

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreek.church)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, December 11, 2016

John 1:14 “A Church with Relational Intentionality”

Intro. Our God is a relational God. Yet the Deist believes that God is the Creator, but that He is distant; He is remote. He started everything, but is not involved in our world. The Bible gives a very different picture of God, especially in the New Testament.

My Scripture verse this morning ties in with the Christmas season and also the topic of my message today. Here we see that God took an amazing step to become even more relational with us. His Son, called here “the Word,” became flesh and dwelt among us. God became incarnate in human flesh when Jesus was conceived and born in Bethlehem. God’s Son walked among us, spoke to us, and ministered to the multitudes with love and compassion. He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah as noted by Matthew in his gospel. He said in Mt. 1:23, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, ‘God with us.’” He was truly God with us.

Jesus is the model for His people. Just as He came and dwelt among the people He sought to save, even so we are to seek to establish relationships with those who need Christ, and especially with those who are seeking a relationship with God. Sinners are estranged from God by their sin. 2 Cor. 5:19 says, “that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.” We are to help others enter into a relationship with God, made possible by the sacrificial death of Jesus.

So this morning as part of our series on becoming a transformational church, we will deal with the topic of relational intentionality. God is a relational God, and we are to be a relational people with one another as believers, and to unbelievers as well.

I want to start with an examination of our opening Scripture text where we see our first truth:

I. GOD BRIDGED THE RELATIONSHIP DEVIDE

Because God is holy and man is sinful there is a big gap between us. So the first step in bridging that gap is found in our text. Verse 14 says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....” The Lord God in infinite love resolved that He Himself would bridge the gap between God and man. God left heaven and came to us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. What is even more amazing is that God actually became one of us. He did not cease to be God, but He became Man. He became human. His body was not a mere illusion. John and the other disciples each had a personal experience that convinced them of the reality of the body of Jesus (1 John 1:1-2).¹ His Deity, though veiled, was never laid aside; His humanity, though sinless, was a real humanity. Truly Jesus is “Immanuel”, God with us.

Furthermore, v.14 says He “dwelt” among us. That word can be literally translated, “tabernacled” among us. It is based on the word for “tent.” The word makes us think of the

¹ In his Gospel, John points out that Jesus was weary (John 4:6) and thirsty (John 4:7). He groaned within (John 11:33) and openly wept (John 11:35). On the cross, He thirsted (John 19:28), died (John 19:30), and bled (John 19:34). After His resurrection, He proved to Thomas and the other disciples that He still had a real body (John 20:24-29), howbeit, a glorified body – Wiersbe.

tabernacle of the Old Testament. There were 4 functions of the tabernacle that are fulfilled in Jesus: 1) The tabernacle was God's earthly dwelling place among the people of Israel. So it is with Christ (v.14). Jesus left heaven and took upon Himself a tent of flesh, so that He could dwell among men. Col. 2:9 says, "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." For 33 years God dwelt among men in the person of Jesus Christ, and He made it possible for Him to dwell among us forever! 2) Also the tabernacle was a meeting place for God and men. It was termed "the tent of meeting" (cf. Ex. 25:21-22). If an Israelite desired to draw near unto God, He had to come to the door of the tabernacle. Even so Jesus is the door (Jn. 10:1-9), the way to the Father (Jn. 14:6) and our Mediator (I Tim. 2:5). Through the sacrificial death of Jesus we can meet with God, and have fellowship with Him. That leads to the next truth: 3) The tabernacle was the place of sacrifice. Jesus took on flesh, and in the tabernacle of His flesh He would offer up Himself on the cross so that we could become reconciled to God. 4) In the tabernacle the glory of God was manifested. Even so, the last of v.14 says, "we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

We need to follow the example of Jesus. Our missionaries do that when they leave the United States, and dwell among the people of other countries. We need to support them with our Lottie Moon offerings. We also need to be missionaries in our own community. We gather to worship, pray, learn God's Word, and fellowship. But we must also go out to the people of our community and dwell among them; build relationships, share the love of God, and share the good news of the gospel. I will talk more about that later.

