

A Church That Gives The Blessing

The following is an excerpt from
The Gift of The Blessing
By Dr. John Trent and Gary Smalley

Jim had struggled in his marriage, in his job as a mechanic, and in his life in general for many years. The only time he went to church was when he and his wife attended a wedding or when he was forced to attend an occasional Christmas or Easter service. From Jim's perspective, the most encouraging place of fellowship he knew was at the bowling alley with his Wednesday night bowling league. Jim lived for Wednesday nights when he and some of the guys from work would arrive early, have a few beers, and then bowl in league play.

From the slaps on the back for making a strike, to the closeness and camaraderie of being on a team, Jim looked at bowling as a shelter to get away from the storm clouds at work and the problems with his family. Unfortunately, after an evening at the lanes, Jim still had to go back home that night and to work the next day and face the reality that his life was falling apart all around him.

During the next year, through the example and loving commitment of a new mechanic at work, Jim heard the gospel for the first time. The new mechanic's name was Ed, and he was a deeply committed Christian. Jim quickly grew to respect Ed's skill in repairing engines but it was his personal life that Jim envied even more. Ed was not perfect, but he had an inner peace and a growing marriage that Jim longed to have. Ed did not force his belief on Jim; rather he did something much more powerful. Ed lived a positive Christian life in front of his coworker, which was like giving salt to a thirsty man.

With Jim's marriage on the rocks and with his bordering on having a drinking problem, one afternoon Jim asked Ed why his life was so different from his (Jim's). Over the next several months, Ed met regularly with Jim and taught him about his need for the Savior and the new life he could have in Christ. On a cold day just before Christmas, Jim prayed with his friend Ed to receive Christ. After thirty-seven years of failing at life on his own, Jim finally turned to the Source of life Himself to lead him and guide him.

Like Jonathan in the Old Testament, Ed was a source of blessing to his friend. His personal caring helped Jim feel secure. Jim's personal life and his marriage began to change for the better as a result of God's working in his life. Ed also encouraged Jim to attend a church where he could learn more about God's word.

Jim and his wife did begin to attend a fairly large church near their house. This church had an outstanding reputation as a Bible-believing church. However, they never seemed to feel comfortable and accepted there. The preaching didn't bother Jim; in fact, he loved to learn from the pastor, who was an excellent communicator. What hurt and confused him was the lack of personal relationships or warmth once the preaching was over.

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Everyone was polite to Jim and his wife, but no one with bright eyes gave them a warm greeting, and dinner invitations after church were nonexistent. To try and develop some deeper friendships with other people at the church, they began attending a Sunday school class. However, after several months of attending the class, they were little closer to the people in the class than they were on the first Sunday they attended.

When Jim's friend Ed took a job at another auto shop out of state, Jim was crushed. He particularly ached over the lack of personal relationships with other men at the church. Since Jim had become a Christian, he had given up his Wednesday night bowling league to attend midweek services. Yet without any committed Christian friends, he was getting lonelier and lonelier. Even when he tried to initiate a conversation with someone else at church, after an initial "Hi, how are you doing?" the strain to find topics to talk about would be uncomfortable. Finally Jim gave up trying at all. There were pockets of friendly people, but Jim noticed that they were friendly to the same people week after week.

This was Jim's first experience at a church and he began to feel that somehow Christians didn't need friends. He tried to immerse himself in studying the Bible and hoped that would take away his need for meaningful relationships. However, as time went by, Jim felt more alone when he was surrounded by the people at his church than he ever had at the bowling alley. The thought of switching churches never really occurred to Jim. This was the only church he had ever gone to and he felt certain this must be what they were all like.

With his only Christian friend gone and with no one at church who took a personal interest in his life, Jim began to spend more and more time with his old friends at work. As a result, he began to slip back into the old patterns he had before he became a Christian. Unfortunately, that included beginning to drink again.

Jim stopped attending Sunday school and attended only the church service. As the weeks went by, no one in his Sunday school class called to ask why he was no longer attending or even stopped him after church to say more than "Hello." While their lack of concern may have been from a feeling of "I didn't want to pry" or "We don't want to put pressure on him," in Jim's mind their indifference confirmed to him that they didn't care. Soon his attendance at the church service was sporadic.

With all the people at this growing church, no one seemed to miss one man who began drifting away from the fellowship; that is, until the pastor unexpectedly ran into Jim's wife on Saturday at the market.

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“Hi,” said the pastor. “How are you and Jim doing?” It was only an innocent question, but it was met with tears and sobs right in the middle of a supermarket aisle. “Pastor, Jim won’t come back to church with me. He said that he has better friends at the bowling alley than he ever did at church.”

