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Peppermint-Filled Piñatas

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Introduction: The Art of Woo

overcoming the christian stereotype

I have a confession to make: I am a bald white guy (BWG) living in a world of color. It was not always this way, as I used to have hair and I used to live in the suburbs in Texas. While I had a great childhood and hope to provide my kids a similar kind of life, I realize that the world they are experiencing is very different from the world I knew growing up. Los Angeles in the new millennium and suburban Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas, in the 1980s are in the same country but not quite the same universe. The world is changing dramatically, and as a result, we cannot live the same way, hiding in our own cul-de-sacs, staying away from others who look or believe differently from the way we look or believe, because now they live next door.

Living in Los Angeles as a BWG has opened my eyes to how others who may not look like everyone else must feel. I don't feel I look unusual. Sure, I know it's odd to be bald in my early thirties. It was even stranger to be losing hair in high school. (In fact, the one actual bald kid in our high school approached me one day and whispered in my ear, "Stop using your hair dryer." I should have realized that when someone who is follicly

challenged gives you hair-care advice, you should immediately contact Rogaine.)

In the late 1990s, while I was working as the youth pastor at Mosaic in East Los Angeles, I was often confused with either a “cholo” (the shaved-head gangsters of East LA) or a skinhead (some sort of neo-Nazi). Of course, neither was true, and I despised the assumptions others made about me just because of my appearance. To eliminate any confusion, I avoided wearing bandannas, super-baggy pants, and swastikas. One teen made me feel a little better, but still a bit odd, as he offered to shine my head for a quarter every time I saw him.

Ironically, I probably wouldn’t be bald today if I wasn’t a Christian. Sounds funny, but it’s true. At the very least, I know I wouldn’t have gone bald so quickly. One of our youth workers encouraged me to offer to shave my head if the youth group brought seventy-five kids to an upcoming event.

Now, working with teens in a church requires one to make great sacrifices, one of which is dignity. I honestly don’t know why youth groups across the nation seem to enjoy shaming their youth leaders. In an effort to coerce teens to come to events, youth leaders have been known to dye their hair, eat pig snouts, and wear adult diapers, among various other humiliating experiences. I don’t remember Jesus offering such ridiculous incentives, but I suppose if we could walk on water or feed five thousand people spontaneously, we probably wouldn’t be resorting to such crazy attempts to get the attention of our teens.

Seventy-five kids were fifty more than we averaged, so I thought I would be safe. I’m not sure why seeing me get my head shaved was more motivational than reaching out to their

friends with the life-changing message of Jesus, but seventy-eight teenagers showed up that night.

With the razor humming, they shaved my head as everyone in the crowd screamed with delight—that is, everyone except my wife, Debbie, who feared my hair wouldn't grow back. Ridiculous thought, huh? Perhaps we should consider Debbie a prophetess, for her prediction came true. Angry with me for agreeing to such a foolish dare, my already-thinning hair refused to return. The recession had turned into a complete retreat.

But at least bald is a cool look. It is still cool to be bald, right?

changing views

Growing up in the Bible Belt gave me a unique perspective on life. I haven't lived in the South since 1994, but since I spent most of my school years there, I feel I have some insider knowledge of Christian culture.

Perhaps things have changed, but when I was there, everyone claimed to be a Christian. For the most part, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant worldview shaped the culture. In many ways I enjoyed and benefited from this environment growing up. Many amazing people influenced me and helped guide me spiritually. Even in public schools we would celebrate Christmas and Easter, while staying away from Halloween. We learned a great deal about the world in which we lived from a Christian and Western perspective.

Unfortunately, since *everyone* seemed to be a Christian, I discovered that for many, their faith remained more cultural than real. They cheered for the Dallas Cowboys, went out to

eat at Chili's, and attended church because that's what Texans do. After seeing friends struggle through life-altering situations and decisions, I saw a genuine disconnect between what people said they believed and how they lived. Since the cultural peer pressure remained so strong, these struggles remained private, driving them further and further from the people who could help them, such as their parents or church leaders. Either those struggling felt judged by those around them, or the cultural pressure to be "good Christians" kept them from becoming authentic and vulnerable.

