

ABSTRACT

Characters of Compassion

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There is evidence that indicates that people in modern America are increasingly focussed on themselves. People in churches are no doubt affected by this selfishness in their walk with God and in their attitudes toward the church and personal ministry. The challenge of this project was to confront our culture's self-centered world-view and to contrast it with one based on biblical compassion, through an intensive group growth experience, based on a sermon series and selected readings.

The project involved four tasks: 1) verifying the increasing preoccupation with "self" in our culture, 2) developing a Biblical and rational foundation for the integration of spirituality and compassion, 3) designing and presenting a personal growth experience for a church setting to help participants develop more other-oriented thoughts, values, and actions, and 4) evaluating a sermon-based reflection group as a means of encouraging spiritual response and change.

Indications of the self-centered bent of our culture were substantiated through a selective survey of contemporary psychology and sociology, in Chapter Two, "Western Society's Suicide of Selfishness."

Chapter 3 begins with a biblical "theology of self." The theological foundation for compassion was based on themes derived from the writings of Henri Nouwen and related biblical material. This material was used to form a "manual of readings" which became the core of a seven-week, sermon-based reflection group. Material from St. Francis was used in the manual to illustrate each theme.

Chapter 4, "Characters of Compassion," is a description of the experience of the study group, which concluded with a visit with Henri Nouwen at the Daybreak community in Toronto, Canada.

Evaluations from the participants regarding their responses to the study and its impact on their thinking about compassion form Chapter 5, "More Compassion?" As part of the evaluation, the adequacy of Nouwen's themes as the theological model informing the study is assessed. To conclude, these reflections on the study were summarized, with a view to identifying directions for the design of future growth experiences involving sermon reflection, guided readings, and small groups. Finally, strategies were discussed for confronting destructive self-centeredness through preaching.

CHARACTERS OF COMPASSION
BECOMING MORE LIKE THE MASTER

by

Gregory Wray McClain

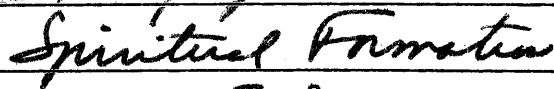
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CHAPTER 1

The Nature and Scope of the Project/Dissertation

The Occasion and Setting of the Project

"Equipping people for ministry" has come to be an important objective of the ministry of The Wesleyan Church of Hamburg in the last decade. The associate pastor, titled "director of discipleship and evangelism," was given this as his major mandate for ministry. The Mission and Purpose of the church reflects this in one of three major statements of activity: ". . .training them to serve as the Body of Christ." (see appendix A) In pursuit of a Director of Christian Education now, we are searching for a person who can mobilize and equip people for life-changing ministry to others, specifically in the areas of children and adult ministry. God's desire to love others through His people has been woven into the fabric of the pulpit ministry. Episodic training events in caring skills and spiritual gifts have been offered to and appreciated by many in the church by the associate pastor. Along with challenges to be involved in the financing of a new building, have come clarion reminders that our real mission is not to build a building, but to build people for the Kingdom of God. Despite these efforts, many in the church appear yet unmoved and uninvolved.

There is evidence from sociology and psychology that indicates that people in modern America are increasingly focussed on themselves and their own happiness. A psycho-analyst concluded his study of the prevalence of this self-oriented perspective, a perspective he finds permeating the structures of society from marriage to the media, with a pessimistic prophecy of its ultimate impact. "The takers will have their feast, the givers will get stuck with the check--and the price

gets higher every day. It will go on this way until the bill becomes unpayable because the majority of us will be takers. Ultimately, the system will collapse."¹ There are others who share the seriousness of his assessment, as we shall see.

People in churches are no doubt affected by this selfishness in their walk with God and in their attitudes toward the church and personal ministry. If this is true, it is a serious situation, since Christians are called to live for the good of others, not for themselves.

Pursuing deeper spiritual lives does not cure this when spirituality is conceived to be personal closeness to God without regard for others, and when spiritual seekers become spiritual "consumers." If Christians do slide into self-centeredness, the advance of the Kingdom suffers, inside and outside the organized church, and the spiritual vitality of affected believers is weakened. My own struggles with the meaning of godliness have led me to question the pursuit of righteousness and "closeness to God" for their own sakes, without concern for others.

Could it be, I have wondered, if Christians could be invited to a life patterned more closely after Jesus' model of "life for others," that God's true purposes would be better served, and that believers themselves would discover the fuller meanings of the "abundant life" Jesus offers? Out of these kinds of questions came the idea for a study that would confront our culture's self-centered world-view and offer to supplant it with one based on biblical compassion. The church in which this study took place is the Wesleyan Church of Hamburg, a church in a southern suburb of Buffalo, New York. Founded in 1957 as a daughter

1. Aaron Stern, Me: The Narcissistic American (New York: Ballantine Books), p. 193.

church of a neighboring congregation, it has grown to over 300 families, with attendance averaging around 450. Having attracted people from a wide variety of backgrounds, we are cemented together by a common allegiance to Christ that bridges our differences, and fuels enthusiasm and warmth. The congregation is well-balanced between young and middle-aged couples, with few older people.

About half of the adults in the congregation are involved in a small group ministry called "growth groups," involvement that has helped to provide pastoral care and relational support for the fairly rapid growth that has occurred in recent years. Growth in worship attendance has been almost 9% per year, and approached 30% this fall, facts which place additional significance on the need to cultivate caring people for wider ministry.

Sensing saturation of our facility and parking four years ago, we began planning to expand. Just prior to construction, these plans were supplanted by an opportunity to purchase a much larger, more visible site. The church is now completing these facilities, the construction of which has significantly increased our visibility in the community, and the completion of which will present fresh opportunities for serving ministry. The potential increase in numbers will challenge us to maintain quality relationships and to keep a clear vision of concern for others, in the name of Christ, as our reason for being. To respond to these issues, we need to reinforce attitudes of love and concern for others, both to strengthen the fabric of our own relationships, and to lay a foundation for response to the needs of those yet unmet and unloved.

Purpose Statement and Assumptions

The purpose of this study is to present an intensive growth expe-

rience that will confront its participants with a clear vision of the potentials and beauty of biblical compassion. This will involve four tasks: 1) to verify the increasing pre-occupation with "self" in our culture, 2) to develop a Biblical and rational foundation for the integration of spirituality and compassion, 3) to design and present a personal growth experience for a church setting that will help participants develop more other-oriented thoughts, values, and actions, and 4) to evaluate a sermon-based reflection group as a means of encouraging spiritual response and change.

The study is based on a number of assumptions, the most important of which concerns the truth and reliability of the Bible and the normative nature of its teaching for optimal living. God's communication through the Bible demands life response, not only intellectual assent to His ideas. This means that our obedience should include thoughts, values and actions that bespeak our allegiance to Him.

It is also assumed that thoughts, values and actions can be changed by meaningful encounter with the teachings of Scripture. In fact, the more they are shaped by Scripture in any person's experience, the more balanced and healthy his or her experience of life will be. Therefore, an experience consisting of teaching on Scripture, with time for personal reflection and creative integration, can be effective in building increasingly other-oriented thoughts, values, and actions in the lives of participants.

Limitations

Designed for church-attending suburban North American Christians, the experiences and format of this project may not be effective with other groups or cultures. Varying styles of verbal communication, social structures, and levels of mobility could prevent the methods used

here from being successful in other cultures. Different needs in different cultural settings might make the concepts less relevant than in western culture. I suspect, however, that our culture is not the only one to be dominated by self-centered thinking. Certainly the biblical concepts of compassion, if correctly interpreted, are universally applicable.

Implemented with only a single small group from a church, no objective attempt at evaluation of the effectiveness of the experience will be made, but an evaluation will be used to project ideas for improving future teaching experiences of this kind. Much of the effectiveness of this kind of evaluation depends upon the self-awareness and perceptiveness of the individuals involved and their receptivity to the study.

This study will not purport to do a complete renovation of participants' world-view, since that represents a lifetime of accumulated beliefs and attitudes. Rather, the primary objective will be to awaken awareness to areas of potential growth, both in the individuals and in their perceptions of the church in which they participate.

This study will not deal with the genesis or content of liberation theology, since it represents only a narrow range in the spectrum of possible expressions of biblical compassion. Instead it will focus on the issues of the development of the individual believer's "interior" life of compassion, though set significantly in a community of other believers.

Other examples could be found of the integration of spirituality and compassion, but within the Roman Catholic tradition this issue has received significant overt emphasis, yielding self-reflective examples such as the ones chosen for this study. Henri Nouwen is a man who

could and did establish himself prominently in the elite academic circles of the world. By his own choice, however, he has prevented himself from becoming charmed by the accolades and successes of academia.

Working in South America, France, and now in Canada, with a community that serves handicapped adults, he exemplifies one who has confronted the seductive dragons of contemporary selfishness, and slain them through the power and vigor of the Word in him. St. Francis expressed this same kind of spiritual vitality in his day and left us not only the mark of his followers, but also the imprint of his spirit in his writings and life.

Organization and Presentation of the Study

Indications of the self-centered bent of our culture will be substantiated through a selective survey of contemporary psychology and sociology and critiques thereof. Fulfilling task one of the study, these findings will be summarized in Chapter Two, "Western Society's Suicide of Selfishness," and utilized in developing three sermons that will be an introduction and invitation to the longer series.

To provide a transition from the "loss of self in pursuit of self" that concludes the analysis in chapter 2, chapter 3 will begin with a biblical "theology of self," on which the rest of the study will rest.

An important component of the study is the manual of readings, based upon themes of compassion from Nouwen's writing. To construct this, passages from Nouwen will be grouped by these themes. Biblical passages that articulate each theme will be grouped into daily readings for the week spent on that theme. One of the passages will become the source for that week's sermon. Incidents and excerpts from St. Francis will illustrate each week's theme in the manual of readings.

Utilizing this material to provide the rest of the theological

framework and to fulfil task two, the selections from Nouwen and some pertinent Scripture will be woven into Chapter 3, "Compassion: Coming Back to Life." Chapter 4 will include a description of the experience of the study group, "Characters of Compassion," fulfilling task 3.

It was planned that interest in the study be encouraged through the presentation of three introductory sermons, each based on a person of the Trinity and his regard for us. These sermons were preached during the last three weeks of September 1990. In the worship bulletin for those weeks were descriptions of the study and invitations to participate (appendix B). Indications of interest were to be made either through personal contact with me, through signing the "friendship pads" we use to record attendance at worship, or through appearing at the study.

The first meeting of the course was on September 27, 1991. At this time, I described the nature of the course and distributed the readings and Scripture selections for the topic for that week. The following Sunday I preached on the topic on which we had been reflecting. Each Sunday evening we met to interact in some way on the week's topic and to receive the readings for the next week.

As the conclusion of the study we visited Henri Nouwen at the Daybreak community in Toronto, Canada, and spent an additional evening reflecting on our notes from this time. The final evaluative session was held on February 24, 1991.

Once the study was completed, I used the evaluations from the participants regarding their responses to the study and its impact on their thinking about compassion in completing an evaluation, which will form chapter 5, "More Compassion?" As part of the evaluation, I will assess the adequacy of Nouwen's themes as the theological model inform-

ing the study.

To conclude, the results of these reflections on the study, especially on the idea of using sermonic material as a guiding curriculum for a spiritual growth experience, will be summarized, with a view to identifying directions for the design of future growth experiences involving sermon reflection, guided readings, and small groups. The impact of the study on my own walk with God will also be described. Finally, since the primary thesis of the project involves the implication that our cultural setting imposes on us a struggle with a growing and vicious specter of destructive self-centeredness, strategies for meeting this enemy in preaching and worship will be suggested.

CHAPTER 2

WESTERN SOCIETY'S SUICIDE OF SELFISHNESS

What's Wrong? the Self Deluded

As I barbecued and served a salmon caught in Lake Ontario, a lake with deeply polluted waters, I wondered about the hazards of ingesting heavy metals as I ate. Not worried enough to desist, I swallowed my concerns along with the fish.

Warnings about hazards more ominous than heavy-metal poisoning abound in Scripture, warnings about absorbing the values and ways of the culture in which lovers of God live. Old Testament prophets brought God's judgment against syncretism with pagan people's perverse ways. "For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent." (Jeremiah 19:4) Wearied with His people's diluted allegiance, God Himself delivered judgment through war and misfortune. "So I stretched out my hand against you and reduced your territory; I gave you over to the greed of your enemies" (Ezekiel 16:27)

Christ's followers are warned by Paul of compromising Christ's claims. He invites his readers to a complete surrender to God's ways in Romans 12:1. "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" The opposite of this surrender to God is capitulation to the ways of the world, decried in the next verse, Romans 12:2. "Do not be conformed to this world...." "World" describes culture as untouched by God's truth, a setting hostile to the goals of life

transformed by Him.

To obey this negative dimension of surrender to God, we need to be aware of what comprises our "world," aware of the ideas that try to force us into their mold, aware of their progress in stealing our hearts and guiding our wills.

Auxiliary Bishop Donald Trautman of Buffalo encountered one of the most damaging of these ideas as he spoke to 25 Catholic high school students about the value of sacrifice. They snickered. "Who of us is going to sacrifice?" One student, in the process of spending \$500 on his prom said, "You're telling me to sacrifice. You've got to be kidding. I want the best and the most of everything in American life."¹

This benighted youth, concerned with what he can acquire and little else, mirrors many like him in America. "Individualism, the emphasis on self-interest over a concern for the common good, is making deep inroads into the national character in ways the average person in Western New York could scarcely have imagined a generation ago."²

This new "ism," individualism, or "selfism," is modelled for us in bold ways by those whom our society reveres. Shirley MacLaine pronounced that "the most pleasurable journey you take is through yourself The only sustaining love involvement is with yourself."³ There are those who promote "the virtue of selfishness," in books such as one with that very title by Ayn Rand. With apostolic seriousness, she maintains that "a genuine selfishness--that is: a genuine concern

1. David Briggs. "A Generation of Americans Indulges in the Pursuit of Self-Gratification," The Evening News, 15 September 1989: p. A4.

2. Ibid., p. A1.

3. Henry Fairlie, Seven Deadly Sins Today, (Washington: New Republic Books, 1979), p. 31.

with discovering what is to one's self-interest, an acceptance of the responsibility of achieving it . . . , represents a profound moral achievement."⁴

Not everyone agrees. Robert Bellah, a sociologist, argued in his popular book, Habits of the Heart, that "individualism may have grown cancerous, destroying social integuments (family, religious traditions, participation in local politics) . . . and actually threatening freedom itself."⁵ If he is correct, each Christian in this culture is under constant assault, bombarded with this idea of the "world" that he or she is the center of their own existence. If we are to resist the power of this lie, we need to be aware of its prevalence.

The influences of selfism bombard each of us in many ways. Evidences of this abound in current culture, finding expression through advocates and critics both. In this chapter we will investigate some of these evidences.

The Media

The media lend powerful reinforcement to self-seeking trends. Taffel, an educator, points to the powerful influences that compete for the attention and minds of students. "The demand for instant gratification is inherent in the fact that entertainment is probably our major industry."⁶ The media that entertain and educate us have shaped our culture. "No force influences our lives more profoundly than the media. It (sic) forms our view of the world, shapes our perceptions of every-

4. Ayn Rand, The Virtue of Selfishness (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 73.

5. Robert Bellah, Habits of the Heart (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. vi.

6. Alexander Taffel, "Who Is to Blame?" Teachers' Clearing house for Science and Society Education Newsletter, (Spring 1989), p. 28.

thing around us"⁷ Christopher Lasch calls modern marketing "propaganda of consumption." "Advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life. It 'educates' the masses into an unappeasable appetite not only for goods but for new experiences and personal fulfillment."⁸

Television is a perfect medium for cultivating individualism. The predominant subjects of television, which "schools" our nation for hours each day, are five: drinking or substance abuse, self-medication, casual sexuality, violence and lawlessness, and quick gratification, which is especially communicated through commercials.⁹ No wonder Stern calls the media a "greenhouse for narcissistic flowering."¹⁰

Education

Television's smorgasboard of entertainment helps create a mentality that comes also to the classroom. An English teacher in Deerfield, Illinois reports that "the students are used to being entertained. They are used to the idea that if they are just the slightest bit bored, they can flip the switch and turn the channels."¹¹ To maintain student interest, schools are tempted by the entertainment mentality, and so to abdicate leadership in students' development. The result is that "deprived of leadership and surrounded by overwhelming skepticism,

7. Aaron Stern, Me: The Narcissistic American (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), p. 135.

8. Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978), p. 72.

9. H. Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelson, Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World, (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1988), pp. 42 & 43.

10. Stern, loc. cit.

11. Lasch, op. cit., p. 150.

students become totally self-absorbed."¹² If everyone at school is out for themselves, it is no wonder that "views of how teachers should interact with students . . . tend to see the main task as arbitration between what everyone wants for themselves."¹³ A man who has observed college students while teaching at Cornell observes that "students these days are pleasant, friendly and, if not great-souled, at least not particularly mean-spirited. Their primary preoccupation is themselves, understood in the narrowest sense."¹⁴

Who is to blame? In defense of educators, Taffel argues that "the priorities of such a society are not lost on the students. They soon learn that instant gratification and the pursuit of the dollars are the prime goals of our culture. . . . the fact is that students respect and value what our society respects and values."¹⁵

The objectives of education are oriented towards productivity and effectiveness. "In the secularized public educational system, we are literally conditioned to become builders of Babel instead of shapers of the Kingdom of God. Everything around us tells us to work on an individual 'tower with its tops in the heavens, and ...make a name for ourselves' through professional success."¹⁶ Students today are seeking what will "sell" in today's market, and what they see selling is the

12. Charles Colson, Against the Night (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1989), p. 84.

13. Mike Wallach, Psychology's Sanction for Selfishness: the Error of Selfism in Theory and Therapy, (San Fransisco: W. H. Freeman, 1983), p. 15.

14. Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 83.

15. Taffel, loc. cit.

16. Richard Lovelace, Continuous Renewal, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 60.

advancement of one's self.

The Workplace

Perhaps they have read the words of a speaker at an American Management Association conference for CEO's. In all seriousness he said, "I want men that are vicious, grasping, and lusting for power."¹⁷ He and his men, no doubt, fit well into the corporate culture described in a study of 250 executives from 12 major companies, cited by Lasch. The study found little company loyalty, the desires to keep options open and to be known as a winner, and little capacity for intimacy or social commitment.¹⁸ Bellah talked to people like this. "I want to keep progressing to the point where I remain challenged, where I come as close as I can to performing at the absolute limits of my capability. That's success."¹⁹

This selfish pursuit either becomes more frenzied or is abandoned as futile when a career flattens out and it becomes clear that one will not make it to the top or be the best.²⁰ So emerges the mid-life crisis. This modern miasma is born of a new-found focus on self and new views of work, devoid of a sense of calling or commitment to a larger good. "For many in middle age, the world of work then dims, and by extension so does the public world at large. For the fortunate among the career-weary, the private world of family and friends grows brighter, and a more expressive self comes to the fore."²¹

17. Max DePree, Leadership is an Art, (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 60.

18. Lasch, op. cit., p. 44.

19. Bellah, op. cit., p. 68.

20. Ibid., p. 69.

21. Ibid.

The Family

Unfortunately, by the time the career-worn executive turns his attention toward home, there may not be enough left there to compensate him or to help restore his flagging personal reserves. He may find himself like Brian, cited in Bellah, whose new-found commitment to his family "seems as arbitrary and unexamined as his early pursuit of material success. But both are justified as idiosyncratic preference rather than as representing a larger sense of the purpose of life."²² Even though devotion to his family is his new goal, he "sees himself as consistently pursuing a utilitarian calculus--devotion to his own self-interest"²³ A family can be a wonderful help in adjusting to the pressures of life, but normal tensions can turn it into an impossibly hot inferno for too many people who focus exclusively on their own interests. A self-centered perspective on family life is a sure formula for its collapse.

A less overt evidence of individualism in the family is the difficulty of transmitting values. When values have come to be identified as the whim of the individual, how does a parent instruct a child? Simple. It does not. Lasch calls this the "collapse of parental guidance," describing "parents' helplessness to instruct the child in the ways of the world or to transmit ethical concepts."²⁴ Translated into later behaviors observed by Bellah, "in the eyes of ...these successful children of professionals without strong religious beliefs, parental love is narrowed to a reward for doing well. . . . 'Being good' becomes a matter of

22. Ibid., p. 6.

23. Ibid.

24. Lasch, op. cit., p. 167.

being good at things, being right a matter of having the right answers."²⁵ "What is good for you is what is right and good" is the message that all too many of our culture's successful parents communicate to their children.

A family comprised of individuals each focussed on himself or herself, each believing that one's own wishes, desires are what are right for them, fails to provide a vehicle for the transmission of any greater or more noble values, and also fails to provide a place for "quasi-natural attachments beyond the individual, that gave men and women unqualified concern for at least some others and created an entirely different relation to society from that which the isolated individual has."²⁶

Lack of commitment of any kind, except for radical commitment to myself, is an impossible basis on which to build any human relationship, especially one with the intensity of family life, as millions of Americans have found out by moving with high hopes of happiness from one failed and frustrating relationship to another. "The problem will only be adequately addressed when we deal with the individualism and relativism that are destroying the notions of duty and commitment central to the marital and familial bond."²⁷

The Aged

Given the prevalence of a pragmatic, self-centered approach to life, it is no wonder that old people in our culture fare so poorly. What do they contribute? "Our society notoriously finds little use for

25. Bellah, op. cit., p. 60.

26. Bloom, op. cit., p. 86.

27. Colson, op. cit., p. 128.

the elderly. It defines them as useless, forces them to retire before they have exhausted their capacity for work, and reinforces their sense of superfluity at every opportunity."²⁸ Concluding that the aged contribute nothing, we relegate them to the fringes of society, and then work hard to prolong our own youthfulness.

The poverty of the selfish perspective of the individualist become especially apparent in the face of death. "Because the narcissist has so few inner resources, he looks to others to validate his sense of self. He needs to be admired for his beauty, charm, celebrity, or power--attributes that usually fade with time. Unable to achieve satisfying sublimations in the form of love and work, he finds that he has little to sustain him when youth passes him by."²⁹ What a poor return the self gives for a lifetime of investment!

Values and Truth

How does one make decisions about what is right and wrong these days, once free of the influence of one's family? Care for others used to be the characteristic of the good man. Now, says Bloom, "the good man is the one who knows how to care for himself, as opposed to the man who does not."³⁰ Bellah describes Ted Oster who lives like that. He likens life to a pinball machine. "'You got to be able to realize that most things are not absolute. Very little is, other than life and death.' Life conceived as a pinball game has its rules, but they are all instrumental, meaningful not in themselves but only as a means to the player's enjoyment. Bending the rules makes sense if it enhances

28. Lasch, op. cit., p. 209.

29. Ibid., p. 210.

30. Bloom, op. cit., p. 178.

the player's satisfaction."³¹

What is emerging is a society of people, each reduced to finding and doing what is best for himself or herself, irrespective of the needs or problems of others. "Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. 'Being good' becomes 'feeling good.'"³² The outcome is that there is no way to make decisions. "How can one decide what one ought to do, if the object is only one's self-pleasure, since so many things seem desirable at the same moment?"³³ Absolutes are gone, since they tend to interfere with achievement of self-realization. The new "noble" goals are freedom, choice, and tolerance.³⁴ Bloom develops this into the thesis for his entire book, The Closing of the American Mind, in which he argues that the only absolute characterizing American culture, especially higher education, is now intolerance of intolerance, yielding an unyielding relativism in every area of life. The bottom line is that ". . . there is no straight edge of truth by which one can measure one's life. Truth is pliable and relative; it can take whatever shape we want."³⁵

Once people really believe this, as many are coming to do, there is no basis for intelligent discussion or comparison of world-views, since the most important value is no longer truth, but toleration of all views of reality. There can be no decision between the value of differing ideas. Since truth is identified so closely with its originator, to

31. Bellah, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

33. Fairlie, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

34. Colson, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

35. *Ibid.*

reject it is to reject its "creator." The consequence of the "elevation" of truth to the caprice of the individual is that the pursuit of truth becomes futile.

When Christians come to view the world from this perspective, that they and their desires are the sole measure and meaning of life, the world has indeed conquered their minds--softening their conviction that Jesus is the Truth, and the only Way to God, and weakening their resolve to live lives submitted to His authority.

The Self's Ally, Modern Psychology

Why has the "self" emerged as a primary pre-occupation of contemporary people? One powerful factor has been modern psychology, which, in both popular and academic guise, has provided theoretical justification for, and almost apostolic impetus to the proclamation of the self as supreme in our society. The message has been that "the proper mode of living is to be oneself--to find out who one is and let no one and nothing interfere with one's self-realization."³⁶ Wallach's title reveals his thesis: Psychology's Sanction for Selfishness.

It is no wonder that those who have never studied the writing of modern psychology "know" about the importance of "self," and not hindering the emergence of your true "self." They have absorbed "assumptions running so deep that they can color a whole society's mode of construing what is natural, what is desirable, what is healthy, and what is appropriate in the human enterprise."³⁷ What is healthy and appropriate is what is healthy and appropriate for me and my "self."

In popular therapies what we find is

36. Wallach, op. cit., p. 11.

37. Ibid., pp. 1-2.

an assertion of self-sufficiency--a denial of one's need for community with others, which is in fact a form of selfishness, since it is always accompanied by a refusal of one's obligation of community with others.... Most of the prescriptions for 'self-actualization' today are rationalizations for an aggressive self-centeredness and in some of their forms violent aggression by one's self against other selves that get in the way.³⁸

If that seems too strong, consider that this same logic is used "as an explanation, if not exoneration, of terrorist attacks on civilians."³⁹ If terrorists can justify their evil as authentic expression of their "self-hood," the rest of us can certainly justify doing whatever it is that we want to do, with the resulting problems that this world-view generates.

