

“When the Church Was a Family”

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Book Note ~ Dave Kraft

Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay also grow. Why do we continue foolishly to operate as if our own immediate happiness is of greater value than the redemptive relationships God has placed us in?

We intend to consistently emphasize the inviolable maxim that spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community. We in America have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group—our church or our family, for example—to which we belong.

The tune of radical individualism has been playing in our ears at full volume for decades. Radical individualism has affected our whole way of viewing the Christian faith, and it has profoundly compromised the solidarity of our relational commitments to one another.

The New Testament picture of the church as a family flies in the face of our individualistic cultural orientation. Our radical overemphasis on a personal relationship with God is an American—not a biblical—theological construction.

Paul’s driving passion was to establish spiritually vibrant, relationally healthy communities of believers in strategic urban settings throughout the Roman Empire.

As church-going Americans, we have been led to believe that our individual fulfillment and our personal relationship with God are more important than any connection we might have with our fellow human beings, whether in the home or in the church. We have, in a most subtle and insidious way, been conformed to this world.

The cultivation of lasting community is at the very heart of emerging Christianity’s renewal project. If a church begins to look like a family, then all its institutional practices will undergo change. The church as a family is primarily about relationships.

We must take care to complement the passionate practice of the Christian faith with ongoing historical and theological reflection. We establish our individual goals in life, and then we utilize the various groups and institutions in society to facilitate the realization of these personal goals and objectives.

To gain a new appreciation for the relational solidarity that characterized the New Testament church. The Japanese word for human person is *ningen*, which literally means “**between people.**”

The individuals in a strong-group society find their identity not primarily in their own personal achievements but in the context of the group to which they belong. And crucial life decisions are made in the context of that group as well. The manner in which I introduce myself speaks volumes about the way I view myself in relation to others in the world in which I live.

We can summarize our most important life-decisions under three headings:

- Vocation What I am going to do with my life?
- Spouse Who I am going to spend my life with?
- Residence Where I am going to live?

American men (and increasingly women), define themselves primarily by what they do, by their individual achievements. People in biblical times simply did not make major life decisions on their own. Americans pay a tremendous price for our cherished freedoms to determine our own vocational, relational, and geographical destinies.

We turn to psychologists—and to medication—to assist us in dealing with the stress and emotional upheaval that inevitably come on us in a society that emphasizes self-reliance and individual autonomy at the expense of relational support and accountability.

The great majority of people on this planet never needed therapy until society began to dump the responsibility for making life's major decisions squarely upon the lonely shoulders of the individual. The collectivist social model is deeply woven into the very fabric of the gospel itself. For the early Christians the overall health and honor of the church family took priority over their individual needs and desires.

In the New Testament world the group took priority over the individual. No image for the church occurs more often in the New Testament than the metaphor of family. For descent group societies, a good marriage is one that enhances the honor and position of the extended family.

This reality leads us into an exploration of the most intimate and highly charged relationship for people in the world of Jesus and the early Christians—the bond among brothers and sisters. Sibling solidarity is the highest relational value for collectivist family members. The collectivist priority of sibling loyalty over commitment to one's spouse.

Disloyalty to one's family is the epitome of impiety in a strong-group society. Sibling solidarity was clearly a highly treasured social value among Jews in ancient Palestine.

There would have been no place in the early Christian church for an American individualist. There remains a problem with an exclusively pro-family theology of the Gospels.

It is interesting to observe that the Jesus of the Gospels often seems to be concerned with something quite different than the material typically found in our creeds and statements of faith. If we want to find out what God is like, we simply observe what Jesus said and did. Pretty straightforward.

Our theological heritage has encouraged us to focus almost exclusively on the saving significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, while generally ignoring our Lord's evaluations of the socio-cultural institutions of His day. We tend to leap from the manger to the cross without touching the ground of everyday human reality—and interpersonal relationships—in between.

Frustrated with current church values and methodologies, emerging church leaders are turning from the New Testament Epistles to the Gospels for guidance.

The time has come for us to pursue a more holistic and biblical Christology; one which reunites belief and behavior in a way that is consistent with the teachings and practice of New Testament Christianity.

