

## **Love Beyond Love [Revisited]**

**And we can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments. If someone claims, "I know God," but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did. Dear friends, I am not writing a new commandment for you; rather it is an old one you have had from the very beginning. This old commandment to love one another is the same message you heard before. Yet it is also new. Jesus lived the truth of this commandment, and you also are living it. For the darkness is disappearing, and the true light is already shining.**

(1 John 2:3-8)

So now we can tell who the children of God are, and who the children of the devil are. Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God. This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. We must not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and killed his brother. And why did he kill him?

Because Cain had been doing what was evil, and his brother had been doing what was righteous. So don't be surprised, dear brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

If we love our Christian brothers and sisters, it proves that we have passed from death to life. But a person who has no love is still dead. Anyone who hates another brother or sister is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don't have eternal life within them.

**We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion how can God's love be in that person?**

1 John 3:10-20

## **Love Beyond Love**

**...let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God.**

What does the term "love beyond love" mean? Simply this:

**“We open our heart, mind, spirit, and soul to a person. Removing all distance and hostility that keeps us from connecting in the places and moments of life that Jesus Christ has intended for us.”**

There is a specific calling and command from Jesus to love people the way He loved. That calling asks us to go beyond our own ideas of love for others – beyond our personal feelings of hostility and broken perceptions of love for others and ourselves. Jesus plainly asks His followers to love like He loved (John 13:34, 15:12-17). For a true Christ follower loving beyond love is intended to be a daily function of life – more than a warm feeling, timely gesture or good deed (although these are always welcomed) - it must be uniquely fluid and meaningfully active. Active love beyond love is not what we do, it is who we are. It shares what has been shared with us: love that is open, intentional and filled with genuine hospitality to all. Christians can often mistake this for some method or form of mission, personal evangelism, or benevolence - but it is not the same thing. Yes, each of those is delivering "the message" of Christ's love to those who need it when they need it most. And certainly we all agree that God has a clear expectation of all Christians (not just some) to deliver the message of Christ's love (Matthew 28) through various methods and opportunities of mission, evangelism, and benevolence. But God's plans for

loving the world do not stop there - they go beyond. Though all are virtuous, worthwhile and meaningful, they are in reality just another place for love to begin. It is love, but not a love to go beyond love. God's commanded love is beyond that, and intended to be even more personal, more intimate, and certainly more difficult than just faithfully delivering a message, mercy, and a meal (even if it is the greatest message) once a week.

No, love beyond love in a "Jesus context" is much more complicated and difficult, and is never as easy as just showing up. To know that is to discover quickly that one does not always feel good about loving and being loved. This is because the way Jesus calls us to love and be loved is intended to continue out beyond us and our huge appetite for feeling good about ourselves. In the context of Jesus and His love - love goes beyond feelings about ourselves, and comes about only in Him. This means "day in-day out" we are going to love and be loved by people who will both reciprocate and reject both us and our love. What we learn then about loving beyond love as Christians is that we keep moving forward as Jesus did - always toward the people. And He did so in spite of their response - whether receiving or rejecting His love. The idea is that in reality He created an open space in and around Himself for people to live life together. It is His expectation that

with grace, we too can progressively create an open space in and around ourselves for life together with anyone who can hear or believe His message of love beyond love. In this sense love beyond love is about being on the "same page" with Jesus, and loving people from that place and space. And though it is not without boundary or expectation that place is welcoming, and the space is very open. Without that reality, loving people the way Christians should love is just not possible.

**April 19th 2015**

**Love Beyond Love**

As each of us search for the thoughts of Jesus and true heartbeat of God the Father, we learn that His love is an open door to a home place (safe) for all kinds of people. We will understand also that no one (more or less) should be shut out from that kind of place or space. As Christ followers it is expected that we extend to others what Christ extended to us.

**"Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another - this is how all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."**

John 13:34, 35

What Jesus asked of us was that we give a sincere, non-pretentious, religious-free welcome to others for living and loving life together in Him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it best when he wrote,

"Love for our neighbor and for one another should stretch widely across all space and distance; and should be equally distributed throughout every portion of it – in the same way the sun casts out light. Christ invited us to share

the perfection of the heavenly Father by imitating His indiscriminate gift of that light (love).”

Bonhoeffer is confirming that we should not only love completely; but completely consistent with the truth we know about the heart and character of God. What do we know about God's heart and character besides the creator of all ruler of the universe type things such as... omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, timeless, ageless, and sovereign? Well, even the little children know that...

### **"GOD IS LOVE"**

In doing this we can be in step with who God has called His followers to be. We know from the earthly life and teaching of Jesus that He intentionally and individually reached out across all social, cultural, economic and health risk lines with His love. He proved in His living, His dying, and His living again that the love of God (His love) is indeed open and inclusive of all, and that it knows no limits. In spite of our self-centric protests, justifications and basically flat out excuse making, Jesus has called us to love people in the same way. Not only is that a repeated and direct red-letter command from Jesus, it is also clear there can be no disconnect between preaching the

message of Christ's love and how we are to live life with others in His love.

### **"This Is the Point"**

This is the teachable moment where we the community at Reunion Church can learn how to go beyond ourselves, and get beyond the religious ideas of men so we can make a home place in Christ for all.

Now let's shift gears. As you may have already guessed by now, settling and sorting through our own relationship in Christ is a big part to clearing the way to forming loving relationships with others. The same could be said of discovering the purpose and meaning Christ has for our life. The two are uniquely connected, and once settled, then the question for you and I is no longer – Who am I, and what am I to do? But rather, the question becomes - How does Christ want to love His community and the many others out there beyond me?

**"Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see. So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests."**

Matthew 22:9, 10

So in hearing the command of Jesus to "love one another as I have loved you" and His clear intentions for us to "go out to the street corners and invite everyone", we can piece together a very personal understanding of "love beyond love."

"Steve, I have loved you, now give what I have given you to people beyond yourself"

We must stop asking "What is my role - and how am I supposed to love"? Those are not the right questions. In fact, there should be no question. **Jesus said, "love as I have loved you." Just love...**

We can start with God's desire and expectation for everyone to have someone to connect with, and for everyone to have someplace to connect to.

**"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."**

1 Peter 2:9, 10

God does not want people to be without a place or to be shut out and disconnected from His community. What we are describing is not just a physical or visible place. It is that and much, much, more. It is the culture and “DNA” in us that will unmistakably define us as people who are open to loving and thinking like Jesus. He gives us His “DNA” by freely and openly loving us – all the while sending us people to love in the same way He loved us. This culture is shared and imparted as a gift. It creates the passion needed for being open to people and relationships in a loving environment that fills the human need for connecting, and belonging. We are describing a place of meaning where the Holy Spirit is always shaping and reshaping us – all the while being surrounded and loved by the people of God. In this place, we know that God is growing our roots deep down to be able to send out our new branches to love beyond love – just like Jesus loved. This growth shapes and forms us and we continue learning while we are being stretched and trimmed by all kinds of personalities and people up close and personal. In this kind of process there is always the need for help in learning to grow this way. Again, it is not easy! God will send that help by calling new people into our lives to love us. God wants us loving beyond ourselves, moving forward towards each other... teaching and being taught... training and being trained... imparting and being imparted to.

We are to equip ourselves in this way for the calling and leadership that is needed for the ever-changing road ahead. As we faithfully do this, remember it is a slow process; one that requires vision, persistence, and patience.

**April 26th, 2015**

**Love Beyond Love**

To help everyone move forward in the process it is good to remind the community that God has birthed within them something very special, and that they have been divinely included along with many others in God's plans for a time and a place like this.

We also experience that God's timing for building His kingdom in this way is seldom the same as ours. Our part is to seek His Kingdom and to follow the leading of His Spirit and to "get on the same page - at the same time." It does not help to merely seek His stamp of approval for our plans and actions for loving. We are supposed to use whatever faith we have in God, to patiently wait on God, while doing our best to follow God, to see His will to be done in us.

We are followers of Jesus, open to connecting with people through what essentially is an invitation for them to walk with us on the journey of life. Discovering to love and be loved on this journey in ways that have until now seemed beyond reach for us all. Along the way we experience many amazing circumstances and settings where the genuine sense and reality of God's Spirit is at work among us. These experiences

are inspiring and give the insights needed to help us continue truly loving all of those we have opportunity to love. This is a mark of spiritual depth and the sign of real spiritual growth. Observing depth and growth within us is one of those good things that naturally encourages us to push deeper into our faith even when loving seems too difficult to pull off. Still, there are those times when everything seems to come to a stop. With no apparent movement, loving relationships get very difficult and can be almost painful, which is for many Christians confusing and at times discouraging. The confusion and discouragement create questions and periods of doubt that often cause us to feel like giving up on loving difficult people in difficult circumstances. But remember, love beyond love is fluid as long as our movement and motivation is towards Jesus - that is the promise of God.

**Just because there are times where there is no visible change with the ones we are trying to love through difficulty does not mean there is no movement or growth. Keep moving - move toward Jesus - there is always change.**

Because this is so important to understand, we should continually filter what we are feeling about "love beyond love" through grids of biblical truth that help us to maintain focus and make clear the path toward Jesus and His thinking and loving.

"Just because what we are feeling is real, does not mean what we are feeling is our reality"

When we become distracted, discouraged, or weary while loving in difficult circumstances the "grid of truth" stabilizes us and keeps us moving - and moving in the right direction. By turning to the "grid of truth", God provides movement in the realm of the Spirit for us, and faithfully leads us back to the genuine path of love beyond love - in spite of what we do not know, cannot control, or do not see. Along with this renewed movement we can experience an unseen momentum that carries us forward sometimes even when we are closing down from obvious frustrations, difficulties and disappointments. We are learning through these experiences that both momentum and our perceived loss of it, are useful for loving in God's Kingdom. We continue our faithfulness at loving beyond love as Jesus asks us. If this sounds like work remember - having a calling to be a community whose priority is to love God and one another openly does not just happen easily. There is a lot of "stuff" to work through - and that's just us. By openly looking at what we have just talked about we are actually working through a good deal of who we are to be in Christ.

**May 3rd 2015**

**Love Beyond Love**

**The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.**

Luke 6:45

**"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.**

**By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments**

**abides in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us."**

1 John 3:16-24

It is from scripture and words of truth such as these that we learn that "being precedes doing", or you can say... "from our being comes our doing." So for now we will talk about who we are to **be** in Christ. Part of belonging to and following Christ means we have been given a specific mission to teach and impart God's truth to those who will gather with us (Acts 2:42-46). Each of us has a leadership role in fulfilling that mission. What is exciting about the role of leadership that God is expecting from us is that our mission is a biblical mission, and follows closely the New Testament model of Acts 2:42-46. Our leadership requires that we **actively equip** those whom we are called to (another part of the journey to loving beyond love), and those we have been given influence with and authority for. **Actively equipping** is what Jesus did for those He loved and desired to love beyond themselves. Here is the truth on this... a genuine and sincere Christian community should have both an expectation for, and obligation to service and participation from everyone - not just the paid or professional staff. So we know that as a follower of Jesus we should **be** people of message and mission, plan and purpose.

**"To love beyond love is our shared message and mission, shared leadership is our plan and purpose. Look at our home - look at our marriages - look at our children and grandchildren - look at our schools and neighborhoods, our shared mission to actively equipping is very obvious."**

At Reunion, we acknowledge the fact that most of the traditional and dynamic seeker-sensitive growth models for current Christian church ministry do not always fit with what God has for His home here among us. It is also fairly obvious that we are not just a gathering of believers going through the motions (though at times we are not above it). We are a community who believes we are called to follow Jesus, with a growing sense of worship and learning as we live and love together in Him.

**We see many good people that truly believe in Jesus... but not all good people truly follow Jesus.**

And though that seems harsh - we all know it is not really harsh it is just true - and because it is true we have to make it right! There are also many that believe and attempt to follow, but ultimately discover they are not willing to go further when realizing that true followers of Jesus are called to literally love

others beyond love, and to truly open themselves to a life together (even if figuratively) with anyone seeking hope regardless of whether that person thinks, looks or acts like them. To think and respond to another person in the ways that Jesus would means wrapping ones arms around all of this... believing it, following it, living it, and literally creating space for life together with others in Christ. The expectations and intention of God for us in loving beyond love is not that we look for ways to get out of it - but rather that we seek better ways to get in to it. Unfortunately not all Christians want to think of Jesus in that way... but that is one of the countless things about the love of Jesus that is so special - and it is certainly not unique to us here at Reunion. **It is simply just who we are supposed to be.**

To help us remember who we are to be in Christ, we have embraced **five active equipping actions** from the first church of Jesus (Acts 2:42-46). We have committed (like them) in mutual covenant to...

