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In the Book of Acts, the early church gathered collectively for prayer. When Peter was delivered from prison by an angel, he found the church assembled at the house of Mary, gathered for a late evening (or perhaps nighttime) prayer service (Acts 12:12). Having a regular weekday prayer meeting had become an established pattern in the (Old) Mennonite Church long before our church group formed. We follow the pattern of having regular midweek services. Where will you be on Wednesday evening?

As Wednesday evening approaches, other things may compete for our time. Sometimes we could finish the job or complete the harvest if we would work just one hour longer. Perhaps we are weary and wonder whether, after three busy days, it is indeed worth all the effort to get the family ready for prayer meeting or rest home singing.

But do we not find again and again that as we enter into the spirit of worship or Christian service, the spiritual blessings we receive far outweigh the costs? The topic we ponder together in prayer meeting feeds our souls. Praying together rejuvenates our spirits. Praying for others and their needs helps us to keep our own needs in spiritual perspective. And when we sing for others, we cannot measure who benefits more from the messages of the songs—the residents of the home or those who came to sing for them.

Are our meetinghouses as full on Wednesday evening as they are on Sunday morning, or is there a significant difference? While we do not consider the midweek prayer meeting or service activity to be of equal importance with the Sunday morning worship service, we should plan to attend regularly. Legitimate reasons may occasionally require us to miss this service. But if we are repeatedly absent from the midweek service, we should make the necessary changes to our schedules so that we can attend regularly.

Our lives and our evenings can become cluttered with activities. We rightly value family relationships and wholesome social contacts. Occupational involvements, including training or service schools, have their place. But before we conclude that we can hardly attend the midweek service because "the church has too much going," we should honestly evaluate the other "going" that we do. If we should be spending more evenings at home, are we starting at the right place? Are our choices properly aligned with

spiritual priorities?

Our view of and participation in the midweek service says something about the vitality of the congregation. Some of us came from congregations where only a few benches of older members regularly attended the midweek prayer meeting. We remember distinct impressions we received when we began attending our congregations thirty or more years ago. Two things stand out vividly—the vibrant congregational singing and the attendance at the midweek service. As the decades have slipped by, has the importance of attending the midweek service also slipped?

Having attended the midweek service, we should then take the blessings and the prayer concerns along home with us. As we gather collectively in prayer, we take our burdens to the

Lord and leave them there, "casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you" (1 Peter 5:7). At the same time, however, our personal prayer lives become richer and more meaningful as we take the burdens and the concerns from the prayer meeting to our personal prayer closets.

We who "see the day approaching" are careful to exhort one another and to forsake not "the assembling of ourselves together" (Hebrews 10:25). In the context of our church life, this includes regular attendance at the midweek service. Then having attended, we go home spiritually refreshed.

—ism



Life Is a Vapor

Did you ever watch a pot of boiling water? The steam rises out of the pot. We see it for several seconds and then it is gone. James 4:14 likens man's life to a vapor which appears for a short time and then vanishes. Many people are remembered only for a while and then forgotten. What is the ratio of a vapor in relation to time? Or the span of life to eternity?

What does the Bible say about the life of man? It says that the length of man's days is in God's hands. "For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14). "Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity" (Psalm 39:5). "Mine age is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd's tent: I have cut off like a weaver my life: he will cut me off with pining sickness: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me" (Isaiah 38:12). "This night thy soul shall be required of thee" (Luke 12:20). "For what is your life? It is even a vapour

that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live" (James 4:14-15). Even though life may last for seventy or eighty years, it is likened to a tale that is told (Psalm 90:9). In Genesis 47:9, Jacob told Pharaoh that even one hundred thirty years is but a few days. "There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death" (Ecclesiastes 8:8). "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Through science, herbs, medicine, or healthy eating, men are seeking ways to slow the aging process and live longer and healthier. But many of them are only seeking a better temporal life. They should be seeking the eternal life that is found only through Jesus Christ and His salvation, wrought at Calvary for all mankind. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36).

