In Another's Shoes

by

Daniel J. Lewis

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Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them.

Harper Lee

Incarnational Theology

The incarnation of God's Son has profound theological implications for every facet of Christian faith. One of those implications concerns human relationships. Jesus said, *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you* (Jn. 20:21). This means that Christians are called to participate in God's mission to the world. Usually, the foregoing passage, along with a number of others, is employed to encourage evangelism and missionary work, and rightly so. There is no doubt that this passage has a basic missions orientation. At the same time, there is a feature of this imperative that affects human relationships in ways beyond simply the goal of conversions. It is rooted in the idea that Christ laid aside his own status and prerogatives in order to enter the world of someone else. He accepted the self-limitations that such a mission would entail. His love for the world was such that he willingly engaged in what might be called a cross-cultural experience. Then, he called his followers to do the same.

Leaving the Father's House and Going to the Far Country

In the incarnation, Christ left one place in order to go to another place. He left what he called "the Father's house" to come to the debased world of humans (Jn. 14:2). He referred to the first place as "where he was before" (Jn. 6:62). In the immediate presence of the Father (lit., "in the bosom of the Father", Jn. 1:18), Christ enjoyed a mutual love and glory with the Father from before the creation of the world (Jn. 17:5, 24). Nothing alien intruded into that perfect existence (cf. Is. 6:1-3). However, in one of his parables, Jesus spoke about a nobleman who "went to a far country" to receive a kingship (Lk. 19:12). In the incarnation, Jesus was that nobleman. What drove him to this extremity was his own love (Jn. 3:16-17).

Much was involved in this condescension. In the various New Testament books, the apostles explored the lengths to which Christ went to come near us. Though rich, he became poor (2 Co. 8:9). Though by very nature God, he set aside

his divine prerogatives and took the form of a slave (Phil. 2:6-7). Though he had life in himself (Jn. 1:4; 5:26), yet he became obedient to shameful death (Phil. 2:8). Though he came from the Father's heart, he accepted the experience of abandonment (Mt. 27:46//Mk. 15:34). He discovered the crushing reality of God's refusal to answer his prayer for survival (He. 5:7-8; cf. Mt. 26:42//Mk. 14:36//Lk.22:42). Since the children of earth are creatures of flesh and blood, he also shared in their humanity (He. 2:14). He was hungry (Mt. 4:2//Lk. 4:2), thirsty (Jn. 19:28) and exhausted (Lk. 8:23). He felt the sting of rejection (Jn. 6:66) and betrayal (Lk. 22:48). He was misunderstood by family members (Mk. 3:20-21; Jn. 7:2-5) and criticized by the religious establishment as a drunk, a glutton and one who fraternized with moral scum (Mt. 11:19//Lk. 7:34). In every way he was tested, just as we are (He. 4:15).

Crossing the Boundaries for the sake of Friendship

All these measures Christ took in order to become our friend. If the second greatest commandment was to "love one's neighbor as oneself" (Lv. 19:18; Lk. 10:25-28), the self-justifying question was, "Who is my neighbor?" To illuminate this, Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan, a foreigner who, even though not in his own country, stopped to aid a wounded traveler (Lk. 10:29-37). "Go and do likewise," Jesus said.

In the larger sense, Jesus himself was the good Samaritan. He came from his own country to ours, and when we were wounded, he stooped to help. He was the "friend" of sinners, and he expressed his openness to them by offering them table fellowship (Mt. 11:19). Publicans and others numbered among the most despised members of Jewish society were among Jesus' followers, including Levi (Mk. 2:14-15), Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-9) and Mary Magdalene (Lk. 8:2).[1] To his critics, Jesus simply responded, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners," and "The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost" (Mk. 2:16-17; Lk. 19:10).

The theology of incarnation is a theology of crossing boundaries. It is refusing to stay within the comfort zone of what is familiar and taking risks in unfamiliar territory in order to make friends. Christ Jesus took the lead!

Commitment to Relationship

In their work *Breaking Down Walls*, Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein explore the process of racial reconciliation.[2] Their particular context is urban

[1] Jewish society in the 1st century had a marked social stratification regulated by birth position and vocation, cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 272, 302, 353ff., 359ff.. Samaritans, publicans and women were at the bottom of the list!

