

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lives of Love

As the train rolled along, a missionary spoke to his Muslim fellow traveler about Christ. Mr. Nassim listened with an open heart. The missionary was intrigued and asked Mr. Nassim why he seemed so ready to listen to the gospel message.

"Years ago," replied Mr. Nassim with deep emotion, "a Muslim friend and I saw two Catholic sisters holding out their hands to receive money for a new hospital building. As we passed them, my friend, instead of giving some money, spit into the extended palm of the sister.

"Thoughtfully, the sister pulled out her handkerchief and wiped off the spit. Then, smiling at my friend, she said, 'All right, that was for me. Now what will you give Jesus?'"

Mr. Nassim looked at the missionary with tears in his eyes and to the click of the train on the track said, "Can anyone forget love like that?" (Abdol Massih 1979:86).

Expressions of love and acts of kindness are greatly appreciated all over the world, not least in regions of high Muslim population. Christian service is worthwhile in itself and need not be justified by reports of spiritual results. There is sufficient motivation in the nature of God and in the teaching and example of Jesus. At the same time, acts of kindness are attractive to people and inevitably raise the question of motivation. When Christians are questioned about their motivation for service, they should be prepared to bear witness to Jesus and his love. And when they do confess their faith, they need to be careful to live a life worthy of the gospel, consistent with the Lord they confess, so that they don't give people reason to refuse the message.

Christian service is an important part of ministry to Muslims. Arne Rudvin defines Christian service as "to live out the Gospel in selfless service and social action for others who are in need and trouble"

(1976:379). The best definition, however, may be the commandment of Paul: "Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2).

Acts of Kindness

Christians strive for a lifestyle of love simply because Jesus has shown us that this is the way to be fully human. Jesus came healing the sick. He came concerned with human suffering. He felt compassion for people in need and acted out his compassion in practical and helpful ways. "Compassion for its own sufficient reason, response for need's own sake—these were the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry, whether with hungry crowds or private sufferers" (Cragg 1985b:141). Christians follow in Jesus' footsteps when they do the same. Jesus' greatest display of love was giving his life for the world. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). That's the example of Jesus, John says simply, then adds, "And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16).

When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, he highlighted the importance of simple acts of kindness. The Samaritan traveler saw a case of obvious human need and responded in the appropriate way. This parable is an unforgettable illustration of what it means to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). The neighbor, Jesus stresses, includes the person who is different from us in ethnic and religious background. Indeed, the neighbor includes the one we may consider our enemy.

God loves all people, and Christians are called to be the channel of his unconditional love for the world. Jesus makes the behavior of God the standard for the behavior of his followers: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Acts of kindness do not require a positive response to be justified. We love other people because God loved us first (1 John 4:7, 8, 11, 12, 20, 21).

Rudvin calls Christian service or *diakonia* "the true fruit of the preaching of the Gospel about him who gave himself for us and who came to serve rather than to be served" (1976:380). The very essence of God on which his divinity rests is *agape* (the Greek word for "love" in 1 John 4:8-10). "From this it follows that the purpose and meaning of the life of the Church is to live in his love and to try to live it out in service in the Church and outside" (Rudvin 1976:381). When Christians follow the compulsion of Christ's love (2 Cor. 5:17), they are set free from self-centeredness and enabled to serve those who are in need of service.

“Following Jesus into the disciplines of the kingdom has given the church gifts of ministry” to share with Muslims, writes Dean Gilliland. Sometimes Christians work as if a polemical approach is needed, when instead the witness calls for an intentional meeting of needs, for visible acts of mercy, and for demonstrations of divine power. “When Christians show holistic concern, verbal witness about Jesus will be credible and will create a reconciling atmosphere for dialogue” (Gilliland 1997:11).

Response to Human Need

The needs of people give us a second compelling motivation for Christian service. Both John and James write that the needs of others are sufficient reason: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17, 18). “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:15, 16).

Rudvin encourages Christians to keep their thinking clear so that they do not end up using compassionate ministries in a way that seems to influence Muslims inappropriately. “Our only motive in *diakonia* should be, as an expression of love, to assist the needy person because he is in need” (1976:380). Institutions such as hospitals and schools, which Christians have established in response to human need, should not become instruments of manipulation. This degrades medical, educational, and Christian service in general. It is also a sign to Muslims that Christians lack faith in the Word of God and in the power of his Spirit.

