

LOVE
BEYOND
LOVE

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Introduction

For years there were two things about seeking to love and be loved by Christians that caused a very subversive confusion and contradiction in me. **The Confusion:** The confusion came from not knowing how to process packed away feelings of rejection from the “\$*^# happens” category of life in professional Christian ministry. I have always said to my closest friends that loving and being loved by people in ministry can be painful. But saying it never really prepares you for living with the hurts we give, or the ones that we inevitably get, from the individuals we end up feeling closest to. It happened to Jesus, and for years I read about the hurts He experienced from His closest companions (the ones that loved Him) but never really made the connection between His experiences and my own. Without making that important connection the hurts from my personal experiences really seemed senseless and unnecessary, so my natural reaction was to pull away from people to protect myself. Pulling away meant that I would merely give an appearance of loving people, but never even consider allowing them to love me. No way that was going to happen! As a pastor this kept me torn inside by an ever-ending cycle of shame, guilt, rejection, and manipulation. How could I stay so dishonest and yet practice integrity or faithfulness in the ministry? How long could I make it without love? Not long. The longer I hid, the more dishonest about my feelings I became, until

ministry felt like nothing more than “to use and be used” (certainly not loving and being loved by people). What was weird was that my personal notoriety and ministry profile continued to increase during this time. Because of the success I could not see the pattern of narcissism or myself becoming completely self-focused. And even if I did see it, I would never admit it.

The longer this went on I positioned myself as a victim who personally made “many sacrifices” for the ministry and deserved something better in return. In this emotional state of mind I was totally incapable of seeing just how far off my feelings and ideas of loving actually were from those of Jesus.

The Contradiction: The contradiction was in being a pastor and all the while living day in day out with such confusion and narcissistic insecurities about how to love and be loved. After all, **love is the signature virtue of Christian-living – right?** This contradiction for me was becoming a constant undercurrent of emotional torment because of how God wired me. I am always unsettled when there is conflict, and things aren’t right with me as a person. Things have to be settled for me to be settled. But this thinking and behavior had gone on for so long and now I was just tired, frustrated, and afraid. Finally, during a time when I was facing a series of very difficult personal life circumstances everything inside came to the surface for me. It just so happened it was while I was reading the book Augustine’s Confessions. Confessions (you may or

may not know) are the personal memoirs of St. Augustine's journey to faith. His struggles connected with me on many levels, and as I read I began to discover some real possibilities for resolving my confusion and contradictions about love.

As a young man Augustine (for many reasons) had constructed some very twisted ideas of love, intimacy, and sexuality. At thirty-two, Augustine entered a period of great emotional struggle and internal anguish. He wrote, "I could not know real love, for I was only in love with the idea of loving." Augustine determined that he could not go on in that condition. After years of searching through philosophy, astrology, intellectualism, and the art of rhetoric, Augustine (quickly breaking down) finally comes to a place where for the first time he gets close to the genuine love he could not find on his own. It was love that went beyond love. God miraculously reveals Himself while an inconsolable and weeping Augustine paces despondently in the garden of his mother's home. In a final act of despair he throws himself to the ground beneath a fig tree in the garden and finally surrenders himself to be loved by God, for the first time in his life - just as he was. He sees for the first time the unremitting love of Jesus as the only real bridge to a healthy and complete intimacy between two people. He is able to see a way of managing the impulsive power of the flesh that destroys any attempt to truly love another person and to be truly loved by them. Augustine discovered that day in his mother's garden, his first and only real

chance for love. He discovered his only legitimate chance for rescuing his depraved soul from hopeless living and imprisonment to his own narcissistic ideas of love.

From the time I read Augustine, I could not forget his words or his confession. I found myself projecting them into the circumstances of my life and ministry until I could no longer take it. I started questioning myself... over and over, "Am I just merely in love with the idea of loving God and His people?" I vowed to find out the truth about me. I intentionally and painfully moved forward to confront the weakest and most hidden areas of my life and character. I began to tackle head on my confusion with order, and my curiosity with timeless truth. I asked myself brutally honest questions about my feelings and ideas of love for myself, for God, and others. I sorted through my life experiences (good and bad), and then began to revisit what the bible had to say about love. I did this without my concordance and word search... I wanted truth not just an answer. I went out of my way to observe more closely the lives of other believer's and other people in ministry with similar circumstances to my own. Then, to gain added perspective and maintain objectivity, I talked for endless hours with those people I felt certain could be trusted to be honest with me - about me. The culmination of the process brought me to a clear realization; most of what I had done, said, and knew about loving and being loved to this point in my life was just not correct! This was just crazy. After nearly twenty years of ministry (at the time) how could that be? I was quickly discovering

