Mama's Meatballs



Seeing God in Everything -
Stories from Relational Gatherings

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Mama's Meatballs

Mama always knew that when I came back home for a visit, I would want her to cook my favorite dish. That was, of course, her meatballs - famous throughout the Tri-State area!

I found out later that she had a secret ingredient: stale Italian bread. I always wondered why there was a loaf of stale Italian bread in the bread cupboard. She would soak the bread and then use it to make her famous meatballs. She would make enough for us to eat and then freeze the rest so I could take some back home with me. My father made an outrageous tomato salad that I would also request. Yummy!

When we had family gatherings, people would always bring their specialties, often at the request of other family members. I'm sure we can all relate.

Meatballs, tomato salad, or whatever food we prepare will cost us time, money, and labor. There is no comparison when we try to duplicate the experience at a restaurant. Nobody can make meatballs like my mama!

Spiritually, it's the same way. It's interesting to compare the corporate church model with the house church model, which I believe is more biblically based.

Think about your restaurant experience. You decide to go to a restaurant with a famous chef. You get dressed up and drive there. If it's a fancy place, you might even get valet parking. You enter, get seated, look over the menu, get served, eat your food, pay the bill, leave a tip, and then go home. If you don't like the food or the experience, you can try another restaurant next time, perhaps one that isn't so big or fancy. Eventually, you'll find a place that fits your style and taste.

Now compare that to a family gathering or a picnic. You have to give some thought to the event, decide what to bring, go out and prepare your meal, make enough for everyone to enjoy, and share your gift with others. Hopefully, you'll also take home some leftovers that others have lovingly prepared.

When we meet together, we are expected to bring something. Participating is good for us and good for the church.

1 Corinthians 14:26
"What then is the right course, believers? When you meet together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation (disclosure of special knowledge), a tongue, or an interpretation. Let everything be constructive and edifying and done for the good of all the church."

The challenge in today's Christian experience is that we are accustomed to paying for services rendered. We expect an experienced cook and staff to do all the work. We just show up, enjoy the experience, and pay for it. If we don't enjoy the experience, we feel free to go to another church.

As stated in Scripture, a healthy house church needs everyone to participate and bring something. In my experience, this is the hardest hurdle to overcome. It's so hard to break the mindset of coming to a meeting expecting to receive rather than to give.

Yes, it takes work, time spent interacting with God, and the courage to share something personal. But over time, each of us will develop a special dish - a spiritual gift to share with others.

Eventually, we will find joy in the preparation and joy in seeing others enjoy what we bring. And don't forget to make enough so others can take some home!

Walking in Circles

My wife and I are taking a little vacation in a couple of weeks. Our ideas of vacation are very different. She will plan out our itinerary for every day, making sure we have a fun-packed time. She is awesome, and I do end up enjoying myself. However, if it were up to me, I would just hang out and rest, sit by the beach, wander through the mountains, and take lots of naps. I like resting!

The word *rest* appears in the Bible over 500 times, but I can't remember ever hearing a sermon on this topic. Hmm…

I just finished reading Hebrews 3 and 4, which talk about rest. Verse 4:9 says, *"There remains therefore a rest for the people of God."* However, this promise comes with a condition, and the earlier verses tell us that not everyone will enter that rest. The illustration is given of the Hebrews wandering in circles for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. We all know that even God rested on the seventh day, so maybe this is something we need to understand and appreciate.

There is something wrong with the current, familiar church structure. Take a look at some of these statistics I found on soulshepherding.org. A quick web search will reveal even more grim statistics concerning pastors.

• 75% of pastors report being "extremely stressed" or "highly stressed."
• 90% work between 55 and 75 hours per week.
• 70% of pastors say they have lower self-esteem now than when they entered ministry.
• 70% constantly fight depression.
• 50% feel so discouraged that they would leave their ministry if they could but can't find another job.
• 80% believe their pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families, and 33% say it is an outright hazard.
• 80% of ministry spouses feel left out and unappreciated in their church.
• 77% feel they do not have a good marriage.
• 41% display anger problems in their marriage, as reported by their spouses.
• 38% are divorced or divorcing.
• 50% admit to using pornography, and 37% report inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.
• 65% feel their family is living in a glass house.

It is no wonder we don't hear sermons on rest. The system is designed to overwork pastors and burn them out.

As a house-church facilitator, my biggest struggle is getting people to participate. The conventional church conditions people to rely on the pastor for everything. Just come to church and get fed. I refuse to fall into that trap.

I've found that, over time, people begin to understand and participate. When they do, it is such a joy to witness! When everyone shares, we begin to see God from different perspectives and understand Him in different ways. We all have valuable input, including children and youth. It's a shame that, in a conventional church setting, children and youth are sent away.

There is wisdom in the way God instructed us to gather and participate, as revealed in the Book of Acts. It really works, and it is worth the effort to get there.

Stones and Bricks

So, a forklift drops a skid of bricks in front of you and then a skid of natural stones. You're asked to build a wall. Which would you pick?

Hmm, well, I guess if you were considering how long it would take or how easy it would be, you would pick the bricks. You would start with the first row, add the mortar, stagger them, and add another row, then another. In no time, you would have a wall.

Natural stones come in all shapes and sizes. You would most likely lay them all out on the ground, consider each one, and then come up with a plan. Maybe the larger, more uniform stones would be placed at the base, and then the others would have to be fitted together, depending on your hands and skill. This would take much longer and be much more of a challenge.

We find bricks in the Bible in the story of the Tower of Babel:

Genesis 11:2-4
"They settled there and said to each other, 'Let's form bricks and bake them. Let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let's make a name for ourselves, for otherwise we'll be scattered across the face of the earth.'"

Bricks are also a key element in the story of the children of Israel in Egypt. Both stories seem to be associated with the key phrase in Genesis 11: *"Let's make a name for ourselves."* In other words, let's build something that will be a monument to our greatness. Bricks are also associated with slavery.

God seems to love stones, natural and beautiful. In fact, if you read Exodus 20:25 or Deuteronomy 27:4–6, you'll find that when God says, *"Build me an altar,"* He not only wants natural stones, but He also gives instructions not to hew them or use iron tools on them. They are perfect the way they are! Maybe you're perfect the way you are?

If you're like me, you've found yourself in many brick-and-mortar churches throughout your lifetime. The leadership wants to build high and fast. It seems that no matter how much the pastor and the leadership try to hew you and cut you up, you just can't fit into their wall.

It becomes painful to be a brick in a wall that elevates one person. After a while, you get frustrated and maybe leave the church altogether, thinking there is something wrong with you.

If you've ever struggled with this, let me assure you: You're a stone!

Each of us is created differently. We're all different sizes and shapes, with different colors and textures. It's God's plan to take each of us, examine us, and fit us into His holy temple, with Jesus Christ as the Chief Cornerstone.

It's so freeing to be part of a group of believers that isn't determined to build something that serves as a monument to someone's greatness. Instead, we recognize that each person is beautiful and unique, and we allow Christ to gently fit us together.

Lonely Weed

My back wall is lined with six Bougainvillea plants. I think the previous owners planted them for privacy. The plants grow quickly and shed their red petals, so regular cleanup and maintenance are a must.

