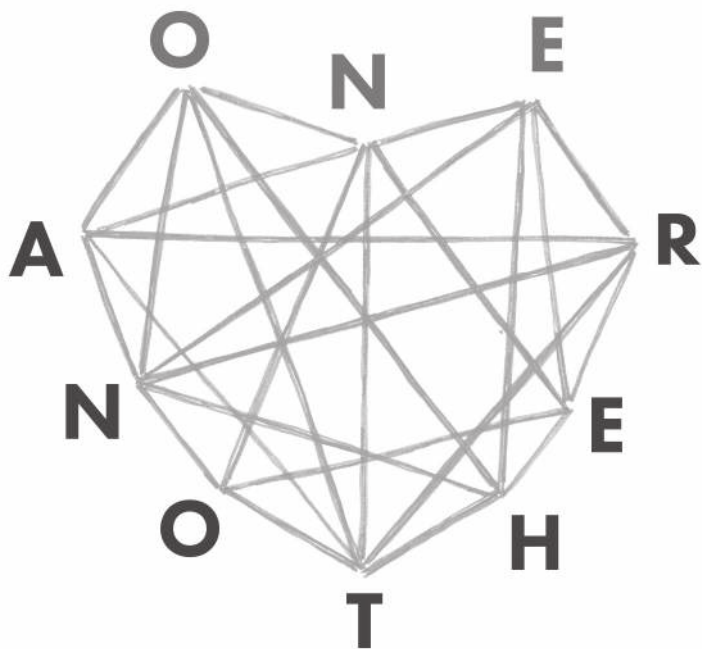


*The New Testament
Prescription for Transformation*

DAVID A. DESILVA



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Introduction

I can be a Christian without going to church.”

“I believe in Jesus, but the church really turns me off.”

“My faith is something between me and my God.”

The chances are good that many of us have heard these or similar statements from people when the conversation turns to church or, perhaps, when we have reached out to invite someone to come experience worship and other facets of the life of our churches. Some of us may even have uttered statements like these at some point in our lives.

The truth is, while we ourselves might go to church and even like the people at church, many of us might still think that how we live the Christian life really is something between us and God (or between us and Christ). While we

will go to church, we may go with our personal boundaries raised fairly high, enjoying friendly interactions while keeping one another at arm's length—and keeping our faith or our life choices safe from other Christians poking their noses too close into our business. We're glad to interact pleasantly on the way into and out from worship, in and around the refreshments, and at potluck dinners. We might even be glad to interact pleasantly for an additional hour in a Sunday school or Bible study group. But, in general, we really may not want the conversations to get too close to home and we exercise all sorts of diversionary tactics if we feel something is getting too personal. We may be reluctant to share the struggles that we're facing in our faith journey or just in our lives and relationships, because we don't want to be judged on any basis beyond the façade we project to manage impressions. And we may be so involved in our own lives and schedules, in which we have left so little room for others, that we become profoundly uncomfortable when someone presents a genuine need and asks for help.

To the extent that we might see ourselves or other members of our congregation reflected in this picture, we are collectively missing out (and causing others to miss out) on one of the greatest and most important resources that Christ has given us to help us in our journey through life and through a life of faithful discipleship—*one another*. We are missing out on the gifts that other believers can be (and are

1

Who Are We to One Another?

Opening Prayer for Session One

Give us open ears, O Lord, to hear you speaking to us through your Holy Scriptures and through your holy people, our sisters and brothers. Let us clearly discern what your Holy Spirit would say to us this day and let us be sure to obey so that, in our lives and in our life together, we may ever more fully reflect your good and holy desires for us. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Redeemer. Amen.

How would you describe your relationship with those other people who show up with you at 9:30 a.m. on

Sunday mornings? Is your relationship like that of members of an audience who converge at a theater for the same matinee, take in the performance, and go your separate ways (perhaps after sharing some words of appreciation for—or criticism of—the lead players with one another over refreshments)? Fortunately, I have not personally encountered many people who feel *quite* so unattached to their fellow believers who assemble for morning worship.

Perhaps the model of the voluntary association or organization—like the Kiwanis or Rotary—better describes how a good number of Christians would categorize their relationships with one another. Voluntary associations were known in various forms in the first century and in various forms today. During the first century, people might join a guild related to their trade as a means of social networking and, occasionally, mutual assistance, or they might join a more overtly religious club and be initiated into the mysteries of Dionysus, Isis, or some other deity. We join with others in a voluntary association on the basis of a common interest or affinity and we associate with them in cordial ways as long as it suits us, or as long as it is in our mutual interest to do so, or as long as we are not too greatly put out or put off by one or more members of that particular group. But we can drop in and drop out of such groups, and we really have no expectation of long-term commitment to the group or to one another beyond what our individual inclinations and inertia afford.

The degree to which your congregation experiences the phenomenon of church-hopping might be taken as an indicator of our general level of commitment to the particular people around us in the local assembly. There are certainly circumstances under which it is right and good to break one's ties with a given congregation in favor of joining a new congregation, generally when one truly believes that the first church is moving in a direction that would violate one's conscience or understanding of God's call on the lives of those God has redeemed. But those circumstances seem to account for only a fraction of the movement between congregations that I myself have witnessed. More often, it seems, church-hopping is one more manifestation of our fight-or-flight instinct: we get into a fight with someone at our local congregation (often someone in some leadership capacity) and we take flight to another church or, in a worst-case scenario, to no church.

