

Reclaiming the Community of the Church

Written by Michael Ivey

Saturday, 09 November 2013 09:32 - Last Updated Wednesday, 31 July 2019 13:45

Editor's note: *We live in a culture that is lacking community. This lack of community in America has bled over into churches and has created the mentality of Sunday club Christianity instead of a community of believers. We now prefer the impersonal outlets of social media over personal daily ministry and fellowship with Christians. In this article, Elder Mike Ivey details the ever growing problem of our impersonal compartmentalizing culture and the real solutions found in the word of God.*

At the request of friends in North Carolina who were concerned with the pathetic condition of Christianity in their region, Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall, with their families and a few others, left Virginia arriving at Sandy Creek, North Carolina in the summer of 1755. Immediately, they began cutting timber and clearing land to erect a meeting house. After completing a small chapel they cleared land for their farms and built cabins.

These brothers and sisters understood the Savior's admonition to seek first the kingdom of God. From the beginning they knew that they were in North Carolina to serve the Lord. They met each evening after the days labor was complete, and on each Sunday, and worshipped God by prayer, preaching and singing. Working together, they first built their meeting house. Together, they cleared land for each family's farm. They helped one another build modest cabins. The result of their labors was the church and community of Sandy Creek Baptist Church. This small group of pioneer pilgrims understood the New Testament principle of church community. Their efforts confirmed the blessing God gives to those who faithfully conform to the model of the New Testament church. Within three years Sandy Creek Baptist Church, which began with a membership of only sixteen, added more than six hundred members and constituted two sister churches, Abbotts Creek and Deep River.

Christ Jesus, our Standard of Faith

The Sandy Creek brothers and sisters proved that faith is not merely an abstract principle. They revealed that it is not simple ethereal sensations. Their faith, demonstrated by manifest labors, wrought concrete results. Their efforts were in harmony with those of the faithful saints listed in Heb 11:34:

"Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."

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They proved James' lesson that faith is manifest by works, and that without works faith is dead. They demonstrated the seeable, touchable, quality of substantial faith with every tree felled, every stump pulled, every rock cleared, every cabin built, all to the glory and honor of God.

Substantive faithfulness can only occur in those who continually measure themselves to Christ. They labor in personal devotion to God by prayer, study, worship and meditation to conform their thinking to the mind of Christ. By good works they seek to be transformed from the carnal affections of a fleshly existence to the joys of spiritual fellowship with God and thereby one another. Praying for direction and opportunity, they condescend from the precarious perch of selfish human conceit and vainglory, seeking instead to spend themselves as living sacrifices to God's glory.

They do so by subjecting their flesh to the affairs of God: They engage, both mentally and physically, in works which God witnesses to their born again spirits. By the spiritual renewal of their minds they transform their conduct into conformity to the "good and acceptable and perfect will of God." They present their bodies as living sacrifices that are holy and acceptable to God. In so doing they render to God a well reasoned, spiritually motivated service.

New Ethics, New Privacy

Much has changed in the last two-hundred forty years since Sandy Creek Baptist Church was constituted. As we approach the twenty-first century the dominate cultural value in America is one of personal noninvolvement with others. We have a privacy fixation. Modern technology has helped create a more affluent populace. It provides many conveniences and much greater freedom of movement. New technology and affluence have also contributed to certain cultural shifts. New behaviors, brought on in part by the conveniences of modern technology, have contributed to a change in various cultural values, including the values of privacy. One new behavior which has directly impacted the cultural values of privacy is the late twentieth century phenomenon of commuting.

Many people live great distances from their workplace, and from where they worship as such, they have adopted a commuter lifestyle. They may drive thirty or even forty miles to our jobs. This new behavior directly impacts certain social values. Those of us who commute to distant locals to work tend to have little interest in the area where we are employed. We do not vote there, do not shop there and are not involved in civic activities there. Other than working, we avoid participating in the affairs of the community or city where our jobs are located. We maintain a certain anonymity among the citizenry of the community in which we labor. Both physically and emotionally we segment, or compartmentalize our jobs from other elements of our lives.

This phenomenon of compartmentalizing is not limited to those who commute to work. Neither is it limited to physical and emotional segregation of job, family and community. The same emotional detachment which is easily recognizable in a commuter lifestyle is apparent among the populace in general. It extends into virtually every aspect of American culture, including family and church. New social values of social isolationism have evolved over the last half

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century. Inclinations toward social isolation and compartmentalizing stems from new behaviors which have their origin in a twentieth century social value of a near pathologic regard for personal privacy. These new cultural ethics, in large measure, were spawned by changes in attitudes resulting from a combination of material wealth and the availability of modern technology, plus historical changes in the behavioral patterns of the nuclear family. The isolation, or detachment that is apparent in a one person, one car commuter culture is only one evidence of the new ethics of privacy which prevails in American society.

