

Review of *When the Church was a Family* by Joseph Hellerman
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I. Bibliographic Data

Hellerman, Joseph H. *When the Church was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009.

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II. Purpose of the author

In his first summary of his literary purpose Hellerman says, “It is my intention to demonstrate that our radical overemphasis on a personal relationship with God is an American—not a biblical—theological construction (Hellerman, 6).” On page eight, he mentions that he is writing for leaders and leaders in training so that they can be “properly equipped to recapture Jesus’ vision for authentic Christian community (8).” A few pages later he elaborates

To the Kimballs of the emerging church I offer this book as my attempt to provide a fledgling movement with some biblical and historical moorings where Christian community is concerned. We have all the resources necessary in the New Testament and in other early Christian literature to erect a robust theology of community on the bedrock of early Christian convictions and social practice. The result will be the kind of community that will satisfy the relational longings of both traditional church leaders and our emerging brothers and sisters. It is to that project that we now turn (11).

Mentioning another goal Hellerman writes, “For in Western culture we must ultimately make these weighty decisions—and shoulder the responsibility for their outcome—alone. I do not believe that God has designed us to do so, and I hope to convince you of this before you finish reading this book” (24).

He states his primary goal again on page 31, “The heart of this book is concerned with recapturing the social vision of the early Christian church as a strong-group, surrogate family” (31).

He also summarizes the book’s central focus at the outset. “There is, in fact, no better way to come to grips with the spiritual and relational poverty of American individualism than to compare our way of doing things with the strong-group, surrogate family relations of early Christianity. This is the central focus of this book (6).”

III. Highlights

In this book, Joseph Hellerman stresses the idea that Christian spiritual growth and maturity must take place in the context of community. He suggests that Western postmodern society's individualistic ideology is a major hindrance to the well-being of the Christian church. Postmodern America is a radically individualistic society in which personal fulfillment is widely considered the highest priority. The breaking up of marriages and church congregations is due to more than personal sin. Our society has conditioned us to believe that personal fulfillment always takes priority over the relationships in our lives. Such a phenomenon is unique to Western postmodern society.

In times past, especially in the first century and pre-first century biblical eras, as well as in most of the non-western world today, this is not the case. Rather than being individualistic or "weak-group" cultures, as Hellerman calls it, they are "strong-group" or collectivist societies in which the well-being of the group, be it the family or village, takes precedence over the personal happiness of the individual. In modern America, we scarcely think about our loyalties to our country, employer, family, and church, but in ancient Israel, other modern non-western cultures, and the first century Christian church the opposite is true. Hellerman uses the example of Josephus who, pleading with his fellow Judeans to surrender Jerusalem to the besieging Roman armies, offered the lives of his entire family and his own life also if perhaps it would make Jerusalem's would-be protectors wise up and surrender the city.

Life in a collectivist society was not wrought with the same stressful dilemmas as is our modern individualistic society. Countless single student adults have little or no direction as to what to do vocationally with their lives. The freedom to decide one's vocation, spouse, and place of residence has left multitudes dazed and lost in the endless sea of possibilities. In collectivist societies, this is a nonissue because each of these three major life decisions is decided for the individual person by his or her parents and family of origin. Modern Americans measure their individual worth and the value of others by their vocations, but, in collectivist civilizations, identity is firmly rooted in the groups, especially family, to which someone belongs. Psychologists and counselors do not help much by isolating the person who has difficulty navigating through weak their relationships but serve mainly as a crutch for such a weak person. Contrarily, the New Testament church functioned more like a strong-group family in the Greco-Roman world.

In the world of the New Testament, family priorities were much different than those of contemporary American society. Unlike Western society in which marriage is the most valued relationship, the bond between blood relatives, especially among siblings, was considered of most importance in the ancient world. Marriages were usually arranged in order to strengthen the extended family and ensure its well-being, and it was their own blood relatives from whom the husband and wife could expect emotional support and companionship rather than from one another. Hellerman hopes that these patterns will shed much light on the use of family language and imagery in relation to the church—the family of God. Then he offers several examples of "sibling solidarity" in the second century and other biblical time periods (41-50).

