

Can We Prevent Sex Scandals in the Church?

Those of us who care deeply about the health of the global church have been in mourning the past few weeks as yet another sexual scandal has surfaced, this one involving 25,000-member Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago and its founder, Bill Hybels.

I was hoping this was only a nightmare, but it's really happening. We'd rather sweep the whole mess under the rug, but apparently there has already been too much cover-up. Repentance requires us to face the ugly truth. It also requires us to have the courage to treat victims of abuse with compassion rather than silencing or shaming them.

All told, 10 women have come forward with allegations that Hybels, who is 66, engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior with them when they were on staff at Willow Creek. Hybels has denied the charges, but the entire elder board of the church and two lead pastors resigned this month because they believe they mishandled the accusations.

Hybels also announced back in April that he was stepping down six months in advance of his planned retirement. As Willow Creek begins a slow and painful process toward recovery, many questions will have to be answered: How does a church handle allegations of abuse? How can leaders avoid the temptations that come along with ministry? And how do potential victims of abuse respond when a powerful, charismatic leader lures them into wrong behavior?

It's not like these issues were never discussed before. After all, Hybels' book *Who Are You When No One Is Looking?* has sold more than 300,000 copies. He has made a career of teaching leaders how to develop character and personal integrity.

Hybels is the guy we consulted when other leaders disappointed us.

This latest scandal is a huge reminder, for me, that no one is infallible. There is nothing you or I can do to guarantee 100 percent that we will never stumble. We are all flawed. We all live with the possibility of failure. But in times like these I go back to some simple guidelines that have helped me to avoid becoming another statistic:

1. Keep the Spirit's fire burning. No man or woman who prays regularly, worships God intimately, reads the Bible consistently and knows God's grace personally is going to fall into sexual sin. When we are full of God's Spirit, His fire will keep us far away from the edge of moral failure. It's only when a person loses his first love for Jesus that he drifts toward sinful desires.

2. Avoid every sexually compromising situation. It's never wise to play next to the edge of a cliff. Yet Christians today seem to think it's spiritual to flirt, literally, with danger. The Bible says: "Flee from youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22a, NASB). "Flee" does not mean linger, loiter or dawdle, nor does it mean wink to see if you get a wink back. It means run!

If you are guilty of making suggestive come-ons, counseling people with no precautions in place, sexting or letting friendships become romantic entanglements, you are headed toward a moral failure. Repeat this over and over: "Don't be stupid. Don't be stupid." Stop compromising. Draw boundaries, and live as far from the edge of sexual sin as possible.

3. Be on guard for traps. In Proverbs, the author warns his son never to go anywhere near the adulteress' house. He also says of her: "For the lips of an immoral woman drip as a honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil" (Prov. 5:3, MEV). The reason so many great Christians fall into sexual sin is that they don't realize its deceptive power.

Immoral sexual attraction clouds judgment and makes men and women do really dumb things that mess up their lives. (Consider King David, who murdered a man to hide his sin after he caught sight of the guy's wife while she was bathing!) The best way to steer clear of sexual sin is to stay 50 miles away from the person who is sending the subtle hints. Don't be fooled by another person's seduction or by your own seductive urges.

4. Keep your mind cleared of sexual debris. I counsel many Christian guys who battle with pornography. Technology has made it more accessible than ever, but that doesn't change the fact that porn works like a computer virus to destroy your moral resistance. A man with "porn on the brain" is much more likely to end up in bed with someone who is not his wife. If you have this problem, get your brain debugged as soon as possible.

5. Don't live in spiritual isolation. Almost every minister I know who fell into sexual scandal was living in a private world with no accountability. If you study the habit patterns of adulterers you find that after they start going down the path of sin they become distant and secretive. God has called us to live in the light (see 1 John 1:7), and that means we should give our close Christian friends the right to confront us and ask hard questions. Don't live in isolation. Be transparent.

6. Keep your own marriage exciting. If you are married, one sure way to stay out of someone else's bed is to be satisfied with your own. Solomon told his son: "Rejoice in the wife of your youth ... be exhilarated always with her love" (Prov. 5:18b, 19b, NASB). Never talk yourself into believing that you have a "right" to adultery because the sizzle went out of your marriage. Your selfish attitude is probably the reason the sizzle died.

Moral failures will continue to scandalize the church, and we

will continue to extend grace and forgiveness to those who have fallen. But with Jesus, sexual purity is possible. Let's do a better job of teaching Christians to walk in it.

The Most Ridiculous Charismatic Doctrine We Ever Created

My friend Charles wanted a mentor. He was eager to learn the ropes of ministry, so he asked an older pastor for training. The pastor agreed—but Charles soon realized the man wanted a valet, not an apprentice. Charles became the man's "armor bearer."

The man never took Charles on hospital visits, involved him in ministry assignments or prayed with him. Instead, Charles was expected to carry the guy's briefcase, fetch coffee and take suits to the cleaners—with no salary offered. In this case, "armor bearer" was a hyper-spiritualized term for "slave."

