

# BEING THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

## A VISION FOR TRANSFORMATION

### Teaching Helps for Session One

#### Introduction

God has created each of us to be a sanctuary where Jesus Christ can live. John 1:14 notes that the Word became flesh (human) and lived (literally “pitched his tent” or “tabernacled”) among us. If God could come into the flesh of Jesus, He can certainly come into us.

Paul observes in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and 6:19-20 that we are the temple, or sanctuary, of the Lord. **[Be sure to read the contexts of each chapter so you’ll have a better grasp of what Paul means.]** We are a dwelling place for God’s Presence. Our Jewish ancestors believed that the Lord actually resided in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. That was the old way. The new way acknowledges that God no longer dwells in brick and mortar. He lives within those who confess Him to be Lord and Savior through His Son, Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 6:20 says, *“For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (NASB, 1995).*

You may want to reflect and write down some thoughts about what it means to *“have been bought with a price.”* The obvious answer is that God allowed His one and only unique Son, Jesus, to die on the Cross. What does it mean personally to you? You may want to encourage class members to think about this, too.

One of the many challenges the church faces today is “easy Christianity.” Many Christians desire, even work for, a convenient faith. We must remember that there was nothing convenient about the Cross – Christ’s death, that is. Unfortunately some believers even long for a Christian faith without the cross – the taking up of their own cross, that is. Do you agree or not agree? Give some reasons.

Our early Christian ancestors did not desire an easy Christianity or a convenient faith. Rather they desired and sought after a bold, radical commitment to Christ – the kind of commitment that was not easy and one that inconvenienced them.

Absorb pages 9, 10, and the top of page 11. Share with the class some of your thoughts about the similarities and differences between the first century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### The Christian Gospel

On page 11, Vestal notes that, as crazy as our world really is, “the Christian gospel is still powerful...” Why do you think the Gospel is powerful? Why is it powerful for us personally and collectively? Is it powerful to you as an individual? Is it powerful to us as a congregation? What is the gospel and why is it important?

The Gospel concerns the Good News of God's salvation through Jesus Christ – His birth, His life, His teachings, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His ascension, His sending the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), and His coming again. Inherently tied to each of these for His followers (Christians), is how they are to live for and thus represent Him in the interim – the time between His ascension into heaven and His second advent.

Baptists have not been good at living “pentecostal lives.” Historically we have celebrated Christmas and Easter with no thought of Pentecost. Many Christians have been afraid of the “Spirit” for various reasons. There have been abuses over the decades from television evangelists as well as the Back to Jesus Movement and the Charismatic Movement of the late sixties and seventies.

The key word here is “abuses.” In and of themselves there is nothing wrong with TV preachers. The Back to Jesus Movement and Charismatic Movement had good aspects about them.

For more on the “Jesus Movement” go to:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus\\_movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_movement)

For more on the “Charismatic Movement” go to:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charismatic\\_Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charismatic_Movement)

Understanding the giving of the Holy Spirit, according to Vestal, helps Christians appreciate the fact that “Jesus is not limited to one time and one place as he was during his earthly ministry. Now as the risen, reigning Lord of the cosmos, Jesus lives by his spirit in all who believe in him, love him, and follow him. Christ lives in us.” (page. 11). So we are the presence of Jesus. Do you agree or not?

Encourage the class to think with you about why we aren't the presence of Christ at times. Offer examples to begin the dialogue. They might include unconfessed sin, arrogance, unforgiving attitude, etc.

Vestal notes at the top of page 12 that “The challenge in becoming the presence of Christ is that many of our prejudices and patterns of living need to be altered.” Is that possible in a culture of easy Christianity and convenient faith? Of course it is, but does the church ( and specifically your church) want to be altered?

If Christ can change us with His presence, then He can change the world through His people who are to embody His presence.

The desire of every Christian should be to become more like Jesus with each passing day. When your class members arrive for study and worship each Lord's Day, each should evidence a more Christ-like spirit than the previous Lord's Day. Maybe we ought to ask ourselves at the beginning of each class gathering on Sundays: “How am I more like Jesus today than I was last Sunday?” (The collective “How are we...” is appropriate, too.)

Highlight for the members pages 13-14, which provide a synopsis of what the study entails.

Move into Chapter One by reading Romans 12:1-2. Remind the class that it is about the renewing our minds by way of transformation. Tell them that transformation comes from a Greek word from which we get the word “metamorphosis.” Simply put, it is changing from one thing to another in the positive sense – changing from something bad to good, from good to better, from sick to well, etc.

God has saved the whole person, including the mind. Challenge yourself and your class to begin to think and do like Jesus. Encourage the members to read and re-read the Gospels over and over all year long.

# Chapter 1

## Beginnings: Receiving the Presence of Christ

### Suggested Focal Passages

1 Peter 1:8-9; John 1:10-12; Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; and John 19:1-20

### First Steps

Remember when your children took their first steps? Hopefully there was abounding joy and laughter from both the children and you. Our first steps with Christ were joyful or they should have been. In some ways, we are continually take “first steps” of some sort with Him. And we choose to do that.

Life is about the choices we make. (Talk about some of those choices – career, spouse, retirement, etc.) Most everything we do is a choice. We choose to do some things; we choose not to do some things. Why is it that we often choose to not be like Jesus and to reject His presence? Encourage the class the share some reasons. You be prepared to share, too.

Christianity is a choice. It is a choice to a new way of living. Christianity is more than a religion. It is lifestyle. It is not designed to merely keep one out of Hell. Staying out of Hell, which ultimately is utter separation from the Living God in Christ, is one of the benefits that goes with this lifestyle. One must choose to live it, however. When one confesses his or her faith through baptism, then one is confessing he or she has chosen to live the Jesus Way. God choose us in Christ, but we choose to follow God in Christ.

You may want to share your conversion experience, or at least some highlights of it, with the class. Maybe someone else will want to share. Conversion was the beginning of receiving the presence of Christ. There was a desire at that moment to trust Jesus. The problem for many believers is that it starts and stops with conversion – the desire for the continual presence of Christ is not a reality. (Make reference to Reflection Question 3 on page 25 for discussion.)

If we really did choose to follow Him, then the question is begged: Do our lives right now reflect that we really did make that choice?

On page 19, Vestal observes that “Receiving the presence of Christ is receiving Christ himself...” He concludes the paragraph by saying we receive Christ

In simplicity – like a child  
In sincerity – like a seeker  
In surrender – like a lover

Reflect upon what this means. What does it mean to be simple like a child? What does it mean to be sincere like a seeker? What does it mean to surrender like a lover? Are we childlike enough? Are we sincere enough? Do we surrender enough? Surrender can be a tough one. The word sounds negative. Why is it that we have so much trouble with surrender?

Emphasize that the very first step we are to take is to make the deliberate choice to be and experience the presence of Christ. It is a choice.

### **The First Christian**

Vestal says on page 20 that “The first person to receive Christ in her life was his mother, Mary.” She was the “first Christian.” Mary was, in essence, the “mother of God.” Indeed, she is a model of faithful obedience. Keep in mind that she was, in all likelihood, an early teenager – probably no more than 13 or 14 years old. Jewish women were “betrothed” (Luke 1:27) at age 12.

How does this make you feel? Do you think she was the first Christian? Was she the “mother of God?” Remind the class that these thoughts are not to promote a deifying of Mary or lifting her to the realm that Roman Catholicism lifts her. Rather, these thoughts help us to appreciate that God can use anybody to fulfill His purposes – namely, being and experience the Presence of Christ for the world.

Read Luke 1:26-38 – “The Annunciation to Mary.” What are some insights from this text about being and experiencing the presence of Christ? Here are a few to get your thoughts churning.

- Surprise – Mary wasn’t expecting an angel to show up, let alone tell her God wanted to use her to birth the “Son of God.”
- Fear – The angel told her to not be afraid. We naturally respond in fear to “heavenly revelations.” We can be afraid of many things when it comes to being the presence of Christ, like rejection by and ridicule of others.
- Possibilities – From the human perspective being the presence may not be possible, but from the divine perspective, anything is possible.
- Surrender – Mary surrendered herself. She “chose.”
- Are there others that come to your mind?

Here is a thought for discussion about being the presence of Christ. What if Mary had said, “No, I can’t do that?” Remember, she had the choice. What would God have done? Would He have thought less of her? Why or why not?

Vestal notes at the bottom of page 21, “Mary shows us the way by modeling how to receive Christ and continue to receive Christ. Say yes to surprise, yes to the mystery, yes to the word of the Lord, but most of all, yes to the One who wants to make His home within us” just like He made His home, literally, for nine months in Mary’s belly!

At this point, you may want to stress the uniqueness of the human personality. Vestal does this at the bottom of page 21 and the top of page 22. Remind the class that anybody and everybody is welcome to receive the presence of Christ as a gift. All that is “required is a receptive and open heart – a simple capacity to trust and to accept what is offered” just as the first Christian, the Virgin Mary, did.

## **The First Easter**

Christianity hinges on the resurrection. Resurrection is more than an event. It is THE EVENT! It is more than just life after death. It is a way of life. Remember, that is what Christianity is: a lifestyle.

What do you think Vestal means by the statement that resurrection "...was the translation of Jesus into a transcendent yet tangible life completely new to human experience."? Encourage class members to share even as you share what you think he means. He fleshes this out in the last paragraph on page 22.

No matter what anybody thinks about the Resurrection, it "is the great reversal that stands everything on its head. It challenges and changes what we thought we knew. And it definitely changes us" (page 23).

## **Conclusion**

Stress that Christ's Presence

Calms Our Fears  
Cleanses Our Guilt  
Cools Our Anger

If you are still afraid

If you still feel guilty

If you are still angry

Then, you need to begin anew; begin with fresh confidence that you are going to receive the presence of Christ.

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## Chapter 2

# The Basics: Nurturing the Presence of Christ

### Some Suggested Focal Passages

John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 4:7-21; John 21:15-19; Ephesians 3:16-19; Psalm 19; Psalm 119; John 8:31; John 14; and others that may come to your mind.

### Introduction

Last week our study began by focusing on “Receiving the Presence of Christ.” Review with your class members the essentials of Chapter 1. You may wish to do this by way of the subtitles in each chapter. Last week’s were:

1. First Steps
2. The First Christian
3. The First Easter

This week’s lesson is focused on the basics of how one, after receiving the presence of Christ, can nurture that presence.

Consider what the word “**nurture**” means. Ask the class what the word means. Affirm the answers (if possible.) Nurture is something that “nourishes.” It is “sustenance.” The word comes from a Latin word meaning, “*suckling*” or “*suckle*.” A second word connected to nurture is “**nurturance**,” which means the providing of loving care and attention.

A third word associated with nurture is “**nutrition**.” It, too, comes from that same Latin word. Nutrition is the process of nourishing or being nourished, especially the process by which a living organism assimilates food and uses it for growth and the maintenance of tissues.

We are encouraged to live healthy lives with a proper diet, exercise, and rest. The result will be the growth and maintenance of bodily tissues. In other words, it means a healthy life.

If one has received the presence of Christ, then one must nurture that presence. A proper regimen of diet, exercise, and rest will result in His presence being nurtured.

Some goals for this session may be:

1. Understanding there are at least three ways the presence can be nurtured.
2. Learning to let Christ love you and you, in turn, love Him by loving others.
3. Learning what the purpose of Scripture reading and study is.
4. Learning the importance of silence.
5. Learning what it means to be at the feet of Jesus.

## Nurturing the Presence Through Love

Love is the essence of any relationship. This is especially true of one with Christ. Many of us learned the Gospel in A Nutshell when we were children. **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”** John 3:16 says it all. This is the bottom line.

What does it mean for God to love us? Ask the class for feedback.

Here’s another one: What is love?

There are four Greek words that translate our English word, “love.” Each has a different meaning.

The first is *storge* [pronounced, “STORE–gay”]. It describes family love as, say the love a father has for his children. This word is not used in the New Testament by itself. It is coupled, one time, with the word *philiōs* (see below) in Romans 12:10 and translated **“devoted” (Today’s NIV)** or **“mutual affection” (NRSV)**.

The second is *eros* [pronounced, “AIR–ros”]. This is sexual love. The word “erotic” comes from this word. It is a sensual love that is more physical than emotional. This can be very selfish love. Note that, in and of itself, there is nothing wrong with *eros*. There is nothing wrong with sexual love, sexual desire in the proper context. This word, like *storge*, is not used in the New Testament.

The third is *philiōs* [pronounced, “PHIL–lee–oss”]. This is brotherly/sisterly love. The word, “Philadelphia” (the city of brotherly love) comes from *philiōs*. It is found throughout the New Testament and translated in various ways: “love,” “brotherly and sisterly kindness,” “love of the brothers and sisters,”. This is friendship love. In John 11:36, an observation was made about Jesus’ relationship to Lazarus, who had died. With Jesus weeping over his friend’s death and the grief of his sisters, Mary and Martha, those present said, **“See how he [Jesus, that is] loved him [Lazarus, that is].”** The word translated “love” is from the word *philiōs*.

The fourth word is *agape* [pronounced, “ah–GAH–pay”]. This is unconditional love that always, no matter what, puts another first. Ideally, this is the love that should govern all human relationships. This is the love with which God loves us. This is the principal word for “love” in the New Testament. Return to John 11. In verse five, an observation is made that Jesus **“loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus...”** The word translated “love” is from *agape*.

In the exchange between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-19, both *agape* and *philiōs* are used. When Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” the word is *agape*. He asks him this twice. When Peter responds twice, “I love you” he is using the word *philiōs*. Jesus asks a third time, “Peter do you love me?” (v. 17). This time, however, Jesus uses the word *philiōs*. Peter responds, as he did previously, with the word *philiōs*. Realizing that Peter isn’t where he needs to be, Jesus meets him where he is. Peter is unable to respond with *agape* as Jesus asks him. So Jesus asks Peter with Peter’s response of *philiōs*. Hope this isn’t confusing!

You may want to remind the class that Jesus meets us where we are in our journey.

What is your response to Vestal's statement at the top of page 28? "God's love for us goes beyond a general benevolence or good will toward all humanity. God's love is highly personal for each human being—individualized, intimate, and passionate." Is God's love personal for each of the more than six billion people on Earth? If it is, how does that make you feel?