“Muslims have been willing to acknowledge and accept acts of impartial Christian love and charity,” writes Roy Hange (1994:23). He recounts examples from the growing treasury of positive experiences of Mennonite Central Committee workers in Muslim contexts. The story of Bob and Jill Burkholder shows how Christians, by the power of the Holy Spirit, can be peacemakers in violent settings. The Burkholders worked in war-torn southern Lebanon to build up relationships of trust between themselves and the Muslims, Christians, and Druze they worked with. In August 1985 Bob was kidnapped and taken secretly to a building where he was interrogated.

Hange writes, “The first question was, ‘Are you afraid?’ Bob replied in Arabic, ‘I fear no one but God.’ This answer broke the ice with his

Muslim interrogators and the following two hours was more a discussion of MCC’s work in Lebanon than an interrogation. Their final words to Bob were ‘keep up the good work’” (1996:71).

When Bob arrived home fourteen hours after his capture, he was greeted by a living room full of religious leaders of various Muslim and Christian groups who were fighting each other at the time! “Their common concern for Bob, who had shown sacrificial concern and love for them, was revealed to be greater than the barriers and bitter divisions between them” (1996:71).

Christians who work to serve the needs of Muslims create space for reconciliation and peaceful faith conversation. John and Elizabeth Shirk served in a Muslim village in Nigeria under MCC in the 1970s. One day they were called to help a young nomadic Fulani woman and her prematurely born child. The Shirks provided immediate shelter for the woman and 11 members of the extended family who were travelling with her. The woman was expecting her two-pound child to die, but Elizabeth helped to nurse the child by feeding it milk with a medicine dropper until it was able to drink milk from its mother. Six weeks later, the child had gained three pounds and was healthy enough for the family to continue their journey.

Some months earlier, the Nigerian State Ministry of Education had wanted to caution the Shirks against inviting Muslim students to join them in their home for weekly Bible studies. The parents of the students had reported these activities of the Shirks to the Ministry, and there was a chance that the couple would be deported. However, the impact of their helping to restore the fragile life of the infant far overshadowed the opposition to Bible studies. “Deportation no longer was a threat, and the credibility and testimony of the MCC workers were strengthened. Much more, God was honored, and His love was made known” (Thiessen 1995:32).

Shining Like Stars

There is a third important motivation for Christian service. The lives Christians live must be consistent with the good news message at the heart of their faith. Will Muslims listen to a message which is somehow contradicted by the life of the messenger? Iranian bishop Dehqani-Tafti found that message and life must match:

Words alone cannot bring the Muslim to the foot of the cross. . . . Christians must show in their lives how Christianity is in truth the

incarnation of the love of God. Most of the Muslims I know who have followed Christ have done so because of the sacrificial life and sustained love of some Christian friend. You cannot bring the Muslim to Christ unless you love him personally. (1982:79)

The gospel message is a precious treasure with which Christians have been entrusted. Being able to hold out this message to others is a great privilege. Christians must not dishonor this treasure by bringing shame on it in the way they live. That is why Paul encouraged the Christians in Philippi to conduct themselves “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). “Christians who have heard the gospel and embraced the good news of redemption must be constantly concerned that this wonderful gospel is not brought into disrepute through their unseemly behavior” (Ewert 1995:46). Paul wrote further that Christians should be blameless and pure, without fault, “shining like stars in your lifestyle, as you hold out the word of life” (Phil. 2:15, 16).

The apostle Peter wrote to Christians who were suffering persecution for their faith that they should always be ready to give a reason for the hope they had. But he urged them to be circumspect in their behavior and to keep a clear conscience, “so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Pet. 3:16).

When Words Are Restricted

In a number of Muslim countries, Christians are not free to speak openly of their faith to Muslims. All verbal expression of the gospel is understood as proselytization and even prohibited by law. In situations where Christians are restricted in what they can say, acts of love and compassion give them a way to express their faith.

The history of the church in Muslim countries includes many stories of people who have sacrificed their lives doing deeds of love in situations where an open witness to Christ was difficult or impossible. One of the most encouraging contemporary stories is the Christian service of Herb and Ruth Friesen. Herb and Ruth have spent several decades offering practical help in a situation where Muslims have been fighting among themselves. The Mennonite Brethren couple from Kansas began a ministry of eye medicine in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1969. Serving with the International Assistance Mission (IAM), Herb and Ruth helped lay the organizational and legal groundwork for a national eye care delivery system called NOOR. They served with IAM until 1979 in the midst of great political upheaval. During that time the NOOR Institute devel-

oped into a top-flight care center and school of eye medicine. Herb has chronicled those exciting years in his book *A Reluctant Surgeon*.