Jesus himself called for his disciples to forsake their families and some of the responsibilities thereof in order to be his follower. He disgraced both himself and his own family publicly by failing to defend their honor and provide leadership for them. Many modern evangelicals try to downplay the harshness of Jesus' anti-family rhetoric, but being too quick to harmonize or smooth over these difficult sayings misses the sharp point which they are intended to make. In order to understand them, however, they must be viewed from the cultural context of Jesus' ministry.

The creeds and confessions from the fourth century until today speak of Jesus' birth and death, but rarely, if ever, mention anything in between. However, the four Gospels of the New Testament focus most of their attention on Jesus' life and ministry. Most of us "comb through" the Gospels asking Jesus is like, but the pressing question for those who witnessed Jesus' ministry was, "What is God like?" which is a profoundly different question (58). We traditionally study the Gospels to examine Jesus and his divinity in order to ensure the orthodoxy of our doctrine. If, on the other hand, we approach the Gospels asking what God is like, we will discover that God is like Jesus, and we will seek to model our lives after his example. Just as the religious leaders of Jesus' day missed the point of Jesus ministry by concentrating on the man, so we today must begin by knowing what we believe about God in order to accurately ascertain his character as revealed in Jesus. The "leap from the manger to the cross" in our own biblical theology often hinders us in following Jesus' model of living (62).

The explanation of Jesus' negative pronouncements against the family is that they are about conflicting loyalties between two groups, the physical blood family and the family of God. Within his strong-group society, Jesus' organizing of a group of followers around him which he referred to as family naturally raised the question of loyalty. Love for God's family was to be placed on the same level as love for God. Thus, the family of God becomes the center entity in the realm of "relational priorities" (65). Jesus also promised that all who had forsaken physical families and possessions to follow him would receive one hundred-fold in return in this lifetime and eternal life in the next (Mark 10:28-30). This was realized in the surrogate family of the church and in their sharing of resources to meet one another's needs. This explains some perplexing passages in the Gospels such as James and John leaving their father to follow Jesus, Jesus' requirement to hate one's family in order to be his disciple, and his refusal to allow a man to fulfill his duty of overseeing his father's burial. Such "Anti-Family Teachings" are meant to resolve a conflict of loyalties between natural family and "Faith Family" (72). Rather than God, family, church, others, the new set of priorities Jesus presents is God's family, my family, others.

Paul regularly employs familial language in his correspondence with the churches he founded. In 1 Corinthians, the apostle pleads with his readers not to sue their brothers in the church. He demonstrated family-like affection toward his converts and taught them to live in family-like unity with one another. During a time of famine and economic hardship in Judea, Paul rallied his Gentile converts in their churches to contribute to the relief and sustenance of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Paul saw this as a duty for the Gentiles since they had partaken of the benefits of Israel and as a tangible way to

express the unity of both Jew and Gentile in Christ. Just as its use is not commonplace within natural families, when Paul makes use of familial terminology he does so as a persuasive tactic. For example, Paul employs this family terminology in his fundraising efforts in order to make his appeal more convincing.

In 1 Corinthians chapter seven, Paul discusses how marriage fits into the “overall scheme of things” within God’s plan and family (90). This passage is often approached by attempting to find where singleness fits into God’s plan, but it is really about how marriage fits in. He is clear in echoing Jesus’ teaching that a man and wife are not to divorce. However, since first-century Christians were expected to marry other Christians but there were cases in which this ideal was not the case, Paul prohibited leaving an unbelieving spouse but allowed the unbelieving spouse to exit the marriage if he or she desired. Going beyond Jesus’ teaching, Paul employs the terms “brother” and “sister” for rhetorical effect, contrasting the more important sibling relationship to the secondary, less important relationship between husband and wife. These convictions of Paul harmonize perfectly with first century Mediterranean family values and Jesus’ teachings to prioritize God’s family over natural family.