The bizarre armor-bearer trend became popular in churches more than 20 years ago, but unfortunately, it's still practiced in some circles. It appeals to insecure leaders who need an entourage to make them feel important.

Some pastors have even assigned trainees to serve as bodyguards—complete with dark glasses and concealed weapons. They are instructed to keep people away from the pastor so he doesn't have to talk to anyone after a church service (because the poor preacher might be "drained of his anointing" if he fraternizes with common folks).

Excuse me while I barf.

I'm not sure what is more nauseating: That some ministers think they are discipling young leaders by exploiting them, or that church members tolerate such pompous behavior from a so-called man of God. And we wonder why many young people have stopped going to church?

More than 10 years ago, I decided to focus most of my energy on mentoring the next generation. This became my priority because I met so many gifted men and women in their 20s and 30s who craved role models. Like Charles, they were looking for authentic examples, but they were often disappointed to find that many leaders don't have time for any personal investment.

If you want to make a genuine impact on younger Christians, please make sure you are not infected with the "armor bearer" virus. Take these steps to adjust your attitude:

Get over yourself. Today's insecure leaders don't realize it's the devil tempting them to become rock-star preachers. Fame is too alluring. Before they realize it, their heads have swelled to the size of Godzilla, and ministry has become a means to prove their imagined greatness. A leader with an inflated ego will have zero interest in investing in others. You must tell yourself daily: "It's not about me!"

Stay accessible. Young people today don't just want our sermons. They want to sit down for coffee after the sermon. They want to ask questions. They can listen to a hundred preachers on You Tube, but when you invite them to dinner, offer to pray with them or take them on a mission trip, you mark them forever.

Keep it real. Older Christian leaders have picked up some bad habits that turn off young people. Some ministers preach with affected voices, demand celebrity treatment or manipulate audiences in weird ways to pretend they have a powerful

anointing. Please talk in a normal voice when you preach so young people won't dismiss you as a fake. Be transparent, admit your faults and let everyone know you've had struggles. Young people don't want to follow someone who pretends to be perfect.

Pour on the encouragement. Many young people today struggle to stay disciplined. Some have addictions. And many of them have immature attitudes. But you will never reach them if all you do is point out their faults. You have to win their hearts before you address problems. If you saturate them with the love of a caring father or mother, their spiritual growth will amaze you.

Don't cling to power. Elijah gave a double portion of his mantle to Elisha. Jesus was the Son of God, yet He willingly handed His authority over to His disciples and told them to finish the job. Paul handed his baton to Timothy when he finished his race. This is the biblical model for leadership—a humble willingness to be surpassed by the next generation.

Every good leader should already be thinking of his or her succession plan. If you have a tendency to control, dominate or manipulate people, you must wrestle with God until your ego is crushed. Let the Holy Spirit break you.

Young people today don't want to follow people who strut and swagger. They are looking for mentors who walk with the limp of humility. Don't let the armor-bearer mentality fill you with pride.

Stop Making God's Guidance So Complicated

When I was in my 20s, I was praying about whether I should enroll in graduate school. Then one morning in my devotional time I came to Psalm 32:8a, and it seemed to be flashing like a neon sign. It said, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go."

The Holy Spirit was emphasizing that God would teach me and that I didn't need additional schooling. That's not to say graduate school is wrong for everyone else; it was just not God's plan for me at that time. And God illuminated a particular Scripture to clearly show me what path I should take.

The Bible promises that God will guide us. But many Christians find it difficult to hear God's voice. And in some charismatic churches we complicate things when we try to make guidance mystical or weird—as if you have to hear an audible voice from heaven about what color shirt to wear.

Years ago, I learned from author Henry Blackaby that there are four distinct ways we receive divine guidance:

1. You can hear God's voice by reading the Bible. Friends have sometimes complained to me: "I just never hear God speaking." Yet when I ask if they read the Bible regularly, they say they're too busy. Their Bible is collecting dust on a shelf while they beg God for a Technicolor vision from heaven!

God supernaturally inspired 40 authors over a period of 1,600 years to compile His love letter to us. After the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek, many people were martyred because they translated it in a modern language. God went to a lot of trouble to compile the Bible. Yet today many people say they are too busy to read God's most direct message to Planet

Earth!

When you read Scripture with a prayerful heart, God can cause a verse to jump off the page as a direct message to you. British preacher Charles Spurgeon recognized this years ago when he wrote: "When I have been in trouble, I have read the Bible until a text has seemed to stand out of the Book, and salute me, saying, 'I was written specially for you.'" Expect God to speak directly to you from Scripture.

2. You can hear God's voice through the supernatural inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not an eerie presence that just hangs around. He lives in every born-again Christian, and He comforts us and actively speaks to us. He can do this in many ways: through dreams, visions, warnings, a sense of conviction or—most often—through what we know as the "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12b) of the Spirit.

I have had prophetic dreams and visions over the years, but the most common way the Spirit speaks to me is through a deep sense of inward knowing. I will never forget a time in 1985 when God spoke to me while I was driving my car in Florida. A message came to me, not audibly but in my spirit: "You will move to Washington, D.C." It seemed to come out of the blue, and I knew it did not originate with me. Four years later I was offered a job in the Washington, D.C., area, and I worked there for three years.

