



We all know a church is supposed to be a community. In *A Field Guide for Genuine Community*, Ben Connelly shows that the biblical model is the family of God. The church isn't a collection of strangers. God wants you to find a unified, purposeful household where you truly belong.

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“COMMUNITY” IS KILLING THE CHURCH

DAY 1

WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU HEAR THE TERM “COMMUNITY”?

In many churches, “community” looks like a small group of people with varying levels of friendship, eating, praying, learning, or laughing together in a living room or classroom. This “community” occurs once a week, for a couple hours at a time. As we learned in the introduction, only 30 percent of American Christians said they were involved in even this type of midweek community. But that’s not the only image of community that come to people’s minds. The problem with the term “community” is that it can bring to mind almost anything!

Simply put, most people—Christian or not—are involved in multiple forms of community. People connect over their shared love for specific sports teams or events. When a Star Wars movie opens, costumed Chewbaccas and Stormtroopers fill theaters across the world, mutually obsessed with the series. Neighbors come together for the benefit their kids’ school; fans follow bands on nationwide tours. Book clubs form and dissolve. Bird-watching or train-spotting clubs meet globally.

A recent commercial for a new Facebook group showed a man at a dog park, discouraged

ANSWER

In Christ, God makes us a spiritual family.

READ

Matthew
12:46–50

by too broad a variety of canines. He receives a “beacon of hope” (said the ad) via Facebook, discovering a community specifically for basset hound owners, which a voice-over declares “more glorious than a million sunsets.”¹

HOW “COMMUNITY” KILLS THE CHURCH

The examples above are examples of “community” according to our culture. If that’s true, a church is merely one option for “community” among many. And any group within a church—Sunday class, Bible study, missional community, prayer group, or ministry team—is simply another option for “community” within the larger “community.” You get the point. As we bring culture’s view of community into God’s Church, we risk treating God’s people with the same (or sometimes lower) priority as we would a Star Wars premier or a basset hound meet-up. Below are some examples of cultural community that have inched into the church:

- Affinity-based community: “I choose church community based on a common interest: maybe people I like or live close to, or any number of other shared preferences.”
- Comfort-based community: “I give myself to others only if the ‘cost-benefit’ ratio stays in my favor. If someone becomes too needy or takes too much time, I opt out, always ‘just for a season.’”
- Convenience-based community: “I can easily leave one community for another. If someone keeps badgering me about a sin issue I confessed, or if there’s a ‘cooler’ group forming, I’m out.”
- Stage-based community: “Many churches change my ‘community’ every time life changes. If ‘community’ is formed around being single, I am kicked out and forced to start over with a new community if God blesses me with a marriage. I start over again if God further blesses me with a child. And so forth.”

While affinity-, comfort-, convenience-, or stage-based community are fine in our broader society, they fight the primary image God uses to describe the Church: *His family!* Think of your own actual family; you do not like the same things as each of your siblings. But you cannot trade your family for another you think is “cooler.” Outside of unhealthy scenarios, you would not walk away from family members in need. And it’s literally impossible for a family to be comprised of a single generation! The family of God described in the Bible is diverse in all these ways. Local churches—expressions of that family—should be too.

We’ll explore how this can look throughout the book. But today’s point is that the common image of church community misses the relationships God calls His children to, as we see it through our cultural lens. In missing God’s true design for His people, we are left with an incomplete picture of God’s church and stunted in some areas of discipleship. “Community” just doesn’t adequately describe the people of God, in today’s world.

WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU HEAR THE TERM “FAMILY”?

Like “community,” “family” means different things to different people. Some of us had generally healthy families; “love” and “support” come to mind when we think of family with images of long holiday meals and laughter. Some had blended families through remarriage, adoption, and/or extended family living together; this may have drawn looks from passersby or added unique dynamics. Some had difficult families; you had to try hard every day to “make it work.” Most families experience some mix of the descriptions above. Every family is rich, poor, or somewhere between—or all three in different seasons. Each household is small, large, or somewhere between—or vacillated at times as you gained or lost family members.