Recall from the previous chapter the three central social values of the ancient Mediterranean world:

1. In the New Testament world the group took priority over the individual.
2. In the New Testament world a person's most important group was his family.
3. In the New Testament world the closest family bond was the bond between siblings.

Jesus radically challenged His disciples to disavow primary loyalty to their natural families in order to join the new surrogate family of siblings He was establishing—the family of God.

Exchanging one family for another is at the very heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. "Hate" here probably does not mean 'dislike intensely' but rather to sever one's relationship with the family.

Jesus did not simply intend for His followers to substitute a personal commitment to Him for ties of blood family loyalty. He intended for them to exchange their loyalty to one family for unswerving loyalty to another—the family of God. And where conflict between the natural family and God's family did arise, the faith family was to become the primary locus of relational solidarity.

Jesus and His followers did not define loyalty to God solely in terms of a low-group, individualistic “personal relationship” with Jesus. Nor, by the way, did they define it as loyalty to the church as an institutional organization (more on this later).

For the early Christians, loyalty to God found its tangible daily expression in unswerving loyalty to God’s group, the family of surrogate siblings who called Him “Father.” Simply knowing the commands and prohibitions of Scripture has proven to be an insufficient defense against the powerful socializing influence of radical individualism in the lives of American Christians.

Our central Western value of emotional intimacy in marriage actually gets no space at all in 1st Corinthians 7. Marriage is instead presented as somewhat of a concession: “it is better to marry than to burn with desire.”

The person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a church and responsible to the church for his or her actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. The individual person is embedded in the church and is free to do what he or she feels right and necessary only if in accord with church norms and only if the action is in the church’s best interest. The church has priority over the individual member.

We bend over backward in our churches to accommodate the radical individualism of people who come to us to find a “personal” Savior who, we assure them, will meet their every felt need. And the overwhelming tide of secular culture threatens to suffocate what is left of the spiritual life of our churches, as the West becomes less and less Christian.

People did not convert to Christianity solely because of what the early Christians believed. They converted because of the way in which the early Christians behaved. The ancient Christians were known for their love for one another. The family ideal reigned supreme as the preeminent model for church organization and social interaction, and the ancient church grew and grew.

Brothers care for the needs of brothers. We find this theme appearing again and again in Christian literature when the church faced pagan persecution. For the early Christians, the church was a family—in word and in deed. Even a pagan philosopher like Lucian had to acknowledge it.

Our journey to the past is now complete. The evidence is conclusive, and the voices are unanimous. For Jesus, Paul, and early church leaders throughout the Roman Empire, the preeminent social model that defined the Christian church was the strong-group Mediterranean family.

A person could read through your statement of faith and conclude that Christianity, as your church teaches it and practices it, has everything to do with how an individual relates to God and absolutely nothing to do with how people relate to one another.”

In the Ten Commandments the first four deal with how we relate to God and the other six speak about our relationships with others.

It is not uncommon to encounter persons who claim to be followers of Jesus but who remain unconnected to a local faith community. The phrase “personal relationship with God” is found nowhere in the Bible.

In Scripture salvation is a community-creating event. The thought that one could somehow acquire a “personal relationship with God” outside the faith family—and remain an “unchurched Christian”—was simply inconceivable to those whose lives had been defined from birth by the groups to which they belonged. To become a Christian was to change groups, plain and simple. The New Testament focus, as we would expect of a collection of strong-group documents, is upon Jesus as Lord and Savior of a group—not only of the individual.

We are not saved only to enjoy a personal relationship with God. We are saved to community. We are saved to God’s group. God’s goal is not simply to usher me into a personal relationship with Him. God’s goal is to transfer me from one group to another, from “the world” to “the family of God”

Salvation thus has tremendous sociological as well as theological ramifications. God saved the Israelites not just so they could relate to Him as individuals but, most importantly, “to be the people of his inheritance” (Deut 4:20). God saved the Israelites to community. For early Christianity, individual salvation was understood as deliverance from one group to another—from “this corrupt generation” to the family of God. People are saved to community.

The miracle of deliverance from Egypt was the establishment of God’s group, Israel. The miracle of Pentecost was the reestablishment of God’s group as a surrogate family that would soon include all the nations. Salvation, at Sinai and at Pentecost, was a community-creating event. Salvation is a community-creating event. The death of Jesus is a community-creating event.

