

Follow Me

“Follow Jesus in Relationships”

September 19/20, 2020

Digging Deeper

Follow Me: “Follow Jesus in Relationships”

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Matthew 9:9-13; 12:45-50; and others throughout

Introduction

“I know something you don’t know.” That sentence is the *credo* of the quintessential *insider*, spoken or implied to the *outsider*. Nothing in the sentence suggests a willingness to grant access to this special knowledge — to *the outsider*. Like the proverbial *wall* which, in cultural terms, represents the unbending desire to keep people out, to refuse participation by persons or groups who might gain access and thereby threaten, contaminate, or rob the insiders of their closely-held identity. There’s nothing necessarily *religious* about the practice of the “wall,” although the religious person easily falls prey to the safety provided by this inside-outside relationship. The question on the table is whether insiders are willing to permit entrance, even on occasion, to those who are unlike themselves, who stand outside as the supreme example of the “other”: alien, foreign, different, unfamiliar, and perhaps even threatening. *All of this begs for new relationships.*

Insiders have already decided. They have decided that outsiders have little to contribute, but much to take away. Insiders react to fear of the “other” where there is no room for reaching out or inviting or including. Insiders see themselves as “good” and outsiders as “bad.” Of course the insiders rarely air their true thoughts about the outsiders, but they constantly betray their true feelings. Insiders have blind spots, however: the truth about themselves that they sustain the deficit of the outsiders without recognizing it. They, too, are outsiders in the eyes of others and also to themselves. *There is a need for new kinds of relationships.*

In the course of ordinary affairs, people regularly live within the insider/outsider dilemma: they move to new communities where they are slow to become neighbors; they enroll of new schools where they don’t belong to any social groups; they take a new job without knowing the dynamics of office politics; they travel abroad where they cannot understand new languages; they are a foreign exchange student in an American classroom; they are a foster child living with a new family; they marry into a new family where they don’t know the in-laws; they have their first child without any parenting experience; they are poor while others are rich; they struggle with handicaps alongside the physically adept; they are immigrants in a predominately nativist society, or nativists in an immigrant community. Feel free to add to this list for your own experiences that suggest many examples of insider-outsider disjunctions that scream back at you, “You don’t really fit in here!” *New relationships are not easily formed.*

Alienation of persons within social groups, nations, institutions, and religious cultures is a malady of our times. But we are not unique, either in the locale we occupy or in our epoch within history. *Difference* naturally invites *dissonance*. Tribal communities within less advanced societies compete for resources: land, food, tools, livestock, hunting grounds, and power. Tribes practice insider-outsider relationships as well. Nations see themselves as privileged, blessed, and *exceptional*, while their neighbors remain inferior, enemies, and suspect. Classes within tribes and nations draw lines of proper conduct, marked by symbols of rank and nobility. Landowners look down on peasants; the vested and salaried dominate the marginal and wage-earner. Those who write the rules for social ranking set the boundaries for upper, middle, and lower classes, and then those classes skirmish over the subsets of upper-middle and lower-middle, upper-lower and lower-lower. Hyphenation produces its own insider-outsider alienation. *Developing new relationships takes considerable time.*

In the long history of God's ancient people Israel, the chosen ones lost their land and their kingdom to the dreaded nations, an event in 587 BCE which hardened the lines between Jews and everybody else. There was also considerable opportunity for the exiles and those who yet remained in Israel to question who were the insiders and who were the outsiders. When finally a remnant of Jews returned to a decimated homeland, they found themselves living alongside others, some Jews and others foreigners. *The question gnawing around the edges of attempts to form one nation again was "who's in and who's out?"* or perhaps more specifically "who are the real Jews?" Inspired by the vision of God's true kingdom, the prophets spoke into this perplexity. Among these courageous voices was that of a prophet we have come to call *Third Isaiah* who spoke and wrote in the venerable tradition of the great Isaiah of Jerusalem (Isaiah 1-39). His words reflect the insider-outsider dilemma but elevate the conversation in the spirit of justice and hope. Here is a selection from his work:

This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. ² Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil."

³ Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people."

And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree."

⁴ For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant-- ⁵ to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.

⁶ And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant-- ⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

⁸ The Sovereign LORD declares-- he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered." (Isaiah 56:1-8).

