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THE GLORY OF MINISTRY

Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others is a very simple matter. It has been beautifully and simply described as, "One beggar telling another where he can find bread." That is so true! I am a beggar. You are a beggar. Every human being alive on this planet is a beggar! Whether we are Christians or nonChristians makes no difference: Our own righteousness is like the filthy rags of a starving beggar (see Isaiah 64:6), and we are all equally lost in our poverty and sin--apart from God. A Christian beggar differs from a nonChristian beggar in only one respect: He has found the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ. When we, as Christians, witness about Jesus, we do not do so from any position of superiority or self-righteousness. We are simply poor beggars telling other beggars where they can find the same Bread we have found!

Sharing Christ does not require a formal or stylized presentation, nor does it require a special place or time. It is not restricted to those who are ordained or are "in the ministry." Every person who has experienced true Christianity is already in the ministry because he or she possesses what others desperately need.

The authentic Christian life is essentially and radically different from the natural life lived by a man or woman of the world. Outwardly, it can be very much the same: involved with making a living, going to school, getting married, raising children, mowing lawns, buying groceries, getting along with neighbors, and so on. But inwardly, the basis of living is dramatically different. Christ is a part of all these things! Life is lived by means of Him. He is the motivator of every wholesome action, the corrector of every wrong deed or thought. He is the giver of every joy and the healer of every hurt. He is no longer merely on the edges of life, acknowledged on Sunday but absent through the week. Christ is the center of everything. Life revolves around him. As a consequence, life comes into proper focus, a deep peace possesses the heart, strength grips the spirit despite outward trials, and kindness and joy radiate abroad. This is really living!

Once we truly understand and appreciate what Jesus Christ has done for us, it is impossible to keep it a secret! The wonderful story of new life in Christ absolutely shouts within us, demanding to be shared with others who still struggle with guilt, despair, shame, and hostility. Whenever we see another hurting human being, we know we have an opportunity for sharing. This is our ministry--an abundant ministry, available to all, as simple and as natural as breathing. It is this ministry the apostle Paul describes in these words:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Four times in this brief statement Paul stresses the word "reconciliation." Since man was designed to be indwelt by God, nothing could be more damaging to our humanity than to be estranged from the God who made us. Alienation from God is the fundamental sickness of humanity, and it breaks out in such hurtful expressions as guilt, hostility, despair, and even addiction (twelve step treatment programs for alcoholism and drug addiction are based on the fact that people use these substances to fill the God-shaped void in their lives).

The best news men could ever hear is that some means of reconciliation with God has been found. It is the great privilege of Christians to declare this good news to those by whom it is desperately needed and who are

willing to listen because of the hurts and holes in their own lives. Effective witness almost always begins at the point of need. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," says Jesus, "and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Certain elements of this ministry are underscored by Paul to indicate its greatness and its relevance. To review these is to become aware of the immense privilege of proclaiming such a message to hurting--and even hurtful!--men and women.

The ministry of reconciliation originates with God. "All this is from God," says Paul. The offended One, God Himself, initiates the way of reconciliation. We, the offenders, only respond.

The good news does not originate with man; it is not simply another way man has invented to find his own way back to God. The very nature of the good news is such that it couldn't have been invented by man. It begins by postulating nothing in man except weakness, failure, and rebellion. By that one stroke, all competition is eliminated in the quest for salvation. No one can properly think of himself as any closer to God than other people--apart from Christ. Those who pride themselves on their moral and respectable lives are no closer to God than the murderer or the sex pervert, for in reality, pride of respectability is just as much a manifestation of alienation from God as murder or debauchery.

This element of the good news irritates and offends many people. Those who count on their good works to save them are put off by this proclamation. They want God to take them on their terms. However, their offense is only further confirmation of the apostle's claim that "all this is from God." No flagrant sinner would dare dream he has some way to stand before God; no self-righteous person would imagine he needed anything to make himself acceptable. The good news of reconciliation could never originate with man. It comes wholly from God.

