

# Advocate Manual

If you are reading this Advocate Manual you have probably been asked to be an advocate for someone at Harvest Bible Chapel. This manual has been adapted from an Advocate Manual created by Twelve Stones (<http://www.twelvestones.org>). We are sincerely indebted to Dr. Garrett Higbee and the counselors at Twelve Stones for their insight and guidance in the formation of our Biblical Soul Care ministry at Harvest. As a potential advocate you probably have many questions, but before we jump into answering those, there are a few things you should know about our Biblical Soul Care Ministry. BSC is a ministry whose mission is to return soul care to the church by helping some of the most hurting members of our church through counseling. At the same time we desire to train those who walk alongside those individuals for long term support, accountability, and encouragement. BSC views the local church as the long-term care provider of each individual believer. Good Christian counsel, or soul care, is biblically based, Spirit-led, and Christ saturated counsel that brings about Christ-likeness, true soul rest, and targets lasting heart change. It is much more than a counseling method; it is a cultural philosophy that should affect every part of body life of our church.

As a result of the above convictions, we require that each individual or couple coming to BSC for help come with what we call an advocate, or advocate couple. During the application process we encourage our counselees to prayerfully consider who will serve in this capacity for them: a concerned friend, mentor, or ministry leader.

We encourage counselees to seek out advocates who exemplify the character qualities they desire to develop and who have a sincere love for God. The advocate should possess knowledge of God's Word, a willingness to come alongside the counselee, and a personal desire to grow and change. Finally, we ask that advocates commit to humbly walk beside the counselee(s) for at least six months .

## **Vital Role of the Advocate**

This is where you come in; you have the privilege of being an advocate, standing in the gap for your friend or loved one in his or her time of need. You do not have to have extensive counseling training or schooling in dealing with deep psychological issues. If you have had training in Biblical counseling, that is great; but it is not necessary to be an advocate. Sometimes, in God's providence, He allows us to be trained in certain areas in order to help others. However, much of the time he allows us to help others in order to get the training we need.

You may ask, why me?|| Well, in His infinite wisdom God has allowed you to be involved for this simple reason; He wants you to be like Christ. You will be taking up a burden that doesn't belong to you and shouldering the weight at your expense for the benefit of someone else... sounds a bit like our Savior doesn't it? And doesn't it always seem that in the midst of life's most difficult times (whether that is ours or someone else's) God reveals our desperate need for Him most clearly?

Personal growth rarely happens to those who remain outside the context of community living, or those who never reach outside themselves for the sake of someone else. Jesus exemplified and calls us to a life of service. Perhaps this is why we are urged over and over in Scripture to love one another.|| The world looks on to this kind of care and is awestruck by the love and commitment of God's community (John 13:35).

## Introduction

We realize this is a huge ordeal and sacrifice for many, but this is a potentially life changing event for you and those with whom you attend. The thought of involving someone else in what has historically been a very private process is a significant cultural shift. In our experience, involvement of God's community in counseling is not only biblical but also very worthwhile for all involved. While we recognize that requiring counselee's to bring an advocate into the counseling process is unique, we are convinced it is biblical and extremely beneficial for the counselee, the advocate, and the body of Christ as a whole.

### What Are Some of the Benefits for the Counselee?

- Provides hope from a committed friend who is willing to walk through the experience with him
- Provides continuity of counseling and help on the home front
- Provides benefit of someone to help communicate greater context, to bring to remembrance key issues and/or remind them of truth gained while in counseling
- Provides the release of not having to capture everything in the counseling session but has a friend taking good notes on his behalf
- Provides deeper insight into the life of the counselee
- Provides weekly direction for conversation and accountability
- Provides a place to ask questions and receive insight into helping the counselee
- Provides benefit of shouldering someone else's burden
- Provides an opportunity to fulfill the law of Christ
- Provides a practical way to flesh out the one anothers of Scripture
- Stirs up believers to gain further training/equipping
- Provides personal growth in closing the gaps between knowing Scripture and living it
- Provides another perspective into life of the counselee (counselor doesn't have to rely totally on his own ability to ask good questions)
- Provides built in accountability for homework and application
- Provides someone to carry his message into the other 167 hours of the week

- Provides a means of helping validate or clarify insights in the life of the counselee and his community
- Provides a natural tie back into the regular flow of discipleship of the local church  
Benefits to the Local Church
- A person is trained to support a body member in a short period of time.
- Creates a support network for Pastors and ministry leaders, allowing them to focus on shepherding the entire flock
- Provides built in accountability for the churches counseling ministry
- Provides a testimony of love and commitment to one another and an on-looking world
- Creates a culture of obedience to the 50 one-another's of Scripture.

Now, you may be asking yourself, what are the requirements, what do I have to do, and how should I prepare?|| We will attempt to answer those questions in the next brief chapters. For now, we would like to thank you for considering this opportunity. You play a crucial role in returning soul-care to the body of Christ. We have seen this fact evidenced over and over again in the experiences of the advocates who have come before you and we look forward to the opportunity of serving you and serving alongside you.

## Preparing for BSC

We want to provide you with profitable and practical information as you prepare for your time as an advocate. So, as we get started, there are four key things we would ask for you to do in preparation for your time:

1. Read through the rest of the advocate handbook. This will provide a good overview of your responsibilities prior to, during, and after your involvement with BSC.
2. We would like you to read through the two chapter excerpts from a couple books we have found very helpful. (These are included in the back of your Advocate Manual). These chapters succinctly communicate the target of our counseling and the importance of community in the change process.
  - Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands, Chapter 4 "The Heart is the Target," by Paul David Tripp
  - How People Change, Chapter 5 "Change is a Community Project," by Paul Trip and Tim Lane
3. Pray! Pray for the couple, family, and/or individual you are coming to BSC with. Pray for the counselor you are meeting with and for whatever else the Lord leads you to pray for

During your time as an advocate you will have a variety of opportunities to learn, grow, and serve. There will be three specific ways that we will ask for your help:

1. Prayer coverage for our time together; the family/individual you came with and the counselor.
2. Providing helpful historical information, insights, and questions that the counselor and/or counselee might otherwise miss or would find helpful.
3. Taking good notes.

## Prayer Coverage

For Christians prayer is like breathing. You don't have to think to breathe because the atmosphere exerts pressure on your lungs and forces you to breathe. Similarly, when you're born into the family of God, you enter into a spiritual atmosphere wherein God's presence and grace exert pressure, or influence, on your life. Prayer is the normal response to that pressure (John MacArthur).

In BSC, as we learn of the pressures that brings a family or individual to our ministry, we respond with prayer. We recognize we are absolutely dependent on God to provide hope and help for the people we serve. We are fully aware of the many variables we do not know or understand, the complexities of the human heart, the dynamic of the English language as well as our own inadequacies and consistently plead with the Lord to show up in a powerful way. Prayer leads us not to rely on ourselves but on God as we seek to bring help to others. Second Corinthians 3:5-6 says *Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, But our sufficiency is from God who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant*. Therefore, as you prepare to be an advocate, we urge you to be constant in prayer before and during our time together. The more we abide in Christ and grow to be like Him, the more His priestly life will work in us. Our lives will become what His is: a life that continuously prays for men|| (Andrew Murray).

There are three ways in particular we would ask you to invest through prayer in our time together. First, we ask you to pray for the individual or family you are coming with to be open and honest about their situation; and ready to receive what God has to say in response (Mark 4).

Second, pray that everyone involved in the counseling, especially the counselor, would have wisdom and insight to understand the heart issue(s) that must be addressed. *Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known*|| (Jeremiah 33:3).

Third, pray that the time in BSC would result in lasting change for the glory of God for everyone involved in the counseling process including the counselor, counselee(s) and you, the advocate(s).

It is a glorious privilege to intercede on behalf of your loved one. No learning can make up for the failure to pray. No earnestness, no diligence, no study, no gifts will supply its lack. Talking to men for God is a great thing, but talking to God for men is greater still|| (E.M. Bounds). With that thought in mind, we look forward to participating with you and for you in this way.

