

We have many specialists that are a great help to the church, but where are the special men who look like Christ?

Every day there are more and more doctorates in our modern churches and the fashion continues to be in obtaining the greatest amount of credits to gain the greatest amount of approval, but where are the saints who look like Christ?

Our colleges and seminaries are being directed by excellent and experienced professionals, but where are the prophets of God who can say with the overwhelming authority of a saint: "Thus saith the Lord," and at the same time have a resemblance to Jesus?

A holy life, a holy church will evangelize, pray, and open new mission fields with greater efficiency and better results than any other priority out of the context of a holy life. Holiness is not a magic touch or an instantaneous prescription, but it involves an instantaneous decision and a process that embraces the whole life. Lausanne I produced one of the best statements of faith in history. Lausanne II should produce the best people of faith in history. Men of God, holy men; women of God, holy women—that is our greatest need and our greatest goal.

LIVING THE CHRIST-LIFE II

Christian Community and World Evangelization

Roberta Hestenes

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32, RSV).

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left (2 Corinthians 6:3-7, NIV).

So much of our thought and energy is devoted to the visions, methodologies, and strategies for worldwide evangelization that we need the help which Scripture provides to sort our priorities. To what will we give our major attention? Of all the things which should or could be done, which ones will capture our energy and our commitment?

We are finite human beings with limited time and energy. While we can accomplish great things by the grace and power of God, no one of us can do everything which needs to be done. We are not the saviors of the world; we are ambassadors for Christ who alone is the Savior. We must make choices. The need of the world does not determine our particular and specific callings. Only through prayer, worship, and attentive study of Scripture can we determine what God is calling us to and what our priorities should be.

Priorities not only relate to which work we do but also to the ways in which we accomplish our work. Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament said little about specific methodologies and strategies; however, they said a great deal about the character and relationships of those who are sent by God into the world to proclaim the gospel and make disciples.

Large sections of the Epistles are devoted to the themes of Christian character and Christian community. A foundational assumption of biblical Christianity is the membership of each Christian believer in the body of Christ—the church. The Great Commission is given to the church, the whole community of believers. The empower-

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ment of the Holy Spirit is poured out on the gathered community, not simply on isolated individuals (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:1–4; 2:1–4; 1 Corinthians 12; Galatians 6:10).

Just as the first disciples discovered when they responded to the invitation to follow Jesus, contemporary Christians discover that Christ's call to faith and obedience is also a call to community. Just as the Twelve did not choose each other, so we find ourselves alongside those of different backgrounds and nationalities, preferences, and temperaments in this marvelous, complex, perplexing, exciting, and disturbing set of relationships which is called the church. Our unity and life together in the church is to be a witness to the world of Jesus as the beloved Son of the Father who gave his life for the redemption of the world. Our unity is centered in our common confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and is demonstrated by the love which we express to one another.

The New Testament is full of instructions and examples of how Christians are to relate to one another. The quality of our life together should be a powerful demonstration of the reality and power of God to transform every form of isolation, sin, and brokenness. The Good News we preach is made credible by our acts of love and service within the church as well as outside the church. Every one of the numerous biblical texts on unity and relationships within the Christian community can be seen as an explication of Jesus' "new" commandment that Christians are to love one another as Christ loves them.

This is not merely a sentimental regard for each other. This love which Christ commands is more than a tolerant forbearance of different traditions, denominations, or agencies. It is not a capitulation to relativism which is to characterize every Christian person and group of persons. It is an intentional commitment to costly, sacrificial, compassionate, caring, and self-denying service to the Christian community. We are called by Jesus Christ to be committed to each other as we walk together as disciples, ambassadors, and agents of reconciliation in all the world (John 15:9–17; 2 Corinthians 4:5; 5:16–21; 6:3–10).

A Barrier to Worldwide Evangelization

One of the great barriers to effectiveness in worldwide evangelization is the way Christians treat each other. All too often what the world says when it sees the church up close is *not*, "See how they love one another," but "See how they attack and hurt each other." In spite of the prayer of Jesus for complete unity among his followers, it is shocking to see alongside wonderful manifestations and expressions of spiritual unity an almost casual acceptance of competitive rivalry, disunity, and hostility. This can be seen in all levels of life in the church from the individual to the congregation, to the national and international reality of a divided church. Over the many decades of the missionary movement, literally thousands of missionaries and church workers have given up their posts and returned home in discouragement and despair long before work was done or the mission assignment accomplished. Many reasons are often given including physical disability, spiritual burnout, or circumstances within the family. There are often other reasons, less respectable to mention and more painful to acknowledge, which hinder the ability of many people to sustain their commitment to Christian ministry.

