

# Article I

## Pastoral care at the tree of life

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- The aim of this article is to strengthen and support sons of God, particularly those who are journeying through the young adult season of life, to grow in their awareness, appreciation, and participation as citizens of the bride city.
- To do this, we will give attention to three discrete relational settings that are fundamental to the growth and development of every son of God.
- Importantly, we are exhorted to participate in *a worthy manner*, which describes those who are growing in their capacity to discern or to positively discriminate between the distinct elements of His body, including their own unique contribution. 1Co 11:29.
- This describes a maturing awareness and appreciation of the sanctification of each member of Christ's body, which has implications for the manner and the mode in which they relationally engage with one another, and for the changing nature of that engagement as they mature through each season of life.

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- Imagine the difficulties that a person might experience if they sought regular medical advice from their mechanic, and parenting input from their butcher. It's a silly and simple example, but it is important that we understand that the Lord takes great issue when His sons either lose touch with, or simply show no regard for, the sanctification of their brethren.
- Sanctification, in this sense, is the positive discrimination that allows us to appreciate each one as being distinct from another in their own sanctification. This is a necessary 'bottom line' reality for every son to know and grow in if they are to be effective, or fruitful, citizens in the bride city.
- The apostle Paul described the body as being a single unit composed of many parts. 1Co 12:12. Every member makes a distinct and valued contribution; and any confusion (lack of clarity), refusal (unwillingness to take their place) or reclusion (preferring solitude, avoiding people), does damage to the whole body.
- When a *mind is controlled by the other law*, it is self-centred. On the other hand, the fruit of a *healed, or renewed, mind* is the capacity and motivation to serve and to properly relate within the community of His body. In fact, the sanctified works of a person's name, in the context of a many-membered body, are always other-centred, and are given to them to minister by the proclamation of God's word. Those who lose sight of, and no longer value, the sanctification of their brethren, demonstrate their *disconnection from the headship of Christ*.
- It is important to remember that a lack of regard for the sanctification of any member dishonours the Father's naming, the Son's training, and the Spirit's sanctifying work. This, in turn, invites the judgement of God to come upon those who transgress. His judgement is then *chastening*, in the hope that they will turn and be trained toward their proper participation, so that they may not be condemned with the world. 1Co 11:31.

### Agape fellowship within the family

- The first of these settings in which we must learn our proper participation is as *part of the family* in which we are nurtured as a son, and as a citizen of the bride city.

- In very simple terms, every covenant home will be established in the culture of agape fellowship, which honours the word of the Lord as their primary reference point for all priorities and activities concerning the program of their household.
- This confirms that the headship of Christ is established in the home, because husband and wife testify of their deliverance from the fallen dynamics in their marriage, and they confess, through word and deed, that they are both submitted to the order of headship. 1Co 11:3.
- This is practically expressed as they participate in their daily routine, where they meet at the tree of life in a conversation of daily prayer, in faith to receive the necessary provision of grace which is equipping them for their works of ministry – the raising of God-fearing children.
- This daily routine confirms that they are honouring and abiding in the word that the Lord is presently proclaiming through His presbytery, ensuring that His commands are upon their hearts. It is from this place that they will then teach His commands diligently to their children, speaking of them when they sit at home (for a meal), when they walk along the road (heading to and from school), when they are preparing to go to bed and when they are rising for a new day. Deu 6:7-8. This is how they nurture *the conversation and conduct of faith*.
- Practically, this resolves any obligation to a ‘blood is thicker than water’ gospel which presumes that the priorities of the family – where they are other than the present truth word – ‘trump’ those that the Lord defines through the word of His presbytery. Further, they do not presume that God would permit believing families to accommodate cultures and practices that are misaligned with the culture of godliness.

### The word is polarising

- Jesus took great care to warn of the potential corruption and destruction within believing homes. He said, ‘Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to “set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law”; and “a man’s enemies *will be* those of his *own* household”.’ Mat 10:35-36.

