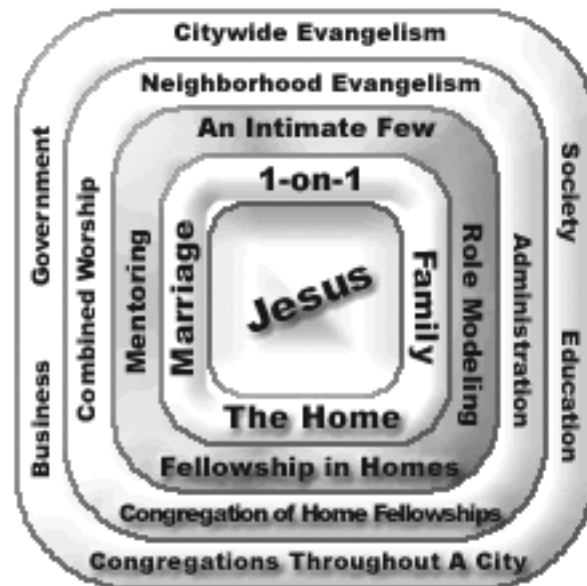


Chapter Twelve

THE HOME FELLOWSHIP LOAD-BEARING RELATIONSHIPS



“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22).

Remember that the Hebraic early Church was both spiritual and practical. The previous chapter explored the critical “vertical element” of the home fellowship, that is, the process by which believers in a home fellowship uphold a righteousness that leads to holy boldness for the sake of the Kingdom. Such believers attract others who are courageous for the Lord. This chapter addresses the “horizontal elements” of the early Church. These are the *enactments* of your faith undertaken because of your love for the Lord Jesus. As with your forefathers in the early Church, only by His grace through the power of the Holy Spirit can you live out the biblical mandates. The keys to the horizontal element in the home fellowship are *mentoring* and *role modeling*. The seven-day-a-week commitment of those in the home fellowship is the avenue by which the wisdom of the older men and women can be incorporated into the lives of younger men and women. This is the means by which the *ish*, the mature man, and the *zaken*, the Hebraic elder, can have their most profound effect on the lives of the less mature. Because of the intimacy grown and nurtured in the home fellowship, loving cor-

rection can be given to those who act foolishly in their responsibility toward God and toward others.

Just how important is the restoration of the wisdom and experience of older men and women in the church today? This cannot be overemphasized. Keep in mind that this loss is a post-World War II phenomenon. If the vitality of the early Church is to be fully recaptured, the wisdom of age and experience must once again be cherished by believers.

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:11,12).

In the Hebraic model of home fellowship, when your family joins together with other families and individuals for worship, sharing, and fellowship, these gatherings are special. They are time spent with friends who are *spiritual relatives*—family you look forward to being with, family with whom you are developing an ever-deepening, load-bearing relationship. If you do not see these occasions as opportunities to share your life with kinfolk you care about, your gathering will become impersonal. The activity, not the people, will become your priority. Instead of strengthening the quality of your relationships as you encourage each other through prayer and testimony that enhances trust in God, each gathering will in time become a duty, an obligation for you and your family. After awhile you will regress to thinking of the coming together as “attending a service.”

Many years ago our friend Karl Duff taught us the concept of “load-bearing.” Sitting in our living room one afternoon, he pointed to an open beam that supported the ceiling. “Mike,” he remarked, “that beam is continually carrying the weight of the roof; the roof depends upon it. We need that kind of load-bearing relationship among believers today.” His words remind us of the intimacy that Paul must have had in mind: *“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:10,15)*, and, *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4)*.

When you get together with believers in a home fellowship, consider that gathering an extension of what you have already been doing in your home. The home fellowship should never become a compensation for deficiency in your own home. Believers should never try to make up for what is lacking through irresponsibility in someone else’s family. It is appropriate to help others develop reliability, but never step in to take on responsibility that is rightly theirs. A number of church leaders have admitted to us that many programs in their churches were designed to compensate especially for undependable fathers. Irresponsibility becomes an increasing burden on others and perpetuates the sin that has fed it.

