

NOT GOOD TO BE ALONE: THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH
IN REACHING THE LONELY AND ISOLATED

by

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ABSTRACT
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in Reaching the Lonely and Isolated
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Loneliness, which can be identified as feelings of social isolation, is an increasing problem not only in American society but also within the church. In this thesis project, we will begin (in Chapter 1) by exploring the reality of this problem along with some of its causes. We will then propose what is the heart of this thesis: lonely Christians must recognize that they are designed not only for relationship with God but also for relationship with others in their local church. Secular society has failed to offer either of these remedies. Christianity has been quick to direct the lonely to God but has often failed to encourage adequate involvement in the local church. It will be shown that communion with God is foundational for eradicating loneliness, but communion with other believers in a local church is vital.

We will turn to Genesis 1-3 and observe that mankind was designed for relationships both vertically with God and horizontally with others, but that these relationships were broken by the Fall (Chapter 2). Next, we will explore the book of Ephesians to see how believers are reconciled to God (Chapter 3) and to other believers (Chapter 4). Because of Christ's work, Christians are unified with those in the church and are expected to engage in reciprocal one-anothering. The final chapter (Chapter 5) will outline some practical ways the church can minister to the lonely in their midst.

To my beloved wife, Molly Marie. The burden of work for this project—
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF LONELINESS

In a country that is increasingly connected—in which social media is pervasive and cell phones are nearly ubiquitous—it would seem impossible for anyone to be lonely. After all, for Americans, connection to another person is just a click away. Social apps such as Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram can be accessed with the swipe of a finger. Texting and email make communication instantaneous. Even video games, traditionally the whipping boy of antisocial criticism, are now played in shared online communities. Certainly, Americans are connected.

And yet, Americans are increasingly lonely. Studies are showing that “ever-greater numbers of people are accepting a life in which they are physically, and perhaps emotionally, isolated from one another.”¹ A survey comparing 1984 data to that from 2004 indicated that people are three times more likely to have no confidante to whom they can talk.² At any given moment, twenty percent of Americans “feel sufficiently isolated for it to be a major source of unhappiness in their lives.”³ It seems that everyone experiences loneliness at some

¹ John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 52.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cacioppo and Patrick, *Loneliness*, 5.

point in their lives: it is part of human existence. But evidence suggests that the occurrence and frequency of loneliness are on the rise.

This increased loneliness in American society indicates that there is a compelling need to think about this issue biblically. The church must be ready to address the devastating effects of loneliness and must be able to clearly articulate the remedy to this epidemic. Fortunately, God has not left us in the dark on this issue. The Bible is concerned with man's loneliness. The theme emerges in the first pages of the Bible: "It is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18).⁴ It is explored in the Psalms: "God settles the solitary in a home" (Ps 68:6). The Old Testament storyline contains individuals who struggle with loneliness—Joseph finds himself alone in Egypt; Elijah thinks he is the last prophet alive—and a nation that is designed for relationship with God but is forced into an exile of loneliness. The New Testament reveals an Immanuel, God with us. On the cross, this one is willing to be forsaken by God so that his people might no longer be forsaken. Indeed, the church itself becomes a place where the lonely can find belonging and acceptance.

Loneliness is a dominant societal problem, a pervasive sickness. But loneliness is also woven into the tapestry of the Biblical story, and therein lies the remedy for this disease. It is imperative, then, that the church provide counsel to those suffering under the suffocating emptiness of loneliness.

The Sickness: Increased Loneliness

To apply the proper remedy, it is wise to first make a proper diagnosis of the disease. Is American society truly growing more isolated? If so, what has contributed to this increased loneliness?

⁴ All quotations in this project are taken from the English Standard Version.

The Diagnosis of Increased Loneliness

Some might point out that recent innovations in technology seem to have made the world more connected, not less. Have not cell phones and social media fostered a culture that is increasingly relational? Admittedly, Americans are more connected than they ever were before. Much of this connection is due to the ever-present cell phone. According to Huffington Post, the number of American adults who own a cell phone is now 92 percent.⁵ The emergence of social media has also allowed people constant access to one another. Many Americans frequent popular social apps such as Facebook, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, or Instagram. In America, Facebook is the most popular. A PEW study in 2016 discovered that 79 percent of online Americans now have a Facebook account.⁶ Facebook comes with around-the-clock access to the lives and thoughts of “friends” and 76 percent of Facebook users access the website at least once per day.⁷ And thanks to the near ubiquity of the smart phone, these social media tools remain within reach every moment of the day.

And yet, Americans are nevertheless increasingly lonely. They have fewer people with whom they feel they can have a meaningful conversation and they say they are surrounded by fewer real-life friends.⁸ Even cell phone-addicted teenagers are increasingly expressing a desire for face-to-face contact with other people. Turkle observes:

⁵ Alexander Howard, “Americans Think Smartphones Hurt Socializing, But Use Them Anyway,” *Huffington Post*, August 27, 2015; available from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/americans-think-smartphones-hurt-socializing-but-use-them-anyway_us_55de233ee4b08cd3359e7031.html; Internet; accessed 1 December 2017.

⁶ Shannon Greenwood, Rew Perrin, and Maeve Duggan, “Social Media Update 2016,” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech* (blog), November 11, 2016; available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016.html>; Internet; accessed 1 December 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2011), 280.

They want and need adult attention. They are willing to admit that they are often relieved when a parent asks them to put away the phone and sit down and talk.⁹

Virtual conversations have not provided the satisfaction of meaningful connection for which some had hoped. In fact, one study found that increased social media use leads to *increased* isolation.¹⁰ Another study concluded that “greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in participants' communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness.”¹¹ It is no wonder then, that as Americans become more connected, they are also becoming lonelier.

The Causes of Increased Loneliness

In 1966, the Beatles asked an insightful question: “All the lonely people: where do they all come from?” If these British rock stars were to look at their society—or American society— fifty years later, they would likely discover that matters have only gotten worse. How did America find itself suffering this epidemic of loneliness? At least three key causes can be identified.

The first cause has already been stated: phones and social platforms have caused people to feel more disconnected. The very technology that is supposed to be eradicating our loneliness is the one that is isolating us. In her book on technology and loneliness, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle studies the ways in which technology is changing people’s

⁹ Turkle, *Alone Together*, 267.

¹⁰ Brian A. Primack *et al.*, “Social Media Use and Perceived Social Isolation Among Young Adults in the U.S.,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 53, no. 1 (July 1, 2017): 1–8; available from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.010.html>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2017. The release statement presents this conclusion: “Young adults with high SMU [Social Media Use] seem to feel more socially isolated than their counterparts with lower SMU.”

¹¹ R. Kraut *et al.*, “Internet Paradox. A Social Technology That Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being? PubMed NCBI”; available from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9841579.html>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2017. The above quote is from the authors’ own conclusions.

relationships. For decades, she has studied technology as a psychologist and has monitored the ways in which it shapes people. Originally optimistic about technology, she has become less so.¹² In looking at people who live in self-created virtual worlds, she states, “I was troubled,” and as she did further research she expresses, “My concerns have grown.”¹³ As she looks at the new modes of communication offered by technology, she concludes, “We are increasingly connected to each other but oddly more alone.”¹⁴ We “hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other.”¹⁵ Sometimes this is because Americans are scared of face-to-face contact; at other times it is because they are enslaved to their devices. Turkle finds herself longing for real-world communication: “My own study of the networked life has left me thinking about intimacy—about being with people in person, hearing their voices and seeing their faces, trying to know their hearts.”¹⁶ Her conclusion: technology has driven people into increased isolation and loneliness.

A second cause of increased loneliness is the breakdown of the family unit in American society. While there have always been people who live in isolation, it appears that the numbers are steadily rising. From 1980 to 2010 there was a thirty percent increase in the number of those who are living alone.¹⁷ Whereas in 1920 only one percent of the population

¹² John Stonestreet notes, “Her optimism about online life turned into deep concern about the state of human relationships,” John Stonestreet and Brett Kunkle, *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today’s World* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2017), 117.

¹³ Turkle, *Alone Together*, xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁷ Cacioppo and Patrick, *Loneliness*, 53.

lived alone, in 2010 a full ten percent were living alone.¹⁸ But those who live by themselves are not the only ones who are living alone. A study of many family households discovered that “on average, family members were together about 14 percent of the time they were at home.”¹⁹ Worse, about one third of the families were never in the same room at the same time.²⁰ But these numbers by themselves are not able to account for the increase in loneliness. It is possible to be alone without feeling lonely. In fact, “those who feel lonely actually spend no more time alone than do those who feel more connected.”²¹ Loneliness is related to a deterioration in the quality of relationships, not the quantity. Unfortunately, quality relationships seem to be hard to come by. We saw above that Americans are less—not more—likely to state that they have a close confidante. One has to wonder how technology, especially cell phones that are always distracting us, has reduced the number of quality relationships, even within a family household.

A final cause of loneliness in America is the degeneration of societal community. Americans are less and less involved in community groups which have traditionally brought people together. Robert D. Putnam writes of this in his national bestseller *Bowling Alone*. In this book he looks closely at community and how it has affected American society. He discovers that community involvement has traditionally undergirded a society so that it is productive, trustworthy, healthy, and safe. But upon examining the membership lists of

¹⁸ Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect: How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make Us Healthier, Happier, and Smarter* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Cacioppo and Patrick, *Loneliness*, 13.

dozens of organizations—civic, political, religious, vocational, social—he concludes that community involvement has declined severely in recent decades:

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into even deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.²²

Putnam’s point is that people are far less involved in their communities than they once were.

They are less connected. They are more alone.

Loneliness within the Church

The disease of loneliness is not restricted to the American culture at large; it has infiltrated even the church. A quick assessment of any church reveals that there are many within the congregation who feel deeply isolated and lonely. This, despite the fact that churches have long been regarded as bastions of community, fellowship, and togetherness. And yet many who sit in the pews week after week are lonely. Widows who have lost their husbands. Young unmarries who long for meaningful relationship. Divorcees who face isolation while also feeling a stigma attached to their condition. Teenagers who are socially awkward, who do not fit in, who are bullied by peers.

It is evident that the church has not been immune to the ravages of the loneliness epidemic. As is so often the case, the disease that affects the culture affects the church as well. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam shows that churches, like so many other community organizations, have faced a decline in their membership: “Americans are going to church less often than we did three or four decades ago.”²³ When Christians could be enjoying the

²² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 27.

fellowship of a Sunday morning or a potluck meal, they are instead found at home or at basketball practice. Similarly, just as families and the surrounding culture are more disconnected, so the church has seen an increasing number of broken families. This pattern holds for technology as well: cell phones and social media have worked their way into Christian homes, decreasing the regularity of face-to-face conversation and increasing the likeliness of loneliness.

There is a need for the church to address the topic of loneliness, not only because it has damaged American society, but also because it has the potential to damage the church.

The Remedy: Two Necessary Components

If there is indeed an epidemic of loneliness, how then should the church respond? It has always been the church that rushes to the hospitals and sickbeds of a pandemic. The same must be true of this fast-spreading disease. Christians believe that God's divine power has "granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him" (2 Pet 1:3). Therefore, the remedy for loneliness is distinctly placed into the hands of the church. Because we know the Creator, we are uniquely positioned to diagnose properly and treat accurately the disease of loneliness. We may even discover that the loneliness is not the disease, but rather a symptom of a far deeper disease.

This thesis will propose a twofold solution to the problem of loneliness. However, before those components are discussed, it would be wise to examine the need for this proposal. It has already been stated that the increasing severity of loneliness in American society is need enough. However, this need is compounded by the fact that there seems to be very little literature which offers a comprehensive solution for those who are lonely.

²³ Putnam, *Bowling*, 79.

The Failure of Much Literature on Loneliness

Secular literature on loneliness is helpful in identifying some key problems, but it is useless in providing a solution. By the end of *Together Alone*, Sherry Turkle concludes that technology, even though it is fueling the problem, will ultimately be the answer. She writes, “We have to find a way to live with seductive technology and make it work to our purposes.”²⁴ Beyond that, we need to value “solitude, deliberateness, and living fully in the moment.”²⁵ The solutions offered in John Cacioppo’s *Loneliness* are more practical: he offers an acronym that encourages the lonely to “EASE your way to social connection.”²⁶ These steps involve things like developing a plan and choosing quality relationships. Susan Pinker’s counsel in *The Village Effect* is similar, encouraging people to get involved in their neighborhoods, make friends at work, and put down their technology. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam is optimistic that Americans can learn to re-involve themselves in their communities. Reform will not happen, he says, unless we “resolve to become reconnected with our friends and neighbors.”²⁷ Secular literature cannot seem to do anything more than offer a hopeful encouragement to create sociable communities.²⁸

²⁴ Putnam, *Bowling*, 294.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

²⁶ Cacioppo and Patrick, *Loneliness*, 237.

²⁷ Putnam, *Bowling*, 414.

²⁸ One book surveyed was particularly appalling, David D. Burns, *Intimate Connections: The New and Clinically Tested Program for Overcoming Loneliness* (New York: William Morrow, 1985). Dr. David D. Burns gives horrendous advice. He tells the lonely that their problem is a lack of self-esteem and that “their real enemy is their lack of positive feelings for themselves” (page 46). He then gives instructions on how to flirt and overcome sexual shyness in order to get someone into bed. What is particularly reprehensible is the complete lack of any encouragement toward community. Dr. Burns seems concerned only with gratifying the lonely person, even if that means using other people to do so.

Christian literature has an entirely different emphasis. These books start in the right place: showing that man was created to be relational and that he was designed for communion with God. This is exactly where the Christian must start—indeed, this is exactly where this project will start. Understanding that man was created for fellowship with God is foundational. However, what most Christian literature fails to present clearly is the importance of the local church in meeting the needs of the lonely. This failure is sad since the church is vital for helping the lonely Christian.

Many Christian books dealing with loneliness have been published. Elisabeth Elliot’s book entitled *Loneliness* is a prime example. It is full of sound wisdom and sage advice. It constantly applies God’s word to real-life case studies of loneliness and abandonment. It gently encourages the lonely to know God, for to know God “is to know that we are not alone in the universe.”²⁹ And yet, Elliot hardly ever encourages the lonely Christian to seek fellowship in a local church. In fact, the only reference to fellowship with other Christians is not even written by Elliot herself, but rather by someone whose letter is quoted in the book!³⁰

There are many other books aimed at the broadly evangelical market. Lysa TerKeurst’s *Uninvited* takes up the topic of rejection and loneliness. TerKeurst consistently moves her readers to find satisfaction in God, saying, “when we have Christ we are full”; but not once does she encourage involvement in a local church.³¹ David Clarke’s *Married But Lonely* begins by recognizing that the lonely should “be close to God”³² and need “a local

²⁹ Elisabeth Elliot, *Loneliness* (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1988), 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

³¹ Lysa TerKeurst, *Uninvited: Living Loved When You Feel Less Than, Left Out, and Lonely* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 49.