**worship together - serve together - learn together  
pray together - break bread together**

**This is at the core of who we are  
- resulting in what our mission requires**

Around the world there are millions of other Christian homes and communities on the same spiritual path as us. They are experiencing the same pulling force of God's Spirit to genuine community, and realizing it will include loving beyond love want to move forward in what God is calling them to. They have the same passion for an awakening to the real message of Jesus - to love beyond themselves, to love beyond their micro-world. Like us they are trying to figure it out, and like Jesus make an open place and spiritual home for all. Knowing that others like us exist is liberating and faith building. It is encouraging to discover we are not alone, and that we are "tracking" along with all who are answering God's calling to be His people and to love beyond love.

**May 10th 2015**

**Love Beyond Love**

**"But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first getting estimates and then checking to see if there is enough money to pay the bills? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of funds. And then how everyone would laugh at you! They would say, 'There's the person who started that building and ran out of money before it was finished!' "Or what king would ever dream of going to war without first sitting down with his counselors and discussing whether his army of ten thousand is strong enough to defeat the twenty thousand soldiers who are marching against him? If he is not able, then while the enemy is still far away, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace. So no one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me.**

- Luke 14:28-33

The ministry at Reunion was once described by one of its leaders as "saving the saved." I think that comment is still true, but not necessarily completed. In the years since that observation was made many effective and diverse ministry tracks have emerged and been accepted. After all these years

if pastoral and evangelistic ministry I am more certain than ever that God has called me to love and care for “lost sheep” and in that sense our ministry here at Reunion has always been consistent. There is a large group of “lost sheep” in our community that believe in Christ but have been hurt or displaced from somewhere else. I openly love them and welcome them into communion and fellowship, and the leaders of our community graciously help me with this ministry.

But, over the years Reunion has grown in such a way that our ministry does not merely represent just “my calling.” Yes, I am the founding Pastor, and I serve and lead accordingly in that role. But God has called many others into the ministry at Reunion. Not only to each other, but to becoming a living breathing community capable of loving like Jesus - beyond itself. In that sense the ministry and calling we have at Reunion is complimentary and shared. Again, the bottom line is that God has with His insights called us all to a community that reflects our common journey and our similar gifts. He does this for the purpose of accomplishing His will in us – to create a home place filled with genuine love and hospitality - making space for not only our similarities and differences, but for the connection that others discover with us.

So, for us to frequently recite and re-clarify to one another our similarities and the differences in ministry is a healthy process and one that helps meet the ever-changing needs of people in our world. This process is made somewhat easier because of our deep discipleship roots and spiritual formation providing clarity for who we are (identity) when loving like Jesus. A home place is being continually formed and reformed in us that would probably have some describing us as...

A Christian community open to loving and to being loved completely in Christ. We have a clear calling and passion for equipping anyone who will come along with us in genuine community to follow Jesus.

We have lived and worshipped together now for sixteen years in a millennial age of what has been described by some as a "global tech-nopoly." I would call it "instant global access and replacement gratification through technology." This global tech-nopoly is driven by what is known as direct response demographic marketing. Ours is a world of distinct and very diverse social/economical sub-cultures (tribal). Unfortunately, some church growth models simply target the most desirable market demographic from among these sub-cultures.

Although there seems to be nothing on the surface wrong with this, there is also something not quite right about it. It leaves some market demographics out - and that is not love beyond

love as defined by Jesus. This is the fast track to a philosophy that solely targets the market-demo that can most quickly and capably help achieve quick access and immediate response. What is seen as essential is data capture, demographic placement, branding and messaging. And although I clearly see the effectiveness and purpose for that strategy, I also become concerned that too much of the all-inclusive mission of Jesus (to love beyond love) becomes displaced or lost. In reality the "tech-nopoly" in which we exist carries with it not only man's greatest means of accessing information - but also his greatest means of dehumanization. My Christians critics would say that we cannot miss out on the means (technology) to get the gospel of Christ around the world faster and quicker than ever before. My response would be, at what price? The gospel went around the world once through the obeyed command of Jesus, and the sacrifice and faith of eleven men - without the means of any technology. There was no dehumanizing, exploitation or marketing - there was only "love beyond love." Frankly, loving and ministering to all kinds of people the way Jesus did, always represents a much slower growth process than the one that has become the American or even a global model of success. The Jesus Model for ministry (loving beyond love) costs a great price - and that is not desirable for all demo-markets. At the very least loving beyond love it is certainly more frustrating long before it ever becomes fulfilling, and it is more

often misunderstood before it is likely to be understood. But in the end, it will get all those who choose it to where they need to get.

The Jesus model of love beyond love **is all about prioritizing** God's expectations of us - **above our expectations of Him.**

**May 17th, 2015**

**Love Beyond Love**

**"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."**

**- Colossians 3:11-17**

**Life Together**

From the illuminating light that is the life of Christ, we are able to see the power of what is called...

## **“THE GIFT OF ATTENTION”**

Through "the gift of attention" there are endless possibilities for love that become available when that gift is completed in us through Christ and then shared in prayer. Which is, by the way, very much what God intended all along! Although we have described several life-changing moments that took place while Jesus was naturally interacting with people (woman at the well, Zacheus, woman with the issue of blood, man at the Pool of Bethesda) - it is important to understand they were not merely **random or coincidental moments** meant to only last for that moment. These were **intentional moments** of attention given to men and women as a gift of God's unstoppable and unconditional love for His creation. The intent in each one of the instances was not for someone to simply have a little feel good moment with God, but rather as a result of the encounter of the love and attention of Jesus... (More on this later)

**Anyone, at Anytime, or Anywhere, could be Re-invented or Redirected to begin a new life in Christ.**

We know from experience that God comes to us in Christ – and from scripture that we come to Him in the same way... and in Christ we have life together with our Creator and Heavenly

Father. The reason for this is love (not temporary love or in the moment love) - but unending, unending, eternal love. Again (please hear this) with Jesus it was never about people who came together to just love for the moment – but He was all about people finding love for one another, through one another, and with one another - a love beyond love. This is a love that is not only for the moment, but for all of life and for all of time. Love that gives us hope for a life together in Him. God wants to be with us, and He is with us through Christ His Son, and that is the way He has chosen for us to have life together with one another – in Christ's love. That is why we can say that His intention was not simply for people to have a mere moment with Him. He seeks for us to have life together in Christ, not just a series of random or coincidental situations and happenstances that never fully connect us to our destiny in Him or with each other.

For example; God's plan for the Church of Jesus Christ was never just about experiencing a weekly one hour worship production for masses of people who barely exchange greetings, glances and head nods with one another. We cannot remain in Christ and continue to live consciously or unconsciously disconnected from one another.

**To be in Christ is to love and to be loved as Christ loved, and to**

**come to one another as Christ came to us.**

This connects us with other people for a life together in Him. Everything outside of that would be best described as a "pseudo love" (a form of love - but not God's full love). **Every form of love outside of Christ is a love that we can purposely or conveniently use to keep ourselves safe, hidden or even at a distance from people we do not want to love or come into real relationship with.** This includes even perhaps those that we believe will not love or want relationship with us (rejection). In fact, there is no better way to keep people at a distance than to use various forms or manipulations of love to categorically or conditionally love them. From a distance it is easier to control difficult relationships through gatherings, events, and little "Facebook moments" with them. In this way we appear on the surface to be a community and to love all people, but really we are just living an illusion - because the love we share is not true love in the sense of Christ's love because it does not go beyond ourselves. By accepting the illusion as though it is true when we know it is not - it becomes deception. It is deception of the worst kind... self-deception.

I am completely convinced that when we hold this up in comparison to the model of Christ, we really **do not have life together** with those people but we are actually just creating an

**image of life together** with them.

### **Images - Some are Real and Some are Not**

Genuine life together can only be achieved through the indiscriminate and unconditional love of Christ. Within that love there is no distance - no unfilled or hostile spaces between us. The Church cannot replicate this love beyond love through intellect, pity, or production – it can only be done in Christ. As followers of Jesus, we do not have the biblical freedom to categorically place conditions on Christ's love for people, or to even sort through people by race, socio-economics, or personality and spiritual profiling. That practice is a sad misrepresentation of God's grace and indiscriminate love...

**“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”**

What are we saying here? Well, of course nothing that hasn't already been said before! Look again at the text written by the apostle Paul to the Colossians... verses 12-14 in particular. Patience, gentleness, kindness, compassion and humility are all virtues used to love others in some form or another; however if the forms of love we use with people even though they be

virtuous allow us to categorize and to place conditions on whom and how we are to love; at that point it is not God's love, and Christ is not in it. When we allow ourselves the liberty to identify and marginalize people through any criteria but the love of Jesus it becomes as we said before, only a form of our own love and clearly not the fullness of His love. In this way we cannot experience or find true life together in Christ.

Doesn't it strike you as a little odd that there is no mention or even a reference from Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection about their betrayal and desertion of Him? His silence in this regard is truly amazing. The first signal of His indiscriminate love and intention for continued life together with the disciples is heard just down the road from the tomb on what we now call "resurrection morning" when He says to Mary Magdalene, "Go tell my brothers..." (Matthew 28:10). This is completely consistent with Paul's revelation of Jesus love that he himself had experienced. So he wrote to the Corinthians of a love that "keeps no record of wrongs." If we respond to this truth by saying that God does not expect us to seek life together with just anyone and everyone - then we are completely missing the point altogether and we overlook what is at the core of His truth, and can eventually end up just existing in this world; shut off and shut out from the very life and meaning that we seek from it. We truly can find ourselves

distanced from Christ; although not cut off, but not fully knowing or living together in the love that God has intended for us to live. And that is distance we speak of.

**"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."**

- Matthew 7:1-2

Therein, lies the distance from others and the absence of Christ's love we are speaking of. When we put that distance between ourselves and others we put it between our self and Christ (Matthew 25:34-40). Even then, by His Spirit He comes to us once again (in grace) to close that distance; so we too, (in Christ) must come to those who have pushed us away or have been pushed away. In these difficult circumstances with difficult people we learn in Christ to make our love real.

Knowing the heart of God and His intentions for us on this central issue of life together is of great advantage to all those seeking to love others the way Christ loved us. It allows us to be able to dream and believe and have faith in a way that Christ did. We can dare to ask, "What can the possibilities of Christ's love itself actually be?" Possibilities of His love not only for those people that we seek to love, but possibilities of His love for us as

well. St. John of the Cross, expressed some of those possibilities when wrote of his experiences in complete isolation and darkness while imprisoned for nine months. From one of those writings called "Dark Night of the Soul" he said,

**"When the love of Christ does come it pierces ones soul. The soul looks then upon great things as little, on many as few, its long service as short, by reason of the fire by which love is burning. It is with the soul as it was with Jacob, who served seven years for Rachel and they seemed but a few days, because of the greatness of his love."**

That type love is overwhelmingly powerful and is beyond our capabilities alone, and it is precisely that kind of love He brings to you and me. And it is a love of that magnitude that confronts us with enormous possibilities in this community at Reunion. We are confronted not merely with the radical reality of Christ's love but as His followers - what to do with it.

**May 24th, 2015**

**"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."**

Romans 15:1-7 ESV

**"We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one**

**repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil."**

I Thessalonians 5:12-22 ESV

In our world of multi-racial, multi-generational social-media networks and communities, the truth is that alternative outlets for true community are a dime a dozen. **But those communities and networks can provide only one element of what is most needed for true community - the element that feels good.** What is missing most often is the element that challenges an individual with truth, asking them and the relationship to grow and change into what God has called them to be. What they really need is a real life as an active participant of the true community of Christ. They do not believe in God – but most of them believe in love. That is our connection point... loving and genuine relationship – love beyond love. In this case, love without strings attached, and a love that is willing to wait for the Holy Spirit to germinate His truth into their intellectual or hostile processes.

Don't get me wrong... as I said, the feel-good element is important and we all know that in its proper place is very much needed.

**"But the feel-good element on its own as a means to an end is incomplete. It is the easy part of the life journey (everyone wants to feel good) – but not the means or path to completing and navigating a difficult and long life journey."**

A genuine Christian community to the anti-churched must be a place where all can see a way to finish what has been started. It must also be a place that where the mind and thinking like Jesus are valued as part of that journey. There should be a welcome to questions and dialogue concerning all biblical and world-views.

