



WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH
MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT

READ, RELATE, PRAY,
PART 2: RELATE

BILL HYBELS

3/8-9/08

Human beings were created by a God who is community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and it is into community with God and others that we have been invited when we give our lives to Christ. This message speaks to the needs that cannot be met in the larger church family experience but can be met in smaller groups. Whatever your need at whatever your stage of life on the continuum of Christian growth, from exploring Christianity to full Christ-centeredness, one of the Willow-defined group experiences (which can be relevant at any church) should meet your need or provide opportunity for you to be a leader to others.

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WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH

READ, RELATE, PRAY, PART 2: RELATE 3/8-9/08 – M0810

Bill Hybels

1 John 4:8

Acts 2:46

I have always thought that one of the massive problems associated with atheism is answering the question that if everything we see around us in the created realm, especially human beings, evolved from blind, impersonal forces, why is it that so much of the human experience revolves around that which is deeply, deeply personal? You understand the question?

I mean, if free-floating gases exploded six billion years ago, and molecules began to attach themselves to each other in increasingly complex ways, and eventually that led to a walking, breathing human being, at what point in that multi-billion year journey did those impersonal forms of matter decide to get so personal, so relational, so interested and capable of intimacy? What was it that eventually caused human beings to ache to know and be known, to love and be loved, to serve and be served, to celebrate and to be celebrated.

Again, I think this is a very fair question. And I think it's quite tough for atheists and agnostics to answer. They cannot deny that human beings have become incredibly personal, and so there's just not a very good explanation from their perspective. I mean, think about a young mother in a third world setting walking day and night for two weeks, risking wild animal attacks and starvation, to get medical help for daughter. Or a young father will defend his family to the death. Happens all the time. Or soldiers will haul wounded buddies on their backs when they could simply leave them to die while they run for safety themselves.

Again, what happened when in the whole evolutionary cycle that made human beings take human relationships so personally?

Now those of us who have read the Bible and found it to be compelling and true have an answer to that question, and the answer sits pretty well in our souls. It does in mine. It might be a stretch for those who are hearing it for the first time; but, again, if you've pondered it and tried to be ruthlessly honest with yourself, you know what it says in the Scripture about this kind of thing.

This first statement might catch some of you off-guard, but we're going to talk about it for a moment: Human beings were made by a God who is a community of persons. That's a significant thought. Human beings were made by a God who is a community of persons. And human beings were made for self-giving love to that God and to others.

Let's ponder these two statements for a moment. Human beings were made by a God who is a community of persons. All of you who know your Bible reasonably well know of this thing

called the Trinity. It's what makes biblical Christianity different from every major world religion. In the other major world religions, the god is a singular personage. In biblical Christianity, you have the Father, you have the Son, and you have the Holy Spirit—three distinct persons who make up the Godhead. And they have enjoyed community in the Godhead from eternity past to eternity in the future.

When it came to creation, God the Father stepped to the forefront, but the Son and the Spirit were involved as well. When it came to redemption, the Son went to the forefront; he's the one who went to the cross. He went to the forefront, but the Father and the Spirit were certainly involved as well. The Holy Spirit takes the forefront when it comes to growing people up into Christ-likeness, but the Father and the Son are involved as well. And so there's this mutuality and relationship that has existed from eternity past in the very Godhead.

Again, when you contrast this with other world religions, you find that at the center of their singular-personage deities is power or knowledge or something else. 1 John 4:8 says that at the center of the Godhead is what? Love. Love; it's relationship.

We human beings were made by a God who is a community of persons. When he creates human beings in his image, from day one they're interested. In fact, on a deep level, they ache to join in the kind of community and relating pattern that the Godhead has enjoyed from eternity past. This is actually what we have been invited into when we give our lives to Christ. We are invited into a quality of community that's potentially beyond anything that we could imagine.

I know this is a little heady. I know these are expansive thoughts. But there comes a time when you just have to wrap your brain around this thing called relationship or community, and you've got to acknowledge that human beings were made by a God who is a community of persons. That's what's been stamped into us irreversibly. That's what we're going to live with, an ache for that kind of thing forever.

And we were made for what? Pleasure? For the attainment of material stuff? Were we made for power? What were we made for? When are you at your absolute best?