In 1982 the couple moved to Pakistan, into which millions of Afghan refugees were pouring following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Herb worked at the Christian hospital in Taxila and then took over leadership of the Afghan Eye Hospital in Peshawar. Ruth began her “gate ministry”: counseling, consoling, assisting, and witnessing to a steady stream of refugees who crowded around the gate of the Friesen’s home daily. “Only eternity will reveal the fruits of this ministry of compassion—and often total exhaustion,” says Herb (Hardaway 1996:13). By working on eyes injured in the Afghan conflict, often to reconstruct a face together with other surgeons, Herb became a world authority on eye injuries from war.

When the door to Afghanistan opened again after the retreat of the Soviets, the Friesens moved to Mazar in northern Afghanistan to start the Mazar Ophthalmic Centre in 1994. Again under IAM, the Friesens and their colleagues treated 20,000 to 25,000 patients a year and organized a medical training program to upgrade the skills of the six doctors and six nurses on staff. Then in 1996, with the MOC in good hands and running well, the Friesens journeyed to Gilgit in northern Pakistan to help start a vision center. The Friesens have worked in settings where their help is greatly needed and deeply appreciated. As people they are respected and loved by Muslims. But bearing witness to Christ can bring very real danger.

Richard and Ann Penner are another couple who were willing to serve in Afghanistan amid danger. The Winnipeg couple and their three children were sent by MBMS International in 1978 to take managerial duties with IAM in Kabul. Even after two coworkers were murdered in 1981, they returned to Kabul to serve during the Soviet occupation. They remained in Kabul during the 1980s when many others fled because of the guerrilla war. Through this faithfulness they earned great respect from the local people. Early in their assignment, Richard described the gentle, patient approach required in a setting where words are restricted. “We become friends with those we work with, try to understand their needs, try to get together with them—which is difficult—and then we are able to discuss with them” (Burkholder 1981:21).

Because of the political and religious dynamics, the Afghanistan work shows few visible spiritual results. But that’s not to say that the acts of kindness are without value, or that the witness is going unheard, or that God is not working in the hearts of people. “The presence, life, prayer, ministry, witness and invitation of the redeemed cluster who

meet in Jesus' name is vitally needed even in situations where the church does not grow numerically," writes David Shenk. Some societies have developed "formidable antigrowth propensities." But that is not a reason to terminate Christian presence or deny compassionate ministry. "In those situations it seems the Holy Spirit is especially concerned about maintaining an authentic presence and witness" (1983:151).

Signs of Divine Glory

In some Muslim countries, missionaries are accused of using hospitals, schools, and other compassionate ministries as unfair means to convert Muslims. Some Muslim leaders say there is no Muslim consent for Christians to do their *diaconia* there (Rudvin 1976:389). What is the appropriate response to accusations of proselytization? It is true that many—likely most—missionaries hope that kindnesses done in Jesus' name will draw attention to Jesus. Those who work in such ministries often want to see Muslims come to Christ. Does this mean that they are using compassionate ministries in an unfair or deceptive manner? The answer is at least partly influenced by the Muslim context.

Christian acts of kindness have the potential to point beyond the physical world to a loving God. Jesus himself made this link explicit in the Sermon on the Mount when he commanded, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Compassionate ministries may also have the privileged role of encouraging a response to God. Christians serve humanity with the ultimate hope that God will be glorified. "If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and power for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Pet. 4:11).

An interesting circumstance of Christian service among Muslims is that Muslims are familiar with some of the acts of compassion of Jesus from the Qur'an. The Qur'an tells how 'Isa "healed those born blind and the lepers," and "brought the dead to life once more" (3:49; 5:110). But the wording of these verses is intriguing. Though the miracles are acknowledged, the glory associated with them is not allowed to attach to Jesus. These verses specify that Jesus was only able to do these things "by [Allah's] leave" (The phrase appears four times in 5:110). This verse and its exegetical tradition seem to have studiously avoided letting the miracles of 'Isa point to his divine glory.

Could this be one of those places in gospel-Islam encounter where an apparent point of contact turns out to be a potential disconnection?

