

“NBC In Focus: God’s Vision Shaping His Church”

Various Passages

Congregational Prayer

Introduction: Take your Bibles and turn to Ephesians 2, Ephesians chapter 2. Have you ever considered the beauty of a doorknob? No . . . well, me either really! The door knob is something that we all benefit from each day of our lives, and yet we use it and use it and use it without much thought about it. Our familiarity with it, and its dependability combine to give us very little reason to consider its functional beauty, its intricate design, and its wonderful blessing to all of our lives. In some similar ways, the local church can be like this. We can be so familiar with it and so used to its dependability that we take for granted its beautiful design and glorious purpose. And so, this morning we pause to look at the Scriptures to gaze upon the beautiful design of God in this thing we know as the Church. We do this today because it is good for us to pause at different times during the life of our church and take an assessment of where we are, and of where we are going.

A survey of the people gathered in this very room would yield a vast array of thoughts about the church in general, and about Newton Bible Church in particular. If I could take the time to walk around the room this morning and ask each of you, what is the point of Newton Bible Church – what would you say? Why do we exist? What is our purpose? Is our purpose meaningful and worthwhile? Is it worthwhile enough for you to be a part of? What if I came around and asked – in light of our purpose, what should we be doing – in other words, what is your vision for our church – what would you say? You may not be able to give a real long and eloquent answer, but rest assured we all have some answers to these questions and these answers guide our personal interaction with and relationship to the church.

Vision is a big thing in our 21st Century world. Vision and Mission Statements dominate the business landscape, and this desire for clear-cut visioning has bled into the realm of the local church. Sr. Pastors are told that good leadership of the church rests upon their ability to hatch a vision and effectively communicate that vision to the Church. Without a clear vision of what we are trying to accomplish the church will die. Most certainly the Scriptures tell us this too. Without vision the people perish. But the question is naturally raised – who’s vision is it that determines the health of the church? In other words, without *whose* vision do the people perish? And the answer is it should be God’s vision that shapes us and propels us. What has God envisioned the church to be and do? How does the church fit into His Sovereign plan, and in light of this, what is God intending to use the church to accomplish? In other words, what is God’s vision for the Church? Without this proper vision we will perish.

I. God’s Vision For His Church

a. The Church is His Doing

- i. And so, to understand God’s vision for His Church we must first understand that the Church is His doing. It is his idea, his entity, his institution. The church is not a product of man’s imagination or of man’s ingenuity. The church is not dependent upon human craftiness to keep it afloat, or mankind’s hard work to make it successful. Jesus declared in Matthew 16:18 – “I will build my Church.” This is a powerful promise of intended action that carries the same weight today as it did the day it was first spoken by our Lord. These were no idle words by Jesus, and they proved to have immediate effect for in

just a short time from the speaking of these words, he was laying his life down on the Cross for the very purpose of laying the chief cornerstone of this building – the Church.

