-being of the church he had recently established. Later, when he received Timothy's good report, Paul was so overjoyed that he could hardly contain himself in his reply to this young congregation. The emotional bonding Paul experienced with his siblings in the faith is patently clear: "[Timothy] has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, *brothers,* in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord" (1 Thess. 3:6-8).

All of the above corresponds, interestingly enough, to modern genetic research. Social scientists have identified a direct correlation between altruistic behavior among relatives, on the one hand, and the number of genes shared by these persons, on the other. Siblings share more of the genetic code than any persons of the same generation (50%), and they typically exhibit a closer relational bond, where altruistic behavior is concerned, than any other family relation. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus, who created us to function in precisely this way, chose the sibling bond—"you are all brothers" (Matt. 23:8)—to define the quality of relationships he envisioned for his community of followers. The New Testament metaphor of "brothers and sisters in Christ" would have strongly resonated with persons in the ancient

world.

The family metaphor, moreover, offers great hope for restoring relational integrity and evangelistic power to our churches today. The early Christians intentionally organized their local congregations around the relational values outlined above, and these churches reproduced themselves and swept through the pagan empire of Rome like a holy fire. Even pagan detractors identified fraternal love as something especially Christian: "See," Tertullian quotes the unbeliever as exclaiming, "how they love one another!" (Apology 39.8). We in the evangelical church today have much to learn from the New Testament family metaphor, as we seek to recapture the New Testament ideal of the church as a surrogate family in order to bring genuine hope for healthy relationships to a broken and dysfunctional world.

Strong-Group Sensibilities: Family Comes First

We come now to the second and final difference (for our purposes) between family then and now, one which will further help us to appreciate the relational power of the early Christian church. I have in mind here the priority which persons in the ancient world assigned to the various social groups to which they belonged, especially to the family. For persons in the Mediterranean world, the group took priority over the individual, and the group that received the greatest expressions of loyalty on the part of its individual members was the lineage group of blood siblings.

At this point another brief detour into the world of cultural anthropology is in order. Anthropologists draw a basic distinction between two kinds of cultures: (1) strong-group societies, in which the group takes priority over the individual, and (2) weak-group societies, where the desires, goals and needs of the individual come before group loyalty and commitment. As you might have gathered, modern America constitutes a distinctly weak-group culture, since we typically place the individual on top of the priority pyramid, so to speak, and we utilize the various "groups" in our world (school, workplace, church) to meet our own needs and advance our own personal agendas.

The world of the New Testament, in contrast, was markedly strong-group in social orientation. This meant that persons viewed their obligations to the various groups to which they belonged quite differently than we do. One writer puts it as follows:

> [An individual in a strong-group culture] would feel responsible, for the most part, to the group (not to the self) for his or her own actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. The good of the whole, of the group, has primacy in the individual's life. The individual person is embedded in the group and is free to do what he or she feels is right and necessary only if the group shares the same judgment that the individual holds. The group has priority over the individual member, and it may use objects in the environment, other groups of people in the society, and, of course, the members of the group itself to facilitate the realization of its goals (Bruce Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1986] 19).

The strong-group values reflected above are quite foreign to Western social sensibilities. However, at the risk of some oversimplification, I will encourage you to substitute "church" for "group" in the above excerpt, for only then you will begin to grasp the manner in which an individual believer might have conceived of his/her relationship with the local church in the world of early Christianity.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The word you should first substitute for "group" in the above quotation is the word "family." For it was the family in the ancient world which, first and foremost, took priority over the individual and demanded undying loyalty of its members.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Among modern Westerners, Latinos, particularly Latinos who remain somewhat insulated from American cultural influence, continue to reflect strong-group values, and this is especially the case where family is concerned.

Tijuana, the bustling metropolis just across the border from Southern California, has become a Mecca for people all over Mexico who come in hopes of a better way of life. As of early 1998, Tijuana boasted an unemployment rate of less than one percent, and opportunities, relative to Mexican standards of living, abound.

In the late 1980's, Juan Jose Espiritu came to Tijuana from Guadalajara with his divorced mother and family. Juan was 13 years old and he promptly went to work cleaning a stained-glass window studio to help support his mother and his five younger

siblings. In 1998, ten years later at 23 years of age, Juan earned $480 per month—the salary of many teachers, journalists and bank employees—creating Tiffany style stained glass windows with peacocks and ships. Juan's success came at the expense of (a) an education and (b) (what we could call in America) a normal adolescence, since Juan dropped out of school and has spent most of his waking hours at work for nearly a decade.