The ministry of reconciliation is personally experienced. The Christian who witnesses to the new covenant does not speak academically. He is able to identify fully with the hurt and darkness of those to whom he speaks, for he has (as the saying goes) "been there, done that" himself. But he has found something else, something so satisfying and complete as to make him eager to share it with others. He doesn't speak of "the plan of salvation" as though it were all theological doctrine, requiring only an intellectual grasp in order to receive it. Rather, he gives witness of a personal Lord who is at once the Savior and sustainer of his life. He does not convey the impression that when he surrendered to this Lord he was immediately and completely delivered from all struggle with evil, guilt, hate, and fear, but he makes it clear that the initial surrender produced a permanent change at the center of his being. And power continually flows from that center to enable him to conquer--gradually, successively, day by day, step by step--the areas of his life yet dominated by evil and failure. He freely acknowledges his present failures but rejoices in the certainty that they too shall succumb to the authority and power of a resurrected Lord. "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14).

The ministry of reconciliation is universally inclusive. "[God] gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ... God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ." One of the wonders of true Christianity is its universality. Though the church was originally Jewish, it was quickly embraced by the Gentiles. Christianity spread from the Holy Land into Europe and Africa, to Asia and the Americas. It has proven to satisfy the spiritual hunger of people from every culture and ethnic background, from every class--rich, poor, and in-between. Jesus is worshiped in the penthouses and in the ghettos, by those of the political right, left, and center. Men find that the message of Jesus speaks to their need as men, and women find that the message of Jesus fulfills and completes their femininity. It brings the wholeness of God to the whole need of every person--physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

The silly idea has arisen somehow that Jesus and God the Father have different and opposing personalities. According to this idea, Jesus is tender and compassionate toward lost mankind, and stands protectively between us and a vengeful, angry God the Father. Paul disposes of this faulty concept forever with his clear statement, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ." It was the Father who initiated the work of redemption. He gave His only Son, sending Him into the world to bring about our redemption and reconciliation through cruel death and subsequent resurrection. It was the Father who "did not spare his own

Son, but gave him up for us all" (Romans 8:32).

So it is the Father *and* the Son who, by means of the Spirit, reach out to a hurting, lonely world and offer pardon, peace, and joy to all who will come. No one is excluded by virtue of race, color, condition, or class. The door is wide open to all.

The ministry of reconciliation is without condemnation. "Not counting men's sins against them." Because of the cross of Jesus, the problem which human evil raises before God is totally eliminated. God does not require anything but the honest acknowledgment of evil to eliminate its degrading, destructive results in human experience. No penance is demanded, nor will any be accepted. No self-chastisement is required. Any attempt to resort to these is but proof that the individual has not believed what God has plainly said. This is not only true when a person first comes to Christ, but it remains true throughout his entire life.

The penalty of death for any or all of my sins has already been fully borne by Christ--and that means death in all its varied forms. I only bear my sins in my experience when I refuse to believe God and seek in some way to justify them before God. But the experience of death ends the moment I believe Him: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

This is the element that especially makes reconciliation such good news. All God ever requires of us is that we acknowledge our evil and be willing to be delivered from its power. The actual work of deliverance is accomplished by God for us on the basis of the death of Jesus. The cross has *already* set us free; it is only waiting for us to believe it in order to make it real in our experience.

Of course, certain natural consequences of our evil will still remain in our experience. Sin always leaves its scars. The person who repents from a lifestyle of sexual sin and turns to Christ will be forgiven--but forgiveness doesn't erase the natural consequences of that lifestyle, such as broken relationships, emotional scars, or sexually transmitted diseases. The person who repents from a life of criminal behavior and turns to Christ will be forgiven--but forgiveness doesn't erase the possibility of punishment for those crimes and the need to make restitution. The consequences of old sins, even though forgiven, often remain. But those sins can no longer produce spiritual death in us, because the resurrection life of Jesus now pulsates within us. The mistakes and rebellions of our past will be turned into instruments of grace to mellow and soften us and make us clearer and brighter manifestations of God's redeeming love.

