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WHERE HAS ALL THE COMMITMENT GONE?

Harold Westing

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Not long ago I overheard a conversation about a Los Angeles newspaper article reporting that a few years ago every car on the L.A. freeway system had 2.9 people passengers. A new survey had just reported that the number had dropped to 2.39 people in each car. A clever UCLA student calculated from

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that information that by the year 2005, only five of every seven cars on the freeways would have anyone in them at all!

I have wondered if that humorous illustration of Los Angeles driving trends might be reflective of other trends in American life. Merchants complain that few customers consistently patronize them and that it is the lowest price that buys the customers. Serial marriages have thrown the whole family unit into turmoil. The celebration of a fiftieth wedding anniversary may soon be a trend of the past.¹ It all makes me want to throw up my hands and cry-- where has all the commitment gone?

Community and Commitment

Two contemporary sociologists, Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*) and Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*), focus our attention to the growing problems in America brought about by our often individualistic and uncommitted values. They bemoan the fact that there is no longer a high price placed on our "community of memories" or those shared ideals and values that grow from our common roots and common causes.² "People growing up in communities of memory not only hear the stories that tell how the community came to be, what its hopes and fears are, and how its ideals are exemplified by outstanding men and women; they also participate in the practices -- ritual, aesthetic, ethical-- that define the community as a way of life."³ However, the American self has detached itself from the community traditions of our past in a "nervous search for the true self,"⁴ -- free

¹ Randy Frame, "Surviving the Slump," *Christianity Today*, February 3, 1989, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 33.

² Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), p. 227.

³ Robert N. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 154.

⁴ Bellah, p. 55.

from obligation, tradition and commitment,⁵ finding its expression in personal success and personal experience.⁶ Bloom notes that,

"The pervading feeling that love and friendship are groundless, perhaps that notable aspect of the current feelings of groundlessness, has caused them to give way to the much vaguer and more personal idea of commitment, that choice in the void whose cause resides only in the will or the self. The young want to make commitments, which constitute the meaning of life, because love and nature do not suffice. This is what they talk about, but they are haunted by the awareness that the talk does not mean very much and that commitments are lighter than air."⁷

As Chuck Colson points out, "Without commitment to community, individual responsibility quickly erodes."⁸ As Robert Bellah observes, "Americans want the freedom of radical individualism, but they do not like the consequences."⁹

Christian Commitment

No one has been effective so far in getting Christians to leave their culture on the coat rack as they come into church. In the past, they came with a certain amount of commitment built in as part of American culture. But today, Christian leadership struggles to find ways to bring Christians to a serious commitment to Christ. It is easy to attack the lack of commitment problem by trying to solve enrollment or recruitment difficulties. That, unfortunately, is like applying a Band-Aid to a much more serious wound. The source of the Christian character is directly related to individual depravity and immaturity. In a society that shies away from the strong medicine of discipline, it becomes very difficult to build a solid core of commitment to Christ and His church.

⁵ Bellah, p. 152.

⁶ Colson, p. 214.

⁷ Allan D. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 109.

⁸ Colson, p. 227.

⁹ Rodney Clapp, "Habits of the Hearth: Community, Family, Religion, and Country According to Sociologist Robert Bellah," *Christian Today*, February 3, 1989, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 24.

We need, instead, to go to the heart and source of this problem and take on the challenge of building the disciplines of the Christian life into those who would or could become serious Christians. I hope, in these pages, to address some of those core problems. Although I can only suggest some superficial and short term solutions, I hope to stimulate thought on the long term healing of our commitment disease.

The Institute of Church Development, a ministry of Denver Seminary, develops and maintains a statistical data base reflecting the attitudes and values of more than 100,000 people from every corner of America and from every size evangelical church. Research conducted by the center indicates that 37 percent of those surveyed nationally would be hesitant to obey church authorities (only 22 percent would willingly obey church authority) and 16 percent felt committed only mentally to the programs of the church.¹⁰ Church and mission leaders cry out that young people are not committed to involvement with religious causes. Gaylord Briley demonstrated that less than 30 percent of religious donors are under the age of 50.¹¹

Christians, reflective of rugged, individualistic, American values, are transient religious consumers anxious to have their every need met. Indirectly they say, "I have a new need and you can't fulfill it. So I'm going around the corner where they can meet that need. Your sermons don't tickle my fancy any more. I'm going to be entertained somewhere else for a while." Where has all the commitment gone?