Preoccupation with individual spirituality remains an incomplete and inadequate picture of the Christian life. Just as we are justified with respect to God the Father upon salvation, so also we are familified with respect to our brothers and sisters in Christ. And this familification is no less a positional reality than our justification.

We need to cultivate both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of what happened to us at salvation, as we seek to mature in the Lord. We cannot stop with the vertical aspect of salvation. We must also embrace the horizontal dimension of New Testament soteriology.

American evangelicalism is a community in crisis, and it will remain such as long as we fail to recapture the biblical understanding of salvation as a community-creating event. The distant out-workings of the Protestant Reformation, which have now left us with a truncated understanding of the New Testament gospel of whole-life discipleship.

Now that American society has become relationally disconnected, the poverty of our “group-less” gospel is glaringly manifested. W. Roof observed, “With believing disjointed from belonging, it amounts to a ‘portable’ faith.” Countless Sunday attenders who opt for individual satisfaction over loyalty to God’s group.

Present salvation (from the power of sin) is necessarily mediated in the context of Christian community. The community, not the closet, is the place where salvation is worked out. Our new converts need to learn from the outset that the Christian life is preeminently a community endeavor.

The biblical picture of reconciliation, with its hope-giving promise of lasting and meaningful relationships, just may be the key “facet of the jewel of the atonement” for the age in which we live. Regeneration often follows, rather than precedes, association with God’s children in a local Christian church.

Moravians made sure that their potential converts understood from the outset that commitment to Jesus meant commitment to His group. There are good reasons, biblical and practical, to revisit our understanding of soteriology and retool our evangelistic strategies in light of the New Testament model of the church as a strong-group family. Our spiritual lives and the health of our congregations depend on it.

It has become increasingly difficult for church leaders to encourage our people to stay long-term in their congregations so that we can grow together in a healthy context of familial support and relational accountability.

The ever-present challenge of Christian consumerism, endemic to many of our densely-populated urban settings, deludes some into thinking that another church down the street will somehow better “meet their needs.” Our culture continues to socialize us to believe that our personal desires and felt needs should determine the course of our daily lives.

Privatization of the Christian faith turns out to be little more than a regrettable accommodation to a pagan culture’s unbiblical obsession with individual determinism and personal subjective experience. We do not have to be conformed to this world. It is time to return to our biblical roots by emphasizing both the corporate and the individual aspects of salvation.

1. We share our stuff with one another.
2. We share our hearts with one another.
3. We stay, embrace the pain, and grow up with one another.

Family is about more than me, the spouse, and the kids. This is the emotional attachment, the affective sense of closeness and intimacy that the Holy Spirit weaves into the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ who spend time together and share life and ministry together.

Church culture in America tends to discourage—rather than encourage—ongoing loyalty and commitment to a local family of believers.

God has now been recast in the role of a divine therapist who aids the individual Christian in his or her personal quest for spiritual enlightenment and self-discovery. And Jesus, in the final analysis, has become little more than a “personal Savior.”

A person does not grow up by running from family to family.

In some cases Jesus went so far as to present ongoing family loyalty and becoming a disciple as mutually exclusive options. A fair assessment of the Gospel evidence uncovers as much anti-family sentiment as pro-family sentiment in the public ministry of Jesus.

Jesus challenged His disciples to transfer their primary family allegiance from one group (the natural family) to another (the family of God). Many of us choose to ignore this principle and isolate our families from the context of relational accountability—and input on decision making—offered by the people of God.

Christians should perceive themselves to be members of a church family and responsible to the church for their actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. The individual person is embedded in the church family and is free to do what he or she feels right and necessary only if in accord with church family norms and only if the action is in the church's best interest. The church family has priority over the individual member.

God has not equipped us to operate as isolated individuals, especially where the most important decisions of our lives are concerned.

The closer a Christian group approximates the strong-group, church family model that characterized early Christianity, the better the decisions that are made by the group's individual members and nuclear family units.

Commitment to God cannot be separated from commitment to God's group. Given the present state of some of our churches, recapturing Jesus' vision for authentic Christian community may seem like a nearly insurmountable challenge.