You were made for self-giving love to God and to others. You're never better than when you're loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and when you're in a self-giving kind of relationship with family and friends. That's you at your best. And whenever you think that something else is at the center of who you are and you align your life around that, you run amuck and you feel that kind of emptiness where you go, "I don't think I was made for this." Well, you weren't. You were made for self-giving love to God and others.

Some of you know that when I was in my early 20s, I read a passage from Acts 2 that was taught to me by my mentor, Dr. Bilezikian. The passage said that when the Holy Spirit's power fell on the first church, the first thing that happened was that people in that church came together. They shared everything in common. They sold property and possessions. They met in each others homes. They met—I love this little phrase; I've taught on it hundreds of times—they met in each other's homes *with gladness and sincerity of heart* (Acts 2:46). Can I translate that for you? They

took off their masks and they related to each other with self-giving love. It was the sign that the Spirit of God was doing the real thing in the early church.

I remember reading that passage in my early 20s, and I ached to be a part of a church that was like that. It was different from anything I had known in the church I grew up in, where people filed in, they attended services, they filed out, and their lives didn't intersect each other beyond the one hour in church on Sunday.

When I heard that we were actually made for self-giving love to God and to others and we could enter into a kind of community where we could take off the masks and really give ourselves in love and support to another person in the church ... When I heard that was possible and what God had for us, I said, "I think I'll cancel my whole career plan,"—much to my father's dismay—"and I'd like to start a church where some of that might happen." It's still one of the driving passions of my life to experience community the way I was designed to experience it.

I was thinking back this week to the very start of this church in the Willow Creek Theater. We had only had our doors open for a couple of months, and people started coming to Christ. And one of the ways I knew that they were actually meeting Christ in a very personal way, was that when I greeted people as they left the theater, they would say, "I want to get to know some other people who are coming to know Christ."

I said, "You mean between now and next time we rent the theater?"

And they were saying, "I can't wait seven days. I want to enter into an experience of relationship with people who are discovering what I am discovering."

This was fascinating to me. The church was so young, and no one was asking for a small groups program in response to a challenge that I put before them; they were simply responding to the movement of God in their lives, like the early church did in Acts 2. They were simply starting to understand by the work of the Spirit that they were made by a God who is community of persons and that they were made for self-giving love to God and others. By reflex they just wanted to move toward each other. And that was powerful.

Since the early days of the church, we as a staff have tried to organize some of this community. We have always understood that the motivation comes from God. It's stamped into our DNA because of who our God is and how he made us. I've been very proud of some of our efforts over the years—how we helped people find community and we connected people and inspired them to give it a try. Then once they discovered it, they were off and running for the rest of their spiritual lives.

Other things that we've launched were well-meaning, but perhaps a little misguided or unrealistic, and we've taken our licks about some of that as well. But we have always been clear at this church that the ache for community that God puts in a human heart involves more than just sitting next to people for an hour a week. We've always been clear on that.

Many years ago I met with some very mature Christ-followers here at Willow, people who on their own had formed some small groups to live out this community and to take off their masks and encourage and challenge and love each other between services. So just to get a rise out of them, I said, “So what does your small group give you that you can’t get at a weekend service, because I’m frankly quite offended that you’re finding necessary more than what we offer? So what do you get in your small group that you can’t get at a weekend service?”

One guy didn’t miss a beat and he said, “You know, I meet with a group of men every Friday morning for breakfast. We’ve grown to love and trust each other so much so that we are completely open about our shortcomings and screw-ups.” He said, “I actually never thought something like this was possible.”

I said, “So you confess your sins to each other?”

He said, “Yup, we do. We do so to hold each other accountable; and to make sure, we challenge each other and support each other to stay on God’s path.”

I thought about that for a moment. Thought, you know, that confession of sin is not a very good public sport. Like if I just stopped the service now and passed the microphone around and said, “Okay. You. You. You. [laughter] Come on, fork over. What did you do?” That would be completely inappropriate in a large corporate gathering, and it would be unwise at all kinds of different levels.

But the Scripture says it is absolutely essential for human beings to confess their sins to each other. So the Catholic tradition is that you go to a priest and you sit in a confessional box and you say, “Forgive me, for I have sinned,” and you launch in. And it cleanses the soul. It’s good for the human soul. Scripture teaches this. But Protestants never really caught the plot, until they started to form little communities where confession of sin could occur. And it’s healing. I’ve done it hundreds of times.

To that same gathering of Creekers that I was questioning, I asked, “Well, what else do you get in a group that you can’t get on the weekend?”

