



Session 3 – Relationships Not Real Estate

What is Authentic Community Anyway?

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them,
because they were harassed and helpless,
like sheep without a shepherd.*

—Matthew 9:36

The voice on the other end of the phone line was serious and solemn: “If you want to see your father before he dies, you need to get here as quickly as possible.” Those were the words I heard as my father, at eighty-five, was close to death. I found myself on a plane within the next two hours and then in a rental car with two close friends pulling up to the Raleigh-Durham Hospital in North Carolina. I learned my father had been unconscious for some time, and because of pain medication, he had been delirious through much of the day. After comforting my stepmother, I entered his room and sat next to his bed, knowing this would be the last time I would get to see him on this side of heaven.

My dad was a good man, but deeply wounded. Although he had become a Christian in his mid-fifties, it had been very difficult for him to communicate his feelings and verbalize his love. I know he cared for me deeply and that he was proud of me, but I longed to hear that from his lips. Like every boy (no matter what age you happen to be) I yearned for the approval of my father and wanted so much to have that deep, meaningful conversation from the heart with him before he died.

PAGE 1

It was about 8 P.M. and my dad's wife, Evelyn (he had remarried after my mom had died), was heading home after a long day at the hospital. She gave me a kiss on the cheek and a hug as she walked out the door. Her eyes were sad and she knew Dad's last days were upon us.

Then something strange happened. I've heard about this in books and doctors tell me that it's not highly unusual, but my dad awakened and was completely lucid. For the next hour and a half, he was all there and we had "the talk" that we had both desired for so many years. Dad asked about my wife and about each of my kids and their kids. He asked me how I was feeling about some of the big transitions in my life and what I was concerned about and what made me most happy. We relived a lot of years and some of our best times together. From Little League ball games to some of the most difficult and painful events of our past—we shared hearts, man-to-man. In those last hours, my father clearly and powerfully communicated the things that were most important to him. He held nothing back. He knew he was going to die. He was ready to die, and he wanted to communicate what mattered most.

When you're going to die, you tell people the things that are absolutely most important to you. On the night Jesus knew that He was going to die, He did exactly the same thing that my father did. After washing His disciples' feet and modeling for them the message of His entire life, He gave them a new command:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

—John 13:34–35 NIV

He commands them, not about strategy, or about doctrine, *but* about how they should treat one another. He commands them to *love* one another, in the same way that He loved them. He loved them unconditionally, sacrificially, openly, vulnerably, and when it wasn't convenient. He met them right where they were and loved them just as they were—believing in them when they didn't even believe in themselves. Jesus loved the disciples in such a radical, self-sacrificial manner that He was now calling them to emulate Him in their relationships with one another.

But why? Why was it so important that the disciples love one another the way that Jesus loved them? The answer: *that the world would know that God sent Jesus, His Son, to save and forgive them.* The greatest and most powerful apologetic in the entire world is not an argument out of

a book, but the love Christians have for one another. When we radically and authentically love one another from the heart, the world stands back in awe and wonders, *What makes them care so deeply for one another?*

After Jesus gave them this new command, He shared the Passover with His disciples. The Passover that night would turn into the Lord's Supper, as He used the elements of the bread and the wine to communicate His love and sacrifice for them and for the entire world.

Shortly afterward, we have the opportunity to eavesdrop on another deep conversation between a father and son: the second person of the Trinity (Jesus), speaking to the Father on the last night of his life about what was most important to Him. Listen to what He says:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

—John 17:20–24 NIV

Here, on the last night of Jesus' life on the earth, He gives *one new command* and He *prays one specific thing* with white-hot passion and intensity. He prays that the disciples will love one another radically and that the Father will work in their relationships so that they might experience unity and authentic community with one another, in the same way that the Father and the Son have authentic community with each other.