**May 31st, 2015**

That community is here with us – and it is God's great and gracious gift to us. For us it is called Reunion, but without Christ and His love, it does not matter what we call it. Here we are a home place - open and welcome to the un-churched, over-churched and anti-churched. This community is at the point in our journey where we are praying that God is not only building for us – but beyond us; **Reunion beyond Reunion, love beyond love... a home place for all.** We pray for a spiritual home place that meets the needs of both our own families and the needs of those extended relationships... to the ones beyond Reunion that we might not necessarily have chosen for ourselves. We are looking for a spiritual home place where the “saved can be saved” and a place where those who are described as the “unsaved” are welcomed and can become connected to Christ through the loving relationships of His people.

**So then, what would a home place such as this look like?**

That is a good question and it is one that you as part of this community must also ask yourself. For me, at least, the answer comes in part from a question that once again goes beyond us here at Reunion Church.

## **“What does the body of Christ look like”?**

I say it looks diverse – (check out Romans 12:5).

**"Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other."**

Diversity... that very well could be the understatement of the ages! **The truth is - the body of Christ is not only the complete expression of diversity, but it also has many levels of faith, maturity, and spiritual understanding... and those levels are the part that we absolutely must see!** Honestly (in this context), when I close my eyes the first picture I see is the one of my own lacking and struggles. But as I take my eyes and attention off myself and look out further (beyond me) I can see that there are good people of all kinds who identify themselves as Christians or at the very least people who believe in God as the divine Creator. There are those who are steady, determined, and strong - and those that are unsteady, uncertain, and

weak. I see Christians/believers who are very knowledgeable and mature in their faith - while others who lack both knowledge and maturity in their faith. I see Christians who struggle with lifelong addictions – and others who live free from their addictions but not from the struggle. Some Christians flounder in relationships with others - and for some their greatest difficulty is just relating to themselves. I see Christians that have a hard time with telling the truth - while others are motivated only with finding the truth. There are Christians who must fight everyday against the impulses of their flesh - while others seem controlled and victorious. There are Christians (believe it or not) who drink, swear, and smoke. There are Christians who battle with sickness, depression, sexual addiction, drug addiction, deep rejection, insecurities, anger, and varieties of obsessive-compulsive behaviors. There are also many Christians whose greatest struggles are internal and hidden from us - we might never see them. Does that make them more spiritual, a better Christian, or more desirable to us than the ones whose external habits and struggles we can see? As we learn to love and be loved like Jesus we should be mature enough to see that there are Christians who are over-comers and then those who at times are just plain overcome.

**“Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone.”**

1 Thessalonians 5:14

We need to rejoice and celebrate with and learn from those wonderful Christians whose disciplined lifestyles move and inspire us - **but we must also learn how to celebrate and rejoice with the ones less disciplined, less victorious; but no less loved by Jesus.**

### **Conclusion**

Unfortunately there are also Christians who through a religious and pious spirit have come to believe that any person who claims to be a Christian but does not live in the way that they personally see fit are simply not Christians at all. But according to the bible that thinking is not true (Romans 14:1-4, 15:1-2).

**"Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you**

**to condemn someone else's servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let him judge whether they are right or wrong. And with the Lord's help, they will do what is right and will receive his approval. In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable. Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God. For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honor the Lord. And if we die, it's to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead. So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God."**

Romans 14:1-11

In fact the bible says anyone who judges and condemns out of pride and arrogance will be judged and condemned in the same way - plain and simple. Sadly some (what I call) Phari-

typical Christians actually believe they are bearing fruit and exercising their spiritual gift when they can successfully identify and publicly voice the faults, failures, and sins of others. According to Jesus they are only bearing poisonous fruit, and have completely missed the opportunity to think or love like Him. It is a lesson to be learned; too often it is our religious arrogance working – when grace and humility is most needed!

**The point of all of this is not endless. Just a little humility would allow us to see that there are circumstances and behaviors in us all that God has been patiently waiting for a long time to change. There are Christians of all kinds at various places in the journey of faith. Sure, it is one thing to “believe in Jesus” and it is another to “follow Jesus”, and they are not always the same. But it is the endless grace and daily love of Jesus that moves us all along the path of becoming his disciples - and not the judgment and condemnation of man.**

**So, who are the people and where is the place that He will use for that change to take place?**

**We are the people – and we are the place!**

Everyday both you and I should call out to God... "Let this love be in us, and in our community... Please God let it be in us."

And then whatever physical place He gives us to call home can reflect His attitude and heart of love for people.

With this understanding we can be the home and a place of belonging for people just like the ones Jesus loved and walked with when He was on earth as a man. It is important for pastors, teachers, ministry leaders, and family leaders to talk and teach often about how Jesus loved them all, and how He spoke to them all, making sure they all knew that there was a place for them to love and be loved - a place for them to grow and to change the disappointments of the life they knew. When He said to them, "come to Me" He included the ones beyond the church (un-churched, anti-churched, and over-churched); the strong and the weak, the over-comers and the over-come, the obstacles and the enablers, the faithful and unfaithful, the simple and the complex. Isn't it crazy that all these years later many Christians and many churches still wrestle with which ones they should love and let love, or who they should make a place for within the community of Christ?

**Certainly after all the things we have been through together at Reunion; me walking with you - and you walking with me... would we, should we, dare we waste precious time with something so opposed to the heart and command of Jesus?**

**Shouldn't our home (the community of faith - the body of Christ) indeed be a place for all those that Jesus calls to it?**

When wrestling with questions such as these I am quickly reminded of the Proverb, "Unless the Lord builds the house those that labor on it unfortunately are laboring in vain." We do not want our labor to be worthless. The truth is that from all the diverse types of people we have mentioned (including ourselves), we each needs a place of covering (a home) s can recover and re-direct (love and care) from the causes and effects of sin, and the consequences of our thoughts, words, and our deeds. We all need a place to grow up in Christ. We need a physical and a spiritual home that directly reflects the personality and needs of a caring community. A place where open and strong relationships can be formed and can flourish. Our home should be the place where all types of people and families of all age groups can love and be loved; a place as we said to grow and change, and a place where we all can experience life together in Christ. That is as they say "the big picture." My question to you is, "What do you see in that picture"?

**Love Beyond Love - June 7th, 2015**

**Changing – Moving Forward**

Isaiah 57:14-19

**And it will be said: "Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people." For this is what the high and lofty One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me — the breath of man that I have created. I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the LORD. And I will heal them."**

A great deal of what needs to change in you and I is behavior related. So to start we have to recognize that most of our wrong behavior is just the result of how wrongly we think – **“wrong thinking produces wrong behavior.”** This statement is not merely a secular idea. But rather it is a biblical truth - a truth

that we can't simply ignore because it asks us to change things about ourselves we do not want to change. As Christians we should be willing and welcoming to godly change, and the personal and spiritual growth that it affects in our lives. **Let me explain;** We Christians should begin to change (**grk;** metamorphoo) simply because we are identified by the change that Christ makes in us as we grow in His grace

2 Corinthians 5:18

**“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come”!**

So, it is safe to say that if you don't want change in your life then you more than likely wouldn't see the need or have the desire to become a Christian. But in all honesty... all of us know we need to change in some way or another; and **in Christ**, God has given us the perfect vehicle for change to take place. Most importantly we need to know that we can change because of Christ; and from that moment we come to Him, we never have to stay the same. In Christ, we are in a constant mode of being formed and reformed by the truth that He reveals to us through His written Word. The process of change is what Christians should correctly identify as **the work of the Holy Spirit in us (God working in us)**. It is a very important work, and is critically significant to shaping our lives together in Christ. But

first let's get back to the idea that **“wrong thinking produces wrong behavior.”** If this is true - and it is; then it is also true that **“right thinking produces right behavior.”** So then, we must be open to changing our wrong thinking – which is one of the great benefits of the Holy Spirit and the power of God's Word working in us.

Listen to what Ephesians 4:22-24 says,

**“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”**

And Romans 12:2 directly tells us,

**“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.”**

**When we know as Christians that our objective is to become agents or instruments of change, we can then (without fear or anxiety) welcome the personal correction God wants to make in us.** He makes these corrections in us as we learn His truth, as we are led by His Spirit, and as we learn to obediently love

each other. Let me describe a spiritual process of two simple ways that our thinking changes:

**First –**

**We must desire to know what we do not know.**

**(Value; Who God Is)**

**Second –**

**We must accept the call to do what we have not done**

**(Purpose; What God's Will is for Me).**

But, NONE OF THIS HAPPENS without the power of the Holy Spirit (God) at work in us to reveal to us HIS word of truth.

As we engage ourselves in the process of learning biblical and spiritual truth, our minds and our thinking begin to change. At that point we can actually see the avenues of change God has made for us and then we truly start to have a realistic expectation of changing our old and wrong behaviors. **But as long as we continue to think in the same old way - nothing new will ever happen.** Sure we can target certain things and mark and timeline them for change which can be liberating in itself; but what we really need is to be made new in the attitude of our minds. When this happens there is no longer a need for us

to justify or trivialize our bad habits and wrong behaviors; they can finally be seen and understood for what they are...

**THEY ARE THE FORCES THAT HOLD US BACK AND UNDERMINE THE PROGRESS, GROWTH, AND THE CHANGE THAT WE ALWAYS TALK ABOUT - BUT NEVER SEEMS TO HAPPEN.**

But with a new attitude in our mind and some corrections and adjustments to our thinking we no longer have to see ourselves headed for one more futile attempt at change followed by disappointment and discouragement. The new attitude and new thinking (in Christ) moves us away from simply trying to correct symptoms, and distances us from embracing the victim mentality. It gives us a way to overcome the madness of continually identifying ourselves with our habits, problems, and circumstances (this is who I am). We have to hear this...

**“We really do change for the better once we allow the Holy Spirit to challenge our old attitudes and patterns of thinking - allowing Christ to lead us in the right direction.”**

The change can be real and ongoing; not just a temporary feel-good experience that picks us up only to be plopped right back down into our old way of thinking... and then followed soon thereafter by our same old patterns and behavior. With this new attitude of our mind (mind of Christ) we can change

how we treat others; which is a breakthrough for those who have damaged and strained many of their most important relationships as a result of their wrong and hurtful behavior.

**We can change hurtful, harmful habits and addictive**

**compulsive behaviors** by committing ourselves to a new way of thinking in Christ and a new way of doing things according to His word. It is not reality to merely say "I think this way or that way now" – or, "I do things this way now." It is an intentional spiritual journey we choose to take so we may seek God's truth and goodness within our lives each and every day. We now think new and spiritually healthy thoughts – we learn new and better ways, and then we go about living in them; not apart from or just alongside of them.

The final thoughts on change and moving forward start with this... **the dynamics of change for Christians must take place at many levels – never just one.** Too often as Christians and Christian communities in despair we have relied on merely a change of heart (emotive experiences) to achieve a change in our circumstances, then we are disappointed when the change we thought we experienced was only temporary. Or the flip side is true when we Christians (in our pride) just simply attempt to intellectualize the change we need, and then are not honest enough about who we really are or the

circumstances we are in. The problem with merely going through an intellectual change in ourselves is that we do not always see the value of complete faith in God or the need to allow God's Spirit to actually complete a work or finish the change in us. There is an obvious disconnect between knowing something and being that something.

**Knowing who we are supposed to be is not the same thing as Being who we are supposed to be.**

So by now we have learned that emotional experiences are not reliable enough, and that relying on our intellect alone often times becomes the very obstacle that keeps us from coming to the point of experiencing true change. There must be affirmative and intentional action. Here it is... God by His Spirit, is working in our intellect and our thoughts to change our mind and the attitude with which we process our thoughts... this is done through a revelation of the spirit of truth in Christ (as we seek Him) - but be made aware that He must be allowed as well to heal the emotions and feelings within in us that have been many times deceitful and unreliable to us (realize we need Him). That is why Jesus prioritized to His disciples the command to "love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength." By obeying this one command Christ makes a way for us find what we seek and receive what we

need in Him. This is a complete change for mind, body, and soul and true change must take place at every level in our human make-up; if not... then that change is too often not complete and we are left to struggle and doubt if the kind of change we need can ever happen in us. Again, we start to think and believe wrongly and then in error verbalize things such as... "Well, this is just who I am" or "This is just the way God made me." When the truth is actually; it is just who **we think** we are, or who we have allowed ourselves (in our wrong thinking and behavior) to then become. But God has made us to be like Him (made in His likeness and image); and the truth is that mankind did not get it done the way He wanted it done, and so Christ came to do what we ourselves could not do. He came so that the metamorphosis of mind, body and soul, could actually happen without a flaw or glitch. Here at this point is where we will find the final component of true and genuine change in the life of a Christian.