[2] R. Washington and G. Kehren, *Breaking Down Walls* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993).

Chicago and the black/white polarization between races. In it, they offer a paradigm for working through the reconciliation process, a litany of principles that we shall follow in this study. The very first principle is "commitment to relationship." If in the incarnation Christ himself crossed the barriers between the divine and human realms, his disciples took seriously their call to do the same.

The importance of this commitment is sharply outlined in Paul's anecdote about Peter's visit to Antioch, Syria (Ga. 2:11-14). When at Antioch Peter was intimidated into segregation by his Jewish friends from Jerusalem, Paul publicly rebuked him. Paul's words carry as much sting today as they did then, for he said: *When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I spoke…* The critical issue here is to see that the gospel drives behavior. The gospel truth of which Paul spoke is this: if Jesus Christ came to save sinners, and if he came to save sinners whether they were Jew or Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free (Col. 3:11; Ep. 2:11-22), and if he declared them all to be on equal ground, the sons of Abraham by faith in Jesus Christ (Ga. 3:26-29), **then to remain separated from those who are God's children is a denial by practice of what one claims to accept by theology.**

The contention by Washington and Kehrein is that the first principle of reconciliation is not education but relationship.[3] A noteworthy cross-cultural example was Ruth's commitment to her mother-in-law as she made the transition from her native Moabite religion to the faith of Israel (Ru. 1:16-17). For Christians, this principle derives directly from Christ's incarnation in the world. Christ did not learn about the world of humans at a safe distance; rather, he identified with what was by nature alien to himself.

The standard excuse against such commitment is the hard work involved. Relationships with other people, even those who are most like ourselves, fall into "easy", "hard" and various middle ranges. In most of our relationships, we cultivate the "easy" ones and avoid the "hard" ones. This tendency is exacerbated all the more when one seeks to develop relationships across racial and cultural lines. The knee-jerk reaction, "I don't need this," is all to easy. A committed relationship requires considerable effort and a determined refusal to give in. It means rising above misunderstandings, disappointments, defensive attacks, and personal pain, the very things toward which the gospel urges us (Ep. 4:2-3, 32; Col. 3:12-14). Every important relationship requires this hard work, including marital relationships, church relationships, and personal relationships.

Furthermore, commitment to relationship means rooting out misconceptions and/or changing one's way of thinking about things. Consider, for instance, the vast rethinking required of Jews before they could accept fellowship with Gentiles.

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[3] Washington and Kehrein, p. 114.

For Peter, fellowship with Gentiles was tantamount to breaking kosher food laws (Ac. 10:9-16). Since the Babylonian captivity, the careful observance of kosher practices, even at the risk of life, had been upheld by all Jews (cf. Da. 1; 2 Maccabees 6:18-31). All his life Peter had been schooled in this rigorous code of separation. The very dust of a pagan country was defiling and to be regarded as the putrefaction of death.[4] To be asked to enter a pagan house and eat was almost more than Peter could bear, and worse, he then had to face the criticism of his Jewish compatriots back home (Ac. 11:2-3).

Traditional preconceptions in the modern world about classes or races can be equally difficult to shed. A black person may come to a relationship with the preconception, *Behind this smiling exterior is probably a raging racist who wants to ignore the atrocities of the past as though they never happened.* A white person may come to a relationship with the preconception, *Underneath this façade is just another militant Black seeking to excuse himself by the tragedy of his grandparents. Every problem he sees has a racial component.*[5] Assumptions and stereotypes are powerful enemies to relational commitment. Many among both blacks and whites have resigned themselves to co-existence without relationship. An increasing response is that "no remedy is necessary," and "both blacks and whites identify with their particular traditions—and that's not wrong…"[6] According to the gospel in the New Testament, it *is* wrong!

Intentionality

Intentionality refers to what is deliberate as opposed to what is incidental. Since most men and women are passive rather than active with respect to cross-cultural relationships, it always is easier to "let it happen", and if it doesn't happen, who can be blamed? A Caucasian might "bump into" a person of Hispanic, Near Eastern, African, Asian or Native American descent, but to intentionally seek out a relationship with someone of another race or culture is rare indeed, even among fellow Christians! Alienation often is many years, sometimes centuries, in the making. The gulf between whites and Native Americans, for instance, is bluntly summarized in the words of Mahpiua-luta (Red Cloud) of the Oglala Dakotas: *They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it*.[7]

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[4] A. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 15.