“Family” can mean a lot of things. But for most people, no matter the specific images that come to mind, family means deeper commitment and relationship than community. This is neither a new concept, nor an inherently Christian one. Actor Michael J. Fox once

said, “Family is not an important thing; it’s everything.” And many are familiar with the twelfth-century German proverb, “Blood runs thicker than water.”

BUT ISN’T “FAMILY” MESSY?

Yes.

(I’m chuckling, tempted to leave this one-word answer and move on to wrap up today’s reading, because a family’s “messiness” is so obvious. But I suppose I’ll elaborate.)

Again, think of your own family: *Are you like each member? Do you like each member all of the time?* (Don’t answer the second question out loud.) Jesus’ disciples were a group of various women and men, with various professions and backgrounds. That sounds messy. His companions were young and old, and from various places. Some were fishermen, at least one was potentially a former prostitute, and one a tax collector. They didn’t have much in common. Some were sworn enemies: Matthew, a tax collector, and thus a despised representative of the Roman government, was in the same small caravan as “Simon the Zealot.” Zealots’ sole passion was ridding Israel of Roman rule . . . at any cost. But Jesus called them both into His band of twelve. That sounds *really* messy!

The first-century churches in the Bible included former mortal enemies, now united into the family of God: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The spiritual family of God is made up of sinful, immature, divided, and broken people. Since people are messy, our churches will be messy. But “messy” isn’t always “bad.” Those extreme differences are what makes our unity in Christ so amazing!

But I do want to pause to acknowledge some readers’ very difficult family situations. Everyone’s family has some difficulty, tension, and imperfection, but some families are broken to the point that the considering of God as Father, or thinking of fellow Christians as sisters or brothers, makes them shudder. Some readers may have been disowned from actual families *because* of their faith in Jesus. Over

my twenty years of church leadership, I have heard of innumerable family wounds. I've walked with families through heartbreaking losses, rejections, sin, and brokenness. My local church family includes several asylum seekers, some of whom fled their homes because their own parents tried to kill them for following Jesus.

I know there's messiness in every family, but I want to write for a moment to those who might yearn to define their family as "messy," because "messy" would be such an improvement compared to the horror and brokenness they faced:

With as much compassion as I can convey through typed words on a page, I want to put my arm around you, tell you that family brokenness is real, valid, and wrong. I want to grieve with you that things are not as they should be, no matter their magnitude. I want to look you in the eye and free you to feel righteous anger and sadness at things God is righteously angry and sad about. *Broken families are not right.* Hard stop. They do *not* fit within God's perfect creation. But from the second page of my Bible on, broken families are real, the result of sin and the whole-life division that started with Adam and Eve. From blame-shifting, to their son's murder of his brother, to all sorts of strife in every generation since, every actual family is "messy," and some leave "messy" in the dust and are downright broken.

PAST AND FUTURE FAMILIES

In that same posture of deep sympathy, I also want to end today's reading by gently lifting your chin and turning with you to the Bible. We see over and over that God makes messy things clean. We see over and over, God restores and/or replaces broken things. Today's reading in Matthew's gospel displays those realities. While Jesus teaches His disciples, someone tells Him that His (biological) mother and brothers want to see Him. We don't know their motive: maybe they wanted to say "hi," but many theologians think they wanted to call Him to His senses. Rather than running to His literal family, Jesus instead offers hope to those with broken and messy families and calls future followers to instead prioritize His spiritual family,

the Church: “Here are my mother and my brothers,” he declares, not of His biological family but of “his disciples” and “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt. 12:46–50).

By His blood, all sin is cleansed; everything messy can be made clean. In His name, every past thing that holds us in bondage is loosed; we can be free. Jesus’ followers are a new spiritual family. Anyone whose parent let them down (so, everyone on earth) can be in an intimate relationship with a perfect heavenly Father, who will never let you down. Anyone whose family saw death and division has eternal life and unity. And on goes God’s promises for all those in Jesus’ spiritual family.