God made a specific promise to us that would enable us to finish the processes of change in our lives. He promised that He would send to us the "Comforter" the Holy Spirit (God's Spirit); and from the promise of the Holy Spirit we would receive the power to change all that is wrong with us today into the men and women God intends for us to be tomorrow! We will talk more specifically about role of the Holy Spirit later. For now, we

must begin to see ourselves in that on-going role of "change" always knowing that He is in us... working on us to stretch us, form us, and reshape us just the way He wants. With this taking place in each of our own lives and then within our church community we have the vantage point to see how to love beyond love. We can clearly see Reunion as the place of spiritual covering and a way for those who are on the fringes to recover as well. Once this happens they can realistically look to change from the causes and effects of the same sinful world that we are in. Now we can move forward!

## **Love Beyond Love Revisited Love and Grace - June 28th**

John 13:34-35

**"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."**

Titus 3:3-8

**At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.**

To make huge eternal truths such as love and grace even approachable and do-able for us I want to go back to a couple of very important common values that we together agreed many years ago as the core of who God has called Reunion to be.

**One - WE ARE CALLED TO CHRIST**

**TWO - WE ARE CALLED TO ONE ANOTHER IN CHRIST**

In these core values alone we can see the necessity for us to love each other and of course to love those who are out beyond us. I believe we first must learn the value directly related to God's personal calling on our life; followed by learning what it means to live that calling in direct relationship to our behaviors and responses to one another. The point being that we will never be able to rightfully answer God's calling in our life without the love of God in Christ, and His grace. We see these callings as the model that Christ has given us to follow (love God and neighbor). This is invaluable. These two callings are also completely consistent with who Reunion is... "We love God and teach His truth; we care for one another through fellowship, communion, and prayer."

**The first calling Jesus gives to all Christians is to follow Him.**

**We are called to Christ – He calls us and we come to Him.**

When we obey the call of Christ we find woven into the fiber of that process the meaning and purpose for life that our soul naturally seeks. When we obey God's calling we can discover His purposes for our life and the immeasurable value He places on our life. What we actually find is the path to genuine Christian community; because in answering His calling, we are actually saying yes to a wonderful life together with others in Him. For Christians (though most do not see it) this life together is the best it can be for us in this world – but we must remember life together is possible only in Christ. Because most do not see this unfortunately they live with the void and they miss out on the wonderful journey with the ones he has gathered around them. What does that mean? One of my favorite Christian theologians and writers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, put it this way...

“It means, first, that a Christian needs others for the sake of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that from eternity we have been chosen in Jesus Christ, accepted in time, and united for eternity.”

That, my friend, **“is”** Christian community.

In Christ, we belong to one another and we belong to Him – now and forever. Life together is precisely what He has called each and every one of us to. The struggle comes in that we do not always listen; or possibly we have heard Christ, but we choose instead to ignore Him. There is also a human tendency to not want to listen when we do not like what we are hearing. Sound familiar? If you are like me (and I have every reason to believe that you are) we reason with God that the other areas of our lives are difficult enough... so why should the place He calls us to worship, and the people He calls us to love be so difficult or tough as well? But is this really a surprise to us? Doesn't His word warn and encourage us, "In this world you will have trouble but do not be afraid for I have overcome the world"? And did He not say, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick"? What we learn from this is that we eventually must set aside our personal protests and our personal preferences for life - and simply trust in His unfailing love for us. He wants to bring about a kenosis (self-emptying) in us. He loves us so we simply learn to listen to Him and then obey His calling for our life. From that act of devotion eventually there comes an abundance of divine grace, genuine spiritual gifts, dynamic natural talent, and powerful faith; all for the purpose of empowering us to achieve the obvious task (the calling) – which is to love each and every one who is called to our community (good or bad). Listen... in spite of the many

urgencies and emergencies "God said this - and God said that", or even the visions, trends, and dreams of great and grand ministries in and around the Christian world **there is but one central call - to follow;** and **there is but one central task - to love.** Everything else is nothing more than our personal twist or interpretation of what that means. And quite honestly, I can't help but believe if we are not successful at those two things ... then anything we might do above and beyond that is really of little or no consequence in God's eyes. **Christ bids us to follow... and we either walk together in love with Him, or we walk alone apart from Him.**

**The second calling Jesus give to all Christians is to one another. We are called to each other - He calls us and come to one another in Him.**

This means that we come alongside those He calls us to; valuing that person with open love and genuine grace. We do this both publicly and privately so we can meet the needs of those He has called us to (remember Christ has called someone to you as well). If we practice this in our "**day to day**", Christianity finally comes alive. And we Christians can actually experience spiritual growth and the virtues of Jesus in our lives. When we prayed over this truth and wrote it down on paper it

looked something like this... we call them **community life principles...**

- **SINCERE LOVE**
- **CARE AND CONCERN**
- **RESPECT AND DIGNITY**
- **TRUTH AND HONESTY**
- **AN ATTITUDE OF HOPE**

IF OUT OF HABIT AND CONSISTENT PERSONAL CHOICE WE RESPOND TO EACH OTHER THROUGH THESE PRINCIPLES MUCH OF WHAT MANY BELIEVE TO BE MISSING IN THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE CAN BE DISCOVERED AND WE CAN KNOW THE FULLNESS OF OUR FAITH IN A VERY REAL AND TANGIBLE WAY. CONVERSELY, IF OUT OF HABIT OR CONSISTENT PERSONAL CHOICE WE RESPOND TO EACH OTHER OUTSIDE THE BOUNDARIES OF THESE BASIC PRINCIPLES WE SHOULD IN ALL HONESTY CONSIDER THIS WRONG BEHAVIOR, AND NOT IN THE TRUE SPIRIT OF CHRIST, AND WE MAY NEVER DISCOVER WHAT IS MISSING FROM OUR FAITH - IT REMAINS EMPTY. **Without any of these principles at work in our daily lives we are living without love and grace - with them we are in the center of the heart of God for how we live, and as we say... there is a better way to live and a better way to love.**

**July 5th, 2015**

## **Love Beyond Love - The Gift of Attention**

**"And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. 47 And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." 50 And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." 52 And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way.**

Mark 10:46-52

### **The Gift of Attention\***

I want to talk more in depth about our responses to people when someone within the Christian community is distraught, overwhelmed, and struggling with the hard, tragic and ugly issues of life. It is critical that our responses during these times

not only be compassionate – but also that they open everyone involved to a common understanding of “being committed to one another.” The **community life principles** are a great start and certainly an excellent standard of behavior to which we reach for, but **among us at Reunion we have set a response boundary for ourselves that (if at all possible) we do not want to violate. That response is this...**

### **No one gets shut out!**

We should never intentionally let our own feelings or ideas hinder the work of Holy Spirit in anyone's life including our own. If we commit ourselves to openness and inclusiveness at critical and crucial times in one another's lives, we can offer a wonderful gift to one another in a very Christ-like way. I believe this will help us overcome many of the personal obstacles that come up, and help correct some of the errors and poor judgments we all have made about others in the past. I am speaking of errors and judgments may have hurt people needing our love, and the love of Jesus the Savior. But instead were minimized, marginalized and shut out. Again, too often it is our own lack of spiritual understanding and wisdom that keeps us from learning to love beyond love. We know many of the words... but what happens when the words break down and mean nothing to the person or persons hearing them? And

why then do we feel the need at that point to press ahead - still trying to say something we think will fix it? Oh, I know what our intentions are – but, what is real compassion or healing about? The love of God, the compassion of Christ... right?

When we with our good intentions plow ahead trying to **fix others** with “shallow words” and “super-deeds” we can at times display a lack of wisdom and sensitivity to a situation needing much more, or ironically, in some instances much less.

Sometimes what is needed starts with just a sincere pause of interest, or simple look of compassion, and nothing more. We have all heard it said (and it is true) that “**just being there**” is what is most important. But the key for us as Christians is much more than that. The key of course is in Christ Himself, and in Him finding that critical point of learning to respond correctly (as He would). Christians call that “coming to you in Christ.”

When we come to anyone “**in Christ**” who is hurting, suffering, or even afflicted we bring to them the gift of life, because we bring to them the love of Jesus - and in reality nothing more from us is needed. **The love we bring is the life they need - both life and love are Christ.**

**Question: How do I come to a person in Christ?**

**Answer: Empty of myself, and yet full of the love of Christ!**

Here is what I believe the heart of God is on that one...

**“In that instance when we realize we can only love – we cannot control, hate or judge – we cannot fix a person or their problem; that is the moment we are empty of ourselves and can finally come to another human being “in Christ”!**

Not that our role in the redemptive and restorative process is un-important or insignificant (God does use us), it is very important and very significant. But it is equally important to know that our responses (on their own) are less than adequate. It is powerful and humbling to know that Jesus will come to the brokenhearted and lost through both you and I. And again, that is not to say that our work and ministry with others is unimportant to God - **NO**. But it does mean that when Christ calls us to others - **Christ above all is essential**. In Christ, the door is open and the fullness of what “loving our neighbor as ourselves” can begin to happen. At that point we are free and able to look inside him or her and sincerely ask, “My dear friend, what are you going through”? Our responses towards them now are more than just something we Christians are “supposed to say.” They now know that they are not invisible! And our response to them becomes an acknowledgment that

not only do they exist to us as a human being, but they can see within us a real concern for what they are going through. It is enough of a concern and enough of Christ in us to stay with them - and to be there with them while they go through whatever it is they must go through. They believe now that they are no longer invisible or marginalized to everyone, and they are no longer in danger of being **shut out**.

Being together with someone in difficulty, suffering, or affliction at this point can cease being awkward and dreaded as we learn to come to them in Christ. We no longer have to panic over what seem to be moments of endless of silence – or agonize in our minds over the right things to say to them. We can stop trying to diagnose and prescribe illnesses, eliminate feeling as though the health, well-being, and the hopes and dreams of those in need all rests upon our shoulders.

**We can actually start loving those who need our love, and simply just be together with those who do not need to be alone during the time of their greatest need.**

Christ modeled the right response for us to opening the door for love to come in.

**We can see that human love can come to us in many ways, but God's love will come to us only in Christ. So we come to one another in Christ - and not ourselves.**

Using His example in response to people, hurting souls are no longer exploited for their pain. They are not merely seen as pitiful or unfortunate victims; but now at the very moment of attention "in Christ" they are becoming someone of personal concern to someone who personally cares. There are many gifts that Christ brought to earth to give to us – but this is the one gift that He asks us to give to one another. When we learn to love and give in this way we can learn to look differently at everyone. Here is a practical example of how we can sometimes find ourselves incorrectly looking at those in need, and then how we should look them.

**If I look through you – I'm saying...**

**I don't need to know you.**

**If I look past you – I'm saying...**

**I'm too busy, I don't have time for you.**

**If I look down at you – I'm saying...**

**I pity you and I feel sorry for you.**

**If I look over you – I'm saying...**

**I'm looking for someone more important to me than you.**

**If I look away from you – I'm saying...**

**I see you, but I don't like what I see.**

**If I stop and look inside you – I'm finally saying,**

**I see you... I want to know how to love you.**

I call the “**look inside you**” the “**gift of attention**” and Christ gave that gift to many people – and He gave it to them just when they needed it most. He gave it to the **leper** when no one else would touch his unclean and contagious body; He gave it to **Zacchaeus** the tax man in spite of knowing that everyone hated him; to **Mary and Martha**, to **Peter**, to the prostitute, to the five-time divorcee, and the list just goes on and on. In fact He gave that “gift of attention” to anyone and to everyone that probably at one time or another had been **looked through, looked past, and looked at, looked over, and looked by in life**. Jesus could stop in the middle of a crowd or in the process of whatever else might be going on and simply look inside people. He would look deep into their heart and soul and give them the gift of attention, and because He gave that gift the door would open for love to come in. Learning this powerful response from Christ is most important for Christians who are seeking real community and connection with others. The first time I heard of the term "gift of attention" was from an author I very enjoy, named \*Brennan Manning. I don't know where Brennan first heard or used the term? Nonetheless, I am certain he would agree it originated with neither one of us, but

(in Christ) belongs to all of us if we seek Him. In Christ, I would describe the “gift of attention” at work in us as...

**“Pausing from whatever we are doing to make someone or something other than ourselves more important - just at the time when it is most important to them.”**

**Outside of Christ**, this **pause** is commonly called a “distraction.” **In Christ** the **pause** should be known as an interruption. And in order for us to experience the effectiveness and joy of loving people in Christ **we should learn**; “it is the devil that distracts us with people – it is the Holy Spirit that interrupts us for people.”

It is important for us as Christians to understand and be able to recognize the difference between the two. When we talk about being led by the Spirit it is precisely in moments such as these when He wants to lead us. It is certainly appropriate to ask the question,

**“Is the devil distracting me with this person or is the Spirit interrupting me for this person”?**

Find the answer, and you find those divine moments where the gift of attention is most needed, and those precious people who most need it.

