The Momentum of Togetherness

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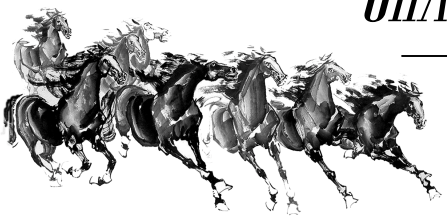
A Team Effort . . .

What more fitting way to start off a book about the church than to acknowledge the church's role in helping to produce it? That specifically means Stef Wyatt and Tina Miller, who performed tasks in transcribing and editing this manuscript. And of course, I have to mention the good folks of Grandview Christian Assembly, who heard these messages in their highly imperfect, original form and yet still received them with gladness.

Chapter One



Continuing Your New Life

My family has always been somewhat pet-friendly. As I grew up we had dogs and cats and once we ended up on a mini-farm where we had horses and ducks and chickens. Every now and then the obligatory parrot or exotic bird would be introduced into that mix. Occasionally we'd bring in a hamster and even more rarely, fish. Here's the way the fish thing would work. Invariably, one of us kids would be at K-Mart and would be inspired by all the aquariums there. We'd beg for permission to get some of those fish until one of our parents would go soft on the idea, and we'd end up bringing a few home in little plastic bags of water.

We didn't have good luck with fish because within about two weeks they'd be dead. Before you knew it, the kids would be gathered around the toilet, flushing Goldie with honors. For a while I was down on pet stores. I felt like they were selling us defective fish. It never dawned on me that maybe *where* we put them when we got home played a very large part in whether or not they were going to survive. My approach had always been fairly standard. You get a glass box, fill it with water and put some of that cheesy turquoise-blue gravel in the bottom. Add fish, and voila! Then, you just monitor the aquarium and make sure all the water doesn't evaporate out of it. We did all that, so in the meantime, I just couldn't understand why we kept losing fish.

Believe it or not, that is the topic of this chapter. It's all about the where, the setting. Setting is a gigantic issue. Your healthy development in the Christian life and whether or not you strongly finish it depends on the setting into which you are introduced following your salvation.

Acts 2:41 is a great place to start this thought. It begins with the Apostle Peter preaching the gospel and "those who gladly received his word." At this point he had just ministered a long, spirit-empowered message and there were a bunch of people who gladly received it. Then they "were baptized." This was their response to the salvation that had internally taken hold of them. "Those who received his word were baptized and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." You could say 3,000 spiritual babies got delivered on that day.

But then the question becomes "Now what?" They have no churches. They have no Christian literature. They have no seminaries. They're just a bunch of babies and all they have for teaching is what Peter just spoke to them. Well, Acts 2:42 says, "they *continued*." That's because real salvation is not just a matter of getting fire insurance. Salvation is a beginning, a first step. It's supposed to continue. It's not a wrap-up that allows a person to rest easy and forget spiritual concerns. And so these early Christians "continued steadfastly, in the apostles' doctrine, in fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer."

The contemporary take on the Christian life, however, is that the people got saved, they got baptized, they all went home, each of them studied their Bible, prayed to God, lived happily ever after and then they died and went to heaven. I know that most Christians wouldn't be so bold as to come out and say that, but this is the concept that is deeply entrenched in the minds of many. If you tend toward this notion, what you're doing is neglecting an extremely important element in Acts chapter 2—*setting*.

Let's go back to the fish example. When you first take that fish home in the little plastic bag of water, the most immediate concern ought to be the setting into which you're going to introduce it. If you're a guy like me who knows very little about such things—pH balances or oxygen

content or any of that kind of stuff —you just walk into the house ready to put it in water. That could mean the kitchen sink. After all, it has water in it. You could just put the fish in there, and when someone needs to wash dishes, take it out, take it to the bathroom, put a couple inches of water in the bathtub and then let it swim around in there. Later when someone needs to take a shower, you can just transplant the fish to a flower vase on the table since that's got water in it, too. You know what you're going to end up with? A dead fish. It's not only important that the fish is healthy. It's also equally important where that healthy fish is placed.

This is the reason why, when we come to Acts 2:46, there's a word about setting. Just scan the verse, "day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together…" The words *continuing* and *together* ought to stand out. Then in verse 47, it says "and the Lord added to their number, day by day, those who were being saved." All of this is an allusion to the idea of setting. Look at what's going on here. Day by day, as people believed in Jesus, He was adding them. Take the average person who believed in Christ during that time. What did the Lord do with him? It was a no-brainer—He would add that person to those who had already believed. He would say "Come on, I've got just the place for you. You've got a lot of problems. You need a lot of help. The best place for you, bottom line, is with the church." It was a one-to-one ratio. If you were saved, you got added. That was the Lord's solution for every living soul who believed in Him. He would say to each, "I've got just the thing for you. I know where you're going to thrive and then finish strong—with others who have believed in Me." And so He would *add*. There was no such thing as the Lord telling anyone, "Alright, I can see that the church is not going to be able to help you very much. And you probably are not going to be able to help it at all. So, I need to come up with an alternate plan for you. Why don't you just move to a mountain instead, or crawl into a cave and pray and study

your Bible." There was no such idea, and if someone had introduced it, it wouldn't have been the mind of Christ.

The implication is that the church, the gathering of the believers, is the best thing for the believer, hands-down. There were no alternate life plans and up until this day there are none. Every day since those days in Acts chapter 2, people have been saved and the Lord does the same thing. He takes the newly arrived believers and adds them to the setting of the church.

The Church—Not a Very Good Idea?

Frankly, I'm not sure if introducing people to the church is such a good idea. Since the first week of my salvation I've been involved with church meetings and services of almost every kind. My resulting experience was often boredom. On other occasions I felt pressured or hurt or offended. More than a few times I approached the frustration point of thinking, "Well, fine. I just won't come anymore."

Call me opinionated, but it doesn't seem smart to subject new believers to those hardships. It would seem better to encourage them to just personally nurture their own faith at home. But as often as I have had bad experiences, I have had many more powerful ones—of inspiration, encouragement, support—all coming from the same church that at times had also wearied me with nonsense. Numerous encounters and relationships with people over the years have rendered me spiritual benefits far beyond my ability to ever have collected them from a position of isolation. Fairly speaking, I have had plenty of good experiences from church involvement, so many in fact, that cutting the church out of my life would have amputated my spiritual growth along with it.

A new generation of hip young Christian writers doesn't see it that way. Negative sentiments in their books suggest that there are better settings for Christians than the New Testament church. Whatever way they express it, one point always seems to crystallize: the church as an

institution is pathetically irrelevant and in need of either overhaul or replacement.

What they typically promote to center stage is the personal spiritual experience—good old rugged American individualism dressed in Christian clothing. It squares perfectly with the cynical idea that the only person you can trust is you. You can trust you and you can trust Jesus, but it's very likely that everyone else has an agenda to enslave you to religious programs.