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- Jesus, by His word, gives *every person* the opportunity to *choose!* There is no such thing as ‘family choice’; or that someone can choose on behalf of another. God gives to every person a choice, and He dignifies what they choose.
- This connects us with our recent emphasis on the polarising effect of the word. To ‘polarise’ means to ‘divide people into two completely *opposing* groups. And the word of the cross divides every person into one of two opposing groups. It is important that we do not hear that as being two different groups who espouse ‘differing opinions’. Polarising means to divide into *completely opposite groups*.
- Jesus gave us a clear statement on this point. He said, ‘Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rise against their parents and have them put to death.’ Mat 10:21. At another time, He said, ‘From now on, five in one household will be divided (polarised), three against two and two against three.’ Luk 12:52.
- Jesus was clear and uncompromising concerning the outcome for a believing household if they depart from placing the priority of obedience to the Lord and to His body above all else. He said, ‘He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.’ Jesus was addressing children, including adult children, regarding remaining loyal to their parents, over and above their obedience to Christ. He continued, ‘And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.’ In this scenario, Jesus was speaking to parents who remain obligated to, and even supportive of, their children, including adult children, even after the children have chosen other than that which the Father had chosen for them. Mat 10:34-38.

### The ‘family-first’ gospel

- Those who are *not* joined in one Spirit with the Lord and His people will typically find another ‘food’ source, and another way to verify their identity and the covering that they have chosen for themselves; evidence that they are no longer eating from the tree of life, each day, in fellowship with Yahweh.
- When a family is not submitted to the headship of Christ but, rather, prefers to source their own food and to define their own agenda, they will reveal a will and priority other than the Father’s will for them. They may achieve many noble and noteworthy things but, unless they

return to the obedience that comes from faith, and do the will of the Father, Jesus will say, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness.' Mat 7:23.

- The approach to life that places the agenda of the family before that of the Father's will and imposes an obligation upon its members to remain loyal to the family and its priorities, is an alternative, or false, gospel. In fact, it is 'a fortress', to which the messengers of Christ have no access and where the pastoral initiative of Christ is absent.
- Those who are born of God have *no obligation* to serve the agenda of their natural family when their natural family members refuse friendship with Christ by refusing the yoke of His discipleship.
- Jesus Himself was required to address 'the family-first' issue among His own natural family. 'Then His mother and brothers came to Him and could not approach Him because of the crowd. And it was told Him by some, who said, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You." But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it".' Luk 8:19-21.
- By implication, Jesus was saying that his natural family was not yet obedient to the word of God, believing that their family connection trumped any discipleship obligation. Accordingly, Jesus' response conveyed to the crowd that His only obligation was to those who heard the word of God and were obedient to it.
- This remains a significant matter among us in the church. Until the issue of family obligation is resolved, and every family is reordered according to what God has chosen for each member, there is no way that a family can be joined in *true friendship*. Friendship among a family can only be established when each one has first resolved their friendship with Christ, where His friends are those who do as He commands.
- Until the idol of family obligation is removed from our hearts, we will continue to be compromised in our affections, hesitating between His table and the familiar table of demons.

### Identity verification in the family - shallow-born

- A further complication to the family-first gospel is when children are born and reared for the verification of their parents' identity.

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These children are abused, because their identity is reduced to a pre-defined label (typically by the father), as part of their projection.