While attending Baylor University, I developed friendships with young men and women who seemed to have moved beyond this framework. They longed to change the world as followers of Christ who saw their mission field as the hospitals, schools, businesses, firms, or organizations in which they planned to work. I had always thought that Christians were supposed to stop sinning and attend church, so they could then donate money to the pastor so he could lead people into a relationship with God. Some of these radical college students I met actually wanted to be a part of serving others *personally* rather than paying someone else to do it. They wanted to contribute, participate, and even lead the charge. As I watched some of my friends start churches, businesses, ministries, and nonprofit mission organizations, I looked for my own place to risk and to sacrifice.

Their enthusiasm inspired me and ultimately changed the course of my life. My ultimate goal for college was to earn a degree so I could get a job, get married, buy a house, and raise my kids in a safe, comfortable, and Christian environment, but my experiences caused me to change this goal. When I began helping at a boys' home for kids in foster care and later worked as a

youth pastor at a church that included primarily Anglo senior citizens in a diverse and transitional neighborhood, I had the opportunity to meet people who were overlooked far too often. In a sense, I realized that I had experienced so much love from God and from my family, friends, and teachers that I wanted to share this love with others. There were times I felt guilty for what I had, but this short-term motivation was replaced by gratitude. The love I had received fueled me to give to others.

My eyes have been opened to a very different reality from my suburban childhood as I have traveled outside of the Bible Belt. Whether I was serving in an economically challenged neighborhood in Brazil or on a mission trip in Mexico, helping to plant a church in Seattle, traveling to Europe to consider serving the immigrants from the Muslim world, moving to Los Angeles to volunteer at a church called Mosaic, or traveling to Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, or Malaysia, I encountered people who not only did not pretend to be Christians; they, in fact, hated Christians. Conversations with Christian leaders from around the world have confirmed that a negative Christian stereotype was prevalent and spreading.

the christian stereotype

We all encounter assumptions based on the stereotypes others have of us. People have preconceived ideas about us based on our appearance, skin tone, gender, choice in clothing, background, behavior, and even beliefs—and, of course, if we are honest, we make assumptions about others as well. Just as being a BWG in LA has created some challenges and even closed some doors, those of us who call ourselves Christians

face the daunting task of overcoming others' perceptions of us in a world that sees us in a less than positive way.

With our religious heritage as a nation, "in God we trust" on our coins, "one nation under God" in our pledge, Christians have seen the United States as a nation filled with "good" Christians and "bad" Christians, unaware of the growing number of Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, animists, atheists, cultists, and Hindus now living in the United States. I am not simply referring to those who move here from other countries, bringing their religions with them, although there are a lot of people who fit this description. I am also referring to the Christians who have walked away from the religion of their parents or grandparents to adopt a new way of seeing the world. More and more people see Christianity as part of their past rather than as a guiding force for their future.

The fading influence of Christianity is not unique to the United States. In the last century, Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, among other nations, have experienced a decline in the number of people interested in participating in a church. In the last twenty years or so, South Korea's enormous churches have begun to dwindle in size as young people have stopped going. How has this happened? How could "Christian" nations find themselves so rapidly and radically reshaped? Sure, there are glimpses of great things happening around the world—places where new churches are springing up and reaching new people in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and even pockets of the Middle East. And if we look closely enough, we can also see good things happening in the Western world. But why does it seem that so many are rejecting Christianity and wanting nothing to do with Christians while maintaining a high level of respect for Jesus?

More and more people seem to have the same attitude as the bumper sticker I see on cars around town: “Jesus, protect me from your followers.” Who is to blame for this anti-Christian bias? Is it the media? Is there a liberal conspiracy? Is it Arianna Huffington or Al Franken? Perhaps we can place the blame on the Supreme Court’s putting an end to mandatory prayer in public schools in 1962, or making abortion legal in 1972, or allowing too many immigrants into the country in the previous decade or so.

In reality, if we are completely honest, many of us who call ourselves Christians are to blame. We have created an environment where we are seen as judgmental, irrelevant, mean, and hypocritical.

