

A Theology of Caring

Caring about other people, and loving them, is difficult. It is even difficult to care for oneself, at times. That is, until we become more like Jesus through a process of spiritual regeneration and transformation.

Regeneration, or being made new, means that I turn over to God all dependence or allegiance which I have to people, places, or things—addictions, habits, or attempts to please people instead of God. The process of transformation is God leading a holy war in my own life as he did in Deuteronomy 7 where "anything belonging to the opposing god must be totally destroyed." Regeneration, transformation and renewal, then, have to do with who is in charge of my life. It means that I seek to please God above all.

I have a need—a hunger—to be appreciated. I have been a people pleaser most of my life. I am in the process of allowing God to be the focus of who I am and what I do. I am in a continual process of moving beyond knowing "about" Christ, to knowing Him personally through faith. In her book, *Romancing the Holy*, Debra Farrington states, "We need to know God, to know that we are loved—unconditionally—by God".¹ I also need to discover/rediscover spending quality time with God. James Bryan Smith writes in *A Spiritual Formation Workbook* that Jesus took time out to spend in communion with God-- he often retreated to a quiet place (Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16). What sets Jesus apart from all the others is intimacy with God: it denotes a closeness, a love, and a trusting relationship with the one he called "Abba." Jesus was a person of prayer. The busier he got, the more he turned to God in prayer. Why? Because he knew God! He understood God as a loving father whose main interest was to love, teach, and heal his people²

In *Foundations of the Christian Faith* James M. Boice states

We want to know God and love him. He has revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus the Messiah (John 1:41). We know God the Father through the Bible's revelation of the Son. We

1. Debra Farrington, *Romancing the Holy* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), 52.

2. James Bryan Smith, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 21.

know ourselves and who we are by understanding his mercy, grace, love, and power of forgiveness. But knowledge of God occurs when we know our deep spiritual need and when we are receptive to God's gracious provision for our need through the work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.³

To know God is to have a relationship with Christ. However, as Larry Crabb states in his book *Encouragement*, he is afraid to look at God, always expecting anger. "As I await the pronouncement of my well-deserved rejection I hear his loving words and see his loving smile. And I am to be eternally encouraged for he has spoken from his love to my fear."⁴

Debra Farrington states, "My relationship with Christ comes from his journey with me and my pilgrimage as his follower in wilderness, and on the mountains, in a lifestyle of joy and contentment."⁵ God has been in the process of renewing my life for over 30 years with me declaring allegiance to Jesus or Satan at one time or another. As much as God's love for me has remained unchanged, so my love for God has run hot, cold and lukewarm. Like Paul the apostle I know the things I should be doing, which I don't do, and the things I should not be doing, which I do (Rom. 7:15-20). At times I have been fearful and frightened, feeling worthless or without value. I have felt alienated from people and from God. I have been afraid to reach out and become distrustful of those reaching in. In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen describes how I've felt. He states that people are generally lonely and they fear solitude. They are hostile and they fear hospitality.

Our lifestyles are vehicles for anesthesia. Panic occurs when we have run out of distractions and are brought close to aloneness. The lonely, hurting, suffering people reach out to momentary, illusory experiences, self-deceits that say "now everything will be better." People desire more and more receive less and less. We need a journey of the spiritual life. We must find the courage to enter into the desert of our own loneliness and by gentle and persistent efforts change it into a garden of solitude, from restless energies to a restful spirit, from outward cravings to inward searching.⁶

3. James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1985), 101.

4. Larry Crabb and Dan Allender, *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 1984), 80.

5. Farrington, op. cit., 18.

6. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: Image Books, 1966), 27.

The process of discovering what Nouwen calls “gentle solitude” is a risky one. In *As if the Heart Mattered*, Gregory Clapper says that to be a Christian is to “commit oneself to the . . . crucible” where spiritual lives are formed.⁷ It is a process which uncovers the very being of my soul. It is a process which exposes and makes me vulnerable. It makes me a participant in the process of becoming known, becoming vulnerable to a holy God.⁸ According to Clapper, “To acknowledge our real pain and brokenness [is] a part of true repentance.”⁹ As difficult as the process is, however, we don’t make this journey unaccompanied, for the Holy Spirit empowers us step by step as we seek to place our burdens on him (Matt 11:28). And out of solitude comes a new calmness of spirit, a freedom from old negative and locked-into patterns of feeling, thought and action.