- Such children commonly face developmental crises in their later years, as they confuse over-regulation in their younger years with rejection. This is typically accompanied by regular punishment in an effort to craft the desired reputation of the parent.
- Children who are raised in such homes carry a perpetual sense of guilt, believing that they have failed their parents. Consequently, the children withdraw and become an enmeshed subculture, typically engaging their mother, who then leans on the strongest male member among her children, seeking acceptance, protection, and identity verification.
- This is the making of a family fortress, which every member is compelled to join and to remain loyal to at all costs. However, when this subculture fails, the reaction is acute and severe. Failure is defined when a member of the cohort breaks free and receives faith to stand in their own sonship, putting off the labels, expectations and obligations.
- The point is that every person must know their own name and must receive faith for their own sonship. Therefore, those who reject the supposed safety of the fortress, and refuse to remain loyal to the dysfunctional family dynamics – and, instead, receive faith to walk in their name and grace – become the enemy of their siblings, who begin to gnash their teeth at them for refusing to live by their unspoken expectations.
- Amazingly, those who are freed from this dynamic are viewed as being traitors because they did not remain loyal in upholding the family-first approach to the gospel.
- As we adjust our heart to receive this understanding, it will free every member of a nuclear family to the reality that they must personally meet and know the Lord, receive His faith for their own sonship, and find their own name.
- When this is *not understood*, the family will presume and expect that their definition and works are the product of family dialogue and are not the outcome of body-centric fellowship under the headship of Christ. Anything less than this is the complete corruption of a presbytery within the lampstand administration.

- Such families then become antagonistic toward those whom they view as being their betrayers because they did not uphold the unspoken obligation to the family-first gospel.
- Such families will typically manifest self-depreciation, and even suicidal tendencies, as a result of psychological pain, believing that someone must 'pay' for their pain. This follows the belief that the most senior or able member among the sibling cohort should be looking after them. As such, they become 'blood-guilty', and carry within themselves a murderous spirit and a relational mode that has little awareness of their impact on others, because they are never accountable. This is a very stark demonstration of the polarising effect of the word.

### Agape fellowship from house to house

- The second of these settings in which we must learn our proper participation is as part of *a network of believing households* which the New Testament authors simply referred to as 'house to house'. This describes the network of households who are joined to the fatherhood of presbytery in any given location.
- Every household that is joined to this network has entered by 'the door of the sheepfold'. They are joined in right relationship with the doorkeepers who are set apart to oversee Christ's sheep. How does this happen?
- On the Day of Pentecost, when the house to house network of the bride city was first established, many among the gathered crowd were cut to the heart by the proclamation of Christ's word. This compelled them to lift their voices for understanding, asking aloud, 'Men and brethren what must we do?' Act 2:37.
- This response to the word will be familiar to many, as it describes the proper response when a son of God is illuminated by the word of Christ's messengers. Their intent is to lift their voice for understanding in order that they might apprehend a pathway forward.
- Peter's response to their cry was to call them to *repent and be baptised, and to receive the Holy Spirit*. This he spoke to the whole crowd at one time, which released a wave of sound (of the 'many waters' variety), as worthy brethren came alongside those who

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responded, and sought to walk in obedience to the word of Christ that Peter had expressed.

- The proclamation of the word defined the ground of fellowship, compelling them to 'sell all' in order that they might 'buy'. And it was here that each seeker was met by a worthy household who invited them to 'speak back' the word of faith that they had heard, as well as its personal challenge to them.
- This would have included both the encouragement from the word, as well as the changes in their life that the word was calling for. It would have also included the request for prayer concerning any need for healing that illumination stirred within them. It is also likely that those who responded to the word would have entreated their newfound brethren to help them to understand what further they needed to do in order to remain joined to this fellowship, to see made complete the work that God had begun.
- Key to their response would have been a prayer of thanksgiving for the effective work of the water of the word. But water was not enough; they needed to instruct the new converts to *believe* for their full and proper *participation*. This was to believe for Christ's blood to flow, cleansing them of their sin and uncleanness while, at the same time, giving to them the capacity of resurrection life. By this means, they were given capacity to be obedient, with the obedience of Christ, to the doctrine of baptism to which they had been delivered.
- When a believer speaks at the agape meal, they do not bring a 'commentary' on what they have heard. Rather, they confess the faith that they have received, and the illumination concerning how His blood is now flowing for them.
- Were it not for the messenger word, each worthy home would remain ready, but quiet. However, when His word sounds forth, each son first asks, in simple humility, 'What must I do?' This invitation activates their brethren to minister, and they speak the truth in agape fellowship. And those who receive, rejoice as they believe that they are eating of the fruit at the tree of life.
- Fellowship is, then, hearing and receiving the instruction of Christ as it is spoken and multiplied through those brethren whom the Lord ordained to be seated together. So, enjoying morning tea, they are bringing to remembrance the word of Christ that is clear for each one,



in the same way as when Peter looked and saw Christ's eyes burning as a flame of fire.