So, this is our prayer for you as an advocate: May God open [your] eyes to understand the holy ministry of intercession to which, as His royal priesthood, we have been set apart. May He give you a large and strong heart to believe what mighty influence your prayers can exert|| (Andrew Murray). Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer|| (Romans 12:11-12).

## Providing Insights

Hebrews 3:12-13 says, *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another everyday; as long as it is called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*|| One of the points the author is making is that the Body of Christ not only has the responsibility but also the ability to bring sightedness to areas of blindness in the lives of one-another. We need each other so we do not fall away or find ourselves blinded by the deception that comes along with sin. When a person becomes a believer he or she is placed into the body of Christ for the purpose of maturity and growth. The church therefore becomes God's intended place for long-term healing and growth for His children. For that reason, the role of advocate becomes of great importance to us and those we counsel.

C.S Lewis states, "In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets." We resonate with the truth Mr. Lewis shares. As counselors, despite our training, giftedness, and experience, we still are not large enough to have the perspective that is afforded us through the body of Christ. As an advocate you might bring insight from the lives, circumstances, relationships, interactions, and patterns of those you come with that we simply would not have without you. We value the input you bring to the counseling experience, and invite you to bring those insights, and questions to bear during our time together in counseling.

## Taking Good Notes

Not only does the advocate have the opportunity to bring insights to the counseling process, he or she also has the opportunity to follow during the week to bring to remembrance the lessons learned at BSC. Peter says, *"Therefore I intend to always remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder..."* (2 Peter 1:12-13). There will be a lot of information shared by both counselee and counselor that will need to get captured into a succinct set of notes for the purpose of drawing upon those insights in the months to come. Bringing remembrance to foundational/root issues, important principles, helpful diagrams, and impactful passages of Scripture helps to nurture the key truths gained during your sessions. Your participation in the session by taking good notes not only helps to capture that information but also serves the counselee by helping him or her to fully engage in the verbal dialog without concern for catching everything.|| At the end of each session the counselor will follow up with homework.

## Involving Your Community

As you prepare for your time as an advocate we encourage you seek the involvement of your church community to provide support for you during your time (particularly if you are involved in a small group).

1. Often times the counselee's line up their own child care with their family members. If that is not possible, this is a great opportunity for the church to provide support.
2. You can enlist the support of your small group or friends by having them commit to a prayer vigil during the counseling hours (you will want to make sure the family/individual you are coming with is involved in the decision of what can be shared as prayer and what can't).

While there is no one pattern everyone follows during BSC, many people have found that there is a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm from the experience. To some degree, the trial or conflict might even subside. Regardless of any immediate relief, it is important for the counselee to be abiding with Christ (John 15), continuing to grow in his or her ability to take thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5), and become a part of their church community (i.e. small group involvement, serving, etc.).

Reviewing the homework with the counselee will provide you additional guidance and direction as you seek to minister to your friend or family member. Proverbs 18:1 says, *Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.* As an advocate, your role becomes especially critical throughout the week. You can provide hope by reminding the counselee(s) of key Scriptures that were shared (Rom. 15:4), reinforcing that spiritual growth is a process (Prov. 24:16), and encouraging them not to give up (Gal. 6:9).

At times the situation may continue to deteriorate to the point that you feel like you need additional help. Please don't hesitate to contact your counselor. We are happy to provide any counsel that will help equip you be Christ's representative in the situation you are facing.

Some additional resources that we have found to be extremely helpful for you as an advocate and in your own walk with God include: *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* by Paul Tripp; *How People Change* by Paul Tripp and Tim Lane; *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* by Paul Tripp and Tim Lane; *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe; *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Tedd Tripp; and *The Cross Centered Life* by C.J. Mahaney.

As a result of your time in BSC, and out of the overflow of your love for Christ and others, our desire is for you to become an ambassador for soul care. || As a result, you will seek out opportunities to see others reconciled to God and each other (Matt. 5:24, 2 Cor. 5:14-21), and encourage others in your community do the same. Some of the ways soul care will manifest itself are: personal investment in the lives of others, loving accountability, daily encouragement, and caring deeply. All of this is done with a balance of truth and grace (John 1:14) for the glory of God.

## Ambassador of Soul Care

## **Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands by Paul Tripp**

The following is an excerpt from the book by Paul David Tripp, (Chapter 4). Paul Tripp served as an advisor to Twelve Stones Ministries for 5 years and presents a very like-minded philosophy of the mission and target of biblical counseling at Harvest. We would highly recommend that you purchase the book in its entirety and believe it would be a great encouragement to you as you walk-alongside your friend.

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### **“Chapter 4: THE HEART IS THE TARGET”**

I grew up in Toledo, Ohio, and our family usually went east for our vacations. But when I was sixteen years old, my dad decided to take our family on the Great Trip West. That year, Dad loaded my mother, my brother Mark, and me into a Ford Falcon and we headed out. For Dad, everything else we did was but a prelude to this experience.

As background, I should note that Dad approached vacations as a contract between the family and himself. His part of the bargain was to plan and finance the trip. Our part was to have a good time. Thus whenever he would ask us if we were having fun, the prudent answer was a hearty –yes.|| Otherwise, he would launch into a well-rehearsed speech about how much money he was spending and how much time he had invested in planning our trip. He would conclude by saying that if he had known we were not going to have fun, we would have stayed home where we could do it for free!

Finally, the –Day of the Grand Canyon|| came. Dad had never been more excited—an emotion that was obviously not shared by my mother. He awakened us early and we soon were on our way. When we reached the Grand Canyon, Dad refused to see it at a location that was –all fences and tourist traps.|| He began to explore, and we ended up driving down a dirt road and then over open ground until we parked 200 feet from the rim.

Mark and I immediately ran for the edge. We pretended to push each other over the rim and sat dangling our feet over the mile-high wall of rock. We threw stone after stone over the edge, oblivious to anyone who might have been hiking and camping below us. It was amazing to witness stones silently disappearing without ever hearing or seeing them hit. We were having a blast, totally unencumbered by fear.

Meanwhile, Mom hadn’t even gotten out of the car. She had one foot on the ground, tapping to make sure that the turf was solid. She had visions that the rim would crumble and we would all fall to the bottom of the Canyon with the car on top of us.

My dad knew she was struggling so he had placed himself near the car. But then Mom would say, –Bob, the boys, the boys!|| and Dad would run toward us to make sure we were okay. At that point, Mom would get queasy and call him back. In short, I don’t think my dad saw much of the canyon that day; he was too busy running back and forth, ensuring that everyone was having fun according to the plan. All of us were in the very same place at the very same moment, interacting with the very same natural phenomenon, but each of us was having a very different experience.

I tell this story because it gets to the heart of what personal ministry is about. Effective personal ministry takes the Kingdom promise of lasting change to the place where it is needed—the heart. In my vacation story, the heart of each member of our family was revealed in our behavior that day. Why did each of us experience such a different day when we were in the same location at the same time? Why did each of us act so differently? The answer goes back to our hearts.

My dad's heart was filled with a desire for his family to have a great time. Everything he said and did was controlled by that desire. Mom's heart was gripped by a powerful fear of heights and her concern for her sons, and this was reflected in her words and actions. Mark and I approached the scene with the fearlessness, invincibility, and immaturity of teenage boys. We just wanted to have fun. Each of us brought a different heart to the situation and so our experiences and actions differed. Our hearts directed our behavior.

#### WHY DO PEOPLE DO THE THINGS THEY DO?

If you want to be part of what God is doing in the lives of others, you need to understand how God designed human beings to function. Why do people do the things they do?

Why can your toddler be so contrary? Why did your friend get upset in the middle of the conversation? Why is your teenager so angry? Why is Amy swallowed up by depression and despair? Why would a man risk his family for twenty minutes of sexual pleasure? Why do you get angry in traffic? Why is that once-romantic couple now engaged in guerilla warfare? Why is Bill driven in his career? Why is Sue so critical and controlling? Why does George speak so bluntly and unkindly? Why is your daughter afraid of what her friends will think? Why does Pete refuse to talk? Why do people do the things they do? The simplest, most biblical answer is the heart.

Even though the heart is one of the Bible's most dominant themes, there is much confusion about the term. In western culture the term is relegated to the fields of romance (Valentine's Day) and sports (he plays with a lot of heart||). In the Bible, however, the heart is an essential category. You cannot understand the human being without understanding the heart. So, what does this term describe?

