

# Made for People!

*Community, Relationship  
and the People of God*

Phil Norris



Salt & Light Ministries

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# Introduction

## God *IS* Relationship!

It's Thursday afternoon and the church hall is buzzing with activity. People are talking excitedly, catching up after a week apart, and introducing new friends. The conversation, seeping through the ceiling to the offices above, is audible but not all decipherable – certainly not for the ill-educated like me! The reason is that it's not all English. Asian dialects can be recognised by the attentive.

This is one of two English cafés being run in Basingstoke by the Community Churches. Their aim is to reach out to the increasing international community of the town through helping them with their English. It is clearly communicated that these cafés are run by Christians but also clear that discussing questions of faith will not be forced upon people but will be in response to questions asked. The atmosphere being set is one of service and friendship, a place to relax, building community for those removed from their communities of origin. And in this extremely relationally-motivated context God is at work.

Recently one international resident from Venezuela was baptised. Her baptism was attended by at least twenty other international residents, some of whom had travelled quite a distance to witness this wonderful event. Her on-going connection to the church has been facilitated by Spanish speakers in the congregation. This is a lady displaced from her home, but finding a community in which she

encounters God, comes to faith, and her life becomes a testimony to so many others.

A visit to the home of another international resident by the Jehovah's Witnesses resulted in Edwin Monger, one of our leaders, being asked to explain the Trinity to all those listening at the next English café event. Edwin spent one and a half hours explaining the Trinity to all these inquisitive people. God is at work. I have subsequently asked Edwin to explain it to us – but he has not yet obliged!

### **A Strange Question?**

It may seem strange that this question of God as Trinity was the subject of conversation at the English café, and in many ways it is. But there is no more fundamental question with which to grapple when it comes to thinking about Christian community than this. Even though the Trinity is shrouded with mystery, it is this revelation of who God is that underpins any attempt at faithfully being his community. In the end we can only respond to this revelation with faith, worship and awe. But this mystery of the Trinity can both profoundly influence our understanding of being God's people and our practice of living that out. So it is worth some effort to grasp as much as we can.

What is equally wonderful in this story is that this English Café story locates the explanation of the Trinity in a context of mission. Of course, the person asking the question did not realise this; but it is truly appropriate. We will see later that living relationally is not an internal culture simply to make me feel cared for and loved (although it does indeed do this), but it has at its heart the desire to represent God to those who don't know him.

In looking at being a relational community the starting place has to be the concept that Edwin explained to that

group. The Trinity is one of the mysterious convictions of the Christian faith that is so fundamental yet so difficult to get our head around. It is so vitally important; yet what difference would it make to the faith of many of us if it were not true? What change would there be in our lives individually or in the life of our churches? If the answer is 'very little' then it is possible we are not really living in a Christian way! That is because this belief and doctrine should radically shape how we live and behave as God's people. It is for this reason that this book begins by reflecting upon the Trinity, so that it can take its foundational role in our establishing church communities.

### **A Confession and a Hope!**

I write as someone who believes passionately in the body of Christ, the church, as the people of God, his family; but also as one who constantly fails in living out that conviction faithfully. On many occasions I have failed to put into practice what I believe, though on a few occasions I have succeeded. I trust that God is continuing to work the truth of this understanding into the reality of my behaviour!

My hope for this short book is that you too will receive a greater revelation of the relational nature of life as a whole, specifically of people made in the image of God, and of the nature of the Church.

In a world that increasingly wants greater and greater levels of productivity, that values efficiency above all else, the place of relational living can be further and further diminished. Whilst acknowledging useful tools that help us reflect on our fruitfulness, these tools must only ever serve. If they become the master, then we are lost! We will become machine-like in what we demand of ourselves and others and even in how we respond to God. He becomes, instead of

my Father, the great slot machine in the sky that I try to manipulate through my prayers, behaviour and sacrifice. That sounds very much like pagan religion! And like pagan religion it will fail us, because God will not be controlled. Instead we will end up disillusioned with apparent unanswered prayer, doubtful there is a God who hears and who is powerful, and given to an ever-increasing search for 'the best way to manipulate God,' dressed up as 'Ten Steps to...!'

Valuing relationship means living life in a way that endows people and creation with dignity and time; it means recognising we cannot confine people to our boxes; and least of all can we expect God to simply be at our beck and call. Valuing relationship means recognising that those made in God's image reflect his very nature and need to be received and honoured in that way.

# Chapter 1

## So what is this Trinity?

One of my children's favourite quotes when they were younger comes from the film 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding.' The film is centred upon an apparently traditional Greek family who have emigrated to America. During the film you see the tension between the generations, particularly the father figure, who attempts to maintain certain traditional Greek ways of being whilst his children are increasingly captivated by the culture of the USA. One telling moment in the film is a conversation between the mother and one of the children in which they discuss who is in charge in the home. The answer given is the man; but Maria (the mother) says, "Let me tell you something, Toula. The man is the head, but the woman is the neck. And she can turn the head any way she wants!"

It's certainly an entertaining film. But it leaves me with a question. Is this the kind of relational life that we want? One of control and manipulation, with competing strategies from different people to get their own way? Is it power that defines relationships, or is there a better way? We see these questions surface in various forms in all kinds of relationships. In family, work, clubs, political parties, communities, and even churches the quest for power and control is frequently the predominant motivation.

Answering this kind of question takes us right to the heart of this book which seeks to describe how our relationships should reflect the relationships we find within God Himself. So let's take a moment to consider God...

## **God as Trinity**

The Bible describes God as one person who exists in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Theologians use the word 'Trinity' to describe this. And belief in this Trinity is one of the fundamental beliefs that define Christianity. It is a mysterious belief because we don't really have anything with which to accurately compare the Trinity and we can't really get our finite minds around it. How can one person, God, also be three persons, Father, Son, Spirit, and all at the same time?

This mysterious belief is a conviction and truth upon which the Christian church throughout history has taken its stand and it is where we must begin our search for meaningful relationships. Many great people have grappled with this doctrine of the Trinity. They have inspected it, analysed it, turned it this way and that, and have tried all kinds of metaphors to help us better understand how one God can also be three. I will leave that great work to others and allow you to find their books! But I do want to affirm that this mystery still stands and our exploration of relational community begins from this understanding of the nature of God. We will come to more about this later.

## **God as One**

The Bible also describes God as one, a Unity. As we have already said, the Bible confirms over and over the reality of the Trinity, and to deny this reality is to not be Christian. God is clearly revealed to us as three distinct persons, **yet**

also as intrinsically one. His unity is never up for dispute. The three persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equally God. There is no lesser member of the Trinity. And these three persons can't be separated. Their unity and connection is unbreakable. We may sometimes highlight one person over the other, even as at times the Scriptures do, but we need to constantly remember that they exist together.

When we talk about the Father, that doesn't mean the Son and Spirit are absent; similarly when we talk about the Spirit, the Father and the Son are not absent; and when we talk about the Son, the Father and Spirit are not absent. All three are present all of the time! The three are one.

However, as the story of salvation unfolds in the Bible there is an apparent 'separation' between the three. We see the Son as the incarnate one who dwells with and amongst people as a man. We see the Father as the one resident in heaven, overseeing all, orchestrating plans and bringing history to its conclusion. We see the Spirit as the one sent by the Father and the Son after Jesus' ascension, dwelling with us and continuing Jesus' work.

But the reality is that they exist together, and where we experience the Spirit, we also experience Jesus and the Father; where we experience Jesus, we also experience the Father and the Spirit; and where we experience the Father, we also experience Jesus and the Spirit. It is a mystery, isn't it?! But let me try to unpack this mystery a little more, beginning by looking at the biblical story.

## The Beginning of the Story about God

In Genesis 1 we have the beginning of our story which introduces us to both God (the Father) who speaks, and the Spirit who broods or hovers over creation. Both are present and active at creation. In John 1, in many ways a retelling of the creation story from John's perspective, we are told that Jesus was also there at creation and that nothing was made except through him. By putting these two Scriptures together we clearly have the Father, Son and Holy Spirit together at creation, creating as one, all involved and all active. This shows us that God as three persons – or to introduce a theological term, the 'triune' nature of God – is not some afterthought to deal with the fall of humanity, but it is how God has always been and always will be.

If this is true, then you could say that God in his very essence is three persons.

We may think this is obvious; but we sometimes make the mistake of thinking and behaving as if God is really one in his essence and only revealed as three. We sometimes imagine God as an actor who dons a different costume for different characters in the play but who is really only ever one person. But this is *not* how it is with God. God is always one and always three all of the time.