³² David E. Clarke and William G. Clarke, *Married But Lonely: Seven Steps You Can Take With or Without Your Spouse’s Help* (Lake Mary, FL: Siloam, 2013), 35.

church that will support you,”³³ but this is squeezed into one brief chapter; the remaining fifteen chapters are packed with tips and tools for forcing an isolated person to engage with you. The Swiss doctor and counselor Paul Tournier would not be impressed by this approach. In his *Escape from Loneliness*, he deemphasizes the individual because he believes individualism deters Christian fellowship. He offers a tremendous insight when he says, “It is the church alone, nevertheless, which can answer the world of today’s tremendous thirst for community.”³⁴ However, in the end his emphasis is on communion with God, not fellowship within a local church.³⁵

Of all the books surveyed, Lydia Brownback alone offers a breath of fresh air. Her book *Finding God in My Loneliness* is saturated with Scripture. She shows that “God created human beings with a capacity for loneliness so that we would yearn for and find our all in him.”³⁶ Her final chapter shows the importance of involvement in a church. She writes, “Participation in a local church is God’s will for us.”³⁷ Her emphasis on the church’s “top priority” is refreshing.³⁸ Yet even here, this chapter is only one out of thirteen. It would be good for Christian literature to explore this topic more thoroughly.

³³ Clark and Clark, *Married*, 39.

³⁴ Paul Tournier, *Escape from Loneliness*, trans. John S. Gilmour (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 23.

³⁵ Each book I reviewed failed to adequately present the role of the local church in combatting loneliness. Gwen Hester-Cohen encourages fellowship with God even at the cost of skipping church gatherings to do so! Gwen Hester-Cohen, *Intimacy in Isolation* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow, 2012). Tim Alan Gardner understands the need to be transparent and vulnerable with others, but he never discusses the local church as God’s given context for this. Tim Alan Gardner, *The Naked Soul: God’s Amazing, Everyday Solution to Loneliness* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2004). Erin Davis does a masterful job of analyzing loneliness biblically. She even writes a chapter on the part of the church, but it is brief and generic, merely arguing that fellowship is good for people. Erin Davis, *Connected: Curing the Pandemic of Everyone Feeling Alone Together* (Nashville: B&H, 2014).

³⁶ Lydia Brownback, *Finding God in My Loneliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

The Foundation: Fellowship with God

This thesis intends to show that the remedy for loneliness consists of two necessary relationships, not programs or curriculum. The first relationship is vertical; the second relationship is horizontal. Both components are necessary because the vertical relationship is foundational and the horizontal relationships are vital.

Man was designed for relationship, and foremost is his relationship with God—the vertical. Augustine famously wrote, “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”³⁹ Man was created to be in relationship with God. Adam and Eve walked with God in the cool of the day. They experienced sweet fellowship. The Fall caused a rift in this relationship, but God covenanted to maintain his relationship with his people. So he loved Israel, he was friends with Moses, and he knew David as a man after his own heart. This relationship was possible only because God became Immanuel—God with us. And so, the lonely Christian must recognize that the foundation for his relational health is fellowship with God.

The Structure: Fellowship in a Local Church

The other key component that is necessary to help the lonely Christian is fellowship in a local church.⁴⁰ The believer must have horizontal relationships: specifically, horizontal relationships within the context of a local body of believers. God has designed man to have meaningful relationships with others. Adam needed Eve. Israel lived in community. Jesus

³⁸ Brownback, *Loneliness*, 155.

³⁹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 21.

⁴⁰ It will be assumed that the local church is an evangelical church that is grounded on the infallible Scriptures and clearly proclaims the gospel.

developed around himself a group of friends that would comprise the first New Testament church. While it is true that God himself is enough, God has seen fit to provide *more than* enough in the establishment of the church. He created a body with many parts, a fold with many sheep. And the New Testament makes it clear that every Christian is to be involved in the lives of other believers within his local church. Therefore, it would be a travesty to neglect participating in a local church body, especially when the disease of loneliness is so prevalent and so immediate.

The Aim of this Project

The aim, then, of this project is to show that it is the local church that provides the remedy for loneliness because it fosters fellowship with God and it facilitates a genuine, reciprocal fellowship with others. We will first look at God's design for mankind that he be in relationship with himself and with others. A study of Genesis 1-3 will show not only God's intention, but also the effects of the Fall on these relationships. Next, we will turn to Christ's redemptive work, observing the resultant union with Christ and fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Finally, we will explore God's intentions for his local church. It will be seen that the Bible expects the Christian to be involved in reciprocal fellowship, that is, the believer is to be involved in both receiving and giving.

Throughout this study it will be clear that there are two necessary relationships that must be cultivated in the life of the lonely Christian. First, it is foundational that believers commune with God. Secondly, it is vital that they develop strong relational bonds within the local church. These two components, taken together, are God's design for his people.

CHAPTER TWO

MAN'S PREDICAMENT: RELATIONAL BUT FALLEN

Anyone who has experienced loneliness will quickly acknowledge that loneliness feels wrong. Loneliness does not seem normal: it feels like a violation of what is natural. Humans are inherently gregarious and communicative. Ron Rolheiser, a Catholic theologian who has written extensively on loneliness, states, “We yearn for full, all-consuming love and ecstatic union with God or with others.”¹ Loneliness feels like a violation of these yearnings.

With increased loneliness in American society, it would be wise to find the remedy for this disease, the solution for this predicament. But to do this well, we must first explore the origin of our desire for relationship. Why does mankind desire fellowship and union with others? The Bible provides the answer. A robust biblical theology will unpack the threads of relationship and loneliness throughout Scripture, from man's creation to his Fall, to his redemption in Christ and to his future glorification.

The next three chapters will seek to use biblical theology to show that mankind was created for relationship and that the church provides in Christ Jesus the perfect remedy for loneliness. Chapters three and four will trace this theme through the New Testament. In the present chapter we will glean truths from the Old Testament about the created qualities of man, the effects of sin, and the significance of God creating an Israelite community. Because

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart: Finding Our Spiritual Home* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 7.

the Creation and the Fall are so foundational to understanding man's relational qualities, most of our focus will be on Genesis 1-3.

Man: Created to Be a Relational Being

It seems self-evident that man is a relational being. With only very rare exceptions, people congregate in cities and villages and homes. They befriend one another and arrange social gatherings. They attend churches and schools. They participate in clubs and organizations. They even initiate conversation with complete strangers. Man craves relationship. In fact, Maslow's hierarchy of needs places "social belonging" as a foundational need, following only physiological needs and safety needs. There is little question about whether man is relational. Perhaps the greater question is why?—why does man yearn for relationship?

The Evolution Explanation

Most secular books assume an evolutionary explanation for man's relationality. For example, John Cacioppo writes that "social connection, along with the genetic dread of loneliness that is its flip side, helped our ancestors survive."² The reason we are gregarious, they argue, is that it helped us to overcome natural selection. We were stronger together than separate. While this might seem a worthwhile explanation, it fails to account for man's relational qualities that are distinctive from those of the rest of the animal kingdom. Why does mankind organize himself into governments or denominations or kayaking clubs? Interestingly, these evolutionists let slip words that might have been uttered by a proponent

² John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 57.

of intelligent design. Cacioppo refers to man's "design specifications."³ Susan Pinker says that we are "wired for frequent and genuine social interaction."⁴

The Bible leaves no room for denying the existence of a divine creator. The evolutionary theory, then, is unsatisfactory. Any explanation of man's relationality must take into account God himself.

The Biblical Explanation

The biblical account of creation makes it clear that man's creation was distinct from that of the rest of creation. Several items in the text point to this. First, man is the final piece of God's creation: the finishing touch, the crowning achievement. He is created on the sixth day of creation and is the last to be created (Gen 1:26), as though God were saving the best for last. Secondly, the text refers to a divine consultation—seen nowhere earlier in the account—when God creates man. In Genesis 1:26, the members of the godhead seem to be conferring with one another: "let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness."⁵ John Calvin refers to this divine consultation as a "tribute to the excellency of man."⁶ Thirdly, man is given commands which no other creature is given: "fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28). It is clear that man was made to be superior to all other creatures. Finally, Genesis 1 emphasizes that man was made *imago dei*, in the image of

³ Cacioppo, *Loneliness*, 127.

⁴ Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect: How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make Us Healthier, Happier, and Smarter* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 267.

⁵ Emphasis added.

⁶ John Calvin, *Genesis, The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 25.

God. This is stated during the divine consultation (Gen 1:26) and then repeated in verse 27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.” This title is given to no other creature. It is a title of dignity, revealing that “man is like God and represents God.”⁷

Man is distinct from the rest of creation. In fact, it even seems that man is distinct precisely because he is relational. This relationality of man may very well be central to understanding the *imago dei*. Theologians have differed over what it means to be created “in the image of God.” There are various emphases; some emphasize man’s intellect, some his moral capabilities, some his position of rule.⁸ Wayne Grudem is helpful when he summarizes three basic categories: *substantive*, which have to do with qualities; *functional*, which have to do with dominion; and *relational*.⁹ It is possible that “there is truth in all these representations.”¹⁰ But it is worth noting that the substantive and functional explanations can be contained within the relational explanation. For example, the substantive qualities of morality and intellect necessitate the existence of a God with whom we are in relationship. Apart from the existence of God, there would be no morality or intellect. Similarly, the functional quality of dominion is only possible in a world of hierarchy and relationship. And so it might be argued that the prime essence of *imago dei* is relationality. Indeed, in his opening sentence on the image of God, Louis Berkhof states, “According to Scripture man

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 442.

⁸ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 784–85.

⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 443.

¹⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 785.

was created in the image of God, *and is therefore God-related.*”¹¹ In his commentary on Genesis, David Atkinson concludes that the image of God “is not about something we have, or something we can do: it is about relationship.”¹² He continues, “First and foremost it [the image of God] is about the particular relationship in which God places himself with human beings, a relationship in which we become God’s counterpart, his representation and his glory on the earth.”¹³ But even if relationality is not the centerpiece of *imago dei*, it is certainly a significant piece of it.

The conclusion then, is that man was made to be relational in a way that no other creature is. In fact, man’s relationality images God who is also relational. Our survey of the Bible will reveal that God enters into relationship with man. But it should also be observed that God is relational within the divine Godhead. The divine consultation of Genesis 1:26—“let us make man in our image”—reveals that the Godhead enjoys communion with the various persons of the divine being. God is relational. Man is made in his image. In this we find an explanation for man’s relationality.

Man: Fellowship Before the Fall

God designed man to enjoy relationship. But with whom should he relate? A closer look at the Genesis account reveals that God intended for man to pursue two types of relationship. The first is with God—a vertical relationship between man and God. The second is with his fellow man—a horizontal relationship between one person and another. It

¹¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 202. Emphasis mine.

¹² David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11: The Dawn of Creation, The Bible Speaks Today*, ed J. A. Motyer (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*

is important that we establish the significance of both relationships so that we can later examine how the church is specially designed to promote both relationships.

Vertical Fellowship with God

It is clear from Scripture that man was designed for fellowship with God. The very fact that God speaks to him shows that he is marked for relationship with God. Joyce Baldwin notes: “The God who meets us on the very first page of Scripture is the one who speaks, and so lets us know him.”¹⁴ God intends for man to know him.

Genesis 1-3 reveals that man was created for relationship with God. Firstly, the functional work that is given to man shows that he knows God—at least to the degree that a servant knows his master. The cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 calls on man to “subdue” and “have dominion” over the earth. Man has been given his task by God and is expected to submit to his master. This is relationship. However, man might more appropriately be called a vice-regent. He is ruling in God’s stead. The Genesis account is clear: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). This is a relationship to God that is full of responsibility and dignity.

Secondly, the moral nature of man is another clue that he was designed for fellowship with God. In Genesis 2:16-17, Adam and Eve are given a moral command that is presented to no other creature. God says, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Adam and Eve have been given a distinct prohibition from God. Prohibitions and commands can only happen in the context of relationship. It is impossible otherwise.

¹⁴ Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50: From Abraham to Joseph, The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. J. A. Motyer (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1986), 9.

Finally, Genesis 3:8 implies that Adam and Eve were in regular fellowship with God. This verse says that Adam and Eve, after they had sinned, hid from God as he was “walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” It appears that God was prone to regularly visit the Garden of Eden to visit with Adam and Eve. Atkinson conjectures that this occurrence was customary for God. He writes, “Here again is an intimacy between God and his world—this is the communion of creation.”¹⁵ God intended that man would walk with him. Baldwin states, “Fellowship between God and the humans he created is part of God’s original intention, and not some strange activity, reserved for those mystically inclined.”¹⁶ Man was made to fellowship with God.

Horizontal Fellowship with Others

In addition to his need for vertical relationship, man also needs horizontal relationship. He was designed to enjoy reciprocal fellowship with those around him. Genesis 1-2 reveals that it was never God’s intention for Adam to live in isolation. God meant for Adam to have a companion. When the creation account first mentions the creation of humans on the sixth day, it specifies that God created two people, not one: “male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Thinking of this verse, Calvin notes that “this way of speaking . . . is of the same force as if he [Moses, the author of Genesis] had said that the man himself was incomplete.”¹⁷ Adam was not complete without Eve. Perhaps this is meant to point to the companionship that is offered by a marriage relationship, but certainly it speaks to the need for companionship of any kind. It is worth noting that the following verse refers to the

¹⁵ Atkinson, *Genesis*, 87.

¹⁶ Baldwin, *Genesis*, 9.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Genesis*, 27.

increase of societal and familial relationships. Here, God tells Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). God’s expectation is the expansion of human relationships and communities.

In Genesis 2, the story of Adam’s need for companionship is told more thoroughly. In verse 18, God makes a profound statement. He looks at Adam—who has no companion—and says, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” This statement is particularly jarring because it follows on the heels of Genesis 1. In Genesis 1 there is a repeated refrain given by God as he surveys his creation: “And God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). In fact, after God creates man as the finishing touch of his creation, he sees him as “very good” (Gen 1:31). So, when God says “it is not good that man should be alone,” there is a clear contrast with what came before.