Is the case over-stated? What can the effect be of the estimated 3,000 diet books, each touting the benefits of a "new you," over 2,000 self-improvement books, each offering the way to be what you can and should be, and 1,000 sex manuals, each offering techniques to increase that greatest of all personal pleasures? Combine them, and they form what one commentator called "an entire 'I'm terrific' library of aggressive narcissism."⁴⁰ Unfortunately the library is not quite adequate, since "the public appetite for this sort of books seems insatiable."⁴¹ Witness: Games People Play, (with sales of over 3,000,000), I'm Okay, You're Okay, Looking Out for Number One, The Art of Being Selfish, How to Be Your Own Best Friend. It is also a library that continues to grow, as the "self-improvement" sections of bookstores demonstrate.

38. Henry Fairlie, Seven Deadly Sins Today, (Washington: New Republic Books), p. 40.

39. Wallach, op. cit., p. 16.

40. David Meyers, The Inflated Self, (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 123.

41. Paul Vitz, Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, p. 31.

The message is that "asserting oneself seems quite broadly accepted as a sign of mental health.... To view personal gratification as the primary basis of our functioning is taken as necessary if we are not to be crippled psychologically."⁴² Who can deny that this sort of logic has crept into their own thinking about their place in the world and into their decisions about how they will live?

It is no wonder that relationships are affected negatively. Other people are almost irrelevant. "With practice at self-love, you'll believe so much in you that you won't need the love or approval of others to give you value."⁴³ The self, truly fulfilled, becomes self-sufficient, not needing others, not caring for others. "This seeking and affirmation of self-sufficiency implies a denial that others have any claims upon us, that there is an outside world of other people contributing to whatever sense of self we possess."⁴⁴ One not only can, but must, evaluate others' and their claims on the basis of their positive contribution to one's own life.

The irony is that when one becomes preoccupied with self, one actually lives in fear of losing self. "Inordinate self-preoccupation is a total mode of being in the world based on a profound sense of worthlessness and fear of self-loss."⁴⁵ The "fulfilled" self does not need others for approval. Yet this self is so concerned with itself that it cannot risk relationships.

42. Wallach, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

43. William Kirk Kilpatrick, Psychological Seduction, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 45.

44. Wallach, op. cit., p. 12.

45. Shirley Sugarman, Sin and Madness, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 49.

An interesting question highlights the inconsistency of this view. "Why be so cautious when surrounded by so many good people like ourselves?"⁴⁶ George MacDonald's vision, described by a godly dwarf in The Curate's Awakening, of a cash-less society, where each offers his product or service to others without charge and without hoarding to his or her own benefit,⁴⁷ is unthinkable with this kind of foundation. Rather, "what we glimpse instead is an abrasive collection of selves, each one pressing his claim to the limit."⁴⁸

It is no wonder that families are disintegrating. Families are now filled increasingly with people who are convinced that no one should impinge on their pursuit of their own agenda. From a psychologist's viewpoint, "What is failing is not the family; what is failing is modernism with its analytic emphasis on the independent, mobile individual, caught up in narcissistic goals."⁴⁹ Why should anyone be surprised? It should be obvious that ". . . concepts and values of selfism are not conducive to the formation and maintenance of permanent personal relationships or to values like duty, patience, and self-sacrifice, which maintain commitment."⁵⁰

Excessive emphasis on personal fulfilment means problems not only for parents but also children. Both parents and children are alleged to have their rights to self-expression. "Child and parent are alien

46. Kilpatrick, op. cit., p. 46.

47. George MacDonald, The Curate's Awakening, ed. Michael Phillips, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), pp. 144-146.

48. Kilpatrick, loc. cit.

49. Paul Vitz, Psychology as Self-Worship, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 89.

50. Ibid., p. 83.

entities rightfully engaged in pursuing their own gratification."⁵¹ One result, noted previously, is that parents demur from the responsibility of teaching any values to their offspring. The laissez-faire approach is mutually beneficial. Children, which could significantly impinge on the self-seeking pursuits of parents, ought not to be hampered by parental impositions anyway. It is not too bold to conclude that "there is every reason to believe that the spread of the selfist philosophy in society has contributed greatly to the destruction of families."⁵² The selfist views of life "do not ask us to consider any more than a selfish purpose to our lives, for always its affirmations begin with 'I-I-I.'"⁵³ Let the follower of Christ beware of the direction of life, especially in close relationships, when his or her thinking and talk begins to be dominated by selfist vocabulary and self-centered thinking.

It is in its assumptions about the inherent goodness of man that modern psychology is most vulnerable. One of Freud's most important assumptions was the self-centered nature of man. After ridiculing the command to "love thy neighbor," he explained his reasoning. "The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved. . . ; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness."⁵⁴ To emphasize his point, he quotes Plautus, "'Homo homini lupus.'⁵⁵ Who in the face of

51. Wallach, op. cit., p. 15.

52. Ibid., p. 83.

53. Fairlie, op. cit., p. 41.

54. Peter Gay, ed. The Freud Reader. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), p. 749.

55. "Man is a wolf to man."

all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion?"⁵⁶ Modern psychologists, Herr Freud!

Most modern psychologists have a strong belief in the inherent goodness of man. "They rarely even discuss the problem of that self-expression which leads to exploitation, narcissism, or sadism."⁵⁷ Instead of problems within, the problems of people come from without. "Troubles are viewed as coming from the outside society, whose constraints and coercions oppress us. The task therefore is to find a mode of living that is truly expressive of, and really satisfying to, the individual in question. Let the person's nature rise up and manifest itself; it is to be trusted."⁵⁸

Not everyone is convinced. A president of the American Psychological Association, Donald Campbell, objected. "There is in psychology today a general background assumption that the human impulses provided by biological evolution are right and optimal, both individually and socially, and that repressive or inhibitory moral traditions are wrong. This assumption may now be regarded as scientifically wrong."⁵⁹ What he is really talking about is the age-old reality of sin. "Although our toes may curl at the mention of human sinfulness, it is increasingly evident that this biblical idea has a profound empirical reality."⁶⁰

One of the unfortunate consequences of viewing human nature as

56. Ibid.

57. Vitz, op. cit. p. 45.

58. Wallach, op. cit., p. 18.

59. Donald Campbell, "On the Conflicts Between Biological and Social Evolution and Between Psychology and Moral Tradition," American Psychologist, December 1975, p. 1122.

60. Myers, op. cit., p. 33.

completely good is that positive, discipline-based improvement techniques can become burdensome in their mandates for change. "Selfist psychology emphasizes the human capacity for change to the point of almost totally ignoring the idea that life has its limits and that knowledge of them is the basis of wisdom."⁶¹ Books written from this perspective "are really workbooks. Most of them contain long lists of exercises for self-improvement. All of them present a model of competence in personal living, work, and child-rearing that few people attain."⁶² The irony of this is that this kind of self-consciousness and self-effort leads not to care-free fulfillment. "We can't afford to be carefree, however, if we believe that at every moment 'it's all up to me.'"⁶³ Self is made out to be its own savior. That burden can lead only to a life filled with care.

The irony of selfism's failure to deliver true satisfaction goes deeper. "Once we start to concentrate on our dignity as a person or our self-worth, we soon lose the pleasure of innocent self-liking. Cut off from its proper context, concern with self-esteem quickly becomes concern with self-sufficiency, status, power, and the like."⁶⁴

What is fascinating is that some of the pioneers of humanistic psychology, psychology that seems to elevate the self to the point of being responsible for its own creation, making it the highest reality in its world, have still sought for higher realities. "Jung centered theory in an esoteric religious tradition; Reich suffered from messianic

61. Vitz, op. cit., p. 38.

62. Kilpatrick, op. cit., p. 60.

63. Ibid., p. 72.

64. Ibid., p. 46.

delusions, Fromm was attracted by Buddhist thought. Maslow concentrated later writings on religion and peak experiences. Carl Rogers and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross have been involved in spiritism."⁶⁵ As Kilpatrick observes, this growing "spiritual trend" "pays Christianity the compliment of admitting what Christians have maintained all along; we need to get ourselves on a different level."⁶⁶

Without doubt, one of the qualities of a healthy human is the ability to "feel good about oneself." But what is the justification for such a claim?

When a psychologist urges you to think 'you are worthy because you say it is so,' that is an encouragement to arrogance. When the same psychologist says you are to look upon yourself as 'the most beautiful, exciting, worthy person ever,'; that is clearly arrogance. In both cases we would be claiming an authority to bestow on ourselves a status that is not ours to give."⁶⁷

Feeling good about ourselves is not necessarily a very helpful standard in any case. "It is possible to feel good about oneself in states of total vacuity, euphoria, intoxication, and self-indulgence, and it is even possible when we are doing wrong and know what we are doing."⁶⁸ Self-esteem is good, but "if our self-esteem is to be justified, it needs more than 'doing one's own thing,' and 'feeling good about ourselves while we are doing it.'"⁶⁹

The self may not only fail to give adequate substantiation to its choices; but its choices may actually be harmful. "That in satisfying our biological hungers we often devour ourselves and others receives

65. Ibid., p. 99.

66. Ibid., p. 100.

67. Ibid., p. 45.

68. Fairlie, op. cit., p. 40.

69. Ibid.

little or no emphasis from self-theorists, despite the well documented psychological principle that the adaptation level for pleasure constantly moves up with experience."⁷⁰ In other words, pursuit of the satisfaction of the self comes to be no more satisfying than the cat chasing its tail, or the drug addict taking drugs from which the effects become less and less satisfying.

This morbid and self-defeating self-preoccupation has rightfully been likened to the condition of Narcissus, who burned with love for himself. Even after having died and passed to Hades, he beheld and adored his image in the Stygian pool.⁷¹ "Narcissus' despair, which led to his undoing, is man's despair. It is the plight of detachment, estrangement, and lovelessness. It is the theism that has no god other than itself. It is self-worship."⁷²

Advances in man's culture have led us to the point where prevalent teachings in the "science of man," psychology, endorse and even encourage the exultation of man to the throne of his own world, and make him and his fancies the measure of all he can know and do.

The Doctor Gets Sick:

The American Church and Selfism

American churches, rather than diagnosing and battling the disease of selfism, have symptoms of unhealthy individualism hampering their own health. This was reflected in the movement away from the church that took place in the late sixties and seventies by Roman Catholic clergy and religious. "Many of them elevated personal development to a place

70. Vitz, op. cit., p. 40.

71. Sugarman, op. cit., p. 17.

72. Ibid., p. 23.

all out of proportion to spiritual development. . . . Thousands left the church. When asked in a survey why they had left, one population of former nuns checked off 'inability to be me' as the main reason."⁷³

Nor are leaders the only victims. ". . . much of the church is caught in the success mania of American society. Often more concerned with budgets and building programs than with the Body of Christ, the church places more emphasis on growth than repentance. Suffering, sacrifice, and service have been pre-empted by success and self-fulfilment."⁷⁴ A short-sighted emphasis on "church growth" can produce a crass quest for numbers as the only measure of the success of a church. In fact, it is an uncritical absorption of pragmatic values that elevates success above obedience to God as the prime objective of church life. These values infect church-goers as well as their leaders and lead to parishioners who are in pursuit not of biblical discipleship, but of "self-fulfilment." Early in this century preachers like Harry Emerson Fosdick and Norman Vincent Peale began to preach the importance of the "self" made positive and fulfilled by the message of the Bible. Fosdick argued in his book As I See Religion, that Christianity is about personality, and that "at its best Christianity has taken up the cudgels for personality, for its divine origin, spiritual nature, infinite worth, and endless possibilities."⁷⁵ Jesus can be no better described than "the champion of personality."⁷⁶ Once one surrenders issues such

73. Kilpatrick, op cit., pp. 23-24.

74. Colson, op. cit., p. 103.

75. Harry Emerson Fosdick, As I See Religion, (New York: Harper & Row), p. 44.

76. Ibid., p. 41.

as Biblical infallibility and miracles as "rear-guard actions,"⁷⁷ it is easy to take the next step of making the personality the substance of one's religion, as Vitz argues has been done.

Although increasingly biblical in recent years, in Peale's teaching "the overriding message and basis for its popularity is Peale's Christian rationalization of self-realization."⁷⁸ Certainly his emphasis has helped people to focus on "the positive power of Jesus Christ," but his perspective on the Christian life seems to leave something lacking as he describes the benefits of "imaging." "When the imaging concept of applied steadily and systematically, it solves problems, strengthens personalities, improves health, and greatly enhances the chances for success in any kind of endeavor."⁷⁹

These two were preaching and writing during times when Christianity seemed to need a boost in respectability, and their constructions lent Christian faith credibility that could make it palatable to even sophisticated New York tastes. ". . . a generation of faltering Christians, bored with and skeptical of basic Christian theology and ignorant of spiritual life, accepted an increasingly humanist notion of the self which had been dressed up with superficial Christian language and concepts."⁸⁰

Fosdick and Peale, however, were not originators of this tendency to focus the message of Jesus on the success of the self. Lovelace observes this tendency throughout the history of the Church. The pri-

77. Fosdick, op. cit., p. 43.

78. Ibid., p. 72.

79. Norman Vincent Peale, Positive Imaging (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1982), introduction.

80. Ibid., p. 73.

mary accomplishment of the Reformation was to clarify medieval individualistic spirituality, and the Puritans focussed on individual spirituality also, while at the same time, preaching that true godliness would lead to prosperity, a view of life and work that still affects us.⁸¹ Lovelace wonders how Puritanism could have produced a spiritually anemic but capitalistic figure like Benjamin Franklin. "Could it be that the Puritan founders put forward an impressive spiritual goal for parishioners, but one that still retained an ascetic distance from ordinary life and did not provide an overarching kingdom goal to bracket together earth and heaven?"⁸²

Back in this century, parallel to the theologically liberal pulpits of Fosdick and Peale in its emphasis on individual spirituality, but from a conservative theological base, was dispensationalism. Its teachings that the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' concern for the well-being of this world were for another dispensation, and that "the ruin of the church and the decay of Western society were a necessary prelude to the return of Jesus, seemed tailor-made for Christians who would rather concentrate on spiritual matters and leave society alone."⁸³

Could it be that the message of Christ, designed to affect and bless the whole world, as was the Abrahamic covenant, is always being subverted by human propensities to self-centeredness? Could this be one of the most insidious of the enemy's attacks and most clear evidences of our sinfulness? Lovelace likens our situation to that of a bar of iron in an electro-magnet, in which the bar eventually becomes magnetized.

81. Lovelace, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

82. Ibid., p. 52.

83. Ibid., p. 56.

This is what he calls "destructive enculturation."⁸⁴

The result has been that instead of ordering careers, families, businesses and governments around God's purposes, we have, at best, tried to talk about Jesus to others while investing our main energy in pursuing the same things as the world: survival, security and wealth. The church is seen as an enclave of spirituality apart from the struggle for worldly success. It is a restricted sphere in which God is permitted to rule: outside we run things.⁸⁵

As Bellah argues, religion became "privatized," a concern for individuals in their own spiritual lives, based on their own ideas. "The unfolding of the universe justifies no rational principles of conduct based upon natural law. . . . Instead it reassures us of our freedom to choose our own God, our own labors, and our own ultimate ends, whatever they may be."⁸⁶ The effect of this was to weaken the ability of religion to influence culture. This privatization "placed religion, together with the family, in a compartmentalized sphere that provided loving support but could no longer challenge the dominance of utilitarian values in the society at large."⁸⁷ The church, pre-occupied with success, many of her participants concerned with their own fulfillment, has been unable to critique these trends in culture and unable to cure them as they have found expression in her own life and mission. The church has been unable, lately, to perform one of the functions that Toqueville saw as essential in America, "the role of placing limits on utilitarian individualism, hedging in self-interest with a proper concern for others."⁸⁸ Even evangelical churches which maintain a strong

84. Ibid., p. 87.

85. Ibid., p. 57.

86. Bellah, op. cit., p. 64.

87. Ibid., p. 224.

88. Ibid., p. 223.

emphasis on personal morality, have little effect on social morality.

"Indeed, the sect draws together those who have found a personal relationship to Christ into a special loving community, and while it urgently seeks to have everyone make the same commitment, it separates its members off from attachment to the wider society. Morality becomes personal, not social; private, not public."⁸⁹

Not only do the effects of individualism weaken the church's impact on the culture, but they deform individual spirituality as well, in two specific ways. First, many people simply expect the church to enhance their experience of "self-fulfilment." The pastor in a liberal Protestant church Bellah interviewed, works for his people to "help them take the scales from their eyes and experience and see their magnificence."⁹⁰ How does God fit into this? "God becomes the guarantee of what he has 'experienced in my life, that there is nothing that happens to me that is not for the fulfillment of my higher self.'"⁹¹ God becomes a helpful accessory in the pursuit of the ultimate good, the self. Nor is this tendency unique to liberal churches. "There is even a tendency visible in many evangelical circles to thin the biblical language of sin and redemption to an idea of Jesus as the friend who helps us find happiness and self-fulfilment."⁹²

The conclusion of this kind of thinking is one that church participants may disavow, but which logically follows, given the premise of the authority of the self. "When the not-so-still voice of the self

89. Ibid., p. 231.

90. Ibid., p. 229.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid., p. 232.

becomes the highest authority, religious belief requires commitment to no authority beyond oneself."⁹³ Bellah found people in this predicament. One person interviewed named her religion or 'faith' after herself. She said, "My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice."⁹⁴

The second effect of individualism is that the spiritual pursuit of the individual can become misdirected into what Rock calls "'instant mysticism' without hard cognitive preparatory work, without examination of conscience. . . ."⁹⁵ One of Bellah's observations was the tendency to withdraw into a purely private spirituality.⁹⁶ The individual's walk with God now becomes another exercise in self-improvement. "The new hero embarks on his ordeal of solitary self-inspection; his life directed toward a goal of spiritual perfection which fades continually out of reach. . . ."⁹⁷ Instead of worldly success, the goal is now spiritual success, sought through a variety of disciplines and inner reflection.

The quality of one's inner life, one's own spirituality, becomes the focus and objective of Bible reading, prayer exercises, journalling, retreats, and spiritual direction. These classic disciplines can be subverted from their legitimate functions as tools of growing toward God to vehicles for exploring and chronicling the progress of the self. Unfortunately, "the person who follows secret movements of his life from

93. Colson, op. cit., p. 98.

94. Bellah, op. cit., p. 221.

95. Stanley Rock, "An Anatomy of Self-esteem: Beyond Narcissism," Reformed Review, 39 (Autumn 1985): 12-15.

96. Bellah, op. cit., p. 248.

97. Paul Zweig, The Heresy of Self-Love (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 182.

day to day and minute to minute is apt to find the firm groundwork of his character continually dissolving."⁹⁸

The pursuit of God for one's own sake is not at all what He intended. "Being alone with the Alone is not a Biblical ideal."⁹⁹ It is not that God is not interested in holiness, but this holiness has a broader reality than personal introspection and scrupulosity can achieve. "We see how far Christian speculation on interior righteousness and on striving for a life of perfection has come from the outward-oriented holiness that the Jewish faith expected in acts of justice."¹⁰⁰

Worst of all, this internal focus of spirituality can end with an inversion of worship itself, for meditation, as an exercise in spiritual attainment, can encourage one to exalt one's own abilities and efforts to reach God. Zweig applies this principle to mis-directed meditation. "To adore God in this way means in fact to elevate the self until it is God who has become the mirror and the poet who is secretly glorified."¹⁰¹ He argues that this is the confusion into which gnostics have often fallen; that love of God and self-deification are often so closely related, that "the inter-locking self-love of the universe blur into a single passionate involvement with self."¹⁰²

This is affirmed from a simpler perspective by Myers. "When self-indulgence is elevated to spiritual exercise, and self-fulfilment is the

98. Ibid., p. 179.

99. Matthew Fox, A Spirituality Named Compassion and the Healing of the Global Village (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1979), p. 10.

100. Ibid., p. 12.

101. Zweig, op. cit., p. 58.

102. Ibid., pp. 19-20.

ultimate concern, we have made a religion of ourselves."¹⁰³ Even spiritual discipline, designed to bring us into closer fellowship with God, can lead people in circles, away from the self-liberating truths of God's Word, to an ever tighter knot of concern for the self and its own "spirituality." Instead of breaking the bonds of sinfulness, it reinforces them. "The disciplines of meditation served to strengthen one of the deepest inclinations of the Christian mind: the secret fascination with self. . . ."¹⁰⁴ The lure of pride in self stretches throughout one's walk with God. When this kind of pride is encouraged by what sounds like the voice of God drawing us nearer but is really the chorus of our culture's sirens of selfishness, it is especially insidious.

The irony of this is that "'pop Christianity' is a religion practically guaranteeing its followers what they want when the Bible itself depicts its people receiving so little success."¹⁰⁵ Instead of hearing a prophetic voice of challenge from Christian preachers in the media, "the utilitarian individualists find in much Christian programming what they seek most--the promise of material gain--now sanctified in the name of God."¹⁰⁶ Many television preachers, relatively orthodox in their theology, nevertheless more or less teach that ". . . faith will lead to a healthy personality, a cure for disease, and even to financial security. In these cases it is sometimes not at all clear whether we are to believe in God or in ourselves."¹⁰⁷ This is precisely the

103. Myers, op. cit., p. 126.

104. Zweig, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

105. Myers, op. cit., p. 143.

106. Colson, op. cit., p. 103.

107. Kilpatrick, op. cit., p. 25.

problem: self-deification. Though we confront the temptation in new guise, it may always be one of the Enemy's perversions of a true walk with God.

"Despite Scripture's repeated admonitions to count the cost of discipleship, to worship God because of who he is, regardless of benefits, and to serve God by serving others-- we are constantly inclined to accumulate fame and fortune and to try to harness God for our own immediate purposes."¹⁰⁸ Langdon Gilkey warns that this temptation will follow us even to the heights of spiritual experience, but that its conquest will bring a wonderful release from self-consciousness. "The final pinnacle of faith, therefore, is to recognize our continuing self-concern and thus to trust our inner peace to the love of God alone. In this way even our anxiety about our own holiness and our own salvation is surrendered."¹⁰⁹ The biblical way to self-fulfilment is through self-forgetfulness in the person and love of God, following the example of the suffering and serving God Himself. If Christ-followers in this day, in our country, can "find themselves" in this way, perhaps the church will once again "be a repository for truth, to maintain its authority, and to hold society to moral account...."¹¹⁰ Perhaps the church can again offer to the world a view of the individual that insures human dignity and that offers a real morality, and spreads salt to renew its culture.

108. Myers, op. cit., p. 144.

109. Langdon Gilkey, Shantung Compound (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 235.

110. Colson, op. cit., p. 99.

Results?

Happiness

Does the game of self-centered individualism work out for the player's enjoyment and happiness? Is it possible to seek the rational fulfilment of one's own desires and thereby to find happiness? There are hints that it might not work out as the selfish self would hope. Scott Peck observes that, "trapped in our tradition of rugged individualism, we are an extraordinarily lonely people."¹¹¹ Bellah's observations led him to observe, "even those most exclusively taught in the first language (sc. of modern individualism) seem to be yearning for something more."¹¹²

Worst of all, the "experience of feeling good," the over-arching "good" of the individualistic self, proves elusive. "For all its unmistakeable presence and intensity on occasion, the experience of feeling good, like being in love, is so highly subjective, that its distinguishing characteristics remain ineffable."¹¹³ If it is material success that is to be the measure of success, then this too eludes the individualist. "Acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, (he) demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire."¹¹⁴

Eric Fromm finds inner dissatisfaction in modern man, observing that "there is an increasing number of people to whom everything they are doing seems futile. They are still under the spell of the slogans

111. Scott Peck, The Different Drum (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 58.

112. Bellah, op. cit., p. 155.

113. Ibid., p. 78.

114. Lasch, op. cit., p. xvi.

which preach faith in the secular paradise of success and glamour.¹¹⁵

Observe the attempts, advertised everywhere and embraced enthusiastically, at "self-improvement," "but always a self-improvement as it turns out, that is measured only by how good one feels about oneself."¹¹⁶

The Future?

Why does "doing one's own thing," even rationally, harm the fabric of society? Colson answers that "the reigning god of relativism and rampant egoism . . . fosters coarse character, destroys any notion of community, weakens civility, promotes intolerance, and threatens the disintegration of those very institutions necessary to the survival and success of ordered liberty."¹¹⁷ Toqueville anticipated this eventuality, and saw involvement in "associational life" as its antidote, an antidote that would avoid what he feared most: "the mass society of mutually antagonistic individuals, easy prey to despotism."¹¹⁸ This is Goodwin's point as well. "The disintegration of community, the decline of shared social purpose, the weakening identification between citizen and nation, and the rejection of moral authority superior to individual judgment or opinion are consequences and manifestations of the modern consciousness."¹¹⁹

Those who see a collapse of society as we know it, as a result of

115. Eric Fromm, Man for Himself, (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1947), p. 144.

116. Fairlie, op. cit., p. 52.

117. Colson, op. cit., p. 108.

118. Habits, op. cit., p. 38.

119. Richard N. Goodwin, The American Condition, (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1974), p. 145.

our selfishness, have a surprising ally in a Frenchman, the Marquis de Sade. Envisioning a republican society in which unlimited self-indulgence was the only governing principle, de Sade painted a picture of culture attractive only to the most perverse. "Sade imagined a sexual utopia in which everyone has the right to everyone else, where human beings reduced to their sexual organs, become absolutely anonymous and interchangeable."¹²⁰ Rand would have each man's reason govern his choices, but

in a society that reduced reason to mere calculation, reason can impose no limits on the pursuit of pleasure--on the immediate gratification of every human desire, no matter how perverse, insane, criminal, or merely immoral. For the standards that would condemn crime or cruelty derive from religion, compassion, or the kind of reason that rejects purely instrumental applications; and none of these outmoded forms of thought or feeling has any logical place in a society based on commodity production."¹²¹

While frightening, this picture of what lies ahead is an all too logical possibility for a culture of people committed to instrumental rules that are shaped by convenience, to further each person's perception of their own self-interest. Each of us and our culture are affected.