- ii. In John 10 Jesus proclaims that he will lay down his life for his sheep and they will hear his voice and come to him because they know him. In Acts 20:28 this thought becomes even clearer when we read that the Church of God was obtained with the blood of Jesus. There were so many glorious things that were accomplished by the incarnation of Jesus Christ. There are unspeakable riches to consider in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, but the most pertinent to our study this morning is the foundation of His Church. He lived, he died, he was buried, he raised to life again – and in all of this together he secured the foundation of a building project that so far has lasted two millennia and will have implications for the rest of eternity – His Church! This is not a physical building, but a building made up with living stones – one stone placed next to another to form a structure that makes up the earthly dwelling place of God.
- iii. In Ephesians 2, we read of this glorious work of God to build His Church. This letter of Ephesians was written to one of the most prominent churches in the New Testament – the church in Ephesus. Chapter 1 describes the work of the Triune God to save a soul from sin and all of this is to the praise of the glorious grace of this Triune God. Then in the first part of chapter 2 mankind is presented as dead in trespasses and sin with no hope of salvation apart from the glorious grace of God. And so we read in verse 8 that it is by grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing, but this salvation is a gift from God through Christ. One of the glorious aspects of this Gospel of Jesus is that it has no respect of nationality or skin color or age or social standing – the grace of God can save anyone. And so chapter 2 goes on to make known that even the most divisive distinction ever known to mankind – Jew versus Gentile – even that distinction is made null in the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ. The natural hostility is put to death by the cross of Christ. And so in verse 13 we read – *read 2:13-22*.
- iv. Do you see what is happening here? Christ has promised to build His church. He has laid down his life and shed his own blood so as to purchase his Church. He did not purchase a physical building, or an idea, or a social club, or an entity fit to meet each person's individual spiritual needs alone. No, Jesus shed his own blood to purchase a people. A people who were lost in their sins, spiritually dead and without hope of salvation. These people – these sheep – Jesus laid down his life for and called them by name and they heard his voice and were gathered to Him in the Church. As we just read, they are gathered as members of the household of God that is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets and upon the chief cornerstone of Jesus Christ himself. In Jesus, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple. It is in Jesus that each of us as believers is being built together in the Church as the dwelling place for God on this Earth. This is being done by Christ, in Christ, and for Christ. So, in chapter 4 of this very letter we are told that the church is the body of Christ and we individually have been made members of that body through the grace that has saved us. The very night before his death Jesus prayed for His church that they would be one and unified as the Triune God is unified. He is answering His own prayer as He is at work to build His Church. He is so invested in the church that in Acts 9 He identifies himself with it when he says to Saul – “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” We are told in Ephesians 5 that he is the Head of the Church and that she is to submit to Him. Jesus is the Bridegroom

and the church is the Bride. He has displayed His love for her by laying everything down and sacrificing His all – his very life – so that he could win His bride unto Himself. As His Bride Jesus purifies the Church with the washing of the water of His Word, and this Word came specifically from His mouth in the book of Revelation to His Church.

- v. Do you see a trend here? The Church is Christ's doing. It is built by Him, it is sustained through Him, and it is all to the praise of His glorious grace. And so you see, the church puts the reputation of Jesus at stake. In fact, that is what the book of Ephesians goes on to say in chapter 3. Let's start reading in verse 8 – *read 8-12*.
- b. The Church is His Display
- i. The church is not only God's doing, but it is also His display. By this I mean explicitly that God is made known in this world through the church. The glorious Gospel was preached to the Gentiles and the Jews so that the light could be turned on for everyone the plan of the mystery that had been hidden for ages – that Jew and Gentile alike would be gathered into one body – the Church. And through this church the many layers of God's infinite wisdom is being put on display to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This is accomplished through the eternal purposes of Christ Jesus our Lord.
 - ii. You see, there is much more at stake in Christ's Church than our personal spiritual growth or our personal preference or our personal vision or even – praise God for this – the reputation and vision of any given church's pastor. The very reputation of God Himself is at stake for it is the expressly stated purpose of God to make Himself known through the Church.
 - iii. Further, let me make clear that the Gospel precedes the Church, and the Church necessarily follows the Gospel. So, Jesus Christ promised the Church and made it a reality by securing the realities of the blessed Gospel. Mankind, once lost in sin and destined for eternity apart from a holy and righteous God can be rescued from the necessary consequence of sin because God Himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ took man's penalty upon the cross and bore the eternal wrath of God. This Jesus conquered death and hell by rising from the grave on the third day. Now men and women from every tribe, language, nation, and tongue can turn from their rebellion and sin and turn in faith to the finished work of Jesus Christ and this grace will in that moment of belief overcome that person's sin and will secure for them eternal life. This Gospel does not just save souls, but through the saving of souls it necessarily builds the church. The Church is the necessary and Biblically mandated product of the Gospel. This is what the Gospel does – it builds the church. This is what the Church follows – the Gospel. Hence, the church is the natural, or better we should say, the supernatural outcropping of the Gospel. Where there is salvation of souls there will be a church being built. So, in a very real sense, the Church becomes the proof of the Gospel. And I think this is what is being said in Ephesians 2 and 3. The Gospel itself is at stake in the Church for the Church is the product of the Gospel and therefore the Church speaks of this Gospel through its very existence.
 - iv. But this is not the popular thought of Western Christianity about the Church. So Mark Dever puts it this way:
 - l. “Many Protestants have begun to think that because the church is not essential to the gospel, it is not important to the gospel. This is an unbiblical, false, and