Wherever this happens, the phenomenon suggests that our relationships are not very deep, so there is not a high emotional cost to leaving. Unfortunately, we do not foster a church culture that expects people to stay and work through any issues despite knowing that it is precisely in such work that the Spirit transforms us and our relationships for the better.

The images for the church that we encounter throughout the New Testament challenge us to examine ourselves

for any hint of an “I can take them or leave them” attitude concerning our brothers and sisters in Christ. They challenge any notion that we are connected and bound only by shared interests—and only so long as no conflicts arise. Rather, they drive us toward accepting a significant and shared responsibility to and for one another—a responsibility laid upon us by the God who called us together in Christ. While this responsibility ultimately is laid upon all members of the global church, it is fired and refined most fully and consistently in the local assemblies—and in smaller, intentional groups within the local assemblies—which provide the fundamental context for living life together in Christ.

• **Questions for Reflection and Discussion** •

To what extent do you think of your faith (and that of other Christians) as a private matter between you and God?

What is your level of attachment, involvement, and commitment to the people in your local congregation?

• • •

The images used by New Testament writers to speak of the church, both in its global totality and in any given local



Welcome One Another

Opening Prayer for Session Two

Give us open ears, O Lord, to hear you speaking to us through your Holy Scriptures and through your holy people, our sisters and brothers. Let us clearly discern what your Holy Spirit would say to us this day and let us be sure to obey so that, in our lives and in our life together, we may ever more fully reflect your good and holy desires for us. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Redeemer. Amen.

The welcome we received from Christ is to be reflected, imitated, and extended in the welcome we give to all who have been welcomed by Christ. Christ did not simply

“come into my life.” He welcomed me into *his* life along with “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). I did not simply accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior. *Jesus accepted me into his body*, the family of the many sons and daughters adopted along with me into God’s household.

The first Christians’ willingness to “welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom. 15:7) stood at the very foundations of the formation and the growth of the early church. Throughout the New Testament, we read about Christians gathering in the homes of the brothers and sisters who had sufficient dwellings to accommodate assemblies as large as perhaps thirty people. In Paul’s letters, for example, we learn that Aquila and Prisca (Priscilla) opened their home to a regular assembly of believers in both Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19) and, later, Rome (Rom. 16:3–5). Nympha hosted a regular assembly in Laodicea (Col. 4:15) and Philemon, in all probability, in Colossae (Philem. 1–2). Gaius was host to “the whole church” in Corinth (Rom. 16:23), which also suggests that smaller circles of Christians in Corinth also met separately in the midsized homes of other believers there (perhaps those of householders like Chloe and Stephanas).

Without the willingness of Christians to welcome one another into their homes, the believers would have had no place to meet, no place to grow, no base for outreach, no matrix for mutual support. Welcoming one another—showing

hospitality by opening up one's home to one's sisters and brothers—was the starting point for discovering and nurturing Christian community. This is no doubt why early Christian leaders kept promoting the virtue of the practice of extending hospitality (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9). Christian leaders and delegates who traveled from city to city also were welcomed in the home of a local Christian householder. Paul opens a window into this practice when he tells Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, since he hopes to travel back to the region of Asia Minor after his release from the prison where he met Onesimus (Philem. 22). The third letter of John also reflects the practice of traveling Christian teachers needing hospitality (5–8).

Meeting in homes could not help but exercise a formative impact on the ethos of the early Christians, reinforcing their identity as household and family one to another. The welcome that early Christians found in the homes of their new family in Christ—whether in their own city or as they traveled across the cities of the Mediterranean—was one important way in which Christians made Jesus' promise real for one another:

“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in

What if your faith is not a private matter between you and God?

If the writers of the New Testament are to be believed, your faith is not a private matter between you and God; it is the business of the family God has given you in the church. And the faith and practice of your fellow believers is very much your business as well. God did not ransom souls; he redeemed *a people* who would commit themselves to living together in ways that reflected God's gracious welcome of each one of them, God's love and forgiveness toward all, and God's passion to see the image of his Son formed in each one of them and all of them together.

In this book, David deSilva guides us through the images of the church that remind us that we are a family—a temple made of living stones, a single organism called “the body of Christ.” Each image reinforces our connections with *and our obligations to* one another, if the new person that the Spirit seeks to bring to life within each one of us is to flourish and reach maturity. He explores the apostolic vision for our interaction with one another, challenging us to be—and to receive—the gifts that Christ intends for us to be for one another, welcoming, loving, serving, encouraging, watching over, and restoring so that each individual disciple feels the strength, support, and guardianship of the whole body impelling him or her on to the full stature of Christ.

David deSilva is ordained in the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church and serves as Trustees' Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Greek at Ashland Theological Seminary. He has written more than twenty-five books, including *A Week in the Life of Ephesus*; *Transformation: The Heart of Paul's Gospel*; *Unholy Allegiances: Heeding Revelation's Warning*; *An Introduction to the New Testament*; and *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. He has also written commentaries on Galatians, Hebrews, and Jude.



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