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Bernard Bell  
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# EMBRACING ONE ANOTHER

*SERIES: EMBRACING RELATIONSHIPS*

In this in-between time between two major preaching series I am using three weeks to explore the relationships in which we are involved. I am doing so through the vehicle of what I described two weeks ago as my personal mission statement. This serves as the framework for how I think and work. This is the framework for how I seek to grow in my own understanding, for what I am trying to convey when I teach and preach, and even for how I think through a worship service. Here is what I seek to understand and to convey:

Who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit; and, as a result, who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world.

This statement contains two parts: a three-part statement about God and a three-part statement about ourselves, with the second being dependent on the first: what we think about ourselves is dependent on what we think about God. The second part, about ourselves, concerns our relationships. We don't live our lives in isolation, but in relationship to others. As God's people we live out our lives involved in three sets of relationships: with God, with one another, and with the world. These relationships should be lived in light of who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. So we could rephrase the statement:

In light of who God is, what he has done in Christ and what he is doing through his Spirit, who are we in relationship to God, in relationship to one another, and in relationship to the world?

This is not an abstract question: it is not simply a matter of who I see myself as being in these three relationships. The answer should affect my behavior.

These three sets of relationships are depicted by three pairs of hands in the window: hands reaching up to God, hands reaching out to one another in reconciliation, and hands reaching out to the world. Each of these relationships involves embracing another, so I have called this series "Embracing Relationships."

Last time we looked at who we are in relationship to God. We saw two important things about God. God is God and I'm not; and God is love, with the paradigm of that love being a father's love for his son, a love into which the Father adopts us. These two truths are both humbling and exalting. It is humbling but also liberating to accept that I am not God. It is exalting to accept that I am the Father's son. Each one of us individually is adopted by God into sonship. I don't use the word "son" to be sexist. Whether we are male or female the Bible uses the language of sonship because in the Biblical framework the son is both the heir and the beloved. Those of you from Asian backgrounds have some understanding of this. In Christ we are each the son of a Father who loves us deeply, who knows what it is to love a son because he has been loving his Son since before the beginning of time.

But we are more than just a collection of individual sons. Together we are a people. Today we move on and look at how we are

to think of ourselves in relationship to one another. We think about this in light of who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit.

## 1. God and his people

Western society since the renaissance and the enlightenment has been individualistic, and the most individualistic of all societies is the American one. Rugged individualism is part of the national myth. Socialism is a dirty word. American Christianity tends to be individualistic: the gospel is about me and God, about accepting that God has a wonderful plan for my life, and getting my personal ticket to heaven. God cares deeply about me as an individual but God is concerned about so much more. God's primary concerns have always been about a people. His plan concerns a people. The metanarrative into which I am placed in Christ is the story of God and his people.

It is true that the story of this people began with an individual. God chose one person, Abraham, but his purposes stretched far beyond Abraham. God called Abraham to be the father of a great people: "I will make you into a great nation" (Gen 12:2).

This past week the Women's Bible Studies resumed after the summer break, continuing in Exodus. This year you women are studying Exodus 19–40, a portion with two major sections: the covenant (19–24) and the tabernacle (25–40). Both sections mark major advances in the story of God and his people. Having delivered the people of Israel from Egypt, God brought them to himself and announced his intentions:

**"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exod 19:4-6 NIV)**

His intention was that they be a people. He then made a covenant with this people, binding himself to them and them to himself. From now on they were legally his people. The treaty document was the Ten Words, the ten commandments. These commandments fall into two sections: commandments pertaining to God and commandments pertaining to man. The first set of commandments can be observed by an individual: you shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an image. But the second set imply a people living in relationship one with the other. Honor your father and mother; do not murder; do not commit adultery; and so on. God cared about how his people treated one another. People were in covenant with God, but also in covenant with one another as God's covenant people. It wasn't only how they thought about God that mattered but how they thought about one another, and how they acted towards one another.

Jesus summarized these commandments as “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37-38). God’s people are called to love their neighbors because they are a people. Who are these neighbors? The near neighbors are all those who are in the covenant community. For Israel this was all those who were part of the people of Israel.

Later the prophets critiqued Israel not only for its sins against God, its idolatry, but also for its sins against one another, forgetting that they were a covenant people who were supposed to live in love to one another. They critiqued the wealthy and powerful for oppressing the poor and powerless in the covenant community. It mattered how God’s people lived together.

After binding themselves together in covenant God had his people build him a tabernacle so that he might dwell in their midst (Exod 25:8; 29:45). He was fulfilling his purpose as expressed in his oft-repeated statement, “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” “I will be your God, you will be my people”—that was achieved in the covenant. “I will dwell with you”—this was now achieved with the tabernacle. God’s purpose has always been to create and redeem a people for his presence.

“But that’s all in the Old Testament,” you may say. Aren’t things different in New Testament? No, in the New Testament God is just as concerned to form a people. He has acted in Christ and is continuing to act through his Spirit to bring this about.

