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## Ministering in Love

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# Ministering in Love

CAROLYN AND JIM HAWKINS

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She came to our ESL class that Sunday morning, frightened, shy, and trying to appear as small as possible. She had immigrated to Canada from China just a few weeks before with her little girl, leaving her husband in China to work. We invited her into class and began talking with her. She hesitantly began to talk to us and let us know the extent of her English skills. As we responded to her with love and concern, she revealed a very lonely person desperately needing compassion. She responded increasingly to our love, hugs, and care for her. She is now in regular attendance at the classes, and growing in her knowledge of English and also her knowledge of Jesus. She is just one of many people we have reached from many different cultures. They respond especially to the warmth, care, and compassion they find among us. We have found that love closes gaps between people of differing nationalities, languages, and cultures more quickly than anything else ever could.

## **CHRISTIAN MINISTRY**

The aged apostle John writes to the church to which he has devoted his life. He has already written a history of the life of Jesus to encourage faith in his Master. But what does he write to this church? He writes about the guiding principle of his own ministry, which he learned from his Master. He writes to a congregation struggling with internal strife on the inside and persecution from the outside. Through all this, he encourages them to remember what is most important: "If we love our Christian brothers and sisters, it proves that we have passed from death to eternal life. But a person who has no love is still dead. Anyone who hates another Christian is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don't have eternal life within them. We know what real love is because Christ gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters" (1 John 3.14-16, NLT). That is the definition of Christian ministry: giving up our lives in love for others.

You can't be in ministry very long before you realize there is no hatred and animosity equal to that which is brought on by religious zeal. One of our saddest memories is of a work that we helped to start. It was growing rapidly. Unfortunately two individuals in the congregation got on opposite sides of an issue. Not only did it destroy the relationship of two families, it destroyed the whole church, and that body of believers collapsed. It was for the same reason, internal strife, that Paul wrote the Philippian letter, knowing that two people in a congregation who are fighting have the potential to destroy the whole church. Why could not love prevail instead? When we respond out of our own self interests, we take our eyes off Jesus and put them onto ourselves. When that happens, the results are often conflict and the destruction of human relationships. When our Christian ministry is informed by love, it does not respond out of selfish ambition or conceit; but, in humility, regards others as better than ourselves (Phil 2.1-4). Ministry that flows from the mind of Christ builds relationships and resolves conflict.

### MINISTERING IN LOVE

It would seem that ministering in love would be the easiest of tasks. All it takes is to make a decision in each situation to act lovingly. And that is often the way in which teaching on love is expressed. But scripture indicates something radically different. The apostle John says, “God *is* love” (1 John 4.8). Since we are to be like God (Matt 5.48), just occasionally doing some loving acts is not what John is describing. It is one thing to do some loving things; it is another to be a lover. When we are lovers, love becomes the defining quality of our life. Whatever situation we approach, we do so not with the question, “Shall I do some act of love here?” but with the fixed determination that loving will be the way to approach this challenge, regardless of what specific action needs to be taken. Whatever is done will be done in love, because that is the natural, Spirit-led inclination.

The apostle Paul’s admonition is similar to John’s. He says, “through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5.13b, 14). He admonishes us to “bear with one another in love” and “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 4.2b; 5.1,2). When we live in love as Jesus did in his ministry on earth, ministry takes on an unbelievably different dynamic.

Some time ago we were in a distant city giving a special series of lectures. A preacher we had known for many years came from some distance to be with us. We could tell as soon as we saw him that something was seriously wrong in his life. When we had time to be alone with him we talked and reminisced about the past for a while. Then we asked, “How is your ministry?” Various complaints and concerns were brought forth. Then we asked, “How is your spiritual life right now?” He dissolved in tears, and we knew we had hit the broken place in his life. He told us he wasn’t praying. He wasn’t reading scripture, except to prepare lessons. His ministry was bitter. He hated to go to work every day. There was a cloud of despondency over his whole life. Trying to minister while ignoring the spiritual resources that are available to us is the quintessential expression of “doing it on your own.”

### LOVE’S TRANSFORMING POWER

For many years the two of us (Carolyn and Jim) worked together in full-time counseling practices, both in Vancouver and in the greater Seattle area. Couples frequently came to us, trying to maintain a marriage in the same way the previously mentioned minister was trying to maintain a ministry—by letting the love and life of the marriage die. Ignoring the resources of love, they were fighting and obsessing over the other partner’s failures. But a quality marriage cannot be sustained in this way. When we endeavor out of our own strength and resources either to have an exciting and fulfilling marriage relationship with our partner or to minister with a congregation, we will ultimately fail.

The rock solid platform that under girds any relationship is a powerful, dynamic relationship with God. As human beings, because of the natural inclination to sin that constantly draws and pulls us, it is so easy to let the grievances and annoyances of the people with whom we have relationships to get under our skin. This is especially so if we do not allow the Holy Spirit who dwells within us to protect and strengthen us. And love is the very first quality the Holy Spirit wants to perfect in us (Gal 5.22). Love enables all the other “fruits of the Spirit” to function and grow in the life of the believer, thus enriching the quality of life in ministry, marriage, and all other relationships. Without love, life becomes bitter, sterile, self-righteous, and barren. That is why John is so bold as to affirm that “Anyone who hates another Christian is really a murderer at heart” (1 John 3.15). We just cannot afford to allow spiritual depletion to happen to us. If we begin to see bitterness, anger, or hatred invading our hearts in regards to anyone with whom we have a relationship, we must not indulge it or wallow in it. If we do, we can know immediately that we are moving away from God and from the life he wants to live in us. We must come back to our Father and confess our departure from

him and open our hearts so that he can rebuild in us his life and love. That hits our pride with a vengeance, for the truth is that pride and love are polar opposites.

The result of spiritual depletion is that not only can we not truly love others, we cannot receive love from them, either. Our hearts become closed off so that efforts by others to love us will be at the least rebuffed, and at the worst we may perceive them as subversive or sarcastic ways to further hurt us. Our spiritual death-spiral deepens and becomes tighter. But if we allow God to begin rebuilding *his* life in us, then we can begin to function on a very different level, a level of love and care and compassion. Such a life brings fulfillment and joy. The despondency and bitterness of the past is replaced by a genuine ability to live in love.

He came one day to visit Jim and said, "I don't love my wife any more, so I am going to divorce her." Jim said, "You need to go home and love your wife." He said, "You didn't understand me. I said I don't love my wife." He was talking about romantic love, which can be fickle and temporary. Jim was talking about agape love which is a permanent commitment or decision to freely give the other person, unconditionally and regardless of the cost, what he or she needs most—God's love. It took a lot of convincing, but finally he was willing to make the decision to go home and love his wife. When he did, we witnessed a transformation. She changed from a bedraggled, beaten down, unloved woman to a radiant wife who felt loved. There is nothing in all of life that has the power to change people more than being genuinely and truly loved.

Jim and Carolyn Hawkins have been in full-time ministry in the Church of Christ for 51 years. They live in Vancouver, British Columbia where they minister with the Delta church.

