

The Problem We Have With Church

Some of you may know that my wife, Marlene, and I spent the last week in the Netherlands doing several conferences there. I was asked to come over to speak to evangelical leaders based on the book that I wrote a year and a half ago called, “Empowered Evangelicals.” I did a conference on that and then a leadership conference.

One of the wonderful things that we discovered in the Netherlands is that the things that are so precious to us here in the Columbus Vineyard—things like calling people into intimate relationship with God that is not religious, but is real and genuine; helping people to discover the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives; creating a church that speaks to the culture that we are living in – a church that is relevant and vital for people living in our day; a real priority on those outside the church instead of the church being absorbed with itself and its institutional politics or its own maintenance. As Marlene and I had the opportunity to experience some of the Vineyard churches in the Netherlands, the really precious thing that came through was that these people are us. We could easily worship in anyone of the places that we visited. They really understood what our heart was. There was a real connection and fellowship with each other.

It is so sweet to go to another culture and to look at another Christian and sense a deep brotherhood, sisterhood, with this other person. We really are connected. We really are one spirit. I know I felt that in India. I have repeatedly felt that in England. And now we saw that in the Netherlands. For those of you who are interested, by the way, this is Marlene and my last international trip for next 7-8 months. We are going to stay at home, mostly.

While we were in the Netherlands, I came upon a management study that analyzes and compares various cultures using different kinds of indicators. The purpose of this study was so that business

people in Holland would know how to market their products in the UK or the US or in Zambia. But as I looked at this massive study, I thought this has extraordinary implications for Christians as we seek to understand people from other cultures and, perhaps, plant churches in other nations.

So, for example, this particular study examined how masculine or feminine a culture was. By masculinity the study meant that the dominant values in the culture are achievement and success. By femininity they meant that the dominant values in the culture are caring for others and the quality of life. So that very masculine cultures, to use their terms, were characterized by ambition, the need to excel, people who lived in order to work, folks who admired big, fast and beautiful. There is great admiration for achievement. It is a culture that is very decisive. Very feminine cultures, on the other hand, were cultures that emphasized quality of life, the need for consensus, working in order to live rather than living in order to work, small and slower beautiful over against big and fast, sympathy for the unfortunate over admiration for the achiever.

And then using various kinds of testing, they discovered that some cultures were very masculine, very achievement oriented, very hard working, task focused, decisive, successful. On their scale Japan was the most masculine society in the world. And Sweden was the most feminine society in the world. The US was more like Japan than Sweden.

Well, they had another scale that measured individualism, how individualistic a society was. Individualism means that people look after themselves first – maybe their own immediate family. Cultures that are highly individualistic are very “I” conscious. They emphasize their own private opinions and obligations are to self and to me and to my needs and my family and to my kids. When someone makes a mistake, the feelings generated in an individualistic culture are feelings of a loss of self-respect and personal guilt. On the other hand, cultures that are low in individualism and emphasize the collective are not so much “I” conscious than “we” conscious. Those cultures tend to emphasize relationships and the need to fulfill obligations to a group. When a person makes a mistake, they don’t feel guilt as they do shame and a loss of face. Highly individualistic cultures emphasize autonomy, the freedom of the individual to make their own decisions apart from any

input or counsel from others. Those who are more collective tend to emphasize harmony and group decisions. There is a relationship orientation.

On an individualism scale, on an “I” focus, I above everything else, guess what country in the world is the most “me” centered? Remember, they surveyed about 100 countries. Remembering that they did a massive cross sampling, who do you think leads the world in emphasizing “I” above everything else. You are right—the great old USA. We’re #1!

Now the problem of being #1 in the world concerning individualism is that the American Christian, by and large, has an enormous blind spot when it comes to the biblical message of the church. We are not the only people in the world with blind spots when it comes to various emphases in the bible. When I was in India, I was shocked by the way Christian men treated their wives. Rather than being as together in the grace of life, rather than being friends and lovers, wives in India were often treated no better than servants. And the loyalty of many men went first to their parents before their wives, so that the biblical message of leaving father and mother and joining to your wife in order that two people might become one before God was missing in so many of the Indian Christian families that I met.

