

When *the* Church  
Was a Family



# When *the* Church Was a Family

Recapturing Jesus' Vision  
*for* Authentic  
Christian Community

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## INTRODUCTION

**S**piritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community. People who remain connected with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in self-understanding, and they mature in their ability to relate in healthy ways to God and to their fellow human beings. This is especially the case for those courageous Christians who stick it out through the often messy process of interpersonal discord and conflict resolution. Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay also grow.

People who leave do not grow. We all know people who are consumed with spiritual wanderlust. But we never get to know them very well because they cannot seem to stay put. They move along from church to church, ever searching for a congregation that will better satisfy their felt needs. Like trees repeatedly transplanted from soil to soil, these spiritual nomads fail to put down roots and seldom experience lasting and fruitful growth in their Christian lives.

Then there are those who leave to avoid working through uncomfortable or painful relations with others in the church family. Running away does provide immediate relief from the awkwardness of a hurtful relationship. It is the easy way out in the short term, and there are legitimate reasons to leave a local church. But people who leave to escape the hard work of conflict resolution are often destined to repeat the cycle of relational dysfunction with another person in another church somewhere else in town.

It is a simple but profound biblical reality that we both grow and thrive together or we do not grow much at all. None of this is terribly novel. We all know it to be the case. So why do we so often sabotage our most intimate relationships, seek help from others only after the damage is irreversible, and continue to try to find

our way through life as isolated individuals, convinced somehow that God will remain with us to lead us and bless us wherever we go? Why do we continue foolishly to operate as if our own immediate happiness is of greater value than the redemptive relationships God has placed us in? Why are we seemingly unable to stay in relationships, stay in a community, and grow in the interpersonal contexts that God has provided for our temporal and eternal well-being?

I count myself blessed to serve on the pastoral team of a vibrant Christian church. We consistently emphasize the inviolable maxim that spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community, and we have in place an extensive support and accountability network designed to help our people grow in their abilities to relate to others in a healthy way both at home and in the church.

Our fellowship is average in size: some four hundred persons of all ages attend on a given Sunday. But not a month goes by in which the pastor-elders are not summoned to intervene in some kind of interpersonal crisis among the members of our church family.

Sadly, much of our intervention has little lasting effect upon the health of the relationships involved. In spite of the counsel and support provided by our leadership team and others in the congregation, people in crisis frequently insist on going it alone—following their individualistic, often self-destructive pathways. Roberta's pilgrimage is but one example of such behavior.

### *Roberta's Story*

Roberta (not her real name) is a bright woman in her forties with a highly charged emotional attachment to Jesus. Roberta loves to sing in church, and her passion for worship infuses those around her with a desire to know God more deeply. Unfortunately, Roberta's family background has set her on an apparently irreversible course to relational confusion and heartache. After a failed marriage, Roberta lived with a sister for more than a decade, spending hours each week involved in various charitable causes. The sister's death brought to the surface a host of family and financial crises.

Roberta's grief process was highly intensified due to years of dysfunctional family relationships. She was dangerously despondent. It was clear to us that Roberta needed outside help in order to gain a proper perspective on herself and the world around her. Roberta's current money problems were only the latest in a history of such fiscal fiascoes, suddenly intensified by a squabble with her surviving siblings over their sister's estate.

Roberta is loved and highly appreciated by our church family. Our leaders sincerely desired to do something tangible to help Roberta get on her feet again, both emotionally and economically. We offered to meet the most pressing financial needs immediately. But we knew that our assistance would benefit Roberta only if accompanied by several nonnegotiable conditions.

We informed Roberta that the money would be hers if she met three conditions. (1) She would see our staff therapist (initially at the church's expense) on a weekly basis in order to find short-term support and guidance in dealing with the loss of her sister. (2) She would meet with a financial adviser who is a member of our congregation (again, *pro bono*) to come up with a game plan to dig herself out of debt. (3) She would agree to attend church regularly and partner with others in the church family in some area of ministry.

What we asked of Roberta was really quite straightforward: relational accountability. We challenged Roberta to quit trying to find her way through life as an isolated individual and, instead, to take advantage of the guidance, community, and accountability offered by her brothers and sisters in the family of God. Only in this way would Roberta begin to grow up to become the healthy person God had designed her to be.