According to those ideas, the best thing you could do for yourself is get a Volkswagen van and drive through the wilderness, looking for a Jesus who doesn't like church, either. Some believe they have learned more from such communion than they ever could have from within a group of believers. I actually like some of those books, but I don't like the subtleties that come out of them—that the best, most colorful spirituality has little to do with church fellowship. There are a lot of these publications emerging today and a generation of cynical, disillusioned believers eats them like candy. No matter how fair and balanced they try to be, the poetic, solitary souls who read them always seem to come away with the message that the church is essentially a throw-away proposition. If you like it, fine, but if you don't you can always kick it to the curb.

And now for a word of balance: I am not advocating a blind eye to the worst elements of church life. Some congregations are too enamored with trends. Others are narrow and unloving. Quite a few have surrendered important spiritual ground. I wouldn't suggest free passes for all of them. Some things ought not to be tolerated like heresy, abuse, sectarianism, and redressing the moral teachings of scripture for the sake of political correctness. Such churches have lost their standing before the Lord.

I also fully believe in spiritual disciplines that involve solitude. Sometimes we all need to get away. Jesus Himself said, "When you pray, go into your closet, where your Father is in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you for praying to Him in secret" (Matt. 6:6). However, the same Christ who said this in the Gospel of Matthew, is the Christ in Acts chapter 2 who adds us to the

very public dimension of the church. In other words, although we need those special moments of private worship, the Lord adds us to the church, not to a closet. That, once again, is a matter of setting.

Sometimes special spiritual experiences go beyond church. Who hasn't been helped by a great conference like Passion or Women of Faith or Promise-Keepers? Or how about a good Christian concert where the music was absolutely thumping? Maybe then you thought, "If only I could have this on a regular basis, I would be squared away. Boy, my Christian life would take off." Every now and then, you might catch podcasts of great messages from evangelical speakers and they leave you feeling like, "Well, who needs plain old church? I can piece together an ideal church experience from the media and special events!" But I warn you this is not the mind of Christ. He *meant* to add you to that often mundane daily church life, not to a virtual church of your creation.

Although special events and ministries are also of Christ, and serve their definite purposes, they're like a rocket booster. For instance, in crisis moments where you need to stay up studying, you might drink a Red Bull or Amp or Monster. Then you're wired. Well, that's not how you're supposed to *live*. That's just how you're supposed to get by in crisis moments. You actually ought to live on a good night's sleep. The same way, the Lord meant for us to live in the church. However, now and then, you need something special. He has prepared additional ministries just for that. Those things are of Christ too, but they're not meant to be our native setting.

The Way It Was Meant to Be

From the standpoint of 1 Corinthians 12:13, look at how we've been prepared for the setting of the church: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." The word "baptized" right away summons up the image of a preacher who takes people into some water, dunks them into it, and brings them up. But here in 1 Corinthians 12:13 it's the Spirit doing the baptizing. And He's not baptizing you in

water; He's baptizing you into the body of Christ, the church. What's more, it says that we *were* baptized—past-tense—meaning this *has* happened to you. Try to wrap your mind around this: the day you believed in Jesus you were baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ.

The typical believer isn't so aware of it. He thinks he got a pretty good package deal already: sins forgiven, eternal life, status as a child of God, deliverance from the lake of fire. He's feeling good. He's sleeping well at night. But there's another thing that the Lord has done to guarantee that our new life will continue. God doesn't save us and then say, "Good luck!" No, He also provides a setting for our continuance. The Spirit baptizes us into a spiritually organic union with Himself and others, to the extent that we become members of the Body of Christ (Romans 12:5).

This is something for every believer. 1 Corinthians says that we were *all* baptized, not just some special types who seem to have more spiritual chutzpah than other folks. It's a fact: If you're reading this and you've believed in Christ, you're *in*, plain and simple.

The verse goes further by adding that we were all baptized, "Whether Jews or Greeks [irrespective of race], whether slaves or free [irrespective of social standing]." Why? So that we could all be "made to drink of one Spirit." The idea of taking a believer and baptizing him into the body is not simply so that he can enjoy an enlarged social setting. Let's be honest, he could join the Rotary Club if he just wanted more friends. The verse reads that a Christian is put into the body of Christ so that he can "drink of one Spirit."

This is so that spiritual experiences would keep coming by exposing the person to a greater volume of the Spirit than what he would have all by himself. The truth is that a Christian only has so much spiritual substance by himself and even what he has tends to leak out. But what if this same believer were positioned right next to people filled with the Spirit? As he gets to know them and is exposed to the Spirit within them, he can be re-inspired, and supported and encouraged continually. It's an excellent way to stave off backsliding.

The wisdom of Christ says, "I'm going to make sure that your experience of the Holy Spirit will keep going, and going, and going, and going. If you dry up, you'll have believers next to you, and if they dry up, there are even more backing them." The odds of stalling out dramatically shrink when you're surrounded with the supply of the Spirit. This plan helps guarantee that you're going to make it—all the way to the end.

This is the beauty of 1 Corinthians 12:13 and in fact, this is why the apostle Paul got down on his knees and prayed for the Ephesian believers. He said, "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named" (Eph. 3:14). This dramatic opening language shows him ramping up to something strategic. Then he says, "that He would grant you according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might, through His spirit, into the inner man." In other words Paul is praying for the believers to be power-packed from the inside out. He continues in verse 17, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you being rooted and grounded in love"—here's the punch line—"*may be able to comprehend with all the saints.*"

Mark this: Comprehension is at stake here. "That you may be able to comprehend with all the saints [the believers]—what is the width and length and depth and height." These are the multi-dimensional measurements of "the love of Christ" (v. 19). It takes being with other believers to comprehend the multi-dimensional love of Christ. It takes more than just you, by yourself.

The solitary Christian is one-dimensional. He needs others. Once others are in the picture, dimensions are added until the love of Christ becomes substantial in a way that was previously unknown—"to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

This whole picture works kind of like a rain barrel—the type with curved wooden slats that are held together at the top and the bottom with a metal band. Once all these slats come together they can contain a volume of water.

However the only thing one slat by itself can do is just get wet; it can't hold anything. Put them together and there is a comprehension of the multi-dimensional volume and fullness of water. It's the same with the believers. Together they comprehend the love of Christ, the fullness of God. Paul realized this. He knew that believers together can contain and experience something far beyond what they have on their own. Together they hold something. That's the "setting" of the New Testament church.

Why This May Not Work for You

Some of you may be thinking, "Well, thank you John for this warm, positive infomercial for the New Testament Church. However it's not my experience. I get up on Sunday morning and I don't feel that there's some kind of wonderful volume of fullness and I don't feel that I'm drinking the Spirit very much. I am not getting this now nor have I ever gotten this by being with other Christians." Alright, granted there are a lot of reasons why this might be your feeling. Before I start wading through them though, let's cut to the chase and examine the simplest possible explanation.

Go back to Acts 2:46. That verse gives a description of what church life looked like for these believers as they were drinking the Spirit, comprehending the multi-dimensional love of Christ, and containing the fullness of God. The first three words of the verse are already a huge correction to most contemporary Christians. It says, "day by day." Compare that to the modern Sunday morning church habit that many have. The modern stuff is like a wafer-thin slice of what is going on in the verse. It barely captures anything substantial.