God is always pursuing us. He never lets up. Frances Thompson, years ago, wrote a poem titled, "The Hound of Heaven," in which he portrayed God as a hound dog who never lets up until the dog finds what he/she is looking for. God never lets up in His pursuit of humanity. He desperately wants to love. He wants to love you. He is constantly on your trail. As Vestal notes, "We will never reach a time when we will not need the rush and flow of God's love made real by the presence of Christ" (p. 28).

That which makes me who I am is that I am in the image and likeness of God my Creator. My spirit has been breathed upon by the very breath of God according to Genesis 2:1-7. I am a living being. Because God has breathed the breath of life into me, God thus animates my mind, emotion and will.

To be fully human means that I have a spirit within me that allows me to receive, experience, and delight in God's love – His *agape* first, and also His *phili*os. He lays down His life through Jesus because He loves us so much.

On the cross, Jesus "commended His spirit" into the Father's hands. See Luke 23:46. We think of doing this at death. But Vestal suggests we are to do it in life as well. We are to engage the practice of giving our lives to Christ every day. "Jesus, I commend my spirit into Your hands this day." Doing so, will result in His presence being nurtured as we allow Him to just love us. Remind the class each of us must be intentional, deliberate, conscious, and thoughtful when it comes to commending our spirits into the Father's hands, even while we still live.

Conclude this section with a reading of Ephesians 3:16-19. The word translated "love," in this passage is *agape*.

For Discussion:

- How can one simply pause and let Christ love?
- Why is it so hard to tell Him that we love Him and not tell one another we love Him and each other? Why is it hard for brother Rough Man to say to Brother Self-Made Man, "I love you?"

### **Nurturing the Presence Through the Scriptures**

Psalms 19 and 119 are powerful words about the written expression of God—the Holy Bible, that is. This is especially true of Number 119 in the Psalter. In this meditation on God's Law, the first five books of the Bible (in the Christian interpretation, this is the entire Bible), the writer is enjoined to keep and teach the Law, not to forget it, to rejoice in it, and thereby possess life.

We listen to and learn about Christ from the Scriptures. In order to do that, one has to open the Bible. The late Dale Moody, seminary professor and theologian, would wear a Bible out

every two or three years. When opening it to read in chapel one morning, a page fell out and he had to retrieve it. There were a few chuckles. He said, “Do you know why my Bible falls apart? I open it.”

The Scriptures must be read in both the Old and New Testaments. If one reads only the Old Testament, he or she misses out on the conclusion of the story. If one reads only the New Testament, he or she misses out on the beginning of the story.

#### LEARN THE STORY

The central character of the Bible is Jesus Christ. He is the means of biblical interpretation. When one reads the Old Testament, one is to read it with the eyes, ears, mind, and heart of Jesus.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is a story.

What does it mean to “learn the story?” It surely has to be more than memorizing it. Some sincere people just can’t memorize. I think it is okay if people cannot memorize scripture. It is far better for them to be able to tell where the story of the Prodigal Son is located (Luke 15) and then tell the story in their own words than to memorize it verbatim from a particular translation. (Is that good advice or not? Why or why not?)

The Bible is a reflection of us. It does define us. It is a narrative about our lives individually and collectively. It is more than a list of dos and don’ts. To be sure, it does contain such lists.

Learning the story and telling it, in our own words, nurtures the presence of Christ.

#### LEARN THE TRUTH

Jesus noted in John 14 that he was the “*way, the truth, and the life.*” He is truth. In learning the truth, it is important to keep in mind that the Bible is not God. It is not Jesus. We do not have eternal life in the Scriptures. Jesus reminded the religious leadership of this in John 5 (note pp. 31 and 32 in the book). The Bible teaches us that truth is in a person: Jesus. We have a relationship with a person -- not with pages. In no way is this meant to demean the Bible. It is a reminder that believers draw truth from the Bible about the Truth. That Truth, according to John 8:31, will set one free.

We are to be careful that we not make the Bible an idol. Remember -- the Bible is not God. It reveals to us who God is and His desire to be in our lives.

Remind the class that Bible reading and Bible study have one purpose and one purpose alone. The result of reading and study should be experiencing the presence of Christ and becoming more like Christ with each reading and each study.

For Discussion:

- What are some scripture readings and study practices that result in experiencing the Presence of Christ and becoming more like Him? Ask the class to share what kinds of scripture reading patterns they use.
- What does it mean to meditate on the word of God?

### **Nurturing the Presence Through Silence**

A couple of songs from back in the sixties come to mind. “Silence Is Golden” and “The Sounds of Silence.” Silence does nurture the presence of Christ. But many are afraid of the quiet. We live in a noisy world and have become so accustomed to noise that we have difficulty functioning without it.

One has to work at being still and knowing that God is God, as the Psalmist says in 46:10. Vestal notes that “one can be all alone yet not enter into silence” (p. 33).

If silence is to happen, it is necessary for one to be disciplined about creating it, nurturing it, and cultivating it. Point out that Vestal, on page 33, says if we truly want to follow Jesus, we must be “willing to follow Him into times of silence.”

For discussion:

- Why are we (maybe some aren't, but in general, most are) fearful of silence?
- What are ways in which silence can be nurtured?
- Ask if anyone has ever been on a silent retreat over the course of a weekend? Use your imagination. What do you think a silent retreat would look like? What do you think might be involved? How do you think it would sound?

### **Nurturing the Presence Through Letting Go**

Falling at the feet of Jesus -- this is letting go. Mary of Bethany is a good example of one who did this and nurtured the presence of Christ in three settings.

First, she sits at the **feet of Jesus** in Luke 10:38-42. Here she is instructed by Him. She is taught the ways of God.

Second, she falls at the **feet of Jesus** in John 11. Here she is comforted by Him as she grieves the death of her brother, Lazarus.

Third, she anoints the **feet of Jesus** in John 12:1-8. Here she worships Him.

For discussion:

- What does the image of “feet of Christ” mean to you? Is it a good metaphor?
- Why is it so hard to let go of old sayings, so to speak, and to receive new instruction from Christ? We’ve heard the adage, “My grandmother told me that it was in the Bible and if grandmother said it was so, it is so.” But what if it isn’t? Talk about ways one can let go. Surely we may, from time-to-time, need to change an attitude or even a belief. Why is it so hard? A Jewish Rabbi said, “Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, but nobody is entitled to be wrong in the facts.” Fact over opinion. Jesus is fact. Grandmother may be nothing more than opinion if she conflicts with Jesus.
- Talk about ways of letting go in being comforted and letting go in worship.

# Chapter 3

## Prayer: Practicing the Presence of Christ

### Some Suggested Scripture Texts

Matthew 6:5-15; 7:7-11; Luke 11:1-13; and John 17.

### Introduction

Last week, our study began by focusing on “Nurturing the Presence of Christ.” Review with your class members the essentials of Chapter 2. Perhaps the best way to do this is by way of the subtitles in each chapter. Last week’s were:

1. Nurturing the Presence through Love
2. Nurturing the Presence through the Scriptures
3. Nurturing the Presence through Silence
4. Nurturing the Presence through Letting Go

This week’s lesson is focused on the practicing the presence of Christ by way of prayer. This is the first of two lessons on prayer. Next week we’ll be examining “contemplative prayer.”

### What Is Prayer?

Maybe it is best to begin with a brief discussion of what prayer is. If you can ask the question: “What is prayer?” you will probably get various responses and all of them will come under the single heading: Talking to God. Prayer, though, is much more than talking to God.

The word “prayer” is derived from a Middle Latin word, which literally means, “to entreat.” It is an act of communion with one worshipped. Peter Selby observes that:

Prayer is the generic term for all aspects of humanity’s conscious relationship to God as in “the life of prayer.” As such it has been held to include liturgical worship **[or worship regardless of the style or form]** meditation and individual prayer, as well as such other religious duties as fasting and almsgiving **[see Matthew 6]**. In a more specific sense, it denotes that part of humanity’s relationship which consists of mental and verbal fellowship with God. The word can also refer, in the plural or with the indefinite article, to forms of words addressed to God.<sup>1</sup>

**[Bold brackets within direct quotations are the lesson writer’s comments.]**

You may want to get the class to responds to Selby’s words – especially the phrase, “consists of mental and verbal fellowship with God.”

Richard Foster, in his book, Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home, says in the preface that “prayer ushers us into the Holy of Holies, where we bow before the deepest mysteries of the faith...”<sup>2</sup> We might ask ourselves: Does prayer really put us in the actual presence of God? (Engage the class in discussion.)

According to Vestal, “prayer is our attentiveness to God” (p. 37). It is our response to God’s constant pursuit of us. We pray because we pay attention to the presence of Christ. Prayer is certainly conversation, but it is more. Prayer is practicing the presence of Christ.

Nicholas Herman, who became known as Brother Lawrence, was born in 1611 in Lorraine, France. After a rather obscure childhood, he joined the army, serving for 18 years. He eventually landed in Paris where he worked for a time as aide to the treasurer of France. He was led to join a Catholic order in Paris where he worked as a cook for 30 years. He died in 1691. He left no major writings, only a few spiritual notes and a few edifying letters. A year after his death some of his notes and letters were assembled and published under the title, The Practice of the Presence of God, which has become a classic in spiritual writings. Interestingly, the book, which is still in print, has been more popular with Protestants than with Romans Catholics.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of Brother Lawrence’s work for our study is pointed out by Vestal. Brother Lawrence discovered the greatest secret of living in the Kingdom of God on earth. It is the art of “practicing the presence of God in one single act that does not end.” He learned an important lesson as a cook: “The time he spent in communion with the Lord should be the same, whether he was bustling around in the kitchen – with several people asking questions at the same time – or on his knees in prayer.”<sup>4</sup>

So how does prayer become practicing the presence of Christ? Vestal reveals how.

### **Rule and Rhythm**

Here the emphasis is upon “prayer practice.” There are many ways in which one can pray. There is no universal rule or rhythm for the practice of prayer. Everyone needs to establish a rule and rhythm for praying as a means of practicing the presence of Christ. Depending on where one is in his or her spiritual journey, adjustments may have to been made in the practice of prayer. The point, however, is that some order and organization for prayer is to be established.

An individual must establish a “rule of life” or a daily discipline. “I am going to get up every morning at 5:30 and spend 20 minutes in prayer” is an example of a rule. We have to engage in prayer. We learn to pray by praying (Vestal, p. 38).

We also need to establish a “rhythm of life.” Life is constant. It never stops. The rhythm of life is ordered by time. Vestal says “we need a holy rhythm incorporating work and play, solitude and community, family and ministry, engagement and retreat, activity and rest” (p. 39).

#### **For discussion:**

1. Ask the class what some of the rules and rhythms of their own lives are. Do they ever change?
2. Do the rules and rhythms come naturally after being practiced for a while? Do you sense the presence of Christ in your practices?

Vestal mentions four broad areas of prayer practices that tie into the rule and rhythm. In this session, three of them will be examined: body prayer, vocal prayer, and mental prayer.

## ***Body Prayer***

Body prayer is the engaging of our physical selves for spiritual ends. This form of prayer might include the following:

1. Fasting – to deprive the body of something in order to become conscious of the presence of Christ. See Matthew 6:16-18.
2. Physical activity or exercise – some people run or play basketball to the glory of God and do so with God in their thoughts every step of the way.
3. Posture in prayer
  - Face down with arms outstretched on the floor – lying prostrate.
  - Bowing in prayer – suggesting humility and reverence.
  - Standing, swaying, dancing. Do Baptists dance?! David did! See 2 Samuel 6.
  - The use of the hands – making the sign of the Cross. We see Roman Catholics do this. Some have disdain for that. Think about it, though. Is there anything really, in and of itself, wrong with making the sign of the cross? The sign of the cross is a good thing, isn't it. Also the lifting of the hands, for example – see 1 Timothy 2:8.
  - Gently kissing an object.

The point of these kinds of motions or postures is learning to be attentive to God with one's body.

### For discussion:

1. Get the class to talk about the various ways in which the body may be used. Has anyone ever fasted and viewed that as prayer? Is fasting important for spiritual reasons?
2. What about posture? Does this make you uncomfortable? Does one have to bow the head and close the eyes in order to be in a posture of prayer?
3. Does the idea of kissing an object in an attitude of prayer bother you? Why or why not?

## ***Vocal Prayer***

We use our voices in vocal prayer which is the most common and widely accepted way to practice the presence of Christ. The voice may be used in public and in private.

Jesus was a person of prayer who offered vocal prayers to the Father. First and foremost, Christ was a person of prayer. As a practitioner of Judaism, Jesus engaged in morning prayer, noon prayer, evening prayer, prayer at meals, and at the various festivals.

Scripture reveals very little about the content of Jesus' prayers with the exception of what may be the most important prayer ever recorded: The High Priestly Prayer or the Lord's Prayer in John 17. What we usually call "The Lord's Prayer" really should be called the Model Prayer or the Disciples' Prayer. See Matthew 6:9b-13 and Luke 11:2b-4.

Vestal, on pages 43-45, proposes nine forms of vocal prayer. He lists scriptures for each, with the exception of talking, singing and chanting.

1. *Talk to God* – using common language.
2. *Sing to God* – sometimes we can only sing what is in our hearts even if we don't have a real talent for it! See Ephesians 5:15-20 and Colossians 3:15-17.
3. *Chant to God* – a sincere and serious repetition of a word, phrase or song that focuses on Christ. It can be as simple as “Lord Jesus Christ I love you more than life itself.” “I praise you dear Jesus.” The so called “Jesus Prayer” is another. One version of it goes something like this: “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, make haste and come to me. Have mercy on me and forgive my sin.” The key is sincere repetition. When a young girl in my congregation was in the critical care unit of an Atlanta hospital, as physicians, EMTs, nurses, and others were fighting for her life, I was permitted to go into the unit and be as near her as they would allow me to be. I was probably 25 feet away from her. I could see her face most of the time – her body all the time. Had she been conscious, I would have been the only one she would have known since family and friends weren't permitted to be there. After praying for a good while, in my fatigue, I began praying a chant for more than an hour, over and over, looking into the room at her, “Lord Jesus Christ, Big Brother and Savior of this child, come alongside her and heal her.” Sometimes I said it in my mind and heart. At other times, I said it aloud, though not in a disruptive way. The point of chant is sincere, heart-felt repetition to God.
4. *Shout to God* – suggests passion and intensity.
5. *Whisper to God* – speaking quietly to the Lord.
6. *Groan to God* – simple sighs or agonizing cries because we don't know what to say.
7. *Lament to God* – complain, be angry, express grief, and/or confusion.
8. *Laugh to God* – a sign of joy.
9. *Babble to God* – a gift of the Holy Spirit often called “speaking in tongues.” See 1 Corinthians 12, 13, and 14.