that my “day to day” loving and being loved was really nothing at all how Jesus loved. The closer and more honestly I looked at how **Jesus loved** without filtering it through my “Steve-ness” (life expressed through my personality, beliefs, and behavior) the more inept and insecure I felt. So I prayed. I prayed to God with a stripped down-straight forwardness, as I had never done before. Then I would sit in silence. Afterward I wrote down the process as I lived through it. Finally I believed “I knew what I didn’t know.” As I started to share this with people in our community it revealed a commonality among many of us. It was funny because I would write, then read it, and then I would have to sit down re-write it because every time I read it I knew the truth and ideas in it were still too small, too rigid, and too limited. And honestly, I could still see far too much of me in it. Each time I listened to myself confess to someone that I wanted love like Jesus’ loved and to think like Jesus thought, I could sense someone or something emerging inside of me – someone with a complete different mind, heart, and understanding. I could sense something else happening in me... something that said, “If this love thinks like me and not like Jesus, I don’t want it, and I don’t have to keep it.” I began to experience an awakening. I was breaking through into a place where I could actually begin to think and love in little and subtle ways like Jesus, and not like Steve Isaac. It was like entering a new and unknown world for the first time.

Here is the revelation I started with... **“If my love for God, for myself and others, judged like me, could get angry like me, had pride like me, or tried to control like me - then it was love that would never go beyond me.”** With that in mind, it was now easier for me to identify my self-centric ideas as various forms of manipulation and not love. There was a better way to live and to love than that. That is precisely what Jesus calls me to; a better way to love - but a love that must go **beyond me**. At last, I could be honest enough to admit to myself and to others that my kind of love was just not enough because it clearly did not go beyond me. And that is where I found my journey.

So as you read the thoughts and perceptions of “Love beyond Love,” I hope you can see the sincere struggle of this wonderful community at Reunion to find what is true and genuine. Our continued discovery is this... **The truth that we seek and do not know, is found somewhere in Jesus.** I hope this creates a hunger for you that (at the very least) will move you to seek out a love for God that can help you love far beyond the limits of you. Love beyond your own myopic and personal perceptions to bring you face to face with **Jesus**, and His very intentional and unavoidable expectations of us. I also think it would be good for you to push the delete key on your own past ideas and feelings about loving and being loved (they won't help you). I ask you to be open to any of the awkwardness and discomforts that come along with the change that this journey will

bring about in your life. I think if you have any confusion or curiosity about your understanding of how to love and be loved it is probably time for you to be ok with being re-directed to learning the way of loving beyond yourself. I am confident that **the real love of Jesus** will disrupt and captivate your world, and then reinvent you a new one. But that is ok... it's a good place to be, and I believe the process is worth every moment.

Love Beyond Love

What then does the term “love beyond love” mean? Simply this: **“We open our heart, mind, spirit, and soul to a person. To remove all distance and hostility that keeps us from connecting with them in the places and moments in life that Jesus intends 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 feelings of hostility and broken ideas of love for others and ourselves. Jesus plainly asks followers to love like He loved. For a true Christ follower loving beyond love is intended to be a daily function of life – not just warm feeling, a timely gesture, or good deed (although they are always welcomed). It is actively shared love that Jesus wants from us! For love to go beyond love it must be active. **Active love shares what has been shared with us; love that is open, intentional and filled with genuine hospitality to all.”** Christians

(especially American) will often mistake this for some method or form of personal evangelism or helping the poor and needy. But it is not the same thing. Evangelism is delivering ‘the message’ of Christ’s love to those who need it when they need it most. Certainly we 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 evangelism and benevolence. But God’s plans for loving the world do not stop there, and though worthwhile and meaningful they are just another place for them to begin. That is love, but not love beyond love. God’s love is beyond that and intended to be even more personal, more intimate, and certainly more difficult than just faithfully delivering a message and a meal (even the greatest message) once a week.

No, love beyond love in a “Jesus context” most of the time much more difficult, and **is never easy**. And to know that, is to discover quickly that one does not always feel good about loving and being loved. That is because the way Jesus wants us to love and be loved is intended to continue out beyond us and our huge need to feel good about ourselves. In the context of Jesus and His love - love goes beyond feelings about us, and comes about only in Him. Which means, “day in-day out” we are going to love people who will reciprocate with our love - and love people who will reject both us - and our love. What we learn then about love beyond love as Christians is that regardless, we keep moving as Jesus did - slowly

forward, always toward people. The idea is that in reality we are creating an open space in us, and around us for living life together in Christ. It is His idea that with grace, we progressively open ourselves to loving anyone who hears or believes His message. In this sense love beyond love is about being on the “same page” as Jesus, and loving people from that place. That place is very open. Without that reality, loving people the way Christians should love is just not possible.

