

*8 Practices for Belonging
to God and Each Other*

Life- Minded

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Life-Minded: 8 Practices for Belonging to God and Each Other
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For Mr. and Mrs. White,
who lived on Abbey Street in Shreveport, Louisiana.
You healed our souls with love.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Romans 12:9–18

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Part One

WHY WE TRY

*How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!*

*It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.*

Psalm 133:1-2

01

Unity for the Win

All for one and one for all.

Alexandre Dumas

Let me start with some good news.

The backstory is this: I've pastored people for the entirety of my adult life and have seen the impact of the local church in the lives of families and communities and cities at large. The local church matters. It matters deeply. And yet for many years now, local churches have been shutting their doors and closing up shop, at a rate of about one church per day.

Let's keep going because that's clearly not the good news.

At this writing, there are about 2.4 billion Christians in the world, which means that for every three people you come across, one of them professes Christ as Lord. Of those Christ followers, roughly half attend church at least once every week. Why do they do this? Some do it out of habit. Maybe they were raised in a church-going family. Maybe they've been going to church every Sunday for years. Maybe it's just what they do. Also true is that some do so out of sheer obligation; if there are points to be had in heaven, they want their name on the board.

But what I've found is that most Christians involve themselves in the life of the church for other reasons. They come to church because they long for community, for a place where they can know others and be known. They come to church because they long to

worship God, to be reminded that there is someone who transcends their problem-plagued daily lives. They long for the hope that in-person connection can bring. They come to church to gain greater perspective than what their Monday-through-Friday reality affords. They come to participate. They come to pray. They come to take Communion. They come to speak real words to a real human being. They come to restore their faith in God.

So, what happens when a church shuts its doors is that these meaningful engagements get shut down too.

A Risk Worth Taking

I was working in my office when another pastor on staff craned his head around the open door. He told me that a woman who taught part-time at his kids' school also worked part-time at a church about ten miles south of our main campus. "She's down in the dumps these days," he said, "because her church is about to hold a congregational vote on whether to sell their building."

Worth \$6 million, the building evidently sat on six acres of land, boasted a stunning 450-seat auditorium, a giant common area just inside the main entrance, an expansive kids' area complete with plentiful classrooms, and even a full-size gym.

Oh, and did I mention it was exactly one mile away from our church's Midtown campus, which had been meeting in a rented space for several years?

I was intrigued.

The church was considering selling because the congregation had been dwindling. Like way too many churches all over the country, they'd shut down during the pandemic and never made a strong recovery. Some people moved to be closer to family. Some people sat out for so long that they didn't know how to come back. Some people got into disputes with other members, and in the end they all disappeared. Now they couldn't afford their monthly mortgage. The only option, they figured, was to close.

In the fifteen-plus years I've been at New Life, I've cultivated close relationships with many pastors in town. But this man was one I'd never met. I wasted no time in placing the call.

"Pastor Lee," I said, "this is Brady Boyd from New Life Church. I understand from one of my pastors that you're thinking about selling the place, but before you do, I have another option for you to consider . . ."

If my math was right, the monthly mortgage for Pastor Lee's beautifully appointed building was 40 percent *less* than what we were paying for rent for Midtown's temporary situation. This was too good to be true.

That first phone call with Pastor Lee led to several more, and in the span of six weeks, the elders and I were ready to jump. If all went well, we would combine forces with the fifty or sixty congregants who still called the church home, we would absorb the outstanding loan on their facility, we would pay their remaining staff for one year's time, and we would begin meeting there officially as New Life Midtown before Easter weekend rolled around.

As you'd imagine, I was fully on board with this plan. New Life's elders were fully on board with this plan. The senior staff I'd talked to were over the moon regarding this plan. But despite our one-sided enthusiasm, this was a lot for Pastor Lee to contemplate. After all, he didn't know me. Sure, we were getting to know one another, but as I'm known to say, it takes a long time to make old friends. We were nothing of the sort just yet.

He also didn't know our people. He'd heard about New Life, but given that we're governed as an independent church and his church was denominational, both doctrinal and preferential issues were certain to crop up.

Plus, he'd assumed things were going to go according to a specific course of action—that of his church being forced to sell their building and for all intents and purposes dissolving altogether. While he didn't like the thought of that plan, he'd made his peace with it. My entry into his world caused disruption and created question marks

where periods had already been placed. For the finances to work, we needed to act quickly, and Pastor Lee knew it. But that speed put pressure on him.

Ironically, my wife, Pam, and I were in a hotel room in Rochester, Minnesota, a thousand miles from home, as all of this was coming to a head. You get a bit of perspective on life when you're about to be hooked up to a dozen or so beeping monitors, wondering if your days will be long or not.