A. Biblical Commitment Christian commitment starts with the Bible. Faithfulness to God and His causes is a primary mandate of Scripture. Christians are commanded to make a deposit of their lives into the hands of the Lord -- put them under lock and key in His spiritual security box and throw the key away. 1 Peter 4:19 exhorts Christians to "commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good." Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:58, encourages them to keep their minds fixed -- "stand firm, let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that you labor in the Lord is not in vain." Jesus asked for faithfulness in His followers, faithfulness in keeping the commands -- obeying the great commandments of Scripture and

¹⁰ Institute of Church Development, "Church Development Survey," 1989. The Institute for Church Development is a consulting organization owned and operated by Denver Seminary, P.O. Box 10,000, Denver, Colorado. It has compiled a data base built upon 100,000 respondents from Evangelical Churches 1983 through 1989.

¹¹ Frame, p. 33.

the Great Commission -- faithfulness to His cause and to His people. Matthew 24:45 says,

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time. It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns."

1 Corinthians 4:2 reminds Christians that "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." And, as Paul put the finishing touches on the training of Timothy for ministry, he encouraged him with, "I am convinced that God is able to guard what I have entrusted unto Him against that day" 2 Timothy 1:12. Paul reminded Timothy, as he would remind us, that it is better to put your life in the hands of the Lord than to put your money in the best savings and loan company.

Christian commitment is developed in an environment where strong, mature believers commit themselves to others. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 says, "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." When we are instructed to commit ourselves to Christ, it includes a serious commitment to His body, the weak and the strong folks. They are all our brothers and sisters, part of God's family, and we cannot just walk away from them in disinterest. We commit to them even when it is not very pleasant. This kind of commitment always includes a tenacious spirit with which we ought to be ready to bear up under the uncomfortableness that often comes with relationships.

B. Church Commitment Every time our culture takes another step away from the biblical norm, the church faces the arduous task of meeting that head-on challenge. Unfortunately, the American church has not always been famous for its ability to meet those challenges. In fact, it seems that the church more often reflects our culture rather than challenges it. On the other hand, conceptual leaders on the cutting edge of evangelical thought -- men like Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Gene Getz, Bob Logan and others -- continually seek to create new forms of church life involving stronger commitment. Both directly and indirectly, these leaders have tried to demonstrate commitment through visible and attractive models.

It is very possible that church structure might be partially to blame for our current commitment crises. In the past, individuals gained a sense of personal ownership of the church through participation in the decision making processes. But in our hurry-up, quick-fix society, people often are not interested or do not want to spend the time working through all the issues that make congregational

rule successful. Often Christians would rather switch than fight -- preferring a move to a new church rather than be involved in the stress and conflict of church government. Additionally, in this era of "mega" churches, fewer people have opportunity to be involved in the decision making processes. Some churches have turned to multiple elder rule as a model for church government, again eliminating many people from active participation in the process of forming the church. The church then moves conceptually from "my church" to the "the church we attend."

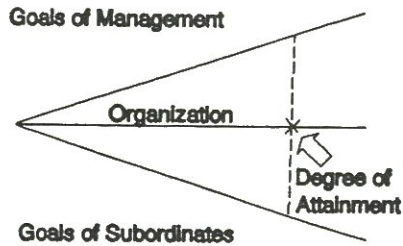
Research from the Institute for Church Development shows that the most significant factor in achieving church growth is found in a solidified and clearly defined sense of purpose.¹² People seem to bond more readily when the church's philosophy of ministry is clear and has become a part of the shared "community of memories." Those churches that have grown significantly in the past years have verbalized and sold their people on their philosophy of ministry. That philosophy answers questions like: what is this church's purpose in existence? what groups of people need to be reached by this church if it is to fulfill this ministry? How does this church go about fulfilling this ministry? As the churches have gone about hammering out these distinctives, it has been important that as many people as possible be involved in those decisions and that in the future every major decision the church makes is made in light of philosophy.

