

Melva's Corner



True Worship

March 12, 2007

(Gal. 6:10)

Central Truth: People who have been loved as much as Christians should know how to love one another

Have you ever thought of paying attention to others (i.e., support, compassion, a helping hand) as a spiritual gift?

Do you remember the biblical character named Barnabas? He had this highly desirable gift. Devoted as he was to loving and honoring God, he dedicated himself to nurturing weak and struggling, cast-off and unwanted souls. This trait of his redeemed personality made him one of the more significant characters in the Acts of the Apostles. Interestingly, his original name was simply Joseph, but the apostles gave him the name Barnabas. The name means, according to Luke, "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36). To call someone "the son of x" is a well-known Semitic way of identifying the person's most notable quality. That Barnabas lived up to his name is apparent from reading through Acts.

In chapter 4, Barnabas sold a piece of land and donated the proceeds for the apostles to distribute to saints in need. It was unthinkable to him that he should have surplus when others were lacking the basics. In chapter 11, he risked his own reputation to take Saul of Tarsus under his wing and involve him in kingdom activity at Antioch. It was unthinkable to him that someone exhibiting repentance and the desire to join himself to the church should be refused. In chapter 15, he parted company with the now highly respected missionary Paul in order to take a once-failed younger missionary, John Mark, on a preaching tour with him. It was unthinkable to him that the young man's failure should be turned into permanent shame or that he suffer punishment beyond the anguish of heart he had already endured on account of his

lapse of faith. When someone needed a boost of encouragement generated by sincere compassion, he was there.

Ever know anyone like Joseph Barnabas? Over the years, I have known several men and women cut from the same bolt of cloth. They show up regularly in hospital corridors and nursing homes. They pay attention to children who don't smile enough or easily. They sacrifice for missionaries, orphans, and people on hard times. They have such compassionate hearts that their eyes tend to moisten easily. When someone needs a listening ear, they make time to listen – no matter how busy they are. And when somebody asks one of these godly people to pray for him or her, you sense immediately that it will be done.

These women have the gift of caring for others. These men are encouragement. They are genuinely compassionate, kindhearted, and benevolent. And they tend to be very quiet and inconspicuous people whose behavior calls attention to others more than to themselves. Theirs is a genuine spiritual gift. The church is God's community in which this gift is imparted, shared, and appreciated. It is the place where healing occurs through self-giving love that shows itself as concern (*not* nosiness), compassion (*not* pity), and comfort (*not* enabling indulgence).

Created as we were for relationship, it ought not surprise us to find that the disconnected lives most people live are unfulfilling and even unhealthy. Oh, we go to work along crowded highways and streets, work in sight of others, and sit in packed church buildings. But for many today relationships don't have much quality to them. There is no real depth or warmth. There are lots of acquaintances but few friendships. And it is painful to have no one with whom to share innermost self and private feelings, the heartaches and joys.

Research done at the University of Michigan just before the end of the twentieth century studied just under 3,000 men and women in the United States, Finland, and Sweden. It concluded that a lack of social relationships heightens one's susceptibility to illness and death. The researchers claimed that loneliness is as significant to mortality rates as smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and obesity. The sort of isolation focused on in that study was characterized by having nobody with whom to share one's private feelings, hopes, and fears. The lead researchers estimated that fully ten to twenty percent of people have close contact with others

less than once a week. That percentage has probably grown rather than declined since their research was published.

Plato envisioned an ideal state in his *Republic*, and Sir Thomas Moore wrote of an ideal society he named *Utopia*. In the New Testament, God's place of belonging is called *ekklesia* and the relationship among its members is *koinonia*. Yet we hesitate to translate the former "church" and the latter "fellowship" for the simple reason that we have cheapened these English terms to mean an innocuous Sunday gathering and pot-luck dinner or my group and its criteria for membership.

In its purest and best instances, the church exists in the world now as an outpost of the kingdom of God. The church is not the fully realized kingdom of heaven, but it is an inbreaking of that kingdom and is a group of its citizens in process of spiritual formation. Its presence in the world bears witness to the cross. It testifies to a view of reality that takes eternity more seriously than time. As a visible community of faith, it senses the call of God to bear witness to life in the midst of death, truth in the midst of lies, joy in the midst of despair and good in the midst of evil.