In Matthew’s gospel and the rest of the Bible, God calls His people into a new family that will one day be perfect in eternity and into local churches, which are imperfect expressions of that new family today. Yes, God’s family is messy; because of sin, every relationship on earth is broken. But rather than being defined by the past pain of our families, God’s family—while still imperfect today—is defined by the promised hope of the future. Jesus offers a *better* family now to the rejected and wounded, which will one day be a *perfect* family. And

101 WAYS

TO MOVE FROM FAÇADE TO FAMILY

1 Read the Bible together: walk through biblical books or themes, learning from everyone’s perspectives.

2 Read books together: address cultural issues, spiritual topics, and questions, through reading and discussion.

3 Commit to grow together: we all have strengths and weaknesses. Spiritual families care for each other’s thriving as much as their own!

4 Commit for the long haul: try to walk through thick and thin, in unconditional love together.

keep hope—Jesus can also restore your broken earthly family. No one is beyond the redemptive pursuit of our perfect, loving Father.

Jesus' view of "spiritual family" is a high one and will only be fully realized in His new creation. In light of our glorious future, God doesn't want His people to settle for mere "community" today, based on affinity, comfort, convenience, or life-stage. He designed us for something far richer, deeper, and more beautiful. It is messy now, will be perfect in eternity, and is based on our common bond of His death and resurrection: God calls us to be His family.

DAY 2

ANSWER

In Christ, God designed His people to need each other.

READ

1 Corinthians
12:12–26

MY BODY, BROKEN . . .

HOW DID YOU “JOIN” YOUR CHURCH?

I **grew up** in a traditional church in small-town Texas and still remember people joining that church. Whether after a year or on their first Sunday, people walked the red-carpet aisle during the final hymn, and chatted with the pastor for a moment. The song faded, the pastor announced the new members, people clapped, and a Polaroid was taken to adorn the foyer wall. The church I attended during grad school had more of a process: people attended a class, agreed to support the church’s doctrine and leaders, and signed a form. (They were still announced with a snapshot, though now with a Kodak disposable.)

Two churches, one unified goal: they got new members. Similar announcements, cheers, and camera clicks. Then church members could do whatever they wanted, as long as they came on Sundays and gave to the offering. (As one pastor I know joked, between those two options even Sundays were less important!) In the Bible, however, the picture of “membership” is not about accountability or liability; it isn’t about a finish line or signed form. The word “members” in the New Testament speaks to relationships: it was a starting line for the long race of devotion and discipleship God’s people committed themselves to (2 Tim. 4:7).

“MEMBERS, ONE OF ANOTHER”

Rather than joining an organization—like a “member” of a social club or coffee subscription service—God calls followers of Jesus “members” *of each other!* Those in a local church are as integrated into each other’s lives—and as vital to each other’s spirituality and sustenance—as a right hand to a left, or an eye to a foot. God’s church is “the body of Christ.” Our mouths, noses, and ears serve different roles in our heads, but exist mere centimeters from each other and need each other. A body’s functions are incomplete with any part missing.

With that foundation, reread the apostle Paul’s words from today’s reading: “Just as the body is one and has many *members*, and all the *members* of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). A new “member” committing to a local church is like an arm—strong, good at lifting things—offering to serve a physical body who is missing an arm. To function well, the arm needs a hand to grip its load, eyes to see where to take the object it lifted, etc. That “member” imagery describes the depth of need Jesus’ followers have for each other: no foot can declare independence and thrive if isolated from the rest of the body; nor can an eye reject the body parts it sees as unneeded. If we think in terms of literal bodies, such thoughts would be ridiculous!

The physical body makes a spiritual point: God’s people need each other. Whether a church has a formal “membership process” or not, each follower of Jesus is a “member,” designed to fit a “body.” We need each other’s gifts, experiences, and faith, and others need ours. In tomorrow’s verses, Paul describes this more specifically: “We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually *members one of another*” (Rom. 12:5). The commitment between God’s people is not about legality, finance, or event attendance; it’s about intertwined lives and devotion to each other.