### Take Care!

If we only focus on God's unity or oneness, we miss his threeness. If we only focus on his threeness, we miss his oneness. We need to emphasise *both*. He is three *and* one in his very essence.

In the Western Church our error has frequently been to major on God's oneness in a way that implies it is greater than his threeness. This has meant we have not always

taken God's threeness seriously enough. If we do this, we emphasise unity over diversity and then may tend to look for conformity and sameness. This tends towards an exclusion of others who aren't like us, superiority about our particular practice of Christianity, and an emphasis on the individual over and against the community. If we misrepresent who God is, then we misrepresent what it means to look like his family.

But equally if we only focus on God's threeness, we will tend to affirm diversity, acknowledging individual pursuit of God and individual vocation but ending up drifting into disconnection and a lack of unity. It can sow to an individualistic way of life that prioritises personal success and happiness over that of the community. What becomes important is what *I* want rather than what builds the community. Again we will fail to adequately express the nature of God.

However, if we maintain the emphasis both on unity and on threeness then we are more likely to experience diversity within unity, which is what we find in God. And that will have huge impact on how we build relational life together.

**Questions:**

1. Does God as Trinity find much place in your (a) thinking (b) praying (c) living?
2. As you think about God's unity, does it speak to you of any areas where you need to make practical changes to how you live?
3. As you think about God's three-ness, does this speak likewise speak to you of any areas in which you need to change how you live?

# Chapter 2

## The Relational Life of the Trinity

You can tell a lot about the values in a family when you walk in and watch how the different members relate together. You can quickly see whether there are unhealthy power struggles, or manipulative or broken relationships. One of the great transitions in family life is navigating through the teenage years of children when decision-making shifts and healthy parental control becomes advising, dialoguing and prayer. The Greek family in the film that I mentioned were struggling with those same issues and were attempting to resolve them by exerting more authority to try to control and by establishing relationships of power and manipulation. (Watch the film to see how they make it through!)

Is this manipulation and inequality the kind of relational life found in God? Or is there a different way, a way which we are supposed to imitate? Is God the Father really a dictator, and the Holy Spirit and Jesus just his minions? Or does God think he is in charge while the Spirit, as the present one, really calls the shots?

## Trinitarian Family Values

John's gospel is a great help to us in trying to understand this relationship within the life of God. Particularly helpful are John chapters 14 to 16 that have lots to say about the relationship of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But here I will simply focus on John 14:6-21:

*Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'*

*Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'*

*Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.*

*'If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before*

*long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.'*

In these verses we see a number of interesting and profound truths.

Firstly, access to the Father is only through Christ, something we need to remember in the multi-cultural, multi-faith and post-modern world in which we live which suggests that there are many different ways to God.

Secondly, these chapters emphasise that knowing and seeing the Father is the same as knowing and seeing Jesus. This truth is powerful. What it means is this. If you want to know what God (the Father) is like, you need only look at Jesus. He is the image, the true image, of the Father, just as Paul describes in Colossians 1:15. Knowing Jesus and seeing him is equivalent to knowing and seeing the Father. The pastoral power of this is incredible, so let me digress for a moment!

All human fathers fail to give a true representation of God as Father. We are all flawed (ask my kids!). How many times have I failed to give them the time, dignity and value that God the Father gives to me? I take hope in this truth about Jesus representing the Father. And as my pastor said to his own kids when he failed them as a dad, "That's why you need a saviour!" Dead right! My children need a saviour. But the closer I can get to representing the fatherhood of God accurately, the better off they will be.

For those who have really poor images of father, some quite horrific, through the failures and sin of their earthly father, this can be a profound help. As they try to

understand God as Father it is very hard to do so well when your image of fatherhood has been so distorted. But the Scripture gives us a way through. To know, understand, and see God as Father they need only look at Jesus. Their image of 'father' can be redeemed through Jesus and the parody of fatherhood they have experienced can be dealt with. It isn't always a quick journey, but it is a journey that can be taken. As you look at Jesus, whatever you see in him is exactly as the Father is. Of course for parents this truth brings a deep sigh of relief! We do our best to present fatherhood, and indeed motherhood, to our children, but trip over our feet all over the place. These verses bring us hope. When we fail, our children can be pointed to Jesus, who redeems our mistakes and enables our children to enjoy the reality of true fatherhood through him.

Thirdly, we read in this passage of the complete identification or unity of Father and Son as Jesus says, "*I am in the Father and ... the Father is in me.*" He points to himself as the true representation of the Father. He says his words are the Father's words and he says his signs point to his unity with the Father.

Fourthly, Jesus points to the inherent love and appreciation within the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit when he says he seeks to bring glory to the Father. There is a selflessness amidst the unity that is incredible.

Fifthly, this is followed by the promise of the Spirit, whom Jesus describes as another one like him. The Greek word here is *paraclete*. This is not an easy word to translate but has the sense here of one who comes alongside and continues the work of the one he succeeds. Jesus says he will ask the Father to send the paraclete Spirit, the other one like him. It is almost like Jesus' alter ego! And this one will live with and in Jesus' followers. What is amazing

though is that the unity of the Spirit and Jesus is further affirmed when Jesus, in talking about the Spirit being sent, says, “*I will come to you*” (v18). The implication is that as you receive the Spirit so you also receive Jesus.

This unity is continuously affirmed in these three chapters of John’s gospel. Read them and worship! As you read through these chapters the emphasis on the unity of the Godhead (the Trinity), their love and honour of each other, and the inability of being able to separate the three from each other is incredibly apparent. Jesus seeks to glorify the Father (John 14:13); the Father loves the Son (15:9); the Spirit testifies about Jesus (15:26); the Spirit glorifies Jesus (16:14). I trust as you read this and look at the Scriptures yourself you will now be convinced!

### **A Useful Metaphor**

One of the historic images used to illustrate this incredible interweaving of love, honour, unity and glorying is the analogy of dance. It is an analogy I find very powerful. Imagine three dancers dressed so as to be indistinguishable from one another, flowing together in perfect harmony. At different times one member of the dance comes to the fore but the other two members are always present, always there. The three never separate whereby there is suddenly only one dancer present but looking to the honour of each other. A number of years ago in a Basingstoke celebration we watched as three dancers performed in a way to illustrate this dance. It was incredible to watch the movement and unity expressed. This wasn’t a static portrayal of God but a God full of life as the three dancers changed positions, wove in and out, merged and emerged. Of course this analogy, like any, is limited; but both unity

and distinction were wonderfully portrayed, and it gave me a powerful, albeit partial, picture of the nature of God.

So now back to the question of God's nature that I left us with earlier in the chapter. The Scriptures seem to point out so clearly that the God whom we worship is not some isolated individual, a God who likes his own space; but rather a God who in his very essence *is* community and *is* relationship. This 'triune' essence of God is profound and mysterious, and is vital for our engagement with God, with one another and with the world. And it is this truth that gives the foundation for all else I want to say in this book as we think about how this truth affects us and our relationship with God.

**Questions:**

1. To what extent is your picture of Father God thoroughly shaped by your picture of Jesus? Take a few moments to reflect on this and allow the Holy Spirit to highlight any ways in which you need to think differently about the Father and what he is like.
2. What strikes you in how I have described the relationships in the Trinity?

# Chapter 3

## God's Image in Us

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)*

If you have ever had the privilege of having children you will have experienced the wonder and amazement when these little people grow to be like you, sometimes physically, other times in character, and sometimes both! It's not all the time, and not in every aspect, but at times they just do. I have to say that very occasionally, from a certain angle, I have sometimes momentarily confused my oldest daughter with my wife!

I remember another occasion standing on the playground of our school, watching a young lad saunter across the tarmac in a particular style, shoulders swaying with a confidence that belied his years, and straight away knowing who his father was! He didn't have to say anything – I just knew!

But you also experience this in terms of character. Have you noticed how the older you get, the more like your parents you become, in both the way you approach things and your mannerisms? One day I found myself putting the car seat belt on in just the kind of way my dad used to – and a way that so often got a quick retort from my mum. I never used to do that, and I don't know why I started, but I did. It

was scary! Or have you noticed a couple who have been married for years starting to look like one another? Their mannerisms become the same, their smiles similar, their eyebrows raised in a particular style.

This God whom we have sought to describe earlier is a God in whose image we are formed. This is something that Genesis 1 is very clear about. We are not created beings that bear no resemblance to our Creator; rather we have been made in his image. And as we worship him, giving ourselves in love and adoration, that image becomes more and more profound and clear. The Psalmist explains this for us. In both Psalm 115 and Psalm 135 we read that we become more and more like the person or object we worship. For example, one verse says: *“Those who make idols will be like them, and so will all who trust in them”* (Psalm 115:8).