A home fellowship must support the *home* as the *basic building block* of spiritual development. If you are not leading the way in your own home by establishing some sort of regular spiritual focus with your family, don’t expect a home fellowship to provide a “Sunday school” program to do it for you! The times in a home gathering when children do share and receive ministry should not be the *only* occasion during the week when principles of godly living are discussed with them. Most parents are glad to share ideas of activities that they are doing at home to help their children to better love, serve, and experience God. Just ask. Your children really do need to see *you* as their primary spir-

itual authority. It's right out of Scripture!

If other families demonstrate good habits and practices that you would like to develop in your own home, ask for help until these qualities are part of your family life. For example, if you are frustrated by a strong-willed toddler's incessant activity, ask for suggestions (and prayer!) from parents in your group who have learned from experience how to survive with victory. If your teenager suddenly seems uncommunicative or withdrawn, seek prayer and counsel from those who have gained insight through their own experiences and investigation. God really does want you to raise godly children and has provided resources who can minister truth and wisdom to you.

One mother expressed her dismay over her thirteen-year-old daughter's occasional outbursts of tearful screaming. Another mom with a daughter the same age acknowledged that her daughter also had emotional flare-ups. This mother then shared counsel that had worked in her own situation. She said that during such tearful occasions with her daughter, she would wrap her arms around the girl to affirm that she understood the inner turmoil and pain and frustration. She would then firmly insist that screaming was an unacceptable way to vent these emotions. This woman and her husband had already established pre-determined consequences for disobedience in this realm of behavior. When her daughter had calmed down, the mom reminded her of these, as well as the family goal of maintaining the home as a sanctuary of peace. In this way the girl was able to learn to take responsibility for her decision of whether or not to obey the family standards of behavior, for she was aware of the consequences. She was also presented opportunity to expand her awareness of the needs of others in her family for peace in the home, and to take her eyes off herself. This type of sharing encourages others to bear one another's burdens and to give glory to God for His wisdom and compassion.

The home fellowships in which the authors have participated have abided by two principles:

- The presence of Jesus in our midst must be the foremost consideration.
- Children must be welcomed as integral members of the body.

Consider this: If Jesus doesn't "show up" in your gathering, should you? In other words, true unity is really representative of your own ongoing fellowship with Jesus and your heavenly Father: "*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*" (1 John 1:3). When your relationship with Jesus is intimate, your home fellowship gatherings will reflect that. The Lord Himself will guide your time together through His Spirit.

If your fellowship with God isn't personal, then something will be lacking in all of your other relationships. Without intimacy with God and others, you will in time look to some form of contrivance to impart a false sense of "fellowship" to your gatherings. An example of this would be the use of singing and music to "conjure up a mood" that makes people feel good. It provides a soulful high but does not restore lost fellowship with God. That can be done only through repentance and restoration.

Beware of another potential pitfall when small groups come together. No one individual should "sweat the outcome" of your gathering and try to control what happens. If this occurs, you have the return of the *sacerdotal*, someone attempting to mediate

between you and Jesus. Be wary of too heavy a reliance on prepared materials as your primary reason to gather, rather than your love of Jesus and of each other. Do your leaders show a greater interest in Jesus and you than in trying to achieve a desired goal when you meet? Over years of ministry we have observed that when the sacerdotal shows up, the Holy Spirit remains silent.

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10).

Home fellowships should never treat children as “second hand citizens” of God’s kingdom. Jesus admonished His disciples to humble themselves and change to become like little children (see Matthew 18:3,4). This perspective can revolutionize your own view of yourself as a “child of God.” Are you able to humbly entrust yourself to Him the same way you desire your children to trust you? Before you consider children a potential nuisance in your gatherings, ponder the Lord’s words about them. By encouraging them to share their insights and questions, you are reflecting the value you place on them. Even the elders permitted the twelve-year-old Jesus a forum in the temple to share *“his understanding and his answers”* (see Luke 2:47).