[5] Washington and Kehrein, p. 119.

[6] R. Vischer, "Racial Separation in American Churches and Its Implications for School Vouchers," *Florida Law Review* (Vol. 53), pp. 209.

[7] D. Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Henry Holt, 1991), p. 449.

Such relational estrangement will not evaporate on its own. Handed-down corporate memories, not to mention deep and painful personal hurts, are like prison walls dividing people. The attitude of many whites is that these things happened a long time ago, the perpetrators were in the past, not the present, so African-Americans or Native Americans or Chinese Americans had just as well "get over it." This is *precisely* the wrong mindset!

Jesus demonstrated the way forward in his overt crossing of Samaritan boundaries. The ministry in which he engaged was "purposeful, positive, and planned…"[8] Hostility between Samaritans and Jews was long standing. Though there is considerable historical ambiguity concerning the origins of the Samaritans, Jewish tradition traces their ancestral roots to northern Israel and the colonists the Assyrians moved into Israel after the fall of Samaria (2 Kg. 17:24-41). Flavius Josephus adds that priests ostracized from Jerusalem during the Persian and Hellenistic Periods also made Mt. Gerizim their home. Whatever the historical details, the rival sanctuary on Mt. Gerizim and rival Torah of the Samaritans sharpened into a vicious tension. Prior to the Maccabean revolt, Samaritans raided Judea and took some Jews into slavery. In 128 BC, John Hyrcanus from Jerusalem retaliated by capturing Shechem and destroying the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim. Later, about AD 6 or 7, the Samaritan reprisal was to scatter bones in the Jerusalem temple during Passover, and even after the time of Jesus, Samaritans massacred a group of Galilean pilgrims in AD 52. Jewish counter-retaliation took the form of sacking and burning Samaritan villages while killing the residents.[9]

There was a road between Jerusalem and Galilee passing directly through Samaria, though Jews rarely took it. Usually, Jews forded the Jordan River near Jericho, traveled northward on the east side of the Jordan, and crossed again south of the Sea of Galilee, precisely in order to avoid Samaria.[10] Nevertheless, Jesus intentionally went to Samaria, or as John records it, *Now he [Jesus] had to go through Samaria* (Jn. 4:4). The fact that Jesus "had to go through Samaria" was not incidental but deliberate! Here, he confronted a Samaritan woman, a deeply despised member of society! As a Samaritan, she was on the lowest racial scale imaginable, lower than bastards, slaves, eunuchs, and foundlings.[11] In Jewish society, the name "Samaritan" was a racial slur and more or less equivalent to the "N" word in America (cf. Jn. 8:48). As a woman, she was lower still![12] Yet, Jesus engaged her in intelligent conversation. He was willing to discuss theology and the

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[8] Washington and Kehrein, p. 125.

[9] H. Williamson, "Samaritans," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), pp. 725-727.

[10] Edersheim, p. 44 and J. Rousseau and R. Arav, *Jesus & His World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 242-243.

[11] Jeremias, pp. 352.

[12] Jeremias, pp. 359ff.

coming of the Messiah! In the end, through her testimony he stayed two extra days in Samaria, and many Samaritans came to believe in him (Jn. 5:39-42).

In the incarnation, Jesus deliberately left heaven in order to break down the walls of hostility—not merely between humans and God, but also between humans and each other (Ep. 2:11-19)! This was an intentional act! Again and again he intentionally crossed huge barriers, touching lepers (Mt. 8:2-3), eating with sinners, consorting with tax-gatherers (Mk. 2:15), and allowing women to accompany him in his ministry (Lk. 8:2-3). Concerning Jesus and women, Dorothy Sayers said it best:

> *Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were the first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows it pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman's nature.*[13]

What Sayers said about Jesus and women is equally true about Jesus and Samaritans, Jesus and Gentiles, Jesus and lepers, and Jesus and any other despised category, whether racial, cultural or otherwise.