## 2. Made one in Christ

Individual faith is essential. In the Old Testament one was born into the covenant people of God, born into the seed of Abraham. But even in the Old Testament faith was important: there was a faithful remnant within physical Israel. Unfaithful Israelites could be cut off through unbelief, while Gentiles could be included through faith. Throughout his ministry Jesus redrew the lines around himself. The people of God were not those who claimed physical descent from Abraham but those who responded in faith to Jesus’ call to gather around himself. Inclusion in God’s true people has always been by faith, but now the object of our faith is Christ.

At the time of Jesus the Jews saw the world as starkly divided into two groups: an “in” group and an “out” group; the included and the excluded; Jews who were included in God’s people, and Gentiles who were excluded. God sent his son to the Jews as their Messiah, their Christ. Christ has brought salvation first to the Jew, but then also to the Gentile, because he has demolished the ethnic distinction between Jew and Gentile, as Paul explains to the Ephesians:

**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Eph 2:13-16)**

The people of God are no longer ethnocentric but Christocentric. But the basis of their full participation remains the same: it is still faith, just as Abraham was considered righteous for his faith. It was not easy for the early church to grasp this Christocentric union and its implications. The Jerusalem church took offense when Peter had a meal with Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his family after their conversion. Later Paul rebuked Peter in Antioch when he withdrew

from table fellowship with Gentiles. Paul told the Galatian Christians,

**There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)**

In Christ we are joined together regardless of ethnicity, gender or social standing. There are plenty of things that might differentiate us, but there is one overriding thing that unites us: participation in Christ Jesus. The pair of different-colored hands in the window represents this reconciliation and union in Christ. We who were strangers to one another have now been brought together in Christ. As we sang earlier,

Beneath the cross of Jesus  
His family is my own—  
Once strangers chasing selfish dreams,  
Now one through grace alone.<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament uses two metaphors to describe our union and participation in Christ. We are a building, each of us being individual building blocks, put together with Christ as the cornerstone. Assembled as this building we are the temple of God, the place where he dwells with his people. Secondly, we are a body, each of us being individual body parts, put together with Christ as the head. Both metaphors express the fact that we’re one together, and that we’re centered on Christ. Without Christ we fall apart. Without a head the body can’t function. Without a cornerstone the building won’t be true.

This union in Christ incorporates “all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2). It is a people that stretches through time and around the world. Earlier we sang *Holy God We Praise Thy Name*, based on the *Te Deum*, a fourth century Latin poem of praise by the communion of saints to the triune God. It begins *Te Deum laudamus*, “You, O God, we praise.” Who is the “we” that praises God?

all creation worships you...  
To you all angels, all the powers of heaven,  
the cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise...  
The glorious company of apostles praise you.  
The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.  
The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.  
Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you...

As you worship today do you sense that you are part of a people, a people that stretches back centuries and stretches around the world?

One of the great benefits of mission trips is to encounter parts of the family elsewhere in the world, to experience the bonds which we have in Christ. My primary ministry overseas has been in Indonesia, particularly in Timor, working with Eli Fangidae. I count it a great privilege to have known him for nearly 25 years. Eli died on Friday. Today I am torn, because I would like to be in Timor with Eli’s family, with the church he pastored, and with the younger pastors for whom he was a father figure, as they gather for the funeral tomorrow. I know many of these people; we are family together in Christ.

On Tuesday I witnessed a beautiful example of this union in Christ. I had invited Baruch Maoz to speak here last Monday. He is a Jewish Israeli Christian who for over thirty years pastored a church near Tel Aviv. The following day Brian, John and I had lunch with Baruch. Brian invited Nerses Balabanian to join us; some of you know our dear friend Nerses. He was born in Aleppo, Syria where

he still has family. He then lived and ministered in Lebanon before being called here to pastor an Armenian church in San Francisco. Here at the lunch table were an Israeli Jew and someone from Syria and Lebanon. There is great hostility between Israel on the one hand and Syria and Lebanon on the other. But here were these two men embracing one another because they are united in Christ. They share a Christocentric union that overrides all their ethnic differences and tensions.

We must take a thoroughly Christocentric view of our union in Christ. It is too easy to exclude groups or fail to fully embrace them. In Christ former enemies and strangers are brought together. The arena in which I observed this as a child was the divide between leper and non-leper. My parents were missionaries in central Thailand, and both worked with lepers, at a time when leprosy was still greatly feared, and lepers were ostracized. Lepers responded to the gospel and came to faith. For many years there were two churches, the so-called “well” church and the leper church. It was a happy day when eventually the two churches united. But it was not easy to live out this union. A few weeks ago I was talking with my mother and a couple of her former colleagues about this matter. They talked about how lepers and non-lepers met for residential conferences. The non-lepers were willing to meet together with the lepers, but they were unwilling to sleep in the same room, so the lepers slept outside on the verandah. That’s a denial of the gospel, a denial of our union in Christ.

It is not easy to preserve this unity in Christ. There is a saying, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity.” Sadly this has been contravened through much of church history. In my homeland of Scotland the Church of Scotland has splintered into numerous small denominations. I was reminded of this again last month when I was in Scotland visiting my family and we were trying to figure out where to go to church when we were all on holiday together. Many of these splits could have been avoided had there been more charity. Scotland is only a small country, too small to have so many similar denominations.