God declared it “not good” for man to be alone. Even in the state of perfection—before the Fall—God purposed to place mankind in community. This implies that man was never meant to find his only fellowship and communion with God. Rather, he was intended to enjoy fellowship with other people as well. “We are made for fellowship,” says Atkinson.¹⁸ He continues, “Personal communion is what the image of God is about—and not only communion between Man and God, but between Man and the rest of his environment, especially his fellow human beings.”¹⁹ Man should not be alone.

It seems that as Adam named the animals (Genesis 2:19-20) he realized he was the only creature with no companion; he was fully aware of his alone-ness. He recognized that “there was not found a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:20). Tim Gardner observes:

¹⁸ Atkinson, *Genesis*, 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

God created Adam as a person who needed to be connected to others in relationships. There was nothing sinful about his feeling lonely. God created the need. But clearly, it's not good, so He didn't leave him that way.²⁰

So God created a companion for Adam: God created Eve. The unique creation of Eve—from a rib of Adam—indicates that she is particularly suited to be his companion. Adam emphasizes this when he declares her “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). He was no longer alone, but had a companion who was perfect for him in every way.

This section of Genesis ends by emphasizing the intimacy of this human relationship. Verse 25 states that “the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” Adam and Eve experienced a beautiful horizontal relationship, untainted by sin, just as God designed it. James Montgomery Boice writes:

They were perfectly open and unashamed with one another. They had no sin. There was nothing in either one to hide.²¹

Man was not intended to be lonely; he was intended to enjoy the person-to-person relationships of Genesis 2:25. Unfortunately, verse 25 quickly gave way to the horrible Fall of Genesis 3.

Man: Loneliness After the Fall

If one really wants to understand the origins of the loneliness that plagues society today, he must look in the third chapter of Genesis. Certainly, before the Fall Adam was alone. But he was not lonely. God supplied all his needs, first with himself and soon after that with a companion. God would have continued to meet each person's desire for

²⁰ Tim Alan Gardner, *The Naked Soul: God's Amazing, Everyday Solution to Loneliness* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2004), 12.

²¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 1:121.

companionship—both vertical and horizontal—if relationships had not become broken by the Fall of mankind. It was the Fall that left man lonely, isolated from his fellow man and distanced from his creator.

Vertical Isolation from God

The communion that Adam and Eve were meant to enjoy with God was damaged by the sin of the Fall. Once they ate of the forbidden tree, their relationship with God was altered entirely. The moment that God appeared on the scene, Adam and Eve hunkered down in fear of him. Genesis 3:8 says that they heard God coming and “hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” They hid because they were guilty sinners and God is a holy God. They instinctively knew that they could not stand in his presence. They also sewed fig leaves together in an attempt to cover their nakedness. Adam explains as much: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself” (Gen 3:10).

This isolation from God is further compounded by what happens at the end of Genesis 3. Here, God banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, from the place where they communed with God, where they walked with God in the cool of the day. God made it clear that sin’s effect was complete: they could no longer enjoy the unhindered fellowship with God to which they were accustomed. Loneliness was now written into their story.

And so it is that mankind is estranged from the very being with whom he was created to be in relationship. Catholic theologian Ronald Rolheiser captures it well:

One of the main reasons of loneliness, according to Hebrew scriptures, stems simply from the way we are built as human beings. It appears that God has made us in such a way that there is within each of us a certain space, a thirst, a lonely emptiness that only He can fill. Consequently, as we go through this life, we are never satisfied. We

are never fully satiated and fulfilled. . . . We are in perpetual disquiet as we yearn and pine for the life-giving waters that flow from the living God.²²

The primary root of man's loneliness is his isolation and estrangement from the God who designed him for relationship with himself.

Horizontal Isolation from Others

Estrangement from God had dire effects for Adam and Eve: this broken vertical relationship caused every horizontal relationship to be broken as well. Atkinson writes:

It is the estrangement which is now enacted between human beings and their Creator which is the basis of the other estrangements of which we read. The people who hide behind the trees for cover from God's searching and questioning voice, experience . . . disruption in their relationships with one another.²³

The existence of broken relationships after the Fall is immediately evident in the Genesis account.

The first sign that human relationships were broken by the Fall is seen in our first parents' immediate awareness of their nakedness. In Genesis 3:6 Adam and Eve partake of the forbidden fruit; sin enters the world. In the very next verse the devastating consequences begin to take their effect: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Gen 3:7). There is here a clear contrast to Genesis 2:25 which reads that "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." Whereas they had previously felt no shame or guilt, they now have every reason to feel ashamed in the presence of another. The nakedness that was once a sign of purity is now hastily covered with fig leaf loincloths. The sweet innocence of untainted communion is gone.

²² Rolheiser, *Restless Heart*, 85.

²³ Atkinson, *Genesis*, 92–93.

This fall from perfect fellowship is confirmed by the way Adam and Eve interact with one another. When God asks them what it is that they have done, they both respond by blame shifting. Eve blames the serpent for her transgression (Gen 3:13). Adam blames the very friend that was given to him as a helpmate and companion. He says, “The woman...she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen 3:12). Worse, he accuses God of being at fault, saying, “The woman *whom you gave to be with me*” (Gen 3:12).²⁴ This verse underscores the fact that man’s relationships are broken in every way: he blames his fellow man and he accuses the God who created him. Gone are the days of unalloyed fellowship.

In fact, part of the curse given to Eve emphasizes the new norm of broken relationships. Eve is told, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr. observes that this verse signals the emergence of conflict in marital relationships:

The woman will suffer in relation to her husband. The exact content of her marital suffering could be defined in either of two ways. Either she will suffer conflict with her husband, or she will suffer domination by him.²⁵

Ortlund prefers the first interpretation—that the wife will now experience conflict with her husband—but it should be noted that either interpretation reveals a new norm of broken relationships. And what is true of the intimate relationship of marriage will be true in all other human relationships as well.

The book of Genesis will go on to prove that every branch of human relationships is broken by the Fall. In Genesis 4 is the first fratricide as Cain kills his brother Abel. Also in

²⁴ Emphasis mine.

²⁵ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Gen 1-3,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 108.

this chapter, Lamech brags of killing a young man out of vengeance (Gen 4:23). In chapter 11, the punishment for building the Tower of Babel is the further dispersion and alienation of people groups. Even in households there is tension and quarreling. Sarai despises Hagar. Esau and Jacob vie with one another from the womb. Rachel and Leah fight for their husband's attention. Joseph is despised by his brothers. Moreover, in these stories we see glimpses of the lonely. Hagar runs away into the wilderness to die. Tamar struggles as a widow to find acceptance. Joseph is sold into slavery in a foreign land. Genesis illustrates that relationships are broken and that loneliness can be expected in a broken world.

Therefore, people find themselves in a bind. They are designed with a desire for relationship, but they are surrounded by brokenness. C.S. Lewis observed:

We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves.²⁶

Lewis understands that despite the Fall, man retains his relationality. But he often ends up lonely, having failed to find satisfactory relationships.

A further study of the Old Testament reveals that—despite the Fall—God purposed to show grace by providing his people with the relationships they craved. We will turn to this next.

God: Grace Shown to the Lonely

While loneliness is a result of the Fall, God never intended to leave man in his isolated condition. Instead, he extended his mercy and grace to his people, working to restore their relationship with himself and with others. This is apparent even in Genesis 3. Here, God does not neglect those who had rebelled against him. Instead, he immediately pursues them,

²⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 12.

going to the garden and calling for man to come to him (Gen 3:8-9). God then reveals his intention of destroying the serpent through the offspring of Eve (Gen 3:15). This *protoevangelium*, or “first gospel,” points to the future coming of Christ as one who will rescue man from the ravages of sin.

But God’s mercies are not just future oriented. In Genesis 3:21 God meets Adam and Eve’s present needs. Here, God allows the shedding of animal blood to provide clothing, a foretaste of the shedding of Christ’s blood to cover man’s shame. This covering of nakedness also enables the restoration of horizontal relationships. Adam and Eve no longer need to be ashamed of their naked appearance. They can pursue a fellowship and union with one another. Indeed, Adam names his wife “Eve” (Gen 3:20), a word associated with life and living. It is as if he sees a future of life and relationship with her.

Even the banishment from the Garden of Eden is a grace. God realizes that it would be horrible to live eternally in a fallen condition; he banishes Adam and Eve from the garden so they do not “take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Gen 3:22). The banishment from the garden also contains a veiled reference to a future restoration with God through the covenant. The cherubim who guard Eden are meant to point forward to the cherubim who guard the ark of the covenant (Ex 24:18-20). God says of the ark, “There will I meet with you . . . from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you” (Ex 24:22).

Another veiled reference to future restoration is found in the banishment “to the east.” Genesis often associates disfellowship with the east; a return from the east is a return to fellowship. John Sailhamer writes that in Genesis, the *east* is “the direction of the ‘city of

Babylon' (11:2) and the 'cities of Sodom and Gomorrah' (13:11)."²⁷ But, he continues, "to return from the east is to return to the Promised Land and to return to the city of "Salem."²⁸ Peace in relationships can only be found in a return to God. This renewed fellowship will only happen within the context of Jerusalem's temple, where ritual sacrifice will enable man to have access to God.

It is evident that God cares for the plight of sinners. He is concerned about broken relationships. And the Old Testament reveals that he provides means for the lonely to find fellowship and community.

The Lonely Given Families

One means of God-ordained fellowship is immediately evident in the Old Testament account: God intended for the lonely to be placed in families. It has already been seen that God made a companion for Adam because it was "not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). This companion was not just a friend; she was his wife. James Montgomery Boice states:

[God] did not merely provide Adam with a suitable helper and companion. He also established marriage as the first and most basic of all human institutions.²⁹

Boice goes on to show that marriage—and the families that are derived from it—is the source of all of society's organizations and institutions. God created the family as the most fundamental environment for man's social community. Indeed, the very first verse of Genesis 4—immediately following the story of the Fall—shows the building of Adam and Eve's

²⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 59.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁹ Boice, *Genesis*, 1:113.

family. Cain is born, quickly followed by Abel (Gen 4:1-2). By the end of the chapter, they have another son named Seth (4:25). They also have grandchildren, some born of Cain and some born of Seth (Gen 4:17, 26). The family line continues, showing that God places families at the center of society's fabric.

God will continue to use the family as a centerpiece of his blessings to mankind. Abraham will be told that his family will be blessed into a great nation (Gen 12:2-3). The twelve tribes of Israel will be a distribution of Israel along family lines. God's intention is that man find happiness and blessing in the family given to him. Psalm 68:6 states, "God settles the solitary in a home." God provides a family for the lonely.

The Lonely Given Israelite Community

In addition to the provision of family, the lonely in the Old Testament were also given the fellowship of the Israelite community. Ever since he promised that Abraham would become a great nation, God grew the Israelites into a community that derived social satisfaction from one another. The wise King Solomon understood the importance of relationships in social communities:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Eccl 4:9-12)

There is advantage—perhaps even necessity—to being in relationship with others.

Sometimes the warmest relationship is with a neighbor in one's community rather than with one's own family. Proverbs 27:10 advises:

Do not forsake your friend. . . .
Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away.

For the Jews of the Old Testament, it was the Israelite community that provided this fellowship. Abraham himself is a picture of one who was lonely but was then given fellowship in a community: his family wandered alone from Ur but anticipated God's promise that they would one day belong to a great nation. Similarly, Psalm 107 provides another picture of the lonely wanderer: "Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them" (Ps 107:4). Derek Kidner notes that this dire situation is meant to represent Israel but that it also represents the "plight of all sinners."³⁰ Fascinatingly, after the lonely wanderer has cried out to God, God provides for him by giving him "a city to dwell in" (Ps 107:7). God gives him a community, a place of fellowship. This is how God "satisfies the longing soul" (Ps 107:9). God's desire is that the lonely involve himself in the Israelite community. "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment" (Prov 18:1). Thankfully, God in his grace has gifted the lonely person with the fellowship of society.

The Lonely Given God Himself

However, a survey of the Old Testament ought to yield the conclusion that horizontal relationships of family and community are not enough. Man was created for a vertical relationship as well. We have already seen that God intentionally pursued relationship with Adam and Eve, even after their Fall. Throughout the pages of the Old Testament, God never wavers from this commitment. Again and again he reiterates his desire to commune with his people. He is covenantally committed to them. O. Palmer Robertson notes that a covenant is a bond or relationship, saying, "The result of a covenant commitment is the establishment of

³⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalm 73-150: A Commentary on Books III-V of the Psalms*, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 384.

a relationship ‘in connection with,’ ‘with’ or ‘between’ people.”³¹ This relationship has been God’s intention throughout all the covenants from Adam onward. Robertson says, “Throughout the biblical record of God’s administration of the covenant, a single phrase recurs as the summation of the covenant relationship: ‘I shall be your God, and you shall be my people.’”³² He calls this the “Immanuel principle” of the covenant because it is the pledge that “God is with us.”³³

The Immanuel principle is scattered across the entire Old Testament. God tells Abraham, in reference to his offspring, “I will be their God” (Gen 17:8). On Mount Sinai, God declares, “I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God” (Exod 29:45). When Joshua prepares to take over the leadership of Israel, God encourages him by saying, “Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you” (Josh 1:5). The psalms ring with declarations that “the LORD of hosts is with us” (Ps 46:7), that God “delights in me” (Ps 41:11) and that he has “searched me and known me” (Ps 139:1). He states, “I am the LORD your God” (Ps 81:10). Much of the history of Israel involves God’s presence given to help them. God’s presence in a pillar of fire and cloud leads Israel through the desert. The Israelite army defeats Jericho because God is with them (Josh 2:14) but loses at Ai because he is not (Josh 7). Elisha is shown God’s presence in the form of “horses and chariots of fire” that can defeat the king of Syria (2 Kgs 6:17). God clearly covenants to be with his people.

³¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 5-6.

³² *Ibid.*, 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

The Lonely Given a Future Hope

But perhaps the most beautiful sign of God’s grace to the lonely is the collection of forward-looking promises given by God. In these, God moves beyond his presence *now* with his people and he promises that there is a future in which he will *continue to be* with his people. These passages are breathtakingly anticipatory. And they may have been extremely valuable to Old Testament Israelites when they considered that their nation had wandered away from God. The prophets are replete with both words of condemnation and promises of future hope. For example, God tells Hosea to name his children “No Mercy” and “Not My People” as a picture of God’s stance toward his unfaithful people (Hos 1:6, 9). But God then holds out a future hope, saying, “And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people’; and he shall say, ‘You are my God’” (Hos 2:23). Here, the Immanuel principle is evident, but it is anticipatory—it looks forward.