Jesus was proactive. He did not merely "wait" for something to happen—he deliberately pursued relationships outside the bounds of cultural acceptance. When he says to us, "Follow me!", can we do less?

Sincerity and Humility

One of the biggest obstacles in any relationship is the mistrust that comes as a result of past grievances. People may get burned once, but they take special precautions not to get burned again. While forgiveness may be offered freely, trust must be built. A spouse who is unfaithful will not easily win back the trust of his/her marriage partner against whom the sin was committed. Mistrust between races is even more complicated, because the cumulative effect of past injustices is generalized to include an entire group. Black Americans, for instance, may have

[13] D. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 47.

ingrained in them from childhood that white folks eventually will "stab them in the back" through discrimination, favoritism, or some other sort of unfairness. Though whites complain that this is a stereotype, the fact remains that there is a good deal of truth in it. Whites, for their part, have their own stereotypes about blacks that must be set aside.

The keys to building trust are sincerity and humility. The English word sincere derives from early Roman architecture, where the Latin label *Sine Cera* was stamped on blocks of marble to verify that they were "without wax," that is, to certify that they did not have chips or cracks that had been camouflaged with colored wax.[14] Today, sincerity refers to genuineness, purity, truth and honesty. It is the "willingness to be vulnerable, including the self-disclosure of feelings, attitudes, differences and perceptions, with the goal of resolution and building trust."[15] The New Testament words translated as "sincere" in the various English Versions carry much the same meaning:

ἀνυπόκριτος (**anypokritos** = genuine, without hypocrisy)
Ro. 12:9; 1 Ti. 1:5; Ja. 3:17
ἁγνως (**hagnos** = innocent, pure)
2 Co. 7:11; Phil. 1:17; 4:8; Tit. 2:5 Ja. 3:17
μὴ δίλογος (**mē dilogos** = not double-tongued, insincere)
1 Ti. 3:8
ἁπλοτης (**haplotēs** = simplicity, frankness)
Ep. 6:5; Col. 3:22; 2 Co. 1:12
ἀληθινός (**alēthinos** = dependable, true, honest)
Phil. 4:8; 2 Co. 11:3; He. 10:22
εἰλικρίνεια (**eilikrineia** = sincerity, purity of motive)
1 Co. 5:8; 2 Co. 1:12; 2:17
γνήσιος (**gnēsios** = genuineness, sincerity)
2 Co. 8:8

In a modern nuance, we might think of the concept of sincerity as transparency. The first hint of hidden motives or an underlying agendum is a death knell to overcoming broken relationships.

Humility goes hand in hand with sincerity. The biblical concept of humility is to "consider others better than yourself" (Phil. 2:3). In Greco-Roman culture, humility was not considered a virtue. In the ancient world, humility was disparaged as weakness.[16] Jesus and the apostles, on the other hand, regarded humility as among the most important virtues. Jesus' compassion for the weary and burdened

[14] G. Bowers, *Vital Speeches of the Day* (Vol. Xxxx (Jan. 15, 1974), p. 222.

[15] Washington and Kehrein, p. 141.

[16] W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), pp. 135-136.

was directly linked to the fact that he was "gentle and humble in heart" (Mt. 11:28-30). Furthermore, he taught that "whoever humbles himself…is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:4; 23:12). In the incarnation, Jesus "humbled himself", even to the extent of accepting the gross injustice of crucifixion (Phil. 2:8).

Humility, as modeled by Christ Jesus in the incarnation, is the intentional setting aside of one's rights. It is refusing to grasp at one's prerogatives, but making oneself lowly, taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6). It means being willing to embrace the culture of another, even though that culture is different than one's own (1 Co. 9:19-23). Humility is not a Christian option, as though it were a special gift for some but not others; it is a Christian imperative for all (Ro. 12:16; Ja. 4:10; 1 Pe. 3:8; 5:6)! To embrace pride of place, pride of race, pride of culture, and pride of background is to be assured that God will be against you (1 Pe. 5:5//Pro. 3:34). Pride not only is an affront to others, it is an affront to God himself, since it is a form of self-idolatry.