dangerous conclusion. Our churches are the proof of the gospel. In the gatherings of the church, the Christian Scriptures are read. In the ordinances of the church, the work of Christ is depicted. In the life of the church, the character of God himself should be evident. A church seriously compromised in character would seem to make the gospel itself irrelevant. The doctrine of the church is important because it is tied to the good news itself. The church is to be the appearance of the gospel. It is what the gospel looks like when played out in people's lives. Take away the church and you take away the visible manifestation of the gospel in the world. Christians in churches, then, are called to practice 'display evangelism,' and the world will witness the reign of God begun in a community of people made in his image and reborn by his Spirit. Christians, not just as individuals but as God's people bound together in churches, are the clearest picture the world sees of who God is and what his will is for them." (Dever, *The Church*, pg. 165)

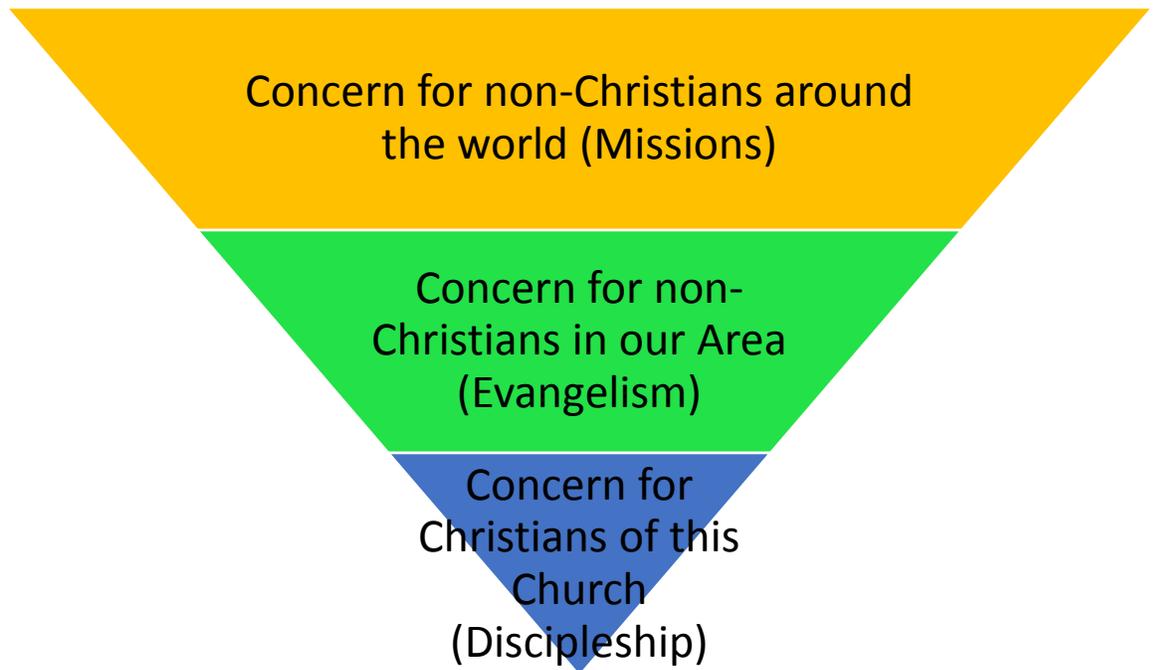
- v. We like to assume a come and go, take it or leave it mentality when it comes to the church because as consumers this is how we view everything else. We pick and choose what we want and we leave what we don't. We invest ourselves in something as long as it is helpful and meaningful to us, but when it loses its meaning or its value then we move on to something else. We like to view the church as a collection of people gathered for a similar interest – like the Girl Scouts, or the Kiwanis Club, or Sam's Club, or the local club soccer team. And so, as long as you have that similar interest you stay a part of that club, but when your interests change you move on and do something else. But this is not what the Church is. The Church is a living organism being built by the glorious grace of Christ as each one of us is joined together in the body of Christ so as to display the glorious character of God. And so the Apostle Peter describes each of us as living stones being built together.
 1. ⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1Pe 2:4-5 ESV)
 2. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1Pe 2:9 ESV)
- vi. You see, we are bought with the high price of the blood of Jesus and we are being joined together as living stones so as to proclaim the excellencies of God. It would behoove us then to be serious about the church.
- vii. As John Stott has said in his commentary on Ephesians:
 1. "If the church is central to God's purpose as seen in both history and the Gospel, it must surely also be central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? How dare we push to the circumference what God has placed at the center?" (as quoted in *Stop Dating the Church*, Joshua Harris, pg. 64-65)
- viii. This statement would not be true if Ephesians 2 and 3, and many other passages, didn't make it so clear that the very Gospel of God is validated and rightly communicated by the Church.
- ix. This obviously does not mean that every entity that is called a church in this world tells the truth about God or displays him properly. So, for instance, you have probably heard