For the ideology of individualism is so powerful that we still look on bonds as restraints; values as opinions or prejudices; customs as impositions. The remaining structure of shared existence, the restraints which make it possible for people to live with, and through, and not merely alongside one another, are assaulted as unjust restraints on liberty, impediments to the free assertion of the self.¹²²

Goodwin described times past, where a consciousness of social bonds to a community, a nation, through relationships with others held fast. But, "to find the consciousness that attends individualism most of us

120. Lasch, op. cit., p. 69.

121. Ibid.

122. Goodwin, op. cit., p. 75.

only have to look within."¹²³

Narcissus sat by the stream, contemplated, with a diseased and flawed pleasure, his own image. "That he wasted away in his self-love is only a symbol of the wasting way of lives that we can see all around us today. They are lives that are vacant, in the pursuit of self-pleasure, as the expressions on their faces are vacant. Vacant of interest, Vacant of purpose, Vacant of experience. Vacant of commitment."¹²⁴

Are we shaped by the "world?" One of the most powerful ideas in our world is the idea that "I am the center of my own existence." This commitment supercedes God, country, community and family, and authorizes the mobilization of all my powers to seize whatever I think will please, satisfy, cultivate, and actualize myself. Just as ingesting tainted salmon brings toxins inside one's body, so living in this culture threatens us with absorption of its ideas, ideas that are antithetical to a close walk with God. One of the worst, the most toxic, is the idea that "I am the center and measure of my world."

Are modern believers poisoned into weakness, conformed to our world, and consigned to defeat by its wiles? No more than the hearers of Jesus or the readers of Paul had to be! The antidote to the poison is continued intake of God's thoughts and ways, absorbed and applied to our lives. Chapter 3 is an offering of that kind of healing medicine.

123. Ibid.

124. Fairlie, op. cit., p. 53.

Chapter 3

COMPASSION: COMING BACK TO LIFE

The Self Re-Discovered

1,550 fifty-pound parcels of nutritious food and warm clothes arrived at a Japanese prison camp for expatriates in China at the time of the Japanese invasion in 1943. These packages, from the American Red Cross, would supplement the spartan diet and help relieve the bitter cold. The Japanese camp commandant announced that everyone would receive one parcel; the Americans, one and a half. The camp was overjoyed; all but seven Americans. They appealed to the commandant, claiming that all the parcels should be distributed only to Americans.¹

Gilkey sought a more just resolution, hoping that other Americans would also reject the selfishness of the few. Surprisingly, they would not. Instead they argued, from various perspectives, that all the packages were rightfully theirs. A conservative missionary went so far as to rationalize from a "moral" standpoint, that the Americans should receive all of the packages, and re-distribute them out of goodwill, not of compulsion.² Tensions in the camp mounted, and the Japanese guards were the only factor that prevented rioting. From Japan came a fair-minded decision: all would receive one package and the extras would be given to another camp.

The grim lesson Gilkey learned from this experience was that the "fundamental bent of the total self in all of us was inward, toward our

1. Gilkey, op. cit., pp. 100 ff.

2. Ibid., p. 107.

own welfare."³ Arnold Toynbee, on the future of our planet, identifies our selfishness as our most critical problem. "I am convinced, myself, that man's fundamental problem is his human egocentricity."⁴

Gilkey's explanation is that there is a "common, pervasive warping of our wills away from the good we wish to achieve...",⁵ a warping that he calls "original sin." Gilkey defines original sin as "this fundamental self-concern of the total self which, so to speak, lies below our particular thoughts and acts, molds them, directs them, and then betrays us into the actual misdeeds we all witness in our common life."⁶ Original sin describes the bent in all humans away from our Creator and Maker, towards ourselves, a bent that we act out not only in conscious acts of rebellion, but in attitudes and thoughts that are less than His standard for us, and are less than what we want for ourselves.

"Doing what we want to do" is the credo of humanistic ethics, but is also the biblical pattern for rebellion against God. "It is not hard to 'walk in the flesh.' All we have to do is 'do what comes naturally' in the most literal sense--do whatever we feel like doing, without asking how God feels about our behavior."⁷ Yet, influenced by popularizers of humanistic perspectives, most people, no doubt, think it best for them to do what they think is right.

Today's non-Christians, encouraged by popular psychologies which accentuate positive thinking and self-acceptance, think of

3. Ibid., p. 115.

4. Arnold Toynbee, Surviving the Future, (New York: Oxford), p. 47.

5. Gilkey, op. cit., p. 115.

6. Ibid., p. 116.

7. Lovelace, op. cit., p. 75.

themselves as fundamentally good people trying to do the right thing but missing the mark occasionally. Even if they are uncommitted to God, they see themselves as honest searchers for evidence of his existence, not as heels continually crossing the street to avoid meeting him.⁸

Such "seekers" are at odds with the reality of God. "Theologically, self-love is the biblical understanding of sin. Sin is being curved in on oneself (as Luther put it). One of the marks of the 'last days' is that people will be 'lovers of self' instead of 'lovers of God'. Their love will be misdirected from God and neighbor to self."⁹

One of the obvious objectives of Jesus' ministry was to upset this self-centered equilibrium in his hearers. He condemned the religious elite of his day for their self-satisfied perfectionism. The ministry of his predecessor, John the Baptist, and much of his own ministry, was directed at heightening awareness of the depth of human need for God's grace and help. Accurate understanding of one's self leads to seeking assistance in coping with one's predicament. As one gains more self-knowledge, "he is made aware of being a 'sinner.'" He is made aware that he is dependent on, but cut off from, his Source."¹⁰ This is the necessary beginning for any true, biblical growth.

The spiritual goal of the Old Testament was known as "the fear of the Lord." "The mighty acts of God combined with exposures to his law are designed to produce a humble awareness of human sin and divine goodness."¹¹ Though Jesus brought completion to this plan, he never changed its message, teaching instead that "hunger and thirst for right-

8. Ibid., p. 67.

9. John Stott, The Cross of Christ, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p. 276.

10. Sugarman, op. cit., pp. 40 & 41.

11. Lovelace, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

eousness" were essential in the life of the new Kingdom (Matthew 5:6), and that the quest for God to rule every area of life was to take precedence over all other pursuits. "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matthew 6:33).

"The God-centered life is spirituality as it is meant to be. It is how we were made to live. It is how we will soon be living for eternity, freed from all our present inward restraints."¹² But this is not what comes naturally. Instead, human beings are bound up in preoccupation with themselves, seeking their own fulfillment, a task which proves to be a Promethean challenge, yielding only small and passing progress, living lives tainted with a self-love which their Maker calls sin, resisting the true nature of things, which yields only further futility. The magnitude of this problem is highlighted by the solution offered to us by our Creator--His own Son suffering unjust death so that we might be freed from our slavery to sin and our crippling preoccupation with our own concerns. Paul's summary of this transformation is that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (II Corinthians 5:17). The awareness of our inability to break out of our self-centeredness, to stop sinning, leads us to the Cross of Christ, where God Himself has offered his infinitely powerful assistance.

Thus in Jesus' death and resurrection, all the dynamics of spiritual death were disarmed and destroyed. Our distance from God and apathy toward him, our compulsive egoism, our selfish manipulation of others, our crippling attitudes and habits, all the shackles of our flesh are dissolved and released."¹³

12. Ibid., p. 33.

13. Ibid., p. 127.

The prison doors of self have been blasted open, and we are free to walk out. To appreciate our potential liberty, however, we must be convinced of our predicament. If we had within us already the seeds of our fulfillment and the power for our own freedom, His sacrifice was unnecessary. "If all we need to do to find wholeness is just be ourselves, then His death sums up to a meaningless gesture, a noble but unneeded self-sacrifice."¹⁴ His death for us, however, offers a far greater affirmation of our selfhood than we can ever find elsewhere, either from within or without, in our world. Far beyond what therapy can offer us in understanding and accepting ourselves, God offers us in paying an infinite price to "buy us back" from our otherwise unbreakable alliance with sin and its consequence, eternal death. True self-esteem will be built as people allow the truths of God's love and the wonders of God's plan to penetrate the depths of their hearts. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

The sacrifice of God of His Son helps us in affirming our worth to Him. It also helps us by providing a model of how to deal with the proud energy of the self. This energy manifested itself during Jesus' ministry in the request recorded in Mark 10:35 ff. James and John ask for positions of prominence in the kingdom. As a concluding punch to Jesus' argument that greatness comes through service, Jesus refers to His own example. "For the Son of man also came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

To follow him in this kind of sacrifice was the call that Jesus expressed earlier as he proclaimed to a multitude and his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross

14. Kilpatrick, op. cit., p. 39.

and follow me." (Mark 8:34) Jesus invites his followers into an unconscious abandonment of themselves called "self-denial." A person bearing a cross was a person condemned to die. The person following Jesus is invited to live as a dead man, a man dead to self. Stott identifies three choices which this invitation involves: 1) the choice between selfish ambition and sacrifice, 2) the choice between power and service, 3) the choice between comfort and suffering.¹⁵ The person who learns self-denial from Jesus, therefore, chooses sacrifice, service, and suffering. No doubt, it was sayings such as these that reduced the multitudes surrounding Jesus at the beginning of His earth ministry to a faithful few at its conclusion. This kind of message was not popular then, and is less popular than other slants that can be given to the Gospel today. "This biblical vision of suffering service has been largely eclipsed in our day by unbiblical 'prosperity gospel' (which guarantees personal success) and by triumphalist notions of mission (which employ military metaphors that do not comfortably fit the humble image of the suffering servant.)"¹⁶ Ironically, it is only by recovering the reality of this life that the true power of the Kingdom and its King will be manifest.

Created in God's image, redeemed by God's Son to be restored to His glory, we have worth. Sinful, rebellious, resistant to God, we sully our twice-bought beauty, and denigrate our true selves. In repentance, we reject the way of rebellion, the way of self-worship, and affirm that God is truly our King and our ultimate concern, not our self. In self-denial, we affirm that He is truly worthy of our love.

15. Stott, op. cit., pp. 286-288.

16. Ibid., p. 291.

Self-denial is not occasionally refusing ourselves a treat, it is a lifestyle of refusing to live for our selves, and electing to live proudly for Him who made and purchased us for Himself. From comprehending Christ's costly sacrifice of Himself we discover our true worth. From the example of His costly sacrifice we discover a correct perspective on our own "selves."

Gordon Liddy was one of the most self-sufficient, self-confident men that Charles Colson had ever known. Yet even he was able to admit his need of a higher power, of a God to redeem him from his sinfulness and self-centered life.

Now the hardest thing I have to do every single day is to try to decide what is God's will, rather than what is my will. And what does Jesus want, not what does Gordon want. And so the prayer that I say most frequently is, "God, first of all, please tell me what you want--continue the communication. And second, give me the strength to do what I know you want, what your will is, rather than my own."¹⁷

Gordon Liddy has confronted the poor side of life, life lived for self. He has discovered the wealth and joy of a life lived for the King. But he has also entered the struggle of learning to spend his life in the new neighborhood God has provided. It is to that struggle that the follower of Jesus Christ is summoned.

Repentance: a way and a guide

Growth and change in our walk with God are often preceded by overwhelming awareness of our deficiencies. Confronted with our own weakness, we can become receptive to new touches of God's grace. In his writings, Henri Nouwen reveals a deep awareness of his spiritual needs. A contemplative, a spiritual director, a seminary teacher, and writer of books about God bares his heart about his own struggle to live for Him,

17. Colson, op. cit., pp. 145-146.

and reflects in this way, on his fifty-fourth birthday.

Looking back, I realize that I am still struggling with the same problems I had on the day of my ordination twenty-nine years ago. Notwithstanding my many prayers, my periods of retreat, and the advice from many friends, counselors, and confessors, very little if anything, has changed with regard to my search for inner unity and peace. I am still the restless, nervous, intense, distracted, and impulse-driven person I was when I set out on this spiritual journey.¹⁸

At the beginning of a book, he asks himself if his twenty-five years in the ministry had brought him any closer to godliness "After twenty-five years of priesthood, I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues. Everyone was saying that I was doing really well, but something inside was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger."¹⁹

Nouwen's candor about his struggles qualify him uniquely to guide us in seeking spiritual renewal and change in our own lives. His struggles mirror our own. The theological model used in this project is constructed from themes that emerge from the writings and life of Henri Nouwen as he has written about a life lived in pursuit of the compassion that grows out of love for God.

Success

At the beginning of the seven-month retreat at Genessee Abbey, Nouwen struggled with "success." "Maybe I was more concerned about the praise of men and women than the love of God. Maybe I was slowly becoming a prisoner of people's expectations instead of a man liberated by

18. Henri Nouwen, The Road to Daybreak, (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 127

19. Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), p. 10.

divine promises."²⁰ He found himself wrestling to escape bondage to success, a struggle for self-esteem. Even in writing Daybreak, fairly recently, this issue kept arising. "The most radical challenge came out of the question, 'Is Jesus truly enough for you, or do you keep looking for others to give you your sense of worth?'"²¹

To begin this journey, we need to ask ourselves about our definition and pursuit of success. To what achievements have we tied our identity and feelings of success? How much do we define ourselves by comparing ourselves to others? To what extent are we willing to change?

God has promised us more than slavery to old ways. "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:27) If we desire compassion, we must be willing to seek the changes in our hearts that only God can bring.

Competition or Compassion?

Nouwen and a friend once met with Hubert Humphrey and inquired about his understanding of the place of compassion in politics. His answer was to hold a pencil and liken politics to it. "'Gentlemen, look at this pencil. Just as the eraser is only a very small part of this pencil and is used only when you make a mistake, so compassion is only called upon when things get out of hand. The main part of life is competition; only the eraser is compassion.'"²² Each of us makes the choice between competition with others to make ourselves feel good, and

20. Henri Nouwen, The Genessee Diary, (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1976), p. xi.

21. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 222.

22. Donald McNeill, Douglas Morrison and Henri Nouwen, Compassion, (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1982), p. 6.

compassion for them. "Compassion is neither our central concern nor our primary stance in life. What we really desire is to make it in life, to get ahead, to be first, to be different."²³ Most of us gain a substantial part of our identity by assuring ourselves that we are superior to others in some area or another.

How much we need to hear, as did Judah, the voice of Micah speaking for God: "The voice of the LORD cries to the city.... You shall eat but not be satisfied, and there shall be a gnawing hunger within you; you shall put away, but not save, and what you save, I will hand over to the sword." (Micah 6:9, 14) Competition with others has never satisfied man's hearts or God's demands.

Change!

Compassion does not come naturally. Competition does. It is part of our fallenness to put ourselves first. If we are going to change, something radical is going to have to happen to us. In Nouwen's thinking, recovery of true personhood, the ability to give to others, to "reach out," requires movement from what comes naturally to us, to what God gives us, a renewal of the heart that only God offers. There is only one issue in our capability for renewal, for real life, and that is the matter of the loyalty of our heart, of single-mindedness.

John the Baptist cried for this as he preached the preparation for Messiah. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." (Matthew 3:8) "Change your lives in a way that befits the Messiah," he was saying. Jesus' entry into a life still requires change in our ultimate loyalty.

An unadorned self

Coming to Daybreak, a community for the care of impaired adults,

23. Ibid.

was an experience that shattered the pretense of false identity. Here degrees and academic achievements added no enhancements to his person. "These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self--the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things--and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments."²⁴ That unadorned self, healthy and worthy, independent of its accomplishments, is a self that has surrendered to God. It is a self that is found only through the difficulty of complete surrender to God. It is this kind of surrender that begins any significant spiritual growth, and certainly the surrender that must underlie the pursuit of true compassion for others. This choice, between a self of our own building, an identity of our own design, and that ordained for us by God, is one of the foundational choices of the Christian life. This choice is also a choice about whether or not one will develop a genuine compassion for others.

Matthew juxtaposes Jesus' "woes" against unrepentant hearts with his invitation to repentance. The harsh words of the "woes" contrast strangely with the gentle object of Jesus' impact. "Come to me, all of you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29) A radical commitment to repentance yields gentle fruit, but still the fruit of change.

God can bring us to this point in many ways. It may be through heartbreak and grief, or it may simply be through a consistent nagging

24. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 16

dissatisfaction with "business as usual." In whatever way it comes, such an invitation is a gift of God's grace.

God and His love

God + life = ?

Polls in America routinely demonstrate that although people do believe in God, their beliefs do not impact their lives very much. Nouwen observed that students do not care much for religious instruction, and then suggests a reason that may explain both students' and the nation's apathy regarding God. Their lives are not touched by what they know or are taught.²⁵

This disjuncture between belief and life certainly also occurs in churches, where spiritually inoculated believers seem to be able to absorb vast quantities of teaching about God without significant responses of obedience to God. To prepare for the future, Nouwen alleges that it will be necessary to "reclaim the mystical aspect of theology so that every word spoken, every advice given, and every strategy developed can come from a heart that knows God intimately."²⁶ If God is half as splendid as Scripture implies, then to confront and comprehend His infinite love will impact our lives.

God's love

Most foundational to Nouwen, of all the truths about God, is the fact of his love. Surprisingly, he discovered, however, that even within the quiet and reverent walls of a monastery, there is a temptation to doubt this. "This is the great adventure of the monk: to really believe that God loves you, to really give yourself to God in

25. Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out, (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1975), p. 62.

26. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 30

trust, even while you are aware of your sinfulness, weaknesses, and miseries."²⁷

This difficulty was also faced by the Israelites. They needed to be reminded of God's love, as Isaiah did, writing God's words: "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life" (Isaiah 41:4). Knowing God's love was and is what makes a relationship with Him.

This is also the primary qualification for Christian leadership and ministry. "The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, 'a heart of flesh,' in Jesus. Knowing God's heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love. . . . This sounds very simple and maybe even trite, but very few people know that they are loved without any conditions or limits."²⁸ What sorrow there is in the world because of this ignorance! What hope for the transformation of our hearts if we could know "He loves me!"

God and Self

One of the first places in our hearts to be touched by the reality of God's love is that of our self-concept. "Without a deep-rooted sense of belonging, all of life can easily become cold, distant, and painfully repetitive. This deeper connection is the connection with the one whose name is love, leading to a new discovery that we are born out of love and are always called back to that love."²⁹ Instead of earning or purchasing our sense of worth, we can receive the love of God as evi-

27. Nouwen, Genessee Diary, p. 140

28. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 25

29. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 113-114.

dence that we are worthwhile and worthy of his attention and love.

Jesus promised that those who loved Him by obeying Him would experience not just the Father's love, not just His approval, but the reality and affirmation of His presence. "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (John 14:24). This loving presence gives true self-worth.

Love and suffering

Another benefit of truly receiving God's love is a fresh perspective on the difficulties of life. Continuing to seek the approval of others, and being disappointed, leaves us vulnerable to continual frustrations, a painful process.

But when I can slowly detach myself from this need for human affirmation and discover that it is in the relationship with the Lord that I find my true self, an unconditional surrender to him becomes not only possible, but even the only desire, and the pain inflicted by people will not touch me in the center. When my 'self' is anchored not in people but in God, I will have a much greater resistance against pain."³⁰

This resistance to pain extends to the events of life as well.

. . . true joy comes from letting God love me the way God wants, whether it is through illness, or health, failure or success, poverty or wealth, rejection or praise. It is hard for me to say, 'I shall gratefully accept everything Lord, that pleases you. Let your will be done.' But I know that when I truly believe my Father is pure love, it will become increasingly possible to say these words from the heart."³¹

This is the kind of freedom described by Paul in Romans 8:35.

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" No enemy or opposition can upset our security in our relationship with Him. "Will criticism or failure or disappointments or economic setbacks?" Paul had experienced

30. Nouwen, Genessee Diary, p. 158

31. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 120

heartbreak and personal suffering but had been sustained by His conviction of God's love, as we can be as well. If we could allow our belief in God's love to truly touch the center of our hearts--the concept we have of ourselves, we would find freedom to live the Life that God brings.

Sharing His love

Of course God's love does not stop at the point of affirming us and our value. In fact, "Jesus invites us to be as close to each other as God is to us. He even asks us to love one another with God's own compassion."³² Love for God, correctly and truly understood, does not separate us from others, but drives us toward them. "When we have found our own uniqueness in the love of God and have been able to affirm that indeed we are lovable since it is God's love that dwells in us, then we can reach out to others in whom we discover a new and unique manifestation of the same love and enter into an intimate communion with them."³³

This kind of love is not based on caprice or on mutual attraction. These wear out, but "unconditional, total love for God makes a very articulate, alert, and attentive love for the neighbor possible. What I often call 'love for neighbor' too often proves to be a tentative, partial, or momentary attraction, which is usually very unstable and does not last long. But when the love of God is indeed my first concern, deep love for my neighbor can grow."³⁴ This is God's intent. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and

32. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 20

33. Nouwen, Genessee Diary, p. 68

34. Ibid., p. 67

his love is perfected in us." (I John 4:11, 12)

This kind of love is needed, demanded, by the difficult and critical world in which we live. Living in the "Daybreak" community, Nouwen concluded that "living close to handicapped people, as do the L'Arche assistants, is impossible unless one draws upon the love of Christ. Without this love, such life leads to 'burnout.'"³⁵ If we are to remain open to the needs of people around us and not insulate ourselves from their hurts and needs, or wear out from trying to meet them ourselves, we too will need to be grounded deeply in Christ's love, evaluating our ministry in its light. Am I doing things for my own sake, to bolster my own self concept? If so, then I can relinquish those burdens. Am I serving because of His love? If so, then I can return to those tasks, confident that His love will continue to be expressed through me, despite my weakness.

Jesus and Servanthood

Love or power?

"Jesus asks, 'Do you love me?' We ask, "Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your Kingdom?"³⁶ The temptation to power is one that Jesus faced overtly Himself when faced by the Tempter, and is a temptation that the church still faces! "One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power..., even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are."³⁷

35. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 64

36. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 59

37. Ibid., p. 58.

Jesus lived a radically different kind of life, making Himself a servant, moving downward from His heavenly privileges, to identify Himself with us and our needs. Peter's protestations about his predicted death ran afoul of this plan and earned him a strong rebuke. This misunderstanding prompted Jesus to summon an even larger crowd to illuminate the meaning of true discipleship. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:34-35)

Later he elaborates this invitation by explaining that he had accepted it himself. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) This is the way of true leadership. "The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross."³⁸ Following this model implies that we will be willing, as Christ was, to be led where we may not be willing to go, to stoop to others in ways that we would not choose. He invites us to "downward mobility" which means that we will prefer service to others to preferment of ourselves.

God reveals Himself

The Christian message is not one of conquest, but in its essence, the message is one of loving service and ministry to others, modeled after Jesus.

It indeed belongs to the core of the Christian message that God did not reveal himself to us as the powerful other, unapproachable in his omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Instead he came to us in Jesus Christ who 'did not cling to his equality with

38. Ibid., p. 62

God, but emptied himself . . . , and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.' Philippians 2:6-8³⁹

Given His example, it can be said that "our fulfillment is in offering emptiness, our usefulness in becoming useless, our power in becoming powerless."⁴⁰

Most important is for us to recognize that in his movement toward us and in embracing the Cross, God does not disfigure Himself. "His emptying and humiliation are not a step away from his true nature. His becoming as we are and dying on a cross is not a temporary interruption of his own divine existence. Rather, in the emptied and humbled Christ we encounter God; we see who God really is, we come to know his true divinity."⁴¹ Jesus made it clear that his actions, even the actions leading to his victorious but painful conflict with the "ruler of this world," were carried out under the Father's orders. ". . . I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father." (John 14:28) And he arose and went to his execution.

Our concept of God needs to include the fact that God desires to reveal Himself through both the person and the passion of His Son Jesus. If we are to understand compassion, the loving suffering of God's Son needs to be imprinted in our consciousness.

"Follow me!"

Not only did he suffer and die for us, but it was a death of the most ignominious sort.

Not only did he taste fully the dependent and fearful condition of being human, but he also experienced the most despicable and

39. Nouwen, Reach Out, p. 77.

40. Ibid.

41. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 28

horrifying form of death--death on a cross. Not only did he become human, but he also became human in the most dejected and rejected way. Not only did he know human uncertainties and fear, but he also experienced the agony, pain and total degradation of the bloody torture and death of a convicted criminal. In this humiliation, Jesus lived out the full implications of emptying himself to be with us in compassion.⁴²

One of the reasons that people opt for leadership based on power instead of love is that it is easier and that it is less threatening.⁴³ It is also less personally demanding. We can give time, even money, but withhold our true selves. This was not the way of Jesus. According to the author of Hebrews, he learned obedience through his suffering. (Hebrews 5:8) At the cross, at the Garden, Jesus could have rejected the way of suffering to escape through power. In our lives we too have choices between the "way of the Cross," the way of service and humility, and the way of power, the way of dominance and competition.

Results?

Jesus commanded us to abide in His love; to remain in it. (John 15:9) When we learn to have the knowledge of Jesus' love for us, we will love Him, and "the desire to be relevant and successful will gradually disappear, and our only desire will be to say with our whole being to our brothers and sisters of the human race, 'you are loved. There is no reason to be afraid. In love God created your inmost self and knit you together in your mother's womb.'"⁴⁴ As God's people announce that kind of message, it is not with a self-pitying, self-mortifying style, but with joy, for they share the compassion of God which they have felt in their own lives. "Their eyes do not focus on poverty and misery, but

42. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 26

43. Nouwen, Jesus, pp. 59-60

44. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 27

on the face of the loving God."⁴⁵

The outworking of servanthood

Jesus reveals the nature of God, in becoming man. "Our God is a servant God. It is difficult for us to comprehend that we are liberated by someone who became powerless, that we are being strengthened by someone who became weak; that we find new hope in someone who divested himself of all distinctions, and that we find a leader in someone who became a servant."⁴⁶ It is even more difficult to allow this concept to find expression in our lives.