## **Love Beyond Love**

### **Gift of Attention - Final Look**

**July 12th**

To fully understand the far reaching impact of the "gift of attention" we need to go back and have some honest dialogue about the people who have become invisible to us Christians. Those folks who seem to just drop off of our radar when they became helplessly aged, hopelessly ill, embarrassingly divorced, disgustingly addicted, or perhaps suspiciously unemployed and could not pay their bills. or even the ones who we just get unreasonably angry with and decide that they are now a non-person in our life. There are many justifications and apparently obvious reasons for us distancing ourselves from any of those people in those type circumstances. But why? Why did they really become invisible to us and to others like us? Simple... all the tragedy and brokenness in their life causes suffering, pain, anger and embarrassment, and at the point we see and feel what they were experiencing - we naturally distance ourselves from those difficult and undesirable things. We don't always see it distancing ourselves from them personally - but it does to them. Don't feel singled out, we have all done it – but we must pray that we do not continue to do it. For Christians everywhere this is a huge barrier for us that must be broken through. We have

to pray that we see people in their condition – listen to them - and then give them only what Christ asked us to give them. When we come to someone “in Christ” who suffers and is in a condition... He shatters that barrier for us and uses the “gift of attention” to bring the kind of love needed. The power of the Holy Spirit eliminates that distance between their condition and us; bringing us up close to them just at the time it is most important. Their condition is no longer the barrier to getting close.

There is an even more powerful picture of the “gift of attention” and how it applies to “love beyond love” by looking more closely at the responses of Christ to the people in His community - as well as the invisible or a “lesser-than.” As He gave the “gift of attention” to people just at the time it was most important to do so we can see how those who received the gift were pulled in and no longer felt shut out. In these real life examples we can clearly see the “gift of attention” at its best. There is Jesus walking among the people and by doing so He is **extending a natural invitation for relationship**. He came to people and then they came to Him. Looking closely at Christ we can now discover how the “gift of attention” **builds the kind of faith needed to see the invisible people**. It takes faith to spiritually see what we cannot naturally see. We can also witness how Christ would **raise the hope in people to keep**

**them moving forward**, when they had been shut out and all but given up hope had become paralyzed. He did all this by simply giving them the “gift of attention.”

## **Conclusion**

The Gospels give us a clear portrait of a very practical and loving Christ - not only walking with men, but praying with them. His walking wasn't of course just about a method of transportation or the idea of getting from one destination to the next, but rather for Him it was about being with people in their environment and their condition. By walking with people Christ could close the distance between Himself and the condition people were in. In the same way His praying with people was more than just another religious act of pride and piety. His praying with people was the deeper way to knowing those who He prayed for or that He was praying with. His walking and praying with people was the way to loving the ones who seemed to others as beyond loving. He absolutely walked with people where they were and whatever condition they were in and He prayed that from that moment they would not remain the same. This should be seen by anyone seeking life together in Christ with others as a very **do-able** way for us to give the “gift of attention” to someone and thus open the door to love... precisely at the time when it is most needed.

We only need to look at the patterns of Jesus to see that this is what “He was all about.” One needs to go no further than with the people who came each day to the temple to worship and for teaching, and even they were just a small part - because they represented only some of the Jesus people. There were the river people, the people in the market, in the grain fields, those by the sea, travelers on the road, the night life people and of course the tavern people, and so on and so forth. Can you imagine... that Christ even gave the “gift of attention” to a criminal while they were both dying on a cross? How amazing.

But there are two or three instances that really capture what must be discovered about the “gift of attention” and what it could mean to life of someone needing it. The first was with a woman (Luke chapter 8) who suffered from a bleeding disorder – she had been afflicted with this illness for twelve years. She finds herself in a large crowd of people who are trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus the new “miracle man” that everyone is talking about. Jesus is on His way across town to visit a young girl who is also very sick and as He passes through the crowd the afflicted woman in an act filled with desperation, faith and determination, reaches out and touches the bottom of His clothing. At that very moment it is as if someone pushes the pause button. They have an **interrupted but miraculous moment** right there in the midst of the crowd; the noise, the

pushing, the shoving and the many distractions, they connect to one another with a focus that is so intense it seems to be from another world. In that moment Christ gives her the gift... the "gift of attention." He says finally, "Thugateros tharseo pisteos sozo" or "Daughter your faith has made you well." Jesus recognized the Holy Spirit interrupting and gave this gift to her just when she needed it the most.

He also gave this type of attention to an immobilized invalid man who had been lying by a pool for thirty-eight years (John chapter 5). The man lies there by this pool because of the possibilities that he knows are there – but his illness keeps him from taking advantage of them. Jesus had come to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. He enters the city at the 'sheep gate' and passes by the Pool of Bethesda which is nearby. Jesus is interrupted when He sees the invalid man lying there. He stops and asks, "Theleso hugiees ginomai?" or "Do you want to become well?" Some might consider this a ridiculous question - but for a man who had been looked past, looked over and looked by for almost four decades the question and the attention was anything but ridiculous. Again there is this moment in the interaction that is filled with such intense focus that it seems as if everything around them stops. The man answers Jesus, "Yes I want to get well, but when I try to get into the pool others get there before me." Right then there is the

moment that this man had been dreaming of for years... Jesus says to him, "Take your bed, get up and walk." Now, because of it being the Sabbath, both Jesus and the man have a decision to make. Jesus must decide to send him on his way knowing that the news will bring a back-lash of hatred from "church-world" - and the man must decide to get up with his bed and go from the place that had been his home for nearly forty years. After all, what other life did he really know? In spite of the cost they both decide to go on. Jesus slips quietly back into the crowd on to the feast, and the man leaves the pool to experience new life. In Christ this is what the "gift of attention" does for us... it helps us to make thoughtful decisions in regards to others and it gives us both the hope to go on and experience new life.

The last example is from John's gospel (chapter four). We find it in the wonderful dialogue between Christ and the Samaritan woman as He sits resting at the edge of the historic Jacob's well. This moment should be forever etched in our minds and kept in our hearts as to what the "gift attention" can really do; and how the ever-compelling love of Christ closes the distance between us and the condition of men and women. And in doing so making an invisible or "lesser than" to become someone visible and lovable in His Kingdom. In this dialogue the "gift of attention" closes the distance between Christ and

this woman in many ways. First there is a cultural distance, and then a religious distance, then a moral distance and a gender distance. The final distance was an emotional distance created by the humiliation and pain of five failed marriages. Everything about this woman was a red flag screaming out “Stay away – damaged goods”! She had been labeled by her community a lesser-than and was definitely invisible... of course until the day she saw Jesus sitting on the edge of Jacob's well resting and waiting patiently to be interrupted. It wasn't just that she needed attention it was that she needed the right kind of attention. Of course that day she found it because Jesus gave her the right gift at a moment when it was needed most. The attention was a love she had sought for her entire life but had never been able to find. It was an attention so intense and so real that it revealed a condition in her that was hidden and not visible to people who did not know her. Once the love of Christ had closed the distance between the two, she could then hear the truth, and it was the truth that would set her free. Years of failure and looking for love in all the wrong places had eventually and painfully closed her off from finding the truth. The “gift of attention” restored this for her in the form of God's indiscriminate love. Just the way it was needed – just when it was needed most.

The completion to the “gift of attention” and the extended invitation for relationship is found in prayer. Another of my favorite authors Philosopher and Humanitarian, Simone Weil once said, “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” When we pray in Christ’s love for someone it is a pure expression of the “gift of attention” because it is the one interruption where heaven and earth pause to give the person we are praying for the attention they need when it is most needed. This is what I call **“a dynamic spiritual action”** - one that we must put our trust and faith in; and one that must be practiced faithfully by the community of Christ. Praying with and praying for another human being is the ultimate gift of attention.

**Praying with and for someone is the final key to unlocking the door to relationship in Christ with people. When we intercede in prayer for someone it closes the distance between Christ and the condition of those we pray for.**

**Within** the processes of prayer for another, it is our own conditions and various levels of hostility that are brought to light for change. This allows our prayer for others to simulate and express the heart of God when we intercede, and takes away judgmental and manipulative prayer. **You and I must see that prayer is not the hammer we use to pound others into shape or submission, as much as it is the tool we use to make our own**

**heart right towards the ones we are to love.** We do not pray for people just to control or fix them – we pray to how to love them as Christ has loved them (love beyond love). We have to get it straight. In John's gospel chapter 17, Jesus prayed for believers and then He prayed for unbelievers. He prayed for His friends and He prayed for His enemies. He prayed for the lost, the sick, the spiteful, but He prayed for those who knew the truth that they might not lose their way and that their joy might remain full (keep a right heart) that they might be able to love the way the Father had loved the world through Him. We can never expect to be able to love one another the way Christ loved us without faithfully praying for people in this way. Prayer as a practice for others is the “gift of attention” and opens the door to showing the love of Christ - prayer is the open door leading to relationship in Christ and caring for the people we love. As we look to love beyond love we need to continue in praying for and praying with everyone and anyone we can. It is the path that leads us out there to love beyond ourselves.

## Love Beyond Love - July 26th, 2015

### "Life Together"

Colossians 3:11-17

**Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

From the illuminating light that is the life of Christ, we can see the power of the "gift of attention" and the endless possibilities for love that become available when that gift is completed in Christ and shared in prayer... which is, by the way, very much

what God intended all along! Although in the chapter “Gift of Attention” we described several life-changing moments that took place while Jesus was naturally interacting with people - it is important to understand they were not merely random or coincidental moments meant to only last for that moment. These were intentional moments of attention given to men and women as a gift of God’s unstoppable and unconditional love for His creation. The intent in each one of the instances was not to simply for someone to have **a little moment with God** (like everybody gets fifteen minutes of fame), but rather as a result of the encounter of the love and attention of Jesus anyone, at any time, or anywhere, could be re-invented or redirected to begin a new life in Christ.

We know that God comes to us in Christ – and that we come to Him in the same way... and in Christ we have life together. The reason for this **is** love (not temporary love or in the moment love) - but eternal love without end. Again (please hear this) with Jesus it was never about people who came together just for the moment – but about people who’ve found love for one another and eternal life together in Him. God wants to be with us and He is with us through Christ His Son. And, that is the way He has chosen for us to have life together with one another – in Christ’s love. That is why we can say that the intention was not simply for people to have a just a **moment with God - but rather**

**for us to have a lifetime filled with a million moments of the presence of God.** He seeks for us to have life together in Christ, not just a series of random or coincidental situations and circumstances that never connect us to our destiny in Him. For example; God's plan for the Church of Jesus Christ was never just about experiencing a weekly one hour worship production for masses of people who barely exchange glances with one another. We cannot remain in Christ and live consciously or unconsciously disconnected from one another. To be in Christ is to love and be loved as Christ loved, and to come to one another as Christ came. This connects us with other people for a life together in Him. Everything outside of that would be best described as a **“pseudo love” (a form of love - but not God's full love)**. Every form of love outside of Christ is a love that we can purposely or conveniently use to keep ourselves safe, hidden or even at a distance from people we do not want to love or come into relationship with. This includes even perhaps those that we believe will not love or want relationship with us. In fact, there is no better way to keep people at a distance than to use various forms or manipulations of love to categorically or conditionally love them. From a distance we can control the relationships and play the “church games” by creating spiritual or emotional “moments with them.” In this way we appear on the surface to be a community and to love all people, but really we are just creating an illusion - because

the love we share is not true love in the sense of Christ's love. By accepting the illusion as though it is true when we know it is not - is a deception. It is deception of the worst kind... self-deception.

I am completely convinced that within the model of Christ that we really do not have life together with those people but we are actually creating only an illusion or just an image of life together. Genuine life together can only be achieved in Christ – in the indiscriminate and unconditional love of Christ. Within that love there is no distance - no unfilled or hostile spaces between us. The Church cannot replicate this love beyond love through intellect, pity, or production – it can only be done in Christ. As followers of Jesus, we do not have the biblical freedom to categorically place conditions on Christ's love for people, or to even sort through people by religion, race, socio-economics, or personality and spiritual profiling. That practice is a gross misrepresentation of God's grace and indiscriminate love... "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

What are we saying here? Well, of course nothing that hasn't already been said before! Look again at the text written by the apostle Paul to the Colossians... verses 12-14 in particular.