of Westboro Baptist Church? They are the church of less than 40 people located in Topeka that has made international headlines by picketing military funerals with signs that say things like “You’re going to Hell” and “God Hates Fags” and “Thank God for Dead Soldiers.” You see, these horrific and hate filled things flow straight from the god they worship. They worship a god who has no love and who has no grace, unless of course you happen to be one of the less than 40 people who are members of Westboro Baptist Church. Their god is not the god of the Bible, but rather he is a god they have crafted from only certain texts of the Bible. And so, their view of god as a hater of sinners, and especially of those who heinously sin through the homosexual act, shapes how they act as a church. Their view of god as a god of hate and wrath and judgment propels them to picket in the most asinine of places. And flowing from their actions that are shaped by their view of god, they pass on this view of god to others. So, they who call themselves a church tell the world around them what the god they worship looks like. And what does the world think of the god of Westboro Baptist Church? Well, they think he is a god of hate and wrath and silliness! The unfortunate part is that many think that this so-called church worships the one true God of the Bible – but they don’t. And so many are deceived to think that the true God of the Bible is all hate and wrath, empty of love and grace.

- x. My point in bringing this up is to show you that the thing that joins us together shapes our gathering and our actions as a church and these actions then tell the world around us the nature of the thing that has joined us together. This can be very terrible as is the case for a church like Westboro Baptist Church, or this can be very glorious, as God intended it in Ephesians 3 and 1 Peter 2. If we are being drawn together as living stones and added to this building of the Church by the powerful grace of Jesus, then our church will show forth the glory of God and His manifold wisdom. In other words, if our church is the product of the Gospel, then our gathering, our function, and our shape and structure will tell the truth about this very Gospel, in all its multi-faceted glory.
- xi. So, this means that one of the most loving things we can do for the world around us is to draw a distinct line between those who are God’s people and those who are not God’s people through the process of baptism and local church membership. Without the structure of formal church membership we have no way of clearly distinguishing between those who are Christ’s and those who are not. And so we would confuse the world through blurry lines of demarcation and this confusion would be over eternal matters. And so, this confusion over eternal matters of who is identified with Christ and who isn’t would be a very unloving thing to do, hence believer’s baptism and local church membership are important. But as much as I would love to chase the rabbit of church membership and give you the logical, theological, and biblical arguments for membership, I must press on to another unyielding reality that must shape our church if we are to tell the truth about the Gospel that has joined us together.
- xii. To cut to the chase and put it simply I will quote Jesus’ words in John 13:
 - l. ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35 ESV)
- xiii. If indeed we have been purchased by the single most significant act of love ever shown on Earth – the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus – then our lives must be marked by this very love. But more than our lives, specifically our interactions with one