THE ONLY IMAGE THAT MAKES SENSE

Only when Jesus’ followers realize that our spiritual interconnectedness echoes our very bones, muscles, and organs working

together do many biblical images come alive. We cannot “let love be genuine, [or] love one another with brotherly affection” without interpersonal relationship. We’re unable to “contribute to the needs of the saints” without knowing those needs and can’t often “show hospitality” from far away. How can we “rejoice with those who rejoice, [or] weep with those who weep,” without being close enough—physically or relationally—to empathize with that deep joy or pain? These are all commands God gives His people, after calling us to be “members one of another” (Rom. 12:5, 9–15).

The Bible often describes gifts God gives His daughters and sons (Rom. 12; Eph. 4; 1 Cor. 12). Their purpose? “Building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). We grow in Christ by “speaking the truth in love” so that “the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15–16). As we’ll see later, over one hundred “one another” commands exist in the Bible. Christians can only fulfill them in committed, trusting relationships together. A deep devotion to each other—as intertwined as members of a literal body—is the only image in which those passages make sense. It’s impossible to live the life of discipleship the Bible describes in isolation; it’s equally impossible if our engagement with “Christian community” is only several dozen (or thousand) people facing a stage, singing and receiving teaching once a week, or exclusively discussing impersonal Bible or theology questions.

CAN THIS ACTUALLY HAPPEN?

When planting The City Church in 2009, we cast a vision for living as a family more than an organization. We would pursue discipleship and mission in neighborhoods and on couches, more than church buildings and from pulpits. Our goal wasn’t to be “different” from other churches, but looking like churches described in the Bible.

In The City Church’s first decade, terms like “missional church” and “missional community” became more common in Christian circles. But in Fort Worth, Texas, these were new concepts in 2009. I was told this kind of church couldn’t happen, that I was idealistic to think

Christians—or any human—would commit to others so deeply. I would counter that we see this in New Testament churches—which, for all their messiness, were closest to the source and thus the purest examples of God’s intention—and often heard something like, “That was then; this is now,” “Times have changed,” “Life is more complex today,” or “People are busy.”

Times *have* changed. But our individualistic, fast-paced culture is even more a reason to reinforce God’s call to “one another.” Everyone *is* busy, but only with things we deem important. We believed this kind of church could exist in the US, in the 2000’s. We pressed on, a group of twenty people in a friend’s living room discussing how this could work. Then I visited Soma Communities in Tacoma, WA, a church that was pursuing a similar vision. (*Soma* is Greek for “body,” and the Tacoma church valued the church body living as the body of Christ. The City Church has since joined the Soma Family of Churches.) Through a week of learning from leaders, serving alongside the church family, and living everyday life with them—including staying in one family’s home—I saw a living example of many ways the Bible describes churches in first-century Israel, Asia, and Europe, contextualized to the 21st-century Pacific Northwest. The training, examples, and interactions at Soma School were helpful, but I remember the moment in Tacoma I knew Christians could still live in this kind of relationship.²

I was up late with my host family, the Uhlers, when we heard a knock on the door. Justin Uhler opened the door, and a baby was thrust across the threshold into his arms. The parent didn’t attempt to enter; there was no greeting. From my seat, it looked like a pair of disembodied arms simply pushed a baby into the Uhler house, exclaiming, “Take her. Our other kid fell and we’re going to the E.R.” The disembodied arms disappeared, leaving Justin holding their baby muttering a stunned “Of course.”

There were a lot of surprising things about those five seconds. But what is most seared in my mind is that there wasn’t a question from either party. There was no “I’m so sorry . . . I know it’s late . . .”

from the parent; there wasn't a moment's hesitation in Justin's acceptance of the living human and unexpected new responsibility. Deep relationship existed. This was how healthy families interact: "I need something, I come to you"; "You need something, the answer is yes. No questions asked." What I saw was love, hospitality, meeting needs, and the entrance of one family into the pain and need of another. The "love" felt (per Romans 12) "genuine."