Similarly, Jeremiah 31 looks forward to a time when God will be with his people. God promises to make a new covenant with his people. Under that new covenant, God declares:

I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more. (Jer 31:33-34)

Here, the idea of Immanuel is evident. There is a time in the future when God will be known by his people.

Isaiah 7 is one of the few Bible passages that contains the word *Immanuel*. In this passage, Israel is given a sign in the promise of a boy: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa 7:14). Writing on this passage, Edward J. Young concludes that this prophecy is forward looking; it anticipates a child who is God

come to his people. “He [God] had promised, and now, in the time of their deep need, He would come to His own, not by might nor by power, but in the birth of a little child.”³⁴ God was going to come again to be with his people.

This Immanuel principle is especially important because man was designed to be in relationship with God. Without him, man is missing a crucial element of his identity. There must, then, be some way for man to know God and find satisfaction in him. The myriad Immanuel promises of the Old Testament held out hope: hope that in the midst of his loneliness, the isolated person might be able to reach out and find God.

Israel’s Exile: An Echo of Eden

This hope of renewed fellowship with God ought to have been particularly encouraging to the exiled Israelites. But perhaps they failed to see that their story of a broken relationship with God was an echo of Adam and Eve’s story in the Garden of Eden. Like their first parents, the Israelites had been created for special fellowship with the Lord, but their disobedience to him led to their banishment from a special place.

The nation of Israel was chosen to be God’s special people. God told Abraham that he would multiply his family into a great nation and give to them the land of the Canaanites (Gen 12:2,7). Hundreds of years later, God reiterated this promise to the nation of Israel, saying, “You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6). Israel, like Adam and Eve, was chosen for special fellowship with God.

³⁴ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), 1:291.

Also, like Adam and Eve, the Israelites were given prohibitions. God gave to them his law and expected obedience. He promised blessing if he were obeyed but cursing if he were disobeyed (Deut 28). Part of the curse for disobedience was banishment—or exile—from their promised land. God forewarned Israel of the dire consequences of disobedience: “And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known” (Deut 28:64). It should be noted that the exile causes a disruption to both horizontal relationships—the Jews will be scattered from one another—and vertical relationships—the Jews will serve false gods. Eugene Merrill makes a similar observation when he writes that the term *exile* is “a singularly appropriate term since it not only suggests the forced removal of the Jewish population to Babylon but also poignantly communicates the absence of Yahweh as well.”³⁵ He continues:

The real tragedy of the exile was not the removal of the people or even the utter destruction of the city and temple. It was the departure of their God from their midst, an absence symbolized, in one of Ezekiel’s visions, by the movement of the Shechinah from the temple to the summit of the Mount of Olives.³⁶

The exile brought about ultimate loneliness. Israel’s most crucial relationship, their fellowship with God, was withdrawn from them.

Man’s loneliness before and during the exile is clearly displayed by the prophets. For example, Isaiah shows the disruption of the social fabric as infants are made rulers (Isa 3:4) and women are so isolated that seven of them will plead with the same man to marry them (Isa 4:1). He also highlights man’s rejection of God: “Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has

³⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 482.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence” (Isa 3:8). Israel has rejected God and so God has sent Israel to a lonely exile.

But even in the utter loneliness of the exile can be found glimmers of hope. God promises to restore his relationship with Israel. It is here that the Immanuel principle comes into play. God has not forsaken his people, but has pledged his faithfulness to a remnant of Israel. Many of the prophets spoke of a future fellowship with God. The latter half of Isaiah is representative of many of these prophecies. Through his servant, God tells Israel, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isa 43:1). He pledges his commitment:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.³⁷

He confirms the steadfastness of his covenant commitment to his people: “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed” (Isa 54:10). God promises renewed fellowship.

Indeed, the postexilic period shows a renewed fellowship with God and with one another. The Israelites, under Ezra and Nehemiah became united in their desire to build Jerusalem and to restore the temple. Willem VanGemeran observes that the exile had “a positive impact in bringing about the unity of a godly remnant from both Israel and Judah.”³⁸

But more significant was the restored relationship between the Jews and God. In the postexilic era is found “the greatness of Yahweh’s love in renewing his covenants and

³⁷ Isa 49:15-16

³⁸ Willem A. VanGemeran, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 57.

fulfilling his promises.”³⁹ God was once again present with his people; he was not going to leave them in their loneliness.

But this was not the full fellowship that Israel had been promised. It was only a partial realization of God’s promises. VanGemenen writes, “Even though the postexilic community experienced some realization of the promises, the reality of fulfillment was delayed.”⁴⁰ The Immanuel principle had not yet been experienced in full. God was still to come to his people in a manner far more tactile than they had imagined. And so, while the Old Testament shows glimmers of hope that man’s relationships can be restored, it also leans expectantly toward the revelations of the New Testament era. It longs for a day when God will “rend the heavens and come down” (Isa 64:1). On that day, relationships will be restored. Indeed, the close of the Old Testament anticipates a time in which God “will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal 4:6). There is a desire for a reconciliation—both vertical and horizontal—that is future and full. What was anticipatory in the Old Testament will become realized in the New Testament.

³⁹ VanGemenen, *Prophetic Word*, 57.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

CHAPTER THREE

MAN'S SOLUTION: FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

Loneliness stems from one fundamental problem: the broken fellowship with God caused by man's sin. Without fixing this fundamental problem, man is unable to enjoy relationships as God intended them. In God's mercy, man has been provided with a solution to his problem. That solution is the person of Jesus Christ who enabled the restoration of fellowship between God and man.

In chapter two, we traced God's intention for relationships through the first pages of Genesis. The prelapsarian Adam and Eve displayed the intended ideal. But in Genesis 3 sin entered the world and relationships became broken. We noted that the Old Testament provided glimmers of hope, but that it was largely anticipatory, looking forward to a greater reconciling of God and man. "The Hebrew scriptures end with a heart that is only partially placated; some of the question remains unanswered."¹ The Old Testament leaned expectantly toward the New Testament.

The New Testament, in Jesus Christ, reveals Immanuel—God with man. And it is Jesus who effects the renewed fellowship between God and his people as well as the union between members of his church. The present chapter will underscore the significance of man being reconciled to God; without this reconciliation, man is lost in loneliness. The following

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart: Finding Our Spiritual Home* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 91.

chapter will then explore the importance of the local church in meeting man's desire for community.

The Focus on Ephesians

The New Testament is lavish in its exploration of man's relationship to God. It is difficult to find a single page of the New Testament that does not bear any implications for the problem of man's separation from God or the solution of Christ's death on the cross. For this reason, this paper will delimit its study of the New Testament to only the book of Ephesians. The selection of Ephesians is hardly an arbitrary choice. Instead, the book of Ephesians has been chosen because within its six chapters it captures the breathtaking scope of Christ's redemptive work in unifying relationships, both vertical and horizontal.

Commentators are nearly unanimous in asserting that Ephesians is about Christ and his reconciling of the church to God and to one another. John Stott states, "Its central theme is 'God's new society'—what it is, how it came into being through Christ."² In creating this new society, God reconciled man in two directions: "we have also been reconciled to God and to each other."³ The result is the "renewed human community" of the local church, built upon this renewed relationship with God.⁴ James Montgomery Boice concurs, writing, "Ephesians is about the church."⁵ William Hendriksen agrees:

Careful study of Ephesians has led an ever-increasing number of exegetes to arrive at the conclusion that the concept of *the church* receives such emphasis in this epistle

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society, The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. J. A. Motyer and John R. W. Stott (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 25–26.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), ix.

that the entire contents can be grouped around it without superimposing one's own subjective opinions upon the apostle's thinking.⁶

Hendriksen realizes that God's work in the church is forefront in this epistle; it is not hidden or vague. For this reason, Ephesians provides the perfect context for exploring Christ's reconciling work in the lives of lonely sinners.

Fellowship with God: Man's Solution

Loneliness feels like emptiness. Something is missing. Inside, there is a hole, a void. People often try to fill that void with worldly trappings, but find that the loneliness persists. The reason for this is that they are attempting to fill a spiritual void with material items or human relationships. The void is meant to be filled by God. Lydia Brownback writes, "Loneliness is an indicator that something is missing"; she then concludes that what is missing "is found only in Jesus Christ."⁷ Ronald Rolheiser agrees:

What will take our loneliness away? Jesus comes as the full, definitive answer to that question. He comes as the living water, able to put to rest the lonely questions and yearnings within our hearts.⁸

Lonely people—whether they know it or not—are yearning for fellowship with God.

The book of Ephesians confirms that man was created for fellowship with God and that this fellowship was disrupted by sin. This epistle also marvelously details the blessings to be found in Christ, the one who solves the problem of loneliness through his redemptive work on the cross.

⁶ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 62–63.

⁷ Lydia Brownback, *Finding God in My Loneliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 14.

⁸ Rolheiser, *Restless Heart*, 91.

God's Intention: Fellowship with Man

Ephesians confirms the Genesis account that man was designed for a vertical relationship with God. In this epistle, Paul clearly states that God intended to be in relationship with man even before he created the world. God's decision to redeem for himself a people is decidedly *not* a last-minute attempt to salvage an unpleasant situation. God's extension of mercy was not an afterthought, a compensation package for the unfortunate fallen humanity. Rather, God intended to be in relationship with man from the very beginning.

God's eternal intention to be in relationship with mankind is found toward the very beginning of Ephesians. In chapter 1, Paul lists the extraordinary blessings possessed by the Christian because of his union with Christ. The first of those blessings is that "he [God] chose us [Christians] in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1:4). Before creation—and before the Fall—God had already set aside a people to be in relationship with him, able to come "before him." But does this necessitate a communicative relationship? Perhaps it is merely a creator-creature relationship, no different than the animals, birds, fish, and plants? In the following verse, Paul writes that God "predestined us for adoption as sons" (Eph 1:5). This is no casual relationship; it is intensely intimate. Hendriksen, writing about the Christian's membership in God's family, observes that the relationship is so intimate that no analogy does it justice: "It is rather useless to look for human analogies, for the adoption of which Paul speaks surpasses anything that takes place on earth."⁹ God's intention has always been that he would enter into relationship with man in a personal manner.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 79.

This relationality between God and man is also hinted at in Ephesians 1:10. In this verse, Paul shows that God intended “to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.” On its surface, this verse points to a horizontal unification of all of God’s creation: “his whole universe and his whole church will be unified under the cosmic Christ who is the supreme head of both.”¹⁰ But this verse also reveals a vertical unification: this unification is *in Christ*. It is under the headship of Jesus that this unity will occur. G. K. Beale and Benjamin Gladd, commenting on this passage, write, “The fallenness and fragmented nature of creation, in a very real sense, has been righted and brought under the cosmic control of Christ.”¹¹ Under Christ’s headship, God’s intention is to bring not just horizontal unity, but vertical unity as well. God will unite mankind to himself through the work of Christ.

As if to underscore the significance of this unity, Paul refers to it as a “mystery” in Ephesians 1:9. In their book on the concept of mystery, Beale and Gladd observe that the word *mystery* appears six times in Ephesians.¹² Significantly, each time it is used, it relates to the theme of unity: both general unity, as in verse ten, and specific applications of this unity, such as the Jew-Gentile relationship or the marriage relationship.¹³ According to Ephesians, this unity—horizontal and vertical—is a *mystery*. The labeling of it as a *mystery* indicates that its revelation is “not a totally new revelation” but is instead “the full disclosure of

¹⁰ Stott, *Ephesians*, 44.

¹¹ G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 158.

¹² *Ibid.*, 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 148.

something that was to a significant extent hidden.”¹⁴ In this case, there is a “full disclosure” that God has unified himself to man through the work of Christ.

The Problem of Sin

God knew, before the foundation of the world, that he would be in relationship with man. But he also knew that man would fall, and so any discussion of God’s relationship with his children must also discuss the problem of sin. Indeed, even as we looked above at God’s prelapsarian intention to be in relationship with man, it was necessary to look at that in light of Christ’s later salvific work. God knew before the foundation of the world that redemptive work would be necessary. From almost the beginning, sin caused a disruption to man’s relationship with God. The book of Ephesians makes this crystal clear.

By reading between the lines, the first chapter of Ephesians reveals the existence of a sin problem. It speaks of “redemption through his blood” (Eph 1:7), “forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph 1:7), and the “gospel of your salvation” (Eph 1:13). But chapter two makes clear that there are dire consequences to sin. The sinner, according to Ephesians 2, is dead in his trespasses and alienated from God.

Dead in Trespasses

Ephesians 2 begins with these words: “you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (Eph 2:1). The “you” in this verse is eventually extended to “we” and “the rest of mankind” in verse 3, and so this appellation applies to all of mankind. “This is the biblical diagnosis of fallen man in fallen society everywhere.”¹⁵ The diagnosis is that

¹⁴ Beale and Gladd, *Hidden*, 30.

¹⁵ Stott, *Ephesians*, 71.

man is dead. Of course, this is not referring to a physical death, but to a spiritual one. At its core, this spiritual death is separation from God. Jay Adams writes:

Death . . . is *separation*. When the spirit is separated from the body, physical death occurs. When the spirit is separated from God, spiritual death occurs.¹⁶

Therefore, a man can be physically alive but spiritually dead, a sort of spiritual zombie.¹⁷ He may be walking around, but he is dead in his relationship to God.

Spiritual death means a broken relationship with God. John Stott would concur: “For true life, ‘eternal life,’ is fellowship with the living God, and spiritual death is the separation from him which sin inevitably brings.”¹⁸ That there is separation between God and man is reinforced in verse 3 when Paul writes that people are “by nature children of wrath.” Not only is mankind dead to God; he is the object of God’s just anger. In his sin, man found himself distanced from God the way a condemned prisoner is distant from the judge who sentenced him. It is no wonder, then, that man feels alone.

Alienated from God

In Ephesians 2, Paul compounds this sense of isolation by offering a second descriptor of mankind: man is “alienated.” Paul writes that unbelievers are “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). In the next verse, he refers to these people as “far off” (Eph 2:13). The sinner is clearly alienated, both from God and from others. John Stott refers to a “double alienation,” an alienation that is both horizontal and

¹⁶ Jay E. Adams, *Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians & Philemon, The Christian Counselor’s Commentary* (Hackettstown, NJ: Timeless Texts, 1994), 77.