Someone said, “Well, my group helps me apply the teaching that I receive at the public services.” This person said, “I come away with fantastic ideas from weekend and mid-week services, but I don’t know how to apply them in my personal life. In my small group, we actually take these great ideas and push them into practice.”

I thought, yeah, I get that. Some else said, “I need a group to hold me accountable.”

Now last weekend, for example, almost every one of you walked out, making a commitment that you were going to read the Word of God every day. You were going to take a journal, and you were going to journal about what God was speaking to you about from his Word. Now I don’t want a show of hands, but a lot of you didn’t do it. And a lot of you know that nobody is checking up on you. You certainly know that I’m not. And so you’ll go another week and

another week, and no one is holding you accountable. That's a very bad situation if you want to grow in Christ. Very bad.

If you experience community properly and give yourself to it, you can actually get some brothers and sisters around you and you can ask them to hold you accountable. Say, "You know what? I want you to ask me once a week if I've been staying with my Bible reading. I want you to ask me once a week" about this and this and this.

Friends, I don't know how anybody grows to full maturity without accountability. And you'll never get it in a church, and I'm not just saying in a megachurch like we are. I grew up in a church of 125 people. There was no accountability in that church either. If there are more than 25 people, there will be no accountability unless you seek it out. And when you seek it out and you kind of hold yourself to the rigors of it ... Like a woman told me recently, "I'm in an accountability group because I don't want to just talk the Christian talk anymore; I want to walk the Christian walk. And I have a group of sisters who keep me from faking it."

Don't you hate it when you're faking it as a Christian? Sometimes I say things, and I just go, "You're faking it, Bill, and no one knows you well enough to call you on it right now." I'm in other settings where people know me real well, and if they hear me going off on something, they'll go, "Bill, come on. We know." I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I guess you do." And that's a good feeling.

Someone else in that group said, "My group helps me sort out major decisions in my life."

Every time we've had a discussion in this church—that I can recall anyway, and we've done this 10 or 15 times, and I'm not going to do it now, so relax ... But many times when we've prayed together, I've said, "Stand if you're at a major crossroads in your life—vocationally, relationally, financially, whatever." Typically, about a third of the congregation stands.

Right now some of you are standing at an intersection that has huge consequences for your future. Some of you came to church this weekend hoping that somehow God would breathe some wisdom into you for this decision that you're making. But if you come and don't touch anybody else and if you go home and you don't have any group that knows you and loves you and can help you sort out major decisions in your life, you're screwed. I wish I could say it more diplomatically. [laughter] But you are just not taking advantage of one of God's greatest gifts of community.

Many of you know that about eight weeks ago, the elders asked if I would step into the lead pastor role here at South Barrington. This is a major decision in my life. [applause] And I knew I was not going to make this decision without consulting people who know me really well and who love me deeply. And to at least half a dozen people that I've been in deep community with, I said, "Here's the deal. What do you know about me? What do you know that I could do or not do? What do you think?" I would have felt so alone in that decision had I not had trusted brothers and sisters who could advise me in this.

You need this in your life, and you're never going to get it in a great big building. It's something you get in community that you don't get in a crowd.

Then someone else in that little group that I asked about what they got in a group that they didn't get from a large group experience ... and this is just so cutting. The person said, "I never feel the love from the big congregation. I feel inspired. I feel taught. I feel a lot of things. But when I'm going through a tough time and I think about my church, nobody really walks with me through a tough time. Nobody calls me and says 'I love you.'"

At the end of most of services, I walk from the bullpen to a place called Guest Central. A lot of times people are flooding out the auditorium doors when I'm walking to there, and sometimes I'll just put my hand on someone's shoulder and say, "Glad you're here today." And they'll actually almost go, like: Who touched me? And then they'll realize I'm friendly [laughter] and it'll be, "Oh. Bill." But that reflex shows me that nobody expects to be touched and greeted and paid attention to in a large crowd. If someone does that, you're like: Weird. Now I have pastoral prerogatives here, so don't go around touching everybody. [laughter]