Once, while venturing out to do some trimming, I noticed a weed that had popped up. It was a single, skinny stalk about three feet high, with the most beautiful flowers. Instinctively, I pulled it out but immediately regretted uprooting it. Why had I just killed something so beautiful?

Lantana Camara is officially considered a weed. A weed is defined as a wild plant growing where it is not wanted and competing with cultivated plants. It was different; it didn't fit, and it had to go, no matter how special or beautiful it was.

How does our religious mindset define what is beautiful and what is not? In what context do we define our ideas of church, pastors, and prophets? What do we do with people who may be beautiful but don't fit in? Have you ever felt that you didn't fit in at an organized church? Unfortunately, like Lantana Camara, if you don't conform in a corporate church, there is little chance of thriving.

I think of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Organized religion didn't recognize their beauty, and so they did as I did: they plucked them out.

As a house church facilitator, I am amazed at how unique, wonderful, beautiful, and yes, wild, people can be. Most Christ-followers have never been given a chance to express themselves in a spiritual setting. We rely on pastors, teachers, and small-group leaders to feed us. This sets a pattern for how things are done and defines what is considered normal.

You can now purchase Lantana Camara, plant it, and admire your “weed” garden. My prayer is that more weed gardens will pop up and thrive, creating a new definition of what a biblical church can be.

Don't give up if you have been hurt by religion. You just need to find a place where you can thrive.



God in a Salad pt.1

My friend Derek makes the best salad I've ever had. What puts it over the top is his homemade salad dressing. Forget about asking Derek for his dressing recipe - he refuses all inquiries.

At our last house church meeting, one of the guests commented on how good the blueberries tasted in the salad. She could tell that the blueberries were organic. Derek responded that all the ingredients were organic, yet another reason why everything tasted so delicious.

Livestrong.com has an online article listing the 10 worst non-organic fruits and writes this about blueberries:

“Blueberries are an additional berry type that contain a high level of pesticides. The thin skin allows the chemicals to enter the fruit's flesh. Buying blueberries organic is the safest option. Conventional blueberries contain 52 pesticide chemicals.”

Wow! I didn't even realize there were 52 different types of pesticides! The use of pesticides can affect the taste of produce and might have negative health impacts down the road.

It's interesting that house church is also known as organic church, reflecting a kind of pesticide-free influence on the crop. When we gather together for house church, we try to model a purity reflected in the Book of Acts. I understand how and why the church model evolved, and I'm passionate about helping the church de-evolve back to its original model. Check out my Resources page for some great books on the subject.

It is inevitable that some people will attend a house church and still attend a conventional church. People enjoy the fellowship found at house church meetings, the ability to share, and the freedom to express their life experiences without judgment from others. Those same people also enjoy the conventional church, with full-band worship, a dynamic speaker, kids' church, youth groups, and coffee and doughnuts in the lobby.

Honestly, it bothers me sometimes when people don't exhibit the same passion I have for house church. I hear them referring to our group as a Bible study or a fellowship group, not really understanding the nature of what house church is intended to be.

My frustration is relieved, however, when God speaks to me through a blueberry in a salad. I'm praying that people will eventually taste and feel the difference. When they do, I'll gladly share why!

God in a Salad pt.2

Yes, it's delicious! Every week, no matter what the main course is, Derek makes his salad. You can really tell that Derek delights in making his salad and in the reaction he gets from his guests. I imagine him in the kitchen, preparing the ingredients and thinking about adding something special, all with a huge smile on his face. This is his gift to the group, and we all look forward to receiving it.

I do wonder, however, what would happen if Derek missed a week. Perhaps I, or someone else from the group, would try to make Derek's salad. We would do our best to copy it, but the group would just be reminded of how much they miss the real thing.

There's no reason to try to copy someone else's gift. There's no joy in that. God is incredibly diverse, and the gifts He gives His children are wonderfully diverse. In a small-group setting, if you're paying attention, it will become apparent that everyone has unique gifts. However, most people don't feel that what they have is anything special. Many have been conditioned to think that gifting means "preaching" and "teaching," and they know they will never be able to speak as eloquently as a senior pastor, teacher or evangelist.

Last week, someone had a song on their heart. They sang it to the group - no music, no instruments - and it was beautiful. Others have shared drawings, poems, words of encouragement, dreams, visions, prophetic words, and inspiring thoughts. Jesus was, and is, in all of it!

Most of us will never be a Billy Graham. True joy and peace come when we realize who we are and that what we possess is something special. Trying to fit into someone else's mold will frustrate us, lead us to believe we "just don't have it," and eventually convince us that we have little to offer.

I pray that each of us will discover our "special salad" and take great joy in preparing it and serving it to others. When we do, our "ministry" becomes effortless, we bless those around us, and we find our faith renewed.



The First Supper

I still remember what my Calculus teacher told me. He said that it was highly unlikely that I would be solving mathematical equations later in life. Learning Calculus was useful because it would train my mind to solve problems. He was correct on both accounts. Problem-solving and critical thinking are important in life.

The picture below is a digitally altered version of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. My friend reposted it on Facebook, along with quotes from all the disciples explaining why they couldn't attend. The last paragraph of the post said, "Following Jesus was never meant to be a solo experience. Pull up a seat at the table. It is a level table, and there is room for all of us." The post encouraged people to attend church.

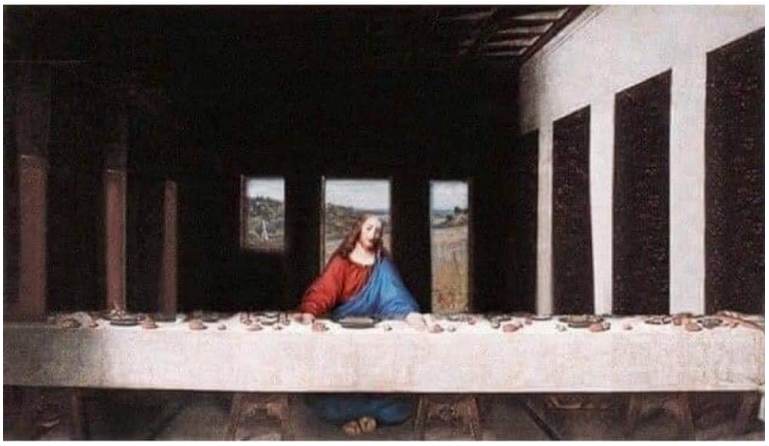
I added a comment: "Here's an interesting question. Suppose you've attended a church for many years. You go faithfully, give money, get involved, and even attend Bible study on Wednesday nights. The question is this: How many times has the senior pastor invited you over to his or her house for a meal? For most people, the answer is never! Doesn't anyone find that strange?

Jesus was sharing the Passover meal with His friends. I'm sure He also ate daily with His friends. This is Jesus! If you've never shared a meal with your senior pastor, maybe you should ask why."

Jesus set an example for us. It's not only *The Last Supper* that matters; it's also *The First Supper* and all *The In-Between Suppers*. We never question the fact that there isn't really a "level table" in a conventional church, at least not when it comes to senior leadership.

I think it's important to think about and discuss such matters. It has been my experience, however, that most church leaders don't see critical thinking and problem-solving as spiritual gifts. Questioning things in church will usually get you labeled as insubordinate. It is not a sin to think about and question what goes on in a church. It is not a sin to feel that something is amiss.