**Patience, gentleness, kindness, compassion and humility are all virtues used to love others in some form or another; however if the forms of love we use with people even though they be virtuous allow us to categorize and to place conditions on whom and how we are to love; at that point it is not God's love, and Christ is not in it.** When we allow ourselves the liberty to identify and marginalize people through any criteria but the love of Jesus it becomes as we said before, only a form of our own love and clearly not the fullness of His love. In this way we cannot experience or find true life together in Christ.

Doesn't it strike you as a little odd that there is no mention or even a reference from Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection about their betrayal and desertion of Him? His silence in this regard is truly amazing. The first signal of His indiscriminate love and intention for continued life together with the disciples is heard just down the road from the tomb on what we now call "resurrection morning" when He says to Mary Magdalene, "Go tell my brothers..." (Matthew 28:10). This is completely consistent with Paul's revelation of Jesus love that he himself had experienced. So he wrote to the Corinthians of a love that "keeps no record of wrongs." If we respond to this truth by saying that God does not expect us to seek life together with just anyone and everyone - then we are completely missing the point altogether and we overlook what

is at the core of His truth, and can eventually end up just existing in this world; shut off and shut out from the very life and meaning that we seek from it. We truly can find ourselves distanced from Christ; although not cut off, but not fully knowing or living together in the love that God has intended for us to live. And that is distance we speak of.

Matthew 7:1-2

**"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."**

Therein, lies the distance from others and the absence of Christ's love we are speaking of. When we put that distance between ourselves and others we put it between our self and Christ (Matthew 25:34-40). Even then, by His Spirit He comes to us once again (in grace) to close that distance; so we too, (in Christ) must come to those who have pushed us away or have been pushed away. In these difficult circumstances with difficult people we learn in Christ to make our love real.

## **Love Beyond Love – August 2nd, 2015**

### **Life Together (Continued)**

What are we saying here? Well, of course nothing that hasn't already been said before! Look again at the text written by the apostle Paul to the Colossians... verses 12-14 in particular.

**Patience, gentleness, kindness, compassion and humility are all virtues used to love others in some form or another; however if the forms of love we use with people even though they be virtuous allow us to categorize and to place conditions on whom and how we are to love; at that point it is not God's love, and Christ is not in it.** When we allow ourselves the liberty to identify and marginalize people through any criteria but the love of Jesus it becomes as we said before, only a form of our own love and clearly not the fullness of His love. In this way we cannot experience or find true life together in Christ.

Doesn't it strike you as a little odd that there is no mention or even a reference from Jesus to the disciples after His resurrection about their betrayal and desertion of Him at His crucifixion? His silence in this regard is truly amazing. The first signal of His indiscriminate love and intention for continued life together with the disciples is heard just down the road from the tomb on what we now call "resurrection morning" when He says to Mary Magdalene, "Go tell my brothers..." (Matthew

28:10). And then again in John's biography of Jesus (John 20:19-23), the disciples meet Jesus in Galilee per His instructions. There is no record of His rebuke, disgust, or even disappointment from Jesus towards His disciples. Instead we hear Him say,

**"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." ESV**

This is completely consistent with Paul's revelation of Jesus love that he himself had experienced. So he wrote to the Corinthians of a love that "keeps no record of wrongs." If we respond to this truth by saying that God does not expect us to seek life together with just anyone and everyone - then we are completely missing the point altogether and overlook what is at the core of His truth. This will eventually end up with us just merely existing in this world; shut off and shut out from the very life and meaning that we seek from it. If we insist and continually live in this way we truly can find ourselves distanced from Christ; although not cut off, but certainly estranged and distant from knowing or living together in the love that God has intended for us to live. And here in the words of Jesus is the distance we speak of.

Matthew 7:1-2

**"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."**

Therein, lies the distance and difficulty with others and the absence of Christ's love we are speaking of. When we allow hostility through judgment and condemnation we not only put that distance between ourselves and others, but we put it between our self and Christ.

Matthew 25:34-40

**"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them,**

**'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'** ESV

And even then because of His limitless love, by His Spirit He comes to us once again (in grace) to close that distance. **And that is our teachable moment and life template moving forward. We too, (in Christ) must come to those who have pushed us away or have been pushed away. In these difficult circumstances with difficult people we learn in Christ to make our love real, and have the opportunity for life together as God the Father has intended.**

## **Love Beyond Love – August 9th, 2015**

### **Life Together (Continued)**

Knowing the heart of God and His intentions for us on this central issue of life together is of great advantage to all those seeking to love others the way Christ loved us. It allows us to be able to dream and believe and have faith in a way that Christ did. We can dare to ask, “What can the possibilities of Christ’s love itself actually be?” Possibilities of His love not only for those people that we seek to love, but possibilities of His love for us as well. St. John of the Cross, expressed some of those possibilities when wrote of his experiences in complete isolation and darkness while imprisoned for nine months. From one of those writings called “Dark Night of the Soul” he said,

**“When the love of Christ does come it pierces ones soul. The soul looks then upon great things as little, on many as few, its long service as short, by reason of the fire by which love is burning. It is with the soul as it was with Jacob, who served seven years for Rachel and they seemed but a few days, because of the greatness of his love.”**

Surely you agree that type love is overwhelmingly powerful and is beyond our capabilities alone, and it is precisely that kind of love He brings to you and me. And it is a love of that

magnitude that confronts us with enormous possibilities in our community at Reunion. We are confronted not merely with the enormous reality of Christ's love but as His followers - what to do with it. In the beginning Christ comes to us with this huge and enormous completely engulfing love; so that we can know the Father and a new life through Him. But then that love grows and changes and comes to us in a way that bids us to come to others, and experience a life together in Him. While this is happening we very seldom recognize what is taking place, but if we stay faithful to His call in the end we discover God's great miracle of grace given us for life together with Him and with others. As we grow in grace and truth we are able to know why it happened.

As a loving community of Christ, what does life together mean? First know that we are not suggesting Reunion as a physical community of Christians living together. That is the easy way out, with a bigger danger of losing sight of Christianity's biggest challenge, which is to take the love and light of Christ to the lost and unloved of our world. The early followers of Jesus did not live in physical community and that is not the calling here for us at Reunion either. We all have families, occupations, interests, and obligations that we are responsible to. But having that responsibility does not let us go our own way and ignore the single most important command of Christ (to love one

another). And it does not mean that we settle only for what is left. It does mean that we prayerfully prioritize our time and attention with what is most important to God... and then to the needs of our families. And then we continue to seek life together with those whom the Lord calls together. The spiritual implication for life together in Christ means that we along with others (and those to be determined) start by building relationships with whomever and whatever we have been given and then as we grow, the Spirit weaves together our increasing faith and our common calling to Christ and we become a strong community. One in which we all can love, worship, and serve in the kingdom of God. Life together in Christ means that we commit to learning biblical truths, live by valued principles and we work faithfully at honest and loving relationships in Christ. What we are describing is the New Testament Christian Church as it is described to us in (Acts 2:42-46).

At this point it is probably appropriate to just lay all the cards on the table. We have been saying throughout this entire document that we will not become the Church of Jesus Christ without loving the way Christ loved. In actuality I believe that it goes much deeper. Soren Kierkegaard, called by many “the father of Christian existentialism”, describes **two types of Christians; “those who imitate Jesus Christ and a second, much**

**cheaper brand – those who are content to admire Him.”** To imitate Him is to love others in Him and to move forward to seek a life together in Him. One of our ministry leaders once heard a pastor say, **“Christians cannot expect the miracles of the New Testament Church without living together in a community such as the New Testament Church.”** I agree with him... and can clearly see that genuine Christian community and life together in Christ was revealed to the apostles at Pentecost. But the 24/7 reality of community actually came to all of them after Pentecost, as result of how they obediently lived their lives in the days, weeks and months that followed. They had finally forsaken all to follow and to love and be loved by others in Christ. The results that followed were the miracles that would help establish and secure the gospel of Christ to the unbelieving world as credible and divinely genuine. Daily life together or “doing life together” in Christ can be simply described as...

**You loving me - me loving you, and (us together) loving others in Christ.**

The miracles that follow come from within the power of the love of Christ – not from the love of man or miracles. This is why we seek Christ, and not miracles. Listen to Luke’s recollection of those first days after Pentecost...

Acts 2:42-47

**“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”** ESV

Within this truth of the “Acts of the Apostles” there is absolute insight into what life together in Christ should look like. It has order and progression to it that unfortunately we have all learned at one time or another to re-route or avoid for ourselves... when we need to. On the flip-side however our expectations of God's supernatural intervention on our behalf seems to never change. With that kind of inconsistency and one-sidedness in our life it is an unrealistic expectation and does not work for God. The difficulty for post-modern American Christians (defined as; the subtle rejection of objective truth

and objective authority) is that they are very proud, stubborn and independent people... taught by example from early childhood that to have it all you must first watch out for yourselves, and secondly you are not to trust people. That is nothing more than a recipe for relationship disaster. In that way of thinking you sacrifice and risk nothing in relationship with others. That does not match up with the heart of Christ or His call to love one another and to live life together in Him.

Manning writes,

**“We are all continually being swept into the obsessive pursuit of three basic human desires; security – pleasure – power.”**

These desires are not evil but they can quickly become so when they are pursued outside of, or independent from Christ. Of course there are some exceptions to this; but **“as we are” right now - this is pretty much “who we are.”** Most human our desire when left unquestioned and untouched by Christ becomes the “myopic” thinking that is often characterized in our lives as patterns of self-gratifying choices. Some of that thinking has probably helped to make some of us successful in certain areas of our life, but it may also be causing us to fail and flounder in the most important ones. Much of the thinking

from the “independent lifestyle” or just floating along in a detached social belief system simply does not work within the framework of the genuine loving community of Christ. And of course, after years of perfecting non-trusting relationships even Christians find it hard to hear the direct words of Christ... **“Love one another as I have loved you”**

It is often easier to love who we want - the way we want - and when we want. But to live that way one must continually be categorizing and placing conditions on the key relationships in life. That cannot be so for Christians – not according to Christ. Many of the cultural/social ideas and philosophies that we currently pick and choose from to navigate our lives are simply not compatible with the daily radical demands of Christ. They are directly a result of what I call the “*post-millennial*” influence in our lives. When confronted by the thought of a life together in millennial Christ with others and the expectation placed on us for loving difficult people, doing difficult things - many Christians see only the inconvenience and cost involved with such a demand. *Post-millennial* Christians say no when there is an expectation of personal “sacrifice and commitment” and they begin to look for “greener” less demanding pastures for their spiritual experience. All churches are eventually confronted with the calling of love beyond love and they too must make a choice – they either become religious

organizations or they humble themselves to the call of Christ and ask the Spirit to lead their people into a loving community and life together in Christ.

Personally, I have been for years running from religion as fast as I can run. However, I am not just running aimlessly, I am not running angrily, and I am not running from the church of Jesus. Religion has an false ideal and illusion of Christian community and of the life together for those involved. I am running from religious illusions and ideals. I know to whom I am called to... **I am called to follow Christ, and in Christ I am called to love you. With that love and I am called to live a life together with you in Christ.**

These are not my ideals or illusions but rather they are the reality of my calling from Christ. Life together in the community of Christ does not come to us in surreal or self-serving ideals but only in Christ. When illusory ideals do not go our own way our tendency is to simply call the community and life together with those in it a failure. In the same way when people we love fall to sin – we (because of our religious and illusory ideals) often identify or see them as failing. It is easy to justify opening the door to the bus and throwing them to the curb. But, in Christ, **when those within our community fall to sin - they cannot be seen or identified as failures, but as greatly valued brothers and**

**sisters in Christ.** It is not about throwing these poor people to the curb. At this point it is all about making sure they don't open the door themselves and jump. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we come along-side the brother or sister who has fallen in Christ, and they are quickly pulled in closer for us to love and protect from the enemy that is obviously trying to destroy them. We pull them in so that the Word of truth can be heard in love and correction and healing can begin. Love such as this ignites the corrective process of the Holy Spirit and the working of unmeasurable grace deep within the one who has fallen. It is precisely how the apostle Paul instructed all the churches of Galatia in chapter six verse one... **“you who are spiritual can restore him gently.”** His original Greek just might shock you. *“Humeís hoi pneumatikoí katartízete ton toiouton en pneumatic prateetos.”* The translation in proper context and in its correct tense goes like this... **“you who are filled with the Spirit of love, carefully breathe life into him.”** Love beyond love breathes life into the lifeless. So those in the community who are practicing the gift of love should carefully, in humility, use the love of Christ to restore within the fallen the life of Christ. This is the kind of love that forgives the sinner - and eventually leads them to sorrow and repentance over the sin. It is also this kind of love that inspires a measurable change in behavior. Here is how writer, theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it...