Understanding Jesus' objective in his self-sacrifice can guide us in the effort to reflect His love. "In the Gospel stories of Jesus' healings, we sense how close God wants to be with those who suffer. But now (at the cross) we see the price God is willing to pay for this intimacy. It is the price of ultimate servanthood...."⁴⁷ Jesus' self-emptying occurred as the price of intimacy with people like us. Servanthood based on his model seeks to establish a similar openness to others. It is to this kind of humility that Paul invites us in Philip-
pians 2:5, based on the example of Jesus.

Power over others is the precise opposite of this kind of intimacy, even when this power has the ostensibly good purpose of advancing God's cause in the world.

We keep hearing from others, as well as saying to ourselves, that having power--provided it is used in the service of God and your fellow human beings--is a good thing. With this rationalization, the crusades took place; inquisitions were organized; Indians were enslaved; positions of great influence were desired; episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals and opulent seminaries were built and

45. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 32

46. Ibid., p. 24

47. Ibid., p. 26

much moral manipulation of conscience was engaged in.⁴⁸

In other words, if we are going to follow Jesus Christ, let us follow Him in the life He lived and died. Most often, however, compassion involves less demanding surrenders of our selves in order to respond in some simple way to the needs of others, as Jesus would.

The Call to Obey

Radical obedience?

As wonderful as is the mystery of Jesus' sacrificial servanthood, there is another aspect of God that his life reveals. "In Jesus Christ, God did not manifest his compassion simply by becoming a suffering servant, but by becoming a suffering servant in obedience. Obedience gives servanthood its deepest dimension."⁴⁹ This kind of obedience also helps us to escape the prison walls of competition. "Jesus' total obedience to his Father led him to the cross, and through the cross to a life no longer subject to the competitive games of this world. Jesus held on to nothing, not even to satisfying religious experiences. Nothing was left for him to cling to."⁵⁰ Jesus invited each of those who would follow Him to take up their own crosses, joining Him in radical obedience, and relinquishing our claim on any dimension of life on this side of Eternity.

Listening

Jesus' obedience permeated every corner of his life and every action. This kind of obedience was based on listening, listening to the Father. "Obedience as it is embodied in Jesus Christ, is a total lis-

48. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 58-59.

49. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 34

50. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 74

tening, a giving attention with no hesitation or limitation, being 'all ear.' It is an expression of the intimacy that can exist between two persons. Here the one who obeys knows without restriction the will of the one who commands and has only one all-embracing desire: to live out that will."⁵¹

It is, in fact, on careful obedience that intimacy with God is based. "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (John 14:21)

Suffering

Suffering takes on a different significance when it is set in a context of obedience to God instead of self-direction. Jesus does not have to prove himself to the Father or earn His love, or even fulfil his commands as a solicitous son. "Rather we see in these actions a divine listening to a divine love, a loving response to a loving mission and a free 'yes' to a free command."⁵² Nothing was too demanding for this kind of servant. ". . . Jesus is the obedient servant who heeds the call and desires to respond even when it leads him to pain and suffering. This desire is not to experience pain, but to give his full undivided attention to the voice of his beloved Father."⁵³ If it was necessary for Him to obey, how much more do we need to be willing to learn obedience, even if it means submitting to suffering?

Results?

When we learn to perceive Him as our loving Father, obedience

51. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 36

52. Ibid., p. 37

53. Ibid., p. 39

becomes much easier. Anxiety about the condition or direction of our lives diminishes. "Obedience is giving full attention to what the Father says to us in this very moment and responding lovingly to what we perceive, because God is our loving Father in whom nothing that is not love can be found. Apprehension, fear, and anxiety cannot sustain themselves in his presence."⁵⁴

The emphasis on the cross and following Christ in carrying the cross can sound perverse, but the call to obedience is not first a call to suffering. "Fellowship with Christ is not a commitment to suffer as much as possible, but a commitment to listen with him to God's love without fear. It is to obedience--understood as an intimate, fearless, listening to God's continuing love--that we are called."⁵⁵

The implication for questions of guidance, questions about where our life is going, is that we must learn to listen to Him more carefully. "...instead of declaring anything and everything to be the will of God, we must be willing to ask ourselves where in the midst of our pains and sufferings we can discern the loving presence of God."⁵⁶ Intimacy with Him and obedience to Him are tightly intertwined. If we truly love Him, not only will we want to obey, but He can be trusted with our obedience, even when we may encounter suffering.

Motivation and energy!

Why do we do ministry, and why do we become worn out in doing it? Sometimes we do good and get worn out. Ministry takes on a different perspective when it is done from the perspective of obedience. "When,

54. Ibid., p. 43

55. Ibid., p. 40.

56. Ibid.

however, we discover that our obedient listening leads us to our suffering neighbors, we can go to them in the joyful knowledge that love brings us there."⁵⁷ This kind of willingness can be used of God to bear fruit. "When obedience becomes our first and only concern, then we too can move into the world with compassion and feel the suffering of the world so deeply that through our compassion we can give new life to others."⁵⁸

This kind of ministry becomes possible as we follow Jesus' example of obedience. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. . . . He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:5, 8)

Is there anywhere that we would not go for Him? Is there anything that we would not do for Him? Effectiveness in compassion requires that we trust Him enough to obey whatever He asks, knowing that the request comes from a heart that loves us without qualification.

Prayer and Compassion

Why pray?

God Himself is the reason for biblical prayer. Reflecting on thirty years of life and ministry since his ordination, above all Henri Nouwen resolved to pray more; not self-centered reflection, but prayers of adoration.⁵⁹ He had been learning this lesson throughout his time at L'Arche, as he watched one of its leaders, Jean Vanier. "I now know that there is a way of living, praying, being with people, caring, eating, drinking, sleeping, reading, and writing in which Jesus is truly

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., p. 41.

59. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 226

the center."⁶⁰ Another man gave him the key to this kind of life:

'Be faithful in your adoration.' He did not say 'prayer' or 'meditation' or 'contemplation.' He kept using the word 'adoration.' This word makes it clear that all the attention must be on Jesus and not on me. To adore is to be drawn away from my own preoccupations and into the presence of Jesus. It means letting go of what I want, desire and have planned and fully trusting Jesus and his love.⁶¹

This is the heart of the psalmist in Psalm 27:4. "One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple."

It is this kind of prayer that leaders and ministers of these days need. "If there is any focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, 'Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?'"⁶²

Jesus and action

Praying in this way is not escaping from the need for action. Rather, it is establishing our connectedness to Jesus so that we may be useful to Him. "He warns us about striking off on our own. 'Cut off from me, you can do nothing.' But he also promises, 'Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty.'"⁶³ The vine is the source of our strength and fruitfulness. "Apart from me you can do nothing," is a strong statement that places a harsh judgment on action without prayer.

60. Daybreak, p. 71

61. Ibid.

62. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 28

63. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 89

Prayer is not nearly as much a waste of time as is action without prayer. "It is only in and through prayer that we can become intimately connected with Jesus and find the strength to join him on his way."⁶⁴

Prayer and discipline

If prayer is our path to intimacy with God, how do we walk this path? Asking that question is itself, almost starting down the wrong way. "We must pray not first of all because it feels good or helps, but because God loves us and wants our attention."⁶⁵ The three disciples were invited to share Jesus' agony in the Garden and failed. He warned them, "Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41) Discipline of our lives, to spend time with Him, is a necessity.

To reach for the privilege of time with Him, we must resolve that it is important to us, and act like it, for prayer "is the human effort to allow the Holy Spirit to do his re-creating work in us. Above all it involves the decision to set aside time every day to be alone with God and listen to the Spirit."⁶⁶ As this listening takes place, "our hearts become like quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do."⁶⁷ This listening takes place "when we "place the words from the Scriptures in the center of our solitude..."⁶⁸

God invites us to Himself. The very desire to seek Him is grace, but we must respond with action, disciplined actions of attentiveness

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid., p. 117.

66. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 106

67. Henri Nouwen, Making All Things New, (San Fransisco: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 79.

68. Ibid., p. 77.

and devotion to Him.

Prayer for others

Prayer does not just impact our internal communion with God. "In the intimacy of prayer God reveals himself to us as the God who loves all the members of the human family just as personally and uniquely as he loves us. Therefore a growing intimacy with God deepens our sense of responsibility for others."⁶⁹

In facing our needy world, prayer is not an escape from the world, but a way to embrace it. "Prayer challenges us to be fully aware of the world in which we live and to present it with all its needs and pains to God. It is this compassionate prayer that calls for compassionate action."⁷⁰ Action is almost demanded, for to pray "is to become those for whom we pray."⁷¹ "In praying for others I lose myself and become the other, only to be found by the divine love which holds the whole of humanity in a compassionate embrace."⁷² This is intercessory prayer that goes beyond perfunctory mumblings to embrace the needs of the people in our world, and to take them to God as our own.

Prayer and community

Prayer needs to be not only individual, but also communal. "Without community, individual prayer easily degenerates into egocentric and eccentric behavior. . . ."⁷³ Prayer is essential to the existence of Christian community. "By prayer community is created as well as

69. Ibid., p. 109.

70. Ibid., p. 116.

71. Ibid., p. 110.

72. Nouwen, Genessee Diary, p. 123.

73. Nouwen, Reach Out, p. 113.

expressed. Prayer is first of all the realization of God's presence in the midst of his people and, therefore, the realization of the community itself."⁷⁴ This is the impact of Jesus' bold promise, "Where two of three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20) When the focus on prayer is lost, "the community quickly degenerates into a club with a common cause but no common vocation."⁷⁵ It is then that we are threatened with powerlessness, as Jesus warned in John 15:5. "...apart from me you can do nothing."

As individuals, we need to pray with others for our own good as well. "Just because prayer is so personal and arises from the center of our life, it is to be shared with others. Just because prayer is the most precious expression of being human, it needs the constant support and protection of the community to grow and flower."⁷⁶ At times when Nouwen found himself spiritually bored and unmoved, prayer with others helped. "What helps me most is praying with others. . . . Friends keep me close to Jesus. I just have to drink in their love and let them pray with and for me."⁷⁷ Prayer together was the backbone of the young Christian church in the face of powerful opposition. After arrest and release, Peter and John returned to the fellowship to pray (Acts 4:23-26). While we face little persecution, the uncertainties, challenges, opportunities, and needs of our day should compel us frequently to more prayer and worship, together.

74. Ibid., p. 112.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid., p. 109.

77. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 211.

Community: Compassion Together

Lonely, tired faces

All of us who go to church have seen their faces. You may only see them for a few weeks. They are people who are drawn to worship, compelled to reach out to God, who find no roots, no relationships in our churches. "The crises in the lives of many caring Christians today are closely connected with deep feelings of not belonging. Without a sense of being sent by a caring community, a compassionate life cannot last long and quickly degenerates into a life marked by numbness and anger."⁷⁸

Nouwen identifies two reasons why community is so important. First, "I have found over and over again how hard it is to be truly faithful to Jesus when I am alone. I need my brothers and sisters to pray with me, to speak with me about the spiritual task at hand, and to challenge me to stay pure in mind, heart and body."⁷⁹ But secondly, and more importantly, we need to be in community to be reminded that it is Jesus who is at work through us, not we who are doing the work of ministry. "This is very clearly made visible when we proclaim the redeeming power of God together. Indeed, whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us."⁸⁰ Ministry alone is both lonely and risky.

God's plan

Community is an essential component of God's plan for the world.

78. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 61

79. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 41

80. Ibid.

"God's compassion became evident in a radically new way of living, which so amazed and surprised outsiders that they said, 'See how they love each other.'"⁸¹ This was Jesus' intention for His expression of His life through us. In the Daybreak community this truth is especially visible. Handicapped adults have such overt needs that the requirement of a caring community is more visible. They need and respond to human affection. Nouwen discovered this. "One thing is becoming clear to me: God became flesh for us to show us that the way to come in touch with God's love is the human way, in which the limited and partial affection that people can give offers access to the unlimited and complete love that God has poured into the human heart. God's love cannot be found outside this human affection. . . ."⁸²

Compassion must find expression in a setting of community. "A compassionate life is a life in which fellowship with Christ reveals itself in a new fellowship among those who follow Him."⁸³ It is this kind of life that points beyond those living it to the one living through them. This is how those who follow Christ fulfil the striking command he gave to those closest to Him: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35) Though beyond human ken and ability, the revelational power of the loving Christian community was its founder's command.

What is Christian community?

The Christian community must never forget its origin in God's call. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,

81. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 50

82. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 59-60.

83. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 50

God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (I Peter 2:9). This call both humbles and honors the participants.

Called together by Christ, a truly Christian community is comprised of people who do not derive their sense of value or esteem from their successful competition with each other, but who "have entered into the mind of Christ and no longer think of their own interests first. . . ."84 Once this happens, "we can see our unique talents as gifts for others. Then too we will notice that the sharing of our gifts does not diminish our own value as persons but enhances it."85 Service to others, rather than being a condescending giving of what we have, becomes "helping our neighbors discover that they possess great but often hidden talents that can enable them to do even more for us than we can do for them."86 Community, from Jesus' perspective, is a place where His love finds expression in our encouragement and enablement of each other. Rather than seeking our own edification, His common call to us summons us to draw out the best in each other.

The power of community

The volume of hurt and need in our world makes compassion a risky business. ". . . confrontation with human pain often creates anger instead of care, irritation instead of sympathy, and even fury instead of compassion."87 Exposure to suffering does nothing to help it. The community, however, can make a powerful difference and creatively

84. Ibid., p. 82.

85. Ibid., p. 79.

86. Ibid., p. 80.

87. Ibid., p. 54.

alleviate some of the anxiety we feel in the face of the needs of the world.

In the Christian community we gather in the name of Christ and thus experience him in the midst of a suffering world. There our old, weak minds, which are unable fully to perceive the pains of the world, are transformed into the mind of Christ, to whom nothing human is alien. In community, we are no longer a mass of helpless individuals, but are transformed into one people of God. In community our fears and anger are transformed by God's unconditional love, and we become gentle manifestations of his boundless compassion. In community, our lives become compassionate lives because in the way we live and work together, God's compassion becomes present in the midst of a broken world.⁸⁸

For the community to do this, it must learn to listen together, to obey God's summons for its life and ministry together. "Obedience, as an attentive listening to the Father, is very much a communal vocation. It is precisely by constant prayer and meditation that the community remains alert and open to the needs of the world."⁸⁹

For God's people to face the world and its needs, to be able to begin to address them, they need to function not as interested individuals, but as key participants in the life of Christ's body. Eyes, hands, feet. "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose." (I Corinthians 12:17, 18) God has brought together a team that He likens to a human body. Not as individuals, but as integral players on this team, He invites us to confront the world with His compassion.

Worth the risk?

The formation of community, however, entails risks. One of these is that the group will become just a warm, soft refuge for protection

88. Ibid., pp. 56-57.

89. Ibid., p. 58.

and comfort. Nouwen warns against this. "When we form community primarily to heal personal wounds, it cannot become the place where we effectively realize solidarity with other people's pain."⁹⁰ But the benefits are worth the risks, for people need to experience the reality of community, and leaders need to strive to provide it. "When ministers and priests live their ministry mostly in their heads and relate to the Gospel as a set of valuable ideas to be announced, the body quickly takes revenge by screaming loudly for affection and intimacy."⁹¹ True community, however, includes concern for those outside its warmth and security. "Wherever true Christian community is formed, compassion happens in the world. This is true not only of Benedict and Scholastica and their followers or Francis and Clare and their brothers and sisters, but also whenever men and women let go of their old, anxious ways of thinking and find each other in the mind of Christ."⁹²

Community has power to change its participants and to make an impact for God. "In community, our fears and anger are transformed by God's unconditional love, and we become gentle manifestations of his boundless compassion. In community, our lives become compassionate lives because of the way we live and work together, God's compassion becomes present in the midst of a broken world."⁹³ It is through community, in community, that Christ's law can be fulfilled. Paul makes this stunningly clear. "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

90. Ibid., p. 63.

91. Nouwen, Jesus, p. 48.

92. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 57

93. Ibid., p. 56.

Compassion

Nouwen perceives our situation today in a way not unlike Jesus' perceptions of the people of his day. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9:36) For ourselves and for those around us, the message of compassion is needed. "Technology is so far ahead of human relations! There is such a need for new ways for people to be together, to solve conflicts, to work for peace. On the level of human relations, we are still in the Stone Age, thinking that power games and fear tactics will settle our problems."⁹⁴

Jesus' response to the suffering and hurts of his day was to ask his followers to pray for "workers," those who would share the challenge of responding to the needs of other world. (Matthew 9:37) He is still looking for people of compassion to help with the harvest.

Compassion: the meaning

Compassion's root words mean "to suffer with." "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears."⁹⁵ Jesus was moved with this kind of compassion as he saw and ministered to people. The word used for this is translated "to be moved with compassion," but actually refers to "being moved in the entrails." "...compassion is such a deep, central, and powerful emotion in Jesus that it can only be described as a movement of

94. Nouwen, Daybreak, p. 183.

95. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 4.

the womb of God."⁹⁶ Jeremiah reminded his readers that our God never tires of giving this kind of care. "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning...." (Lamentations 3:22, 23a) Our compassion is launched and sustained by understanding his compassion for us.

It is to compassion, to an identification with the suffering and needs of people, that Jesus calls His followers! Naturally, we resist this kind of life, "but once we see that Jesus reveals to us, in his radically downward pull, the compassionate nature of God, we begin to understand that to follow him is to participate in the on-going self-revelation of God."⁹⁷ The challenge of compassion is to pay close enough attention to God's heart that we can know where and how he wishes to express his compassion in our world through us.

Compassion: the power

Humanly speaking, a life of true compassion is an impossible burden. But compassion is not something for which we strive or in which we are trained. It is by our new, second nature, through Christ, that we can be enabled to live in compassionate servanthood. "Compassion is no longer a virtue that we must exercise in special circumstances or an attitude that we must call upon when other ways of responding have been exhausted, but it is the natural way of being in the world. This 'second nature' allows us to see compassion not in moralistic terms, that is in terms of how we have to behave as good Christians, but as a new way of being in the world."⁹⁸

96. Ibid., p. 16.

97. Ibid., p. 29.

98. Ibid., p. 30.

We can never really be trained in compassion. "Compassion is a divine gift and not a result of systematic study or effort. At a time when many programs are designed to help us become more sensitive, perceptive, and receptive, we need to be reminded continuously that compassion is not conquered but given, not the outcome of our hard work but the fruit of God's grace."⁹⁹

Compassion: the model

Compassion is not helping the "less fortunate," but is radical servanthood after the model of Christ. "Radical servanthood does not make sense unless we introduce a new level of understanding and see it as the way to encounter God himself."¹⁰⁰ As we minister, we may be tempted to feel sorry for ourselves, like martyrs who have sacrificed so much. "By viewing compassion as an obedient response to our loving Father, we avoid the constant temptation to see it as a noble act of self-sacrifice."¹⁰¹ The motive for love to which John appeals is simply the love of God for us! "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." (I John 4:11)

This kind of motivation is powerful. "When we are led by love instead of driven by fear, we can enter the places of the greatest darkness and pain and experience in a unique way the power of God's care."¹⁰² We can ask ourselves where we could go that God needs us to be compassionate, as He would be, doing simply what He would do.

99. Ibid., p. 90.

100. Ibid., p. 31.

101. Ibid., p. 41.

102. Ibid., p. 44.

Compassion: the results

One result of growing to have a more compassionate heart is the ability to see life and its events in a different light. "A compassionate man can no longer look at these manifestations of evil and death as disturbing interruptions of his life plan, but rather has to confront them as an opportunity for the conversion of himself and his fellow human beings."¹⁰³ This kind of perspective means a radically different perspective on the unexpected as it meets us.

What if our interruptions are in fact our opportunities, if they are challenges to an inner response by which growth takes place and through which we come to the fullness of being. What if all the unexpected interruptions are in fact the invitations to give up old-fashioned and out-moded styles of living and are opening up new unexplored areas of experience?¹⁰⁴

Compassion: your response?

There are two qualities that will come to be more and more characteristic of your life if you do grow to be more and more compassionate. "Joy and gratitude are the qualities of the heart by which we recognize those who are committed to a life of service in the path of Jesus Christ."¹⁰⁵ We find joy "because in the midst of service a divine presence becomes visible and a gift is offered. Therefore, those who serve as followers of Jesus discover that they are receiving more than they are giving."¹⁰⁶ We experience gratitude as our ministry "grows not from the need to prove anything or to persuade anyone but from the desire to give free witness to that which is profoundly real."¹⁰⁷ When

103. Nouwen, Reach Out, p. 42.

104. Ibid., p. 37.

105. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 32.

106. Ibid.

107. Ibid., p. 127.

we minister with this kind of perspective, we can continue even when results are meager, and our own hearts can remain joyful and peaceful.¹⁰⁸

"Be compassionate, as your heavenly Father is compassionate." So Jesus commands in Luke 6:36. Speaking to his disciples, this was not optional for those who would "follow more closely." His design was for all his followers to reproduce the Father's compassion as He had. This can become a heavy burden if we forget what it is that we are really doing.

We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.¹⁰⁹

What a tremendous challenge! What an incredible honor! It was to this challenge and honor that participants in the journey were invited, as the next chapter describes.

108. Ibid., p. 126.

109. Nouwen, Jesus, pp. 43-44.

CHAPTER 4

PEOPLE OF COMPASSION

Introduction

Given the fact that most people's hearts, even those of Christians, are not set on caring for others, the most important purpose of this journey was to invite people to understand and embrace the idea of a life-long journey towards compassion as one of the most important dimensions of their lives. The course was not designed to teach techniques or skills for ministry, but to build awareness of its challenge and desire for its exercise.

The course was to be an experience in personal discipleship, offering stimuli for reflection on one's life, and requiring the personal discipline of time spent in reading and reaction. It was also designed to include a corporate component, utilizing group activities, exposures, and experiences, to enhance further the level of integration of the material into our lives. A further objective was to gain experience in using the sermon as a teaching tool in a small group setting.

The congregation's introduction to "Compassion--a Spiritual Journey," came during a three sermon series on self-centeredness in our culture, as contrasted with the ministry of each person of the Trinity. The sermons were each derived from a number of relevant texts rather than from one text, and were topical sermons, incorporating material from "Western Culture's Suicide of Selfishness."

The first contrasted people's care for themselves with God's care for people. The second contrasted people who put themselves first with Jesus who put others first. The third contrasted people's efforts to do

well with the potential that the Holy Spirit offers us to do even better by being part of God's plan and design. On each Sunday, an outline of the message with key points and statements was included in the bulletin. Near the conclusion of each sermon I described the "compassion journey" and mentioned that people would be welcome to attend. The last two Sundays before it began, people were given opportunity to indicate their desire to attend by noting it on the "friendship pad" which is regularly circulated during the announcements for people to record their presence. A few people did sign up one week, none of whom actually came. In making the announcement on the morning on which it was to begin, I mentioned that the study was designed especially for those who did not feel that compassion was part of their life. At least one person responded on the basis of this.

Meeting #1, Introduction and Invitation

Having determined with the Congregational Reflection Group to meet as soon after the message as possible, and that having the readings in hand prior to the message would be helpful, I decided to meet on Sunday nights. To fit the schedule best, the introductory meeting was held on the Sunday of the last introductory sermon, September 26, 1990, at 7:00 pm.

Seven people appeared, including my wife and one member of the Congregational Reflection Group. There were, in addition to Sue and me, two other couples, one woman of which was very pregnant and scheduled to deliver November 9, and two women without their husbands. For the introduction, I shared my motivations for the course, which included a personal desire to make compassion more a part of my ministry and a desire to see compassion more a part of the foundation of our church. To understand their expectations, I asked them to record their

expectations and then to share them with the group. The responses varied from each other and from mine significantly. I then shared the objectives and commitments of the course described on the hand-out.

To acquaint them with the issues of the course, we discussed excerpts from the last three sermons which I had compiled. Discussion centered around the issue of "selfism" as it has encroached on our thinking, one of the earlier questions in the worksheet. During this discussion, the issue was raised of why we were going to be reading an author about whom there might be reason to question his Christian experience. I explained that this issue had surfaced during the Congregational Reflection Group's reading of the "manual of readings," and I thought that this issue would be a worthwhile stimulant to our discussions. This time ended as I turned to the concluding issues highlighted by the text of Romans 12:1, 2.

To finish, I highlighted the assignments and distributed a book by Nouwen to each participant or family.

Meeting #2, Repentance, October 7, 1990

Having presented issues of self-centeredness in the first three sermons, the purpose of this meeting was to heighten participants' awareness of the "propaganda of consumption" with which they are bombarded. Using magazines brought by the participants and collected by me, including Time, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, Ladies Home Journal, and others, we constructed collages of ads and titles touting a self-centered life. Once completed, we explained the motives or messages behind the material we selected.

Discussion of the question of the effect of this kind of bombardment was lengthy and raised many issues.

To introduce the issue of the morning's sermon, whether or not

people have left their "first love," I asked about the cultural blandness of the evangelical church. This elicited a variety of opinions, including one that "my non-Christian friends are more Christian than I." It was also mentioned that our differences are internal, not necessarily external.

It was agreed, in response to the next question, that for most people, their first love is self. The discussion of repentance yielded agreement that repentance does have an on-going place in the life of the growing Christian. During the discussion of the readings, one person noted their pleasure at Nouwen's writings, and another noted that they were still uncertain that he was a Christian after reading of his struggles in The Genessee Diary. We left this issue to be resolved by further investigation.