I would argue that there is a better way. The road may be more uncomfortable, but stopping to have supper with your friends and Jesus makes it all worth the effort!



1700 Years

1700 years is a long time. When you think about a period of this length, it's really hard to grasp. In comparison, our country is only 250 years old. It's been roughly 1700 years since the Roman emperor Constantine supposedly converted to Christianity in 312 AD. It is reported that the night before a major battle, Constantine prayed for success and, either in a vision or a dream, saw an image bearing the words *"In Hoc Signo Vinces"* ("In this sign, conquer"). Others reported that he saw the first two letters of *Christ* in Greek. Whatever he saw, he was victorious in battle and credited his victory to the Christian God.

After his victory, Christians and Christianity went from being persecuted to being tolerated, then legalized, favored, and even funded by the government. Emperor Constantine became the supreme patron of the church, the head of the church. Christians went from meeting in homes under the threat of persecution to gathering in former pagan temples in complete freedom.

To learn more about this transition, you can download *Biblical Church* for free. (**Resources** page)

I firmly believe that Satan tried to wipe out Christians for 300 years, killing and persecuting them, but to no avail. Eventually, Satan changed his tactics to infiltration, impregnation, and ultimately, corruption of the faith. Spiritually, for 1700 years, Christians in the Western world have lived in bondage rather than freedom, worshiping under a pagan-ordained structure. Religion replaced relationship.

In **Genesis 15:13**, it says that Abram's offspring would be afflicted for 400 years. According to scholars, the amount of time they were actually enslaved varies. Whether the actual enslavement lasted 350 or 400 years, it was still a multigenerational experience. The generation that was set free by Moses was born and lived as slaves, as did their parents and grandparents. Although they were free in body, when trouble came, they wanted to return to Egypt. We are all familiar with their journey to the Promised Land and their wandering in the desert.

It's hard to reverse 1700 years of slavery. It doesn't even feel like slavery anymore; it's just the way things are. There's no need to question things or even consider that there might be a different way to do church. But bondage is bondage, and religion will always bring bondage. It's a hard statement, but I believe it to be true with all my heart.

I know that I am free now, and only because I am aware of what it feels like to live in bondage can I truly appreciate that freedom. Spiritual freedom is liberating! Returning to relational worship, what I call house church or organic church, breaks the power of that religious spirit. I long for my brothers and sisters to be freed from religious bondage.



Listen Up

Learning to hear from the Father is one of the critical skills we need if we are to navigate life successfully. My cousin was exiting Tower Two with a coworker during 9/11. An announcement came over the speakers instructing people to remain - or even return - inside. My cousin heard a voice saying, "Leave!" His coworker returned inside and never made it out. We need to hear!

Unfortunately, many in the church have abdicated the responsibility of hearing directly from their Father and instead rely on hearing from their pastor. It reminds me of the following account.

Deuteronomy 5:23–27:
"So it was, when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, that you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. And you said: 'Surely the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire. We have seen this day that God speaks with man; yet he still lives. Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God anymore, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? You go near and hear all that the Lord our God may say, and tell us all that the Lord our God says to you, and we will hear and do it.'"

We all know that God spoke with Moses, but I think most Christians aren't aware that everyone heard the voice of God. It was God's intent to speak directly to His people.

In Numbers 11, it is recorded that God's anger was aroused because the people were complaining about their hardships. Fire from the Lord came down, and a number of people were consumed. I believe the people remembered this and didn't want to take a chance on it happening again. They were afraid. It was safer and easier to abandon the idea of hearing from God directly. Moses became the middleman.

Is it still easier and safer to believe that one man can stand in front of a group and speak for God?

"Pastor, you go near and hear all that the Lord our God may say, and tell us all that the Lord our God says to you, and we will hear and do it—and we will pay your salary!"

Sorry, I changed that up a bit. But seriously, are we repeating the same narrative?

If you understand the importance of hearing from God for yourself and are trying to do so, don't be discouraged. You will be successful! It takes time, but it is well worth the effort.

If you are using a middleman to hear from God, I would encourage you to ask yourself why. I believe the best way to navigate life is by hearing the Spirit speak directly to you. Listen up! Your life as a Christ-follower can be filled with passion, excitement, and productivity if you do.

True Family

I've always loved the exchange that Jesus had with His mother and His disciple John. It is recorded in John 19:26–27. It was a tender exchange right before Jesus proclaimed, “It is finished!”

“When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.”

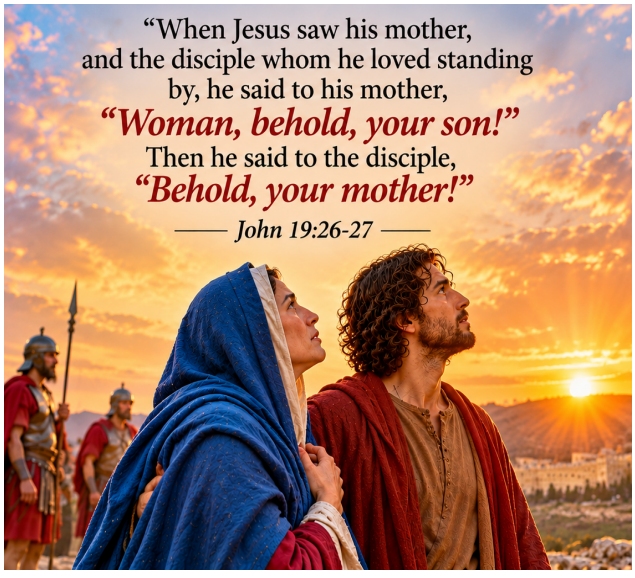
In this act, Jesus fulfills a beautiful truth found in Psalm 68:5–6:

“A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation. God sets the solitary in families...”

Throughout Scripture, Jesus referred to God by various titles, including Theos, Kyrios, Great King, Lord of Heaven and Earth, God of the Living, Most High, and Abba. However, I would suggest that the most frequently used, familiar, and relatable term Jesus used was *Father*. It is worth taking the time to ponder why the Creator and Sustainer of all life would want to be known as a Father rather than by some grandiose cosmic name. What would you call yourself if you held that position?

The Bible says that when we decide to follow Christ, we become part of His family. We are adopted, God becomes our Father, Jesus becomes our big brother, and we are introduced to a multitude of sisters and brothers. The early church ate and met together, shared everything so that no one was in need, and provided for widows and orphans. No wonder the early church had such an impact on society!

If we think in the context of family, the Scriptures become a guidebook for how to treat others, how to love one another, how to deal with conflict, and how to do life together. We learn to regard others as more important than ourselves, how to treat our spouses, and how best to reach those outside our family. I believe that doing life together with a spiritual family connects us to God and to one another in a more significant way than a conventional church can offer. Sitting down, sharing a meal, having conversations, and praying for one another may seem like such simple things, but it is in this environment that the Lord can speak to us, shape us, and mold us to become more like Him.



Rock Tumbler

My friend Vince and I stopped to search for some fire agates around Safford, Arizona. I found a bunch of small, pretty rocks that just lent themselves to being polished. I had always wanted a rock tumbler, and this was a great excuse to purchase one.

