

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR GROWTH

The most recent General Conference of Elders was completed a few weeks ago. The theme for the conference this year was “Creating an Environment for Growth.” As the responses for the Beyond Today and our other media efforts continue to grow there is a growing awareness on the part of the Council that we need the right kind of church environment for those new people that God wants to bring into His church.

I would like to speak from the heart today about one aspect of this right kind of church environment that I am passionate about and had a real impact on me when I was brand new to the church nearly 30 years ago and that is the spirit of inclusiveness. To introduce this topic I would like to quote from a sermon that was given in the first year that I attended church. In a sermon about giving, Carn Catherwood, made the following comments:

Are you a giver? Does God remember you? ... The example of the givers is in what creates in many ways the greatest impression on those who are new and they remember the givers. You offer food, you offer conversation, you offer the warmth of your home to somebody and it builds a bond. It binds us together and us to God because God is the giver of every good and perfect gift and wants us to become givers.

In my early years of the church I saw both sides of this coin. Not having grown up in the church I received rather minimal friendship from my immediate peers a couple of years either side of my age and, to be perfectly honest, I was rarely included in their activities.

On the other hand there were a few older singles who did befriend and help me for which I was very grateful. I was 16 when I first started to attend church on my own and for many months I was that strange kid who used to ride on my push bike to church from my place at Holland Park to Mansfield. In those days I didn't own any slacks or any dress shirts. One example of the kindness that those older singles showed me was that, unknown to me, a few of the older singles put together some money and bought me some good church clothes for my first feast.

That contrast between what I would call “unintentional neglect” on the one hand and the inclusiveness of those older singles made a very deep impression on me as a new member back then. That kind of “unintentional neglect” is easy for any one of us to slip into as it takes vigilance to be aware of the needs of others and effort and sometimes courage to step up to the plate to help others and make them feel included.

A few months ago Dave Barton spoke about the DOC or Duty of Care principle. As far as our duty of care to others goes there are a few scriptures that have stuck out in my mind that I have personally found that are very confronting and challenging that really test the depth of our love and how much we are inclusive, caring people.

To be honest there have been times that I have failed miserably in this area. There have been times when personal issues have destroyed my self-confidence and I haven't had the courage to reach out to others the way that I would like to. Even to this day, I occasionally have days like that.

No matter what the challenges that life throws at me I remind myself that these verses are still here to challenge us to move from the human love which we might think is good enough to the love of God. When Jesus said, “Love another as I have loved you” He was raising the bar a

whole lot higher than the kind of love we humanly might think is good enough. With that as background, let's take a look at some of those challenging scriptures that show what the love of God looks like in action.

For our first confronting scripture please turn with me to Luke 6:32. Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount says the following: "But if you love those that love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same."

Here is a real litmus test for a christian. We can ask ourselves some hard questions – Is our love merely limited to our own small circle of friends? Is it limited to giving only when it is convenient to us? If it is, then Christ quite bluntly says here that our love for others is no better than that of the pagans and sinners of the world.

There are other people who can easily be left out unwittingly like widows, widowers, single parents and others on their own. Many of us have limitations on what we can do to give to others but what we can do to help create a sense of belonging we should do by welcoming visitors, the elderly, children, new members and looking after anyone else who might be lonely and in need in our midst. It's perfectly natural for people to associate in smaller groups with people who have similar interests to us. Such smaller groups are needed to get to know others on a more personal level. It's only when these groups become exclusive when it becomes a problem.

Another way we can slip into just caring for our own is only caring for those in the church and not caring for those in the world. We can do this on a personal level with individual people we meet or we could do this by not caring about the Work of God.

How much do we care about the media work that God is doing through the church to reach new people with the gospel and the truth of God? Have we lost our interest and zeal for the Work or are we on fire and care about the responses and growth of the Work in the church? Mr Armstrong used to always say that we are here to do the Work of God. We are not here just to get our own salvation and the church is not to be just a social club.

Let's now take a look at our next confronting scripture over in Luke 14:12. Starting in verse 12 we read: "When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite *the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind*. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."

That sure is a confronting and sobering scripture to think about next time we think about inviting people over for dinner or organising a get together with others. The main thrust of this verse is not to give to others in order to get something back but it also gives us pause to think beyond our own circle of friends to those who might normally miss out when we arrange a dinner or get together with friends.

For our next challenging scripture showing the love of God in action please turn to Matthew 25:34-40 where we read: "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed *You*, or thirsty and give *You* drink? 'When did we see You a stranger and take *You* in, or naked and clothe *You*? 'Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me.'