As each of us search for the heartbeat of God the Father, and the very thoughts of Jesus, He will teach us that His love is an open door to a home (safe place) place for all kinds’ of people. We will understand also that no one (more or less) should be shut out from that kind of place. As Christ followers it is expected that we extend to others what Christ extended to us (John 13:34, 35). What Jesus asked of us was that we give a sincere, non-pretentious, religious-free invitation to others for a life together in Him. Dietrich Bonhoffer 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).”

Bonhoffer is confirming that we should love completely, and not only completely; but completely consistent with the truth we know of the heart and character of God. In doing this we can be in step with

who God has called His followers to be. We know from the teaching of Jesus and from how He has personally reached out to us that His love is indeed open to all and that it knows no limits. Jesus has called us to love people in the same way. 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 where we the community at Reunion Church can discover how to go beyond ourselves, and to even get beyond religion 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 loving relationships with others. The same could be said of discovering the purpose and meaning Christ has for our life. They are uniquely connected, and once settled, then the question for you is no longer – Who am I, and what am I to do? But rather, the question should be - How does Christ want to love His community and the others out there beyond me? (Matthew 22:9, 10) What is my role in what Jesus wants to do with His love?

We can start with God's desire for everyone to have someone and someplace to connect (1 Peter 2:9, 10). God does not want people to be without a place or to be shut out and disconnected from community and Him. 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. 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.

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. On this journey discovering in Jesus to love and be loved 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 comes to a dead stop.** With no movement, loving is very difficult and can be painful, which is for

many Christians confusing. The confusion creates 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 requires continued movement and growth and **the movement has to be towards Jesus**. Just because there is no visible change with the ones we are trying to love through difficulty does not mean - no movement. Keep moving - move toward Jesus.

Because this is so important to understand we should continually filter what we are feeling through grids of biblical truth that help us to maintain focus and make clear the path toward Jesus and His thinking and loving. When we become distracted, discouraged, or weary while loving in difficult circumstances truth stabilizes us and keeps us moving - and moving in the right direction. By turning to 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 to be faithful 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 easily happen. There is a lot of "stuff" to work through. By openly looking at we have just talked about we are working

through a good deal of who we are to be in Christ. From being comes doing. So for now we will talk about **what we are to do in Christ.**

Part of belonging to 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). Fulfilling that mission requires actively equipping those we are called to - another part of the journey to loving beyond love. Actively equipping is what Jesus did for those He loved and desired to love beyond themselves. And, because (like Jesus) 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. Our shared mission to actively equipping is very obvious. At Reunion, we are reconciled to the fact that most of the traditional and dynamic seeker-sensitive growth models for current Christian church ministry do not fit with what God has for His home here among us. **It is fairly obvious that we are not just a gathering of believers going through the motions. 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 believe... but not all good people follow Jesus. And there are many that believe and attempt to follow, but ultimately discover they are not willing to love beyond love, truly open to a life together (even figuratively) with anyone that does not think, look or act like them. To think like Jesus would mean wrapping ones**

arms around all of this... believing, following, and creating space for life together with others in Christ. Unfortunately not all Christians want to think like Jesus in that way... but that is something special, but not unique to us at Reunion.

As far as what we are to do in Christ, we have embraced *five 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, and break bread together*. This is the core; 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 the Spirit and they feel the same passion for an awakening to the real message of Jesus - to love beyond their own little world. Like us they are trying to figure it out, and like Jesus make an open place and spiritual home for all. Knowing 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 others that God is calling as well.

A Home Place

As far as our visible place or label in the ministry of the kingdom of heaven, (along with those like us) we would not be identified as traditional, seeker-sensitive, or emergent. Neither our success nor failure is understood or celebrated similarly to any of those models. To the people that we have opened ourselves to love, none of that matters to them. They simply respond to the love. Love is what

defines and identifies us. And, we have finally figured out that loving beyond love will truly identify us with Christ.

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."
(John 13:34-35)

Quite candidly, and for the record, I never felt called specifically to any church model (other than the first church of Jesus), yet I think that anyone familiar with the community at Reunion would agree that some of who we are, and much of what we believe, connects us through love at some level with all three of the models above. We are glad for that connection. Let me explain it this way (then we can move on)... Much of the movement and values at Reunion are very traditional. And without a doubt we are very sensitive in response to any unsaved seekers who come our way. We also believe that the life-changing gospel of Jesus is completely relevant to a postmodern culture. But the bottom line is this... we sincerely want to be identified by our heart and pursuit of loving like Jesus.