But on the other hand, we in the US have this great blind spot when it comes to the biblical message of the church – the people of God, the “we” of Jesus Christ, because of our radical individualism. Gordon Fee, who may be today the leading New Testament scholar, speaks about this in one of his books saying, “Imagine a single person is sitting at home in front of his TV. A Christian broadcast is on, a sermon is preached, an invitation is given, and the person responds by accepting Christ. But the person never gets involved in a church. The only church the person attends is by way of TV. There is no connection with a local body of believers.” Gordon Fee asked this question: Is that person saved? And then he gives a shocking answer, at least according to American standards. He says, “God only knows, but such salvation lies totally outside the New Testament frame of reference.”

In other words, in the New Testament salvation is never thought of at all as a purely one on one, me to Jesus, relationship separated entirely from our relationship with each other in the church. It is Americanism and not biblical Christianity that thinks of Christianity as solely me and Jesus. Salvation in the bible always means being joined to God through his son, Jesus, and in the very same action being immediately joined to the people of God – the church.

So in the 3rd Century a church Father named Cyprian said, “There is no salvation outside the church” meaning that God is saving a people, not just a group of isolated, unconnected individuals who fellowship with each other over the Internet when they are not involved in some non-Christian chat room or watching a video. Yes, salvation is through faith in Christ and Christ alone, but joining to Christ immediately connects you to his people. Because of our individualism, our emphasis on me and mine and I, American Christians by and large don’t understand at all the New Testament message of the church. If the church is meeting my needs and is interesting to me and my husband or wife doesn’t object too much – ok, I’ll attend. But if not, I’ll just go it alone with Jesus. We often miss the fundamental problem people in America have with the church. Survey’s say that people’s problem with church is that they feel churches are hypocritical, or the services are boring, or they’re always talking about money – but the surveys are too superficial in their questions. The real problem of church for Americans is that call to church involvement, church relationship and service to the church confronts our radical individualism, the supreme emphasis that we Americans place on me, myself and I. Interestingly, an article in the newspaper just this week was bemoaning the fact that a certain local female baseball player just jumped leagues and left her loyal team in the lurch – it was called “Me Myself and I.”

Today I am going to speak about the problem of the church because, friends, whether you are in a Vineyard, or associated with another group of people, believers or not associated at all, we individualistic Americans have a problem with the church. Let’s pray.

In Ephesians 3:8-11, the apostle Paul is saying, “Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to

make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Now the great apostle said that his message was a two-fold message. First of all, Paul came preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ. I like that phrase, “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Many people say, “Don’t preach Christ to me. I have enough to worry about. I am just trying to handle life. Don’t preach Christ to me. I am just trying to keep my head above water.” And what they are implying is that Christ and Christianity will somehow diminish their lives. That Christ will somehow come and take something from them. But the apostle Paul says that the reason why we preach Christ is to enrich people. Christ enriches us relationally. He enriches us personally. He enriches us practically. He enriches us eternally.

I told you this before, but there was a time when Jesus stood on the temple mount in Jerusalem and he shouted out at the top of his lungs, “I am not a thief. The thief comes to kill and wound and destroy. I came to give life and that more abundantly.”

So many people think about Jesus as a thief. But as I like to express it, Jesus is the kind of person who, when he breaks into your home, instead of stealing from you, you open your refrigerator and there is a wonderful dinner left behind. You open your jewelry box and you say, “Wow, a new Rolex! Where did that come from?” You open your drawer and a really awesome new sweater is in it.

Paul came first preaching Christ, the enriching Christ. But he also came preaching the church. He came “to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.” Now, the word “mystery” the way it is used in the bible does not mean something that is a dark, obscure, secret puzzle. Something that is inexplicable, incomprehensible. When the bible speaks of “mysteries” it is speaking of what we could not know

by ourselves with our own unaided intellects, but what had to be revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. What no one, not even the angels, could figure out apart from God. The whole demonic realm couldn't figure it out either. But now God is lifting the curtain on this previously hidden secret – the church.