One home fellowship to which we were committed consisted of six family units totaling twelve children, ages one to seventeen, and eleven adults. Generally when we assembled as a group, the adults and older children sat in a circle while the little ones played with interlocking blocks, tiny cars, coloring books, and picture books in the middle in a designated area. (A colorful quilt could mark the boundaries of your play area.) The toys were set aside just for home fellowship times, so no one had “ownership” over them. Even the older children sometimes kept their hands busy with plastic blocks while their ears were tuned in!

Often one of the little ones would crawl into an empty lap for a quiet story or take an available hand for a drink in the kitchen while discussion was going on. The adults became aunts and uncles to these children, and the teens were regarded as big brothers and sisters. Thus, even though few in the group had extended family locally, relationships developed to a certain level of family intimacy.

On Sundays when our home fellowship gathered with other home fellowships in our congregation for praise and worship, we were often there more than an hour before the worship began. The children played together while the adults supervised and drank coffee, talked, and prayed. Our fellowship family sat together with the children during the praise and worship. Because of the extended love and care, you couldn’t tell which adults the children belonged to!

We have found that children who are not accustomed to quiet play gradually learn. When outright rebellion flares, the parent can accompany the offender to a bedroom to handle the situation in the manner he or she chooses. Consistent commitment by the adults and the example set by peers and older children help more active children settle in. However, we also have no unrealistic expectations that a two-year-old will sit quietly for an hour either! Parents are encouraged to allow others to help with child care. This not only gives them a break but fosters trusting attachments between the children and adults in the fellowship. Anyone can wipe a nose or hold a little hand on a walk-break!

Spontaneous midweek gatherings strengthen these relationships. Barbecues, nature hikes, slide shows, home videos, picnics, impromptu prayer times, game nights—all are expressions that say “We care”. Not every person can make every get-together, and that’s all right. Each one knows that he or she is only a phone call away for praying, rejoicing, and load-bearing. For single and divorced members, these relationships are especially vital as the love they share in the home fellowship may represent the most comforting source of family care that they are experiencing.

We have found that it is sometimes appropriate to break by gender into different areas of a home. Older children often enjoy participating in discussions with adults if they feel that they will be heard. Either gender can supervise the activity of the little ones. If the discussion seems inappropriate for young people, the older children can head outside for a break with the younger ones or for a snack in the kitchen. The keys are *flexibility* and *adaptability*. If you meet in a home that isn’t normally “childproof”, the hosts can move the untouchables out of reach and the parents can bring toys for their own children, confining their activities to a designated spot.

Some home fellowships alternate adults (both men and women) to supervise activities with the children for part of the time. The activity depends on the particular talents of the person in charge and the age of the children. Examples are songs, crafts, storytelling, baking, games. Because relational contact is maintained during the week through personal visits or by phone, the children feel as though they are with family. New additions can be lovingly incorporated into the fellowship. Both adults and children learn to carry on conversations with all age groups, a skill often undeveloped in a society and church culture that epitomize homogeneous groups.

If the children squabble with each other, provide an opportunity for them to resolve it (but not to the point of tantrums or belligerence!). We encourage parents not to step in too early nor to feel unduly embarrassed if their children’s behavior is not letter-perfect. Disagreements can be learning opportunities for yielding rights and helping one another. Sometimes the older children can intervene in creative ways that encourage their sense of responsibility too. Some parents may seem oblivious to the disruptive behavior of their own children. This is a prime opportunity for the gray-haired mentors to take the parents aside to discuss appropriate “house rules” so that the apprehension levels of others can be diminished. Parents whose children have already graduated from that stage may be able to offer helpful recommendations based on their own previous experiences.

“Therefore, as we have the opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10).