In the first, second, and third century Roman world Christians were a minority in society, but the church was strong and united and its family-like care of its own members as well as the pagan poor is an undeniable fact of history. The political and religious environment was “passionately pagan,” but the church not only thrived, it also experienced incredible expansion (102). A large part of the church’s success was due to the myriad of gods and belief systems in the recently united Roman world, and Christianity offered a straightforward alternative to the confusion. More so than belief, however, what really struck a chord with people was Christian behavior. They behaved like family, shared their material goods, cared passionately for the sick and imprisoned, and ransomed their own who were taken captive. To go one step further, their loyalties were rearranged, transferred to, and fixed on Christ and his family even in the face of persecution and under the threat of death, often by or with the participation of their blood families.

Churches today, more often than not, place most or all of the emphasis on the individual when it comes to doctrinal statements. The reconciliation of a person’s relationship with God (vertical) is a major part of the gospel, but when believers are converted to Christ they are saved into a community (horizontal). Both vertical and horizontal aspects of salvation are important, and the Scriptures do not downplay either one. However, American Christianity tends to ignore the horizontal aspect of salvation and the Christian life and turn Christianity into a “personal relationship with God” and Jesus Christ into a “personal Savior” (123-124). However, it is impossible to live with God as Father without embracing the Father’s other children—a Christian’s brothers and sisters in the church.

The Bible teaches that God saves people into community. Just as Israel was rescued from Egypt as a nation, so, in the New Testament church through the third century, salvation was “a community-creating event” (130). This truth does not deny the

importance of the individual to God, but to emphasize the vertical aspect of salvation rather than both vertical and horizontal aspects is to miss God's design for salvation and the Christian life. Such an individualistic approach to soteriology reduces Jesus to a "personal Savior" whom we can drag from church to church and from marriage to marriage (135). If the church firmly grounds its soteriology in collectivist language and expectations and begins to behave more like a family, then perhaps it will once again be as effective in evangelism as the early church of the first three centuries.

The New Testament family, like a natural family, shares its material wealth with one another as if what individual members own does not belong solely to them but to the entire group. Christians also share their hearts with one another, rejoicing together in glad times and mourning together in tragedy. Like the apostle Paul to the church at Thessalonica, they feel and express deep affection for one another, and this compassion for one another moves members to action and to care for one another's needs. The family stays together when the going gets tough or when conflicts arise. They accept one another in spite of the faults of others. They grow and mature together. This is not what is seen in contemporary Christendom, however, in which members avoid committing to a group of believers. When confronted with trying or painful circumstances, then readily exchange one church group for another rather than sticking it out, confronting and growing through the pain. When Christians learn that their church is their family, then they will begin to reap the benefits of life in community.

Some easily write off their Christian families when making huge life decisions such as marriage, but Jesus exalted the priority of God's family over that of blood family. This only makes sense if following Jesus is synonymous with "joining his group" (165). Still others are able to heed the Bible's approach to priorities even in matters concerning their families. Those who obey the Word experience benefits far beyond their own lives because they open their lives for God to use in ministry to others. Unfortunately, many still isolate their natural families from the wisdom and love offered to them by the church, but Christians have a responsibility to God's family for the way they live their lives.

Hellerman then echoes his statements in chapter one in which he points out the emotional stress Americans pay for their absolute autonomy in making decisions about vocation, marriage, and residency. The church, he says, can help alleviate this unnecessary stress and help Christians make better decisions. The better a church imitates the early church by embracing "the strong-group, church family model," the better the decisions made by the individuals and families in the church's congregation will be (170). Then Christians will experience the many benefits that come from being a part of a strong group that shares its wealth with and invests its wisdom into each member.

