

“Balancing the ‘I’ and the ‘We’ ”

1st Corinthians 12:12-30

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Since the 1950s, social scientists have gained considerable insight in the study of human behavior. Up to that point, people in counseling had tended to try to figure out the complicated causes and motivations behind our behavior. Because of the influence of the Freudian psychologists, the individual would be the focus, what he or she thinks, feels and the focus of their dreams.

But in the last fifty years of the 20th century, we had started to realize that the way we act and react to people around us turns out to be in patterns of behavior that take place within family system of relating. That is, the way we acted in the dynamic with our parents and other family members in our youth, often tends to be the way we relate to others today.

Of course each of us has our own unique personality but in general, those eighteen years we spent with our family, have a lot to do with our relationships throughout life. This is why counselors, today, are usually trying to get people, who come to them, to see some of the patterns of relating to others (that they have been involved in at home), so that they can help them gain perspective on unhealthy relationships with others and have a happier life. It is why entire families are asked to come in for counseling instead of just the identified person who supposedly has “the problem.”

I’m going to talk about how a healthy family may be described and then talk about a church family because I believe they have similar characteristics. But first let’s briefly look at a description of an unhealthy family dynamic. We can sometimes understand the positive by looking at the negative.

Basically, in all of us there are two things that need to be balanced. First, we need to have a good idea of who we are as an independent individual.

Secondly, we need to be able to relate to other people. We need, then, to have an ‘I’ and a sense of ‘we.’

But individuals can not come out of their home life into adulthood with a balance of these two things if they are living with an unrealistic perception of the ‘I’ or the ‘we.’ In a family situation where the parents are experiencing a great deal of anxiety and alienation in their relationship – that tension usually spills over into the children. Children can often become caught in the triangle where each adult is competing for affection – each demanding loyalty from the child while he or she is going through all the pain with his or her spouse. The amazing thing about children is that they can sense marital tensions clearly, even if these conflicts are never openly discussed and it affects them.

Another factor in childhood experiences in the family dynamic is that in troubled households, communication is usually poor. Individual’s feelings are missed and people are manipulated. In poor-communication households, children have great difficulty in achieving positive and balanced self concepts when they feel torn by their parent’s troubles. But that’s life, sometimes, and if the parents are going through rough times, they obviously would like it to be better but the point is that it’s hard on kids.

When families become rigid in their roles, somewhat stale in their relating to each other – so that they insist that everyone be the same or are forced to follow the dictates of a domineering individual – that causes difficulties. It inhibits people from trying new things and being creative – and the over-control causes anger and frustration to build until it comes out elsewhere, such as in school experiences. A simpler way to say this is that because of the tensions in the unhealthy marriage and because parents can

sometimes be so needy for the child or children to make up for the gap in their failed marriage, the children do not get a chance to emotionally break away and become emotionally independent.

I could tell you many stories about young adults who left home for college, the service or marriage, who were emotionally underdeveloped, even though they had good minds, simply because they came from a household which did not allow them to discover a separate emotional identity – apart from the family dynamic.

I'm thinking of a young woman who was so sheltered, that when she went off to college, she had to call home several times a week, just because she wasn't trained to make her own decisions. When these situations exist in extreme forms, the individual has a hard time living realistically, functioning with a good concept of self and living happily with others. In short, often parents are not working themselves out of a job – trying to get their teens to become more and more independent. Are you training your children to think for themselves, sometimes thinking and making decisions different than what you would choose?

The results, then, are that individuals, coming out of family dynamics such as this, tend to duplicate similar patterns in their own families later on. Their way of relating, (withdrawing from or advancing toward others), becomes a pattern that is known and familiar – that way of relating is all they know. In marriage, then, a person tends to seek out a partner who is exhibiting something of the dynamic they found in the relating style of their family of origins. Eighteen years in one household, in our formative years, is a long time and usually it is all we know.

In the empty nest years of marriages, when all the children are gone, and the poor marriage relationship has no children to go to, marriages fall apart. If we are people in a marriage relationship, we might be wise to ask ourselves: 'Will we honestly

enjoy being with one another, day in and day out, for hours at a time, once the kids are gone?'

But that's enough of describing the negative. What is a healthy family like?