Roberta declined our offer and rejected our advice. Like many people in our churches, she chose to chart her own course and to bear her pain alone rather than to integrate herself into the body of Christ through the vehicle of strong relational accountability. We no longer see Roberta at Oceanside Christian Fellowship anymore.

### *American Individualism and a Church in Crisis*

A story like Roberta's impacts more than just the individual involved; it takes its toll on a whole church family. On more than one occasion I spent a great deal of time with Roberta on the phone as the above crisis unfolded. We also dedicated an hour or so of our elder board's precious meeting time in our efforts to carefully craft the three conditions (see above) for the financial assistance that she requested.

We have free assistance available through professional counselors and financial planners who are graciously willing to donate their time. And we have a church body ready to receive and encourage anyone willing to embrace our oversight and our guidelines. But Roberta benefited from none of these resources since she foolishly chose to sort out her problems on her own, apart from input from her brothers and sisters in Christ. And we are all the worse for it.

It is tempting to dismiss relational crises like Roberta's as personal expressions of individual sin and selfishness. But the increasing tendency of persons in our churches to make wrong-headed life decisions, and to make them in isolation from the broader church family, demands a more nuanced explanation. Personal sin and selfishness have been around since Adam. Why the marked increase in relational breakdown in our society and in our churches today?

I suggest that it is the unique orientation of Western culture—especially contemporary American society—that best explains our propensity to abandon, rather than work through, the awkward and painful relationships we so often find ourselves in. Social scientists have a label for the pervasive cultural orientation of modern American society that makes it so difficult for us to stay connected and grow together in community with one another. They call it *radical individualism*. What this amounts to is simple enough. We in America have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group—our church or our family, for example—to which we belong. The immediate needs of the individual are more important than the long-term health of the group. So we leave and withdraw, rather than stay and grow up, when the going gets rough in the church or in the home.

The influence that our radically individualistic worldview exerts on American evangelical Christians goes a long way to explain the struggles we face to keep relationships together. The incessant failure of marriage after marriage, along with the repeated unwillingness of persons to stay in the local church in order to grow through relational conflict, are only in part due to individual sin and selfishness. Broader cultural values are in play.

Our culture has powerfully socialized us to believe that personal happiness and fulfillment should take precedence over the connections we have with others in both our families and our churches. So we run from the painful but redemptive relationships God has placed us in. The tune of radical individualism has been playing in our ears at full volume for decades. We are dancing to the music with gusto. And it is costing us dearly.

### *A Different Approach to Interpersonal Relationships*

By contrast, nearly all other societies throughout history have been (and continue to be) collectivist in their view of the world. Most persons who have lived on planet earth have simply assumed that the good of the individual should take a back seat to the good of the group, whether that group is a family, a village, or a religious community. People who have been socialized to embrace this “group

comes first” mentality are convinced that such an arrangement is in their best interest even at the individual level. So they stay the course when the going gets tough.

For those of us who are new to cultural analysis, perhaps an illustration will help. Nowhere are the differences between the individualist and the collectivist or strong-group approach to society more obvious than in the area of decision making. Two young women, fellow students at a Christian university, found themselves comparing the marriage strategies of their respective cultures. One was an American, the other a student from Iran. The discussion was hardly academic since the Iranian student was looking ahead to an upcoming summer wedding when she would marry a man whom her parents had picked out for her many years before.

The young Iranian bride barely knows her future husband. The American girl is astounded. “How can you let your parents marry you to a man you do not even know?” the American asked. She then proceeded to extol Western marriage strategies and the freedom she had to choose her own spouse. The young Iranian woman was equally amazed. “How can *you* act independently of your parents and contract a marriage which may not contribute to the long-term well-being of your extended family?” she replied.

The cultural distinctives are clear, and so are the different priorities. In choosing a spouse, we in America place the highest value upon our own personal fulfillment and happiness. Marriage is the place, first and foremost, to meet the relational needs of the individuals involved. This can only occur if we have the freedom to choose a mate.

The Iranian woman, like others around the world from traditional societies, had been raised to believe quite the opposite, namely, that the honor and health of the group—in this case her family—should take priority over her own freedom and over her personal satisfaction in a marriage relationship. Accordingly, she was quite content to sacrifice her freedom to choose a mate for the good of her extended family.