We had about 25 volunteers of all ages who did that yesterday when we went to Ettrick Elementary school. We served breakfast to 15 families and others, worked with their children in recreation, crafts, and music. Some of our volunteers went with their parents to buy Christmas presents for their kids, who would not have been able to do so without hundreds of dollars in contributions. Many of our volunteers were very intentional about talking with the parents and children. Volunteers help wrap presents. How can the church reach people for Christ without building bridges and becoming incarnational?

So establishing the Scriptural basis for being relational as a church, I now want to share some principles from our book, *Transformational Church*.² I want to begin with the fact that:

II. DISCIPLESHIP SHOULD BE RELATIONAL

Tony Stoltzfus said this, "We were never meant to live the Christian life alone. Christianity is an interdependent, community-oriented faith. And yet when we set out to improve our prayer life, or deal with our anger problem, or ... become a better father; most of the time we work on it completely alone."³ Tim Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan said this, "There is no way you will be able to grow spiritually apart from a deep involvement in a community of other believers. You can't live the Christian life without a band of Christian friends, without a family of believers in which you find a place."⁴

This is based on Scripture. Eph. 3:18-19 says, "may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — to know the love of Christ which

² Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2010).

³ *Leadership Coaching: The Discipline, Skills, and Heart of a Christian Church* (BookSurge Publishing, 2005), quoted in *Transformational Church*, p.101.

⁴ Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008), 124-25). quoted in *Transformational Church*, p.114.

passes knowledge....” We best learn the great truths of God with other believers. Then Paul said in Romans 1:11-12, “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established — that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.” Jesus spent at least 3 years living with His apostles, showing them daily how to live and please God. His process of discipleship was very relational. So don’t be a “lone ranger” Christian. Discipleship takes place with other believers. So let’s look a little deeper into this subject of discipleship. First:

A. Discipleship Does Involve Teaching – I’m afraid that the pendulum of contemporary discipleship has swung too much toward a view of discipleship that is all about relationships, and too little on instruction in God’s Word. Some seem to believe that just getting together and hanging out with Christian friends is discipleship. That may facilitate discipleship to some degree, yet the word “disciple” means “a student, a learner.” When Jesus gave the Great Commission, He said that we are to “make disciples, teaching them all that I have commanded you...” (Mt. 28:19). So when the early church was established, we read in Acts 2:42 that “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (or teaching). The apostle Paul said in Romans 12:2 that we are to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind....” That requires reading and study of God’s Word, as well as hearing the teaching of God’s Word. Paul said in Col. 1:28, “Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” It’s impossible to perfect the saint without teaching God’s Word. One of the spiritual gifts is teaching, and both in small group Bible studies and expository preaching, we make disciples through teaching God’s Word.

So let us continue making disciples through the teaching and preaching of God’s Word. All of our teachers need to be diligent in teaching God’s Word.

B. Yet Discipleship Also Takes Places through Relationships – That is why we read in Acts 2:42 that they not only devoted themselves to the apostles’ doctrine, but also “fellowship.”⁵ Intentional relationships fill in the cracks that we normally see people fall through in local churches.

So let me give some suggestions regarding relational discipleship:

1. Cultivate Relationships Outside the Classroom - Sunday School teachers need to be with their students outside the Sunday morning experience. Many of our classes are having Christmas dinners and parties this time of year. It is good for our teachers to interact with your class members outside the classroom.

You can also cultivate relationships in other small groups such as service or ministry groups such as committees and teams. You can recreate together. We ought to be able to show each other how Christians are to live in other environments.

2. Invest Time in Future Leaders – Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” Paul disciplined Timothy, who was to disciple other faithful believers, who in turn would disciple other faithful believers.

I ask the Deacon of the Week to visit with me to disciple our deacons in ministry. We spend time together on our way to visits. Discipleship takes place in a relational way.

⁵ This is the only time in the book of Acts the word translated “fellowship” is found.

III. OUTREACH SHOULD BE RELATIONAL

Some people will visit a church without first being invited by someone they know. However, studies show that the vast majority of people visit after first being invited by a friend, neighbor, co-worker or family member. 53 percent in transformational churches agreed with this statement, “There is a culture of inviting at our church, where people are constantly invited by others to get connected on a deeper level.” Yet the visitors who keep attending and even join the church are primarily people who establish relationships within the church. I would also say that churches retain new members a year or more primarily to the degree that new members establish relationships through small groups and in other ways.