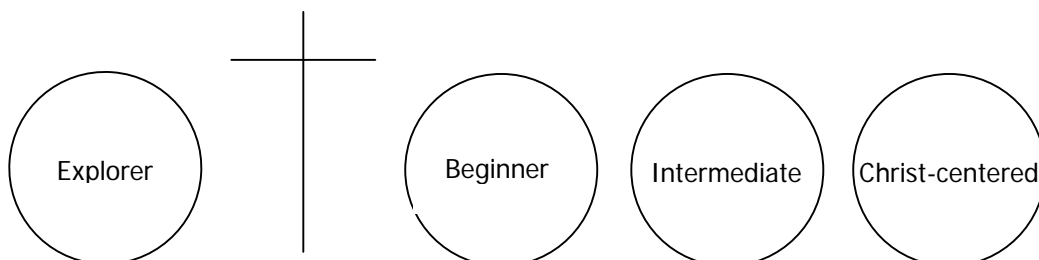
But it is really true that unless you are committed in self-giving love to God and a few other people, when you need love the most, your church will let you down. I've heard this from a thousand Creekers who've said, "You know, I lost my dad and nobody from this church called me."

And I'm like: "Well, there are, like, 23-25,000 of us. Unless you take responsibility and get engaged with some people, you're not going to get what you're looking for from this big crowd.

Anyway, in five minutes with that group of Creekers, I got five airtight explanations of what you can get in a group that you can't get from a crowd: confession of sin opportunities; application of Scripture; accountability; guidance for decision-making; encouragement, love, affirmation. And that was just for starters. The list could go on.

But most of you know this stuff that I'm saying. This is not new material to you; you just needed to be reminded of it again. And many of you are very interested in where we're going with our group life, with our whole commitment to biblical community. Where are we going in the future?

Last weekend I drew these circles. I said we have explorers. Then we have brand-new believers; they're beginners. Then we have people who are growing in Christ—intermediates, maybe. And then we have people who are totally Christ-centered. And I posed the question: When does the Bible get real urgent in this developmental trail? And you all said it was at every stage.



Here's a similar question: When does community get real urgent in this whole spiritual pilgrimage? Answer: In all of it. Yeah, it actually does. Leadership has spent the last six weeks in hundreds of hours of meetings. We've concluded that people who are exploring would really like an Explorer's Group. It's like putting a puzzle together in a team. Sometimes throughout the past we've had explorer groups with seeker small groups and Tough Questions classes.

I had dinner a few weeks ago with a guy who said he was in a Tough Questions class with one of our staff members for eight months. I was, like, "Is that a reflection on the teacher or you?" [laughter] But he said he had to be a part of a group to eventually come to a place of commitment to Christ. And I think there are hundreds of people who would like to get into an explorer's group led by a real thoughtful Christian who would take the time to answer all the questions that explorers have.

Then there's another thing that there's been a bit of confusion about—the Table groups, but I would like to clear it up. The Table groups started with the idea that maybe you would pull together some people from this church who lived by you. You would have a meal together and eventually you would discuss how you were going to penetrate your neighborhood and love your neighbors better. Some of these started with great excitement; some of them fizzled out. There's been some ongoing confusion about this, but I'd like to clear it up.

I absolutely love the idea of neighborhood emphasis and all of us who call ourselves Christ-followers doing what Jesus said a central commandment was—to love our neighbors. Who could not love that idea? It comes straight from our Master's lips. But, again, there's been a bit of confusion about the philosophy and the purpose of these kinds of groups.

What we're suggesting in moving ahead is that anyone who has a strong evangelism gift and loves to maybe have some neighbors who are far from God over to their house to meet around a table once a month or every couple of weeks, do it and just let the activity of God have its way. That's all. Host a dinner. Invite people far from God, and watch God work around a table. That's how we're going to be thinking about this in the future. I actually lead one of these in the little town that I spend time in during the summer. I'm a ferocious advocate of these things. It fits my gifting real well.

Then leadership thinks there's another kind of group, maybe called a Foundations Group or an Establishment Group. This is for new believers who, if they do not get grounded in the Word of God and understand some basic theology, could lose their way early on in the walk. In my opinion, we haven't had these kinds of groups adequately in the past. But we will in the future.

Then for growing Christians, there's what we've just talked about as Small Groups, when you get eight or 10 Christ-followers together and you study a curriculum. And you love each other and confess your sins to each other. You do the kinds of things I was talking about moments ago.

We also think there ought to be Accountability Groups. And something very interesting to me: the closer you draw to Christ, do you need more structure in a small group gathering or less? Yeah, less. Most people who have reached this kind of maturity in Christ-centeredness don't

need the kind of structure of some of the other stages. What they need is mentoring or accountability or spiritual friendships or peer-to-peer relationships where they can be inspired and be held accountable and be cheered on. And we're going to have a whole series of these groups that will be available to folks as well.