Ironically, the Iranian bride will likely end up just as happily married as her American counterpart. One jokester explained it this way: in traditional societies a man’s parents choose his wife, and he does not know who she is until after the marriage; and even though the custom in America is completely different, the end result is often exactly the same!

Various approaches to decision making helpfully reveal the radical differences between the mind-set of traditional societies and the “American way,” and not just

in the area of courtship. Americans clearly relish the freedoms we have to make decisions in all the key areas of our lives. We are generally free to decide *what* we are going to do with our lives (vocation), *who* we are going to do life with (marriage), and *where* we are going to do it (place of residence).

People in traditional, strong-group cultures typically make none of these decisions in isolation. They are made within the context of the family or village community, and the well-being of that family or village takes center stage as the final arbiter in the decision-making process.

I am hardly naive enough to suggest that modern Americans ought to return to the extended family systems of generations ago. We hold on tenaciously to our hard-won personal freedoms. But we must recognize that we have paid a tremendous emotional and spiritual price to be released from the cultural shackles reflected in the strong-group values of our ancestors.

The Robertas in our American evangelical churches are not making foolish and destructive decisions due solely to individual stubbornness and sin. The issue is much broader than this. It has to do with the way in which we have been culturally programmed to view the world around us.

Our uniquely individualistic approach toward life and relationships, so characteristic of American society, subtly yet certainly sets us up for failure in our efforts to stay and grow in the context of the often difficult but redemptive relationships that God has provided for us. Radical individualism has affected our whole way of viewing the Christian faith, and it has profoundly compromised the solidarity of our relational commitments to one another.

### *Recapturing the Relational Power of Early Christianity*

The cultural outlook of the ancient world generated a markedly different approach to interpersonal relationships. The world in which Jesus and His followers lived was a distinctly strong-group culture in which the health of the group—not the needs of the individual—received first priority. And the most important group for persons in the ancient world was the family. It is hardly accidental that the New Testament writers chose the concept of family as the central social metaphor to describe the kind of interpersonal relationships that were to characterize those early Christian communities. There is, in fact, no better way to come to grips with the spiritual and relational poverty of American individualism than to compare our way of doing things with the strong-group, surrogate family relations of early Christianity. This is the central focus of this book.

The New Testament picture of the church as a family flies in the face of our individualistic cultural orientation. God's intention is not to become the feel-good Father of a myriad of isolated individuals who appropriate the Christian faith as yet another avenue toward personal enlightenment. Nor is the biblical Jesus to be conceived of as some sort of spiritual mentor whom we can happily take from church to church, or from marriage to marriage, fully assured that our personal Savior will somehow bless and redeem our destructive relational choices every step of the way.

You may be surprised to discover that the expression "personal Savior" occurs nowhere in the pages of Scripture. We will encounter other surprises in our discussion, some of which will encourage us to reconsider traditional and long-held ways of viewing the Christian faith. It is my intention to demonstrate that our radical overemphasis on a personal relationship with God is an American—not a biblical—theological construction. What we find in the Bible, rather, is a God who seems at least as concerned with His group (me in relationship with my brothers and sisters in Christ) as He is with the individual (me in relationship with God).

Consider Paul's perspective. In his letters, Paul refers to Jesus as "*our* Lord"—that is, as the Lord of God's group—53 times. Only once, in contrast, does the expression "*my* Lord" appear in Paul's writings (Phil 3:8). This speaks volumes about the priorities of the great apostle. Paul's overarching concern in his ministry went far beyond the personal spiritual pilgrimages of his individual converts. Paul's driving passion was to establish spiritually vibrant, relationally healthy *communities* of believers in strategic urban settings throughout the Roman Empire.

Until we get this straight, the Robertas of American Christianity, along with their churches, will repeatedly suffer the debilitating effects of the culture of radical individualism, as it continues to sabotage our most precious interpersonal relationships. We must embrace the fact that our value system has been shaped by a worldview that is diametrically opposed to the outlook of the early Christians and to the teachings of Scripture. As church-going Americans, we have been socialized to believe that our individual fulfillment and our personal relationship with God are more important than any connection we might have with our fellow human beings, whether in the home or in the church. We have, in a most subtle and insidious way, been conformed to this world.