For ten years, the folks who'd met in a Fort Worth living room pursued similar things. As twenty grew to sixty, we were commissioned as a church. We've since seen a few hundred disciples—some new, some who had yearned for this life—join us. Our church has planted other churches to see this happen in other cities. As I write this, our family and another elder couple are being sent out to start another new spiritual family, and I serve an organization to foster this everyday discipleship across the world. "Church as family" takes different forms in different moments. It's not easy. It means sacrifice and commitment. And not everyone in my church "gets it." But those who do wouldn't trade it for the world; several have said, "We can never go back" to what they experienced previously. I can say with certainty, "Yes, this kind of Christian life is possible, even in our individualistic, post-Christendom Western world."

BROKEN BODIES MADE WHOLE

In early 2012, a piece of my vertebrae broke off into a spinal disc. Pain consistently shot down my left leg as we tried a year of tactics to avoid surgery. We could not, so I spent Christmas recovering in bed while my family feasted, celebrated, and laughed in the next room. (Or maybe they laughed *at me*; it's pretty foggy and I'm sure my painkillers gave them plenty of fodder.) While I recovered, my torso adjusted subconsciously to protect the wound while I slept. The skin, muscles, and tissue healed around the incision, though the actual injury was to a disc. Many who have had surgeries can relate. The interconnectedness, sacrifice, and care of various parts of my literal body are metaphors for Jesus' spiritual body we see in the Bible.

What we believe drives what we do. From the Old Testament's literal tribes beginning from one man named Israel, to the New Testament theme of adoption in Christ, to the imagery of household, family, and body used to describe the church, it's clear throughout the Bible: God's people are more than a community; we are a spiritual family. Today we answer the question, "Why should I care?" saying, "We are made for each other." By God's design, our lives are intertwined with the lives of other disciples, especially in our local church—and that's spiritually true, whether we function in that truth or not. We are each members of a body, and we need other members' gifts. The Bible's imagery of "membership" is far deeper than being announced and cheered for and snapping a picture. We are members of one another. That means that—like it or not—we're in this together, and God created us to need each other.



101 WAYS TO MOVE FROM FAÇADE TO FAMILY

5 Consider your week: How much are you alone? With other Christians? With not-yet-believers? If you're mostly alone, pray for a desire to move toward others.

6 Consider friends: Is your social interaction more online or in-person? Consider how to turn digital "friendships" into personal relationships.

7 Consider idols: Where do your time, money, and resources go? What do you think about during free time? Are those things isolating or individualizing?

8 Consider margin: Is every moment packed? Is there space for others to drop by unexpectedly, or time for someone in need? Create unhurried time for relationships.

DAY 3

ANSWER

In Christ, God's church is more than an institution.

READ

Romans
12:2–13

LET THE CHURCH BE THE CHURCH

“LET BARTLET BE BARTLET.”

A turning point episode in the fast-moving, early-2000's show, *The West Wing*³ was entitled “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet,” referencing the series' President Jed Bartlet (Martin Sheen). A memo is discovered from within the White House, criticizing Bartlet's weak leadership. Toward the episode's end, Bartlet's Chief of Staff and close friend Leo McGarry (John Spencer) confronts Bartlet, agreeing that the president is neutral to the point of irrelevance on many issues. After a spirited argument, Bartlett finally says quietly, “I don't want to feel this way anymore . . . I don't want to go to sleep like this.” McGarry replies earnestly, “You don't have to.” Stirring music starts playing, as Bartlet's conviction grows: “I want to speak.” McGarry encourages, “Say it out loud. Say it to me.”

The conversation continues as both the music and confidence swell, and the episode climaxes with Bartlet ready to lead boldly and “speak now” on important issues. As the president talks, McGarry scribbles on a legal pad. Finally Bartlet asks, “Doyouhaveastrategyforallthis?” McGarry replies, “I have the beginnings of one; I'm gonna try [this] for a little while.” He throws the legal

pad onto Bartlet's desk like a gauntlet, and we see his words: "Let Bartlet Be Bartlet."