As a child of God, "your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Our bodies do not belong unto us. Each of us is only a steward of our God-given body. We should be good stewards of all that God has given us, including our bodies. Therefore, to take care of the body is good and right, and herbs, healthy foods, and medicines have their place. "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

How shall we relate to the aches and pains of life as we age? We acknowledge first of all that life on earth has an end. We look forward to the time when our bodies will be changed into glorified bodies—free from the limitations we experience in these physical bodies. To pursue relief from the degenerating and debilitating process of age or diseases is not wrong, but our ultimate goal should be to honor and serve God with our bodies. We should never pursue questionable or occult powers to heal or relieve pain. We need to rely on the wisdom and grace of God for the decisions we make to care for our bodies.

Life is a gift from God. We should thank the Lord for every new day. Whether we are young, middle-aged, or old, we have no promise of life. Accidents and disasters, which take only hours (or even seconds) to occur, leave the homeless, the maimed, and the dead in their wake.

We should make our calling and election sure, repenting of all known sin, and faithfully serve God. Not knowing the day or hour of departure from this life motivates us to prepare for that time. We are admonished to be ready, not get ready, for the coming of our Bridegroom.

Hezekiah was told to set his house in order, for he was going to die. We too should have arrangements for those we leave behind, especially wives and children, by providing for them in a will.

We should remember that life is a vapor when making business decisions. We should ponder, would my choice cause an undue hardship for others if the vapor of my life were to vanish before I am able to finish what I have started?

We must honor God in all areas of our lives, acknowledging our need of His salvation. Observed by a watching world, we should live above reproach. We need to give glory to God for life and health (or a lack of it); acknowledging that all we have comes from Him. In summary, we must honor God with our bodies and with all our substance (the temporal things of life), realizing that He alone has the right to give and to take away.

Brother David



Halloween Paganism

He sounded incredulous "You do not do anything for Halloween? Why, a third of the people in this country will attend a party. And a little trick or treating for the children is certainly harmless enough. I'm a Christian too."

We might wonder what is so unchristian about Halloween. Perhaps we should inquire if there is anything Christian about it. We know this world contains graveyards, bones, spiders, masks, and costumes; but why the emphasis on these things at this time? What is their common denominator? Where did all this start? Some sources say that Halloween had its origins in the festival of Samhain among the Celts of ancient Britain and Ireland. November 1 marked the end of the summer when the herds were returned from pasture. For some reason, it was also assumed to be the time when the souls of the departed returned to visit their homes. Bonfires were set to lighten their hearth fires for the winter and to frighten away evil spirits. Masks and disguises were worn to avoid recognition by supposed ghosts. Witches, goblins, fairies, and demons eventually came to be associated with the day. It also became a day of divination on matters of marriage, health, and death.

All Saints' Day was established by the Pope in the seventh century. In the following century, perhaps in an effort to supplant the pagan holiday with a

Christian observance, the day was moved to November 1. The evening before All Saints' Day became a "hallowed eve" and, thus, Halloween. The end of the Middle Ages brought the merger of the two holidays, and the Reformation put an end to the holiday among Protestants.

The early American colonists largely forbade the celebration of this holiday until the 1800s when harvest festivals developed and incorporated elements of Halloween. Large numbers of immigrants to America brought their Halloween customs with them. In the twentieth century, Halloween became a popular holiday, especially among children.

This day is associated with activities such as pulling "harmless" pranks. Along with black cats and scary beings, another symbol of this holiday is a hollowed-out pumpkin, carved with a demonic face, and often lit with a candle placed inside.

One belief behind the custom of carving out turnips (later in America, pumpkins) was that it represented a departed soul or a spirit released from purgatory. Another belief was that it represented the soul of a departed man who, legend says, was fit for neither heaven nor hell; therefore he wanders the earth with his light, looking for a final resting place.

Halloween is a celebration of the powers of darkness. "When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee" (Deuteronomy 18:9-12). The Bible places a curse upon witchcraft and fortune telling. "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; witchcraft, . . . revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21).