another in the Church. This term “one another” becomes a very popular term throughout the rest of the New Testament to refer to the relationship between brothers and sisters in the Church. We are members of one another as Romans 12 tells us, and 1 Corinthians 12 makes known that each part is joined together to make the whole and each individual member is important. And our relationship with one another as individual parts is to be demarcated by self-sacrificial love so as to flesh out the Gospel in all of its glory for the lost world to see. The kind of love put on display by Christ. The love that we all personally know through our faith in Jesus. The love that we stake our eternity on as we have settled our faith upon the redemption of the Cross of Calvary. This love is to be the telltale quality of our interactions within the church. It is to guide our motives as we relate to one another. It is to direct our responses to one another. It is to propel our service to one another. It is to shape our forgiveness, and it insists upon our mutual investment. And so the New Testament tells us to love one another by comforting one another, admonishing one another, considering one another how we can stir one another to love and good works, bearing one another’s burdens, confessing our sins to one another, showing hospitality to one another, forgiving one another, edifying one another, submitting to one another, receiving one another, not judging one another, and many more. In the expression of this self-sacrificial love we show forth the glorious Gospel that has joined us together. Hence, your love for your brothers and sisters of Newton Bible Church is essential for the proclamation of the glorious riches of God in this world. The church is the God-ordained, and God-designed context for the full maturation of your faith and for the full expression of what the Gospel does to a life.

- xiv. And this is counter cultural. The church is the most counter cultural organism that exists today, and this is true for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it is to be known by its member’s love for one another. This love for one another is marked throughout the New Testament by an increasing level of concern for the spiritual state of others. And so, the soundness and health of our church is indelibly linked to our overall concern as a church family for the spiritual state of others and the carrying out of that concern through actions of love to encourage and help others. This concern for others should include the broad concern for the non-Christians of the world which will play out in an interest and investment in missions. This concern for others will include a concern the non-Christians of our own area and will play out in an interest and investment in evangelism. And this concern for others should especially be seen in our relationships with others in our church and this will play out in discipling one another. These are not the only ways that our love should come out – so for instance we should be concerned for the spiritual state of other Christians around the world and of our area as well, but these three areas are to define our church life. This inverted triangle graph puts this on display:



- xv.
- xvi. Not any one of these categories is more important than the other, and not any one of these categories is less important than the other. If we are to be telling the truth about the Gospel that has drawn us together, and about the God that we worship, then these three general categories of concern for the spiritual state of others should be seen in our midst. Significant things need to be said about each of these categories, but unless you want burnt roast for lunch this afternoon I better focus my attention on one of them in our time remaining.
- xvii. Over the last several months we have been hearing a lot about discipleship within our own church family. I am convinced that Missions and Evangelism are directly linked with discipleship in our midst. In other words, the healthier these one another relationships are as we express Christ like love in our efforts to disciple one another then the healthier our evangelism and missions will be as well.

II. NBC Shaped By This Vision

- a. So, how does all of this play out specifically at Newton Bible Church? We have seen God's grand vision for His Church and so now let's take this paradigm of love fleshed out in the one another relationship so as to display the glory of God and let's consider our church.
- b. Our Unique Demographic
 - i. On the back side of your Sermon Notes insert you will find two graphs that are intended to give you a bit of a picture about the makeup or demographic of Newton Bible Church. I have included this in there because I want you to see the glorious opportunity that is before us as a church to flesh out the love of Christ in a completely counter-cultural way and in so doing we have the wonderful opportunity as a church to proclaim the Gospel to the world through our interactions with one another.
 - ii. Before I make some suggestions along this end I want you to just look at these charts. The top chart (*show first chart on screen*) is a breakdown of our church population. Now, as you can imagine, taking analysis of our church body is not necessarily an easy thing to do because you have to come up with some general categories to put people in so as to analyze the opportunities before us. And so what you see on your chart is a combination of age and life situation analysis.