Jim had been searching for closeness in relationships and a blessing from his church family, but he never found it. In less than ten months, Jim had gone from sitting at the midweek service at church to drinking beer again with his buddies back at the bowling alley. Perhaps Jim should have been mature enough to stay in the church and to concentrate on giving to others, never receiving love back himself, but he wasn’t. And neither are many new believers just like Jim.

Is this simply the story of one man who had too little faith? We wish it were. Unfortunately this story can be told of many churches today that talk about the blessings of genuine fellowship (*koinonia*) in a sermon or in a Sunday school class, but do not practice it with people within the church. While we may not like to admit it in the Evangelical community, many people who come to our churches find more of the elements of the blessing in a bowling alley than they do inside the church walls. Instead of letting this discourage those of us inside the church, it should encourage us to learn how to be a people of blessing. We need to learn how to make significant relationships within the church, not superficial ones. From the first time God called a special people to be His own until today, we as believers have always been called to be a blessing to others.

Our Calling Is to Be a People of Blessing

From earliest times, God’s people have been called to be a blessing. When God first came to Abraham, He gave him a very specific promise. We read: “I will bless you/And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. . . . In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2-3).

Centuries later, in the book of Acts, Peter tells us what form this blessing took for all nations. The blessing came in the body of the suffering servant, Jesus, a descendant of Abraham’s who has the power to bless our lives by freeing us from sin. Peter said: “God . . . says to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways” (3:25-26NIV).

Introducing people to Jesus Christ is the first and foremost way a church can bless others. When men and women are introduced to the Source of blessing, they come face to face with Someone who can be their best friend and their very source of life.

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If we have been called to provide people with the blessing of knowing Christ, what is the best way to see that happen? Let's let our Lord answer that question. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; . . . All {people} will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). What does that mean to us?

People outside the church will never care how much we know about Christ until they know how much we care for each other. When a body of believers becomes committed to loving each other, then they can truly be called a church that is serious about winning others to Christ.

The Blessing: a Churchwide Guideline for Loving Others

If Jesus commanded us to be people who deeply love each other, why do so many churches struggle with being warm and sensitive to the needs of others? Is it a lack of loving people in the church?

We fully believe that it is not the lack of caring believers in the church that results in people like Jim going away unblessed. Rather, these people lack the knowledge about how they can practically meet the relational needs other people have once they come to know Christ.

The church needs to be first and foremost a place where the gospel is preached and where Christ is honored as our Lord and Savior. But God designed the church to be a caring community as well. We can't escape the fact that when we fail to bless and love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are failing in our duties as a family of God. When one member of the body rejoices, we should all rejoice. When one member weeps, we should all weep. (1 Cor. 12:26)

The exciting thing about the concept of the blessing is that it can be a guideline for all kinds of loving relationships. Obviously it can provide a tangible way for parents to bless their children. We have also seen how a marriage and even an intimate friendship can be built up by the elements of the blessing. However, it doesn't stop there. Some churches today train and encourage their people to provide each aspect of the blessing to others. And thankfully more and more churches are leaning to do this training. In fact, show us a church anywhere in the world that is meeting the genuine needs of its members and drawing others to Christ, and we'll show you a church where God's Word is being taught and where the relationship elements of the blessing are being applied. What happens when a church, or even a department within a church, gets hold of the concept of the blessing? Let's look at how the principles of the blessing, applied in one

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church's Singles department, literally turned their ministry around.

Mark was the leader of a large singles Sunday school class. In fact, on any given Sunday, they could have more than 150 young men and women in attendance. Like many church groups, Mark's class struggled with the problems of turnover and building deep relationships. They had the heart for ministry to others, but that caring desire never seemed to move out of their class leaders' meetings and into their class.

Almost two years ago, we shared the principles in this book at a conference Mark attended. He jumped on every bit of information we could give him about the blessing and asked us to speak at a class retreat he had coming up. God used that conference Mark attended and the ensuing class retreat to plant the biblical principles of the blessing within the hearts of the people in the class.

We found out only a few months ago that after the retreat, Mark formed a group of people within the class called the Blessing Bunch. Their goal was to identify people in the class who particularly needed one or more elements of the blessing and then actively to commit themselves to be the person who provided that need.

With one young lady in the class who had broken an engagement, providing the blessing meant simply taking her hands and crying with her. For a man, it involved a brother in Christ picturing a special future for him that gave him the confidence to tackle a difficult new assignment. Still another woman needed to know that she was of high value to her friend and to the Lord after a week of listening to her employer say she was worthless. Having a strategy for meeting needs within the group by teaching and applying the elements of the blessing became a real help to this leader. In fact, Mark talked about the principles of blessing so much, many of the class members would say to each other in fun, "Have you had your blessing this week?"