Solitude makes intimacy possible. We must, through solitude, empty ourselves of prejudice and self and listen to what God is speaking to us in order to make room for others. Solitude deepens our affection for one another: we are free to love one another because God first loved us. In moving from loneliness to solitude we are able to move from anxious reactions to loving responses as we are transformed by Christ and his forgiveness. Clapper states that true repentance brings about a burning desire to change. Repentance is oriented toward the future.¹⁰ It frees us and calls us into a life of holiness. Forgiveness, when fully understood, leads to a life of holiness.¹¹ This new freedom leads us from hostility to hospitality.

Hospitality begins with a self-denial and a loving service to others. Loneliness promotes hostility, anger and fear. Solitude makes us good hosts. Nouwen states “A good host is one who believes his guest is carrying a gift he wants to reveal to anyone who shows genuine interest. A good host shows encouragement, affirmation and support and welcomes the contributions of others.”¹²

Every Christian is called upon to be a host, creating space for others' needs and the salve of healing in

7. Gregory Clapper, *As if the Heart Mattered* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1997), 14.

8. Nouwen, *op. cit.*, 47.

9. Clapper, *op. cit.*, 76.

10. *Ibid.*, 41.

11. *Ibid.*, 68.

12. Nouwen, *op. cit.*, 87.

Christ. Christians are obliged to offer open and hospitable space where strangers can become friends, where the healing of relationship can take place. We are called to allow space where people can grow without fear, where positive development can take place.

Hospitality allows us to put on Christ. Through it Christians may turn their *hostis* into *hospis*¹³, putting away all hostility and bitterness, making others better than themselves (Phil. 2:3). This transformation separates us from old patterns and leads us to the cross. We become aware of our neighbor's needs and begin to heal others' wounds as our wounds have been healed by Christ. We put on the mind of Christ (Phil.2:2)

We can imitate Christ by modeling his attitude of humility, submission and service (Phil. 2:1-12). Humility is our ability, through the power of the Spirit, to be brought low by God. It is the strength of this attribute which enables us to do for God's sake what we commonly would do for our own sake with a broken and contrite spirit (Psalm 51:17). Humility frees us from serving ourselves. We become free to do the will of God--as Christ humbled himself and became obedient to death for our sins. We are to submit ourselves (and all that we are and own) to him, giving us the freedom of serving God and neighbor. Submission allows us to love others without demanding anything in return. Submission allows us to value other people. Submission allows us to love ourselves (Christ in his gracious sacrifice has declared our worthiness). Loving ourselves is a prerequisite to loving others. In submitting ourselves to Christ we humble ourselves, relinquishing the right to have our own way. In submission we are able to serve him, having been freed from selfish lifestyles and possessions which tend to "own" us. As our model Christ submitted himself to the will of his Father and "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" (Phil. 2:6).

In service we seek to follow Christ who came not to be served but to serve (Matt. 20:28). In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Williard states that [in service]

13. *Ibid.*, 89.

we engage our goods and strengths in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world. [We] may also serve others to train ourselves away from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment or covetousness. In that case service is undertaken as a discipline for the spiritual life. Service is the high road to freedom from bondage to other people. We cease to be "manpleasers", for we are acting unto God in our lowliest deeds¹⁴ (p. 182).

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says that true service comes from a relationship with Christ and a solitude of the heart. "We serve out of whispered promptings, divine urges" of the Spirit¹⁵. All service becomes important. There is no measurement and it is difficult to distinguish between small and large service. The true servant is content to serve in a "hidden" way, with no need for recognition. He or she serves for God's honor and glory. Foster states

True service is indiscriminate in its ministry. It has heard the call of Jesus to be "servant of all". True service ministers simply and faithfully because there is need. It refuses to allow feelings to control service, but rather the service disciplines the feelings. True service is a life-style. It acts from ingrained patterns of godly living. True service can withhold the service as freely as perform it. It can listen with tenderness and patience before acting. It can serve by waiting in silence. True service builds community. It puts no one under obligation to return the service. It draws, binds, heals and builds.¹⁶

My personal need for renewal is constant. I hate my sin. However, God's process of transformation has brought me to a place where I no longer hate myself. Where I was once a physical, emotional, and spiritual cripple, I am now completely healed and able to stand with peace of mind before my father in heaven. I have had to learn--I have wanted to learn--the humility of Christ: his attitude and his submission and his obedience. I have had to learn to be clay in the hands of the Potter and what that means. I have learned the spirituality and practicality of John Barnard's hymn "Have Thine Own Way Lord"

Have thine own way Lord, have thine own way
Thou art the potter, I am the clay
Mold me and make me after thy will
While I am waiting yielded and still.¹⁷

14. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 182

15. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) 112.