Juan made none of these sacrifices, however, for the sake of his own individual goals and aspirations. Good strong-group person that he is, Juan instead dreams that his good fortune will give his younger siblings the educational and vocational opportunities he was denied. He says he will not allow them to quit school and work, as he did. "Perhaps one of them will become a doctor," Espiritu said. "That is my desire."[1] Juan Espiritu, the individual, lays down his life for the sake of the group. Juan Espiritu, the brother, lays down his life for his siblings.

The application to the Christian church should by now be clear. In the strong-group world of Mediterranean antiquity, where the group came first, and where the most important group in society was the blood lineage group of a father with his sons and daughters (brothers and sisters), Jesus of Nazareth established his group—to become the early Christian church at Pentecost (Acts 2)—as a surrogate family of brothers and sisters. And this strong-group perspective fills the pages of our New Testament.

The emphasis that American evangelicals place upon Jesus as "*personal* Lord and savior," for example, would have been, at best, secondary to early Christianity's view of Jesus, where Jesus was understood, primarily, as the savior of a *group*. This assertion is easily demonstrated from the language of the New Testament itself. For example, Paul uses the term "Lord" with a first-person, possessive pronoun ("my" or "our") a total of fifty-four times in his letters. Fifty-three times the pronoun is plural—"our Lord" (Lord of a *group*). Only once, in contrast, does Paul use the expression with the singular pronoun, "my Lord" (Phil. 3:8).

Anyone who truly desires to adopt the New Testament church as the model for experiencing Christian community today must embrace a prophetically challenging, counter-cultural biblical truth: God's family—that is, our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ—must take priority over all of our individual desires, goals and aspirations. Family—our eternal

family—comes first. After all, these very priorities are preeminently reflected in the manner in which Jesus lived and died, and they are to serve as our guiding light, relationally, as well: "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).

Revisioning Christian Community for the Church Today

The practical nature of this article encourages me to conclude with some suggestions for recapturing the New Testament reality of the church as a surrogate family. I have recently been reminded by a colleague at Biola University that biblical Church Growth is a discipleship process which must include evangelism, the assimilation of newcomers, and the education of believers. During my earlier years of ministry, I conceived of this process as a linear one: (1) conversion, followed by (2) involvement in a local church, where (3) biblical education would characterize the ongoing life of the believer. This was, after all, my own experience when I became a follower of Jesus at 23 years of age back in 1975.

I am now discovering, however, that the "1→2→3" of discipleship often looks more like "2→1→3" in twenty-first century Southern California. That is, non-Christian newcomers to Oceanside Christian Fellowship, where I minister, first tend to establish relationships with our church members, and then make decisions for Christ some months, or even a year or two, later. In this discipleship process it is the quality of the relationships our newcomers make with our regular attenders—and the quality of the relationships they observe among the members of God's family—which lead these folks finally to give their lives to Jesus.

Evangelism and the Message of Reconciliation

The "2→1→3" of modern discipleship makes perfect sense when we consider it in view of what I like to call "the many-faceted jewel of the atonement." The New Testament writers assembled a variety of images from the world of their day as they sought to picture the manifold fullness of salvation in Christ. From temple and altar come images of sacrifice and propitiation. From the marketplace comes the metaphor of redemption. In other contexts the victory won at the cross over the powers of darkness is the particular aspect of Christ's death that is emphasized. As readers of this journal are well aware, the impact of these different images of atonement varies from time to time,

and from culture to culture.

In traditional, strong-group societies, for example, where moral guilt is generally not internalized, there may be little sense of personal sin (what we might call *internal* evil) on the part of the individual. Such cultures, however, typically exhibit a profound dread of *external* evil, as persons desperately employ a variety of religious rituals and practices to protect themselves from unseen forces of evil in the spiritual realm. In settings like these, it is the good news of Jesus' victory over the powers of darkness through his atoning death which profoundly resonates with those who hear the gospel message, and an effective evangelistic ministry will intentionally highlight this aspect of the atonement.

Contrast this traditional setting with the more introspective, individualistic orientation of modern western society where, until recently, the New Testament image of individual justification through the forgiveness of sins—a message dealing specifically with *internal* evil—has proven to be the key "facet of the jewel of the atonement" drawing men and women into the kingdom. I include the phrase "until recently" in the previous sentence because I believe that I have observed a shift in our culture which renders yet another biblical image of salvation most relevant for contemporary American culture. The image I have in mind is the New Testament picture of salvation as *reconciliation*—an image drawn not from the temple or the marketplace, but from the family.