Creating Christian community is the work of God's Spirit and not of human beings. Christians can live out God's intention of strong Christian community as a church in congregations of less than 200 and in a system of smaller group ministries for larger churches. Christian teaching must be converted from unbiblical messages which prompt members to adopt an individualistic consumerist attitude to teachings about biblical community. In church, Christians should begin to sing worship songs together as a group

rather than as individual worshippers, and teachers must stress the importance of the Christian family in the living out of God's purpose and plan. The concentration of the church and its ministry must change from a Sunday morning show which is designed for keeping track of attendance and giving and focuses members on getting their individual needs met to a relational environment in which true discipleship takes place. Finally, pastors can facilitate this vital change in the way church is done by laying aside secular leadership guidelines for a time and both embracing and embodying the New Testament teaching and model of the church.

When true family loyalty is given to a group, Christian or not, there is always the danger of an abuse of power by the leadership in which a leader or group of leaders takes advantage of the members' strong-group, family loyalties. For this reason, our American culture tends to be suspicious of authority, and many churches are embracing a leaderless methodology for doing church. The real answer, however, is in a system of leaders with checks and balances which prevents too much authority from accumulating in the wrong hands. Both Jesus and Paul provide much instruction for Christian leaders. The New Testament church was led by a plurality of leaders who functioned as servants of the members of their congregations. The church is made up of our true brothers, sisters, mothers, and children, but God is the sole Father and Jesus the only "senior pastor" of every Christian (190).

In addition to biblical teaching, there are also practical reasons for adopting a team approach to church leadership. First, its system of checks and balances protects the group from abuse by an authoritarian leader. Second, it keeps Christians from imaginarily living out their goals and dreams through certain celebrity Christian leaders whom they view as some sort of super Christians. Third, it ensures that the whole congregation gets their spiritual needs met. A variety of spiritual leaders and teachers will inevitably connect with and make sense to more people than a single figure. Fourth, a team of leaders, functioning in family-like loyalty and harmony serves as a model of strong-group, family church life for the larger congregation. Fifth, the leadership team provides "moral accountability" for individual church leaders, and sixth, the team of leaders provides protection for its members from the "emotional rollercoaster" ride between the two polar extremes, "pride and depression" (196-197). Finally, Jesus himself is the church's ultimate example and model of true servant leadership.

In this book, Hellerman examined the early church's appropriation of the ancient Mediterranean family's collectivist values in which the group took priority over the individual person and nuclear family and the strongest relational bond known to humanity was the bond between brothers and sisters. Jesus taught that his followers were a family which surpassed the natural family, and Paul encouraged and expected the congregations to which he wrote to behave as such. The ancient church retained a functional, family model for nearly the first three centuries of its existence. The early church maintained boundaries between those who were inside and outside of the Christian community concerning how they expected their members to behave and believe. These Christians placed the well-being of the church above their own needs, goals, and

desires and counted on the group for assistance when faced with the “material and emotional challenges” associated with belonging to Jesus (216).

In contrast, the amount of loyalty and the number of “meaningful relationships” in today’s evangelical churches are declining, and church is becoming more and more individualistic (216). Although God’s way will inevitably prevail over culture, all Christians would be better off embracing Jesus’ model for Christian community. Christians today are beginning to actively seek for more than what the church is offering. They are looking for a family rather than an institution with leaders that are family members and servants, a church family that cares for its own and for the broken who are on the outside. However, contrary to our current culture’s relativistic stance, the church and its leaders must uphold biblical boundaries concerning sin and salvation in order to promote true, healthy, and biblical community rather than merely what postmodern Western society envisions that community should be.

The true thrust of the gospel, the goal of which is to create a family of God’s special people for him, must be emphasized. Conversion of the individual is important, but it is the beginning, not the end, of the journey. If conversion is authentic, then it will be evident in the relational behavior of the convert within the family of God. This method of conversion into family is exemplified in the New Testament epistles and the book of Acts. In today’s individualistic society, evangelism must be accompanied by education and socialization of individual converts (or prospects) into a collective family of disciples. The invitation of commitment to Christ must be coupled with an invitation to join God’s vast family of brothers and sisters. The two cannot be separated and together constitute the holistic message of the gospel. Without being born into true Christian family, newly reborn Christians will not survive.