The model for ministry at Reunion continues to be the New Testament Church as was described by Luke the author of The Acts Of the Apostles. In following that model we can serve our neighboring Christian churches (large and small) regardless of their style or affiliation by praying for them to be a source of strength and influence for the kingdom of God in our city. They are also an encouragement for us in the areas of ministry that we might lack in. I believe the

Christian Church should be the same, though roles and profiles may differ above all the Church must love. The apostle Paul described it like this:

(1 Corinthians 12:14-31)

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But, in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are un-presentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now

you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
(NIV)

The ministry at Reunion was once described by one of its leaders as “saving the saved.” I think that comment is true, but not necessarily complete. In the years since that observation was made many effective and diverse ministry tracks have emerged and been accepted. I myself have had many confirmations throughout the years 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 have been hurt or displaced from somewhere else. I openly love them and welcome them into communion and fellowship, and others 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 Senior 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 roots and formation in knowing clearly 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 any one who will come along with us in genuine community to follow Jesus.**

We live in an age of what has been described by some as a “tech-nopoly” (instant access and gratification through technology) driven by 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 demo-graphic 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. Usually it is those market-demo’s whose life circumstances and lifestyles make us feel most uncomfortable, or do not make a nice fit or enough of a contribution to our “church-world”

ideas and plans. This is the fast track to a philosophy of solely targeting the market-demo that can most quickly and capably help achieve immediate numerical growth, financial strength, and desired amenities. 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 model of success. **The Jesus Model** for ministry costs everyone involved more than just money, and is certainly **more frustrating long before it ever becomes fulfilling**. It is more **often misunderstood before it is likely to be understood**; and it is absolutely all about prioritizing **God's expectations of us** above of **our expectations of Him**.

"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)

Sadly, in America the strategic research and target demographic model has too often become a final criterion for labeling the desirable or undesirable for their churches. Even after dynamic churches launch dynamic evangelistic efforts *the much needed* ongoing ministry (discipleship and loving relationship) to undesired demographics is considered too difficult and too labor intensive to follow up on. To quote an oft-used church growth term – “that kind of ministry is a tough sell.” Knowing what we know about *love beyond love* and a **red letter** Jesus, we have to ask, **“Why, is it not worth it?”** **“Why is there so little strategy for ongoing ministry or open relationship with those who have been labeled outcasts, lesser-thans, or the emotionally unintelligent?”** Why is that kind of ministry left to para-church organizations and 501C-3’s. Sadly I think it is because of the perception surrounding negatively labeled people groups: high risk equals slow to minimal return on investment. But for community at Reunion, we are discovering that this “high risk factor” is really what makes the difference for us. It is a perfect match for who God has called us to be. When we truly think like Jesus it is obvious that **we are not** called to love only people with positive labels or to view people merely as a target demo-graphic. Jesus told the Pharisees...

"Healthy people don't need a doctor — sick people do." Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices.' For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough." (Matthew 9:12-13)

When we think about love like Jesus we do not judge, label, or write people off as undesirable or a bad market-demo. To even come to a person solely on how they can benefit us... is wrong for that matter. Frankly, that is far too easy and is a real contradiction from how Jesus wanted us to come to people. We must understand that we are not only called to love – but we were made to love. We were made to love people, and to extend to them the grace that has been extended to us and to then go on even further and share the space that has been shared with us. When we forget that (which is our tendency), we need to be reminded by the Holy Spirit that we are to generously love, and give to others as we invite them to live with us together in Christ and in God's grace.

In effect you could say that the community at Reunion is called to love the so-called difficult people – but so is everyone. The reality is that many pastors and ministry leaders do not see it as wise to be in messy relationships with outcasts or as one pastor from large church ministry called them... *"the crazies."* Don't get me wrong, I do believe that most Christian ministries in America would readily share the gospel message with anyone in a genuine attempt to evangelize

them, and I am quite certain would also offer some form of benevolent opportunities. So I sincerely mean no malice or ill-will - but I do believe many churches no longer want the on-going responsibility of loving and caring for the **outcasts and lesser-than's** who come their way. But without welcoming them into an open and hostility-free space - there is no real possibility of leading them forward into true life together in Christ. And there is no real possibility for genuine and sincere community... but that is where the story begins. That is our story... *the story of love beyond love.*

To move on we need to talk about three specific terms that might represent those in our world who have been described by much of the Christian Church as “difficult people.” These three terms are known as **THE UN-CHURCHED, THE OVER-CHURCHED, and THE ANTI-CHURCHED.**

Un-churched people in this context could be those who might have had no experience with or point of reference for Christianity, or “church-world” as we know it. They do not use or possess a personal lexicon of “church-world” *sayings, ebonics, clichés, or hot words.*