When it arrived, the instruction booklet said this:

“Oceans and rivers take hundreds or thousands of years to polish stones. The Advanced Rock Tumbler will help you get faster results than nature, but you'll still need to tumble your rough gemstones for about a month for maximum polishing results. Be patient!”

The process is very simple: add your rocks, add enough water to cover them, insert the grit, and start tumbling. You have to repeat the process four times, using finer and finer grit each time. The biggest complaint about a rock tumbler is the noise it creates while rotating. You can hear the motor, but it's the sound of rock tumbling against rock that causes the most noise.

In Ephesians 4:12–16, Paul takes us through the process of a Christ follower's growth, which includes maturity, stability, and integrity. The believer is expected to grow up, but it is apparent that many believers never seem to achieve this. They seem like rough gemstones out in nature, getting slowly tossed around by the waves of life.

The rock tumbler, or house church, is the perfect environment for getting polished up. As we do life together, we are in close contact, and we rub against each other. We use the water of the Word and the grit of life to help with the process. We've all heard **Ephesians 4:15:**

“But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ -”

We've also all heard the truth spoken to us without love, and we can tell the difference.

Speaking the truth in love is key to spiritual growth. As we do life together, we will inevitably see rough spots in the people we fellowship with. We can then gently speak into each other's lives, with our mutual love and respect allowing us to consider the observations made. It's through this process that the Lord helps us change, becoming beautifully polished gemstones!



The Spirit of Cain, pt. 1

"Imagine you walked into a restaurant and ordered a steak.Twenty minutes later, the waiter comes back and puts a plate of spaghetti in front of you, claiming it's the best spaghetti you'll ever try. Would you be happy about it? No, you would send it back because it wasn't what you ordered. It wasn't even close!

I feel like this is what we have done with the Church. God gave us His "order" for the Church. He told us precisely what He wanted through His commandments in the Bible. In our arrogance, we created something we think works better. Rather than diligently studying His commands and delivering exactly what He asked for, we have been influenced by so many other things. We think about what we want, what others want, what others are doing. In the spirit of Cain, we bring an offering we think He should accept rather than what He actually asked for."

Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church*

I encourage you to read Francis Chan's book, cited above and on my **Resources** page. The book is an honest account of his life and his struggles overseeing a large and "successful" conventional church. He eventually walked away and is now serving steak to those who are hungry for it.

For me, I grew up in church and have been a part of church and ministry all my life. As part of leadership, we would discuss how we could do things better, attract more people, get the worship team to be tight, decide which refreshments to serve in the lobby, raise funds to build bigger or buy better equipment, invite special guests to speak, develop small groups, etc., etc., etc.

It became a never-ending series of small tweaks to make the spaghetti taste and look more like steak. It is never enough. You can never turn spaghetti into steak!

When we bring an offering that is acceptable to God, He rejoices, and we rejoice. There is a joy and peace I experience now that I never experienced while I was trying to do church the conventional way. I have solid relationships with my spiritual family, and my relationship with my Father has been really sweet.

I challenge you to get involved in a more relational church. If there isn't one around, please contact me, and we can walk you through starting one. You don't have to be a master chef to serve a good steak!



The Spirit of Cain, pt. 2

I noticed that my friend had experienced a significant spiritual growth spurt. It was so noticeable that I asked her what had happened and what had changed. She told me she had joined a house church. I got angry and told her she was in a cult. I even told her I was booking a flight to come down and rescue her. I was upset.

When I traveled down to see her, I actually stayed in the home of her house church leaders, Teryl and Diane Hebert. Listening to their testimony, learning about what had happened to the church throughout history, and experiencing house church life changed me forever. The Bible came alive, the New Testament made sense, and I finally found my missing puzzle piece. I returned home so excited to share my discovery with family and friends. Of course, I was met with some skepticism.

Why did I get so angry? Why do people get so angry when you share about house church?

In Genesis 3:7, Adam and Eve sinned, and they sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness. In verse 21, God made tunics of skin. The leaves weren't enough. God had to shed blood to cover their sin. This would establish a pattern of sacrifice and worship that would ultimately culminate in Jesus Christ.

The next chapter of Genesis records the story of Cain and Abel. God had established the principle of shedding blood to cover sin, but Cain brought crops produced from his land. Abel brought the firstborn of his flock. Abel's offering involved shedding the blood of his innocent lambs. God was not pleased with Cain, who wanted to worship God his own way. Instead of admitting his error and changing his ways, Cain became angry and killed his brother. Why did he get so angry?

I saw my friend experience growth and freedom, yet somehow, I thought it was a bad thing.

If you are a house church leader, not everyone will understand what you are doing, and some will be critical. Brick-and-mortar churches have been around for 1,700 years, and the idea that there might be a better way to worship is incomprehensible to many people.

Rejoice in the fact that Christ will bring people into your sphere of influence who genuinely want to worship Him in a more biblical way.



Body Building

My friend Derek, who makes amazing salads, has well-developed biceps. His muscles are far more defined than the average male's. Our house church group knows that he works out about four or five times a week. I'm sure that if I went to the gym and worked out like he does, I would have well-defined muscles, too. I choose not to.

Although I don't look like this in the natural, I sometimes imagine myself looking like this in the spirit.. Have you ever imagined what you look like spiritually? Do you picture yourself as a mighty warrior, pulling down the strongholds of the dark one? If not, the question arises: How do we get there? How do we *work out* spiritually?

Sometimes it's easier when we all work out together, helping each other grow.
1 Corinthians 14:26 says:
"How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification."

Edification, or body building, occurs when we all participate. Over the years, as a facilitator of house church, I have found this to be the greatest hurdle to overcome. Most people have been accustomed to going to a conventional church where there is no expectation of giving (except money).

There must be a paradigm shift in our thinking. At first, it's a struggle to engage and hear from the Lord. We're too busy, or we just don't know how to hear. It could be that we don't know what our gifts are, or we don't know how to minister through our gifts in a small-group setting. Ephesians 4:7–16 is another great passage:

"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says:" When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men."(Now this, "He ascended" —what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; hat we should no longer be children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

The last verse above is so important, especially where it says, "...every part does its share...." The mystery is that as we all share, we all get built up!

As a group, we must be committed to going to this gym and putting in the work! It's difficult at first, but it does get easier over time.

The Bluegill and the Arrowead

My friend Paul and I would meet on Sundays for coffee and fellowship. I would look forward to our time together, sipping coffee and chatting about life. One Sunday, he suggested going out into the desert to a place where he occasionally goes to spend time alone with the Lord.

After about a 15-minute walk down a dry creek bed, we separated, and both of us found a place to spend time communing with our Lord. On our walk back, I saw a small pool of water with a bluegill struggling to survive. The little bluegill was fighting hard. I had my empty coffee cup with me, so I decided to scoop it up to see if I could help.

When I got home, I immediately went back out and bought a small fish tank. I lined it with some rocks, including a few from a paleo site here in Arizona. If you've read my other posts, you know about my love for fossils and rocks.

For almost three weeks in the fish tank, the bluegill never ate. I tried all sorts of food, but it wouldn't take a single bite. Surprisingly, though, it seemed to be getting stronger. When I noticed some blue returning to its gills, I decided it was best to release it into a lake.