MADE FOR MORE

Many Christians feel like their relationships echo Bartlet's emptiness: We're part of an organization called a "church," like Bartlet held a position called "president." But we don't live up to the potential of what the church could be, any more than Bartlet lived up to the potential of his office. We are pressured into a version of "church" based on experiences with, or expectations of, others. (That was also true of President Bartlet, whose stagnation stemmed from trying to fit the mold he thought would lead to reelection.)

In many churches, people know some people's names, greet each other on Sundays, meet in classrooms or homes weekly for an hour or two, discuss the Bible and mention a few general ways it impacts God's people, and pray or deliver a meal when a need arises. Then we contrast that spirituality with passages like today's from Romans 12, where the early church embodies a whole-life love and devotion, and we know something's missing. We are made for more! Why are Christians—many of whom yearn for the deep, familial relationships we see in the Bible—stuck instead on the surface, unable to dive? One answer stems from recent church history.

A SIX-DECADE SHIFT

Most Western Christians' view of "church involvement" is shaped by a trend known as the "church growth movement," whose foundations are traced in part to American seminaries in the 1960's. Soong-Chan Rah's insightful *The Next Evangelicalism* analyzes this trend and draws this conclusion: The church growth movement's "core principles tend to emphasize the Great Commission [found in Matt. 28:18–20] at the expense of the Great Commandment to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Church growth principles, therefore, prioritized an individualized personal evangelism and salvation over the understanding of the power of the gospels to transform neighborhoods and communities. They also emphasize a

modern, social science approach to ministry, focusing on pragmatic planning process that leads to measurable success goals.”⁴

In other words, the movement shifted ministry from the corporate “y’all” to the individual “you,” from the places we spend most of our lives to church buildings frequented for a few hours a week, and from stories of fruit to statistics-based metrics. The past sixty years have seen this philosophy infiltrate and reshape most American church paradigms and practices. “With the megachurch model becoming the model of evangelical church success, an overwhelming pragmatism began to shape ministry,” Rah explains.⁵ And while Christians felt this shift during the latter half of the twentieth century, today most accept it as normal: the church growth movement is the overarching reality we have known our whole lives. But while it’s an accepted trend, it has led down three paths that can keep churches from living up to God’s calling and our potential:

1. Churches Are More Institutionalized

The church growth movement is part of the reason denominations have declined, and the reason many churches across the Western world have a similar look, feel, and ethos. “When visiting different evangelical churches throughout the United States, a certain degree of familiarity begins to emerge . . . you can sniff out an evangelical church even before describing it in great detail. Part of the explanation [for this] is American evangelicalism’s tendency to copy and initiate successful ministry efforts.”⁶ This blurring of lines speaks of institutionalizing God’s church. “Executive pastors,” so common today, were unheard of before the 1960s, as were multitiered church staff titles like “director” and “coordinator.” Popularized by early adaptors to the church growth movement, these structures are built on the entrepreneurial, business, and organizational management strategies that helped shape the movement.⁷ Some churches now operate more like businesses and institutions, rather than bodies and families.

2. Churches Are More Professionalized

As churches institutionalized, the movement also led to more professionalized ministry: If growth is the goal, every experience with a church must be excellent. From venue to music; from preaching to engaging kids; to every other aspect of ministry, growth starts by attracting people, and attracting people means doing everything as well as possible. This requires time, quality, and expertise, which in turn requires paid staff who carry out the majority of the ministry. The “all-in” involvement of God’s body, the many giftings God gave to His people, and the need for one another for spiritual growth is thus diminished. Some churches advertise popular Christian bands they hire for services, rather than being led by their own members’ merely adequate musical gifts. Others rent billboards where pastors invite drivers to special events, promising an excellent experience should they drop by on Sunday. Instead of servant-leaders equipping “the saints for the work of ministry”⁸ in everyday life, many churches are led by a few professionals who do the majority of that ministry, which is primarily received by large groups of non-professional Christians in an ever-updated church facility.