Of course, running across all stages is what we call Serving Groups. There's a whole bunch of people, a ton of people, here at Willow who found their spiritual gift and want to put it into play. And they want to have a small group experience around their serving. When they serve in the CARS ministry or serve in Elevate or wherever they serve ... when they serve, they want to be surrounded by loving people to pray with and to cheer each other on.

I find explorers who want to serve the poor alongside others who are serving the poor. And we've had a lot of people come to Christ at our church because they joined a group that was serving the poor and they said, "I like this. I like how Christians act. I like their heart for the poor. I think I'm going to become one."

Support Groups—man, there are so many people in our church who go through seasons where they really need support. You lose a loved one, and you know that we have Grief Support groups. You go through a divorce, and we have Divorce Recovery groups. And when you go through these groups with other people who are going through the same thing, it's powerful. It helps you.

So there are these seven kinds of groups that we think should exist as we move into the future. And you have to take responsibility for sorting out the kind of group you need at this stage in your life. We're not going to be real directive about this. We're not going to say, "Okay, line up. You, you, and you, go there." You are big boys and girls. You know if you need an Explorer's Group. You know if you need a Support Group. You know if you need an Accountability Group.

As a staff, our commitment is that we are going to support and nurture and develop all of these kinds of groups so that you can participate in them as the Spirit leads. You might want to jump right into something like an Accountability Group. You might want to go back a little ways and say, "I never had a good foundation laid under me. I think I'm going to go back to a Foundations Group."

But our commitment is that when these all get up and running, because they're not all up and running yet, we're going to support them without partiality. We're not going to say one group is not as important as another. They're all important, and we're going to support them without partiality.

Over time we'll challenge you to select the kind of group experience that you want to have. We want to challenge you who are growing Christians and Christ-centered that it's time for some of you to lead a group, to make an investment of your life in some explorers or at a Table or whatever. One of the greatest joys I have ever known is not standing talking to a sea of faces—I do that because God tells me that I should—but I get so much more joy sitting around with a small cluster of people trying to figure out how God needs to be God in our lives.

And that's where the real action occurs in Christian development. It's when you're just bare knuckle over a restaurant table, pleading with somebody or confessing to somebody or grabbing hold of somebody and saying, "You know, God wants to do something great in your life." That's where the action is, and I've always loved it more around a table of some sort than on a stage. And many of you can attest to that.

The purpose at the end of the day to all of these groups is to move you toward Christ-centeredness. That's the purpose at the end of the day. Human beings were made for self-giving love to God and to others. This is what you were made for. And I hope this clarifies some things.

This week, by God's grace, a generous family from Willow allowed our family to spend a few days together. Shauna and Aaron and little Henry, my 16-month-old grandkid of whom I'm a shameless idiot fan. My son, you know, is in the middle of the South Pacific, so he could not join us, but Shauna and Aaron and Henry and Lynne and I were together. We were getting ready to pray before a dinner, and this little 16-month-old has developed a pattern where whenever we're going to pray before a dinner, he reaches out his arms so that our family will hold hands when we pray. And when we're done, he always claps.

And what I came to see with fresh awareness is that my ultimate small group is my family. That's my ultimate small group. I have no business running around giving myself to all these other kinds of things if my home is unattended. When my home is well-attended and when I'm giving myself to Lynne and to Shauna and to Todd and to Aaron and to Henry, then I'm living out what I was made for. And, hopefully, God will grace my life and give me extra that I can pour into some of these other things as well. But make no mistake about who our ultimate small group is. It's our families.

Let's stand for closing prayer.

Father, we're grateful that you're a community of persons, and that there's relationship in the Godhead such that when you created human beings, we ache for the same. We want to know and be known, love and be loved, celebrate and be celebrated, serve and be served. And when we find that relationship with like-minded people, it's a gift. It's just a huge gift.

For some who have never found it, you have it waiting for us. We've just got to take some steps. Others of us have had it and we lost it somewhere over time. We wonder if it ever can be rediscovered, and it can. We pray that you would breathe hope into those who have once experienced community and don't have it now.

God, thanks for this service, for what we celebrated in the sacrament of Communion, and for all that you're doing in our church. We're grateful, and we say it together in Jesus' name. Amen.