It’s amusing at times, but can you see how this relates to the stories above? As a couple grow older together and have spent so many years gazing at one another they start to pick up one another’s mannerisms. Imperceptibly, little by little, their love and devotion to one another fuels a merging of their characteristics. I have a dear friend whose husband died some years ago, but even now there are occasions when I see her husband in her. She does something, laughs in a particular way, makes a certain facial expression, and I instantly see her husband. It is a wonderful and unusual testimony to their love for each other.

A more light-hearted and strange example is when owners look like their pets! Ever seen an owner who looks like their dog? Some people are so besotted with their pets that the same effect happens. Watch someone walk into a room with their pet dog and see if you can notice any similarities. It is incredibly funny, but the years of undying

love to this animal have produced similarities in movement or expression that unite them. The way they waddle, or screw up their face, or... As a dog owner I had better stop there; but please do tell me if I ever start looking like my dog!

All these examples come straight out of the principles of Genesis 1 and echo the words of the Psalmist. We become like the thing we worship! It can be very humorous or very frightening, depending upon your perspective; but have a look round next time you're in a large gathering and see what you can notice. I know DNA and genes are also involved for offspring; but isn't it amazing that we resemble those we love?

### **Called to Be Like God**

The point for our reflection on community is this: if we worship God, then, as the Psalmist indicates, we will become like God. Adam and Eve were created to reflect their Creator, destined to grow in their imaging of him as they lived in relationship with him. God's desire was they would make decisions that affirmed their relationship with him and showed a lifestyle of worship. In this way they would increasingly demonstrate who God is and what he is like. This remains our call. As we live lives of worship and as we gather to worship, the image of God is formed in us. That is one reason it is so good to gather with God's people regularly to worship. Because in doing so I am deliberately, intentionally setting my gaze upon the true God. I am saying "no" to every other supposed lord that seeks my worship in this world. And as my worship is turned to the true God so his image is increasingly and imperceptibly worked into me. We will comment about the effect of the Fall on this call shortly,

but at this stage simply let the wonder of that call inspire you to worship.

Now, if we are formed in the image of God, what does God's triune nature mean for that image?

There is significant discussion and debate about what it means to be created in God's image. Is it to do with our ability to think outside of ourselves, in contrast to animals that live by instinct? Is it to do with our creativity mirrored after God's creativity? Is it to do with our capacity to choose and to distinguish right from wrong? Maybe it's all of these things; but I want to suggest that it is *at least* to do with being created as relational beings and not isolated individuals.

### **No Man is an Island**

The old saying that "no man is an island" is true. God has not made us as islands. But as those made in his image, God has made us as communal and relational creatures. We need others, others to give to and receive from, others to love and be with, others in whom identity is formed and belonging experienced. This contrasts radically with those philosophers who suggest that knowing myself, or knowing who I really am, requires isolation and separation. God's word says the opposite. As those made in God's image, relationship does not diminish who I am; rather in relationship I become more whom God has created me to be. Friendship, marriage, family, team, neighbourhood, colleagues, are all potential relationships designed to help me become more the person that God has created me to be. In and through these relationships I mature and become me!

Marriage is perhaps the most intimate expression of that reality, but it is not unique in carrying the capacity for

affirming identity and bringing maturity. Let me personalise what I am saying. Phil Norris is not 'lost' as relationships grow, but 'Phil Norris' becomes more 'Phil Norris' through his relationships as husband, father, son, friend, colleague, neighbour, church member. I am defined and am being defined by my relationships. That's one reason why the loss of those relationships is so devastating. Our very identity is fractured as relationships end. And yet who we are remains defined by those relationships even when they no longer exist in the same way. My mother died suddenly in August 2008. I miss her so much at times. There was a sense of fracture and theft caused by her death; but the reality and influence of our relationship continues beyond that death. I remain defined by having been, and still being, her son.

The marriage vows about two becoming one, does not mean you have disappeared into some kind of new being, a third person that is made of the two of you. Rather, marriage enables you to become more yourself. You become more who you are as you enter this most intimate of relationships. The ceremony practised in some traditions that includes extinguishing two candles as you light a third as symbolic of your new relationship is really quite wrong! The two never go out. You may light a third to signify your unity, but in your unity your own candle burns more brightly.

### **A Fallen Image**

So what impact has the Fall had? The obvious answer is the image is deformed, marred, and corrupted. Relationships are fractured and become manipulative and broken. But the image is still what God is after. Listen to Paul. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasts the time of Moses with the

time of Christ and the Spirit. He contrasts the glorious face of Moses after he had been up Mount Sinai with God with the far greater glory of Christians who now have the Spirit. And he concludes by saying that as we contemplate the Lord's glory, something happens: we are transformed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another (verse 18). We are having our image conformed more fully to the image of the one who made us. Do you see how this relates to becoming like the subject or object of our worship?

But the converse is also true. If we worship anyone or anything other than God, we are being formed into that image. If we worship money, then people become resources for me to use for my financial success. As soon as they do something that limits, or, worse still, reduces, my financial success, they become disposable. If we worship career progression, then people become stepping stones to that progression. If we worship sex, then people become conquests, potential or actual. And if we worship materialism, then we objectify people.

As we continue to worship these things, we end up bearing their image and instead of displaying the wonderful, life-affirming image of God, we portray instead the image of our idols: greed, exploitation, manipulation, self-centredness. And not only do we portray these images to others, we also project these images onto God. God becomes the means to my career progression, my success, my acquisitiveness. God becomes objectified as the great slot machine in the sky, which, if approached in the right way, will give me all I request.

All this means it's quite important we get our worship right! And that we recognize our idols and turn our backs on them. Can I encourage you to stop right now before reading further and ask God to highlight any idol that has

crept into your life and that is forming you in its image. Confess it and ask God to deliver you from the idol and to re-form you in *his* image.

If all I have said is true, then to deny relationship, to try to exist on my own, is to deny my very being, to deny myself. The emphasis on individualism prevalent in our world is not the image of God. The self-centred living that many of us pursue is not the image of God. What I am arguing is that the image of God is relational, and that the character of that relational life is loving, honouring, unified, and serving the other.

**Questions:**

1. What percentage of an average day is spent thinking about yourself and about the relationships in which you live? What does this tell you?
2. What might change practically if you were to live more in community than individualistically?
3. What are some of the things or people that receive most 'worship' in our culture today? What about yourself? What receives your most passionate 'worship'? (be honest!)



# Chapter 4

## God's Image in Israel

We focussed in the last chapter on God's image in people as individuals, and recognized that this image brings them into relationship with others. We saw how in Genesis Adam and Eve were called to live this relational life as images of God. But is there a way in which a people were called to do this? Is there a corporate dimension to being made in God's image? Israel's story gives us an answer.

In the Old Testament Israel is referred to as 'God's son'. In Exodus 4:22 God refers to Israel as "*my firstborn son*". As God's son Israel was supposed to worship God and to look like him. One aspect of the call of Israel was to display God to the world, through their shared life. A passage in Hosea (chapter 11) is really interesting because it contrasts the call of Israel as God's son with their waywardness, idolatry, and sin. A similar tale could be drawn from the opening chapters of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 1 describes Israel as children, raised by God, yet rebellious. God longs for their return and that they would be who they were called to be. In verses 16b-17 God says, "*Stop doing wrong, Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.*" Why this? Because this reflects who God is. This is God's children being like their Father.

## Re-member or Dis-member?

One of the major ways in which Israel lived out this image was through their memory. You don't need to read far in your Old Testament before you come across the call to remember. It seems Israel was frequently told to remember, retell, and remind themselves of their history, their story, their ancestry. They celebrated feasts and festivals, they wrote on doorposts, they built piles of stones, all with the purpose of reminding themselves of who they were, where they had come from, and remembering what God had done. Of course many of these ways of remembering and retelling were corporate celebrations themselves, capturing in their enactment the relational dimension of life. But more than that these events connected Israel with their past, their ancestors, and their story. One of my professors alerted me to what I consider a profound truth; namely, that the opposite of to remember is not to forget but is to *dis-member*! Think about it! As Israel celebrated, re-told and rooted themselves in their past, they also *re-membered* who they were. Their corporate identity was re-established as they did this, uniting their own lives with those who had gone before, and understanding the relationships of the present as totally connected with relationships of the past. They were *re-membered*.