More often than not, we simply need to figure out how to get out of God's way in order to let Him do His community-creating work in our lives.

The time is past for preaching and teaching that serve only to reinforce, rather than to challenge, the unbiblical assumption that Christianity is to be conceived of as some sort of an individual path to spiritual enlightenment or, worse yet, a commodity to be consumed.

We should take advantage of the power of corporate worship to teach our people that the church is a family. Now it is certainly the case that God often does meet us at our point of need. But a teaching ministry that overemphasizes this reality runs the risk of promoting an individualistic, anthropocentric view of the Christian life.

We give our people the wrong impression that God's primary objective in our lives is to help us achieve our relational and vocational goals, to relieve our stress, to give us joy and peace—All at the personal level. We must assure our people that this relational context is what "going to church" is all about.

Simply promoting a small-group program as a second option during the week is not enough. These relational settings must become central to the values of our church culture.

You might try what I did on a Sunday morning some time ago. I preached a sermon entitled "Why Sunday am Is Not Church," in which I compared early church family values and practices with the way that we do church on Sunday.

I proceeded gently but firmly to inform my people that many of them—some of whom had attended on Sunday for years—had never been to church!

Then I encouraged them to begin going to church, that is, to start attending one of our home-group settings where they could cultivate the kind of surrogate sibling relationships that God intends for His children to enjoy with one another. We switched from a large group pattern of church to that of a network of house churches.

Sunday worship and teaching combined with home-group relationships is a powerful prescription for vibrant Christian living.

We are all quite aware that Sunday attenders generally do not become spiritually formed disciples of Jesus. If we want to return to the world of New Testament Christianity, the relational environments in our churches must take precedence over our larger weekly gatherings.

Some pastors depend on public teaching ministries for a weekly shot of self-esteem, and our personal identities have become far too wrapped up in our role as the community's "Sunday sage."

It has been my observation that church leaders who spend the bulk of their week in the business world, and who have not been extensively exposed to New Testament ecclesiology, remain quite satisfied to view growth in Sunday morning attendance and the expansion of the church budget as the primary benchmarks of a healthy Christian community. As long as our key leaders remain so satisfied with so little, we will not recapture Jesus' vision for authentic Christian community.

Our personal investment in the success of our Sunday services, and the affirmation we receive when things go well, tend to make it emotionally difficult for us as pastors to embrace the truth that our people need each other much more than they need us.

We must preach community, and we must structure and present our church programs in such a way as to make those relational environments a first priority for the lives of our people.

We ourselves need to be in community in order to model community life for our people if we truly want them to embrace church family values for their own lives.

The American evangelical model of the CEO pastor who functions as a spiritual father to his congregation and as a business executive with his staff—but who relates to no one in the church as a peer brother in Christ—directly betrays the New Testament metaphor of the church as a family.

A return to the church as God intended will begin, as is often the case, with a transformation of values and behaviors among those who lead God's people.

The central problem with abusive cult groups lies in the concentration of power into the hands of a single individual and the utilization of the leader's authority to manipulate rather than to serve his followers. A single authoritarian leader in charge of a community structured to embrace strong-group values is a recipe for spiritual and relational disaster. Plurality and servant leadership are designed to be central to God's model of the church as a strong-group family.

The strong-group church family is not to be led by a single individual but by a group of people, variously identified in the New Testament as elders, overseers, or pastors (the terms are interchangeable). Plurality leadership was the common model in the early church.

There are no straightforward examples of one-man leadership until the letters of Ignatius (c. AD 110).

I offer some pragmatic arguments for the team approach. The first four address primarily the needs of the flock, and the last two demonstrate the value of the plurality model for the pastors involved.

(1) A Safeguard against abuse.

Strong-group churches must be led by a team of pastor-elders in order to prevent group authority from falling into the hands of a single individual. The parade of cult aberrations in contemporary American society strongly cautions us against placing strong-group authority into the hands of a single individual.

(2) A safeguard against “celebrity-ism.”