Sure, the gospel is a challenging message to share, but it is not the gospel that is turning people away from church. Most people don’t like to be called sinful or to be told their eternal destiny won’t be fun-filled, but typically our actions rather than our convictions have created this negative stereotype. I have met many people who have walked away from the church of their childhood in order to find “freedom.” After years in youth ministry, I have learned from other youth leaders and discovered for myself the challenge of keeping teenagers connected to church after they graduate from high school. If we added up the number of people who stopped believing in God because they stopped enjoying church when they were in junior high or even twelve years old or younger, we would be shocked at how many walk away from the faith of their parents.

I can relate to the kid who finds himself forced to go to a place he does not enjoy. In my younger days, there were times I would sneak away from the church building to jump on a neighbor’s trampoline. Other times I would fake an illness on

Sunday morning to avoid going to church because of the boring music and boring sermons. Miraculously, when I was seventeen, I encountered God personally as I sensed Jesus inviting me to fully trust him with my life, yet the church was still something I had to endure, one of the sacrifices God was calling me to make. There were moments when I caught glimpses of what could be, especially at camp or in college, but the weekly routine remained less than inspiring.

After graduating from college, I traveled the world and moved to Seattle and then to Los Angeles in search of churches that acknowledged and addressed our ever-changing world. In my limited search, I discovered that there are no perfect churches, but there certainly are communities of faith that are expressing the eternal truth of God in ways that can be understood in our new world. Sadly, these communities seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

Many times, what we Christians perceive as persecution from the world is actually the direct result of our own mindless or even evil decisions. For one, we have a sordid past. In the name of Christianity, people have destroyed civilizations and forced conversions. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the “civilizing” of North America, and our participation in slavery don’t look good on our résumé as Christians. Like you, I don’t claim that these parts of Christian history are based on God’s love and his principles, but I cannot help wondering what we are currently doing or not doing that will cause us to feel ashamed in the future.

For far too long, the world has been made aware of what we as Christians hate rather than whom we love. When asked what Christians believe, most people would begin creating a “Don’t Do” list. People are far more aware of what Christians

are against than of what we support. Rather than hearing a call for true freedom, people feel unloved by Christians and therefore unloved by God because of our behavior.

We tend to judge people who do not know Christ by the same standards we have for ourselves. We should not be surprised when people who have not surrendered their lives to God live differently. If we struggle to measure up to our high standards with God's help and intervention in our lives, how can we possibly have the same expectations for others who have not sought or received God's forgiveness and strength? It's like getting mad at Stevie Wonder for not waving at us when we walk past him.

Our personal relationships often betray our feelings for the world as well. Rather than befriending and loving those who do not yet follow Christ, it seems that the longer we follow Christ, the fewer people we actually know who believe differently from the way we believe. We have created our own world within a world, a bubble in which we live with everything we need: Christian books, Christian shirts, Christian music, Christian jewelry, Christian movies, Christian sports leagues, Christian stores, Christian video games, and even Christian mints. I'm all for entrepreneurial ventures, but I'm afraid we have (inadvertently or perhaps sometimes purposely) isolated ourselves from the world around us. Perhaps there are some who have been reached by reading a T-shirt with "God's Gym" on the front, finding a gospel tract on a urinal, or attending events featuring Christian bands, but most of the time we forget the importance of reaching out to others through these experiences. Instead, we choose to enjoy these events as an alternate reality outside of the rest of culture.

Some of our churches have so consistently become a refuge for Christians from the world that we fail to become communities that go out into the world, or even communities where seekers feel free to come and explore the possibility of a God who loves them and has a plan for their lives. We've even created our own language that now requires translation: Christianese. Our isolation from the world fails to communicate God's concern for those around us but instead communicates that we do not want others in our lives who do not know Christ.

In conversations with people who have rejected Christianity, many times they have mentioned racism, conflict, hypocrisy, and even a lack of compassion as key reasons. For years, we've all heard that the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday mornings is "the most segregated hour of the week," yet what have we done to change this? When the world sees us fighting among ourselves with church splits or hears of another pastor who embezzled money or left his wife, we just prove to them that we have nothing more to offer than what they are already experiencing. When non-Christians are moved to help those who are underprivileged, they volunteer at Goodwill or at a downtown mission. Serving the community rarely equates in people's minds with volunteering with a church. Too few of us are engaging the very real needs we should be meeting while inviting our spiritually open friends, family members, coworkers, and neighbors to join us.

the art of woo

If you are anything like me, you have moments when you dream of overcoming the Christian stereotype.