Sensitivity

Sensitivity is the art of learning to empathize with someone different than oneself. It is learning to appreciate the other person's point of view. It is asking, "How might the world look if my life experience were that of someone else?", or more directly, "How might my words sound if I were listening to them through the ears and experience of someone else?" Sensitivity is the delicate art of walking softly through subjects that are painful or embarrassing or awkward.

In his priesthood, Christ Jesus is the supreme model. Priests, by definition, are representatives. This means they are to represent the viewpoint of someone else rather than themselves (He. 5:1). Priests should empathize with human weaknesses, and insofar as they do so, their experience of those same weaknesses enable them to be gentle rather than harsh or clumsy (He. 5:2). Christ, also, sympathizes with our weaknesses, since he was tested just as are we all (He. 4:15-16; 5:7-8). As Christians, we, too, are priests (1 Pe. 2:5, 9). On the one hand, this means we all are free to worship God directly without mediation (Ro. 12:1; He. 13:15-16), but more than that, it also means that we should empathize with our brothers and sisters, carrying their burdens (Ga. 6:2; Ro. 12:15-16).

One of the most important areas requiring sensitivity is language. Sensitive language avoids categorizing people. To speak of Asian Americans or African Americans as "you people", for instance, creates racial distance. It is apt to be heard as "you people [who are not part of our superior white culture]." To use terms that others find belittling, even if you yourself don't think of them that way, is insensitive. It shows disrespect. One of the greatest fears of cross-cultural

communication concerns the very real problem of not knowing what language might be offensive. The risk of stumbling into disrespect by accident can be daunting. Perhaps the advice of James is appropriate here: *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak*...(Ja. 1:19a). Talking affirms the worth of oneself. Listening affirms the worth of the other person. Listening communicates that you believe the other person has something worthwhile to say.

Cultural differences easily become targets for value judgments. (My way is better than your way!) The sensitive person withholds judgments (Mt. 7:1-5; cf. Ro. 2:1; 14:10; Ja. 4:11-12). Withholding judgment means postponing evaluation. It means giving the other person the benefit of the doubt in the face of language and behavior that one doesn't entirely understand. Withholding judgment makes room for the development of trust, and trust will only be built over time.

In spite of every effort, the odds are good that everyone will express insensitivity at one time or another. When this happens, one can respond in one of two ways. The most natural response is defensiveness ("I didn't mean it that way" or "You misunderstood me"). Defensiveness generally communicates rationalization and/or justification, which is simply another way of expressing superiority. Better is a simple, sincere apology ("I'm sorry. Please forgive my clumsiness"). Humility will go a long way!

On a practical note, one question many people have when anticipating a cross-cultural relationship is the challenge of simple conversation. What does one talk about, and what landmines must be avoided? A warm smile, good eye contact, and the willingness to introduce them to your friends is a good way to start. Model what you want in return. While an awareness of all the grievances, mistrust and broken relationships of past history are necessary background information, *the primary focus must be on the person to whom you are talking, not the historical baggage they may or may not bring with them.* If you are speaking with a Christian of a different culture, talk about how you came to Christ and what Christ is currently doing in your life. What you have in common is your Christian faith! You may even ask the other person to speak about their faith or their church. You might want to inquire about their family.

Once again, however, sensitivity is crucial. Don't make the mistake of Janet, the eager young white woman who, when visiting a black family and seeing a teenager with a baby, asked, "Do you know who the father is?"[17] Before asking questions, consider if they might be taken as intrusive or offensive. Think in advance of ways to pose questions or statements that do not have embedded within them prejudices or stereotypes. Above all, listen *totally* to the other person. This means engaging your eyes, mind and heart in hearing what they have to say.

[17] Washington and Kehrein, p. 156.

Thinking is much faster than speaking, so the habit of most people is to only half-listen when the other person is speaking. (We often use the rest of our mental faculties to assess what is being said, think of how we are going to respond, and so forth.)[18]

Interdependence

If differences between people and cultures can lead to alienation, they also can be a source of strength. Witness the common fact that people tend to marry spouses who are unlike themselves. In a struggling marriage, the partners may allow such differences to drive them apart, but the maturing marriage finds ways in which such differences can build strength and interdependence. This kind of mutual strength derives from each party recognizing the significant contributions of the other. In the end, such recognition leads to equality and mutual appreciation.