The ability to hear the Spirit's voice is developed over years as we grow in Christ. If you really want to hear Him, you should ask God to fill you with His Spirit. As you allow more of the Spirit's presence and power in your life, you will set aside your selfish agendas and sinful habits so God can communicate to you without any hindrance. Meanwhile, a selfish, stubborn attitude is the No. 1 obstacle to hearing God!

3. You can hear God's voice through people. God never intended for us to live in isolation. We are members of His body, the church, and you will hear God better when you are in fellowship with His people. God can speak to you through a pastor's sermon, a friend's wise counsel, a mother's rebuke, a mentor's phone call or a prophetic word given to you by one of God's Spirit-filled servants.

God uses the gift of prophecy, but you should never chase after prophecies. I know Christians who will travel across the country to attend a prophetic conference to get a word from God, yet they have not read the Bible in months or sat still long enough to hear from God on their own. Never treat the holy gift of prophecy like fortune telling. When God needs to speak to you in an unusual way, He has faithful messengers who will deliver it to you at the exact time you need it.

4. You can hear God's voice through circumstances. Not everything that happens to you is God's will. But God is sovereign, and He has power over nature, over government leaders and over all the details of your life. He opens doors that no man can shut. If you have been praying about getting a job at one company, and suddenly you get an offer at a different company, this may be God's sign that He has a better place for you to work.

My oldest daughter wanted to attend a college in Tennessee, and we were praying about her decision. Right after we prayed, I got a call from the president of a college in Georgia. He was inviting me to speak at the school, but in our conversation, I learned that this school was willing to offer my daughter a scholarship. She ended up enrolling in that school, meeting her future husband there and working for that college four years later. God was totally involved in that phone call from Georgia!

Ask God to tune your ears to His voice in a fresh way. Read God's Word with an expectant heart, listen carefully to what

the Lord is saying through His servants, pay attention to what He is saying to you through circumstances and tune your spiritual ears to the inner voice of the Spirit. Guidance is not complicated when you sincerely want to hear Him speak to you. {eoa}

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What's the Rudest Thing People Do in Church?

It doesn't bother me anymore when I hear a phone ringing during a church service. Welcome to life in the 21st century. But I was shocked recently when I heard a blaring ringtone while I was preaching—and a woman on the second row pulled her phone out of her purse and began a conversation as if she were in the waiting room of a hair salon.

That incident prompted me to ask my friends to share their own stories of rudeness in church. My question triggered an avalanche of pent-up frustration about crinkly candy wrappers, smelly feet (yes, someone took off their shoes during the service), unruly children, coffee-sipping saints and parishioners who try to finish their pastors' sentences during sermons.

When I tallied the responses, I came up with this list of the rudest things people do in church:

1. Talking during a service.
2. Texting, surfing the web or playing video games.
3. Sleeping—or snoring!—during a sermon.
4. Clipping fingernails or toenails during church. (I was amazed at how many people listed this offense. One person said his church's sound technician clipped his nails routinely during the sermon, and it was amplified over the loud speaker.)
5. Answering a ringing phone in church.
6. Painting fingernails during a service. Three coats, in fact!
7. Eating potato chips during the sermon.
8. Playing Words With Friends during worship.
9. Letting babies cry incessantly.
10. Selling Avon products in the sanctuary.
11. Chewing gum noisily. (One friend from Puerto Rico said he is particularly annoyed when people “chew gum like a goat.”)
12. Public display of affection. (One person complained about a man and wife who enjoy giving each other back rubs during worship.)

Those were the most common replies. Other infractions included 1) “Pushing people to the floor while praying for them”; 2) “Eating fried chicken in the pews and leaving the bones”; 3) “Taking change from the offering plate”; 4) “Swearing in church” (I didn't ask for the details on that!); and 5) “Flossing teeth during the sermon.”

But as I mused over these replies, I couldn't help but wonder: What does God consider rude?

I don't think crying babies annoy God. Nor do I think He is offended if a husband and wife get cozy in church. And surely He has compassion for a person whose tiny bladder forces them

to go to the restroom more often than everyone else.

Some of us need to lighten up and extend grace to latecomers, fidgety kids, teeth-grinders, Millennials who enjoy good coffee, young mothers with infants and people who have to report to work promptly at 1 p.m.

But when I look at the Bible, it's obvious God doesn't like it when people refuse to focus their attention when He's talking. He calls us to listen. Moses told the Hebrews they would be blessed if they listened to God's commandments (see Deut. 11:27). Solomon said when we come to God's house we should "draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools" (Eccl. 5:1). Ouch!

Isaiah said God awakened him "to *listen* as a disciple" (Isa. 50:4c, NASB, emphasis mine), while Jeremiah rebuked Israel because they "did not *listen* or incline their ears" (Jer. 17:23). And when Jesus was glorified in His transfiguration, the Father declared, "*Listen* to Him!" (Luke 9:35b, MEV, emphasis mine). We can't please God or be His faithful followers if we don't listen.