There is great hope, however, for profound transformation. God's vision for community, as reflected in the lives of the early Christians, offers a powerful antidote to the relational ills that so often characterize the lives of modern evangelicals. We need to exercise a degree of cultural sophistication in order to distance

ourselves from our own perspective and to embrace the very different values of the early Christian church. Comparing the New Testament church with contemporary Christianity necessarily involves a significant conceptual leap both culturally and theologically.

Therefore, some of what follows will be challenging reading, but a cross-cultural excursion of this sort is absolutely indispensable. Before we can return to the twenty-first century to address the practical people issues of everyday life in evangelical America, we must gain a new understanding of the very different strong-group values of the early Christians. Only then will we be properly equipped to recapture Jesus' vision for authentic Christian community.

### *Is This Book for You?*

It is probably too late to ask that question. You have already bought or borrowed a copy from someone. But it might help to know that I have designed the book for two primary groups of church leaders and leaders-in-training.

#### *Traditional Church Leaders*

Many of us serve as church leaders in a traditional congregational environment, or perhaps we are in seminary being trained for such a role. Our churches own buildings, craft budgets, employ paid staff, and regard the Sunday service as our primary community gathering. If this description of church sounds familiar to you, then consider yourself a key part of my target audience, whether you are a paid pastor or a volunteer church leader.

A good portion of those who serve the institutional church sorely recognize the need for renewal and reform in the way we do ministry. Our programs are tired, our services have often become repetitive and nonengaging, and—most notably—we increasingly struggle to keep our people connected with one another in ongoing networks of mutual support and accountability.

We tried for a season to play the consumer game by appealing to our people's felt needs through programs such as "Three Keys to a Healthy Marriage" and "How to Find Success at Work." You have surely heard the sermons, and you may very well have preached them yourself. The spiritual bankruptcy of consumer Christianity has become quite clear in retrospect. Indeed, it has completely backfired where the cultivation of community is concerned. The "let us meet your needs" approach to marketing the church, which became so popular among baby boomers in the 1980s and 1990s, has only served further to socialize our people to "prefer a variety of church experiences, rather than getting the most out of all

that a single church has to offer.”<sup>1</sup> This hardly encourages lasting Christian community, so we continue to long for genuine renewal.

I trust that those of you who are attempting to revitalize an existing congregation’s values and structures will find in this book a promising vision for church as God intended it. But I must caution you in advance to prepare yourself for an acute paradigm shift. A return to the community orientation of early Christianity requires much more than a slight course correction in our weekly programming or the addition of another line item to the church budget.

Contextualizing New Testament social values in our congregations requires us to significantly revise the way that we conceive of church. And there will inevitably be a cost to pay as leaders. For as is generally the case during seasons of renewal, those of us who have the most invested in “church as it is” will inevitably be called upon to sacrifice more than others in order to liberate our people to experience “church as it was” during the New Testament era.

### *Emerging Church Visionaries*

My second target audience consists of another group of church leaders who are passionate about renewal among the people of God. I have in mind here the creative, disparate collection of pioneers who are giving guidance to a movement known as the emerging church.

This phenomenon involves believers from a variety of denominational and theological traditions, and each emerging church is unique in one way or another. But one thing these communities share in common is the conviction that the kind of change God desires is so systemic in nature that it cannot occur within the context of traditional church structures and practices. So our emerging brothers and sisters have left the institutional church to try their hand at church renewal outside the system.

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger have recently produced a highly informative overview of emerging church thinking and practice. The authors surveyed dozens of young (and not so young) leaders, and they summarized the values of the movement in terms of three “core practices” that they found common to each emerging church.<sup>2</sup> One of the three core practices Gibbs and Bolger identify relates directly to the theme of the book you are reading. That value is “living as community.” Authentic community constitutes a bedrock priority for emerging Christianity.

Brad Cecil, a leader associated with the emerging church Axxess in Arlington, Texas, distinguishes sharply between the consumer strategies that character-

<sup>1</sup> G. Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Waco: Word, 1998), 18–19.

<sup>2</sup> E. Gibbs and R. Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 43–44.

ize certain expressions of institutional Christianity and the relational agenda that drives his own church vision:

We are not interested in short-term relationships or meeting a person's needs or functioning as a spiritual vendor for people. Rather, we want to be a community of people committed to sharing life together.