Many non-Christians have an interest in Jesus but are turned off by the church. This provides Christian leaders the opportunity to cultivate true, biblical, family-style church for their non-Christian friends and neighbors to experience for the first time. This will allow them to make “informed decisions” to join themselves to Christ and to his family (224). Church leaders must lead the way in moving the church from Sunday service into authentic Christian community by connecting with members of their own congregations and fostering brotherhood and friendship therein.

The strong-group, family approach to Christianity worked wonders for the success of the early church and the spreading of the gospel from Jerusalem throughout the entire Roman Empire.

IV. Critical commentary

In the opening chapters of the book, Hellerman paints an accurate picture of the ancient, collectivist family and its values and demonstrates the early church’s appropriation of such values in its community life and worship. His exploration of the ancient collectivist family model is educational and relevant to his discussion on the church as a family, particularly his concentration on the especially strong bond between

siblings. This illustration translates well into the idea of the New Testament since most Christians are accustomed to the brother/sister language of both the New Testament and the contemporary church. His emphasis on the sibling bond of the ancient family and his repeated biblical references to the church as brothers and sisters in Christ effectively urges Christians to think of and treat their fellow members of the family of God as brothers and sisters rather than merely calling them such.

Hellerman demonstrates that the sibling bond is the strongest relational bond in collectivist societies both past and present. He uses this to effectively illustrate Jesus' call to prioritize following him above a person's blood family. In the process, he correctly asserts that belonging to Jesus is equivalent to and inseparable from belonging to his family, the church. His real-life examples, taken largely from ancient history, are especially useful in supporting his various points concerning collectivist values and sibling solidarity. He provides ample biblical evidence in favor of his claims about the community-creating aspect of the gospel and salvation.

I believe that Hellerman is well justified in his unwillingness to downplay the forcefulness of what he refers to as Jesus' "anti-family" sayings (54). However, his claim that Jesus "dishonored Himself and His family" by refusing to answer the call of his mother and siblings, using their call as an opportunity to teach his disciples about God's kingdom stands on especially weak ground. It is weak because it assumes that first century Jews viewed societal and familial norms as more important than a prophet's work of proclaiming Torah to the nation. It is the Torah to which all societal values must bow; first century Judean society was not a secular society but one that centered itself on the religion of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Additionally, to label the response of James and John to Jesus' call as "treachery" is to conclude that their leaving their father with his boat and nets could only have been viewed negatively by both their "abandoned" father as well as the first century readers of Mark's Gospel (68). Such a conclusion simply cannot be ascertained from the biblical text, however, and it totally discounts any honor that might have been attached to a person who was chosen to be a disciple of a rabbi as well as any family pride that this might have entailed. Many scholars agree that Mark's Gospel tends to concentrate on the failures of Jesus' disciples, but the supposition that the calling of James and John and their subsequent response is among the disciples' failures cannot be supported textually.

Hellerman's handling of Luke 14:26 is wrought with both strengths and weaknesses. He points out the vital hermeneutical fact that the word "hate" does not always mean "intense dislike" nor does it always represent the opposite of love. Drawing on the Hebrew root for the Greek word translated "hate," he concludes that "hate" in Luke 14:26 means to "sever one's relationship with the family" (69). The strength of this interpretation is that it would add much in the way of relevance to the word used for hate in the passage. It also renders the passage more readable and less difficult to comprehend. However, although Jesus likely spoke both Hebrew and Aramaic, probably mostly Aramaic, the passage is written in Koine Greek, so a word study of the Greek term would be a better starting point to examine the meaning of the passage.