Let me, as an aside, underline the idea that the church is one of the things that the angels didn't know about. You know, God doesn't tell his angelic host everything. It says in 1 Peter 1 that the prophets searched intently to understand the prophecies regarding Christ. And he goes on in 1 Peter 1:12 to say, "Even angels long to look into these things." They stoop to look because they didn't understand the prophecies about Jesus' first coming. God holds back from his angels certain things he chooses to keep secret and then reveals to us as people. And the church is one of those great cosmic secrets that the Lord had chosen to hold back, but that the angels are now getting to watch and learn about.

Friends, let me tell you that you are not alone when you think you are alone. The angels, the principalities, the demonic realm are all watching. And they are all looking into this open secret called the church. This new people of God, this new humanity, this multi-colored, what Paul calls the manifold wisdom of God – it is the multi-colored revelation of God's plan in bringing people not only into relationship with him, but into relationship with each other. But we absolutely don't get the church. And for Americans the church is a closed mystery, not an open secret.

Let me spin this a little differently. What is the first thing that we individualistic Americans talk with people about immediately after they profess faith in Christ? We just got done with our Summer Harvest in which we were calling people into relationship with Christ. Now, what is the first thing, friends, in the US that we tell people after they profess faith in Christ? We say to them, "Well, you need to learn to pray and you need to read your bible. Maybe you need to repent of this or that particular sin or attitude." Of course, all of those things are appropriate for discussion for someone who has come to Christ. All of that is absolutely appropriate. But what is the first thing that the New Testament, in virtually every book, speaks to people about upon their confession of Christ? In

first place, of first priority, is involvement in the church. Understand now your connection to the people of God. Listen to me – the reason why so many people make decisions and never go anywhere with it is because they miss the first thing Christians must do after they come to Christ and that is to get involved with Jesus’ church. In fact, I have never met anyone who ever progressed very far as a Christian who was not involved in a church, and I never will. It is an impossibility. Our growth in Christ is inextricably tied to our connection with a church. The first thing a new Christian needs to hear is, “Get connected to a great church.”

Look at Matthew 16 with me. I want you to see this. “Jesus asks his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my father in heaven. I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’”

Now, the interesting thing that Jesus says immediately after the confession of Peter – “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” – the interesting thing is that Jesus immediately starts talking about building his church. What he doesn’t say to Peter is, “That is just an incredible thing you just said. God has spoken to you. Now it is just going to be me and you, you and me, together alone for eternity – just the two of us, kid, and I’m going to give you an abundant life and peace and a good marriage and a great way to make more money.” Instead he says, “Let me tell you about the church and the authority of the church and the ultimate triumph of the church, since you just made a saving confession. The first thing I am going to talk to you about is my church.”

Or how about Acts 2? Peter preaches the gospel to the Jews who were gathered on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. And they cry out, “How shall we respond to your message?” Peter says, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.”

Why baptism? In speaking to the people about baptism he says, “Join yourselves to Jesus, but also fulfill the entrance requirement to the church.” Baptism is the admission requirement to the church.

The reason why we Americans have such a low view of baptism and so many folks are believers for 10 years or 20 years and then sometime down the road choose to be baptized or are waiting for some leading from God to be baptized is because we don’t understand that you turn to Christ and then Christ says, “Enter my church through baptism.” Those of you who have not been baptized as followers of Christ – definitely sign up for our upcoming baptism. We love doing these really big baptisms on Saturday evening and Sunday morning. We’re shouting to the world, “Hey! Look! Here are some Christians who get it! They understand the need to enter the church.”

So we have all these people saved on the day of Pentecost, getting baptized, that is entering the church, and it says in v. 41, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their numbers that day.” What is the first thing we read about these people who accept Christ? They are involved in church. They devoted themselves to the apostles preaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to prayer.

Salvation to church. Or how about this? In 1 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul speaks about an issue of immorality in the Corinthian church. He says to them that it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that does not even occur among pagans, a man has his father’s wife. Apparently there was a guy in the church that was sleeping with his own stepmother. Now, what is fascinating about where Paul takes this is he never addresses the immoral man at all. Unlike individualistic American Christians who would say, “What is the matter with you, guy. Are you out of your mind? How could you be doing such a perverted thing?” Paul rebukes the church for its failure to discipline one of its members. The American church would say, “Hey, it’s not my problem. I didn’t do anything wrong.” Paul said to the American church, “Yes, you did do something wrong. While people get divorced or separated in your group, when someone is sleeping with their girlfriend or has terrible business ethics, with you not saying anything or doing anything about it, and you pretend that you can continue to be friends and everything is just OK, you are

adopting an individualistic, privatized kind of religion that says, “It is really none of my business.” No wonder American Christianity has so little impact. It’s no wonder that millions of decisions for Christ are recorded in America with so little to show for it, because it is all just me and Jesus and none of us has any responsibility toward anyone else.