The shift in priorities directly impacts the way in which Cecil and his peers measure progress and growth in the church:

We don't desire growth for growth's sake but rather a community that grows slowly through natural introductions. We don't measure our success by numeric growth. We have decided to measure by other means, such as, How long do relationships last? Are members of the community at peace with one another? Are relationships reconciled?<sup>3</sup>

One encounters similar sentiments throughout the literature produced by emerging church thinkers. The cultivation of lasting community is at the very heart of emerging Christianity's renewal project.

In fact, Gibbs and Bolger reflect rather extensively on a specific expression of Christian community, one that has captured the imagination of numerous emerging church leaders: the idea that the church is a family. The authors devote a whole section of their chapter about community in the emerging church to the theme "A Family, Not an Institution." They insightfully observe,

Emerging churches pursue the "new family" practices as modeled by Jesus and his followers, and their embodied way of life operates similarly to the life of an extended family. . . . If a church begins to look like a family, then all its institutional practices will undergo change. Church as family is primarily about relationships. It is not about meetings, events, or structures. Such rubric questions do not make sense when discussing relational issues.<sup>4</sup>

I applaud the longings for authentic community that characterize the values of emerging Christianity. And I have no problem with our emerging brothers and sisters seeking to actualize Jesus' vision for community beyond the boundaries of the institutional church. If you consider yourself part of the emerging church, I trust you will encounter in the pages of this book a kindred spirit who shares your desire to recapture the relational values and practices of the ancient Christian church.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 99.

<sup>4</sup> Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 97.

But I suspect that you will also be challenged by what you are about to read. Renewal movements have historically tended to emphasize church practice and the various expressions of the Christian life, while giving less attention to careful theological reflection and lessons learned from church history. This scenario is playing itself out all over again among certain expressions of emerging Christianity.

For all the preoccupation in the emerging church with culture and cultural studies, it remains the case that certain aspects of postmodernism—religious pluralism, tolerance, and moral relativism—have the potential to hijack this wonderfully promising expression of renewal in Western Christianity. Apparently even those of us who attempt to be most sensitive to current trends and thinking are not immune to the seductive influences of the dominant culture.

For example, one uncovers a number of highly problematic observations among the otherwise insightful and illuminating musing of the emerging church participants cited in the Gibbs and Bolger survey. One group in the UK invited a Buddhist to instruct their church about Buddhist approaches to prayer: “We didn’t talk to him about the differences between our faiths. We didn’t try to convert him. He was welcomed and fully included and was really pleased to have been invited.”<sup>5</sup> Other expressions of emerging Christianity engage in the questionable practice of dispensing entirely with all forms of recognized leadership.

To their credit, emerging Christians exhibit an ongoing fascination with the ancient Christian church. And so they should. For the early Christians enjoyed all the relational integrity for which the emerging church so desperately longs. Ancient Christianity owed much of its social capital, however, to an intentionally structured approach to leadership and to distinct social boundaries between genuine believers and those who claimed to be brothers but were not behaving like Christians.

Unbelievers were not simply assimilated into the early church with their pagan religious beliefs and practices intact. Paul intended for the unbeliever who was welcomed into the midst of a house church in Corinth to have a rather different experience than the Buddhist guest at the emerging church in the UK. Paul longed for him to be “convicted by all . . . judged by all. The secrets of his heart will be revealed, and as a result he will fall down on his face and worship God, proclaiming, ‘God is really among you’” (1 Cor 14:24–25).

To be sure, the early Christians were socially inclusive—and remarkably so. But they sacrificed their very lives to maintain the ideological exclusivity of their loyalty to Jesus. None of these characteristics of early Christianity sits particu-

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

larly well with emerging Christians whose socialization into postmodern culture has rendered them irretrievably jaded and suspicious about matters such as truth claims, recognized leadership, and community boundaries.

We are reminded once again that we must take care to complement the passionate practice of the Christian faith with ongoing historical and theological reflection. Fortunately, the more insightful practitioners of emerging Christianity readily acknowledge as much. They desire to retain all of the best that the early Christians had to offer.