"Have you had your blessing this week?" These people meant this as a joke, yet making the people in that class aware of the elements of the blessing opened many doors of ministry, doors to a number of men's and women's lives that had once been tightly closed. But what happened in this singles group did not stay confined to their classroom. Giving the blessing began to spread throughout the entire church.

Several of the members of the class became convicted about their relationships with their parents as they learned about the concept of the blessing. One young man in particular walked out of the classroom one Sunday morning and right to a pay phone where he called his father for the first time in more than four years. Other people began to share the principles of the blessing with their family members at the church and it, too, led to a time of healing.

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The singles class even talked about the concept of the blessing at a Sunday evening service a few weeks following their retreat. One thing Mark shared was that the married people in the church could bless the singles by not expecting them to get married tomorrow and by inviting them into their homes. This began an “adopt a single” program that helped bring a once nearly isolated group into the mainstream of church life.

This story is just one department that decided to get serious about blessing other people in their lives. The results spread throughout the entire church and helped bring a new sense of warmth and caring to many people.

Imagine what would happen if an entire church decided to bless those in their fellowship and were trained how to do it! We would have a church where relationship needs were actively being met by a welcoming handshake or hug (meaningful touch); where appreciation for a fine sermon, working in the children’s department, or simply listening to a hurting brother or sister was verbally acknowledged (spoken message). We would have groups of believers who acknowledged every member’s true worth (attaching high value) and who gave them words of hope and encouragement to reach their God-given potential (a special future). All these elements would be wrapped in the willingness to let people fail and not let them walk away unnoticed, because a decision had been made already that they were valuable (an active commitment).

This church sounds like the kind of church most of us would like to belong to, and it can be. All it takes is one person to start a Blessing Bunch to begin to meet the needs of those around them. Even more than that, this kind of church can become the kind of place that those outside the church long to be a part of, a true place of blessing. A church that is committed to applying the principles of the blessing can make a tremendous impact on the unsaved. Once church members learn about this concept and experience it within the church, they can begin to transport it outside the church walls. Monday through Saturday they can provide the elements of God’s blessing to a non-Christian society desperately in search of genuine security and acceptance.

An employer can evaluate how well he or she is doing in being a blessing to his or her employees. A schoolteacher can learn about the blessing and recognize the telltale signs of a child’s growing up without parental acceptance. A student can befriend a fellow classmate and point him or her toward a secure source of blessing through Christ.

Hitting the Target When It Comes to Loving Each Other

Aristotle once observed, “You stand a far greater chance of hitting the target if you can see it.” At first glance, this statement might not sound too profound, but it really is.

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Churches, parents, spouses, and friends stand a far better chance of hitting the target of loving each other if they can see how to do it.

Following the guidelines provided in the blessing can help our words and actions score a bull's-eye when we want to communicate God's love and acceptance to our loved ones. Coupled with sound teaching from the Word of God, the elements of the blessing can also provide a tremendous tool for evangelism. The blessing can even help us fulfill the Great Commission to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). If the mark of disciples is that they "love one another" (John 13:34), applying the principles of the blessing can help God's love radiate to a needy world.

As we end our look at how the blessing applies to our church family, we are nearing the end of our journey in this book. However, we have one more important stop to make. There are two people in our lives who can especially profit from a blessing we can give them-our parents.

Before we look at how we as children can give back a blessing to our parents, let's listen to the words of a song that captures the kind of place the church needs to be: a shelter for those who have faced the storms of life, and a place where God's love radiates to a needy world; a place where the blessing is given to others and where authenticity is a password to fellowship. A place Ken Medema pictures in these haunting words:¹

If This Is Not a Place . . .

If this is not a place, where tears are understood, then where shall I go to cry? And if this is not a place, where my spirit can take wings, then where shall I go to fly? I don't need another place, for trying to impress you, with just how good and virtuous I am, No, no, no, I don't need another place, for always being on top of things. Everybody knows that it's a sham, it's a sham. I don't need another place for always wearing smiles, even when it's not the way I feel, I don't need another place, to mouth the same old platitudes; everybody knows that it's not real. So if this is not a place, where my questions can be asked, then where shall I go to seek?

*And if this is not a place, where my heart cry can be heard, where, tell me where, shall I go to speak? So if this is not a place, where tears are understood, where shall I go, where shall I go to fly?**

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¹Ken Medema, sound recording, *Through the Eyes of Love*, Word Records.