The Bible uses —heart|| to describe the inner person. Scripture divides the human being into two parts, the inner and outer being. The outer person is your physical self; the inner person is your spiritual self (Eph. 3:16). The synonym the Bible most often uses for the inner being is the heart. It encompasses all the other terms and functions used to describe the inner person (spirit, soul, mind, emotions, will, etc.). These other terms do not describe something different from the heart. Rather, they are aspects of it, parts or functions of the inner person.

The heart is the —real|| you. It is the essential core of who you are. Though we put a tremendous amount of emphasis on the outer person, we all recognize that the true person is the person within. For example, when you say that you are getting to know someone, you are not saying that you have a deeper knowledge of his ears or nose! You are talking about the inner person, the heart. You know how the person thinks, what he wants, what makes him happy or sad. You can predict what he is feeling at any given moment. Because the Bible says

your heart is the essential you, any ministry of change must target the heart. This perspective is explained in several Scripture passages.

### FRUIT, ROOTS, AND THE HEART

One of the most important word pictures in the New Testament reveals Christ's perspective on how people function. It is Christ's answer to the age-old question, —Why do people do the things they do?||

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:43-45)

Christ used ordinary physical things to explain unfamiliar truths. Here he likens the way people function to a tree. If you plant apple seeds and they take root, you don't expect to see peaches or oranges growing. You expect apple seeds to become apple trees that produce apples. There is an organic relationship between the roots of the plant and the fruit it produces. Christ is saying that the same is true with people.

In Christ's metaphor, fruit equals behavior. The particular fruit (behavior) this passage discusses is our words. Christ says that our words are literally our heart overflowing. People and situations don't make us say what we say, though we tend to blame them. (—He made me so angry!|| —If you had been there, you would have said the same thing!|| —These kids simply make me insane!||) Rather, this passage says that our words are controlled by our hearts. A tree produces fruit, and our hearts produce behavior. We recognize a tree by the fruit it produces, and, in the same way, the Bible says people are known by their fruit.

In my early pastoral days we lived in a twin home, with our elderly landlady living in the other side of the house. In exchange for reduced rent, I agreed to do all of the yard work. In the busyness of ministry and family life, it was sometimes hard to find time to mow, rake, or shovel, but I tried to be prompt and faithful. However, no matter how disciplined I tried to be, my work never seemed timely enough for our landlady. To get me to work on her schedule, she would go out and start shoveling or raking, knowing full well that I would rush out and complete the job. I was unaware of how irritated I have become over her manipulation until one afternoon when I heard the leaves rustling outside. I looked out the window to see my landlady, in her housedress and slippers, raking the leaves. In my anger, with my hands on my hips, I said aloud, —If she think I'm going to rush out there and rake for her, she's nuts! I'm going to rake on my time or not at all!||

What I didn't realize was that one of my sons had been standing beside me. In a split second, to my horror, I saw him in the front yard, hands on his hips, yelling at my landlady, —My dad says if you think he is going to rush out here and rake for you, you're nuts!|| I couldn't believe it. I was mortified. I wanted to back away from my words and rush out to tell my landlady that I had said no such thing—or at least that my son had misunderstood what I'd said. But I had to face the fact that the words had come out of me, that I had said what I'd meant, and that the words were the fruit of anger I had carried for quite a while. There was an organic

connection between my words and my heart. You would not solve my heart problem by removing my son or teaching me to be more judicious with my words (though you would save me a lot of embarrassment!). The problem with my words was directly tied to the problem with my heart, which is where a comprehensive solution needed to be applied. This leads us to the second half of Christ's illustration.

In Christ's example, the roots of the tree equal the heart. They are underground and therefore not as easily seen or understood. But Jesus' point is that a tree has the kind of fruit it does because of the kind of roots it has: we speak and act the way we do because of what is in our hearts.

There may be no more important thing to say about how people function, yet this seems to be hard for us to accept. In many ways we deny this connection and blame people and circumstances for our actions and words. Here Christ calls us to humbly accept responsibility for our behavior. He calls us to humbly admit that relationships and circumstances are only the occasions in which our hearts reveal themselves.

If my heart is the source of my sin problem, then lasting change must always travel through the pathway of my heart. It is not enough to alter my behavior or to change my circumstances. Christ transforms people by radically changing their hearts. If the heart doesn't change, the person's words and behavior may change temporarily because of an external pressure or incentive. But when the pressure or incentive is removed, the changes will disappear.

This is the spiritual truth Christ accused the Pharisees of missing in Matthew 23:25-26: —Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will also be clean.||

Christ looked at the externalism of the Pharisees and said, —You guys just don't get it. You pride yourselves on your right behavior, yet your hearts are a mess! Start with your hearts and right behavior will follow.|| To make his point, Christ pushes his illustration to the limit. He says, —Clean the inside of the dish and the outside will also be clean.|| You can't really do this with your dishes at home—washing the inside of a dirty pan will not automatically clean the outside. Yet this is what Christ is advising; that's how powerful the heart is. Do we really believe what Christ is teaching here?

Many of our attempts to change behavior ignore the heart behind the actions. We threaten (—You don't want to even think about what I will do if you do that again!||), we manipulate (—Would you like a car of your own? All you have to do is...||), instill guilt (—I do and do for you and this is the thanks I get?||), raise our voices, and do a host of other things to change behavior, but change never lasts. The moment the outside pressure wanes, the behavior reverts to what it was before. The body always goes where the heart leads.

#### PERSONAL MINISTRY AND FRUIT STAPLING

Christ's word picture helps set the direction for personal ministry, as we can see when we expand and apply it. Let's say I have an apple tree in my backyard.<sup>1</sup> Each year its apples are

dry, wrinkled, brown, and pulpy. After several seasons my wife says, —It doesn't make any sense to have this huge tree and never be able to eat any apples. Can't you do something?|| One day my wife looks out the window to see me in the yard, carrying branch cutters, an industrial grade staple gun, a ladder, and two bushels of apples.

I climb the ladder, cut off all the pulpy apples, and staple shiny, red apples onto every branch of the tree. From a distance our tree looks like it is full of a beautiful harvest. But if you were my wife, what would you be thinking of me at this moment?

If a tree produces bad apples year after year, there is something drastically wrong with its system, down to its very roots. I won't solve the problem by stapling new apples onto the branches. They also will rot because they are not attached to a life-giving root system. And next spring, I will have the same problem again. I will not see a new crop of healthy apples because my solution has not gone to the heart of the problem. If the tree's roots remain unchanged, it will never produce good apples.

The point is that, in personal ministry, much of what we do to produce growth and change in ourselves and others is little more than —fruit stapling.|| It attempts to exchange apples for apples without examining the heart, the root behind the behavior. This is the very thing for which Christ criticized the Pharisees. Change that ignores the heart will seldom transform the life. For a while, it may seem like the real thing, but it will prove temporary and cosmetic.

This often happens in personal ministry. From a distance it looks as if the person has really changed. When held accountable, the person does and says different things. The husband seems to be gentle and attentive to his wife. The teenager seems to treat his parents with new respect. The depressed person is up and out of the house. The broken relationship seems to have been restored. But the changes don't last and in six weeks or six months, the person is right back where he started. Why? Because the change did not penetrate the heart, so changes in behavior were doomed to be temporary.

This is what happens to the teenager who goes through the teen years fairly well under the careful love, instruction, and oversight of Christian parents, only to go off to college and completely forsake his faith. I would suggest that in most cases he has not forsaken his faith. In reality, his faith was the faith of his parents; he simply lived within its limits while he was still at home. When he went away to school and those restraints were removed, his true heart was revealed. He had not internalized the faith. He had not entrusted himself to Christ in a life-transforming way. He did the —Christian|| things he was required to do at home, but his actions did not flow from a heart of worship. In the college culture, he had nothing to anchor him, and the true thoughts and motives of his heart led him away from God. College was not the cause of his problem. It was simply the place where his true heart was revealed. The real problem was that faith never took root in his heart. As a result, his words, choices, and actions did not reveal a heart for God. Good behavior lasted for a while, but it proved to be temporary because it was not rooted in the heart.