"A *house of prayer for all nations*" is a holy and disruptive phrase for it looks beyond the divisions of insider and outsider to a renewed Israel which envisions the "gathering of still others besides those already gathered." Look at the list of inclusion: "eunuchs" (persons with messed up sexuality) and "foreigners" (persons who likely engineered the exile). The prophet saw past these facile distinctions and imagined a community without exclusion based on loyalty to the covenant God was making with "all nations." *New relationships are God's purpose for a new world from all nations.*

When we finally get around to thinking about *life in the Church*, the lineaments of difference are no less pronounced, and are in many ways intensified by our commitment to *distinctiveness* as Christians who follow Jesus and refuse any other lords. American churches grapple with the acquisition of new members, purity of doctrine, forms of worship, rules for social practice, requirements for membership, and priorities for service to others. Churches balance budgets, raise money, elect officers, call pastors, recruit volunteers, and hopefully preach the gospel to save souls. None of those activities is immune to insider-outsider dynamics. In multi-cultural communities, shaped by the ever-growing reality of globalism and migration, the Church faces the conflict between loyalty to nationalism and the Lordship of Jesus. Should the Church have sufficient courage to bring the gospel to "every creature," they will inevitably share in the wider cultural conflicts about race, immigration, poverty, class, gender, and inclusion. Without much effort Christians who take the Church seriously (some do, some don't) will find themselves at the intersection of all those conflicts and face the inevitable divide as insiders facing outsiders. *Christians must work seriously at new relationships.*

Faced by the truth about themselves within the complex communities of the 21st century, the Church cannot be neutral if it is faithful to Jesus and to his gospel. Either the Church accepts the challenge of inviting outsiders to become insiders or the Church colludes with the posture of fear, isolation, walls, differences, and alienation. Should the Church choose the latter, it becomes simply one more religion among others, vying for members that

simply look just like themselves. Such churches make no difference precisely because they surrender to difference without transformation, to separation without inclusion, to alienation without reconciliation. In effect, they cease to be the Church which the kingdom of God is raising up in the world to be the sign that God has arrived to make His home in the person of Jesus His Son, by the presence of the Spirit, and through the community of the Church. *Which kind of Church will we be and with what sorts of new relationships?*

The Relationship of the Tables (Matthew 9:9-13)

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Matthew 9:9-13).

We have already visited this text in our first study of this series and discovered that all three synoptic gospels (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*) incorporate essentially the same story. The differences have significance, of course, not the least of them the name of the man whom the first gospel calls "Matthew" but *Mark* and *Luke* refer to as "Levi." We previously summarized the importance of this variation and offered further explanation of Matthew Levi's odd combination of professions. That material will be repeated in what follows while adding special emphasis on the contrast *between insiders and outsiders*.

1. Mark: "Levi (This is his "tribal" name. Priests and other Temple leadership came from this tribe of Israel.) son of Alphaeus (Greek: *Halphaios*; His father's Hebrew name is *Halfay*)".
2. Luke: "Tax collector named Levi". Compare this to Matthew's version: "Matthew the tax collector" in Matthew's list of the Twelve (10:3).
3. Curiously, in the Gospels of *Mark*, *Matthew*, and *Luke* there is a list of the Twelve apostles in which another apostle, James, is called "son of Alphaeus" (see Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15), whereas Matthew is simply listed by his given name. Was Matthew a brother of James? Nowhere does Scripture tell us this, but the suggestion is attractive.
4. From these texts it appears that Matthew is his given name, whereas "Levi" is his tribal affiliation. That is, his name is "Matthew the Levite, son of Alphaeus." Once again, it is helpful to read all three accounts, and gather the necessary evidence from them.

The idea that Matthew was a Levite has significance. Not all Levites were priests, but many of them became Pharisees and devout students of Torah. Though not qualified to serve in the Temple, they found an equally holy calling in explaining the Scriptures to others. Careful readers of Matthew's Gospel discover his love for connecting the Old Testament Scriptures with the life of Jesus. After he met Jesus, Matthew became a Messiah-teacher, and his previous background made this possible.

