

# MOVING TO THE CORE

## Part 5

Recently Jeff Grunzel gave me some one-liners that I thought you might enjoy. They come under the heading of “Some Thoughts”:

- I wonder how much deeper the world’s oceans would be without sponges.
- Honk if you love peace and quiet.
- Eagles may soar, but weasels don’t get sucked into jet engines.
- I drive way too fast to worry about cholesterol.
- Borrow money from a pessimist -- they don’t expect to get it back.
- For every action there is an equal and opposite criticism.
- Bills travel through the mail at twice the speed of checks.
- The colder the x-ray table the more of your body is required on it.
- If at first you don’t succeed, then skydiving isn’t for you.
- No husband has ever been shot while doing the dishes.
- A balanced diet is a cookie in each hand.

One more: Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you a mechanic. That is true. Becoming a real Christian requires something of us. So it is when a Christian wants to become a part of the core of a church. Again, something is required.

I am presently in a series of messages on moving people from the edge to a full fledged commitment to the core or center of Christianity and the Lord’s Church. This is the fifth message in that series. Every message from this point on will build off of my last message on commitment. Today we will study a commitment to relationships.

### 1. TRUE CHRISTIANITY, BY GOD’S DESIGN, IS TO BE DEEPLY RELATIONAL

Think with me back to the creation of the world.

- God created light,
- God created the heavens,
- God created the land and the great seas,
- God created vegetation,
- God created the sun, moon, and stars, and
- God created the animal kingdom.

That was all well and good.

However great each of those things were, they were all nothing more than the prelims. They just got the Lord’s creative juices flowing. The real biggie – the Grand Finale – was to be found on the Sixth Day of Creation. Listen to the loving account: Genesis 1:27-29, **“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.’”**

It was all created for man, and man was created for God.

It wasn't that God was lonely and needed some sort of relationship. God was and is perfect and in need of nothing. However, God wanted a relationship. He wanted to have fellowship with humanity.

It is obvious from Scripture that prior to Adam and Eve's sin, the two of them and God had a very close intimate relationship.

- Then too, Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.
- Later, we see that God and Abraham were friends.
- David was known as a man after God's own heart.

Now we come to the Life of Jesus. One of my favorite verses can be found in John 1:14, **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."** The whole story of Christmas is a story of relationship. God came down to live with us; to become one with us.

Robert Ripley of "Believe It or Not" fame, once told of the world's longest love letter. He declared that the longest and simplest love letter ever written was the work of a Frenchman in 1875. The message contained the phrase "Jevous Aime" (jevooz-em), "I love you," 1,875,000 times. That was a thousand times the calendar years of the date. The prodigious lover did not pen the letter with his own hand. He hired a scribe. A lazy type could have instructed the secretary, "Write the sentence 1,875,000 times." But he was too entranced with the sound of the three words. HE DICTATED IT WORD FOR WORD and had the hired man REPEAT IT VERBATIM. All in all, therefore, the phrase was uttered orally and in writing 5,625,000 times before it reached its destination. Then Ripley goes on to say, "Never was love made manifest by as great an expenditure of time and effort."

Ripley was so wrong! It is incredible that a man would go to such lengths to express his love. However, the greatest expenditure of time and effort to express love was not done by the Frenchman, but rather by God Himself in His great show of love for mankind--for you and for me!

God wrote a book, a love letter, totaling 1,189 chapters, 773,691 words, scribed by about 40 men who engaged in writing it during a period of about 1,600 years, dating from approximately 1500 B.C. to 100 A.D. Each word, each chapter, each page, each story cried, "I Love You!" from God to man. The famous love stories of Shakespeare, Margaret Mitchell, Eric Segal, and others, blush in failure and inferiority by comparison.

The reason God went to such efforts to express His love is due to the fact that GOD IS LOVE. This means not only that He is the source of love, as we so often think of Him, but rather, HE IS LOVE ITSELF--ITS VERY DEFINITION! Love Personified.