The weaknesses of Hellerman's approach to this passage are several. First, while attaching the plain meaning "to sever relationships" to the passage improves its readability, it completely removes any sense of hyperbole from Jesus' pronouncement. Therefore, in order to draw such a conclusion, one must first be able to confidently conclude that Jesus did not mean to use the word as a hyperbole. Such an attempt will inevitably remain inconclusive. Secondly, it ignores the sense of preference which it carries in other biblical passages (cf. Romans 9:13). Third, Hellerman's translation of the passage is just as troubling, if not more so, than ones which utilize the word "hate." If he is correct, then Luke 14:26 would be a command from the Lord to his would-be disciples requiring them abandon and sever all ties with blood relatives in order to follow him. This is ludicrous since, as Hellerman points out on page 69, this was not always the case. Finally, it would be an etymological fallacy to conclusively determine the meaning of a word used in a certain literary contest based solely on the meaning of its root.

It is more likely that "hate" in Luke 14:26 carries the same sense as it does in Romans 9:13 and in Matthew 10:37—the sense of preference. Jesus is not calling his disciples to abandon their families as a prerequisite to following him. Rather, he seems to be calling his disciples to forsake their blood relatives if they get in the way of following him. Jesus, as God, is to have first priority in their lives, and, as Hellerman points out so well, prioritizing God means prioritizing his family. Furthermore, if a person is faced with the ultimatum to serve God or serve one's family and he or she chooses to reject the family and serve God, this is the same as loving God above all else and hating one's family since love is action and not merely an emotional feeling. Therefore, to cease being an active, supporting member of one's natural family in favor of active participation in the family of God is the absence of loving action toward the former and is thus hate.

Another one of Hellerman's speculations is concerning the famine mentioned in Acts 11:27-30 for which Paul organized the collection of a relief fund by the Gentile churches to the saints in Judea. The author quotes the above passage wherein it states that a prophet named Agabus predicts the famine, but then Hellerman ignores this revelation in his consideration of what possibly caused the economic downturn. He offers an over-budget widow's fund and exhausted resources due to hospitality toward pilgrims as possible causes of the hardship. However, both of these options assume that the Jerusalem church was at least partially responsible for causing the famine due to the mismanagement of its resources. I suppose this is a possibility in the modern world in which economics are controlled by and dependent on stock markets and central banking systems, but first century Israel was largely an agricultural society which depended on the ground's yield of crops. The "bear market" for which Hellerman is searching is simply a failure of the land to yield sufficient sustenance (85). His subsequent statement which declares that it is understandable why the church suffered during the famine because it was led by "displaced Galileans (Peter, James, and John)" is purely speculative and absurd. It is fairly obvious from the text of Acts 11:27-30 that a "serve famine" is predicted which is going to affect the Judean churches, and God revealed this beforehand which then prompted other churches to send relief to Jerusalem in order that God's family would not suffer the same lack as their apostate neighbors.

Despite each of the above criticisms of Hellerman's conclusions, I found Hellerman's assessment of the Christian church to be extremely culturally relevant. He spoke to true issues such as tough vocational decisions, the challenge of finding a spouse, and the stress caused by an overwhelming number of options. He also hit the nail on the head concerning issues that many non-Christians have with the church. The importance of community is a reviving value in postmodern Western culture, so I share Hellerman's hope that solidarity will continue to catch on in the way we do church. I also share his concern that a focus on relationship without orthodox doctrine is a dangerous road to travel. However, I do not share in his optimism concerning a return to orthodoxy. As the apostle Paul by the Spirit predicted in 1 Timothy 4:1, "In the latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons," and this has been steadily occurring and increasing since the first century. It is most unfortunate what Jesus' predicted saying, "Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name, and done many wonders in your name?'" and he will answer them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matthew 7:22-23), but sadly this is how it will play out for the "many" who follow the "broad... way" (v. 13).

