

(This article is built on an earlier article entitled "What Happened to John?" printed in the September/October 2008 issue.)

The aroma of strong coffee hung heavily in the air, calling to John as he reached for yet another 1099 form. It was April 14, 9:30 p.m., but he and his employees had a long way to go before the clock struck midnight on Tax Day. "We burn both ends of the candle this time of year," he remembered joking with a client earlier in the day.

The ringing of the phone jolted him out of his mental assessment of progress. It was his 7-year-old son, Joe.

"Dad, when are you coming home?" he queried.

"Oh, not for a while" John absent-mindedly replied.

"Dad, there were some dirty things the boys were talking about at school today, and I need to talk," he continued, almost as if John had invited him to spill his story.

"Son, I really don't have time right now" John said tensely. "We'll talk some other time, OK?"

"Sure, Dad, whatever." Silence. Dial tone.

Two weeks later...

John pulled out of the restaurant parking lot with a lot on his mind. It was his first meeting with his discipleship advisor** and he had asked John some tough questions.

"John, what are your goals in life...with your walk with God, your wife, your children, and your job? How are you doing with the moral battles you face? Tell me what you enjoy most about your relationship with Jesus. What past or present addictions have you experienced? Are you willing to be a rebuilders like Nehemiah?"

No one ever asked him these questions before, and he certainly wasn't prepared to answer them now. Distant memories of the marijuana joint incident flooded his mind. Then there was the time in that gas station restroom where he was caught off guard by that one magazine. Yet, what did those incidents have to do with his life now?

"After all, they're under the blood. I'm a church member with a nice family and a successful business. Of course, there are those times when I think about several women I know," he mused. "But I quickly get rid of those thoughts. Every man has temptations. Besides, we can't keep a bird from flying over our heads, but we can keep it from building a nest." Suddenly, he realized he was arguing with himself.

"What *is* my purpose in life? Why *do* I get harsh with the children? Shouldn't marriage be more than what our marriage is? If I have so many friends, why do I feel so alone?" John's insides churned. "OK, ...OK," he resolved. "Wow, I've blown it, but I'll be a Nehemiah. Whatever it takes, whatever the cost, I'll share everything."

We Can't Do It Alone

Whether you identified more with the teenager John in the previous article or with adult John, most of us wrestle with these issues in a very significant way at least once in our life time. These stories are happening all around us: in our work places, our churches, and our families. We are all fighting battles in the ultimate war. While our side will win the war, many battles are lost in the loneliness of secrecy. Many of us would like to think that we do just fine in relationships, yet few know how to productively enter another's battles. For some, the pressure to look like we have it all together reigns as king. Maybe it's not been safe to share, or maybe our flesh has valued reputation over relationships. Whatever our reason,

when it comes to dealing with who we really are, there is a large, silent majority in our circles trying to go it alone.

If you're unconvinced, ask yourself and others these questions: How many people close to me do I know well enough to discuss our deepest struggles and greatest spiritual victories?

Do I currently *know* their private battles; their wins and losses? If not, what holds us back?

See the Need

This is a call to action to all men regardless of past or position: let's lay aside who we think we are, and join our brothers in the trenches of their "private" battles. Here is where we are:

Leaders of the churches often tend to have their lives "put together." By and large, they appear to have overcome their personal struggles. They've found "purpose" in leading the congregation. One of their primary concerns is how to balance the demands on their time. As a result of their busy schedules, relationships with those in their congregation tend to be conducted on a firefighter-type basis: the relationships that are on fire get the attention. Consequentially, many leaders feel lonely (i.e., "I can't share with anyone in my congregation"); many live

If we are going to find the true strength of relationship, though, we all must come to the same point as John. We've got to admit we've blown it; we must commit to real relationship whatever the cost. The strength we find in relationships will mirror the extent to which we are willing to be real and vulnerable with God and those around us.

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on the edge of burnout. Still, they do love the Lord and long to lead well; to impact people for Christ and eternity.

Laity, on the other hand, tend to be directionless. They haven't been "called" to "ministry or missions." As a result of this mentality, many of our men do one of three things: 1) shrivel up and die spiritually & relationally; 2) put position, possessions, or some other preoccupation above relationships; or 3) pick something superficial over which to fight (approximately 50% have been through at least one church split***). Lack of purpose and misdirected focus in turn, frequently opens the door to more obvious and addictive sins. Yet, most laity long to contribute in lasting and meaningful ways to the lives of others as well.

I ask the question: Is this what we want? Or does Christ call us to something deeper and more real? Remember, the state of our relationships with our brothers usually reflects the state of our relationship with God.

Count the Costs

What is the answer to our dilemma? The Word of God clearly spells it out — meaningful, living relationships with God and man. If we are going to find the true strength of relationship, though, we all must come to the same point as John. We've got to admit we've blown it; we must commit to real relationship whatever the cost. The strength we find in relationships will mirror the extent to which we are willing to be real and vulnerable with God and those around us.

As we count the cost, keep three words in mind—risky, messy, and necessary. We will get hurt in relationships; things will even get messy; but we will find healing there as well. Sure there is risk involved in getting close to people, but it's like a business venture—there is both great risk, as well as great potential return. So take the risk, get messy . . . be real. Christians really don't have another option anyway (Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25; 1 John 4:7-8).

Reasons For a Plan

Deep relationships will inevitably require a plan. Jesus lived with his disciples day and night. Ananias and Barnabas both discipled Paul. In turn, Paul spent years discipling Timothy, Titus, and many others (2 Timothy 3:10-17, Titus). What a profound impact these types of close interpersonal relationships had on the birth of the early church.

