

INTRODUCTION

Almost everyone here understands what it means to sit down at a computer and connect to the Internet. Once you get online you can visit a chat room and connect with people all over the globe, or you can receive and send electronic mail to people. Or you can simply use your internet browser to access an incredible amount of information.

Computers and the World Wide Web have created an information revolution that can only be compared to when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1436. The Internet Age has created a new vernacular of computer terms. I recently found a list of the Top Ten Maxims for the Internet Age:

10. A journey of a thousand sites begins with a single click.
9. Don't byte off more than you can view.
8. Home is where you hang your @.
7. Speak softly and carry a cellular phone.
6. The geek shall inherit the earth.
5. There's no place like www.home.com
4. Too many clicks spoil the browse.
3. What boots up must come down.
2. You can't teach a new mouse old clicks.
1. Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to use the Net and he won't bother you for weeks.

During January, we're talking about what it means to get connected. Last week I shared that just as you are able to connect to the internet, it's possible to be connected to God through Jesus Christ.

I hope you'll take your CONNECTED bracelet and wear it for forty days. It may not be a fashion statement, but it is a spiritual statement. It is to do three main things (1) when you see it, it should remind you to have a personal quiet time of prayer and Bible reading every day to stay connected to God; (2) It is to serve as a conversation catalyst. When someone asks you about it, you'll have the chance to say that your church is having an emphasis on being connected and the bracelet is to signify you have been connected to God through Jesus; (3) finally, it's to identify the thousands of Green Acres members in the community. I don't even know who is a member or not sometimes. I've learned to smile and wave at everybody I pass because there's a good chance I'm their pastor. But if I see you with a bracelet at the grocery store or coffee shop, I'll know you're a member and I'll introduce myself to you. You can do the same thing.

Today we're going to consider what it means to be connected through your church. In the New Testament, there are three main word pictures for the church. We are the Bride of Christ and Jesus is the Bridegroom who will come and claim His Bride. We are the Building of Christ, and Jesus is both the foundation and the Chief Cornerstone; each of us are living stones. But the most common picture of the church is as a body where Jesus is the head and each of us are like body parts. In Ephesians, Paul compares the church to a body eleven times. He writes:

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Ephesians 4:11-16)

The church is the only channel God has ordained for His children to connect with one another. No church is perfect because it is comprised of imperfect people, but the head of the church is perfect. I agree with the little poem that says:

*I think that I shall never see
A Church that’s all it ought to be;*

*A Church that has no empty pews,
Whose Pastor never has the blues;*

*A Church whose Deacons always Deke
And none is proud but all are meek;*

*Where gossips never peddle lies
Or make complaints or criticize;*

*Where all are always sweet and kind
And all to other’s faults are blind.*

*Such perfect churches there may be,
But none of them are known to me.*

*But still we’ll work, and pray and plan
To make His Church the best we can!*

I am passionately in love with the Church of Jesus, as imperfect as she is now, one day She will be presented without spot or blemish. Until then, I’m going to do my part in the body of Christ. Let’s learn four exciting things are being connected through your church.

(1) CHURCH ISN’T A PLACE...IT’S AN EXPERIENCE OF FELLOWSHIP

I want to read three verses and see if you can find the common word that appears in them. Jesus said in Matthew 18:20 “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” Then we read about the early church in Acts 2:44 “All the believers were together and had everything in common.” The third verse is the one we’ve already read in Ephesians 4:16

“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” It’s the word ‘together.’

So, my first connection with the church is simple: **Let’s get together!**

Years ago I knew a preacher who was always getting his expressions and gestures confused. He would say something like, “When you get out on a limb, that’s the time somebody will pull the rug out from under you.” I can remember he used to say, “people, we’ve got to come together!” (separate hands) It’s true, like the Beatles used to sing, we’ve got to ‘come together, right now under Him.”

Fellowship is more than cookies and Kool-Aid in a fellowship hall. It’s when followers of Jesus gather together in His name and experience something called *koinonia* which means “to share a common cause.” In the New Testament there is no such thing as a “closet Christian.” According to the scriptures, you can’t be a “Lone Ranger Believer.” Through Jesus you are already linked up with the other members of the body. For someone to try to live a solo Christian life would be as absurd as my hand leaving my body and trying to function by itself. Yet, sadly, many individuals try to have a spiritual existence separated from the Body of Christ.