Against the hellish isolation of our time, the church must be a group of people in congregation (gathered-togetherness). The *ekklesia* of Christ has not only been called out of the world but has been called together for His purposes. This doesn't mean that we are always together in large groups but that we are always together in spirit. Each of us must take the risk to relate to others who share the view of the cross, eternity, and virtue that we profess. Against a cultural reluctance to make commitments, we have committed to be God's presence for one another.

So we assemble on the Lord's Day, celebrate our call from God, discern the body of Christ at the table with our fellow-believers, and affirm one another. When we do so, we must allow the Spirit of God to quicken us by His presence, to renew holy zeal in our hearts. But beyond our times of spiritual renewal en masse, we must be willing to seek and open to experience contact with one another that allows spiritual intimacy. These are burden-bearing, joy-disclosing, service-sharing experiences that cannot happen in

whole-church assemblies. They are too personal. They require small-group and one-on-one settings.

This is the venue that had to be created by Alcoholics Anonymous because of the church's failure to be the church. They are settings in which men and women abandon defensiveness and lies in order to become vulnerable to one another. They open their hearts without condemnation from the rest of the group. With the pain of self-judgment already so intense it can hardly be tolerated, they bare their insecurities, addictions, infidelities, and failures to one another as the beginning point for recovery. Without fear of envy in such a community, they celebrate their triumphs, good fortune, temptations resisted, and successes.

The term "church" is a dirty word to some people. And what a pity that is, since Christ Jesus intends for the church to bear witness to Him throughout the world.

For these people, however, church has been the address for a vindictive God, His abusive shepherds, and a joyless flock. They have been regaled over and over again by these very same people with the Four Spiritual Laws or the Five Steps to Salvation as their only hope of escaping hell if they should die tonight. "What if the hypocrites, snake-oil salespeople, and folded-faith witnesses to Jesus as 'my personal Savior' were the ones to die tonight?" they think to themselves. "Mightn't the world be a happier, friendlier place without them?"

And we wonder why these people are turned off to Christianity? We wonder why they are so angry at the idea of prayer in public schools or faith-based initiatives that will get some of their tax dollars? "Well, they're just ungodly souls who won't hear the truth!" someone says. That may be true of some, but many of these people are the most ethically sensitive and professionally upright, family-dedicated and community-involved people you will ever meet.

These people will not hear the message of Christ about their salvation favorably until its bearer (i.e., the church) is saved first! And the church does need saving from its hypocrisies, injustices, and authoritarianism. The church must get outside itself – or perhaps, better, it must get over itself – in order to belie the image of an us-versus-them attitude of superiority and judgment. To be

credible, it must become less institutional and more personal, less defensive of itself and its history and more confessional of its insufficiencies and failures, far less materialistic and self-serving and more generous and loving toward people, movements and entities it cannot control or manipulate. In order to be convincing to people who didn't grow up inside it and learn how to turn blind eyes to its obvious defects, the church must get over its addiction to religious power and learn the healthy lifestyle of spiritual vulnerability, where His children tell the story of Christ, affirm the reality of God's love in him, and learn how to pay attention to one another. After all, to "love the whole world" or to "love my (faceless) neighbor as myself" can be nothing more than pious profession. In the church we rub elbows with real people, notice their faults, pay attention to the hurts and needs of these imperfect people and allow God to perfect His love in us by teaching us to deal with one another in love. The church is where God reassures me that I am loved securely enough that I can take the risk of loving you. And that is His message for us all.

People who have been loved as much as Christians should know how to love one another. May it be so here – and in every holy community that has been formed around the gospel of the grace of God.

When the church is together in her corporate worship, the proclaimed (i.e., preaching Scripture) and symbolized (i.e., eating the Lord's Supper) word challenges the bride of Christ not only to be faithful to her husband but to make her transformed nature manifest in serving those in the community. The love that exists freely as self-giving within the Trinity becomes the model for how the individuals who are one in Christ will love one another. The corporate assembly overflows into the daily life experience of all who are in that relationship. Such love blesses even the larger community around that church. The bride's radiance turns heads to her bridegroom and the world is captivated by the beauty of God's love that is being lived out in the church.

Scriptural References:

"So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (Gal. 6:10).