Numerous conveniences created in the industrial, then electronic, and now communications revolutions have allowed us to disengage ourselves from our immediate surroundings, including one another. For some, the seclusion created by such conveniences as the automobile, modern housing, telephone, television and microprocessor may only be physical. However, the present condition of our society seems to suggest that along with making our lives easier, modern conveniences have made us less dependent upon one another in areas of our lives ranging in importance from mere convenience to outright survival. A diminished requirement for personal interdependence has resulted in less meaningful social interactions of mutual benefit at every level of social organization, including family, church, community and the nation; which aided a trend of compartmental behaviors of social isolationism. Further, with the advent of the telecommunications super highway the trend is growing in both the scope and rate of social detachment. Potentially, when tele-commuting becomes fully functional, the necessity for social interactions in employment, shopping, entertainment and education will greatly diminish. We will be even less dependent upon one another. Diminished interdependence based upon heighten self-sufficiency through technology has contributed to a spiraling decline of interpersonal skills. This includes the entire scope of social skills needed to maintain both public and private relationships. In both public and private circumstances we don't seem to get along with one another as well as we once did.

An elderly friend furnished the following first hand example of how modern technology can change behaviors. For several years a distant neighbor, in horse drawn wagon, passed by his father's farm on his weekly trip to town. As his father's farm was the halfway point of the journey, without exception, the neighbor stopped to rest his animals and give them water. During this break he visited, offered his friend a ride into town, or volunteered to pick up whatever supplies he might need, delivering them on his return trip home, when again he again stopped to rest his animals. This practice continued uninterrupted for several years, until the neighbor bought an automobile. After that, he no longer needed to stop at his friend's farm. The car didn't require rest or a cool drink of water as his horses had. Acquisition of an automobile changed the neighbor's fellowship with his friend. Relieved of the need to rely upon another to help him care for his horses, the neighbor decreased the social interactions between himself and his friends. Going to town became a compartmental behavior which no longer required his engaging in his former behaviors of social interaction based upon interdependence with his friend. Thus, introduction of a modern convenience altered the neighbor's ethic of social interaction based upon his need which actually resulted in mutual benefit, to a new ethic of compartmental isolation based upon the neighbor's need being met by the automobile. This new behavior weakened the bond of friendship because new technology diminished the level of interdependence their friendship required. The amount of social interaction between the two men decreased. This brought about a diminished emotional commitment to the friendship. From

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the basis of mutual need for one another, their culture of neighborliness was redefined by a new value of weakened interpersonal bonds. Practically speaking, both men benefited less from their friendship as the result of new behaviors and values brought about by new technology.

In addition to modern technology, certain changes in underlying social values also contributed to the isolationism of compartmental detachment and the spiritual decay it produces. These changes brought about new behaviors which influenced a breakdown in the relational structure of nuclear families. In part, the cause of a breakdown of the emotional, then physical composition of the nuclear family is linked to a fundamental behavioral change in American society which occurred at the conclusion of World War II. The war saw America emerge from her previous inclinations toward global isolationism. As the United States stepped forward to engage the world, ideas and philosophies which previously were mostly limited in America to intellectual discussions among academics gained widespread popularity. One such philosophy which received broad acceptance is existentialism. The acceptance and practice of this closed system model of human experience as the basis for forming rationalized moral values is a major contributor to the behaviors of the New Privacy found in America today. New behaviors which were derived from the rationalized transient values system of existentialism almost immediately became apparent in American society. (For those interested in learning more about the damaging effects of existentialism, Francis Shaeffer's book, *The God who is There*, is recommended).

After World War II a significant nucleus of American mothers, who initially entered the labor force to aid the war effort, chose to continue working outside the home. In turn, the financial advantages gained by the phenomenon of two income families encouraged other mothers to enter the work force. In less than two decades this new behavior gained such widespread acceptance that mothers working outside the home became a societal norm. The significance of this new behavior cannot be disregarded. Throughout the history of western civilization up to World War II, the principle responsibility of mothers was nurturing their children. They did not rely upon others to provide any substantial portion of personal caring for their children. However, when mothers chose to continue to work outside the home new ethics resulted in many of the duties of child care were transferred to outside care providers and had the impact of weakening the interpersonal bonds of the nuclear family. This transference resulted in children receiving qualitatively different nurturing. The acceptance of a fundamentally different model of childcare, outside the home and away from a nurturing parent represented a new cultural value, or morality.