Friends, you know, unfortunately churches teach and cater to this. Even in our advertisements we communicate a message that says, “Let me tell you what will be in it for you. If you come our way, you will have peace. Your marriage will improve. You will be blessed. You will be healed.” And this is all true, but we miss the central message which is God is building a people.

In the Newcomers Class, I tell folks all the time that a Christian without a church is like a fellow who wants to play offensive tackle in football, but doesn’t want to play on a team. Well, I am an offensive tackle, but I just want to play alone. Or I am an Army sergeant, but I really don’t like this idea of having to actually join the Army. I’ll just play army by myself without the Army.

Well, for the remainder of this talk, I’d like you to consider the biblical response to our individualism and the priority the New Testament puts on our relationships. I would like you to turn back to the book of Ephesians and we will look at 4:1-3, “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.”

This passage is a transition from the previous three chapters. For three chapters Paul has been telling us who we are in Christ. Now he changes the tone and tells us what we must do therefore. Paul is moving from belief to behavior. From creed to conduct. From principle to practice. And the key word, which helps us to understand this, is found in verse 1. The word is worthy. Paul says, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling.” Worthy. The word literally means to be equally weighted. The picture Paul was drawing is of a scale. On one side, in one of the pans, we have all of the spiritual blessings of chapters 1-3. In chapters 1-3 Paul told us

that because you are in Christ, you are accepted. Because you are in Christ you have authority. Because you are in Christ you are free from slavery to sin. All these are blessings.

And you can picture all the blessings that come to us as a result of Christ breaking into our lives as being on one side of the pan. All the things that Jesus does when he breaks into your house and leaves those little gifts behind – all those characteristics of Christ. He says that is on one side of the pan.

Paul says, “I want you to live a life of equal weight to the blessings you have received.” To be worthy of the calling is to balance the blessings that God has given us by an appropriate response of life. Live commensurate to the blessings God has given you.

Now, again, it is interesting that in telling us, “OK, what is it that we are supposed to do with all these blessings? Where do we turn? What is the first thing?” Paul says, “I want you to focus on your relationship with the church.” Someone gets saved? Talk with them about the church. Be baptized as your admission requirement to the church. Here in Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Columbus, we would say along with getting baptized, come to our Newcomers Class where you can find out about the church and get hooked into the church, get connected to the church, then get involved in a small group – co-ed kinships, women’s kinships, men’s groups. The rubber really meets the road in the Christian life is in our relationship with other Christians.

Here is the thing that challenges me so much. In v. 3 Paul says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit.” Make every effort. It is almost as if Paul were saying spare no expense. Do everything within your power. Don’t settle for anything less than excellence in your relationships with other believers.

We settle for such a low standard in our relationship with each other. If we were honest, we would have to say to the apostle Paul and to God, “I settle. I am satisfied with a certain level of disunity.” There are relationships that we have as Christians where things are not worked out with this other person and so we avoid them. Yeah, there is a cloud in our mind as we think of this other person, but we will pretend as we walk in the hallway that we didn’t see each other. We will look the

other way. We will settle for some burned bridges in our past. Some places where we are just not healed. Some relationships that are not OK. Paul says make every effort. We say we have tried and that is enough.

Sometimes in our relationships, if I could use an analogy, it is like we are saying that it is impossible to keep all ten of the commandments in the big ten. But I will keep 8. And maybe I am not doing so well regarding the command about stealing and that other command about lying. But at least I don't bow down to idols. I haven't taken the Lord's name in vain and I call my parents. So I know that I am at odds with these other two people in the church and I have this broken relationship with someone in my family, but these other 8 relationships are OK. Isn't that enough? I mean, so what if I can name four women or six guys that, boy, there is a cloud over our relationship. I am busy. My business is growing. I have to focus on my kids. I have school. I have so much on my plate. To try to go back and deal with old business of six months ago or a year ago or five years ago, hey, most of my relationships are relatively OK.