We should never hesitate to return to God when we sin. He is already fully aware of our sin. In fact, He expects us to fail, because He knows us better than we know ourselves. Like the loving father of the prodigal son, He is not ashamed of us, nor does He reject us. He waits for our return, and when we do, He welcomes us with a father's kiss and with open arms.

An innocent man was once on trial for his life in a court of law. After the evidence was presented by both the prosecution and the defense, the prosecuting attorney rose to give his summation to the jury. He spoke at great length and with persuasive eloquence, citing all the evidence against the accused man. When the prosecutor had concluded his speech, the innocent man leaned over to his own attorney and whispered, "He was very convincing. For a while there, he even had me believing I was guilty!"

Satan is much like that prosecutor. He accuses us, making us feel guilty even after our sins have been completely washed away by the sacrifice of Jesus, even after God has pronounced us innocent because of the cross. As Christians, forgiven by God, we may at times experience shame, we may feel unworthy--but those emotions come from our accuser, Satan. They do not come from God. Our loving heavenly Father has already forgiven us and waits only for us to acknowledge our sin and thank him for the restored relationship that is already ours through Jesus Christ.

The ministry of reconciliation is personally delivered. "And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation." The good news does not come by means of angels. It is not announced from heaven by loud, impersonal voices. It doesn't even come by poring over dusty volumes from the past. In each generation it is delivered by living, breathing men and women who speak from their own experience. Incarnation, the word become flesh, is forever God's way of truly communicating with people. It comes always at the cost of hunger

and thirst, personal hardship borne for Christ's sake--blood, sweat, and tears.

Some today have claimed to come to Christ apart from the aid of others, having read the good news in the Scriptures without the aid of teachers. But they have forgotten the labors and hardships endured by those who have given them the Scriptures in their own language, often at the cost of their lives. No one who reads the Bible in English should ever forget that Tyndale, Wycliffe, and Coverdale, the early translators, were all bitterly persecuted men who labored at the risk of their own lives.

It is easily demonstrable today that only a few Christians are able to read the Scriptures and grow by direct obedience to the precepts stated there. The rest of us seem to require models and mentors to follow. Only a few have the gift of faith, daring to challenge the accepted norms and traditions in the church which violate God's Word. But when those few lead out and exemplify in their lives the blessing that comes from obedience to the Scriptures, others are able to follow. Love and faith must somehow become visible, embodied in human lives, before they can be caught and emulated by others. "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). There is a strong personal element about the gospel which cannot be eliminated without diminishing and harming its effect.

The ministry of reconciliation is authoritatively accredited. "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). Ambassadors are the official spokesmen of a sovereign power in a foreign state. Their word is backed up by the power that sent them out--but only when the word of the ambassador truly represents the mind and will of the sending state. So Christians everywhere are authorized spokesmen for God, "God making his appeal through us," but only when they are living authentically as Christians. Whenever that is true, God honors their word by making visible and realistic changes in the lives of those who respond to their witness. It is the mark of undeniable reality which we saw in Chapter 2.

In John 20:22-23 the risen Lord Jesus gave his apostles (and us, through them) the authority to declare the forgiveness of sins or the retention of sins, depending upon the response of listeners to the message of the gospel. To those who believe and accept, we may authoritatively declare, "Your sins are forgiven." To those who disbelieve, we have authority to say, "Your sins are yet retained."

This is part of that "priesthood of every believer" which Scripture teaches so clearly but which has been opposed by much of the institutional church through the centuries. Martin Luther recovered the truth briefly during the Reformation, but it was soon lost to sight again. Yet nothing is more encouraging to a servant of Christ than to see the Lord honoring his ministry by radical and permanent changes made in the lives of those whose lives he touches.

