

The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation, Part 2

By Larry Crabb

I really urge you to pick up the brochure that Dr. Coe mentioned. I think I'm gonna get on here in just a moment. Here we are. Um, to pick up the brochure that he mentioned for the Institute of Spiritual Formation. I just think it's a marvelous brochure that is worth considering very strongly. Let me just mention, very much in passing, uh, I always feel very anxious mentioning this sort of thing. We are putting together a new weekend seminar that will kind of be our flagship of New Way ministries. New Way ministries is built the verse Romans 7:6 that I talked about in chapel service here at Talbot. It's where Paul says we've been delivered from the law so that we can serve in the new way of the Spirit not in the old way of the written code.

And I've tried to think about what that means and the Lord has struck me in the past year or two with a realization that in many ways I have lived in the way of the old code which I summarize very quickly as I'm gonna find some way to get it right so that my life will work as I want it to. I'm gonna raise my kids probably so they'll grow to be the kids I want, I'm gonna love my wife the way I should so she'll respond to me the way she should. And it's this whole quid pro quo thing that I'm gonna make this happen and God will cooperate with my agenda and I trust that He'll get that clear. And I disguise all that in terms of Oh Lord I just want You, and what I really want is that He'll cooperate with my agenda. And that's the old way of the written code.

And there really is a new way of the Spirit that is simply the Spirit prompting us to move into the presence of God and to find sufficiency there. And uh, we're gonna put on a Friday night and all day Saturday conference. We're gonna do our first one in Boulder, Colorado. We're gonna do two a year is our plan. And again just to mention in passing, the contemporary Christian musician that I most deeply appreciate is Michael Card and he's gonna be providing the worship for us at our conference. And a new book is coming out by Michael that has not come out but it has affected me as much as any book in the past year. It's called "Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity" by Michael Card and it's a marvelous book. It just has inspired me deeply so I'm just gonna give a plug to that if I can.

Again we talked a little bit about a vision for community and quickly said some things about the way that the Father and Son relate and notice that Jesus said in John 17 that we actually have been given resources that He calls "the glory" in John 17 that make it possible for me to relate in a powerful way with another person - in a way that actually stirs the reality of the spirit's work in somebody else's life. I can participate in your spiritual formation. Folks, that is a trip. That is exciting! And to have a chance at participating in the spiritual formation of your spouse, to have a chance at participation in the spiritual formation of your kids, of your friends, it's unbelievable. It's a difficult process.

Let me tell you a quick story that has set me off on the path of understanding how we have been given the opportunity to participate in the miraculous activity in the souls of each other. Let me tell you a story that has become paradigmatic for me when thinking through what this glory is

that can be transmitted if you will, or shared, or poured into each other. It happened with my older son. Again with his permission. When he was in college he went to Taylor University. Some of you have heard of Taylor University. A very fine Christian school in the Boondocks of Indiana, it's just away from everything civilized. Chuck Olsen has often said: Send your kids to Taylor. It's 50 miles from the nearest sin [audience laughter]. It's not. Um, and my son went to Taylor University and I was away at a conference and speaking for a week someplace and the next morning I was to get up and speak again and that night the phone rang, it was my wife in tears and she said, honey our son's just been expelled from Taylor. And the next morning I was to get up and give a 3 hour talk on parenting.

That was a little tough. I gave it actually. I couldn't get on a flight until after that so I gave a talk, didn't tell anybody about it. Flew home and drove down from Warsaw, Indiana where we lived to Upland, Indiana where Taylor University is - an hour and a half drive. And as I drove down those, that hour and half to be with my son who had just been expelled from Taylor, who had been rebelling for about 5 or 6 years, and rebellion had come to a severe point of culmination and we didn't know what to do. We were desperate. Um, as I drove down in that car I had one of those anointed experiences where it just became very clear that Jesus was with me and what became very clear in my soul I believe, was the Spirit speaking within me saying "Larry, you've tried everything but grace."

And when I saw my son I was so filled with the vision of what the Spirit could do with his life that my first words to him when I saw him for the first time I was not angry, and if you knew me

that transcends the Red Sea miracle [audience laughter]. And I saw him, and with tenderness in my eyes that was not contrived, I simply said four words: How can I help?