This day provides an outlet for people's fascination with the occult and the power of the devil. Satan worshipers gather in public and worship their god. The call to come out from the world and to be separate could have no clearer ring than on an occasion like this. "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Ephesians 5:11).

Halloween seems to be a time to take a dare on how close one can get to the devil. Haunted houses, corpses, and talking dead take the mind far from

sobriety and into the realms of the powers of darkness. Getting involved in satanic practices will bring us under the control and deception of the devil. Christians through the ages have had scruples against participation in a celebration such as this. In different eras, efforts have been made to remove this practice or replace it with a more holy observance. The activities of this day, such as partying and prank playing, are not fitting for the New Testament Christian. Nothing about this holiday is upbuilding or helps one to draw closer to God.

In the last few decades, adults have become increasingly obsessed with the observance of this day and use it as another occasion for revelry, immodesty, and drunkenness. But as God's people, we are commanded, "Walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened" (Ephesians 4:17-18). "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:21, 22). As we live by these Scriptural principles, we will separate ourselves and our children from the activities associated with this day.

Is it possible to be caught innocently in a pagan practice? A fall display including pumpkins on the front porch may not mean to us that we are commemorating Halloween. But in the eyes of the world, is our pumpkin really much different from the carved one on their porch? Do they know that we are not celebrating Halloween?

The whole concept behind Halloween involves death, darkness, deception, fear, pagan rituals, and Satan. When we understand that this holiday involves using the trappings of Lucifer's kingdom to pay him homage, we will stay far removed from it.

Brother Brian



Producing Positive Peer Pressure

The effects of negative peer pressure are readily observed, but is there such a thing as positive peer pressure? If so, what is it? We should "consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works" (Hebrews 10:24). The story of Ruth and Naomi is one example of positive peer pressure at work. Friends who help us in our obedience to civil, parental, and church authority; who bolster our separation from the world; and who strengthen our love for God are exerting positive peer pressure.

The title also assumes that we will exert positive peer pressure in those areas where our friends have a standard slightly different from our own—perhaps a practice that is less consistent with Biblical principles or traditional values. For our own spiritual good, this must not be true for most of our friends. Rather, as we relate to our peers, we experience a mix of strengths and weaknesses where each is willing to learn from the other.

POSITIVE

Positive peer pressure will be produced only by those who live out their own Bible-based convictions. Perhaps we have developed convictions regarding the item in question, or we may simply understand the need to obey authority as our convictions develop further. Living out our convictions will mean standing out when we are seemingly the only one in the group who feels this way. At times, others may need our example to boost their own convictions enough to stand with us.

Studying God's Word and hearing His messengers are key elements to developing convictions that help us persevere—even when our friends do not see the need as we see it. If our convictions change easily and are not constant and enduring, we will likely not pass our inspiration along to others.

Positive peer pressure will be produced only by those who see the good in others. We need to understand that we are human and have weaknesses ourselves. We will observe the lives of others from the perspective of finding areas where we could improve ourselves. Like the Bereans, we will compare our observations with the Scriptures to see if they are indeed valid. We must allow these positive pressures to work in our own lives and be willing to adjust our own convictions. If we are not growing spiritually ourselves, we will become weak and exert a negative pressure on others.

Positive peer pressure will be produced only by those who do not let their guards down when they are with a group of friends. Young people may tend to relax when together. Perhaps things are said that are unkind or not entirely true. Individuals may not even really believe what they say, but rather are "testing the water" or trying to build their own "popularity." Others take it as truth. In this way, a few words lead to conversations and finally to actions that everyone regrets later. How much better to think our thoughts through before they become words! We will then have a positive effect on the conversations and actions of the group.

PEER

Positive *peer* pressure will be produced only by those who love their fellow men. This love will not be something that suddenly develops overnight

as our concern for a certain individual grows. Our new "friend" will likely not appreciate the sudden, overwhelming friendship. Consequently, any effort on our part to suddenly exert positive pressure will not have the results we intended. Rather, we must remember to first be friendly to all—"a man that hath friends must shew himself friendly" (Proverbs 18:24). Then we must be constant in our love, for "a friend loveth at all times" (Proverbs 17:17). As we radiate Christ's love to all people, our circle of true friends will grow, and so will our opportunities to be a positive influence to those peers.