Yet today we live in a distracted culture. We are sleep-deprived multitaskers. We surf the web while we watch TV; we text while we drive; we tweet while we work; we take calls when we are meeting friends for conversation. Some people even crash into each other on the sidewalk because they are so busy Googling they didn't see another distracted Googler headed straight toward them.

We are so focused on everything that we can't focus on anything. I sometimes wonder if the proliferation of fast food, sugary drinks, movies on demand, "smart" phones and 24-hour news isn't rewiring our brains so we can no longer pay attention to anything.

I'm not bashing technology. But we could lose the art of discipleship if we don't reclaim the habit of careful

listening. That means when we come to church, especially, we should not just turn off our phones but also tune out all other distractions so we can focus on what God is saying to us—through the preacher, the worship songs, the prayers and the Holy Spirit’s still, small voice.

Please don’t be rude to God. Don’t just go to church. Go and hear the word of the Lord. Don’t talk, text, sleep or take calls when He is speaking. Listen as if your life depended on it. {eoa}

Don’t Be a Church Dropout

All my life I’ve heard people make up excuses for missing church. Long before funny memes were invented for social media, absentee churchgoers joked about attending “Bedside Baptist,” “Church of the Holy Comforter” or “Church of the Inner Springs” to imply that they decided to sleep in on Sunday morning.

I’m not going to condemn anyone for taking a week off from church if they are overly tired, going on vacation or hosting company. But today we have a growing subset of Christians who have developed a complex theology of church delinquency. They usually rattle off their list of complaints (“the pastor preaches too long,” “the music is too loud,” “nobody reaches out to me,” etc.) and then they claim it’s perfectly fine to practice faith solo style.

The biggest reason people drop out of church is they've been hurt by other Christians. One offense spawns another. Resentment grows. And before you know it, they close their hearts to others, burn bridges, build walls and live in isolation.

If you or someone you love has given up on church, I understand your pain. I've had my share of disappointments in church over the years, including some spiritual abuse from leaders. But I want to offer six reasons why you shouldn't let a bad experience end your connection to God's people.

1. The church is Christ's body on earth. With all its flaws, the church is still God's Plan A. Jesus announced before He went to the cross: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Jesus intends to use the church—even in its weakness—as His primary tool to reach the world with the gospel. Heaven does not have a Plan B. Jesus is the head of his church (see Col. 1:18) and we are His hands and feet. To reject the church is to reject God's ultimate strategy to bring heaven's kingdom on earth.

2. The Holy Spirit has called us to work and flow together. When we were born again and baptized, the Bible says we were mystically unified with all other born-again believers and connected to each other by the Holy Spirit. The Lord also connects people in local congregations. This connection is holy, and we should never make light of it or damage it. Paul told the Ephesians to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" by being in close fellowship with each other (Eph. 4:3). To reject this union of believers is to dishonor the work of the Spirit.

3. God accomplishes more through His corporate people than through isolated individuals. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit worked primarily through the nation of Israel, and through individuals who had special callings and remarkable

courage. But in the age of the New Covenant, the Spirit dwells in every Christian believer, and the corporate church makes a much bigger impact. This is why Jesus told His disciples after He went to the cross that we would do “greater works” than He did on earth (see John 14:12). And because healthy churches can pool resources and organize volunteers, they are able to offer ministry to children, youth, families, singles, the needy and the lost overseas—in a way you could never do while sitting home alone.

4. God’s authority flows through His church, not through “lone ranger” Christians. Some people who’ve been hurt by church leaders feel they can never submit to another pastor again, nor will they honor a person who is called by God to carry the authority of a minister. Yet God has delegated to certain people the task of building up the church (see Eph. 4:11-12). It’s totally acceptable for you to leave an unhealthy church with poor leadership, but you should quickly find a new church where you can be equipped to fulfill your ministry. It was never intended for a Christian to live with a my-way-or-the-highway attitude.

5. It is by living in Christian community that we learn to love and serve. The book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians who were thinking of abandoning their Christian faith because of persecution. Some of them even stopped attending church, but Paul addressed their disillusionment by saying: “And let us consider how to spur one another to love and to good works. Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us exhort one another, especially as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25). People who live in isolation find it difficult to develop character, and they often get discouraged; those who walk together in close fellowship inspire each other, and they improve each other just as iron sharpens iron.

6. If you leave the church because of hurt or resentment, you

make it more difficult to find healing and reconciliation. It might sound spiritual to say you are pulling away from people to focus on God. But the New Testament says your relationship with God is directly related to how you relate to others. John wrote: “Anyone who claims to live in God’s light and hates a brother or sister is still in the dark” (1 John 2:9, MSG). People may have hurt you, but God will also use people to heal you. Don’t let the hurts of the past paint you into a lonely corner. Choose to forgive. Take a risk and keep loving.

Please don’t check out of church or give up on God’s flawed saints. There is no perfect church—and if there were, it would not be perfect after you joined! There is a place for you in God’s eternal family.