Seeking ways to bless those around you, particularly those in your spiritual family, demonstrates a heart filled with gratefulness for all that God has done for you and in you and through you. It is in the fertile soil of loving relationships that you are able to truly *discern needs* that you can then fill. A single mother in our home fellowship had undergone a painful divorce and felt emotionally and physically drained. Her nine-year-old daughter was very special to us, and each family in the fellowship spent extra time including her in family activities: sledding, walking the dog, playing at others’ homes. Both mother and child were able to regroup and continue with joy. In fact, this family has

since moved out-of-state, and we *still* exchange calls and letters as “family.”

Remember that the early Church came together spiritually prepared to encounter Jesus. It is imperative that you prepare yourself and your family before you gather to worship: *“When you come together, **everyone** has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All must be done for the **strengthening of the church**”* (1 Corinthians 14:26, emphasis added). Worshipers coming together should spiritually prepare themselves in advance, anticipating to participate as the Holy Spirit leads. Do not wait for the scheduled gathering to roll around in the hope that whatever is ailing you will somehow be “fixed” when you meet for worship. Each day has its own troubles. As you face these with one another’s help, you can focus on *God and His moving in the body* in your gatherings. Set aside the distracting worries and anxieties of what you may have to face when you get home. Concentrate instead on the majesty and sovereignty of God. He is aware of all you are going through. Worship Him!

***“Do not withhold good from those who deserve it,
when it is in your power to act”*** (Proverbs 3:27).

There is a close connection between *caring* for someone and *sharing* with that person. Apperception of the above verse and others like it in the Hebrew Bible fill the New Testament. For example, Paul apperceived Proverbs 3:27, above, in these verses: *“But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also **excel in the grace of giving**...Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be **equality**”* (1 Corinthians 8:7,13, emphasis added).

Jesus recognized that people have material needs for which they work. His parable in Matthew 20:14,15 addresses the landowner and the hired workers in the vineyard: *“I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”* If you are part of a home fellowship, ask yourself, “What benefit do others receive from me? Am I a gracious giver of myself to those whom I profess are spiritual family? Does my (sometimes sacrificial) availability reflect my appreciation for all that my Father has given to me?”

Financial responsibility to others in the faith is based on the Hebraic understanding that sees all things as God’s. The early Church clearly recognized this: *“All the believers were **one in heart and mind**. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they **shared everything they had**”* (Acts 4:32, emphasis added). James reiterated responsibility for the well-being of others: *“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not **accompanied by action**, is dead”* (James 2:15-17, emphasis added).

The Holy Spirit often prompts His people to meet the specific need of another. How often the authors have been the recipients of the exact dollar amount required at a certain time! For example, we had no sooner arrived at our destination a thousand miles from home when the car radiator failed. We had no funds for this unexpected glitch, but a family friend agreed to repair it for a certain amount. The following day two checks arrived totaling the whole amount of the repair. Neither donor

knew of our specific need but had responded to the urging of the Holy Spirit to send help!

Good deeds of charity were a hallmark of Hebraic daily life. The *“righteousness [that] delivers from death”* (see Proverbs 10:2, 11:4) was no abstract concept but a deliberate donation of material goods to meet real needs. The Hebrew word for righteousness means **“acts of right or justice,”** or what we would call “charity.” The attitude that God demanded toward a needy brother was this: **“Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be *openhanded* toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land”** (Deuteronomy 15:10,11, emphasis added). From a Hebraic standpoint, to do that which was right constituted worship of God. To love God was to love your fellow man in a way that met his needs.