Paul says, "You don't get the church at all, do you individualistic Christian?" Make every effort. Stop settling for just OK. Aim at peace with every single Christian that you know or have ever met. Aim at total unity and nothing less than perfect harmony. Jesus and you are not enough; it's Jesus and you in the context of our family relationship with each other.

How far should we go in making every effort to be at peace? How far should we take this?

As I have studied this over the years, I have consistently been struck by the fact that our relationship with each other, our unity with each other, is one of the few things that the bible teaches that we are to keep God waiting until we accomplish. This is pretty awesome because in general worshipping God comes before everything else. The bible teaches that we are supposed to worship God before we go out and try to make more money, before we go to the gym, before we clean our house another time, before we read the newspaper, before we take care of our body or our leisure – we are to worship God, even ahead of our golf game. Even ahead of our own relaxation. Even ahead of the Buckeyes.

But you know, in Matthew 5, Jesus says if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you leave your gift there. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. In other words, first go, first make every effort to be at peace and then worship God. This reconciliation, this unity with the church, this cleaning up of our relationships is so important that Jesus says God will wait to receive our worship until we tackle first things first.

We don't get it. In the Old Testament there is a story about a king named Saul. King Saul was told by the Lord to utterly destroy the Amalekites. To take their sheep and their cattle and to kill every last one. But King Saul said, "I have a better way." So he holds back some of the cattle and sheep to sacrifice to the Lord. King Saul is rebuked by the prophet Samuel in this classic statement where he says, "To obey is better than sacrifice." See, Saul thought he could make a big show of religion. That he would come before God in this grand worship and somehow that would deal with all the areas of disobedience in his life. Yeah, I see that there are areas of disobedience. There are areas of sin. I see that there are things that I am holding back on you God. I see that there are broken relationships. But I am just going to come to worship and lift my hands and sing and tap my foot and that will take care of everything.

And the Lord says to us what he said to Saul. To obey me is better than sacrifice and a show of religion. Worship can wait. First, straighten out your relationship with the person you are at odds with. Do everything in your power to get things right. And then come and worship me with a clear conscience, knowing that you have done all that you could do.

Why does God hold us to such a high standard regarding our relationships with each other? Friends, God ties our relationship with him to our relationship with each other. I tell you there is no more common temptation for Christians in individualistic America than to try to separate what God has joined together. It is me and Jesus and it doesn't matter how me and you are doing. The prophets in the Old Testament continually rebuked the people of God who claimed to be worshipping God while they neglected the poor and lied to their neighbors and were cheating on

their wives. Jesus in the book of Matthew says that our forgiveness from God is tied to the way we forgive each other. He said in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." He is not saying that we earn forgiveness from God by forgiving our brothers and sisters. What he is saying is that to the extent that we refuse to forgive another person, to the extent that we refuse to deal with the hurt and upset and anger over our broken relationships, to the extent that we live with a cloud between us and someone else, to that extent our hearts have become hardened and we can't receive forgiveness or intimacy from the Lord.

Do you wonder why you have grown distant from God? Because there are bridges burned between you and another believer. God's forgiveness is always there. God's grace is always there. But our hearts are not always capable of receiving the grace of God. Our hearts have been calloused and hardened by unforgiveness and we can't take it. Our relationship with God is thoroughly tied in the New Testament to our relationship with each other.

And this message is all through the bible. The book of James talks with us about the absolute hypocrisy of cursing another Christian and then blessing God. The apostle John says the same thing when he says that we are so self-deceived, when we hate a brother we can see and then claim to love the invisible God whom we can't see. It is ludicrous. It is hypocritical.

And of course this whole message is ultimately challenging to those of us who are married. The apostle Peter says that if you are at odds with your spouse, you better clear that up before you go to pray. Now, I need to add that sometimes we have done everything humanly possible to try to clean up our relationships. I am not trying to bring condemnation on any of you who have made every effort, who have gone the extra mile, but in the majority of cases, we haven't turned toward our spouses and done everything possible. We haven't gone to the other Christian and done everything possible to work the relationship out. Why settle for OK or even less than OK? Put your foot down with your mate. Draw the line and say to them, "We must do something." Go to one of the Vineyard marriage enrichment groups. Get some marital counseling, if not for the sake of our marriages, for the sake of our spouses' lives.