#### For Discussion:

1. What do you think about reading a written prayer? Is there anything wrong with that? Do you think God appreciates thoughtfulness in our spoken prayers?
2. Is it necessary to practice all nine forms of vocal prayer? What advantage is there to doing so? What are the disadvantages, if any?
3. What about chanting? Do you ever say something over and over to God?

#### ***Mental Prayer***

Mental prayer is the framing or constructing of a mental image in response to God. “You are in my thoughts” can be a kind of prayer. To see someone in one's mind and to focus on them can become a way of praying for them. If we see the person, so does God.

This is more than just a mental process. It is an act of genuine faith. And that is what prayer is -- an act of faith. Vestal notes that we often talk about “answered prayer” or say “prayer changes things.” This is true. We do see some prayers answered and we do witness change as a result of prayer. But is it necessary for prayer to be answered or to see change in order for prayer to be genuine? As Vestal says, “prayer is not a scientific exercise” – scientific suggesting it can be proven or validated. Prayer “... is a faith exercise” (p. 45), nothing more and nothing less.

Focus on C. S. Lewis' explanation on page 46 and then on Hebrews 11:1.

One of the best observations about prayer is on page. 46. “In prayer we think and talk as if God is really there, and we act as if that God is personal, caring, and responsive.” God really is there. He really is in our midst. We don’t have to ask Him to be with us or “come into our presence.” He is already in our presence and we are coming into His. Before we even come to Him, He is constantly moving toward us. Read Psalm 139 as a reminder that we cannot flee the presence of God, no matter where we go.

Ultimately, God is spirit. God is neither male nor female. We refer to Him in the masculine sense as Father and as Son since those are rendered in the masculine form in Greek in the New Testament. Interestingly, however, the neuter form in Greek is used in the New Testament to refer to God as Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit is announced as neither male nor female! It is appropriate to say, “He” when referring to the Holy Spirit and, believe it or not, it is also appropriate to say, “She” when referring to the Holy Spirit. It is probably best to just say, “Spirit” or “the Spirit” or “Holy Spirit.” In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word that describes God as “spirit” is, more often than not, in the feminine form. Sometimes it is masculine, but that is rare. Most are feminine.

The point of all this is to acknowledge that God, who is spirit, is not bound by time or gender and whatever. He is everywhere. He is incomprehensible. That’s one of those things left to mystery. This is where the mental comes in to play. Vestal says, “Prayer, especially mental prayer, is paying attention or fixing our thoughts or centering our lives on ‘the invisible’ reality we call God” (p. 47).

There are four forms of mental prayer described on pages 47-51.

1. *Discourse* – this is a conversation with God. A mental construct is formed and it is expressed to God with the belief that God hears and answers it. We are speaking, if only mentally, and God is listening. The Model Prayer or Disciples’ Prayer is in this form. See Matthew 6:9b-13 and its parallel in Luke 11:2b-4. The Luke version is different. Vestal touches on each request in the Model Prayer on pages 47 and 48. “To be able to pray is to be human” (p. 48).
2. *Meditation* – this is thinking thoughtfully on a biblical or spiritual truth for a prolonged period of time. Meditation is not rushed. It is an evidence of patience. The long-term goal is transformation by the Spirit of Christ. To think about something is, if God is in the center of it, praying about it. Thinking can be praying.
3. *Imagination* – this is placing one’s self into a biblical story. The story becomes a story about you. “Much of scripture feeds the imagination because it is designed to do so” (p. 50). This is especially true with Revelation.
4. *Remembering* – this is a reflection on the past. A part of biblical Christian faith involves remembering. In order to do that, one must rehearse the memories. This is why we gather on the Lord’s Day week after week because, in our study and worship, we remember together by listening to a portion of the Story once again. We are to set specific times to remember – the Lord’s Day is the best, but not the only one. There is a cultic calendar in the Old Testament and Jesus, the fulfillment of the Old Testament, practiced it. That cultic calendar detailed in Exodus 23:14-16; Leviticus 16 and 23; Numbers 28:1-29:40; and Deuteronomy 16:1-17 became the basis for our Christian Calendar which includes the Lord’s Day (Sunday), Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost, in addition to other holy days such as the anniversary of the church.

Honoring these times is a way to pray by remembering. Keeping a journal is also an excellent way to remember. It uses the body and the mind. Remembering can also move us to confession.

In prayer, we are to examine our lives as we seek to be and experience the presence of Christ.

#### For discussion:

1. Is it necessary for prayer to always be answered? Why? Why not? Is it enough to simply pray and give no thought to answers?
2. Vestal says, "In prayer we think and talk as if God is really there, and we act as if that God is personal, caring, and responsive" (p. 46). Based on that statement, it seems that prayer is more of a relationship than it is bowing the head and closing the eyes ("the life of prayer" according to Selby). Ought not every waking moment be such that we believe God really is in our midst and that He is caring? What do you think about the idea that prayer is about a relationship?
3. Think about some ways you can use your mind in praying. For example, you might use your church's pictorial directory to pray for members simply by looking at their pictures.
4. What about the imagination? Have you ever put yourself into the biblical story?

#### Conclusion

Prayer really is practicing the presence of Christ. "Practice makes perfect" is the expression. Return to Brother Lawrence, who, you remember, discovered the greatest secret of living in the Kingdom of God on earth: the art of "practicing the presence of God in one single act that does not end."

The time one spends in communion with the Lord should be the same, whether one is bustling around in the kitchen or factory or office or wherever – with several people asking questions at the same time – or one's knees in prayer.

#### For Next Week...

Encourage members to read and re-read carefully Chapter 4 on "Contemplative Prayer." It is a short chapter, but may be the most challenging to grasp.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Selby, "Prayer" in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* Edited by J. G. Davies (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 440.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Allen Cabaniss, "Brother Lawrence" in *Who's Who in Christian History* J.D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, editors and Donald Miller, associate editor (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Brother Lawrence, *The Practicing of the Presence of God* (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), back cover of the book.

# Chapter 4

## Contemplative Prayer: Resting in the Presence of Christ

### Some Suggested Scripture Texts

Psalm 37:7; 46:10; 62:1-5; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Isaiah 6:1-8; 40:18-31; Jeremiah 6:16 Habakkuk 2:20; and Matthew 11:25-30

When looking at the suggested texts, be sure and review the context.

### Introduction

Last week our study began a two-week concentration on prayer. As with previous weeks, you will want to review the essentials of Chapter 3 by utilizing the subtitles of the chapter. The first one is not a subtitle. It is focused upon understanding what prayer is. Those following are the subtitles.

1. What Is Prayer?
2. Rule and Rhythm
  - *Body Prayer*
  - *Vocal Prayer*
  - *Mental Prayer*
3. Conclusion

### The Realm of Contemplative Prayer

This session moves us into a realm of praying with which most are very inexperienced and even uncomfortable. The underlying concept which undergirds contemplative prayer is silence. Richard Foster says it “immerses us into the silence of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Silence is a good thing. We live in such a loud and deafening environment that often we have difficulty hearing God in a noisy world.

Contemplative prayer moves us into the realm of silence – a realm that is mostly unknown to many Christians. In silence, we are permitted to rest – the body, the mind, and the spirit. Vestal rightly titles this chapter: “resting in the presence of Christ.” The ultimate goal of this kind of praying is to listen for God in quiet.

Sometimes words get in the way. Often husbands and wives are very quiet in their relationship. When traveling together, they may go for hours without saying a single word to each other. Are they angry or upset? No. They are simply confident in their relationship that they can speak love and commitment without words. They can be in the same room for an extended period and never speak, yet be closer than ever, absorbed into one another simply because of each other’s presence. They rest in the quiet of their relationship. One can think, for example, of couples who are in the same car, seated by each other traveling for a hundred miles, talking constantly, and yet be a thousand miles apart.

On pages 53 and 54, Vestal notes, “Contemplative prayer for a Christian does not deny or negate the physical and mental realities in which we live. These are God’s good creation. Neither does contemplative prayer aim at becoming nothing, being nothing, or entering into nothing. Christian contemplation is based on the firm belief in a personal, loving God. But it is also based on the belief that this loving God is infinite, holy, and eternal. So there are times when it is good to stop talking, stop thinking, stop striving, stop everything, and just ‘be’ in the all-pervasive presence of this loving, good, personal, infinite, and transcendent God.” In other words: Shut up and listen!

Please note that, biblically there is nothing wrong with saying “shut up.” When Jesus calmed the storm in Mark 4:35-41, He said to the wind, in many translations in verse 39, “Peace be still.” Other translations say, “Be quiet” or “Hush.” The word translated “peace” or “be quiet” or “hush” literally means to “shut-up.” Sometimes there is the need to tell the inner voices and outer voices to hush and be quiet so that a calm can come.

That is the purpose of this kind of praying. It is not seeking anything. It is not asking God to be with Grandmother while she is having gall bladder surgery. That does not mean we abstain from praying for Grandmother’s surgery; it does mean, however, that every prayer we pray should not always be aimed at the sick or at some request. Winfred Moore, a retired Baptist pastor from Amarillo, Texas, once told the prayer meeting crowd in the church he pastored on a Wednesday evening, “If it weren’t for gall bladder surgery, Baptists wouldn’t have anything for which to pray.” While humorous, there is an element of truth in his observation. “Contemplative prayer is to listen, to be loved, and to love” (page 54) and not to make any pleas for help.

Vestal summarizes two forms of contemplative prayer. Both of these have a common goal--“to create a space where God can communicate” (p. 55). These forms help us focus or center. As an aside, contemplative prayer has also been called “centering prayer.” The point is to help one get centered and turned away from the distractions of the world and our lives.

As you guide the class in a discussion of Kataphatic Prayer and Apophatic Prayer, you may want to remind them this may be totally new to them. If it is new to you, acknowledge it. Our Christian ancestors across the centuries have practiced these forms of prayer as a way to get focused.

### **Kataphatic Prayer**

The word “kataphatic” [pronounced, kata-FA-tic] is the combination of two Greek words meaning “with images.” It stresses the use of the senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) as a means of experiencing divine grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Vestal lists various ways in which one can practice this kind of prayer.

### ***Music***

Music can transport one into another realm. It has the power to capture the attention and direct one into the presence of God. Think about a piece of instrumental music that is meaningful to you, in which you sense the power and presence of God whenever you hear it. What does it do to you? Or, think about a song, whose lyrics usher you into the presence of God.

Neither has to be “religious.” If you saw the movie “Sister Act,” you know this. The sisters sing the secular song from the ’60s, “I Will Follow Him.”

There are moments in worship, for example, when we hear a stirring song the choir or a soloist or group sings that is so overwhelming that a thunderous applause is most appropriate. There are other times, however, when the song is so still, so soft, so profound and hushed, that all we can do is sit in quiet, awestruck wonder.

### *Nature*

Look around you and marvel at God’s creation. Think of the hymn, “This Is My Father’s World.” Creation allows us to experience the power and presence of God by simply looking at it. Vestal talks on page 56 about “immersing” oneself in nature. He also points out, rightly so, that God and nature are not the same. Nature does, however, reveal God for it has His imprint on it.

Get the class to join you in thinking of a time when you were led to worship as a result of being “immersed” with nature. Be prepared to share an experience or enlist one in the class to do so.

The first time I saw the ocean, I was moved to silence even as I listened to the roar of the waves. I was overwhelmed at its vastness. Another experience that moved me to a hushed moment was reading Isaiah 40:25-31, several years ago, which I had read on many occasions. But this time it struck me that God put all the stars in place, named each one, and knows each one by name. I don’t know how many stars there are, but let’s say there are 1,782,938 stars (we don’t know how many there are because of the vastness of the universe). God knows each star by name – even those that haven’t been discovered! I drove out in the country, away from the light of the city on a clear night, to look into the heavens, after reading Isaiah 40. I beheld the stars. I was quiet.

Nature can also calm our spirits. “Nature,” says Vestal, “can...calm and soothe us. Nature can create a sweetness and healing that no logic or language can” (p. 57). Examples of this are a sunrise and/or a sunset. One of my best friends from college days is dying from cancer in Kentucky. One of his desires is to see a Pacific sunset before he departs this life. He thinks there will be something soothing about that, even though he knows it will not heal him; he believes it will bring him closer to His Creator. My friend will probably not see the Pacific sunset, since death is drawing ever nearer. But he has seen the sunset many times in Kentucky and has been drawn near to God and calmed in his spirit.

### *Artistic Beauty*

Both the performing arts (dance, drama, film) and the visual arts (painting and sculpture) allow us to enter into contemplation. I have watched liturgical dance (Baptists call it “interpretive movement” since Baptists don’t dance! That’s a joke – although there may be an element of truth in it!) in gatherings where I experienced God’s presence. There may be some drama or film such as “The Shawshank Redemption” (my favorite movie) or “To Kill A Mockingbird” which draws us into the presence of the Holy Other.

Images are used in worship to help us contemplate. In our church, on the Lord’s Supper table are some symbols of salvation: a loaf, a cup, a jar of water, a cross, a crown of thorns, a

towel, a wash basin, a pitcher, a flask of oil, candles, and ashes. A cross is placed above the baptismery in the center for all to see. On the walls, down the hallways of the church building, are depictions of various biblical scenes that were painted by some of our members. All of this is visual art which helps us to experience God. Consider the powerful image in our chapel. The stained glass window of Jesus praying in the Garden is a powerful way for us to sit and contemplate the presence of Christ and to rest in it. All of these icons (images) are ways of doing just that -- resting in Jesus.

