



None of Us Are Sinners Emeritus

Why many people are scared of true fellowship—and what to do about that.

Galatians 6:1–4; Philippians 3:12–16

Bruce Larson coined the phrase “relational theology.” A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, he pastored various churches, including University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, where he is now pastor emeritus. Bruce served as president of Faith at Work and has authored over 20 books, including No Longer Strangers, The Relational Revolution, and Mastering Pastoral Care. In this interview, Larson opens up about why Christians don’t open up.

When did it dawn on you that Christians were missing something in the area of fellowship?

I was a student minister at a little church up on the Hudson River, and one weekend I found out some shocking news: a teenage girl in the congregation had left town to go to her older brother’s home. She was pregnant. I said to the dear woman who told me, “Could I go and see her?”

“Oh, no,” she replied. “You’re the last person she wants to know what’s happened.”

Suddenly it hit me: That’s what’s wrong with the church in our time. It’s the place you go when you put on your best clothes; you sit in Sunday school; you worship; you have a potluck dinner together—but you don’t bring your life! You leave behind all your pain, your brokenness, your hopes, even your joys.

How much have we changed since then? Have we made progress?

I think in almost any church of any size there are now at least some people trying to be real, asking, “What does it mean for me to belong to Jesus Christ and also to belong to his family?”

You see, God asks us three questions when we try to get close to him. First, he asks, “Will you trust me with your life?” That’s what he said to Abram: “Will you leave the familiar, sell your house, pack up your goods, and move out?”

Next God asks, “Will you entrust yourself to a part of my family?” I was in seminary when I finally opened up and entrusted my secrets to a fellow struggler, and it was like Pentecost for me. The power of God was suddenly released when I gave up being invulnerable.

Finally God asks, “Will you get out and be involved someplace in the world?” When people say “Yes” to all three questions, we have an alive church.

But why is church still a lonely place for some people?

The church, unfortunately, has become a museum to display the victorious life. We keep spotlighting people who say, “I’ve got it made. I used to be terrible, but then I met Jesus, got zapped by the Spirit, got into a small group, got the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit ...” and the implication is that they are sinners emeritus. That’s just not true.

What we need in the church are models who fail, because most of us fail more than we succeed. That’s why we need to remember that the church is not a museum for finished products. It’s a hospital for the sick.



Bruce Larson

“The church is not a museum for finished products.”

How do believers solve their loneliness problem?

Many Christians think that if they read their Bibles enough or go to enough meetings and groups, they can be “cured” of loneliness. Yet even Jesus on his last night in Gethsemane was excruciatingly lonely. Had he taken the wrong road? Could he endure the crucifixion? He had only two choices: he could hide his loneliness or share it. He chose to share it with three trusted friends ... and they kept going to sleep on him!

We know Jesus is our supreme example. Yet how many churches would welcome a pastor who, late on a Saturday night, would call three elders or deacons and say, “Would you mind coming over to the parsonage? It’s been a tough couple of weeks. I haven’t prayed in ten days, my wife and I aren’t speaking, I’m full of self-hate, and tomorrow is Sunday. I thought if you three came along and just kept me company while I prayed. ... You know, I really want to make it somehow.”

A real New Testament church would say, “This pastor is like Jesus.”

But we’re more prone to say, “No, you’ve got to have it all together, Pastor. Smile a lot. Be successful.”

Some say mission is what’s important—Christians need to focus on the urgent tasks rather than their feelings.

This is like a person saying, “I don’t need to eat—just work.”

It is true that we are to be productive people. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. But the branches must have nourishment through connection. In other words, Christians, to be productive, need to be nourished, and we do this in community. We have no choice—God made us this way.

Do small groups help?

Church leaders ask me, “How do you get small groups going in a church?” There is only one infallible way. You start one group because you need it.

How does a group become a place of true fellowship?

It begins when people can’t stand the façade anymore. See, it doesn’t do any good to know someone else’s secrets unless he tells them to you. And it doesn’t work for me to say to you, “I know what your problem is.” That just destroys the relationship. You have to come out with it first, and then I can minister to you.

Even in a small community, though the hiding places are few, there’s no release until the person voluntarily says, “You know, I’ve been unfaithful,” or “I’ve defrauded someone,” or “I’m a closet homosexual,” or whatever.

It’s like when Jesus said to the man in the tombs, “What’s your name?”

The fellow said, “Well, I’ve got a lot of them. My name is Legion.”

Only then could Jesus start helping him. The Lord doesn’t barge into a person’s life, and neither can we.

Discuss

1. What does it mean to bring our lives to church?
2. Do you agree that we need models who fail? Explain.
3. What is positive about the fellowship in our church? What could we do to enhance it?