Symptoms of Brokenness

One of the most significant discouragements for many young idealistic Christians who move into full-time Christian service is their persistent experience of conflict, rivalry, and uncaring behavior among those who are supposed to work together in love and harmony. They join, hoping for a fellowship of common love and common purpose,

but their experience may fall far short of their expectations. Often, their expectations were unrealistic. More often, in all their preparation and training for service, little was said about the basic reality of most ministry assignments.

Ministry is carried out through a group of persons who may not know or understand how to build positive relationships, how to handle conflict, or how to work together in caring ways to accomplish the common ministry. The issue of how to develop and maintain community and unity among Christians is crucial to sustained and effective service.

There are other problems which can contribute to a lack of a spirit of unity and caring in a particular group of Christians. Sometimes cohesion and commitment within one group is sought by joining in a common attack on some other group of Christians outside the circle of acceptance. Joining together as "insiders" against "outsiders" does build a sense of group loyalty. When Christians do this, however, our witness to the watching world is damaged.

Another issue is envy or jealousy. These feelings are seldom acknowledged or addressed as temptations and problems even though they are almost always present in any large group with levels of leadership.

At times, problems may center on leaders; at other times, on issues of loyalty and trust among participants. Strong leaders of Christian organizations are occasionally seen as those who have great visions, yet may be prone to use people to accomplish those visions without adequately caring for them. One common temptation is to judge other people's motives and ministries as inadequate or misguided while hoping we will be judged more positively ourselves.

Another sign of a lack of compassion may come when people sin and fall. Instead of the gentleness leading toward restoration spoken of in Galatians 6:1, some organizations may solve a problem by discarding or setting aside even the repentant wounded or fallen worker. This is in contrast to Jesus who tenderly restored Peter after his bitter failure with his threefold denial (John 21:15–19). The terrible joke is too often repeated, and believed, that "the Christian church is the only army that shoots its wounded."

We seem to struggle between two extremes: one, of denying the importance of purity, holiness, and appropriate accountability and discipline within the Christian community; and the other, of harsh judgment and a critical spirit which can damage the faith and hope of those who fail to measure up or meet expectations. In all the complexities of our relationships, when we work together as Christians, our ministry priorities can become distorted if the drive for success in our programs crowds out the biblical requirement of active love.

During my twelve years as a professor of Christian formation and discipleship at an evangelical seminary, I worked with young students and older career Christian workers from over eighty countries and at least as many different denominations, mission organizations, and theological traditions. I have often heard thrilling stories of the power of God in transforming people, bringing new life and spiritual vitality into some of the most difficult situations imaginable. And all too often, I have also heard heartbreaking stories of painful, broken relationships which led to divisions and strife, suffering and sorrow. Many times this resulted in separation among Christians and difficulties in ministry.

Biblical faith takes seriously the pervasive effects of sin and spiritual warfare. And though a loving and sovereign God can bring good out of every evil, much of this suffering is an additional burden which should not be accepted as inevitable or impossible to change.

Our Need for Love and Community

Too many Christians are suffering from a lack of love which leaves them feeling isolated and lonely, uncared for and discouraged. They feel used instead of loved, criticized rather than affirmed. This can affect our marriages and families, as well as our daily work in the tasks of worldwide evangelization. This is not a lack in God's love, which overflows constantly towards us, but a lack of love in the Christian community. When we have a great task to accomplish, we sometimes forget that the people who are called to accomplish that extraordinary task are ordinary people who need to receive and give love.

The triune God, who lives eternally in relationship, created us for relationships. We were made for fellowship with God and with each other. We truly need each other to be fully human, fully Christian, and fully effective. We need each other for comfort in times of suffering. We need each other to rejoice when we rejoice and weep when we weep. No matter how strong we are, we need to bear one another's burdens and receive help with our own burdens. We need each other's gifts. We need to hear truth spoken in love. We need relationships which help us and nourish us as we seek to give ourselves to others. We need people to whom we can confess our sins, with whom we can pray for healing and wholeness. We need conversations which build us up and affirm our gifts and abilities (Genesis 1-2; Romans 3:9-20; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Ephesians 4:14-16; James 5:13-16).