Wise leaders recognize that the false dichotomy we often erect between belief and behavior will ultimately undermine the long-term viability of any expression of the Christian faith—emergent or otherwise. D. Kimball observed that “everything we do in church is a reflection of what we theologically believe, whether we are consciously aware of it or not.” Kimball is determined to help his people “consider how theology impacts what they do and practice.”<sup>6</sup>

To the Kimballs of the emerging church I offer this book as my attempt to provide a fledgling movement with some biblical and historical moorings where Christian community is concerned. We have all the resources necessary in the New Testament and in other early Christian literature to erect a robust theology of community on the bedrock of early Christian convictions and social practice. The result will be the kind of community that will satisfy the relational longings of both traditional church leaders and our emerging brothers and sisters. It is to that project that we now turn.

<sup>6</sup> D. Kimball, prepublication manuscript cited by R. S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 72.

## Chapter One

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### THE GROUP COMES FIRST

*At these [temple] sacrifices prayers for the welfare of the community must take precedence over those for ourselves; for we are born for fellowship, and he who sets his claims above his private interests is specially acceptable to God.*

(Josephus, *Contra Apion* 2.197)

**T**he movie *Titanic* went down in history as one of the costliest and most lucrative films ever produced. The epic production also won eleven Oscars. Moviegoers sat utterly spellbound by the \$200 million worth of special effects and attention to detail. Among the technological marvels that garnered the film the award for Best Visual Effects was a near-perfect 1/20 scale replica of the *Titanic*. But visual fireworks alone did not propel *Titanic* to the center stage of the 1998 Academy Awards. Only a simple but powerful love story could do that, and the love story from the movie *Titanic* colorfully illustrates what happens when our Western individualistic relational priorities collide with the values of more traditional societies.

The interaction between *Titanic*'s main characters, Jack and Rose, epitomizes Western romance at its best. Jack is a scrappy but charming street kid who is on the great ship only because he won a boarding pass in a poker game. Rose belongs to the upper echelon of British society. She is engaged to be married to a man from her own social stratum with whom she is traveling in first-class accommodations. The story line makes it perfectly clear that Rose has no affection for her fiancé. In fact, the fellow is portrayed as an arrogant, obnoxious individual.

In a memorable scene Rose's mother reminds her daughter that the arranged marriage is in the best interest of her family. It seems that Rose's father died after

squandering away his fortune, so for Rose's mother and her family the impending marriage represents the only hope of maintaining their wealth and preserving their social status. Rose has been set up with a man for whom she has absolutely no affection in order to guarantee an honorable future for her extended family.

But then one evening Rose meets Jack on the deck of the ship, and the encounter ignites the flame of a romantic fling that serves as the main story line for the rest of the movie. Rose is caught in a quandary. She loves Jack, but she is engaged to a highly unappealing man whom she is obligated to marry for the sake of her family. Whom will Rose choose?

Jack, of course. If Rose had chosen otherwise, the movie simply would not have worked for the tens of millions of American viewers who followed the tragic tale. We are quite unmoved by the potential social dilemma confronting Rose's extended family. Rather, our sympathies lie with the heroine's own personal satisfaction. As I watched *Titanic*, I could almost hear the thoughts running through the heads of the viewers in the theater: *Forget your family's fortune, Rose! Ignore your mother's wishes! Dump the rich jerk! Follow your heart! Go after Jack!*

What I want us to see here is that *Titanic's* love story would not be nearly as well received in cultures like those of the New Testament world. If *Titanic* were shown in first-century Palestine with Aramaic subtitles, the audience would be utterly appalled to discover that Rose would even consider sacrificing the good of her extended family for her own relational satisfaction. They would find Rose's fling with Jack both risky and foolish. First-century Jews would expect Rose to marry the rich fellow and endure a life of emotional dissatisfaction, if such an arrangement could somehow preserve the honor and social-status of Rose's extended family.

### *The Group Comes First*

The markedly different reactions to a love story like the one portrayed in *Titanic* illustrate the most important difference between modern American culture and the social world of New Testament antiquity. We are individualists. Our personal goals and individual satisfaction take first priority when we make critical life decisions. But the peoples of the ancient world exhibit what cultural anthropologists call a collectivist view of reality. Another way of saying this is to refer to the biblical world as a strong-group society. I will use the expressions "collectivist" and "strong-group" interchangeably throughout this book.

What this means is that for people in the world of the New Testament, the welfare of the groups to which they belonged took priority over their own indi-