Most people would describe their church as a “friendly church.” But often churches only act friendly, or just assume they are friendly. When I and my family are on vacation we visit churches. All would say they are friendly, but I have found only a few to be so, and even those were friendly on more of a superficial level. People who visit and even join the average church have to be motivated to connect relationally to people in the church. First, they have to fit in. By nature we are tribal people. We do not tend to welcome those outside our tribe unless they already seem to fit it. You look like us; you speak our language. The next step, once you are qualified, is to break in to becoming an insider. You must patiently, gently, break into the sacred areas of the church normally reserved for insiders. You have to learn your way around the building, get involved in a small group, volunteer to serve, and learn how we do things around here. It normally takes a while to become an insider, and too often new people have to take the initiative to get involved.

Folks, that us *human* behavior. The church ought to be different. God accepts all people, regardless of race or national origin according to Acts 10:35. Romans 15:7 says, “Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.”

So I want to share some ways we should improve our outreach to guests who visit our church:

A. All of Us Should Reach Out to Guests – 62% in Transformational Churches agreed with this statement, “When people visit our church, there is a plan in place to ensure multiple people greet them.” It is not just the job of the usher and door greeter. People expect them to greet people. Guests are more impressed when others in the church go out of their way to greet them and make them feel welcome. People in Transformational Churches greet people because they want to connect with guests relationally.

Even people who tend to be more shy and reserved should at least greet guests and others that you do not know well. Be intentional about it. 46 times in the New Testament we read about Christians greeting one another.

B. Don’t Just Be Friendly, Be Relational – People are not just looking for a “friendly church;” they’re hungry for *friends*. So allow enough time before or after Sunday School and church services to interact with people near you. Be intentional about starting conversation. Ask how they are doing. Ask if they have any prayer concerns. Build the kind of relationship in which they would be willing to share their burdens and concerns with you.

Remember, our purpose is not simply to get them to come back. Our ultimate purpose is to help them experience that transforming power of Christ in their lives. That requires an experience of salvation and Christian discipleship.

Tammy, a grandmother in her mid-forties, dealt for nearly a year with bitterness because her only grandchild had been taken from her home by a social service agency. She blamed the child's other grandmother for much of her troubles. The crisis of losing the child and unbearable bitterness prompted Tammy to seek relief and answers. She started looking for a church though she rarely had attended church in her lifetime. The leaders at the Scottsdale church had created an environment conducive to the development of relationships. Over the years many of the members of that church became highly intentional about developing relationships with men and women who visited the church and, especially, the unchurched who had never visited the church before. Tammy indicated that the responsiveness of those in the church was remarkable. "I've never encountered this type of love and concern. I was blown away." Their relational outreach led to her salvation and connection to the church.

Let me share some specific ways you can be more relational with guests and other attendees:

1. Invite Them to Lunch – You may have to build a relationship over 2-3 Sundays before they will accept an invitation, but eating a meal and sharing conversation over lunch is a great way to build a relationship.

2. Invite Them to Your Small Group – That may be your Sunday School class, a Bible study, a prayer group, or a service group. Relationships are formed better in small groups. 71% in transformational churches agreed with this statement: "Newcomers to our church are tactfully yet purposely connected to a small group."

3. Reach Out in Times of Need – When people are sick, injured, bereaved, or suffer some other loss, they are open to ministry. Look for opportunities to reach out to people at such times.

4. Make Time for Relationship Building – Let's face it. We only have so much time to give each week for family relationships, friends, and relationships in our church family. Yet leave enough time for at least one new relationship at a time. In order to make more time for relationships, some things will need to be eliminated. If you have so many church activities and programs that you don't have time for relationship, you probably need to cut back on one or two of those activities. After all, when programs replace relationships, they become dead, religious activity. Yet before you cut out church activities check some of your own non-relational activities you could cut out, like watching 20 hours of TV each week!