The ministry of reconciliation is voluntarily accepted. "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). Throughout this passage the apostle uses words which underscore the noncoercive nature of the gospel: "appeal," "beseech," "entreat." Since, as he says, we make our appeal "on behalf of Christ" or, literally, "in place of Christ," it is important that we be no more coercive than Jesus was when He ministered in the flesh on earth. In fact, authentic Christianity is Christ, by the Spirit, speaking through us today. It cannot be otherwise and still be of the Spirit. There is a remarkable absence of pressure in the presentations which Jesus made to people. He offers himself repeatedly to them. He invites them to respond. He warns them of the consequences if they refuse. But he does not harangue them or use emotional stories to sway them. When they seem reluctant to respond, He neither prolongs the occasion nor makes the invitation easier. In fact, He is forever sending men away and thinning the ranks of His disciples.

As we have already noted, the proper approach to the servant of Christ is by the open statement of truth to commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. Appeal is made to the will to respond, and if it does not do so, the matter is left with God to work further in His will and time. This is true not only for the evangelist, but also for the pastor-teacher or anyone who imparts the truth of the new covenant. "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still," says a wise old adage. Truth must find a willing response from the heart or it is of no value. Contrived responses are a waste of time.

The ministry of reconciliation achieves the impossible. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Here is the supreme glory of the new covenant. It actually achieves what could never be achieved by fallen man: righteousness (worth) before a holy God! It seems impossible even for God. How can a God of justice justify the unjust? How can a righteous God righteously declare a sinner to be righteous? It is a puzzle that staggers the angels. But it was achieved! He who knew no sin, Jesus the Righteous One, was made (on the cross) to be sin on behalf of us, who knew no righteousness, in order that the righteousness of God might be forever *ours* !

Righteousness is not only our unchanging *standing* before a holy God; it is also our present state whenever we are walking in the Spirit. The cross, therefore, is forever the ground of Satan's defeat. It was the ace up God's sleeve which Satan could not have anticipated. The great accuser can never find any ground by which he can turn a righteous God against us, for all our evil was forever cut off from us in the cross, and we now have a totally new identity. We are one spirit with Jesus himself. "But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:17). No wonder Paul shouts in Romans 8:31: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The inevitable outcome of righteousness is freedom. The righteous man is at rest; all his internal tensions and problems are solved. He is not anxious about himself but is free to give his attention to others. That is the glory of the new covenant. "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

The ministry of reconciliation is experienced moment-by-moment. The opening verses of 2 Corinthians 6 continue the apostle's argument: "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, 'In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

It is possible to accept the grace of God in vain. That is, it is possible to live much of life in dependence on the resources of the flesh rather than on the power and riches of the Spirit. Then, of course, for such moments or hours or days Christ has profited us nothing. We have Him, but we live as though He were not there. The grace and power of God are ours, but they do us no good.

Since we must take God's grace by faith (or dependence) and it comes to us moment-by-moment, then it is the present moment we must be concerned with. "I tell you, *now* is the time of God's favor, *now* is the day of salvation." The fact that we walked in the Spirit a few moments ago is of no value to us now; the intention we have to walk in the Spirit in just a few more minutes does not redeem the present. If we choose to act in the flesh *now* , it is wasted time, gone forever, never to be retraced or regained. Let us run the race of life seeking to live each moment in the power and grace of the Spirit of Christ, for any time spent in the flesh is time in which we have accepted the grace of God in vain.

This, then, is the ministry of reconciliation which has been entrusted to us by God. He does not send us forth alone, but goes with us Himself to be both the Author and the Finisher of our faith. Perhaps it would help to summarize:

The Ministry of Reconciliation . . .

- Originates with God, not man;
- Is personally experienced;
- Is universally inclusive;
- Is without condemnation;
- Is delivered by men;
- Is owned and accredited by God;
- Is voluntarily accepted;
- Achieves what otherwise is impossible; and
- Is experienced moment-by-moment.

What a powerful and challenging opportunity His great ministry affords us! The apostle Paul is can't help being caught up with the glory and wonder of it as he writes. He now closes this section of his letter dealing with the new covenant by relating his own experience of the ministry of reconciliation. He does so with incredible power and intense beauty. In doing so, he presents the story of his own life as Exhibit A.

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