16. *Ibid.*, 112-113.

17. Trinity Hymnal (Great Commission Publications, 1991), 726.

Spirituality is not the performance of religious rituals, but a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. Christian spirituality is knowing Jesus personally and seeking to live out that relationship on a daily basis. The ramifications are enormous as we try to understand and experience what it means to be intimately related to our Savior. James Bryan Smith says that many areas of our lives have "no trespassing" signs posted, blocking access for God to mold and shape us.¹⁸ He goes on to say, "the key to effectiveness... is my willingness to surrender the control of my life to God"¹⁹. Looking back over my own wilderness experience—time God used to break me, melt me, and mold me—I see that he was working to make me effective in his service. God’s Spirit did the work, as Daniel Iverson’s “Spirit of the Loving God” states

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me
Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.²⁰

The breaking was all for my good. God was at work. It was all for my healing. Farrington says, "Without knowing the why's of my life -- without knowing there was a God who intended that I suffer . . . a loving God . . . I could not finally heal."²¹

By understanding God’s love and sovereignty and the limitations (or futility) of my own timetable and agenda I am at rest with what Romans 12 calls “the renewing of your minds.” Smith says “The Holy Spirit works primarily in the area of our minds, the shaping the way we think, and this takes time. Genuine change takes time.”²²

He continues, "To experience of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we must do two things. First,

we must ask for the Holy Spirit (Mark 11:13). God is waiting for us to pray for the work of the Spirit, whose working presence is a gift to those who simply ask. Second, we must

18. Smith, op. cit., 55.

19. Ibid., 29.

20. Trinity Hymnal, op. cit., 688.

21. Farrington, op. cit., 49.

22. Smith, op. cit., 37.

practice the discipline of waiting (Psalm 40:1). When we pray for the spirit, we are not praying for an answer; we are praying for God to enter us, to fill us with his presence, his thoughts, and his words. This will require the kind of passion that takes the form of patient waiting" and a lot of love.²³

Speaking on this type of spiritual formation, Michael Sanders states, "I like what Francis Schaeffer said about this love. He states that it must be an "observable" love... not just talk--but action. Our relationship with Christ affects all our other relationships: spouse, children, friends, employees, employers. There is no relationship that you and I can enter into that is not directly affected by our spiritual life in Christ."²⁴ Smith says that it is our responsibility to understand the Bible and let our lives be shaped by it. The result is a powerful witness to the world around us. When we study the Bible we should have ears to what God may be saying to us -- a message that is meant to penetrate our lives, molding and shaping our thoughts and our hearts.²⁵

The whole idea of renewal has made me more conscious of my relationship with God: how he cares for me, and how I must care for others because of this loving relationship. This has prompted me to develop a "theology of caring." This theology of caring comes out of my personal pilgrimage involving a search for my identity, developing a healthy relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ my Lord, and developing a godly, obedient concept of service and caring. Having this biblical theology of caring is essential for me to live out the great command to love the Lord first and foremost, and to love my neighbor as I love myself (Matt. 22:37,39).

The character that we have as care-givers, the ones who show compassion, must be a strong one. It must be molded and hardened in the fires of loneliness when no one but God is there.²⁶ This is the building of character James 1:2-8 calls for when he speaks about the testing of our faith.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so

23. Ibid., 36.

24. Michael Sanders, *A Call to Spiritual Formation*, 1997, Warner Southern College. Online. Available. [Http://sites.goshen.net/Library_of_God/sanders.html](http://sites.goshen.net/Library_of_God/sanders.html)

25. Smith, op. cit., 51.

26. Crabb, op. cit., 60.

that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

The character for caring requires sacrificial giving and living in the power of the resurrected Savior.