“God has already laid the only foundation for our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. We thank God for giving us other Christians who live by God’s call, forgiveness, and promise. Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the common life, is not the one who sins still a person with whom I too stand under the word of Christ? Will not another Christian’s sin be an occasion for me ever anew to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Therefore, will not the very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches me that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting.”

Life together in Christ must be understood as the “extraordinary grace” that it is. In that grace, together we are seeking truth, and not just truth as a noble exercise of intellectual and spiritual

stimulation, but as the truth of God's Word in Christ, stimulating a process of change within us. This will also stir within everyone in the community an increasing desire for a new and holy life together. A life formed in the very image of Jesus. We are not just desiring to be "made good" as C.S. Lewis says, but we desire to be "made new." Paul the apostle called this process "a new creation in Christ." Christ the Word of truth.

We are made new in Christ, and no longer remain that detached, distant, or demanding individual who has been not only our own worst enemy, but also at times an enemy to others who are seeking life together in Christ as well. It is in that new image we are truly led by the Spirit to participate in Christ by sharing our love with a community of others in worship, prayer, fellowship, communion, and service. So often in the Christian community we are self-moved and self-motivated rather than moved and motivated by the Spirit (remember "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life"). When as Christian author Brennen Manning says, "our sense of self comes from our base desires of security – pleasure – power"; we are only acting in ways intended to win the approval of others, to beat others, to avoid the criticism of others, or to escape rejection from others. Bonhoeffer added to that when he wrote...

"Satan's desire is to turn me in on myself to the extent that

I become enslaved and become a destructive force in community. The thrust from Jesus Christ is the opposite – to enhance my freedom so that I can become a creative force of love. It is the spirit of self-centeredness and selfishness versus the spirit of openness and self-sacrifice for the good of others.”

That negative and selfish force that hurts and wounds others is a reflection of all that is old and all that we want to leave far behind. When it finds a way to raise its ugly head we all must faithfully resist it, and in honesty confront its presence. How? Well, certainly not in the same old spirit or in the same manner it confronts us.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

**“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, 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.”**

The answer is; that the community of Christ is made new and

filled with new life built on specific and humble foundations of love towards God. In the newness of Christ we resist and confront that old spirit with the new resources we have been given by Christ. As simple and as dated as these foundations may be, they still remain God's way for us to build the community and find the love we seek in Christ Jesus. They also are a key to overcoming the tendency towards the negative and hurtful behavior of the old and selfish persons we used to be; and as Christians we look for these loving foundations to help connect us with other Christians through Christ. The Christian community first forms itself in Christ, and then around one another through these eternal and divine expressions of love to become the body of Christ. This is not religion - but it is God's way to life together in Christ. The practical way to identify these mighty expressions of love might look something like this...

### **Faith Foundations**

**worship together – john 4:23, 24**

**pray together – ephesians 1:16-23**

**learn together – colossians 1:9-14**

**break bread together – acts 2:46, 47**

**serve together – ephesians 4:11-16**

These were the foundations of faith practiced daily by the early

Christian church. The fruit of those foundations is still evident today. One might argue that the early church is no longer a relevant model for today's postmodern world – an access technopoly filled with diverse and complex societal dynamics and insights. But that argument is skewed with the influence of the postmodern thinking. The (anti-Jesus) postmodern thinkers say there must be more – that having faith in an all knowing - all loving God is only being naïve; and that “absolutely nothing is absolute” and anyone believing so is just “simple minded.”

However, as Christians we are clearly called by God to a life together in Christ, and so we must be very objective and single-minded in order to answer its radical demands. And because the objective we seek is not merely a visionary idea but a genuine reality, we have every reason to have great hope in our journey and our destination. There was but one objective for the community of those early Christians... “To know Christ... and to make Him known.” They gathered themselves around the Son of God to worship, pray, learn, eat, and serve together... in the process they grew in grace and in the love of Christ. In Christ alone they lived and amazing life together and the rest is as they say... history. Led by the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples made known the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world and just as He had told them it eventually cost all of them their earthly lives. But not before they had met their objective and had reached their destination. So, theirs

was certainly not an irrelevant history - but rather it was one that led its followers into a world changing journey - moving them ever forward by faith into the future and into an eternity of reward and rest and a final life together in the presence of none other than the Creator, God the Father.

## Love Beyond Love – August 6th, 2015

### Submission or Surrender

There is only one way for us to see the need for life together in Christ in the ways we believe it to be. That way could only be described as a complete surrender. It is what Brennan Manning, calls the surrender of our self, and allowing God to be God as keys to living in the kingdom. But what does a personal surrender of that magnitude involve? Certainly we start by remembering that Jesus tells us; *“we lose ourselves to find ourselves.”* This loss makes a way for the Holy Spirit to transform our lives. It forces us to soul search and to having a personal “heart to heart” with ourselves to expose any kind of Christ-less security, pleasure and power as a cheap imitation of the real thing. Paul wrote...

Philippians 3:8

**“I consider all things nothing more than rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”**

Finally, being able to see the imitation in this light causes us to seek for the genuine and real thing. Sincerely seeking for God in Christ always begins to create a necessary and healthy

distance from any identifiable bondage to our flesh. We can understand then what Paul meant when he wrote... to the

Galatians 5:1

**"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."**

The surrender we describe is not the heavy handed "give up all - or burn in hell" that many suppose it to be – that is a conscious acceptance of reality. Actually, the surrender God wants from us is the great discovery that comes when we have finally realized the end of ourselves. At this point for anyone who is willing to trust in God this discovery is the beginning of the new creation in us that is Christ Jesus. It is the "extraordinary grace" that God is. **He could take from us what He wants - instead, He patiently takes what we give him.**

If we, in the course of following Christ discover we have surrendered all, in the end we will have it all. If we merely submit and make concessions and merely give Him portions... well, you do the math. But in the interim, the awareness that we are a child of God and being able to live with and love others in Christ as sons and daughters takes a tremendous burden and pressure off us, in the sense that we no longer have to live day to day controlled and obsessed with meeting our own needs and pursuing our own base desires. We no longer

have to live as victims when we believe others have not met our expectations or fulfilled our needs the way we wanted them to be fulfilled. Listen again to Paul...

Galatians 2:20

**"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."**

## Submission or Surrender II - September 13th, 2015

The self-affirmation we seek is found when we obediently and instinctively look only to Christ Jesus, and to Christ Jesus alone for the sense of who we are. The complete surrender we are speaking of lifts from us the huge weight many of us tend to needlessly carry. Without that burden the emotional suffering that has been brought on by our addictive desires is healed. As Brennan Manning says, *"the manipulative games we play can stop... the money game, the security game, the male – female game, the power game, the intellect game, and so on."* You and I can then simply present ourselves to one another; **"Here I am. I come to you in Christ; it's all I've got."** In this way we can come to one another in humble self-awareness just as Christ would come to them... we can freely **just be** for them, without fear of rejection or thought of their usefulness to us. This is a righteous honesty. When attempting to live with other Christians outside of this honesty does not happen for us the way we believed it should we will most often stuff our frustration and anger over the failed relationships and expectations that follow. Left unchallenged these feelings soon become a very real bondage that we keep hidden in the shadows. At some point you and I must come forward into the light and in faith and renounce the bondage to all darkness in our life. We must be free from the emotional attachment to those things that

keep us from complete surrender to God's work in us. We must in good conscience live in that freedom and triumph over the obstacles and excuses that we have formed to protect our weakness rather than expose it in honesty and humility. That I believe from both apologetics and personal experience, is a complete surrender.

As Christians we often speak of the need for submission to God. When I hear it or read it I think immediately of the passage found in the writing of James...

James 4:7

**"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."**

First there is the actual word study for the word submission for the context in which the writer uses it. The original word and language was ***hupotageete***; meaning ***obediently yielding or presenting to authority***. The context of the word James used was actually quite militaristic. Today he might say something like... "*be a good soldier and get back to your place in formation.*" Now... *the* soldier may not always want to - but he does because in evaluating his circumstance, it is the best thing to do.

So there is an important difference between submission and surrender. *Submission has been described as the conscience acceptance of reality.* On the surface there is yielding, but underneath there can often remain a tension of resistance and anger that can even represent a small seed of rebellion that still exists. **For example;** I say that I accept who I am, but I do not accept it to the point that I willingly act out who I am. That is only a half-hearted acceptance. You could call it many different names... compliance, acknowledgement, resignation, or concession – but in the end it is not complete and it is not surrender. There is obvious evidence within us of reservation and quiet doubt. It is something that goes like... “*Ok, I’ll submit*” but all the while thinking to ourselves, “*but when you are not around I am still going to do what I want to do.*” Sound familiar? If it does, then that is more than likely the problem. Godly surrender is different; surrender takes submission to a whole new level... to a level of honest transparency, willful transformation, and completion.

### **Submission is only Something**

### **- Surrender is always Everything**

Surrender becomes the moment when my forces of resistance have shut down and stopped working, when I discover that I

cannot help but respond to the call of the Spirit. Dr. Harry Tiebot, writes that, *"The emotional state of surrender is a state in which there is a persisting capacity to accept reality."* For the Christian the ability to surrender is a gift from God... once again we describe it as an extra-ordinary grace. Because we are conquer conscious and performance based culture it is difficult for us to understand that however eager and motivated we are to achieve surrender does not matter completely.

Surrender does not come merely through personal endeavor. Often the key to surrender is not what we are doing – but what we stop doing. Tiebot goes on to say, *"With respect to the act of surrender, it is an unconscious beginning to the end of our own conscious resistance, not willed by the patient even if he should desire to do so."* So then it is fair to ask, **"How does this all important surrender happen... and if the intensity of our desire is not the answer... then what is?"**

First and foremost we must see surrender as a process that has a very distinct beginning but is not defined by a one-time event. It is the fruit and evidence of our continued spiritual growth in Christ. It is discovering the value of the continuance of submission in the name of Christ's love until we are completely surrendered to Him. **We seek for this surrender to Christ in prayer, in healing, and in the strength of the Christian community. From this we grow in love - we grow in grace, we**

**learn to be faithful and diligent to live and persevere in Christ – at peace with ourselves to seek His will and not our own. The result of this process is not just another submission but rather a sweet and complete surrender.**

I asked myself why there is such an importance to God's idea of surrender for Christians. I believe in God, I believe in Christ His Son, and so on... but just because I think I know what to say as a Christian about surrender doesn't necessarily mean that I know how to surrender. That only comes in Christ, and in obediently following His call to us. Let's not kid ourselves; God's expectation of our complete surrender to Him is indeed demanding and unsettling - even offensive to some. But why should this surprise us? It is supposed to be demanding and unsettling. There is nothing about following Jesus Christ that indicates anything differently. The unsettling is the result of Christ's calling as it begins to challenge our thinking, taking direct aim at our stubborn and prideful will. Complete surrender to God in Christ is the destroying and humbling of man's ideas and agenda. But we must see that this surrender is not the final frontier.

**"Surrender to God and the calling of Christ is not some graveyard for the weak-minded and weak willed, but in reality it is the place of re-birth for all of us who need hope**

**and still believe that there is more to this life than some of the mess we often times flounder in."**

It is the extra-ordinary grace of God that brings to us all that is new and right for our lives. Surrender is only a part of the process of being transformed and made new in Christ, but it is a very vital part. The surrender that Christ wants from us is for the purpose of completing in us a change that finally makes the difference in our life and brings us to that place of truly loving others that He has wanted for us all along.

**The place He wants for us of course is a life together as the true community of Christ as we have described from the Acts of the apostles.** But we absolutely cannot get there without this very definitive surrender to Christ that we all struggle with. The example for this is simple; the disciples even though they each had at some point obediently and submissively answered the call of Christ to follow, did not come to the point of complete surrender until after the resurrection of Christ. Until then they each had moments of doubt, anger, frustration, and resistance to the mission or agenda of Christ. In his biography of Jesus John actually confesses (chapter 6), that Jesus gave them all an option to leave after they questioned his teaching (the partaking of His flesh and blood) because of its radical and unorthodox demands. The reality was that most of His disciples

did leave, and then there were only twelve of them. Ironically, Jesus turned and said to them even at the very moment they had vowed to remain, *“one of you is a devil.”* It got worse. The evidence of their lack of surrender continued as they fled from Christ into the darkness and the crowds during and after His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Further evidence was their obvious silence while buried in those angry crowds as Christ was tried and judged before the Sanhedrin High Priests. And just days after the resurrection of Jesus there still remained among them traces of resistance from Thomas who even doubted Jesus while standing right in front of, who would not believe until he saw the scarred hands and touched the pierced side of Jesus. No, they finally surrendered on the Day of Pentecost as the upper room in Jerusalem was filled with the Holy Spirit. Nothing they had done until now had brought them to this point of complete surrender other than their willingness to go on with life together and to finally truly love each other. That is all they had left... there was nothing else to give or do. They showed up that day surrendered and at that moment they begin to receive “the promise” and everything they had lost or given up in terms of security, pleasure and power to that point was given back. How? Why? The answer is found in the prayer that Jesus had prayed for them just before His crucifixion. He prayed,

**"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. "**

This is the prayer and will of Christ that these men would come to a full surrender to His call, and in that surrender would love one another as He had loved them. No more half-hearted concessions, bitter resignations or stubborn compliances – only surrender. From their surrender came the perfect love of Christ, and they could finally come together as one in Him, being of one mind and in complete unity. In that unity of the spirit was the power to love the world and leave the mark of Christ Jesus as the beloved Son of God on the hearts of all mankind. The apostle Paul would confirm this divine truth twenty-five years later as he wrote to the Colossians...