Any of you who have been parents will recognise what follows. When my children were young they regularly asked my wife Helen and me about our childhood. Time and time again they would ask us to rehearse their favourite stories. One of my childhood stories was how we used to sneak out of the house, often before my parents were up, by climbing out of an upstairs window onto a flat roof. Once on the roof we would swing down onto the ground and head off to play, perhaps including lighting a fire in the nearby field. This

was one of my recurring stories. One day when I came home from work I found that my youngest, at that time probably aged 3, was re-enacting this story and was on the flat roof of our house, having climbed out of the bathroom window. Needless to say I moved quickly to rectify the situation and suggest it wasn't done again! But what was going on? Unknowingly to them, my children were connecting with their past. They were understanding their lives in the light of our lives; they were re-living our story as their story. They were re-remembering their lives and thereby gaining identity.

We also see this at re-unions, whether for work, school or family. What happens? Stories are told! Stories that root us back in our past and that connect us to one-another. If it's a regular re-union, perhaps a family or work gathering, frequently some of the same stories are told every time. The stories are sometimes embellished and exaggerated almost beyond recognition, but out they roll! These stories connect our lives as we rehearse shared past history, and in telling these stories, we understand who we are together more fully.

Many of us joke about older people telling the same old stories; but perhaps it is for the reasons just given. In telling the stories they locate themselves relationally, and in hearing them we know more of where we have come from.

### **A Great Cloud of Witnesses**

A poignant example of this sense of imaging God through re-remembering our connection with brothers and sisters in Christ through history occurred a few years ago at a Basingstoke celebration. The speaker, Sarah Williams, was due to speak from Hebrews chapter 12 and the great cloud of witnesses described there. In preparation for the

message our worship leader Gary Bastin picked a song that spoke about one generation declaring to another the wonders of God. In Gary's inimitable style he encouraged different age groups in the congregation to sing out to one another, finally ending with those over 90 singing. As the one lady over 90 prepared to sing, Gary took the microphone over to her, and as she sang the congregation broke into applause, honouring her. Later Sarah spoke inspiringly as she described the amphitheatre picture of Hebrews 12 and people taking their place as they cheered on those still on the track. She placed historic figures in the amphitheatre and described how there was a place for us. She contrasted those still running and those who had gone before, now cheering and watching. It was a wonderful morning that connected us with the history of the saints and gave us perspective on our own place. The 90-plus-year old lady left that morning having been applauded and honoured by the whole congregation and having heard an inspiring, perspective giving message about finding our place in God's great amphitheatre. Little did she or we know that she would die the next morning! It moves me even now as I think about it. What a way to go! Re-remembered in our midst and re-remembered with those who have gone before.

### **The Law Helps Israel to Remember**

Another key aspect that illustrates how Israel was to remember who they were, to be God's son and to image him, was through the giving of the Jewish Law or Torah. In many ways the Law was given to protect and restore relationships. It is given in the context of covenant, a relational framework itself, and must be understood in that context. The Law was not an arbitrary set of rules and regulations but was instruction appropriate for those called

to be God's children or God's people. Since God's covenant carried within it the aspiration of blessing all nations on the earth it seems the purpose of the Law was to help regulate the relationship between God and his people and to shape Israel to be the kind of people that adequately reflected God's presence into the world.

The foundational nature of the Ten Commandments, within the Law, is set then in the context of relationship. It is the Ten Commandments that are the starting place for understanding the purpose of the Law. They can be divided into two parts; the first, consisting of laws one to four, focusing on the vertical relationship between God and man; the second, consisting of laws five to ten, focusing upon the horizontal relationship between people. This thrust is consistent throughout the whole Law and helps us see how everything about Israel's Law was to ensure that the people God had called to be his children in the world lived in such a way that his ways, image, and relational approach were displayed.

### **The Law Shows us God**

We could describe the Law as a self-revelation of God. But what kind of God gives these kind of laws? The answer is a God who, even though he recognises the fallen state of the world, demonstrates his grace, desires, and nature. The Law is an act of grace because it provides a means for relationship to be restored and maintained. In it God has facilitated communion between mankind and himself, providing for the ongoing forgiveness of sinful acts, for the cleansing of acts that have defiled, and for the community to approach the presence of the holy God. Hence the Law reflects the relational nature of God and gives emphasis to God's ultimate intention for the whole earth.

The setting-apart of the Israelites as God's children was for the sake of the world and the giving of the Law was so that the relationship God desires to have with people could be seen. Obedience to the Law meant blessing, and was the way to be fully human, fully bearing God's image and exhibiting that original intimacy that God intended with humankind. Isn't it interesting that when Jesus was asked to sum up the Law he did so through the summary of loving God and loving your neighbour, relational emphases that come right out of the Ten Commandments.

**Questions:**

1. How might you be able to 're-member' yourself in your own family or your church story?
2. Who are your great heroes of faith in the Bible story, and how does thinking of them help you?
3. What might it mean practically to connect yourself with those who have gone before us in the faith?

# Chapter 5

## God's Image in the Church

If relationship is foundational for me as one created in God's image, if it is true for Israel as God's representative people, how much more is it true for the Church as Christ's body. Let me re-phrase that so you hear it clearly. The Church *is* Christ's *body*, so of course it should image him.

Give us a crisis and the local church of which I am a part is brilliant. Quick response, self-sacrificing, demonstrable care and love – the Church at its best. And its welcome to newcomers is also excellent. Testimonies from newcomers so often refer to the welcome received. If these two aspects were all that people encountered and were the totality of Christ's image, then we would be doing fine. But of course they are not, and like any church we have plenty of 'room for improvement'!

If we are Christ's body then of course we must be his image, whether we do that well or badly. Bodies cannot be separated from the person to whom they belong and cannot be separated from their power in communicating who someone is. But in contrast to the image-hungry popular culture, being Christ's body has everything to do with our communal nature, our togetherness, our shared identity, and little to do with whether we are big, small, black, white, fat or thin. Or we could say that our effectiveness at imaging Christ has nothing to do with whether our church is large, small, contemporary, traditional, urban or rural.

Paul uses this metaphor of the body so powerfully in his letters to the Corinthian church to make sure that the members of the church consider one another aright and that the apparently weak or insignificant members are not forgotten. But the metaphor is even more powerful, because the image doesn't stop with understanding one another simply as part of a shared whole but points to that body as also having a powerful impact in imaging Christ to those currently outside the body.

Paul makes a number of major contributions to our understanding of the Church as Christ's body.

### **Imaging God's Glory**

Firstly, Paul sees the body of Christ, the Church, as the place where the glory of Christ is seen. He writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

*And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

This verse sums up 2 Corinthians 3 in which Paul contrasts the ministry of Moses with the ministry of Christ. The former he says came with glory, even though it also brought death. The ministry that came through Moses, written on stone tablets, couldn't produce life in its hearers; yet it was still accompanied by so much glory that people couldn't look directly at the effects of this ministry on Moses and he had to wear a veil to hide his radiant face. Paul describes this to highlight how much more glorious was the ministry of the Spirit seen in Christ. And Paul wants us to understand that this far more glorious ministry is now being formed in us. Unlike the glory that came with Moses,

which was temporary, the glory of Christ does not fade and continues in increasing glory. The glory we reveal is the glory we are receiving as we are transformed. And it is the glory of God seen in Christ, in whose image we are being re-made. This work of re-imagining Christ in us is the work of the Spirit who dwells in us.

Can you see the triune nature of this glory that involves God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? This is the triune God now revealed in the Church. And when Paul speaks about the presence of the Spirit in the Church his emphasis is often focussed upon the Spirit dwelling amongst us *together*. For example the reference to this in 1 Corinthians 3:16 uses a plural 'you' to make this emphasis. There is a clear, corporate dimension to the indwelling Spirit that goes way beyond simply the Spirit dwelling in – as marvellous as that is! And knowing, experiencing and having this glorious Spirit in our midst draws us into our ministry, which is reflecting that glory to others.

If the glory of Christ is an image of the glory of God, so the glory in the Church through the ministry of the Spirit is also a reflection of God's glory and puts it on display for all to see. For Paul, glory represents the very presence of the one true God in the midst of his people. Paul expects an authentic, glorious, experience of the presence of God through his Spirit in the church.

### **Imaging God's Character**

Secondly, Paul expects this glorious Spirit to produce the character of God in us. That's where the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5) come in. This fruit can only be worked into my life *in community*. I never get angry, frustrated, impatient, grumpy, jealous, or bitter when I am on my own – well not normally anyway, although I can argue with myself!

