

MISSIONS: Bearing the Burdens of the World

by Chris Surber

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When we bear the burdens of other followers of Jesus, we enter into lived communion. We embody the message that is embodied in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. We become one another's incarnation. We become one another's preacher. We become living witnesses to the immediate power of the gospel. Bushnell says, "The power is to be personal, and will therefore lie in the facts of the personal life. These facts therefore are preeminently the good news that composes the gospel; requiring heralds to go abroad and publish it."¹

The Great Commission bids us go. The Great Commandment tells us the manner of our behavior in the going. Passages like Galatians 6:2 inform our pilgrimage in this world. We are not only going to those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our call is to go also to those who have heard, yet presently bear burdens alone.



Kim Quint, member of Mt. Hope CC, with a little boy in Monrovia

A child I know by name waits at a rickety table under a braided palm branch shelter for the feeding clinic. He hopes the missionaries won't cancel it today, as they did last week because they could not drive to his community. The roads were blocked with burning tires because of government instability he does not understand. He appears patient as he waits for the food. He isn't. He does not have the energy to complain. He is hungry — really hungry.

Haiti is the part of the world to which I can speak most intelligently about poverty and suffering, but it is hardly unique. I know Missionaries in Burkina Faso, Rwanda, and other parts of the world report similar stories. Fellow followers of Jesus all over the world suffer conditions of poverty that are so bleak as to be soul crushing.

There are many kinds of global persecution that are worthy of addressing. However, for the sake of clarity, I am going to focus on our collective responsibility to fellow followers of Jesus who carry the cruel yoke of extreme poverty around the world. We are a part of a global brotherhood of souls, and the Christian life is inherently a life of sharing and bearing.

Here are just two passages of Scripture and a few thoughts as to how the Lord is calling us to life on mission as bearers and sharers of the love and life of God found in Christ.

Bear One Another's Burdens

In Galatians 6:2 the Apostle Paul says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (ESV) The application of Christian virtue is not found in a vacuum of human application. At the very least, it simply can never be quantified or verified if that virtue, no matter how well intentioned, is not tested within the context of real human interaction. In other words, no monk in a hut on a hill alone with his sacred texts and personal prayerful holiness ever did anything worth doing.

Christ does not call us to personal piety devoid of practical human concern. Commenting on this idea, Marva Dawn wrote, "That is another reason why we so much need each other in Christian community — to remind one another of the source of our motivation, to encourage a deeper reliance on the Lord's empowerment for all of our slaving."² When we bear the burdens of others, we find out our own motivations — whether they be true or false — because love hoarded is not love. It is self-gratitude.



Pastor Surber in Haitian Creole at the Pentecostal Church of Monrovia, Haiti

Share One Another's Needs

"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45 ESV). For me, this has been the hardest lesson to learn. I grew up poor by American standards. Clearance rack Pro Wings and hand-me-downs were most certainly not my attire of choice. They were just what I was given to wear! As I matured into a young man, I worked hard and made a life for myself. I took pride in providing for myself. No, I was full of pride because of my false belief that I alone had provided for myself.

I had pulled myself up by my bootstraps, but I forgot to praise God for the bootstraps, the strength to pull, and His blessing upon the pulling. Some of our brothers and sisters around the world do not have the bootstraps and they do not know anyone else that has any to lend. That is where we come in. This passage speaks

specifically to one local congregation that held "all things in common." Our Congregational identity might incline us to see this kind of Christian community as inherently local. As such, any inference we might draw as to our obligation or inclination to do likewise would likely be to interpret and apply these practices locally.

There is a local application in our community churches. However, our Congregational identity does not give us a "pass" on our inherent connection with the global Body of Christ. The Kingdom of God is for believers everywhere. We are Christian only, but we are not the only Christians. Christ is the light of our local fellowships but "In a much more exalted sense is Christ the light of the world."³ The light of Jesus shining at home casts light into a global portal.

Moreover, if their identity is complete in Christ and our identity is completely Christian, we not an obligation to extend the circle of our concern for burden-bearing and

need-sharing to the global Body of Christ? Does the command of Christ to bear the burdens and share the needs of fellow followers of Jesus not extend to every corner of the globe? Are we not bound to do our part not only to bring the story of Christ to the world so that they may find life in Him, but also to bring the story of Christ to life in us that in bearing their burdens and sharing their needs they would find Him alive through us?

A child neither you nor I know by name sits at a rickety table under a rickety shelter waiting for you and me to care about his hunger, his lack of education, his sickness, and the myriad ways he and his Church community are oppressed by the demons of poverty. Will we be global burden bearers and need sharers?

If he, you, and I are one in Christ, as best I can discover from Scripture and experiencing the love of God in Christ, his burdens are mine to bear. His needs are mine to share. What shall we do? When shall we do it? How long will he sit at that rickety table waiting on you and me?

¹ Marva Dawn, "Truly the Community," *Evangelical Grand Rapids*, MI, 1992, page 185.
² Hance Bushnell, "The Vicarious Sacrifice," *The Regina Press*, New York, Reprint Edition 1975, page 530.
³ J.B. Kaizer, "The Glorious Body of Christ," *The Banner of Truth Trust*, Carlisle, PA, 1967, page 265.