They are simply people who are looking for something. They do not know necessarily what they are looking for... they just know there is something more out there, and so they seek it. This group will sometimes push and pressure us and they will often ask us Christians the hard questions about who we are and why we do what

we do. But refreshingly, they are without a doubt a group of people with the least amount of pretension. Like it or not “they are what they are.” For “church-world” this represents part of the problem or difficulty with them. In “church-world” their potential in Christ will not always be seen and they will be categorized as not quite suitable for helping to meet the high profile and aggressive goals of the modern church growth model. They are often times categorized by growth experts as 4’s, 5’s, and 6’s when “church-world” is looking for 8’s, 9’s, and 10’s. In this type sorting system they simply become dehumanized and can easily be considered a “lesser-than.” This means they are “lesser-than” what is wanted or preferred (a 6 is lesser-than an 8), and they can be identified as the ones not to invest in or to “bring along.” I have personally heard it articulated that, “the risk does not justify the investment.” They may have lifestyles, emotional needs and unhealthy behaviors (baggage) that can really disrupt our nice neat ministry agenda and in the process they can stretch us further than we might want to be stretched. But this is the type of stretching God wants for us; and we need it. It is that type stretching that must take place in order for us to truly understand God’s grace and to love people beyond love. It is that kind of grace and love that Christ gave to all of those lesser-than’s outside of

“Church- world.” This grace is a value system that does not always fit into a narrow growth driven “church-world”... **and you and I just can’t sit around and talk about this kind of grace; it is meant to be who we are - gracious.** It is the kind of grace that leads wandering souls towards the kingdom of God, and is the kind of love that rescues those who are wounded and considered undesirable and just too difficult for “church-world.”

Over-churched people could be defined as those who have really just had enough of “church-world.” They want nothing more to do with corporate religion, church politics, and the huge charismatic and narcissistic egos of many “church-world leaders.” They do not want to hear one more manipulating prayer, and they want nothing more to do with ministries that are less than genuine in what they are doing, and unaccountable for how they do it. These people for whatever reason have lost their confidence in the Church as a trusted community or reliable resource for spiritual direction. Ministry to over-churched people must really be viewed as more of an attempt at recovering something that has been lost or stolen (lost sheep). The over-churched people, many of who know Christ can all speak the language (**Chris-ta-bonics**), but because of bad experiences or just plain disgust within “church-world” they may carry with them a cynical attitude and skewed theories about Christianity. Because of the cynicism they are not one bit afraid to tell it to you like it is (although

when done with a right heart this can be quite helpful and a real blessing). They too, can ask some very hard questions about who we are (big picture), and why we do what we do in ministry. They can do this because as I said, they do not trust those in “church-world” any more. Another difficult side to them is that they can sometimes embrace the victim role – some are legit, and others are questionable, but all of it is real. Usually they have a “hurtful story” about what people in the church have done, or not done to or for them... resulting oftentimes in how their lives or ministries were destroyed. For those whose stories and experiences are true, this is truly heartbreaking. Consequently many carry a deep-seeded victim or rejection mentality. So, for what it’s worth, most of the **over-churched** believe they are better off getting rid of “church-world” from their lives. This may not mean that they have completely lost their faith in God, or basic love for Christ, but they certainly have lost their way, or are simply running away (they just don’t always know it). Sadly, what happens in the whole terrible process is that are good people who really need to love and be loved who lose access and a chance for a life together in the community of Christ. What they are losing however is the key elements for spiritual growth and willful obedience, which defines the “true Christian community.” They will never readily admit this though. So to the over-churched the

community is a place that doesn't always look or sound like "church-world" but in the true love of Jesus helps recover what has been lost, stolen, or thrown away. Only an unconditional love beyond love can restore loss such as that.

Most **anti-churched**, are not just **anti-church**, they are in many cases **anti-God**, and could be considered agnostic or moderately atheist. Their position is expressed often in various levels of hostility and makes the difference between them the un-churched and over-churched very clear. Logically they do not believe in God, so why would they believe in church. Many have been raised with hostility towards God or church. Others have become hostile because they blame God or church for some life tragedy or personal abuse. And many are just wired with a mind that analytically rejects a faith-based or biblical worldview and have not found an intellectual path to lead them there. Although some anti-churched have never believed, some have discarded their belief simply because they never actually took the time to find out if God really does exist for them. There are many anti-churched who came to their Godless conclusions on their own, and there are others who got there because what little faith they had at one time could not survive the reality check of a hostile secular college education; consisting of a four-year diet of Neitzche, Darwin, Sagan, Dawkins, Hitchens, etc. (If you notice, most anti-God college philosophy professors are themselves unwilling to go the distance with students who openly disagree with them (as if philosophy were a study of facts). In spite of their boastings of open-mindedness and freethinking they often reject real open-minded and freethinking

students who are capable of contradicting them with biblical worldviews. **Nonetheless, they convince many young people that believing in God means losing all intellectual integrity.** But nothing could be further from the truth (more on that later).