Meeting #3, The Love of God, October 14, 1990

The primary objective of this meeting was to take Dr. Norman Kagan's "Affective Sensitivity Scale" which is used to measure one's ability to empathize with people. Since this is a fairly long media-based instrument, initial discussion was minimal. I did want, however, to have feedback regarding understanding of the sermon, so prior to administration of the instrument, I initiated a discussion of the sermon, focussing initially on the practical message or "take-away." One participant's response indicated that although she had understood that it was about love, she interpreted this to be about love for others, not God's love for her. Other responses indicated a better understanding of the primary issue--God's love.

A question about the correlation of the readings with the message sparked little response other than basic agreement.

The second question raised the issue of men and women's respective

response to God's love. This elicited significant discussion, with some arguing that men are not as sensitive as women, which was not a precise answer to the question, but which was the primary direction of the discussion. As a result of my efforts to re-focus on the issue of men in relation to the love of God, there seemed to be some consensus that men do not respond to this as well as women.

Since time was passing quickly, I did not deal with the third question, about living in a world surrounded by God's love, which was the focus of the sermon.

The instrument itself was lengthy, consisting of 106 multiple choice questions about what people were thinking or feeling during filmed formal counseling situations. It consumed almost two hours, during which we took one break for snacks and conversation. Participants complained during and after the test that answers did not necessarily include what they would have thought was the correct response, and that the abrupt entries into the conversations gave insufficient context for understanding the situations, although the questions asked not for insight but for understanding of feelings.

Since the possibility of meeting with Henri Nouwen in Toronto in the context of a visit to Daybreak was available, I asked them to consider their schedules in light of that.

Meeting #4, Jesus as Servant, October 21, 1990

The Bible readings and Nouwen passages during the preceding week had been about Jesus' servanthood. During this meeting a video about Mother Teresa was shown. The objective of the meeting was to confront us with the radical nature of servanthood to which we are called in Christ and to raise issues about how this servanthood is to find expression in our lives.

The video portrays Mother Teresa as a radical but not sentimental servant of others, in particular, the "poorest of the poor," for the sake of Jesus. Her "call" to her vocation was an important theme, as was the simplicity and poverty of her own approach to ministry.

The emotional impact of the video on us was significant, and we skipped most of the questions, only discussing 5. "Where is servanthood needed today?" Mother Teresa's observation about the deeper poverty that we have in our country was noted, the poverty of loneliness. It was also noted that there are pathetic and apparently lonely people here in Hamburg. The issue of servanthood and the teaching of servanthood in the evangelical church was raised. A few ministries that care for physical needs in this area were mentioned such as City Mission and Operation Good Neighbor.

In the aftermath of the meeting it was observed that perhaps in searching for a new staff member for Christian Education, we should be looking for someone not to serve us more but to launch us into involvement with the community in more effective ways.

We concluded with prayer during which some of the pray-ers talked openly with God about their servanthood, with one person in particular, a forty-two year old woman who is delivering her third child, offering herself and her child to God afresh.

Once again I presented what is still only a possibility, the idea of spending some time in Toronto at the Daybreak community.

Meeting #5, Jesus as Obedient, October 28, 1990

The session had as its objectives 1)reflection on the issues of obedience raised in the readings and morning message and 2)reflection on the significance of the Passion of Christ in the life of a believer. Taking place at a participating couple's home, the discussion began by

reflection on a quote from Jim Eliot taken from the morning message.

There was general consensus that this attitude is sometimes appropriate.

One raised the issue of "listening" to God from her reading in Making All Things New. Memories of the video about Mother Teresa led into discussion of some of the areas of obedience mentioned in the third question. Discussion never turned to specific areas of our obedience in our lives.

While I demurred when asked about areas of obedience, saying that I could only answer for myself, another pointed out that there are common areas of obedience for us all. This highlighted for me that there are in fact "core areas" of obedience, upon which we build our personal responses to God, and that the subjective perspective with which I answered that question is part of the very world-view that I am attempting to combat in this project.

In responding to the question about the direction of the church, participants discussed at length the importance of listening to God as a church body, especially as we prepare to move to a new building with new potentials and ministries.

I did not use the movie, Jesus of Nazareth, as planned.

Meeting #6, Prayer, November 4, 1990

The objectives of this meeting were to investigate the place of prayer in our lives and to explore the possibility of shaping our prayers into more effective spiritual resources in our ministry.

Some of our ideas about our feelings about prayer were "guilt" about not praying, especially with children, and boredom. Others felt inferiority when trying to pray and inferior in self-expression. In terms of difficulties, some felt ignorance about what to say, frustration about finding time, and another, encouragement in praying

during life situations. One person responded that she had come to a point where she simply tried to "talk with Jesus" during the day about her life, abandoning an attempt to carve out long periods of time.

Worship, it was felt, can help to put life in perspective and give us strength to our faith. Performance often creeps in as a basis for our acceptability to God. I pointed out that Psalm 27, which talks about seeking God's face, can be prayed for selfish purposes or for purposes of truly honoring Him.

We then discussed distractions, as raised by Francis' destruction of his pottery. This prompted one participant to express his frustration and even disgust with Francis and his inability to cope with the demands and temptations of life without total abnegation. It was suggested that distractions can become opportunities, rather than impediments to prayer.

We discussed the difficulty of knowing how to pray for, and what to do for needy people, a discussion which was focussed primarily on the somewhat vague needs of "poverty," not spiritual neediness.

Meeting #7, Community, November 18, 1990

(This meeting, scheduled for November 11, was postponed due to heavy snow, rain, and high winds. This meant that the reflections this evening, and next, were on sermons preached the preceding week.)

The objectives of this lessons were to highlight some of the issues raised by Nouwen in relation to a church community, First, what does it mean to "love each other as Jesus does?" Secondly, how does God lead the community into response to needs?

Initial discussion concurred that it is possible to attend church and be lonely, even when well-acquainted with the people of a church, especially for women who come without their husbands. One person

mentioned an admonition from some speaker who had suggested that if you assume that people you meet in church are lonely, you will be correct 80% of the time. It was also noted that some participants had been so involved in church ministry that they were not aware that they were lonely, a predicament precisely like that described by Nouwen in the readings.

Growth groups, like those we have in this church, provided the bulk of people's response to the question about Jesus' present ministry. It was also questioned as to whether or not he would have large churches, but countered that he did preach to large crowds.

In evaluating our present "love," it was mentioned that our purpose or goals as a church are not necessarily "owned" by all as they ostensibly are in a fraternal organization. Perhaps we need to recruit people more to a more visible mandate or purpose. Such groups make demands on participants, yet it is simple to belong to a church. We discussed a number of areas where a perspective of love was finding expression. One suggested that we can bring a perspective of giving to others as we come to church. The noise level in the sanctuary where people are greeting each other, possibly the price for personal interaction, was also discussed.

In discussing the setting of Jesus' "love one another" command, it was mentioned that perhaps, given its "narrow" assignment, perhaps it is God's intention that leadership and more deeply committed people model this in its application to the whole. In the areas of confronting others it is difficult to be loving, an issue which raises the question of the definition of love. Bluntness and candor may not be excluded by a commitment to love someone.

The issue of the Body's response to needs led to discussion of an

anticipated staff person as the church. This person should facilitate the entry of present groups into more active, people-centered ministry. A reflection on the Mother Theresa video suggested that we need to narrow our focus to "one person," as she did.

A young unwed mother who had attended our church and then had gotten "lost" was mentioned as an example of one who could have needed more personal contact, but did not receive it. Growth groups could focus their ministry on needs like these.

A brief discussion of the possibility of a "Christian community" living together mentioned the difficulty of living together and having "bad days."

A discussion of "grapes" and "marbles" began with talk about "dying to self" and putting others' needs first, realizing that we each are not "so unique." We also discussed the tempering process of life itself, that prepares us for more effective ministry to those who experience similar needs.

Older people in the church who have "paid their dues," were mentioned as a source of puzzlement and potential ministry. It was wondered how they could be motivated to be involved in caring for kids and helping with existing ministries.

John Maxwell's concept of having every church person involved in some ministry was mentioned as rigorous, but possibly wise. This launched us once again into a discussion of the staff person for which we are looking, with the comment that we do not need an inexperienced person whom we must train in equipping ministry.

The session included discussion of our last formal session, next week, and our anticipated trip to visit Daybreak in Toronto on November 30. I also mentioned that they should be thinking about what to ask in

the time with Henri Nouwen.

Meeting #8, Compassion, November 25, 1990

This was to be the final formal session. Its purposes were to summarize people's responses to the challenge of compassion, to reflect on the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in enabling the emergence of compassion. All original participants were present except for the couple that had just had a baby.

Discussion of the definition of compassion revealed that participants had thought about it, and wanted to go beyond Nouwen's beginning, "to suffer with." The issue of the "teachability" of compassion yielded agreement that it cannot be taught, but that this experience had opened some fresh perspectives on it. Our own need to experience compassion was mentioned, along with the difficulty in our culture, of finding time to express compassion. While it cannot be learned, it was pointed out that learning listening skills can open opportunities for expressing it as a result of attitude changes in us. As a gift, we receive it especially as we grow with God and spend time with Him.

Briefly we discussed the difference between what Kagan was measuring on the empathy scale, which was the skill of empathy, and compassion, which involves a deeper attitude of heart.

On the issue of the value of studying compassion, one participant felt that although it had not been at all what she expected, she had grown some in her understanding of her own problems in feeling compassion as a nurse. She related well to his passages about exposure to suffering causing numbness and anger. We discussed the need that Nouwen identified to be with others to experience compassion ourselves, at least to be able to express our needs and to humble ourselves.

In discussing openness to the gift of compassion, Catherine Marshall's book The Helper was mentioned, in which she encourages us to ask for the Holy Spirit, to be with us from the beginning of the day, to make us accept what comes.

The fruit of the Spirit, one commented, had always seemed to be expressive of God's personality, so it comprised God's compassion, and our summons in bearing it, is to emulate God and reflect His personality. Once again the issue of busyness and compassion arose. How can we deal with it, fit it in? It was also asked how it can fit into the life of a church. This issue has been raised repeatedly but not answered.

In responding to the question of how to love enemies and be a gateway for God, we discussed simple sensitivity, a change in attitude towards each other, as one possible expression.

The final question involved needs for compassion and paths for the future. Initial responses were to the second part of the question. Some were finding opportunity to express it in present ministries. The impact of the series on the congregation was discussed, and it was suggested that a survey be taken some Sunday about people's understanding of it. A number of suggestions were made that the course be offered again. Some said that it dove-tailed with other things happening in their lives.

In discussing our need for compassion, some felt unworthy of "compassion"--care or understanding perhaps, but not compassion. Ministry together with friends, I observed, may lead us into tensions and difficulties that, when resolved, instead of destroying our relationships, can strengthen them. I raised what I consider to be the tension of servant leadership: having to make decisions that affect

people, sometimes negatively. Responses concerned the need to "stay in step with the Spirit." It was also wondered how much real prayer support and encouragement had been given to some of the people working intensively on the building project, an excellent observation.

Briefly we discussed the evaluation issues I have raised, to be formed into a formal evaluation later, and finalized plans for the trip to Toronto.

November 30, 1990, trip to Daybreak

Six of us, five participants and one's husband, arrived at the Daybreak community just after 10 o'clock a.m., November 30, 1990. The community had granted us a visit between 10 and 3 p.m. that day. One of the assistants, a young man on sabbatical from his work in the U. K., gave us a brief introduction to the community from his perspective. He had been attracted to the community by its combination of spiritual vision and practical work. He gave us a tour of the few buildings on the property and returned us to one of the houses where we had a bowl of soup with the residents who were present. At one o'clock we walked to a farmhouse on the back of the property that had been converted to a chapel and residence with five bedrooms for Henri Nouwen and others, now called "Dayspring."

In a white sunny room with contemporary furniture, we found a small circle of chairs prepared for us. Nouwen himself served us coffee and a plate of breads and cookies, also prepared for us in advance. After brief initial observations, and an explanation of our interest in compassion, he pointed to a painting hung over the fireplace, high on a wall going up to a cathedral ceiling. The picture was of two Renaissance characters embracing, one on his knees in front of the other. The picture was a detail from a Rembrandt depiction of the

Prodigal Son returning home to his father. Henri explained that this picture had meant much to him, in relation to the issue of compassion. For a long time he had thought of himself as the younger son, running off and then returning to God, the God who loves us enough to let us run off. The son retains a symbol of sonship in the sword. He has not forgotten that he is the son. Peter returned, even though his rejection has been just as profound as Judas'. The Father does not desire stories or apologies. He simply desired his son's return.

The older son, Nouwen realized, was like himself as well, never straying, but never really grateful for the blessings of sonship. Many ministers, he observed, are resentful or angry, not claiming the goodness but complaining about declining churches or lacks of success, intensely jealous of each other. Many such people exist in churches also, resentful of having missed the fun of lostness, not realizing their own lostness. The Father goes to the elder son too. He suffers with them both and cares for them both.

But, Henri noted, they were also called home to become fathers. Sons become fathers! We are called to receive others, having made the journey ourselves. What should we do when we return? Become compassionate like our Father! The Father has suffered, but he receives his sons back without condition or complaint.

The Father figure portrays the receptivity of God. His mantle is like the sheltering wings of Psalm 91. The boy's head is shaved like a baby from the womb, bespeaking the returning son's likeness to a baby returning to a womb. The hands are also strikingly different; one is large and thick. It grasps firmly. The other is longer, more delicate, more feminine, expressing the father's and the mother's kind of love. This father is more than a patriarch, but one who knows no greater joy

than this return of his son.

So as we become compassionate as the Father, we are to come to a place where others feel loved and not questioned. Jesus went to prepare a place for sinners, and revealed that there are many places in his Father's mansion, for all sinners to return. A congregation needs to be reminded that they are all like each son and the father. Bitterness needs to be converted to gratitude. As we live together, we need to "call each other home."

To move to another area, Nouwen draw a diagram, a line representing a life-line. Over this he drew a graph, up and down lines, representing the highs and lows of life. Most people measure their value on the basis of two questions: Who am I? What do others say about me? Their lives are a constant fluctuation between the depressions. Most ministry ends up trying to help people during the "down's." Jesus did not focus on the world's definition of our worth. This is based on competition. Though very seductive, He did not accept it. Instead, our identity is in Him. We are who we are. We are because He created us and had our identity before we were. We need to say "You are a child of God, not 'you can become one,' but you were and God has known us before we were born."

The spiritual challenge is to claim this truth and let it radiate until it penetrates the world. The point is not to dip into God when the other doesn't work. Jesus related to the world as a child of God. In fact, when asked questions from the perspective of the world, he did not answer "from below." Asked questions "from below," He would answer "from above." We try to answer people's questions on the lower level, not on the higher level. Our task is to help people live with Christ as the Center. Home is accepting God's ownership. Psycho-therapy deals

with the lower level, not the higher level. It can help us to be free to claim our identity in Christ.

God is to be our first love. Others are second. We can give our second love only when we are in touch with our first love.

This led to a discussion of community. A most important point is that there is no ideal community. After prayer, Jesus chose his disciples, and one of them betrayed Him. Flaws are always present in community. Community is where people want to live with lives to remind us of our second love, if we have our first love in its proper place. In community we offer each other forgiveness for not being God. Compassion is rooted in being held safe, in having our Center back at home with God. We need to return there again and again. That is what a congregation needs to do, realize that we have expectations that cannot be filled by each other, but only by God. When we are both anchored in God, then we have space for others. Ministry is a call to claim our true identity. The ministry of compassion is to help people know they are children of God, and is not based in sentimentality.

The dynamic of being a child of God is based on four words spoken at the feeding of the 5,000, about Jesus, with the two at Emmaeus, and in the early Christian church. The words had to do with bread: taken, blessed, broken, and given. This was true of Jesus and it is true of a child of God. Ministry is to make us aware of this dynamic.

First, we are "taken," or chosen. We have each been "noticed as precious." We are each wanted, desired. The handicapped need to realize this especially, for they were disappointments to people, especially their parents. We all need to realize this, for in our culture we are important only if we are unique. We have been chosen to reveal the chosenness of others. This was Israel's role, through its

blessedness to reveal the blessedness of other nations.

Jesus received His blessing at the baptism at the Jordan. He lived with the reality of this blessing, and despite the valuation of others, knew, "I am beloved of the Father." This allows Him to be faithful, for he never loses this blessing. This is the role of the spiritual disciplines, to know that we are blessed. Prayer is to listen, as Jesus communed with God, listening to the inner voice. One task of compassion is to bless, not to "say good" about another or to compliment, but to say the truth of God: "You are blessed of God." When the prodigal son returned to the father, the father said, "You are my beloved son," and began to weep and weep. The question of ministry is how to bring the truth that people are beloved children of God.

Brokenness is part of everyone's life. We are all broken, for life breaks us. The challenge is to help people see brokenness from the perspective of children of God. We cannot heal brokenness in this existence, but we can see brokenness under the blessing. Without this, brokenness affirms people's worthlessness. "See, I'm no good." People feel cursed, and the brokenness destroys them. They feel dark, angry, resentful. Ministry is not to heal the brokenness, but to put it under the blessing.

Finally, we are broken to be given. Ministry is to help people die well. Dying is brokenness in completion. Death is a beginning, a point at which we become a gift for the world. Jesus said that it was good for Him to die so that he could send the Spirit. He was broken so that he could be eaten and given. All the little deaths of our lives can be "sending." We can live those deaths to become more of a gift for others. Though suffering, we can live under the blessing. In ministry, we can offer our suffering to bear fruit for other people. We do not

have to be thrown into despair, but as Jesus began new life, so can we. Live, remain, and your life will be fruitful.

As Jesus multiplied the bread, he took it, blessed it, gave it, multiplied and made it fruitful. We may not necessarily expect to show fruit, but to trust Him for fruit. We may remind each other of this process each day. We need to have contemplative knowledge, not head knowledge of these things. Community is a fellowship of calling each other home. Intercessory prayer is community being together. Compassionate ministry helps remind each other that we are to be taken, blessed, broken, and given, and to help each other get in touch with our first love.

Although this seemed to provide a break-point, I asked a question about prayer. Nouwen responded without hesitation. We need space where we can face our own chaos and anxiety. Inside we are garbage cans. In an aside, he called television the enemy of the spiritual life, not so much for its content as for its effect in pulling us out of ourselves. Most of it is bad for our spiritual lives.

In prayer, we should take one of the "sacred texts," or texts held in regard through the ages, and say it and meditate on it. We should be saying the truths, and so let them be drawn into our hearts, to the center of our beings, where God dwells. We should say the truths about who we are. Say the truths of God, and let them enter into our center, forming sacred space there. God's truths should become pictures on the inner walls of our hearts, pictures that define who and what we are. We should then live from these places, going into the world.

Prayer is to eat the words of God and to let the words shape us. Then we can invite people into our inner space; so that we can say, in the name of Jesus, this is where we are.

Ministry is speaking of the place of prayer, speaking only from that place, saying the words of our prayer even as we do things like shopping. When they become part of us, then we know what to say in ministry situations, just as Nouwen invited us into his inner space and shared with us without worrying about advance preparation.

In compassion, it is important not to try to have compassion for people, but to be compassionate with the compassion of Jesus. God will tell you how to help people. Jesus communed with God and out of that communion, He spoke and ministered.

Be faithful to God's call, trust Him, and you cannot help but minister. It is God that can change the world. We are not in control. We need to be faithful to Jesus first, and then trust that we will bear fruit.

Here Henri's reflections seemed to run out, or rather, we sensed that we had what we had come to find. Although he had just finished a retreat an hour before, he seemed to be present with us, to be "with" us the entire time. I asked him to pray for us, and he invited us to the simple chapel in the basement. It was a ring of chairs around a makeshift altar with a modern icon on a beige carpet. Before praying, he told us that on the way down to the chapel, he had been informed that his sister-in-law in Holland was suffering a relapse of her cancer and that he needed to decide on his course of action. A couple of us prayed, and he concluded with a simple prayer.

Back at the main office, we were shown a video of the ministry of Daybreak and given a room in which to reflect on and process our time together.

Final meeting, December 9, 1990

The five of us who had visited Daybreak, reflected in a somewhat

random way on our experience using a description I had prepared. The first issue that arose was that of community. It was asked whether it occurs in the church or wherever people are gathered, even outside a spiritual setting. We remembered Nouwen's comments about community being a setting in which the people are called together by God, where He is at work. It was also mentioned that he pointed out during our interview that there exists no perfect community, and that even under Jesus' direction the disciples were a flawed group.

As we discussed our visit with Nouwen, we remembered his confident sharing of himself and his welcome for us, an openness that was exemplary.

One participant noted that my outline could be more accurate in mentioning that four areas of ministry were tied to each of the four dimensions of the stories he mentioned: taken, blessed, broken, given.

Discussion turned toward people with needs in the church now that are somewhat hidden but very real: people with family members who have died of AIDS, a family who lost a twin at birth. The goal for a church should be a community such that people will share such needs with someone else in the community.

In terms of the study itself, it was observed that it might be helpful to have a growth group study a book of Nouwen's and visit Toronto. Another said that the visit and experience broadened their appreciation for the perspectives of another tradition. Another reflected that we did not learn anything we did not already know, but had these things put in new perspective. One observed that they received more from my sermons than from his talk.

I commented about art, how in Rembrandt's day it contributed to spirituality, but today is almost our enemy in its often twisted

perceptions of the world. Our discussion then touched on our acquisitive culture, the lack of time for compassion and the need to put God first, our own church's response to people at Christmas, and some current expressions of ministry.

A question was raised about the scoring of the empathy scale, and I commented that I did not believe, based on the group's reaction to this and the rather limited information that was returned, that dealing with this any further would be helpful.

Returning to evaluation, it was suggested that reflection groups on sermons be made more available, but without necessarily seeking large numbers, which might inhibit their effectiveness. It was suggested that I might do a series and make available a series of readings to accompany them that would be discussed. There was agreement with this concept. It was also mentioned that these kinds of meetings would be helpful to relationships, especially with me. I could actually invite specific people for involvement in short groups of this nature. The discussion ended on the note that continued offerings of this kind of group would be helpful, and that we all seemed to believe that something special had happened in the group during our time together.

Aside from the rather natural benefits of spending time with other people, reflecting on subjects of mutual interest, were there any benefits in our understanding and practice of compassion? Chapter 5 addresses this issue.

CHAPTER 5

COMPASSION: WHO CARES?

Evaluation of Compassion project

These evaluations include my observations and the reflections of a final group meeting on February 24, 1991, approximately three months after the study concluded.

The Bottom Line?

During our final session, one person commented that he had learned to be more open to God's plans, not designing his own future and ministry. He was a person already motivated to care about people, yet his perspective on ministry as a lay person had been enlarged and liberated by new insights about "listening" to God. This had been one of the significant messages of the study. He went on to describe increased opportunities and satisfactions in ministry that he had recently experienced.

His wife mentioned that in her ministry with children there had been more opportunities to be sensitive to "little things" in time with the children and their parents. She has found parents confiding in her about some of the issues they face with their children.

A person in the study who has been leading a ministry group in the church reflected on her increased ability to be herself and not worry about the outcomes. She also described how she has perceived that we need to recover the "gift of being present" with people to whom we speak, and that we can be the ones to give this gift. A number of comments were made about the impact of the video of Mother Theresa, a person who exemplified "not being for self, but for others." It had

been helpful to see such a person portrayed so powerfully.

At both conclusions to the study, first when we stopped meeting formally in November, and also at the final evaluation session in February, there was a sense of loss. We were now finished and would meet no more. Those involved in the evaluation and making these comments were three of the six who had been able to be involved in the entire study. As I reflected on the entire experience, it seemed that if at least half of the participants left the study experience having reflected deeply on themselves and having tried to develop their potential for caring for others in situations in which they are involved, the course had the kind of success for which I had hoped.

Pre-course preparations and invitation

It had occurred, however, on a much smaller scale than I had anticipated. I had prepared for twenty in the first session and had wondered why only six people appeared. What was the reason for the slender response from the congregation? Was the invitation presented so unclearly that people simply did not know about the course? Did people in this congregation just not care about becoming more compassionate? Was the idea of the course too novel? Were schedules so busy that few considered it an option?

In the group's evaluation session, it was pointed out that a more recent study opportunity based on a preaching series on Ephesians had good response. Yet it may have been presented more clearly. Others, however, noted that neither that study nor this one had been clearly understood by many. Some of the participants in this study had even been questioned about how they had been "chosen." It was clear to me that new ministry ventures need to be "over-sold" vigorously in order to give a congregation an honest opportunity for involvement.

Judging from the group's ideas, it seems that people in the church did not, in fact, know clearly what was happening, and that no conclusions should be drawn about the church people regarding their level of interest in such experiences, especially when this was the first of its kind. An additional action that could have netted more response, but which I considered unnecessary, would have been to recruit participants personally, as we do when establishing small groups in our church. This would have guaranteed a nucleus, at least, for the class, with common understandings of the course's purpose, and were this kind of intensive course to be repeated, I would actively recruit a core of participants.

Evaluation of sermons as teaching tools

Discussion of the viability of the "sermon-study" with the group itself yielded encouragement that this study had helped the participants to "get more out of" the sermons. One person noted the helpfulness of the visual component of seeing the material written down. This means that providing outlines for regular sermons does help some people gain more from messages. The benefits of the sermon studies, they felt, were that they could see far more lasting learning through extra reinforcement.

The group did not discuss what I think is a critical issue that can be addressed in small reflection groups, the matter of the life application of the message. Real learning, in a spiritual setting, demands life response!

Discussions of the sermons during the course teaching time were not, however, the most productive parts of the study. It may be that sermons are difficult launching points for discussion, especially when their presenter is present. People involved in the new sermon

discussion series, on Ephesians, seem to have had engaging discussions despite little formal guidance from pastoral staff. This was encouraging.

