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To Trust or Not to Trust

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Sara and I had spent almost a week among them. Invited to teach, we were also learning as we watched the simplicity of fellowship, worship and growth that this group of believers shared together. Finally, late one evening while sitting by the fire with some of their key people we got to ask our questions about the life they shared together.

"How do you teach believers to trust each other?" Sara asked.

By the facial reactions around the room, you'd have thought Sara might as well have asked them if they sacrificed animals. They glanced at one another, and shook their heads as if to say, "You really don't get it, do you?" I was taken back. We had witnessed their honesty, their openness, their service to each other. Surely they worked on trust.

One finally spoke, "Where does the Word teach us to put our trust in men?"

I started probing the deep recesses of my mind whirling through every Scripture I could recall. I couldn't come up with any Scripture to answer the question.

How could this be? Much of what I taught about the power of Christian community was to help people see how much they need each other, and assist them in building the kind of trusting relationships that would allow them to share God's life together. But I knew, and most of those I've taught also knew that this trust always breaks down. We are imperfect people after all, who will make mistakes, fail each other especially at critical moments which is why churches often leave a wake of broken people.

But isn't community based on trust? I've probed that question often since our encounter almost 8 months ago. Our last issue of BodyLife dealt with the trust we can have in the Father through the faith Jesus demonstrated on the cross. Now let's take a look at the implications of the cross in our relationships with other believers.

Why Didn't Jesus Do it?

It's probably the most difficult question I've ever been asked whenever I've taught on community. "Why do we have to trust others if Jesus didn't?" I've been asked that twice both of them referring to the same Scripture:

But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about

man, for he knew what was in a man. (John 2:24-25)

On both occasions I mumbled something about Jesus' superior wisdom and that no one was able to understand his death on the cross until after it was over anyway.

But even at the time the question bugged me. If Jesus didn't trust men because he knew what was in them, why would he ask us to? But the only models I knew for body life were those where people were trying to trust each other.

I didn't stop at the time to realize it was also the common denominator in those who had been deeply hurt by past church experiences. They had trusted others only to see them turn on them whenever their struggles, needs or gifts didn't fit the prevailing agenda.

So as believers, are we or are we not to trust each another?

Turning to the Word

Three words continue to crop up in most teaching regarding the importance of church life: commitment, accountability and trust. These are used to describe the kind of life that brothers and sisters ought to share together. I've used them often to help people see the great value that body life can be to them.

'Commitment' is not used at all in the New Testament, though its root, 'commit' is. Interestingly enough it is overwhelmingly used to talk about committing sin, as in committing adultery. Only in the Old Testament can we find references about committing our ways to the Lord. Two references in the New Testament describe committing people to the grace of God. All of these, however, are clearly directed at the Father and his work, nothing spoke of being committed to each other or to the church.

Likewise our 'accountability' in Scripture is only directed at God. We are not accountable to the local church, to its leaders, or even to other brothers and sisters. Paul specifically exempted himself from such thinking: "To me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you; in fact, I don't even examine myself. The one who examines me is the Lord." (I Cor. 4:4-5)

Though there are extensive references to trusting and believing throughout the Word, I couldn't find one where we are encouraged to let another believer be the object of our trust. We are told to love each other, pray for each other, bear each other's burdens, forgive each other, serve each other, stimulate each other to love and good deeds, be kind to one another and many other such things, but we are never told to trust one another. All references to trust and belief are firmly and exclusively directed to God. If he is the one in which all of our trust is invested, what do we have left over to give to another believer?

Interesting isn't it? Words we consider critical building blocks to body life are not even part of the

foundation that Jesus laid for the church. In fact, these are the concepts that the church has historically used to bind people to its programs and agendas, as in, "Don't you trust the leadership here?" "If you're going to grow you need to be committed to what God is doing among us." "You've got to be plugged in somewhere so you can be accountable."

Jesus only gave us two directives: Love God and love each other. Doing that, we will fulfill all his ambitions for our lives.

Institutional Words

So why are these words so commonly used in the church today? Commitment, accountability and trust are all words that deal with institutions, and are necessary for the survival of any institution. It is what allows people to find identity and cooperation.

Regretfully many people don't have an accurate distinction in their minds about the church as God sees it and the institutions that have sprung up around it. We think of them as the same thing.