Note these verses:

- Jeremiah 31:3, **"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with loving kindness."**
- John 16:27. **"For the Father Himself loves you. . ."**
- Romans 5:8. **"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."**

- 1 John 3:1. **“See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called children of God. . .”**

Quite possibly, though, no verse depicts God's love to us in surer, plainer, or more beautiful terms than does the famous passage, John 3:16. One minister has made more than 600 outlines of the verse. Another minister, Henry Moorehouse, preached several years, until death took him, always using John 3:16 as his text.

The verse is so powerful due to the fact that it's central truth is the immeasurable, unfathomable love of God. Thus, it presents the love in four dimensions:

- The Breadth: **“God so loved the world**
- The Length: **That He gave His only begotten son,**
- The Depth: **That whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish**
- The Height: **But have everlasting life.”**

Martin Luther called the verse "the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature," for it shows:

- **"God** the greatest lover,
- **So Loved** the greatest degree,
- **The World** the greatest quantity,
- **That He gave** the greatest act,
- **His only begotten Son** the greatest gift,
- **That whosoever** the greatest invitation,
- **Believeth** the greatest simplicity,
- **In Him** the greatest person,
- **Should not perish** the greatest deliverance,
- **But have** the greatest certainty,
- **Everlasting life."** the greatest possession.

To me, simply, the verse states that when God loves, He loves a world, and when He gives, He gives His Son. Such is the boundless love of the eternal Father of mankind!

The whole plan of salvation is based on God's love for man and His desire to have an eternal relationship with His creation. Try though you may, you will never be able to separate the Lord from relationships.

Someone once wrote: To The World You Might Be One Person; But To One Person You Might Be the World. Friends, you mean the world to God!

## **2. AS RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD, SO IT IS THAT THEY SHOULD ALSO BE IMPORTANT TO HIS CHURCH.**

The Christian life involves much more than just believing, it involves belonging.

Ephesians 2:19 (*The New Living Translation*), **“So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family.”**

Romans 12:5 adds, **“so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”**

As you know, I am into surveys. One pastor surveyed his church. When he asked, "Why did you join this church?" 93 percent of the members said, "I joined because of the pastor." He then asked, "What if the pastor leaves? Will you leave?" Ninety-three percent said, "No." When he asked why they wouldn't leave, the response was, "Because I have friends here!" Notice the shift in allegiance from pastor to other members. This is normal and healthy.

Relationships are the glue that holds a church together. Friendships are the key to retaining members.

Are you aware of the fact that Paul the Apostle uses the phrase "**one another**" some 40 different times? It's true. Let me give you a sampling of these verses:

- "**Love one another.**"
- "**Pray for one another.**"
- "**Be kindly affected to one another.**"
- "**We are members of one another.**"
- "**Serve one another.**"
- "**Forgive one another.**"
- "**Comfort one another.**"

How many of you believe that these are verses that apply to the church today? How many of you feel as if we should obey them, as we obey the Lord? Good. I have one more. Romans 16:16 adds, "**Greet one another with a holy kiss.**" The writer is saying, greet one another warmly. Greet one another with a holy love.

Then, too, the same writer uses the term "**body**" an additional 30 times to denote the fact that although we are different in many ways, we are nonetheless one body.

- Some of us might play the part of the eye,
- someone else the foot, and
- yet someone else the hand, nevertheless,

Paul says that we are all one body in Christ Jesus! Different functions and different ministries and yet one!

Then, the New Testament uses the term "**brothers**" 230 times to emphasize the fact of our oneness. The word brothers literally means "from the same womb – or wombmates." It is distinctly a family term.

When it refers to Christians, it means:

- "fellow believers,"
- members of God's family,
- brothers and sisters in Christ.

Are relationships important to the church? The answer is obvious.

### 3. IS THERE A NEED?

I want you to do something for me this afternoon. A number of you will be watching the Super Bowl. Anheuser-Busch will be the biggest advertiser during the game – I checked. They have purchased "several minutes" of ads at better than \$2 million for a thirty second shot.

