

## ***Living in the Relational Church, Part 2***

By Wayne Jacobsen  
<http://www.lifestream.org>

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Heb. 10:24-25)

I don't know of another Scripture that has suffered more abuse than this one. It is often quoted as the reason people must file into a religious institution on Sunday morning, sit in rows and submit to a music performance and a lecture that others have put together for their benefit.

For many, that is the only standard that determines whether someone belongs to God's church or whether they are regarded as independent and rebellious. It has become so enshrined in our religious psyche that nothing else matters.

If you frequent one of these religious establishments with some regularity (every few weeks will do) others consider you to be a healthy believer. If not, however, they raise an eyebrow of caution. Just going validates someone's faith even when nothing else about their lives would indicate that they know who he is. Some of the most arrogant and independent people I know sit through a weekly religious event and still go out and live life on their own terms.

Pressed on the point, many will admit that Sunday morning attendance isn't going to earn their way into heaven or secure a life-transforming relationship with the Living God. But while they concede it may not work for everyone, they consider those who do not attend to be in grave danger.

How tragic! When we fail to view the church as God does, and unthinkingly embrace what 2,000 years of religious tradition says it is, we miss out on some of the simplest and best truths of God's Word. For the writer of Hebrews is talking about something far more vital than where someone sits on a weekend morning.

### ***Encourage One Another***

The above passage from Hebrews was never intended to be a proof-text to demand people sit through a programmed 'service' every week. But please don't misunderstand me here. If your relationships with other believers revolve around such a meeting and you are growing to experience all that God has for you in the midst of it, stay with it!

But I think we make a critical error if we assume that's all the writer had in mind. I see five reasons why he must have been talking about something more:

First, the early church did not have anything like what we call 'church services' today. Yes, they got together--mostly in homes, and only occasionally in larger settings to hear one of the apostles or a distant teacher help them discover who God is and how to walk with him. These gatherings,

however, didn't look at all like most programmed gatherings today which are often designed more to entertain than to equip.

Second, the writer specifically focuses on an environment where each believer is actively involved in encouraging the others--stimulating them to love and good deeds. Where does that happen in most Sunday morning events today? People only look at the back of other people's heads while all the 'ministry' flows from talented musicians and orators up front. This Scripture paints a far different picture of face-to-face dialogue and personal engagement.

Third, he tells them to do it daily. How can that be fulfilled in a weekly or twice-weekly event? If he meant such gatherings they would have to meet every day. Obviously he's not talking about organized meetings, but spontaneous connections between believers learning to live together in God and finding occasion to cross each other's lives daily.

Fourth, he specifically says the main reason for getting together is to encourage each other. Most people talk about attending our religious institutions today because of the need for accountability, not encouragement. That can have some painful, if unintentional results. Philip Yancey tells about a prostitute who was looking for help and was encouraged to go to church. She responded, "Why would I ever go there, I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

Surprisingly, no Scripture assigns believers or leaders to provide accountability for each other. That is reserved for God alone. We are told to encourage each other and though that means at times we might have to confront or admonish, it does not mean we hold each other accountable.

Finally, he envisions believers connecting with each other all over the community. While claiming to be essential gatherings for believers, our Sunday morning events do more to fragment the body of Christ in any locality. Rather than connecting us with a wide-diversity of his people, we end up meeting with people who are just like us and who believe the same things we do.

### ***Two or Three Together***

The writer of Hebrews was encouraging a relational connection between believers that goes far deeper than any religious service can offer. He was talking about the entire network of relationships God builds between believers and how important it is for us to let others into our lives. Don't go it alone, when we can be so helpful to each other.

Paul gives us some insight as to why in Ephesians. He said that the fullness of God is revealed in the whole of the body, not in the individual believer. We won't know enough on our own nor have enough strength. But how do we live that out? By being a spectator in a large gathering, or by sharing our lives with fellow travelers who are coming to know his life?

Even Jesus himself made it clear that the most powerful moments of body life happen in twos and threes, not in groups of hundreds. It's where people can be known for who they are, loved through their most desperate pain, and discover God's presence with others.

The most powerful example of that in this century happened in Red China during the communist regime. As people were forced underground by persecution they discovered the joy caring for one another, the focus of being excluded from the mainstream, and freedom from religious traditions, one-man leadership, and those who were not completely sold-out to God. How God's life grew among them is the stuff of legend. But are we listening to the lessons they learned during that time? No! We're too busy smuggling in our Christian programs so they can be more like us.

Circumstances forced them to embrace what the New Testament speaks so clearly. True body life cannot be embraced institutionally, it is the result of people who are passionately loving Father and learning how to live as a family with other brothers and sisters.

Sadly, many believers have never tasted of that kind of body life--holding no greater view of the 'church' life than to file in on Sunday, enjoy the performance and go back to their lives. However, when crisis hits and they need friendships to speak the life of God into their circumstances, no one is there for them. They will soon find that sitting through the performance has not adequately prepared them to face the darkest days of their lives.

### ***Finding the Family***

Knowing God as Father leads to an engagement of his people as family. Do you sense that hunger stirring in you? It's happening to people all over the world. Weary of the political games used to manipulate institutional power, or bored with the passive environment fostered in worship "services," people are dropping out of organized religion in ever-greater numbers.