Without openness to faith or Jesus as foundational theological truth the anti-churched are left to despise and mock, or endlessly search and lament what they will never find. They are out there looking for something they might never have and for truth they might never know. This condition creates a real vacuum inside and often they try and fill it with various activities and busy-ness to replace the community and connection they are missing. They look to clubs, weekend recreation, neighborhood karaoke bars, social network and Internet communities, service organizations and special interest causes. Eventually they discover that alternative activities such as these are not an adequate replacement. All of these activities and busy-ness are engaging, fun, and capable of meeting some of their need, but they cannot replace what is needed most; to love and be loved in Christian community through a sincere relationship with Jesus. Here is why that is true. **The truth is that alternative outlets for true community provide only one element of what is most needed - the element that feels good.** What is missing is the element that challenges an individual with truth, asking them to grow and change into what God has called them to be. What they really need is a 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, that feel-good element is important and we all know 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 open thinking are valued as part of that journey. There should be a welcome to questions and dialogue concerning all biblical and world-views.

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). Well, 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 off myself and look out further (beyond me) I can see that there are good people of all kinds who identify themselves as Christians. There are those who are steady and strong and those that are unsteady and weak. I see Christians who are very knowledgeable and mature - while others who lack knowledge and maturity. I see Christians who struggle with old addictions – and others who live free from addictions. Some Christians struggle in relationships with others - and for some their

greatest struggle 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 more victorious. There are Christians (believe it or not) who drink, swear, and smoke. There are Christians who battle with 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 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 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 (1

Thessalonians 5:14, "Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone"). We need to rejoice with those wonderful

Christians whose disciplined lifestyles move and inspire us - **but we must also learn how to rejoice with the ones less disciplined, less victorious; but no less loved by Jesus.** 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). In fact the bible says anyone believing that way is arrogant - plain and simple. Some religious (what I call *Phari-typical*) Christians that actually believe they are bearing fruit and exercising their gift

when they can successfully identify and publicly voice the faults 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. 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.

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 I call out to God... Let it 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. We should remember how He loved them all, and how He spoke to them all making sure they knew that there was a place for them to be loved and a place for

them to grow and to change the disappointments of the life they knew. When He said to them, “come” He included the ones beyond the church (un-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. Isn’t it crazy that all these years later many Christians and many churches still wrestle with which ones they should 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, or should we, dare waste precious time with something such as that? And after all, is that really even our choice? Shouldn’t our home indeed be a place for all those that Jesus calls to it? 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 everyone we have mentioned (including us) needs a place of covering (a home) so we 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”?

Changing – Moving Forward

(Isaiah 57:14-19)

14 And it will be said: "Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people." 15 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. 16 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. 17 I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. 18 I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, 19 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." NIV

A great deal of what needs to change in us 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 and is a truth that we can't ignore simply because it asks us to change things we do not want to change. As Christians we should be “all about change.” Let me explain; Christians should begin to change simply because they are truly Christians who grow in 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 to become a Christian. But really, come on... 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. We need to know first that we can change because of Christ; and from that moment we come to Him, we never have to stay the same. In Him, 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. It is a

very important work and is critically significant to forming 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, we must be open to a change in 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; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 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 of change, we can then without fear or anxiety welcome the personal changes God wants to make in us.** He makes these changes 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 is God”). Then we accept the call to **do what we have not done** (purpose; “What is His will for me”). But, none of this happens as we said earlier without the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us to reveal to us the 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 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 or exposed for what they are... **the forces that hold us back and undermine the progress and growth that we always talk about - but never seems to happen.** With a new attitude in our mind and some corrections and adjustments in our thinking we no longer see ourselves headed for one more futile attempt at change only to be followed by miserable failure. The new attitude and new thinking (in Christ) moves us away from simply trying to correct symptoms and distances us from 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 and new mind **we can change how we treat others**; 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 bad habits and addictive 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 merely just saying I think this way or that way now – or, I do things this way now; but it is a spiritual journey we choose to take so we may seek God’s truth and goodness within our lives each and every day. We 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 them.

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 (emotion) to achieve a change in our circumstances and we are

disappointed when the change we experience is only temporary. Or the flipside 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 going through merely an intellectual change in ourselves is that we do not always see the need for faith in God or allowing God's Spirit to actually complete a work or finish the change in us. There is an obvious disconnect between knowing and being.

Even more importantly... 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. 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. 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; 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 and form 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 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 and Grace

(John 13:34-35)

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." NIV

(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. 4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 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, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. 8 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. NIV

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 as the core of who God has called Reunion to be.

WE ARE CALLED TO CHRIST.

WE ARE CALLED TO ONE ANOTHER IN CHRIST.