The risen Jesus commended the church in Ephesus for its faithfulness to truth, its success at exposing false teachers. But along the way the church had lost its first love, which I take to mean its love for the brethren, its love for one another.

How do we think of ourselves in relationship to one another? In Christ we are one. We are parts of one body with Christ as the head; we are stones within one building with Christ as the cornerstone. We must think of ourselves as a people, and think of ourselves as gathered around Christ.

### 3. Spirit-enabling to live together

As a family we are called to live together. But it is not always easy living together. This is where the work of the Spirit comes in. God is at work in us through his Spirit to enable us to live together as a people. I want to highlight two aspects of what God is doing in us as a people through his Spirit. He is transforming our characters and he is equipping his people with gifts.

#### 3.1 Character transformation

Firstly, God is transforming our characters. Living together is not easy. Just because we are family doesn’t mean it is easy to get along. Sue and I are fortunate in that both our families like getting together; we enjoy one another’s company. We don’t choose our family members. We are born into a family and we generally accept the family we

have, but even so not all families get along. But in the Christian family it is often different. Particularly in large churches we self-select into homogenous communities of like people. We gather around ourselves people that we like. But that is not the way it is supposed to be. God gathers all sorts of people into his family. We have to learn to live together. God is at work through his Spirit transforming us so that we are able to live together.

In the New Testament epistles there are many lists of virtues. Probably the best-known is the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:

**The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Gal 5:22-23 NASB)**

These are not abstract virtues that you exhibit on your own. You don’t have patience on your own. It’s when you are in relationship with someone else that you find out whether or not you have patience. These are virtues that are shown in relationship with others, as we live Spirit-empowered lives together.

Even monks had to learn this. The first monks went off into the Egyptian desert to pursue God in isolation. Benedict tried this approach but then he came to an important understanding: learning to live together in community is essential even to the monastic life.

As a people put together in Christ we have to learn to live together. God is at work in us through his Spirit to transform us and give us the character necessary to live together, to be patient with one another, to think of one another more highly than of ourselves, to be generous with one another, and so on.

#### 3.2 Spiritual Gifts

A second aspect of what God is doing in us through his Spirit is the allocation of spiritual gifts. Though we are all one in Christ Jesus we are not identical. Though God is conforming us into the image of his Son, we are not all the same. We are each different parts within the one body, different stones within the one building. Just as the different parts of a body function in different ways, so God through his Spirit has given each of us different gifts so that we function in different ways. Paul told the church in Corinth,

**There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4-7)**

After listing some of the gifts he concluded,

**All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. (1 Cor 12:11)**

Paul then draws on the analogy of a body to explain how this works:

**Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many... But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (1 Cor 12:12-14, 18-20)**

But the church in Corinth evidently had trouble accepting this principle. Paul rebuked them using irony: if the foot were upset that it weren't a hand, or the ear that it weren't an eye, how could the body function?

God has so designed this body that we need each other in order to function as a body. Through his Spirit he has given each of us different gifts, so that we all have to use our individual gifts in order to function as a body. This is one reason why the ministry of the saints is so important: it takes all the saints, each with their Spirit-endowed gifting, for the body to function.

Last Sunday was our Ministry Connections Sunday, an opportunity to explore the ministries of the church and see where we each might fit in. But this functioning as a body must extend far beyond formal ministries, beyond home fellowships. It is easy for individualism to affect how we view church life. But the church is not a collection of individuals. It is a local part of the family of God which stretches around the world and through time.

God's Spirit has equipped us with gifts for sharing with one another, gifts that are to be used for building one another up, whether spiritually or materially. These gifts are not for our own individual benefit but for the proper functioning of the body. All the gifts are important. Some are teaching gifts; some are helping gifts. Some of the helping gifts involve giving generously. John Lennon told us to imagine a world where there is no need. That's one solution: to imagine a world with no need. But it seems that God has so designed things that this side of heaven there will always be need. In ancient Israel it was taken for granted that there would be the poor, the widow, the orphan. It's as if they were there as a test by God to see how the covenant community would treat them. In the New Testament we see that the church included the poor and widows. Deacons were set aside to provide material care for them. We have deacons here who do a wonderful job providing material care for those in need. We have a need fund, and are constantly amazed at your generosity to give to this fund. The solution is not to get rid of the need in the first place, but that those in a position to help should help those in need. It is good that the needs are there because then we can help together. Repeatedly we read of Paul gathering a collection from the churches to help the church in Jerusalem at a time of famine. He urged the saints to contribute generously not for a building or a program, but to help their brothers and sisters, whom they had never met, a thousand miles away across the sea, in their time of need.

In conclusion, how are we to think of ourselves in relationship to one another? Together, we are the people of God. God has united us in Christ, in a union which stretches across every division the world has. Through his Spirit he is equipping us and transforming us so that we function as a people, as his people. We are so much more than just a collection of individuals; we are a family, God's family, called to live life together.

1. Keith and Kristyn Getty, *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*, © 2005 Thankyou Music.

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