When I wrote the book "Connecting" where I tell the story that I'm briefly sharing now, when I wrote the book "Connecting" I sent a copy of the manuscript to my son and said I wanna make sure not only that you agree to let me write this publicly obviously but I wanna make sure I'm telling it accurately. And he read it and the first words that I'd mentioned were other than "how can I help you" it was "I want to bless" or "I want to help" something like that. He called up and he said dad I read the manuscript and it's exactly what happened except you didn't say "I want to bless" you said "How can I help?". It was 8 years earlier that it happened and he remembered the exact four words. And when I said how can I help, his response was to - you could see a softening and we went and sat at the back room of a coffee shop - in little Upland, Indiana, THE coffee shop in Upland Indiana [audience laughter]. And he just poured out his heart and I became his father/confessor and he shared with me more difficulties in his life than I really cared to hear. And I listened for about 2 or 3 hours. And all I could think the whole time was, "this is what Jesus is all about". And next day he turned his life over to Jesus. What do you know?

And he came home and he said to me, words that I'd been waiting 20 years to hear. He said "Dad," we didn't know what to do with him now, he had to come home, he couldn't live at Taylor, is he gonna live at home now? Is he gonna get a job? Is he gonna go to school? I mean we didn't know. He said "Dad, can I just live here and get a job and you disciple me." And my thought was let's get the old projector out, we'll make that happen! You know, I've been waiting

for this for 20 years and in a mystical way - and forgive me if this sounds too mystical for some of you but it was very clear the Lord was telling me "No. You are not to disciple you son." And I had no idea what to do. I wanted him to stay home. I wanted him to you know, get a job and we'd spend time in the word and we'd pray together and I'd teach him the Bible! And we'd have a great time together. And I set a deadline for myself to make a decision and the deadline came and I had no idea what to do. I went to my office that day, the mail came. There was a letter from one of my friends Dwight Edwards. He's a pastor in College Station, Texas. This was just a chatty letter from a buddy. Soon as I read that letter it was very clear that I wanted to call up Dwight. Dwight was a Youth Pastor then now he's a senior pastor at a marvelous church in College Station, Texas and he's a man that's a former tennis pro and my son's a tennis pro, and I thought well this is a marriage made in heaven well I'm gonna send him down to be discipled by Dwight. So I called Dwight up and when I got the mail that day.

And he said "Larry, how yah doin?" and I said not so good and my voice choked up and it was clear there was more that was involved than sociability and so I told him what had happened and before I could say could I send Kipp down to College Station he said "Send him down here. We'll get him a job, we'll disciple him, we'll get him in school. We'll do whatever. Whatever God has for him." I said Dwight this is just amazing. This is of the Lord and to make a long story short Kipp did go down and Dwight discipled Kipp and moved him toward marvelous maturity and he's now the father of my two grandkids and he's just a marvelous dad and a marvelous godly husband and father and son. And we're just as thrilled as we can be obviously. Um, and Dwight was used of God to facilitate a lot of the spiritual formation in our son.

And when I said to Dwight after our talk on the phone I said Dwight this is just so wonderful how God works! And you know let me tell you why I called today, and I didn't think I'd call you frankly but your letter came today. And he said what letter? And I said what do you mean what letter I'm reading it. And he said "I didn't send you a letter". And I said you did too! I've got it in front of me. And he said read it. And I started reading it and he said "Larry, I mailed that 6 months ago." Came that day.

You know isn't it possible that there's a supernatural world that we need to enter more commonly? Is it possible that there are resources that when we yield to the Spirit and understand maybe just a little bit of the glory that God has put in us that maybe we can begin to experience the reality of those things. Every time I tell that story I get goosebumps and I wanna cry. What are the resources that are in us. What is the glory that God is talking about? Let me just suggest to you something that is fresh for me over the past four or five years.

I've been saved for almost 50 years now. And the gospel feels like it's just becoming a new reality for me. I remember when I was in my late 20's early 30's I sat with William Hendrickson, the well-known Bible commentator/scholar. He was in his late 70's at the time and we happened to have lunch together and this wise old brilliant scholar in the scriptures who knows the Bible in ways that I never will, he said to me as a young man. He said to me "Oh, I think I'm just

beginning to understand the gospel." I remember as a kid saying Can I help? [audience laughter]
I mean what's the problem here, He died for your sins, you go to heaven, I mean that's how it works isn't it? I mean do you have a problem with this?

Um, and now I'm 57 and I'm saying I think I'm just entering kindergarten. Now, let me tell you what I'm talking about, and maybe this is old stuff to you but this is new to me. Or some of it's new. When I think of the New Covenant, I ask myself, well what is this New Covenant in the blood of Jesus that has opened the New and living way into the presence of God? Where our souls can feast on Him. What is the New Covenant that has done something in the depths of my being that can come out toward you and powerfully affect your life and some thing in you can come toward me and powerfully affect my life. What has the New Covenant done within my soul that can build community that will lead to spiritual formation. Let me suggest to you that, as my friend Dwight Edwards has taught effectively. He has a book called "Revelation Within" that I strongly recommend to you. It's a little primer on covenant theology that is written in very readable wonderful style and Dwight put it this way. He said um, he always assumed as a pastor when he got behind the pulpit and spoke to the congregation, he made the assumption that people in his church should live for God but didn't really want to but ought to. And he thought it was his job to persuade them to do what they really didn't want to do. And he's come to call that the eat-your-vegetables approach to sanctification.