In these core values alone we can see the necessity 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 love and 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 He gives to all Christians is to follow Him. **We are called to Christ** – He calls us and we come to Him. We have said often times that our first call is to Him (Christ); but we can see that immediately thereafter He calls us to each other. By obeying this

calling (both of them) we can 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 genuine Christian community; because by answering His calling we are actually answering the call for life together 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 of life together in Christ 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 all are not listening; or maybe we have heard Christ, but we choose instead to ignore Him. Then again, most of us do 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 is for the day to day of Christianity to come alive; and of course to experience growing virtue in our lives. So the second is - **We are called to one another in Christ.** This means that we come along side those He calls us to; valuing that person with love and grace both publicly and privately (apparently this was important to Christ as well, "this is my command, that you love one another"). When we prayed over this truth and wrote it down on paper it looked something like this... we call them *community life principles...*

Community Life Principles

SINCERE LOVE

CARE AND CONCERN

RESPECT AND DIGNITY

TRUTH AND HONESTY

AN ATTITUDE OF HOPE

Responding to each other outside the boundaries of these basic principles would be considered for us as **wrong behavior, and not in the true spirit of Christ (without love and grace).** As people who

are very serious about our calling to Christ and to Christian community we should be more than willing to commit ourselves to living publicly and privately with these five principles. Right thinking tells us that this is Christian behavior as God expects of us - and living together like this in Christ gives us a shot at “saving our saved” as well as being able to reach those hurting and searching people out there beyond us and beyond Reunion. This is the genuine work of the Holy Spirit and what we pray will continually be obvious at Reunion so we can become the place that we all know that it is supposed to be. The sad truth is not many in our world care about treating people with love and grace anymore. But for us, this truth has become the spiritual compass that tells us the way a real community of Christ is to come and go; it tells us how to improve our character, and how to grow ourselves in His grace and how to treat each individual with genuine loving-kindness. In dealing with the fragile vulnerability of a person’s heart and spirit we must be very, very, careful. Only love and grace get us there. It tells us when we can begin to move forward, when to step back or aside; and grace keeps us just the right distance and headed in the right direction once we get going (Proverbs 3:1-12).

The Gift of Attention

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

responses during these times not only be compassionate and real – but also that they open everyone involved to a sense of “in this thing together.” 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 drawn a line that we agree if at all possible not to violate. “No one gets shut out”!** You see, we should never intentionally let ourselves or our own ideas hinder the work of Holy Spirit in anyone’s life including our own. If we will just commit ourselves to being open and inclusive at critical crucial times we can offer a wonderful gift to one another in a very Christ-like way. I believe it will help us overcome many of the personal obstacles that come up and also help correct some of the errors we all have made in the past. I am speaking of errors and judgments that may have hurt us, or may have hurt people needing our love, and the love of Jesus the Savior. But instead they might have been labeled or categorized 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 do we feel the need then at that point to press ahead - still trying to say something that we think will fix it? Or to make sure that others understand our actions, when we know deep inside they are wrong. Oh, I know what our intentions are

– but, what is real compassion or healing about? When we with our good intentions plow ahead and try to **fix it** with “*shallow words*” and “*super-christian deeds*” we display a lack of wisdom and genuine love. Sometimes what is needed starts with just a pause, or simple look, 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 is much more than that. The key of course is Christ Himself, and from that critical point learning to respond correctly (as He would) to all of those He said for us to “love as we love ourselves.”

When we come to anyone “in Christ” who is hurting or suffering, or even afflicted we bring to them the gift of life, and nothing more from us is needed. **Try to answer this question; “How do I come to a person empty of myself and full of the love of Christ”?** When you can answer that then you will know what it means to come to someone “in Christ.” Here is what I have come up with...

“In that instance when we realize we can only love – we cannot hate or judge – we cannot fix this person’s problem - and we are starting to feel fairly inadequate about it; that is the moment we are empty of ourselves and can finally come to another human being “in Christ”!

Not that our role is un-important or insignificant but to know that our own responses are less than adequate and we come to a person (if at all) only after Christ comes to them. And that is not to say that our work with them is done either - 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, “What are you going through”? Our responses towards them now are more than just something we Christians are “supposed to say.” They are not invisible! And now our response to them can be 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 their illnesses and eliminate feeling as though the health and well-being, 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 this response for us as the right one to opening the door for love to come in. ***As human beings we can see that love comes to us in many ways, but God's love will come to us only in Christ.*** 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 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.

But, if I stop and look inside you – I’m finally saying, I see you... I want to know how to love you.