This is a well known passage but I wanted to briefly draw your attention to one of the words in this passage. It is the word "least". Does God consider them the least? Looking at other verses in the New Testament I don't think so. Paul talked about how we are all one in Christ and God doesn't view any of us as second class Christians based on physical qualities like being Greek, or Jew, male or female so I would say that it is us flawed mortals who put different value on other people either because of our attitude or lack of interest in some compared to others. The Apostle Peter said that God is no respecter of persons and has no such partiality. He cares for all people and He wants to develop that same deep love within us. Jerry and Mary White in their book "Friends and Friendship" write:

Loyalty means supporting a friend in difficulty as well as prosperity. "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Proverbs 17:17). We need friends desperately at times of problems and difficulty...Adversity reveals the depth of friendship. Adversity is not just those catastrophic happenings of life and death when many rally around, but also those deep waters that only a few know we are passing through. Friendship really deepens when we pass through those difficulties together (p16-17).

In the church there are advertised needs such as those that members ask for prayers from the church for but there are many more needs that go under the radar such as the deep waters of very personal trials that most of us go through at some time or another. Sometimes people need support and encouragement, sometimes words of advice or just someone to listen to them, sometimes it's a private matter or it's something someone may not feel comfortable asking a minister for help with. These are the sort of needs you only find out about by spending time getting to know people and asking them from time to time about what's happening in their lives in a friendly way.

Often people are guarded and will only share their deeper pains with those who prove by the time that they are willing to invest that they care enough for that person. At other times people might say a throwaway line, something to indicate that there's a problem just to test whether the other person cares enough to enquire further about it or is willing to help. eg. We might ask someone how they are and they might say "Could be better" or whatever. It takes pro-active rather than reactive concern to find out such needs.

For our next confronting scripture please turn with me to Luke 15 and we'll start reading from verse 4: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? "And when he has found *it*, he lays *it* on his shoulders, rejoicing. "And when he comes home, he calls together *his* friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'

When was the last time that we went after someone who was lost? It may be someone who is drifting away from church or from God's ways. This passage tells us that we shouldn't be indifferent in such situations but reach out and be a help to those who have left the path.

One good example of this is how Breen told me how he ended coming back to church after leaving for many years. I won't embarrass the person by mentioning him by name but this friend of mine touched bases with him regularly over many years. It wasn't from the motive of getting him back to church but just being an interested friend and when Breen finally decided he wanted to come back he wanted to attend where this trusted friend attended.

In addition to people we know who left the church many years ago there are people who come here briefly but may drift away. If we have gotten to know them and we have their details it's

worth touching bases with them from time to time and take an interest in what's happening in their lives. That genuine interest and friendship may make the difference in that person wanting to come back to church.

The last challenging verse that I would like to look at today is Isaiah 32:8. In this verse we read: "The generous devise generous things and by generous things do they stand." In the same sermon I quoted from earlier the following comments were made about this verse:

Plan your giving. That is sit down and make an active plan for giving - opportunities, occasions and situations where you intend to live the way of give. Put some pressure on yourself! Plan it! Don't sort of stumble haphazardly into giving. You can't and you won't! Plan it, organise it, think about it and set it in motion consciously. Isaiah 32:8 says, "The generous devise generous things and by generous things do they stand." Yeah, you have to have a plan.

Plan regular opportunities to give hospitality. They're giving experiences that we need. Maybe once a month, maybe more often. Plan things in your prayer time, especially plenty of intercessory prayer for others. When you ask God to bless someone who is sick, who is weak, who is depressed you have given them time. It's a reflection of the way of give.

Plan to see those who are sick or elderly. Plan to talk to new members, visitors or those who need someone to talk to or someone who you haven't talked to for a while. If you're a single man have an active plan for giving in dating. Plan to use your resources - your money or whatever to give to others. Finally plan your offerings which you add on to your tithes in advance and plan to increase your Holy Day offerings as time goes by.

I see a couple of themes that run through these challenging passages we've looked at today. One is the theme of being inclusive with the friendship and help that we give to others. The other theme that I see is that we have to be proactive with our giving not merely reactive.

Regardless of whether we are in the ministry or just members God doesn't want us just being reactive Christians who wait for others to come to us when they need help. He wants us to be proactive getting to know others, touching base with what's happening in their lives and finding out and helping others with their needs of friendship, advice, encouragement and physical and financial help where appropriate. Are we proactive or reactive Christians? To quote again from the message I quoted from at the start of this message: "Are you a giver? Does God remember you?"

In conclusion, I believe God would want us to strive to be more proactive as a church and be inclusive so when He has new people He wants to bring into His church He feels that our local church will be inclusive and support any new people He wishes to call into His church.