Deep down, we long to be part of a loving and diverse community. We long to be part of a church known for caring for those the world has forgotten. We want to live out our lives of faith in ways that would please God and intrigue those around us. Wouldn't it be amazing if people saw our lives and wanted what we have? Wouldn't it be tremendous if people saw us living by faith, expressing love, and sharing hope?

Rather than coming across as judgmental, homogenous, isolated, conflict-filled, and irrelevant communities, we need to show the world what Christ truly intended us to be. We need to practice what I like to call "the art of woo."

In the sixth century BC, Sun Tzu taught us how to destroy others in *The Art of War*.¹ Someone else has taught us how to manipulate people in *The Art of Seduction*, so why can't we learn "the art of woo"?² I love The Gallup Organization's definition of woo: "winning others over."³ The more common definition implies a romantic pursuit, one's attempts to gain the affection of another person. Both descriptions are helpful for us in this journey. We need more woo. Since we are God's children and representatives, those around us need to feel loved by us.

My hope is that these pages will inspire us to develop "the art of woo" so that we might learn to develop diverse communities, resolve conflict, overcome bitterness, create a better future, and even heal our fractured world. Wouldn't it be amazing if as followers of Christ we found ourselves as part of the solution in our divided world rather than as part of the problem? In the end, don't people matter most?

Signs of change are all around us. I am meeting more and more leaders who are determined to create communities that show and share Christ's love in fresh ways in their cities. These

leaders and communities have inspired me to believe in a new future.

In addition, serving at Mosaic in Los Angeles has been a life-changing experience. Whether volunteering in the parking lot, hosting a small group, working with teenagers or college students, or serving as part of the leadership team, I'm continually amazed by this community. There are so many loving, sacrificial, talented, and courageous people, and we are all from such varied backgrounds. Not only are we diverse ethnically; we are diverse socioeconomically, generationally, politically, and even spiritually. Stepping into this diverse community as outsiders in 1998, Debbie and I immediately felt welcomed and included. For the last several years, I have learned a great deal from our community and our leaders.

My desire is to live a life that embraces the people Christians love to hate. I want to gain influence among those who look different, act differently, live differently, and believe differently. I want to overcome the Christian stereotype with love. I want those around me—whether or not they have a similar background and worldview—to be aware of God's love through my words and my actions. I want to take Jesus seriously when he challenged us to love God and love our neighbor. I want to learn “the art of woo.”

This book is for those who want to join me on this journey. It won't be easy. If you are anything like me, you seem to fail more often than you succeed. We will disappoint ourselves at times. Furthermore, actually reaching out to people and loving them can be painful and heartbreaking. In fact, there are people all over the world who are being genuinely persecuted, imprisoned, and even killed as they try to love those who do not want their love. It is far easier to remain isolated and spend

time with those who already love us, but there are so many others who need to feel and experience authentic friendship.

We live in a diverse world filled with unprecedented opportunity. Now is the time for us to become agents of change creating genuine unity among people from a variety of backgrounds and worldviews. Through stories and insights gleaned from my own experiences and failures, the experiences of others, and the life and teachings of Jesus, my hope is that we will discover how to move beyond ethnic, racial, cultural, and ideological barriers toward genuine friendship with others.

PART 1



PEOPLE MATTER
MOST

Curry Favor

winning people and influencing friends



Every Fourth of July, we celebrate the birthday of the United States with friends from church. Soccer, volleyball, music, and food at the park create a great environment to invite other friends who aren't yet connected to a church. A few years back, a friend of mine named Masayoshi joined us.

Erwin McManus, the lead pastor of Mosaic, and his family had just returned from time in New Zealand, so they were eager to share with us their newfound interest in the game of rugby. Masayoshi chose not to play, so I mentioned I would find him later. I love competition of any type, but the prospect of another type of football without pads fascinated me.

Even though Erwin explained the rules, chaos ensued after the kickoff. The twenty guys on the field kept reverting to North American football rules. Rather than pitching it backward, we insisted on throwing it forward. We kept trying to block, tackle, and pass rather than ruck, maul, or scrum. In the end, as every single play ended up with several illegal moves, our enthusiasm began to die down, not to mention that we

were becoming exhausted. I decided to take a break and find Masayoshi rather than try to figure out the real rules.