Vestal notes that all practice kataphatic prayer by way of the Lord's Supper. It is all-encompassing involving all the senses. Read his words about this on page 58. I had never thought of the Supper in this light. I have come to a new appreciation of the Faith Meal we eat together in the Lord's Supper.

#### For discussion:

1. Names ways in which all five senses can be used in prayer with images.
2. What about music as a vehicle for kataphatic prayer? Ask the class to share their thoughts about music being a form of prayer – instrumental included. Warning: there may be a temptation to argue about “genre” of music and one's personal preference. Paul said in Ephesians 5 *“to sing hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs...”* We are supposed to sing all of them – not just those we prefer. Don't digress into discussions such as, “We need to sing more old-fashioned hymns” or “We need to ditch the hymns for Chris Tomblin” or “...have more organ and piano” and “...less percussion and guitar.” If the discussion moves in this direction, the whole point of music as a way to rest in the presence of Christ is missed. Duke Ellington once said, “There are two kinds of music: good and bad.” Think about the good kind of music, regardless of genre, as that means of contemplation.
3. Does nature really allow us to rest in the Presence? How does ecology fit into this? Are being environmentally responsible and moving in the direction of being “green” ways to rest in the Presence of Christ?
4. Name some of the ways art inspires a centering of one's spirit. Ask members, including yourself, if they have ever gone into their places of worship, sat down, and looked at any of the symbols there in silence and for a prolonged period of time. If they haven't, ask why not?

#### Apophatic Prayer

The word “apophatic” comes from two Greek words meaning “without images.” This kind of contemplation seeks to “minimize and even deny the senses and all mental constructs so as to respond to God alone. The goal of apophatic prayer is response to God rather than thoughts or feelings about God or images of God” (p. 58).

This is an attempt to negate our human and finite constructs of God. It is simply responding to God as a profound mystery who is far beyond human comprehension. It can open one up to positive images, though, that augment the experience of resting in Christ's presence. Vestal offers a good example by utilizing the grand hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy!” Read the lyrics on page 59. Even though God is revealed, there is also a “hidden-ness about God.”

“If in this form of contemplative prayer one can embrace an inward separation from the world, solitude, and silence – even briefly – one encounters and experiences the God who also dwells in separation, solitude, and silence. A truly holy communion takes place” (p. 59).

You may want to note that this is extremely hard to do. I confess that I’m not very successful at it. Most aren’t, because it is such a different kind of way to pray. It takes practice, practice, and more practice. Even then it is not always achieved. I think this is why Dr. Vestal says, in the above statement, “even briefly.” This inward separation can happen, but it may be for a brief moment.

The key is to center on something. Centering prayer is a practice in which a sacred word is selected and used as a way to grant God permission to put His presence and action within an individual. The challenge is learning how to center one’s thoughts.

#### For Discussion:

1. Ask the class what it thinks about “prayer without images?” Can anyone give a testimony about praying this way?
2. What are some ways one can achieve, if but for a brief moment, centering?
3. This kind of praying can be time-consuming. Do you think being introduced to this sort of praying reminds us that praying requires discipline and time?

#### Conclusion

We need to learn to relax more than we do. We certainly need to rest in the Lord. There are many ways by which we can do this. Contemplative prayer is one and can be very meaningful and rewarding. But it takes time and it takes practice. Kataphatic prayer is easier to achieve than apophatic. But both can be challenging. Again, these remind us that to be and experience the presence of Christ one is to move beyond making requests to God for whatever reason.

Contemplative prayer is not for the novice. “While we are all equally precious in the eyes of God, we are not all equally ready to listen to ‘God’s speech in His wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence.’”<sup>2</sup> It takes time to achieve. Don’t be afraid to begin the journey, however, into this realm of prayer. It really is resting in the presence of Christ.

#### For Next Week...

Encourage members to read and re-read carefully Chapter Five on “Personal Transformation.”

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, Prayer: Finding the Heart’s Home p. 155.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, p. 156.

# Chapter 5

## Personal Transformation: Being Changed by the Presence of Christ

### Some Suggested Scripture Texts

Jeremiah 29:10-14; Matthew 6:25-34; Romans 7; Romans 8:18; Ephesians 5:10-20; Philippians 2:5-13; 1 John 4:1-6

When looking at the suggested texts, be sure and review the context.

### Introduction

Begin by reviewing last week's lesson (or you may want to review the past two weeks, since both were on prayer). Contemplative prayer immerses us into the quiet of God. There are two forms of contemplative prayer.

1. Kataphatic prayer – prayer with images.
2. Apophatic prayer – prayer without images.

You may want to ask if class members were able to practice these forms during the past week. If some did, ask if they are willing to share their experiences with the class. You may want to share yours.

This week's session is on personal transformation. The emphasis is upon allowing the presence of Christ to change us. A full and meaningful life comes by way of love. (Remind your class of the kinds of love from a previous session.) This particular love is *agape*. Is *agape* really possible or is it something about which we just talk and never seek to put into practice?

One of the essential questions of the Christian era is this: Can I, as a believer in Jesus Christ, live the kind of life that Jesus lived? Vestal asks if the life He lived is "a real-life option for today?" (p. 62). It's a good question. Can we (all of us individually and all of us corporately as a church) be transformed by the presence of Christ so that, as human beings, we can "receive love, give love, and live in love?" The answer is "Yes", but it is up to us individually and corporately.

The word "transformation" suggests change in form or appearance. From a combination of two Latin words – *trans* meaning "across, beyond, or through" and *forma* meaning "form", to be transformed is to go beyond the current form. Another way to put it in this session is: "What do I look like as a Christian? Does my form as a Christian need changing?" The answer is yes. My life could always look better and my form is in constant need of change.

### For Discussion:

1. What does your current form look like – your actions, attitudes, morals, etc.? Does your form need to go beyond the current form? If members say "No", then gently remind that no matter how godly one's current form may be, it always stands in need of being made better.

2. Zero in on living just like Jesus lived. Why do we live that way or why don't we live that way?

Vestal notes that, "Personal transformation is not left to us alone. We are not abandoned to our own will and wit... An incredible gift is offered to us. Not only consolation, comfort, and companionship but Christ's real presence collaborates with us in the process of inward transformation." (p. 62). Vestal now proceeds to show how this transformation occurs.

### **Transformation Takes Place in the Soul**

Inward change is difficult and because it is, some of us become skeptical and unenthusiastic and don't even make an attempt to change. Years ago, in a discipleship class I was teaching on the challenge of following Jesus, a young man said, "I'm not sure I want to be that spiritual." I appreciated his honesty. But how sad. Many will go only so far in their relationship with Christ due to the difficulty of following Him. Don't misunderstand me. To follow Him is joyous, no doubt; but following Jesus day-after-day can be exceedingly difficult due to our cynicism and pessimism, let alone our some times selfish lack of desire.

Changing lifelong intolerances, entrenched grudges, and paralyzing fears is no small task to accomplish. This is why we need Christ. His presence really can and really does change the way we think about things and it also affects the way we feel and behave.

I think Vestal's point that Jesus is so close to us in His presence that we often miss it altogether is a good reminder of what His presence really concerns. Quoting Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a Roman Catholic poet and mystic, Vestal notes, in a nutshell, that the goal of Christ's presence in "a deepening of faith." (p. 63). How true! We want or should want our faith to be deeper today than it was yesterday. That is transformation. That deepening of faith will result in a change in attitudes and actions.

When we allow Christ to be in us, we are awakened to a new self -- ourselves in Christ and Christ in us. Here is where we think about our/my relationship to Christ. That relationship should get better with each passing day. We are made new to receive and give love.

We are to constantly be asking, not demanding, that Christ will work in us to produce a personal transformation that will make a difference in the world. It is about seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (see Matthew 6:33).

#### **For Discussion:**

1. What does it mean to deepen one's faith? Faith is belief. Is my belief simply that there is a better life to come called Heaven or does it involve more than the life to come?
2. Vestal observes that "the ways of the inner self are complex and subtle" so we shouldn't "be shocked when change occurs in serendipities and surprises." See if some in the class wish to share experiences of change in their lives that truly were surprises. Think of some from your own experience.

### **Transformation Takes Place in Our Story**

Each of us has a story to tell. Our stories began unfolding the day we were born, they continue at this very moment, and will conclude when we die. Vestal notes, on page 66, that, “Everyday life is the place where transformation takes place because that is the location of the divine presence and providence.” But this is hard for some.

It is important for each believer to know his or her story – to get in touch with it, give thanks for it, and learn from it. This is the clear intention of the opening chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy. In those first three chapters, Moses does an historical review for the people, reminding them of their collective story. Anytime I remember or am reminded of the collective story, I am prompted to remember my own story. My story and our story encompass the past, present, and future.

### ***The Past***

We are to reflect on the past – both the good and the bad – and learn from it. The good and the bad are part of the story. Most of us have said, “If I had it to do over again, I would have...” How often have you said that?

God does not cause bad things to happen to people. Last week, I mentioned my friend dying from cancer whose desire was to see a Pacific sunset. He died shortly after I sent the study guide. For three years, he battled cancer. God did not cause that cancer, though. As a result of that cancer, however, God brought good as Allan renewed friendships and focused on celebrating each day as a gift. Trusting God results in good coming out of that which is bad.

It is a mistake for a Christian to suppress the past. Peter, I think, reflected on his denials of Christ – three of them within a short period of time. Even Jesus subtly reminded him of what he did (see John 21:15ff). Doing so made him all the more determined to be and experience the presence of Christ – so much so that, tradition says, when he was crucified in Rome, he asked to crucified upside down -- for he was not worthy to be executed as was His Lord.

Don't be afraid to remember – even the bad stuff.

### ***The Present***

It is in the present that we live. Life, each day of life, is truly a gift. My friend, Allan, realized that and attempted to celebrate each day as such. We are to express gratitude to God for the gift of this very moment. The present can be odd. One moment is filled with joy. The next is laced with sorrow. One minute is peaceful. The next minute is conflicted.

Vestal says, “Faith in Christ does not shield us from pain and problems, difficulties and disappointments.” (p. 67). Regardless, we are to celebrate it. It can be celebrated with the presence of Christ.

Don't be afraid to celebrate the present – even those conflicting emotions.

### ***The Future***

Our hope is that a better day is coming. And one is. We are to live with the belief that tomorrow will be better than today – even if it isn't. One day, however, the Day of Christ, will be the ultimate in better. That day is in the future. To be transformed by the presence of Christ calls us to “anticipate the future.” (p. 68).

Using the story of the Native American and the weather bureau, Vestal reminds us that “no one really knows the future.” (p. 68). But God does work, even now, in our future.

The first paragraph on page 69 is commanding and I personally resonate with Dr. Vestal's words. These words may make some of the class uncomfortable. We are reminded that God allows us to participate with Him in “shaping our future.” To be in fellowship with God, to have a relationship with Him through being and experiencing the presence of Christ, is to be in a partnership with Him as well. “But the future is also as bright as the choices we make and the faith we exhibit,” say Vestal.

Does God have a plan for our lives? I believe He does. But He allows us to help Him shape that plan because He has made us rational human beings in His likeness. When Vestal says he doesn't believe “the future is already fixed or determined,” I agree.

Think about this. God has not fixed or determined that my marriage is going to fail. If it fails, that is not God's fault. It is my fault and/or my spouse's fault. He has not fixed or determined that my reputation is going to be destroyed by persons who don't like me or by my doing something immoral. If that happens, it is not God's fault. That is the fault of others and/or myself. God has not fixed or determined that some people are going to Hell. That is the fault of people who refuse to confess Jesus as Lord and of you and me, whenever we refuse to bear witness to Christ. These things may happen in the future. God knows they are going to happen. But God has not fixed or determined that they will happen. Whether they happen or not is up to me and up to us. God has not written the script all by Himself.

The oft-quoted Jeremiah 29:11, “*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope,*” is a reminder that God always wants what is best for us in spite of ourselves. Stated in the context of Jeremiah's letters to Babylon (29:1-32), these words are part of the first letter (vv. 1-23), addressed to the exiles of the first deportation in 597 BC. While in exile, Jeremiah offers the people some revolutionary advice (vv. 4-7). They were to settle down for the long haul (70 years), establishing homes there and even praying for the welfare of that city. Verses 8-9 warn against listening to false prophets.<sup>1</sup>

Verses 10-14 consist of assurances regarding a future salvation.<sup>2</sup> These words, in the context of Jeremiah, prepare the reader for the section that follows in chapter 30:1-31:37, known as the Book of Consolation. The future of the people in exile rests on God's “*promise*” (v. 10) – literally God's “good word.” The promise is described, in verse 11, as plans God has for the people, plans for “*welfare*” (literally *shalom*, “peace”) that provides for a future and a hope. A tangible element to the future consists in the restoration of the people to their homeland.<sup>3</sup> **The restoration, however, is predicated on their seeking God with their whole hearts.**

My aim here is to point out that God does know the plans that He has for us. His plans are for our well-being or peace. His plans are to give us a future with hope. But He doesn't write the script all by Himself. We assist Him in fulfilling His plans. Even though God does

know the plans He has for us, we unfortunately tend to frustrate those plans. I hope this makes sense.

For discussion:

1. We learn from the past or at least we should. Why do we so often want to suppress the past – even the good? Are we afraid to learn from it? As you reflect, note ways in which you have been transformed by Christ's presence.
2. Christ is among us in the present. Do you sense a personal transformation right now, this very second? If so, in what sorts of ways?
3. Anticipating the future. What does that really mean? How do you work toward the future in partnership with God? Is the future really a matter of "What will be will be?" Do you feel there is nothing you can do about the future and so your attitude is one of resignation in which you say why bother with anticipating personal transformation?

### **Transformation Takes Place in Our Struggles**

Spiritual transformation is not easy. It is a slow process. It takes time to become like Jesus -- even a whole lifetime. Grace is free, but it is not cheap. Grace is God's part. Faith is our part. They work together. God has gotten His part right. We've not always gotten ours right, though. Years ago, someone made the observation: "Pray like everything depended on God and work like everything depended on you." Here's the rub: We've not gotten the prayer thing right, but we have gotten the work thing right and tend to depend on ourselves more than we do on God.

The point is that personal transformation is a struggle. It doesn't happen in a split second. We need to work on the "prayer thing" and be cautious with the "work thing." Vestal says, "Transformation involves struggle, and actually it is in the struggle itself that we experience transformation." (p. 69).