Normally at those times when I am on my own, I love everyone, have no wrong thoughts, and am totally at unity with the whole of creation! I am fine without people and people are fine without me! But I am made for people. And when I am with people God works his fruit into my life. It's amazing how I can work out how to handle a situation with another person when I am on my own, assuming they will obviously and easily see things from my perspective and with my eyes. Then reality kicks in as I present my so-called obvious solution to them – and they see it totally differently! Now I am faced with whether I really exhibit fruit – patience, kindness, self-control – or whether the fruit I have is simply exhibited when I am on my own – in which case it is no fruit at all.

I see the same in my family. I think I am there to raise my kids, teaching them and training them. But they so often are the ones raising and training me! They tell me when I am grumpy, they raise an argument that if I am honest carries weight and sense, they ask questions I cannot easily answer, they send me to prayer and thought, they stretch my patience and my laying down of my life. I am growing, changing, maturing as they test me and challenge me. I have to apologise for snapping, being grumpy, judging wrongly. (I'm sure all parents get the picture!) And as these things happen, fruit is worked into my life and I am being conformed to the image of Jesus. But this fruit comes in a corporate or communal context. It is a corporate or communal attribute. *We* demonstrate fruit, *we* show grace, *we* forgive, *we* love...

## **Imaging God's Power**

Thirdly, we together image the power of God. That's where the gifts of the Spirit fit (1 Corinthians 14). Not only God's character but also God's power is manifested in his body. The restoration of the gifts of the Spirit are not so that we can have a whoopee-do time, as fun as that might be! Rather they demonstrate who God is and what he is like. Of course, Jesus proves this – just look at the gospel stories and see the many demonstrations of power exhibited there. Power demonstrations in and through Christ's body, the church, likewise reveal and demonstrate the reality of a powerful God. That's why we pursue God's presence and power. God isn't just a 'great idea,' even if the idea is the best in history. God is alive, powerful, and changing lives. So, even amidst times when power isn't seen as we expect, or when we question the mystery of God's ways, we need to remember that one aspect of imaging God is to expect and see his presence and his power. We can't control or manipulate that, but we can pray and respond to it.

At the time of writing this I have just returned from an overseas trip when I experienced more of God's healing power than I have for some time. I found myself standing before the congregation, microphone in hand, with a young lad standing before me who had responded to a word of knowledge. Everyone was watching me. As a man of faith and power the kind of thoughts going through my mind were, 'God this could go really well here and we'll have a great time – or this could go horribly wrong! What are you going to do Lord?' I guess my focus was right in that it is God's work; but I think my thoughts were generated more out of doubt than faith if I am honest! Praise God, he healed the lad and we then had a wonderful time praying for

healing and deliverance. God's power was seen and experienced – and my faith grew! I certainly need more of that and I think we all do. We are to be vessels of God's glorious powerful presence that demonstrates his reality and power.

### **Imaging God's Ways**

Fourthly, we demonstrate God's government, his way of rulership, judgement, and justice. Part of imaging God is to rule, to govern and to live in his way. That's why we should be passionate about justice and be the most compassionate people on earth, because God is; we should be the people where most mercy is found, because God is; we should be the people who welcome extravagantly, because God does. I contrast two bosses I had in the computer industry. The first defended his team at his own risk, sought their good, and was a joy to work for. His focus was the team and drawing in whatever support and training was needed to make the team successful. He did not need to be seen to be the only source of wisdom and influence because he was more concerned about the team than his own reputation. The second was manipulative and controlling, difficult to trust, and at times aggressive. I know which one more reflected the government of God! I wonder how well we do in our workplaces, in terms of reflecting God's rulership and justice? Are we known as fair bosses and respected employees? Do we exhibit mercy and compassion whilst frequently being employed in situations in which the bottom line is king? It is not always easy; but God's Spirit will give us wisdom.

## **What Image Will We Portray?**

What is at stake in all this is the portrayal of Christ. Paul, I am sure, would say (and certainly implies) that if we have bitterness, jealousy, envy, bickering, or unforgiveness between us then we are not portraying the image of Christ but actually the image of the enemy. At various places in his letters he asks his readers why they are taking their brother to court, or sleeping with their father's wife, or quarrelling. He asks these things because when we do such things we malign the image of Christ.

I still remember one camping holiday when our children were very little. We had set the tent up and I was desperate for a coffee but we had run out of milk. I wanted to get up to the shop, get the milk, and get back as fast as possible to have my coffee. But I knew if I was spotted by one of my children they would want to come with me and I knew that would slow me down. So I sneaked away. I hadn't gone far when this little voice yelled after me, "Dad, can I come?" So with much reluctance I took my daughter's hand and we slowly trudged up the hill, taking ten times as long as necessary. Somewhere during this whole drama God convicted me. What kind of image did I want to portray of what God was like? A father who didn't have time for his kids, a father who was too goal-oriented to slow down and give time to his children? I was convicted!

To work at harmony, unity, peace, forgiveness, justice, power, presence, in the community, although at times incredibly challenging, are vital to portraying Christ in a way that echoes his words about the Father. He said, "Do you want to know what the father is like? Then look at me." We want to be able to say, "Do you want to know what Jesus is like? Then look at us."

**Questions:**

1. Think about how your own church. In what areas does it 'image' God well, and in what areas does it need to improve? How might you personally aid that process?
2. Are there any relationships in which you need to image more of God's character? How might you start to do that?
3. Which aspect of God's character do you think you image best and which do you need to grow more in?

# Chapter 6

## Living a Relational Life

Two phone calls I never made but that I wish I had: the first, when my grandfather was on the phone, I wondered about speaking to him, but didn't. And within a few days he was dead. The second, a planned call to my mother before I went on holiday but in my busyness of getting ready I thought I would call the next day as I travelled. She died that night. As I reflect on those calls, I sensed in both the nudging of the Spirit to make them, but on both occasions I failed to respond. I don't beat myself up, in many ways there was nothing left unsaid. But it would have been a nice final farewell until we meet again.

But what can I learn? My busyness, or procrastination, or unresponsiveness to the Spirit's nudging meant I missed an opportunity. An opportunity for a final communication in this life, an opportunity to affirm relationship. I put other things on those occasions above relationship. I was busy, I was tired, I would re-schedule. Now of course those things happen, and sometimes they are the right responses. It is just striking what those responses meant on those occasions.

## **Human Being or Human Doing?**

The question is sometimes asked “are you a human being or a human doing?” Perhaps another way of asking that question is, “Are you Martha or Mary?” One prioritised relationship, the other prioritised service.

The truth is, we’re all probably a bit of both. And you can’t actually separate the two. My life involves both relationship and acts of doing. Both give definition to my life. Relationship highlights how I image God in my relationships with others; doing highlights how I reflect God as creator, organiser and giver of order. Whether I create as a computer analyst, a teacher, a car mechanic, a strategist, a pastor, a doctor, a CEO, or a coach, my creativity is a reflection of God.

But I do want to suggest that my creative acts should take their place in the service of people. If my creative acts result in dehumanising people then they are out of place. However, the creations of people are rarely that black and white. Often they have the potential for good yet in this fallen world they can also dehumanise people. Virtually every technological advance needs wise reflective use, so that it enhances rather than robs relationships. Social networking sites can be incredibly powerful for maintaining relationships, communicating, and keeping in touch with what is going on in others’ lives. But they also have the potential to make friendship more shallow as I sign up the five hundred and fifty-second friend! Or if technology totally replaced personal encounter so that I never heard someone’s voice or met them in person, then again I, and they, have lost something of the preciousness of being human.

I am not an Apple user, but to those who are, and maybe to some of us who aren't, Steve Jobs' creations delight many with their clean, simple design and their ease of use, before you even get to their power. Here was someone who designed things that have great potential to enhance life and to cause celebration at creative genius; yet even here thought is necessary. The beauty of carrying what I want to listen to with me wherever I go is great; but it can, and does, reduce human interaction as I exist in my own world, non-engaged with everyone around me. I think the British, particularly in the south, are experts at ignoring everyone else as we commute to work, jump on the tube, queue at bus stations, without further technology that separates me from everyone else and locks me in my own bubble. We don't need to be anti-technology, but we do need to be thoughtful!