3. Churches Prioritize “Input Metrics”

Finally, this trend—which prioritizes “ministry efficiency,” “quantitative effectiveness,” and (as you’d expect from its name) “church growth”—also leads churches to define success based on consistent growth in areas like attendance, giving, program participation, new members, and baptisms. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with knowing who is involved in one’s church family, and we should definitely celebrate someone’s entrance into our fellowship and especially into the family of faith. But as my friend Elliot Grudem, whose ministry Leaders Collective focuses on pastors’ health, once asked a room of pastors, “Aren’t those metrics similar to a bakery celebrating the amount of flour and yeast that was delivered? Instead of measuring input, would churches be wiser to measure output? Instead of celebrating the number of people who enter, should we focus

on stories of people growing in faith and life change, discipling one another, sharing the gospel, and fruitful ministry?”⁹

THE WATER WE SWIM IN

You may have heard the opening of a 2005 commencement speech by novelist David Foster Wallace: “There are two young fish swimming along, and they meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ The two young fish swim on for a bit, then eventually one looks at the other and goes, ‘What the [expletive] is water?’ Wallace’s point is clear: “The most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.”¹⁰

The first verse in today’s reading, invites Jesus’ followers to “*not be conformed to this world* but be transformed by the *renewal of your mind*, that by testing you may *discern what is the will of God*, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). Today’s reading invites us to consider who God calls us—His Church—to be. Have our churches been shaped by “this world”? Is “renewal of the mind” and discernment of God’s will needed to become all God designed us to be?

To be clear, some good things came from the church growth movement; a three-year self-analysis of Willow Creek—a leading voice in the movement—found that “the church and its ministries seemed to have the most influence at the beginning of a person’s spiritual growth process.” But that same study “paints the picture of the church being too preoccupied with the early growing years, leaving the spiritual adolescents to find their own way—without preparing them for the journey.”¹¹ By focusing on the masses, individuals were left behind. I must also say that today’s reading is less about church size than mindset. American pastor John Mark Comer explains: “I like the definition of *mega* as ‘(1) Sunday centric, (2) personality driven, and (3) consumer-oriented programming.’ You can do church that way with two thousand, two hundred, or twenty.”¹² While today’s reading is heady, it’s simply helping us know the water we swim in. By institutionalizing and professionalizing

ministry, and focusing on growth, efficiency, and certain metrics for over half a century, Western Christianity has increasingly shifted away from “church as family” (a concept we’ll explore tomorrow).

Yes, most churches are *legally* not-for-profit organizations, but in God’s eyes we are *spiritually* far more. We need a Bartlet-McGarry moment to shake off the paralyzing water we’ve swum in, to free us for the deeper identity, intentional commitment, and familial devotion we see within the pages of our Bibles.

LET THE CHURCH BE THE CHURCH

Romans 12 is for every Christian—as are other passages that paint the church as a devoted family. You *are* a son or daughter of God, and a sibling to other Christians. They need you, and you need them, whether or not we’re “professionals.” As part of a church, you are *already* part of a family more than an institution. You *have been* empowered by the Spirit to live out the “one another” commands. You *are* gifted uniquely for building up the body. Bartlet was dubbed “president” at his inauguration. Generally at your salvation and specifically when you commit to a local church, you are

101 WAYS TO MOVE FROM FAÇADE TO FAMILY

9 Forgo your solitary weekend away and invite someone over who’s struggling—the company and time will mean the world to them.

10 Find a walking, jogging, or cycling partner: consistently go together.

11 Become the home where others’ kids land after school—provide great snacks, a play area, games, and conversations.

12 Become the home where adults want to land too—provide grown-up versions of the prior suggestion!

dubbed a “member of God’s family.” Let’s all play our part!

The questions aren’t whether we can conform to institutional expectations, desire to attend some program, or want to care for others and develop deep relationships. The question is if we will live out the identity God already gave us, or choose to settle for less. Will the church be the church, as described in the Bible? Will the family of God be the family of God?

(Can you hear the swelling music and feel the pulsing snare as we close today’s reading?)

Will we even risk the opinions of the world around us, and of other Christians who settle for less, to pursue illogical but God-given commitments to each other? Let’s jump out of our current stream, into a refreshing and better—even if scary—rushing river. Let’s live as the family of God. Let’s “let the Church be the Church!”

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