In qualitative terms, contracted care providers were and are unable to make the same emotional commitment to the children entrusted to their care as that which is based upon a mother's love. As an apple and orange are both fruits, but qualitatively different fruits, the care giving was also different in essence. Caregivers provided nurturing, often even love motivated nurturing, but qualitatively they could not provide the nurture of a loving mother to her own child. This problem was further aggravated by the fact that, in many instances, baby-sitting and daycare giving was driven by a profit principle rather than love motive. With these encumbrances, while the child's physical needs, and even some level of his emotional needs could be well attended, his deeper emotional requirements, which could be adequately addressed only by his mother, were left unattended for most of the child's waking hours. Thus, contracted childcare was and is still

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fundamentally unable to provide the same quality of care that a child receives from a loving mother.

In this circumstance, beginning with the baby boom generation, many children were raised with an experience of diminished parental nurturing. They were compartmentalized away from mother, with contracted care providers, for a significant portion of each day. Absent the atmosphere of the nurturing reassurances received from a full time mother's care, and spending a significant amount of time during their most emotionally important years with caregivers, these babyboomers were conditioned to accept family compartmentalizing and the emotional detachment it produced. An effect of these new care giving behaviors was the development of a cultural value, or morality, of weaker parent/child bonds. Hence, children were raised with behaviors that enforced a morality of a fundamentally weakened nuclear family. In turn, the weakened nuclear family became the model for marriage and family for the baby boom generation. When these babyboomers reached adulthood their own experience enforced the weakened family bond model as the pattern for marriage and raising children. Even babyboomers whose mothers stayed home suffered from the influences of the new family model. They were influenced by their friends whose mothers worked outside the home, the media and television, potential marriage partners and society as a whole. They were emotionally conditioned to be less committed in both marriage and parenting. This led to an even more fragmented and further weakened family unit which resulted in increased rates of divorce. In turn, an increase in single parent families resulted. With increasing divorce rates, single parenting became a behavioral norm and the morality of the single parent family was initiated. Its acceptance, in large measure, redefined society's concept of the American family. However, the long term consequences of the social acceptance of this new cultural behavior received scant consideration.

Aside from its contributions to redefining societies concept of the family, which now includes such alternative life styles as singles living together and homosexual cohabitation and parenting, single parenting created a stress point of its own in the fabric of society. For the first time, women (who are most often the heads of single parent households) were required to balance their duties as principle wage earners against their parental care giving duties. However, because of rising costs of living, due in part to the new behavior of two wage earner households, in many instances, the amount of time needed to keep food on the table meant that nurturing duties were all but eliminated. Each morning children were given to childcare providers and each evening an exhausted mother was required to spend time cooking, cleaning, etc. Almost no time was left for love motivated nurturing behaviors. Thus, the generation following the babyboomers, generation X, became even more detached from traditional family values.

(A note must be added here. While the practice of mothers leaving their children to work outside the home contributed to the spiraling decline of the nuclear family, the greater responsibility for the decline rests upon husbands who did not properly fulfill their responsibilities of spiritual leadership of the family. Even more responsibility rests upon preachers, including myself, who

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neglected to adequately teach scriptural family value principles such as are found in Eph 5:33, 6:19, Tit 2:5, etc.. However, this article is not offered to assign blame; rather, the intent is to define the problem and offer a solution.)

Today, generation X and their children (generation nihilism) are reaping the whirlwind sown by their parents and grandparents. Many of their behaviors are expressions of the despair of failed values. Their hopelessness is expressed as cynicism and nihilism. They have replaced the lost values of family unity and nurturing with drug use, random violence, gang membership, promiscuous sexual activity, epidemic rates of teen pregnancy, and an alarming increase in teen suicides. Thus, we find that in these last days of the twentieth century, the fabric of American society is badly torn. We are a socially fragmented and emotionally isolated nation of people.

The ethics of this new morality of the nuclear family is in stark contrast to behaviors and morality of the family prior to the twentieth century. Until this century, families often shared living and sleeping quarters. Sometimes entire families ate and slept in the same room. Frequently, extended families, including parents, grandparents, married children and grandchildren all shared the same residence. Families generally shared most things in common. They ate together, worked together, entertained one another and worshipped together. In such circumstance an atmosphere of mutual cooperation was mandatory.