Paul told the Philippians to "*work out*" their "*salvation*" (2:12). We struggle with the flesh and the world. The flesh seeks to dominate the spiritual. There is a church culture and a world culture. The world seeks to dominate the church. Read carefully Vestal's words about this on pages 70 and 71. Romans Seven is a good word that speaks about this battle within the human self.

In the midst of our struggles, Vestal extends two encouragements:

One is that the root of this struggle within is not in our physical bodies. There is nothing wrong with our physical bodies and the physical aspect of life. The root of our struggle within is the raging war between good and evil.

A second word is resilience and determination through endurance. It is a matter of hanging in there and exercising self-control, self-denial, and self-discipline.

Our struggle is with the forces of evil –something which we should never underestimate.

For discussion:

1. What does it mean to “work out your own salvation?” Does that mean you do it alone, outside the context of other believers – the church, that is?
2. Have you ever found yourself struggling with the Evil One? What was it like? Who won? Were you transformed because of the presence of Christ?
3. What are some ways in which one can be resilient and determined to endure?

### **Transformation Takes Place in Our Suffering**

I don’t know of anyone who enjoys suffering. But “pain is a part of life, and it seems we live our lives on a continuum of hurts, sometimes seen by others but more often unobserved.” (p. 73).

There are the “simple incidents that interrupt.” See page 73. Then there are “the stresses” that can turn to “distress.” See page 73.

The question is what do we do with our suffering? Vestal does an excellent job on pages 73 and 74 in suggesting how the presence of Christ can work in our suffering to transform us.

Suffering can never be fully explained. But it can be a means by which we are transformed individually as a result of the presence of Christ with us always -- even unto the end of the age as Christ promises. (See Matthew 28:19-20.) The third stanza of the hymn, “How Firm a Foundation,” speaks to this assurance:

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,  
My grace all-sufficient will be your supply  
The flame shall not hurt you, I only design  
Your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

Paul was right when he said in Romans 8:18. *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”*

For discussion:

1. How have you suffered in the past? How are you suffering, if you are, in the present? Share some examples and encourage class members to share. This may be painful, but it will afford an opportunity to share about Christ’s presence and how, perhaps, transformation took place.
2. What does the presence of Christ mean to you in suffering?

### **Conclusion**

Remember, Christ is present and his “presence compels and creates love, reorients and renews the human spirit toward compassion and kindness. That presence creates a whole new capacity to love God, neighbor, and self.” (p. 61). And when all is said and done, that is enough. That is enough. Let Christ’s presence transform you.

**For Next Week...**

Encourage members to read and re-read carefully Chapter Six on “Christian Community.”

Prepared by Jimmy Gentry, Pastor  
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<sup>1</sup> Mark E. Biddle, “Jeremiah” in The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha Augmented Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 1123.

<sup>2</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “Jeremiah” in The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002), p. 403.

<sup>3</sup> J. Andrew Dearman, “Jeremiah/Lamentations” in The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2002), p. 262.

# **Chapter 6**

## **Christian Community: Experiencing the Presence of Christ with Others**

### **Some Suggested Scripture Texts**

Matthew 16:13-20; 18:15-20; Acts 1 and 2 (especially 2:42-47); and Hebrews 11 and 12.

Remember, when looking at the suggested texts, be sure and review the context.

### **Review**

Review last week's lesson on Personal Transformation.

1. Transformation takes place in the soul
2. Transformation takes place in our story
  - Our past
  - Our present
  - Our future
3. Transformation takes place in our struggles
4. Transformation takes place in our suffering

### **Introduction to Christian Community**

This week's session is on Christian community. To put it another way: It is about the church. The purpose of this session is to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of the church – not the brick and mortar, but the people who make up the church. The brick and mortar are important, but the church is people. Another purpose is to remind all of us that the church is part of God's desire and plan; so believers are to have a high regard for this organism called "church." Church is Christian Community.

It is tempting and quite easy, to be honest, to be constantly critical of the church. Many love to discuss what's wrong with the church. When asked, "What's right about the church?" some are quick to say, "Nothing!" How sad. The church is the body of Christ. William H. Willimon, a United Methodist Bishop in North Alabama, wrote a book more than 20 years ago titled, What's Right With The Church. The title is not a question. The book is a spirited statement for those who have not given up on the church and for those who have. It's a great book – one that I read shortly after its publication. The title says it all. There is a great deal right with the church!

You may want to review the different ways Vestal, on pages 77 and 78, suggests the church looks. All of these are right. The challenge for any congregation is to balance each of them, since all are visions of the body of Christ, the Church that is. The point Dr. Vestal makes is that to be the presence of Christ "is not quite as straightforward or as easy as we might think, because Christ Himself is not quite as easy to understand as we have thought" (p. 77). Jesus did teach social justice. He did stress liberation theology. He encouraged the acceptance of women. He was charismatic.

All of this is to be fleshed out and lived out in community. Nobody is an island to him or herself. We aren't called to "go it alone." If we are called to do that, rest assured that it is not God the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit calling us to do that. The call to go it alone is biblically and theologically unfounded. It is, perhaps, motivated out of pride and selfishness.

Christian community is "remarkable and amazing" (p. 78). It is in Christian community that we are granted the opportunity and joy to bless one another in our points of view and our spiritual giftedness. We are most fully the presence of Christ when we participate in community – the community of the "assembly of the faithful," to borrow a line from the Psalmist (149:1). In fact, I would argue that one cannot be the presence of Christ apart from the Church.

For discussion:

1. Ask the class to define community. What is community in the secular sense? What does the term "faith community" mean?
2. How does your class describe the body of Christ? Do any of them see themselves described by one of the classifications Vestal uses on pages 77 and 78?
3. Why do some so-called believers, Christians that is, want to go it alone? Do you think this is becoming more and more the norm in today's culture?
4. From where have your best spiritual experiences come? In private or in community?

**Historical Community**

Whether we like it or not, the present is connected to the past. It is true that history can be utterly boring, but it is important – especially church history. Some are just ignorant of it. Others have a disdain for it and, as Vestal notes, intentionally disconnect from it.

The past is important. Our ancestors lived in the past. Think of the countless numbers of people who have become Christians from the Day of Pentecost until the present day. "Sand on the seashores and the stars of heaven." God said something like that to Abraham about the patriarch's descendants which, in Christ, include us (see Genesis 15; 17; Galatians 3-4). The Bible is a book about the past. When the book of Revelation was written, probably between AD 85 and AD 100, bringing to a conclusion the canon of writings, the story did not immediately jump to 2009. The past with all its struggles and successes both informs and inspires.

On page 80, Vestal observes that a crucial standard is at risk whenever the community ignores her history – not just your local church's history, but the Church at large. "When we define everything according to its relevance today, we imply that 'today' has no touchstone or commonality with yesterday." Today becomes idolatrous.

I am concerned, for example, that a generation of Christians could potentially be reared, not in all quarters but in some, who have no idea who Billy Graham is and the role he played in marking Christianity. In our Baptist ranks, it disturbs me that younger and older believers alike do not care that this year, 2009, marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Baptists or that Baptists played a pivotal role in securing a Bill of Rights for the USA Constitution and especially in establishing religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Time does not permit a mentioning of the many saints who have been pivotal throughout the past 20 centuries in the shaping of Christianity as we know it.

Vestal reminds us that “we can and should see ourselves as inheritors and participants of a community that reaches back in time,” but also one that “stretches beyond time” (p. 81). We are the “carriers of a tradition” that has been handed down from one generation to the next. Each succeeding generation, ideally, should be more hopeful and more encouraged as a result of its connection with the past – through the historical Church.

For discussion:

1. Why do we in the community of faith, in general, often consider past events in the church’s history to be unimportant?
2. Does it make any difference how Christians, for example, understood the book of Revelation in say the year AD 729? Why or why not?
3. Hebrews 11 and 12 suggests an on-going connection with the past. Should we keep adding to the list, “By faith... (this person’s name, that person’s name)? How about, “By faith, some of the saints in your church...”?
4. What are ways in which we can connect with the church’s past? Vestal mentions a few on pages 80 and 81. Think of some others.
5. How does the historic Church move us to be and experience the presence of Christ?

## **Global Community**

The church is global. The global Christian community is bound by the simple confession “Jesus Is Lord.” From a small band of followers – at least 120 on the Day of Pentecost – the church has expanded over these centuries all over the world. There are more than 6 billion people who live on planet Earth. About a third, 33%, or roughly 2 billion claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. While all who claim so may not actually be followers, the point is that Christianity is a global community.

This global community does not practice “church” in exactly the same way. Christianity’s diversity is staggering. I knew this, but it wasn’t until I ventured to Mozambique nearly six years ago, that I discovered that rich diversity. It was reinforced, again, when I traveled to Birmingham, England for the centennial celebration of the Baptist World Alliance in 2005. Mozambique and the BWA were moving moments for me.

Our historic faith continues to become global. It is contextual too. When missionaries from the USA go to some country or to a specific people group, they do not go to teach people how to be Americans by doing Christianity “American style.” As Vestal says, “the day of colonial missions is over. The day when Western culture and Western denominations imposed their culture on other parts of the body of Christ” (p. 82) is long gone or should be. In the twenty-first century of Christianity, we “partner across geographical, theological, and national boundaries” (p. 83) in order to do ministry together.

Along with Dr. Vestal, I am shocked and saddened that many believers – including in our own churches – lack an international angle. Again, it is driven by a narcissism and a national political fear that has spilled over into the church. Our attention can become focused on “us” instead of the rest of the Christian world. “We have to take care of us in this consumer age of church. Besides, we know how to do it better than anyone else. Hey, we’re Americans.”

Interestingly Christianity’s greatest explosion of growth, both spiritual and numerical, is not in the Northern Hemisphere. Rather, it is in the Southern Hemisphere, especially in many

Third World countries. Perhaps it's possible that we don't know how to do it better than anyone else.

For discussion:

1. How does a local church, like ours, encourage a global perspective – especially in hard economic times?
2. Do you think it is necessary for everyone to go “into the world”, to another country, to grasp the significance of the church as a global community?
3. What are some ways to connect globally and to be the presence of Christ? The Baptist World Alliance's Congress meets in Honolulu, Hawaii in the summer of 2010. This is an opportunity to join with 12,000 different kinds of Baptists from all over the world.

## **Local Community**

Practically all the references in the New Testament to “church” describe the church as local in nature: The church in Rome; the church in Philadelphia; the church in Sardis; the church in Philippi. You understand. Here's another: our own church in our own community.

The church is a local community. Nothing is more profound, in my estimation, than a congregation functioning as the presence of Christ. Ironically, this is where it is most difficult to be and experience the presence of Christ. Unfortunately, the local church finds itself smitten by discrimination and power illustrated by comments such as, “This is my church” or “You're not from around here.”

According to what Vestal says on page 84, we are to offer ourselves in intimacy and involvement. This is not an easy task. It can be one of great risk because we fear failure or lack of acceptance. “Living in authentic local community is one of the most challenging and demanding commands of Christ to obey. And yet it is what the world needs and wants from Christians more than anything else. When the world sees genuine Christian community at a local level, it sees the very presence of Christ” (pp. 84-85).

For discussion:

1. Was Jesus a community builder in the local sense? He always seemed to be on the go. Review, on page 85, what Jesus did to foster local community. Was He right in considering people more important than institutions and traditions?
2. What are some ways in which the local community of faith can be strengthened in being the presence of Christ? Have you ever had some church members whom you do not know into your home for the sole purpose of getting to know them?
3. Vestal says, “The greatest expression of local community takes place in the local congregation where the Word is proclaimed, the supper is celebrated, believers are baptized, married, and buried.” Do you agree or not agree? What about members of the body of Christ in the local community who never come to corporate worship, eat the supper, watch a baptism, and so forth? Are they *really* members of that local body?

## **Missional Community**

Christian community -- the church -- in every expression, according to Vestal, “differs from other forms of community because it is created by Christ to extend his redemptive mission in the world” (p. 85). The church exists to be in partnership with God in reconciling the world to Him through His Son, Jesus, in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Christian community “is to represent, serve, and proclaim the kingdom of God. Its goal is not to build up the institution or to enlarge its membership or even enjoy its own existence. Rather the purpose of Christian community is faithfulness to God’s mission in the world. Its very identity and essence define it as a missional community” (pp. 85-86).

As we continue to discover God’s great mission to restore and heal a wounded humanity through Christ, we are to look for ways whereby we can involve ourselves in His mission. There is much more to Christian community than simply showing up for study, worship, and the potluck dinner. These are important, but there is more.

We are to be captured by Christ’s vision to see and hear a world in need – even if the world doesn’t see and hear its own need. We are to be about the task of proclaiming in word and deed the Good News of Jesus Christ in all those places where it is news. And, there are places right in your own community. Certainly, these need our being and experiencing the presence of Christ.

#### For discussion:

1. What do you think about Vestal’s observation on the bottom of page 85 and top of 86 that Christian community’s goal is not to “build up an institution or enlarge its membership or even enjoy its own existence?” Isn’t the church’s getting bigger in membership, attendance, and offerings the measure for true success in community? Does a big crowd of people gathered mean the crowd is being and experiencing the presence of Christ?
2. What are ways locally whereby we can be the presence of Christ missionally? Soup kitchen? Salvation Army? Goodwill?
3. Have any of you ever been on a missional journey? Describe what that experience has meant to you.

#### Conclusion

The church is Christian Community. And community is about relating to one another. Christianity is about relationships – first and foremost. To be and experience the presence of Christ requires connection with the historical church, the global church, the local church, and the missional church.

#### For Next Week...

Encourage members to read and re-read carefully Chapter 7 on “Pain and Sacrifice.”

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# **Chapter 7**

## **Pain and Sacrifice:**

### **Embracing the Presence of Christ in Suffering**

#### **Some Suggested Scripture Texts**

Isaiah 1:11-17; Matthew 6:1-21; 25:31-46; James 1:26-27; and the other texts listed throughout the chapter.

Remember, when looking at the suggested texts to be sure and review the context.

#### **Review**

Review last week's lesson on "Christian Community."