Suppose someone had a once-a-week Sunday morning habit of drinking a glass of water. Further suppose every time you saw him he looked weak and his skin was wrinkly and yellow. You'd ask, "What's the matter with you? He'd say, "Well, I don't know. I'm feeling dehydrated." Then you might say, "Why don't you drink something?" Then he says, "I already drink a glass of fluid once a week on

Sunday morning. I don't get much help from it, though. Fluids are overrated."

That's silly reasoning and yet Christians end up caught by it all the time. Let's face some facts here: an hour on Sunday, no matter how pumped the worship is or entertaining the preacher can be, is not the same as church life that happens "day by day." A Christian life trying to sustain itself on a fleeting once a week experience is not going to match the church life described in the Bible.

The scriptures model a daily church. I know talking about this is risky because a word on church involvement can become pressuring. Most of us feel busy to death already. People have varying levels of commitment to their congregations ranging from heavy to light to downright anemic. Those at the shallow end of the pool have reasons for being there.

I am not interested in becoming a judge and jury, passing sentences on their cases. When I point out that the picture of biblical church life in Acts 2 is a daily affair, more than mere Sunday morning attendance, it's not supposed to stir guilt. Rather, the Acts 2 picture is supposed to inspire us with a description of what Christians looked like as they mined the richness of the New Testament experience. And if you follow that example, you will probably get the same thing.

The book of Acts is similar to one of those expensive recipe books with the glossy, color photos. Turn to the page with lovely golden fried chicken. Looks great, right? There are directions under it, telling what the chef did to obtain it. But suppose you say, "Well, I can't really afford flour. I can't afford oil. I don't have this or that. I'm not going to the store. Forget it. I've been to the store twice already this week. I'll just have to make do with what I've got in the cupboard." Prepare yourself because at the end of your cooking session, you'll get something totally different from what's in the picture. Odds are it won't be lovely or golden.

Rest assured that your cooking catastrophe won't be the cookbook's fault. You can stamp your foot and say that the book is a cheap fraud but the question will always turn

upon whether you followed the recipe in it. Similarly, the experience you get out of being in the church has to do with taking your cues from the New Testament cookbook, and the first one is "day by day."

No real Christian leader wants to brow beat church members into greater involvement. As a leader in my congregation I certainly want to see everybody committed to Christ and the church, but not out of guilt. I want the folks at Grandview Christian Assembly hooked on drinking the Holy Spirit. In other words, I want them here for the right reasons, committed up to their eyeballs because they love it.

Sometimes I get emails from people who say, "John I'm sooo sorry I'll be out for the next couple of Sundays. I'm really really really really—" and then I want to put up my hand and say, "Cut it out. Stop apologizing to me. Chill! Jesus still loves you." Frankly, I want folks to be in our church because they want to be here and delight in comprehending the love of Christ with all of us. I want them to enjoy the volume of God that we're containing and not come because they've been trapped. I try to remember this because it's a gold standard in terms of a leader's attitude toward the people who worship with him.

Jesus never forces anyone to love Him. He never forces growth. If you give Him the brush off, He'll let you stay in your rut, and even pitch a tent in it. But in the meantime He'll continue to encourage and invite you out of it. In principle the church does the same thing. It discourages sinful behavior and irresponsible living. On the other hand, it promotes commitment to Christ and a life of righteousness and peace and joy. But as far as getting in your face and trying to enforce either—that's crazy. That kind of approach violates the whole spirit of the New Testament. We're supposed to be here revolving around the reality of 1 Corinthians 12:13—drinking the Spirit, and Ephesians 3:17—containing the fullness of God. If that has to be stuffed down anyone's throat, something's wrong.

Acts chapter 2 provides a description, a portrait of people that are really onto something, not people who've been made to do something. So it says, "Day by day they

continued with one mind, in the temple [a large group setting] and breaking bread from house to house [a small group setting]." This house to house fellowship represents a level of entrance that many Christians never find. They were eating together and warmth broke out. So the verse goes on to say that "they took their meals with gladness." It was genuine gladness, not the feigned stuff, which is why the last part of the verse mentions their "sincerity of heart." They were real. Their gladness was authentic.

Verse 47 also mentions the believers praising God. They were joyful toward the God who had provided them salvation in Christ, a reality that took them down a road to "having favor with all the people." Now there's a switch—the non-Christian community liked the church. Rather than complain about our being hateful and hypocritical, the unsaved neighborhood was saying things like, "Those church people sure are weird about Jesus, but they're a good bunch. Can't help but like 'em." We can never hear too many of those remarks.

I strongly encourage you to find a deeper level of the church than mere events or just coming on Sunday to drink a "Dixie cup of water" for the week. There's something else, something below that initial layer. Most people visit a church like they might go ice fishing. They're hoping to catch a blessing or an experience of some kind. They wander out onto the surface of a frozen lake and say, "There's no water here. None at all." So they walk around on top of this frozen lake, wondering why they don't get much out of it. Actually there's a ton of water under the ice at another level.

That's where we need to go. And this is what Acts shows us—drinking of the Spirit and the fullness of God as it occurs in daily life with the believers. Momentum is born that way. We get it from within one another in the fellowship of the church.

Group Fellowship Questions

1. This chapter focused quite a bit on the importance of setting. Share an experience you might have had related to introducing pets into an ill-fitted setting or of washing clothes in the wrong temperature water or cooking in the wrong pan or at the wrong temperature.

2. Is Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19 hopelessly packed with random thoughts, or is there a spiritual progression of one thought leading into another? Sort through his prayer and try to identify them.

3. Have 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 3 and Acts 2 given you any hints about how your church experience might be enriched? If so, please discuss them.

Chapter Two

Becoming A Disciple Among Disciples

Let's start this chapter off with something weird and random—an article called "The Ugandan Monkey Boy" (And you were worried you wouldn't get something relevant out of this book).

Incidentally, this piece is not a joke.

> [1]John Ssebunya was born in the mid 1980s, but ran away from home (probably aged around four) after seeing his mother murdered by his own father (who, according to some reports, subsequently hanged himself).
>
> It's generally accepted that John Ssebunya was cared for at least to some extent by green African vervet monkeys while in the jungle. Details are confused but is seems John was found by a tribeswoman or girl (called Millie) in 1991, hiding in a tree. She returned with menfolk from the village and, as is so often the case, not only did John resist capture but also his adoptive family came to his defense, throwing sticks at the villagers.
>
> Initial reports suggest John Ssebunya's entire body was covered with hair [This is a sign of malnutrition in a child that age]. When he defecated, he excreted worms over half a meter long. Once captured and cleaned up, he was covered in scars and wounds, with knees scarred from crawling, he was identified as John Ssebunya.

> He was given by Millie to the care of Paul and Molly Wasswa, who ran a charitable foundation for orphans. He couldn't talk or cry initially, but has subsequently learned to speak.
>
> John now not only talks but also sings, and tours with the Pearl of Africa children's choir. John was the subject of the BBC documentary *Living Proof*, screened on 13 October 1999. You can read more about John's account in the book *Savage Boys and Wild Girls*, written by a behavioral scientist named Newton.