Kenneth Cragg explains how in the Gospel of John, "the deeds of Jesus, in healing and teaching, are disclosures, or manifestations, of glory and truth" (1985b:247). Jesus' miracles of healing and meeting physical need are signs of a greater reality (sign or *ayat* is another Qur'anic concept), according to the Gospel of John. They are related to an apprehension of Christ himself. John shows that such miracles as the feeding of the five thousand—though described in other Gospels as responses of compassion for people and their physical needs (Matt. 14:14; Mark 6:34; cf. Matt. 15:32; Mark 8:2)—point beyond material sustenance to the Bread of Life whom people need even more urgently than they need physical bread.

Jesus felt compassion for people when he saw their physical hunger. He acted and met that need. But he also saw that the people would eat that food and still die (John 6:49, 58). Then he indicated the source of satisfaction of the deepest human needs. "Here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:50, 51). John records that in the aftermath of such personal claims of Jesus, even some of his disciples "turned back and no longer followed him" (6:66). People took offense.

There is, therefore, a strong gospel connection between acts of kindness done in Jesus' name and witness to Jesus himself. Compassionate ministries can attract attention to the One full of compassion (James 5:11). But Christian service must never degenerate into a means to induce or manipulate a wanted response. Christians in Muslim settings must have a clear understanding that they do acts of kindness because they are followers of Jesus and because there is a great human need for these ministries. "We serve because God is love" (D. Shenk 1983:150).

Prepare Hearts for the Gospel

Muslims themselves will quickly recognize whether our Christian service flows from hearts of love or from dishonest or selfish motives. Asian and African Christians have much to teach us here. African converts from Islam frequently testify that they were attracted by the transparent love and friendship of Christians and by being valued for just who they were. F. S. Khair-Ullah observes, "unless by the grace of God we touch another heart with love, it may never really come to know the much greater and wonderful love of God for him" (1975:824).

Lebanese leader Fouad Accad tells the story of an African Christian woman who befriended her Muslim neighbors. By the time Accad came

to visit the family, their hearts were already prepared to hear the gospel. Accad has found that a Muslim who has been taught that Christianity is a heresy probably won't listen to a presentation of the gospel, "unless that Christian who is in contact with him has become a close, dear friend to him and has a character that commands respect" (1997:31).

David Shenk tells of how Christian missions worked in Somalia between 1945 and 1960 to develop quality medical, educational, and development programs. Soon after Somalia's independence in 1960 it became illegal to propagate any religion except Islam. Yet the humanitarian work of Christian agencies, including the Somalia Mennonite Mission, had developed an image for the Christian faith which provided room in the society for the emergence of unobtrusive Christian fellowships. "Muslims frequently ask about the meaning of Christian mission presence. Such occasions open opportunities to express the faith in us, with the gentleness and respect missionary Peter had counseled in biblical times (1 Pet. 3:15-16)" (1994:197).

"Keep Up the Good Work"

There are many compelling reasons for Christians to live lives of love among Muslims. Acts of kindness give Christians a way to express God's compassion for humanity and to meet urgent physical needs. They also provide fitting opportunities to bear witness to Jesus and his love. Christians have tended to err in two directions. One error has been to preach the gospel without responding to the immediate human needs in front of them. The second error has been for the church to be so focused on improving the situation of humanity that it forgets the heart of its message. "The real Gospel is not development or progress but the proclamation that He loved us first," reminds Rudvin. "We only attain real life through faith in the crucified and risen Lord" (1976:382). Christian acts of kindness cannot themselves create faith or give people new life, "for it is the pure Word of God who alone is able to create faith" (1976:380).

We need to continue to work at a biblical balance of word, deed, and presence. Mennonite mission agencies, like many other Christian groups, have struggled to strike a balance in Muslim settings (Friesen 1992:115-119). We are tempted by the extremes of a "spiritualized gospel" and a "materialized gospel," notes LeRoy Friesen—because each, in its own way, is less costly to share. Perhaps the Muslim context, with its special sensibilities and its unique theological understandings, can draw out a more authentic integration.

Roy Hange finds an encouraging lesson in the story of Bob and Jill Burkholder. He reflects on Bob's remarkable release by his Lebanese kidnappers and notes the words with which the captors sent Bob home:

If there is a way forward for Christians with Islam, it may be for Christians to "keep up the good work" in acts of love in Muslim contexts, to encourage each other on the way of service in our respective faiths, and to find contexts where day-to-day dialogue can build understanding as Christians commend Christ as the One through whom God has made us infinitely free to love, free to understand Muslims on their own terms, and free to forgive. (1994:23)