¹⁷ Boice, *Ephesians*, 47.

¹⁸ Stott, *Ephesians*, 72.

vertical.¹⁹ We will explore the horizontal alienation in chapter four, but our focus now will be on this vertical alienation from God.

The Greek verb used in Ephesians 2 for “alienated”—*apallotrioo*—is used only two other times in the New Testament.²⁰ Each time it refers to alienation from God. In Ephesians 4:18 Paul talks about the Gentiles being “alienated from the life of God” and in Colossians 2:20 he writes of Gentiles who “once were alienated and hostile in mind.” Paul seems to apply this word to Gentiles because they were outside the nation of Israel. As Gentiles, they were alienated from all the blessings heaped upon Israel. The primary blessing of being an Israelite was the unique relationship with God. The Gentiles did not have that; instead, they were “without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). Worse, they were clueless regarding an expected Messiah. Boice comments:

Unlike the Jews, the Gentiles had not even had a chance to know Christ. Their religion was totally pagan. They did not even have the expectation of a Savior.²¹

They were alienated from Christ and from personal fellowship with God.

This alienation is true of any person who is not in Christ. It was true of the Gentile, but also of the Jew who rejected Jesus. And it was sin that had caused this alienation. Sin had destroyed the relationship between God and man. Man, rather than being alive to God, was spiritually dead to him. Rather than communing with God, man was alienated from his presence.

¹⁹ Stott, *Ephesians*, 90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Boice, *Ephesians*, 77.

The Solution Found in Christ's Redeeming Work

The book of Ephesians plainly presents God's intention to be in relationship with man and the broken fellowship caused by sin; but it places even heavier emphasis on the *solution* to the problem of sin. Whereas the first is spoken, the second is shouted. Ephesians seems to revel in the truth that man can indeed have a restored relationship with God and that this is possible only because of Christ's intervention. Man is provided with the perfect remedy for the epidemic of loneliness.

The Significance of "In Christ" in Ephesians

The book of Ephesians emphasizes the role of Christ in bringing about the restoration of man's communion with God. For example, Ephesians 2:13 reads, "But now *in Christ Jesus* you who once were far off have been brought near *by the blood of Christ.*"²² Jesus was instrumental in reconciling God and man.

But even more conspicuous in Ephesians is the union that the Christian has with Christ himself. Jesus was not just the means of man's reconciliation; he was also the object. This union with Christ is referenced continually throughout the book. Below, we will examine four different images that Paul uses which highlight this union. But first we should note Paul's use of the phrase "in Christ." Throughout Ephesians, Paul uses this shorthand phrase to remind his readers of their participation in Christ's work. The phrase "in Christ"—or its equivalent using a pronoun or alternate name such as "Beloved" or "Lord"—appears thirty-three times within Ephesians' six chapters.²³ It occurs eleven times in the first fourteen

²² Emphasis mine.

²³ Hendriksen lists many of these references in his commentary (Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 71). However, because some verses contain the phrase more than once, the count of thirty-three is mine.

verses of Ephesians to emphasize that the Christian’s spiritual blessings are only experienced through his union with Jesus.²⁴

The phrase “in Christ” applies only to the Christian and is an indication that he is restored to fellowship with God. John Stott writes, “To be ‘in Christ’ is to be personally and vitally united to Christ, as branches are to the vine.”²⁵ There is an intimate connection. Louis Berkhof, writing of this mystical union, defines it as “that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation.”²⁶ He adds that because of this union “believers have fellowship with Christ.”²⁷ In being united with Christ, man has found the fellowship for which he longed. To be in Christ is to be reconciled to God. The vertical relationship—so foundational for man’s relationality—has been restored.

Four Pictures of Man’s Restored Fellowship to God

In Ephesians, Paul uses many metaphors to illustrate the intimacy of the relationship between God and man. Each metaphor uses an earthly picture to show the close connection that is forged through Christ’s redemptive work. We will examine four of them.

Adoption as God’s Child

The first metaphor used by Paul that reveals the intimacy of man’s relationship to God is found in Ephesians 1:5. Here, Paul writes that the Christian was chosen and predestined for the purpose of adoption into God’s family: “...for adoption as sons through

²⁴ Stott, *Ephesians*, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 449.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 453.

Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” This adoption means that Christians are no longer strangers or enemies to God. Instead, they become “God’s sons and daughters with all the privileges implied.”²⁸ They now have “free access to their heavenly Father.”²⁹ This access to God is couched in the most intimate of terms, the relationship between a father and his child.

Paul uses the picture of adoption again in chapter two when he writes that Christians are now “members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). Before this phrase, Paul had used a government metaphor, indicating that Christians are citizens of God’s kingdom. But here, the language is more intimate. Lloyd-Jones points out that the Christian is given “the right of approach to Him [God] which a child always has to a father,” a far freer access than a court member has to his king.³⁰ Paul confirms this in Ephesians 3 when he says that the Christian has “boldness and access with confidence” (Eph 3:12) and so “for this reason I bow my knees before the Father” (Eph 3:14). It would seem then, that the Christian has no reason to be lonely; he has unfettered access to his heavenly Father.

Participation in the Body of Christ

A second metaphor used by Paul is that of the Christian’s participation in the body of Christ. Paul refers to this several times. Ephesians 1:22-23 calls Christ “the head” and the church “his body.” Again, Ephesians 5:23 says “Christ is the head of the church, his body.” But the most detailed discussion is in chapter four:

²⁸ Boice, *Ephesians*, 11.

²⁹ Stott, *Ephesians*, 40.

³⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation: Studies in Ephesians Chapter 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 330.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:15-16)

This image of the church as a body is familiar to most Christians. Paul deals with it extensively in First Corinthians. Because it has such significant implications for the horizontal relationships of the church, it will be explored more deeply in the next chapter.

But for now it should be noted that the body is joined to the head which is Christ. The body cannot live without the head. John Calvin wrote of Christ the head:

It is he who supplies all our wants, and without whose protection we cannot be safe. As the root conveys sap to the whole tree, so all the vigour which we possess must flow to us from Christ.³¹

Again, because of the work of Christ, the Christian need never feel alone. Indeed, his very life proceeds from his union with Christ his head.

Inclusion in the Holy Temple

In Ephesians two, in order to indicate the inclusion that every Christian has in God's kingdom, Paul uses the imagery of a building being constructed out of all Christians. He writes that "the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:21). This "temple" is "a dwelling place for God by the spirit" (Eph 2:22). The language used here recalls images from the Old Testament wherein God was seen to dwell with his people and to commune with them in the Temple. Here, Paul is saying that this phenomenon of God-meeting-man now happens within the church. G. K. Beale points out that Paul believes "not merely that the church is 'like' the temple but that it is the actual

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians, Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 21:287.

beginning fulfillment of the latter-day temple prophecies from the Old Testament.”³² The church is the new temple. It is remarkable that, due to Christ’s foundational work, God is able to dwell with his people in the church. What a marvelous comfort for the lonely person!

United in Marriage to Christ

The most intimate of all the images is undoubtedly the image of the Christian as a bride of Christ. Not only has Christ restored the broken relationship between God and man, he has married the Christian to himself! In writing about how husbands and wives should relate, Paul draws parallels to the relationship between Christ and the church. In fact, James Montgomery Boice says that the institution of marriage was created by God so that people could better comprehend man’s standing with God:

When God created marriage it was not simply that God considered marriage to be a good idea. . . . God created marriage to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church.³³

Human marriage is meant to remind man of the mystical union that the Christian has with Christ. Boice observes that Paul does not raise the comparison to the Christ-church marriage until a certain point, “when he is talking about the *union* of two persons in marriage as a result of which they become ‘one flesh.’”³⁴ Just as a man and his wife become one flesh, so the Christian is united to Christ so that the two become one. The Christian, then, can never be truly alone—he is always present with God.

³² G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 260.

³³ Boice, *Ephesians*, 205.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

Prayer as a Sign of Man's Fellowship with God

There is one final theme in Ephesians which helps to display the reality of man's restored relationship with God. Like the themes and pictures already discussed, this theme is scattered across the entire book. This theme is that of prayer. Prayer is a clear indicator that man has been granted access to God.

Prayer is woven into the fabric of the entire letter of Ephesians. "More than any other New Testament epistle, it [Ephesians] has the character and form of prayer."³⁵ In Ephesians 1:16, Paul says to the Ephesians, "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." He then proceeds to write out the substance of his prayer for them. Toward the end of his letter, Paul encourages the Ephesians to take up the armor of God along with prayer: "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Eph 6:18). He then requests that the Ephesians pray specifically for him (Eph 6:19).

But the most prominent prayer is in chapter three. Here, Paul prays a marvelous prayer on behalf of the Ephesians. This prayer is a reminder that God is in relationship with the Christian. Firstly, the nature of prayer itself betrays a relationship between God and man. The fact that Paul can pray—and encourage the Ephesian church to pray—reveals that the Christian enjoys communion with God. Paul alludes to this at the beginning of his prayer when he states, "I bow my knees before the Father" (Eph 3:14). He has access to God.

Secondly, the content of the prayer shows that the Christian is in relationship with God. Paul says his prayer for the Ephesians is that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph 3:17). A. Skevington Wood observes that the verb for "dwell" is in the present continuous tense which indicates that "it is as the Christian keeps trusting ("through faith")

³⁵ Stott, *Ephesians*, 19.

that Christ continues to indwell.”³⁶ He continues, “No static condition is in view here but a maintained experience.”³⁷ The Christian always experiences the indwelling of God. In verse 19, Paul prays that the Ephesians would “be filled with all the fullness of God.” John Stott describes the implications of this clause as “staggering.”³⁸ He writes that this is a prayer for God’s fullness—his perfection—to fill the Christian. Surely, Stott says, this looks forward to our final state of perfection, when the Christian is “filled to capacity, filled up to that fullness of God which human beings are capable of receiving without ceasing to be humans.”³⁹ But the prayer is that the filling would begin to be experienced *now*. This indicates that the Christian is presently able to be filled with God, a staggering thought—and a great encouragement to the lonely Christian.

Fellowship with God: Foundational and Fulfilling

Despite the Fall, people have not been left to themselves. God enabled them to be reunited with himself through the redemptive work of Christ. As a result, the Christian experiences fellowship—rich fellowship—with God. This fellowship with God is foundational for the Christian’s other relationships. It is also absolutely fulfilling and satisfying.

³⁶ A. Skevington Wood, *Ephesians, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1978), 11:51.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Stott, *Ephesians*, 138.

³⁹ Ibid., 138-139.

Fellowship with God Is Foundational

The Christian's fellowship with God is foundational to all his other relationships. After the believer is reconciled to God, he is placed into the community of Christian fellowship with others. It is worth noting that many of the metaphors used by Paul place the individual Christian within the corporate church. The *plural* church all comprise the bride of Christ; *many* stones are placed side by side along the foundation of Jesus; the body whose head is Christ consists of *many* parts; the Christian's adopted family is filled with *others*. These relationships within the church are incredible, but they would fail to exist without Christ. Without Christ, the metaphors become nonsense: a building with no foundation, a brideless groom, a headless body. The relationship with God and Christ is certainly foundational. But the foundation also provides for the possibility of relationship with other people, particularly people within the church. The vertical relationship makes possible a horizontal relationship. Indeed, no horizontal relationship would even exist apart from God's creative work.

Fellowship with God Is Fulfilling

Yet fellowship with God is nevertheless absolutely fulfilling and satisfying. This is implicit behind much of what Paul writes. The catalogue of blessings in the first chapter of Ephesians reveals the blessedness of communion with God. Qualities such as election and adoption and redemption and forgiveness are merely a part of the "every spiritual blessing" given in Christ (Eph 1:3). Similarly, the final greeting of the epistle speaks of the Christian's blessings of peace, love, and grace (Eph 6:23-24). The Christian's relationship to God has given him everything he needs for relational happiness. Elisabeth Elliot writes, "To know

God, or even to begin to know Him, is to know that we are not alone in the universe.”⁴⁰ Even if a man were alone on a remote island, God’s presence guarantees that he is not truly alone.

But a word of caution is in order here. It must be remembered that our fellowship with God will not be entirely enjoyed until we are glorified and in his presence. While many of the Christian’s blessings are enjoyed immediately, the full realization of them will not occur until the believer is in the presence of Christ. Therefore, Christians live in an era of tension between what *is* and what *is not yet*. D. A. Carson echoes the terminology used by many theologians when he states, “The New Testament shows how Christians are squeezed between the ‘already’ of what has arrived and the ‘not yet’ of what is still to come.”⁴¹ This *already-not yet* terminology is important to keep in mind when we consider the believers’ relationship to God.

Ephesians refers to this *already-not yet* distinction. At the beginning of his letter, Paul writes of the Christian already possessing spiritual blessings, but he refers to them as being “in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:3). Similarly, writing of the current status of all believers, Paul says that “[God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6). Christians, because of their union to Christ, are already with Christ in heaven. George Ladd, referencing this verse, observes, “The very phrase describing the status of the believer, ‘in Christ,’ is an eschatological term.”⁴² He explains that there are eschatological events “that have already begun to unfold within history.”⁴³ He continues,

⁴⁰ Elisabeth Elliot, *Loneliness* (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1988), 17.

⁴¹ D. A. Carson, “Partakers of the Age to Come,” in *These Last Days: A Christian View of History*, ed. Richard D Phillips and Gabriel N. E. Fluhner (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 91.

⁴² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 596.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

“The blessings of the Age to Come no longer lie exclusively in the future; they have become objects of the present.”⁴⁴ In fact, the language of “this age” and “the one to come” comes from Ephesians (Eph 1:21). These two idioms occur together only here in the New Testament.⁴⁵ But a broader study of the New Testament reveals that the two ages overlap: “The remarkable thing about NT teaching . . . is that in one sense the ‘age to come’ has already appeared in Christ.”⁴⁶ This is why the Christian is able to experience “every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Eph 1:3) even though its full realization is still in the future.

The imagery of adoption offers a helpful illustration of this reality. Ephesians 1:5 states that Christians have received “adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.” We have seen that this means restored intimacy with God. But this intimacy is not yet fully realized. John Frame’s words are poignant:

Of course, the believer’s adoption exists from the beginning of his regenerate life. But as with many of God’s other blessings, there is in adoption an *already* and a *not yet*. Although we are already sons and daughters of God, we await a higher fulfillment of our adoption. . . . Our sonship is both present and future. We are God’s sons here and now (1 John 3:2), but the creation awaits the full manifestation of that sonship.⁴⁷

Christ’s work has enabled the Christian to be reconciled to God *now*, but the full enjoyment of that relationship is *not yet*.

