

BodyLife Past Article Archive

Resons to Run: Living in the Relational Church - Part 5

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"You must stay with him. That is only way God will bless."

I heard the words, but was so shocked by them that for a moment I doubted my own ears. I was sitting at the table of a woman who was ready to divorce her husband of two years. I knew the abuse she had suffered at her new husband's hands and the risk she felt that her children from a previous marriage were under in continuing to live with him.

There's no doubt the situation was messy. Many of us had wept, prayed and counseled with both of them as the situation unfolded. A few days earlier another couple had asked me to go with them as they shared with her a word the Lord had put on their heart for her. When they dropped the bomb on her so unequivocally demanding her compliance, I knew something was desperately wrong.

I turned to face Beth (not her real name). She was obviously as taken back by their words as I was. Before she could speak, I opened a door for her escape.

"Of course, Beth, you know that words like this are only valid to the degree that they confirm what God has already put in your heart. If not, you're free to disregard it." In the next few moments she told us that she didn't agree with what she had just been told. She had been seeking the Lord diligently and was getting counsel from two women in the fellowship we knew to be godly. Both of them had affirmed her decision to separate.

"Then feel free to pursue that," I told her. "If God has anything else in mind, I'm sure he will make it clear to you."

Outside her home, the couple tore into me on the driveway. "What were you doing in there? We had God's word for her and you gave her all the excuse she needed to ignore it." No amount of explaining soothed their anger, and I knew that if something didn't change in the weeks ahead, I would not be able to serve alongside them much longer.

As much as Scripture invites us to run with open arms into relationships with other believers, it also warns us that not all relationships are healthy ones. Failure to understand that, cause many to be trapped in destructive relationships that will not only erode their own walk with God but also will in time cultivate a cynicism about others that will make them withdraw from healthy relationships.

Not an Easy Out

Scripture talks in no uncertain terms about the value of walking alongside other brothers and sisters of the faith. What each of us knows and sees on our own is only a small part of all that God is. As he connects us to other brothers and sisters who are discovering that same life we begin to get a fuller picture of him. That's why he defined his body as "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

When those relationships work well they will encourage us to stay the course, comfort us through our darkest moments and help us keep our trust in God when we're tempted to place it elsewhere. There is no treasure greater in this world than sharing that kind of friendship with believers who are committed to God's work in your lives.

Everything I write here presupposes that truth. I know how easily these words can be used to excuse those who want to be lone rangers in the body of Christ. Do that at your peril. I want no part in it because our God is a reconciling God and his purpose in Christ is to bring all things together in him.

Where we are coming to discover his heart we will not be looking for excuses to distance ourselves from others just because a relationship goes through a difficult moment. Any deep friendship I've ever had has at times traversed deep waters where misunderstanding, human weakness and personal failures have caused hurt and confusion. If we bail out whenever relationships get difficult, we will never know just how truly awesome friendships in Christ can be.

However, I often cross paths with believers who are plagued by relationships where other believers are manipulating and controlling them. Wanting to be humble and open they make room in their lives for the wrong kind of counsel and advice and are overwhelmed with guilt when they can't satisfy what others expect of them.

That's why the New Testament not only tells us to love each other deeply, bear with each other through the tough stuff and forgive each other's faults as they arise, but it also warns us to recognize when relationships turn destructive and to take proper distance from them.

Have Nothing To Do With...

Paul put it in the simplest terms possible, "Have nothing to do with them." He used the same phrase in a variety of circumstances to help us recognize the signs that the relationship we're having with another believer is not going to help us know God better and follow him more closely. He warns us to step aside from them, not in judgment or anger, but simply so that they will not swallow up our spiritual passion nor lead us astray.

These may not always be easy to recognize, especially when they come from people we care about, or even those who have helped us in the past. It is often the most well-intentioned people in our lives that will

unwittingly make it more difficult for us to do what God asks.

Jesus faced that reality with one of his closest friends. When he told Peter about his journey to Jerusalem and his impending death on the cross, Peter jumped to his defense vowing to prevent such a thing from happening. His best friend had become the voice of the evil one. Jesus had to put that talk behind him knowing how seductive Peter's misplaced love could prove to Jesus' obedience to his Father.

To recognize when our relationships with believers move into treacherous waters does not mean we have to judge people or their motives. We only have to recognize that their words and actions are doing more to prevent us from following God than they are encouraging us to do so. We don't take distance from them as if we are superior to them, or because they've become evil, but simply knowing that they will be an occasion for us to trip over our own worst motives. His desire was not to spawn separatism or oneupsmanship, but that the environment of body life you live in would be conducive to real spiritual encouragement and growth. So what can we watch out for?

The Pharisees' Yeast (Matt. 16:6-12; 2 Tim. 3:2-5): Jesus warned his disciples to steer well clear of it and Paul did as well when he spoke of those with a 'form of godliness, but denying its power.' What were they talking about? They both refer to busybodies who are always pressuring people to conform to their standard of morality. Because their righteousness is conformity-based it is only an outward pretense and does not reflect what's really inside. I knew one brother who made young couples embarrass themselves by confessing that they had premarital sex at their own wedding while he was hiding an affair in his own closet.

These people can forever justify anything they do even though you have often witnessed the disparity between what they appear to be and who they really are. Like yeast, this attempt to make themselves look good while trying to change others is incredibly contagious and before you know it, you'll find yourself doing it to others. Because righteousness can only come from God's transforming work inside of us, no one who has experienced it ever tries to force it on others. They know it simply won't work that way.

Dividing Lines (Titus 3:10): These people think they can judge between those who belong to God and those who do not. Thus they have an obsession with controversy and gossip, leaving a wake of broken relationships wherever they go. These are not always easy to spot because their rhetoric of theological purity disguises their real bent. They love to hold institutional power and accuse others of being divisive who do not conform to their way of doing things. Just remember it is never divisive to raise honest concerns or ask the difficult questions.