I'm not being dramatic here; for more than eighteen months I'd wrestled with some weird mystery ailment that had necessitated one inpatient surgery, two outpatient procedures, an army of pharmaceuticals that hadn't come close to winning the war, and a whole lot of sleepless nights. This trip to Mayo—my third in nine months—had been scheduled for the purpose of running me through yet another battery of tests to see if a different set of experts could sort out what was wrong. And as I climbed into bed, my mind filled with thoughts of all that the next day might bring, my cell phone rang.

“Pastor Brady, I'm having some reservations regarding the contract.” It was Pastor Lee, and I could tell he was aggravated.

I would have been aggravated too.

Pastors like to pastor. You know what they don't like to do? Weed through the fine print of legal paperwork. Does anybody like to do that?

Forty-five minutes later, after listening as well as my fragmented attention would let me and then offering up the truest assurances I could, I disconnected the call, I laid my head on the pillow, and I stewed. Would the deal go through? Would Pastor Lee get cold feet and back out? Was God in this whole nutty idea like I thought he was? Was this as promising a solution to both churches' problems as I'd convinced myself it was?

Around midnight, I drifted off, waking a brief six hours later to dress and head to the clinic. I wouldn't get my test results for several days, but in the interim, Pastor Lee called once more—this time

with good news. On that Sunday afternoon, after I'd made it back to Colorado and was resting quietly at home, Pastor Lee delivered the news that the congregation—decimated as it had been—had voted nearly unanimously to approve the consolidation with us. Feeling totally elated, I swiped to my phone's camera and handed the thing to Pam, while I proceeded to do the goofiest, most obnoxious fifty-six-year-old-fat-guy dance. You know what? I didn't care. If David could dance before God in nothing but a flimsy linen ephod, I could show God my fully clothed moves.

Weeks later, on a Wednesday night, the 350 members of our Midtown congregation met at their new church building and were welcomed with wide smiles and open arms by the fifty-plus members who had called that place home for years. Suddenly everyone had scores of new brothers and sisters in Christ, and the energy and optimism in that foyer was palpable. The veterans took the rookies on a tour of the space—every room, every gathering area—offering the kind of contextual stories you only get by having lived somewhere for a while. By the time they convened in the sanctuary to pray and sing songs and enjoy unhurried conversations with each other, friendships had formed.

We're more than a year into the merger, and in addition to the 200 percent growth that campus has enjoyed these past nine months, nearly all the original four hundred are still serving side by side.

The Pull toward Disunity Is Real

I love that story because it demonstrates the power of unity, when we finally let unity win. Admittedly the human-nature approach in almost every situation is to let disunity run its course. Distance is easier than devotedness. Harmony is harder than havoc. Congruence takes far more intention and effort than chaos will ever demand. And yet throughout Scripture God makes his expectation known, which is that we strive for unity at all costs.

In the next chapter, we'll look at the utter devastation that disunity is causing us these days, but in case you think it's a recent phenomenon, let me nip that in the bud here. Way back in Genesis 4, just after God created the heavens and the earth and the stars and the sky and the first man, Adam, and then his mate, Eve, we find the world's first offspring making their grand appearance: Cain and Abel. Here's what we initially learn about them: "Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast" (vv. 2–5).

The text goes on to say that God, noticing Cain's countenance, asked what was wrong with him. "If you do what is right," God said to the young man, "will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (v. 7).

Cain should have taken the cue from God that bad stuff was about to go down, but like me and most of the guys I grew up with, some of us only learn the hard way. "Let's go out to the field," Cain said to his brother (v. 8).

Yeah. That's never a good sign.

"While they were in the field," verse 8 continues, "Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him."

The first child ever born on this earth was a *murderer*, and of his own kin. This is how things began as fallen humans started to populate the earth: in a tragically disunified state.

And then there was this: After God saw what happened—and make no mistake about it, our heavenly Father sees everything—he turned toward Cain and asked a question. "Where is your brother Abel?" he said (v. 9).

To add insult to injury, Cain the murderer then chose to back-talk Holy God: "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

I think Cain meant the question to be rhetorical.
God's answer, it would turn out, was yes.

We Belong to Each Other

Throughout the Scriptures, both Old Testament and New Testament alike, God places a high priority on how those of us who say we love him treat others who love him too. You can't read the Bible without noticing God's people being called "brothers and sisters" in Christ.

Psalm 133:1, which begins the epigraph of part one of this book, says in the New Living Translation, "How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!"

It's *good*, God is saying, when we let unity have its way.

Proverbs 17:17 says that "a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity." Which means that when the stakes are high and your outlook is low, a brother is the one you need.

In the New Testament, we read in Matthew 12:46–50 of a time when Jesus was teaching his followers, and a man approached to let Jesus know that his mother and brothers were waiting for him just beyond the crowd. Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"

Then, pointing to the disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus wasn't minimizing his biological family here; rather, he was elevating his *spiritual* ties.