When I got home, I decided to clean out the fish tank. I dumped all the rocks into a plastic strainer and began rinsing them off. I noticed that the paleo rocks had softened, were dissolving, and were turning into mud. After a good rinsing, I was shocked to discover an arrowhead in the strainer. Incredibly, an arrowhead had been hidden inside one of the rocks! I had always wanted a real arrowhead. Considering all the variables in this story, this was truly something special.

I used to tell myself that I was the Rock of Gibraltar. It was just me and God, and I didn't need anyone else. People, especially those who called themselves Christians, would disappoint me, and I decided life would be better without them. However, we do need each other, and God helps refine our lives through other people, whether we like it or not. He designed life that way.

The paleo rock containing the arrowhead could have sat on my shelf for years without me ever knowing what was inside. God used the water to soften the rock and reveal something beautiful.

What's inside your rocky heart that needs to be released?

With so many variables involved, I know the Lord had His hand in this fish story. Perhaps you think it's silly, but I know that Jesus is the Master of setting up events in our lives to bring out the beauty in all of us. He uses each of us to accomplish this. This was just one example.



Are You a Geode?

My friend Vince and I recently traveled to the Desert Gardens Annual International Rock, Gem and Mineral Show in Quartzsite, AZ. One of my purchases was the geode pictured below. I love looking inside and seeing the beauty of the crystals, each one so unique. I found the following information about geodes online.

"Geodes are formed when there are pockets of air within rocks. This often happens after volcanic eruptions when lava cools around air bubbles. These pockets leave space for groundwater to seep in. But the water itself doesn't produce geodes - it brings along minerals which stay in the rock even after the water evaporates."

On the outside, geodes just look like plain balls of rock. It's only after an experienced rockhound spots one and cuts or cracks it open that its true inner beauty can be revealed. Some are quite fantastic!

For most of my life, I have been involved with media. I was good at it. My talent opened doors for me in church and ministry life, but I always felt like I had a deeper purpose that I couldn't quite find. I had something special inside, but there were no spiritual rockhounds to help crack me open.

Do you feel like this sometimes? Are you an usher or greeter? Do you help clean the sanctuary, run the media booth, or teach Sunday school? There are countless jobs to do in a conventional church, but has anyone seen inside you? Has anyone wanted to crack you open to reveal your true calling and the beauty Christ has formed in you?

My wife and I recently had the pleasure of going out to dinner with a great couple. I love meeting new people. I love hearing their testimonies and learning how God has been faithful in their lives. They've recently relocated to Phoenix, and they're thinking about getting involved in a house church.

No matter where they go or what they decide to do, I hope we can keep in contact. I love to see what's inside when God cracks people open!



Bigger is Better?

NPR recently posted an article entitled *"Megachurches Are Getting Even Bigger as Churches Close Across the Country."* The article highlights Liquid Church, located in Parsippany, New Jersey, which is growing at a rapid pace.

"For the last several years, Liquid Church has been one of the fastest-growing churches in the nation, and a big part of its success has come through assimilating smaller, more traditional congregations. Four of its seven campuses - all in New Jersey - have come through these mergers."

NPR article by Scott Neuman

An unfortunate truth mentioned in the article is that the average Christian congregation has about 65 members, and a third of them are over 65 years old. With smaller, declining congregations, these churches are ripe to become satellites of the megachurches of the world.

If you facilitate a House Church, you sometimes have to fight against the mindset that bigger is better. Early on, when I was doing House Church, I had a friend who attended our group while also attending a traditional church. During one of our meetings, he began to complain about the traditional church he was attending. He had written a song and wanted to perform it at his church, but the music director said no. My friend was very upset by the rejection he received. He was on the worship team and had been attending for years, but the answer was still no.

Naturally, I suggested that he share his worship song with us. He never did. The mindset that performing in front of a large gathering is more worthwhile than performing in front of eight or nine people is troubling. The lines between performance and ministry become blurred. Does Jesus love us more if we minister or perform in front of large crowds? Are large crowds a sign of success and health?

In John 6, Jesus talks about eating His body and drinking His blood. This didn't go over well with many of His disciples.

"From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, 'Do you also want to go away?' But Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'"

John 6:66–69

It's fascinating that Jesus chose to do life with a small group of people. Take some time and meditate on that. Why did He choose to do this? What was His motivation? Perhaps there is some merit in His example.

For me, I'm content with doing life with a small group of people. Maybe you should give it a try, too.

Martha, Marth, Martha

"Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her. ”

Luke 10:38-42

If you’ve been a Christ follower for any length of time, I’m sure you’ve heard this portion of Scripture expounded on and preached about. I’m not here to do that. I find it fascinating that an interaction in a home between two sisters and Jesus has been forever immortalized in Scripture.

Mary was at Jesus’ feet, hearing “His word.” Luke never mentions what Jesus was talking about but instead records the words of a disgruntled woman accusing Jesus of not caring about her plight. Surprisingly, Martha never interacts directly with Mary. Instead, she wants Jesus to correct Mary’s behavior. There is no indication of whether the situation ever came to a resolution. Did Mary, after hearing the discussion, get up and help? Did Martha put away her things, stop working, and listen? I guess we will never know.

Jesus was in a home, doing life with people. If you’re involved in a house church, you know that people have all sorts of theologies and beliefs, and sometimes those beliefs must be lovingly challenged. What better environment is there to discuss disagreements or misunderstandings than among a group of spiritual family members?

If Scripture were still being written today, maybe some of your house church conversations and disagreements would also be immortalized.



Great Quotes

Does God need a house? He who made the heavens and the earth, does he dwell in temples made with hands? What crass ignorance this is! No house beneath the sky is more holy than the place where a Christian lives, and eats, and drinks, and sleeps, and praises the Lord in all that he does, and there is no worship more heavenly than that which is presented by holy families, devoted to the fear of the Lord.

Charles Spurgeon

As the church started in the home, it is going to come back to the home.

J. Vernon McGee

The church is never a place, but always a people; never a fold but always a flock; never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray, not where you pray. A structure of brick or marble can no more be the church than your clothes of serge or satin can be you. There is in this world...no sanctuary of man but the soul.

John Havlick, Southern Baptist pastor

The expression 'in church' (*en ekklesia*)...refers to an assembly of believers. There is no suggestion of a special building. Indeed, the idea of a church as representing a building is totally alien to the NT.

Donald Guthrie

Even the meetings of the 'whole church' were small enough for a relatively intimate relationship to develop between the members.

Robert Banks, Fuller seminary professor speaking about the early church.

The early church was able to defy the decadent values of Roman civilization precisely because it experienced the reality of Christian fellowship in a mighty way... Christian fellowship meant unconditional availability to and unlimited liability for the other sisters and brothers - emotionally, financially and spiritually. When one member suffered, they all suffered. When one rejoiced, they all rejoiced. When a person or church experienced economic trouble, the others shared without reservation. And when a brother or sister fell into sin, the others gently restored the straying person. The sisters and brothers were available to each other, liable for each other and accountable to each other. The early church, of course, did not always fully live out the New Testament version of the body of Christ. There were tragic lapses. But the network of tiny house churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire did experience their oneness to Christ so vividly that they were able to defy and eventually conquer a powerful, pagan civilization. The overwhelming majority of churches today, however, do not provide the context in which brothers and sisters can encourage, admonish and disciple each other. We desperately need new settings and structures for watching over one another in love.