This *not yet* aspect of the God-man relationship explains why loneliness still exists, even in the church. Lydia Brownback wisely says:

⁴⁴ Ladd, *Theology*, 596.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁴⁶ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 89.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 976–977.

The primary reason we are lonely is that we aren't home yet. God created us for communion with him, and therefore loneliness will be fully eradicated only when we get to heaven.⁴⁸

But even now, the Christian is blessed to know God relationally. He also has a guarantee that this relationship is forever: he has been “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (Eph 1:13-14). The lonely Christian, then, can rest in the surety of God's presence. There is great comfort in the words of a hymn written by George Matheson. Facing the onset of blindness, abandonment by his fiancée, and the departure of his beloved sister and caretaker, Matheson penned words which beautifully remind the Christian of the steadfast nature of God's presence:

O love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Brownback, *Loneliness*, 15.

⁴⁹ George Matheson, *O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go*, *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission, 1990), 708.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAN'S SOLUTION: FELLOWSHIP IN A LOCAL CHURCH

Most Christians, no matter how lonely, will not deny that God ought to be supremely fulfilling and satisfying. Their actual experience may differ from their belief, but they have enough exposure to God's Word to understand that they were designed for a relationship with God. However, it seems to be more difficult for some Christians to grasp the importance of fellowship with other believers. In his book meant to facilitate transparency in relationships, Tim Gardner writes:

Most believers won't question the assertions that we need God and that we need Christ in order to have a relationship with God. But there seems to be a great deal of hesitancy when it comes to admitting that we also need people. . . . After all, isn't God enough? God answers that question with one word: no.¹

Gardner argues that Christians need fellowship with other people. Paul Tournier agrees: "It is the church alone . . . which can answer the world of today's tremendous thirst for community."² Being in community with other people is vital for the Christian.

This project has intended to show that man is designed for both vertical and horizontal relationships. The Bible emphasizes not only man's relationship with God, but his relationship with others. When Adam was alone in the garden, God deemed this to be "not

¹ Tim Alan Gardner, *The Naked Soul: God's Amazing, Everyday Solution to Loneliness* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2004), 12.

² Paul Tournier, *Escape from Loneliness*, trans. John S. Gilmour (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 23.

good” despite his perfect fellowship with God, and provided for him a companion (Gen 2:18). When Elijah bewailed his lonely isolation, God first revealed himself but then also assured Elijah that there were seven thousand prophets with whom he could fellowship (1 Kgs 19).³ When Epaphroditus longed to return to his home church, Paul did not admonish him to find his satisfaction only in God, but sent him back to his home (Phil 2:25-28). Likewise, Jesus surrounded himself with people even though he enjoyed perfect fellowship with God.

Fellowship with other believers, then, is a vital piece of the Christian’s life. In fact, it ought to directly correspond to one’s renewed relationship with God. Mark Dever writes that “many Christians don’t realize how this most important relationship with God necessitates a number of secondary personal relationships—the relationships that Christ establishes between us and his body, the Church.”⁴ These secondary relationships are possible because, through their redemption in Christ, Christians have not only been reconciled to God, but they have been reconciled to others as well.

This message of dual reconciliation is central to the book of Ephesians. So, this chapter will once again explore Ephesians to better understand the necessity of local-church fellowship, particularly for the one who is lonely. But first it would be wise to establish the significance of the *local* manifestation of the church and the error of several unbiblical alternatives.

³ For more on Elijah’s loneliness and the provision of fellowship both vertical and horizontal, see Appendix A.

⁴ Mark Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 22.

Why the Local Church?

The term *local church* refers to a group of Christians who gather at the same location to worship.⁵ While the New Testament uses the word *church* to refer to local, regional, and universal bodies,⁶ the predominant image is of a local gathering. D. A. Carson notes:

There are surprisingly few references to the universal church in the NT. The overwhelming majority of the occurrences of the word ‘church’ refer to local churches.⁷

It seems that the first century Christians emphasized the church in its local setting.

The focus of this project is on the local church rather than the universal church because it is the local church—not the universal church—that enables the believer to rub shoulders with other believers. The Bible indicates that the lonely individual needs real-life face-to-face interaction with other people. The Apostle John’s words in 2 John 12 are telling:

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.⁸

It is only in relational proximity that a person can find true fellowship. And for fellowship that is uniquely Christian, the believer ought to go to God’s gathered church at a local assembly. Thus, our emphasis will be on the local church.

⁵ It should hardly bear mentioning that *church* refers to the people in the church and not to a church building. Also, while the true church is the “invisible church,” it should be noted that the local church is comprised of the “visible church.” That is to say, when a believer is in fellowship with others in a local church, he cannot always be certain that the others constitute the true invisible church. Nevertheless, God calls the believer to participate in the one-anothering of this local church.

⁶ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 1020.

⁷ D. A. Carson, “Why the Local Church Is More Important Than TGC, White Horse Inn, 9Marks, and Maybe Even ETS,” *Themelios* 40, no. 1 (April 2015): 2.

⁸ It should be noted that in this verse, John states that face-to-face contact is better than the technology of his day—in this case, pen and paper.

Unbiblical Alternatives to the Local Church

Because the church offers such sweet fellowship, it is sad that so many self-professed Christians fail to take advantage of it. Instead of dedicating themselves to a local church, these Christians have settled for unbiblical alternatives. It would be wise to analyze these popular alternatives before exploring the life-giving vitality of the local church itself.

The Solitary Christian Life

One of these unbiblical alternatives is the solitary Christian life. These people believe that it is fine to be a Christian without attending a local church. They suppose that their faith is only a personal matter. The ecclesiologist Mark Dever writes, “Many Christians in the West today tend to view their Christianity as a personal relationship with God and not much else.”⁹ These people believe that since they have prayed a prayer of repentance, their eternal situation is secure. So they avoid a local church, thinking that if they want to pursue God more, they can do that on their own initiative: at a local park, on a hike, or in front of a YouTube sermon. A George Barna study in 2005 estimated that 20 million Christian Americans “are bypassing the local church in their efforts to achieve significant spiritual growth.”¹⁰ They assume that a solitary Christian life is fine.

But, Dever notes, this is wrong. He says, “Never does the New Testament conceive of the Christian existing on a prolonged basis *outside* the fellowship of the church.”¹¹ Instead, the New Testament uses images of bodies and marriage and buildings to demonstrate that the

⁹ Dever, *Healthy*, 21–22.

¹⁰ Chris Shirley, “It Takes a Church to Make a Disciple: An Integrative Model of Discipleship for the Local Church,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 50 (2008): 207–208.

¹¹ Dever, *Healthy*, 26.

Christian is part of a collective group. This collective group is the church universal. And, says Dever, “That universal union must be given a living, breathing existence in a local church.”¹² As we study Ephesians below, this should become obvious. John Stott, in his preface to his commentary on Ephesians, says, “Nobody can emerge from a careful reading of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians with a privatized gospel.”¹³ There ought not be a solitary Christian life.

The Parachurch Substitute

Another unbiblical alternative to the local church is the replacing of the local church with involvement in a parachurch organization. Some Christians may believe that their involvement in a Christian organization or ministry is equivalent to involvement in a local church. However, the two are not the same. A parachurch ministry does not have all the qualities which would make it a true church. Edmund Clowney observes, “The limitation of the parachurch group is that it lacks some of the marks of the church.”¹⁴ Carson, in an editorial, argues for the superiority of the local church and uses this same line of reasoning. He says that the local church is “the only body characterized by certain NT-sanctioned identifying ‘marks’ that reflect its essential constitution.”¹⁵ Qualities such as preaching, sacraments, and church discipline must be present for a church to exist.¹⁶ Additionally, and

¹² Dever, *Healthy*, 26.

¹³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God’s New Society, The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. J. A. Motyer and John R. W. Stott (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 9.

¹⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 107.

¹⁵ Carson, "Local Church," 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

particularly applicable to the discussion of loneliness, the local church is concerned with all the facets of the lives of all its members. He goes on to write:

A properly functioning church, precisely because it is concerned for the whole church, is concerned for each member of the church. That includes not only discipline in the ultimate sense, but mutual admonition, the instructions of the church-recognized pastors, the kinds of correction, mutual encouragement, instruction in righteousness, and rebuke that equips the servant of God for every good work.¹⁷

This rubbing of shoulders, this mutual one-anothering, is the result of life together in a local body that is truly a church. Parachurch ministries, though wonderful, can never replace the local church.

Minimal Church Involvement

A final unbiblical replacement to the local church needs only a brief mention—for anyone involved in church ministry it is a familiar phenomenon. The people in mind here are not those who entirely avoid the church but those who minimize the church. These people are glad to be connected to a local congregation, yet keep their distance, showing up for only the weekly worship service—which is itself not a major priority. As we explore Ephesians, we will discover that an in-and-out approach to church life is not the Bible’s expectation. One-anothering cannot happen when believers fail to live in community with other Christians. Instead, there must be an intentional pursuit of fellow believers. Chris Shirley notes, “The local church is composed of disciples who should be investing themselves in the lives of other disciples.”¹⁸ Investing in lives is something that takes time.

The local church needs believers who are committed to it. God’s intention is that the Christian find a satisfying horizontal fellowship within his local body of believers. Indeed,

¹⁷ Carson, “Local Church,” 7.

¹⁸ Shirley, “Disciple,” 212.

the Christian should feel an intrinsic desire to commune with other Christians. William Hendriksen writes, “It stands to reason that, being drawn to God, the recipient of divine grace is in this very process also attracted to his brothers and sisters in the Lord.”¹⁹ It is this local-church attraction to which we now turn.

The Biblical Expectation: Reciprocal Fellowship in a Local Church

When studying the topic of unity in the book of Ephesians, the believers’ unity with God is seen to be foundational. However, the work of unification does not stop there. Ephesians expects that Christians will also be unified with their spiritual brothers and sisters. There is a direct correlation between the two. John Stott observes:

To be “in Christ” is to be personally and vitally united to Christ . . . and thereby also to Christ’s people. For it is impossible to be part of the Body without being related to both the Head and the members.²⁰

God’s restoration of his relationship with his people, then, had a profound effect on how Christians relate to their fellow believer. There is a restored relationship. “A Christian is someone who, by virtue of his reconciliation with God, has been reconciled to God’s people.”²¹ This restored relationship must be valued.

Ephesians uses several images to show the unity that exists in the church—we have already touched upon each of them in chapter three. We will now explore these images more deeply, noting the way in which they present a unity that is intrinsic to each Christian so that

¹⁹ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 4.

²⁰ Stott, *Ephesians*, 22.

²¹ Dever, *Healthy*, 24.

there is little room for lasting loneliness. We will then explore the imperatives of Ephesians and show that they assume the Christian's reciprocal involvement in his church.

What Christians Are: Unified by Christ's Work

Ephesians cannot conceive of a Christian who is outside of fellowship with other Christians. There is no "lone wolf" believer. The work of Christ Jesus is so full and so complete, that every Christian is necessarily brought into the community of faith. Ephesians 1:9-10 makes it clear that God's "purpose" and "plan" is "to unite *all things* in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth."²² This "all things" refers to a consummation—not yet fully realized—of the entire cosmos in Christ; but it certainly includes "the Christian living and the Christian dead, the church on earth and the church in heaven."²³ Indeed, this unity is part of the "mystery" of the New Testament. This mystery, revealed earlier but now seen in full clarity, has to do with "the scope of the Messiah's rule."²⁴ That is, Christ is securing a *universal* reconciliation and it is impossible for anyone who is in Christ to be left out.

Therefore, every Christian is a part of this reconciliation, not just with heaven and with Christ, but also with one another. The images of family and marriage hint at the particular involvement of every Christian with the other. When Paul states that God "predestined us for adoption as sons" (Eph 1:5), it is implied that Christians become part of a family in which they have brothers and sisters. Similarly, the church is collectively declared

²² Emphasis mine.

²³ Stott, *Ephesians*, 44.

²⁴ G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 152.

to be the wife of Christ in Ephesians 5:23-31. That there is only one wife, not multiple wives, hints at a unity within the church.

But Ephesians does more than merely hint at unity in the church. It states it in bold terms. We will examine three images which reveal that the Christian is expected to become an active member of the church. These three images are the Jew-Gentile reconciliation, the house/temple imagery, and the body of Christ metaphor.

Jew-Gentile Reconciliation

The church in Ephesus, like many New Testament churches, needed instruction on how Jews and Gentiles were to relate to one another in their local assemblies. Prior to this, God had dealt primarily with the Jewish nation of Israel. Gentiles were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise” (Eph 2:12). “But,” Paul writes to the gentile Ephesians, “now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13). To what, exactly, have they been brought near? To Christ, certainly, but also to the Jewish people. Paul goes on to write that Jesus “has made us [Jew and Gentile] both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14). The next verse reiterates that Jesus has created “one new man in place of the two” (Eph 2:15). It is remarkable that Jews and Gentiles, once so hostile to one another, have been united through Christ’s blood! The message is clear: those that enter the true church of God have been unified into one entity.

In the next chapter of Ephesians, Paul refers to this inclusion of Gentiles into the church body as a “mystery” (Eph 3:6). G. K. Beale and Benjamin Gladd, writing on the New

Testament use of “mystery,” argue convincingly that the “mystery”²⁵ is not that Gentiles will be included in geographic Israel, but that they will be included in Christ who is “the embodiment of true Israel.”²⁶ This union in Christ means that what unites the church is not any geographic or ethnic marking, but simply its inclusion in Christ. The wonderful mystery—now revealed in full—was that one could belong to the church “without taking on the covenantal markers of Israel, which formerly they were required to do to be considered Israelites according to the Old Testament perspective.”²⁷ In the church there is not division, but unity. Beale and Gladd summarize in this way:

Christ is now the only “tag” with which one needs to be identified. This is why Ephesians 2:15-18 speaks of Christ’s death uniting Jew and Gentile into “one new man.” . . . Jew and Gentile are one because they are now incorporated and identified with Christ, the Israelite Messiah who represents them.²⁸

The Jew-Gentile reconciliation exhibits that Christ has united the various members of the body of Christ so that unity is the default mode of the church. No Christian is unconnected.

The House/Temple Metaphor

In a similar way, Paul uses the imagery of a house or temple to show the intrinsic unity of the church. In fact, immediately after discussing the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, Paul uses this imagery to show what the church now looks like. He says that Gentiles are now “members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being

²⁵ Remember from chapter three that a “mystery” is “the full disclosure of something that was to a significant extent hidden.” Beale and Gladd, *Hidden*, 158.