And on the basis of his study of scriptures and New Covenant theology he's come to the conclusion that every person in the congregation that knows Jesus. Every person who has come

to live under the terms of the New Covenant at the core of their being, hungers for God. Now it's not a matter of eat your vegetables. Now it's a matter of indulge your sweet tooth. What you long for the most is available, and let me as your pastor, let us in our small groups and our congregation, let us arouse the desire that God has already put there!

Let me talk about four provisions of the New Covenant - there are more but let me talk but the four essential provisions of the New Covenant that when we understand that these are some of the resources within us, that enable us to related to each other differently. Let me preface that with something I hadn't prepared to say but I think that the most glaring weakness in the Evangelical community - and I'm a part of it - is simply the way we relate. Um, that so often when I relate I have agendas that I don't own, and they have nothing to do with me loving you and they have everything to do with just getting you to do for me what needs to be done. There's just a manipulative model in our relational style and there are so many things that are happening that we're not fully aware of that we just don't know are going on and there are just so many struggles that are taking place in our lives and maybe some of these can actually be overcome when we understand the provisions that are made in the New Covenant.

The friend that I just had dinner with - I mean we had just a marvelous time! We spent a weekend with him and his wife. My wife and I spent a weekend with him about a month ago and we had a terrible time. We had very significant conflict. When they left for the weekend. I said to my wife there's two things that are gonna happen. Either our friendship is gonna die. Or I'm gonna have the courage to call and deal with this thing. So I called the next day and said um, that

was a lousy weekend wasn't it? He said yeah. I said I don't know what happened but we gotta talk coz I'm kinda mad and I think you are too and I don't know how to handle this. How do you repair a fracture on the basis of the New Covenant? It all depends on how you look at each other. All depends on what your goals really are. All depends on what your appetite really is.

Let me give you four provisions that enabled Jim and I to have a wonderful dinner tonight after a horrible weekend just a month ago. Here are the four provisions - and you know all of this, but reflect on it.

Number one: A new purity.

A new purity. What does it mean that as far as the east is from the west so far have my sins been removed from me by the blood of Jesus? Does that mean that when you see me at my worst you can celebrate? I think I may have shared this story with you earlier this week in some context I really don't recall.

A fellow came to see me a couple of years ago. His wife had left him after 20 something years of marriage, had a couple of kids. Totally blindsided his wife left him. I think I did share this in chapel maybe. And um, the end of one of our sessions he said to me five minutes before the end of our session he said to me "Larry I gotta tell you something." What is it? "I went to a topless

bar last night." And, that's bad. I think it's awful. What Christian has any business being at a topless bar. When he said that to me I just spontaneously said "Praise the Lord!" He looked at me and said "for what?" He said "I don't get it." And I said well let me think, I don't know why I said that. I'm not happy you were there and I hope you never go again. But I really felt like praising the Lord. And I thought about it and I said you know, there is such cause to celebrate. Where sin abounds grace doth much more abound. I mean isn't it amazing to think that you did something as heinous as that and you're not gonna go to hell! That's incredible. And maybe now you're gonna see it in a way that you never saw before.

And then I went on to get ridiculous about it. And I said tell you what, the next time you get tempted give me a call. Pick me up. We'll go down to where the topless bar is. You go down to the topless bar, I'll go to a coffee shop next door. And when you come out you come to the coffee shop and I'll say "Good to see yah!" and buy you a coffee.

What does grace mean? It means that when my friend Jim failed me, and I believe he did. And I think I failed him but I think he failed me too. Hmm. I think I saw a pretty ugly part of Jim. Can I celebrate? Can I celebrate grace that I'm no better than him. He's a bit of a skunk that one but me too! And grace covers us both. Is it possible to actually celebrate grace when you are betrayed?

Second element of the New Covenant: A new identity.

You've heard lots of stuff on this and let me give a few thoughts on this. One of the dangers of therapeutic culture is we become a labelling culture. And the diagnosis we put on the insurance forms kind of marks us and now I am and anxiety/neurotic or I am bipolar. No no no. That's not who I am that may be what I'm struggling with. But we take labels and put them on ourselves, a terrible mistake.