**“And he has given us this command:
Whoever loves God must also love his brother”** (1 John 4:21).

Weigh this Hebraic view of a Christian life: The essence of the love that Jesus refers to lays not in what you say but in what you do. Jesus linked the final judgment with *“whatever you **did** for one of the least of these”* (see Matthew 25:40, emphasis added). Sheer hypocrisy is living in a manner that refutes your moral words: *“Even a child is known by his **actions**, by whether his **conduct** is pure and right”* (Proverbs 20:11, emphasis added). Paul exhorted Philemon, *“I pray that you may be **active** in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have **refreshed** the hearts of the saints”* (vv. 6,7). The living witness of your faith testifies to your ability to fully fathom your manifold treasures in Jesus as you share them with others. As those you encounter see more of Christ’s love in action through you, they will begin to attribute more to Him working in you and less to you as a “good person.” Thus they will *“see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven”* (see Matthew 5:16).

James exhorts the faith community to *“show [your] faith by what [you] do”* (see 2:18). This outworking of a loving faith takes *time*, the commodity people seem to treasure most and have at their discretion the least. The choices to be made in the use of your daily twenty-four hours can seem staggering unless you ask yourself, *“What would Jesus do?”*—then abide by the answer the Holy Spirit reveals.

Aside from your responsibilities to your family, strengthen those with whom you are growing in Jesus. As *“living stones”* (see 1 Peter 2:5) in God’s spiritual house, you are a reflection of Christ in you and are bound by the exhortation of Peter: *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your **good deeds** and **glorify God** on the day he visits us”* (1 Peter 2:12, emphasis added). Again, only intimate, load-bearing relationships will spur you on to actively expend your life for Jesus’s sake. Your acts of kindness in no way earn you salvation. They are the outpour-

ing of Spirit-driven love that *evidences* the work of God in you.

In Israel we saw a wonderful living enactment of Paul's word to the Galatians, "*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*" (6:2). On buses younger people gladly and automatically got up to let the older folks sit down, fulfilling (perhaps unwittingly) the injunction, "*Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord*" (Leviticus 19:32). Passengers stepped off the bus to carry baby carriages onboard for mothers. People staggering on the rain-slipperied floor immediately were met with a multitude of outstretched steadying hands. The list could go on... We were reminded of Jesus's teaching about the Samaritan when He was asked, "*Who is my neighbor?*" (see Luke 10:29-37). In essence, He answered that our neighbors are all those for whom, through the love of Jesus, we reach out to *bear their load*.

"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality" (Romans 12:13).

The Hebraic early Church excelled at hospitality, another tangible demonstration of love. Opening one's home to others was deeply engrained in Middle Eastern culture and was expected among Gentiles as well as Jews. Biblical hospitality is an entirely different phenomenon than what we in the United States regard as "inviting people over". Americans may love to entertain, but our gatherings are more oriented to the *activity* we do (barbecuing, playing cards, discussing a study book or video) rather than to the relational development with the guests themselves. For instance, many church programs involving a home setting use a Bible study or some prescribed curriculum as the focal point for gathering.

Program-based agendas often emphasize content conveyance rather than the *needs and concerns* of the participants. Consider the lasting impact the Word of God makes when biblical truths are addressed to current life situations—living parables, if you will. How much likelier that God's truths will result in *changed lives*, particularly if those truths are shared with people who have a genuine concern for an individual as "family". Programmed studies may inform and interest the participants, but unless the information can be role-modeled and somehow applied, it will most likely be stored on the mind's back burner and probably forgotten.

Since much of the western Christian community has lost awareness of the importance of the home, hospitality from the heart has become scarce. The book of Hebrews reminds believers, "*Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it*" (Hebrews 13:2). Among the pastors and church leaders we have encountered, few have practiced the criterion of hospitality required in Titus 1:8 and 1 Timothy 3:2. At the retreat center, we found through survey that seldom are believers invited into the homes of others in the congregation just to deepen their relationships. Those who do share a closer-knit camaraderie often have points of contact outside the spiritual realm, such as children on the same sports team or carpool activity.