This makes his becoming a "tax collector" highly unusual. How is it that this "Levite" takes on such a hated profession in the eyes of observant Jews? It is likely that Matthew saw little hope in the various options open to him for improving his life as a Jew in Israel. Judging from the quality of the Gospel he would one day write, Matthew had real skill as a scholar, no doubt learned from his Pharisee teachers. He may have been a "scribe" based on the frequency he mentions that profession in his Gospel. Meticulous, accurate, with attention to detail, Matthew had little difficulty transferring those abilities to the tedious bookkeeping associated with tax collection. The difference? One profession promised to make him rich in spiritual ways, while the other vocation delivered on the promise to enrich him with material rewards. Until he discovered the wealth of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus, tax collection suited him just fine.

All three accounts are unanimous in telling us that when Jesus called out "Follow me", Matthew complied. All three synoptic Gospels record that he had been "sitting" at the tax collector's station, but when he heard from Jesus, "he arose and followed him". Matthew would never return to this sedentary life again, but would, like the Twelve find himself on a mission for Jesus.

Note: Luke is unique here. He adds the statement: "And leaving everything....". This was one of Luke's deepest passions: the sort of discipleship that "left it all" behind for the sake of Jesus (see Luke 9:23 where Jesus asks that his disciples "deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow".) Matthew is no exception, Luke tells us. Matthew left the tax collecting business behind; he made a clean break.

"Guess who's coming to dinner?" would be the question Matthew might have sprung on his other guests. After all, it was his house and his dinner. Luke once again gives us some important detail left out by the other two synoptic writers: "And Levi made him a great feast (Greek: *dochē*) in his house." This is no ordinary meal, but a banquet-style feast where hospitality was lavishly given and received. Such gatherings were for friends and intimates. The meal was a place where trust was expressed: you don't eat food with people you don't trust. They might poison you! Matthew offers the feast in honor of Jesus and he wants his buddies there to share in the joy.

The situation at the feast is laid out by all three writers. The guests and the host are "reclining". The Greek words for "reclining" used in the three Gospels are compounds of one basic word "to sit", each adding a prefix which intensifies the way they sat, namely "together", "alongside" each other. Recall how Jesus found Matthew sitting at his collector's booth? That word for sitting lacks the prefix--just ordinary sitting. Here, the sitting is collective, shared, and part of a community. Most importantly, Matthew and his friends share the feast "with Jesus", implying a new kinship and personal regard the one for the other. The size of the feast is variously described as "large" where "many" people joined with Matthew and Jesus. One scholar suggests as many as forty people could occupy the roomy space of a tax collector's house.

Matthew's feast created quite a stir among another group who were present (Note: Did Matthew invite these old associates of his?) , but staying aloof were keeping a watchful eye on the actions of Jesus. Critics of Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees embraced strict ideas about something called "purity" or "holiness". To them, separation from unclean things frequently meant refusal to associate with unclean people. Matthew Levi would have been a notorious embarrassment to them. We have already seen that as a Levite he would have had some connection to the Pharisees, an association that at some point he abandoned to collect taxes. It is possible that these were Matthew's old associates, and they would have seen him as a backslider of the worst kind.

"Eat and Drink", says Luke

"Eat" say Mark and Matthew.

Either depiction meant putting one's lips and hands on the unholy vessels touched by unholy hands of a tax collector, and sinner.

Being a sinner meant simply being like a pagan, a Gentile: one of the *goyim* (=non-Jewish ethnic groups).

"Why?" ask the Pharisees scornfully. To what end? What good can come from this?

Only Luke has the Pharisees putting the question directly to Jesus.

Matthew and Mark put the question to Jesus' disciples. This is understandable. A rabbi (and they would consider Jesus to be one, albeit not one of theirs!) was responsible for the actions of his disciples. And, the reverse was true: he represented them, being their greatest influence. "What kind of rabbi are you following?" they imply by posing their query to the disciples. Or, the Pharisees might be looking for proof that Jesus actually taught his disciples to act this way and want to see how well the disciples can make a good argument in defense of this behavior.

It's interesting to see how easily the Pharisees can "bury" Matthew beneath the generality of the phrase "tax collectors and sinners." They don't say "this tax collector, Matthew". The Pharisees want to make general rules affecting everyone; there is little room here for the salvation of the individual person. Jesus, on the other hand, embraces the individual wherever he finds him. Matthew is no exception.