And if you why wonder Jesus puts such focus on this request and such passion into this prayer, it is because the credibility of Christianity would rise or fall on the basis of Jesus' followers' relationships with one another. Jesus knew that the most powerful means of authenticating His true identity and God's greatest act of love for this fallen world would be how His followers would love one another in everyday life.

When Authentic Community Became Real for Me

I was eighteen years old and a skeptic. As I shared earlier, I came to know Christ at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes' camp in 1972. I was a skinny young kid who had earned a basketball scholarship at a small school and was at this camp primarily to hone my skills, not learn about God. After three or four days of listening to the Bible and even opening it on occasion, I was curious, but far from convinced. My religious experience had been anything but positive.

But after an afternoon workout, I had a powerful experience that completely reshaped my view of Christianity. I found myself walking behind the wide receiver for the Atlanta Falcons and the fullback for the University of Illinois. I can still vividly remember the green gym shorts the professional wide receiver was wearing and the sweaty cut-off football jersey the fullback was wearing as they walked off the practice field.

I watched this wide receiver, with bulging muscles, fame, and wealth, take a genuine interest in the fullback's life. I couldn't make out all that they were talking about except for the fact that the college athlete was sharing some deeply personal struggles. At one point, the pro put his arm around the massive shoulders of the sweaty fullback and began to communicate, in hushed tones, words of hope, love, and understanding. I could tell they were totally unaware of my presence as I followed several feet behind, but I could make out just enough of the conversation to watch, for the first time, a grown man love another grown man in a masculine way.

My view of Christianity prior to this camp was that it was primarily for women, people who need a crutch, and those who were weak. Somewhere along the line, I had bought into Karl Marx's view of religion—that it was an opiate for the masses, but certainly not something that I needed.

As I listened intently on the long walk across the practice field that day, an emotion began to stir in me for which I was unprepared. Watching a successful athlete love another man in a powerful and masculine way pierced through all my defenses and insecurities. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes and a set of emotions that were foreign to my experience. Before long, I was walking just a little bit closer, but staying far enough back not to disturb them. I wanted to hear what they were really talking about and to validate for myself the sincerity and vulnerability that I sensed was being exchanged.

By the time I'd reached the other end of the practice field, all I knew was that these two men

had something that I wanted. I didn't know what it was at the time, and I didn't know how to get it; but what I did know was that I was an insecure, driven, over-the-top hypocrite who longed to be loved and accepted. I was tired of pretending and projecting that I was something that I knew I wasn't. I longed to find a place where I could just be *me* (whoever that was!) and be loved and accepted for just who I was. What actually happened as I walked across the field was that I heard the message of life because Jesus' prayer in John 17 was being answered before my eyes as I saw two Christ-followers love each other the way Jesus loved them.

Authentic community is powerful. *Authentic community* is something that we all long for. *Authentic community* goes way beyond simply being on a team or being a part of a club. Authentic community occurs when the real you shows up and meets real needs for the right reason in the right way. It's when the love of Christ is shared and exchanged with vulnerability, sacrifice, and devotion. It's a place where you can be just who you are and be loved in spite of your struggles, hang-ups, and idiosyncrasies.

As I shared earlier, later in that week at camp, I personally asked Jesus Christ to forgive me for my sin and to come into my life. I asked Him to make me the man that He wanted me to be. I believed the good news about Christ because I saw the good news lived out in a relationship between two ordinary people whose names I'll never know.

Why Is Authentic Community So Difficult to Find?

Unfortunately, most Christians don't experience biblical authentic community. Even with the rise of the small group movement, there's no guarantee that being in a small group will necessitate Christians loving Christians the way Jesus loved His disciples. I've been in some excellent small groups where the feeling of authentic community was palpable, but I've also been in some small groups where we discuss the Bible, enjoy some positive social relationships, and go about living not much differently after our time together than we lived before. Authentic community is extraordinarily powerful, but extraordinarily rare.