God's delivery system for the gospel is relationships with people who have met Him. Transformational Churches get relationships and do them intentionally because relationships are the platform through which most people find and follow Jesus. However, that leads to one more requirement:

5. Share the Gospel with Them – I'm all for building relationships with unbelievers. Yet establishing a relationship alone will not lead to the salvation of a sinner. There must also be the sharing of the gospel. Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us, but John calls Him "the Word." He proclaimed the gospel of salvation. We must do the same. Yet even if an unbeliever rejects the gospel and Christian morality, that does not mean that we close the door on our relationship with them. They may do so but we should not. People typically take months, sometimes years to surrender to Christ as Savior and Lord.

IV. CREATE A RELATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Our authors have shared with us in their book what relationally intentional environments look like. Here are the characteristics:

A. Relational Environments Produce Family - Family language is common in the New Testament. Jesus Himself even calls us brothers in Hebrews 2:12. Paul used the word “brother” more than 120 times in describing Christians and used “sister” on five occasions in his letters. He regarded himself as the spiritual father of those he evangelized and mentored in the Christian faith (1 Cor. 4:14-15). So in the church, made up of born again believers, we can rightly call each other brothers and sisters. We can and should consider ourselves one big family. The challenge is to build biblical family without creating a closed group. In today’s culture family images represent pain and disappointment in the lives of many people. The family of God can become a place of hope and healing. The local church can provide unconditional love and nurturing environments that people have yet to experience. Also, family produces an environment of accountability.

B. Relational Environments Practice One-On-One Relationships - Larger and smaller gatherings will never provide all that is needed for real transformation. What the larger groups begin through teaching, worship, and encouragement is completed by God in individual conversations. So let us all engage in one-on-one conversations with people in person, by way of the phone, and in other ways.

C. Relational Environments Provide Space For Difficult People - Sadly, churches often have no place for recovering alcoholics, the poor, single mothers, and those who struggle with physical, emotional, and mental disabilities. We feel much safer and comfortable around people who are at least as healthy as we are. Yet God has not given us the option of pushing away *the hurting.

Ed Stetzer wrote about a T-shirt that he saw. It said, “Jesus Loves You But I am His Favorite.” Really? Whereas we tend to have favorites, but Jesus has no favorites. He loves everyone with a lavish, everlasting love. Even those we consider high maintenance or emotionally unhealthy.

Notice the welcoming environment surrounding Jesus. Luke 15:1-2 says, “Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them.’”

James taught the inconsistency of faith and favoritism. He gave an example of favoritism that involved giving a rich man a better seat at church than a poor man. James said, “My brothers, hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without showing favoritism” (James 2:1, HCSB). James had already challenged Christians to engage people in the margins of life. He said back in 1:27, “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble....” We must be willing to minister to the hurting because when God really moves, broken and hurting people show up. The hurting and outcast of society flocked to hear and be with Jesus, and He received them. We should do the same.

I want to commend our church for our ministry to those with mental disabilities. I commend our outreach to widows and the homebound. Our deacons do much in that regard. However, what about others who have hurts and problems?

If you were to start a conversation with someone in the community that is hurting, that really has had some problems in life, could you say to them, “Hey, come to our church. People

will love you there”? Or would you hesitate to invite them because you are concerned they would face rejection?

Conclusion: I believe we have shown, both from the example of Jesus and from Scripture, that relationships are God’s chosen delivery system for evangelism and discipleship. Since that is the case, they are worthy of our highest focus and intentionality. We need to tear down barriers to people having a relationship with God and His people. Instead, we need to build bridges. God has done that for us. We should build bridges for the gospel and Christian discipleship to others. Will you help us?

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); Herschel H. Hobbs *John: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint; not including sermons on pp. 23-40); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); E. Y. Mullins, *Treasury of the World’s Great Sermons*, p.428; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); notes from John Piper, “The Word Became Flesh,” 12/24/1989 (desiringGod.org); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 139-150; Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2010); Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); Warren W. Wiersbe, “*Be*” *Series: New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, John* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

ABOUT THESE SERMON NOTES

© Dr. Stephen Felker. These notes may be used and even shared for personal study or ministry, but not for commercial purposes. The author credits the sources listed above and footnotes for much of the content. The “live” recording of this sermon will be more completely in the author’s own words. To obtain an audio recording of this message, you may listen free at www.sermonaudio.com/pastorFelker. A video of this sermon may be available at <http://swiftcreek.church/>. Dr. Felker’s email address is S+Felker&2@aol.com (remove signs).