

GOING DEEP TOGETHER

Revelation 21:2-4, 22:3-5; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn

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As a young reader I remember devouring the works of Jules Verne, among which was the science fiction novel he published in 1870 entitled *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. This was written before submarines as we know them today were possible. The story is told of a certain marine biologist named Professor Aronnax who finds himself aboard a ship investigating a collection of unusual incidents at sea. He, his assistant, and his harpooner end up chasing evidences of some kind of sea monster or perhaps a narwhal, which is a whale with a single long horn.

In one particularly close encounter with the beast the three men are thrown overboard when it collides with their ship. To their great surprise they discover that the monster is actually an underwater vehicle. In a flash Aronnax and his men are captured and brought inside the submarine. There, amid trappings of art, science, and literature, they meet Captain Nemo and learn about his sequestered life beneath the sea in his ship, the Nautilus.

Thus begins a series of undersea adventures where the secrets of the deep are revealed. They explore the beautiful corals of the Red Sea, the hidden wrecks of battleships, the Antarctic ice shelves, many creatures of the deep never seen before, and even the lost city of Atlantis. Finally, the Nautilus encounters the Moskstraumen whirlpool off the coast of Norway, and by a quirk of fate, Professor Aronnax and his men escape. The fate of Captain Nemo is left, like the entire life of this unusual and brilliant man, shrouded in mystery.

The world was fascinated with this far-sighted book from the 1800s. The technology to build submarines is now quite familiar, but the depths of the sea are still filled with wonders and mysteries. The massive undersea earthquake and resulting tsunami off the coast of Indonesia in 2004 brought creatures to the surface which had never been seen before. These are things which prior to that date simply were not known because they were too far down. The fascination of readers with Captain Nemo is that he was able to see things no one else had seen.

OUR TENDENCY TO AVOID THE DEEP

In the same way there are wondrous things in our people connections which will never be seen without our going deep. As I have studied the nature of the body of Christ in the Bible for many years I have not stopped marveling at the great things God has in mind for our interpersonal relationships. I have also been distressed at how few believers in Christ seem willing to undertake people connections of that depth, preferring to break them to avoid the challenge.

There are only two Biblical reasons to sever relationships in the body of Christ. First, we are told to separate from those who embrace heresy and refuse to be corrected. Second, we are told to separate from those who may hold to sound doctrine yet are practicing heinous sins and will not repent. That means that all other people connections in the body of Christ last forever! Think of how many bad things you will eventually see in the other Christians and how many bad things they will see in you if we choose to stay close in Christ! It is this long-term process of loving our way through these things

that takes us into the deep where wonders of God can be seen which cannot be seen in any other way.

Let's be honest: It is hard to go that deep! But every time we cut off a people connection which is difficult we float back up toward the surface. In this way it is possible to live in the shallows for a lifetime, never knowing the things God has in store for us in the deep. It is also possible to choose to plateau in our people connections. Every time someone threatens to take us deeper we pull back, shut them down, or cut them off. Both of these are dangerous ways to live in light of the fact that God wants to take us down to the deep to show himself to us. God may send Captain Nemo to ram the ship of our life with the Nautilus just to make us sink down to where he wants us to be, twenty thousand leagues under the comfortable shallows of life.

OUR DESTINY IN THE DEEP

God wants to go deep with us. That is why he gives us eternal life. The people connection we have with God through Christ will never stop going deeper. I am reminded of the passage from the Westminster Confession which answers the question of the chief purpose of mankind, which is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. That enjoyment begins in this life and never ends.

The Book of Revelation gives us a small window into the unthinkable blessings our Lord has in store for those who trust in him. First, he gives us a new city and a new environment for our people connections where the concentration of people no longer concentrates sin, where good upon good can compound forever: "**And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband**" (Revelation 21:2). Even though jammed with redeemed and glorified human beings, this city, unlike all the cities with which we are familiar, will be all about Jesus Christ.

The next verse of this passage reveals the truth trumpeted by Westminster: "**And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them...'**" (Revelation 21:3). For God to dwell among us with no separation caused by sin means that we will be able to enjoy the perfect attributes of God undimmed by anything. All of our finest pleasures on earth will seem as nothing when we see him face to face, and they will not plateau. Because he is infinite, we will enjoy growing to know him more truly as we go deeper with him through eternity.