As a kid I had a big problem with stuttering. I used to be a very bad stutterer. And many stutterers will tell you, many persons with stuttering problems will tell you that there are certain letters that are difficult letters and my two letters were "L" and "P" that I really couldn't say and my name is Larry and I was raised in Plymouth Meeting in Pennsylvania among the Plymouth Brethren [audience laughter]. And uh, one Sunday morning at a little Plymouth assembly where God's 50 people gathered around and when a young man turned 15 it was expected in the written code of the brethren that that young man would stand and say something at the Lord's Supper after a word of prayer.

So one Sunday morning, 15 year old kid I felt the leaning of the pressure of the saints so I rose to my feet and I offered a prayer and I stuttered and I felt really bad and I was totally embarrassed and I think I prayed the most heretical prayer in the history of the church. I was thanking the Father for being on the cross, the Spirit was in the grave and Jesus was watching the whole thing from heaven. And you know I was just stuttering and making a fool out of myself and finally I

think the Spirit did come through and I thought of the word Amen and said it and sat down. And how did I see myself at that moment when I sat down. Child of God? No. Stutterer. I'll never forget what happened. As soon as the service was over I made a beeline for the back door. I didn't want any elder coming over to me and telling me that it was Jesus on the cross. I knew that. So I went to the door just ten feet from where I was sitting in this little assembly hall that we were in.

Jim Dunbar, an elder in the church, 70 years old, sitting across there. He beat me to the door - I have no idea how he did that I think God levitated him there you know. So I get to the door and Mr. Dunbar stopped me and he said "Larry can I have a word with you", and I said [mumbling noises] I'm a stutterer, and I'm a heretic and I don't know Jesus died on the cross [audience laughter]. And here's what he said to me, he said "I wanna tell you one thing. Whatever you do for the Lord I'm behind you a thousand percent" and he walked away. Perichoresis. That animated my soul. I walked out of that door not cured by a long shot but I thought there's more to me than a stutterer. You know when I got over my stuttering? When I shed the label.

I did a minor in speech pathology in college. Just learning the theories. But let me tell you what happened. I was in graduate school, still stuttering. And Dr. Ate, A-T-E, Dr. Ate, he was one of the supervisors nobody wanted because he was so gruff. And I was walking down the hallway once, 24 years old in my internship, in my PhD program and Dr. Ate was coming down the hall and we knew each other a little bit and he stopped me in the hall and "Hey, Larry! Howya doin'?" and I said "I I I'm okay D D D Dr. Ate". And he said - now look at what happened here - he

looked at me and he said, "You stutter!?" And he said "Well I used to too and I got sick of it so I stopped. Well why don't you?" and he walked away [audience laughter]. And I haven't stuttered since. Explain that one. Well here's my explanation. I think it's weak but it's part of it. Either this guy was the biggest jerk in the history of time, which he really wasn't. Or he saw something in me beneath my stutter. I think that's why I shed the label [pause].

I wonder in our small group when I get together with you and I say to you "Yeah, Rachel and I had this thing and I told her let's not talk about the problem with Dave and Genie..." and I wonder if you know me pretty well and you go "Larry, you do this a lot. You're just that kind of guy. You're living outside the new covenant." I'm not just that kind of guy. I'm a new creation. I have a new identity.

The story is told in the Civil War of a young man that lived in the North and was about to be conscripted to fight for the union army and he had an ill mother and his mother was a widow and he wanted to stay home. He didn't want to go and fight. Not out of lack of loyalty to his country but out of concern for his ill mother. And he decided that maybe if he could travel and go to Washington D.C. and get an audience with Abraham Lincoln and explain his plight to the president that maybe he could be excused from military service and he just was a dreamer that he could actually see the president. So he got to D.C., and got to the white house and of course nobody let him in there and he just tried it for a day or two and asked people "Do you know anybody that could get me in" and "How do I do this?" and nobody knew a thing and he just was

sitting on a bench, true story, outside of the white house, very forlorn. About to go home, be conscripted, leave his sick mother, go fight in the war.

And a young ten year old boy or some such age came to him and said "Mister, are you alright?" and the guy looks at the little kid you know, says "No, I'm not alright." "What's wrong?" The kid seemed interested so he told him the story and he said I've just been trying to see the president and see if I can get out of it. And the kid said "Well, come with me." So they walked to the gate and the guard saluted and he walked in with this kid and walked into the white house and into the office of president Lincoln. It was Lincoln's son! Say, I've got a better Son than that on my side. It's my identity, and He's my older brother and He takes me to the presence of the Father. Do you see me that way? Do I see you that way in our small groups?