The value of interdependence was recognized in the ancient church of Antioch, the first interracial congregation. Here, the earliest Christians first began to tell the story of Jesus to Greeks (Ac. 11:19-21). In a relatively short time, the Antioch church developed into a multi-racial, multi-ethnic congregation. Its leaders were Barnabas, a Jewish Levite from Cyprus (cf. Ac. 4:36), Simeon "the Black," probably an African,[19] Lucius of Cyrene, possibly either a Hellenistic Jew or an African proselyte, Manaen, a Palestinian aristocrat, and Saul, the Christian Pharisee from Tarsus (Ac. 13:1). This diverse leadership enabled the Christians in Antioch to break down ancient cultural and ethnic barriers that separated the different social strata. Each leader brought to the table a different sets of strengths, and together, they became a formidable force for missions. This is the church that sent out the first missions team to Cypress (Ac. 13:2-4) and Asia Minor (Ac. 13:14; 14:1, 8, 21).

This same spirit of interdependence can be seen in the ministry of Paul, the Jew, and Titus, the Greek (cf. Ga. 2:3). When Paul and members of the Corinthian church became embroiled in an acrimonious confrontation (2 Co. 2:1, 5; 7:12), Paul sent Titus as his personal ambassador to work toward reconciliation (2 Co. 12:18; 7:6-7, 13, 15). What Paul was unable to do, Titus managed to accomplish with great diplomacy (2 Co. 2:12-13; 7:5-11). Each needed the other! Paul's theological depth needed to be balanced with Titus' people skills.

This kind of interdependence is no more than what is expressed by the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. The same Lord, the same Spirit, and the same God works in all the members for the common good (1 Co. 12:4-7, 12-

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[18] For some of these insights, I am indebted to Vicki Metters and the guidelines she has developed for huddle leaders in Christian camping.

[19] **Νιγερ** (*niger*) is a Latin loanword meaning "dark-complexioned", cf. *BAG* (1979), p. 539.

13). No member of the body can say they don't need the others (1 Co. 12:21-27). The members should have equal concern for each other. The suffering of one should mean the empathy of the others; the same is true for members who are honored, so all can rejoice together.

This mutual concern does not merely refer to the relationship between fellow members of a single congregation. It also refers to the relationship between different congregations, as is well illustrated by the relief fund Paul helped arrange between the Christians in Asia, Greece and Italy and the Christians in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was especially hard-pressed economically, and Paul urged the Christians in the western churches to respond generously to this need (Ac. 11:27-30; Ro. 15:25-27; 1 Co. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 8:1-5, 10-15; 9:1-5).

Some have argued that it is better simply to allow Christians to sort themselves out by race, class and culture.[20] In fact, in the church growth movement of the late 20th century, some researchers advocated exactly that! Since people tend to be most comfortable with those who are most like themselves, congregational growth should follow a strategy embracing this tendency.[21] The problem with this approach is that the main goal was numerical growth, not Christian maturity. It was dressed up in the spiritual language of building the kingdom of God, but it was easily susceptible to less noble motives. The fact is, white Christians need black Christians! Hispanic Christians need Asian Christians! We all need each other's perspectives, gifts, and strengths for the maturity and growth of the body (Ep. 4:16)! The denominational fragmentation of the Protestant church, if anything, has made isolation along class, cultural and racial lines even more pronounced. This cannot be the church envisioned by Christ (Jn. 17:11, 21-23)!

Sacrifice

At the most fundamental level, sacrifice means giving up something valuable.[22] For the ancient Israelites, it meant giving up a valuable animal for slaughter at the Tent of Meeting or Temple. In several of the levitical offerings of sacrificial animals, the Israelite was instructed to bring his animal, lean his hand on its head at the presentation, and slaughter it (Lv. 1:3-5; 3:2; 4:4). While there is debate concerning what the ritual of "hand-leaning" might mean,[23] there is no doubt

[20] Coexistence without relationship increasingly has been the choice of both black Christians and white Christians, for instance, cf. R. Vischer.

[21] C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984) and *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1985).

[22] Literally, the word זֶבַח (**zĕbăḥ**) refers to a slaughtered animal.