Along with our planning and programs, we need spiritual direction and discernment of the will of God. We need strength and support for the spiritual battle. These needs can never be adequately met in impersonal, task-oriented structures. They can only be met in significant relationships which encourage and empower us for service.

The great model of this is the committed relationships of Jesus and the Twelve. We see this pattern continued in Acts 2:42-47, where large meetings of new Christians were interspersed with the smaller groups of home fellowships, or house churches, which became the primary form of gatherings for the early centuries of the Christian movement. It was in a small group of Christians described in Acts 13 that the missionary movement was born. It was to these relatively small fellowships of Christians that most of the New Testament letters were written with their instructions for appropriate conduct in their relationships with one another.

Down through the centuries, we have continually rediscovered that meaningful relationships of integrity and caring are nourished in communities who take seriously the command of Jesus to practice love within the fellowship while doing the work to which we have been called.

Temptations That Hinder Growth in a Caring Community

A possible cause of an uncaring community is an unrecognized yet common acceptance of the secularized Western values of competitive individualism and success. Instead, we need a practical involvement in the biblical visions of a covenant community of caring and outreach. The Western, and particularly the North American world, tends to focus on pragmatic goals and innovative entrepreneurship as a preferred style of organization-building and success.

There are significant strengths in some aspects of these values but there are dangerous weaknesses as well. There is a danger that we will conceive our work in terms of competition with other Christian groups rather than in terms of our faithfulness and courage in doing the work that God has given us to do.

A second contributor is the assumption that the best leader is the "task-oriented"

leader. This type of leader can fall into the trap of being so consumed with work that there is little time for nurturing relationships either with God or with other people. One young missionary leader shared his astonishing discovery after becoming ill and unable to work, that he had always believed that the Westminster Catechism taught: "What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and *work for him* forever!"

We will never be the kind of leaders who truly bring glory to God unless we develop and nurture a deep relationship with God and deep relationships with other Christians. Relationships take time; they take attention; they take intentional effort. Jesus led the disciples by modeling a life of prayer, a life of service, and a life lived in community. We are called to no less.

A third contributor to the lack of caring community is the common dichotomy in the Protestant missionary movement separating the congregation from the larger church with an accompanying split between responsibility for discipleship and missions. Congregations are sometimes presumed to own the responsibility of spiritual growth and care for personal needs, while Christian organizations and institutions are to accomplish tasks in the larger world. This assumption can contribute both to weak churches with an inadequate involvement in ministry, and larger organizations who feel little or no responsibility for the spiritual development, nurture, and care of their people.

Congregations support ministry while denominational and mission agencies accomplish the work. Pastoral care and its related ministries are usually seen as the responsibility of the congregation, while evangelism, church growth, education, relief, and development ministries are seen as the primary responsibility of separate organizations. Workers are supposed to arrive at their positions fully developed spiritually with all the resources necessary to sustain themselves through the years of service with minimal time and effort from the ministry organization.

This runs contrary to the increasing reality that some of those who offer themselves for service are long on enthusiasm and willingness, and short on adequate biblical and theological foundations, spiritual depth, and discipline necessary to sustain quality ministry. And many of the Protestant mission-oriented groups fail to make adequate provision for the spiritual and emotional nurturing of their people. The assumption that congregations in expatriate contexts provide depth, understanding, and personal care for employees of Christian organizations is often unrealistic. Generalized exhortations do not substitute for the personalized attention which matters of the spiritual life and Christian service require.

Annual retreats or weekly chapels in our offices, although worthwhile, simply do not provide the quality of love and care which is needed to sustain ministry day after day, year after year. We need to be able to pray together and talk with each other, not only about our work, but also about our lives. The provision of spiritual directors and the encouragement of Christian small groups are only two of the possibilities which could be used to enrich the life of ministry communities.