Our attitude must show unconditional love. Then consciously and consistently we will be able to do what does not come naturally: selfless ministry, service of compassion, bringing the good news of Jesus Christ, and promoting the welfare of others.²⁷

Only by personally knowing Christ's love and concern are we able to care for others. It is by his "breathing" in us that we are once and forever changed. We move higher and deeper into meaningful relationship with Him, with His help.²⁸ In this relationship we know and enter into his care and compassion and become part of his ministry - his incarnated ministry through us on earth. According to Andrew Purves, the service of compassion asks us to come along side those in need as Christ came along side us. "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."²⁹

We need to be people of compassion who will not be too quick to take pain away but will have the spiritual and mental toughness to walk [along side], sharing in [another's] journey to the point where woundedness can be shared and confronted.³⁰ Compassion is ministry. It is hands-on and requires a relationship. It demands love. Compassion is a ministry without limits. It is evangelical, bringing persons to a place where they may "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). Compassion is the ministry of Jesus Christ by which he enters into another's brokenness. Compassion is situational. It cannot be pre-packaged. Compassion is vicarious. It means suffering with another. Compassion bridges

27. Ibid., p55.

28. Nouwen, op. cit., 66.

29. Andrew Purves, *The Search for Compassion* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 35.

30. Ibid., 124.

the gap between social and pastoral ministry. Compassion demands a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ. This is the vital element which makes compassion possible and is found whenever people are being liberated to serve, where they search after a faithful and obedient walk.³¹ Our faith and our compassion is a biblical demonstration that Jesus is the Lord of our lives.

As a church leader and director of ACTS Mercy Ministries, I need to show others “the biblical map,” train them how to follow that map, and model what it means to “be” Christian. I am committed to servanthood and calling people to a servant lifestyle, choosing to serve, rather than be served. I am committed to calling people to “the gospel of Christ [which] knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.”³² I am committed to motivating people to attitudes and behavior based on doctrinal fidelity. As Clapper says, “If we are to take these religious affections seriously, they need to find expression in our actions.”³³ We need to live lives of gratitude.

I am committed to proclaiming that the person with a problem in our community “offers the church the wonderful opportunity to be the church. We are graciously given the eyes to see her as a gift of God sent to help ordinary people like us to discover the church as the body of Christ.”³⁴ Stanley Hauerwas states “The church gives us all sorts of new opportunities to experience the depth of God’s love, giving our lives a direction we would otherwise lack.”³⁵ He says that there is a way in which we cannot hear the gospel without being truthful people—and hearing it is linked to conversion.³⁶ Conversion brings renewal and recovery of the church and its ministry. And ethics does not get much more Christian than this—an ordinary person living the Christian life before other ordinary people.³⁷ True Christian ethics will always reflect true spiritual transformation.

31. *Ibid.*, 131.

32. Clapper, *op. cit.*, 13.

33. *Ibid.*, 95.

34. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1989), 82.

35. *Ibid.*, 59.

36. *Ibid.*, 128.

37. *Ibid.*, 111.

Based on my faith in Jesus I am seeking “continual renewal through spiritual exercises, spiritual gifts, and acts of service.”³⁸ In my work of overseeing seven ministries and 300 volunteers working with at risk people groups (homeless/addicted, elderly, children in poverty, separated/divorced, racial reconciliation) I emphasize Christ-centered spiritual formation. I also encourage prayer, Bible study and mutual accountability in the lives of my workers. Among the various leadership teams I have instituted more regular times of training and encouragement as God has raised up new leaders for this.

I continue to emphasize a horizontal management style by being present at as many ministry sites as possible to encourage, rally, and “cheerlead” my leaders and workers. I urge my workers to grow in their relationship with Christ and in the relationship with one another. Empowering, motivating, and advocating for my people, I believe, is the greatest task I can do for them--just as the Holy Spirit is the one who comes along side us.

I am challenged to be more of a pacesetter and vision setter in the area of mercy ministry and reconciliation--with God’s help. The areas in which I work and lead, of working with hurting people, are not exotic. They are, however, those ministries and those people Jesus modeled and loved. Through his love I hope to develop servant hearts even as our Lord develops his servant mind-set in me.

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38. Smith, op. cit., 58.