Ronald Sider, seminary professor

Great Quotes, *cont.*

For two or three centuries, Christians met in private houses...There seems little doubt that these informal gatherings of small groups of believers had great influence in preserving the simplicity and purity of early Christianity.

W.H. Griffith Thomas, co-founder of the Dallas Theological Seminary

For the first two centuries, the church met in small groups in the homes of its members, apart from special gatherings in public lecture halls or market places, where people could come together in much larger numbers. Significantly, these two centuries mark the most powerful and vigorous advance of the church, which perhaps has never been equaled.

David Watson, Anglican priest and evangelist

Since in the first and second centuries church buildings in the sense in which we think of them today were not yet in existence, families would hold services in their own homes.

William Hendricksen, Reformed scholar

The New Testament Church began as a small group house church, and it remained so until the middle or end of the third century. There is no evidence of larger places of meeting before 300. There is no literary evidence nor archaeological indication that any such home was converted into an extant church building. Nor is there any extant church that certainly was built prior to Constantine.

Graydon Snyder, Chicago Theological Seminary

Those...desirous of being Christians in earnest...should...assemble by themselves in some house...those whose conduct was not such as befits Christians could be recognized, reproved...or excommunicated... Here we could have baptism and the sacrament...and direct everything towards the Word and prayer and love...

Martin Luther

It strikes me that there would be a great deal of good done if persons who have large rooms in their houses would endeavor to get together little congregations...Where there is a Church in the house, every member strives to increase the other's comfort, all seek to promote each other's holiness, each one endeavors to discharge his duty according to the position in which he placed in that church.

Charles Spurgeon

King Makers

I went out for some Mexican food with my friends Rich and Craig, and at one point, we talked about some of the larger churches here in the Phoenix area. We discussed some of the multimillion-dollar homes that the pastors of these large churches owned or were currently building for themselves. Of course, this is not just a local issue. I'm sure we're all aware of the large salaries, mansions, and private jets that many ministers around the country have. I certainly don't believe Christians should live in poverty, but it does seem that the excesses of some ministers are not a true reflection of the life of Christ and His followers.

The question is...how does this happen? I've always been fascinated by the account in 1 Samuel 8, where the Hebrew people demanded a king. God's plan was to have judges and prophets guide the people, but they wanted a king like the other nations. Samuel warned them about what that would mean.

"So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who asked him for a king. And he said, "This will be the behavior of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen, and some will run before his chariots. He will appoint captains over his thousands and captains over his fifties, will set some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and some to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. And he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage, and give it to his officers and servants. And he will take your male servants, your female servants, your finest young men, and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take a tenth of your sheep. And you will be his servants. And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the Lord will not hear you in that day." 1 Samuel 8:10-18

Is it our fault? Are we the ones still demanding a king? Are we the king makers? Instead of developing personal intimacy with Christ and intimacy with other followers, would we rather go to a large facility and listen to a king tell us how to live our lives?

Many of the warnings Samuel gave still ring true today. At church, we become workers for the king, busy bees building his kingdom. We lose our freedom, and, of course, we're expected to give our tenth. For many, this is the easier path. It requires us to give our time, talent, and treasure, but it doesn't necessarily require us to develop the true intimacy that the Father desires for us.

It's quite sad that the people rejected God.

"But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." So Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day - with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods - so they are doing to you also. Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them." 1 Samuel 8:6-9

I hope you'll take the time to examine your heart and ask yourself whether you're truly serving the King or whether you're serving a king. There is so much beauty and freedom in living out our Christian walk the way God intended. Yes, the path is difficult, but the results are worth every step!

Preparing the House

I recently came across this quote from **T. Austin Sparks**.

"The truth is that subjection to Jesus Christ is not a miserable life as a vassal. It is a life of triumph, a life of victory, a life of glory, a life of fullness. It is the blinding work of the enemy with men, to make them think that to belong to the Lord, to have the Lord in their lives, means they are going to lose all that is worth while, and be shut down, and then all the time be poor cringing creatures, hardly able to lift their heads up, going about as beggars. That is Satan's lie. The Old Testament brings it out here so clearly that, when all things were subject to, submitting themselves to, God's appointed king, it was a time of fullness, such as the people had never known: and so it is when Jesus is Lord with us in heaven."

T. Austin Sparks, *God's Spiritual House*

The Old Testament Scripture he is referring to is found in **1 Chronicles 24**. In this chapter, David is preparing to hand over the many resources he has collected to Solomon so he can begin construction of the House of God.

"Now David said, Solomon my son is young and inexperienced, and the house to be built for the Lord must be exceedingly magnificent, famous and glorious throughout all countries. I will now make preparation for it."

"Behold, a son shall be born to you, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies all around. His name shall be Solomon, for I will give peace and quietness to Israel in his day." **I Chronicles 24:5, 9**

As we examine our lives, are they full of victory, glory, and fullness? If not, maybe there are a few things to consider. Have we been blinded by the enemy into believing that a life truly devoted to Christ is slavery? In this case, we hold back from completely surrendering to our Lord. We want to keep various portions of our lives separated from Him. It's hard to give up everything.

However, I think there is something more troubling. Consider our corporate church culture. We are taught that we need to help our church or pastor fulfill his vision for his house. We are given gifts and talents to help build up the ekklesia, but instead, we use them to build up a man's vision for his church. You might think this is harsh, but would you consider the fruit of the church today to be "exceedingly magnificent, famous and glorious throughout all countries"? Would you consider the church to be at rest from our enemies? It appears that something is not working. A church based on and founded upon dynamic personalities will never achieve this. I know from personal experience.

So the question is, whose houses are we building? I truly believe, and have experienced, that when we submit ourselves to our King, rather than to a dynamic leader, our lives and the life of the ekklesia will be exceedingly magnificent.

Does Your Pastor Make House Calls?

My mom, at 93, still had a sharp mind. Her detailed recollections of childhood and life events were incredible. I asked her if she remembered doctors making house calls. She did, and then began telling me all the times doctors had come to her home.

House calls for doctors are a thing of the past, and it seems the same can be said about pastors. Pastors have a tendency to isolate themselves from the sheep in order to preserve their personal and family time. It's understandable; they're overwhelmed.

We all love the story of the Good Shepherd going after His lost sheep.

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing." Luke 15:4-5

Jesus got His feet dirty traveling around. He didn't set up shop somewhere and expect people to visit Him at His "church" once or twice a week. He became intimately involved in people's lives. He was intensely relational. He went after lost sheep, and He made house calls.

I remember a good friend I had at a large institutional church. When his daughter was born, he asked me to be her godfather, I was happy to accept. As he rose through the ranks of the church hierarchy, he eventually became an assistant pastor. At that point, the senior pastor advised him to change his phone number and not give it out to anyone. I had no way of communicating with my friend, and our relationship ended.

The church structure dictates that isolation is simply the way things have to be for those in leadership, but this is contrary to everything Jesus taught and modeled. My friend only lasted a few years after his appointment before leaving the church completely disillusioned. I'm sure many of you could share your own heartbreaking stories.