I was hoping to get to know my friend a bit more. He had moved from Japan to study at Cal State University, Los Angeles, a school within walking distance of my house. Several people from Mosaic met Masayoshi, and he soon got involved with several small groups over the years. During this particular summer, Masayoshi participated in our backyard group and seemed very intrigued by our conversations. Even when he moved farther away, he faithfully came each week.

As Masayoshi and I sat in the shade, I asked him about his spiritual journey. He described how his background of growing up in Japan had influenced him toward a more secular way of looking at the world, yet with a deep respect for ancestors, connected to a mixture of Buddhism and Shintoism. Once he was in LA, a group of international students invited him to join them for weekly dinners. Not knowing anyone in the United States, he jumped at the opportunity to develop friendships. When he discovered that those hosting the parties followed Christ, he became more intrigued rather than turned off. He wondered why these strangers were so kind and seemed to genuinely care for him. He couldn't figure out why they seemed so happy and even intentional with their lives. As he continued to get to know more and more people who followed Christ, eventually he could not rationalize away what was happening in his heart. He decided to follow Christ too.

I was stunned. People in Japan have historically been quite closed to the idea of a relationship with Jesus. Yet for Masayoshi, after just a couple of years, he desired to entrust his entire life and future to Christ. At the picnic, he shared about his fear of his parents' reaction to this news. In order to honor them,

he had decided to tell them about his decision on his next trip home, which was quickly approaching. With their blessing, he wanted to be baptized when he returned to Los Angeles.

Later that fall, Masayoshi was baptized, and after graduating, he eagerly looked forward to returning to Japan so that he might be able to help his friends and family discover what he has found in a relationship with Christ. His courage and resolve inspire me. I have often thought about how Masayoshi's life was so dramatically changed as a result of the friends he met in LA.

Compare Masayoshi's story with the story of a missionary family who lived for seven years in Japan without ever seeing a conversion. When asked if they had any friends, they responded with only the names of a few other missionaries. Sadly, they did not have any friends in Japan who did not follow Christ. This missionary family had a passion for reaching people. They studied outreach strategies in seminary and language school so that they could communicate. They had learned how to debate with Buddhists, Shintoists, and secular atheists, but they didn't know how to befriend them.

The missionary family spent years preparing for ministry in Japan and years in ministry in Japan, but they were playing the wrong game—just as in that rugby game we weren't just playing by the wrong rules; we weren't even playing the right game. North American football and rugby may be similar, yet they are worlds apart. We can't just tweak the pass here and the pitch there. The points are different. Defense and offense are different. There are no huddles in rugby. Once we stop trying to play football with a rugby ball, we will begin to enjoy the nuances of an entirely different game.

As followers of Christ trying to reach people, we are in a totally new game. We try to make minor adjustments to the rules, thinking that doing so will help us succeed, but we won't be able to break through until we start playing the right game.

Many of our programs, ministries, and churches operate as though our world is filled with people who want to be Christian and just don't know how. There is less interest in switching religions than we would even care to discover. Rather than simply looking for ways to develop new strategies and programs, we must hone the skill of developing relationships. We need to go back to the beginning and capture the essence of interaction with the world around us. Our future depends on recapturing our ancient past.

currying favor

The most effective apologetic is love. This may seem simplistic or even naive in a pluralistic, universalistic, spiritually heightened, anti-Christian, and syncretistic world, but knowing all the "right" answers is not nearly as effective as demonstrating a transformed life of genuine love and concern and care. We need to follow the apostle Paul's guidance to "preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage," while ensuring that we follow how he wanted his church-planting protégé, Timothy, to do this—"with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). As a college student preparing to preach the word and teach the truth, I began to discover through relationships with people who did not follow Christ that what I knew was not nearly as important as how I treated them.

As we shape the future of how we live our lives as followers of Christ, we need to look back at the beginning of our history. In a time and place in history when following Christ was considered a cult, even still the first followers of Christ were well respected among the people. In Acts 2:47 Luke describes these early followers of Christ as “enjoying the favor of all the people.”