Finally, Hellerman is right on with his assessment concerning the church, its ministries, and its leadership. Church should not be modeled after American corporations, but it should work to become everything that Jesus designed it and planned for it to be—the true family of God. The first century church was "all together and they had all things common," they sold their possessions in order to meet one another's needs, and they met daily in the temple and in their homes (Acts 2:44-46). They remained "steadfastly" faithful to the "apostle's doctrine" (v. 42), and miracles and signs were accomplished among them (v. 43). The churches of today are a far cry from this model, and I agree with Hellerman that it must be restored. Church leaders must lead the way and humble themselves as brothers and sisters of the congregation, respected and submitted to in love and not by compulsion or spiritual manipulation. Christian leaders must abandon full control of the church over to God and resume their role as trainers and equippers of the body of believers for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). Ultimately, Christian ministry must be redefined in order to recover its original significance, taking the focus off of leaders performing a Sunday morning show and returning it to its proper place of ownership within the ranks of ordinary Christians.

V. Notable quotations

1. "People who remain connected with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in self-understanding, and they mature in their ability to relate in healthy ways to God and to their fellow human beings." (1)
2. "It is a simple but profound biblical reality that we both grow and thrive together or we do not grow much at all." (1)
3. "Our uniquely individualistic approach toward life and relationships, so characteristic of American society, subtly yet certainly sets us up for

- failure in our efforts to stay and grow in the context of the often difficult but redemptive relationships that God has provided for us.” (5)
4. “God’s intention is not to become the feel-good Father of a myriad of isolated individuals who appropriate the Christian faith as yet another avenue toward personal enlightenment. Nor is the biblical Jesus to be conceived of as some sort of spiritual mentor whom we can happily take from church to church, or from marriage to marriage, fully assured that our personal Savior will somehow bless and redeem our destructive relational choices every step of the way.” (6)
 5. “As church-going Americans, we have been socialized to believe that our individual fulfillment and our personal relationship with God are more important than any connection we might have with our fellow human beings, whether in the home or in the church. We have, in a most subtle and insidious way, been conformed to this world.” (7)
 6. “The purpose of church, of course, is to help me continue to grow in my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Or so I have been trained by my culture to believe.” (15)
 7. “Jesus set the ultimate example of this family-first mentality when He gave His life as a ransom for many. As one of our New Testament authors put it, “He laid down His life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 John 3:16).” (31)
 8. “For the early Christians, the church was not an institutional organization with a mortgage payment. The church was a living organism with a mission.” (51)
 9. “There is much work to be done in our American churches if we are someday to recapture Jesus’ vision for authentic Christian community. But embracing a genuinely biblical ecclesiology is a challenge that is well worth the effort. The relational and spiritual health of the people in our churches depends on it.” (52)
 10. “To do traditional Christology—asking “What is JESUS like?” (left-hand side of chart)—with an unexamined conception of God is to risk investing our affirmation of the deity of Christ with our ideas about God, rather than with the reality of God’s character as revealed in the priorities and activities of Jesus of Nazareth.” (61)
 11. “It is time to complement our orthodoxy with a robust emphasis on orthopraxis. Only then will we be able to recapture Jesus’ vision for authentic Christian community.” (62)
 12. “Jesus would have been much more than their “personal Savior.” They would have joined His group.” (71)
 13. “The Carthaginian church family’s moral standards were high, but everyone in the church who met those standards was entitled to the financial resources of the community.” (101)
 14. “Our society is at least nominally Christian.” (102)
 15. “In our day and age, the way in which most of us first become acquainted with the name of the first and greatest of all Roman emperors is through a story about the birth of an insignificant peasant boy in rural Judea: “In

those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered” (Luke 2:1). God truly has used “the world’s weak things to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27). He has turned the world upside down.” (103)