Personally, I've had the privilege of being discipled by several men. I've also had the opportunity to disciple others, and participate in several accountability/men's groups. Through relationship, Christ has been giving me a freedom and purpose in life; freedom from lust, anger, fear, a critical spirit, etc. He is bringing purpose through

opening my eyes to the hurting lives around me. My relationships with the Lord, my wife, and my children have become my most thrilling investments. The hardness of my heart surprised and shocked me; but God has begun to soften it.

In short, I submit to you that organized one-on-one discipling relationships as well as accountability groups are clearly supported in scripture (1 Timothy 3, Titus). I also believe they could alleviate many of the relational conflicts in our churches. Managed well, they have the potential to both significantly reduce demands on leaders (i.e. Moses in Exodus 18) and at the same time, give lay brothers a meaningful avenue of building the church (Acts 6:3-6; 1 Corinthians 14). It's unrealistic for our leaders to expect, or be expected, to have time to adequately build personal relationships with every member in the congregation. However, like Moses, in Exodus 18, a system can be set up for doing so.

Differences in learning styles and personality are further reasons to consider our options. While Sunday definitely has its place as an act of meaningful corporate worship, is it wise to limit our relational interaction to a large group setting? Personally, I don't learn very quickly in a classroom setting, especially when it comes to relationships. I need hands-on training. It's quite a powerful motivator when my strengths and weaknesses are exposed to a brother. It allows others to speak into my life in a personal way. Really, that's what the sharpening process is all about (Proverbs 27:17).

Brothers and sisters, the opportunities are all around us. Many people within our churches are silently longing for someone to care enough to venture deeply into their heart. However, the enemy's opposition to meaningful relationship is fierce. If we attempt these types of relationships without a plan, they will likely be defeated. With a plan, there's no telling what God will do.

Develop a Plan

Here are some specifics for developing a plan. First, choose a discipleship advisor carefully. Examine his relationships. Are those under him following him with respect or resentment? Ten years from now, the state of your relationships may resemble the present state of your discipleship advisor's relationships. What is the vision of the man you are considering for your advisor? Is that the direction you want to head? As you venture into relationships, begin praying about how God would have you disciple others.

Fathers, our family is our first priority. As children grow, they are our #1 call to discipleship. Later, as they enter teenage years and begin finding their direction in

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but we will be effective witnesses of the Gospel as well. Unbelievers will realize that difficulties do not defeat us; instead, troubles and adversities draw us closer together and to the Lord. They will recognize that the Gospel truly is good news, and many will yearn to know our Lord as we know Him.

What better testimony can we have than to strive for greater faith and unity in Jesus Christ, and present before others a life worthy of His calling? ■

Becky Souder is a teacher at Maranatha Christian School, and the wife of Glen Souder who is pastor at East District Church.



And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. Luke 21:28

We are in a global economic crisis. Businesses are failing, factories are closing, and the housing market is plummeting. People are losing their jobs and retirement funds are dwindling. The government of the United States is considering drastic measures to avert further economic collapse. Many are fearful, distressed, and depressed with the grim prospects ahead in a troubled, crumbling world. Some have taken their lives in the face of financial reverses and losses. Furthermore the freedoms we have been enjoying seem to be steadily eroding in an increasingly anti-God climate.

What is beyond the horizon? As children of God, we don't know what the future holds, but we know and trust the One who holds the future in His hand. We look beyond the scope of these troublesome times on earth with a solid, living hope of a glorious future with our Savior in eternal rest. Until then we are to live by faith as we anchor our trust and security in our faithful, unchanging, almighty God. With such a firm confidence in Him, we do not need to live in the grip of fear, or anxious worry. "I will trust, and not be afraid" (Isaiah 12:2).

God is still on the throne and has everything in His control. Nothing takes Him by surprise as He accomplishes His sovereign purposes with infinite wisdom. He is our Rock, our Refuge, and our Help in time of need. With the assurance of God's abiding presence and all-sufficient grace, we can face an unknown future with calm serenity and deep, settled peace. God will provide for our needs and give us strength and wisdom to face whatever happens. He will safely guide us through the uncertainties of our pilgrim journey of our heavenly home. ■

Hold to God's unchanging hand.

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life, why not help them find an additional discipleship advisor. Also, consider the possibility of leading a Bible study/accountability group within the church. Look for someone to disciple as well. If you are a minister, I encourage you to lead out in calling men into the fray. If you are a lay brother, be sure to wait for and work under the blessing of your church leadership. Remember, this is a plan to unify and build our churches, not divide them.

However you choose to go about building deeper relationships, here are several things to consider: 1) Relating closely is not an option; and we need a plan. 2) Room for improvement in relationships is the biggest room in any church. 3) Conflicts in relationship are simply opportunities in disguise. 4) Many hands in building relationships make light work -- don't try to go it alone. 5) As we grow our capacity to love others, our capacity to love God grows as well; and vice-versa. 6) One will never have more intimacy than he has honesty.

Like John, God is calling us to be Nehemiahs. Remember, though, he didn't build the wall in 52 days, everybody worked at it together. Together, we can build our relationships. As our relationships are built, the army of Christ will be strengthened as well. We can rescue the wounded brother; we can save our brother's soul from Hell (James 5:19-20)! ■

**Discipleship Advisor = A more mature believer assigned or asked to disciple another believer within the body of the church, preferably the local church.

***Statistics taken from the CARE survey (Conservative Anabaptist Relationship Evaluation).

Jeremy serves at Fresh Start as
HEART program facilitator / counselor.

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24-25

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