The ethics of mutual cooperation and sharing were not unique to the nuclear family. Many of the behaviors of the family were also cultural behaviors within the community. People relied upon one another for emotional support and physical survival. There was a cooperation in neighborhoods and communities which caused people to almost consider their neighbors as extended family. The social fabric of American culture was interwoven with godly moral values and behaviors found within our families and practiced in our communities. These ethics of cooperation and sharing originated from scriptural teachings. They are godly behaviors. Numerous scriptures reveal that behaviors pertaining to interpersonal relations in the first century church were based upon Bible doctrines of mutual love, concern and cooperation. A few of these scriptures include, Ac 4:34-35; 6; Ro 12; 1Co 12:1-27; Eph 4:16-32; Col 2:19; 1Ti 5:12; Tit 2; Jas 2:15-17, and Jas 5:16. The love ethics of mutual care, taught in churches as Christian virtues, extend to the family and community. The doctrine of applying these behaviors to family and community is also taught in the scriptures. They are included in teachings contained in Mt 4; 5; 6; 22:21; Lu 10:42, Ga 5:26, Eph 5:33, 6:19, Col 3:25, 4:1, Philemon and many others. Thus, the local church was not only the spiritual center of the community it was also the platform from which most social interaction of care and support was launched. Hence, the narrative of the beginnings of Sandy Creek Baptist Church provides an example of these teachings.

Mutual cooperation did not mean that there was no privacy. In fact, privacy behaviors such as modesty and keeping one's private life to oneself were more prevalent in the past than is the case today. Modesty was based upon the moral values of fear of God and genuine respect for one's self, and others. It was considered both immoral from a godly perspective and disrespectfully offensive toward others, except in the most intimate moments of marital relations or else when health or hygiene requirements dictated, to observe another person's nakedness. There were no tabloids or talk shows where lurid details of one's most personal thoughts and

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experiences were openly discussed.

The difference in privacy values in the past and today is that past generations observed privacy as a matter of mutual respect derived from godly morality. Today, privacy is based upon selfish emotional detachment. Evidence of this is the popularity of talk shows and tabloids: People who jealously isolate themselves from neighbors and families will openly discuss the most private aspects of their lives in tabloids or on nationally broadcast talk shows. Also, the selfishness of the new privacy encourages a constant attack upon godly moral behaviors of modesty by a commercial lust industry which includes entertainment, the clothing industry, print media and many forms of media advertising. Its scope is expansive; including such things as suggestive clothing, decadent literature, provocative advertising, perverted television programs and movies and outright pornography.

Sexual promiscuity is yet another evidence that today's privacy behaviors have almost no relationship to moral values of mutual respect. The sexual ethics of new privacy enables people who are only casually acquainted to engage in the most intimate sexual behaviors. This is because the situational ethics of new privacy are focused on self. Generally, they are sensual pleasure oriented behaviors directed toward a purpose of immediate self-gratification.

Perhaps, the most far reaching and poignant confirmation of the selfish immorality of the ethics of the new privacy is the legalization of abortion as a right. Based upon revised twentieth century interpretations of the Constitution behaviors of the new privacy, in the case of abortion, even supersede traditional Constitutional rights of life. When a woman's right to exercise the ethics of new privacy is measured against her unborn infant's traditional Constitutional right of life, new privacy prevails and the baby dies.

With an almost complete breakdown in godly privacy values, gradually, over the last fifty years, behaviors relating to community type behaviors of cooperation and sharing were replaced by compartmentalized lifestyles of emotional isolation. Beginning just after World War II, this shift to a new privacy, of each person having his "own space" and doing his "own thing" produced a generation of emotionally isolated children who are now parents and grandparents themselves. The impact of this cultural shift is of such magnitude that it fundamentally altered American society philosophically, politically, and spiritually.

Today, two plus generations into the new privacy, each child expects to have his own space. The ideal is for every child to have his own bedroom, television, telephone, credit cards and car. Children are allowed, even encouraged to keep their doors closed, so as not to disturb mom and dad with their music, television programs or telephone conversations. Parents do not intrude into their children's private domain. The selfish neglect of preoccupied parents, has enforced the same self-centered behaviors in their children which, in the parents' generation, was expressed as the pop culture virtue of "doing your own thing." Thus, for most of the last half of this century, almost from the cradle, children, who are now parents themselves, and their children, have been conditioned by the new privacy behaviors of emotional isolation.

Development and expansion of new privacy ethics resulted in cultural behaviors of personal noninvolvement. However, while we have become less involved with one another, our social

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needs have not diminished. With an aging populace, increasing rate of illegitimate births, and a growing number of single parent households and AIDS the need for personal involvement has never been greater. Further, in the case of single parent households and illegitimate births and AIDS, a strong argument can be made that new privacy ethics are major contributors to the increased demand for personal involvement. But, consistent with our new behaviors, the response is to attack social problems with money and government programs rather than one-to-one personal involvement. One time family and neighborhood activities, such as caring for a sick neighbor, feeding a needy family, or boarding an elderly relative or needy child have been assumed in various measure by the government or any one of hundreds of social organizations. Today, we provide financial support to government or some charitable organization to run social welfare bureaucracies which insure us that we need not be personally involved. Thus, we allocate money in an attempt to appease our guilty consciences. We are quite willing to throw money at social problems as long as we are not required to make a commitment to be personally involved.