In our mobile society, local churches often do not stay together long enough to bond with each other and to their commonly owned sense of direction. A congregation that is truly bonded together most often has a philosophy which clearly states what they see as their purpose and ministry. Together they have hammered and carved out a unique way to express their worship and service for God. They have found the most critical needs in their community and ordered their priorities to meet those needs. They become unique expressions of Christ's Gospel to their communities.

Hersey and Blanchard believe that, "The extent that individuals and groups perceive their own goals as being satisfied by the accomplishment of organizational goals is the degree of integration of goals. When organizational goals are shared by all, this is what McGregor calls a true 'integration of goals.'"¹³ What Hersey and Blanchard have seen as true in the business sector is also true for the religious sector of American society. The more clearly a church defines and owns its goals, the more it will be successful in attaining it goals.

¹² Institute of Church Development, 1989.

¹³ Kenneth H. Blanchard and Paul Hersey, *Management of Organizational Behavior* (5th ed.; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988), p. 139ff.



Source: Blanchard and Hersey¹⁴

In addition to clearly defining a philosophy of ministry, churches need to take a serious look at their process for recruitment and training of workers. I was surprised to hear Martin Marty say that the age of greed is over and that we are now in the age of the volunteer.¹⁵ Eighty million volunteers systematically report for service in America. Many of these volunteer workers come from the booming ranks of the retired who now, for the first time in our history, outnumber high school students.

But the church tells a different story. For years Christian educators have complained that they are unable to recruit people for their Christian education ministries. Church members do not want to commit to work for more than three or six months at a time. This trend has, in fact, become one of the great job dissatisfactors among Christian education professionals -- even to the point of causing some to leave the field of Christian education.

During the 1950's, it was common to find people investing a major part of their adult lives to Christian education teaching assignments. My personal experience was that the average Sunday school teacher spent 8.2 years in teaching, and those teachers averaged two to five years in a particular classroom. It was even possible to find the great saint who had stayed at Sunday school teaching for 15 years or more.¹⁶

¹⁴ Blanchard, p. 139.

¹⁵ Martin Marty, "No Religious Group to 'Win' in '90s," *The Denver Post*, February 4, 1989), p. 6B.

¹⁶ Harold Westing, "Mission Appraisal and Prescription of the Sunday School," (unpublished research from approximately 250 Sunday schools in America).

Perhaps the elective system in the adult departments of our churches that began in the 1950's has taken away the need for long term commitment and does not insist that adults get involved in the learning process for themselves or with other adults. Today the potential worker's commitment is determined by personal convenience and is spurred on by individualism that is critical of faithful commitment to the cause of Christ and to the church.

After years of researching hundreds of Sunday schools, I have noticed that church education programs seem to fit into one of two categories -- as truth dispensing centers or as discipling institutions. Truth dispensing centers pride themselves in trying to stuff religious information into the minds of students. Many church and Christian education leaders seem to think this is the ultimate goal of church education. In fact, the lack of concern about this phenomena demonstrates to me that church leaders see the CE program of the church as simply a place to dispense Biblical data and are satisfied to see students simply fill their minds with religious information. Nowhere in Scripture are we admonished just to know the content of the Bible. While we often err on one side in that so few Christians know anything about the content of the Bible, we can also err by only being able to "walk-through" the Bible as an end unto itself. We are to know the Bible so we can live it out in our daily lives.

It alarms me that so little genuine discipling is going on in our church education programs. The idea of discipling has been a Christian staple for a long time, but those things that make for genuine discipling -- teaching, modeling and relational accountability over a period of time, require great discipline on the part of our church educational programs if they are to succeed in this society where commitment to people and to processes is rare.