As we launch into this section of r12 Christianity together, I want you to know this is far

from theoretical for me. I've gone through one of the most significant ministry transitions of my life. It's the first time in twenty-five years that I have not been the senior pastor of a local church. My role as a pastor provided me with the structure and the environment in which authentic community could occur on a regular basis—whether it was with staff members, close friends, or biweekly meetings with elders that included large chunks of times in the Scriptures, sharing, and praying. But when I didn't have this anymore, I realized how much I had taken for granted the in-depth, honest relationships we shared.

During this time, Theresa and I have experienced what I now believe many Christians experience as a “normal” way of life—periods of loneliness and disconnection as we searched for a place to belong. We visited various churches and found it to be one of the most frustrating and discouraging experiences of our lives. In the midst of it all, my daughter came up with an idea that proved to be God's answer to our prayer.

Annie was going to a great church in the Atlanta area that has a huge singles population. She'd met ten or twelve people in their mid-twenties who all longed to grow spiritually, but were at various levels of maturity and didn't know exactly how to move forward. Well, before long, my wife is cooking dinner every Monday night for “twelve of Annie's closest friends” and I'm opening the Scriptures and doing life with the next generation. All I can tell you is what started out as Bible study turned into an extended family. Joy and love grew out of our time together beyond anything I ever expected.

After two or three weeks of us getting to know one another, the sharing got deeper and more honest. Soon group members were meeting one another's needs, sharing from the heart, and crying out in prayer together. The other night, as Theresa was finishing up the dishes and we were cleaning up the house after everyone left, I had this overwhelming sense of peace. What a privilege it is to be a part of God's family and really do life from the heart with a group of people.

Later, as we turned off the lights and went to bed, I put my hands behind my head and began to consider what was so wonderful about the evening. What was it that was so good about being with these young adults over the last several weeks? Just before Theresa drifted off to sleep, I said, “You know, honey, tonight was a blast, wasn't it? Tonight reminded me of why God led us into ministry in the first place. Do you remember when we first started out thirty years ago and we had college students over at our house for Bible study? Do you remember how I would meet with the guys to

disciple them and you would meet with the girls? That's what it felt like tonight. It wasn't just preparing messages or building buildings or creating systems or hiring staff or structuring organizations so people could be in a position to grow; it was just hands-on loving ordinary people and being loved by them, just as we are." We put our heads on the pillow that night with a renewed sense (after thirty years of ministry) of "this is what it's really all about."

I do not know where you are in your relationship with Christ or in your relationship with His church. But what I do know is that it breaks God's heart that only a small percentage of Christ-followers genuinely experience the kind of life-changing community I am talking about. Authentic community is what it looks like when Christians really love one another. God's plan and gift to His Body is not that we simply meet together weekly, listen to someone talk, sing some songs, work hard to be morally pure, or even perform in good deeds to help others. These things are certainly meant to be the overflow of our relationship with Christ, but I fear that far too many Christians do them yet live lonely, isolated lives, longing to be loved and accepted just for who they are.

IT'S YOUR MOVE—Become a Romans 12 Christian

God longs for you to experience authentic community and we're going to learn how that can happen for ordinary, everyday people just like you and me.

Think—What did Jesus command and pray for His disciples?

Reflect—Why do you think Jesus made such a point of focusing on our relationships with one another?

Understand—What gets in the way of experiencing authentic community in *your* life?

- Too busy—no margin
- Religious activities
- Disconnected from other like-minded believers

Surrender—Are you in meaningful, growing, Christ-centered relationship with a handful of people? If not, will you ask God to show you what you need to do in order to move in that direction . . . or deepen what He has already provided for you?

Take Action—Declare war on isolation and superficial relationships in your life! Write out John 13:34–35 on a 3×5 card and commit to living it out as God leads you this week.

Motivation—Consider watching the fourteen-minute video message “How to Experience Authentic Community” at r12 online (**LivingontheEdge.org/r12**).

Encourage Someone—Make the first move this week. Initiate coffee, dinner, or dessert with someone(s) and talk about your common need/desire for authentic community.