Christ's illustration establishes three principles that guide our efforts to serve as God's instruments of change in the lives of others.

1. There is an undeniable root and fruit connection between our heart and our behavior. People and situations do not determine our behavior; they provide the occasion where our behavior reveals our hearts.
2. Lasting change always takes place through the pathway of the heart. Fruit change is the result of root change. Similarly, in Matthew 23, Christ says, –Clean the inside of the cup and dish and the outside will become clean. || Any agenda for change must focus on the thoughts and desires of the heart.
3. Therefore, the heart is our target in personal growth and ministry. Our prayer is that God will work heart change in us and use us to produce heart change in others that results in new words, choices, and actions.

### THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Though the Bible has much to say about the heart, few Christian books on marriage and family, communication, conflict resolution, or even discipleship focus on it. These practical books seldom display an understanding of the centrality of the heart and how it operates. We can't assume that people understand us when we talk about these things. We need to develop the ideas further.

An interesting Old Testament passage can help us do this.

Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. Then the word of the LORD came to me: –Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all? Therefore speak to them and tell them, –This is what the sovereign LORD says: When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet, I the LORD will answer him myself in keeping with his great idolatry. I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.‘ || (Ezek. 14:1-5)

The elders of Israel have come to the prophet Ezekiel with questions they want to ask God. It would seem like these spiritual leaders are doing the right thing. But God recognizes that there is something wrong with them. What is it?

God points out their idolatry, which is idolatry of a specific kind. They have idols in their hearts, a more personal and fundamental form of idolatry than ritual religious or cultural idolatry. An idol of the heart is anything that rules me other than God. As worshiping beings, human beings always worship someone or something. This is not a situation where some people worship and some don't. If God isn't ruling my heart someone or something else will. It is the way we were made.

Romans 1 is helpful here. It is probably Scripture's best analysis of the nature and effects of sin. Paul presents the core of our struggle as a –great exchange.||

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. (Rom. 1:21-25)

Sin is fundamentally idolatrous. I do wrong things because my heart desires something more than the Lord. Sin produces a propensity toward idolatry in us all. We all migrate away from worship and service of the Creator toward worship and service of the created thing. This is the great spiritual war beneath every battle of behavior—the war for control of the heart. This struggle is captured well by the old hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. The third verse says,

O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be; let that grace now, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it—prone to leave the God I love: here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

The hymn reflects the fact that a person does not wake up one morning and say, —You know, I'm tired of being a theist. I think I'll become an atheist. || No, the hymn depicts the great exchange that takes place within our hearts in the routine moments of life. Sin leads us to believe that life can be found away from the Creator, and so we, in subtle and obvious ways, forget the Creator and defy the creation. Our behavior is ruled, not by worship and service of the Lord, but by a ravenous desire for something in the creation. As John Calvin said, our hearts are —idol factories, || and our words and actions are shaped by our pursuit of the things our hearts crave.

To make matters worse, this idolatry is hidden. It is deceptive; it exists underground. We can make this great exchange without forsaking our confessional theology or even our observance of the external duties of the faith. So we hold onto our beliefs, tithe, remain faithful in church attendance, and occasionally participate in ministry activity. Yet at the level of what we are really living for, we have forsaken God for something else. This is the silent cancer that weakens the church, robs individuals of their spiritual vitality, and leads to all kinds of difficulty in relationships and situations.

At its core, sin is moral thievery. It steals the worship that rightly belongs to God and gives it to someone or something else. It robs the Trinity to purchase the creation. Every sinner is in some way a worship thief.

At its center, sin is also spiritual adultery. It takes the love that belongs to God alone and gives it to someone or something else. It is a life shaped by the satisfaction of cravings, rather than by heartfelt commitment and faithfulness. Every sinner is in some way a spiritual adulterer.

The deepest issues of life are issues of worship. Worship is more fundamental to our essential nature than the pain, pressures, or pleasures of our experiences. What we worship determines our responses to all our experiences. Sin is much more than doing the wrong thing. It begins with loving, worshiping, and serving the wrong things. Sin in some way always involves the great exchange.

## GOD'S RESPONSE

The Ezekiel passage then gives God's response to the elders. Because these men have idols in their hearts, God says he is going to answer them –in keeping with their great idolatry.|| What does this mean? God is saying, –Because you have idols in your hearts, the only thing I want to talk about is your idolatry.|| Why? Maybe these men had important things to ask God. Maybe they had pressing decisions to make. Why would God refuse to talk to them about anything but the idols?

A crucial phrase explains God's response and reveals much about how the heart functions: –These men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces|| (Ezek. 14:3).

Imagine that someone places his hand up to his face so that he is looking through his fingers. What will happen to his vision? It will be seriously obstructed, and the only way to clear it is to remove his hand. In a similar way, an idol in the heart creates a stumbling block before the face. Until the idol is removed, it will distort and obscure everything else in the person's life. This is the principle of inescapable influence: Whatever rules the heart will exercise inescapable influence over the person's life and behavior. This principle has obvious implications for personal growth and ministry.

I once counseled a successful executive from New York City. He was the most controlling man I have ever met. He had been married for thirty years and handled all of the financial, parenting, and decorating decisions of the family. He was so obsessed with control that he would rearrange his wife's clothes closet according to his prescribed plan (blouses, skirts, pants, and dresses, in graduated shades of color)! Now, imagine that I did not know all this as I spoke to his wife. His controlling tendencies would not be in my mind as I listened to her complain that she and her husband never talk and that many conflicts are left unsolved. What would happen if I rolled up my counselor's sleeves and gave the husband good biblical instruction on communication and conflict resolution? Would this lead to basic changes in his marriage? The answer is no, because he would use his new understanding and skills to get what his heart worshiped. Because my counsel would not have addressed this man's idols of the heart, it would only produce a more successful controller. As long as the desire for dominance ruled his heart, he would use whatever principles and skills he learned to establish even greater control over his family.

If we fail to examine the heart and the areas where it needs to change, our ministry efforts will only result in people who are more committed and successful idolaters. This is why God will only answer the elders of Israel in keeping with their heart idolatry. If they do not change there, whatever God tells them will only be used to serve the idols that rule their hearts. We will even use the principles of the Word to serve our idols!

Because idolatry operates in the subtle shadows of the thoughts and motives of our hearts, most committed idolaters have no idea that this is their problem. But the influence is powerful just the same.

## COVERT AND OVERT IDOLATRY

I have traveled to northern India several times. Spiritually, this is one of the darkest places on earth. Idolatry permeates every aspect of individual and cultural life. Stand almost anywhere in northern India and you can see an altar to one of Hinduism's many gods. One day I stood in a temple and watched a young priest feed, bathe, and clothe an idol. I watched his colleague lie prostrate on the floor before an image of wood and gold. I was overcome by their sincerity and devotion. These inanimate images controlled every waking moment of the priests' young lives, even though they had no ability to see, speak, or act in any way beneficial to their worshipers. I witnessed hordes of poverty-stricken pilgrims bathing in the Ganges River after long, arduous journeys, so that their souls would be cleansed and their prayers answered.

One day I entered a temple and watched person after person do homage to a fifteen-foot, black stone phallus. I thought to myself, How blind and deceived these people must be! How utterly disgusting this must be in the eyes of the true and living God! I literally ran out of the temple, overcome with the darkness, saying to myself, I am glad I'm not like these people! But as I looked back at the temple, I was humbled by the thought that I am like them. My idols are not the overt idols of Hindu polytheism; they are the covert idols of my heart. But either way, they are god-replacements. From God's vantage point, my idols are just as disgusting as anything I had seen that day. They command my daily devotion, shape my daily routine, and guide the way I interact with life, though they have no power whatsoever to deliver. There are times when I am just as deceived and blind as the young priests I observed. Overt idolatry has much to tell us about how covert idolatry controls our lives.

Nowhere but in Scripture will you get this perspective on human motivation. The Bible alone declares that human beings are worshipers by their very nature and that everything we say and do is shaped by worship. God's Word alone insists that we are always serving God or some aspect of the creation, and whatever rules our hearts will exercise inescapable influence over our lives and behavior.