How is this possible? The customs and practices of this new understanding from God called “the Way” seemed absurd, ridiculous, or even offensive to those around them. Some had walked away from Jesus, thinking that he was advocating cannibalism as he referred to what we now call “the Lord’s Supper” (see John 6:35–58). The idea that slaves and women deserved respect and honor seemed absurd and even revolutionary. These early Christians spoke often of death—personally dying to self, the martyrdom of some in their community, and the death of the Messiah on the cross. More radically, the men and women who met together daily to study the Scriptures and to serve others claimed that the Messiah had died, had miraculously rose from the dead, and now was mystically communicating with them through the Holy Spirit. I can guarantee, the early Christians weren’t following the advice of Dale Carnegie and “winning friends and influencing people” as a result of their beliefs—so what was it? Perhaps they were reversing Carnegie’s mantra. Could it be that the early Christians were “winning people and influencing friends”? Developing friendships takes longer and requires more effort, but the impact is greater and longer lasting.

To curry favor, the early followers of Christ had relationships with people who did not yet know Christ. Their message was one of tremendous hope, and they demonstrated sacrificial

love. Sound simple? If you are anything like me, you know that what may sound simple to accomplish is actually extremely difficult to do. We struggle to have friendships with those who do not follow Christ and even with those who do not live as though they follow Christ. At times our message comes across as judgmental. Too often we live independently from those around us who have genuine needs. For us to overcome these struggles, we should consider the example of the early church.

Luke, a doctor, historian, and adventurer within the early church, writes of the exploits of our Christian forefathers and foremothers:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.

Acts 2:1–8

These early followers of Christ were in relationships with others who did not know Christ. With the help of the miraculous, they shared with God-fearing Jews and converts who had come from all over the world to be part of a religious celebration called Pentecost. If we had been in their place, we probably would have enjoyed the wind and the gift of tongues

for ourselves. Thinking, “Isn’t this amazing what God is doing among us!” we may well have failed to venture out from being together in that “one place.”

The early church didn’t just talk about God’s love; they actually loved people. Their reputation for generosity preceded them. People heard about the way these followers of the Way would sell their land and possessions and give the proceeds to meet the needs of others (see Acts 2:44–45). Their community included not only men, but women, slaves, and people from a variety of socioeconomic, political, and ethnic backgrounds as well. It should come as no surprise that the followers of Jesus would follow his example and soon after the miracle at Pentecost begin to go out to befriend and include religious zealots, pagans, tax collectors, Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, Ethiopians, and so many others.

People who did not follow the Way respected those who did because of the way they loved each other and loved those who were not yet in their community.

As followers of Christ, we should be known by our love. As “the beloved disciple,” John, grew older, he wrote letters to those close to him, preparing them to carry on without him. He writes, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7–8). God’s character exudes love to such a degree that John writes that “God is love.” In his very nature, God can be classified as “love.”

Wouldn’t it be amazing if people looked at our lives and described us in this way? To hear someone say, “She personifies love,” or “If you looked up ‘love’ in the dictionary, you would see his picture.”

When we are born into God's family, one of the most dominant genetic traits that becomes evident in our lives is love. If you want to discover whether you are related to God, just ask someone if they experience love from your life. Love is the greatest clue.

In the Scriptures, love isn't simply a warm feeling or even a choice of kindness. Love as defined and lived out by God involves sacrifice, as John illustrates:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4:9–12

The apostle Paul also affirms this understanding of love when he writes, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Love equals sacrifice. We must be willing to lay down our lives for the sake of others (see John 15:13). We must be willing to sacrifice our needs in order to meet the needs of others. The love others are to feel and experience around us is no less than love that actually costs us something. For too long, I have loved when it was convenient, expedient, or even strategic. To love to the point where it actually hurts connects more closely to what the word means. Love has been reduced to "like" or "lust." Genuine love requires genuine sacrifice.

The early church may have met in homes and hung out near the temple, but they also lived in the community and shared their lives with others who were not yet part of the Way. Too often we require others to come to us to find God rather than allowing what God does among us to spill over into the lives of those who have not been with us in that “one place.”