Jesus no doubt thought his disciples were not quite ready to take the final exam from the Pharisees, so he speaks up, offering a solid justification for his actions. From the three Gospels we can collect three distinct supporting points Jesus gave for his action:

1. All three Gospels generally agree on the wording of the first: Sick people need a doctor, well people don't. Luke, however, uses a distinctive medical term for "well people": the Greek word *hygianontos* from which we get "hygiene". Why? Because Luke was a physician and prefers correct terminology! Mark and Matthew opt for the generic "strong people". They all agree on the idea of sickness as literally "being in a bad way" (Greek: *kakos*). The general saying Jesus cites is well-known to his listeners, a proverb from the Greek writer Diogenes.
2. In a passage found only in his Gospel, Matthew doesn't quote from a Greek thinker. He quotes the Old Testament prophet Hosea (6:6) and introduces the text with the words "Go and learn what this means." That's significant. The venerable Pharisees are instructed by Jesus to "learn" something new: something they apparently failed to grasp. And this quotation gets to the heart of why Jesus agreed to attend Matthew's banquet in the first place: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." It's not a difficult Scripture, but its application requires that the Pharisees make a major adjustment in their thinking. What is "mercy"? Behind the Greek word used by Matthew lies the Hebrew word *hesed*, the covenant love of God. Be faithful to the true meaning of Torah; be concerned about those things God cares about. Foregoing the feast in Matthew's house was a sacrifice in the eyes of the Pharisees that would somehow make God look on them with favor. Yet, Jesus tells them to learn an even greater lesson: God wants mercy before he wants sacrifice. Jesus is telling them: show covenant love to Matthew first of all. Think about yourselves last of all.
3. Then all three Gospels join their voices in proclaiming the Good News brought by Jesus: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." And then Luke adds his unique emphasis: "... to repentance." Jesus declares himself to be "the coming One", "the calling one". He proclaims his goal: "repentance", which translates the Greek word *metanoia* which means "change one's mind" or "re-direct one's life", a word rooted in the Hebrew term which means simply "turn" or "return". What God wants, Jesus says, is "changed lives". And it's pretty hard to change them if you don't get next to them.
 - 1) "Righteous": used in a cynical sense here, I believe, to suggest "self-righteous": those who define righteousness in a certain way, see themselves in that way, and judge others as not being that way. Not the righteousness of God, but "their own righteousness". [Note: St. Paul speaks in similar ways in Romans 10:3: "For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."]
 - 2) "Sinners": The Pharisees had already pigeon-holed the tax collectors this way. Jesus associates with "sinners", that is, Gentiles, pagans, undesirables, unholy people. Again, Jesus reverses the meaning by referring to the "sick" who need a physician. He has come to bring healing to the sick, true righteousness to those who recognize their need of it. [Note: Once more, we hear from Paul in the same vein in Romans 3:9 "What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin..."]
 - 3) Matthew lived the life of a sick man. He knew he was unrighteous. But he apparently also knew that his former Pharisee associations as a Levite hadn't made things much better for him. Judaism in its present form had failed him. But Jesus reached out and called him precisely because he was sick and in need. Here was a man who found more fulfillment in collecting taxes than in being a self-righteous Pharisee. Jesus calls him away from both, and, in Luke's words, "to real change", "to repentance".

The sequel to all of this in Matthew's Gospel appears in chapter 10 (and in Mark 3 and Luke 6). In that passage, the Gospel writer lists the names of the Twelve apostles. It is as if all the Gospel writers are trying to say, "Now that Jesus has called and embraced the 'tax collector and sinner', the number of apostles is at last complete. For if Jesus can save a tax collector, he can save anyone. And what's more, who better to reach the unreachable than one who has been there himself." Indeed, Jesus then sends all of them forth to bring his message and his

healing to the four corners of Israel. And there, included in that cohort is Matthew Levi, tax collector and sinner, a man sick and in need of healing, a sinner whom Jesus called to repentance.

Matthew began his life in the Jewish faith by following the expected practices prescribed by his tribal identity as a Levite. Clearly his affinities to other things, such as money, replaced his devotion to the priesthood and to service to others. *Relationships* in Matthew's lens were important if they furthered *riches*. He no doubt subscribed to the dictum, "It's not just what you know but *who you know*" that really matters. However, in his social register the "who" didn't exist for their own sale but for the benefit of his profession. Relationships were a means to an end, not ends in themselves. Sitting with Jesus at the fellowship table alongside his business friends, Matthew Levi learned new lessons about the importance of relationships for higher purposes. He saw Jesus defending his association with people whom the religious elite despised, and Matthew must have wondered to himself whether relationships were made for better things than he had previously regarded them.