16. “The early Christians responded with an appealing alternative to the state policy of religious toleration: throw out all the pagan gods and replace them with Jesus.” (103)
17. “People did not convert to Christianity solely because of what the early Christians believed. They converted because of the way in which the early Christians behaved... The ancient Christians were known for their love for one another.” (104-105)
18. “at Sinai and at Pentecost, was a community-creating event.” (130)
19. “We cannot stop with the vertical aspect of salvation. We must also embrace the horizontal dimension of New Testament soteriology.” (132)
20. “After all, “I can leave my church—or my marriage—and my personal Savior will happily accompany me wherever I go.”” (135)
21. “The idea of salvation cannot be reduced to a personal relationship with Jesus. God’s plan is much more encompassing. God intends for salvation to be a community-creating event.” (136)
22. “In the present case, exchanging the New Testament’s community-centered approach to the Christian life for our own culture’s individualistic view of spiritual formation has, in turn, subtly skewed our conception of God. God has now been recast in the role of a divine therapist who aids the individual Christian in his or her personal quest for spiritual enlightenment and self-discovery. And Jesus, in the final analysis, has become little more than a ‘personal Savior.’” (153)
23. “The payoff for making right decisions goes far beyond the boundaries of the lives of those immediately involved.” (167)
24. “It really does take a village to raise a child or to nourish a marriage. But only a special, supernatural kind of village will do: the surrogate family of God.” (168)
25. “The closer a Christian group approximates the strong-group, church family model that characterized early Christianity, the better the decisions that are made by the group’s individual members and nuclear family units.” (169)
26. “The priority most churches place upon the success of the Sunday service subtly but powerfully communicates the message that this impersonal, once-a-week social environment is quintessentially what “church” is all about. After all, this is where most church leaders count heads, and this is where we collect the money.” (177)
27. “If I had to choose, I would rather have our people attending a home group than sitting in our Sunday morning service.” (178)
28. “If we want to return to the world of New Testament Christianity, the relational environments in our churches must take precedence over our larger weekly gatherings. We will just have to leave it to God to take care of the finances and the Sunday attendance.” (179)

29. “It has been my observation that church leaders who spend the bulk of their week in the business world, and who have not been extensively exposed to New Testament ecclesiology, remain quite satisfied to view growth in Sunday morning attendance and the expansion of the church budget as the primary benchmarks of a healthy Christian community. As long as our key leaders remain so satisfied with so little, we will not recapture Jesus’ vision for authentic Christian community.” (179)
30. “You can spot the Christians who view their pastors as celebrities. For one thing, they ditch church when the senior pastor is out of town. After all, they don’t go to their local Christian community to hear from the head of the church, Jesus. They go to church to listen to their celebrity pastor.” (193)
31. “Christians in America do not need pastors who are celebrities. They need pastors who are mature brothers—pastors who walk alongside them hand-in-hand, overcoming the same spiritual obstacles that their sheep face, in the context of the interpersonal accountability and relational integrity that God has provided in His church family.” (194)
32. “The church is a family, not a show.” (194)
33. “One of the most tangible ways to communicate to our people that Jesus is the head of the church is to lead and feed our churches in a team format at the human level.” (194)
34. “The early Christians knew better. They knew that they needed a balanced diet. Even Paul did not have the whole truth. (That is probably why God did not let him write the whole New Testament!)” (195)
35. “The family of God is not an institution that I as an individual Christian utilize to help me grow in my personal relationship with Jesus. The family of God is the place where I join together in community with my siblings in the faith, in order to engage in God’s great missional adventure of world evangelization. The family of God is the place where I lose my life in order to gain it.” (222)
36. “Receiving Christ as Savior without church involvement is a sure recipe for stillbirth.” (223)
37. “If a pastor is unwilling to risk openness with a handful of brothers in his church—for whatever reason—then the members will surely do likewise. We simply cannot take our people where we are unwilling to go. We must be willing to go there whatever the cost.” (227)
38. “Pastors must cultivate sibling-like relationships with a handful of people in their own congregations so they can model “church as a family” to the rest of the flock.” (228)