Part of the problem with sermon discussions in this study could have been lack of consistency in the format of the course. In the first three meetings, the bulk of the time was taken by learning activities: the collage, the video of Mother Teresa and the empathy scale. The format for the course changed after those were completed to more discussion. Perhaps, I have thought, the format in a course short as this, the format should be established early on and remain the same throughout the course, although the group seemed to enjoy the variety, as noted below.

The manual of readings

The manual of readings did seem to stimulate discussion during the course meetings, sometimes following the questions I had prepared, and sometimes following different trails, sparked by some controversial idea. During the final evaluation session I inquired about the usefulness of the manual. Most people seemed to have read it prior to the sessions. Their responses were that it did appear to correlate well with the rest of the course, and that it helped them keep the focus of each topic as it was presented in the sermon.

The strength of the manual lay in the strength of the author. Nouwen's writing is packed with insight. Somehow he presents thoughts that are clear, fresh and gripping, often in a few words. The material from St. Francis added what I thought were helpful illustrations and expansions of the concepts. I was surprised, however, that the radicalness of Francis' life alienated more than it challenged. During the course, people were also reading some of Nouwen's books. As I thought

about the manual, I wonder if the experience have been as meaningful if Scripture readings had been conjoined with daily readings in a book? One of the greatest benefits of a "manual" of selected readings, however, is that readings can be more carefully correlated with appropriate passages. During the first week of the course, while reflecting on true success and self-worth, my own feelings of frustration with the lack of response were helped and healed in powerful ways. I still wonder if careful thematic matching of Bible passages and other readings could probably offer this same kind of experience without the rigors of producing a "manual."

The course meetings

The meetings themselves provided a welcome accountability for completing the readings for most. The Mother Theresa video was a highlight, and had obviously provided material for reflection for a number. It was agreed that seeing compassion in action in her life and ministry was most meaningful. We also discussed the expression of compassion in Henri Nouwen's life, especially how he was "present" with us during our visit. The visit with him in Toronto was a highlight of the experience. People like him are rare. How this could be duplicated in another experience of this kind is difficult to imagine. His presence was a lesson both in the potential of godliness in a person and a vindication of his contention that closeness to God precedes the development of compassion for people.

In our evaluation, the question was raised as to how we get beyond the surface issues with people to deal with solutions. One suggested that it requires our time. We discussed possibilities in our congregation for ministries to emerge from the interests and concerns of individuals, such as lay counselling.

One person described the resolution of the early anxiety about the lack of a definition of compassion through coming to a point near the end of the course of believing that it so complex as to evade easy description. Leaving the definition of compassion until the end seemed to have created a creative expectancy.

Regarding the design of study experiences, the group agreed that a relatively short commitment, such as six to eight weeks is most attractive. The one week respite granted us through a snow squall was a helpful break in allowing extra reflection and catch-up reading. This is a helpful note in planning future group experiences. "Breaks" in the pace are helpful for maintaining energy.

Asked about the structure of the meetings, which varied from doing a collage, to watching a video, to doing the empathy inventory, they responded that this was helpful, not intrusive, as I had suspected, giving opportunity for relationships to develop and for some fun. It was also commented that the size of the group, though different than I had anticipated, was not a detriment, but perhaps a desirable feature.

Norman Kagan's empathy scale had showed some promise of providing an objective evaluation of the impact of this study. Its tedious nature and its offense to some of the participants, however, ruled out a second use. The only evaluations offered, therefore, are subjective, based on the responses of the participants.

Could the course have had the same kind of impact if it had been offered to a larger group? As people left our last meeting, we all expressed a sense of loss. It had been good to be together and to think, study, and pray. The couple that had dropped out because of a birth had returned for that last meeting. It was good to be together again. Important benefits of study groups of this nature can be the

relationships that can be built and the experiences of wrestling with powerful Truth in the company of people with whom one might not normally choose to associate. If these relational components were not preserved in a large group setting, I do not believe that some of the best growth would have occurred.

Evaluation of theology of the project

Saving or "growing" grace

The model that has been drawn from Nouwen's perceptions of compassion includes repentance, God's love, Jesus' example, Jesus' obedience, prayer, community, and compassion itself. No definition of compassion appeared in this work until the last chapter of the manual. Although this is not true of the sequence of Nouwen's own works, it reflects the logic of his understanding of compassion. It is not to be sought for its own sake. In the same vein, people are not to be "reached" simply because they are lost, or for their own sakes. It is God's love that gives compassion its true depth and people their true value. It is critical, therefore, that our vision of compassion be based first on the love and work of God for us. Compassion emerges as a gift of His grace. This prevents compassion from being able to be "taught." "Compassion is not a skill that we can master by arduous training, years of study, or careful supervision."¹

Nouwen's model, however, bears up well as the foundation for developing a life of compassion. Understanding of God's love for us as the basis for our own self-concept does necessarily precede our being able to give self-less love modeled on that of God's, expressed for us in Jesus. An important element that Nouwen emphasizes and that we may

1. Nouwen, Compassion, p. 90.

too easily dismiss is the corporate nature of compassion. True compassion, compassion that is neither sentimental nor impotent, demands that we experience and express it as part of the Body of Christ. Here, together, we look and listen to the needs of the world, while we also together sense the heartbeat of God. Here, together, we seek guidance for the expression of this compassion in the world.

There is an additional path of access to compassion, however, that Nouwen seems to neglect. That is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Love is the acme of all the Spirit's fruit (Galatians 5:22) and the bond of all the other virtues (Colossians 3:14). Control by the Holy Spirit is essential for a godly life and a foundation for the development of true love. Once again, compassion and even deep love for God are impossible without the gentle operation of God, through the Spirit, in our hearts.

A full-orbed presentation of godly compassion, and any kind of a personal experience of growth in compassion, require deep dependence on the work of God's Spirit. Were I writing again, I would include a chapter on the Spirit's ministry of love to us.

"Is he saved?" The question of Nouwen's salvation, raised in the Congregational Reflection Group, after reflection on section one of the theology chapter on repentance, highlights a potential difficulty in Nouwen's theology: the obfuscation of "saving" with "growing" grace. Nouwen's self-examination, yielding harsh results, in The Genessee Diary, for example, can lead one to question whether or not he has known the renewal and relief of regeneration.

The very title, however, of Making All Things New, harbors a hope, not false, that he does perceive the need of man for radical change. To delineate this is the purpose of the book. "Jesus does not speak about a change of activities, a change in contacts, or even a change of pace.

He speaks about a change of heart. This change of heart makes everything different, even while everything appears to remain the same."² Nouwen certainly acknowledges the need for a re-discovery of true self-hood. This is one of the major benefits of truly understanding God's unconditional love for us and is the message we carry. "The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God's word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life."³ He also freely acknowledges the need for a shift in our primary focus on ourselves.

Having acknowledged all of this, however, Nouwen seems to avoid clear acceptance of the depravity of man. Tempered, perhaps by his psychological training, by his Roman Catholic background, and perhaps by his intended audience, he does not seem to give the power of sin over us its due. Even in Compassion, a book sparked by a man's suffering and great patience in the face of the murder of his son by the government in Guatamala, defeat of sinfulness does not play a great part. Not radically convinced of man's radical lostness, his rescue efforts are milder than we really need.

This is compounded by his view of God. Lost in the love of God, he tends to neglect the fullest dimensions of his character. He maintains, in a sentence harmless enough in its sentimentality, but bordering on classic heresy, that knowing God's heart means announcing

2. Nouwen, Making All Things New, p. 42.

3. Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, p. 17.

"that God is love and only love."⁴ While God is certainly love, the very definition and foundation of love, the converse is not true. Love is not all that is God. He is in fact also the definition and foundation of justice and righteousness, and He reveals Himself to us very clearly in these terms.

The cross of Jesus is a powerful model for us and our compassion, revealing the desire of God for a relationship with us, demonstrating His love and compassion, but it is also a powerful witness to the fact that His justice and righteousness must also be satisfied. This view of the atonement, not currently popular, is probably not dominant in Nouwen's thinking, with the result that the precariousness of man's position before God, and God's character itself, are both diminished. Since salvation is not so critical, the "rescue" of regeneration can tend to blend with the "recovery" of growth, and worst of all, salvation can become a function or product of sanctification.

This can have at least two specific effects on the way we live. First, despite trying to ground our self-concepts in God's acceptance, as Nouwen counsels, we can end up trying to sublimate our selfishness and portray Christ in our lives on our own, without the relief of forgiveness and the new start of regeneration. Accepting God's love gratuitously and affirming that we are good does not unburden our guilt or change our hearts. We can end up working very hard to be compassionate and feel loved, in order to feel and achieve a salvation which has already been provided.

The second effect is on both the motivation and the content of our compassion. If people are not "lost" in their sin, and doomed for

4. Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, p. 25.

Eternity, exercise of compassionate ministry can be more blase. Nouwen rejects "saving" people as a motive for ministry. "The two most damaging motives in the makeup of missionaries seem to be guilt and the desire to save."⁵ While compulsive passions to "save" others have no doubt marred the compassion and mental health of many, that desire certainly characterized Jesus' ministry. "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10) The love of God for us is certainly a powerful impetus to care for others, but we can rightly be moved by their desperate situation without Christ?

What next?

Guidance?

One of the issues prompting this study was the desire to motivate more people to relate with compassion, to "care" about their world. One question that has to be asked of a traditionally structured church like the Wesleyan Church of Hamburg is whether there are any outlets for such "care" if it were to develop. Programs and boards execute our present conception of ministry, but offer little room for creative expression for the passions and visions of people in the congregation. Ministry dreams happen "from the top down."

People who may have concerns have no place to have the Body "listen" with them to the voice of God on these issues. Though containing risks, this also contains limits. If others are not hearing and responding to the same issues, one can be reasonably sure that God is not leading in this direction. People with concerns or passions do not generally even have the assurance that these may be valid invitations to ministry. They need to be convinced that out of their

5. Nouwen, Gracias!, pp. 161-162.

dreams and hopes, the Body can be led. They also need to be convinced that opportunity will be granted for the Body to respond to their promptings.

All of this needs to take place in an attitude not of demand on each other, but of dependence and listening to God, so it should begin with 1) attempts to convince people that their ideas and perceptions may be the basis for responses of the Body, and 2) occasions where the parts of the Body are invited to "listen" to God's perspectives together. These could be in the setting of groups invited together, using the present growth group structure, but formed with a specific issue or ministry in mind.

Sermon-reflection groups

During the last six months there have been two opportunities to be involved in a sermon study group in our church. The first was offered through this study; the second was offered as a complement to a book study of Ephesians conducted in February and March of 1991. The first was led by me, through carefully prescribed material. The second happened in growth groups at the option of each group, using a variety of study materials on Ephesians, again, at the discretion of the group. Anecdotal feedback from these groups has indicated good responses in terms of discussions and interest in the text.

This suggests to me that sermon reflection groups may be effective in increasing the impact of sermons, but that pastoral involvement may be more of a hindrance than a help. Some in the evaluation group reflected this opinion. Freed from the need to consider the originator of a message, groups may feel freer to dissect and digest it. Printed materials, however, such as an outline and suggested avenues for further study on each sermon, would be helpful resources. Group leaders have

indicated that they are. Their participants have taken notes more, knowing that their group would discuss the material later. Although a small group setting has advantages, it has seemed to me that the groups studying Ephesians currently have benefited from the momentum of knowing that other groups are studying the same thing and from the complementary input that the sermon gives.

Spiritual formation through spiritual reading

If the group had met and had only reflected on the sermons, would the effects have been the same? Though difficult to assess with any certainty, there was a depth of interaction with the issues that would have been difficult to achieve only with a sermon. Could the same effect have been achieved by reading a book together, along with daily readings? This could be true. The discipline of daily readings seemed to enhance people's level of preparedness and receptivity for the sermons. Therefore it seems that most of the benefits of the experience could be present using a core of selected readings or a specific book, sermon reflections, and prescribed daily Bible reading.

Personal reflections

In the week immediately following the first session, at which a disappointingly small number of people appeared, the topic was change in our lives, through repentance, specifically change related to our concept of success. It was a moving experience to read these selections, the morning after the meeting, and to see how clearly they related to my own feelings of frustration. "What is success?" It is certainly not people-pleasing preaching and large groups at events we sponsor. What do I need to feel good about myself? I know that I sometimes desire a form of success that is other than God's. "How many people were in worship on Sunday?" There have been summers when I could

feel good if there were more than 200. Now, I'm a little disappointed when there are less than 500. Where does it end? Of course, that kind of insecurity never does.

One of the issues emerging very clearly from this study for me is the extent to which my self-concept is based on artificial standards of my own creation, rather than on God's concept of righteousness. This can breed an acute form of anxiety as the tower builds higher and higher, more and more vulnerable to collapse. "Success" is fragile. What if we can't meet the payroll? What if attendance drops? What if I can't get good sermons together anymore? How does this change?

The answer is to learn to find success in knowing that one is acceptable to God without one's "successes," acceptable not only because of "creation love," which made me, but most of all because of "Calvary love" which has re-claimed me. As Nouwen revealed, this is a life-long process for some of us. As I age, I sense that it is getting more and more difficult, but also more and more critical to the health of my walk with God.

Compassion and me

As a young boy I used to "feel sorry" for people and want to help the needy. As a man, it has come clear that "helping people" is not as easy as I had thought. The preoccupations of my own personality have gotten in the way. In the early days of my ministry, some people seemed to wonder, usually quietly, if I really cared for people. One would-be helper of the church and me inquired if I had ever thought of becoming a teacher. My style of leadership has tended more towards ideas than people, creating visions and thinking ideas rather than building people. Out of this mix has come a desire to be more caring, more compassionate, more warm. I am unable to say if these qualities are against the real

grain of my personality or not, but most of the time they do not come naturally. My preaching has become more warm, more personal, more loving (or at least I want it to be), and this is probably my most effective form of ministry, yet I desire to be more caring, more compassionate in personal encounters as well.

Preaching to a self-centered culture

As we have seen, even secular observers despair over the future of our culture. Permeated with a self-centered mentality, one wonders about the hopes for its future. Any foundation for a common core of values has been eroded by a relativistic epistemology which makes each person the measure of his own truth and therefore his own morality, moralities in which the desires of each person are to be pursued by them, if they are to be "true to themselves."

Preaching the Truth must confront this subjectivism in knowledge and morality. There is Truth, and though He sounds a bit provincial for thinking so, Jesus claimed not only to have it, but to be it. While recognizing the strange sound of this to our audiences, it must be presented, with readiness to respond to the amazed and questioning hearers. Perhaps the best way to help them is to try to make them aware of the destruction that has occurred of their world-views.

Churches that want to grow, as ours does, are encouraged these days to be "seeker" sensitive so that visitors can feel welcome. It should be possible to challenge their ideas and their world-views without alienating them, especially if a self-centered world-view can be clearly demonstrated to be impoverished and damaging to one's experience of life. Of course it can! Yet evidence of its absolute dominance of the modern mind continues to accumulate. To dethrone it in Christians' minds, it must be challenged boldly both in preaching and in the model

of discipleship articulated. While "seekers" may be sensitive to harangues on selfishness, awareness of sin necessarily precedes the need for its cure, and furthermore, at least some of them may be seeking because of a nagging awareness that serving oneself may not be as satisfying as they had hoped. Perhaps God has something better. The church and its leaders need to be unafraid to announce that there is an alternative to selfish indulgence.

Can compassion be taught?

Did this study help me? Nouwen maintained that compassion cannot be taught. This should not surprise me. Believing, as I do, in the depravity of man, the corruption of the will, it should make sense. Whatever Nouwen's convictions are about depravity, his teachings about compassion make it clear that it is not a human attainment, that it is even inappropriate to seek it for its own sake. That is a powerful lesson in itself.

The more useful, lesson, however, is that it is a by-product of knowing Jesus. One does not change the inevitable self-centered focus of one's life to care for others without a radical transformation from within. One does not become more compassionate by willing it, wishing it, or studying it. One becomes more compassionate by knowing the Compassionate One Himself.

APPENDIX A

The Wesleyan Church of Hamburg

MISSION AND PURPOSE STATEMENT
(working version)

The purpose of the Wesleyan Church of Hamburg
is to exalt Christ,
following His command to make disciples of all people, by
introducing our friends and community to Jesus Christ,
challenging them to grow to be like Him,
and training them to serve as the Body of Christ.

APPENDIX B

These sermons comprised the introduction to the series.

Series: Compassion--intro Date: September 19, 1990

"God Cares for People. People care for Themselves"

Followers of Jesus Christ live in a polluted culture. TV's, radios, classrooms, glossy pages. We watch, read, listen. The poison builds.

For the next three weeks, I invite you to a clean-up campaign! to search for one of the most poisonous of the ideas of our world.

What is the enemy? Young man: "I want the best and the most of everything in American life." He has made himself the center of his world! He has been poisoned. He is a selfish person.

Look at alternative, and see the beauty of not being selfish, a beauty that is revealed in the character of God! Scripture uses many words for God. Four have to do with His care for people!

People care about themselves, but God cares about people! How?

(I. Love. A Relationship!)

Jeremiah 31:3 God speaks to His chosen people, the Hebrews. God loves people. He desires a personal relationship with us.

God relates to us in love. But this kind of love is more than feelings! Deut. 7:8, 13 It includes affection and action!

People care about themselves. God cares about people! How? One way is by LOVE. He wants a relationship with each of us!

(II. Mercy. Relief from sin!)

"I want men that are vicious, grasping, and lusting for power." A speaker at an American management Association conference for chief executives. Imagine his response if you went to him with a need?

How does God respond if we approach him with a need? Psalm 25:16.

People cry to God for mercy. How will He respond? Isaiah 30:18, 19 Do they deserve His forgiveness? No. Does he offer it when they ask? Yes. Do we deserve mercy? No. Does He give it? Yes!

People care about themselves. God cares about people. One of the ways is by MERCY. He offers RELIEF from our sin! our guilt!

Ministry to ACOA's--Adult Children of Alcoholics. 22 million adults! Healing for their pasts. "ACOA's need what the church represents: trust in God for wholeness." Then God can be trusted for wholeness.

(III. Compassion. Restoration.)

Environmentalists argue the need to conserve our resources. "Throw-away" things are no longer wanted. Too bad somebody isn't as concerned about our relationships. When a person no longer contributes to your life, they are expendable Not with God.

To Israel, people who had rejected His love, He speaks Isaiah 54:6. "...with deep compassion I will bring you back." God's Compassion is His guarantee that no one is disposable.

People care about themselves. God cares about people with compassion that restores relationships.

Hosea 2:23 They rejected Him. He punished them. But He isn't finished.

If you mess up in this life, there are lots of people that will write you off. Insurance companies, friends. Not God.

People care about themselves. But God cares about people. And one of the ways, is by compassion, He RESTORES relationships.

(IV. Lovingkindness. Reliability.)

Robert Bellah studied American individualism. He talked to Ted Oster. Ted believed that life is like a pinball machine, with rules, but they are only for the player's enjoyment. There are no absolutes except life and death. Nothing firm. Nothing true. Not in God's world!

Psalm 31:16, Psalm 36:7, Psalm 147:11

People care about themselves But God cares about people! One way is by a word translated "lovingkindness," "steadfast love," or "unfailing love." This love that God has for us does not change, fade or grow dim.

People care about themselves, but God cares about people, in a way he calls "steadfast love," Reliability!

Concl.: Narcissus, loved by another, failed to reciprocate. As he gazed into still water, he caught sight of a beautiful face. Narcissus had fallen in love with his own reflection.

People with minds polluted with the selfishness of our day have fallen in love with themselves. People care about themselves. The pollution test is this: Which are you more like? Narcissus, or God? In the next couple of weeks, we'll continue to search out this poison of selfishness, and then we'll look at God's alternative!

Narcissus sits by a quiet pool. Call to him. He won't be distracted by us! He cares only about himself. There are millions like him.

Behold. The God of the Universe, reaches out in love, mercy, compassion, and steadfast love. He says to you, "I care about you." There are a few who are becoming more like him. Why not be one of them?

Series: Compassion--Intro Date September 23, 1990

"People Focus on Selves. Jesus Cares about People"

42% of the people who go to church in England go to sleep. Why go?

Listen to this message from Jesus. Matthew 10:34-39. If you come to church expecting to hear from God, then we have good reason to be here.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I need to be reminded not to absorb the self-centered thinking of our culture. I invite you to come on a clean-up campaign, to get rid of the idea that "self" is most important!

People put themselves first. Jesus cares about people.

1. Jesus SAW people!

Penelope Russiano, When Am I Going to Be Happy? Isn't being happy the most important thing? Do you believe that? Jesus would be puzzled.

Matthew 14:14, Mark 8:34, Luke 7:13

Jesus SAW! If Jesus had been wondering about self-fulfillment, he would never have seen the sick people. Jesus SAW people.

2. Jesus CARED! Compassion!

James Hinman at Harvard Business School died of poison, the third student that year that could not take the pressure, the competition.

People put themselves first. And they need to work hard to keep it that way, to demonstrate to themselves and others, that they are righter, better, quicker, more intelligent than others. Competition!

Not Jesus! He saw a crowd of sick people, a grieving mother, lost people. He had compassion for them.

Compassion is caring about people, feeling with them. People put themselves first. Jesus cares for others, with COMPASSION.

3. Jesus acts. ACTION

Alex was a powerful, executive in his mid-forties, life in a shambles. With Wayne Dyer, author of Pulling Your Own Strings, he began new behaviors, and changed, retired and bought a farm. Goals did change, it was still his own strings that he was pulling, still his own happiness, dreams. What sounds like a success story, is really just selfishness.

People put themselves first. Jesus cares about others. Listen to how.

Matthew 14:14 He spent the entire day moving through the crowd, touching person after person, and healing them.

Matthew 9:36 He called his 12 disciples and sent them to the harvest, to care for people. He invited others to join him.

People focus their best energies on themselves. Jesus acts to help people. ACTION!

He saw physical needs He acted to meet them.
 He saw emotional wounds. He acted to soften their pain.
 He saw spiritual emptiness in lost people, He acted to fill them.

People put themselves first. Jesus cares about others, ACTING to help,
 to heal, to bolster their growth, to meet their needs.

Concl.: How can you act on your compassion for people? What can you do? One of the most powerful things that you can do is to pray. Open your eyes and ears as you live. What are the needs being expressed by people near you? Can you add them to your prayers?

Consider participating in the "compassion study." Through October and November, I'll be preaching on some components of compassion, and then offering, on Monday nights, a group study. September 30 we'll begin.

What if you and Jesus and Narcissus had come to Buffalo on Friday afternoon? There was a kid with faded sneakers on a skateboard.

A blonde in a business suit with a notebook under one arm darted a glance at a watch on her wrist, and strode across the pedestrian mall. A lady at the little stand hawked great smelling hotdog for a dollar. Farmers were stowing their empty bushel baskets from the day's sales. A middle-aged man with long hair shuffled along without much energy. A mustachioed businessman man in white shirt and tie, minus coat that hurried for a quick conversation with someone in a car. A little old lady stopped to rest her packages on the sidewalk, to check her purse for a slip of paper with an address.

What would they have done? Why Narcissus has found his reflection in a small rain puddle, or a store window. He didn't see anything. But Jesus has seen them all, and more. What will he do?

If He visited Buffalo, he would find a church and say,

While I was here, I SAW people. Now you SEE them!
 While I was here, I CARED for people. Now you CARE.
 While I was here, I ACTED to help. You ACT too.

Wouldn't that be a wonderful meeting, a meeting with Jesus? Those kinds of meetings still take place! Those meetings still take place when Jesus' followers see Him and say, "I want to be like Him."

Series: Compassion--intro

Date: September 30, 1990

"People Strive for Excellence. The Spirit Does Better"

What is success? for a church? Is a church successful when it conceives and completes an attractive building, and pays it off? Success for believers in America? Would evangelicals be successful if they were respected? Success for a person following Christ? Successful if you lived, made a pile of things, and then conked? Would that be success?

Jesus Christ ended his life as a convicted criminal, sentenced to die, rejected by his peers, abandoned by his friends, ridiculed by his enemies. Yet out of that humiliation and defeat came history's greatest revelation of the power of God. What can the word "success" possibly mean if it doesn't include the power of God?

God's Spirit calls people who follow Him to a life beyond our best.

1. An Incredible Future (Ephesians 1:13, 14)

Sheila Larson has a faith called "Sheilaism." Her faith is named after her. "It's just to try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself."

"That's it Sheila? What about the future? What lies ahead of you? What plans has your wisdom made? What will your power bring to pass?

Ephesians 1:13-14 God has a future, a plan, a design of perfection and splendor. God's Spirit is the promise that it will be true!

Spiritual power, God's power, is released and revealed as His people move "self" aside and allow His Spirit to move through them!

2. A New Purpose (Ephesians 2:22)

Before a broadcast audience, a minister handed out ten checks. "Each of these \$1,000 checks will return one hundredfold to me, according to God's Word. One for my church, one for my school, one for my mission work, ...and this last one for my wife and myself...." Then he invited those present to give the "biggest offering ever."

There are plenty of people that come to church for the wrong reasons. "Here I am at church. What am I going to get today?"

Here you are at church. What's supposed to be happening? Ephesians 2:19-22 God's building a temple! A temple was the place where God met with them. God says, I want a new temple, made of people, for me to meet with them, a place for me to manifest my presence!

This is God's plan for this period of time! This is God's agenda for history now! He's preparing a place for His presence.

The Spirit shares the benefit of God's purpose in life! Spiritual power, God's power, is released and revealed as His people move "self" aside and allow His Spirit to move through them!

3. Inner Strength! (Ephesians 3:15-16)

What's the difference between a hard-working, hard-driving believer, and a hard-working, hard-driving, self-motivated atheist? Ephesians 3:15-16 Is your inner man or woman stronger than your friend's? Paul's prayer was not just for inner strength. Go on. Ephesians 3:17-19! This is strength in a relationship, relationship of love, with God.