6 Ways to Become a Better Friend

The church today is a lonely place. People are starving for relationships. Some have walked through painful church splits, others have been betrayed by friends they trusted, and still others have closed their hearts entirely to avoid being hurt again. Even though we are called to model the love of God for the world to see, we are wounded and cold.

Recently the Holy Spirit drew me to study the friendship that developed between David and Jonathan during David’s early years. It is clear from the biblical record that God put Jonathan in David’s life at a crucial time in his journey to the throne. And if it were not for Jonathan’s covenant relationship with his friend, David would never have been able to overcome the obstacles he faced during Saul’s reign.

God orchestrates our relationships, and it is He who brings people into our lives to help us. Don't resist this process!

Ruth would never have journeyed to Bethlehem and married Boaz if it had not been for Naomi's coaxing. Moses needed Aaron and Hur to hold up his hands during the battle against the Amalekites. The paralyzed man would not have been healed if his friends had not lowered him through the roof to see Jesus. Timothy would never have become a strong leader if Paul had not adopted him as a spiritual son.

You will never achieve your maximum spiritual potential without the help of those key relationships God places around you. Yet in order to benefit from these friendships you must open your heart and take the risk of being a friend.

Do you want to become a better friend? Here are six steps you must take:

1. Be willing to go first. Proverbs 18:24a says: "A man who has friends must show himself friendly." Don't wait for a friend to reach out to you. Take the first step and be willing to break the stalemate. British preacher Charles Spurgeon put it this way: "Any man can selfishly desire to have a Jonathan, but he is on the right track who desires to find out a David to whom he can be a Jonathan."

2. Learn to discern when God is connecting you with someone. Last week at a conference in Arizona, I was supposed to sit at the speaker's table. But the person in charge of seating didn't recognize me, so I was asked to sit elsewhere. This was a blessing in disguise because I was seated by a pastor from Texas named Scott. As soon as we began talking, we both realized God had connected us for a reason. We became instant friends!

After David killed Goliath and moved to Saul's palace, the Bible says "the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David" (1 Sam. 18:1b, NIV). This is the work of the Holy

Spirit. All Christians should experience a sense of family connection, but there are certain friends you will feel deeply connected to because God is putting you in each other's lives for a reason. Let God knit you to people.

3. Put your friends before yourself. Jonathan loved David so much that he risked his life to help him fulfill his mission. Jonathan even dodged Saul's spear in his effort to help his friend. This reminds me of Jesus' words about friendship: "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Don't put your own success first. The best way to become more like Jesus is to help someone else succeed.

4. Be an encourager. When David was fleeing from Saul in the wilderness, Jonathan went to Horesh to cheer up his friend (1 Sam. 23:16). There were times in David's life when he had to encourage himself, but in this case, Jonathan was God's instrument. We need each other! If you allow the Holy Spirit to speak life and hope through you, your words can propel your friends into their destiny. Look for ways to encourage others—with your words, gifts, cards or hugs.

5. Cover your friend's flaws. David confided in his friend Jonathan, and he poured out his heart in frustration. When I'm going through a difficult trial, I sometimes just need to vent. I also need to confess my weaknesses without fear of judgment. I have loyal friends who allow me process my pain ... and they don't run and tell others else about my junk. You will be a trusted friend if you know how to keep a confidence.

6. Don't allow jealousy to ruin friendships. At one point, Jonathan realized David would one day be king of Israel. Jonathan was supposed to inherit the throne, since he was Saul's son, but he knew God had chosen David instead. He could have gotten angry, but instead he gave David his royal robe, his armor and his weapons (see 1 Sam. 18:3-4). If we have God's love in our hearts, we will want our friends to surpass

us.

If you've been hurt in previous relationships, break out of your isolation and ask God to heal your heart. Then choose to be a Jonathan to someone else.

Do You Want Deeper Friendships? Adjust Your Attitude

I've been blessed with some amazing friends. When my father died back in January, several of my friends surprised me by showing up for the funeral unexpectedly. Two of those guys flew all the way from Pennsylvania to Georgia, rented a car and drove to my town simply to support me on that difficult day. When they walked into the church, I burst into tears because I couldn't believe they would sacrifice so much to stand with me.

I've come to learn that good friends are so much more valuable than money, fame or career success. Yet many Christians I know struggle in the area of relationships. Many people I've met—even pastors—admit they have no friends. And many churches are full of lonely people who are starving for friends but don't know how to make any.

The modern church doesn't always place a high value on relationships. While the New Testament commands us to "love one another deeply with a pure heart" (1 Pet. 1:22), we have developed a cold corporate culture that doesn't resemble the book of Acts. We are content to herd people into buildings for services and then herd them out.

Our main concern is that they simply occupied a seat and listened to a sermon. But did they connect with each other? Even in churches that try to nurture relationships, only a fraction of the people get involved in small groups.

I don't believe we will see New Testament revival power until we reclaim fervent New Testament love. But that serious form of love isn't possible without deep healing and serious attitude adjustments.

