



Defeating Isolation

10.5.08 by Matt Dickerson

Article:

My natural tendency is toward isolation. From junior high through high school, I was what you would have to call an unpopular kid. I was not athletic. I didn't party. I lacked good looks. And academics came far too easily for me. Mothers probably wished their daughters would date me, but the girls themselves didn't even want to be seen talking to me.

Until the end of my junior year, I had only two friends, both of whom I knew from church. One was pretty close to me, but we had no classes together. We rarely crossed paths in school, and he was only nominally more popular at school. The other "friend" was nice to me in church and youth group, but at school (where he was quite popular) he did not want to be associated with me. At best he was distant, and occasionally he was downright unkind.

I spent my afternoons alone, often reading or tromping in the woods, or listening to music, or fishing in nearby ponds and streams. Being alone became normal for me. Somewhat alienated from school, I accepted isolation.

To some degree, this pattern is still with me. I now have a wonderful wife and family, and some very close friends. We have been a part of some wonderful churches. And yet it is still easy for me to feel isolated and disliked, and as a result easy for me to withdraw and to choose isolation.

A few years ago, a pastor of a church I was in told me in a heated moment that lots of people in our church disliked me and found me standoffish. I guess there will always be people who dislike me—people at work, people in town, and even people in church. I could even name a few in all those categories (and more than a few in the first.) I don't like to give people *reasons* to dislike me, but I have to admit that those reasons for disliking me do exist. I have faults.

Still, it cut me deeply to hear my pastor tell me that. To dismiss his words because they came in a moment of anger would be too easy. I had to assume he spoke the truth. The next Sunday, I went to church, sat in a pew, and felt tense and isolated during the entire service. It was difficult for me to sing, to pray, to hear the words of the sermon. I felt the outcast.

This lasted more than two years. I would go to church, serve where I was asked to serve—leading music, teaching Sunday school, or even serving on a board of trustees—but it required an act of faith; I did not do it because it felt good.

Throughout this time, I reflected that Satan, the enemy, wants to isolate us. But God's nature is one of perfect fellowship and unity, and his people are called to reflect that nature. In John 17, Jesus prays for the unity of his followers as the means by which the world will know the truth of the Gospel. Love and forgiveness are both expressed most fully in unity.

Because of this, Satan's greatest efforts through history have been aimed at destroying the unity of the church. The enemy wants to isolate us. Ultimately, he wants us to seek isolation—to separate ourselves from each other, to choose resentment over forgiveness, anger over love, distrust over trust. He starts by making us feel isolated, disliked, mistrusted. But unity is not a way we *feel*, any more than love and forgiveness are. Unity, or oneness, is a gift from the Holy Spirit, and it is our *choice* to live out that gift—whether we feel it at any given moment or not.

I have written about my own experience as if isolation were a peculiar trait to me. But we are all susceptible to isolation, although the temptation comes in many different forms that vary with our personalities. For me, the temptation came in the truth of the pastor's words, which Satan used to disguise a great deceit. The biggest lies often come wrapped in small truths. It is true that some people might not like me or want to be around me. But that small truth does not make me any less a part of God's body. Indeed, the unity and glory of God's body may be shown even more beautifully when acted out by people who don't naturally want to be together.