Love is the new apologetic yet again. In a time when animosity toward followers of Christ seems to be rising, we need to live this out now more than ever. Some of the animosity we now experience may be, in reality, the displaced anger of those who have been hurt by others in the name of religion.

matchmaking

Several years ago, a friend of mine named Erik Quillen asked me for advice. (We called him “EQ” in the office to avoid confusion between the two of us.) After he complained a bit about his lack of a love life, I decided to help him out. I wrote down the names of five women in our church and encouraged him to ask them out, one at a time. He could only complain again if his dating situation had not changed after he had finished asking out the women on this list. Most single guys I know complain, yet they never ask anyone out. I figured that giving them a list would keep them from coming back to me in the future. EQ was different—he actually did it!

He began by inviting the second woman on the list out on a date. Once that relationship seemed to be leading nowhere, he thought about his next move. After considering his previous experience with the third woman on the list and realizing he didn’t even know who the fourth and fifth women were, he summoned the courage to invite the number one woman

on his list, Holly, to dinner at the Cheesecake Factory. Deep inside, he had admired this person all along, but he had seen her as beyond his reach. Seventeen months later, EQ and Holly were married.

Since I am involved in a church where 80 percent of the attenders are single, you can imagine how many times someone asked me for a list. To dispel the myth of my prophetic nature as a cupid, I must finally reveal the secret of my list: I wrote down the names of the five women I suspected EQ already liked. I had seen him spending time with Holly in her office. Since they worked together, he would go in to get something, but he would come out twenty minutes later. Using my keen intellect, I put Holly at the top of his list.

I have to admit I like being a matchmaker, much to the dismay of my single friends, but when you have a good marriage, you want everyone to experience that amazing relationship. The same should be true in our relationship with Christ.

When someone has a great relationship with God, he or she should want others to enjoy and experience that relationship as well. We need to be willing to reallocate our time and energy because we are so in love with God that we want the people we care about to discover the same God we love and who loves us.

Paul was a matchmaker. As an apostle, Paul gave up his rights in order to freely serve and love others. Seeking to match up others with God, Paul wrote:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under

the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

1 Corinthians 9:19–22

How different our lives would be if we went to such great lengths! We need to learn to share with others, naturally and in appropriate moments, how amazing a relationship with Jesus can be. We seem to openly refer others to movies or restaurants we enjoy, yet when it comes to spiritual conversations, we seem to slip into a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Internally, we should be more motivated to become matchmakers.

There was once a broken and paralyzed man in Galilee who had some very caring friends. In a time when someone with a disability was considered cursed by God, these friends refused to walk away. They had heard that a man named Jesus was healing people. Helping their disabled friend get on a mat, they picked him up and walked a great distance to find this gentle Healer. A crowd surrounded the house in which Jesus stood. These friends decided not to give up. “We’ve come this far, so why stop now?” they must have concluded. Climbing onto the roof, they tore the roof apart to make a hole large enough to lower their friend in front of Jesus. This was the moment they had been waiting for. All the walking, carrying, roof digging, and sweating had been worth it. Jesus was going to heal their friend!

Jesus astonished the paralyzed man, his friends, and the entire crowd gathered in that home when he offered the

paralyzed man forgiveness for his sins. Certainly the friends must have been filled with bitterness in that moment. Their friend needed new legs, not a new heart, yet Jesus reminded the crowd that the greatest miracle is a transformed life (see Luke 5:17–26).

Often we long to experience more of the miraculous—wanting to see people healed of their afflictions or even to be healed of our own. In doing so, we overlook or downplay the greatest miracle Christ offered as he walked the earth and the greatest miracle he offers to all of us today. What do all of those Jesus healed of leprosy, blindness, paralysis, and even death have in common now? They are all dead. But a heart transformed by God lives forever. God still physically heals people today. Physical healing doesn't last; spiritual healing does.

As the religious leaders' anger poured out in their venomous words against Jesus, Jesus decided to heal the paralyzed man physically too. Standing up, the man who was once paralyzed now walked home with his friends, the ones who were willing to carry him to meet Jesus.

If we want to become better matchmakers who passionately desire to help others discover the hope we have in Christ, we *must* learn to love. We must go to great lengths to serve and to meet the needs of friends—even to the point of being willing to pick them up and carry them if that's what it takes.