A healthy household seems to be one where the adults have a trusting and loving partnership. Ideally, a marital relationship is where there is vulnerability and humor and where both would enjoy living with each other – even if there were no children around.

A healthy family is one which produces mature people, one which fosters or nurtures the type of individual who is first of all, fully in charge of him or herself. This is a person who can make choices based on accurate perceptions about self and others, and who can take responsibility for the decisions made.

A healthy family produces someone who is in touch with his or her own feelings and who knows how to express their thoughts and feelings appropriately – in the context of sensitivity to the feelings of others. A healthy family is one which has the willingness to see differences in individuals as a chance to learn and explore – rather than viewing individual differences as threatening. In other words, a healthy family system is one that helps an individual have a balance of a good self concept and the ability to have good relationships with others.

Now I know after hearing these ideals, we are probably thinking about some of the good and not-so-good elements in our past and present family experiences. But we might be quick to remember that even though some mistakes were made in the past as parents or as marriage partners, we shouldn't think that we are responsible for any one else's ultimate destiny. Each person is responsible for their own life.

As we do become aware of patterns of relating in the past, each of us, alone, has the responsibility for our present and future. We *can* change and grow. Happiness and fulfillment *can* be achieved. No one is ever hopelessly locked into undesirable patterns unless they choose to believe they are. We should believe in the power of God to bring about change.

Yet, sometimes it is helpful to step back, with perspective, and be aware of some of the patterns in which we've been and perhaps still are involved, so that we can say to ourselves, "I've been choosing to react like this but I'm not going to do this anymore. I am going to choose to do it this way instead." The point of mentioning all this about family dynamics is that it relates exactly, I think, to a healthy congregation. Just as a family dynamic can help or hinder an individual's growth, a congregation, as a larger family, can have a profound influence on us as individuals.

The theologian Martin Marty observed that today, the Church has had great difficulty in getting people to be loyal to local congregations. He says Americans have "become a nation of religious window-shoppers and shoplifters." People, he suggests, have a tendency to be lazy and avoid the discipline of getting involved with other Christians. So we see that some people prefer to watch church on TV or not go at all. It is more comfortable and it demands nothing of you – except an occasional check in the mail.

It is extremely easy to be an individualized Christian because no one can judge you or put you to work. Of course you will not grow or learn. That's why it is so important to be involved in a local congregation. It's as healthy and edifying to you as being part of a body, in Paul's words in Corinthians.

The congregation at Corinth was, in many respects, an unhealthy church. There was snobbishness over who was more talented in what was considered spiritual things. So the ones who could speak in tongues acted like everyone else was simply not as spiritual as they.

The whole purpose of chapters 12-14 was to deal with this pressing problem of spiritual score-keeping and the belief that the particular religious experience of speaking in tongues was some kind of absolute proof of "true spirituality." There was also rivalry over who was to be followed as a teacher, who was

more popular, as well as other problems with which you are familiar by now. But Paul's answer to a healthy church actually echoes some of the characteristics of what makes a healthy family today. Let's look at them.

Paul says we're supposed to be like a human body, where every person is understood as important, even though they perform a different function. In verses 12:1-11, Paul listed a number of spiritual gifts: wisdom, knowledge, administrative skills, teaching abilities, prophetic sensitivity, and so on. In those verses he talked about roles.

Some people in a church are teachers, others are helpers, some administrators and organizers, some preachers and so on. As he mentioned these many different kinds of abilities, he was underlining the basic concept that we are all a little different. Just as a healthy family enjoys the diversity of personalities and encourages individuality, so the church should be loose enough to let everyone contribute his or her abilities for others in their own way.

If you are a helper, whether it is the willingness to do a cleaning or repair project or provide transportation, you are performing an important function of the body of Christians in your church. If your ability is in administration and you can organize the things that need to be done to keep the institution of the church functioning, you are performing an important function of the body of Christians in your church.

You may be someone who is scared to death to get up in the front of the church before a couple of hundred people but you may be a very affirming person on a one-on-one encounter. Perhaps you come over to people who are having a difficult time and you make them feel better. If so, you are performing an important function of the body of Christians in your church.

You see, the goal of a healthy family is to help each member of the household have a positive and independent concept of self as well as relate well to

others in and outside of the family. A church functions with similar goals: to help each member discover the love that God and God's people have for them and to work together on how we can take the teachings of Christ and apply them in our daily lives. These are the central tasks in a healthy church. As we use our own particular and unique abilities for others around us, we are building up other individuals in what Paul called "The Body of Christ."