[23] Various suggestions include the ideas of transference of sin, personal identification with the animal to be killed, declaration of the purpose of the offering, declaration of ownership, and substitution in which the animal dies instead of the guilty person, see discussion in J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 151-153.

that the offering was intended to be the giving up of something valuable. In fact, the Israelites were forbidden to offer animals with defects (Lv. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6: 4:3, etc.). Later, the prophets excoriated the people for bringing animals that were blind, crippled or diseased (e.g., Mal. 1:6-8). The idea of sacrifice became a metaphor for the giving up of other valuable things. In the New Testament, Paul refers to a love offering donated by the Philippians as "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice" (Phil. 4:10, 14-18).

In relationships, especially relationships that are cross-cultural, one of the things most liable to be sacrificed is what we commonly call "the comfort zone," that is, the common backgrounds, assumptions, buzz words, worship style, musical preference, dress codes, and so forth. Most often, we associate with folks whose tastes are similar to our own in most of these areas. Here, we feel that we "fit."[24] In moving toward cross-cultural relationships, one finds that many if not most of these familiar landmarks are different.

The incarnation of God's Son was an incredible sacrifice, and his condescension becomes the model for Christians to follow (Phil. 2:1-8)! In his urgent concern for unity, Paul emphasized the self-evident characteristics of Christianity with four "if" clauses:

> *If there is any encouragement in Christ [and there is!]…*
> *If there is any incentive from his love [and there is!]…*
> *If there is any participation in the Spirit [and there is!]…*
> *If there is any tenderness and compassion[and there is!}…*
>
> *THEN…Christians should be one in mind, one in love, one in accord and one in direction. Each believer should defer to the interests of his or her brother or sister in Christ, avoiding selfish preoccupation and the cultivation of one's own experience and familiar preferences.*

This kind of behavior calls for sacrifice! At a minimal level, such sacrifice means learning to share food and customs with which one is unfamiliar. At a deeper level, it means giving up valuable time and certain accepted notions of form or respectability. In a Christian context, it means learning to appreciate someone else's worship style. When working together cross-culturally, it may mean giving up cherished notions about who is "most qualified" to lead. Whites from the suburbs, for instance, are accustomed to college education and management skills. To defer to another leader whose background is different requires intentionality and humility. It also may entail accepting criticism, both overt and subtle, from family and friends.[25]

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[24] Washington and Kehrein, pp. 186-187.

[25] Washington and Kehrein, pp. 193-194

Frequently, Jesus used a phrase to punctuate his teachings: *The first will be last, and the last will be first*. When his disciples pointed out their personal sacrifice in order to follow him, he said it (Mt. 19:30//Mk. 10:31). When he told the parable of the workers, all of whom were paid the same regardless of the hours worked, he said it (Mt. 20:16). When his disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest, he said it (Mk. 9:35). When Jesus told the parable of the owner of the house who firmly shut the door, he said it (Lk. 13:30). This repetition of the same phrase in several different contexts suggests that for Jesus this reordering of common expectations was a basic principle of the kingdom of God. To sacrifice common expectations in deference to someone else may not only be important, it may be necessary!

Empowerment

Empowerment is allowing someone else to have power. This contemporary buzz word, which attends a wide variety of modern "isms", is not in and of itself a bad word, though sometimes it raises negative feelings when it is touted by radical groups. In personal relationships, empowerment is the willingness to share control with someone else so that each may contribute to the relationship freely and without coercion. Empowerment is an antonym for hierarchicalism. Hierarchicalism resists sharing power, while empowerment seeks to share power. In cross-cultural relationships, empowerment aims at equality. Especially where there has been significant inequality, oppression and derogatoriness, empowerment is corrective and liberating.