Two questions which every Christian leader should ask regularly are: *What are we doing to help nourish and express Christian faith and love for each other?* and, *What am I doing to encourage and practice spiritual accountability and growth in my own life and the lives of those around me?*

A fourth factor which may inhibit development of a caring community is an organizational culture which inhibits expressions of struggle, suffering, brokenness, confession, and repentance. This occurs through failure to provide an environment that facilitates careful listening, gentleness, tenderness, forgiveness, and a constant goal of encouragement and restoration. Sometimes we miss the biblical teaching that the need

for firmness in conviction is to be accompanied by patience and tenderness. Strength may be expressed in honest openness and vulnerability as well as in other ways. Paul often shared his struggles and burdens as he sought to care for the young churches. Jesus was the great author and perfecter of our faith, yet he was not afraid to show his need or to weep at the grave of a friend.

Biblical Requirements for Building Christian Community

Ephesians 4:32 gives three instructions to Christians: be kind; be tenderhearted; and be forgiving as God in Christ has forgiven you. These instructions are so simple they are often overlooked in the larger, more grand challenges. Yet, they reveal God's will for our priorities as people working in the tasks of ministry.

We are to be kind. The dictionaries define *kindness* as "well-meaning, helpful, charitable, sympathetic, pleasant towards other people." This is the opposite of acting or speaking in rough, brutal, or harsh ways. We are to treat people in such a way that we build them up, not tear them down; that we affirm, rather than attack; that we hope for the best, rather than assume the worst; that we rejoice in the good and keep no list of evil.

This does not mean that we will never disagree with people or need to find ways to handle significant differences. Conflict and disagreements have always been present in the church from the first century until today. Yet in the midst of differences, we are to treat each other with kindness. Without gentleness and kindness toward others, we become unable to acknowledge our own limitations, weakness, and vulnerability and then we may fall ourselves. When we draw up our lists of qualities of leadership, kindness is seldom mentioned, yet it is to shape our behavior toward each other.

The second part of the instruction is that we are to be tenderhearted. The obvious opposite is to be hardhearted, cold, or indifferent. Tenderheartedness is defined as being "humane, sensitive, compassionate, open to the needs and desires of the other person." To be kindhearted does not mean that we are "soft-headed" or thoughtless in our actions. We are to be warmly affectionate to one another rather than manipulative, calculating, cautious, or withholding of warmth and concern.

Without tenderness, our fellowships can become dishonest because of fear. We may hide our weeping if we think people will criticize, ignore, or be made anxious by our tears. Expressions of honest perplexity or struggle can be disdained as signs of weakness or incompetence. It sometimes seems as if no new questions are to be allowed, even though the world around is rapidly changing. When tough realities force new questions or doubts, a harsh community which insists on only repeating the same formulaic answers can crush a struggling spirit.

To confess our sins or to acknowledge our weakness does not automatically disqualify us from all future leadership. The lives of David and Peter illustrate the awfulness of sin and the restoring mercy of God. Paul often shared his struggles. When allowed to guide our behavior, tenderheartedness and kindness encourage unity and reduce conflict.

The third part of the instruction is that we are to forgive each other as God in Christ has forgiven us. Forgiveness is necessary in our relationships because we do hurt each other and we need to confess our sins in the appropriate way. To practice forgiveness is not a compromise with sin; it is a biblical requirement. True forgiveness is not an easy toleration of evil but acknowledges that there has been a wrong committed or a right left undone which must be dealt with.

We are to seek purity, holiness, and righteousness, but we must also acknowledge the reality of sin and failure as we are continual receivers of the grace and mercy of God.

As God has forgiven us in Christ, so we are to forgive one another. This is not an easy discipline, yet it is a critical one.

A lack of forgiveness in the life of a fellowship can leave an organization vulnerable to deceit and pretense because the truth will not be handled sensitively and will be forced into hiding. Forgiveness opens the door to restoration and renewed service. It proclaims our belief in our own identity as forgiven people who have wonderful news to share with the world about the love of God in Christ.

As we come to the Communion table of our Lord in the midst of a broken world, we find the center of our unity and a rebuke to all forms of our conflict. It is a powerful reminder of the Upper Room where Jesus commanded us to love and prayed that we might live in unity. We are reminded of the great price paid for our redemption so that we could be adopted into the family of God. However great our sin, greater is the mercy and forgiveness of God. As we have freely received the kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus, so may our communities of worship and service be true fellowships of love. The world will then truly see and receive our witness because they see how we love each other.