Do you need more friends? Do you find it challenging to move beyond superficiality into deep, meaningful connection? Do you struggle with loneliness? Here are five of the most serious reasons Christians today struggle in the area of relationships:

1. **Self-centeredness:** Jesus defined love when He said, "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Real friendship is always sacrificial. We tend to want friendship on our terms; we want to be loved and encouraged and comforted. But if we want that kind of love, we must be willing to give it to someone else first. British preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Any man can selfishly desire to have a Jonathan; but he is on the right track who desires to find out a David to whom he can be a Jonathan."
2. **Lack of transparency:** Too many people today live with secrets. We are experts at faking it. We hide our private pain behind masks and thick body armor. We go through the motions and we mouth the right words—but church life becomes shallow without raw honesty. True friends take off their armor, reveal their shame and share their hearts—and they confess their sins to each other (see James 5:16). This is the path to true healing.
3. **Bitterness:** Paul told the Ephesians, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one other, just as God in Christ also forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). Yet many

Christians today have never let go of their resentments. They don't realize that people who seethe with anger over past hurts poison themselves—and make it impossible to develop close friends. Bitterness will make you unfriendly—and people will avoid you because you are toxic. If a grudge takes root in your soul, get rid of it quickly before it eats your capacity to love.

4. **Low self-esteem:** Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31). But our love for others is short-circuited when we don't think we have anything to offer in a relationship. Many people lack the confidence to reach out and make friends because they don't think they deserve to be loved. Self-hatred can be caused by abuse, lack of parental affection, bullying or other factors. If you struggle to love yourself, you must be willing to crawl out of your shell and seek help. Reach out to the people around you. God has prepared someone to pray with you!
5. **Fear of rejection:** I meet people who have given up on church altogether because they were betrayed. Some have even left ministry positions because friends turned their backs on them. Their attitude is "I will never let anyone hurt me like that again." But is it really worth it to close the door on the possibility of friendship just because of one or two bad experiences?

Proverbs 18:24 says, "Friends come and friends go, but a true friend sticks by you like family" (MSG). The loyal friends in my life have more than compensated for any disappointments. Friendship is a risk worth taking. Don't let anything stop you from enjoying healthy relationships.

Do We Want Civil Conversation—or Civil War?

Last weekend, President Trump's spokeswoman, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, stopped at the Red Hen in Lexington, Virginia, to enjoy dinner with a group of family and friends. The rest of her story will go down in history. The owner of the small farm-to-table restaurant, Stephanie Wilkinson, felt that having a White House employee in her establishment was a violation of her political convictions. So she asked Sanders and her party to leave.

Wilkinson told The Washington Post that her gay staff members felt violated by President Trump's decision to bar transgender people from the U.S. military. They didn't want a Trump staff member under the same roof with them.

"We just felt there are moments in time when people need to live their convictions. This appeared to be one," Wilkinson said.

Sanders politely left the restaurant. But a war of words ensued. Last Saturday California congresswoman Maxine Waters, a Democrat who has called for Trump's impeachment numerous times, said at a rally in Los Angeles that citizens should publicly harass members of Trump's staff.

"If you see anybody from that Cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd," Waters said. "And you push back on them. And you tell them they're not welcome anymore, anywhere."

It almost sounded like Waters was calling for mob attacks. Then on Monday, columnist Michelle Goldberg of The New York Times defended the practice of "public shaming," and said Sanders got what she deserved at the Red Hen restaurant because she supports Trump.

I don't remember a time in my life when the anger level was this high in our country. We have almost reached riot level.

Are restaurants going to start asking for party affiliation when patrons ask to be seated? Will members of the U.S. military be "shamed" if they walk into a theater? How long before someone feels he is justified in assassinating a political official in the name of "democracy"?

We need to pray for peace in America. We are more polarized than ever. During our Civil War more than 150 years ago, we were divided into blue and gray camps. Today we are blue and red. And people on both sides seem ready to fight.

My biggest concern is how Christians will position themselves in the midst of this heightened hostility. Will we bring reconciliation? Or will we fuel the flames until both sides explode? Here are a few pointers that will help us to become agents of peace:

1. Subdue your anger toward your political enemies. Do you find yourself blowing up when you watch newscasts or when you discuss politics with co-workers? Remember this: Proverbs 29:11 (NASB) says, "A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back." The Bible calls angry people fools!
2. You don't have to comment about everything. One reason the anger level is so high today is that we have so many social media platforms to spew our thoughtless words. Actually, the best strategy may be to zip your lips. We should consider the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 5:2: "Do not be quick to speak with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God. For God is in heaven, and you are on the earth; therefore may your words be few." And remember: That applies to tweeting, too.
3. You don't have to take sides in every argument. It is possible to be on the right side of an issue and still

be very wrong because of your attitude. You can angrily defend your right position, yet you can lose God's blessing because you didn't show love or act with wisdom. We want to look at issues through our Republican or Democratic lens, or through our conservative or liberal agendas, but God's kingdom transcends political parties.

4. Wash your mouth out. Celebrities on both sides of the political divide have resorted to profane and vulgar public comments to get their points across. Comedians Kathy Griffin and Samantha Bee began fueling this fire, then Roseanne Barr's TV show was canceled because of her racist comments about former Obama adviser Valerie Jarrett. Then actor Robert DeNiro dropped his vulgarity on President Trump at the Tony Awards in June—and was cheered for it.