In Israel we were overwhelmed by the hospitality we encountered, a very deep warmth and regard for *people*. Hospitality was and is a basic function of the Jewish home. (We realize that open-hearted warmth also characterizes many European and Asian cultures in general.) This practice, as the Scriptures make plain, was central in the Hebraic heritage of the early Church. Peter instructed God's people, "*Offer hospitality to one another*" (1 Peter 4:9). Certainly the weekly joyous celebration of the Sabbath is an avenue for reunion. But other spontaneous get-togethers offer insight into the desire for commitment and depth of relationship.

One afternoon as we walked around our Jerusalem suburb of Pisgat Zeev, we prayed to encounter an Israeli family that had been settled in "the land" for a long time. Suddenly, two German Shepherds bounded up to us, pursued by their shouting, laughing master. Rebuking them in Hebrew, he turned to us, extended his hand, and introduced himself as Yehuda. He added, "You are Americans staying with Schlossberg family? They good people!" We nodded eagerly, and shared with him some of our experiences and impressions of Israel. (We should note here that although English sometimes failed him, Yehuda spoke fluent French, and Sue was able to recall enough high school French to enable a fairly flowing conversation!) As he turned to leave, Yehuda said with a twinkle, "You come to my house soon."

Later, back at the Schlossbergs', we asked Bert if invitations like that were meant to be taken seriously. "Sure," he answered. "Just pin him down to a time." The next time we encountered Yehuda on a walk, we continued our conversation where we had left off. Again he stated, "You come to my house." Smiling, we asked, "When?" Grinning back, he responded, "Friday. Nine AM." Friday morning arrived and we climbed the flower-bedecked steps of Yehuda's home, greeted by the barking dogs. As we entered the airy, casually cluttered home, Yehuda's cheerful wife Berte grabbed our hands and led us up to the kitchen. "Please, you sit here." Bustling about the kitchen, she asked, all at the same time, "Do you want coffee? We have juice too. How about soda? Yehuda, here, put these pastries out. I just got them—they're wonderful. I'll get some fruit for you too. Do you like the fruit in Israel?" Overwhelmed by the concern for our gastronomic well-being, we could only nod and smile and nod and smile. As we all dipped into the feast set before us, questions, comments, and responses flowed between us. We felt as welcomed as if we had known them for years!

Sharing family adventures (they have five children) and mutual concerns for the declining moral state of our respective cultures, we found so many planes of commonality between us. What sealed our care for each other, though, was our expression of love for the Bible. We had gleaned so much from the Hebrew Scriptures in the past weeks and were able to point time and again to verses that reiterated God's promises to His Jewish people. Finally, moved by the Spirit, Mike tearfully asked forgiveness from Berte and Yehuda on behalf of his Polish ancestors for the atrocities committed against the Jews during the Holocaust. More tears flowed, hugs abounded, and acceptance was affirmed. As we moved to depart, they both insisted, "Please, wait. Another pastry, more fruit. We must talk some more." (As we later commented, "When you prepare to leave an Israeli home, make sure you plan your departure ahead of time. It'll take you an hour to get out the door!")

Subsequent visits provided the same generosity and kindness. At one point Berte regarded us wonderingly and asked, "Are there other Christians who believe like you do?" We had been sharing with them the love we felt for the Jewish people because God loves them, and avowed our beliefs from Romans 11 that He had a special plan to be fulfilled in and through them. We assured them that we were not alone in this. With what sorrow we hugged each other good-bye the morning of our flight home! What had started out as hospitality had ended up in loving friendship.

We believe that the absence of biblical hospitality in the American Christian community today contributes to the shallowness of the relationships seen in so many churches. One friend noted that the depth of relationship in her congregation appeared to be a mile wide and an inch deep! Hebraic hospitality offers spontaneity so that friends feel free to drop in without prior arrangement. This openness to unannounced intrusion also makes it easy for them to turn to one another in their time of need. Our western scheduling of every church gathering and activity makes it that much more difficult to spontaneously turn to other believers when problems befall us. It is ironic how natural it was for us as children to stop by our friends' homes. Somehow cultural entrapments take over until what once seemed so natural during youth is later perceived as intrusive when we "mature."