Reconciliation is most simply defined as (a) the restoration of a right relationship with Father God and (b) the restoration of right relationships with one's fellow human beings who, through conversion to Christ, become one's siblings in the faith. As cultural analysts will tell us, persons in our relationally fragmented, increasingly isolated techno-culture are highly sensitive to the need for healthy relationships with other people. Their own family experiences, however, have often left them painfully aware of the tremendous difficulties involved in cultivating such relationships with the resources the secular world has to offer. The biblical picture of reconciliation, with its hope-giving promise of lasting and meaningful relationships, seems to me to be the key "facet of the jewel of the atonement" for the age in which we live.

Our gospel message of reconciliation must, however, take on incarnate form, and here is where the New Testament idea of the

church as a surrogate family comes in. A Christian community that seeks to live out the surrogate family model can serve as a living metaphor for the reality of reconciliation with God, and others, in Christ. Unbelievers who attend such a church begin to get a taste of the hope God provides for right relationships in Christ, as they live among us and develop friendships with church members. Some months later, God willing, they give their lives to Christ. We will not be surprised, then, to discover that regeneration will often follow, rather than precede, initial involvement among God's children in a local Christian church. All of this assumes, however, that the local church effectively functions according to the surrogate family model outlined earlier in this article, and to do so will demand a degree of intentionality on the part of church leaders and members alike.

Transitioning to a Family-Oriented Church Model

Contextualization of the family metaphor will, of course, differ from church to church in the modern world. Churches under 200 or so may be able to live out the family model as a single group. Larger churches will need to design auxiliary ministries to facilitate such a social reality. It seems to me, however, that all of us must begin the change process by critically evaluating both (a) the *content* of our teaching as church leaders and (b) the various social *contexts* in which this teaching takes place. Right thinking constitutes the foundation for life-change and, in this regard, solid teaching is in order about the New Testament model of the church as a family, including specific instruction detailing the biblical responsibilities of brotherhood. I have discovered in my congregation, however, that surrogate sibling relations are better "caught" than "taught," so it is also essential to provide for our people the kind of social environments in which church family relations can be experienced first-hand.

With respect to educating our people, the time is past for preaching and teaching which serves 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. We must, instead, lovingly immerse our people in the eternal truth that the Christian faith is preeminently a community endeavor to partner with God in the expansion of His kingdom. And we must teach our people how to live as brothers and sisters in community together.

Teaching, however, is not enough. We must also change 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 they collect money. 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*.

We must instead provide environments where people can experience the church as a family first-hand, and we must convince our people that these environments are the meat-and-potatoes of true Christianity—they are what "going to church" is all about. Sunday is just the gravy. Simply promoting a small-group program as a second-level 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,* and I proceeded to inform my people (gently but firmly) that many of them—some of whom had attended Sundays for years—had never been to church! Then I challenged 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. 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, at a later gathering, I informed our top-level leadership team of twenty or so persons that, if I had to choose, I would rather have our people attending a home group than sitting in our Sunday morning meeting.

Please understand. Ideally, I want my people together both on Sunday and during the week. The combination of Sunday worship and teaching, on the one hand, with home-group relationships, on the other, is a powerful prescription for vibrant Christian living. If we want to return to the world of New Testament Christianity, however, the relational environment must take priority. God will take care of the finances and the Sunday attendance. My primary responsibility as a pastor is to encour-

age my people to grow in Christ in the context of those surrogate sibling relationships that God has provided specifically for their eternal well-being. For our particular church setting, this has meant that, when push comes to shove schedule-wise, home group involvement takes priority over Sunday attendance in the lives of our people.

This brings me to a final charge, directed now to those of us who are 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. Some of us, however, overly depend on our public teaching ministries for a weekly shot of self-esteem, and our personal identities have become far too wrapped up in our role as the community's "Sunday sage."

The result, ironically, is that the very leader who can most convincingly persuade his people that Sunday morning is not church as God intended it—the preaching pastor—often has the most at stake in clearly communicating that message. Our personal investment in the success of our Sunday services tends to make it emotionally difficult for us as pastors to embrace the truth that our people need each other even more than they need us. We must transcend these understandable but unhealthy feelings, however, 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-line priority for the lives of our people.

The responsibilities of senior church leaders, however, go beyond encouraging church family relationships through appropriate teaching and programming. Pastors must model surrogate sibling solidarity for their people, as well. Indeed, pastors must pursue relationships with a handful of brothers in the congregation, first and foremost, for their own spiritual health. Pastors are not immune to the reality that spiritual formation occurs in the context of community. We, too, 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 need to be in community ourselves in order to model community life for our people, if we truly want them to embrace the church family idea as a priority for their own lives. The American evangelical model of the CEO pastor who functions as a spiritual father with 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 to authentically and credibly challenge others to live together as surrogate siblings. A return to the church as God intended will begin therefore, as is often the case, with a transformation of values and behaviors among those who lead God's people.

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NOTES

1. L.A. Times, Monday, January 26, 1998.