John Cheydleur gives some wise tips as to how to motivate Christians to a personal involvement in the goals of the ministry and the process of discipleship.

- a. Ministry ideas must clearly define needs and the specific groups of people who have those needs.
- b. Focused ministry concepts succeed, ideas which are diffused fail.
- c. Ministry concepts must lead to action conclusions.
- d. Ministry concepts must describe the future and how to get there.¹⁷

¹⁷ John Cheydleur, "The Idea Behind Motivation," *Leadership Magazine*, Summer, 1980, p. 58-61.

Bear Valley Ministries in Denver, Colorado, is a fine example of a discipling ministry. Tim Robertson and Frank Tillapaugh have spent time trying some very creative and powerful things to get people more involved in ministry. Their process, which they call spiritual brokeraging, challenges Bear Valley Baptist members to respond to God's inner call to greatness. They ask interested people to sit down with them and explore where they want to be spiritually and in Christian service during the next few years. They ask people to think through their current spiritual inventory and to evaluate what kinds of investments they want to make in the coming years to see their spiritual portfolio grow. Tim and Frank challenge these Christians to dream about what they would like to do for the Lord in the coming years and then encourage them to invest in the spiritual disciplines needed to reach those desired destinations. The leadership of Bear Valley Ministries meets quarterly with each of these people to help work out a plan of discipleship. This entire process releases these folks from a fortress mentality and sets them in an incarnational posture. The training and service opportunities provided stretch for their spiritual muscles as they become involved in maintenance ministries within the church or create new and exciting new ministries to the community. Bear Valley Ministries hopes to involve one thousand people from the congregation in this form of personal growth and service.

Christian commitment will be enhanced if we take some notes from the small group movements that have been started in this country. Robert Raikes may not have realized the significance of what he did more than 200 years ago when he started the small group movement through the Sunday school. Those cells of commitment in the early days of the Sunday school movement were one of the major ingredients that brought such a lasting result from that movement. This is still true today.

The churches that are growing today have discovered how to facilitate interpersonal relationships. About 70 percent of the American people, however, relate best with other people through activity-type relationships. It is very rare to find a church that has more than 60 percent of its congregation involved in any type of small group ministries. The Institute for Church Development research reports that the average congregation has only 25 percent of its congregation involved in small group ministry.¹⁵ We should not be surprised to learn that, from time to time, *The Denver Post* lists over one thousand secular support groups that meet in the Denver area. This listing, while just the tip of the iceberg, demonstrates that people are searching for altruistic support systems to be a part of in an effort to fill interpersonal needs in our sprawling urban

¹⁵ Institute for Church Development, 1989.

society. It ought to be frighteningly obvious that the American church could and ought to do a much better job of providing Spirit - led structures and opportunities to meet the Christian's interpersonal needs. Certainly the example of Lyman Coleman and his team at Serendipity House should inspire us to start new ministries with these goals in mind.

C. Family and Commitment One of the major factors in the crises of commitment in America today arises from the breakdown of the traditional family structures. Serial marriages have thrown the whole family scene into turmoil. "With one of two marriages ending in divorce and countless others existing in name only, to trust someone to be honest and committed over the long haul is increasingly difficult."¹⁹ We need to be creative to heal this massive disease in the fiber of our American value system. "There is no society in the world where people have stayed married without enormous community pressure to do so."²⁰

Dan Finnegan, a young minister in Boulder, Colorado, provides us with a marvelous model of one way to approach this need. As leader of the young married Sunday school group in his church, Dan leads his class through the process of developing their philosophy of family. He regularly addresses a specific topic which is a part of a family life philosophy and each couple is asked to write down what they believe and to indicate their degree of commitment relating to that subject. Topics include issues like family worship, finances, time with children, etc. Dan's hope is that the couples will become accountable to each other and to the group for the fulfillment of their family philosophies.

Another trend that seems to affect the spirit of commitment to the ministry of the local church is that most mothers of small children are working.