That story is a reminder that although all of us are born 100% human, we still must enter a process of *becoming* fully human. It's something that occurs in the setting of human community. In order to become, you have to be able to look around and observe normal behavior—things like speech and walking erect—behavior that is encouraged in human life. John was denied that experience and his process was short-circuited, resulting in his looking more like a monkey than a man.

As a Christian, you are very much in the same boat, because the day you believed in Jesus Christ, you became a child of God. Where God is concerned, you're a full-out Christian when you believe in Him. However, following that point, you must enter a process of *becoming* Christian. You are, but you must become, all at the same time. Like John Ssebunya's case, a lot of how a Christian turns out is based upon the setting into which he is placed. According to the Bible that setting is the church.

Jesus has decreed that the place for all believers is the body of Christ. That's where we're supposed to be. It's our native habitat and it's where we learn to be Christians. The Apostle Paul instructed the believers to take note of the many things that they saw modeled in the context of the church and practice them. He wrote, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is

any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise—meditate on these things " (Phil 4:8).

In fact, early Christians were called disciples, which comes from the Greek word *mathetes* (meaning a learner). So when all these learners gathered together as the church, the chief characteristic of the church was that of learning. It means "We're not there yet, but we're at least arriving."

The learning environment in the early church was continuous. It wasn't enough just to know some fundamental propositions of thought and teaching. The disciples were discovering how to apply truth and live it out in real time. If you were a brand-new Christian introduced to this community full of *mathetes* (learners), then you became a learner. It was a lot like a child growing up in a family where he could watch and listen and practice things such as walking, talking and behaving.

Christians learn from other Christians how to be a Christian—for better or for worse—but where Jesus is concerned, it's always intended for the better. He gave us a magnificent book and He also gave us one another.

A Christian or a Monkey?

A few days ago I was reading a story about a pastor who was having some struggles in his church. Apparently one of the members owned and operated a pornographic bookstore. Even worse, he also played in the worship band. I wondered how something like that could slip through the preventative security of church fellowship. That bit of information must have been one of these things that came out slowly over time between sets at band practice. Somebody must have said, "Hey dude, what do you do for a living?"

"I own a business."

"What kind of Business?"

"It's a bookstore."

Then maybe somebody said, "Well, I'm looking for a study Bible. I'll come to your store and buy it." Then the guy says, "We don't sell *Bibles* in my bookstore."

The whole thing might have gotten disclosed just like that. But how could such behavior exist in a Christian for any length of time? One possibility is that the guy wasn't a Christian to start with, just a fellow who liked to play instruments for a crowd on Sunday morning. Another possibility is that he really did receive Jesus at some point when he was younger, but had since managed to evade any kind of meaningful relationship with healthy Christians. Somehow he had never entered into a companionship where somebody could say, "Hey man, let's talk" and it would have been the kind of rap session that really made a difference. The "mathetes" community had failed to enfold him. The result was a man eternally saved by Jesus but living and looking like a monkey. Where was the healthy communal influence of others' faith upon him? It wasn't there. The absence of learning had left him distinctly un-Christian to the naked eye.

The Myth of the Perfect Church

If Jesus really wants the church to work as a setting where people grow, then it seems logical that He would make sure it is perfect. Otherwise, new impressionable believers will grow up warped by flawed mentors and companions. A lot of Christians actually harbor this thought. They are on a constant quest for the perfect church, but they may as well be searching for the lost continent of Atlantis. On this earth, a church has never existed that is the perfect blend of love, inner life, activity, social awareness, belief, consistent Christian living, and everything else that makes for a really impressive resume. It was not found even among the churches recorded in the New Testament. Every time we read an epistle or the record in Acts, we get glimpses of the ideal church and then just as quickly they go away, eclipsed by various problems. If we are all assembling as disciples, learners, then by definition it means we're a group of people who haven't got it all figured out. Even the Apostle Paul said, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own" (Phil. 3:12). He had the solid,

sound foundation of the faith and a great deal of maturity upon it, but never left the definition of a learner.

So, put a bunch of self-confessed learners together and you are virtually guaranteed to have an imperfect church. Beware of the illusion of an ideal, know-it-all church. Such groups are typically on their best behavior in order to gain potential members. Later, the other side of the story becomes apparent in a sick church culture that could contain elements like hyper-legalism or heresy. By then, it is often emotionally difficult for a new member to withdraw.

I fully agree with finding a congregation that is spiritually healthy, and one that reasonably—not perfectly—but reasonably, matches biblical standards. Things like doctrine, practice, communal health, and concerns for living out the Christ life ought to be central to our considerations. We should be responsible when we look for a congregation to join. But once you've found that church, a place that is functionally imperfect…please, shut up! I heard one salty minister say this about marriage. Addressing the women in the room, he said, "Look, there's no such thing as the perfect man, so marry one and shut up." I know, I know. It's a crass statement, but effective in its own insensitive way. The point is, that although no one wants to say, "Settle for less," neither does anyone realistically say, "Wait for perfection."

The church is in a similar category. Churches are full of *mathetes*, which not only automatically means learning, but failure as well. It does not get any better than that. My wife and I were with a difficult and often odd gathering of Christians for decades. From the beginning we felt that the group looked reasonably like the New Testament church in terms of core beliefs and devotional practices. We decided to stick around and make it work, learning the lessons of how to love and how to forgive. We learned to overlook group eccentricities and deal with problem people, serving together with them and following Jesus. And of course, they had to tolerate our faults. Whether or not the group was the perfect fit for us was immaterial. We learned things at another level of the Christian life.

Eventually we did leave, but not over personal hostilities. When the group started to display cult-like attitudes and definite signs of a disturbing sectarian trend, we separated from it. But for so very long, we made a home in the middle of these quirky folks with an attitude that we were in it for the long haul. And we were. I'd like to challenge all the rest of you to do the same thing. Be a disciple for a change. Don't be a Christian who lives out the quest for Atlantis—entering and leaving places based on whether you like the parking or the doughnuts or whether you receive celebrity treatment.

If you allow an unhealthy "Jesus Gypsy" pattern to get started in your life, then Paradise will always be where you're not. Every so often you'll sever fellowship with the Christians surrounding you for whatever reason, and you'll go out looking for something better. Of course you'll regularly find it and then talk it up to everyone, but in about six months the cycle will reboot and you'll start to find problems with the cool new church. As the pattern spirals downward, you'll continue escaping inconveniences and difficulties but you'll also never be planted with anybody and ultimately never learn much of anything. Under those circumstances, what is unconsciously happening is that you're looking for a group that will *not* challenge you to grow. And that is an awful quest to be on.

The Imperfect Church Set Up By Jesus

Let's look at the early church the way that Jesus set it up. Luke 6:12-13 says, "It came to pass in those days that He [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself, and from them He chose twelve whom He named apostles." After praying all night long as the ideal Man of God, He was saturated with the presence of God the Father. It was an incredibly important thing to do. Jesus was about to choose people who would represent believers for all time as a microcosm of the entire New Testament church.