I like to ask people who have spent years attending church, tithing, and volunteering their time if they have ever been invited to the senior pastor's home just to hang out or even go out for coffee. I'm usually met with puzzled looks, as if I've asked them something inappropriate. I grew up in church and have served on staff, but I've never been invited to a pastor's home - not once. Doesn't that seem strange? We pour our lives into a church or ministry, yet develop only superficial relationships with those in the hierarchy.

The question, then, is whose pattern should we be following? Whose pattern should our pastors be following? Jesus made house calls. He got involved in people's lives, and He went after wandering sheep. Does your pastor follow Christ's example?

The institutional church model is broken. The gap between clergy and laity doesn't lend itself to forming meaningful relationships. There must be - and there is - a more excellent way. I encourage you to search for it.

The Problem With Wendy's

If any burger chain will still be around 2,000 years from now, it may well be McDonald's. They may not have the healthiest food, but they have great marketing and have built quite an empire.

I recently searched online for "healthiest burger chains," and an article on Cozymeal.com came up entitled *Top 16 Healthiest Fast Food Burgers in 2024*. McDonald's had no burgers on the list. Wendy's Jr. Hamburger took second place, and the article said this:

"The Jr. hamburger from one of the healthiest fast food chains, Wendy's, might become your new best friend. This mini version of the classic packs a flavorful punch and is a lighter option than the Jr. cheeseburger. Featuring a fresh beef patty with toppings on a soft bun, it's a delicious option."

One wonders why people are still attracted to a less healthy option when alternatives are right around the corner.

When I talk with people about relational gatherings, I run into a common issue. You can talk to people about how unhealthy the institutional church may be, but you can't simply tell them to run to Wendy's and check out the food there. Healthy relational gatherings are hard to find. It's also difficult to tell people who have been on a steady diet of McDonald's for 1,700 years that there might be a healthier alternative. There may be no place for them to actually experience it.

If you're flipping burgers at Wendy's, you're my hero. I'm proud of you. Don't stop, and don't get discouraged. As more and more healthy relational gatherings crop up around the country, we can finally invite people in to sample the food. Then they can make their own decisions.

I'm hopeful that, as He continues to build His church, people will have a place to experience the biblically based reality of relational gatherings. Who knows? Maybe Wendy's will be the one that survives into the future.



Knots and Nets

A knot is a structure made on a length of rope by twisting the rope around itself. Knots often bind the rope to itself or to other objects. According to *The Ashley Book of Knots*, there are over 3,800 core knots in the world. Different knots serve different purposes.

After I moved to Phoenix, I began searching for relational fellowships in the area. Most of these gatherings had little to no social media presence. I found many of them through word of mouth or through people contacting me via my website. I was surprised by the number of groups out there (see my **Relationships** page). I was also surprised by how different each group was. They all follow the four pillars mentioned in Acts 2:42, but each group is unique in its expression. Like knots, these groups serve different purposes.

I was visiting a house church in Sun City hosted by John and Marlena when a word about nets came to mind. It really struck me. Knots are great, but it's only when you connect them together that you can build an effective net. Nets are better at catching fish than individual knots. Small, independent groups have a tendency to focus inward, which can result in losing fish. Let me explain.

If an older person decides to explore a relational fellowship for the first time and happens to visit a group that caters to young people, they will most likely not feel comfortable. What happens? There's a good chance they won't come back and may even abandon their search for a group. However, if the host knows of other groups that might be more suitable, they can direct the person elsewhere. A network of independent relational fellowships that know one another and understand each group's strengths can help us catch more fish.

We're not in competition with one another, and we shouldn't get upset when someone doesn't connect with our group. It's not personal. We need to have the seeker's best interests in mind and try to connect them with a group where they can feel at home. We need to start looking outward and connecting with others.

If you haven't checked out my **Resources** page, please do. I've read lots of books about relational fellowships over the last few years and have posted some great excerpts. While reflecting on knots and nets, I was reading *The Community of the King* **by Howard A. Snyder**, published in 1977. This was the first time I had read something about groups connecting with one another. The excerpt is below.

"Much harm can be done to the body by a small group with an independent spirit which goes off on a tangent and creates division. There must therefore be coordination among such structures, both on the local level and more broadly. In a local church community, at least one person from each group, with some gifts for leadership, should participate in a coordinating group which acts as a clearing-house for information and a center for ideas and planning. Thus the groups are mutually supportive, each contributing to the other, demonstrating in still another respect the mutuality of the body of Christ."

Knots and Nets, *cont.*

Similarly, each group is not to carry out its specific mission in total isolation or independence from other groups. All groups are part of the body. Cooperation is needed between the groups to achieve maximum effectiveness. This is true within a local church community and the same thing applies to several local churches within a city or suburb. **James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton** in their book ***What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?*** demonstrate the need for such cooperation and show how to go about it. This cooperation is equally necessary at regional, national and world levels where cooperative planning and coordination is notoriously lacking. As David McKenna suggests, too often in the Church a wide span...exists between brothers who share a common faith and partners who are willing to share common resources."

Let me encourage you to start looking outward. Pray that God will help you find and connect with other groups. If someone contacts you looking for a place to meet, invite them out for coffee, ask what they're looking for, and connect them with a group that fits their needs.

Let's start spreading our nets in preparation for a great move toward relational fellowships!



A Broken Shell

Many years ago, I was on a mission trip to the Philippines. I traveled to a remote island where our small boat landed on a shore covered with shells. There were so many that I couldn’t see any sand, just beautiful shells. In my excitement, I reached down and grabbed a handful, not realizing that children were watching me. When it was time to leave, the children lined up, and each one excitedly handed me a shell. Each shell was beautiful, but then one little girl handed me a broken shell. My first reaction was disappointment, and I thought about discarding it once I left the shore.

However, before I left, I felt the Lord asking me what I would do with broken people. Would I just toss them away like the broken shell? That shell became more meaningful to me than all the perfect ones.

After I shared this story with my good friend **Fernando Souza,** he responded:

"In that small broken shell, there is a story. Your story made me reflect on the perfection of the church. The church is perfect, but its members are not flawless beings, but individuals in a constant process of transformation. And it is precisely this imperfection that makes the church so precious. It is a perfect family of imperfect children who are nurtured, strengthened, and perfected day by day by God, through the Holy Spirit and life together with each other.

The church is the most precious place on Earth for us, the children of God. It is here that we find a home, a family, a flock of sheep guided by the true Shepherd. It is here that we surrender to the Lord and His people, strengthening each other in our walk of faith. *"You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you."* **Song of Solomon 4:7**. In God's eyes, the church is perfect because it is formed by imperfect people seeking the perfection of Jesus. The church reminds us that true beauty lies in accepting our flaws and in the process of constant transformation."

The truth is, if you've been involved in relational gatherings for more than an hour or two, you've most likely encountered broken people. Honestly, we are all broken to some extent, but what do we do when we encounter someone in need of help? For many who come, a loving and open environment will bring healing and growth. It may take a while, and it might be messy, but people who are willing to change can and do change. Watching someone grow and mature in Christ is glorious.



A Broken Shell, *cont.*

However, there are others.

The gift of discernment is crucial in this area. I've heard so many horror stories and have experienced some myself. Dysfunctional people come to the group. You see the red flags, but you have a desire to help them, so you overlook those flags. You continue to meet, but they never change. They have the potential to destroy the group in one fell swoop, and they usually do.