"It is no longer possible for most families in America, in either the middle class or the working class, to make it on one salary. With so many working wives, women who are also mothers, an entire form of life that we took to be "normal" in the immediate postwar world, is gone. . . . This places a tremendous strain on everyone in the family. Institutions are not set up to provide a substitute for that woman who

¹⁹ Caryl S. Avery, "How Do You Build Intimacy in an Age of Divorce," *Psychology Today*, May, 1989, p. 31.

²⁰ Avery, p. 27.

is no longer there, the mother who was the moral backbone of our neighborhoods."²¹

According to the Institute For Church Development database, an average of 51 percent of mothers with children still living at home are working and in some churches in and around urban areas the figures go as high as 80 percent. In the secular community, the national average of working mother is 55 percent as compared with 16.4 percent in 1958.²² In the past, these women provided much of the volunteer energy in our church programs.

Additionally, it is frightening to realize that only 17 percent of American children live in a nuclear family -- with two original parents living at home with their children. There is no longer a place where young people can gain a sense of dignity and worth through collaboration and dialogue with adults. Thus the home, where the needs of commitment are transmitted from generation to generation, is no longer stable.

The American public educational system seems to be unable to face these same issues. When we look back to the 1950's, postwar babies flooded classrooms and the teacher/student ratio shifted from 1 teacher to 17 students to every 35 students. The task force of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development says that most middle schools make an already difficult period of life even harder and create an "arena of casualties" for both students and teachers. Most young adolescents attend massive, impersonal schools, learn from unconnected and seemingly irrelevant curriculum, know well and trust few adults in school, and lack access to health care and counseling. "The chances that young people will feel lost are enormous."²³ In this environment, adults brush up against children for only a short time and the result is that young people are growing up in a moral vacuum where learning has become sterile and destructive to their self-worth.

Young people, in search for self-worth, seem to have nowhere to go but to the television for their values and their heroes. Of the top ten heroes listed in the 1987 *World Almanac of Youth Heroes* all, including President Reagan, were television personalities. In the late 1940's and 50's, there seemed to be a great many heroes for young people to follow. They were people who had served our country or the cause of Christ well. In those days, great missionary heroes were the heroes of Christian young people. Today, Christian young people could look

²¹ Clapp, p. 23.

²² Institute For Church Development, 1989.

²³ Susan Tift, "Help for At-Risk Kids," *Time*, June 26, 1989, p. 51.

to missionary heroes like Dr. and Mrs. Wendell Geary who, in forging out of the jungles of Borneo an entire village, Bamboo River Community, including a hospital, school and church, have left a fingerprint upon the lives of many who have witnessed their labors for Christ. As young people look for a cause on which to build their lives, they can be impressed and inspired by people like this who have committed themselves to years of arduous service in difficult situations.

Challenge To Commitment

As serious Christian leaders, we must be students of our rapidly changing culture. We should not be surprised at the low levels of commitment in American society. As Vince Lombardi once said, "the quality of a man's life is in direct proportion to his commitment to excellence regardless of his field of endeavor." But as church leaders, we must heed Nicholas Woltersdorf when he reminds us that

"children tended to practice as the model practiced and preached as the model preached. The practice of generosity on the part of the model increased generous behavior in the child. . . . It was the model's practice that influenced the practice of the subject, with the preachment having just a slight tendency to diminish the effects of practice if the two were inconsistent. Preaching induced preaching rather than practice."²⁴

As Woltersdorf cautions us, we need to teach our congregations not how to preach, but how to live.

Bringing commitment back into the lives of Christians will be a long and arduous task. We cannot expect to see massive changes in what has been the erosion of many decades. But we can take some meaningful steps to build commitment back into the fiber of our Christian communities. Facing both the good and the evil in cultural changes, we must become creative design engineers who take the present uncommitted circumstances and turn them into opportunities for effecting the Kingdom of God.

²⁴ Nicholas P. Woltersdorf, *Education for Responsible Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 57.