



It's Time for a Relational Reformation

by Adam Ormord

“Every five hundred years, give or take a decade or two, Western culture...goes through a time of enormous upheaval, a time in which essentially every part of it is reconfigured”¹
(Phyllis Tickle)

Within the past two weeks I've had the opportunity to engage in conversation with two authors who are greatly impacting the local church. First, we welcomed Winn Collier, author of *“A Burning In My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson”* to the Colorado front range for two evenings of discussion on the life and legacy of Eugene Peterson. Pastors, ministry leaders, spiritual directors, formational practitioners, and many others gathered together with a shared desire to be encouraged, strengthened, and challenged to live and serve out of a healthy relationship *with* God and others.

Pastor Peterson wasn't perfect, as his biography gently unpacks, but his devotion to God, as well as his commitment to a *particular* people, provide a blueprint for relational ministry which is needed now more than ever. One particular question asked of Winn Collier really resonated in my soul: “What is the biggest threat today to our *long obedience in the same direction?*” Winn's ever-thoughtful response hung in the atmosphere like a heavy morning fog, *“ambition and boredom.”* Those were Eugene Peterson's words, according to Collier. As he slowly and carefully unpacked his answer even further, Winn added, *“broken hearts, losing heart, and a desire to please others.”*

Can you feel the relational loss expressed in those words? The lack of life-giving relationships in so many of our communities, our churches, our world, even within our own homes, is causing us to lose heart and become bored. We're willing to pursue something - anything - in order to triage our broken hearts. For lack of being truly known and 'listened back to life,' we're trading our souls for magic beans, hoping that the ensuing adventure will spark meaning and satisfy our longing to be truly seen. But apart from God, we always come up short.

One week after spending time with Winn Collier, I had the opportunity to sit in on another conversation, this time with Michel Hendricks, co-author of *“The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation.”* This intimate, living room gathering was the ideal setting to discuss why loving relationships are so critical in the transformation of our character.

When talking about how our brain is designed to *‘look for a bigger brain,’* (ie. how a baby forms emotional resilience when attaching to a nurturing caregiver), Hendricks explained, *“We put effort into the relationships that form our character. We cannot form our character directly.”* The Church, for the last five hundred years or so, has

¹ Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Michigan: Baker Books, 2012), 17.



emphasized changing our thinking, with the expectation that “*new thinking produces new behavior.*”² How’s that working out for us? As important as correct thinking may be, Hendricks points out that an informed understanding of how our brains *actually* work means that we cannot overlook “*more dominant drivers of character change.*”³ What we need is a “*relational reformation.*”

*“The right brain integrates our life, including our connection to loved ones, our bodies, our surroundings, our emotions, our identities, and our community. Character formation flows out of these connections. The right brain processes these questions: Who is happy to see me here? What do I feel right now? Is there anyone here who understands me? How do I act like myself right now? What do my people do in this situation? The answers to these questions drive our character development.”*⁴

Make no mistake, when we talk about the right brain and character development, we’re actually talking about discipleship in the way of Jesus - the formation of Christ in us, which is precisely what the Apostle Paul longed to see lived out in the context of *relationships* among his adopted family in the Kingdom of God. “*Do you know how I feel right now, and will feel until Christ’s life becomes visible in your lives? Like a mother in the pain of childbirth.*” (Galatians 4:19, The Message)

Here is where we find ourselves. Sensing the winds of change. Recognizing the wave of the Spirit of God. Exploring God’s design for how we are truly transformed from the inside out. Charting a new course on a journey toward Christlikeness forged in authentic relationships. Dallas Willard was presenting at the 2013 *Knowing Christ Today* conference in California when he prophetically said, “***I think that we are coming into a time when many churches and leaders, and Christians who aren’t in leadership positions, will say, ‘It’s all about discipleship and transformation into Christlikeness.’***”⁵ The time has come.

In this defining moment, we *stand at the crossroads, look, ask for the ancient paths*, and pay attention to what we’re paying attention to (*see Jeremiah 6:16*). God is inviting us into genuine *relational rest* - a settling of our souls - as we are truly seen, heard, known, and loved into well-being; not just by God, but by one another.

This is not a slick new program with promises of quick results. This is a relational reformation.

Will we walk in it?

² Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation* (Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2020), 28.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Dallas Willard and John Ortberg, *Living in Christ’s Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Christian Audio, 2014)