Colossians 3:12-15

**Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy,**

**kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace.**

This is all the evidence we need as Christians to prove to us that the "love of God and of one another" is our core mission here on earth. Along with the understanding that we cannot get there without the surrender of ourselves to Christ's calling to follow Him as He follows the Father; and to live our lives together in simplicity as dear children of faith in the unity of the Spirit. That is where we begin finally to... get it. Without that revelation we are not even close to being on the same page, and love beyond love is nothing more to us than pages of words.

## **Love Beyond Love - September 27th, 2015**

### **Historical Pentecost**

#### **What is Pentecost?**

For Christians, Pentecost is a holiday on which we remember and celebrate the outpouring of God's Spirit on the early followers as Jesus promised. Before the events of the first Pentecost, which came a few weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection, there were followers of Jesus, but no movement that could be meaningfully called "the church of Jesus." So, from a historical point of view, Pentecost is actually the day on which the church was started. This is also true from a spiritual perspective, since the Spirit of God brings the church into existence and breathes the breath of life into it. And so we can factually say that Pentecost is the church's birthday.

#### **What does the word "Pentecost" mean?**

The English word "Pentecost" is a transliteration of the Greek word *pentekostos*, which means "fifty." It comes from the ancient Christian expression *pentekoste hemera*, which means "fiftieth day."

But Christians did not invent the phrase "fiftieth day." Rather, they borrowed it from Greek-speaking Jews who used the

phrase to refer to a Jewish holiday. This holiday was known as the Festival of Weeks, or, more simply, Weeks (*Shavuot* in Hebrew). This name comes from an expression in *Leviticus 23:16*, which instructs people to count seven weeks or “fifty days” from the end of Passover to the beginning of the next holiday (*pentekonta hemeras* in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture).

Shavuot was the second great feast in Israel's yearly cycle of holy days. It was originally a harvest festival (*Exodus 23:16*), but, in time, turned into a day to commemorate the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. This day became especially significant for Christians because, seven weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, during the Jewish celebration of Shavuot/Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the first followers Jesus, thus empowering them for their mission and gathering them together as a church.

### **What actually happened on that day of Pentecost?**

This event is recorded in the New Testament book known as The Acts of the Apostles. Chapter 2 begins...

**“And when the day of Pentecost [*ten hemeran tes pentekostes*] had come, [the first followers of Jesus] were all together in one place” (2:1).**

All of a sudden, a sound came from heaven, like a strong wind, filling the house where the people had gathered. Something like tongues of fire rested on their heads.

**“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak” (2:4). (Notice the tongues of fire on the heads of the people in the painting by Restout.)**

The languages spoken by the early Christians were intelligible (not other worldly) and were heard by thousands of Jewish pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot. The content of the miraculous messages had to do with God's mighty works (2:11). Many who heard these messages in their own languages were amazed, though others thought the Christians were just drunk (2:12).

At some point, Peter, one of the leading followers of Jesus, stood up and preached his first sermon. He interpreted the events of that morning in light of a prophecy of the Hebrew prophet Joel. In that text, God promised to pour out his Spirit on all flesh, empowering diverse people to exercise divine power. This would be a sign of the coming “*day of the Lord*” (Acts 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32).

Peter went on to explain that Jesus had been raised and had poured out the Spirit in fulfillment of God's promise through Joel (2:32-33). When the crowd asked what they should do, Peter urged them to turn their lives around and be baptized in the name of Jesus. Then they would be forgiven and would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:37-39). Acts reports that about 3,000 people were added to the church that day (2:41). Not a bad response to Peter's first sermon! And that is a biblical thumbnail version of historical Pentecost.

## **Present Pentecost - Our Reality Pentecost**

**October 4th, 2015**

Isaiah 61:3

**The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.” (NIV)**

Acts 1:4-9

**"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you**

**to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. (NIV)**

You and I have talked often about the principles of change, how effective they can be and just how vital a role they must have in our personal lives and in the ministry of the community at Reunion. This type change points our community directly to the promise and power of the Holy Spirit that came to all believers at Pentecost. One of the things I am very proud of is my spiritual origins and heritage in Pentecostalism, so I want to be very clear on how I word this, because I do not want us to misunderstand or to be misinformed in regards to the true purpose and plan for the Holy Spirit's work in our lives and in the life of our church. I believe in the gifts of the Spirit as an essential service to the body of Christ, and I believe even deeper still in the fruit of the Spirit that shapes and forms our character to validate the gifts that we serve with (more on that later). It is important to understand that without the promise and power of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's unique work in us, not only are we **not the church of Jesus**, but we are **not even**

**the body or community of Christ.** Without the Holy Spirit we are just another religious organization in “church-world” doing religious business. We do not want to **just do** religious business... we want to love, as Christ has loved us. That is why we must demand of ourselves and of one another to genuinely seek God for the reality Pentecost and not settle for a rehearsed sideshow void of any real serviceable power for His Kingdom. Reunion is called to be a part of the body of Christ, and as a part of His body we must understand our role and do our part in His Kingdom. But to do this we need the “real” power of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost) to get it done.

**The real power of the Holy Spirit is meant to effectively bring about change in the lives of all who will follow Jesus.** That change began when Jesus came to here to earth. At that moment the work of the Holy Spirit began. I know it sounds silly, but it is important to realize that Jesus did not come to earth, and then Holy Spirit simply showed up thirty-three years later – they are One. When Christ is present, the Holy Spirit is present. To help us understand we probably need to go back to something that took place between Jesus and His disciples post-Resurrection and pre-Pentecost. According to Luke's Gospel biography, Jesus (not long after His resurrection) said to his followers...

**“Now I will send you the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven.”**

But, John's gospel biography recalls that on Sunday night of the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples who were hiding in fear from the Jewish leaders in a remote location. While with them (John was there) Jesus said directly to them...

**“Peace be with you. As the Father sent me so I am sending you. Then He breathed on them and said, “Be filled with the Holy Spirit. If you forgive any ones sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them they are not forgiven.”**

We also know from the passage in Acts chapter 1, that when Jesus visibly left this earth He promised to send the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of God) so that all believers (at all times and all places) could finish the mission that He had started. The initial promise of the Spirit from Jesus was made to first century followers so that **they** would have the wisdom, courage and power to deliver His message to the entire world, as they knew it. Pentecost was God's starting place for the church to begin their mission. **For those who gathered in the upper room**, the

power of the Holy Spirit that came that day would help them to finally close the gap between knowing Jesus, and becoming the people He had asked them to be. **For those who gathered that day as witnesses on the street below** the power of God's Holy Spirit revealed to them the truth of the gospel and the love of the resurrected Savior Jesus Christ! They would return to their homes around the regions and beyond of the Mediterranean to share this revelation of love and hope. No one who experienced or witnessed what took place that day could have gone from there to do what was done on their own power. They all needed the Spirit of God to change, direct, teach, and empower them so they could become witnesses to the world of what they had personally seen with their eyes and heard with their ears of Jesus Christ Himself. Because of the persecution they were about to face they would also need the comfort of the Holy Spirit to endure the physical attacks from those who hated the message of the resurrected Christ, and who would do anything to stop them from preaching the gospel of Jesus. But the promise of the Holy Spirit to them was not confined to the event or single experience (no matter how glorious) they would have on the Day of Pentecost. Just as there is no cheap grace there is no cheap Pentecost... so it is important to know that they did not go to the upper room looking for just another miraculous experience (they had already been witness to many miraculous experiences) - they

went looking for, and waiting on, the specific promise that Christ had spoke to them. Hours later, they did not leave the upper room talking about how awesome it was to speak in a foreign language they had previously not known. They were not sitting around in the temple days later telling embellished stories about how an “unbelievable” windstorm hit that day, or even how amazing the cloven tongues of fire above their heads looked. No matter how spectacular, those events were specifically intended to be further evidence and visible signs to the unbelieving Jews - not reassurance for the gathered disciples. Come on... the disciples had recently watched Jesus die, and then had seen Him resurrected from the dead. They did not need additional spectacular signs and wonders to get them further on board. For them **Reality Pentecost** was not about supernatural manifestation – it was about the promise of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit that came with it. Each one would leave the upper room knowing without a doubt that the promise Jesus made to them concerning the Holy Spirit had been fulfilled in them. **They knew they had received the very real power Jesus had promised, with an assurance that regardless of their varied and eventual circumstances, they would go and do what Christ had asked them to do... even if it would cost them everything.**

Jesus had asked them go make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He also told them to teach these new disciples to obey all the commands He had given them. Now, if you remember correctly... the most important and the newest command of Jesus, was to love God, and then to love each other just as He had loved them. He added to that... "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." And, that my friends, is the real power of the Holy Spirit, and the reality Pentecost.

**In the final analysis**, what took place at Pentecost was about the power (Spirit) to love beyond love. A power to finally become what Jesus had expected of them in the days and years to follow. Pentecost was one more of many promises from Jesus that had been fulfilled in them. And now a genuine power of the Spirit forever changed their lives in a way that they could finally serve and support one another, and become the original witnesses of the love of Jesus to the known world.

**For the first time they could love beyond themselves.** Love to a lost world - proclaiming the message of hope to people who were hopeless without it.

**Love is the reality of Pentecost.**

How ironic, that when all is said and done, love is and has always been at the core of every real move of God's Spirit. **“For God so loved the world”...** That is because love beyond love never fails to go the full distance that is needed.

What was important at Pentecost is still important for us today - the promise and the power of the Spirit to proclaim the gospel and love of Jesus! For us at Reunion we can see within our own lives the weaknesses and barriers that we have allowed to distract us from our real mission. The things that keep us from reaching our potential and completing the many things we have started and left unfinished. We can see where we (like the disciples of Jesus) have too often used His love for us in such selfish and disgraceful ways. The brokenness of our families and the issues and circumstances of our world always seem to undo our best intentions. We get started... but we never quite have what it takes to finish. That is something that has to change in us. We need to embrace the promise and live in the power of the Holy Spirit. We know that God is faithful and because He is faithful He always finishes what He starts. When the disciples received the real power of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost things needed to change in them. And as evidenced in their lives after Pentecost – that day they changed. But the change was not just for the apostles and the people of Pentecost. The change was for all of those who were a witness to Pentecost as

well, and the same promise of the Holy Spirit is for us. The promise Jesus made was for believers (everywhere and anytime) to become a living witness of His message of love and grace. Around us we have friends, neighbors, and co-workers who seem even to be in worse need than we are. We see their struggles as we look beyond ourselves to the hopeless chaos they exist in; they need someone to love them beyond how they have ever been loved before. Just like those who gathered on the Day of Pentecost we too are unsure of ourselves because we (better than anyone else) know our own limitations, and that we do not have what it takes on our own to love like we need to. But those circumstances are a perfect environment for God's promise of the Holy Spirit to make a difference. Because He knows what we need better than we know ourselves. And with the promise of His Spirit comes the real power needed to grow in His grace and to heal our own wounds. With that we can begin to learn to love in ways far beyond what we think is humanly possible.

You see, God knows that if we will allow His Holy Spirit to fill us in the ways and the places of our life that need it most we will surely change. And then the people who live differently than us or simply live in lifestyles or places that are beyond Reunion Church, can now be loved and they too can change to become what Christ wants them to become. Again this is not

merely another church formula or experience; but it is the opportunity to start the journey to becoming what we all know we should become. Real power to become the sons and daughters of God! It is part of the actual destiny and cause that God has for us - to be His witnesses and to finally finish and complete in us all that we have dreamed and hoped for. What we are describing isn't merely about rushing wind, cloven tongues of fire, or unknown languages - it is about us saying yes to the promise of His Spirit, and yes to the power of His Spirit in us. We have to step forward and begin the journey...