One chilly Jerusalem night Bert and Exie Schlossberg realized that it had been weeks since they had seen their neighbors across the street. Around 9 PM, after we had retired to our room, they headed out and knocked on the neighbors' door. Eli and Rivka answered in their bathrobes, laughing with joy to see their friends. They immediately lit up the house, set out goodies, and filled the next three hours with animated conversation. You need the honesty in your relationships to welcome unplanned visits, or to express that the timing really is unsuitable. Just make sure that presuppositions of how others *might* react don't keep you from spontaneous care. Even a note on the door indicating that you stopped by when they were out demonstrates that they were on your mind!

If you examine the levels of relationship you have with the various people in your life, you might be shocked to find how shallow so many of them are. How many of your conversations ever get beyond *issues*: politics, the high cost of living, the decline of morals, crime, the alcohol and drug problems of young people nowadays? How many dig beneath to the things that pain you and hinder your walk with God? True load-bearers "*rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn*" (Romans 12:15). They pray and fast with each other to find God's answers to the painful or confusing situations afflicting them. They also have an open heart attitude that doesn't flinch at godly admonishment: "*Faithful are the wounds of a friend*" (Proverbs 27:6). Such wounds require deep commitment and compassion born out of times of shared sorrow and joy.

On several occasions we presented the following two statements to retreaters and churchgoers:

- Name three people in your congregation to whom you would turn in time of deep trouble in your life.
- Name three people in your congregation with whom you would ask to do an activity.

In so many instances when we compared and analyzed the results, the responses verified how shallow and uncommitted the relationships were within those congregations. Few could come up with three names for each category (apart from the pastor's name, which appeared regularly under the "time of deep trouble" category. Seldom was the pastor a person with whom people shared social activity.) Of those who had listed six names, we investigated further. Many admitted they probably wouldn't in reality contact some of the names; these had just seemed like people who would be understanding or fun. In light of this data, Christian relationships that can "carry each other's burdens" are relatively few.

***"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,'
says the LORD Almighty"*** (Zechariah 4:6).

One of the vertical-horizontal facets of the early Church was decision-making. ("Vertical" refers to your relationship with God; "horizontal" to those in the earthly realm.) Hebraic believers were persistent in seeking God's *rhema*, His revealed will or decision, rather than leaning on their own reasoning and understanding. The Greek philosophical influence in today's church leans heavily on rationalization, employing a lot of "pro and con" discussion. With this type of human reasoning come elements of control and manipulation that tend to divide and estrange people.

An earnest devotion to seek God's guidance testifies that Jesus Christ is the Head of His "called-out ones". When God's people long to restore intimacy with Him, a desire for His guidance is an early indicator: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, "Let us go **at once** to **entreat** the Lord and **seek** the Lord Almighty. I myself am going'" (Zechariah 8:20,21, emphasis added). Pursuit of the Lord's continuous guidance must first be a matter of priority in your *home*. When you refuse to listen to God's guidance, Zechariah warns: "When I called they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen," says the Lord Almighty" (7:13).

How detrimental to others in your home fellowship or even at the congregational level to expect God to manifest His power and presence in your midst when you neither seek Him nor uphold His holiness in your own home. A number of times when the authors have been with a group that was seeking God, the Spirit would quicken to us or to someone else in the group, "The sin of Achan is present. God will not listen to your request." (See Joshua 7.) Achan had tried to hide his personal sin. God had held that sin against all of Israel by letting them be defeated by the people of Ai. When the sin was revealed and dealt with, Israel was able to conquer their enemy. Be conscious of tolerating hidden sin that restrains God from guiding and acting on your behalf.