Americans used to have heroes. Now we have celebrities. It’s pretty scary to think just how far some Christians will go in order to maintain their allegiance to their spiritual celebrities. Christians in America do not need pastors who are celebrities. They need pastors who are mature brothers—pastors who walk alongside them hand-in-hand, overcoming the same spiritual obstacles that their sheep face, in the context of the interpersonal accountability and relational integrity that God has provided in His church family. One of the most tangible ways to communicate to our people that Jesus is the head of the church is to lead and feed our churches in a team format at the human level.

(3) A model for church family life.

In our day of dysfunctional families and increasing relational chaos, the local church needs more than a solitary preacher who talks eloquently about getting along with others but who answers to no one in his everyday ministry. A church needs a team of pastors who model people skills in their relationships with one another. Plurality leadership provides the context for just such modeling.

(4) Moral accountability.

I find it troubling that numerous pastors exhort their people to join Bible study and accountability groups, while they themselves answer to no one for their own moral and spiritual lives. The lone-ranger approach to pastoral ministry is not only unbiblical it’s also dangerous.

(5) Prevention of pride and discouragement.

From what we learned about the New Testament model for church leadership, it appears that God never intended the burdens and blessings of pastoral ministry to fall on the shoulders of a single individual. I had always heard it said that a strong leader is needed to direct a church through a difficult period of change. I would rather have a strong team of leaders any day.

Leaders who serve will not abuse or manipulate.

Paul said that Jesus “did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage.”

Three fundamental characteristics of Mediterranean society and ancient family systems:

1. The group comes first: In the social world of the early Christians the survival and health of the group took priority over the needs and desires of the individual.
2. It's all about family: The extended (patrilineal) family system was the group to which persons in Mediterranean antiquity expressed primary relational allegiance.
3. I am my brother's keeper: The closest same generation family bond in the New Testament world was the bond between consanguine siblings.

Social anthropologists refer to modern America as a weak-group society where the needs, goals, and desires of the individual come first. All of this illustrates a fundamental cultural axiom in contemporary Western society: The individual comes first.

Jesus and family: Jesus viewed His followers as a surrogate family. Paul and the family of God: The apostle Paul expected the communities of Christians he established throughout the eastern Roman Empire to function as surrogate families.

The ancient church as family: The ancient church retained the family model and exhibited sibling social solidarity throughout the pre-Constantine era of early church history.

It must be recognized that in the New Testament era, a person was saved not solely to enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus. A person was saved to community.

It is not by accident that the phrase “personal relationship with God” is conspicuously absent from the pages of Scripture. According to the New Testament, we are saved to community. Salvation involves adoption into the family of God. Indeed, salvation is becoming a member of God's family—a family that includes both a new Father and a new set of brothers and sisters. Biblical salvation is a community-creating event.

We are saved not simply to enjoy a personal relationship with God; we are saved to community. There is no room in biblical Christianity for an unchurched Christian.

If salvation is a community-creating event, if conversion to Christianity means being saved to community, then it would seem that for a conversion to be genuine, this relational aspect of salvation must somehow find expression in the everyday life of a professing Christian.

The family of God is not an institution that I as an individual Christian utilize to help me grow in my personal relationship with Jesus. The family of God is the place where I join together in community with my siblings in the faith, in order to engage in God's great missional adventure of world evangelization. The family of God is the place where I lose my life in order to gain it.

Cyprian of Carthage boldly asserted, "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother"

The idea of encouraging people to pray a prayer of personal repentance—to "accept Jesus as personal Savior" and thereby become a child of God—must therefore be complemented with a challenge to become part of God's family.

Otherwise, we simply perpetuate the radical individualism that has rendered American evangelicalism culturally and morally impotent, and we blatantly ignore the New Testament picture of regeneration as a community-creating event.

Receiving Christ as Savior without church involvement is a sure recipe for stillbirth. Church involvement in the New Testament sense means the development of intimate, healthy, long-lasting relationships with one's brothers and sisters in Christ.

We must tell the world that following Jesus involves both commitment to God and commitment to God's group.

There remains a final ingredient that will prove absolutely essential for recapturing Jesus' vision for authentic Christian community.

We need church leaders who have the courage both to teach and to model a radically counter-cultural approach to doing church in their local congregations. And, frankly, it will take more courage to do the latter than the former. Pastors must cultivate sibling-like relationships with a handful of people in their own congregations so they can model "church as a family" to the rest of the flock.