We're to follow suit.

In 1 John 2:10, John the apostle wrote, "Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble." These are spiritual siblings he's referring to, joint heirs in the family of God.

Two chapters later, he wrote, "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their

brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (4:20). Again, we’re talking spiritual siblings here, and the expectation among us is *love*.

We are to love one another, John 13:34 says.

We are to be devoted to one another, according to Romans 12:10.

We are to live in harmony, Romans 12:16 says.

We are to build one another up (Romans 14:19).

We are to be like-minded (Romans 15:5), and to care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25), and to serve one another (Galatians 5:13), and to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), and to forgive one another when we fail (Ephesians 4:32).

In other places in Scripture, we’re told to be patient with each other and to speak truth to each other and to be compassionate toward each other and to submit to each other in deference, considering others better than ourselves.

We’re to greet each other and show hospitality to each other and be humble toward each other and pray for each other.

We’re to live like we’re one big family, in other words, in all its messy, magnificent bliss.

Prizing the Bond of Peace

During my growing-up years, my family shared at least two meals a day together at least five days each week. If you’re over age thirty, your experience was likely the same. Until a couple of decades ago, for so many families it was completely normal—expected, even—to eat breakfast together before parents went to work and kids went to school each morning and dinner together once everyone got back home. At the time, I don’t know if I would have said that I loved all those meals. I was a typical boy. Sometimes I would have far preferred throwing a ball or chasing fireflies on the front porch to sitting around the little table in our kitchen every evening with my parents asking me how my day went. But looking back, I see those meals as the gift that they were.

My parents didn't have much, but they had pride of ownership in that house, which was located just seven miles from Logansport, Louisiana. They'd built it with their own hands—literally—and every inch of that three-bedroom, one-bath home was leveraged to the full. To my recollection, the biggest room of our house was the kitchen, and now I know why. Even if the canned surplus from the previous season's peas, okra, tomatoes, and corn was down to nothing, my mom was going to harvest whatever vegetables she could scrounge from the two-acre garden she kept on our plot of land, and she was going to cook dinner for her family as frequently as she could. Sometimes my sister or brother or I would help, and as a reward we'd get to lick a bowl . . . corn bread, frosting, whatever. But usually it was just Mom in there working her magic with some meat we'd hunted—venison, duck, quail. We were going to sit down after school and before homework. We were going to eat. We were going to drink vast quantities of iced tea. We were going to ask questions of each other and talk about the petty grievances we'd suffered from classmates or work associates and maybe confess a sin or two. And the five of us were going to do it as a *family*—Mom and Dad at the ends of the table, us kids filling the seats in between.

Those meals were more than a chance to get nourished physically. They provided spiritual nourishment too. Sitting around that table together, looking into each other's faces, engaging with one another, working through disagreements, haggling over whose turn it was to tackle the dishes . . . all those points of contact forged something important in us. They reminded us that we were Boyds. We were family. All for one and one for all—we were in this thing for the long haul.

There's a verse that comes to mind often, whenever I think back on my upbringing, on the memories my family and I share. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 4:3). You know what? It *does* take effort to stay unified. Unity

doesn't happen organically; unity requires a fight. But if there is encouragement to be found in this verse, it's in its final five words: *through the bond of peace*.

We're to establish and maintain a bond of peace with our nuclear family.

We're to establish and maintain a bond of peace with our neighborly family.

And most relevant to the subject of this book, we're to establish and maintain a bond of peace with our *spiritual* family—our brothers and sisters in Christ. This concept cuts right to the heart of what being “life-minded” truly means—resolving to set aside differences for the purpose of prizing unity, both within the church and beyond. Just like my mom and my dad and my siblings experienced day after day, week after week, all those years when I was growing up, we are to come together regularly. We are to share life with each other. We are to take an interest in each other. We are to work through our differences, being led, as always, by grace. We're to stay the course with each other, held tight by our bond of peace.

I've always loved Jesus's wording in the Sermon on the Mount, his longest and most profound offering during his earthly ministry, when he spoke of who the “blessed” ones are. In Matthew 5:3–10, he says that we will be blessed when we are poor in spirit and when we mourn and when we hunger and thirst for righteousness and when we exhibit mercy and when we are persecuted because of righteousness. Tucked between these assurances, he says this: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (v. 9).

That word he chose, “peacemakers,” is one we shouldn't overlook. He didn't say that peacekeepers would be blessed but rather peacemakers. The difference in those terms is huge. This is active, not passive. It's not maintaining peace as much as *mobilizing* it, which is a whole lot harder. You know this if you've ever tried to resolve a conflict with someone who was really fired up. Peacemaking takes effort. It takes commitment. It takes persistence. Which is probably why peace is called a *bond*.