Matthew watched Jesus treat outsiders like insiders without the smugness of the Pharisees or with the compromise of his convictions. Jesus wasn't befriending tax collectors because he agreed with their usury but because they, like Matthew Levi, were capable of better things if they learned to follow Jesus. Being tax collectors did not prevent them from following Jesus, but following Jesus would radically alter what they did about tax collecting. Matthew was the first in his cohort to make this discovery when he was called by Jesus from his *collection table*. But then Matthew led the way for his associates by inviting them to the vulnerability of the *dinner table*. Here are two tables, both implying forms of relationships, but only one of them found Jesus sitting and engaged with people as human beings but not people as objects for profit. By following Jesus, Matthew learned the difference of the tables and decided only the fellowship table was for him.

Let us choose our tables wisely, out of love for people no matter where we find them or what they are doing or whom they befriending. Rest assured that Jesus sits at that table and we need to be there also.

The New Insiders

⁴⁶ While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:45-50).

The family dynamics span all of human history, shaped by time and place, culture and morality, politics and social orders. What comprises the *household* also undergoes change. What we call the *nuclear family*, consisting of father and mother with one or more children living under the same roof, has not always defined the family unit. Throughout the world over many ages, wider family structures included extended family members with grandparents, servants, and dependent elderly relatives. Had we walked into the living arrangements of ancient worthies like Abraham or Moses or David would have found any combination of these possibilities.

The physical structure of the "house," whether simple tents, stone buildings, wooden framed units, or hewn caverns, might consist of a single open space where food preparation and sleeping quarters had no separating walls. In other cases, smaller rooms might have housed livestock and food storage. Wealthier families added extra stories with further division of living space. The palace, fortress, and castle were further enhanced by lavish resources which were the privileged conveniences of the upper classes and royalty. Archaeologists regularly uncover ruins of these wide-ranging styles and then draw conclusions about how families organized themselves in light of this physical architecture. Social strata within families become apparent from such building layouts. Especially noteworthy is the absence of *privacy* for sleeping arrangements, suggesting that the boundaries between persons of a family depended less on *rooms* and more on social discipline, propriety, and internal bonds between individuals.

Roles also varied within Middle Eastern societies represented in the biblical stories. Largely patriarchal, men were viewed as the top of the authority structure, in pyramid-fashion, while women performed routine work-related tasks in addition to bearing children and caring for their nurture. The famous profile of the “ideal woman” in Proverbs 31:10-31 includes not only domestic tasks but also commercial activities that would have taken women outside the home and into the marketplace. Children in these societies commonly followed father and mother in both inherited trades and daily duties within the home. Servants had a range of functions that actively engaged them in managing the household, securing resources, protecting children, and working in various agrarian activities. Servants were an integral part of the family unit, entrusted with important responsibilities and honored accordingly. The phrase “trusted servant” was commonplace in the language of households (compare Genesis 24). Elderly family members added supportive services in raising children, passing along wisdom, and creating stability. Widows in households exchanged their services for support from the family.

Agrarian life originally determined many of the roles, tasks, relationships, and purposes that held families together. However, once commercial life expanded towns and villages into more urban centers, those roles shifted to meet new needs, and so the family structure adapted accordingly. Trades became more focused and better organized, drawing their workforce from apprenticed children who eventually formed guilds with family-like social structures. This web of evolving economics changed the face of societies and the underlying families which sustained them. In the days of Jesus, the cultivation of natural resources from land and sea further shaped family life, so that in the gospels we find the family of Peter engaged in its productive fishing business, while others around Jesus might be contractors for the building trades. Jesus came from such a family and bore the moniker “son of a carpenter” (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:2-3; Luke 4:22). From his parables we gain insight into the lives of shepherds, winemakers, farmers, tax collectors, investors, and landowners, along with their attending servants. Families were enmeshed with all of these vocations, its members the active participants with corresponding roles and duties. Much of the work force was contract labor which followed the agrarian calendar of planting, cultivating, and reaping. Finding jobs was often a hit or miss proposition, creating times of both plenty and scarcity, not only of crops but of family income. Sociologists underscore the impact of these cycles on the health of family life and on its stratification into class structures.