Sadly, money seems to be one of the few bridges we have left to reach one another in our compartmentalized lives.

New Privacy and the Church

New privacy ethics are also present in our churches. Many of us have adopted the same compartmental ethics of emotional detachment toward church membership as we have toward the distant communities where our jobs are located. As with our jobs, for many, church attendance is just another facet of a commuter lifestyle. In the last half century, many churches have gone through a transition from addressing the needs of its members as a community of believers, to becoming churches filled with emotionally segregated commuters who meet together. Rather than viewing church membership as a whole life commitment, we have compartmentalized it. Today, many people regard church membership as an activity; something we do rather than who we are. Many of us dispassionately separate it from other members of the congregation and other parts of our lives as something which requires a certain block of our time and involves interaction with other people. In a singular fashion, we worship God, while giving little regard to the needs of those around us who are also worshipping God in a singular fashion.

We keep to ourselves. Functionally, our emotional attachment to one another is minimal. We have very little contact and almost no participation in one another's lives. We fellowship on Sunday and then go on with our lives, detached from one another until next Sunday. We are all alone, together. By this I mean that compartmentalizing has first, intellectually in a participatory way, then emotionally, isolated our Christianity as one compartment of our segmented lives. We isolate our Christianity from other compartments of our lives such as job, school, neighborhood, and in some cases, even family. Similarly, we may isolate our Christian motivated behaviors from different people with whom we interact within the various compartments of our lives, including our brothers and sisters in the church. We interact with mom and dad, brother and sister in our family compartment. We interact with supervisors and fellow employees in the employment compartment of our lives. We interact with school mates in our school

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compartment. We interact with church folk in the church membership compartment of our lives, etc. We have self, family, job, church, neighborhood, school, etc, all of which we segregate from other compartments of our lives, including other people in other compartments, based upon cultural boundaries of emotional detachment as defined by new privacy ethics. Thus, for many of us, acknowledging and practicing Christian values as Christian values only in the context of our Christian compartment is the New Privacy behavior of compartmental Christianity. This is in direct contrast to former behaviors which viewed church membership as a formal and declared manifestation of core values of loving God and one another based upon God's love for us. These core values of Christianity were the acknowledged and practiced ethics in every facet of our lives.

The culture of compartmental behavior encourages us to isolate Christian behaviors to the formal practices of religion; mostly in houses of public worship with others with whom we attend church. And when we do bring Christian values behaviors into another compartment of our lives we tend not to acknowledge them as behaviors based upon our adherence to Christian values. This is because New Privacy ethics discourage sharing the ethics of Christianity, as Christian values, on our jobs, in the neighborhood, in school, etc. Further, the ethics of New Privacy have created new taboos, which in some instances are now institutionalized as societal law. Laws which discourage or ban public displays of Christian worship, such as prohibitions against public prayer in school, nativity scenes on public property, religious conversation in the workplace, etc. represent institutional confirmations of a New Privacy morality.

New Privacy morality includes a principle of political correctness which in many instances claims and renames ethics of Christian morality so as to disassociate them from Christianity while retaining the behavior. Thus, even when the practice of Christian ethics is encouraged they are not presented as Christian behaviors. One example of this is public debate regarding a return to traditional family values. The behaviors being promoted have their basis in Christian teachings. However, they are presented as pragmatic solutions to current social problems rather than Christian ethics. Thus, the philosophical basis for their promotion is not obedience to a creator God. They are being promoted as rationalized values: They worked before, perhaps they will work again. Even in this debate the underlying philosophy is existential. It is still a closed model system of developing values based upon self-definition. We rationalize the correctness of traditional family values behavior based upon our present interpretations of human experience. That is why the debate is framed in the context of traditional family behaviors rather than obedience to God's will. Thus, even when the behavior appears to be godly, it is not; because it does not acknowledge obedience to God's will as the motivation for the behavior.

The impact of New Privacy ethics on churches is not limited to physical and emotional compartmentalizing. It has produced spiritual deprivation. As a result, our fellowship is hindered because we are confused as to what constitutes fellowship. This problem, beginning with the breakdown of Christian values in each of us, extends to our fellowship with God.

The amount of effort required to maintain the New Privacy ethics, often leaves us with little time to commit to one another. We allocate a block of time each week for public worship. However, for many of us this is the only contact we have with our brothers and sisters in the church. Once

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our duty of public worship is complete we detach from this responsibility and move on to some other compartment of our lives. In this circumstance church members find it difficult to develop any sense of identity, as a community of believers. Seeing each other for only an hour or two each week, we have neither the time nor inclination to be personally involved with one another. Pressure to maintain new privacy lifestyles, or the pursuit of greater wealth, so we can have more compartmental privacy, clutter our lives with activities which leave us with little time to be involved with our brothers and sisters in the church. Furthermore, the new privacy leaves us uncomfortable with the idea of being too involved with one another. This has resulted in less visitation among church members. Also, it inhibits the spirit by which we engage in remaining social elements of church life. This, in turn, degrades opportunities for spiritual fellowship to occasions of superficial social interaction. Our fellowship becomes spiritually disjointed.