1. Historical Community
2. Global Community
3. Local Community
4. Missional Community

#### **Introduction**

This lesson is focused on the Christian's accepting the Cross of Christ as part of his/her daily experience. This is no small task. The Cross is the ultimate expression of humility. The merit badge of genuine discipleship is humility and to be humble calls for self-denial. Another reason is because the Cross represents pain and sacrifice, the title of this lesson. Ours is a culture that stresses "no pain" and "no sacrifice." The saying, "No pain, no gain" really, in this age, is passé. Here's a thought. Maybe the culture does stress pain and sacrifice – pain and sacrifice for someone else, but not me.

The Cross is to be our central model for the faith if we are to be and to experience the presence of Christ. It is a privilege to take up one's Cross daily and follow Jesus (see Matthew 10:38; Luke 9:23; 14:27). It is a call to sacrifice and even to pain. As Vestal points out on page 87, however, it is not that Christ is calling us to "enjoy suffering." Nobody, of whom I am aware, wants to suffer and experience pain – not even Jesus. He pleaded with His Father to allow "the cup" of the Cross to pass by Him (see Matthew 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-39; Luke 22:39-44). He did not look forward to the suffering that accompanied crucifixion.

Yet, He accepted the Father's will and gave Himself to the task with obedient joy. Obedience? Joy and suffering? Yes. "Here is one of the first lessons to learn: Sacrifice and joy are not mutually exclusive. In fact, to live sacrificially—even though painful at times—is the most fulfilling and rewarding way to live" (page 88). It is also the obedient way.

The challenge for any believer is to hold the ego in check. It has to be denied. Again, to be and to experience the presence of Christ calls each of us to lose ourselves in something bigger

than we are. Christians are always to see an advanced progression, a more impressive dream, and a righteous objective. This lesson offers ways whereby sacrifice can be embraced.

For discussion:

1. The ego is important. One is to have a healthy ego. It is the unhealthy ego that becomes problematic. What makes the ego unhealthy? Give some examples. “Is there anything more advanced than I? Can there be a more impressive dream than that which is focused on me? What more righteous objective can there be than what’s right for me?”
2. Why is the Church afraid of humility? The towel, pitcher, and wash bowl are reminders and symbols of humility. Do these make you uncomfortable? Why or why not? John 13:1-17 focuses on these and Christ’s act of washing feet as an act of humility pointing to another act of humility: The Cross.

**Offer Forgiveness**

All of us have heard sermons on forgiveness. John the Baptizer came preaching a repentance of forgiveness of sins (see Mark 1:1-8). Forgiveness is an act and an attitude and, as Vestal points out, it may be the most difficult act to do and the most difficult attitude to possess. Forgiveness is easier said than done and can be very tricky for various reasons. This is where the ego has to be held in check; because, when it comes to forgiveness, pride often gets in the way. Yet, we are expected to forgive because God forgave us and still forgives us in Christ. One who practices forgiveness may experience pain and sacrifice.

Whenever we are hurt, the tendency is to lash out because we are angry and frustrated. We become vengeful and want to get even. Vestal accurately observes that there can be pleasure in feelings such as bitterness and resentment. “Sacrifice means denying this reality” (page 89). We are to forgive no matter what. We are not to put conditions on forgiveness, either. To say, “I will forgive you if you do this or that” is contrary to being and experiencing the presence of Christ. It is arrogant and therefore sinful, and anything but the presence.

Because ours is a “get even” world, forgiveness tends to be viewed by others as a weakness. Fortunately, we take our signal from the teaching that is not of this world. Because we do, forgiveness, from the Christ perspective, is a sign of strength. And when all is said and done, it is the Christ perspective that makes a difference. Who cares what the world thinks and says if we forgive when the cultural thing to do is “get even?”

The truth is that forgiveness, in many respects, is more beneficial for the person who forgives. Whenever someone asks you for forgiveness, as a Christ person, you are to extend it and you need to tell that person you forgive them. This is a dialogue that begins to mend the rupture no matter how that breach in the relationship may have occurred. The assurance of pardon is important. How many times have I heard, as a pastor in counseling, something like this: “I knew my daddy loved me, but he never told me and in many respects never showed me.” I often wonder if a child, especially an adult child, honestly knew “Daddy loved me?” In many care sessions, I’ve witnessed persons confess they really didn’t know if a parent or sibling loved them or not. How sad.

How sad when someone seeks forgiveness from another or others only to be rejected. It is more than sad. It is demonic. There is a word of warning for the one who refuses to forgive: The Ultimate Forgiver may not forgive the one refusing forgiveness. Jesus said as much in the

Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:12, 14-15. This is serious. We are to forgive even if someone doesn't ask for it. This can be painful and may require sacrifice.

In a similar vein, none of us is to ever be of the mindset that says, "I don't ever have to seek forgiveness because I never do anything that warrants such." All have sinned, as Paul notes in Romans 3:23. To say I haven't sinned or don't sin is, likewise, arrogant. To think that I don't ever sin against someone by hurting him or her with my words or actions or even a silent attitude is a dangerous and even damning thought.

We can forgive if we keep our eyes constantly on Jesus, seeing Him on the Cross and hearing Him speak, "*Father forgive them...*" (Luke 23:34). Remember that forgiveness always produces reconciliation – even if it is just reconciliation between one's self and God.

#### For discussion:

1. Why are we afraid to forgive others? Why are we afraid to forgive ourselves? If the church is not a place of forgiveness where forgiveness is requested and extended and a place where people know they have been forgiven, then what does that say about being the presence of Christ?
2. Do we really believe that forgiveness demonstrates greater strength of character? Is it really the only act that can break the vicious cycle of sin and selfishness? If we do believe that forgiveness is evidence of strength, why do we not do a better job of encouraging one another to practice it?
3. If you were to ask Jesus, face-to-face, "Jesus please forgive me of this" (what you did or didn't do), what would He say? If you were to ask someone for forgiveness, what do you expect to hear? If someone asks you for forgiveness, what do they expect to hear? Unfortunately, these really are hard questions to resolve. Or are they? How can they be resolved since there is fear related to forgiveness.

### **Obedience When It's Not Easy**

Whoever said, "Following Jesus is a piece of cake!" must have been in the Twilight Zone. It is much like a person in a former parish who said to me some years back: "I wish I could find the person who led me to Christ. He forgot to tell me some things." It is not easy to follow Christ because often there isn't any cake and there is a great deal to tell. To follow Jesus is to do right in all things. Doing right demands obedience.

Again, the world, in which we live, suggests "obedience" is not a good word. Obedience insinuates control and many of us don't want to be controlled. Many like to control, but don't want to be controlled. And yet, throughout the Scriptures, there is a constant emphasis on obedience. Biblical people are to be obedient people and that means letting Christ rule them.

"God values faithfulness in the smallest duty" (page 91), which often is never noticed by anybody except God and the angels. Too often, we are more dutiful to communal exhibitions of spiritual devoutness. Some of us want to be seen by others and complimented for what we do. Sometimes there is anger when others don't applaud us for our efforts.

Keep in mind that Jesus calls us to be obedient by practicing our righteousness quietly. He is very clear about this in Matthew 6:1-21. We don't obey to be approved by each other. We don't do things to get someone else to like us. We practice our righteousness to please God.

That being said, an aspect of our righteousness is to encourage others in their acts of devotion. While this sounds almost contradictory, we are to build up one another and encourage one another in the name of obeying Christ. Obeying Christ calls us to be kind to someone when kindness is uncalled for since the “someone” may be hateful and mean. “Obedience means we relinquish the need to be right, to win, to be in control” (page 91).

Review the scriptures on pages 91 and 92. These are some of those “Ouch!” scriptures.

Faith in Christ results in obedience to Christ. If faith doesn’t result in obedience, then it is not faith. While you may not like that, biblically it is true. It makes no difference how cold or hot the water was in which you were baptized – whether in a creek or a modern baptistery. Your conversion, when you turned to Christ in faith, is important. But if there is no obedience to Christ after the conversion, you may not have been converted at all.

Obedience is challenging and at the same time stimulating. To follow God’s will and to do what pleases Him is a challenge for any conscientious believer who seriously wants to be and to experience the presence of Christ. Vestal asks on page 93 why obedience is so hard and often painful. He confesses that perhaps it is one of those things that is best left to mystery. Quoting Hebrews 5:8, he notes that Christ “learned obedience through what He suffered.” Christ chose to do what was right. Thank God He did – for our sakes.

To obey or not to obey? That is the question and the choice for the one who wants to be and to experience the presence of Christ.

For discussion:

1. All of us want to be liked. So we do things in order to get people to like us. Or we develop a “holier than thou” or “better than you” attitude and become spiritual show-offs. We seek the praise and ovation of others for what we do. Why is this? Why cannot the people of God simply do things consistently throughout the year, as opposed to during the Christmas season only, for example? Why cannot we do things simply for the sheer sake of “doing” in the name of Jesus? Which is a better way of being and experiencing the presence of Christ: The way of public display or doing acts of Christ quietly, without calling attention to one’s self?
2. What does it mean to obey Christ? Can one genuinely have faith in Christ without deliberate and thoughtful obedience to Christ?

**Open Yourself to Human Suffering**

Read to the class, if time permits, the Parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. If time doesn’t permit, quickly review it. Our lives, in the end, are going to be judged on how we have treated each other. Make no mistake about that. Christianity is a religion of relationships. It is not so much about staying out of Hell. The truth is we create Hell for each other and humanity by the way we treat each other in the here and now—all in the name of Christ. Often, we don’t treat each other very well, either.

The sheep and goats narrative suggests that the “criteria for judgment relate to how we have responded to human suffering” (page 94-95) wherever that suffering may be. Jesus

Himself, His real Presence, identifies with those who suffer. If we have done this to the least of these, we have done it to Jesus.

The face of the hungry is the face of Jesus

The face of the thirsty is the face of Jesus

The face of the unclothed is the face of Jesus

The face of the homeless is the face of Jesus

The face of the prisoner is the face of Jesus

The face of the stranger is the face of Jesus

The face of the sick is the face of Jesus

Do we really believe this? Hopefully we do. For in all of these there is the presence of Christ. Our response to all of these is to be the presence of Christ. Here's a thought: The presence of Christ meets the presence of Christ. I hope that makes sense. Responding to human need and human suffering takes a lot of time. It requires financial sacrifice. It calls for "sitting where the suffering sit" to adapt a word from Ezekiel 3:15.

To be and to experience the presence of Christ is more than simply a going through the motions of religiosity. It is not how we worship or what we confess through a corporate confession, as important as these are. If our worship is genuine and our confessions of faith are heartfelt, then our worship and confession will cause us to do something tangible—particularly for the suffering in this world.

In fact, simply going through the motions of worship and confession with no thought of goodness and justice by "rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow" (see Isaiah 1:16-17) makes God sick.

God is gladdened whenever we put our worship and confession into action by caring for those who can't care for themselves. This is evidence of true religion according to James 1:26-27. God knows and loves every human being on Earth. To be and to experience His presence necessitate that we know the suffering of humanity and do as much as we possibly can to alleviate some of that suffering. Ideally, all human suffering can be eliminated through Jesus Christ. But in reality will it?

Christians cannot ignore the pain and suffering of humanity. We are our brothers' and sisters' keeper. Many of them are suffering. When they suffer, Christ suffers. If they and Christ suffer, we should suffer with them.

For discussion:

1. Think about the Matthew 25:31-46 passage. When you see other people, especially the suffering, do you see Christ or do you see simply a project or someone to be ridiculed or lectured?
2. What are some ways we can participate with Him in caring for a suffering humanity – especially a suffering international humanity?
3. What about a missional journey to, say, the poorest country in the world? If I'm not mistaken, Haiti is the poorest nation on the planet. What do you think such a journey would look like?
4. Based on the Isaiah 1 passage, do you find yourself simply going through the motions of Christianity? What are some ways by which one can overcome that tendency?

## **Conclusion**

Offering forgiveness, obeying Christ when it is inconvenient, and opening up to the suffering of humanity are ways we may embrace the presence of Christ. It is often painful and always calls for sacrifice. The Cross is our model. In the Cross are represented pain and sacrifice. Let us “take up the cross and follow Jesus,” being and experiencing His presence.

## **For Next Week...**

Encourage members to read and re-read carefully Chapter 8 on “Engagement and Ministry.”

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# **Chapter 8**

## **Engagement and Ministry: Being the Presence of Christ as a Servant**

### **Some Suggested Scripture Texts**

Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45; John 13:1-17; 1 Corinthians 12-14; and other texts throughout the chapter.

Remember, when looking at the suggested texts, be sure and review the context.

### **Review**

Review last week's lesson on "Pain and Sacrifice."

1. Offer forgiveness
2. Obedience when it's not easy
3. Open yourself to human suffering

### **Introduction**

This chapter is on service. Believers are servants of Jesus Christ. Jesus, Himself, is the example for us to follow. He was a servant. He modeled the servant life and reminded His disciples that true greatness in the Kingdom of God is predicated on servanthood. Jesus washed the feet of the twelve in the Upper Room on the first Maundy or Holy Thursday evening as they gathered for the Passover Supper. John 13:1-17 narrates this moving account. Jesus did this as an act of humility to remind those fellows, who had argued about which of them was the greatest, that they were to serve one another in the lowliest kinds of ways. In that day, one could not stoop much lower than to wash the feet of another.

Being and experiencing the presence of Christ, wherever we may find ourselves in the world, demands that we live our lives as servants of God. We do this by way of the spiritual giftedness with which the Holy Spirit has endowed us and we do so in cooperation with other believers who are also spiritually gifted, but may not have the same gift(s) we have.

It cannot be stressed enough. The ministry of servanthood, which Jesus began, continues through His people, the Church. Dr. Vestal observes that, "with the power of his indwelling spirit, we can perform his works. In fact, according to his promise, we can perform even greater works because he is alive and active in us (see John 14:12)" (p. 100).

Christ's ministry, in essence, was twofold. It was a ministry of proclamation and a ministry of compassion. He was not afraid to speak the truth to people and He also was not afraid to deal with their physical, emotional, and social ills as a reminder that God is concerned about the whole person – mind, body, and spirit. The things He said were important. The things He did were just as important.