Perhaps to our estimation, good choices would mean people who were a natural, harmonious fit with each other, men who had like dispositions, backgrounds, and similar temperaments. But let's look at whom He chose. First it was "Simon, whom He also named Peter" (v. 14). If you know anything at all about Peter in the New Testament, you'll know that he wore all of his insides on the outside. There was hardly anything he said that he didn't think about a week later. He was a quick, extroverted, and natural-born leader. But the person right next to him in the line-up is Andrew his brother. Andrew was a connector. He knew a lot of people and was a networking kind of person. As a matter of fact, he himself brought Peter to Jesus. Peter might have said, "Okay, everybody listen to me!" Yet Andrew was likely to say, "Hey, don't we have a mutual friend?" There are always these types of people in the New Testament church—folks who lead and folks who seem to know everybody.

A little further into the line-up we find James and John who were called in other passages, the 'Sons of Thunder.' It was a designation that described their disposition. They were quite emotional. They loved hard and they hated hard. At one point they wanted to kill a bunch of people who had rejected Jesus by calling fire down from heaven on them. Jesus had to turn around and rebuke them. Thus, James and John were the fiery dispositions in the mix.

Then there was Phillip, who was one of those practical, logical guys who could always find the reasons why something couldn't be done. In John chapter 6 you see him in action. At the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus turned to the disciples and said, "You feed them." Then quickly, in Phillip's head, he calculated the cost per head, multiplied by an estimated number of people present and then turned to Jesus and said, "Even 200 denarii wouldn't feed a crowd this size." So Phillip was the bean-counter and antithesis to the emotional guys.

Then there was Bartholomew (Nathaniel). Jesus met Nathaniel in John chapter 1 and said, "Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile"—which means that Nathaniel

was a really nice guy. There was no dark, guiding, malevolent intention inside of him; he wasn't hiding anything. Thank God that there are these types of personalities in the church—not too opaque; true salt of the earth.

When you come to Matthew in verse 15, you immediately have to look at the other end of that verse where we find Simon the zealot. It's amazing that these two were ever in the same room together. Simon was a zealot—a party that was opposed to the Roman occupation of Israel. They hated the Romans. They were the most extreme form of Right-wing political government and they believed the Romans should be removed by any means, including force if necessary. As for Matthew—he had been working for the Romans, collecting taxes for them. It's not hard to imagine these two locking horns over political views. And Jesus put them together. He called them both into a close fellowship of twelve people, hardly larger than a small group Bible study. In a setting so close, you're bound to bump into one another's views. That's hardly comfortable.

Now look in the middle of verse 15, where there's Thomas. Thomas was slow to believe and cynical. In fact, he promised that he wouldn't believe unless absolutely compelled to do so. When he was told that Christ had resurrected, he was the one who said, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the marks of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe" (John 20:25). It seems there's a Thomas in every fellowship, some believer who is a dark horse and has difficulty trusting the promises of God.

Now let's skip to the middle of verse 15, where there's James the son of Alphaeus, and then in verse 16, Judas the son of James (not Judas Iscariot). The Bible tells us almost nothing about these two. There are plenty of people in the church like this. You never know much about them. They hold their cards close to their chest. No one ever knows exactly what's in their hand, what they're thinking or feeling. These two quiet fellows were with the rest of those who had been chosen, contrasting the extroverts.

And then last in the line-up was Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. Judas represents the person who was there for all the wrong reasons. He's in church hoping to sell car insurance or meet a girl (married or not). Maybe Judas hung around with Jesus, hoping for material gain or to become something. Whatever it was, it wasn't right. When people say, "I don't like going to church because there are hypocrites," I want to say, "Get over it! There was one with Jesus." One out of twelve was false. Does this mean we should have hypocrites like Judas Iscariot in the church? Naturally I wouldn't encourage people to assemble with the church and be false. However, in some cases you learn all the stuff you shouldn't do by being next to such people.

Now put these folks together and you've got a microcosm of the church on the earth. There will be introverts, extroverts, the logical, the emotional, the careful and the quiet. In some cases, yes, there will be souls who are around for the worst reasons. This is the matrix that we have been planted into. We have not been sown in tofu—we've been planted in real soil. It's dirty, it's brown, it's nutritious, and that's how we grow—in a mix of personality types.

Lessons in the School of Christ

I've been thundering on about learning, but what is it that we learn in the matrix of varied believers? Take a look at this list of examples that the Bible furnishes us:

Love one another (John 13:34)
Edify one another (Rom. 14:19)
Receive one another (Rom. 15:19)
Forgive one another (Eph. 4:32)
"Members of one another"—commitment (Rom. 12:5)
Honor one another (Rom. 12:10)
Rejoice with one another (Rom. 12:15)
Serve one another (Gal. 5:13)
Carry one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2)
Encourage one another (1 Thes. 5:11)

Be hospitable to one another (1 Pet. 4:9)
Confess your sins one to another (James 5:16)
Pray for one another (James 5:16)

To a very large extent, these things represent what we learn in order to become true disciples of Jesus Christ. Notice that in each of the references it says, "one another." This confirms yet again that we learn to live Christ in the social, communal context of the Body of Christ.

The very first lesson is to "Love one another" (John 13:34). It's amazing how that Christians can have a gigantic missionary heart bursting with love for folks on the other side of the world whom they've never met, but can't manage to love the people who are with them in their home congregation. It seems that we gush with affection for anyone who speaks different languages and eats strange foods somewhere out there over the bend of the earth. Though we are called to love all men, it is especially challenging to love the sometimes strange person who sits next to us in a church gathering. Often the front line trenches aren't in Africa or India. "The action" is on your knees, praying about how you just can't love so-and-so, and how you'd much rather punch him. It's all about having breakthroughs in the social dimension of the believers. Until you're learning to love the person with that annoying personality in your small group or service group, love is still just a beautiful ideal in a sermon.

There's also the command to "Edify one another" (Rom. 14:19). This has a lot to do with learning how to build up the spiritual condition of another believer. It is ministry in its rawest sense—reaching inside of a human being and feeding his or her interest in Jesus. Don't confuse this with mere friendliness like, "Hey Thad, let's go to a movie, and then shoot some basketball!" Edifying means learning how to directly address the need for God in another person's spirit. Maybe it would take the shape of praying with someone or teaching them the Bible. In any case, it is typically spiritual in nature.

The next two on our list, "Receive one another" (Rom. 15:19) and "forgive one another" (Eph. 4:32) are exercises

in becoming big people. New folks visit our church meetings every week but you're bound to have felt the temptation to avoid them and retreat back to your comfort zone of familiar friends. I know this feeling. It's awkward to let people into the special borders of friendship that has taken time to cultivate. They don't get the inside humor. They haven't been though anything with you yet. So, receiving one another is a stretch to your heart that leads to making you bigger. Forgiveness is the same. The big person learns how to drop things. The small person is always logging mistakes: "She 'dissed me at the snack table." "He looked at me the wrong way." "I was not wildly received this morning after walking in." "No one commented on my trendy top." Small folks continually think about what wrong was done to them but big hearts forgive.