²⁶ Beale and Gladd, *Hidden*, 164.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:19-21). All Christians are included in this building structure and are cemented together by Christ’s work. The reference to Christ as the cornerstone is a reminder that this unity is possible only *in Christ*. John Stott warns, “Unless it is constantly and securely related to Christ, the church’s unity will disintegrate and its growth either stop or run wild.”²⁹ But in Christ, the Christian, like a stone in a building, supports and is supported by others who are around him.

The Body of Christ Metaphor

Perhaps the most explicit picture of Christian unity is the body of Christ metaphor. Paul uses this metaphor extensively.³⁰ In both Ephesians 1:22-23 and Ephesians 5:23, he describes Christ as “the head” and the church as “his body.” Ephesians 3:6 refers to Gentiles and Jews being made “members of the same body.” But the heaviest use of this metaphor occurs in chapter four. Stott observes that this is “one of the two classic New Testament passages on the subject of church unity.”³¹ In verse 4 Paul states that there is “one body” and in verse 12 he refers to the church as “the body of Christ.”³² Then, in verses 15-16, Paul writes, “We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” The image

²⁹ Stott, *Ephesians*, 108.

³⁰ Of course, the metaphor of the church as a body is not found only in Ephesians. It also emerges in Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 1:13, 1 Corinthians 6:15, 1 Corinthians 12:25-26, Colossians 1:18, and Colossians 1:24.

³¹ Stott, *Ephesians*, 147. The other passage to which he is referring is John 17.

³² The word “church” is never used in this passage, but it is clear that “the body” refers to the church. For a brief discussion, see James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 127.

of the church as a body is meant to show the unity of the church. “It is clear as daylight and universally admitted,” says William Hendriksen, “that this section, especially its opening verses, emphasizes unity.”³³

But the use of body imagery also highlights the individuality of each member in the church. Not every part of a body is the same. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul emphasizes that “there are many parts, yet one body” (1 Cor 12:20) so that Christians “are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27). Similarly, in Ephesians 4, Paul notes the individuality of church members: “And he [God] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” (Eph 4:11). There is a diversity of gifts which mirror the diversity of church members. And yet, the goal of these gifts is unity. They are given “to equip the saints of the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12).³⁴ James Montgomery Boice notes that the purpose of these gifts is “to serve Christ’s people, so that the body itself might become increasingly unified in faith and mature in practice.”³⁵ The body of Christ, then, includes many individual members who are united through Christ so that they can work toward a common goal: the building up of the church to the glory of God. No Christian is excused from this responsibility. A member divorced from a body is an impossibility.

³³ Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 181.

³⁴ It should be noted that translators and commentators have differed in their interpretation of this text. Some follow the Authorized Version in allowing verse 12 to contain three ministries performed by the church leaders listed in verse 11—equipping saints, doing ministry, and edifying the body of Christ. But many—and I agree with them—argue that verse 12 conveys a two-tiered ministry: the church leaders equip the saints who then do the work of ministry which builds up the church. This fits well with the overall argument that each part of the body is “working properly” (Eph 4:16). Hendriksen, Stott, and Boice all argue this interpretation. See Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 197–98; Stott, *Ephesians*, 166; Boice, *Ephesians*, 140.

³⁵ Boice, *Ephesians*, 138.

Each of the above images—the Jew-Gentile reconciliation, the house/temple imagery, and the body of Christ metaphor—has shown that the Christian is undeniably bound to his fellow Christian. He cannot be alone. Because he is united to Christ, he must receive all the blessings that come with that, and those blessings include the church. It is impossible to be a stone in a building without interacting with other stones; it is impossible to be a part of a body without being connected to other body parts. The Christian is a piece of a unified entity: the church.

What Christians Must Be: Unified in Reciprocal One-Anothering

It has been established that Christians are unified to others within the church of Christ. But a discerning examination of Ephesians will reveal that the members of the church do not always *act* unified. Therefore, Paul fills half of his letter with admonishments, instructing the Ephesians to do those things which express love and unity. Commentators agree that while the first half of Ephesians consists of exposition and indicatives, the second half consists of exhortations and imperatives.³⁶ This means that Paul devotes three chapters (Eph 4-6) to the task of encouraging the Ephesian Christians to behave properly. Included in this are the encouragements to be unified (Eph 4:1-16) and to practice godly one-anothering within their local church (Eph 4:17–5:20).

So which is it? Are Christians unified or do they need to work toward unification? The answer: both! The Ephesians are told to be what they are, to exhibit what is already true of them. Hendriksen summarizes this seeming contradiction this way: “the church *is*

³⁶ Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 63; Stott, *Ephesians*, 146.

spiritually one; therefore, *let it be* spiritually one!”³⁷ Really, the Ephesians are told to be visibly what they already are invisibly by virtue of their unification in Christ.

Even the Christians’ involvement in a local church shows this phenomenon in practice. Here, Christians connect themselves to other flesh-and-blood Christians so as to be connected physically just as they have already been connected spiritually. And once Christians are in the church, they must continue to work toward exhibiting the unification that in fact they already have in Christ.

On a practical level, working toward unification means loving and serving other people. A phrase which aptly describes these actions is “one-anothering.” This phrase translates several Greek words and is used at least one hundred times in the New Testament.³⁸ In Ephesians, Paul uses it only five times, but the *concept* of one-anothering fills the final three chapters. Again and again, Christians are told to perform certain acts of love and service toward one another. They are to love (4:2), speak the truth (4:25), not steal (4:28), speak encouragingly (4:29), be kind (4:32), be sexually pure (5:3), and encourage in song (5:19). They are to exhibit love and submission in their marriages, parenting, and employment (5:21–6:9). They are to pray for one another (6:19).³⁹ There is a clear expectation that Christians will greatly involve themselves in the lives of others within their local church. This one-anothering is essential if Christians are going to be in practice what they already are in Christ.

³⁷ Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 182.

³⁸ These words include *allelon*, *heautou*, *allos pros allon*, *allos . . . heteros*, and *hos men . . . hos de*. See W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William Jr. White, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 446–447.

³⁹ And this list does not attempt to be comprehensive! There are far more imperatives that speak to how the Christian should relate to others.

Reciprocal One-Anothering

Reciprocal one-anothering is a central tenet of this project. In approaching the topic of loneliness from a Christian perspective, this thesis has asserted that the believer was created for fellowship with other people and that this community must be found in a local church. It is in the local church that Christians rub shoulders with other people—and these are people to whom they have already been united through the work of Christ. But it is important that we emphasize the reciprocal nature of this one-anothering. Christians are expected to both give and receive. They cannot approach the church as though it only exists to fulfil their personal desire for community. Instead, they must be prepared to give as well as receive. Lydia Brownback, writing about the local church, says that “it is there that we are meant to serve and be served by others.”⁴⁰ Tim Gardner agrees:

God does not put you in relationships just so you can have your own needs met. He wants you to enrich the lives of others. . . . You are the solution to their loneliness just as they are called to chase loneliness from your life.⁴¹

The one-anothering of a local church must be reciprocal.

This reciprocity is clearly seen in Ephesians. Firstly, it is implicit. In all the exhortations given in the final three chapters of Ephesians, it is understood that the command is for the entire church. The letter is written “to the saints who are in Ephesus” (Eph 1:1), that is, it is written to all Christians in the local church, not just a segment. Everyone is to practice truth-telling or kindness or submission. It is never one-way. But secondly, this reciprocity is explicitly stated. Ephesians 4:12 says that God has gifted men “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” It should be noted that all Christians—

⁴⁰ Lydia Brownback, *Finding God in My Loneliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 154.

⁴¹ Gardner, *Naked Soul*, 3.

all “the saints”—have been equipped to do ministry within the body of Christ. No one is excluded.

And so, mutual one-anothering must happen within the local church. Mark Dever gets it right when he says that “a true Christian builds his life into the lives of other believers through the concrete fellowship of a local church.”⁴² He goes on to point out the reciprocal nature of this relationship:

He [the Christian] knows he has not yet “arrived.” He’s still fallen and needs the accountability and instruction of that local body of people called the church. And they need him.⁴³

A Christian sick with loneliness must not enter the doors of a church only because he feels needy for companionship. This would be to receive only half of his medicine. Instead, he must look for ways to serve others within the body of Christ, remembering that “whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered” (Prov 11:25). He must both give and receive.

Requirements for One-Anothering

If Christians are called to practice reciprocal one-anothering, what should that look like? Does it have to be in the context of a local church? Or can one-anothering happen via Facebook, text messaging, or written letters? Again, Ephesians offers some answers. We will find that one-anothering requires the following four things: presence, love, vulnerability, and action.

⁴² Dever, *Healthy*, 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

One-Anothering Requires Presence

Firstly, one-anothering requires presence, at least to some degree. Long-distance one-anothering, whether it be via postal service or via internet, ultimately lacks certain qualities that emerge only face-to-face. We are already familiar with the Apostle John's remark in 2 John 12:

I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

Paul also expressed his desire to fellowship with people in person. In Romans 15:23-24 he writes, "I have longed for many years to come to you"; his reason is that he hopes to "enjoy your company for a while." On the occasion of writing to the Ephesians, Paul was unable to visit them because he was under arrest in Rome.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he thought it wise to send a substitute: "So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus...will tell you everything. I have sent him for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your heart" (Eph 6:21-22). Paul did not depend on his words alone to encourage the Ephesians; he sent Tychicus as well. In-person encouragement is somehow more meaningful than written encouragement.

While some one-anothering can be done by alternate means, other one-anothering requires face-to-face contact. For example, in Ephesians 5:19 Paul tells the Ephesians that they must be "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart." This is a reference to gathered worship on the Lord's Day.⁴⁵ Paul assumes that the Ephesians are gathering for corporate worship and that

⁴⁴ E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957), 19.

⁴⁵ Stott, *Ephesians*, 205.

one-anothering will be a part of that. Perhaps one of the biggest problems with people's unbiblical alternatives to the local church—remaining solitary, substituting the parachurch, or involving oneself only minimally in the church—is that they miss the face-to-face one-anothering that is offered by the local church. And perhaps this is why the author of Hebrews encourages the church to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Heb 10:24-25). How can there be “love and good works” without intentional proximity?

One-Anothering Requires Love

But presence in the same location is not enough. There must also be relationship. There must be love. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is that they would be “rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17). He begins his exhortations in chapter four by urging them to walk in a worthy manner, “bearing with one another in love” (Eph 4:2). Then, in chapter five, he encourages them to “walk in love” (Eph 5:2). Love involves the extension of oneself toward another person, the very opposite of insulating oneself in isolated loneliness. John Stott defines love this way: “love is constructively to seek the welfare of others and the good of the community.”⁴⁶ In thousands of different ways—many of them recorded in Ephesians⁴⁷—the Christian is called to extend himself in love toward other believers.

One-Anothering Requires Vulnerability

One-anothering also requires vulnerability. Just as the Christian extends himself to others, he must also open himself to the reach of others. Ronald Rolheiser observes that “the

⁴⁶ Stott, *Ephesians*, 149.

⁴⁷ For example, Ephesians 4:25–5:4 is packed with practical exhortations for living in community with others.

antidote to loneliness, the path to intimacy and togetherness, lies in vulnerability and nakedness of spirit.”⁴⁸ A good representation of this vulnerability is found in Ephesians 4:25: “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” Paul is speaking to Christians who are “members one of another” and he tells them to “speak the truth,” to be open and honest. It is only within the context of this vulnerability that Christians can truly do the work of one-anothering. How can a person be encouraged or admonished—how can he receive the proper prayers or scriptural encouragements—if he has not been forthcoming about his true condition? Vulnerability is crucial.

One-Anothering Requires Action

Finally, one-anothering requires action. The one-anothering commands are commands *to do* something. When Paul tells the Ephesians to “walk in love” (Eph 5:2), he immediately shows that this will necessarily affect how they act and so he proceeds to outline rules for holy living (Eph 5:3-20). Christians who attend their church gatherings and are open and loving towards others, but who do not actively *do* anything, are not truly one-anothering. They must speak. They must act. William Hendriksen writes that unity in the church exists “so that the church can be built up, and can thus be a blessing to the world.”⁴⁹ Therefore, he continues, “In order to accomplish the tasks assigned, believers should co-operate, each contributing his share to the inner growth of the church.”⁵⁰ The church will grow through one-anothering only inasmuch as the individual members actually speak and act.

⁴⁸ Rolheiser, *Restless Heart*, 79.

⁴⁹ Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 182.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The Results of Reciprocal One-Anothering

What will happen if a local church truly engages in reciprocal one-anothering within their fellowship? Certainly, the lonely Christians will find themselves in community with others. But, perhaps even greater than this, the church will display the gospel to the watching world. One-anothering cannot happen in isolation. It happens in the real-life world of hurt and unintention and disloyalty. But these broken relationships offer the church the opportunity to display, through one-anothering, the life-giving message of the gospel. Mark Dever writes, “The church gives a visual presentation of the gospel when we forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us, when we commit to one another as Christ has committed to us, and when we lay down our lives for one another as Christ laid down his life for us.”⁵¹ And the church’s impact is no small thing. It is huge. Paul posits that the church’s unity has a universal impact when he writes that it is through the church that “the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10)! Edward Welch, meditating on this verse, wrote:

The church is being watched and studied by spiritual powers, and it is through the church corporate that the great riches of God’s wisdom are being announced. What is the pinnacle of this wisdom? That God has demonstrated his glory by bringing a motley group to himself and uniting them in Christ.⁵²

What an amazing truth! Our reconciled relationships, both vertical and horizontal, are bearing witness to the wisdom and mercies of our God!

⁵¹ Dever, *Healthy*, 29.

⁵² Edward T. Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 203.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The Bible clearly addresses both the causes and solutions to the problem of loneliness. The truths found in Genesis and Ephesians hold deep implications for today's church. If indeed it is Christ's atoning work that can restore the lonely, the church must be intentional about directing isolated individuals to Christ and to his reconciliatory work on the cross. The cross becomes man's greatest hope for community and belonging. The cross reconciles lonely people to God and then necessarily places them in fellowship with other people. Jesus understood the importance of both these relationships when he taught on man's greatest commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.¹

Jesus stated that all of man's duties are summed up by man's love in two directions: vertical and horizontal. It is the church's duty, then, to cultivate loving relationships in these two directions. If this is done well, the church can stem the tide of increased loneliness.