As you watch these advertisements, I want you to notice that beer commercials don't sell beer, they sell fellowship. No one is ever portrayed drinking alone; it's always done in the context of people enjoying each other's company.

Everywhere you look there are signs that people are hungering for fellowship, community, and a sense of family.

- Someone once wrote that America is "a nation of strangers. "
- As a result, we're experiencing an epidemic of loneliness in society.
- One Gallup poll reported that four in ten Americans admit to frequent feelings of "intense loneliness."

Let me let you in on a secret. A church can be one of the loneliest places on earth. In fact, the place can be downright threatening:

- What if you take someone else's pew?
- What if the person next to you snores?
- Did you get the clapping or no clapping section?
- Do you have a direct path to an exit just in case things get out of hand?
- Will the preacher have you hold hands with the person seated next to you?
- How much longer until this is over?

Get the message?

Singer John Charles Thomas, at age sixty-six wrote to syndicated columnist Abigail Van Buren: "I am presently completing the second year of a three-year survey on the hospitality or lack of it in churches. To date, of the 195 churches I have visited, I was spoken to in only one by someone other than an official greeter and that was to ask me to move my feet."

In the face of such need, the church must and can do better.

Noted doctor, author, Christian, Paul Tourier has gone on record as saying "I am convinced that nine out of ten people seeing a psychiatrist don't need one. They simply need somebody who will love them with God's love and take time with them and believe for them and they will get well."

Along this line, the ancient philosopher Seneca cried, "All of my life I have been seeking to climb out of the pit of my besetting sin and I cannot do it and I never will unless a hand is let down to draw me up." What an appropriate description for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, "**A HAND LET DOWN.**"

Dr. Carl Jung, the famous psychoanalyst, was counseling a man who had been in therapy for a number of months. No progress was being made. Finally the noted doctor said, "friend, I can not do any more for you. What you need is God."

"How do I find God, Dr. Jung?" The man asked. "I don't know. But I suspect if you will find a group of people some place that truly believes in Him passionately and just spend time with them, you will find God." According to the account that I read, the fellow followed the doctor's advice and was healed.

This past week at New Life Assembly of God I dealt with:

- Both birth and death,
- Premarital counseling and divorce counseling,
- Someone who had nearly died, someone who had been healed,
- Gut-wrenching pain, and wonderful joy.

The needs of humanity are great. People desperately need that hand let down.

#### 4. WHAT IS THE CHURCH TO DO?

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 quotes the Apostle Paul saying, **“Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.”** I like what the brother says, don't you? He commended them for all of their love; for all of their efforts. Then he added, don't get self-satisfied. Do more, much more.

Can I commend you? I truly believe that New Life Assembly of God is really a very a friendly church. Our friends that have visited us have commented again and again on just how friendly you people are. Thank you. I believe that our network of greeters are faithful and caring individuals. I get the impression from being around them on Sundays that they truly enjoy doing what they are doing. We are providing a climate where people can be made to feel welcome and accepted.

Although we are classified as a large church, we are structured in such a way that we appear to be a large group of small groups.

- Sunday school classes,
  - Home cell groups,
  - Generation Best – for those 35 and older,
  - New Directions – for those 34 and younger,
  - Singles,
  - Youth groups
  - The choir,
- and so forth.

Yet the same as these are seen as being strengths to some, others would see them as being a weakness. Each of these groups can appear to be surrounded by a high and wide wall to some folks. They can not ever see themselves as being able to scale that wall in spite of all of their best intentions.

Therefore, 1 Peter 4:9 notes, **“Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”** Both 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:8 declares that one of the qualifications of a deacon -- those at the core -- is that he must be hospitable.

Romans 15:7 adds, (*The Living Bible*) **“So warmly welcome each other into the church, just as Christ has warmly welcomed you; then God will be glorified.”** Hospitality has always been a virtue and a duty of God's people. Old Testament and New tells us of the need to open our homes to strangers and to one another.