Heart idolatry can subvert even our most worshipful moments. For example, prayer is our most God-directed act, yet it too can be warped by an idolatrous heart. Have you ever rehearsed a prayer before publicly praying it? (You know, –Our dear Heavenly Father...No, no...Our sovereign, gracious Heavenly Father...no...Father in heaven, we are...||). Why do we do this? Are we trying to get it right for the Lord? That doesn't work because he hears the rehearsal! Isn't it really an attempt to use public prayer to gain the respect of the people around us? Because our hearts are captured by a desire for human approval, we use an act of worship to get glory for ourselves!

This is why the principle of the Ezekiel passage is so important, and why the focus of God's transforming grace is heart change. Our spiritual battle is a war for the heart. When that war is won, people behave in ways that please their Creator. God will never be satisfied with the crumbs of externalism. He rails against this in Isaiah: –These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me|| (Isa. 29:13a).

## APPLYING THE PRINCIPLE

My daily behavior is my attempt to get what is important to me in various situations and relationships. My choices and actions always reveal the desires that rule my heart. I never come empty. This is the deepest issue of human experience and a major answer to the question, –Why do people do the things they do?|| As James says, we are led away by our own desires (James 1:14).

This principle has several applications for personal growth and ministry.

1. Our hearts are always being ruled by someone or something.
2. The most important question to ask when examining the heart is, –What is functionally ruling this person’s heart in this situation?||
3. Whatever controls my heart will control my responses to people and situations.
4. God changes us not just by teaching us to do different things, but by recapturing our hearts to serve him alone.
5. The deepest issues of the human struggle are not issues of pain and suffering, but the issue of worship, because what rules our hearts will control the way we respond to both suffering and blessing.

#### IT’S A MATTER OF TREASURE

Christ also talked about what rules the heart using the metaphor of treasure, as we see in Matthew 6:19-24:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot server both God and Money.

Three principles in this passage speak to what we have been considering.

1. Everyone seeks some kind of treasure. (This is Christ’s operating assumption.)
2. Your Treasure will control your heart. (For where your treasure is, there you heart will be also.||)
3. What Controls your heart will control your behavior. (No one can serve two masters.||)

There are only two kinds of treasures, earthy and heavenly, and whatever treasures we choose will become our rulers. They exercise control over us, for if something is your treasure, you will live to gain, maintain, and enjoy it. Sadly, we often fail to see this in ourselves, though we can see it in others. One of the most tragic things that could happen to a human being is to invest his life in pursuit of the wrong treasure.

Luella has always been the fire marshal in our family. Whenever we moved into a new house, she explored all the possible exit routes and came up with exit plans in case of fire in various parts of the house. She would then gather the family, explain the plans, and quiz us until she was sure we all knew what to do in an emergency.

This usually worked well, except for the time when I had recently acquired the guitar of my dreams. I had been in a music store buying new strings when I saw a handmade nine-string guitar. Its sound was more beautiful than any guitar I had ever heard. When I told my mother about it on the phone, in a miracle moment she said that she and my dad would buy it for me. This was more than I had ever hoped for, but in a week, I was the owner of my beloved instrument.. Every evening after supper, I would retire to the living room and play, scarcely believing that this guitar belonged to me.

Shortly thereafter, Luella held her fire safety talk around the dinner table. She turned to me and asked, Paul, if a major fire broke out on the main floor of our house, what would you do? || Without a moment's thought, I responded, –I would run into the living room, grab my guitar, and get it out of the house!|| I will never forget the look on the faces of my family, or the silence that seemed to last about a year. Finally, one of my children asked, –What about us, Dad?|| My embarrassment and shame were deepened by the look on Luella's face that asked the same question.

The guitar in the music store had become a dream, the dream had become a purchase, and the purchase had become a major treasure capable of rearranging my priorities in a fundamental way. So it often is. We rarely say, –I am going to set my heart on this thing and let it completely control my life,|| but that is exactly what happens.

The person you met and mildly enjoyed becomes the person whose approval you cannot live without. The work you undertook to support your family becomes the source of identity and achievement you can't give up. The house you built for the shelter and comfort of your family becomes a temple for the worship of possessions. A rightful attention to your own needs morphs into a self-absorbed existence. Ministry has become more of an opportunity to seek power and approval than a life in the service of God. The things we set our hearts on never remain under our control. Instead, they capture, control, and enslave us. This is the danger of earth-bound treasure.

Every human being is a worshiper, in active pursuit of the thing that rules his heart. This worship shapes everything we do and say, who we are, and how we live. This is why the heart is always our target in personal ministry.

**How People Change by Paul Tripp & Tim Lane**

The following is an excerpt from the book by Paul David Tripp and Tim Lane Titled How People Change (Chapter 5). Tripp and Lane present the necessity of the body of Christ as a crucial element for sanctification. We would highly recommend that you purchase the book in its entirety and believe it would be a great encouragement to you as you walk-alongside your friend.

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#### CHANGE IS A COMMUNITY PROJECT

In the previous chapters, we have focused on individual change and growth in grace. But this process is not simply an individualistic one. It happens best - and primarily - within community.

Let me share one woman's story of her family's involvement in a small group that meets in their home. She speaks frankly about the work involved, along with the deep joy and satisfaction they have experienced over five years in the same group. What she says is central to understanding the importance of relationships if we are going to grow in godliness.

My husband and I have been a part of the same small group for the past five years. . . . Like many small groups, we regularly share a meal together, love one another practically, and serve together to meet needs outside our small group. We worship, study God's Word, and pray. It has been a rich time to grow in our understanding of God, what Jesus has accomplished for us, God's purposes for us as a part of his kingdom, his power and desire to change us, and many other precious truths. We have grown in our love for God and others, and have been challenged to repent of our sin and trust God in every area of our lives.

It was a new and refreshing experience for us to be in a group where people were willing to share their struggles with temptation and sin and ask for prayer . . . . We have been welcomed by others, challenged to become more vulnerable, held up in prayer, encouraged in specific ongoing struggles, and have developed sweet friendships. I have seen one woman who had one foot in the world and one foot in the church openly share her struggles with us. We prayed that God would show her the way of escape from temptation many times and have seen God's work in delivering her. Her openness has given us a front row seat to see the power of God intersect with her weakness. Her continued vulnerability and growth in godliness encourage us to be humble with one another, and to believe that God is able to change us too.

Because years have now passed in close community, God's work can be seen more clearly than on a week-by-week basis. One man who had some deep struggles and lots of anger has grown through repenting of sin and being vulnerable one-on-one and in the group. He has been willing to hear the encouragement and challenges of others, and to stay in community throughout his struggle . . . . He has become an example in serving others, a better listener, and more gentle with his wife. As a group we have confronted anxiety, interpersonal strife, the need to forgive, lust, family troubles, unbelief, the fear of man, hypocrisy, unemployment, sickness, lack of love, idolatry, and marital strife. We have been helped, held accountable, and lifted up by one another. We have also grieved together, celebrated together, laughed together, offended one another, reconciled with one another, put up with one another, . . . and sought to love God and one another. As a group we were saddened in

the spring when a man who had recently joined us felt that we let him down by not being sensitive to his loneliness. He chose to leave. I say this because, with all the benefits of being in a small group, it is still just a group of sinners. It is Jesus who makes it worth getting together. Apart from our relationship with him . . . , we have nothing to offer. But because our focus is on Jesus, the group has the potential to make a significant and life-changing difference in all our lives.

. . . When 7 o'clock on Monday night comes around, I eagerly look forward to the sound of my brothers and sisters coming in our front door. I never know how the evening will go, what burdens people will be carrying, how I will be challenged, or what laughter or tears we will share. But I always know that the great Shepherd will meet us and that our lives will be richer and fuller because we have been together.