1. So the young families category is basically anyone who is relatively young – from the newly married to the families who have young children who are still mostly in elementary school. You will notice that of the 291 people who regularly attend Newton Bible Church 40% of them fit this category, which obviously includes kids and all.
 2. The next general category is the Young Adult singles. These are people who are out of high school, who are not yet married, and who are relatively young – say up to their mid-30's or so. 9% of our people fit this category.
 3. The next category is our Mid-Life families. These are family units who are generally in the 40-70 age range. If they are married and have children, those children are all in high school or beyond. These family units are still very active in that they are still working and many of them have entered the grandparent stage of life. 29% of our church population fits into this category.
 4. The last general category is our later in life category – and notice how gentle I am being in the terms I am using, because believe me, when you are talking about age and life situation there is a mine field of offense to weed through. So this last category is generally people who are 70 or older, who have retired from full-time employment and who are in the sunset years of life. 22% of our church population fits into this category.
 5. Before we move to the next chart I want you to notice some things. 49% of our church population fits into the Young Family or Young Adult Single category. This should be hugely encouraging to us as a church family. Half of our church is young, and this is a good and wonderful thing at which we all should rejoice. But notice also that half of our church is older too! 51% of our church family is over 40 and out of the young children stage of life. I want you to see in this the built in health of the many generations that are represented in our church family makeup. There is great balance to our church family, and this is a wonderful thing that God alone has done.
- iii. The bottom chart (*show the next chart*) on your sermon notes page is a breakdown of our family units using these same categories. So, of the 291 people who regularly attend Newton Bible Church this breaks down into 148 independent family units. So every single adult is considered a family unit, and every young family is considered a family unit and so on. This chart shows you that the Young Single Adults, Mid-life and the Later in Life categories have an increased percentage of family units over population and the young families category obviously has less family units as compared to population. So, let me make some observations from these charts before I lay out for you the glorious opportunity that is before us.
1. We have a burgeoning contingent of young families and young single adults. This presents a significant shift in our church body makeup and should signal to us that we need to be shifting our outlook as well. So, when my family moved here 2 ½ years ago there seemed to be a general consensus or mindset that we were an older church with a smattering of a few young people. Well, we can't think that way anymore. We are indeed a very diverse church family with a significant number of young families, young adult singles, mid-life families, and later in life families.

