

Christ Church Communique



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Healthy Church Relationships

I strongly suspect that if churches were to model the structure and priorities of the early church, most would be radically different than they are today. Even a cursory glance through the Book of Acts reveals God's church as founded for the express purposes of worship, the serious study of Scripture, the offering of prayers, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and the cultivation of authentic fellowship.

Sadly, God's purposes and priorities for His church receive little attention today. Rather than modeling God's church as recounted by Luke in his letter of the Acts, contemporary congregants are seemingly content to dutifully make their weekly pilgrimage to their church, politely shuffle in, sing a few songs, put a \$5 in the plate, endure a "message" or "talk," and then silently file out—all the while staring at their shoes—only to repeat the process the following week. It's all rather sterile, solitary, and isolated. Drudgery, we might say. But not so in the early church.

Rather, the letter of the Acts provides rather compelling images and accounts of the early church as a body of believers tightly knit together through mutual and intimate relationships. Surely Jesus' life and ministry presents a very similar pattern, as He committed Himself during His earthly ministry to nurturing a deep and meaningful relationship with His disciples. He ate with them, talked with them, traveled with them, ministered alongside of them, and invested His life into them. Jesus did not merely talk about the significance of relationship; rather, He lived it out in the context of a committed community of faith and ministry.

Healthy churches do likewise. They have considered God's design and priorities for His church, and have pondered the life and ministry of Jesus, and they are authentically modeling these qualities and commitments in their lives with one another.

Friendliness and Biblical Relationships

Yes, healthy churches are friendly churches—but they are so much more than this. Personality-driven churches, socially-driven churches, event-driven churches, and seeker-driven churches are all friendly church—indeed; this is their stock in trade. To be sure, most churches are friendly...at least on Sunday mornings. Most churches strive to be the kind of church where people want to return, and they instinctively, or otherwise, know that friendliness is a major

“drawing card” for visitors to a church. But friendliness does not make for a healthy church and is a poor substitute for biblical relationships.

A church seeking numerical growth may settle for friendliness, but a biblically healthy church goes well beyond friendliness to commitment. In a biblically healthy church, the members are welded together with a deep and lasting commitment, concern, compassion, and caring for one another that transcends passing Sunday morning conversations and occasional social activities and events. Healthy congregants realize all too well that though mid-week Bible studies and prayer groups provide potential opportunities for healthy relationships to form, these are not, in and of themselves, the relationships that Scripture has in view. They also recognize that, too often, mid-week Bible studies and prayer groups are launched as little more than mechanisms by which to retain newcomers by fostering relational ties. Healthy churches understand that this is not the same as healthy biblical relationship.

In healthy churches the transformational power of the Gospel is lived out in every facet of the believer’s life—including their relationships with others, and they both intimately know, and are known by, others in their church community. And in healthy churches where biblical relationships are forming or have formed, it is the spiritual renewal and transforming power of the Gospel that is foremost in the minds of the people as they enter into committed relationships with one another. Fellow believers invest themselves into the lives of one another with both the desire and intent of *truly* knowing one another, loving one another, and serving one another—even when this is not easy, convenient, or comfortable.

Little wonder that while many churches offer opportunities to establish wonderful friendships, they are not experiencing healthy biblical relationships. To engage in the same requires an intentional and long-term commitment to imperfect people with whom some may share nothing in common, save the presence of Christ in their lives. But such is the mark of a truly healthy church. Personal preferences and levels of comfortability are placed aside in order to invest in the kind of relationship with fellow believers that Jesus modeled and the early church followed. Indeed, truly healthy churches are not characterized by their buildings, or programs, or events, or staff, or history, but by the authenticity of their worship, the faithfulness of their teaching, their dogged commitment to the Gospel, their passionate heart for the lost, and the quality of their relationships with one another.

And, remarkably, the healthy church is the one in which the members pursue these relational priorities without becoming cliquish. Rather, their sincere desire is to meaningfully connect as many people to the spiritual heartbeat of the church as possible. To this end, most of what amounts to the real life and ministry of the church occurs *outside* of the church building. In a healthy church, congregants gather on Sundays to worship and be equipped, and then disperse to engage in meaningful relationships with one another and to evangelize the lost. Sadly, somewhere along the line, these priorities and pursuits became reversed, and most churches have never corrected the error.

The Relational Priorities of a Healthy Church

Of course, there are limits to the extent to which one can be meaningfully and deeply involved in the lives of fellow believers. To be sure, it is practically impossible to be intimately involved in the lives of *everyone* in the church. As such, most people will find that they will cultivate

intentional relationships with smaller groups of people while remaining open to the church as a whole, and neither intentionally nor otherwise shunning those not in their circle of closest friends. Hence, healthy churches are comprised of healthy church members who take care to ensure that special friendships do not become cliquish or exclusive. Their arms are always open to welcome and embrace others who pursue their fellowship.

