

STANDING TOGETHER

A PERSONAL
REFLECTION FROM
TOM PRICKETT

THE AMAZING OLD-GROWTH trees in the forests along the northern coast of California literally took my breath away. I had never seen redwood trees before, except maybe in an encyclopedia. Craning my neck to peer toward the tree tops, I quickly realized that angle could not be maintained for very long without hurting my neck! Still, I couldn't stop myself from staring upward.

MY KNOWLEDGE ABOUT redwood trees up to that moment was based mainly on what I had read during my east coast upbringing. I remember thinking, If you could move one redwood to New York and plant it in your front yard, people would come from miles around to see it. You might even decide to build a fence around it and charge admission! However, your lone tree probably would have real problems with the snow and freezing winter temperatures common to New York. It seems evident that God knew where the redwoods would grow best, so we had better leave them where they are.

A BIT OF research on redwood trees reveals that these tallest of trees upon earth can live to be 2,000 years old and grow close to 400 feet in height. Just to put that number in perspective, that is taller than the Statue of Liberty from base of her pedestal to the tip of her torch! Redwoods grow together for a reason—essentially for protection from the kinds of catastrophes that come to trees. They have a shallow root system, and without nearby trees around to protect them from the wind, they would fall down. They need one another for support in their upward growth.

ANOTHER KIND OF growing is described in 2 Peter 3:18, where we read, "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." On my journey through the redwood forests of California, I noticed an unusual feeling while standing among those gigantic trees. It was like a special environment had been created just for them. Could our spiritual growth be enhanced by the right environment? It seems reasonable to assume that it could.

WHERE WOULD YOU expect to find a spiritual environment where you could thrive as a believer? Would it be where you worship God with others who love the Lord as you do? God

meets His people in church. True, He is with His people wherever they may be, but when believers get together to worship God in spirit and in truth, He is there. We read in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

NOTICE THAT IN the New Testament, Christians are always identified with other Christians. The images used to describe this relationship between the followers of Christ are a *body* and a *family*, united together with Christ as the head. Being part of the church is not joining an organization like we might join a civic or social institution. It is a much closer bond; we are essentially connected to other believers. Almost 250 times in the New Testament, Christians are called "brother," "sister," or "brethren," even though they were from different cultures, backgrounds, and races. It did not matter what their status was in this world because they were related to each other in Jesus Christ (see Galatians 3:26-28).

THE MIGHTY REDWOODS stand century after century, keeping at their never-ending task of holding each other up. They break the force of the wind through a team effort, just by keeping rank. As members of the Church—the Body of Christ—let's picture ourselves standing side by side with members of our church family, supporting and sustaining one another. To be a part of the Body of Christ may be the single most important thing we can do, for the end result is that the unit functions as it should.

WHAT ARE SOME ways we can do our part as a member of this spiritual unit? The first and most obvious way is to make a concerted effort to be in God's house regularly, in company with other members of the same body. Our very presence indicates that our church is important to us. When the Bible speaks of believers worshiping, in nearly all cases, they were worshiping *together* (see Acts 2:42; James 2:2). This isn't to say that we can't meet with God alone in our cars or our homes—of course we can! However, we are directly instructed not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is . . ." (Hebrews 10:25). There is a reason for that admonition; we need each other.

WE CAN HELP each other by faithfully performing our church-related responsibilities, even if our tasks are not particularly glorious or

highly visible. Someone has to vacuum the church and weed the flowerbeds occasionally. Our dedication can be an inspiration and encouragement to others "growing" around us. Plus, we will be setting a good example for younger generations coming along!

WE CAN ACTIVELY be involved in helping each other to grow in faith. Paul told the saints at Thessalonica, "Wherefore comfort [encourage] yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). An affirming word at just the right moment may make the difference for someone who is wavering in his or her faith.

WE CAN BE alert to needs within our church family, and offer assistance when we are able. In the Early Church, fellow Christians cared for each other's physical needs (Acts 9:36, 39), financial needs (Acts 4:32-35), emotional needs (Romans 12:15), and spiritual needs (Ephesians 4:12). Everything we have has been granted by God, so we should be willing to offer of ourselves and our resources to others.

CERTAINLY WE SHOULD support our brothers and sisters when they face difficulties. The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Galatia, "Bear ye one another's burdens." In other words, be available to those who are hurting. Be just a phone call away with an "I'll meet you for coffee and we can talk about it." We may provide the extra stability that person needs when facing the winds of adversity. Remember, Christians are described as a *body* and a *family*. If your body and family are functioning correctly, pain is felt and taken care of.

IF I EVER return to the redwoods, no doubt they will appear exactly as I saw them the first time. They will express to me the stability I first saw, continuous and unchanging. When we enter a church of God's people, we feel the same stability. We know we can depend on our brothers and sisters in Christ to be there, doing their part, even in a world full of change and turmoil. What a wonderful and God-designed support system!

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