The effect of all this is that the spiritual bond of fellowship among church members is weakened. Weakened fellowship inclines us to view church involvement as an activity rather than a whole life commitment. We see those with whom we share church membership as people with whom we share a common interest rather than as brothers and sisters with whom we have pledged, in church covenant, to share our lives. In this circumstance, functionally, the fellowship of the church is disjointed. There is a disconnect among the membership. Disjointed fellowship has a pervasive tendency to bring about attitudes of legalism and/or sentimentalism. This is because members are less familiar with the cohesive characteristics of a Holy Ghost supplied spiritual bond of church unity. Instead we are inclined toward strict interpretations of past opinions (legalism), or else what makes us feel good (sentimentalism) as instrumentalities by which we bind ourselves to one another. In turn, both legalism and sentimentality impede one's fellowship with God and thereby blocks spiritual fellowship with one another. Both are control oriented means which replace personal faithfulness. The practice of either of these is saying, in a sense, "God's way cannot work. I will use man's way."

One easily recognizable symptom of disjointed fellowship is a lack of spiritually motivated interaction among members, which results from members first mentally, spiritually, and physically isolating themselves from one another. The result of this spiritual detachment is inconsistent fellowship. There is a form of fellowship. However, it is erratic. It is erratic because it is a rationalized, situational fellowship. It does not rely exclusively upon spiritual motivation in order to exist. Rather, while we may be seeking signs of spiritual validation we are actually relying upon rationalized behaviors spawned of legalism and/or sentimentalism to maintain a bond of fellowship. Erratic fellowship is often evident as irregular church attendance. Also, it causes disregard or slothfulness among members in attending to the spiritual and physical well-being of one another. Disjointed fellowship is a fellowship of self-benefit and convenience. We are motivated by desires to receive rather than to give. Therefore, When we are together, we love and care for each other and enjoy one another's company and conversation. However, when we are apart we think of one another with little actual concern, except perhaps during times of crisis, for each other's complete well-being.

Practice of the ethics of New Privacy causes us to become benefit oriented Christians. Our service to God is directed toward what benefits we receive; rather, than as God's servants to others, what we may do for others because of what God has already done for us. This is a form of self righteousness. It is the self-righteousness of a pragmatic self-interest motivated religion.

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We worship God not because he is creator God who is to be both loved and feared. Rather, our praise is from the selfish perspective of what do I gain from obeying God. This is new privacy Christianity. The selfishness of benefit oriented religion prohibits us from having spiritual fellowship with one another because our every action, even if we are rendering a service to another, in reality is motivated by a desire for self-gain. Thus, when we render a service, rather than doing so that God may receive all the glory, we serve to receive a blessing. This humanistic approach to serving God does have its reward, but it is not from God. Its prize is the hollow satisfaction of vain glory. We become our own reward. We are isolated with self. In this atmosphere of spiritual detachment and erratic fellowship the church becomes dysfunctional. It does not work in a way which is consistent with the description of church unity and function recorded in **1Co 4:16**;

"...the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

In such a condition it is understandable why members turn to other interests to entertain their minds and occupy their time. As nuclear families experienced a progression of weakened family unity, then fragmentation, disintegration of family values, and finally emotional and physical breakup, today our churches are faced with weakened fellowship, then disunity, disintegration of spiritual values, and finally breakup. However, the disintegration of a church may not be physical. Since churches are primarily concerned with spiritual welfare, evidence of disintegration is that functionally they become spiritually irrelevant. Churches in this condition no longer address the spiritual needs of her members and the community. Interest declines, then attendance, and finally membership.

What Can We Do?

What is the answer to the challenge of overcoming disjointed fellowship in our churches, of healing our families, communities and nation? Must we become like the old order Amish and give up modern conveniences in order to reclaim our fellowship with one another? I think not. Even though modern technology and new privacy behaviors have provided new challenges to traditional church fellowship, the challenges can be met. The challenges of church fellowship in the twenty-first century will be successfully addressed by congregations who choose to return to old first century paths. Those who elect to pursue the present course will have a short journey, I fear. Disinterest, and the confusion of legalism and/or sentimentalism will see their doors closed and boarded. As is the case in Europe, I fear that churches who choose to stay the present course will close, or become museums and monuments to the "Christian Era" of American culture.