Can I tell you one of the big problems in conservative Evangelical Christianity today? It's celebrityism. And um, I travel a lot and I address a lot of audiences. And this celebrity stuff is awful. Sometimes you start believing it. See me as a child of God and I'll see you as a child of God. That's who we are. See me as a celebrity then get to know me and you'll be so disappointed. When you see the real me. Don't be disappointed. Praise God that I belong to Him. And the Son can take me to the presence of the Father every time. That's my identity.

Third element of the New Covenant that will help us to develop community is a New Disposition. I like to call it a New Appetite. I like to believe it's the New Heart of Ezekiel 36. Where the prophecies that - God speaking - I will give you a new heart, and I will move you to keep my decrees. And I believe that what's happening here is that the Law that was outside of us is now inside of us. And when the Law that was outside written on the tablets of stone is now written on my heart, the requirement of the Law becomes a desire within my being. And what was before an imposition now becomes an appetite. And that's why I don't really like the word accountability as a central concept in small groups. I like the word appetite. So we hold each other accountable? Yah, there's a place for that. It isn't a bad word but it isn't a core word. The core word is that when you see me away from God, when you see me being unkind to my wife and you say something like "Larry are you spending much time in the Word?" Say it that way and I'm gonna turn you off. "Alright I know I should, I...[mumbling]"

But suppose you looked at me as a guy who, right now the appetite is hidden, but it's there because I'm regenerate. Suppose you were to believe in me. Suppose you were to say, "you know Larry, you mistreat your wife. I know how much you long to bless that lady". And when people have said that to me I fall apart in tears. Because I really do. I long to bless that lady. My appetite is to be Christ-like to her. You believe that and you see me behaving poorly, the new covenant will let you see me differently because I have a new appetite.

I mentioned Brennan Manning earlier this week in a chapel and I had the opportunity to ask Brennan for a chance to get together and this was a couple years back and I was struggling with something that was very difficult in my life and I had made known this difficulty to Brennan over a couple hours of interaction together and as I'd made known this rather ugly part of my life, the secret that I hadn't shared and made known to Brennan, Brennan began to cry! My first thought was is it that bad? I mean you don't want the surgeon to look at the xray and go "Oh my goodness!" You don't want that. I mean, what's happening here. So I said, Brennan what are you crying for? And here's what he said to me. He said, Oh Larry, every time I am with you I am so drawn to Jesus. [pause]. I was like, Why? If I had killed somebody would that make you even more drawn, I mean I just told you something terrible. And here's what he said, literally his words, I'll never forget them. He said "It's just so clear that you hate anything that creates distance between you and your Lord." That's true. Wow, a miracle of grace! I really do hate things that get between me and Jesus. And Brennan saw it because he believes the New Covenant. And he knows that my appetite is for God even when I mess up.

Last thing, I'll just say it simply, is a New Power. The Holy Spirit dwells within. And all I'll say about that very briefly is that the power is released most primarily in brokenness. Do you believe that the power of Christ is within me when I tell you about my problems with Rachel? If you look at me on the basis of the gospel, no longer after the flesh but on the basis of the gospel realities, you know what I'm gonna feel when I'm with you? I'm gonna feel safe and encouraged and invigorated.

Last thing I'll talk about for just a few minutes. Those are the resources for community. A couple of comments on the practice of community. We've talked about a vision for community; the Father and Son relating. We have the glory to relate like that. We've talked about the resources for community, the new covenant - resources for a new purity, a new identity, a new disposition, a new power - that can help help us look at each other very differently. Now how can we put that into practice? Well let me give you a couple of quick thoughts. There's no final word on this of course so just a couple of quick simple thoughts.

Something that's been helpful to me that grows out of all the theological issues I've been trying to share with you is this. That when you get together in a small group for intentional spiritual formation, keep four words in your mind, I would suggest to you. The four words are these: Know, Explore, Discover, and Touch. Know, Explore, Discover, and Touch. Wouldn't it be something if in our small group when Rachel and I share something in our small group, you really wanna Know us? And you Explore our lives. And you Discover the work of the Spirit. And Christ in you connects with the Christ in me and the Touch happens that invigorates my soul and you have actually aroused the love and the desire to practice good deeds towards my wife, that God has put within me in the new covenant. What would it look like to know, explore, discover, and touch?