. . . I hope that by hearing my story you will be encouraged to make a commitment to become a part of a small group and experience the blessing of Christian community within the smaller, more intimate setting that it makes possible.<sup>1</sup>

### Living in the Tension

In this testimony, we see the importance of redemptive friendships in the process of change. We also see the ongoing tension between what we gain and what we must endure for these relationships to work. The movie *About a Boy* captures this tension well. In it, a single man is trying to come to terms with his freedom as a single person and his longing for a meaningful relationship. As the story begins, his character is musing about his predicament:

In my opinion, all men are islands. And what's more, now's the time to be one. This is an island age. One hundred years ago, for instance, you had to depend upon other people. . . . Whereas now, you see, you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies and more importantly, the right attitude, you can be sun-drenched, tropical, a magnet for Swedish tourists. . . . The sad fact is, like any island dweller, from time to time, I had to visit the mainland.

As the movie unfolds, he moves towards a meaningful relationship, forgoing the freedoms he enjoyed while single. The story portrays humanity's deep longing for relationships, and concludes that they are worth pursuing.

At another level, though, meaningful relationships are often avoided. They require work, sacrifice, humility, and selflessness. While the idea of loving another person taps into something inherently human, it also exposes our sinful self-centeredness. In *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Changes Lives*, Tod E. Bolsinger observes:

More than any before us, an American today believes –I must write the script of my own life.|| The thought that such a script must be subordinated to the grand narrative of the Bible is a foreign one. Still more alarming is the idea that this surrender of our personal story to God’s story must be mediated by a community of fallen people we frankly don’t want getting in our way and meddling with our own hopes and dreams.

At one level we want friendships. At another level we don’t want them! In creation, we were made to live in community, but because of the fall, we tend to run from the very friendships we need. Quite often, our longing for them is tainted by sin. We pursue them only as long as they satisfy our own desires and needs. We have a love-hate relationship with relationships!

The Bible recognizes this profound tension, but still places our individual growth in grace in the context of the body of Christ. The Scriptures call us to be intimately connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our fellowship is an essential ingredient for lasting change. The work of redemption involves our individual relationship with Christ alongside our relationships with others.

### Friendships and Personal Change

Have you ever heard someone say, –You’ve made your bed, now lie in it||? As Christians, we know that nothing could be further from the gospel. This statement says, first, –Your problems are irreversible, so you are stuck in your own mess.|| And second, –You are totally on your own.|| In other words, don’t expect help from anybody! If things are going to change, you had better find a way to fix them yourself.

Joe was single, lonely, and very angry with people who had been part of his life. He always felt used by others and had become very cynical about the possibility of meaningful friendships. He felt especially betrayed by Christians who shunned him because of several social unacceptable habits.

Joe was not doing well spiritually. He had cut himself off from other people, and yet he had a deep desire for someone to understand him. Whenever he sought help with his problems, he was given sound biblical counsel about how he needed to think, believe, and respond to his problems - how he needed to change as an individual.

Joe lived within a profound tension. He did not like other people, but he had made human companionship his primary object of worship. He would avoid others and yet complain that others did not care for him. Well-intentioned helpers saw his relationship idolatry, and mistakenly avoided calling him to a community of friends who could help him grow. It was like saying, –Because you have made an idol of food, don’t eat!||

Joe was understandably confused and bitter. He needed help. He needed to change and take responsibility for his responses to life’s problems. But he also needed a community of friends where he could find hope and encouragement, along with challenging, honest, and loving accountability. Sadly, he was not being encouraged to pursue such redemptive friendships.

What does Joe need? He needs to know that when Christ brings us into the family of God, we are never alone again, no matter how much of a mess we have made of our lives! Yet many Christians latch onto the hope of personal change in a starkly individualistic way. Many helpers fail to move struggling people into the rich context of redemptive relationships. Instead, they cling to the arid individualism of our society. They have a –Jesus and me|| mindset as they battle sin and seek to become more like Christ. At first we might think, Why not? After all, getting involved with people is complicated and time-consuming. Who needs it? I could be reading my Bible and praying! Spending time with other people is not very efficient!

But God has a bigger - and, quite frankly, messier and –less efficient|| - plan. As we saw in the testimony at the beginning of this chapter, change is something God intends his people to experience together. It's a corporate goal. What God does in individuals is part of a larger story of redemption that involves all of God's people through the ages. You, Joe, and every other believer are already part of the story and part of the family. That is the context in which personal change takes place. Change within community is counterintuitive to the way we often think, but Scripture clearly presents it as God's way of making us more like Christ.

### Living in Community Like God Himself

Have you ever wondered why living in community is so important? Your immediate response probably emphasizes the personal benefits of good friendships. While these are valuable, the most important reason for community is the reality that God himself lives in community! Does that sound strange? It shouldn't. God lives in community with himself! Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in perfect harmony, love, and unity. We begin our discussion about the importance of community where all good theology begins: with God. When we do, it radically alters the way we think about relationships. They become God-centered and not people-centered.

In the last of sixteen sermons on 1 Corinthians 13, Jonathan Edwards says:

God is the fountain of love, as the sun is the fountain of light. And therefore the glorious presence of God in heaven fills heaven with love, as the sun, placed in the midst of the visible heavens in a clear day, fills the world with light. The apostle tells us that –God is love||; and therefore, seeing he is an infinite being, it follows that he is an infinite fountain of love. Seeing he is an all-sufficient being, it follows that he is a full and overflowing, and inexhaustible fountain of love. And in that he is an unchangeable and eternal being, he is an unchangeable and eternal fountain of love.

There, even in heaven, dwells the God from whom every stream of holy love, yea, every drop that is, or ever was, proceeds. There dwells God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, united as one, in infinitely dear, and incomprehensible, and mutual and eternal love . . . . And there this glorious fountain forever flows forth in streams, yea, in rivers of love and delight, and these rivers swell, as it were, to an ocean of love, in which the souls of the ransomed may bathe with the sweetest enjoyment, and their hearts, as it were, be deluged with love!<sup>3</sup>

Everything each person of the Trinity is and does is always in union with the others. We were made in the image of this glorious God. Is it any wonder, then, that this deep longing for

intimacy and relationship is woven into the fabric of our nature? Human beings long to connect because that is what they were made for. With the entrance of sin, this longing was corrupted and easily becomes idolatrous. Because of sin, we long to find all of our hope for relationship in other human beings. If we don't get what we want out of those relationships, we often do hurtful, sinful things. Our approach to relationships is often self-centered.

But God is a redeeming God who does something utterly amazing to reconcile us to himself and others. The gospel opens the door to friendships where we can be conformed into the very image of Christ. When talking about this new community, the church, Paul clearly has this in view. In Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul turns from talking about our great salvation in chapters 1-3 to the new human community we have been brought into. He begins to instruct the church about the practical outworking of the gospel in everyday life and relationships:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. [Eph. 4:1-6]

In light of the great grace of God, Paul calls members of this new community to enter into relationships with their Christian brothers and sisters in humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. He urges the church to be vigilant to keep the unity of the Spirit; he does not tell them to create it, because it is already a fact. When you trust in Christ, you are immediately welcomed into fellowship with the source of love, the triune God, and with his family, the church. In light of that, spare no effort to make sure your relationships reflect the unity and love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It all begins, continues, and will end with God at the center.

Paul grounds this call to community in the redemptive work of the Trinity. Notice how the word one is used in verses 4-6. Each use is attached to a member of the Trinity. There is one Spirit at work in one body. There is one Lord through whom we have one hope, faith, and baptism. There is one Father who is over one family, the church. All of the blessings are ours because of what the Trinity has done in creation and redemption.

Let's reflect on what the Trinity has done to make us one body, united to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Genesis 15, we find an odd story loaded with redemptive significance.

He also said to him [Abram], —I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you the land to take possession of it.|| But Abram said, —O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?||

So the LORD said to him, —Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.||

Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, —Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.||

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, —To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates - the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.||

What is going on in this strange encounter? Abram is struggling to believe God, so God helps him. He tells him to cut some animals in half. That night, a smoking firepot and a blazing torch pass between the animal halves. God was saying, —If I do not keep my promise to you, may what happened to these animals happen to me!|| This is called a self-maledictory oath. God is saying, —If I don't keep my end of the bargain, may I be ripped asunder!|| Over two thousand years later, God the Son hung on a cross, crying out, —My God! My God! Why have we been ripped asunder?|| God allowed what should have happened to us to happen to Jesus. We were the ones who failed, yet the triune God was torn asunder so that we might be united to him and to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The perfect love, unity, and joy that existed between the Father, Son, and Spirit were demolished, for a time, for our sake.