I'm not surprised when celebrities spew profanity. But I'm amazed when I hear verbal venom coming from Christians. Every time we lash out at our enemies we are driving a deeper wedge between Jesus and the people who need Him. My 90-year-old mother taught me that if I don't have anything nice to say, I should keep my mouth shut. I hope good manners don't die with her.

5. Pray that God will set a guard over President Trump's mouth. After the June 22 incident at the Red Hen with Sanders, President Trump took the low road by tweeting about the restaurant in an insulting way. His taunting didn't help things. Even though he is surrounded by Christian advisers, he has yet to dial down his caustic language. When he uses crude or childish words in his tweets, he actually helps those he opposes.

It is no secret that our president can be impulsive and short-tempered. A man in his position should use discretion, or else his impetuous words can close doors and ruin diplomacy. The

psalmist prayed: “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3). Pray this for our president.

Our country is in a dangerous position in this hour. Fuses are short, nerves are on edge, and fists are clenched. Violence could break out at any moment in this atmosphere of rage. May it never be said that God’s people fueled this fire. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you control your anger, and ask Him to use you as a peacemaker in these troubled times.

If You Want New Wine, You Need New Wineskins

You may not have heard the crashing sound. But last week, old walls of tradition collapsed when the nation’s largest Protestant denomination elected a new leader.

The commotion occurred after J.D. Greear, 45, a successful pastor from Durham, North Carolina, was elected president of the 15-million-member Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Greear is the youngest leader of the SBC in 37 years, and he brings with him a fresh approach to ministry that could trigger a wave of growth as well as upset some hyper-conservatives.

Greear lives outside the traditional Baptist box. His church doesn’t even have the word “Baptist” in it. The Summit Church, which he started with 300 members in 2001, has now grown to 10,000 members who meet in nine locations throughout the Raleigh-Durham area.

The church’s worship has an exuberant charismatic flair. In a

2012 teaching series on the Holy Spirit, he told his congregation that it's a sin to restrict speaking in tongues. But most of all, The Summit is aggressively evangelistic and missions-focused.

When Greear was elected on June 12, he said God is stirring the SBC and exposing "a startling amount of sin in our midst." Greear said he welcomed God's uncomfortable work "because whom the Lord loves, he chastens." He was specifically referencing recent reports that SBC leaders have at times told women in abusive marriages that they should submit to domineering husbands.

Greear even issued a heartfelt apology in June for the mistreatment of women in his denomination. "We are sorry and we should have heard you before now," he said. "We know our deafness has added to your suffering."

The changes in the SBC have greatly encouraged me because I see similar shifts going on throughout the body of Christ. We are opening our hearts to change like never before. We are recognizing that too often we allow old mindsets to mire us in ruts of inflexibility and irrelevance. Our wineskins have aged, and we can't contain the new wine of the Spirit.

I hope those of us in the charismatic/Pentecostal world can learn some things from the SBC.

In our fast-paced world, Apple debuts a new iPhone almost every year and the most popular apps have almost monthly updates. We've come to expect frequent upgrades on all our technology. Yet for those of us involved in ministry, we tend to think the church needs no remodeling or renovation. That is a faulty assumption.

While the gospel itself is both timeless and flawless, the packaging we wrap it in must adapt with the times or we will quickly lose relevance. Pipe organs, steeples and choir robes were never wrong, but they won't help us reach today's

generation. Nor do stale religious systems, tired terminology or worn-out denominational programs that should have been mothballed long ago.

Jesus reminded us that we should never put new wine in old wineskins. "Put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved," He said (Matt. 9:17b). But many churches and ministries today insist on pouring their new wine into old models, again and again. We resist innovation and we fight progress.

I'm willing to guess that 90 percent of what we are doing in church today needs a total makeover. We are facing the most daunting renovation project in the history of the church. But the task is not impossible. It will require us to take these painful steps:

1. We must break free from the fear of change. God is always on the move. He might lead us to camp in one spot for a while, but we can never get too comfortable in one place. His trumpet will eventually blow, and the cloud of His presence will shift. Don't park when God is calling you forward. Stay open to His fresh directives and expect Him to stretch your faith. He is adventurous!

And be prepared for a surprise: Pentecost moments come suddenly! (See Acts 2:2.) The Holy Spirit is not under obligation to give you a two-year advance warning of His shifts.

2. We must be willing to defy tradition. People who are married to the past cannot embrace the future. Sacred cows do not belong in the pulpit; they must be sacrificed. "The way we've always done it" will not work in God's new season. The crowd chooses the comfortable pews of nostalgia, but God is with the courageous few who are willing to blaze a new path into unreached territory.

3. We must ask the Spirit to reveal His new strategies. We cannot rely on church growth gurus, popular books or rock-star preachers to lead us into genuine change. Copying spiritual trends is just a form of carnality—and it is a sad substitute for real innovation. If the Holy Spirit does not orchestrate the work of transforming the church, our changes will be shallow. The last thing we need is a superficial upgrade.

