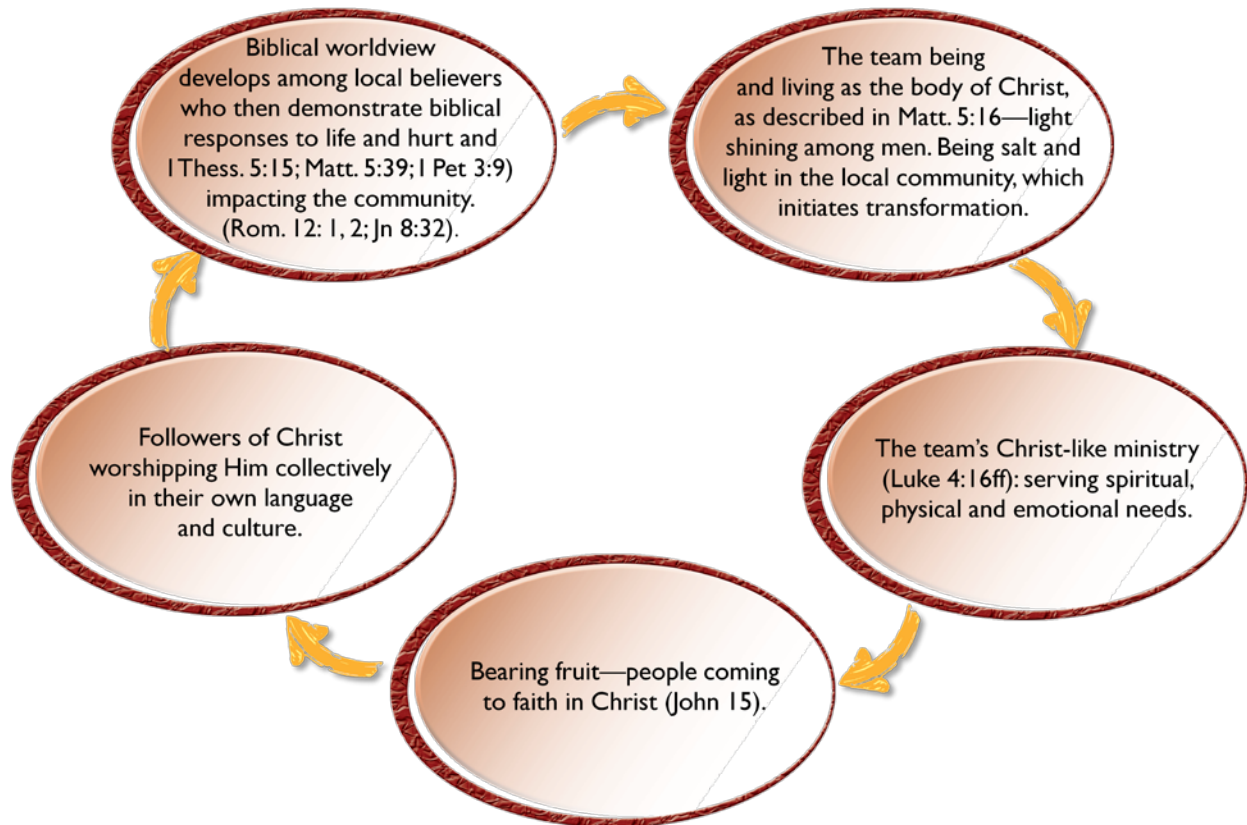


The Cycle of Christ-honoring Transformation in Communities



God is the God of transformation! From the moment of creation, God brought about transformation of the physical world, making that which was “without form and void” into a place where life could and would thrive. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, God has affected transformation among the very ones who have been corrupted by the effects of sin. We read that one day, heaven and earth will be ultimately transformed for the eternal joy of the redeemed (Rev. 21).

In the intervening time, God is in the process of transforming our lives. Paul defines God’s purpose in Romans 8:29, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” (ESV) God uses all life experiences to accomplish His purposes (v. 28), so that instead of being conformed to this world (12:2), we will be transformed into the image of Christ.

This truth provides a framework to understand how God is bringing about transformation in communities where Christ is yet to be worshipped. We call it the “Cycle of Christ-honoring transformation in communities.” Christ-honoring transformation:

- is Christ-centric, not man-centric. The church, as the body of Christ, is the central component. As such, Christ-honoring transformation seeks to see reproducing

churches established where the church does not exist. is accomplished by Christ's authority (Matt 28:18).

- follows Christ's model for ministry (John 20:21).
- is accomplished in dependence upon Christ to do the miraculous, not by man's effort, strength or wisdom.

The process of Christ-honoring transformation in communities begins with the call of God on the lives of some of His people to leave their home and cross into another culture where He is yet to be worshipped. It is the body of Christ sending out men and women from among its own to the nations. Local fellowships participate with Christ in His work (Matt. 16:18) in light of the promise that there will be people from every tongue, tribe and nation worshipping God in eternity (Rev. 5:9).

Transformation takes place in the world through the body of Christ! Jesus Christ's life, sacrifice and resurrection provide the basis for the consummation of God's purposes for human history. It is through His local body that God continues to accomplish His transformational purposes in the world today.

