

# Be a Restorative Fellowship

## *Bethany's Call:*

Titus 3:3-7

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Two-year old Allison went to the doctor for a regular checkup. He checked her coordination, had her stack blocks and watched her walk. Finally, he said, "Allison, can you stand on one foot for me?" She walked over to the pediatrician and climbed on his foot.

Allison brought laughter into that room, and that is often true of our misunderstandings. However, some carry pain. They are neither so innocent nor so inconsequential. A hurried driver misreads the speed of an approaching vehicle and the distance necessary to safely pass. Some misunderstanding happened among federal, state and local authorities in Louisiana that left people stranded in squalor and dying.

Unfortunately, our misunderstandings about different things, about life, about relationships, and about God leave us stranded in squalor and dying. We're all sinners. The problem with being sinners is that we are deceived. Indeed, we are socialized in deception. We grow distrustful, and we grow destructive passions. We suffer biological, economic, social, relational, emotional and spiritual fallout from being sinners and living in a sinful community. We suffer problems at the hands of others, and we cause problems for others. Paul wrote:

***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.*** (Titus 3:3, NIV)

*We're foolish.* Like alcoholics who refuse to face the consequence of their behavior, we create a culture that denies reality, excuses indiscretion and is purposely shortsighted. *We're disobedient.* We ignore or dismiss what God has spoken. *We're deceived.* We think we know

better, but find out differently. *We're enslaved.* Our life and labor are driven by deceptive notions of fulfillment. *We live in malice and envy,* finding ourselves demeaned in hateful speech and hearing our own tempers and tongues flaring and filleting others.

The good news is that God has provided in Christ a double cure as the old hymn *Rock of Ages* affirms: "*be of sin the double cure; save from wrath and make me pure.*" The mission of Bethany is "**Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ.**" We're focused not only on faith, but also on freedom.

Having said that, I realize we can only fulfill our mission as we ourselves trust Jesus completely. That means trusting his word. How can we trust and obey Christ if we don't know his word? A core belief of Bethany, an unchanging value, is that the Bible communicates clearly and accurately the will of God. The Bible was given for you to read, know and trust. It is essential for your obedience; and it is pivotal for your freedom. Truth cuts through the fog of deception and denial, and points the way to life.

Bethany Church first gathered to worship on Columbus Day 1958. Its founding pastor Richard Harper noted in that first worship service how Columbus and others had received a charter in their mission from the royals of Europe. He declared that day:

So do we today receive a charter from our sovereign, The Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ. The three articles of this charter are stated in the introductory brochure for Bethany Church, in which we state: "ABOVE ALL ELSE we seek to bring a faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, to help people find LIFE in His name, and to establish in Sunset Terrace, Rochester, an integral part of the Church Universal."

Bethany's founding pastor proclaimed as the second article of our charter from Christ the *call to help people find life in Christ's name.* The work of Bethany is not just faithfully presenting and representing Christ to our community; it is also helping the people of our

community, including you, find life in Christ's name. That is what makes all the difference.

Matthew wrote of Jesus:

***He healed people who had every kind of sickness and disease. News about him spread far beyond the borders of Galilee so that the sick were soon coming to be healed from as far away as Syria. And whatever their illness and pain, or if they were possessed by demons, or were epileptics, or were paralyzed — he healed them all.*** (Matthew 4:23-24, NLT)

People were attracted to Jesus not so much because he was a speaker. They came to see him because they wanted a new life from him. Whether they were sick, lame or tormented, they found in Christ soundness that Jewish people call *shalom*. It is this soundness that all people lack, and it is the soundness that the Spirit of Jesus continues to author.

We read earlier how the Apostle Paul said we were shortsighted, rebellious, deceived, addicted, afflicted and broken. However, Paul writes on:

***But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 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...*** (Titus 3:4-5, NIV)

Through divine generosity rather than human achievement comes new life. There is a washing of our hearts, minds and souls. It happens in two ways. We are washed first through *rebirth* and second through *renewal*.

Rebirth happens as we become convinced of sin and judgment. Until then we live with a deceitful crust of self-righteousness. We constantly excuse ourselves and condemn others... unless their sins or tolerance of sins makes us more comfortable. Our cry is "I'm okay, and you're okay as long as you think and act like I'm okay." We comfort one another with our shortsighted view of our behavior.

One day I finished preaching a controversial sermon, shook all the hands as people left and then with sweat pouring off my brow, turned to a friend who knew my agony. He looked at

me and said, "Well, no one walked out or stood up and interrupted you." Since I imagined that feelings and reactions could continue beyond the site of the sanctuary, I felt less than reassured. Shortsightedness may offer relief, but it cannot reveal reality.

When we realize that the effects of our sins are eternal, when our hearts hunger for mercy and we are ready for God to make something and someone new of us, when we say, "Yes. I have opposed almighty God, sullied the name of his Christ and wounded people beyond human repair, I need you to forgive me and change me," then we experience rebirth in forgiveness and love. From that point on, it becomes difficult to be bitter. It is contrary to our new nature and standing. A lot of attitudes, ideas and positions are washed away by the flood of God's love.

Guess what? Sin doesn't stop then. In fact, through rebirth we become more alert to the presence, power and problems that sin brings us. Through rebirth we become alert to all kinds of deceptive, addictive and destructive behaviors. The washing removes a lot of dirt on our glasses so we can see better. Our hearts break as we become more aware of the damage we are doing. However, God is not content to let us see our sins. Instead, his Spirit brings the washing of renewal. The Spirit sews new attitudes, new relationships, new habits and new life. Through the Holy Spirit we are raised to new life in a new family.

That new life and renewal was the whole point of a Jewish festival that Jesus attended. For seven days the priest would process to the temple with a gold pitcher of water and pour it on the ground next to the altar where sacrifices were offered to God. From that place would come renewal. On the last day no water was poured. John reports:

***On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." (John 7:37-38, NIV)***

In Jesus is the water of truth and love. As we taste his truth and mercy, we come to know the love of God. Consequently, the attitudes and actions that result from that love seep, spurt and stream out of us. We can't help but be priests to other people. I didn't sign up to be a priest. I just am one through rebirth and renewal. That's the way it is. I can't help but reach out as I was reached out to. Our relationships become the temple where God reveals himself and works to bless his creation. God builds his kingdom through friendships we establish. As our heart grows with truth and love, our relationships become redemptive and restoring. As we change, people see hope.

Paul was describing Christian fellowship, Christian community when he wrote:

***We will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*** (Ephesians 4:14-16, NIV)

It is in Christian fellowship that we experience the renewing stream of Christ's truth and love. Jettisoning our self-righteousness, we confess our sins and faults to one another, pray for one another and support one another. In that context, there is acceptance, forgiveness, support, encouragement, wisdom and the power of renewal. God's heals and restores his broken children's faith, heart and life.

God's vision and call to us at Bethany is to obey Christ completely and be a restorative fellowship for one another, for the community, and beyond. That is what God is doing among us. Will you welcome or resist what Christ is doing?