And remember: Just because J.D. Greear and his team are attracting big crowds in North Carolina does not mean your church will automatically grow if you copy him. You need your own download from God, not a suit of armor that was fashioned for someone else.

The Lord wants to unleash a gushing river of new wine into the church today, but we must prepare our wineskins. What is old must be renewed by the Spirit, what is outdated must be remodeled, and what is ineffective must be replaced. God wants to do a new thing. Don't resist it.

10 Bizarre Facts About North Korea

Last month, I wrote a column about North Korea in which I predicted that, sooner or later, the repressive “hermit kingdom” will fling open its doors to Christianity and join the 21st century. Many readers pushed back with strong criticism, either because they don't trust Kim Jong Un or because they don't trust President Trump's negotiating skills.

But I'm sticking to my prediction. I personally believe North Korea's future is not in the hands of Kim, Trump or any other

human. I believe the sovereign Lord of the nations is engineering this miracle because He wants to reach the millions of people who have been starved, oppressed and brainwashed by North Korea's leaders for too long.

Regardless of what you think of the agreement that was signed by Kim and Trump on June 12 in Singapore, I believe there is cause for genuine celebration. Yes, the details were fuzzy. Yes, there were a lot of what ifs and maybes. But if we step back and study how strange North Korea is—and how backward and barbaric—we would realize that we are witnessing a historic breakthrough.

Consider these bizarre facts about this nation of 25 million:

1. Christians in North Korea have been crushed by steamrollers and roasted over fires. North Korea has the world's worst record of religious persecution. Christian Solidarity International has reported that believers in Jesus are routinely taken to prison camps where they are tortured, subjected to forced labor or herded off bridges. One source has reported that women and children were forced to watch other Christians being shot by machine guns. Possession of a Bible is considered a crime punishable by death.

(Thankfully, President Trump raised the issue of North Korea's abysmal record on religious freedom when he met with Kim Jong Un this week.)

2. As many as 3 million North Koreans starved in the 1990s. The economy is so poor that more than 6 million people are malnourished today, and one-third of all North Korean children are stunted because of starvation. The average person earns an average of \$1,800 per year, making North Korea one of the poorest countries on earth. Yet it has an army of 1.2 million soldiers—twice the size of South Korea's military.

3. Officially, North Korea is a necrocracy—a government led by a dead man. Even though Kim Il Sung has been dead for 18

years, the government says he assumed “the office of the eternal presidency” on the day of his death, July 8, 1994. His current successor, Kim Jong Un, reportedly had plastic surgery to make him look more like his grandfather.

4. There are 34,000 statues of the late Kim Il Sung in the country. That’s one statue for every 750 North Koreans. The dead leader’s embalmed body is on display in the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, and it is the most popular tourist site in the country. All citizens of North Korea are required to wear a badge that features Kim Il Sung’s face.

5. In North Korea, it is not 2018. It is the year 107. The nation uses what is called the “Juche” calendar, which marks time according to the birth of Kim Il Sung in 1912. Any North Koreans who were born on July 8 or December 17 are not allowed to celebrate their birthdays—because Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il, died on those days.

6. The country is called a “democratic republic,” but there is nothing democratic about it. Elections are held every five years, but only one name appears on the ballot. If a voter wishes to choose someone else, he or she can cross the name out, but the ballot is not secret. There is no court system in North Korea, and no private property.

7. Kim Jong Un’s loyal subjects believe he can control the weather. The government’s propaganda machine has convinced the population that a new star appeared in the sky when the 34-year-old leader was born. An official biography published by the government also says Kim learned to walk and talk before the age of six months and that he can control the weather with his moods.

8. North Korea is often in a state of blackout. The electric grid is so poor that most people have no light, especially at night. Satellite images taken from space show the entire country in darkness (and tourists say North Koreans love the

dark because it gives them privacy). To make matters worse, only three percent of roads are paved—but the roads are rarely used since there are so few vehicles. A very small, elite number of North Koreans have access to the Internet, but all online content is filtered by the government.

9. Children are taught a song in school titled, “We Have Nothing to Envy in the World.” Schools are used to brainwash North Koreans from the earliest grades. Yet the kids are expected to bring their own desks and chairs to school, and often students are required to do government work during school hours. Parents sometimes bribe teachers to keep their children from doing hard labor.

10. Citizens of North Korea must produce a certain quantity of human waste. The government requires this because farmers have little or no access to chemical fertilizer. Many citizens have had to place locks on their outdoor toilets to keep neighbors from stealing waste to meet quotas.

Christians are often ridiculed because we believe demons are real and that those devilish powers are working behind the scenes to affect world events. Why is that so hard to believe? I can't understand how anyone can look at the bleak situation in North Korea and not believe the devil exists.

Thankfully, the Bible also says Christ overcame Satan's power through His death and resurrection—and that God's kingdom will expand wherever the gospel is preached. Because of Christ's victory, swords will be beaten into plowshares, and freedom will replace tyranny. That is what I expect to see in North Korea.