

THE STUCK SYNDROME

ARTICLE 10: REAL FELLOWSHIP

Imagine the church in a way as never before. Imagine it without any building. Imagine it without paid clergy. Imagine it with, at most, only a few pages of Scripture. Try seeing church as a communication free-for-all, with no set program, no committees, no constitution, not even any bulletins. Does this sound alien? But this is actually how the church was before.

"Before what?" We may ask. Before we started adding a hefty quantity of goofy paraphernalia, which oddly enough became more a definite part of church than what church is really all about, namely a loving fellowship. The first three hundred years of the church functioned amazingly without any of the above items. Churches were small, living room centered, close-knit organisms, where people knew each other. They knew about backgrounds and struggles, victories and dreams, heartaches and fears, and there was a lot of belly level laughter to be sure. They didn't need any hype; they had heart. They didn't need any evangelistic programs; their love itself was magnetic. They didn't have to worry about budget; they had little expense besides helping the poor, the widow, and the visiting missionary. They didn't have to teach on commitment, any uncommitted invertebrates were weeded out naturally by threat of chains and wild beasts. The one thing they did have was each other; bonded with the glue of God. It was their only asset; everything depended on that reality.

Church is none other than the loving family of God. According to James Rutz of Open Church Ministries, church means simply being a family, "God and His kids- doing what good families do- sharing their hearts and lives." One thing that this means to me is that church should be basically fun, because good families are a lot of fun (and it is interesting to note, according to Natural Church Development research, there is a significant connection between church growth and laughter). So if church is other than this model, it is actually none other than a model of spiritual familial dysfunction. Diane Fassel explains that, "When the fun goes out of work, it is a sign that something is dysfunctional in the organization. When the immune system of the organization is down, then all sorts of disease take hold." So here we would be wise to examine ourselves, if the time for being a loving family is being overrun by programs, goals, facilities, and even a glutton of "good" teaching, then we are missing the whole point of church.

What kinds of things should we be seeing happen when Christians get together? Here is a list Rutz gleaned from Scripture:

- >Provoke one another unto good works.
- >Confess your sins to one another.
- >Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another.
- >Bear one another's burdens.
- >Encourage one another to build each other up.
- >Respect those who work hard among you.
- >Warn those who are idle...encourage the timid.
- >Pray for each other so that you may be healed.
- >Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Or how about, "When you all come together, everyone has something to contribute: a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, an interpretation...you can all prophesy in turn." But is there ample room for these instructives, these non-negotiables, to be obeyed? Certainly once in a while it happens. There is a little crack that forms in the system, and a blazing light comes forth through the flood gate, there is a torrent of emotion, confessions, praises, wide eyes and lumpy throats and as Rutz says, you have instant revival! And pray then that there will not be panic for someone to jam a thumb into the wee hole in the dike.

Four years ago I had rare experience of real fellowship. The occasion was the first gathering of the Promise Keepers group in Japan. I was speaking on the subject of sexual addiction. My strategy to grab attention at the beginning of the seminar was to hold up a sign with only two kanji written on it (masturbation). Needless to say, everyman's attention was mine. At that moment I held the sign high several cameras went off, including that of a reporter from the Christian Shimbun (I have always worried where that picture would show up!) Then I asked the men if they had ever heard that word in church before. Not a single one had.

This is strange in that Japan is likely the world leader in pornography. And with the easy access of porn on the Internet the majority of men are spending hours with pornography each week, including Christians! And not just young men, husbands, fathers, pastors, and missionaries. I have counseled many ministers who are secretly and deeply addicted to sex.. I have talked with ministers who destroyed their homes and churches because of it. I have listened to the laments of wives whose husbands who have abandoned them for this rubbish. One broken minister told me of being arrested because of his sex addiction, and how the policemen snickered when they found out what his occupation was.

But at one point in this Promise Keepers meeting men paired up to pray for each other, and shared honestly from the broken places in their lives. They trampled their pride and became brothers, bleeding and in need of each other, and by those shattered spirits, for a moment, Hell was crushed. I had never seen such beautiful vulnerability in Japan before. The brokenness was sacred. How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. (Ps 133:1,3)

Of course that is what we all long for. A place where we share more than ideas, trends, and activities—where we go beyond the topics of sports, shopping, weather, hobbies, and house. We all long for a safe place where we can be real. Where we don't have to hide, where we know we are accepted no matter what. A place where grace flows like a fresh mountain stream and refreshes us all on its banks. We do not gasp at the confession of another, because we know that we ourselves are no different. We all struggle with greed, lust, pride, and we all long for something better than that, and little by little Christ is formed in us. But as one famous psychologist said, a family is only as healthy as the secrets it carries.

Recently, a friend who is a former pastor and sex addict shared his testimony in church. I marveled as, before thousands, Harry told his story of pastoring while living in immorality. He explained openly that he had numerous affairs, even with women in his own church. But finally one day his secret was exposed. While Harry spoke to a mistress on the phone, his son listened on the other line, and told his mother. Needless to say, his family and world fell apart. At middle age he moved back into his parents home destitute. You would never know that if you met him today. Harry is a new and healed man. He obviously has the joy of the Lord. He found a place where he was received with open arms, where other men who have struggled just like him wrapped their arms around him. Slowly, piece by piece, his life came back together, and now he ministers other men who are caught in the snare of sex addiction and secrecy. Because of men like Harry, people at church feel safe, they can share anything, and still be fully accepted. Why all this talk about sex? Because at the root of sex addiction is a longing we all have—a hunger for none less than intimate connection. And intimacy is impossible with secrets. We don't share everything with everyone

In any family secrets keep people from each other. Secrets ensure that the enemy is ruling. Secrets are the sister of pride. Secrets maintain stuckness in the family of God. But if we became honest think how we would be healed. If leaders shared openly and ministered from their woundedness others might face themselves truthfully. Our voice would echo authenticity, it would echo from every mountain.