Again, the pattern of spiritual guidance and decision-making experienced in the home fellowship must be an extension of what is already practiced within the family. The Church of the New Testament relied solely on the Holy Spirit and His illumination of the Hebrew Scriptures to bring understanding to their walk with God. They had no access to the libraries and videos of today. As evangelist David DuPlessis wisely observed, "They had to depend on the Holy Spirit and His teaching and guidance. They had no other option but to minister, to preach and to write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."¹

Seek the Holy Spirit. Do not proceed without the *rhema* of God, His guidance that brings with it the power for fulfillment: *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man **remains in me and I in him**, he will **bear much fruit**; apart from me you can do **nothing**”* (John 15:5, emphasis added).

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord.
‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts’”* (Isaiah 55:8,9).

From the Hebrew Bible the early Church was able to apperceive God’s sovereignty in decision making: *“The Lord works out everything for **his own ends**...In his heart a man plans his course, but the **Lord determines his steps**”* (Proverbs 16:4,9, emphasis added). Decision making is a crucial facet of relationships that are committed to one another and dependent on reliant trust in God. Worldly methods or processes that are used in decision making can cause tension among friends if they feel that bad counsel was given or good counsel not acted upon. Both in the home and in the home fellowship, be sure to select decision processes that God has ordained. Biblical examples of decision-making include, but are not limited to, the examples that follow.

When the disciples replaced Judas with another man to complete the Twelve, they followed the principle of Proverbs 16:33: *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord”*, and, Proverbs 18:18, *“Casting the lot settles disputes and keeps strong opponents apart.”* Two disciples had been proposed to fill the void left by Judas. Instead of taking a popularity poll or vote that could have left some still wondering later if the decision had been correct, they *“drew lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the apostles”* (Acts 1:26). By employing this method any time a potential dispute might arise, further controversy is diffused: *“Every decision is from the Lord.”*

Early believers recognized that their hearts were deceptive beyond measure. *“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9). Since childhood they had been nurtured on Proverbs 3:5,6, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”* The deceit of Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5) and its consequences certainly had warned them about lying to the Holy Spirit: *“Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?’...When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened”* (Acts 5:3,5).

God’s protection method to keep His people from being deceived by their own personal desires included the confirmation of two or three persons. Autocratic decision-making by individuals represented a foreign concept. The early Church’s process of decision making was apperceived from the Hebrew Bible: *“A matter must be established by the testimony of **two or three witnesses**”* (Deuteronomy 19:5, emphasis added). The teaching of Jesus reaffirmed this: *“Again, I tell you that if **two of you agree** on earth about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven”* (Matthew 18:19, emphasis added). Paul reiterated the same principle: *“Every matter must be established*

by the testimony of **two or three witnesses**" (2 Corinthians 13:1, emphasis added).

The church at Antioch used the witness of spiritual gifts, prayer, worshiping, and fasting to set aside Paul and Barnabas for ministry: *"In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers...While they were **worshipping** the Lord and **fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had **fasted and prayed**, they placed their hands on them and sent them off"* (Acts 13:1-3, emphasis added).

Fasting had been a component of spiritual life for centuries. Denying the flesh to focus on spiritual matters signified a wholehearted dependence on God for the answers sought. One present-day congregation of three hundred home fellowships in Guatemala encourages two believers from each fellowship to fast one day a week so that each day is bathed in fasting and prayer by a minimum of six hundred believers. They are seeing mighty interventions of God in their midst! Jesus Himself said, **"When you fast"** (see Matthew 6:16), not *if* you fast. Surely there are blessings to be released when believers humbly seek to minister to one another through prayerful fasting before His throne.

God has not left His people to struggle alone to discern His will. Christians are fellow believers committed to seeking God's best for each of His children so that they will be equipped to obey their Lord. Like Paul, earnestly ask God on behalf of one another to *"fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding"* (Colossians 1:9). Seek Him in your prayer closet and diligently study His Word for *rhema*. As you entrust yourself to Him, He will use your spouse and/or faith family to confirm His plans for you.