I know many of them have sadly given up on God, but many others hunger to share an authentic body life with other believers that allows Jesus to truly be at the center as we learn how to live in the full freedom of his life. Like many on the cutting edge of hunger, they may not know what they are really searching for. Since most of us have been steeped in religion most of our lives, we're not sure where else to look. So we keep looking for an event, a group of people or a mentor to help us find a way, and often come away disappointed in the search.

As I said in the last issue, institutional dynamics will only produce a shadow of what family life really is. It cannot provide the reality. If relationship is what we hunger for, then we might want to think relationally. God's kind of community isn't produced by man's ingenuity or program. It springs up organically among people who are learning to follow Jesus and see themselves as part of something larger than themselves.

Thus, finding Father's family begins with Father, not with others. If he is not the object of your whole-hearted pursuit, you will miss so much that he has for you. Don't begin with a program. Begin with him. Don't let any expression of body life be a substitute for cultivating your own relationship with him. That's how we often get it confused. We seek to relate to God by relating to others. The exact opposite is true. We learn to relate to others, but loving God first and foremost. Then you'll be able to see how he is placing you in the family around you. Look at that in the whole of your locality, not just in a single group. God has people everywhere. Discovering how he wants to place you in it is a process that may encompass the following stages:

*1. Spontaneous Fellowship:* Getting connected in this family often begins with spontaneous fellowship. What hungry believers has God placed around you? These might be people you know that you invite over for an evening of fellowship, or share lunch together once and a while. It also happens in more serendipitous moments when you just happen to be standing in line at the store and find out the person next to you also loves the Lord.

God has many ways to bring his family together. Get to know the family that just moved into the neighborhood; invite the new employee home from work, or volunteer in your community and see who God brings near you. I'll guarantee you'll never look at people around you quite the same way again. They might be believers with whom you can share God's life, or people who don't know him at all whom you can love in his name.

Either way, this is where fellowship begins. People who meet, find a bit out about each other and find that they hold the life of God in common. In my travels I have met people in every corner of the world who hunger to know the Living God, and find just a meal together, or staying over in the home of someone I've never met before begins a life-long relationship sharing our passion for Jesus.

Spontaneous fellowship can be fairly fluid. They may only last a few moments, or days, but sometimes they may go on to become far more significant. Look around you. The believers God wants you to experience body life with may be closer to you than you think.

*2. Developing Friendships:* Out of these spontaneous encounters, you will find people with whom you seem to have a deeper connection. It is if the Holy Spirit is drawing you together to help each other in the journey.

Friendships develop because people make an effort to get together. They are in touch with each other every few days; look for things to do together and find themselves encouraged every time they come away from each other.

Friends don't place expectations on each other, or use people for their own self-needs. Friends are those who can share their journey together under Father. They don't seek to control each other, or toss another aside when they no longer meet their needs. Godly friendships look to share a journey together with ever-deepening honesty and vulnerability, always freeing the other person to be absolutely genuine.

Often friendships develop between people who help each other through difficult times. What often starts out merely as a compassionate act of ministry can easily become a close friendship. That's why it is important to engage people in need around us, offering to support them and give what help you can to get them through a crisis.

Every true friendship we have with someone in Father's family is an incredible treasure. They are worth every bit of time we give to cultivate them. The real ones last forever, even though time and circumstances may not make it possible to be together with great regularity. But when you do connect you can pick up right where you left off.

*3. Intentional Community:* As friendships develop, sometimes people find themselves wanting more. God made us for community, remember, and though we are linked by the cross to every other believer on the planet, one of the most valuable ways to experience his life is to explicitly share the journey with a group of friends.

Intentional community happens when an individual or family decides to join with others in sharing their journey. Realizing that Father has called them to walk together for a time which could range from a few months to a number of years, they choose to share their journeys together, both by gathering regularly for sharing, worship, prayer and study of the Word, and by staying in touch with each other through the week.

Listening to God together, guarding each other's freedom in Christ, caring for each other in moments of need and being mindful of how God wants to use them to extend his kingdom seem to be some of the significant objectives of this kind of community.

The forms it takes, however, can vary greatly. House churches can look this way as do more loosely affiliated groups that often spring up within institutions. These are not held together by covenants or creeds, but by the choice people make to love deeply enough to stay with each other through the ups and downs of life, and to live their lives openly before each other. Though it probably demands an entire article some day, children fit into this environment with incredible ease and nothing will better prepare them to live a life-long adventure in Father's family.

### ***Initiative Required***

Why are such groups sometimes difficult to find? Because they require a level of individual initiative that more programmed structures have robbed from God's people. Either because they prefer everything to be spoon-fed to them, or because they've been taught to think they are incompetent to follow God without an 'ordained' leader handy, many believers have little time or energy to discover the fullness of living in Christ's body that Father intended.

There are far easier ways to get together with Christians, but to discover the depth of what it means to live in Father's family we cannot sit back and wait for someone else's program. Instead we can choose to engage the lives of people God has placed around us looking for ways his life in us can bless others. As we recognize people God's calling us to walk with we can combine our resources with those of other brothers and sisters and find ourselves far more equipped to stand in these increasingly-darker days.

That's what the writer of Hebrews wanted you to know.

That's what God is rebuilding in these days. Ask him to teach you how to see his church as he does, and live in the joy, power and freedom of that reality.

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