What God has created sets the context in which people dwell. It is extravagant, wild, powerful, and amazing. Living right in this context, people encounter majesty, wonder and ultimately worship of the creator. My work, whatever it might be, should likewise have the potential to produce gratitude and enhance life, to produce wonder at times and maybe even worship. Have you ever sat at a good restaurant and been astounded by the textures, aromas, and tastes of the food brought to you? Have you ever Skyped someone in a village in Eastern India and marvelled that you can see someone thousands of miles away in a world so different from your own that you would not know it was the same planet? Have you ever taken a medicinal drug and given thanks for the speed of pain relief and wondered at the genius that discovered this concoction? Our work can point to wonder at a God whose image is displayed through people and worship of a God whose fingerprints are seen

throughout life. If we can do this, then relationship and function become a whole. My function doesn't depersonalise, and my relationships don't prevent constructive work.

### **Personalise or Depersonalise?**

But maintaining this right perspective is incredibly difficult. It affects how we view people and how we make space for them. For those in work situations where they have responsibility for employing others, this perspective should also affect that process. What is the right balance between filling a role and making room for the gifts of the particular person? Do I box the person into my way of thinking and the needs I have, or do I build a role around this person, allowing them to major on their passions and gifts? How much responsibility do I carry for this person's well-being if I have offered them a job that hasn't gone to plan? And of course, it is the same in the body of Christ. We have often said, "Whenever anyone joins us, we change." Yes, they imbibe our culture, our way of doing things; but we also change as we receive who God has made them to be, and celebrate with them the gift of their being in our midst. Our communities should therefore be constantly changing, always reflecting those who belong, as God brings different people to us reflecting different aspects of his character. But more about this later.

Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian, speaks of life as either depersonalising or as relational. He contrasts living in a way that objectifies or living in a way that personalises, and of course encourages the latter. One treats people simply as objects at my disposal, resources for me to use; the other recognises the dignity of all, seeks their good, and refuses to make them subservient to my goals. What marks

out many leaders in our world is their focus, goal-orientation, and ability to 'make things happen.' Whilst potentially useful attributes, the temptation is to simply view people as a means to an end, as resources to align, as objects for my forward movement. Again of course, helping people find their place is good; but if my drive for progress results in dehumanising people, then I am not being Christian! Why are the Scriptures so harsh towards those who depersonalise people, people for example who murder or rape others (e.g. Leviticus 24:17; Deuteronomy 22:25)? Because to murder or rape someone is to treat that person as nothing more than an object, to deny their humanity, to treat them simply as a means at my disposal or for my pleasure. Most of us don't go anywhere near that; but how many times do I treat someone in a way that simply gets what I want out of them and then discards them?

My wife has put up with me for over 20 years now. I'm glad she has! But she has suffered more than most from times when I have forgotten to treat her as human. Demanding her service, expecting her performance, insisting on her compliance – all more concerned with what I want than who she is. Time and time again I have failed and needed her forgiveness, but just occasionally I get it right. I can spend many hours sitting with, encouraging, just giving my presence to someone in their trial; but somehow it's easy to expect I don't need to do the same at home.

To live relationally means I allow people to be human, I treat them with dignity, and I put them above every goal, target, or achievement. From a very young age we have tried to instruct our children that all people are made in the image of God and to treat them in that way. We don't need

Christians, out of some moral superiority, condemning those that differ in their outlook from us. All – the crook, murderer, homosexual, old person, young child, homeless person, the educated and uneducated, the poor and the rich, the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim – all are created in God’s image. That image may be deformed, as it has been in us, and needs re-forming; but all were created by the God who loves them and endows them with dignity.

### **Just Be...**

Frequently as a pastor I have had to put myself in situations that are not easy to handle – life and death times that are heart-wrenching and relationship-shattering. And frequently, as I head to my destination, I am reminded that it is not words but simply my presence that is enough. Being present, not with platitudes, clichés, or good advice but simply being there. Often I will be there, largely quiet, not with lots to say, but by my presence demonstrating empathy and solidarity. I used to think when I saw couples at a restaurant who were not talking that they had run out of things to say, maybe they were bored with each other, maybe life had got dull. But now I realise that you don’t have to speak. To be in the presence of someone is often enough; the presence itself speaks, saying, “You are worth my time. Being with you is important. I am with you.”

My eldest daughter recently turned 18. It is an exciting time in her life with new opportunities, qualifications being attained and the prospect of leaving home for an adventure. As we celebrated her birthday, I wanted to make sure that the message was clear; so I reminded her again what the case was when she was born: we love her *simply for being her*, not for anything she does. As she arrived in this world she had to do absolutely nothing to deserve or

warrant our love – we simply loved her for who she was, as she lay there gurgling, doing nothing to keep order in the house, get the chores done, or contribute to the family finances. She was just there! And the same is true now. Whatever she does or doesn't achieve, whatever contribution she makes to the household (and we do hope for something!), our love remains simply for being her. It's true for all our kids. I am sure they will all achieve certain things in life; but the priority of being and relationship is enough – enough to draw my love, esteem and affirmation for being them.

**Questions:**

1. How might I start to see my daily work as imaging God?
2. Are there areas where I de-personalise people in the way I act? And what about my church?
3. Is there anyone who simply needs your presence right now? If so, go and give it!



# Chapter 7

## Hospitality and Welcome

It may seem strange to dedicate a chapter to the theme of hospitality and welcome, but I make no apologies! Hospitality and welcome capture so much of who God is, what we have experienced from him, and what we strive to be. As church members we all want our churches to be the one where visitors say, “We were made so welcome!” I have recently had the opportunity to visit two churches that are not part of our Salt & Light family. On both occasions I have been greeted and spoken to by people I didn’t know. At one service one of the young people came up to my wife and me and handed us a small box of chocolates as a welcome gift. We were certainly pleased – but whether everyone else was when they discovered we were only visiting and not a potential new couple I don’t know!

I am sure at times we all do well at welcoming others, but at other times we fall short. It’s not always easy to get it exactly right is it? We want to welcome, but we don’t want to smother! We want people to know they are wanted, but we also want them to have the space they need. But what lies behind this desire to welcome? Is it simply so they will come back? Is it to manipulate them and guilt trip them into making another visit? Or is there something more intrinsic to being God’s people that has to do with welcome? I’m sure it is the latter.

## **Welcome is God's Way**

We welcome because God has first welcomed us. God is a welcoming God. He is never too busy to fit us in, to listen to us, or to be there whether we know it or not. God's welcome of us is not to somehow manipulate us to come back. He can't help but welcome us because it is his very nature. And it was that nature that flowed out from God in the first place when he created this world and invited us to share it in communion with him. We were never supposed to 'go it alone.' We were always supposed to live in harmony with God, sharing creation with him.

But even when we turned our backs on the Creator, his desire to welcome us came rushing towards us, offering us a way back, with no grudge at our waywardness. He didn't now expect us to demonstrate perfection, or to pay or bribe our way back in. But he made the way himself; he did what was necessary. His welcome of us was not weak but cost him dearly. His welcome of us meant his moving towards us, because we had our backs turned towards him. Everything about him was welcoming.

## **Welcome is Costly**

There are some lessons for us to learn here. Being a welcoming people is costly. Many of us struggle to break the silence with someone we don't know. Many of us are comfortable leaving the connection to someone else. We don't want to move beyond ourselves because it can be awkward, and we might not know what to say. But to demonstrate who God is, we need to find his way of doing so. That may mean leaving the conversation we are having with a long-standing friend so that the visitor is not left standing alone. It may mean being willing to feel awkward and potentially look silly in order to ensure that the

welcome of God is expressed. But I guarantee that more people will appreciate the effort, however awkward it might be for us, than being left on their own whilst everyone else is busily relating.

### **Welcome Changes Us**

What is also striking in God's welcome of us is that things changed – and changed permanently. The eternal Son moved towards us and became flesh, taking on our form, in order to get the welcome out! This wasn't a change for a moment, only to revert back to normality once the welcome had been offered. This was a change for ever. And sometimes we need to think that way.

We have had a school as part of our group of churches in Basingstoke for over thirty years now. It is one of the best things we do together. Not only does it participate in excellent education for our children but it helps us disciple our children in the ways of God better than any other vehicle we have. It is fantastic. But a number of years ago we began to realise that something our school didn't do very well was to offer the welcome of God to others, to those not participating actively in the community of faith. And so began a process of considering that possibility. We discussed, we argued, we fell out, we made up, we prayed, we saved, we strategized, we weighed – whatever we needed to do to consider how we might express this welcome of God in a way that was consistent with his character but didn't undermine what he had helped us to be so successful in over the years. It has meant change, and permanent change. No longer is the school only for members of the church community but now the welcome of God is offered to those who would like to travel with us, who as yet may not know the God we worship. We are

offering and demonstrating welcome. And I believe God is pleased.