Then there's learning to be "Members of one another" (Rom. 12:5). This has to do with seeing yourself and other believers as being attached. When we as Christians understand our value toward one another, we'll begin to understand the necessity of commitment, of being there for that other person. Sometimes this occurs right in our homes. If you are married to another Christian, to some extent the church is in your house with you. A spiritual level of commitment ought to exist there. A husband and wife who are well connected can usually tell if one or the other is spiritually dry or down—that they haven't touched the Bible in a while or prayed or had any fellowship with the rest of the church. Occasionally in the past my wife called me on the carpet if I became distant from the Lord's presence. She didn't do it to nag, but because she was committed to my spiritual life. Commitment means you're there for the other person or persons to make sure that they make it all the way to the end of the Christian race and finish gloriously.

"Honor one another" (Rom. 12:10) means to recognize the dignity and holy rank of every believer and to esteem them. It means I not only value what you do, but I wouldn't want to harm your spiritual welfare in any way. There are, for instance some things I might do and be

comfortable with, but I wouldn't invite you to do them. Maybe I'm okay with them because I'm personally backsliding and don't care much for myself, but I'm hesitant to bring you into them because you're a fellow child of God. It might somehow stumble you. This is a serious kind of honor reflected even in the way I talk to Christians. They are, after all, people who have Jesus Christ living in them.

"Rejoice with one another" means that within the Body of Christ I am able to locate a joy bigger than my own. I've got one small life and I tend to only get excited about the things found within it. But if I cultivate the ability to rejoice with you whenever good things happen to you, then it is joy compounded. I started to learn this early on and found out that by doing it, I was becoming a progressively happier person all the time. I found myself having multiple reasons to celebrate. As we learn this, whenever somebody says, "I got the job I wanted!" we won't think, "Well I didn't get one, so who cares?" Instead, we can say, "Wow! I'm so happy you got it." "You got a new car? That's great! I'm driving a piece of junk—a Camry that doesn't have a working air conditioner. But at least *somebody* could have something nice!" All of this is learned within the context of the church, where we become big happy people because there are all kinds of good things going on at any given time.

The next two items on our list are "Serve one another" and "carry one another's burdens," referring to self-sacrifice. This attitude really says, "I'm willing to bear that situation with you, to shoulder the weight of it, because I know it's heavy." The consciousness of being together in the endeavor to serve Christ, of not living as though I'm the only one that counts, is a serious form of learning.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:11, we're told to "encourage one another." That means you find and point out the good in everything. Once you start doing so, you'll become a positive person. But it's a real exercise. Most of us notice only the bad stuff. Negative things are interesting. They're juicy. Just look at the news. NBC started putting a tiny segment at the end of their broadcast called "People who

make a difference." Apparently so many viewers had complained that the news was dark that the network had to create something positive. And it got a huge reaction. We must also become good-news givers in the church. There's already wall-to-wall bad stuff. When somebody's down, get proficient at lifting them up. Once this becomes a habit, a certain transformative process begins to slowly turn us into positive people—not only those who have been encouraged, but those who do the encouraging.

"Be hospitable to one another." That means to invite people into your personal circle of life without feeling invaded. When I was younger and much more self-centered, I'd get mad if people showed up at my house. I'd think, "Oh boy. I didn't want company. Take a hike!" But now that I've had the opportunity to learn hospitality in the church, sometimes after our small group, for instance, I like it when people hang around, watch some television, and eat up all the snacks in my refrigerator. They'll sit on my couch with their laptops open doing homework or play with my cat. I must admit that it feels good. If you tend toward hermitage, there's no cure quite like the practical environment of community.

"Confessing your sins to one another" indicates rebuilding broken relationships. When I offend you, I'm honest, and I say, "Hey, I shouldn't have done that." Or, "I admit, that was overboard." Or, "I was rude." I don't make excuses, like saying, "Jeff, I know I was rude, but you were a jerk." Don't do that. An insult camouflaged as an apology won't rebuild a relationship. It further damages it. Confession might also mean bringing out something you are struggling with to a couple of trusted friends. It could involve saying, "Hey, will you pray with me about this? I need some accountability help here. I'm not getting through at all."

Lastly, "Praying for one another" involves a selfless use of your spiritual energy for someone else's well-being. Basically you're telling God, "Don't worry about blessing me right now. I'm okay. Could you turn all of your attention to this person and do something for them, please?" That is praying for one another.

Now, once you take all these things—all these one another's—and add them up, you'll have a whole bunch of Jesus. No wonder when serious seekers come to the church and run into that critical mass of learning, they want to come back. The church is a setting in which we constantly have to come to terms with what we claim to believe. Eventually my wife and I learned a lot of valuable lessons in the difficult Christian group I mentioned earlier—maybe not from the group itself, but from the Lord as we were in the group. Looking back on all of it, I doubt that He would have had the chance to teach us so much had we become a couple of moving targets, church hopping from one frying pan to another.

As Christians, let's make a concerted effort together to be learners, *mathetes*. If so, hindsight will eventually confirm that the church was the weightiest medium of spiritual education that you could have had.

[1]Feral Children (2008). *John Ssebunya, the Ugandan Monkey Boy*. Retrieved on Februray 1, 2009 from www.feralchildren.com/en/showchild.php?ch=ssebunya

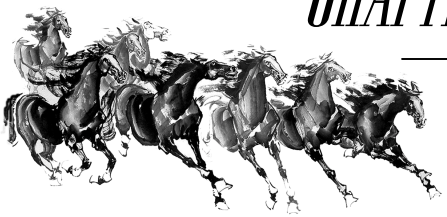
Group Fellowship Questions

1. Share your experience of needing someone else in order to learn something (i.e., riding a bike, reading, etc.).

2. Can you find yourself in the Luke chapter 6 lineup of apostolic personalities? Without telling anyone what you think, ask others who they think you most resemble (No fair saying Judas Iscariot!).

3. Name some "one another" activities that you have recently participated in or plan to participate in (If you're planning something, be sure to report to your group how it went!).

Chapter Three



More Than A Visitor

"The Momentum of Togetherness" is a play on words meaning that there is a positive forward thrust when you're together with other believers. In previous chapters we handled this thought in successive levels of depth. Now we're going to finish it. But to keep the foregoing thoughts from becoming a jumble of information, I'd like to deliver a quick recap.