We must reset the priorities of our lives, putting service to God first. Our service must be motivated by our love for God because he is God and has commanded us to love and serve one another; and not, because of what benefit we might receive from serving. We must make time for our brothers and sisters in the church. We must reclaim the battleground of true Christian perspective. This can be done by transforming our lives away from conformity to a

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material reality and the rationalized values of a humanist oriented society; which defines liberty as monetary wealth and personal safety, defining gain as godliness. True liberty is worshipping our Creator God without qualification and acting in every situation according to godly principles. Such a transformation can occur by renewing our minds to a perspective of uncompromising discipleship.

The rudiments of mind renewal and life transformation are found in the Bible. The examples and lessons of the Savior and Apostles provide twenty first century Christians with information which is essential to the challenges of discipleship. We must reclaim and preserve the special fellowship of church membership. This can only be accomplished by pursuing the same bond of spiritual unity and following the same principles of church fellowship that were present in the primitive church. The first century church is the model for Christian discipleship. It has proven to be a sufficient study for Christians throughout the ages who persevered in the harshest cruelties. It is a sufficient model today, for contemporary Christians who must persevere through the subtlest cruelties.

We must repent in order to reset the priorities of our lives, putting service to God first. We must make time for our brothers and sisters in the church. The myriad of social problems faced today by our churches and the nation are symptoms of a more serious condition. The symptoms are social, but the condition is spiritual. We are covetous of our time. Thus, we pay to be noninvolved. With the press of commitments brought on by our compartmentalized life styles, time has become our most precious commodity. Therefore, we are more willing to give financially because it is not as painful as giving up time and privacy.

Church membership is a whole life, lifetime commitment. By whole life, I mean that every facet of our lives, including every type of activity, should be directly influenced by our Christianity and the commitment we have made to God and our church family. The people we have joined in the bond of church covenant are our brothers and sisters. We share a common family identity and a unified identity of purpose. The commitment of church membership requires that we care about one another, and take care of one another in the same way that the most loving and attentive nuclear family cares for its members. We are to respect one another as we respect our fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters.

One example of New Testament church fellowship is Jerusalem Church. A principle by which they exercised fellowship with one another is found in Ac 4:32. "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common." This church shared all things in common. Because of the unique circumstances in which they lived, the membership of this church was literally dependent upon one another for daily sustenance. Joining the Jerusalem church meant being cut off, both economically and socially, from Jewish society. This reality made it necessary that a communal lifestyle be adopted by church members. Out of necessity, they shared all their material goods in common. Further, because they were cut off from their families, they sought extended family comfort and care from one another. While present day circumstances do not require a communal lifestyle, spiritually, the commitment which the Jerusalem brothers and sisters made to one another, to have all things in common, has not changed. The church is a spiritual community. Therefore, church members should view

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both their needs and contributions in the context of having all things in common. If any have need, there is a common need in the church. If any have provision there is common provision in the church. This existence matches some of the characteristics which the Savior and the Apostle Paul identify as features of the church. For instance, Jerusalem Church's isolation from the community is characteristic of the spiritual sense of the non-worldliness, or segregation of the church from the world, (**Joh 17:26**). Their loss of family fellowship is comparable to the Savior's admonition that loyalty to God must come first, even before immediate family, (**Lu 14:26**

). The idea of literally sharing all things in common points to Paul's allegorical use of both the nuclear family and the human body as examples of the church.

In his first epistle to Timothy, the Apostle Paul compared the fellowship of spiritual unity among church members to that of members of an immediate, or nuclear, family: fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters.

"Rebuke not an elder, but entreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; The elder women as mothers, the younger as sisters, with all purity." (1Ti 5:12)

Paul's instruction indicates that church members are to look upon one another with the same love and respect that exists in a large, close knit family. He makes a similar point in his Ephesians letter.

"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children." (Eph 5:1)

The family metaphor of the church indicates a horizontal, or out flowing, fellowship among church members. This feature is part of their commonly shared identity as children of God. In the context of Eph 5:1 fellowship is a principle, jointly shared by church members, of worshipping God. It is an integral function of discipleship which is presented as an essential element of worshipping God. Members possess a spiritual bond to one another which they share by the fact of their mutual relationship as children of God. They manifest the bond as fellowship with one another. Fellowship is evident as mutual concern, (kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another). When concern for a brother or sister is acted upon in a tangible way, (be ye kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another), it has the effect of rendering a service to God. Therefore, when a child of God is kind, tenderhearted and forgiving toward another child of God he is worshipping God by manifesting discipleship, (Be ye therefore followers of God). His attitude and actions are indicators of his relationship and fellowship with God as a beloved child, (as dear children). They are also indicators of his relationship and fellowship with his fellow children of God as brother or sister, whichever the case may be.

John confirmed the necessity of a tangible, seeing, touching, fellowship in the church family if one is to have a spiritual fellowship with God.