God sees one church that encompasses every believer in every corner of the world. He sees that not in its institutional failures, or the weaknesses of its leaders or adherents, but as the bride he is preparing for his Son. He views the church with great affection, desire and adoration. Gene Edwards, author of Tale of Three Kings, has taken to calling the church, "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World." I love that description and understanding it from that perspective will keep us from growing cynical and sarcastic about that which God loves so much.

But that is not the same thing as the organizations, buildings and meetings we call 'church' today. Wherever believers gather and seek to work together an institution springs up around it. That's what allows the group to organize, collect and spend money and make decisions. Leaders are almost always selected who provide certain 'services' for the members. That's been true for 1900 years and will probably be true up to his coming.

Men need institutions to function. Those institutions can be good, releasing the Lord's life and power among a group of people, or they can become self-serving seeking to use the institution as the extension of their own power needs or the means to their own comfort.

If church history teaches us anything it does demonstrate that while the institution that surrounds the church has often been helpful in preserving history, serving needs, testing orthodoxy and preaching the gospel, it also too often lets the institution overrun the life of God within it. You can always see that when a church battles over 'what's right' in nonessential matters instead of focusing on being right with each other in love and forgiveness.

Church renewal is often only letting believers re-discover what they had in the beginning, before the

institution organized it to death. As such, the church often becomes a substitute in people's lives for a dynamic relationship with the Father. It happens so subtly that few are aware of it. We get so busy maintaining the program and meeting needs that we adjust to the waning life of the Spirit by increasing the institution. When it does we emphasize commitment and accountability.

The Father's Community

Our attempts to make other believers, or worse yet a church institution, the object of our trust, our commitment or our accountability is to place it in the role that has been reserved for the Father alone. That sounds dangerous, doesn't it? God has invited us to something so much better.

From the dawn of creation to Jesus' death on the cross, the Father's plan has always been to invite us into the fullness of relationship that he shares with himself. Since before time The Father, Son and Spirit have shared absolute joy, love, life, glory, power and wisdom without any thought of one being exalted over the other. God is a community and wherever he manifests his presence he builds community.

That's the hunger that stirs in people's hearts who desire to know the Father. It isn't necessarily for all the trappings of church life today, but to know the community of the Trinity, and be able to share that journey with fellow travelers who are learning to follow the Lord.

That's the connection Jesus was making with his disciples in the upper room in John 14-17. He wanted them to transfer the friendship he had with them to the Father and the Spirit, and with himself on the other side of the resurrection. "that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us." (John 17:21)

In exactly the same way the Father and Son shared life and love, he wanted to share with them as well. We get to experience their life, love, sharing joy and wisdom. Jesus identified that community as the basis by which believers would find their unity and their ability to demonstrate his glory to the world. It doesn't thrive on our trust in each other, but our faith in the Father. The former will leave us hurt and bitter when we fail. The latter will allow us to know God in ever-increasing fullness, and touching that it will be impossible for us to contain his life and love.

Body Life, Father Style

Almost without trying the Father's love in us will spill out causing us to 'one another' believers with love, prayer, forgiveness, insight, money, help and anything else others might need that we have.

Only out of that fullness and our trust in God to fill our own needs will we be able to share without any expectation for others to reciprocate, or any desire to manipulate their response. This is the essence of fellowship believers freely loving each other, assisting however we can, but without any compulsion to get

others to do it our way.

We'll visit this topic again in a future issue, because it is so critical. Notice I've not given any institutional fixes here. What I want you to consider is not the structure you attend, but your relationships with other believers. Are you trying to trust them or do they demand your trust? If so, you will get hurt, because we will fail each other out of our own flesh, and even at times when we don't understand other people's obedience to the Father.

If you have been hurt like this, let the Father bring healing to your life. Your hurt, only testifies to your misplaced trust and holding onto it will hold you back from finding a freedom to experience the life of God and share it with others.

So what do our relationships with others look like? A man in Australia expressed it best: "It looks like this, Wayne, "in my relationship with you I don't want you to trust me more, I want to help you trust the Father like you never have before. If you're doing the same thing with me then we're sharing fellowship. If I am and you're not, then I get to minister to you, which is a joy. But I'm not being cheated because I'm trusting the Father for everything I need."

Doesn't that make sense, and isn't it liberating?

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