So Peter says that if you are at odds with your spouse and you don't make every effort to be reconciled, there is a big sign over heaven saying, "closed for the day." Heaven can wait until you and I deal with our relationships here on earth. I know this is hard. I know this is tough. It is tough for me. But the fact is there are two bars on that cross that Jesus died on. There is one vertical one that speaks to us about God's relationship with us and there is a horizontal one that tells us about our relationship with each other. And those two bars were nailed together. God does not want us to try to pull the cross apart. These two strands, the individual's relationship with God and Jesus Christ and our calling to be part and parcel of a unified church are so woven together in scripture that we ought never to try to separate them.

Now it is interesting that the apostle Paul calls us to make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit, to maintain it. The spirit of God creates a unity with each other. It is God's spirit that makes us one through our common confession of Christ, through our common joining together in the life of Christ. But Paul assumes that because of our sin and fallenness and tiredness and negligence and personalities and different cultural backgrounds and all that all of us bring to the table – our dysfunction, our relationships with each other, will break down. That without continual maintenance, the law of entropy will be at work in the church. The fact that everything at some point winds down. Have you ever noticed that about your house? That unless you really stay on top of it, it doesn't get cleaner, it gets dirtier. That over the course of a day, mess will increase. That children left in a room alone will tend to cry and hurt each other at the same exponential rate as the number of kids in the room. The shingles on your roof don't get better, if just left alone.

Paul assumes breakdown. It is not a great crime that we have problems with each other. That is an assumption of the bible. We will have problems. The great crime is that we don't care enough about each other to make every effort to try to repair those problems.

Now the effort that we are to make in maintaining unity takes work. I understand that. There is a great temptation to try to let sleeping dogs lie. Do you know what I mean? It is in the past. It is really difficult. Sure, we never cleared it up and there is this rift in our relationship, but I can live

with that. I'll just walk away from the church or switch small groups. How many Americans have put their relationship with God on ice because they would not do the hard work necessary to heal a relationship? You can't live with relational tears. Unless you are prepared to live with much less than perfect fellowship with God and much less than the doing of his will, we as Christians are required by Almighty God to pick up the phone, to write the letter, to set up the appointment, to gather together. And if we can't solve it, we pull in a pastor or a kinship leader or a woman's group leader or a friend or a counselor. And if it doesn't get resolved in one setting, you set up two or three. You make every effort.

You know, maintaining unity doesn't only involve work, it involves wounds. No one who takes seriously the Christian call to peace waging and peace keeping can escape being hurt. It is hurtful to throw yourself in the line of fire again to try to work out your relationships with that difficult person in your life.

There is a wonderful story in John 20 after Jesus rose from the dead. In one of his post resurrection appearances he says to them, "Peace be with you." And then the text says that he showed them his hands and his side and again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."

Do you get it? Jesus is saying, "Do you see? My beloved daughter, my beloved son, do you see? Little children, do you see my hands?" Showing them his hands and his side he said, "Peace be to you." Do you understand little children what it cost me to make peace between you and God? I was pierced. I was wounded. I was beaten. I was bruised. Now as the Father has sent me into the world, so I am sending you. If you are going to be a peace wager, if you are going to walk in my steps as a Christian, you are going to be wounded too.

You know, virtually every day in some way or other I talk with people about their relationships with other people. Very often people are troubled by the state of their relationships with another person. They are exhausted. They are frustrated. They are upset. They are hurt. Folks come and they talk, whether in the office or in counseling, and very often what an individual is looking for is a

quick fix, an easy low cost remedy, a way to maintain unity in my spare time without much effort or pain. And I will tell you straight up, there is no easy way to heal a relationship. There is no low cost solution.

Isn't there another way I don't risk disappointment again by trying to reconcile with my mate? Isn't there some other path than going through the pain of counseling? Isn't there something else other than me having to make a call and put my head on the chopping block again? Opening myself up to that person's rejection? I don't like them. There, I have said it. I don't like them.