This strength is not for me to display like a ballooned body-builder. Ephesians 3:20-21 This strength is to bring Him glory, to point to Him.

Lots of people like to hear that believing in God will keep us from being sick, get you well if you are sick, and make your prosperous. He is more interested in helping you to have an inner strength for a relationship with Him, than in perfecting your circumstances.

Spiritual power, God's power, is released and revealed as His people move "self" aside and allow His Spirit to move through them!

4. Sensitivity to Wrong (Ephesians 4:29-30)

The Christian that used to stand out in the culture because of his righteousness is now camouflaged, smeared with the same filth that pollutes our culture. There is no power left in our lives. No wonder.

Ephesians 4:30 As Paul describes the wickedness that can clog the life of even a Christian. There are still standards. God is still a righteous God who expects that people who love Him will be righteous too!

The self-centered person says, "I'll decide what's right for me." The God-empowered person says, "Spirit, let me live to please you."

Spiritual power, God's power, is released and revealed as His people move "self" aside and allow His Spirit to move through them!

5. Spiritual Power! (Ephesians 6:18)

Children in some of my children's classes have toyed with Ouija boards. One got a correct answer about an impending death. Another thought that books on a nearby shelf fell by themselves. Spiritual world?

Paul writes of spiritual realities! Ephesians 6:10, 13, 18. There is a spiritual world. Victory in this world is secured through prayer.

Spiritual power, God's power, is released and revealed as His people move "self" aside and allow His Spirit to move through them!

APPENDIX C

These sermons were preached as the "Compassion" series. To follow the "journey" experience, each should be read following the manual material and the Scripture for each topic.

Subj.: Repentance
Series: Compassion

Passage: Revelation 2:1-7
Date: October 7, 1990

You Can Restore Lost Love!

(Dialogue of son and daughter "repaying" parents.)

"But son, honey. We don't want your money."
"Don't give us that sentimental stuff. You paid. We paid.
Here's the check. Now you won't be seeing us anymore."

The house got quiet. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the clock that Grandpa had built. Tears don't make noise. Grandpa gazed down at the check in his wrinkled hands.

"Dad. What're you crying for? Dad, what is it you want from me?"

"God, what do you want from me? Jesus answers. Revelation 2:2-3
What do you want, God? Hard work? No. Toil? No. Patient
endurance? No. Doctrinal purity? No. Spiritual stamina? No.
Then what? What does He want from me? What do you want from us?"

Revelation 2:4 "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned your first love." What God wants more than work, stamina, patience, or anything else, is your love. God reveals in Revelation 2:5, how we can renew and restore our lost love for Him!

1. Remember your relationship!

Restore your first love? vs. 5 From what had they fallen? A personal relationship, a personal relationship with God!

A young man trudged slowly towards home. (Prodigal story) Because of the father's joy at finding his son again, there was no punishment that day. There was a celebration.

It is your story. Rebellion against the father, repentance at wrong, restoration to God's family! We realize our sin, our rebellion. He sees. He has compassion. He welcomes us home with a celebration!

If you want to restore lost love, REMEMBER the wonder of a personal relationship with a holy, but forgiving Heavenly Father.

2. Repent from your rebellion

How restore lost love? Rev. 2:5 Remember the heights from which you have fallen! Repent...."

"Repent" means to get a new way of thinking. When you repent you change your mind about your actions. You change your mind about what is right for you. You change your mind about yourself.

Walt Wight was a pipefitter in a Boston shipyard. He had no use for other people. He struggled to get along with them. "The Lord worked in my heart, and I realized that the love of Christ had to be shown through me." "As I look back over the years and see that Jesus has made my life meaningful and beautiful and that he has given me the promise of eternal life, I can't imagine anyone not wanting to belong to Christ."

Christ is His first love! How do you get there? Remember the relationship He offers. Repent from the wrongs you've done!

3. Respond with action

How restore lost love? Rev. 2:5 "Remember the heights from which you have fallen! Repent, and do the things you did at first." Remember. Repent. Respond with action!

First Love includes action! During the construction of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, a visitor spoke to a worker. "What are you doing?" "I'm shifting this pile of dirt from here to there." Another man? "I'm helping Sir Christopher build St. Paul's Cathedral."

Which is most like you? Tired, worn out, and angry about all the demands on you? Or living and giving and serving, out of love for Jesus?

You can restore lost love! You can love Jesus best.

Last Sunday night I was extremely disheartened. Series and study seemed like failures. Monday morning I read the materials from my course. Henri Nouwen: "'Is Jesus truly enough for you, or do you keep looking for others to give you our sense of worth?'" Then I read the question I wrote: "Would you be helped by believing that Jesus is enough?" On my paper I wrote, "Jesus is enough." Yes. That is the answer."

A ship can sail all over the world, through tranquil seas and stormy tempests, and never be lost, if its compass is set on the right. A man, a woman can sail through life, through peaceful days, through days of pain, through suffering and hurt, if their first love is set on Jesus.

In Ephesus, in that wealthy, beautiful city, some things had captured some Christian's "first love." Some challenging business venture, some lovely home, some lovely woman or handsome man, some worthless trifle had squeezed him slowly from His rightful place.

In Buffalo, some wonderful objective, some elusive goal, some success, some precious possession, some worthless trifle, may still squeeze him from our "first love." But you can put Him back.

Remember your relationship with Him--how He loves you.
Repent of your wrong--putting anything before Him.
Respond with action--a life motivated by love for Him.

"What does God want from me?"
Very simple.
Your love.
Does He have it?

Subj.: God's love
Series: Compassion 1990

Passage: Isaiah 43:1-7
Date: October 14, 1990

"How Has He Loved Us?"

"I hate church."

"I like it." (argument about church and God)

"I really like the Bible."

"I can't get anything out of the musty old book, myself: old-fashioned ideas, antiquated language. I wonder why it's so different for you."

What's the difference? One lives in a world where God is not God. The other? His world is different, a world filled with the love of God.

How do you learn to live surrounded by His love? You let Him speak to you about His love from Scripture. You let those thoughts sink into your thoughts. You begin to think of Him and yourself as He does.

The actions of God toward his people is described in Isaiah 43:1-7 reveal His love.

(1. He CREATES us.)

God, how have you loved us? Isaiah 43:1 He created Jacob. He formed the nation of Israel.

God spoke to a man named Abram. Genesis 12:1-2 The rest of the Old Testament is a love story of that God and His nation, the Jews. Genesis 12:3 He loved Israel by bringing her into existence, creating her.

God, how have you loved me? I made you. I formed you. I brought you into being. The person who lives in a world filled with God's love can hear Him say, "I am he who created and formed you, my child. In love I made you just what I wanted you to be."

(2. He REDEEMS us.)

God, how have you loved us? Isaiah 43:3-4 God's handiwork appeared headed for destruction. Turn off the TV. The carnage will be too brutal, too grisly, too bloody. What good will His love do here?

The other side of the Red Sea. A strange quiet. The waves. A chariot wheel. A spearhead. A corpse. He redeemed them, saved them, at the price of an army, because of love.

God, how have you loved me? I have redeemed you! Behind you lies the record of your sins. Ahead of you lies the punishment you deserve. When the judgment is pronounced against you, I place it on my own Son.

The person in a world filled with God's love can hear Him say, "I am He who redeemed you. I paid for your sins, because I love you."

(3. He PROTECTS us.)

"God, how have you loved us?" Isaiah 43:2 I protect you. Israel was attacked. God never promised that they would not pass

through deep and stormy water. He never promised that roaring fires would not sometimes surround them, and threaten to overwhelm them. He promises that He will be with them, and will protect them. Isaiah 43:4

Is there an army outside? Trust me. I love you. No food in the cupboard. Trust me. I love you. Is there rebellion in the army? Trust me. I love you. Have you sinned and brought your world crashing down on your own head? Trust me. I still love you.

The person who lives in a world surrounded by His love can hear Him say, "I protect you. Behind you lie difficult times. I was with you. Ahead lie challenges, opportunities. I'll be with you. You see, I love you."

(4. He RESTORES us.)

"God, how have you loved us?" Isaiah 43:5-7 God RESTORES His people. By the year A.D. 100, the Jews had been blasted out of their land. By the year A.D. 1900, the boundaries of their land no longer existed. 1990. Israel is back on the world's stage.

"God, how have you loved me?" "I have restored you to a relationship with me your Maker, your Creator. I have loved you back to me."

"God is at work in my life, and I'm excited about what He's doing." As people describe to me their stories, I sense that God said, "You, I want you back. Come on home!" If you've never heard God express that to you, let me say it. He loves you now. Loved you before you were. Loved you through all your wandering. He still wants you back.

Concl.: You've talked about God's love, people who live in a world with His love. What'll change in my world if I buy into this?

1. Your concept of your SELF
2. Your relationships with others.
3. The church?
4. Suffering and difficulties?

Susan Hill's daughter was born after 24 weeks and died months later. The title of Sue's book was I'll Never Stop Loving Her. The story of God's love for you could be the same: I'll Never Stop Loving You.

1. A mother bears a child. God made and shaped and created you.
2. People care for children. With the life of His Son, He redeemed you.
3. Parents protect their children. God offers His care to protect us.
4. To restore health, humans will go to great lengths. God's love offers to restore us to a relationship with Himself.

On every day for as long as you and I are alive, the choice to live in a world filled and surrounded by God's love is up to us, to you. If you want to grow spiritually, get to know God's love.

Subj.: Jesus
Series: Compassion 1990

Passage: John 13:1-17
Date: October 21, 1990

"Jesus Christ--Wimp Or Warrior"

A wimp is a person who "wimps out" because something's too hard. They quit. They fail. They let people walk on them. They are losers.

Was Jesus Christ a wimp?

I encountered the wimp factor in the Northwoods of Wisconsin...

An American soldier recently encountered the wimp factor in Panama... One of my cousins, while a young girl, was attacked by a swarm of wasps or bees. A man was walking by on the sidewalk above. He went off calling for help, dominated by the wimp factor.

Was Jesus Christ a wimp? Or was he a warrior?

At an AMA conference, the speaker: "I want men that are vicious, grasping, and lusting for power." The ultimate warrior triumphs on movie and television screens regularly.

Jesus Christ--Wimp or warrior? How find out? Study his life, even analyze one event. After around three years of ministry, it was Pass-over. Jesus was celebrating this holiday with his disciples. They were surprised to see Jesus get up.

John 13:3-5 Even fishermen like Peter or John or tax collectors like Matthew didn't do that sort of thing. They would eat with dirty feet.

Jesus had doffed his robe, stooped at each man, untied his sandals, and poured water over his feet.

Now, stop. Seriously asking about whether Jesus is a wimp or a warrior? Is there any doubt? This guy is washing feet. Taking out garbage cans? Licking boots? Pumping out the cesspool? What a wimp!

vs. 3! Jesus was a man sure of his identity. He wasn't hoping to win the favor of the disciples, buying friends. He knew that the Father had given all things into his hands. He knew that The King of Creation had entrusted Him with all power. He knew his origin in Heaven. He understood his destination. He knew that all Creation would lie at His feet, that all mouths would call Him Lord. And he stood up and washed 24 feet, even the feet of a man named Judas Iscariot.

Wimps grovel, collapse, because they're weak. Jesus Christ was too sure of His identity, who and what He was, to be a wimp.

Listen to how Jesus himself explained his action: 13:12-13

"Teacher"--Rabbi. That was a respected position in Jewish society.

"Lord." That was strong language for a man to call himself. "Ceasar."

"Ruler." "You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am."

But there is more in this situation. Jesus has gone around the table to Peter. John 13:6 Listen to Jesus' answer. "Well, maybe this is a little silly. Why don't you pick up here and finish the job?"

John 13:7. Jesus seems resolved about this. Peter persists. John 13:8 Jesus is resolved. Jesus has determined that this is to happen. He explained in a few minutes what He had decided, what he had meant in this situation. John 13:12-17. He had decided, determined to serve them. He had determined to teach them a lesson about servants. If they were His followers, they were to determine to be servants!

Is this a wimp? Wimps collapse. Wimps are controllable. Wimps don't make decisions. Others decide for them. Wimps have weakness, not willpower. No, this guy Jesus is not a wimp!

Is this a warrior? Warriors dominate. Warriors control others. Warriors decide to control situations and people. Warriors seek their ends, not those of others. Warriors don't serve others. No, at least on the basis of this incident, this guy Jesus is not a warrior!

Not a wimp. Not a warrior, but a servant of others. Not a doormat, not a dictator, but a servant of others. How did he do it again? Remember? His identity. He was secure in his identity in God. He knew where he had come from, where he was going, and what the Father had given Him. His decision, his determination to serve others.

How could we sum up the message of this incident? After all, he says that you will be blessed if you know this and do it.

Our identity in God (who and what we are in God) empowers us to serve others willingly, instead of serving ourselves.

Sure identity in God, empowers us to put others first.

Knowing who we are in God, makes it possible for us to determine to serve others.

AND to stop being wimps (who are weak with others),
OR to no longer be warriors (who are at war with others).

What's the difference? sexual temptation? decision at work?
pain and suffering? a job around the house? a need at church?

Jim Eliot was a young missionary in Ecuador. On January 6, 1956 he and four others landed their plane on a little sandy beach on the shore of the Curaray River. Two days later the five men were speared to death.

Three years later, his wife Elizabeth returned with her young daughter. Jim Eliot, Elizabeth Eliot. Wimps? I don't think so. Warriors? Not really. Servants of God? Yes.

Most of the people in this world are wimps or warriors. There aren't many servants. There aren't many people can determine to live to serve others. But you can. Then there would be one more. God would have one more servant in the world.

Subj.: Relationships
Series: Compassion 1990

Passage: Philippians 2:1-8(11)
Date: October 28, 1990

"Get a New Mind"

(story of crucifixion) One legionnaire pinions his arm. Another raises his mallet to drive home the spike. While the victim is close, still on the ground, look at the face. Before he's raised up, look. Note carefully the features. Don't look away. Yes. It's true. It's you.

"Ah," you say, pulpit rhetoric. Not so for the man or the woman or the young person who is a follower of Jesus Christ. Listen: Phil. 2:5-8! The mind of the man on the cross is to be the mind of the people who follow Him! Do you have that mind?

The Cross of Christ is a summons to His followers, to have a mind like His, to experience a revolution in (personal) relationships!

What is the mind of Christ like? Consider His "mind" with me as it is revealed in Philippians 2:1-8.

(1. Humility)

Phil. 2:5-6 Before the world was, He was equal with God. In John's words, He was with God and was God. This One, by whom the world came to be; this One who shared rule of our Universe, did not exploit His rights, His privileges, but laid them down, and put them aside.

Humility. The Greeks did not consider humility a virtue. Jesus did. He lived it. vs. 3 "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit..." sounds terrible. Who would do anything from those motives? Almost every person that has ever lived. What's the alternative? "...regard others as better than yourselves." That's totally illogical and unreasonable. Who wants to do that?

The Lord of the Universe. The Suffering Servant. The One called Jesus.

What's His mind? His attitude? Humility! "regarding others as better than Himself," coming to live on earth. How do you figure? What do you think He was doing down here? slumming? touring? He was here, King of the Universe, because He regarded us as worthy of His time: 33 years, and His life. Humility. "regard others as better than yourself." Jesus did.

Illogical? You bet. Unreasonable? It sure is. The Cross of Jesus Christ is the most illogical and unreasonable event in the history of this world, unless you understand the humility of Jesus. He regarded us, more than He regarded His own life. Humility.

(2. Servanthood.)

vs. 7 "(He) emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." His mind expressed itself in becoming a slave.

No refugees from an episode of "Upstairs, Downstairs" with starched shirts and cut-away jackets. Slaves were the property of their owners.

He did not solve every problem on earth. He met the need to which He was called. He served in the way God needed Him to serve, as Servant, Suffering Servant, Savior of the World.

Lieutenant Henry Herrick was a green lieutenant in command of a platoon in one of the first major engagements of the Viet Nam war, Nov., 1965. He ended up giving his life. His last words were, "I'm glad I could give my life for my country."

Many of you would die for this country, for this one, if you were asked. But for what do you live? For whom do you live? Jesus Christ lived, and died, as a servant of humanity, people, men and women, you and me.

A professor of mine, once dean of a seminary, president of a college, senior editor of Christianity Today, was asked about the church's biggest problem. "...the church of Jesus Christ needs people who are willing not just to talk about servanthood, but to have the mind, the will, the heart of servants, like Jesus."

(3. Obedience.)

The mind of Christ? vs. 7c-8 Humility, Servanthood, Obedience.

St. Francis was asked about the truly obedient man. "Take a lifeless body and place it where you will. You will see that it does not resist being moved, it does not murmur about its position, it does not cry out if it is allowed to lie there... This is a truly obedient man."

Part of the mind of Jesus Christ is complete obedience to the will of the Father, even though that led Him down a road to His own execution.

Jesus took time to listen to the Father's will for Him. If you decided that you wanted to obey Him, would you know what to do?

Concl.: Jim Eliot worked as a missionary among Indian tribes in Colombia. He wrote "My flesh often lacks the deep feeling that I should experience at times.., but I cannot stay for feelings. So cold is my heart most of the time that I am most always operating on the basis of pure commandments, forcing myself to do what I do not always feel simply because I am a servant under orders."

A servant under orders! Not waiting for feelings. If you wait for it to feel good to enlist as a humble servant, obedient to your Master, you will never begin. And Jesus would have never hung on the Cross if He had waited until it "felt right and good."

The mind of Christ. "What was that?" you say.

Simple humility. "Others are more important than my own life."

Simple servanthood. "I will live and die for those I love."

Simple obedience. "I will do what my Father commands."

He just gave up His life. He invites us to do the same thing.

Subj.: Prayer
Series: Compassion 1990

Passage: Matthew 5:9-13
Date: November 4, 1990

"Without Me, You Can Do Nothing."

Prayer is the path to fruitfulness, effectiveness. (John 15:5)
Prayer transforms enemies into loved ones. (Matthew 5:43-45)
Prayer expresses our fellowship with Jesus. (Matthew 26:36-46)

How should we pray? Are there any clues? "Pray in this way:" Wouldn't it be great if Jesus said that? He did! Jesus reveals how to pray, how to be close to God, through prayer, in Matthew 6:9-13.

(1. Admire)

"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." The beginning? Worship, adoration, praise. Want to pray and commune with God? ADMIRE Him first.

Henri Nouwen: "I now know that there is a way of living, praying, being with people, caring, eating, drinking, sleeping, reading, and writing in which Jesus is truly the center."¹ Another man gave him the key to this kind of life: "'Be faithful in your adoration.'"

If you want to learn to pray, to commune with God, learn to ADMIRE Him.

(2. Desire)

"Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What if God's will had been done in the Persian Gulf? What if God's will had been done in Congress? All would be right, just, and fair. What if God's will were to be done in your life? All would be best for you!

Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, preparing to die, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want." And He submitted to God's God's design, God's purpose.

"Father, thy will be done in my life, today. I submit to the twists and turns of my life, today. I DESIRE your will for my life.

(3. Rely)

"Give us this day our daily bread." Hey, we don't need this one. We've got plenty of food. Perhaps, but what about those worries you have? What about that difficulty you're having? What about the financial bind you seem to be in? Well, he doesn't care about those. He invites you to pray about "bread," and you think he doesn't care about those things?

Daily Provision! You are invited to RELY on Him. Food? Yes, but also strength, patience, grace, endurance, courage, kindness, wisdom, forbearance, to face difficulties, memories, hurts, unfairness, injustice.

1. Daybreak, p. 71

"Give us this day our daily bread." "Father, provide as only you can do for the demands of this day, for me. Provide as only you can do for my friend who still doesn't know or trust You. Provide as only you can do for my parents, my children, my friends." RELY on Him for His resources!

(4. Restore)

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us."

Have you ever stepped on a rotten board? A dock, a stair, a deck, a porch. Somewhere each one of us has encountered rotten wood. Wood that has failed, collapsed, been destroyed by bacterial action.

Each of us encounters rot in another place: relationships. Sin rots relationships. Like bacteria eating at wood, sin weakens our walk with God. Sin corrodes our relationships with people. We offend. They offend. Rot eats at our heart.

"Forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who have sinned against me." Father, restore me to your presence. Wipe away the offenses--the foolish thoughts, the jealousies, the anger. Forgive me. Restore me. And Father, those who have wronged me, I forgive them too. Help me to do that, to restore them in my heart. Take the rot away." RESTORE me.

(5. Rest)

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

This week two televangelists went to San Francisco to confront the power of evil there, to cast out demons and to speak of Christ's power. Here and there, there is one who can and will deliver those who call upon Him: Jesus, crucified, buried, and alive forever more! REST in Him!

Bruce Smith is in the best shape he's ever been in, perhaps the best defensive player in football. Long after Bruce Smith has weary quadriceps, followers of Jesus Christ will have His power.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Father, there are a lot of temptations out there, some in me. Sometimes I'm not very strong. I REST in your victory."

Concl.: "God, I know that you're there. I know that you're important. But, Sir, I have so many things to do. I love you, but I'm so busy. What?" "Apart from me, you can do nothing." Why not decide to be with Him, in Him, and He in you, every day, through prayer? 5, 10, 30 minutes?

Your prayer doesn't have to be fancy. You may drift into other thoughts, even fall asleep. Just start again. It may not be long. Just do it!

Subj.: The Body
Series: Compassion 1990

Passage: John 13:31-35
Date: November 11, 1990

"When They Seek, What Will They Find?"

Teen-ager brought to church by mother. "I wonder what it'll be like?"
What'll he find when he seeks?

Businessman coming to church. "Maybe my friends are right. Maybe I should try their church. "Honey, let's try that church you were telling me about." What will Lenny find when he seeks?

New parents. "How's he going to learn about God?" "Maybe we should try some church." What will they find when they seek?

How do people feel when they show up in the foyer of an average church?
Invisible? Ignorant? Unwanted?

What does Jesus want them to feel? John 13:34, 35 Jesus, what is it that you want people to find when they come to your church? "My love."

Jesus wants His followers to love each other as He did.

Wouldn't it have been great to know Jesus? To be one of the disciples? He loved them so much, even though they were imperfect. He spent time with them walking around. They camped out together and fixed their meals together. He taught them about following Him. They had their problems, their jealousies. He dealt with those. But they spent alot of time together.

Listen to this again. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you." Did you get that? Being with each other, ought to be like being with Jesus. If His followers love each other in the same ways that He loved them, then being together, ought to be like being with Jesus! LOVE AS HE DID.

It's unreasonable. It's impossible. Last week, 489 people gathered here to worship. We're supposed to love each other as He would? Exactly. He wants us to love each other so that people can tell that we're His followers? You've got it. It can't be done.

A command with authority. If you were to say that to me, I would say that you are right. There's no human way that it can be done. But Jesus Christ told us to do it. Did you notice the authority? "Could you guys try to be nice to each other while I'm gone, to kind of remember me?"

This guy gathered a few people around Him, eleven of them. He was about to have his life snuffed out on a Cross, to rise again, and return to His Father. He wants to make a lasting mark on the world. His plan is to change the course of history. "Okay, Lord, what's the plan?"

"A new commandment." "A new commandment I give to you. The old stuff about loving those who love you" is out. Love one another, because I said this is how I'm going to capture the world." "HUH?"
John 15:12 How did he love them?

He prayed for them. Luke 22:31 He taught them the truth. Luke 24:45
 He cared for their needs. He confronted them with wrong. Mark 8:33
 He expected great things of them. John 14:12 He told them to love each
 other as He had done. John 15:12 He gave up His life for them. John
 15:13 He called them His friends. John 15:14

Jesus wants His followers to love each other as He did.

How can this happen? I don't know. It's humanly impossible. But He
 said to do it. "Love one another as I have loved you."

Take a bunch of marbles and put them together. Mix them up. Put some
 pressure on them. They chip away at each other. They don't mix. Take
 a bunch of grapes Put them together, mix them up. Their juice blends
 and together they become more than they could be by themselves.

There are churches, and clubs, and thousands of groups filled with
 marbles. Jesus Christ invites His followers to be grapes, people whose
 lives blend together, and merge, and by His power, become more together
 than they ever could have been on their own.

Friday I sat with an expectant father, off and on, during the events
 leading up to the birth of his son. He was elated, jubilant, at the
 news. I was happy thinking of the moments, the joys, the years ahead.
 I thought of the fun of having a new little child, loving that child.
 As I thought, I thought about my own children. "You say you love your
 children. What are you doing about it?"

We have some great programs: "Mix and Meet," growth groups, Bible
 studies, Prime-Timers. But programs will not fulfil Jesus' new command:
 He said it can, it must be done, if we are to obey Him and to show the
 world we are His. It will take this: people like you who will say,
 "I am His. I believe in Him, I love Him, I want to be what HE wants."

As He shows me the actions it will mean, I will do them.
 As He shows me the price it will take, I will pay it.
 As He lays down the challenges, I will take them up.

Mother Teresa has held in her arms the street people in Calcutta, India.
 When she came to America, she said that she saw worse poverty than in
 India, the poverty of loneliness. When lonely people come seeking in
 this church, what will they find?

Joy-filled worship, truth-filled preaching, good classes, nice groups,
 well-run programs? But Jesus wants them to have more! Listen to the
 Lord of Heaven and Earth, the Head of the Church, His body: "A new
 commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have
 loved you, that you also love one another."

Jesus wants them to find His love. Will they? They can!
 It isn't up to Him. It isn't up to the staff. It's up to you, to
 people who will say to Him, "Yes. I will love as You loved!"

Subject: Compassion
Series: Compassion 1990

Passage: Luke 6
Date: November 18, 1990

"Flying Upside Down"

play song by Ken Medema-- "Flyin' Upside Down"

Last week, squatters battled riot police with water cannons and tear gas, in Berlin. They have causes, and for those causes they will occupy empty buildings, dig trenches, build 35 foot thick barricades, and battle well-equipped riot police. They are radicals.