This is the ground on which we build all relationships. Every time you are tempted to shun another believer, remember that the Father, Son, and Spirit were torn asunder so that you might be united. When you sin or are sinned against, you are to move towards your sibling in Christ aware that Father, Son, and Spirit were torn asunder so that you might be reconciled! If we approached relationships in the body of Christ with that in view, it would transform our friendships. In Ephesians 4, Paul says that to the degree you do this, you will be —built up|| [v. 12], —become mature|| [v. 13], —[attain] to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ|| [v. 13], and —grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ|| [v. 15].

### Belonging to God's Family

When we place our trust in the work of Father, Son, and Spirit to make us acceptable in his presence and revoke our own attempts to make ourselves acceptable before God, he graciously forgives our sins. He also adopts us as his children. So often, the blessing of adoption is seen only through an individualistic lens: I am a child of God. This is true, but your adoption goes beyond an individual blessing. You have been adopted into a new family. The blessing of adoption is both individual and corporate. When my wife and I adopted our fourth

child, he not only got a mother and father, but three older siblings! He became an important part of a larger social group, his family.

When the apostle Paul was discipling new believers, he repeatedly reminded them that there was help in Christ and in Christ's people. This is reflected in Ephesians 2:14-22, where Paul tells them that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

What is God seeking to produce in his people? He intends us to be people who are moving towards each other in community. He removed all the barriers so that we can be people who hope, love, worship, and serve together. It is very important to him.

It is impossible to read this passage and come away with the idea that Christianity is a –just-me-and-God religion. Have you ever heard someone say, –Yes, I am a Christian, but I don't go to church. Why do I need that when I have the Lord? Or, –What is most important is my personal devotion to Christ, not the church. The Bible never separates the two. Our salvation connects us to God and his people. It is not an either-or but a both-and arrangement. It is not just in heaven that we will be united around the throne of God. Our personal relationship with Christ unites us to believers now!

Notice how Paul brings this out. He says that God has –destroyed the barrier to create in himself one new man. We are –fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. We are –being built together to become a dwelling place in which God lives. . . . – We can't become the Christians we are meant to be by being alone with God. This is not God's intent. What we become, we become together.

We tend to read the Bible through such individualistic lenses that we need to be encouraged to see the strong social themes that are throughout the entire Bible. In the Old Testament, God clearly says, –I will be your God and you will be my people. The –you is plural. When Paul and other New Testament writers address the body of Christ, their words are most frequently directed to the church as a whole. In Romans 12:1-2, a passage that is often applied only to the individual Christian, Paul urges the church to –present your bodies [somata (plural)] as a living sacrifice [thysian (singular)]. Isn't it interesting that he calls all the individuals who make up the church to present themselves corporately before God as a living sacrifice?

How does this vision impact you? Does it surprise you? Intimidate you? Annoy you? Encourage you? How much does your life currently allow you to develop relationships that are deep enough to help you grow and change? What are some common obstacles that hinder redemptive relationships from developing in our lives? Consider the following list and ask yourself if any of them apply to you:

- The busyness of life, keeping relationships distant and casual.
- A total immersion in friendships that are activity- and happiness-based.
- A conscious avoidance of close relationships as too scary or messy.
- A formal commitment to church activities, with no real connection to people.
- One-way, ministry-driven friendships in which you always minister to others, but never allow others to minister to you.
- Self-centered, –meet my felt needs|| relationships that keep you always receiving, but seldom giving.
- A private, independent, –just me and God|| approach to the Christian life.
- Theology as a replacement for relationship. Knowing God as a life of study, rather than the pursuit of God and his people.

Do any of these apply? Think about your closest relationships: your spouse, parents, children, or small group. What needs to change so that you can form more meaningful relationships with the people who are already in your life? American culture may idolize the Lone Ranger and Superman as heroes who right wrongs and ride out of town alone, but the solitary approach to life and change is utterly foreign to Scripture. In fact, the Bible sees it as weakness rather than strength! The person of character, according to Scripture, will have genuine friendships and be a genuine friend. After all, isn't that the essence of the second great commandment to –love your neighbor||? When we are adopted into God's family, we have many new brothers and sisters to love!

Yet this is not simple. Being involved with people is time-consuming, messy, and complicated. From our point of view it is inefficient, but from God's point of view it is the best way to encourage growth in grace. Our value system collides with God's, but his means for bringing about change in us is best. That means we will have to make time for these kinds of friendships to emerge and grow. We will have to be realistic, too. Close relationships make it more likely that you will sin against someone or that someone will sin against you. There will need to be times of confession and forgiveness. There will be times when you will need to

serve someone, even though you feel you lack the resources. There will also be times when you will be served! That may not sound like a challenge, but if you are proud, it is the last thing you want!

These are the very reasons why community is such a big part of God's plan to transform us into the image of Christ. Living in community pushes us to die to ourselves. There will be times when loving others and allowing others to serve and love us will feel like death, but this is the pathway to real life in Christ. The more we understand our own hearts, the more we see that it takes a work of God's grace to transform self-absorbed individuals into a community of love. Being in redemptive relationships shows us our need for change and helps bring it about!

### Being Loved as a Family

Ephesians 3:14-21 highlights God's way of grounding an individual Christian's growth within the body. For years, I read and taught from this passage focusing primarily on individual change and relationship with Christ. I failed to connect the Christian's personal life and sanctification to the larger body of Christ. But Paul is vigilant to see Jew and Gentile living in community, even though there could not have been a more radical notion than the idea of Jew and Gentile being on equal footing with God and each other! The tension that existed between Jew and Gentile in the first century was more profound than the ethnic and racial divisions that exist in America today. In view of this tension, Paul constantly applies the message of grace to individuals, but individuals who are in fellowship with one another. This perspective should keep us from reading Ephesians 3:14-21 through the lens of individualism.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurable more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.

As Paul prays, he wants the Ephesian believers to grasp the nature of God's love for them in Christ. His prayer certainly reflects his desire for individuals to know God and understand his love, but this knowledge and —power through his Spirit|| come to a group of individuals living in communion with God and in community with one another.

Look at the language Paul uses. Do you get a sense of how big the love of Christ is? Can you imagine what it would take to really tap into it? The love of Christ is so wide, long, high, and deep [infinite, in other words] that we cannot see this love or experience it all by our finite selves. We need strength from God to comprehend it and we have to grasp it —together with all the saints|| (v. 18). It is much like a jury that relies on twelve different minds to come to a full understanding of the truth. When we are in meaningful relationships with one another, we

each bring a unique perspective and experience to our knowledge of Christ's love. One person has been rescued from a menacing addiction. Another has been brought through deep suffering. Still another has been sustained by God's grace in a difficult marriage. The list goes on. When we gather to share our stories, we see a different aspect of the diamond that is the love of Christ. Together, our understanding and experience of God's infinite love becomes fuller, stronger, and deeper. Not only are we strengthened in our individual growth in grace, but the entire body is built up by a fuller sense of the power and hope of God's grace! The Christian life is not less than individual, but it is so much more.

Paul's prayer is that the Ephesians would, together, be rooted and established in love. It is the only way they can be filled with all the fullness and power of God. As isolated individuals, we cannot reach the level of maturity God has designed for us. It only happens as we live in a loving, redemptive community where we celebrate the many facets of the gospel. When we look ahead to Ephesians 4, we see that Paul follows his prayer with all sorts of practical instructions on how to pursue and preserve the unity of this community. Our personal transformation must be worked out within the family of God.

The gospel is not only more clearly perceived and experienced within community; it is the basis for the community!

If, as we see in Ephesians 4:4-6, God himself lives in community, could we expect him to want anything different for us? If his redemptive plan caused him to enter our world and get close to us, should we be surprised that he calls his children to do the same with each other [4:1-3]? The things we do to enjoy deep fellowship with God and each other are the very things that make us less self-centered and more like Christ. It is the change he is after!