To be Christ's presence in the world requires us to participate in the ministry of speaking His presence and living His presence. It is word and deed – not one or the other, but both.

For discussion:

1. Think about John 14:12. Vestal says, “We can perform his [Jesus'] works. ...we can perform even greater works because he is alive and active in us” (p. 100). What do you think this means? Does this mean the kinds of physical healings He performed?
2. What does it mean to serve Christ in a world that increasingly wants to be served?

### **Ministry of Word**

Longtime pastor Frank Pollard said, “There will always be one more sermon to prepare.” There will always be one more word to speak on behalf of Christ. The truth He put forth is the same truth we are to announce to believers and non-believers. Dr. Pollard's observation complements Dr. Vestal's notation that it is “a never-ending task” (p. 100).

The truth believers convey to others is truth that first has to be truth in them. This is why we are constantly learning. We never learn enough truth about Christ. When truth becomes a personal reality in our lives, we become witnesses of that truth to others as we deliver the message of truth.

Dr. Vestal rightly and keenly notes that none of us is responsible for actually converting another human being. “Only the Holy Spirit can do that” (p. 100). Sometimes I will receive a call from a pastor search committee who is considering someone to be their pastor who has listed me as a reference. Occasionally, the inquirer will ask, “Is he a soul-winner?” I always say, “No he's not and neither am I; nor is any other person. Only the Holy Spirit can win a soul. The person is, from what I observe, a faithful witness.” Unfortunately, that is not what some pastor search committees want to hear.

We are supposed to be living proof of what God has done in Christ for us and then we are to faithfully tell what He has done. We connect our own personal stories to THE Story of Christ. We offer a faithful witness and leave the rest up to the Holy Spirit. As Peter reminds readers in 1 Peter 3:15-16 we give “*an accounting for the hope that is in you...with gentleness and reverence.*”

The ministry of the word is served in various ways as noted on page 101. Then Dr. Vestal makes excellent use of that declaration, “Christ Is the Answer”, by fleshing out some of that for which He is the answer. He lists four on page 101.

1. Christ is the answer to *life's origin*.
2. Christ is the answer to *life's destiny*.
3. Christ is the answer to *life's meaning*.
4. Christ is the answer to the question of *life after death*.

We proclaim Jesus Christ because “Jesus presents himself to us not only as God's representative or God's servant but as one whose relationship to God, origin from God, oneness with God, and life in God make him unlike any other human being who has ever lived” (p. 102). Wow! The ministry of the word is one encompassing a proclamation of Christ and then a

teaching of Christ. Those who respond affirmatively to the proclamation are to be taught the way of Christ.

“The teaching ministry of the church is central to its mission” (p. 102) and is entrusted to pastor-teachers and professors and researchers, for the *“equipping of the saints”* (see *Ephesians 4:11-13*), as well as to good Christian men and women who are called by God to teach Sunday School and Bible studies because they have been given the spiritual gift of teaching. But each of us – every Christian – is to engage in conversations about Christ with others that will, hopefully, result in freedom for the listener.

For discussion:

1. Do you think the four answers Dr. Vestal proposes sum up what life really is? Why or why not? What do these say about being and experiencing the presence of Christ?
2. What are some barriers to sharing our faith in Christ with others? How can these barriers or obstacles be overcome?
3. Does the ministry of the word involve more than speaking words about your experience with Christ to others? What about words that build up or tear down?

### **Ministry of Deeds**

Being the presence of Christ is about speaking. It is also about doing. St. Francis of Assisi once remarked, “Preach the Gospel and, if necessary, use words.” His point was that words and deeds should be used in preaching the gospel. Deeds are just as vital as words to being and experiencing the presence of Christ.

Jesus was a person of action. He spoke, yes; but He also performed good works as evidence of the Kingdom’s arrival in His person. The ministry of the word is embodied in the things He said and thus the things we say. The ministry of deeds is embodied in the things He did and therefore the things we do in His name. So we are to exercise care with our words and our deeds.

Christ did things as “acts of compassion and justice” as evidence of the Kingdom’s presence. His ministry is continued whenever we practice compassion and justice in the world. But, as Dr. Vestal notes, we do not limit or restrict Christ “by our actions” (p. 103).

Keep in mind that He is quite capable of working through non-believers, too. He worked through the pagan Cyrus during the Babylonian Exile, according to Isaiah 45. Read the Old Testament book of Esther and capture the sense of how God worked through a non-believer, King Ahasuerus. He works through whomever He chooses.

“But those who believe in Christ become his representatives, extending Christ’s ministry of reconciliation, restoration, and re-creation” (p. 103). Some suggestions by Dr. Vestal as to how these deeds are enacted, by whom they are enacted, and where they are enacted are offered on page 103.

To be the presence of Christ by way of the ministry of deeds calls for a sincere personal humility. One is not to call attention to one’s self. Rather, attention is to be called to Christ in the ministry of doing. We do because doing is the right thing to do and is ordained by God in accord with the nature of His kingdom.

Again, Dr. Vestals notes examples on page 104 as to how the ministry of deeds becomes a reality. Preaching the Word without words is essentially caring for people who suffer. And the truth is that each of us suffers to some degree or another.

For discussion:

1. What are some deeds in which members of the class engage on a daily basis? What about weekly, monthly, and annually? Are these genuinely acts of service for Christ? Or are they acts of service for self?
2. Why do we do good things? What is the motivation?
3. Do we couple good deeds with good words?

### **Prophetic Ministry**

William Slone Coffin, Jr. was a Christian activist, who died in April 2006. He was chaplain at Yale University for 17 years (1958-1975), during some of the most turbulent times on college campuses and, for that matter, in the entire nation. After that, he served as pastor of New York City's Riverside Church for 12 years. I heard Coffin preach when I was in seminary during a chapel service on campus in 1982. He was an exceptional preacher. In 1979, President Carter asked him to be one of three or four clergy-persons who was granted permission by the Iranian government to visit with the American hostages and minister to them during Christmas.

One of the first sermons he preached as pastor of Riverside Church elicited a response from an 18-year-old parishioner. Coffin, who was in his fifties at the time, said it was some of the best advice he ever received as a pastor-preacher. The young man said, "Dr. Coffin, whenever you have something to say that is both painful and true, try to say it softly."

To be prophetic is to speak words that remind humanity of its condition – which is sinful. Jesus did this throughout His ministry – before and after the resurrection. Prophetic words are often painful and at the same time they are true. Those words need to be spoken softly. They are to be offered, in other words, with thoughtfulness and humility as coming from one who is a fellow struggler, seeking answers. All of us have been guilty of speaking harshly, with no thoughtfulness, let alone humility. I know I certainly have.

Everybody is plagued by the sin problem. And the only way out of the problem is through Jesus Christ. This is why He came. Jesus came to take care of the sin problem in its various forms. Jesus' life, accordingly, stands "as a judgment or a contradiction to human sinfulness. The purity of his motives and the beauty of his character contrast starkly with the rest of us. His righteous life, unflinching obedience to his Father's will, and awe-inspiring holiness provide a model and an example to us all. So perfectly did he adhere to the will of God that he can speak sternly to hypocrisy and pretense" (p. 104).

A prophetic ministry encompasses a direct challenge to hypocrisy. That is why the Old Testament prophets proclaimed in word and deed. They were confronting hypocrisy. Hypocrisy abounds today. To serve Christ as His presence requires saying something that is both painful and true. Jesus did this often as indicated on page 105. Note that all the references listed there are a reminder that Jesus was a prophet who confronted hypocrisy with, sometimes, a biting sarcasm.

We are to “engage in prophetic ministry. Exactly what form this will take varies from culture to culture and will be determined by the context and times in which we are called to live” (pp. 105-06). If one is to be prophetic, there is a need to say with softness words that are, at the same time, both painful and true.

On pages 106 and 107, five specific passages are mentioned to consider. Each of these speaks to the kind of character believers are to exhibit in carrying out the prophetic ministry. If time permits, review these with the class. Again, it is about speaking softly and, to reiterate, I think this “speaking softly” concerns one’s life in Christ – moral, ethical, humble, holy, etc. How Christ-like am I when I deliver a prophetic word?

Dr. Vestal notes that the one who seeks to render a prophetic ministry as the presence of Christ is to avoid hypocrisy and practice integrity. He speaks well to this on page 108. **“Prophetic ministry requires us to repent of our own sin and then to repent again and again” (p. 108).** This will enable us to say something softly that is both painful and true.

Prophetic ministry will set one free. But, as Ernest T. Campbell who preceded Coffin as pastor of Riverside Church observed: “The truth will set you free, but not before it makes you mad!”

#### For discussion:

1. What does it mean to be and experience the presence of Christ as it pertains to being prophetic?
2. Prophecy is not just a foretelling of the future; it is a “forth-telling” in the present. It is telling what is happening right now. Why are we more comfortable with “foretelling” than we are with “forth-telling?”
3. How do we handle the concept of saying things softly? There are things that need to be said to the church and the world that are both painful and true. Encourage the class to think of some. Here’s an example to get you and your class members engaged. Many people, including Christians and maybe some in your class, love and watch the show, “Grey’s Anatomy.” Some think it is the best show on television. The painful truth, however, is that it is a horrible show that glorifies the physical pleasures of sex with anybody and everybody outside the context of Christian marriage. What kind of response does a prophetic ministry make to it?

### **Priestly Ministry**

Priestly ministry is a balance to prophetic ministry. One is to engage a prophetic ministry, saying something that is both painful and true. One is to also engage a priestly ministry, saying that which is both painful and true with softness.

Jesus was King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He was also a prophet and He was also a priest – a high priest at that. Biblically, priests were ritual specialists and mediators between God and people. A priest is someone who stands in for another. The priest functions to bridge the gap that separates the holy deity and sinful humanity. That is precisely what Jesus did on the Cross. The Cross serves as the bridge between humanity and God. It is the connector.

His death is described as “atonement.” The word literally means “a setting at one.” It focuses on setting things right between God and humanity. Jesus’ death on the Cross provides

the means for atonement. He was the Ultimate High Priest, whose work on the Cross was plenty enough. His was a “one time atonement.” He doesn’t have to be crucified over and over, again and again. See Hebrews 9:11-12. In fact, it might be worthwhile to read Hebrews 7-9 before Sunday.

Key words in the priestly ministry are “grace” and “forgiveness.” Jesus freely forgives all who will receive His forgiveness as a gift. Vestal suggests that we are to receive this grace each day. In order to engage in the priestly ministry of Christ and thus be His presence, we are to move beyond a “performance-based religion or trying to prove our worthiness or goodness before God” (p. 110). Otherwise, we can’t be grace agents. In order to do this, Christians are to constantly look to the Cross.

If one has received grace, then one is empowered to be a dispenser of grace and thus be an agent of reconciliation so atonement can become a reality to those who’ve never received Christ. The church, as Vestal reminds us, is not only a “safe place, but a saving place” (p. 111).

On pages 111 and 112, Dr. Vestal suggests way to live out a priestly ministry.

Here is a good place to stress the emphasis upon the priesthood of all Christians. This is a Christian principle and is certainly one of the hallmark Baptist teachings. In Christ we are priests before God. On behalf of Christ, we stand in the gap. We serve as the bridge. Such texts as Exodus 19, Isaiah 61, 1 Peter 2, and Revelation 1 are reminders that all Christians are a “kingdom of priests.”

#### For discussion:

1. What does it mean to be “priestly?” Don’t think about the pastor and the pastoral team. Think about you yourself as being a priest. What does that look like?
2. How do you understand your role as a member of a royal priesthood? Read 1 Peter 2:4-10. What is the purpose of our priesthood?
3. Are you fulfilling your calling to be priestly? How? What else can you do?

#### Conclusion

Jesus came to serve and not be served. He did this through the ministry of the word, the ministry of deeds, a prophetic ministry, and a priestly ministry. Pray that your life will reflect these as the presence of Christ in the world.

#### For Next Week...

Encourage members to read and re-read carefully the final chapter, number 9, on “Peace and Justice.”

# **Chapter 9**

## **Peace and Justice:**

### **Becoming the Presence of Christ for the World**

#### **Some Suggested Scripture Texts**

Isaiah 11; 58; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 6; 15; 23; Romans 8; and Ephesians 6:10-20.

Remember, when looking at the suggested texts, be sure and review the context.

#### **Review**

Review last week's lesson on "Engagement and Ministry."

1. The ministry of the word
2. The ministry of deeds
3. The prophetic ministry
4. The priestly ministry

#### **Introduction**

We begin our final lesson on this most timely study. Today's focus is on peace and justice. Both of these words are rich with biblical flavor. Let's ponder the idea of justice first.

In the Old Testament, justice has to do with impartial arbitration, equitable treatment, or adherence to an ideal of what is right. In addition to these meanings, the biblical nuances of justice focus on the highest values of a right relationship to God and to others. In the New Testament, justice suggests righteousness or uprightness.

Peace in the Old Testament reflects the ideal of God's good creation and describes a state of well-being. Peace is the opposite of warfare, violence, and conflict. Peace is an important word in the New Testament, occurring 100 times. It is found in every book with the exception of 1 John. The word connotes wholeness and well-being, especially through restoring relationships between God and humans and among humans, individually and corporately.

Christians are to be impartial and to seek fair-treatment for all. They are to seek that which is right. Christians are to be seekers of peace – defined not just an absence of war in the world, but a repudiation of violence in any form. When we lived in Springfield, Tennessee, Springfield Middle School, which our daughter attended, adopted this definition of violence: "Violence occurs wherever anyone harms, or threatens to harm, a person's body, feelings, dignity, or possessions." That is an outstanding definition. Using that definition, violence is contrary to justice and peace.

As Dr. Vestal notes on pages 113 and 114, statistics, such as the ones he mentions, do call for Christians to respond. The plight of humanity is to be met by believers in Christ who are

His presence in the world. Further, such deplorable conditions contradict the ethics of the kingdom of God (p. 114).

We are to be peacemakers and practitioners of justice. We cannot be and experience the presence of Christ unless we are.

For discussion:

1. Read some of the suggested scripture texts. How do these speak to peace and justice?
2. Ask class members to define peace and justice. Are true peace and justice possible in this life?
3. What does it mean to you when you hear that one in five people live on less than a \$1.00 a day? This represents, by the way, 1.5 billion people.
4. Should Christians bother with seeking to eradicate poverty and disease? Why? Why not?