"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen." (1Jn 4:20)

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This statement goes to the heart of personal faithfulness and devotion to God. John teaches that the fellowship of loving God is contingent upon the fellowship of loving our brothers and sisters. He implies that the quality of one's personal devotion toward God is governed, at least in part, by the quality of his devotion to his brethren.

James ties all this together. Using the same family allegory as did Paul and John he wrote that providing for the physical needs of a brother or sister is an evidence of faith. He says that faith is demonstrated by works, and that without works, faith is dead. His example of the utter worthlessness of a purely abstract faith principle, void the social interaction of a seeing, touching faith of involvement, is presented in the context of personal outreach to brothers and sisters.

*"If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit. Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (**Jas 2:15-17**).*

James' admonition indicates that an out flowing of others directed activity, of one providing for the needs of his brothers and sisters, is seeable, touchable, faith. Thus, he teaches that: 1. There is a horizontal, or out flowing faith which is to be practiced by church members and 2. This faith requires that personal service, including physical activity, be exercised. These principles, together with those developed from Paul and John's writings form the context for one's faithfulness and fellowship of love with God. There is a vertical fellowship with God which is available to believers; but, as we have noted, John indicated that it is available contingent upon the horizontal fellowship brothers and sisters have with one another. One cannot have a horizontal fellowship of hatred or neglect toward his brother and at the same time have a vertical fellowship of love and devotion toward God. John says this is an impossibility. James says that one cannot be faithful to God if he neglects his brothers and sisters.

The personal outreach of horizontal fellowship with brothers and sisters in the church has its basis in the common identity of every child of God in Christ. Children of God possess individual identities as individual objects of God's love for whom Christ died personally. This indicates that they have individual value with God. He loves each one personally. But this does not change the fact that collectively, they are all in Christ and thereby possess a united, or collective identity. When one acknowledges his individual identity as a child of God by joining a collective body of believers in the church, he becomes part of the collective identity of the church, which is the body of Christ. In this setting his fellowship of faithfulness and love toward God is measured by God by his good works towards his brothers and sisters. This is common to every member of the church. The function or dysfunction of the church, as the body of Christ, is contingent upon the tangible, seeing, touching faith each member supplies. When every joint (member) supplies (Eph 4:16) the church is functional. To the degree that any joint is not supplying the church is dysfunctional. When every joint supplies the church is edified, or built up. It is growing. When any joint fails to supply growth is inhibited. When every joint supplies the church can expect spiritual growth, growing in grace. Spiritual growth prepares her for numerical growth through ingathering. When she has grown sufficiently spiritually the Lord sends increase. This idea of a

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oneness among believers was first identified by the Savior. In his intercessory prayer, shortly before he was crucified, Christ prayed for the apostles and all that would believe;

"And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me...." (**John 17:22-23**)

Several places in the New Testament the Apostle Paul used the human body to present an metaphoric picture of the unity of church members. He presented similar lessons on the topic in

Ro 12

;

1Co 12

, and

Eph 4

. In these texts he describes a highly developed metaphor of the church as a human body. He makes the point that Christ is the head of the body. Thus, the church is presented as the body of Christ. Christ as the head signifies his preeminence over the body. Further, Paul taught that the church receives its direction from God. That is, the mind set of church members is to conform to the mind of Christ, which he revealed while he lived among men. In addition, they are to look to Christ, through the ministrations of the Holy Ghost, for personal direction in all matters concerning both their personal lives and their collective life in the church.

In **1Co 12** Paul likened church members to individual components, or parts of the human body.

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ."

He went on to make the point that not all parts of the body are identical. Neither do they all have the same function. However, they are all equally important if the body is to function properly. In acknowledging differences in church members, Paul noted that all members are equally important to God as objects of his love; and, that they are all equally important to one another for the well-being and overall function of the church.

"For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.....Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." (1Co 12:14-27).

Paul continues the narrative by identifying various gifts in the church. .

The social problems of American culture, which are variously manifest in the congregations of virtually every church in America, will never be eliminated as long as American Christians are

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more willing to spend money than we are to spend time. Until we return to God and His first century New Testament Church model of personal fellowship among church members, of personal ministering to the whole scope of spiritual and social needs of one another, spiritual deterioration of our churches and American society will continue. Only when we return to the love ethic of Jesus, of loving a personal God and loving each other personally, will healing occur. When we humble ourselves, seek God's face for a spirit with which we may repent, and pray earnestly for God's forgiveness of our many sins then He will heal us. When we return to showing our love for God by manifesting a love of personal involvement with each other God will first heal our lives, then our families and churches, and finally our communities and nation.

[Click here to read the corresponding article, Seven Gifts in the Church by Elder Michael Ivey](#)