Positive *peer* pressure will be produced only by those who really care about their friends' needs—whether physical or spiritual. Paul's friends set an interesting example for us while he was on his way to Rome. "And from thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii forum, and the three taverns: whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage" (Acts 28:15). We will show our interest by asking about current issues in our friends' lives. This indicates both that we are thinking about them and that we intend to help where we can. We should not view this information as a juicy tidbit to be spread to those who will only pass it along in the same manner. We will also understand that we have needs that our friends can fill, and we should relate to them accordingly. If we act as though our friends have nothing to offer us, they will get the message, move on, and find a circle of friends (whether good friends or bad) where they do feel needed.

PRESSURE

Positive peer *pressure* will be gentle. "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient" (2 Timothy 2:24). "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17). Sharpening is also done a little at a time. If too much pressure is applied when sharpening, excessive heat will result. How true this is in human relationships! We cannot push our convictions onto others who have no interest in listening. When we sense a closed door, it is time to stop talking. We must understand that our actions speak louder than our words and that patient, consistent example may accomplish what argument cannot.

Peer *pressure* often effects greater change when it is constant and consistent rather than radical. The devil takes people on a downward course one little step at a time so slowly that they hardly realize what is happening. If someone among us were to suddenly promote a large change that is not in accordance to God's Word, we would resist steadfastly. However,

sometimes an individual will promote very small, negative changes, and many more people are drawn away.

Positive peer *pressure* works in a similar way. As growing Christians, we should certainly be open to positive change. Major adjustments are at times necessary. But in the routines of everyday living, most positive changes are made in small steps as we observe the practical outworking in the life of a friend.

Positive peer *pressure* is strong when "a word [is] spoken in due season." A friend may ask our opinion on a given issue or perhaps we otherwise sense an openness to discuss something. Then it is our duty to "earnestly contend for the faith." Perhaps only a few words are needed to turn the tide in a negative conversation. Even then, brotherly love and humility must be predominant, because after all, we do not always have the right answer!

Positive and negative peer pressures are both very real forces. We should deliberately choose to be an uplifting influence. Whether intentionally or subconsciously, we will exert a pressure—negative or positive—upon our peers. Because both we and our friends are human, our endeavor to exert a positive peer pressure may not always produce the desired results. This is not an excuse to give up—it is a reason to go to the Lord for guidance in all we do and say.

Brother Ernest



Church Committee Report

The Child Care Committee

The Child Care Committee received its commission from the MMM and was organized in the fall of 1980. The charter members were Eby Burkholder, Henry Weaver, Melvin Kurtz, Lester Boll, Mervin Leaman, and Elvin Graybill, Sr.

The work of this Committee is a labor of love, an interest in the souls of children. As society around us deteriorates, the choices of self-seeking parents leave behind a stream of neglected children. Sometimes circumstances beyond a parent's control leave him unable to fulfill his responsibilities. While the Child Care Committee does not have a printed mission statement, the work of the Committee has been to provide a godly home for children who need a home, and to provide the counseling and framework in which to do this. The children we assist usually come from outside our circles.

The work of foster parents is also a labor of love. It is a demanding work, as well as a rewarding work. The full rewards will be realized only in eternity.

As the Committee approaches its thirty-five-year mark, we want to acknowledge the selfless labors of those who have contributed to this work for many years. The last two charter members ended their service in recent years. Brother Eby's direct involvement ended in the fall of 2011, and Brother Lester has just ended his many years of service as his slot has been filled by the recent election of Brother David. Those of us who are newer to the work desire to understand and appreciate the vision that brought this work into existence.

In the thirty-year period from its formation in 1980 through 2010 an average of between three and four children per year have been placed in our homes. In the five years since then, only one new child has been placed. This has raised some questions. What are the reasons for this decline? Should we be changing our approach in any way? Are there related fields of service in which we should be involving ourselves?

The Committee has maintained the policy that we do not solicit children. Leads are developed through existing cases as well as community contacts by our church families.