Let me tell you a couple of things that we do in our spiritual formation group and we're learning. We don't have it right but we have a couple of thoughts that we're finding somewhat helpful. First thing we do when our small group gathers is we don't eat first. When you eat first you

become a social group. Anything wrong with getting together to eat? No. But that isn't our purpose. We get together for intentional spiritual formation. We get together Sunday afternoon and that will be at our home this Sunday. 5 o'clock, from 5 to 7:30 we get together and then we're gonna eat afterward. People come in the door at 5 o'clock and you know we say Hi, we're not stiff, we get some coffee whatever. But we sit down and by about 5:10 we start. We don't just kibitz and socialize coz we're there for, for thrilling business.

And the first thing we do is what we call the Sacrement of Delight. We take Zephaniah 3:17 seriously and believe that God sings over us with delight because of the new purity and we believe that most Christians live feeling very unaffirmed in who they are in Christ so this is what we do. We draw names out of a hat - this is a ritual we have every time we meet - and there's ten of us in the group. And I draw a name out and it might be my wife, it might be Wes, it might be Judy, it might be Tom. And I draw this name out, everyone draws a name. And we all go off into our different corners. And for ten minutes we simply meditate on that person in the presence of Christ. In the presence of the Trinity. And we ask ourselves some questions as we meditate, as I meditate on Tom. God, what are you excited about when you think about that guy? Then I have a little card and I write him a letter: Dear Tom... and then we have a little notebook that we keep and we've got our cards in there and at 3 in the morning sometimes when I'm in misery I'll get my card out and I'll see, why, Jenny told me that so and so. God thinks that, wow. And then we get back in the group and we read our cards to each other. And pretty often there's tears and hugs. And that's how we start our group every time.

And then we simply open ourselves up to the spirit by practicing a little *lexio* for a bit. *Lexio divina* - perhaps you know what that is, perhaps, a little sacred reading, spiritual reading. Just read through a text several times. A brief text and there's different ways to do that. I'll just mention that briefly, similar to what we did tonight. But we do that just to put ourselves in the presence of the word, and to honor the scriptures and let the spirit speak to us through the Word.

Then we move from that into the process of telling stories. And I believe that one of the great mistakes that groups make is that you get together and the purpose is to catch up in each others lives. That gets in the way of spiritual formation. Um, I was in a "Catch-up" group and it really annoyed me. It annoyed me because I had ten minutes. So what we do is we sit in prayer for a time and we ask who here in the room is coming tonight and would love to be known by this group of believers? It happens every time that somebody says, you know, I would like to let you know something about me tonight. And we have a little covenant that we've agreed on - we've all signed a covenant about we're gonna live out the New Covenant in each others lives as best we can - and the person begins to share the story. And we look to create safety. And the way we look to create safety is to take seriously the New Purity.

Now what does it mean for Rachel and I to be safe to share what happened in our lives with this group? We meet Sunday night and - I love my wife deeply and she loves me and we have a strong marriage but we had a tough time two weeks ago and we agreed that we really wanna talk about it in our group Sunday night. And the reason I wanna talk about it is I know when I look in Bob and Claudia's eyes and Wes and Judy and Tom and Jenny, I know that they're gonna be

looking at us with Sheer Delight! And I feel safe. They're not gonna judge us. Worse, they're not gonna advise us! They're just gonna be excited that we're broken in the presence of God and maybe God can do a deep work in the middle of our brokenness. Great safety. Commit to celebration.

Then explore. I'll let you know me if I feel safe with you. And then explore. Give me the gift of Curiosity. Can I tell you how rare the gift of curiosity is in the Christian community today? We all want our platform. And when you tell me, as Bob told me over coffee - a member of our group, we had coffee a little while ago - and as Bob began to share he said you know, this is going on and I gotta tell you about a struggle I'm having and there's a part of me that thinks pretty quickly in certain ways and wants to come up with ideas and, but to explore Bob and give him the gift of curiosity and say "tell me more about that", when's the last time somebody's been really curious, fascinated by you? You are actually a Masterpiece of God's creative genius in the making. And I've got the privilege of exploring something of what's happening in you - yeah the mess of the flesh but as well as the Spirit and the New Covenant realities in your soul. I get to know you. This is a kick! Don't pray too quick. Don't quote scripture too quickly. Don't give advice too quickly. Give the gift of curiosity. Listen. Explore. Wonder. Ask.

Thirdly, Discover. That's what the spiritual directors mean by the idea of discernment. What's the spirit doing right now? Is something going on? Can we just sit quietly and discern that and think it through?