We are also told that although our people connections on a fallen earth are marked with difficulties, that will all change: "**...And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away**" (Revelation 21:4). Imagine what ever-deepening people connections will be like when they are only about joys! It is impossible to fathom.

That deepening process will take place in an environment of activity as the apostle John wrote in the next chapter of Revelation: "**There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him**" (Revelation 22:3). We will be worshiping him forever, and we will be serving him. I do not understand all that means, but we will be more like God than than now. He does not change but he is always active. The same will be true for us, so we will be working together forever. John also tells us we have other work to do: "**And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the**

sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 22:5). I do not know all that reigning entails, but eternity is clearly full of redeemed people worshiping and working together, tasting the intense blessing of the direct knowledge of God more fully as we go deeper with him forever.

HOW TO GO DEEP IN OUR PEOPLE CONNECTIONS

Once we know that it is our destiny to go deep with God and man we need to know how we are going to do it. Paul wrote about the nature and methods of a love worthy of the long haul in his letter to the Corinthians. After listing the characteristics of such love, Paul dropped the bomb: "**Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away**" (1 Corinthians 13:8). The God-kind of love does not give up. It has no rip cord, no ejection seat, and no escape hatch with a big red handle. In fact, love far overtops the significance of every earthly good, even those which God gives to the church such as spiritual gifts.

So to go deep in our people connections we must begin with the true definition of a love which will not quit at a level of which no human being is capable. I offer you the following motto to help focus the challenge of going deep. I recommend you post this and repeat it every day with respect to all the people in your life: "By the Spirit and truth of Christ working in me I will never stop loving you!" That's where the adventure begins.

Paul begins to explain how we pursue this kind of love with: "**Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant...**" (1 Corinthians 13:4). Some translations call this first quality longsuffering, which is a good description of how love chooses to undergo many difficulties without complaint. Patience is not merely negative, because the same love then reaches out in kindness.

There was a man in a congregation I pastored named Ed whose wife struggled with mental and emotional wholeness. Even when she was relatively well she could move into a crisis at the drop of a hat and then Ed would have to adjust his plans to care for her. She might start fussing and fuming in the middle of a church service, and then he would have to leave. Things continued to deteriorate for her, and the last several decades of her life were spent in a condition we would not wish on anyone. And Ed was there for her, fulfilling vows he had taken more than half a century earlier to love and care for her in sickness and in health. This was a man who lived the motto: "By the Spirit and truth of Christ working in me I will never stop loving you."

Love is also "**not jealous.**" Jealousy is when we are motivated to guard what we have against the possibility that others might get it, or even get the same. It is unspeakably sweet to relate to people who do not want what we have, and are not guarding what they have as if it were their source of life. Are you that way for other people? A people connection marked by the absence of jealousy has a wonderful peacefulness about it because it is not about the acquisition of anything. If God takes care of us, we do not need anything from anybody, as Paul wrote elsewhere: "**And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed...**" (2 Corinthians 9:8). Knowing that we have what we need shuts down jealousy and frees us up to be a blessing to others. This has a powerful preserving effect on our people connections.

Love also **"does not brag and is not arrogant..."** Bragging tends to be driven by the fear that others will not esteem us adequately, so we blurt out things designed to enhance our reputation. Honestly, I find it very easy to see when others are bragging but when the inward impulse to puff myself up in others eyes is upon me I find it hard to notice that I am doing it. Fortunately, God gives us something to drive out our personal quest for renown, and it is the mandate to glorify him. I love the way Isaiah put it: **"Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts"** (26:8 NIV). Nature abhors a vacuum, and the temptation to vaunt ourselves is so great that we must fill the hole with the only thing worthy of such attention which is the wonder of God.

Arrogance is similar to conceit. This is the spirit of self-inflation as it is seen in concrete deeds which reveal the heart. Once I was in a convenience store on a trip attempting to purchase a map. I found the one I needed and stood in front of the counter, about three feet away. The cashier would not look at me, and before I could say anything someone had stepped in front of me. The cashier waited on that man, and then I thought for sure he would help me. Before I could speak, a woman stepped in between me and the counter and the cashier waited on her. As soon as she left I threw my item on the counter and thrust the money at the cashier who then waited on me without making any apology for what had just happened. The motto of arrogance is: "I do what I want, and it's your problem!" No marriage, family, or church body can last long when salted with arrogance. Instead love says: "I do what's good for everyone, and your problem is my problem."