There is strength in numbers! When I was pastor of a church in Alabama in the early 1980s I did a children’s sermon every week. It became harder to come up with those three minute messages than the main message! One Sunday I had the kids on the platform and I handed a boy a pencil and asked him if he could break it. He took the pencil in both hands and broke it fairly easily. Then to prove a point I had a bundle of about seven or eight pencils and asked him to try to break that—he couldn’t, but he was certainly trying. I went on to explain to the children that one person alone is weak, but when we join up with other believers at church, we have strength together. While I was talking I didn’t notice that the boy with the bundle of pencils had slipped over toward the choir rail as I was finishing I looked up in time to see him slam that bundle of pencils down on the corner of the wooden rail, and there was a loud “crunch” as the pencils broke! That’s one reason I don’t do children’s sermons every Sunday anymore! But there is strength in gathering with others.

Jesus was the Master Teacher and He often used the world of nature to illustrate truth. He would say things like “consider the flowers” or “look at the grass.” In Matthew 6:26 Jesus said, “Look at the birds of the air...” There are several important lessons we can learn from geese as we think about the church. Have you noticed when geese migrate they never do it alone? And when they fly, they utilize a V-formation. Why do they fly together in a V-formation? According to information I got from a NASA website, each goose creates a wing-tip vortex that provides extra lift for goose behind them. Because they fly in formation they can fly 71% further than a single goose could fly alone.

How did those geese figure out to fly in formation? Did some head goose with a degree in aeronautical engineering from MIT figure it and say, “Okay, guys, if we fly in this formation, we’ll go further.” No, God made them that way, and God made you and me to have fellowship with one another. You may think the church is for the birds, but the same is true for us. We can be more and do more when we join together than we could ever do as individuals. Geese fly

together because it makes the journey easier, and we are a church because when we are together, going in the same direction we benefit from each others life—it makes the journey of life a lot easier.

If a goose falls out of formation, he immediately loses the updraft from the formation and it becomes harder for him to fly, so you'll see stragglers struggle to rejoin the formation. Are you a follower of Jesus who has fallen out of formation? Have you lost the fellowship of a small group of people who love you and pray for you? Why don't you decide to rejoin the formation?

(2) CHURCH ISN'T A PLACE...IT'S AN EXTENSION OF SERVICE

Look again at the last verse in our text. We are the body of Christ, and a healthy body grows and matures. The last sentence in verse 16 says the church "grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Those last six words are critically important—as *each part does its work*.

So here's my second connection: **There's a job for everybody!**

The New Testament isn't the only place where the metaphor of a body is used. I have a role in the body of Christ and so do you. In this body called Green Acres my job is the Pastor/Teacher, do you know what your job is? One reason the body of Christ is often paralyzed is because many of the body parts aren't operating as they should. God has a role for you in this body nobody else can fulfill except you. And until you figure it out and start functioning in the body, you won't find true spiritual fulfillment.

In Ezekiel 37, God took the prophet to a valley of dry bones and told him to preach to them. As Ezekiel preached the bones started connecting with each other. That's the source of the old song that says, "The foot bone's connected to the ankle bone; the ankle bone's connected to the leg bone; the leg bone's connected to the knee bone..." Ezekiel soon had an army of skeletons standing in front of him. Then before His eyes God put flesh and muscles on them, but they didn't have any breath—they didn't have the Spirit of the Lord. Then God breathed His Spirit into them and they became a great army. Then God said, "Ezekiel, this is just an object lesson of Israel; they're like a bunch of dead bones, but with my Spirit they could be great."

That's a lesson to the church too. God wants to bring life where there is death. If you're an ankle bone lying over there all alone, God wants to unite you with His body. He wants to give you life and pour His breath, His Spirit into you. Even in the church we've got some dry bones. What kind of bone are you? Some people in the church are jaw bones: They *talk* a good game, but don't live up to it. They love to talk about religious things but when they leave church, they are a different person. Are you a jaw bone? Other people are wishbones: All they do is talk how they *wish* things were different. Others are knucklebones: All they do is constantly *knock* what's going in the church. But, thank the Lord, some are backbones: They can be counted on to *support* and give stability to the Body. What kind of bone are you? Everybody's got a job to do!