Not everyone fit neatly into the prevailing social structures of the family. Among Jesus’ closest friends were Mary, Martha, and Lazarus who seemed to share a common household where married life appeared to be absent and domestic life became more fluid (see John 11). We witness the negotiation for household duties between Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42, and the privileged place of learning sought by Mary, while Martha was occupied with food preparation, leading to conflict. The text cited for this section of our *Background Notes* takes place before Jesus’ coming death on the cross. On that occasion we witness the mother of Jesus, Mary the widow, being placed by Jesus into the care of a non-relative and one of his disciples (John 19:26-27). This *extension of family life* parallels Jesus’ own words when asked about his own family:

⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” ⁴⁸ He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:46-50).

The New Testament offers a spectrum of family experiences as well as the roles of men and women outside the Jewish homeland, within the wider Roman Empire. The book of Acts begins with the wider circle of Jesus’ disciples gathered together for prayer with Mary his mother in their midst and Peter acting in a parental role to the community of 120 persons:

¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. ¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) (Acts 1:13-15).

Clearly, the early Church imagined itself in light of Jesus' teachings, to be likewise a family which is renewed by the risen Jesus.

Later, in Acts 2, the community of the Holy Spirit as a result of Pentecost, exhibits qualities and practices that mirror many of the traditional roles reserved for families:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47).

Such a reconstruction of persons into a family life by no means replaced the traditional families, and yet the sort of life together which they shared expanded the social structures.

Acts contains further stories about persons in roles that share common features with families. Whole households are baptized into the life of the Christian community: the household of Cornelius a Roman officer (Acts 10:1-48; 11:14); Lydia the cloth merchant (Acts 16:14-15); the prison official in Philippi (Acts 16:23-40, especially 16:33). Outside of *Acts* we learn from Paul that he baptized the household of the Corinthian, Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16). Baptism, administered to these households, was a powerful sign of God's new work through the Spirit within extended Gentile families; it was a transforming sign that granted a new social standing and relationship to every member of those families.

That the gospel was bringing new relationships and social dimensions to families continues to be echoed in the letters of Paul and the apostles of the New Testament. Special sections of various letters have been commonly called "household codes" (German scholars call these *Haustafeln*):

These "codes for the family" consist of instructions in the New Testament writings of the apostles Paul and Peter to pairs of Christian people in different domestic and civil structures of society. The main foci of the Household Codes are upon husband/wife, parent/child, and master/slave relationships. The Codes apparently were developed to urge the new first century Christians to comply with the non-negotiable requirements of Roman Patria Potestas law, and to meet the needs for the new Christian order within the fledgling churches.¹ The two main passages that explain these relationships and duties are Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1. An underlying Household Code is also reflected in 1 Timothy 2:1ff., 8ff.; 3:1ff., 8ff.; 5:17ff.; 6:1f.; Titus 2:1-10 and 1 Peter 2:13-3:7. Some Scholars interpret the *Haustafeln* passages to be "Peter and Paul's radical Christian 'remix' that often passes unnoticed by modern readers."²

The "remix" suggested by current research is a transformation of existing and traditional forms of the family into examples of the new creation. The result is a new family structure where Christ's redemption overcomes the effects of the "fall" and gives to spouses, mutual submission and to other household members, a new equity where concepts of property are replaced by the dignity of persons. All of these transformations correspond to Paul's larger vision of the "new creation":

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:16-17).

When "the new comes," family relationships, roles, and practices conform to the life of the risen Christ who redefines what husbands, wives, parents, children, and household servants look like in light of the gospel and within the body of Christ. Such re-imagining of the family means more than mere egalitarian reform, and instead reaches for a whole new of practicing the family. For the early Christians and for us, to be a family is to share in the new creation, revitalized by mutual love and service for every member. *Without that family*, life in

¹ Evelyn and Frank Stagg. *Woman in the World of Jesus*. Westminster Press, 1978; James E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972.

² Timothy Gombis, "A Radically Different New Humanity: The Function of the *Haustafel* in Ephesians". *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 48/2 (June 2005) 317-30.

the household faces insurmountable challenges in the kind of world we now inhabit. *With that family*, the future of families is hopeful and full of new possibilities!