One need that continues to knock at our doors is assistance for parents in our own circles who are struggling with youth who have behavioral issues. The Family Support Committee was formed in 2009 with this need in mind. As they worked in this field, this committee concluded that the most pressing need was a facility for troubled boys and young men. This gave rise to the Liberty Ridge Farm, (LRF) and the Family Support Committee became the Liberty Ridge Farm Committee.

With the full scope of this work on their shoulders, the LRF Committee has reached out to our Committee for additional associate support. This would involve providing advice and direction in an attempt to meet the needs of individuals while remaining in their own homes, and assisting with securing host homes as the need arises. While much of this is done and should continue to be done on a local congregational level, we realize that at times these needs can overwhelm local resources. The LRF Committee is also reaching out for associate support in giving follow-up structure and accountability to the young men who leave that facility.

Certainly we need the Lord's blessing and direction in all of this. Our efforts many times seem inadequate, but we want to continue do what we can as we consider the worth of each soul—those within as well as those out-

side our church communities. Pray for us as we seek to fill our place in helping souls to heaven.

Brother Nathan For the Child Care Committee



First Things (Part 4)

The Importance of Right Relationships

"Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:24).

Tap, tap. Brother Aaron looked up from his Sunday school book to see the kindly face of his minister leaning over his shoulder. "Let's step outside the church. I want to speak with you," he said.

The year was 1968, and the young congregation was having Communion service. "Brother Aaron, it was pointed out to me that there is a feud between you and your son-in-law. You have made very unchristian remarks to him. This needs to be addressed," the minister admonished.

Aaron hung his head. He knew it was true. He did not take Communion that Sunday, but after the service, he made reconciliation. Peace was restored. Within four months, Aaron suddenly died of a blood clot. At his funeral, his minister said, "We thought Aaron was preparing to live, but now we know he was preparing to die."

This sobering but true story certainly illustrates the truth of Jesus' teaching. Even if you are next in line at the altar, leave! First make reconciliation. Aaron needed to put things in the right order, too. God will not accept sacrifice from a heart that still cherishes ill feelings and refuses to make proper acknowledgments.

Christians at times need to settle differences and wrongs between themselves. How? Go with a spirit of humility, love, and forgiveness. Acknowledge your own humanness. Keep your emotions Spirit-controlled. Be optimistic; the goal is to gain your brother. Go now; "to obey is better than sacrifice." Do it privately; "tell him his fault between thee and him alone."

Reconciliation is not optional in the brotherhood; it is imperative. If my ungodly neighbor steals my firewood, I must maintain. Christian love and nonresistance toward him. I may or may not speak to him of firewood. But if my brother in the church steals my firewood, then I have an obligation to help him see his error. The brotherly address is not intended to spitefully

straighten out an offender but to restore him to usefulness in the Lord. Whether or not I get my firewood back is beside the point.

Young people, beware! It is tempting to think that an offensive person can be detoured. "I have enough other friends that suit me. I just won't talk to him at church. He doesn't seem to need me, so I don't need him either." But the Bible teaches a better way. First leave the altar of sacrifice and be reconciled. Then remember—your gift is still waiting at the altar.

—*Brother John*



PRAYER POINT

*"The effectual fervent prayer
of a righteous man availeth much"*

Pray "that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men." The increasingly aggressive support for sinful social practices brings the people of God into a direct line of conflict with the world. Pray that God would "keep [us] from evil."

Pray for the newly ordained brethren as they assume their God-given responsibilities. The future of the church is certainly related to the perpetuation of strong, faithful leadership in the rising generation. Pray also for the faithfulness of the families of the ministry.

Pray for godly wisdom and Scriptural unity in relating to the continuing issue of modern technology. Certainly the open Internet is too dangerous for our use. Pray that the Lord would direct in the ongoing spiritual welfare of the church.

Thank the Lord for the "fellowship of . . . saints." Our public assemblies provide much spiritual inspiration as we meet with believers of "like precious faith." We should treasure this privilege above all other social or business relationships.