The first stage in the cycle is to be and live as the body of Christ within the context of a local team. The team does not exist simply to work together toward the accomplishment of a common objective. It is in and through team relationships that the reality of God's transforming grace and mercy are first manifested among those who do not know Christ. What will eventually be communicated verbally is demonstrated through the way that members of the team interact with each other.

The second part of this first stage in the cycle is to build into the community through the God-honoring use of professional and vocational skills which serve the needs of the people in meaningful ways. First, workers need to possess skills that are useful in this work. The vast majority of the world's least-reached people groups are geographically located from Iran to Bangladesh (including South Asia and southwest China). For "outsiders" to move into such areas, they need to demonstrate their ability to benefit the community in some way, whether through education, medicine and healthcare, business, social services or any other area that is deemed valuable by the community.

Second, as workers use their skills to establish themselves in the community, they understand that these skills are a real means of communicating the good news. Workers do not approach "ministry" as separate from their professional skills, but rather through these skills. In all they do, teams need to stand firmly on the Christ's command in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Such an approach is in obedience to the biblical command that "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Col. 3:17, ESV). The local context will determine whether it is best to have a

team which focuses on one area of service or whether the team consists of people with a wide range of skills that serve the community in different capacities.

The next stage in the cycle of transformation builds on the first. As workers live out the reality of Christ in team relationships and serve the needs of the community through professional skills, they model Jesus' ministry as described in Luke 4:16 and following: proclaiming the good news and ministering to the needs of those around us. Their priority is and must continue to be the proclamation of God's love and truth as revealed in Christ and the written Word of God. Spiritual needs are a central component to all other needs.

Jesus' model of ministry demonstrates that the physical, emotional and social needs of the community are a vital part of outreach. They are not treated as secondary, but as a means through which the good news of God is lived and proclaimed. Through this comprehensive approach to the person's and community's needs we demonstrate that the reality of the grace of God, and acts of compassion toward the needs of least-reached people, are "authentic expressions of neighbour-love. For who is my neighbour, whom I am to love? He is neither a bodiless soul, nor a soulless body, nor a private individual divorced from a social environment. God made man a physical, spiritual and social being. My neighbour is a body-soul-in-community. I cannot claim to love my neighbour if I'm really concerned for only one aspect of him, whether his soul or his body or his community."¹

We welcome the opportunity to live with the tension of integrating the proclamation of God's love and truth in the person of Christ into the professional skills through which we are serving the community. On the one hand we pursue, with excellence, to be a blessing to the community in a holistic manner. Yet, we are not content to provide deeds of service that lack explanations of why we are willing to give our lives in such a way. Social service, moral reform and physical healing may all play an important part in improving the condition of communities, but apart from the message of Christ, as He speaks through the lips of the gospel messenger, any improvement is only external and temporary. Therefore, we actively seek opportunities to communicate the truths of Scripture in the most culturally-appropriate ways possible.

This flows quite naturally into the next stage, where living and proclaiming the truth of God, flowing from communion with God (John 15:4-7), bears fruit to the glory of God (John 15:8). Bearing fruit has numerous implications in the life of the believer. In this context, we trust God to produce specific fruit: men and women placing their faith in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, and thus being born into the family of God (John 3:1-21). Using our skills and gifts does not stop at being a social blessing to the community. There is a faith goal: trusting God to see people born into the kingdom through the intentional proclamation of the gospel (Rom. 10:13-16).

¹ Stott, John. "Walk in His Shoes" (London: IVP, 1975), p. 16.

As men and women place their faith and confidence in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ and His miraculous resurrection, they begin to gather together to worship God in their own language, in biblical and culturally-appropriate ways. This is the work of Christ, who promised that He would build His church (Matt 16:18). As the body of Christ, we are God's co-workers in the fulfillment of the work of Christ. The establishment of communities of faith, called the "church" by Jesus, is not the work of man, but the work of Jesus. Gathering and worshiping Him corporately is the natural outflow of individuals who have placed their faith in Him.

As the local group of believers grows in their personal and collective faith in God, we trust God for another transformation to take place: believers embracing a biblical worldview (John 8:32; Rom. 12:1,2). As God's Word is taught and understood, believers begin to perceive their attitudes, practices, rituals and life in general through the lens of biblical principles. In time, the truths of God's Word produce unnatural responses to life and pain (1 Thess. 5:15; Matt. 5:39; 1 Peter. 3:9).

A significant indicator of the transformation taking place within the community of believers includes what Dallas Willard describes as the "radical goodness that progressively subverts and replaces the radical evil in the fallen human soul, social and other environments"² (John 12:24,25). In place of revenge for injustices there is mercy and grace. In place of selfishness there is giving. In place of deceit there is integrity.

Such Christ-honoring transformation does indeed impact the surrounding community. Amazingly (from a human standpoint), God is not limited by the size of the local group of believers in accomplishing His purposes. This is why we describe this process as "transformation in communities," not "of communities." Jesus did not promise that whole communities would believe—He said that the road to destruction is wide and the road to salvation is narrow. Though the local church may be relatively small in respect to the size of a local community, Christ-honoring transformation does take place!

As this cycle continues, by God's grace, new communities of believers send out followers of Christ who move into new areas which do not have access to a church in their own language and culture, and the process begins again. May God be honored and pleased to accomplish his transformational work IN us and THROUGH us!

² Willard, Dallas. *The Renovation of the Heart*. Carol Stream: NavPress. 2002. p. 74.