And then Touch. Whatever is most alive. I don't know why, whether it's a western thing or just a human thing but it's so difficult for us to touch one another with what is most alive within us. [inaudible], um, My friend told me a story - he's a pastor. Of a wonderful church. And I asked if I could mention this story tonight if it seemed to occur to me and he said yeah, please do. What happened over dinner, he was sharing that last Sunday in between the two services where he preaches to a thousand people in each service - sizable church - and after he preached the service and the service was over he went over to the foyer to greet people and say hi in the half hour between services. And there was a guy there that he kinda knew, a member of this church and he went over and he said hi and the guy said hi, it's nice to see yah, and then he said, "can I share something with you?" - the fellow said to the pastor, my friend, and Jim said yah, what do you wanna share? And he said, "well, having run into yah I'd like to take the opportunity to tell you that we are leaving the church." And uh, [Jim said] okay. Can I ask why? "Well yah, our child is involved in a Christian school affiliated with another church and we think it might be better at a community level if we go to this church where our child is involved in a Christian school. But I guess there's more to it than that. I just think that maybe we could develop a different level of community at the other church as opposed to this one. Well I guess the real reason is um, we've listened to the other pastor and we just think he's a lot more practical." That's hard.

And Jim told me, he said that he walked away from the conversation and just something inside of him said "I don't wanna preach. I wanna quit the ministry, I wanna dump the whole stupid thing and just get out of here." And then he saw two guys that were in his Wednesday morning group,

covenant group he has with a buddy of guys, two guys were standing by his office serendipitously. And he said, "Would you guys come in for a second, can I tell you what happened?" And he told these two guys what had happened and the two guys didn't do much. But Jim said it just meant the World to him to know that when he got onto the pulpit the next hour that there were two guys out there who knew that he was struggling big time. Two guys that were just praying their heads off the entire service. He said he found that so strengthening.

And as Jim told me this story, and I'm just sitting there looking at him, and something inside of me is just bursting with love for this man. And we're sitting at this restaurant. We're a couple of guys. So what do you do? "Hey, neat story Jim, how about that...So those guys were a pretty good blessing to you, huh? Well let's analyze this, I mean tell me why you think this uh, you know, -" and I thought nuts! No! And I just leaned over and I said, "I am just so filled up with love for you right now." and I began to cry. And Jim just looked at me and he said, "this is a really good moment." [audience laughter].

Why don't we wrap it up by suggesting a couple of things to you quickly as we finish. Gospel of John chapter 5 in verse 26. Very strange verse it reads like this, "The Father has granted the Son to have life in Himself." Trinitarian theology that's beyond my mind. The Father has granted the Son to have life in Himself. 1st John 5, God has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son! Colossians 2:9 in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form. And you have been given the fullness of Christ. Second Peter 1:4 through God's promises you may participate in the divine nature on the basis of all of this when we get together it's a supernatural opportunity.

Think hard about how to arouse the reality of the divine nature within us because of the grace of God in the New Covenant.

The practical conclusion to all of this just to summarize everything that I've said - here's my question to all of you: Are you safe in your small group? What a tragedy that most people go to their graves with secrets. A lot of guys in this room have sexual secrets that nobody knows about. You need a spiritual friend who you can tell you went to a topless bar last night. And the person will embrace you and say isn't God's grace wonderful? Are you safe? Are you curious? Wouldn't you wanna explore somebody? It's so hard to say something like "I had a great time in scripture last night," and for somebody else to say "me too." It means so much when somebody says, "What is it?" Are you curious about my spiritual life? I'm curious about yours. When you say that your prayer life last night just lifted you to the heavenlies, and I go "Man, let's make some time. I wanna hear about that!"

I laid down on my bed this afternoon, took a little nap and just thought about the Trinity for about half an hour. Amazing time. Are you envisioning what could happen in people's lives? Are you free to pour out the fullness of what is in you into somebody else's life. The few times that I've been it's been something else.

The role of community - supernatural community in spiritual formation. A couple of thought.
Thank you very much.

[Applause]

John is suggesting that if you have any questions for about five minutes we're gonna stop at 9:30 and it's 9:24 so if you have any comments or questions that you'd like to think about briefly together, just a few minutes, anything you wanna raise or think about for just a little bit? [pause] I see a hand right there yes? [Inaudible audience comment] Can I keep going for 2 hours? haha [audience laughter], but thank you for that. I see a hand in the back yes?

[Inaudible audience comment] Uh, first New Purity, second New Identity. A new identity. Uh, a lot of teaching on the new identity. The only point that I underlined there was to get rid of labels. And to recognize that the only label that we can pin on each other is child of God. Saint. I'm very much in favor of the 12 Step movement, Alcoholics Anonymous, I think it's been a great thing. Um, I have one criticism of it. And that is when a person stands and says "Hi, I'm Fred and I'm an alcoholic" that's not theologically correct. When he says Hi I'm Joe - if he's a Christian - Hi, I'm Bill, whatever, and I'm a Christian, I'm a saint and I struggle with drinking a whole lot that I shouldn't. "I'm Larry and I'm a stutterer" - no no no. I'm Larry and I struggle with stuttering but I'm a child of God. So that was my second point. Other hand I saw over here, yes ma'am?