Paul goes on to write that love **"does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered..."** (1 Corinthians 13:5). Unbecoming behavior is simply rude, and rudeness can have no part in love that takes us to the deep things of God. Self-seeking cuts the heart out of our people connections. Sometimes when I want to rebuke myself for self-seeking, I sing a "cracked" version of a familiar worship song: "It's all about me, Jesus. And all this is for me, for my glory and my fame..." If stealing the honor due only to God does not make the heart crawl in repentance, I'm not sure what will.

The choice not to be provoked reveals that the kind of love which lasts must be able to withstand genuine reasons for provocation without succumbing. There are many times when we feel provoked by others which reveal our own weaknesses, but what about those times when anyone would be provoked? None of us has risen to the level of provocation visited upon the Holy One of Israel who was insulted, abused, violated, and demeaned without cause. One false witness after another was brought before the court to testify against Christ **"...but He kept silent and did not answer"** (Mark 14:61a).

The last phrase of this verse instructs us to let offenses against us go. Love **"does not take into account a wrong suffered."** Other translations say "thinks no evil" (NKJV) and "not resentful" (ESV). I also like the idea that the person who has chosen to walk in love does not have a mental list of wrongs committed against him. I remember one day when I had a reverse quiet time. Instead of getting shipshape before God I made a list of wrongs done to me over the years. Fortunately, before I could go out and inflict myself on others that day, the Lord convicted me that he had not kept such a list of my wrongs when he forgave me in Christ.

Keeping a list of wrongs is one of the major reasons that our people connections do not go deep

and we never discover the wonders God has for us there. The assumption is that when the failings of others toward us get too great we are prepared to revoke our love and fellowship. Eventually everyone fails us. This is a logic which leaves us alone and treading water in the shallows.

Love that lasts a lifetime also **"does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth"** (1 Corinthians 13:6). The God-kind of love cannot be pleased with anything evil, and so our treatment of others is guided by the righteousness and goodness of God. Don't you wish everyone who ever sold you a house or a used car was guided by righteousness? And unrighteousness is always allied with untruthfulness. There is a sweetness in truth-telling, as hard as it sometimes is, which strengthens our people connections. By contrast, it is hard to love someone who will not tell you the truth. I have seen Christian marriages break up which could have withstood the offenses committed but which could not withstand the unwillingness of one or both parties to be truthful.

Finally, Paul gives the big picture of the kind of love which takes us into the deeps with God, for it **"bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"** (1 Corinthians 13:7). This sounds like it makes us very vulnerable, and it does. If you and I want to love God's way we will get hurt. It is unavoidable. But the alternative is far worse which is to end up alone and bereft of the things which make life worth living. Love withstands all sorts of difficulty, it trusts implicitly, it thinks the best and most hopeful things, and it overcomes every kind of abuse.

Is that possible for folks like you and I? Not by ourselves. That is why the motto is: "By the Spirit and truth of Christ working in me I will never stop loving you."

CONCLUSION

Imagine how our marriages, our families, our churches, and all of our people connections are affected when we speak those precious words. There was a woman in a church I once pastored whose husband left her to take up with another woman and begin a career as a croupier in a gambling casino, leaving her with two small children. She wandered off from church for a while so I went by her apartment for a visit. I knocked on the door and she called out for me to come in. When I stepped inside I saw her inappropriately dressed, lying on top of a man whom I knew to be a scoundrel, with her children playing in the next room. My heart was breaking. She came out to the door and I asked her to step outside and chat for a bit.

She said she was visiting other churches, not knowing what she really wanted to do. I told her that there was a really good reason for her to come back to our fellowship. I looked her in the eye and said: "After all, we already love you." She did, in fact, come back, and several years later I was privileged to marry her to a fine Christian man with whom she has built a new life and family. There were wonderful things for this woman that God had in store for her only if I was willing to reach out in pastoral love, and only if she was willing to love the body of Christ back.

There are better things to be found in the depths of our people connections than the wonders Captain Nemo found in the depths of the sea. They will only be found when we choose the harder path, seek the Lord's help, and shape our relationships by the same kind of love he has expressed toward us. Go deep! You will not be sorry you did.

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