Another aspect of welcome I alluded to earlier in this book was that whenever anyone joins us we change. I wonder whether that is our experience? Sometimes we act and think as if it is ok to welcome people as long as they fit in with us, as long as it doesn't cost us too much, or we aren't put out. We have dealt with some of those questions earlier, but it is vital that as a community we realise and accept that whenever anyone joins us, we change. I mean it! They don't just imbibe our culture and our ways but we adjust to them and receive who they are. Each person comes to us as a gift from God. Presumably if they are a gift from God, made in his image, they have something from God to bring to us. We have tried to recognise this in our newcomers' course. We do of course share something of our history and culture with them, but we also acknowledge that who they are affects us. We need to make room for their contribution and their participation. If they have become part of our body they need to function and feel a part. They can't simply spectate or stand on the side lines until we think they have truly imbibed our culture.

Of course, I understand that we can't be all things to all people. There are some ways of being church that just aren't us, and there are some ways of behaving that will place restrictions on participation until God has wrought some change. But if God brings, we need to welcome. And that extends to welcoming the gifts, attributes and ways in Christ that this particular person has.

## **Every Part Functioning**

When we do this, we will all be blessed! My testimony is that locally we have been expanded in God through the many different emphases people have brought to us. I think of artists and poets, of iconographers and dramatic readers. I think of monks and liturgy, of Passover celebrations and tabernacle building. I think of flower displays, of serving the community and caring for the poor – the list is endless. So many of these experiences have been brought to us by people with a God-given passion that has been given room to shape us all. Rather than a new-comer having to jettison who they are so they become just like us, instead we need to ask, who has God made them? What passions do they carry that can help us as a community to grow? What leadership can they bring to us in their area of gifting?

Asking these questions and making room may again prove costly. We get used to who we are. Presumably we like our style and way of doing things or otherwise we would not be there. But the cost is worth it. The encounters with God as we stretch ourselves to make room and learn from someone else can be wonderful. New perspectives are gained, personal growth occurs, and the community reflects Christ in different ways.

Isn't this part of what it means to be the body of Christ? Each one functioning, each one taking her or his place and finding space to be who God has made them to be? Each one leading us in the gifts and passions which God has given them and all learning to submit to the leadership in each other? This sounds like mutual submission and the gifting of the Spirit being released in each one.

## **Full-fledged Hospitality**

We can take this aspect of hospitality and welcome even further. As we look at God we see that his welcome of us is permanent hospitality. It is not simply ‘come visit me, stay a while, and then go.’ Rather God’s welcome is full-fledged hospitality. Even as God himself “moved into the neighbourhood”, as Eugene Peterson writes so powerfully in John chapter one in The Message translation, so God’s welcome invites us to make our home his neighbourhood. The hospitality we will enjoy is not that of a temporary visitor but is participation in the love, peace, honour, joy, and delight that makes up the community of God. And so we’re in. We are in with Father, Son and Holy Spirit and all those who have journeyed before with Christ. We are in with all those alive today who belong to Christ. I remember walking across the Bristol Downs many years ago and coming to a deeper revelation of being ‘in Christ.’ I remember again in Canada some years later again having a revelation of what it means to be part of Christ’s community. It means we are welcome, permanently, because of what God has done for us in Christ and by the Spirit. It means I cannot do anything to get in, or to stay in. It means all that is necessary for me to be part of that community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that envelops all those who are in Christ, is to remain in Christ. And this kind of welcome has profound implications for our welcome of others.

On one level it’s easy for us to arrange a good welcome for first time visitors to our meetings; but it is how we move through the visiting to home-making stage that is vital. Do our cliques and friendship groups remain the same or are we ever reaching out, like the Trinity, to truly allow and enable people to make their home with us? Does our

hospitality stretch beyond a welcoming meal, which is fantastic, to more fully include and accept someone with all their unique mixture of characteristics, gifts and passions? Do we invite them into the relationships of our communities? Are we willing to embrace the participative life of someone who has not spent years imbibing our culture and to give them the dignity of inclusion, acceptance, and belonging? These are challenging questions, or at least I find them so. But God, in his wisdom, includes us so radically with himself and endows us with so much blessing that we have to grapple with whether our churches mirror that image or whether we are more guarded and difficult to break in to.

We had an example of this welcome in our small group. It largely meets socially and around food, attempting to create an environment that is inviting to many, whether Christian and church members or not. One lady in our congregation whose husband is a Muslim came with her husband to one or two small group gatherings. Her husband so enjoyed himself that he offered to host a gathering himself and so we had a wonderful evening eating international food cooked by him. He has subsequently become a regular member of our group.

I think about another husband who has not yet become a Christian but who gets offended if he is not included in church activities! (He doesn't really get offended but he feels so much part of things that he expects to be included!) I also think about an unmarried couple with children who became part of the local church. As they encountered Christ, partly through the Church's acceptance of them, so the Holy Spirit led them on a journey to marriage, the burning of unhelpful materials, and becoming part of the body of Christ. Although they have now moved away from

the area, the welcome they received still impacts their life today.

If we can remember and remind ourselves how much we have been welcomed by God, then it will revolutionise our approach to others. If we can recall how far we were from God when he received us, then we will be more prepared to receive others. Why not stop now and meditate on this welcome. Let the Spirit of God give you revelation about your welcome by God and guide you in your welcome of others!

**Questions:**

1. What strikes you about God's hospitality towards you?
2. How do you demonstrate his hospitality towards others?
3. How easy does your church make it for new people to find their place and function? What changes might enable a greater demonstration of the welcome of God to people?

# Chapter 8

## Community and Mission

As this short book comes towards a close, let me pick up what I hope you have seen implicitly throughout: that an emphasis on relationship and community is not distinct from mission. In fact *good community is vital to effective mission*. Teachers and pastors who so often spend their time building up the local church are not involved in a non-mission task; but rather as they help the church be the church in all its wonderful and glorious diversity and unity, it becomes the missional agent God has called it to be.

And in this day, the desire for community is expressed and seen everywhere. Whether it's describing the workplace as a 'work community', or the branding a school as a 'community school,' or a focus on the 'local community,' the word 'community' has become something of a buzz word for our generation. Is it a word devoid of any real meaning, or does this vocabulary capture the longings of a generation?

I would like to suggest that there is at least an element, and a significant element, in which this language reflects a current void in society, a void created by the soul-destroying, life-defeating extreme individualistic way in which society has taught us to live. And that life devoid of meaningful relationships will eventually produce a cry for greater community. We of course have our share of the blame in that.

Admittedly some may use the language of ‘community’ simply as a marketing ploy to connect with a specific audience; but the very fact that it has perhaps become a marketing term indicates there is something behind its frequent use. The cry for authentic community, shared lives, being known and knowing people, reflects the lack of these things in a society that has become increasingly egocentric and isolating.

The bandying around of the word community is a response to that. The *Friends* sitcom of the 90s probably drew its great success from the sense of connectedness and community exhibited by the main characters. They had a place they called home (the coffee shop) and they had friends who knew pretty well everything about them so they could be themselves. If God has truly made us as relational beings then the completely individualistic approach to life that has invaded our society and our churches is going to lead to a call for more authentic community, like *Friends* demonstrates. The word ‘community’ may have become cliché and jargon, but let’s not miss why it has arisen and where it has come from. And let’s not miss what an opportunity this is for the Church! The Church as the community of God’s people, demonstrating deep fellowship, living out Spirit-filled life, loving and serving, caring for each other deeply; this is true, Spirit-inspired community. And this kind of community is incredibly missional.

### **Taking One Eye off Mission**

A good friend of mine says that to be truly missional you need to take one eye off mission. Hmmm... An interesting thought and one which does carry some truth. We are all engaged in a right re-emphasis upon mission, reaching out,

incarnating the gospel amongst those we are trying to reach. I am passionate about that. But the point is this: if in pursuing mission we lose sight of the fact that a healthy, vibrant, grace-filled body is missional itself then we will lose our way. I am convinced that the apostle Paul would in his inimitable way castigate us if we were so pre-occupied with the mission activity that we didn't tend to the internal working and life of the body of Christ. For Paul the internal life of the body is not separate from mission. If we have nothing to show, no community that demonstrates life in Christ together, or nowhere to point to where Christ is embodied, then we are simply one vain philosophy amongst many, one good idea competing with other good ideas. But if we, as we proclaim, can also point people to a church that demonstrates, however limited by our fallenness, what the life of God achieves in a community, then our message has great power.