In fact:

- 1) Hospitality is an evangelistic tool, leaving a lasting impression on visitors and breaking down misunderstandings or resistance.
- 2) Hospitality serves to strengthen new converts.
- 3) Hospitality meets benevolent needs.
- 4) Hospitality creates fellowship.
- 5) Hospitality makes the church a home.

Billy Graham use to tell of a church member in Boston who once said, "I cannot speak in prayer meetings. I cannot do many other things in Christian service that other people do. However, I can put two extra plates out on my dinner table each Sunday and invite two young men who are away from home to come home and eat with me." He did that for many years and as a result, he led many a young man to Christ. When he died a number of years ago, a bus was chartered for those who wanted to attend the funeral. Special invitations were given to those who had become Christians through his influence. As it turned out, the people had to charter extra buses, because 150 people came to honor the man who had preached the Gospel by means of an extra dinner plate.

In an article titled, "Where Are the Visitors?" Lyle Schaller says, "The most influential question that can be asked of a first time visitor is, 'Would you like to come home with us for dinner?'" For those not interested in "Knocking on doors," Schaller notes, "Just open your door."

Now I do not want to imply that the only way that one can be hospitable is by entertaining someone else in your home. Hospitality should be a way of life. Notice the pattern found in Acts 2:46-47, **"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."**

- The fellowship was regular
- intimate
- relational
- not a burden
- focused on God
- well accepted, and
- profitable.

Hear me, please. I want to place a challenge before you this morning. I want us to make it nearly impossible for a person to desert the faith – to backslide -- while they are attending New Life Assembly.

- I want to make it so that no one falls through the cracks,
- No one from here goes into a Christless eternity,
- No one from this church is left behind when the Lord returns.

I believe that we can be so much into relationships, into fellowship, that we are able to keep such close tabs on people.

Can you imagine the pain of seeing your child becoming a prodigal and walking away from home? I want us to grow in Christ until we come to feel that same pain when someone from our church family rebels against God and turns away from the faith. Such a commitment will demand more of us than some superficial Sunday morning "Kum-by-ya". It will demand a commitment – a relationship -- with one another.

We have some truly fascinating people in this church. They are worth the time and energy that it takes to get to know them. Do you realize that we have:

- A converted Jew who once studied to be a rabbi?
- A fellow who owns what I would call a proverbial telephone museum?
- A possible contestant in an upcoming Tough Man show?
- Someone who is a direct ancestor to King James of the King James Bible?

- At least two former missionaries?
- A man who was electrocuted and lived to tell about it?
- A female aeronautical engineer?
- One of the very first persons in history to have open heart surgery?
- An entrepreneur who should gross a million dollars in this the second year of his business?
- A lady who was healed here of Lyme's Disease this past summer?
- An eighty-something year-old lady who is a former tennis champion? She is still very active and athletic.

Before I move on, I must tell you the true story of the priest who saw Robert Schuller's TV program *Hour of Power*. One of the things that impressed him most was the practice of everyone turning around and shaking hands with, and greeting, the other worshippers seated nearby. The priest felt that their church was a bit stuffy and could use a bit of friendliness. So, one Sunday he announced that the following Sunday they were going to initiate this practice. At the close of this same service a man turned around to the lady behind and said "Good morning," and she looked at him with shock at his boldness and said, "I beg your pardon! That friendliness business doesn't start until next Sunday."

## **5. A CALL TO THOSE ON THE EDGE**

I received an E-mail this week that really spoke to me. Perhaps you too have seen it. It is entitled, "Visiting Day." Let me read it to you:

He had been looking forward to this moment all day long, after six days of labor and it had finally arrived - Visiting Day! The man with the keys arrived to swing open the large, heavy doors. The cold gray hall sprang to life in the warm glow of light. He could hardly control his emotions.

The families began to arrive. He peers from the corner of the room, longing for the first glimpse of his loved ones. He lives for the weekends. He lives for these visits. As the cars arrive, he watches intently. Then, finally, they arrive, for whom he would do anything. They embrace, eat a light lunch and reminisce how things used to be. At one point, they break into singing, with interruptions of laughter and applause. But all too soon it is over. Tears come to his eyes as they depart.

Then the men with the keys close the heavy doors. He hears the key turn in the lock, marking the end of a special day. There he stands, alone again. He knows that most of his visitors will not contact him again until next week. As the last car pulls away from the parking lot, Jesus retreats into loneliness as He waits until next Sunday - Visiting Day.

Pretty heavy, isn't it?

The same as some marriages are made up of what I call married singles, so it is that some churches have a whole group of people that I call regular visitors. That is really what they are. Like two people living together, they want relationship without strings, benefits without commitment.

Along this line, I want to share with you a list of actual excuses people have used for why they missed church. I think you will enjoy them:

- "I just had this feeling I shouldn't be there." (I wonder where that feeling came from?)
- Church gives me gas!
- The preacher moves around too much.
- They don't meet my needs. (I am sure that staying home does.)

- There are too many hypocrites in church. (Hey, the way I see it, one more won't make a difference.)
- I have nothing to wear. (I wonder what this person does about going to work?)
- I belong to the 700 club; that's good enough. (Call Pat Robinson when you need someone to preach your funeral.)
- I'll get religion when I get to purgatory. (Good luck.)
- God made Football.....doesn't that cover it? (We'll see at the judgment.)
- I did not miss Church, I found a new Church. It's a wonderful Church. No singing, no sit-stand-kneel, it's very peaceful. Every Sunday you can faithfully find me at Saint Mattress.

Friends:

- We need the church.
- Our kids need the church.
- Our neighbors need to see us go off to church.
- Our fellow employees need to hear that we go to church.
- Our friends need to know that we go to church.
- The spouse needs to see that church is important.
- The pastor needs to see that church is a higher priority on Sundays than St. Mattress.

So, now is the time to commit to church,

- To relationships,
- To service,
- To faithfulness.

Put down the roots, this is your church.

### **BEFORE I CLOSE OUT THIS MESSAGE, I WANT TO MAKE A BRIEF COMMENT ABOUT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.**

C. S. Lewis once wrote an essay on church membership. He noted that the word membership was a distinctly Christian word. However, time and the world has taken the word over and emptied it of all its original meaning.

Church membership to the Apostle Paul meant becoming a vital organ of a living body. As each of us know, any organ that is detached from the body will not only miss what it was created to be, it will also shrivel up and die quickly. The same is true for Christians that are uncommitted to any specific congregation.

There are numerous benefits to membership:

1. It identifies a person as a genuine believer. You have to be a born-again Christian to join the church.
2. It provides a spiritual family to support and encourage a person in their walk with Christ
3. It gives an individual a place to discover and use his or her gifts in ministry.
4. It places the person under the spiritual protection of godly leaders.
5. It provides accountability.

Are you a member of the Lord's church?

The community talks about **THAT** church,  
the crowd talks about **THIS** church,

but the membership talks about **OUR** church. Members have a sense of ownership. They are

contributors, not just consumers.

In Rapid City, where I use to pastor, I once met a person who had visited over 60 churches in the Rapid City area. He had tried the church that I pastored at least twice. Nevertheless, he never could find a church that suited him. What a shame; what a waste. He wasn't able to benefit from the church; the church wasn't able to benefit from him. Everyone lost. Every week he had to start over in his quest to find that perfect church.

- Not one church out of sixty had a pastor that could feed him.
- Not one church out of sixty could meet his spiritual needs.
- Not one church out of sixty was quite honesty good enough for him – so he ended up hopping from place to place to place.

Seriously, who do you think had the problem here? He sounded so proud; so spiritually superior. And yet he didn't even realize that the enemy had blinded his eyes with pride and self-righteousness.

Hebrews 10:25 says (*The New Living Translation*), “**And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming back again is drawing near.**” He evidently thought that even God's Word applied to everyone else but him. Again, sad.

Let us resolve to not be like that poor brother. Today the call is to move to the core by way of a commitment to relationships.