In the church I pastored, individuals and families always came to a deeper awareness of the grace of Christ when they experienced it through the community of believers. I recall one family that was struggling spiritually. They went through a season of suffering that brought a dozen or more brothers and sisters in Christ to their aid. They were also aware that the church was praying for them on a regular basis. As this family rubbed shoulders with individuals, families, and the entire congregation through their trial, their faith was strengthened. Their presence on Sunday mornings ceased to be routine and their involvement in worship grew. At one time, I had wondered if they would make it through the service without becoming bored. But after their experience of community, they were much more engaged when songs were sung, testimonies were shared, and the Lord's Supper was celebrated. They even started remembering the sermons!

Sometime later, I asked them what had made the difference. Without hesitation, they described how they had seen the grace of Christ in those who had helped them. It was a combination of seeing the gospel lived out practically and the personal relationships that had been formed. On several occasions, their friends had shared stories of how God had strengthened them in the midst of a trial. They also prayed with the family. God had caused this family to become dependent upon the body of Christ and, through it, they had come to grasp, together with their fellow Christians, the depth and beauty of the gospel. Such friendships are clearly one of the primary ways God causes us to grow.

## Purified as a Family

We have seen that God places us in a redemptive community to change us into the likeness of Christ. We understand the love of Christ more fully when we look at it with other believers. Another component of Christian growth involves saying —no|| to what is harmful and —yes|| to the things that produce life and godliness. Here, Christian friendships not only help us see something [the love of God]; they also help us do something [obey God]. Both are important and must be kept together as we think about the Christian life. Christian friendships do not simply help us bask in the sunshine of God’s grace; they also help us roll up our sleeves and strive after holiness.

In Titus 2:11-14, we see the community of faith as a place where we are encouraged to pursue a life pleasing to God.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say —No|| to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

This is another passage that first appears to present God’s grace to individuals, who are then commanded to use that grace as a way to privately —clean up their act.|| But as the passage describes the final goal of God’s grace, it says that Jesus gave himself to us —to purify for himself a people . . . eager to do what is good|| [v. 14]. The ultimate goal of God’s grace is an active, healthy, unified body of believers, a full-fledged family freed from sin and its slavery. It is this people, purified and zealous for good works, that is God’s precious inheritance.

Just as in Ephesians, Titus 2 includes instructions for corporate living. We need each other’s help as we learn to say —yes|| and —no|| to the right things! Paul calls believers to live in a way that helps others to be built up as well as built together. We must be built up because divisiveness is a terrible thing. It is damaging when people quarrel and sow seeds of dissension, and Paul warns against it. But the body of Christ must also be built together. It is deformed and disabled when people never fully join and participate in the first place. In a similar way, the apostle Peter, in 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10, uses rich Old Testament language to describe the corporate nature of our sanctification:

As you come to him, the living Stone - rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . . But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Peter speaks of individuals as —living stones|| who are —being built into a spiritual house to be holy.|| Like Titus, he issues a corporate call to individuals who have been ransomed by God from a lifestyle of slavery to sin and darkness.

The corporate nature of our growth in grace is highlighted in many places in Scripture. In Romans 12:1-8, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:7-16, and 1 Peter 4:10-11, Paul and Peter speak of the diversity of gifts. First Corinthians 12 is especially important, because Paul talks about the many different gifts while using the metaphor of the physical body. Each believer receives gifts from the Holy Spirit to be used —for the common good|| [v. 7]. We are to live as unique and vital parts of Christ’s body, connected to serve, and be served by, the rest of the body [vv. 12, 14]. No one part should think of itself as useless, especially when compared to more prominent or —glamorous|| parts [vv. 15-27].

Think about the gifts God has given you. How are they meant to serve other members of the body as they seek to honor Christ? What gifts do you need from others to help you do the same thing?

When we don’t think about our gifts in this corporate way, the very gifts that are given to bless the community are used to divide it. I remember a situation where a church was located near a trailer park. Over the years, the church had struggled to reach out to this community. In a congregational meeting, the pastor encouraged the congregation to make a new commitment to serve the people there. One person stood up and said that past efforts had failed because the church lacked organization. Another person said that the church had failed due to lack of knowledge regarding the people’s practical needs. Still another said that the church lacked evangelistic zeal.

In each case, the person offering the criticism had the gifts to make the effort succeed! The person who saw a lack of organization had the gift of administration. The person who saw the lack of concern for practical needs had the gift of mercy. And the person who thought the church lacked evangelistic zeal had the gift of evangelism. What should have been a very successful outreach was short-circuited because they had not been using their gifts, the very gifts that were needed most. Instead, they had lapsed into an unhealthy criticism of what others were not doing.

About a month later, these three individuals got together and pooled their gifts of evangelism, mercy, and administration to spearhead a successful ministry to the residents of the trailer park. The lesson is obvious: We are better when we are together. Without a combination of gifts expressing the grace of Christ, that very grace is shrouded in ineptitude and pride. Our gifts are for the common good, not self-aggrandizement. When we fail to see this, we find that our gifts actually create division within the body of Christ, instead of uniting us.

Are there places where your gifts are needed in the body of Christ? A better question is, —Where are your gifts needed?|| One good way to determine your gifts is to ask yourself where you see weaknesses in the body. It is highly likely that you see these weaknesses because you are looking at the church through the lens of your gifts. Where you see weakness is probably the very place where God wants you to serve your brothers and sisters.

Have you ever seen what happens in a church when there is a death in a family? The pastor and others seek to comfort the family with the promises of Scripture. Other people bring meals, watch children, make phone calls, run errands, clean the house, drive the grieving family to the funeral home and help them make arrangements. Others give financial resources to cover unexpected expenses. Some assist with banking, budget, and insurance matters. Others simply come to weep with those who mourn. It is the body of Christ using its gifts to corporately express the grace of Christ.

Have you ever experienced the love of Christ in this multiplicity of ways? Wouldn't you agree that God's love and power are more fully revealed when the gifts are used in concert? Doesn't it provide more hope for the future, more encouragement to trust the Lord, more strength to do and be what God calls us to be? Everything is more powerful when combined with the ministries of the rest of the body.

### The Sacraments

Much could be said about the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace in the Christian life. They are the most tangible ways in which the things we have been discussing are displayed. These visible reminders capture both the individual and corporate nature of the Christian life while simultaneously placing the gospel at the center.

Think about the sacrament of baptism. When Peter preaches to the crowd in Acts 2, they respond to his call to trust in Christ by saying, –Brothers, what shall we do?|| Peter responds, –Repent and be baptized!|| He calls them to individual repentance and faith in Christ at the same time he calls them to commit to the body of Christ. As we saw in Chapter 2, baptism is a picture of personal regeneration and cleansing as well as a call to enter the body of Christ. It centers on the grace of God while symbolizing individual spiritual cleansing and corporate identification with the church.

In the same way, the Lord's Supper is both individual and corporate. Isn't it ironic that individualism and self-centeredness are evident in both places where the Lord's Supper is set before us? When Jesus was leading his disciples in the Last Supper, Judas was preparing to betray him and Peter would later deny him. James and John wanted prominence as his followers. When Paul gives instructions regarding the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, he is responding to incidents in which people are failing to love one another!

Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 also emphasizes its individual and corporate dimensions. In 11:28, he urges believers to examine themselves before taking part: A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread or drinks of the cup.|| This is a call to personal repentance and faith. In 10:17, he says, –Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.|| This is the corporate side. The sacraments and our participation in them serve as reminders that the Christian life is both individual and corporate. One without the other is not sufficient. It is not either/or. Though we are not given the option of separating them, we often do.

What is the point of all of this? God's work of change has relationships at the core. They are a necessary means and a wonderful goal. Humble community is not the icing on the cake of the Christian life. In a real way, it is the cake. Relationships of love are a means of personal

growth, a mark of God's people being purified, and a clear argument to the world for the truth of the gospel.

When we pursue individual spiritual growth through redemptive relationships, we have a powerful combination that beautifies the bride of Christ as she prepares to meet her bridegroom. As we continue to discuss the specifics of change in the following chapters, remember the relational emphasis that the Bible sets in high relief. It is a reminder of where we need to grow, and how much we need God's grace to see it happen. We must not take the change process out of the context in which God has placed it. We grow together!