So what do healthy church relationships actually look like? How does a healthy church order their relational priorities? Let me put forward some thoughts:

1. **Christ is first in all matters.** Where Christ is not central in either the life of the believer or the life of the church, spiritual health cannot be present. Regardless of the quality of one's relationships with fellow believers in the church, Christ must rule the theology, priorities, and purposes of His church. And regardless of the quality of one's relationships with fellow believers in the church, Christ must rule the mind, will, and emotions of His people. Too often one hears of those who can acknowledge that their church is spiritually compromised or bankrupt, and yet who remain because "that's where my friends are." This makes as much sense as refusing to move out of a house sitting on a toxic waste site because, "I like my neighbors." No, everywhere in Scripture we see that mature believers fellowship with those with whom they worship, not the reverse. Christ must be central in both the church as a whole, and the individual lives of the believers, otherwise friendship is confused with fellowship, social relationships are confused with spiritual relationships, and "getting together" is confused with "living together."
2. **Commitment to family transcends all other earthly relationships.** In healthy churches, commitment to Christ is followed by commitment to one's own family. Here, while acknowledging significant doctrinal differences, the example of the Mormon Church in extolling the priority and value of the family relationship is, nonetheless, admirable. Healthy churches are comprised of healthy people who give priority to their marriages over their children and their children over their church. Healthy couples build hedges around their marriages and recognize this as consecrated space. Nothing and no one—save God and His Word—traffics in the sacred space that exists between husband and wife. Healthy couples still "court" each other and commit to spending quality time alone together on a regular basis. Healthy couples also set aside regular and intentional time to spend with their children, and take seriously their God-ordained role as the primary shapers of these little lives. Indeed, the quality of one's relationship with his or her spouse speaks volumes regarding the quality of relationships that one is able to establish and maintain in the church. Frequently, a lack, or unhealthy level, of involvement in the lives of others in the church signals trouble at home. In healthy churches, the members (including the ministers!) place their family above all earthly human relationships and it shows in the way they prioritize their time and resources.
3. **Commitment to fellow believers, in particular, one's own church family, follows commitment to family.** I suppose that there would be those who would balk at the suggestion that our commitment to fellow believers transcends our commitment to those outside of the household of faith. After all, are we not called to be witnesses to those in need of Christ? Indeed, we are. But I believe that we often neglect one of the most powerful testimonies that we can have in society—that of allowing a

watching world to see how we love one another. A genuine faith lived out under difficult circumstances and in tangible ways is a powerful witness. How tragic it is when churches decide to air their dirty laundry in public. How sad it is when members speak ill of their church or church leaders. How destructive it is to the cause of Christ when rumors spill out and gossip spreads and scandals unfold in the church. Few things signal an unhealthy church as easily or readily. Few things destroy one's testimony as effectively or quickly. But where Christ is Christ of all—He shows Himself as such in healthy, caring, concerned, and committed relationships; and a watching world is compelled to consider the truth claims of Christ and a transformative Gospel.

4. **Commitment to those outside of the household of faith follows commitment to fellow believers.** I am saddened when fellow believers tell me that they have either few or no non-Christian friends. With whom is one sharing his or her faith? Healthy believers are engaged believers—not isolated believers. Healthy believers are meaningfully engaged in the lives of their unsaved family members, neighbors, co-workers, and friends, always with a view toward living their life of faith openly and with credibility in these contexts. They are grounded in their faith and ready with reasonable answers to common questions, and ensure that the direction of influence is from them to others and not the reverse. Again, Jesus' life serves as an example. He openly kept company with sinners and was criticized for spending time with the most unsavory characters. Yet, the direction of influence was always clear. Jesus was spending intentional time *with them*, not the reverse. He was living His life of obedience and commitment to the Father before others, and it was never long before they were challenged to consider His Person and purposes as a result of His physical presence in their midst.

Conclusion

How are you doing in your spiritual life? One way to take quick inventory is to consider your relationships with others in the church. How well do you know your brothers and sisters—not their favorite color or dessert, but their struggles and victories? How well do your brothers and sisters know you? Are you deeply known by those with whom you worship? Are you living your life openly and honestly with those in our church? Are you consistently involved in your neighborhood small group fellowship? If not, you are missing an important element in your spiritual life and development, and depriving God's Spirit from working in your life in a very real and meaningful way.

How's your marriage? When's the last time you took your spouse out on a date? When's the last time you stole him or her away for an overnight at a local hotel or bed and breakfast? When is the last time you came home from work a couple of hours early, loosened the tie, got down on the floor and spent time with your kids? When's the last time you invited someone you don't know very well to join you for lunch after church? When's the last time that you got some folks together and really opened up and shared your lives with one another?

Beloved, it is all a part of God's design and purpose for those He has called to be a part of His church. It is all a part of what it means to authentically live out the Christian faith. We get

together, not to merely share some laughs, but to share our lives. We get together, not to merely be friendly, but to cultivate fellowship. We get together to know the other and be known by the other. Not consistent with your personality style? Consider Jesus. Look at His relationships with His disciples. Follow in His footsteps. It is how the Christian faith is lived out.

So, how's your spiritual life? You need only look around.

Grace and peace,

Robert W. Evans

**February Issue:
Defining True Worship**



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