For Christians, empowerment has unique features that distinguish it from the secular agenda. In the culture at large, empowerment is virtually indistinguishable from seeking power for its own sake. Power, in this sense, is self-determination, self-sufficiency, autonomy, status and success. Jesus, in fact, firmly warned his disciples from seeking this sort of power (Mk. 9:33-35; Lk. 9:46-48; 22:24-27). Rather, empowerment in the Christian sense aims at equality (2 Co. 8:13-15). It recognizes that all power rightly belongs to Christ himself (Jn. 13:3: Mt. 28:18). Any power that Christians have is derived from God (2 Co. 4:7; Ep. 3:16-17; 1 Pe. 4:11), and in fact, the primary character of human life is weakness within which the power of God can be displayed (2 Co. 3:5; 12:9). The model for Christians is Christ himself, who was crucified in weakness but who lives by God's power (2 Co. 13:4). Christian power is the power of great endurance and patience (Col. 1:10-11).

What undermines this sort of Christian empowerment is worldly power, and sadly, many Christians have succumbed to the lure of such power, sometimes even justifying it by religious language. No greater distortion of Holy Scripture is

imaginable beyond the "Christian" slave-owners in America who defended their right to own the bodies of African men and women by appealing to the curse of Noah (cf. Ge. 9:24-25). In modern America, slavery may be a horror of the past, but the ripples have yet to cease. Nor is oppression limited to any particular race. The Chinese who were brought to America to build its western railroads were little better than slaves. Japanese Americans held in camps during World War II must rank as another example. The systematic destruction of Native American life is yet another. Virtually any people group in the world, whites included, have historical horror stories of indignities, oppression and discrimination.

Racism continues, some of it overt, but much of it subtle. Subtle racism is treating one race differently than another, and in spite of political efforts toward equal rights—efforts that must be deeply appreciated—the final answer to racism is not merely the passing of laws. Something fundamental must happen deep within the human heart to change attitudes and feelings. According to the New Testament, this fundamental change comes only through the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Co. 5:14-19).

Washington and Kehrein argue persuasively that the primary empowering agents that set everyone free are repentance and forgiveness, whether Gentiles and Jews, whites and blacks, Hispanics and Asians. These are the fundamental elements in coming to Christian faith in the first place, and they are the fundamental elements for reconciliation between estranged groups as well. "An attitude of repentance empowers the other person—or group, or race—to lay aside anger and blame, and it opens the path to forgiveness."[26] What cripples the effort toward reconciliation is the current "web of confusion over personal responsibility and corporate guilt, blindness to 'institutional' racism (i.e., ingrained in the system), and our human disposition to point the finger of blame at someone else."[27] "True reconciliation only works when both repentance and forgiveness are mutually exchanged."[28]

So, who makes the first move? Actually, it is less important to designate one or the other as it is that *someone* does so! Certainly in the case of Christ, the One who was the most deeply offended by human sin made the first move toward forgiveness. At the same time, various leaders in biblical history have taken the initiative to offer identificational repentance in behalf of their ancestors. This was true of Daniel (Da. 9), Ezra (Ezr. 9:5-7, 10-15), and Nehemiah (Ne. 1:5-7). Both Moses and Paul were even willing to entertain the idea of their own rejection if it would mean the salvation of their people (Ex. 32:31-32; Ro. 9:1-3). Here, these

[26] Washington and Kehrein, p. 198.

[27] Washington and Kehrein, p. 199.

[28] Washington and Kehrein, p. 199.

leaders demonstrated an *attitude* of repentance. They did not lapse into the self-serving argument that it was someone else's sins, and not their own, but they humbly identified with the sins of their own ancestors, accepting responsibility for them as though they were their own. This is precisely what Christ did on the cross! The One who had no sin accepted the sins of others and bore them himself.

In a cross-cultural context, identificational repentance makes forgiveness and reconciliation possible. It sets the other person free to build trust. It may even liberate others to the extent that they can more clearly examine their own hearts and confess their own shortcomings. However, any efforts toward self-preservation or self-justification, even if technically justifiable, will cripple the effort toward true reconciliation.

The emphasis here must be on the *attitude* of repentance and forgiveness, something that is deeply inward. Too often, what has been offered are public gestures symbolizing repentance and forgiveness while no real inward attitudes of repentance and forgiveness are nurtured. Public gestures are important in their own right, but if they are not undergirded by real inward change, they become merely an excuse to go back to carrying on business as usual. Real changes in attitude, however, produce long-range changes in behavior. Such changes, surely, are more significant than gestures. It is this deep and lasting inward change that fosters reconciliation and true Christian empowerment.