Encouraging the Vertical

The primary duty of the church—in regard to loneliness—is to encourage people to find satisfaction in their union with God. The first and greatest commandment according to

¹ Matt 22:37-39

Jesus is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Matt 22:37). Man was designed to be in relationship with God, and the emptiness of loneliness ought to remind us that we need to be filled with the fullness of Christ. Lydia Brownback writes, “God created human beings with a capacity for loneliness so that we would yearn for and find our all in him.”² Therefore, the church would be remiss if it failed to point lonely people to Christ Jesus.

A church can easily emphasize the wrong thing. Many churches seek to solve problems such as loneliness by organizing more programs. The widows and widowers are directed to a social group for the elderly. The unmarried twenty-somethings are given a College and Career hangout. The recently-divorced are sent to a support group in the church basement. These programs are good—even vital—but they can easily distract from what is most important: one’s relationship with God.

The church must constantly cultivate the spiritual lives of its congregants. Sunday worship must be prioritized. Spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading and prayer must be encouraged. Paul exemplifies this in his letter to the Ephesians. When he prays for them, he focuses on their knowledge of their relationship with God. He prays that God “may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3:16-17). Paul desires that the Ephesians understand just how amazing this relationship is. He goes on to pray that they “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19). Paul’s prayer is that all Christians would experience the fullness of

² Lydia Brownback, *Finding God in My Loneliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 14.

their relationship with God. Today's church must be winsome in encouraging the same pursuit.

Fostering the Horizontal

It is also imperative that the church foster horizontal relationships within the local congregation. In particular, the church must be aware of those within its walls who are susceptible to loneliness and must know how to help them. The broad, secular world is already aware of the plight of loneliness. It has already discovered that there are many health benefits to being socially connected. Susan Pinker writes, "Our social ties influence our sense of satisfaction with life, our cognitive skills, and how resistant we are to infections and chronic disease."³ Perhaps the secular world has identified the loneliness-problem with greater accuracy than has the church. But it is the church that offers a robust understanding of why loneliness exists and how the local church can assist the lonely. Many local churches fail to do this well. They would be wise to implement the following three suggestions.

First, churches must *pursue the lonely*. People that are lonely need to be pursued: some intentionally remain isolated; others *do* desire fellowship but resent the fact that they themselves have to do the pursuing. Certainly this should not be; the lonely must be sought out. Jesus did this. He spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). He said that his purpose of coming into the world was "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus pursued the lonely; the church must do the same. In Acts, the church is seen ministering to widows (Acts 6:1-3). James encourages Christians "to visit orphans and widows in their

³ Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect: How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make Us Healthier, Happier, and Smarter* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 9. This paper does not have space to relate the many scientific and anthropological studies which have shown that people are hardwired for relationships and that their happiness and health is directly related to their social-connectedness. These studies are wonderful proof that God designed us for community.

affliction” (Jas 1:27). When the church failed to minister to Paul in his loneliness, Paul’s disappointment is evident: “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!” (2 Tim 4:16). The church today should fear that it might be charged “guilty” for failing to pursue the lonely.

Secondly, churches must *create face-to-face opportunities for fellowship*. In a world that is increasingly connected through technology and social media, the church must be careful that it does not trade face-to-face communication for digital interaction. The temptation is there: it is often easier to send a text or email than it is to knock on someone’s door or sit down for coffee. But the absence of embodied presence creates a lesser interaction. In Paul’s epistles, he regularly expresses his desire to be with the Christians to whom he is writing. “I long to be with you,” he says (Rom 1:11, 1 Thess 2:17, 1 Thess 3:10, 2 Tim 1:4). Actual physical presence makes for a different interaction. In his book on how technology is influencing Christians, Tony Reinke writes:

Not *everything* in true fellowship can be typed out on phone screens and sent at the speed of light through fiber-optic cables. This is the reality of communication. . . . The Christian’s challenge is to love not in tweets and texts only, but even more in deeds and physical presence.⁴

Obviously, ministry to physical needs can only happen with physical presence. But, as Reinke later observes, physical presence also allows one person to honestly know another: “Eye-to-eye authenticity is the key to empathy, humility, and trust in our relationships.”⁵ The local church, then, must create many opportunities for its congregants to interact in face-to-face encounters. Each church should consider how to cultivate an environment where

⁴ Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Cell Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

people—instead of rolling in and out of church—linger and talk and fellowship and where they—instead of remaining isolated at home—regularly practice hospitality and ministry.

Finally, churches must *encourage reciprocity in one-anothering*. Many Christians are familiar with the adage that twenty percent of the congregation does eighty percent of the work. There is likely much truth to this, but it should not be. The work of one-anothering is expected of all Christians, not just a select few. When it comes to loneliness, there can be an expectation that the lonely individual needs to *receive* more than *give*. But this fails to account for the fact that every Christian is called to participate in one-anothering; every Christian is called to *give*. The lonely Christian, then, cannot throw a pity party for himself, grumbling that no one ever fellowships with him. His duty is to extend himself. Paul's instructions in Ephesians offer a helpful insight here. Paul tells any former thief to do "honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph 4:28). Instead of stealing, give to others. Similarly, the lonely, instead of grasping for attention from others, should extend themselves toward others in one-anothering. Reciprocal one-anothering can only happen as each church member pursues the others. The lonely are not exempt from this.

Are the lonely willing to exert the energy needed to extend themselves toward others?
Or do they prefer the *idea* of fellowship without being willing to pursue it themselves?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idolized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by

others and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands set up by their own law, and judge one another and God accordingly.⁶

The church needs to be full of people, lonely or otherwise, who are willing to pursue others, engage them in face-to-face conversations, and do the rewarding work of one-anothering.

God Uses Even Loneliness

Loneliness should never be treated lightly. It is real and it is painful. But it is also one of God's many tools for growing his children. Loneliness *can* be good. Moses was prepared for his ministry through forty lonely years in the wilderness (Exod 2-3). Similarly, Jesus spent forty days in the desert before beginning his ministry (Matt 4:1-2). Elijah's loneliness drove him to cry out to God (1 Kgs 19). Paul's loneliness allowed him to discover that "the Lord stood by me and strengthened me" (2 Tim 4:17). Loneliness provides an opportunity for growth. It forces Christians to examine their hearts, their own self-centered motivations and desires. It also allows Christians to lean on God and seek the warmth of knowing him. Without loneliness, they might never have realized they were thirsty for God.

God also allows loneliness to be a touchstone with the unsaved world outside the church. Many non-Christians are seeking meaningful friendships and relationships. The church ought to capitalize on this! The church should advertise to its neighbors, perhaps literally but also in words and deeds, that it offers truly meaningful community and fellowship. The editors of *Christianity Today* write:

One wonders what it would take for the church . . . to hold equal fascination for our lonely culture. To draw our culture to Christ, evangelical churches spend enormous amounts of money on slick marketing materials, enormous amounts of creative energy crafting "authentic" worship, and enormous amounts of intellectual capital on postmodernizing the faith. We're not convinced these strategies get to the heart of our cultural malaise. Perhaps another strategy is in order. What if church leaders mounted

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Muller and Albrecht Schönherr, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 36.

a campaign to encourage each of their members to become friends, good friends, with one unchurched person this year?⁷

Many unchurched people are sick with loneliness. The church holds the remedy. This is an amazing opportunity to reach the unsaved.

One truth that might especially resonate with the unsaved is the fact that Jesus himself experienced alone-ness, being distanced from all other people. He faced Satan's temptations alone in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-2). When he was about to be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, none of his disciples labored with him in prayer (Matt 26:40). During his trial and crucifixion he was rejected and denied, even by some of his closest friends (Matt 26:56, 70). Why did Jesus, the son of God, allow himself to be "rejected by men" (1 Pet 2:4)? Why did he minister to his own people, even though "his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11)? Why go through all that? The answer is incredible. He did it so that he could redeem a people for himself! He experienced loneliness on the cross so that we could experience fellowship with him. He was forsaken by the Father so that we could be adopted into the heavenly family. He bruised his heel so that we could become members of his body. He was lonely so that we never need to be lonely again!

Throned upon the awful tree,
King of grief, I watch with thee.
Darkness veils thine anguished face:
None its lines of woe can trace:
None can tell what pangs unknown
Hold thee silent and alone.

Silent through those three dread hours,
Wrestling with the evil pow'rs,
Left alone with human sin,
Gloom around thee and within,
Till th'appointed time is nigh,
Till the Lamb of God may die.

⁷ Editors of Christianity Today, ed., "Look at All the Lonely People," *Christianity Today* 50, no. 11 (November 2006): 31.

Hark, that cry that peals aloud
Upward through the whelming cloud!
Thou, the Father's only Son,
Thou, his own Anointed One,
Thou dost ask him—can it be?—
"Why hast thou forsaken me?"

Lord, should fear and anguish roll
Darkly o'er my sinful soul,
Thou, who once wast thus bereft
That thine own might never be left,
Teach me by that bitter cry
In the gloom to know thee nigh.⁸

⁸ John Ellerton, *Throned upon the Awful Tree, Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission, 1990), 250.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: THE CHURCH HOLDS THE SOLUTION

In this project, loneliness has been presented as a problem, but not a problem that is without hope of resolution. In chapter one, we explored both the ubiquity of the problem and the various attempts at solving it. It became clear that the problem of loneliness is only growing worse. Statistics show that Americans are increasingly lonely; much of this is due to the breakdown of families, the degeneration of societal communities, and the lackluster effects of increased technology. Not even the church is immune to loneliness. While many studies have proven that Americans are indeed increasingly lonely, these studies have failed to provide an adequate solution. The best that secular literature can offer is the hope of improved technology or of stronger neighborhood communities. While Christian literature does better, pointing the Christian to God, most of it fails to show the role of the local church in helping the lonely. This project sought to prove that it is the church that holds the best remedy for loneliness because the church understands the root causes of loneliness and is therefore well-positioned to propose the right solutions. Those solutions must include the restoration—through the work of Christ—of relationships both vertical and horizontal.

We next employed a robust biblical theology to discover the causes of and solutions to man's loneliness. In chapter two, our survey of Genesis 1-3 revealed that man was designed for relationships both vertical and horizontal. Adam was created to be in relationship with his Creator. He was also given Eve because it was not good for him to be

alone. But Genesis 1-3 also reveals that the Fall ruined these relationships, causing a “double alienation”¹ wherein man was estranged from both God and others. Man was then in a position where loneliness was likely, even expected.

But God did not leave man in a world of broken relationships or lonely isolation. He provided reconciliation. In chapters three and four we studied Ephesians to discover how these relationships—both vertical and horizontal—can be restored. The key is Christ’s work of reconciliation, bringing redeemed sinners into union with himself and then uniting them to one another in the church. Chapter three focused on the Christian’s vertical reconciliation with God. The book of Ephesians confirms that man was created for relationship with God but that this relationship was broken by sin. It also offers the glorious news of restored relationship. Ephesians is rich with images of reconciliation: Christians’ union with God is like marriage or adoption or being built into a temple or being a body part connected to the head. All of this is possible because the Christian is “in Christ.” This renewed fellowship with God is foundational to the Christian’s life and is absolutely fulfilling.

Chapter four looked again at Ephesians, this time to understand Christ’s work in reconciling horizontal relationships. Ephesians shows clearly that Christians are reconciled to one another. Paul uses powerful images to show the extent of this reconciliation: Christians are members of the same body; they are stones in the same building. This is possible only because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Christians, then, must strive to *be what they are*. In the second half of Ephesians, Paul instructs the local church to build up the body of Christ through one-anothering. This one-anothering requires presence, love, vulnerability,

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God’s New Society, The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. J. A. Motyer and John R. W. Stott (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 90.

and action. Every Christian is called to do this, and so the one-anothering ought to be reciprocal, including both giving and receiving.

Chapter five deals with the practical implications of these truths, particularly for the local church. The local church stands in a pivotal position. The church holds the best solutions for the problem of loneliness. First, the church can cultivate people's relationships with God. The lonely must be encouraged to find satisfaction in union with their heavenly Father. Secondly, the church can foster reciprocal relationships with others. To do this, the church must intentionally pursue the lonely, create opportunities for face-to-face fellowship, and encourage true reciprocity in one-anothering. If this is done well, lonely Christians will find themselves folded into the wonderful fellowship of the body of Christ.

The problem of loneliness is not insurmountable. God has given us everything needed for restored relationships. He has given us the reconciling blood of his son. He has also given us the warmth of belonging the fellowship of the church. May God use his church to reach the lonely not only in America but across the globe!

APPENDIX A

THE LONELINESS OF ELIJAH

The most startling story of loneliness in the Old Testament might be that of Elijah in 1 Kings 19. This project did not have a fitting place for a discussion of this story. However, this passage in 1 Kings was very influential in shaping my thinking for this thesis, particularly the way in which it shows man's need for both vertical and horizontal relationships. For this reason, I have included a brief discussion of the Elijah story here in Appendix A.

The story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 reveals that loneliness is a harsh reality for many people, even for biblical saints. It also reveals God's twofold provision of fellowship: with both himself and others. In chapter 18, Elijah had been faithful in his service to God, even successfully challenging hundreds of Baal prophets at Mount Carmel. But in chapter 19, Elijah is alone. Knowing that Queen Jezebel desires to kill him, he has wisely removed himself to the wilderness. He bemoans what has become of Israel and asks that the Lord take away his life (1 Kgs 19:4). These are the feelings of one who feels isolated.

When God confronts him, Elijah says, "The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, *and I, even I only, am left*, and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kgs 19:10).¹ Elijah felt that he was the only remaining faithful Israelite. God's response is twofold. First, he reveals himself to

¹ Emphasis mine.

Elijah in “the sound of a low whisper.” God reveals himself as relational. Dale Ralph Davis notes that this whisper reveals that “Yahweh is present especially in his word.”² God is there; and he is one who speaks words. Elijah is given a reminder that God’s sweet care is still available. But Elijah repeats his same complaint; he still feels lonely. Perhaps this is because he was made for relationship in two directions, not one. And so God gives his second response. He tells Elijah that he is not actually alone, isolated from other people. God says that he has reserved “seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (1 Kgs 19:18). God is telling Elijah that there still remains a remnant—a community of Israelites—with whom he can fellowship. He is not alone.

This story highlights profound truth. Man may become lonely, but God makes provision for the lonely. God draws to Elijah’s attention that he has the very relationships for which he was designed: he has a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with his fellow man. Both are a wonderful resource for God’s saints.

² Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly* (Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2002), 264.

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