**Seeking A Kingdom Perspective**

What is the kingdom of God? Put simply, it is the rule and reign of God in someone's life. When God, through Christ, rules and reigns in our individual lives, then justice and peace will rule and reign as well.

Vestal presents a good definition of the kingdom of God on page 114. The rule and reign of God is tied to the lordship of Jesus Christ. If He is truly Lord of our lives, we will seek to obey His teachings. The kingdom has a past, present, and future. Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom. The kingdom came in Jesus Christ. That is the past. The kingdom is here right now and can be observed in local congregations, like ours. It is imperfect because the church is still possessed, at times, by selfishness – sin, in other words. But it is still visible now. That is the present. The kingdom awaits its consummation. A day will come, the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ, when He will bring to completion the salvation (kingdom) that He began in us. When Christ comes, the kingdom will be complete. That is the future.

The kingdom of God is past, present, and future. All are connected and therefore, all are important. But it is the future for which we strive. We do so with the past as our foundation and the present as the context for ministry. Isaiah 11:1-9 provides a good picture of what the future kingdom will look like. We work toward that end right now, though.

Vestal notes that we serve the kingdom now and pray for its coming (“Thy kingdom come” in The Model Prayer), and live anticipating “its full realization” (p. 115). The kingdom has already come, but we wait for its fullness. Because we are to be excited about the fulfillment of the reality suggested in Isaiah 11, we are moved to seek justice and peace right now.

For discussion:

1. Do you believe kingdom people, you and me, can really make a difference in the world? How so?
2. How is the kingdom of God a present reality for you and others in the class?
3. Matthew 6:33 speaks of seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (justice and peace). What does it mean to “seek” the kingdom of God? Is simply accepting Jesus as one's Lord and Savior enough? I'm saved. I'm going to Heaven. So why do I still have to “seek” the kingdom?

## Simplify Your Life

Richard Foster, in his book, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, has a chapter titled “Simplicity.” He says, “simplicity is freedom” and it brings “joy and balance.” I would imagine that most in your class, I included, live very complicated lives which are anything but simple.

The hallmark passage is Matthew 6:19-34. It reminds us that we are to live a life of simplicity that is not controlled by possessions. As the birds trust God for provision, so should we. Simplifying our lives is a must when it comes to being and experiencing the presence of Christ in the world.

Quoting from Jeffrey Sachs’ book, The End of Poverty, Dr. Vestal observes that “more than eight million people around the world die because they are simply too poor to survive” (p. 116) each year. That means 20,000 die every day. Of note, it is estimated that 15,000 of these are children. This ought not be. Poverty is a moral issue. If you have ever been to a Third World country, you know this is true. I saw it first-hand in Mozambique. We cannot claim to be in a relationship with Christ if we ignore the suffering of the world which comes as a direct result of poverty.

When Jesus said, ***“You always have the poor with you”*** (Mark 14:7; Matthew 26:11; John 12:8), He was not calling upon us to ignore the poor, as if we can do nothing. Inspired by Deuteronomy 15:11, Jesus was reminding His disciples then, in the context of Mary’s anointing Him with costly oil and Judas’ disdain for it, that poverty is real and the needs of the poverty-stricken are to be met. The same is applied to His disciples today. The Deuteronomy text is in the context of need and declares, ***“Since there will never cease to be some in need on earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”*** In fact, Mark’s version of this text, written first, adds, ***“and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish.”*** The ***“whenever you wish”***, hopefully means always.

### For discussion:

1. Consider Vestal’s experience in Kenya which he cites on page 117. Ponder the answers of the Kenyan boys when asked about the best thing in their lives. How do we respond when asked that question? My hunch is that most of us don’t respond with “Jesus.” Why don’t we respond as they did? Ponder their answers to what is the hardest thing in their lives. Ask the class what is the hardest thing in its life – individually and corporately. Again, my hunch is that, for most of us, it is not from where my next meal will come.
2. Explore ways our lives can be simplified. Can anyone share how he/she has recently simplified life? How did we get so complicated with our possessions in the first place?
3. Is the USA really possessed by “an insatiable desire for self-gratification?” (p. 117). In what ways?
4. True or false: “Sacrifice, asceticism, modesty, self-discipline, and the like, are not popular virtues” (p. 117) in the USA culture. Why is this true? Or why is this not true?

## Find and Use Your Voice

Jesus went into the wilderness to commune with God for 40 days right after His baptism. He fasted, prayed, and pondered. During this time, Matthew 4, Mark 1, and Luke 4 confirm that the Evil One assaulted him. He was confronted with various temptations. Luke’s account notes that,

*“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him [Jesus, that is] until an opportune time” (4:13).* Satan attacked Jesus, tempting Him constantly to forsake His calling throughout His earthly ministry. Jesus was tempted over and over again.

We, too, are confronted by the Evil One. We are attacked and tempted to reject our calling to make a difference in the world. He uses thoughts like, “There’s so much need. Why bother? This isn’t my problem. The poor are poor because of their own doing.” On and on I could go. I think you understand.

We are not to allow the devil to so overwhelm us that we fail to find our voices and speak up. Whenever we see greed, dishonesty in business or in government or in the church, violence, racism, the demeaning of persons, the put down of women or men, the devaluing of internationals who reside in our communities, and pompous arrogance cloaked in the “you aren’t from here” mentality, we are to confront it just as Jesus did. He was constantly challenging the religious system of Judaism. See Matthew 15 and 23 for some stinging examples. Interestingly, Jesus didn’t challenge the government that much. He challenged the institution of religion. That is not to say that if the government were corrupt, He would not challenge it. He would. His mission, however, was to set the institution of religion right.

It is easy to be silent and not say anything for fear that someone might get their feelings hurt or a long-standing tradition might be challenged. Remember: If whatever we do as Christians is not being and experiencing the presence of Christ, then we ought not do it.

Find your voice and use it.

For discussion:

1. Explore why are we afraid to speak up against injustices – war, poverty, abuse of the environment, racism, etc.
2. What about our ways here at our church? Are there any traditions which need to be cast aside in order to do ministry to the most destitute of society wherever in the world?
3. When is the last time you were tempted to remain silent when you should speak on behalf of the marginalized in the world? Did you overcome or give in to it?

**Become Political**

On pages 119-123, Vestal does an outstanding job in clearly delineating how Christians can become involved politically. I really can’t add much to this discussion. I will offer a few reminders to you that you may wish to offer them to your class.

God transcends secular politics. Keep in mind there is nothing wrong with secular politics. God, however, does not favor one party over the other.

Our allegiance is not to this party or that party. Our allegiance is not to the USA. Our allegiance is to Jesus Christ and His kingdom, which is a kingdom not of this world.

As Christians, we are to know what is occurring in the world. Karl Barth (pronounced, “bart”), a renowned theologian from Germany in the 20th Century, observed that Christians are to function with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. The Bible speaks to world happenings now and how these are to be addressed. Simply put: If there is a need in humanity,

that need is to be met in the name of Jesus. At least, that is what Jesus taught in Matthew 25:31-46, a text we've already alluded to in our study.

Build on Vestal's four suggestions on page 120:

1. Be a participant and protagonist in the political process.
2. Don't be so partisan.
3. Cultivate a global perspective.
4. Work for bipartisanship.

Couple with this prayer.

For discussion:

1. How does my Christian faith square with the way I vote? Don't take this the wrong way. There has to be a broadening of the issues to include more than abortion and homosexual behavior. These are important issues, of course, but they aren't the only ones. Don't forget poverty, lack of health care for 40 million Americans, the environment, AIDS, peace-making, etc.
2. What am I personally doing to make a difference? (By that I don't mean, "Well I'm voting only for Republicans or Democrats.")

Conclusion

I share with you the names of a few organizations that can help engage us in being the presence of Christ in the world by way of justice and peace.

The first is **The Micah Challenge**. Micah Challenge is a global campaign to mobilize Christians against poverty. The campaign aims to deepen Christian engagement with impoverished and marginalized communities, and to influence leaders of rich and poor nations to fulfill their promise to achieve the eradication of poverty.

<http://www.micahchallenge.org/>

The second is **Evangelicals for Social Action**. ESA is a community of Christians committed to living out their walk with Christ holistically – that is, with the whole of their lives.

<http://www.esa-online.org>

I would also offer some eight ways we can change the world. These are known as the Millennium Development Goals and many groups are promoting them. In short these are the goals:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower wWomen
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

For those teaching young people, encourage students to listen to a Christian musician named Derek Webb. His lyrics speak deeply to some of the themes of justice and peace mentioned in this lesson. Derek began his career in the band, Caedmon's Call. I recommend them.

Webb offers much more than contemporary Christian music that, more often than not, is dominated by praise and worship motifs and rarely offers much moral and ethical content at all – especially moral content of a holistic variety. Sadly, much that is played on Christian music stations is music made by comfortable white people for comfortable white people. Please understand, my observation is not an attack on praise and worship motifs. There's much more, however, that needs to be sung. Derek Webb is doing this. Adults, you can listen to him as well.

### **For Next Week...**

Encourage members to review the book and come prepared to share thoughts and insights, perhaps testimonies, about the study. There will be an overall review of the material next week.

Prepared by Jimmy Gentry, Pastor  
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# **Concluding Session**

## **Being and Experiencing the Presence of Christ: A Vision for Transformation**

### **Review of the Sessions and Challenge for the Future**

#### **Introduction**

Today concludes the study of Dr. Daniel Vestal's book. I pray this has been a rewarding experience for those who have read and studied the book. It is my hope that the dialogue in class each of the past nine Sundays has been beneficial to you as a teacher/facilitator and to each student in the class.

I pray that today's session will be beneficial, too, as you review the lessons and look to the future. As we continue forward in the future, we do so confident that the Holy Spirit will empower our churches to be and experience the presence of Christ as a result of this study, which hopefully, has provided a paradigm enabling a vision for persistent transformation.

Let everyone know that this class session is designed for:

- Reviewing of the nine chapters
- Extending opportunities for testimonies about the study
- Seeking clarification on issues
- Making a commitment to seek to be and experience the presence of Christ not only in 2009, but until the Lord returns

#### **Review**

Handle the review in whatever manner you may choose. The headings from each chapter are provided for your convenience.

Chapter One – “Beginnings: Receiving the Presence of Christ”

1. First Steps
2. The First Christian
3. The First Easter

Chapter Two – “The Basics: Nurturing the Presence of Christ”

1. Nurturing the Presence Through Love
2. Nurturing the Presence Through the Scriptures
3. Nurturing the Presence Through Silence
4. Nurturing the Presence Through Letting Go

### Chapter Three – “Prayer: Practicing the Presence of Christ”

1. What Is Prayer?
2. Rule and Rhythm
  - Body Prayer
  - Vocal Prayer
  - Mental Prayer
3. Conclusion

### Chapter Four – “Contemplative Prayer: Resting in the Presence of Christ”

1. Kataphatic Prayer – prayer with images
2. Apophatic Prayer – prayer without images

### Chapter Five – “Personal Transformation: Being Changed by the Presence of Christ”

1. Transformation Takes Place in the Soul
2. Transformation Takes Place in Our Story
  - Our Past
  - Our Present
  - Our Future
3. Transformation Takes Place in Our Struggles
4. Transformation Takes Place in Our Suffering

### Chapter Six – “Christian Community: Experiencing the Presence of Christ with Others”

1. The Church as Historical Community
2. The Church as Global Community
3. The Church as Local Community
4. The Church as Missional Community

### Chapter Seven – “Pain and Sacrifice: Embracing the Presence of Christ in Suffering”

1. Offer Forgiveness
2. Obedience When It’s Not Easy
3. Open Yourself to Human Suffering

### Chapter Eight – “Engagement and Ministry: Being the Presence of Christ as a Servant”

1. The Ministry of the Word
2. The Ministry of Deeds
3. The Prophetic Ministry
4. The Priestly Ministry

### Chapter Nine – “Peace and Justice: Becoming the Presence of Christ for the World”

1. Seeking A Kingdom Perspective
2. Simplifying Your Life
3. Finding and Using Your Voice
4. Becoming Political

## **Testimonies**

You may want to enlist a couple of people to share brief words about what insights they have gained from the study. How have they been transformed? This is a question to ask everyone.

You may want to share what you personally have gained from reading and studying Dr. Vestal's book. How have you been transformed?

Do members feel better equipped to be and experience the presence of Christ?

Was anyone convicted to do something differently? Was anyone, for example, convicted to seriously take a look at how life is lived and work to personally simplify it?

## **Conclusion**

Encourage members of the class to re-read Dr. Vestal's book in 2009. In fact, ask members to commit themselves to reading it once a quarter, but not to read and re-read simply to say, "I did." You personally need to make this same commitment before you ask others to do so. I've worked through the book twice. I commit to reading and pondering it several times between now and December 31. Ask your class to ponder the material. Remind them that these nine chapters are foundations for being and experiencing the presence of Christ.

Suggest all pray a similar prayer each morning: "Lord, help me to be and experience your presence throughout the day." Suggest a similar prayer be prayed in the evening: "Lord, I hope that I was the presence of Christ and that I experienced His presence today. When I wasn't and didn't, forgive me."

Tell everyone to consider those moments when failure occurred and ask for specific forgiveness. Then, encourage all to turn those failures in to successes in the strength of the Holy Spirit. A good practice to engage for this would be journaling one's progress in Christ. This takes time, but is of tremendous value in chronicling one's spiritual growth.

Save enough time in this final session to read, in unison if you choose, the four poetic offerings by Dr. Vestal on pages 126-129, which summarize the reality in which Dr. Vestal seeks to live his own life and which he also desires for others to live (p. 125). These include:

1. A Confession of Faith
2. A Doxology
3. A Witness
4. A Prayer

You may want to enlist some persons to read these in different kinds of ways.

Encourage the members to read these four pieces each day, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak and teach through these statements. Challenge them to consider reading them every day for the rest of 2009 as a reminder that all of us are to be and experience the presence of Christ.

Live the vision of transformation!

Thank you, again, for leading this study. My life has been changed as a result of it. I pray that many others have been changed.

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