2. And so, while we have a significant and growing contingent of young families and young single adults, we also have a steady and foundational contingent of mid-life and later in life families. In many ways these families provide the backbone for our church family, and the faithful legacy they have upheld for decades is something that we should all praise the Lord for.
- c. Our Glorious Opportunity
- i. What all of this should point out to us is that we have a tremendous opportunity before us to show forth the love of Christ across generational and life situational boundaries. Because of the unique makeup of our church family that God himself has brought together, we have the opportunity to be gloriously counter cultural as we live out the love of Christ in these one another relationships.
 - ii. I say this is counter cultural because our natural tendencies would point us to affiliation with those inside of our own life situation categories, and this is not wrong, but it cannot be exclusive. Our culture at large would tell the young people in this room that it is their turn to make a name for themselves. It is their turn to forge their own way, shove off from the harbor of past generations and chart your own course. Our culture would tell us that those later in life in our midst are unimportant and unnecessary and that those in mid-life are out-dated and in need of stepping aside and getting out of the way. But, God would tell us differently. And the love of Christ that we all know would direct us to inter-generational discipling relationships that would enhance the health of our church family as we all seek to have the same mind and the same love so that we may know the unity of Christ in our midst.
 - iii. I also say this is counter cultural because we have a unique culture within our own church family. So, of these 4 categories on the charts there is a lot of cross-over between the categories of biological families. So, many of our young single adults are the adult children of our mid-life families. Many of our Later in life contingent are grandparents and great-grandparents to our Young Families. What this means is that for many of you the need for relationships outside of your biological families is pretty low. Even most of your spiritual needs can easily be met by those within your own broader family unit. But if we all just retreated to developing and investing in those relationships within our own broad family units, many people within our own church family would be left out. Many would have no one showing them consistent concern for their own spiritual well-being and fleshing out the love of Christ in a God-glorifying one another relationship.
 - iv. And, so we must be counter cultural. We must set out to show loving concern across life situational boundaries and outside of natural family boundaries so as to bring greater health to the church family and therefore to show forth the glorious riches of the mercy and love of God – as we are intended to do by God. This inter-generational and mutual loving concern for one another’s spiritual health is the Biblical model. We have the multiple generations and various life situations, and we also do have the mutual loving concern that does go across generations and breeches life situations, but you and I need to develop this all the more. So let me make a few shepherding suggestions to each of these groups. These suggestions are not exhaustive, but rather they are given to prime the pump of your heart as you consider how you can take a step in living out the love of Christ in the body of Christ.
 1. To our young families, in light of the unique makeup of our church family, I would encourage you to consider adopting a later in life family that is outside of

your immediate biological family. Let them know that over this next year you want to minister to them and serve them and get to know them. Have them over for lunch after church. Ask them what projects need done around their house. Take your children by for random visits, just to see how they are doing. Let your kids know that older folks are very important and model love to this family for your children. Pick out a young single adult and also invest in them. One of the most awkward things about being a part of a church family as a single adult is that you are never quite sure where you fit with all of these other people who have families of their own. Let these single families know by your actions that they are important to your family and that you love and accept them and that you want them to be a part of your lives. Develop a discipleship relationship with them – so if you choose a single lady, then wives seek time with her apart from regular church gatherings. Meet her for coffee, text her to see how her day is going, and so on. If you choose a single guy, then husbands you do this! Also, Young families, I would encourage you to seek out a family in the mid-life category and develop a relationship with them where you invite their input into your family. They have been down this road before and they have successfully raised children. When you have those complex parenting situations, don't just talk to your parents about it, give a call to this mid-life family and see what they did with their kids when they faced similar situations. So, for instance, I have had very fruitful conversations with several of our men in this mid-life category about raising boys who love God by growing into leaders in the next generation. Seek out these relationships.

2. To the Young Adult Singles I would encourage you to invest yourself in your church family. Please know that we love and appreciate you and are so thankful that you are a part of us. We know that you have a lot of pulls on your attention and your time and so we rejoice that you invest in our church family. And so over this next year seek to increase that investment. Seek someone who is in one of these older categories to meet with you regularly to disciple and encourage you in your faith. Find someone younger than you that you can invest into. Start developing relationships now with our elementary children. Know their names and pick one or two, outside of your immediate family to get to know better. Seek out a later in life family that you can minister to. You have time and energy to be a special blessing to them so make it known to them that you want to serve them. I would also encourage you to find a ministry in the body that you can plug yourself into and be faithful to continuously do. Don't be content to simply attend on Sunday mornings but be persistent to see how you can be involved in the work of the ministry.
3. To our Mid-life families I would encourage you to use your freedom from family responsibilities wisely. You don't have the strains of a young family anymore, but you are not so far removed from it to forget what it was like. You remember being a young family and longing for someone in the church, outside of your immediate family, to invest in your kids and in your marriage. So, pick a young family and let them know that you want to be a blessing to them. Ask them if it would be okay if you watched their kids for them so that they could go out on a date. Buy them a gift card and put it in their box here at church and let them know that free

babysitting comes with it. Also, I would encourage you to pick a later in life family and care for them in a unique way. Now, I know that some of you have your own aging parents to care for and by all means this is your first responsibility. But when this isn't consuming your time or your schedule I would encourage you to seek to make in-roads to some of these same situations in our church family.