The “look inside you” is called 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 just look inside people. He would look deep into their heart and soul and give them what we call the “gift of attention”, and because He gave that gift the door would open for love to come in. Learning this response from Christ is most important for Christians who are seeking real community with others. In Christ, the “gift of attention” is defined 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 is commonly called a “distraction” but in order for us to experience the effectiveness and joy of loving people in Christ **we must 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 to that and we will find the answer to **whom and when** the “gift of attention” is most needed. As Christians we know that the answer is only in Christ - and to Him it seems quite obvious that everyone was important, but yet, not everyone got His personal attention. So for you and I, we have to start and end with the same idea in mind as Christ; “everyone is important (no one gets shut out), this gift is for all.” **We certainly would not want to be the one to be shut out - so we begin to open ourselves up to loving all that cross our path, and we continually pray for the Holy Spirit to show us the ones who need it the most.** As tough as it may seem there are no exclusions made for the people we might

perceive as difficult, un-likable, over-bearing, or not spiritual enough. Let's be honest here... People get shut out far too often and many times just at the very moment they need to be pulled in.

If you really want to know something even more truthful we can go back and talk about the people who have become invisible to us Christians when they became ill, got divorced, became addicted, or perhaps lost their job and could not pay their bills. Why? How did they become invisible to us and to others like us? Simple... all those tragedies in their life caused suffering, pain and embarrassment, and at the point we could see and feel what they were experiencing - we naturally distanced ourselves from those things. 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.

We can get 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.”

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. Prayer is the key that unlocks the door to relationship in Christ with people, and it closes the distance between Christ and the condition of those we pray for. In the process it continually changes our own condition of hostility towards others. **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 without faithfully praying for people in this way. As the “gift of attention” is the open 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 open door that leads us out there to love beyond ourselves.

Life Together

(Colossians 3:11-17)

“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.
12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved,

clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” NIV

From the illuminating light that is the life of Christ, we are able to 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 anytime, 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 the 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 **moment with 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. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (NIV) 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. In the beginning Christ comes to us with this huge and enormous completely en-

gulfing 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.

So then, as this 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 a 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 recently 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 real community actually came to all of them as result of how they obediently went from Pentecost 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. What followed them 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 come from within the power of the love of Christ – not the love of man.** This is why we seek Christ, and not miracles. Listen to Luke’s recollection of those first days after Pentecost...

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” NIV

This truth in 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 desire when left unquestioned and untouched by Christ becomes the “myopic” thinking that is often characterized in a pattern of self-

gratifying choices. Some of that thinking probably has helped to make some of us to be successful in certain areas of our life but it may also be causing us to fail 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 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 the current postmodern influence in our lives. When confronted by the thought of a life together in 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. **Postmodern 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.

I personally, am running from religion as fast as I can run, but I am not just running aimlessly and I am not running angrily. Religion has an 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 un-measurable 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 Deitrich Bonhoffer 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.

“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. (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

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.

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 to the Philippians, “I consider all things nothing more than rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (3:8).

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, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (5:1). 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. The surrender God wants from us rather 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 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, *"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"* (Galatians 2:20). 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 we tend to needlessly carry, without that burden the emotional suffering that has been brought on by our addictive desires is healed. As 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." We can 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 in humble self-awareness to them 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 freed 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 is a complete surrender.

As Christians we often speak of the need for submission to God. I think immediately of the passage found in the writing of James the apostle (4:7), *"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."* 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 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 like... “Ok, I’ll submit” but all the while thinking to ourselves, “but you will never force me to do anything about it.” Sound familiar? If it does then that is the problem.

Surrender is different; it takes submission to a whole new level... to a level of transparency, 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 extraordinary grace. Because we are performance oriented 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. Dr. 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 slop we are all presently wallowing 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 described by Luke, in Acts 2:42-46. 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. At one point John confesses in his gospel (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 demands. Most of His disciples did leave, and then there were only twelve of them. Ironically, Jesus turned and said to them even at that very moment they had vowed to remain, “one of you is a devil.” The further evidence of their lack of surrender continued as they fled from Christ during His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Further evidence was their obvious silence among the angry crowd as Christ was tried and judged before the Sanhedrin High Priests. And just days after the resurrection still remained among them traces of resistance from the doubter Thomas, 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 fifty-five years later as he wrote to the Colossians...

“Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” NIV

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.

Reality Pentecost

(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)

We have talked 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 the Holy Spirit 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 so that all believers (at all times and all places) could finish the mission that He 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 where that started. **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 as**

witnesses on the street below the power of the Holy Spirit that day 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 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 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 an 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. 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 merely just more validating signs to the unbelieving Jews. 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. 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 promised, with the assurance that regardless of their varied and eventual circumstances, they would go and do what Christ had asked them to do.** And what was that?

Well, He 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 always 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...

God is always moving us into circumstances where faith is possible. That is what Reunion beyond Reunion – Love beyond Love is all about. God has clarified His calling and made specific His plans for us. Now we must be either faithful or faithless to His call. Like me, I know that you want to be faithful. I want to have great faith to finish what God has divinely started in me. I invite you not just to follow me - but rather I invite you to join and walk **with** me. I invite you to a journey to seek God and those things that we do not know. I invite you to find with me a love beyond love.