Unhealthy churches are those which do not let others be different. Individuals, in these congregations, insist that others just meet their needs by mirroring them in every way from hair styles and dress to personal beliefs. This is where there is jealousy, envy, pride, and arrogance. So the question is: how do we pull all our different gifts together for the body of Christ? What is it that can unify our diversity?

Paul suggests that it is love which creates unity. He says that whenever anyone finds out that they possess a gift, they should reflect on how they are using this gift for the good of the whole community. If that house church in Corinth two thousand years ago, or churches today, operated with this as the governing principle, things would be remarkably different.

In the midst of giving practical and theological advice to this ailing congregational family, Paul shifts gears and writes a beautiful poem about love and the use of gifts in what we call chapter 13. The church is like a family, as the body of Christ, and it is unfortunate that modern translators have arbitrarily divided this section off into three chapters, because chapters twelve through fourteen were actually one unit.

To bring this home a little closer to us today, I'd like you to listen to what it might sound like if chapter thirteen, and the first verses of chapter fourteen, were written today. Sometimes hearing a familiar passage put in contemporary language catches you in a different way.

"I might belong to a small study or prayer group that has become quite close and has established a bond. I might have even had ecstatic religious experiences of transcendence. Yet if I think that this is what it's all about, (my personal experience), and if I forget that loving other people is more important than what I'm into – my experiences, then, are about as significant as a two year old blowing on a kazoo.

I might be able to preach a sermon and because I put so much into it, maybe excite other people about their faith – even appearing to have a sophisticated grasp of Christianity and current issues. I may even have a lot of faith to get me through some pretty tough times but if I can't extend myself to love others, the whole thing would just be show business and phony religion.

Suppose I was one of those reflective sort of folks who make a lot of sacrifices for others – even giving up having nice things in order to give to charity. And suppose I so busied myself with church work that I hardly had time for anything else but church. If I wasn't doing it out of love for other people, instead of meeting my needs, I'd be no different than a shallow philanthropist who was giving large sums of money away, just to ease some guilt, look good to others and acquire a needed tax break.

Love, (real love that is), shows up in little things. You see it in patience with someone who doesn't have any tact and who says things that, at first, make you cringe.

Love is kind – like doing those little things that no one ever finds out about. Love isn't conceited or proud because those things are a result of being self-centered. The times when we're ill-mannered and irritable – that isn't love.

We're not being loving people, . . . when we sit and reflect on how bad someone else is in the church, keeping a record of their problems and rough edges. In fact, love is happy with the truth and the truth is that our growth patterns are surprisingly irregular and slow, when it comes down to it, and if we want to

keep a list on someone, we ought to be mindful of our own rough pilgrimage through life.

Love is something that works hard and it never gives up. Love has a basic faith in the goodness of the other people. It hopes that things will get straightened out with God's help.

Love is patient with others – especially those who are not doing *what* we want them to do, (*when* we want them to do it.) Love, as it turns out, is very powerful. That's why love is eternal.

Now sure there are inspired messages but how many of them can you actually remember? They all pass away.

Of course there are times when we feel so spiritually up, that we wonder whether we might be in heaven. But even these experiences pass.

We can become excited about knowledge and the wonders of the world but how much do we *really* know? All of our gifts are good, in themselves, but they're only partial images of what is to come. Total completeness and wholeness comes in the next life.

You know, when we were children, what we said, what we felt inside and what we were thinking (on those rare times when we bothered to think at all) – all that was pretty childish when we look back. When we mature, though, we put aside that sort of immaturity because now we realize that the more we know, the more we know we don't know.

It's like looking through a tinted sheet of transparent plastic or a window in a house with fogging moisture covering its surface. But God fully knows everything. There are no surprises for God.

Meanwhile there are three things that are going to last in the long haul. They're the ones that will make a difference in our lives. They are faith, hope and love. But the greatest of them all – the one that makes the difference between a life that is 'so-so' and a life that can, at times, be marvelous – is love.

It's love, then, upon which you should constantly focus – every time you use your abilities around others. If you do, you are going to have that great

balance of feeling good about yourself and getting along with others here and outside of the church." ■