A bond says, “Because of our common faith in Christ and our shared deposit of the Holy Spirit, I am for you. We may disagree from time to time, but I will not pick a fight. I will not cancel you. I will not disparage you behind your back. I will not give up on you. I will not give up on *us*.”

I can think of six or seven friendships in my life that could have totally broken apart along the way. Each one suffered a breakdown for a distinct reason, and were I to lay out all the details here, you and I both could survey the damage and say, “Yep, I see why it failed.”

But it didn’t. They didn’t. None of those friendships fractured. The reason? It was the bond of peace. We decided that this spiritual bond was more important than winning the argument that had driven us apart.

That same bond of peace is what helped Pastor Lee and me work out the kinks in the contractual arrangement and bring our two congregations together as one. Despite our never having met prior to that first phone call, I am his brother, and he is mine. Beginning from that place of spiritual kinship made all the difference in the world.

If you’re married, I hope you see this bond at work in your relationship with your spouse. For Christian marriages that make it—and there are plenty of these that I see—the reason they last is this bond of peace. They prize unity in their union and persist. They have their share of difficulties—all married couples do. But they stick around to work through them instead of bailing at the first sign of trouble. Or the 873,208th, as the case may be.

To be bound by peace is not to be free from conflict. It is simply to be predetermined that peace, in the end, will prevail.

The bond of peace is a rope that ties us together. It’s a link that connects our lives. It’s a yoke, like the ones used to hook oxen to a plow to keep useful tension in play as the animals work to accomplish their task.

I shouldn’t have to say this, but given our current climate, I will: A bond of peace is not something you ought to prize in an abusive relationship, whether that abuse is physical, sexual, verbal,

emotional, spiritual, or psychological. If you question whether you're in an abusive relationship, seek help before taking even one step suggested in this book. If, however, your relationships are *not* abusive but are instead just aggravating from time to time, read on.

This bond of peace we are told to uphold is in turn what holds us up. When storms come—and they always do—this bond is our anchor. When the world spins out of control—and it does from time to time—this bond is our solid ground. When depression hits or our kid won't come home or the disease is diagnosed or the sin is found out, this bond—this sacred, spiritual bond—is that flicker of hope we desperately need on that way-too-dark night of the soul.

“We can uproot the powers by being peacemakers in our homes, schools, workplaces, cities, and world,” wrote pastor and author Rich Villodas. “In an increasingly divided world, followers of Jesus are to participate in making peace, not in making matters worse.”¹ To which I say a hearty amen.

We are to make peace, not make matters worse.

What a perfect starting point. And when we come back to the heart of how God sees us—as one family, unified by faith—we will perfectly position ourselves for becoming people of peace. People bound together by peace. People who have something very real to say to a world in chaos, a world itching to find its way.

This strategy worked for the early church, whose story unfolds in the first few chapters of Acts.

“When the day of Pentecost came,” Acts 2 begins, Jesus's followers “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” (vv. 1–4).

This passage continues with a remarkable demonstration of spiritual unity:

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. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (vv. 5–11)

I can’t help but think about how our story will be told one day, the church’s story, yours and mine. It won’t center on Parthians and Elamites and Arabs and Cretans, of course. But wouldn’t it be incredible if it carried the same unexpected weight?

Boomers and Gen Xers and millennials and Gen Zers . . .

Brown people and black people and white people alike . . .

Members of every political party . . .

Residents of purple states and red states and blue states . . .

Plumbers and teachers and art critics and podcast hosts and writers and salespeople and gym owners and pastors and architects and graphic designers and players in the NFL . . .

People who have been walking with Jesus for decades and people who met him just last week . . .

Introverts and extroverts and planners and spontaneous types . . .

Together, we’ll declare the wonders of God, united by faith in one place.

It happened in first-century Jerusalem.

It can happen again with us.

There are roughly 2.4 billion Christians
in the world.

Which one irritates you the most?

Church is a place for meaningful connection—a like-minded community who worships, prays, and participates together for the singular purpose of glorifying God. “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” David exclaims (Psalm 133:1), implying that unity can exist.

But unity is, well, *difficult*. The apostle Paul has to remind the church to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). *Life-Minded* draws our attention to the reality of that text: it does take effort to stay unified with our spiritual family. Effort takes commitment. It takes persistence. It takes hope.

Speaking both truth and grace, Pastor Brady Boyd echoes Paul’s words in a contemporary context with 8 practical challenges to put peaceable unity into action. He invites you to devote yourself to the pursuit of Jesus, so you can enjoy life within the church like never before.



Brady Boyd serves as senior pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs and cohosts the *Essential Church* podcast, which features conversations with pastors and leaders about important issues facing the church. The author of several books, including *Addicted to Busy*, Boyd passionately writes and teaches on the subject of following Jesus.

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