### Agape fellowship with the presbytery

- The final of these settings in which we must learn our proper participation is *with the doorkeepers of Christ's sheepfold*.
- It is very unlikely that a person can sit in a church congregation and receive any substantial or ongoing transaction of God's life while they remain disconnected from those who are set apart to oversee and shepherd a given church community. Therefore, an important aspect of being joined in one Spirit with the Lord and His people is that of being known 'at the gates' among the elders.
- The apostle Peter wrote to those whom Christ had appointed as under-shepherds, who were overseers of the lampstand churches, saying, 'Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly.' 1Pe 5:2.
- This provides us with an important qualification for being part of His flock. Peter explained that the flock of God are among those who are elders and under-shepherds who serve under Christ, the Chief Shepherd, as overseers.
- Accordingly, the flock of God demonstrate that they are the sheep of the Lord by accepting the feeding and tending care that is extended to them by Christ's under-shepherds.
- This means that *connection* to Christ's shepherding initiative is firstly found through fellowship with the under-shepherds who are proclaiming the word of present truth.

### Have fellowship with us

- This connects us to the key statement of the apostle John in his first epistle, 'Have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son'. 1Jn 1:3. John was writing as part of a presbytery, inviting the church to have fellowship with them.
- He went on to say that if they would walk in the light of illumination that comes by His word, they would be joined to the fellowship of the Father and the Son; and it is in this fellowship that the blood of Christ

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is effective to cleanse them of all sin. 1Jn 1:7. This means that when we are joined to the fellowship of illumination by receiving the word, we receive faith that joins us to His (suffering) blood which is able to cleanse us of sin.

- Importantly, John was not directing the church to insist on direct and exclusive contact with ascension graced brethren like himself. That was already the case and continued while ever they remained current in the word that the presbytery were proclaiming. Rather, he was conveying the importance of *fellowship*, and the order by which God's grace flows to every member of His body.
- In this respect, fellowship is only effective as we *honour the order of headship*. And the first thing that must happen as we set our houses in order is that Christ is set as Head of His church, which establishes the headship of each home. This means that we will be growing in the knowledge of our own name and the name of our brethren, because we are joined in fellowship with Christ and His shepherding care *only* as we recognise the authority of the name that belongs to each servant in the Lord's house. Mar 13:34. Heb 13:7,17.
- This means that we offer our obedience to those who rule over us, and we are submissive, knowing that they watch out for our souls as those who must give account. Heb 13:17. In the same way, Peter encouraged those who are younger to submit themselves to their elders. 1Pe 5:5.
- This begins at the earliest age, when godly parents place their child into the hands of the elders – the shepherds, or watchmen – before the congregation, when they testify and dedicate their child to the Lord.
- It continues when the child engages the elders, in fellowship with their parents, when they step forward to be baptised. Here, they are taken in hand by the shepherding brethren and are baptised in the name of Christ and into His body.
- In their primary and early teenage years, the child will be trained as they join the offering priorities of their parents, working alongside them at the church working bee and enjoying regular fellowship with a variety of homes.
- By their late teenage years, they are ready to present themselves individually to the elders at the gates with their confession of faith,

and the motivation to make offering. This is where every son will prove the will of God concerning their sanctification and is where they will learn to serve in the administration of the church, under the care of various deaconing brethren.

- It is also where they will offer themselves to honour the headship of Christ, conveyed to them by the word of presbytery, granting them faith for their daily participation in the offering of Christ, where they will receive resurrection life.