Let's look at our geese again and learn from them. As they are flying in formation, the lead goose doesn't benefit from the updraft of a goose in front of him, so what happens? Studies show

they share the lead—they share the load. After awhile the lead goose drops back and get in formation and another goose will take the lead.

Folks, don't think for a moment I want to be lead goose all the time! I get tired, just like you. That's why we practice something called shared leadership—I depend upon the work of our staff, our deacons, our committees and our members because there is no way I could even be aware, much less involved in everything that takes place in our church.

But the main point is if you don't take your place in the formation and lead for awhile we won't get as far. Studies show in the average church about 20% of the people do about 80% of the work; 20% of the people give about 80% of offerings. How would you function if only 20% of your body was operating? You'd be in ICU! If you haven't found your job in the Body of Christ yet, talk to us and let us help you connect as we share the work load.

(3) CHURCH ISN'T A PLACE...IT'S AN EXPRESSION OF ENCOURAGEMENT

According to Hebrews 10:25 the reason we are to come together as a church is to encourage one another. The Message says, "Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging and helping each other, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching." In Texas, we know what spurs are (not the NBA team in San Antonio). Cowboys used to wear spurs on their boots to make their horses go faster and to keep going. Giddyup!

That's another connection we have in church: **Don't give up!**

Life is tough, in the best of times, and when we come together we should be spurring each other to keep on trusting. Giddyup! When someone is thinking about walking out on their marriage this is where they should hear the message "Don't give up!" When a troubled teenager is contemplating walking away from God this is where they should hear "Don't give up!" When a troubled person is thinking about ending it all, this is where friends should be saying, "Don't give up!" We all love the old song "Home, home, on the range, where the deer and the antelope play..." but I especially like the line that says, "Where seldom is heard a discouraging word." That should be the description of our church and every church, where seldom is heard a discouraging word. Instead this should be a place where people always hear an encouraging word!

What about our geese? Here's a quick trivia question. It's a pride lions, a pod of whales, and a bed of oysters, but what do you call a group of geese flying in formation? If you said "a gaggle of geese," you're close but no cigar. It's a gaggle of geese when they're on the ground or water but it's called a *skein* of geese when they're flying (get connected and look it up for yourselves.)

If you ever see a skein of geese flying overhead listen carefully, and you'll hear a lot of honking going on. Many ornithologists believe the honking is a form of audible encouragement the geese give each other. We don't know what they're saying. It may be some young goose asking, "How much further?" Or it may be mother goose telling stories. Or perhaps its wife-geese saying, "Don't you pass another exit without stopping for a rest room break!"

Or, it may be they're just saying, "Keep it up! Let's go! It's a long journey, so keep flapping!" The Christian life is a long journey too, and we can't make it unless we have people encouraging us. It could be the only honk you hear is when you are a half-second late to go at a green light on the loop. But wouldn't it be great if we decided we were all going to become a bunch of honkies and start encouraging one another?

(4) CHURCH ISN'T A PLACE...IT'S AN EXCHANGE OF COMPASSION

Everybody needs a church because a church should be a shoulder to cry on when you are hurting; it should be a hand to pick you up when you've fallen; it should be a warm hug when you're lonely; and a tender word when you need comfort. We live in a time when people are suffering in ways we never imagined. They are looking for a place and a group of people who will show them genuine love.

So that's our point of connection, we have the responsibility of: **Caring for those who are struggling!**

We went snow skiing over Christmas and I was trying to keep up with my 25 year old son-in-law who is half my age. I was following him and he skied over a jump and didn't get much air so I decided to increase my speed over the jump to show him how to do it. I didn't realize there was about six inches of fresh powder at the top of the little ridge and when my skis hit that fresh snow they dug in and stopped—but I kept going. I had the most spectacular fall of my skiing career as I performed a high speed face plant. I was wearing a lumbar pack (I don't wear fanny packs) and there was a bottle of water in pockets on each side. I hit the snow so hard, those water bottles shot out like torpedoes and went flying about 150 yards down the slope.