First of all, the native and necessary setting of a Christian is the church--the assembled believers. Just like a fish is in a lake, and a bird is in the air, and a plant is in the ground, a Christian is in the church. However, a person typically enters the fellowship of the church in layers. Statistically speaking, there are millions of people at this very hour getting together for a worship service. That one hour or so is the extent of their involvement in the church. I'm not griping about it. In fact, I'm delighted that people make a regular habit of Sunday morning church attendance. Some of the folks in our church have said, "I've never been regular anywhere until I came here." I thank God for that. This is a tremendous first step toward becoming a serious Christian—when the church assembles, you're there. That means something to the Lord, and long-term, it will definitely mean something to you. However, as good as the Sunday morning habit is, the experience only tends to be like the front door and foyer of a home. When we confine our involvement with the church to Sunday morning, it's sort of like visiting somebody, stepping through the front door, and just

standing there in the foyer area. You keep your hat and your coat on because you're not going to be there very long. Even as the host is saying, "Why don't you come in and sit down," you're saying, "Aw, no. That's okay. I'm only going to be here for fifty-two minutes and then I'll be leaving again." Five hundred such visits wouldn't bring a visitor very deeply into anyone's home. And yet for millions, that is the extent of their involvement with the church.

Compare the Sunday-morning-only experience against what is seen in the pages of the New Testament and the church there will look a bit fanatical. Those early Christians will seem over the top and impractical. The contemporary sixty-minute experience won't match what you read; it won't even look similar. The way that the New Testament talks about the church, it's as if business (and commitment) is booming. True, there are problems, but people are growing and maturing and ministries are being hatched and new things are happening all the time. That is what you'll read in your New Testament. But when you contrast the scriptural picture with the limited Sunday morning church experience, it will seem that there is a grave dissonance between the two. That's why the popular attitude toward the book of Acts is "Well, that's the way it used to be." I respectfully disagree. At least in principle, that's the way it can be for us, now.

The early believers advanced beyond the front door foyer experience of the church. They went deep into community. So can we. The textbook descent typically begins when you start to have more in common with other believers than just seeing them at a distance every Sunday—when you are positively affected by the faith and spiritual life in them. It's when you find out that others really do believe in Jesus and they've experienced Him and have riches of faith to share with you. In order to get to this good stuff, it takes more time, more energy and a bit more commitment. That's the first level.

Level two is primarily a learning level. That means not only are you inspired and fed by others, but sometimes annoyed by them as well. You've not only discovered their spiritual riches, but their difficult personalities. Now what

should you do? You don't seem to fit with them, so you might be tempted to do what a lot of folks do—start a random church search, looking for that perfect glass slipper fit. After you find it, only two or three weeks or months need to pass before you'll start to feel that your foot is cramped. Maybe it wasn't really a fit after all. And the whole wild goose chase starts all over again. By doing this, we miss the fact that the Lord has put us in a mundane daily church life so that we can learn and become His disciples in the midst of all kinds of personalities. The learning really comes out in the 'one anothers'—love one another, receive one another, forgive one another, etc. All such things are learned in the social dimension of the church, not in isolation.

Owning the Church

Now we come to the very deepest level of penetration in the New Testament church: ownership. That has to do with a person feeling like the church is essentially his or her church. Ownership always brings up the two key terms of responsibility and accountability. What does that mean? Let's use the example of a tug-of-war contest. Suppose we offered the participants a lucrative $15,000 cash prize to the winner. With a deal like that, we're bound to get enthusiastic takers. It's a fun event with a potentially big payoff. But watch how things change when we mention that there is a fee to participate in the contest—shall we say $500 a head? The initial enthusiasm gets a reality check. There's some hesitation, because now we're asking for an up-front commitment. If they still sign on, I guarantee that the entire attitude of the participants will be different. Now everybody will have an ownership stake in the tug-of-war team. They're in this effort to the tune of $500 apiece.

Concerns start to emerge, responses to things that might affect the team's performance. The plastic rope is cheap and skinny. It's better to get one that's braided. The team members are worried that their shoes are all wrong. They feel it's better to get rid of their worn out slick-bottom sneakers. They're worried about one member who has a

sore ankle. Responses continue to mount. There are concerns about the state of the playing field (is it muddy or dry?) and the skill of the other team, all because they have a vested interest, a commitment to the event. These considerations and concerns indicate a level of interest way beyond what the team members had before they each put up their $500. At one point even if they had lost, they wouldn't have lost much—a little pride, maybe. Now it's different. They are full of responses. And response is a word that occurs inside the larger word *responsibility*.

Let's take this a little further. Suppose the team decides to have a tug-of-war training to learn some techniques. When one guy doesn't show up for it, the other members respond by calling him on the phone to ask, "What happened to you?" The missing guy tells them that he has the stomach flu (which makes his absence excusable). But then again, he might tell them, "Dude, I had just gotten to level twelve of 'Shoot 'em Up' and that's the grand master level where the company mails you coupons to Steak n' Shake. I'm sorry; I couldn't leave it hanging there." The missing member might add, "Besides, you guys don't have a right to ask me what I'm doing. I don't belong to you. You can't tell me what to do." Now I would say this fellow not only has a problem with responsibility but *accountability* as well. Accountability means that you are willing to provide an account of your actions to teammates, because they are depending on you.

Responsibility and accountability represent the level at which a person most deeply enters the experience of the New Testament church. Spectators never understand this. They can't because they only watch. In fact, their lives are spent observing committed people going through all the deliberations and drama and preparations in church ministry. Then when the dust settles, they give the thumbs-up or thumbs-down on all of it. These armchair quarterbacks have one overriding concern: "What did I get out of it?" or worse yet, "Did anyone do anything wrong?" They feel no desperation to reach the mountaintop because others typically carry them up. Nothing is at stake for them. They are free of responsibility and accountability.

The question is, why would we seek further responsibilities when we're all maxed out already? Why would somebody that works a job, that goes to school full-time, and that has a family with responsibilities at home want to put extra time that they don't have into the church? In our church, no one gets paid for anything. Nobody gets a plaque erected in their honor such as "In Memory of John Doe, who showed up early and vacuumed the carpet." And to add insult to injury, your service group teammates might call you, not to thank you for your mighty talent and selfless service, but to ask why you missed an important planning session. Telling them that you were at a movie won't be an acceptable excuse, either. So again, why would anyone want headaches like that?

There's one chief reason why that Christians seek out opportunities to be inconvenienced and accountable to others in the church. Scan the verse carefully: Revelation 1:5 says, "And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood…" (and now watch the associated effect of His loving us and washing us from our sins) "…*He has made us kings and priests to His God and Father*. To Him be the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." This verse gets major reinforcement from Revelation 5:9, which starts off with a praise to Christ: "You were slain and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And have made us *kings and priests* to our God and we shall reign on the earth."

The salvation of Jesus Christ confers a dual status upon us. As a believer, you are now a king and a priest. It really doesn't matter what you feel about it. You might say, "I'm not a king. I'm just some guy that's in a program at Ohio State and I'm working a little job." That's partly true. You really are at OSU, working a little job, raising a family. You're Irish or German or an African-American, and you make little money and have no economic or social

standing, but all of that is by your *first* birth. The Bible says that when we get saved we experience a second birth. Your first birth made you something. By believing in the Lord Jesus and being washed in His blood, your second birth also made you something—a king and a priest.

All believers are royalty in the eyes of God although we're not full-grown kings. We're like those little boy kings whose father's crown is so big that it slips all the way over our head down to our waist, where it fits like a belt. That's the kind of kings we are now.