4. To our later in life families I would encourage you to pray. I cannot emphasize how important it is for you to take that extra time in the morning and the evenings and pray for our church. We cannot maintain and grow a healthy church in our own strength. This is a supernatural work of God and so we need you to pray. We understand that you can't "do" as much in the work of the ministry, but we do know that you can pray, and we want you to know that this is more important than the doing for the doing without the praying is empty and powerless. I would also encourage you to invest in those younger than you. We need you. We need your wisdom. We need your counsel. We need your love. We need your understanding and patience. Don't believe the lie of the world that you have nothing to offer to those younger than you. No, we are counter cultural here at NBC and we want your investment in our lives!
- v. So, the bottom line of all of these suggestions is – intentionally reach across life situation boundaries and biological family boundaries for the sake of edifying the body and putting on display the glorious love of Jesus Christ. This is essential for the health of our church, and more importantly this is essential for our church to be a truthful testifier of the grace that has saved us. This is a growing process. We will not be perfect at this in one month. So, take one step over the next month to this end. Let me just say that not only must we all make purposeful effort driven by our concern for the spiritual well-being of others, but we also must receive the purposeful effort of others as they seek to make in-roads into our life. So when that young family comes to you and asks you over to their house for lunch to build this relationship – make it happen. When that brother or sister pursues a relationship with you for mutual edification and discipleship – make time for that. The very character of God being displayed in this world is on the line. There is nothing more discouraging in the body than a people who pay lip service to discipleship who then refuse to follow through in the actual practice of relating to one another and loving one another.
- vi. Now, you may hear all of this and say – I don't have time for this, or I don't know where to start. I would say that this may take a rearranging of your priorities. This may mean that you need to take stock of what is important to you and why, and then what is important to God and assess if your life matches with His design. I would encourage you to make the weekly schedule of the church a priority. We really don't meet all that often and when we do meet as a body each gathering provides a unique opportunity for you to grow in these relationships. Sunday School, Sunday night, and Wednesday night in particular offer unique opportunities for you to connect to people outside of your life situation and biological families for the purpose of mutual edification.
- vii. And to help you know where to start with this we have designed care groups in which we have divided up the 148 family units into 8 different groups. Each group is made up of a balanced combination of Young Adult Singles, Young Families, Mid-life families, and later in life families. These groups are designed to encourage care for one another and

they break down the church family into a digestible group so that we can be assured that all are getting this intentional investment. Obviously these groups are not intended to be exclusive, so if you already have some of these relationships with people in other groups we long for you to continue and grow these relationships. But these groups are designed to help you know where to start this process of further investing in your church family.

- viii. And so tonight we will gather at 5pm for a carry-in meal. As you come tonight we will meet you at the door and let you know what group you are with and where your group is meeting. You will take your food to the Family center to let the Hospitality committee get the food all set up while you go and initially meet with your group in your assigned room. Then when most of your group has gathered the elder who has been assigned to your group will pray and you will come get food and take it back to your rooms to eat together. There will be time of interaction and fellowship around the food and then each elder will lead his group to discuss some of what we have talked about this morning and then especially to spend time praying together. For we cannot go forward in building these relationships without the supernatural work of God in our hearts. And so in our groups we will spend time praying for this to be true among us.

Conclusion: Do you see what a glorious opportunity is before us? Do you understand that God has designed the Church to be the central display of His character and of His Gospel in action in this world? Do you understand that your love for one another directly plays into the display of God and his love for us? Are these relationships central to your life? Does this love for the body of Christ inform your schedule and direct your motives, actions, and responses to this church family? May God help us all to grow in this by His grace. Let's pray.

Benediction: Romans 15:5-7