

MOVING FROM VISION INTO MISSION

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At the memorial service for Elton Trueblood at Earlham College last year, Dr. Peter Lee spoke of our deep loss of our teacher and friend; then he added with gratitude, "but we still have his written word." Indeed we do! Those words (written in over 28 books) continue to be a source of hope for me and that is why I share these words from *The Yoke of Christ*, by D. Elton Trueblood.

It is hard for us to visualize what early Christianity was like. Certainly it was very different from the Christianity known to us today. There were no fine buildings. In most places there were, in fact, no Christian buildings at all. There was no hierarchy; there were no theological seminaries; there were no Christian colleges; there were no Sunday Schools; there were no choirs. Only small groups of believers - small fellowships. In the beginning there wasn't even a New Testament. The New Testament itself was not so much a cause of these fellowships as a result of them. Thus the first books of the New Testament were the letters written to the little fellowships partly because of their difficulties, dangers and temptations. All that they had was the fellowship; nothing else; no standing; no prestige; no honor. For a long time practically none were citizens of the Roman Empire. The citizenship of Paul was stressed partly because it was so rare. It was actually true, and not mere rhetoric, to say, "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth"(I Cor.1:26). The early Christians were not people of standing, but they had a secret power among them, and the secret power resulted from the way in which they were members one of another.

Can you think of what it must have been like? One little fellowship was meeting in a house in Phillipi, another was gathered in a house or a rented place or a synagogue in Corinth. In Ephesus the fellowship met in a rented place, a school building, but mostly Christians gathered in homes. That is why one of the most precious terms in the New Testament is "the church that is in their house." At first the rest of this world hardly knew that they existed, for they made no great stir. It was only at Thessalonica that the early Christians were accused of turning the world upside down. For the most part they did not seem subversive, though they really were...

What occurred in the ancient civilization was the organic development of the fellowship, but never a merely individual Christianity. That would not have been able to survive. The fellowship was the only thing that could win. The early Christians came together to strengthen one another and to encourage one another in their humble gatherings such as are described in I Corinthians, Chapter 14, and then they went out into their ministry in the Greco-Roman world, until they were finally able to touch every part of it educationally, politically, culturally, and morally. All of these parts were touched because the fellowship itself had such intensity, such vitality, and such power. This was the method; this was the victory; and this is why we are here...

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To wear Christ's Yoke means to be engaged in the building of Christ's Church. When Saul journeyed toward Damascus to imprison the Christians there, he was met on the road by the Living Christ. From that moment on, Paul's objective was to build the Church. And he did - Philippi, Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Crete, and Athens. Everywhere Paul went he sought to build the fellowship. Everything Paul wrote was to strengthen and encourage those fellowships.

Hundreds of years later, Francis, in the little town of Assisi, was confronted by the Living Christ. "Francis, seest thou not that my house is in ruins? Go and restore it for me." Francis was obedient and went straight to work. At first, he misunderstood his call, as most of us do. He began to build church (the little chapel of St. Damians) with stone and mortar. Douglas Steere wrote of Francis' misreading of God's call this way.

Taking it literally at the outset and begging, borrowing (and even selling some of his father's goods), he began restoring the badly decayed chapel. Francis saw before long that something far more costly was being asked of him. Only when the interior life of the church was touched could it ever be renewed, and for that nothing less than a great flood of prayer - nights on end on the slopes of Mount Subasio, together with the final agony of LaVerna was required to unleash the flood of compassion, of charity, of Christian abandon that such an operation demanded.

The Church that God calls us to build is not of four walls made of brick and mortar, wood or stone. The Church is not a building located on a particular street corner. The Church we are called to build is not based on race or gender or creed or doctrine or culture or nationality or language. It is not based on rites and ceremonies. (Circumcision is nothing; uncircumcision is nothing; the only thing that counts is new creation! Galatian 6:15). Rather, the Church we are called to develop and nurture, is based on transformed lives.

Jesus does not come to us simply to save our own puny little souls. To the contrary, Jesus comes to us and calls us because He needs us to help Him build His Church. He comes to us because He has work for us to do and a ministry for us to exercise.

The fellowship (Church) is the salt, the light, and the leaven. We are called to be yoked to Christ and yoked to each other. Yoked with Him we do with Him whatever it is He is doing. And Jesus is building Church. He intends to build that Church through us. It is without walls, without labels, without location. It is a horizontal fellowship crossing all the boundaries that so often divide us. And the only thing that matters - is that each person in it is becoming a new creation. What does that mean? It means a person who is being transformed into love.

The task of a builder is never easy. It was not easy for Paul or for Francis. Fortunately we do not have to do it on our own. Jesus shares the yoke with us and helps us to become all that He intends for us to be. And when the weight of building Church becomes heavy, or life takes a tumble, or our spirits become discouraged, Jesus appears to us along our roads, calling us anew to the task.

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Can we build Church in prisons? Yes, we can and we do it. Throughout the country there are those who have been called to "visit those who are in prison" as Yokefellows. The "free person" goes into the prison not to preach or teach, but to build the Church -- to build the fellowship. In one of the work camps in Michigan, one person has been doing this for 28 years. A small group is gathered. He sits within that group as a listener. Gordon Cosby has said, "To listen to another may be the greatest gift we can give to that person." The scripture is read. Prayers are spoken. Silence is accepted. One person speaks of struggles; another, of joys. Each listens to the other and all encourage one another. In this process, new life emerges. The members of the group become joined together in a deep, mystical relationship. A redemptive fellowship is born. The Church of Jesus Christ is being built.

When a person who has been in one of these Yokefellow groups is released from prison, his or her greatest difficulty is finding a similar fellowship on the outside. Many write asking where they can find a redemptive fellowship, a group of people who will listen, share, love, and encourage, like that fellowship they knew within prison walls. Such redemptive fellowships are rare and need to be built on the outside of the prison walls as well as the inside.

Building Church is what Yokefellows are all about, whether on a college campus, in a church, or behind prison walls. By building Church we seek to penetrate every nook and cranny of this world with the Gospel. The importance of the fellowship is beyond description. It all begins with the individual life, the single person - but it cannot end there. It must always become a fellowship! A fellowship of inadequate, but committed people who wear Christ's Yoke with Him.