Because each of us only has a handle on but a facet of God's glory the desire to make our part the whole jewel has fragmented Christianity into a thousand brand names with pet doctrines and personal preferences of worship styles that has splintered the body of Christ around the world. When I was in

Nepal before Christianity was legalized in that country, I witnessed an incredible amount of love and unity in their shared sufferings. It wasn't long, however, after Christianity was legalized that denominations of every stripe came in and divided up the body of Christ by offering monthly stipends to those who would affiliate with them. Don't be a party to division. Don't be sucked into the notion that your way of doing things is the best or only thing God is doing in the world, or you will find yourself swirling about in a whirlpool of self-righteousness and miss the bigger work God is doing in our world.

Misplaced Confidences (Phil. 3:1-11): The number one assault on the early church was to forsake their trust in God's ability to accomplish his work in them and then strive to do by their own effort. Nothing better sidetracks believers today either. Those who place confidence in the flesh will be a constant stumbling block to those wanting to learn the life of trust. When you see people blaming others or passing out lists of things you can do to be a better Christian, you better know you're with people who are placing their confidence in something other than the work of God himself.

Rationalized Sins (I Cor. 5:1-13): All of us struggle with temptation and sin and our ongoing assessment and honesty about our weaknesses is a key ingredient to real body life. When people rationalize their failures to justify themselves, they have missed the essence of what it is to live as broken people at the foot of Jesus. God does not love us because we do nothing wrong, God loves us because he loves us; and sinners are who he came to redeem. We don't have to change the definition of sin to think ourselves righteous, but rather find in our own temptations even more reason to draw near the only one who can transform us. Unfortunately we only think of sexual sins in this way, but Paul's list to the Corinthians also included such things as greed, idolatry, swindling and slander.

Being Number One (Col 2:16-22 3 John 9): Whether by selfish ambition or a mistaken idea of what leadership in the body is all about, many people seek to have first place in any expression of the body. Though that place is reserved for Christ alone, they think it is theirs and act that way by demanding that their wisdom prevails, their preferences are served and their plans to be viewed as God's plans. They think it is their responsibility to manage other people's spirituality and are threatened by anything less than unquestioned obedience. You'll know you're near one of these when they force you to choose between submitting to them and doing what you honestly feel that God has put on your heart.

Step Away Quietly!

Of course, who of us can honestly say we haven't fallen into one or more of these traps from time to time ourselves? That's what makes them so destructive. They offer us the very things our flesh craves-- acceptance, feeling of superiority, and control. Hang around believers who live like that and you will find all the excuse you need to be like them. We take distance from them because they will rob us of the hunger of listening to God every day and following him.

The reason Paul gave us these instructions is so that we could follow God's leading when he encourages us

to step away from a destructive relationship and not feel guilty about it. We have pursued such a false notion of unity in the body of Christ that many of us feel the need to pretend fellowship even with those who are hurtful and destructive in the life of the body.

Please notice that Paul never asks us to distance ourselves from the people of the world. How else will they ever come to experience God's love if it is not through people like us loving them even in the midst of their worst failures and sins? The danger of distraction doesn't come from the world, but from so-called believers whose misguided notion of the life of God provides easy distractions to the depth of his calling.

When John wrote that many antichrists had already gone out into the world, he was not talking about wicked people who actively opposed Jesus Christ. Rather, he was identifying those who appeared to be inside the faith who would draw dependence on themselves rather than on Christ alone. They were of the antichrist spirit because they sought to take his place in the lives of the faithful. It is a tragic commentary on our time that so many would-be leaders in the God's church today feel they can only fulfill their calling by making people dependent on them. The results are always disastrous.

Of course having the freedom to run doesn't mean we have to run. People that act destructively are themselves broken and fractured people. They need love to. If God graces you to stay near them to love them and you can do it without compromising your own relationship with him, by all means do it!

But when you recognize that another believer is distracting you from the real prize of knowing him, you don't have to go on a tirade. You don't have to confront, accuse and try to prove you're right. You don't even have to overreact and become the lone ranger. All you have to step away quietly from them and spend your time in the body of Christ with those relationships that stimulate you to draw closer to God and recognize his work in you.

With the demands of life pressing us from every side, time is just too short to waste our energies on other believers filled with manipulation, gossip and division. When you have a chance to be with other believers don't you want it filled with encouragement, revelation and humility?

After all, life in the Body of Christ, shouldn't make you doubt his ability to work in you, but to help you trust him even more.

After this article was published, I had the following email exchange with a reader that clarified some issues in this article. I include it here:

I found myself being troubled at a foundational level when reading 'Reasons to Run' in the March issue of BodyLife. The troubling may have come because of a certain conviction I hold from the Word that you may have inadvertently left out. After all, the whole concept behind the gift of His love and grace is to empower us to become

like Him, which in its fullness, is the power to be free to obey in all loving devotion to Him, making reconciliation with man by His love. I know you alluded to this kind of faith, but, failed to bring it out in regards to the woman seeking a divorce. This was troubling.

Wayne's Response: I guess the opening illustration I chose was a poor one. I related that opening story only to demonstrate how abusive leadership can be when it presumes to speak into someone's pain without even listening to what they had been through and what they were hearing from the Lord. The 'reasons to run' were about taking distance from destructive relationships in body life and were not meant to be taken as justification for divorce. I am sorry if that illustration added confusion to the article. But I do appreciate you raising it with me. While I believe that no human relationship is outside the scope of God's healing, I also realize in situations like the one I used here that it takes engagement by both parties to bring reconciliation which was not possible in this situation at that time.

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