There is no other way. Being wounded as we try to reconcile is part of the package. As God sent Jesus into the world, Jesus sends us. And I know that Jesus absolutely understands the temptation to avoid the cross. I can go to Jesus and have somebody who is empathetic with me because he was tempted in the same way to avoid the cross. I know that if I follow Jesus he won't rip me off. He came to enrich me, to give me life, to not steal it. He is a good shepherd; he is not a thief. I know that Jesus will protect me when go to him. I know his grace is sufficient for me. I know he is going to help me.

So how can we have the quality of relationship to really really embrace this message of the church? Verse 2, and we are going to end here, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." This is an incredible insight into the basic reason we have problems with each other. The #1 reason why we have problems with each other is because we have adopted a me-first attitude because of our radical individualism. The fact that our needs are not getting met in a relationship, the fact that our pride was wounded, the fact that we didn't get the recognition that we deserve, that the relationship is not fulfilling, that we were not thanked, we were not cared for, we were not appreciated – our individualism, our American me-first attitude is behind so much of our discord and disunity. What about me? What about how I feel? The #1 reason people have marriage problems is selfishness and self-centeredness. We won't bend; we won't compromise.

And Paul says, “You know, if you are going to really go after God’s heart for relationship, you need large doses of humility and meekness.” Humility and meekness says things like, “I will take the first step. I will be the first one who picks up the phone even though I may feel that you were a significant part of the problem. I will humble myself and tell you that I think I was wrong, even before you do. I will come to you and say I blew it. I am sorry. I will set up the appointment. I will write the note. I will give up my independence and my need to always stand apart.” Humility and meekness. Meekness is strength under control. We have seen it over and over. It is strength that is harnessed. Meekness is the opposite of moodiness. To be meek, I don’t indulge my moods. I don’t get a chance for an hour or a day or several days to punish someone else by my moods. I don’t get to punish my spouse or my roommate or my friend or my employee or employer by being in a bad mood. If we say that we are committed to the plan of Jesus, if we say that we are committed to doing everything possible to maintain relationship with each other, then we are absolutely not entitled to mood control over our environment. We are not entitled to sulk or to be silent or to engage in self-pity. I must be me. And that means fundamentally that you practice mood control. Humility and meekness. Patience.

Patience means long-tempered by God’s grace. We are going to stretch out that response time. I am going to be long-tempered instead of short-tempered with a short fuse. With God’s help and with God’s strength, I will be patient with those who are not as mature as I think they ought to be; who are not as sensitive as I think they ought to be; who are not as smart as I think they ought to be. Since I know that God is not through with them just as I know that God is not through with me, I will be patient with his process in their life.

Forbearing and bearing with each other in love means that I want to do everything possible to maintain relationship. I can’t focus on other people’s weaknesses. Dear Abby is full of people who focus on other people’s weaknesses. My husband has cracked his knuckles for 15 years, I can’t stand it and I want to put poison in his coffee. My neighbor’s kids constantly play in my driveway. If I see them again, I will push them off their bikes.

Disunity flows when we focus on other people's flaws. Let's stop looking at each other's mistakes and flaws. Let's stop focusing on each other's weaknesses. Let's stop talking with each other about what is wrong in each other. Let's start talking with each other about what is right with another person. What they did correctly. What we saw them do well. Let's cleanse ourselves from our hyper-critical attitudes.

It is not easy. Being the church requires work. It involves wounds. It costs. But oh, the benefits of church. We get to be involved in something beyond us. We get to live as a counter way to this highly individualistic culture. We get to enjoy relationship with each other as well as God. We get to give and receive love. We get enriched with all the riches of Christ through the church. We get family. We get to show something to a dying and fractured culture in which people are more and more and more divided, pursuing more radical expressions of autonomy.

We get to say that with Jesus Christ, it is all different. And it is not just different in the invisible realm. Jesus Christ makes a difference in the whole way that I relate to myself and the way that I relate to other people.

What does this mean practically for you? If you need to, get baptized. If you are attending here and haven't been to the newcomer's class yet, or if you are hanging around the fringe, get involved in a small group. Stop hiding in the crowd. Stop hanging back. If you have a broken relationship, do something about it. In fact, do everything within your power and prayers to heal your relationship. Catch the message of the church.