This week I sat in a Bible study. What if these twelve or fourteen men and women began to realize their potential as a squad of people, radicalized by the claims of the world's most revolutionary radical?

Jesus, a radical? When you say, you are Truth, that's radical. When you say that people will be judged by your words, that's radical. When you call the establishment "painted graves, full of corpses," that's radical. When you call your followers to be like God, that's radical.

Luke 6:36 Treat people the way God does. That is radical. vs. 28 "Love your enemies." That's radical. That's "flying upside down."

This isn't for everyone. vs. 27 "to you that listen..." "to those of you who are willing to hear and obey..." For those of you who are willing to try flying upside down, here is how you can do it.

(1. Seek nothing but the good of others!)

vs. 27 The Hebrews had learned from Moses to love Hebrews. Jesus says, "Fly upside down." Love your enemies. Not "like" them, fall in love with them." But "do good to those who hate you."

vs. 28 Jesus Christ is expiring, pinned to a tree, and he prays, "Father, may their mockery return as fire on their heads, may their children fail kindergarten." No. Dying, he prays for his tormentors.

vs. 31 vs. 35a Want to fly upside down? SEEK THE GOOD OF OTHERS!

Le Surgeon was a house in L'Arche, for severely handicapped adults, needing total care. What rewards? "Philippe smiles. Jean-Luc looks you in the eye. Gerard gives a hug. Michelle sleeps a whole night. Sylvienne says one more word."

Living for the good of others. Flying upside down. Hit the stick hard, and flip it into a hard roll: Fly upside down. A whole church could!

(2. Own nothing but what you will give!)

What else, Jesus? vs. 29b, 30, 34, 35a! Just when you thought it couldn't get any crazier, He goes for your wallet. What's this part of flying upside down? Ownership! OWN ONLY WHAT YOU WILL GIVE!

Rector of the Episcopal church mentioned that their pledges were up. He said, "I hope they're giving their hearts too." The last thing that

people seem to give to God is their wallet. If we're really willing to let go, it means that we are learning to "fly upside down."

A bishop had been robbed. The thief was captured. The thief is Jean Valjean of Les Misérables. The bishop: "It is all a mistake." They release Valjean. The bishop continued. "My friend, before you go away, here are your candlesticks; take them. Now, go in peace."

If we will own nothing but what we will give, we can fly upside down.

World Vision and World Relief this holiday! Why shouldn't the starving, hurting people they care for receive over \$5,000 dollars from us?

(3. Glory only in God's approval!)

People who live radical lives know what they're after. vs. 35b, 36! God's approval. If you want to live as a radical follower of Jesus Christ, glory in nothing but God's approval! If you fly upside down, what'll happen to you? vs. 36 You'll be like your Heavenly Father!

Four people were flying in a single-engined airplane. The pilot, a minister, a Boy Scout, and "the smartest man in the world." At 12,000 feet, the one engine gave out. Three parachutes, four people. All jump but minister and Boy Scout. Boy Scout: "Don't worry mister. That guy wasn't the smartest guy in the world. He just grabbed my backpack."

Millions of people are hurtling through the air clutching a backpack, that they think is a parachute: values, objectives, priorities, world-views that they think are going to endure, insuring their happiness.

You want a radical life as a follower of Jesus Christ? Learn to look at your real life goal! Look beyond to the face of Jesus Christ, sitting on a hillside one day, a sunny day in Judea, saying, "Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate." If He had known Ken Medema, he might even have said, "fly upside down."

Seek nothing but the good of others.
Hang onto nothing but what you'd give away.
Glory in nothing but God's approval.

Robert McQuilken noticed his wife getting forgetful. (Cared for wife with Alzheimer's Disease) He had to choose between work and caring for Muriel. He resigned. "It is all more than keeping promises and being fair, however. As I watch her brave descent into oblivion, Muriel is the joy of my life. Daily I discern new manifestations of the kind of person she is, the wife I always loved. I also see fresh manifestations of God's love--the God I love to love more fully."

Dare we say, that he is being like God, by his compassion, by his love, by his radical obedience, by his flying upside down?

We can say it for him. We could say it of you. He said it: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." Be like Him. Fly upside down.

APPENDIX D

Questions and additional material used in the manual

To approximate the experience of the journey, daily read and reflect on the section of the manual you wish to study, along with the appropriate Scriptures. At the end of the week, read the sermon summarizing that topic. Use the material on St. Francis for additional reflection.

I. Introduction and Invitation--Repentance

1. Introduction. Ezekiel 36:22-38 How do you think that the people in your world would rate your "success?" At this point in life, how do you rate your own "success?" How do you respond to Nouwen's candor regarding his spiritual struggles?

2. Repentance: Getting a New Mind. Micah 6 What have been some of the issues on which you have compared yourself to others and thereby found either feelings of success or failure? Would you be helped by believing that "Jesus is enough?"

3. Relationships. Matthew 3:1-12 Competition or compassion? Which would you say characterizes your relationships more?

4. Change! Matthew 11:20-30 Is it possible that some of the weariness in your life comes from pursuing this kind of success, this kind of worth? How could fresh surrender to God help relieve this?

5. An unadorned self. Revelation 2 Are you at a point in your life where you are willing to make, or to make again, this kind of a surrender?

6. Radical conversion. Revelation 3 Has your perspective been "radically converted?" Do you have an understanding of God that you can trust with your entire life? your whole self?

Repentance

The wealthy cloth merchant, Peter Bernadone, had been patient long enough. His son's soft lifestyle as self-appointed prince of party-ers in Assisi had amused and frustrated him. But this new bent of his--giving money away to poor people and even begging himself was intolerable. He imprisoned him in the house to no avail. Claiming religious privilege because of his new-found commitment to God, as one could do in 12th century Italy, his son was haled before the bishop.

His crimes? Not only had he been acting crazily, but he had given the proceeds of a significant sale to repair a poor church building. What did the bishop have to say to this? Before he could render judgment, the young man answered for himself. "From now on I can freely say, 'Our Father who art in heaven, not 'father, Peter Bernadone,' to whom, behold, I give up not only the money, but all my clothes too. I will therefore go naked to the Lord.'" Returning not only the money, but his clothes and even his under-garments, Francis stripped himself of worldly possessions at that moment, and was then covered by the mantle of the astonished, but approving bishop.

For the sake of God, he turned his back on possessions of any kind, and refused, from then on, even to touch money, to have any possessions of his own, or to allow those who followed him to own anything. From indulging himself to denying himself even basic comforts, St. Francis thus expressed his contempt for ownership and accumulation of possessions and money, which he believed to be obstacles to his love for God.

Francis' abandonment to God attracted others and he wrote a "rule" for those who would follow him. Attachment to God alone found expression in this way. "We should wish for nothing else and have no other

desire; we should find no pleasure or delight in anything except in our Creator, Redeemer, and Savior.... Nothing, then, must keep us back, nothing separate us from him, nothing come between us and him."¹ How much God meant to Him!

Question: It took a number of divine interventions in Francis' life to bring him to the point of total surrender to God. Meditate on the events of his surrender and the "rule." To what do you think God may be calling you at this point in your life? Do you think that one issue may be in the area of "simplicity," or a life-style less cluttered with love for "things?" How could this find expression?

II. God's Love

1. God + life = ?. Deuteronomy 7:1-16. How much would you say that your beliefs about God impact your life? How would you evaluate your desire to know God intimately?

2. God's love. Isaiah 43:1-21 OR Hosea 11:1-12 What does it mean to you to say that you know that 'God loves you?' Is it sometimes difficult to believe? Why? What differences would it make in your life if you were to come to accept more deeply the fact that God does love you as you are?

3. God and Self. John 14:15-24 How often do you find yourself comparing yourself to others in order to gain your own sense of worth or value? How could accepting God's love, His value of you, help you in learning not to compare yourself to others?

4. Love and suffering. Romans 8:31-39 In what ways do you think that you resist God "loving you the way He wants to?"

1. Marion A. Habig, ed., St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of Sources for the Life of St. Francis, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), "Rule of 1221," p. 52.

5. Sharing His love. I John 4:7-21 In what situation do you face a difficulty of achieving real love on your own? In what situation do you find yourself now where you are facing what you might call "burn-out?" How might re-founding your love in Christ's love for you help you to resist the temptations of burn-out you face?

Francis and Our God

Francis jealously guarded his followers against the encroachment of possessions and materialism, forbidding the ownership of any property, money, or goods, not out of cruelty, but out of love for God. In the Rule of 1221, by which they were to be governed, he wrote, "In that love which is of God (I John 4:16), I entreat all my friars, ministers and subjects to put away every attachment, all care and solicitude, and serve, love, honour, and adore our Lord and God with a pure heart and mind; this is what he seeks above all else."²

St. Francis is known for his sensitivity to the creation. This too is born of his love for the Creator. Flowers, sun and moon, stars and animals reminded him of God and brought him joy as he thought of His wisdom and grace in creating them all.

"All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made, And first my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and light you give to us through him. How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendour! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness."³

Thoughts of Jesus were constantly on his mind, and even as he was eating, if he began speaking of Him, he could forget about his meal.⁴ The love of God was so precious to him that these words could affect a transformation of his visage. "For immediately upon hearing the 'love of

2. Habig, St. Francis' "Rule of 1221," 22, pp. 48-49.

3. Habig, St. Francis' "Canticle of Brother Sun", p. 130.

4. Habig, Celano's Lives, I, 115, p. 329.

God,' he would become excited, 'stirred, and inflamed, as though an inner chord of his heart had been plucked by the plectrum of the outward voice of the speaker."⁵

Consider these words from the last section of the first rule, and the heart from which they flowed:

With all our hearts and all our souls, all our minds and all our strength, all our power and all our understanding, with every faculty and every effort, with every affection and all our emotions, with every wish and desire, we should love our Lord and God who has given and gives us everything, body and soul, all our life; it was he who created and redeemed us and of his mercy alone he will save us. . . ."⁶

This prayer concludes his "Praises Before the Office." Pray it in the spirit of St. Francis, offering God each phrase and thought. "All-powerful, all holy, most high and supreme God, sovereign good, all good, every good, you who alone are good, it is to you we must give all praise, all glory, all thanks, all honour, all blessing; to you we must refer all good always. Amen."⁷

Question: How much a part of the fabric of your life is your "love for God?" How could it be woven in more fully?

II. Jesus and Servanthood

1. Love or power? Matthew 11:20-29 How do you feel about the "downward mobility" of following Jesus? Where are some of the contrasts in your life of achieving power or offering service to others?

2. God reveals Himself. Matthew 20:20-28 Given the fact that the Cross is the ultimate self-revelation of God, how does your concept of God need to change? In what ways could the passion of Christ come to

5. Habig, Celano, II, 196, pp. 519-520.

6. Habig, St. Francis' "Rule of 1221," 23, p. 52.

7. Habig, p. 139.

be more a part of your life?

3. "Follow me!" Luke 22:24-30 What is your reaction to the suggestion that this kind of ministry is the true meaning of the care for other to which we are called? What situations do you face where it is easier to use power than to make a downward movement to give true love?

4. Results? John 13:1-17 With the attempt to follow Christ in his servanthood can come a temptation to a false martyrdom. How does this perspective help us to overcome this? In what ways can the thought of the resurrection sustain us through difficult moments of ministry?

5. The outworking of servanthood. Philippians 2:1-11 In what ways do you confront the tension between relating to people from a position of power over them and becoming increasingly open and vulnerable to them and their needs? How can you begin to relate to people more after the example of Jesus' servanthood?

Jesus and His Incarnation

The celebration of Jesus' birthday was a special event for Francis. He called it the "feast of feasts on which God, having become a tiny infant, clung to human breasts."⁸ When Christmas fell on a Friday, he permitted, even encouraged meat to be eaten, and desired that the poor and hungry be fed, and even animals given extra food on this day.⁹ Sometimes in referring to Christ, he would call him simply "the child of Bethlehem."¹⁰

One year at Christmas, while at Greccio, he asked a man named John

8. Habig, Celano's Lives, II, 199, p. 521.

9. Habig, Celano's Lives, II, 200, p. 522.

10. Habig, Celano's Lives, I, 86, p. 301.

to prepare a place where the humble entry of Jesus into the world could be remembered that would be like his original birthplace, replete with ox and ass standing by. There, with much joy and worship, the humility of Christ's entry into the world was celebrated through the Mass. This was the beginning of the tradition of using a creche as a Christmas ornament.

Not only the Incarnation, but also the Passion of Christ energized Francis' love for God. Early in his life, while still sorting out God's call, he was praying in a dilapidated church at San Damiano, before a crucifix. While praying, he felt that the figure on the Cross stirred and spoke to him. "Francis, go, repair my house, which, as you see, is falling completely to ruin."¹¹ Although for a few years he misinterpreted this message to mean actual re-construction of broken churches, he was, from that moment, especially moved by the thoughts of the crucified Christ. "From then on compassion for the crucified was rooted in his holy soul"¹²

Love for Christ, not primarily as the distant, awe-full God of the Dark Ages, but as "with us," revealed in the splendors of Creation, as "with us in the flesh in Christ," and as poured out on the Cross, was at the heart of his life and his message. "The love of him who loved us much is much to be loved."¹³

Once, while ill near the end of his life, a brother enjoined him to seek refuge in Scripture, as he had so often before. Francis' response reveals his heart and the result of his communion with Jesus.

11. Habig, Celano's Lives, II, 10, p. 370.

12. Habig, Celano's Lives, II, 10, pp. 371-2.

13. Habig, Celano's Lives, II, 196, p. 520.

"It is good to read the testimonies of Scripture; it is good to seek the Lord our God in them. As for me, however, I have already made so much of Scripture my own that I have more than enough to meditate on and revolve in my mind. I need no more, son; I know Christ, the poor crucified one."¹⁴

Question: How could paying more attention to Jesus' humanity and passion affect your walk with Him? In what ways are you willing to shape your life to know Christ more so that when your life is over, you will be able to say, "I know Christ?"

IV. The Call to Obey

1. Radical obedience? Mark 8:31-38 What are some of the things to which we cling, in contrast to total obedience to God? How would radical obedience to God eliminate "things to cling to?"

2. Listening. John 14:28-31 What are some of the ways in which God speaks and to which we are invited to listen? What stands between you and total listening to the voice of God?

3. Suffering. Hebrews 5:7-10 How would you evaluate your responses of obedience to God? to earn His approval? to obey a commanding God? or to respond in love to His grace and love? What difference can this make in the way we live out our obedience?

4. Results? John 15:9-10 What fears do you have about following and obeying God completely? As you look at the difficulties in your life, where can you see the presence of God? In whatever difficulties you face now, can you sense what God may be communicating of Himself to you?

5. Motivation and energy! Philippians 2:1-11 Have you come to a

14. Habig's, Celano's Lives, II, 105, p. 448.

point of truly trusting in the loving providence and direction of God? What are the areas in which this is difficult? What are the areas of obedience to which you sense God may be calling you these days?

St. Francis and Obedience

As a young man, Francis had a vision of a great palace and a beautiful bride. Taking this to refer to a military career, he prepared for battle and knighthood. While on the way, a voice in a second vision inquired about his journey and his purpose. Asked who could do better for him, the servant or the Lord, he responded, "the Lord." The voice then asked, "Why then are you seeking the servant in place of the Lord?" Francis answered, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"¹⁵

As he grew in his faithfulness, it became his passion not just to obey Christ, but to be like Him in every way he could. Christ was the reason and the shape of his obedience.

While ill near the end of his life, he was asked if he would prefer to die as a martyr. His response was,

My son, that has always been and still is most dear to me and more sweet and more acceptable which pleases the Lord my God most to let happen in me and with me, for I desire always only to be found conformed and obedient to his will in all things.¹⁶

When asked by a brother about the truly obedient man, Francis answered by describing a dead man.

"Take a lifeless body and place it where you will. You will see that it does not resist being moved, it does not murmur about its position, it does not cry out if it is allowed to lie there... This is a truly obedient man; he does not ask why he is being moved, he cares not where he is placed, he does not insist on being changed elsewhere. Raised to an office, he retains his accustomed humility; the more he is honored, the more unworthy

15. Habig, Celano's Lives, II, 6, p. 366.

16. Habig, Celano's Lives, I, 107, p. 321.

does he consider himself."¹⁷

Yet this obedience was only and always for the sake of the Master Himself. In his "Admonitions," written for the friars early in the order's history, he commanded what he did himself: "Look at the Good Shepherd, my brothers."¹⁸

Man's learning mattered little to Francis, and his counsel about it applies especially well these days. "I am often wearied with the many things I read and hear; in thee is all I wish or long for. Let all teachers hold their peace, and all created things keep silence in Thy presence; do Thou alone speak to me."¹⁹

Question: Write a prayer of your own expressing the desire of your heart to obey Christ alone.

V. Prayer and Compassion

1. Do you love me? Psalm 27 To what extent are you motivated in your prayer by love and love alone? How would this affect the time you spend in prayer if it were to be more true?

2. Jesus and action. John 15:1-8 Have you had the experience of feeling "alone," "out-on-a-limb" in ministry without Jesus' presence?

3. Prayer and discipline. Matthew 26:36-46 How much discipline or effort do you put into your prayers? What additional discipline would you commit to exert to receive the gifts and grace of deeper intimacy with God?

4. Prayer with others. Matthew 5:43-48 To what cries and needs

17. Habig, Celano's Lives, II, 152, p. 484-485.

18. Habig, St. Francis' "Admonitions," VI, p. 81.

19. Gratien de Paris, I Know Christ: the Personality and Spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi, trans. Paul Olinvy, (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute, 1957), p. 66.

are you tuned that seem to need your intercession? What part of the world of humanity do you think might need you to embrace it in prayer?

5. Prayer and community. Luke 18:1-5 Do you have any friends with whom you share the deep prayers of your heart? How could more of this happen in a church?

Francis and Prayer

There were two basic activities in Francis' life. "It was his custom to divide up the time given him to merit grace, and as seemed necessary to him, to give part of it to working for the good of his neighbors and the rest to the blessed retirement of contemplation."²⁰ The reason was that through prayer he was able to maintain his connection with Christ, even while exiled from His presence for this life. "Therefore, he tried to keep his spirit always in the presence of God, by praying to him with out intermission, so that he might not be without some comfort from his Beloved."²¹ For him, the importance of prayer exceeded the importance of food. "If our bodies must take their food in peace--our bodies which will one day be the food of worms, just like the food we eat--what peace and quiet should not our souls enjoy to receive their food, which is the food of life?"²²

God was so important to him that distractions could not be tolerated. Once during Lent he had carved a little vase during a few spare moments. During the recitation of the Office, it came to his mind. On finishing the recitation, he was sorrowful about his lack of concentration, and commented, "Alas, what a worthless work that has such power

20. Habig, Celano's Lives, I, 91, p. 306.

21. Habig, St. Bonaventure's Legenda Majora, X, 1, p. 705.

22. Habig, St. Bonaventure's, Legenda Majora, X, 6, p. 709-710.

over me that it can twist my mind to itself! I will sacrifice it to the Lord, whose sacrifice it has impeded." And he threw it into the fire. "Let us be ashamed, to be caught up by worthless imaginings, for at the time of prayer we speak to the great King."²³

Although he did not forbid brothers to continue their academics, he warned them about their studies. "I do not mind, provided that they do not neglect prayer, after the example of Christ of whom we are told that he prayed more than he studied."²⁴

From his instructions to his brothers before they even knew the official ecclesiastical office, we can guess at the content of much of his prayer. "When you pray, say Our Father, and We adore thee, Christ, here and in all thy churches which are in the whole world, and we bless thee, because by thy holy cross thou hast redeemed the world."²⁵

How do you think ministry and prayer were related in his life?
How is your own adoration?

VI. Community: Compassion Together

1. Lonely, tired faces. Ephesians 4:7-16 In what ways have you ever felt lonely even when involved in a church? How have you experienced the need for community? Is it difficult to admit this?

2. God's plan. John 13:31-35 How could people see God at work through the life of a community? In what ways has Christ ever manifested himself to you through community?

3. What is Christian community? I Peter 2:1-12 If this is the meaning of community, what kind of perspective do we need to have about

23. Habig, Celano's Lives, II, 97, p. 442.

24. Habig, St. Bonaventure's Legenda Majora, XI, 1, p. 712.

25. Habig, Celano's Lives, I, 45, p. 245.

each other? What does a person gain by being part of this community?

4. The power of community. I Corinthians 12:12-27 How can this kind of openness to God happen in the church? How does the church help to connect between people's perceptions of needs and action to meet them?

5. Worth the risk? Galatians 6:1-10 What are some of the risks of community for you? What are the dangers of today's church omitting community? In what ways would you like to work with others in expressing God's love to this world?

Francis and God's Community

From reveling with wealthy companions at the parties of Assisi, to praying alone in the mountains and serving the lepers, God called Francis to go, alone. His old friends now ridiculed his zeal. But the call was not a call to solitude.

In Assisi a man named Bernard on occasion offered Francis shelter and food. Bernard enjoyed his company, was drawn to him. One night he discovered why. Francis prayed. Francis communed with God all night long. Francis' life reflected the quality of his time with God. This was what Bernard wanted too. He announced his intention to join Francis. Giving his significant wealth to the poor, he did join. Soon others began to follow, many others.

Writing a Rule for his followers in 1221, Francis captured the essence of their common vision: "...following the teaching and the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁶ This obedience was to be reflected in their life together. "Far from doing or speaking evil to one another, the friars should be glad to serve and obey one another in a

26. Habig, St. Francis' "Rule of 1221," 1, p. 31.

spirit of charity."²⁷ One of the features of their relationship was that none of them were to rule over each other. "All the friars without exception are forbidden to wield power or authority, particularly over one another. Our Lord tells us in the Gospel that 'the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them' (Matt. 20:25). That is not to be the way among the friars. Among them 'whoever wishes to become great shall be their servant, and whoever wishes to be first shall be' their minister (Matt. 28:26-28), and he is their servant."²⁸ The very name by which they were called indicated the nature of their new direction: "Friars Minor." Francis indicated that they were never to be called "Prior."

Despite the demands of their "rule," despite the deprivations of their existence, men rushed to join them and to live the new life. "Followers of most holy poverty, because they had nothing, loved nothing, they feared in no way to lose anything."²⁹

Although some of the stories of St. Francis may have been embellished, there can be no doubt that a little man was so aflame with a passion for God and the ways of His Son that others, warmed by that heat, were drawn to it, and to the One from whom it came. Together they left a lasting impact on the world.

Question: How do you feel about the idea of being involved in a group of people deeply committed to sharing Life in Christ? What components would you want if you were to join yourself to others by a Rule to guide your life? Imagine yourself a part of his order. What would have

27. Habig, St. Francis' "Rule of 1221," 5, p. 36.

28. Ibid.

29. Habig, Celano's Lives, I, 39, p. 261.

driven you to join?

VII. Compassion

1. Compassion: the need. Matthew 9:35-38 How do you think that greater compassion for people would help to meet the crushing needs of life in these days? How do you think that some of the needs of your life could be met through receiving compassion?

2. Compassion: the meaning. Lamentations 3:22-24 If Jesus were alive today, where and how do you think he would begin to reveal His love around you?

3. Compassion: the power. II Corinthians 1:3-7 How has this experience changed or shaped your own understanding of compassion? In what ways are you more open to God's gift of a compassionate heart?

4. Compassion: the model. I John 4:7-12 What do you think your motivations for ministry have been? Why do you want to care about others? How would focussing more of God's love, both giving it and expressing it, motivate you more effectively in difficult times?

5. Compassion: the results. Colossians 3:12-14 How could becoming a more compassionate person assist you in responding more effectively and redemptively to the interruptions and frustrations you encounter?

6. Compassion: your response? Luke 6:27-36 How do you think that God is inviting you to become more compassionate?

St. Francis and Compassion

As a romantic and cultured young man, lepers had always been repulsive to Francis. While riding one day, during the time of his renewed reflection on his life, he met one, and felt revulsed, as usual. This time, however, he felt the need to overcome this alienation if he was to serve Christ. Dismounting, he approached the leper, who extended

his hand for alms. Instead of only giving alms, he also seized his hand and kissed it.³⁰ During much of the rest of his life, he directed his attention to the care of lepers. He came to know love for them, dressing their wounds and waiting on them. He described the transformation of his mind in this way. "When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me."³¹

The motivation for his ministry was not pity, but love for God and desire that men should know him. In the Rule of 1221, he encouraged missionary work, "to proclaim the word of God openly, when they see that is God's will, calling on their hearers to believe in God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Creator of all, and in the Son, the Redeemer and Savior, that they may be baptized and become Christians, because 'unless a man be born again of water, and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God' (John 3:5)."³²

The love of God propelled him to want to preach to the Moslems, in particular to the Sultan of Egypt. While ministering among the Crusaders in Syria, he crossed the battle line toward the Muslims, and was savagely dragged before the Sultan. There he explained that he had come to proclaim the triune God and Jesus Christ, Savior of all. Offered rich gifts, he refused even to take them to the poor. From lepers to the Sultan of Egypt, God used his willing heart to proclaim His love.

30. Habig, St. Bonaventure's Legenda Major, I, 1, 5, p. 638.

31. Habig, St. Francis' The Testament of St. Francis, p. 67.

32. Habig, St. Francis' "Rule of 1221", 16, p. 43.

No doubt the key motivating factor in Francis' life was his love for God. His appreciation of the world, his love for people, his impassioned service, his rigorous worship were fired by love for God and desire for others to know Him. His time was occupied, remember, with contemplation or prayer and service to others.

Near the end of his life, as he was suffering, knowing that he was dying, he told the friars, "I have done what was mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours."³³

Question: Who is there in your life, perhaps someone not attractive or easy to love, who needs to know God's love through you? How will they receive it from you?

33. Habig, St. Bonaventure's, Legenda Majora, 14, 3, p. 739.

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