After fifteen years of participating in relational gatherings, I've gotten better at discerning which people have the potential to set off bombs. It usually doesn't happen right away. It seems to happen once they are fully integrated into the group, and the timing of the blast is often opportune.

If you're unsure whether a person will integrate well into the group, it's better to meet one-on-one or in a small, separate group and honestly discuss any issues you observe. If the person is confronted in a loving manner and there is no positive outcome, they may eventually disconnect on their own. On the other hand, if a person is humble and willing to discuss issues, there is hope that they can and will change. When people change over time, it is a good indication that the Lord is working in their lives and that they can become a healthy part of the gathering.

Perhaps you'd like to share your wisdom on this issue. We can all learn from one another. Feel free to contact me.



ChurchDash

Over the last fifteen years of meeting in homes, someone would occasionally suggest getting Costco pizza, Chinese food, or KFC. It gives everyone a break, and people chip in a few dollars to help cover the costs. However, this is usually the exception. It's much better and healthier when people contact each other during the week and plan the meal together. Someone usually takes responsibility for providing the main dish, and everyone else discusses suitable side dishes. It actually becomes quite fun! Before the meal, I usually proclaim, "Every time we meet, it's like Thanksgiving!"

It's also much better and healthier when people prepare a spiritual meal during the week. Over the last fifteen years, in my experience, the hardest mindset to overcome is the need for people to bring something to the meeting. They come expecting those who are more gifted to teach or share. If they are asked what the Lord has spoken to them during the week, they get on the phone and call ChurchDash, hoping God will deliver something instantly. And yes, you aren't fooling anyone! We can tell the difference between home-cooked and store-bought.

Of course, there is always room for Holy Spirit inspiration and spontaneity during a meeting. I'm not referring to that. If we gather once a week, we should engage with Him throughout the week by reading our Bibles, listening to worship music, reading a book, or praying. Something should be quickened in our spirit - something so tasty that we want to share it with our family. If you're not engaging with the Lord during the week, or you don't know how to hear from Him, talk about it. It's an important issue that needs to be resolved.

I came across this while reading *Biblical Church* by Beresford Job and thought it was worthwhile to share.

"The simple truth is that in the New Testament, and therefore in a biblical church, we actually find the exact opposite of a church 'service'. Rather than a 'led from the front' format where the design, by definition, breeds passivity and hence spiritual atrophy, we see a format positively brimming over with opportunities and challenges for all present to actively participate. Wholesome activity, with its subsequent growth into spiritual maturity, is the watchword here, in contrast to the sterile and repressive inaction of the spiritually stultifying passivity of religious 'services' as practiced in unbiblical churches. When all are free to take part and face the challenge of being duty bound to be reaching out to the Lord for whatever he wants them to bring to the gathering, then no longer is it a question of just coming along and asking, "How can I be blessed and what can I get out of it?" That is spiritual selfishness from which the only outcome can be ongoing spiritual immaturity. In a biblical church the question is rather, "What can I bring today? How can I give and be a blessing to others?" It is the complete opposite! It is the way of growth, of spiritual maturation, and of believers moving ever toward the full stature of the Lord."

Let's all bring something we've caught during the week. We need to share it with others so that every meeting becomes a spiritual Thanksgiving meal!



Egyptian Popeye

Congratulations to Massachusetts bodybuilder Moustafa Ismail. Guinness World Records is still trying to determine whether these guns are real, but if they are, they would set a record at 31 inches around. Moustafa insists his arms are all natural and points to his eating and workout routines as proof. He consumes seven pounds of protein, nine pounds of carbohydrates, and three gallons of water each day. He works out for two hours every day, lifting up to 600 pounds.

“They call me Popeye, the Egyptian Popeye,” Ismail, 24, said while working out in the Boston suburb of Milford. But unlike the cartoon character, “I like chicken, beef, anything but spinach.”

You may love or hate these out-of-proportion arms, but sometimes it seems that our relational gatherings can be similarly out of proportion. If we take Acts 2:42 as a template for doing life together, there is one aspect that seems to get more exercise than the others.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Acts 2:42

Yes, it's the apostles' teaching. Let me say that, in the past, I was triggered when people called our gathering a “Bible study” because it was something much deeper. I have since learned how to deal with my emotional issues. I can also imagine people beginning to pick up rocks, wanting to defend the importance of studying Scripture. I get it, but please hear me out.

You are responsible for engaging with Christ during the week. During your time in His presence, you will receive something that needs to be shared.

"What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up." 1 Corinthians 14:26

You may say that the above Scripture describes something that happens spontaneously. And yes, perhaps occasionally it does. However, I would suggest that the majority of what is shared should already be gathered in your spirit before you ever arrive at the meeting. Just as a meal is planned beforehand, so should the spiritual food be prepared in advance.

If you want to study Scripture, have a Bible study, or go through a book when you gather, that's great but please examine your motivation. Why are you doing it? Is it because you can't get to 1 Corinthians 14:26? Is it because nobody brings anything to share and you're fearful of the silence?



Egyptian Popeye, *cont.*

The hardest part of my journey has been trying to get the saints to engage with our Lord during the week. This is a holdover from people attending the IC, where nothing is ever expected of them. We must help people experience Christ for themselves, hear Him speak, and share what He has given to them. This is how we grow and encourage one another.

Don't give up on people. It takes time, but it's worth it. There is so much beauty and wisdom contained in others, especially the quiet ones.

If people aren't engaging with our Lord during the week, we must address this issue. To justify filling the empty space with Bible teaching will only make us unbalanced, like the Egyptian Popeye.

Postscript: After posting this on Facebook, I received a comment that I really liked and have included below. This is from Willie Joubert.

"To be honest, many times even the home gatherings and organic expressions that I attended (and at times had at our house) were not balanced. Looking back I can see how I gradually moved and became more balanced. It was and is a process. The reality is that many of us left the institutional church as we recognized that the Biblical record in the New Testament presented a very different way of gathering and that the very structure of the Institutional Church makes it impossible to express the fullness and unity of the body of the Lord.

However, we have been and often remain so tied to the ingrained concept of a " Christian Meeting," that we continue to structure it around 'studies and discussions,' with some form of 'worship', understood as singing with or without accompaniment. It took me years to really get it that the first century believers met mostly without Scripture as most were illiterate and scrolls were not widely available even if some could read. They did not have a copy of what we call the New Testament. They were filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit, having accepted the basic truth of the life and ministry of Jesus as shared by the apostles and others.

They gathered to support one another and learn from the experience of the others. They shared life! In this sharing of life they stood out in the pagan society and their very way of life touched and transformed others and society itself. They did not meet to discuss theoretical concepts and theology! They met to encourage and support one another. Each one brought what they could sharing how the Spirit led them and how the Lord met their needs.

It saddens me that I keep reading how some seek to find a home gathering and many do not feel they can start one themselves, for they are conditioned to think that it means to lead a group Bible Study or discussion. We fail to realize that simply inviting someone for a meal and trusting God to lead the discussion around a table can be where two or three are gathered in his name. The opportunities are endless, if we move beyond the obsession of studies and head knowledge."