Paul offers his cosmic vision of the new Family of Jesus, made possible by resurrection life that literally raises families to new life, giving them *a new name* and thus *a new identity*. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle offers a majestic prayer which summons the Lord's presence for the well-being of his entire human family. Notice his appeal to God in terms of the word "families":

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ *from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.* ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21).

The apostle imagines in this prayer the joining of families: heaven with earth, earth with heaven, in this crucial undertaking to transform all families through Christ's infinite resources and to fill the whole creation with the comprehensive dimensions of divine love. Together, the new family of God comprises "all the saints" with deep roots and immeasurable power.

Conclusion

Insiders become the perennial home for outsiders in Jesus' new family *where new relationships nurture new communities*. Within the community of the church, sacred spaces form around the gospel story and people gather in small groups, Life Groups, where they form new relationships with sufficient energy to break down the barriers naturally imposed by race, religion, class, and economics. Jesus knew the story of insiders and outsiders, and his own life and work embraced the world of human beings by becoming one of them. His followers, those who agree to accept his invitation, "Follow Me," imitate his embrace of the world.

Personal experience confirms the truth that *distance* is often the obstacle between Christians and the world, between insiders and outsiders. There is a substantial divide that prevents movement from "us" to "them." Some of the distance is artificial. Some of it is real. In my teenage years, I commonly heard about the "generation gap" attributed to the rapid pace of cultural change, symbolized by an emerging subculture where new social forms challenged the dominant establishment in politics, society, and religion. The use of psychedelic drugs, adoption of innovative music styles, clothing fads, and protest speech coalesced into distinct groups of young people who aimed to transform established practices and institutions. Elder cohorts felt threatened by the pace of this shift, while the emerging communities grew increasingly suspicious of any traditional values. In the years that followed the "gap" grew into a highly diverse society that significantly called into question the relevance of religion for new generations.

Champions of the Gospel felt this gap as they pondered how the message of Jesus might bridge the gap. What strategies would the Church adopt that would adapt its faith to the new world without leaving behind the core truth that gave Christianity its distinctive and non-negotiable identity? Outside the western experience of the Gospel, missionaries had always faced the experience of cultural gaps when they embarked on fresh initiatives to newly encountered people groups. The work of Bible translators, for example, faced the ongoing task of rendering the sacred texts in the many native languages of their audiences of foreign lands. Such work wasn't just about finding the right words or the proper grammar but involved the "disconnects" — the gaps — in cultural and social customs. Guided by the tools of the social sciences and cultural anthropology, Christian linguists bridged the gap with creative solutions in their resulting translations. This project was not easy, to be sure, and yet missionaries made progress. Gaps yield their ground to new relationships. New relationships form local experiences of the family of the Father where Jesus is present and the Spirit is working.

Encouraged by world-wide efforts, the Church "at home" moves forward in post-modern societies, driven by the deep conviction that Jesus is "the way" to the Father's house. In the setting of the local church, equally

productive approaches are possible. Evangelism is, however, more than the consideration of “programs.” The commission of Jesus remains our supreme calling: “Whenever you go into the world, make disciples of all the nations,” anchored with the promise “I am with you always, until time ends” (Matthew 28:19-20). At the moment of Jesus’ return to the Father, he faithfully empowered his earthly witnesses with the Spirit, and soon afterward sent signs to them that whole world in all of its diversity would come within their spheres of influence.

Those signs included “Pentecost,” a well-established feast of ancient Israel that took on new meaning through the fresh arrival of the Spirit. Luke, the careful historian and theologian, preserved the written account of this development. Among his reports of the New Pentecost was the following description:

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs-- we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own languages!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:5-12).

Several helpful points come from this text. Notice the detailed geographical narration which highlights the numerous environments from which the pilgrim Jews came, “from every nation under heaven.” Luke’s account underscores the reality that Jews were a scattered community and not only residents of the holy land. They were part of the world-wide *diaspora*, or “scattering” that took place during the previous five hundred years. By coming to the homeland for the feast of Pentecost, these diaspora Jews drew near to the apostles’ sphere of influence. Then, observe the pressing question the pilgrims asked: “What does this mean?” They looked for understanding in the words and actions of the Gospel witnesses, and the context for finding meaning was precisely the community experience afforded by the shared festival. What follows in Acts 2 is Peter’s sermon which ultimately gives birth to the local church in Jerusalem. But the impact would be wider, since the diaspora Jews would then return to their respective homes throughout the Empire and create their own spheres of influence, enriched by the message of Jesus. The mission was launched. *New relationships began forming.*