Interestingly, the highly dignified rank that's been conferred upon you in your second birth is linked to that of service—you are also a priest. Every one of us is a priest. As a matter of fact, you can't exercise authority without being a priest. Authority and service are inseparably linked. That's the reason why the Lord Jesus told the disciples, "Whoever would be first among you shall be the servant of all" (Mark 10:45).

The priestly status is precisely where the Christian drive for service comes from. We are priests and as a result there's a desire to serve that just automatically wells up inside of us. Admittedly, you don't have to be a Christian to want to do things for other people and serve them. Consider the outpouring of good will to disaster areas. All kinds of people, Christian and non-Christian give money and various forms of aid. Believers don't have a monopoly upon works of service. But there is an area of service that others can't mimic.

Real priestly service draws on the imagery of the Old Testament from the books of Exodus and Leviticus. There, all day long the priests facilitated the people's worship of God. They would receive the Israelites and assist with preparing their sacrifices by washing the animal, killing it and ceremonially enabling the worshipper to connect with God. At other times the priests would go into the tabernacle, the tent in which God lived, and would trim the lamps and set out fresh bread and perform various other services that directly affected how people met the Lord. The overall priestly operation described in the Old Testament was so much more than simply doing good

things for people. It came down to bringing people to God and bringing God to people. That is priestly service.

Naturally, this shouldn't disallow simple good works. We're not trying to spiritualize every need into oblivion, like telling a hungry person to go pray and then read some Bible verses for dessert. Our service as priests occurs on multiple levels, including practical help, but finding ultimate fulfillment in ministering Christ to people. For instance, a person with a gambling problem might come to you asking for money. Helping him that way might be a good thing and it meets an immediate external need. However, the cumulative effect will be small and it may even enable him to continue his gambling habit. At another level, we might help the gambler understand why he gambles and lead him to do something about it. A counselor could probably help at that point, but only a New Testament priest can give the most strategic help. That is where we plumb the depths of the gambler and quench the thirst in his spirit that he has tried to slake with money and the thrill of chance. We introduce him to Jesus Christ.

Getting back to our original point, the reason why that we respond to the idea of service in the church is that we're priests. A part of us will never be happy with anything less than whole-hearted commitment. We can tolerate punching in and punching out in a number of areas of life like school, preparing our income taxes, or mowing the lawn. Each has a basic set of minimum requirements and we're happy when we're done with them.

One thing I personally cannot tolerate, though, is going to church. I hate going to church. So do you. Priests can't live in that world where church is a clock-in and clock-out proposition. We can't just go and watch. We're not made that way. Real believers want to get into the game. When it comes to people finding Christ, we cry, we rejoice, and more than anything else, we want to help.

For years I visited churches as an unsaved person and I couldn't have cared less about what went on there. But I remember the first time that I visited a church after I was born-again. I had a totally different feeling. Before I even attended the church meeting, I had a week to envision

what it would be like. Whenever I thought about the believers that would be there, I had an awestruck feeling. They were people just like me who also had Jesus living inside of them. I wondered how to treat them. I also wondered what we were going to do. I expected a lot of prayer and talk about deep things. I had never met a group of born-again Christians before, individuals, yes, but never a concentration of serious Bible believers. So I got out of the car, walked up to the building, and there they were, not praying or trading deep thoughts back and forth, but…moving chairs. It was nowhere near the profound, impressive image I had cooked up in my head. But the more I watched them, the more I began to imagine those chairs with the children of God sitting in them, listening to the Bible and being built up in their faith. I began to feel like I wanted to help. I'm not the practical, hands-on type, but I just couldn't think of anything I'd rather do than get my hands on those chairs. I knew that Christians, followers of Christ, were going to be using those chairs and I thought that if there was just something I could do for them to serve them, or if there was some way I could improve their experience, even if it meant moving chairs, I'd do it.

That response was small, but priestly in nature. A little while later and after further growth as a Christian, there was something more. I began to feel as though I needed to tell people about Jesus. I didn't know I was a New Testament priest of the gospel, but I somehow felt responsible to help my friends know the Lord. That was interesting, because I couldn't really answer any questions, at least not tough ones. So I would give answers that they didn't ask for, using the three verses that I knew. That meant every now and then someone would be standing there looking at me fully confused and saying, "I didn't ask that." My response: "I don't care. You need to believe in Jesus."

I also taught Bible studies to anyone who appeared to be less knowledgeable than I was (there actually were some). One time I read the first chapter of Ezekiel and was so impressed with it that I went and told everybody else, even though I had no idea of what was going on there. If

somebody showed the slightest bit of interest at all, including a pulse, I'd say, "Come to my room tonight, and I'll teach you all about it." If only one person showed up, I wouldn't care. I would just act like there were 500 people present. This is a priestly response and it is in all believers. As long as you let it, it will rise up and take you down the road of service.

The Making and Breaking Ingredient

One final but extremely important point: 1 Peter 2:5 says, "You also as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood." Then 1 Peter 2:9 adds, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood…" There's an emphasis here. We are not simply a loose association of priests, that is, people who have impulses to serve and do things. You're a priest, yes, but you're part of the 'hood' too. The priesthood is the collection of priests who put their spiritual energies together in their service to God.

If you separate a priest from the priesthood, it would be like a basketball player dropping his team. He might think, "I'm tired of the team concept. There are too many headaches. Besides, my other teammates are not that gifted. I think I'll just drop out and be a star on my own." The day he does it, he's done with basketball. He's done because what makes the basketball player is the team. The separated player can headline in exhibition events and he can still do commercial endorsements but effectively speaking he's done with the championships, the tournaments, and all competitive contests. The New Testament priesthood of the believers is the same way. Once you decide, "I can do things better on my own, by myself," then, friend, you're done as a priest. We were meant to put our energies together in order to respond and be accountable to God and to one another.

An onlooker might wonder why church members flock to the back and wash dishes after a church lunch. It's the priestly impulse. Why would a little church band come to the meeting hours earlier than everyone else, especially when the church is small, and there's no chance of

becoming a singing celebrity? Again, this is the priestly need to be responsible and accountable. There are all kinds of people doing stuff in the church, little things, some completely unnoticed, and it is all because in some small sense, God and humanity need it. My brother said to me one day, "You know, you've been doing this preaching thing for over 20 years and you're still not rich and famous. That makes you the dumbest smart guy I have ever met."

It made me wonder, "Why *do* I do this? Easy answer: It's because of what I became in my second birth. That priestly identity drives me. I will never be able to just go to church. I couldn't stand to watch it once a week. I'll always have to be in the team effort! And so will you. I encourage you to nurture that priestly impulse. It will take you to the place of responsibility and accountability, the deepest level in the New Testament church.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you recall the first time you were given responsibility over something? What was it like? Did you mess it up or did you shine? (Don't be afraid to share either experience).

2. Read the Old Testament portion of Exodus (chapter 29) that deals with priests. Of course these externals do not apply to New Testament people, but what was your take-away concerning the dignity and attention to detail that God commanded concerning His priests?

3. What principles do you see in the section concerning priests that would hold true for today?