[Inaudible audience question]

Yeah I think that a lot of our understanding of the spiritual journey of going to God alone and reading the Bible and making sure that you're digging into it, I think it comes out of Western individualism than it comes out of the Scriptures. Um, and I strongly believe that there has to be a balance between community and solitude. I think there's an incredible need to become quiet in the presence of the Lord and simply to worship Him and to spend incredible amounts of time in the Word. I'm all of that, I don't minimize that for a moment. I know you're not. I think the notion of just an individualistic journey of just read your Bible and do what you're told, I think it's really a terror of the depths of our own souls. Because when we face the depths of our souls we don't know what to do so we keep it simple and shallow and just manage everything. Dallas Willard talks about a "Sin-management model of sanctification" which he derives appropriately.

I think that perhaps the - just sort of a soundbite answer to a question that deserves a lot more of an answer - maybe the thing that's helped me the most in embracing the community - which I'm scared of, I mean I'd like to stay in my role as Dr. Crabb the expert who knows what he's doing you know as opposed to realizing I don't have a clue what I'm doing half the time. But I think what's opened me up to the pursue the notion of the spirit working through community is really reflecting on the implications of the Trinity. I think we need to take seriously what people like Jim Houston say very powerfully that if you believe in the Trinity then you necessarily believe that final ontology is relationally. Fancy sentence but take the words apart and I think it means something. If you believe the Trinity, then you believe that final reality is not propositions and therefore the point of life is not to learn your Bible. The point of life is to relate well. To love

Jesus and to love others. How do we know that? the Bible says so. the Bible does not say the point of life is to know your Bible. the Bible says study to show yourselves approved unto God and [inaudible]. There's plenty of verses about studying and meditating on the scripture and all that but all that has a flow and a rhythm and a purpose and the purpose always has to do with the summary of the entire law" Love God and Love Others. So the whole point is to replicate the Trinity in human community. And when we understand that then I think we have within our souls an arousal of our desire for what we were designed for, which is relationality. We were never designed for individuality. So I think that's at least a part of an. answer to a big question. Pick one more, yah?

[Inaudible audience question]

I have No idea [audience laughter]. Um, I'm sorry. I think that I don't know. It's in the Bible somewhere probably [audience laughter]. I really don't know. I kinda run along here, I'm sorry, yah?

[Inaudible audience comment]

Again another quick answer to a big question. I believe the law of linearity - what I call the law of linearity: If A then B, B follows A. You know if I want good kids then raise them in a certain

way and I have good kids that sort of a thing. If I want God to bless me then I do this and God will bless. If I want my church to grow so I follow certain principles and my church will grow. This law of linearity, I think that has been entirely abolished in the New Covenant. I think the law of influence remains. I think that the godly parent, get a hundred godly parents and a hundred ungodly parents, I think that you'll have more godly kids on this side than on this side. I don't think there are any guarantees. But you'll have likelihood is that the godlier parents will have godlier kids. That's not a guarantee, but it's a probability. So it's a law of influence if you will.

I think that the danger of thinking in terms of quid pro quo law of linearity kind of thing is that it really easily is assimilated into our minds as a way to pursue some other goal as our ultimate goal than the glory of God. And that's what I think is the problem with it. Um, do I think it's wrong for me to say that I wanted God to bless tonight. I want the chat that I give tonight to encourage people and so because I really would like that, I've thought about this, I prayed for it, I've prepared myself and prepared my notes and I came here knowing what I wanted to say. So I've done my preparation in the hopes that God will bless. I think that's a reasonable way to go about it. I put gas in my car so it doesn't stall. You know I think it makes sense to do these kind of things. But I think that the difficulty is that once we start focusing on - here's the B that I want, how do I get what I want? What is the A that gets me the B - that we really settle for a lesser goal than simply knowing God. And that's gotta be the primary thing and I think the law of linearity is so often used. And I think it's just rampant in American Christianity - it just becomes the whole point of Christianity is to use God not to know Him. And that to me is the old way of the written code that I argue against.

Okay I think we're at time, anybody have something that **MUST** be said or you're gonna be frustrated for the rest of your life?

[Inaudible audience comment]

Thank you, Dave, I appreciate that. It's been good to be with you. I'm grateful.

[Applause]

End of recording.