To describe the identity of our circle of impacted persons, the New Testament uses the word *oikos*, taken from the Greek language with the basic meaning of “household.” Within the societies represented by the biblical world, the *oikos* functioned like an extended family and described not only the immediate family, but also included servants, servants’ families, friends, and even business associates. One’s *oikos* was a sphere of influence, the social system composed of those related to each other through common kinship ties, common tasks, and common territory. The New Testament *oikos* included members of the nuclear family, but extended to dependents, slaves and employees. The *oikos* was the discrete social unit by which the church grew. Throughout their letters, for example, Paul and Peter gave special instructions to the “household” and its members, showing them how to live together in light of the Gospel (see Ephesians 5:22-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1, 1 Timothy 2:1ff., 8ff.; 3:1ff., 8ff.; 5:17ff.; 6:1f.; Titus 2:1-10 and 1 Peter 2:13-3:7).

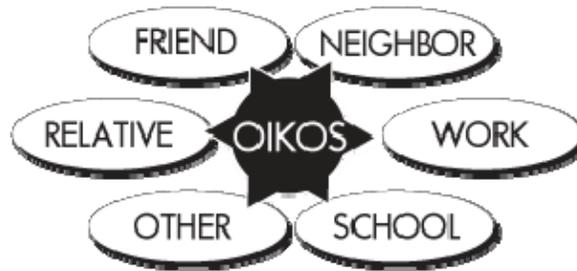
More fundamentally, Jesus formed his own *oikos* when he called his twelve disciples and then spent three years sharing life with them. In turn, these apostles formed the nucleus of the first Christian community which extended the Gospel’s influence to others who were influenced by three universal units of social systems: (a) common kinship, (b) common community, and (c) common interests. As we study the New Testament, we find that the apostolic church used the interlocking social systems of common kinship, community, and interest as vehicles for reaching the world with the Gospel.

Peter B. Hammond, professor of anthropology, Indiana University, observes that “in most cultures the social systems of greatest importance are based on kinship. Human beings everywhere are born into some sort of family. And almost always this family is important in giving them-literally and figuratively-a start in life: producing them, feeding, clothing, protecting, and educating them, and eventually establishing for them a

'place' in society...In most cultures the kin group plays an even more important role [than in America], lasting throughout life as the principal source of the individual's emotional, economic, social-and frequently supernatural-support, and providing the basis for community organization."³

David G. Mandelbaum, professor of anthropology, University of California, summarizes his findings: "Whatever diversity there may be among social groupings the world over, there are at least two types which are found in every human society. The family is one of them—In every land, among every people, the child is ordinarily raised and nurtured within a family. The other type of group universal to humanity...is the local community. Just as no person normally lives all his life alone, devoid of any family, so does no family normally live entirely alone, apart from any local group...of neighbors." Mandelbaum goes on to point out a third group—the clan—which is also a cultural universal, if one allows for its evolution in the contemporary Western setting. The clan has developed into "...the social units which are extensions of the local group...voluntary associations based on common interests...ranging from trade unions and medical associations to bridge clubs and parent-teacher associations. Each of these groupings is held together by a common interest, an interest arising from mutual participation in the same trades, the mutual enjoyment of a game, or mutual problems in relation to a set of children."⁴

Applied to our local church setting, the *oikos* becomes "a group of eight to fifteen people with whom we share life most closely as our sphere of greatest influence, our relational world, and the most natural and common environment for evangelism to occur. [It is] a microcosm of the world at large, for whom God sent His Son that they would be delivered from the bondage of sin and given fullness in Christ."⁵



Such communities are part of family life at C1. They are the common spaces where friends make friends, insiders and outsiders close the gaps, Christ becomes present in flesh and blood, and fellowship gives birth to service where God's kingdom keeps calling, "Follow Jesus." Let us find our communities, form our fellowships, and serve God and others for the sake of the world.

Glory to God! Amen.

³ Peter Hammond. *Cultural & Social Anthropology: Selected Readings*. (New York : MacMillan, 1964), 145-46.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Taken from the planning notes from Pastor Brian Wangler for this series.