For Paul this is the gospel. Paul's passion overflows in Galatians when he fears the undermining of the gospel because of how the community was beginning to live. In Corinthians he claims he is already present in spirit, dealing with the one who sinned grossly, so that the community life is run well. In the Pastoral Epistles (Timothy and Titus) he urges his co-workers to put in place means for good order in the body. A body that works and functions well, that is full of grace and life and the Spirit, is for Paul thoroughly missional.

So I think my friend is right: one eye off specific mission activity so that what we proclaim continues to be embodied and more. So come on pastors, teachers, carers, nurturers; come on mums and dads in the community; keep bringing your wisdom to bear on existing and new communities so that this gospel that has won us can be seen, touched and

experienced by many. And come on all you witnesses, you proclaimers, you preachers; as you declare, also point to where what you proclaim is found; and let's allow this person-affirming, dignity-giving, welcoming, powerful, and gracious place called the church be experienced.

**Questions:**

1. How might it help to see your building of community as mission?
2. What needs to grow for your community to be more effectively a demonstration of God's life?
3. Are you aware of any areas where the world's individualistic emphasis has affected how you live?

# Chapter 9

## The End!

I call the last chapter the end for two reasons. Firstly it is the end, and if you have read this far, well done! I hope you have been inspired, provoked, and helped. Secondly, this last chapter is about the end, the end of our biblical story that tells of the end of history as we know it.

We have looked at Genesis and the beginning; now we will draw some final lessons from Revelation. It is great that we can read about the end before we get there. For most of our lives we don't know the detail of what is coming next, but for the people of God as a corporate entity, made up of countless individuals, for the whole of creation, and for the place of God's dwelling we are given glimpses of our future. It may not be enough to answer all our questions or to map out a detailed timetable of end-time events, but it is enough. It is enough to encourage us to live in the light of the future it portrays; it is enough to give us hope when life is not as it should be; it is enough to show us that relationship and community truly are at the heart of who God is.

### **Together Around the Throne**

The last book of the Bible portrays the wonderful picture of the whole of creation, the angels and cherubim and people of every tribe and language, gathered around the throne of God worshipping Christ (Revelation 4-7). This wonderful

picture shows where we are headed. It shows what eternity will be like. There is no exclusion based on race, gender, or age, or anything else that distinguishes one person from another.

At times we enjoy a taster of that future here on earth. I still remember meeting with members of European nations in Germany for a Salt & Light leaders' event and our being led in a variety of national languages by the worship leader. It is a feat repeated a number of times over the years and has almost become part of our shared liturgy – perhaps it should be so. These powerful times let us glimpse something of that Revelation throne room, yet also recognise there are still so many nations missing. As we worship together in this way we both celebrate yet are propelled into mission.

Community does that. There are too many missing from our communities, both nationally and internationally, for us to be content. Yes we can celebrate, but we see the gaps. Many of us also increasingly have this kind of foretaste in our local communities. The immigration statistics may cause politicians headaches, but for the Kingdom of God it is a great opportunity. For us in the UK we no longer need to travel to reach the nations because we find the nations increasingly coming to us. And as we serve them in the name of Christ, by his Spirit we are receiving opportunities to reflect in small ways our shared multi-cultural and multi-ethnic future.

## **The Broken are Included**

As we consider the future gathering around the throne, there will be those present who in this life have struggled with all kinds of temptations and sin but have been held by the grace of God. Some will have known substantial freedom and healing in this life that they may describe as complete – though I suspect there will be a whole other level of freedom to enjoy when the Kingdom fully comes. Others will have struggled in this life, hanging on to Christ and yearning for the day of their complete salvation. But they will all be there, gathered around the throne, worshipping and free and changed. We are some of those broken, but I suspect there will also be some there whom we did not expect.

And if that is the end we will enjoy, then in my simplistic mind we might as well start living and preparing for it now! Welcoming all, having grace for the broken, enjoying those not like me.

## **Your Kingdom Come ... on Earth**

In fact there is biblical injunction to do this. Jesus' prayer in Matthew 6 teaches the disciples, and us, how to pray. Key to this prayer is the sense of praying God's kingdom, rule, and will, God's eternal destiny, into the present reality. "*Your kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven,*" he taught us to pray. That sounds like praying heaven onto earth, the eternal kingdom invading our present, the reality of God's ultimate will impinging on life on earth right now. If that is our prayer and our task, then surely that should influence our practice of church even now.

We should be the most generous, forgiving, merciful, and inclusive people on earth. Why? Because we know from

our own experience that eternity is secure, not because we have somehow earned or won our place there, but because we have been forgiven, included, and have received mercy. It is the grace of God that has held us. And if the grace of God has held us, then we need to demonstrate that grace to others. We need to give them room to grow, to learn, to make mistakes, and to be forgiven. We need to accept and love, welcome and include all those who would come. Maybe in extreme situations we need to action judgement, as Paul did in Corinth; but our characterisation needs to be one of grace and love.

As we seek to reach out in mission, we will increasingly encounter those who need to know the kind of room I have been describing. If we want to share with them what we have experienced in and through God then we will have to loosen our expectations upon their behaviour and allow the Holy Spirit to shape and convict in his good way and good time. I still remember a man who had come to Christ coming to me and telling me he had burned certain videos he had collected. I asked him who had told him to do that. I don't think anyone had raised it with him but the Holy Spirit had been doing what he does so well, convicting and convincing of the truth. It will take grace from us if we are to make room for those who do not yet live as Christians seek to do but who, if we give them space and time, will encounter the God who changes us and will ultimately take their place around the throne.

## **Eternity with People!**

What else does the throne in Revelation say to us? Around the throne are multitudes. I, and we, will not be on our own! Eternity will involve me with others. I will not suddenly find myself existing in a state where the only one with whom I have to deal is me. The individualised world in which I live will no longer be the norm, but I will spend eternity with people! The difference is that my relationships will no longer be affected by sin. My misunderstandings and being misunderstood will be finished. My sense of aloneness and isolation will be over. Intimacy in relationships will be the norm as we are fully known and fully know. Perhaps one reason it appears there won't be marriage in eternity is because marriage, the relationship with the greatest potential for intimacy in this life, will no longer be needed because the intimacy we all crave will be real, present, and for all.

Not only that, but all kinds of people that are not like me will be present. And I will be spending eternity with them. If the transformation into the image of Christ is not yet complete in my life at the time of my death or Christ's return, which of course it will not be, then I will need the "*twinkling of an eye*" change that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 15 in order to cope. Suddenly I will be living amongst Africans, Asians, Eastern Europeans, Americans, Australians and the French! Without the coming of the eternal Kingdom I will struggle and so will they. But with it...! And what about living amongst those who in this life have struggled with lying and jealousy, with bitterness and depression, with lustful thoughts and sometimes actions, with homosexual temptations, with anger, and have sometimes fallen – just like me – yet have known the grace

of God forgiving, and lifting them and giving them hope. And suddenly they, like me, find themselves in an eternal kingdom that finally frees them from it all, completely, a kingdom that renews and redeems them in Paul's 'twinkling of an eye', and puts them in a family that loves intimately and forever.

If that is our shared future then surely we should start living that right now. We should start offering that welcome and forgiveness, and hope and grace, and love and intimacy that will be our lot for eternity and, as the Spirit enables, usher in as many as possible into that kind of relational community.

Finally, as we come towards the end of Revelation, we read this: "*Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God*" (Revelation 21:3). God will dwell with his people and the glory of God and the Lamb will be the light by which his people live (Revelation 21:23-24). Now, at last, relationship with God will be complete and fulfilled. The God we have sought to follow and worship will now be known by us more intimately than ever before. The confusion and doubt we have sometimes known in this life will be ushered away as God dwells with us, guiding us and leading us to live according to the light of his presence. The sin that has interrupted our gaze upon Christ will be banished. We will be free and whole and full of joy. What a day that will be! And all the nations will be present (21:26), bringing their tributes before the great king.

Let this vision of community and relationship inspire you! May you grasp its wonderful outlook of mission and may you give your heart and soul to following Christ who by his Spirit is transforming us from one degree of glory to another so that when people encounter us, the Church, they

*The End!*

increasingly see God. And may they marvel at the God whose character is portrayed through his people as we welcome all kinds of folk with the open arms of love with which we ourselves have been welcomed. Amen and amen!

**Questions:**

1. Who from your geographic community is missing from your church community? What might you do to reach and include them?
2. What aspects of heaven are experienced in your church community? What aspects do you need to keep praying for?
3. What inspires me about our future destination as God's people and how does it affect how I live right now?