

**NORTH CAROLINA  
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**SERIOUS BIBLICAL RELATIONSHIPS**

The five elements of an effective teaching program

- 1) a specific time and place
- 2) a targeted approach (age, topic, etc. specific)
- 3) trained and purposefully chosen teachers or instructors
- 4) a clear goal or expected outcome, which can be succinctly articulated so that everyone can grasp what they are seeking to achieve through teaching
- 5) serious biblical relationships (beyond what is common to most churches) that hold us accountable to one another, as well as to God, for the application of the learned principles of his Word, and for growth toward full spiritual maturity.

The focus of this article is the need to promote serious biblical relationships (beyond what is common to most churches) in Sunday school/small groups, that hold us accountable to one another, as well as to God, for the application of the learned principles of his Word, and for growth toward full spiritual maturity.

"Keep me honest..." is a typical (Southern?) saying! What we mean is that there is value in being held accountable by an independent party, or better a friend. Accountability is very important. It is the bedrock of progress. Most of us have some kind of inertia to overcome, except of course for you over achievers! For the Christian life to be successful, it needs balance, growth, passion for God, moral conviction and a commitment to persistence or perseverance. We face spiritual opposition from the enemy and an increasing antichristian social pressure in America. Everyone needs community in order to be able to put down the kind of roots that stabilize their Christian walk with God. No one walks with God in a vacuum.

I used to be very intimidated when I spoke to people who "appeared" to be "spiritual" (whatever that means), but who said they did not need to go to church to live the Christian life successfully. "True..." I would say, but then would plead, "...but it is better and more satisfying to have good Christian relationships." To which the reply often was, "Well, I used to go to church but they are all hypocrites."

Now far be it from me to pre-judge anyone, but my perception of these people was that most of the time they were loners who resented being accountable to others, and who carried an air of superiority. Their non-attendance in the church, and lack of attachment to other believers was often a badge of honor (in their own eyes). However, I have also observed that such people are miserable recluses, and are often dissatisfied, carrying a grudge or nursing some kind of wound that they refuse to have dressed. They do not want other people because that would be to admit a degree of dependence, and to have to accept what the Bible calls submission (to one another) (Eph 5:21). Submission is mutual respect that allows others to impact your life spiritually for the sake of maturity and spiritual progress.

How shortsighted is that? To admit that we need others for the sake of our spiritual progress is not an admission of weakness, it is an admission that we are biblically based in

what the New Testament calls the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12; Eph 4; Rom 12). The first thing that happened after the first sermon on the Day of Pentecost and 3000 were saved, was that they immediately entered into community with the existing saints (cf. Acts 2:42-47)! The body analogy of the relationship Christians have with one another asserts that each of us grows when other members of the body selflessly supply what is need for the growth of others, when each one does his or her part within the community of believers (Eph 4:16). The picture is one of total selflessness and commitment to the benefit and ministry that is derived toward others. It is the opposite of selfishness that is the hallmark of the staunchly independent believer. In fact Paul makes the growth of the church (the body) dependent on the success of the interrelatedness of the members of the body. Ultimately the church is successful because of the interconnectedness of its members (Eph 4:16). This is why he calls for unity in the Spirit (Eph 4:3).

This leads me to make a couple of other observations about the New Testament concept of the church. If we take Luke seriously, and we should, he describes the church as a connected and interrelated group of people, who depended on one another, and who shared a deep sense of satisfaction and joy in their relationships, through the Spirit (Act 2:42-47; 4:32-37). It is interesting to note that they shared not only on the spiritual level in prayer, teaching, doctrine and communion, but on the material level by eating at one another's homes and sharing their resources. Indeed Luke shows to us that the sharing was at times sacrificial (Acts 4:35). I remember once while in England, Loala and I were pastoring the Southmead PH Church, when we had to move from one house to another. Our very elderly piano player, Eric Insal gave us a considerable amount of money to help defray expenses! Mr. Insal was a strange man. He still had gaslight in his home, no electricity! He had very little resources, but he sold some antiques to help us, which he didn't realize had value until Noel Brooks drew it to his attention. He did exactly what the Christians in Acts did to bless us at a time of need! This made a lasting impression on me.

Paul tells us the story of how he stood up to Peter in Galatia (Gal 2:11-16). Peter was the one whom God had challenged as a Jew not to call Gentiles unclean, and not to dissociate himself from them, especially when God had saved them and brought them into the kingdom of God as equals (Acts 10:9-23; 11:1-18)! And yet the same Peter withdrew from fellowship with Gentiles in the context of the church at Galatia, when Jews from Jerusalem came down, and he feared the repercussions. Paul held Peter accountable to God for the theology of the Old Testament, which he recites, and to Peter's own vision in which God challenged him to change his attitudes!

When we say strong relationships are important in the church, or in this case Sunday School, this is what we mean, relationships in which people care for one another enough to help with genuine practical needs, nurture the faith of others, and who have developed enough capital to be able to hold one another accountable for their commitment to God and practical Christian living! So, you may well ask, how can we set about setting up such an environment? Well I am going to suggest five important ingredients to incorporate in your Sunday school that promote genuine spiritual relationships among dedicated and serious disciples of Jesus Christ...

1. Be natural – It is entirely natural for relationships to develop among those who love God, so don't over programmatize it... i.e. have a separate fellowship for every demographic, singles, singles with intendeds, singles with dogs, singles with cat's, singles

without pets, singles who do not eat breakfast before going to work... we have become a little silly about all of this! Keep the programs natural and simple. Just provide innovative opportunities to get together and let God do the rest!

2. Do provide environments for relationships to develop – This is where Sunday school comes in. You do need a smaller group setting for people to get to know one another, especially if you have a large church. So break down your Sunday school into groups. Rule of thumb, break down children (up to college) by age, but find other ways to divide your adults, by using electives for example (with one exception, seniors generally like to be together in a group of more or less their own age).

3. Each group should have a teacher and a facilitator – We automatically know what the teacher's role is, but the facilitator's role is to make stuff happen... stuff that builds relationships, like fellowship activities, outings, sending cards, visitation, follow-up on sickness or hospitalization, encouragement, etc.

4. Group identity – Each group or class should have a predominant identity. It will depend a great deal on the dynamics of the class or group as to what that identity finally turns out to be. Many classes coalesce around their teacher or teaching style. This identity is something the whole class can identify with and enjoy. Others coalesce around the style of class interaction, through discussion and fellowship. You get the idea. If you identify the nature of your groups you can direct people to the best fit for their personality and needs when they begin coming to your church. Discover and understand the identities of your small groups or classes.

5. Consistency – One of the most important ingredients for success in the church is faithfulness or consistency. You need for your groups to be stable, stable teachers, stable composition, stable identity and stable style of teaching. Don't discourage development and innovation, progress and forward movement, rather encourage these, but the basic group dynamics should be respected, nurtured and held firm! In other words don't introduce a curriculum, assistant teacher, or catalytic individuals who will change the group dynamics and wreck the bonds that have developed.

On the authority of Heb 10:25, when I am told, "I don't need to go to church to be a Christian..." I reply, "O yes you do, the Bible says so!"

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