I bent my neck back and pinched a nerve, but I got up pretty quick and kept on skiing—yeah, I'm tough! I had a numbness in my neck and right arm, but I could handle that, so I skied the other days. Last week the feeling started to come back in my neck and arm and by Wednesday I had a terrible pain in the neck. Now the staff members here will tell you I sometimes *am* a pain in the neck, but it's the first time I *had* a pain in the neck. I broke down and went to see a doctor friend on Friday and I told him it hurt to raise my arm. He said, "So, don't raise you arm." No, he told me it will take a while for the nerves in my neck and arm to heal, so he gave me some medicine and prescribed some physical therapy. Thankfully I'm already doing better.

But I learned something about my body this week. I noticed this week as the pain in my neck increased, the rest of my body started going to help it. When I got a twinge, my right hand would fly up to grab it, and my vocal chords even got into the act, "Ouch!" Without even realizing it, my whole body started leaning to compensate for the pain, as well. It was just a tiny area that was injured, but it affected the whole body.

That's a great picture of the church. When one member of the body of Christ is hurting, the other members should rush to their aid. I am always proud to hear how our Sunday Morning Bible Study groups rally around their members when there has been a death, surgery, or job layoff. That's the body of Christ in action.

Can our skein of geese illustrate this function as well? You bet. Studies have shown if a goose flying in formation gets sick or wounded and has to drop out of the V, two other healthy geese will follow it down and stay with it and protect it until it is either healthy again or dies. At that time the geese will join another formation migrating toward their destination. In the same way, the Bible says we are to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

CONCLUSION

People in our culture are hungry to be connected; that's why they carry cell phones and pagers. That's why millions of people enter chat rooms and leave notes on message boards. We are a generation of 'screenagers' who spend hours in front of a computer screen or a video screen trying to connect with the people we see on television. People talk about the participants on Survivor and American Idol as if they really know them, but the best place to make friends and build meaningful relationships is through the Church—the Body of Christ.

I think one of the reasons people are turned off by the church is they see the lack of commitment and zeal in our lives while they are looking for a group that has a radical commitment to Jesus. My heart's desire and prayer is that our church will be a radical fellowship of love and acceptance. I pray God will set the members of our church on fire for Jesus, and when that happens, people will come to watch us burn.

How about it, are you tired of nominal, mediocre Christianity? One of my favorite speakers and writers is Leonard Sweet. He wrote something in his book *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café* that really resonated with my spirit. This is the kind of out-of-control disciple I want to be. He says:

I am part of the Church of the out-of-control. I've given up my control to God. I am not here to please the dominant culture. I live to please my Lord and Savior. My spiritual taste buds have graduated from fizz and froth to Fire and Ice. Don't give me that old-time religion. Don't give me that new-time religion. Give me that all-time religion that is as hard as rock and as soft as snow. I've stopped trying to make life work, and started trying to make life sing. I'm finished with secondhand sensations; third-rate dreams; I can't be bought by any personalities or perks, positions or prizes. When hard-pressed, I will never again simply hang in there. I will stand in there; I will run in there; I will pray in there; I will endure in there—I will do everything in there but hang. I won't back down, slow down, shot down, or let down until I'm preach out, taught out, healed out, and hauled out to share God's mission in the world. Until He comes again or calls me home, you can find me filling, not killing, time so that one day He will pick me out in the lineup of the ages as one of His own. And then...it will be worth it all...to hear these words, the most precious words I can ever hear: 'Well done, thou good and faithful...out-of-control disciple!' (From *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café* by Leonard Sweet)

OUTLINE

CHURCH ISN'T A PLACE. IT'S AN:

(1) EXPERIENCE OF FELLOWSHIP

My Connection: Let's get together!

(2) IT'S AN EXTENSION OF SERVICE

My Connection: There's a job for everybody!

(3) IT'S AN EXPRESSION OF ENCOURAGEMENT

My Connection: Don't give up!

(4) IT'S AN EXCHANGE OF COMPASSION

My Connection: Caring for those who are struggling!



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes