

Testimony

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At school in India I shared a room with Kamal who went on to join the Pakistan Foreign Office and then to become a diplomat for Bangladesh when that country split from Pakistan. Kamal was unusual among the boys at the school in that he had been to school in the UK while his father was working here as a lecturer. So he knew this country first hand and one of his observations on this country when we were discussing religion was that Christianity is a one day a week religion whereas Islam is a seven day a week religion.

At the time I had not made my commitment to Christ but, when I did, I was determined that I would be a seven day a week Christian. That does not mean that I treat Sunday as no different to any other day — I have always kept Sunday differently from other days — but that I see everything I do on the other six days as part of my Christian life.

I had already learned from my father that one aspect of Christian life is respect for others and I remember my shock when my tutor at Oxford treated me with a respect which I had not expected. He later wrote a book about how Jesus turned on its head the conventional Greek way of thinking about respect for God by showing that God respects us too.

I have always taken the commandments to love God and to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ as the central expression of a Christian life and I fairly quickly learned how love, and in particular unconditional love, is central to people’s relationships and sense of self-respect. That meant for me that, whatever I did, at work, at play, at home or away, while riding a bike or a motorcycle or driving a car, should be done respectfully and with a concern for others.

Of course, I have frequently failed to live up to those commandments but I have never believed they were the wrong commandments to follow — indeed, my life’s experience has taught me that they are the right ones for everyone.

My first employer was a high Tory greengrocer who was ethical to the core; he was also successful which showed me that being ethical is no bar to being successful. He bemoaned the arrival of supermarkets, not because they were a threat to him but because, he said, ‘I’ve worked all my life to get reasonable hours for shop workers and now they are ruining it.’ He saw no reason why shop workers should have to work unsociable hours to satisfy big business and we should all be concerned about the conditions of those who serve us in any business.

That lesson lived with me and, when I was a manager, my unit had the lowest sickness/absenteeism rate in the organisation — well under half the average of most ‘well-run’ businesses and the same as another unit in an organisation with which I later worked as a management consultant. They were a joy to work with but extremely tiring because they were so enthusiastic and committed to their jobs. The manager’s respect for and love of all those around her filled the whole place and enabled the team to achieve outstanding results without the stress that was affecting many other units in the organisation.

Unfortunately, I have met many Christians in Christian and voluntary organisations who have no respect for their staff or volunteers and who will bully or deceive them if it gets them earthly glory or ignore their needs because they are too pre-occupied with their own kingdom work to see treating people with respect as central to all kingdom work. I have also met Christians who show real respect and concern for those around them but it is often the Christians who have the least respect and concern for others who have the public profile — the sort of Christians who were visible to my Moslem friend when he was living in this country. They haven't gone away; they are all around us.

So what is it like trying to be a seven day Christian? Well, it is filled with failures — to respect people and to love them as you should — but it has also been filled with opportunities to try again and to do better. The statistician W. Edwards Deming said that you should never aim for perfection because perfection in this world is impossible — and he could prove that mathematically — but rather to do everything a bit better next time than you did it last time.

That may not bring instant rewards but, as I have gradually learned how to love my neighbour more truly as myself, it has brought me a great many rewards. God has also given me many wonderful opportunities to serve Him: I had the opportunity to learn to use a computer before the PC came out; I was involved in exploring the implications of feminist approaches in a wide range of subjects from psychology to language to management — something which then informed my study of Luke, the feminist gospel writer, and made me realise how many of the feminist concerns which some male Christians dismiss are central to Jesus' teaching; I was involved in a ground breaking management consultancy course which opened my eyes to a whole range of scientific discoveries which I am now inflicting on people through the Science and faith days; I had opportunities to work abroad; I became involved in supporting staff in difficult employment situations; I became involved in working with two charities in difficulties; I had unparalleled opportunities to work with people in a wide range of organisations — I say unparalleled because I learned through one of my trips abroad a new way of doing management consultancy which I was able to introduce to this country and which made my work as a management consultant much more interesting and effective.

I remember someone saying that my father must have had to give up a lot to become a missionary — but the rewards he gained were tremendous, among them to found the Dacca Fire Brigade, to write a book on New Testament Greek which has literally changed students' lives and to work with people from so many different cultures and countries both in India and in this country. He would never have had those opportunities had he not given his life to God.

Another aspect of being a seven day a week Christian is that you cannot be careless about what you do. To love your neighbour you have to care for and about them; so you have to care enough to find the best way of loving your neighbour and then take the trouble to develop the skills you have so that you can deliver that loving care in the best possible way. To quote the motto outside Rawson School near where I live, 'only my best will do' — whether what I am doing is working with people, being a husband, being a father, playing football or driving a car. I don't always achieve it — I missed a sitter in one memorable football match — and I have often allowed myself to take my eyes off the crown that is at the end of the race.

But, because life as a seven day a week Christian is so rewarding in so many different ways, I have always been pulled back to it and God has always given me new opportunities throughout my life. Often these have not been in great tasks for Him but, as with Naaman, in requests to do little things for Him which have meant so much to the people for whom I have done them

and have reminded me that a seven day a week Christian can have the whole week full of little things that make a great difference to others but which, to coin a phrase, are ‘nothing to write home about.’

I have also been pulled back by the many people who have opened their hearts to me over the years because they have learned that they can trust me with their situations. This is a great privilege and an honour but it has also given me an understanding of many situations which I could never experience for myself and of ways in which to express my love towards those who find themselves in those sorts of situations.

You also cannot be a seven day a week Christian if you do not care about yourself. To use the metaphor of the writer to the Hebrews, an athlete has to keep themselves in training for the race; if you are going to be able to love your neighbour as yourself, you have to keep yourself physically, emotionally and spiritually fit. Exercising and eating sensibly are the best ways to keep yourself emotionally fit because the stress chemicals build up in our bodies if we do not exercise or we eat the sorts of things that give our bodies stress. Prayer and bible reading are essential for spiritual fitness and, though I have often been puzzled by the directions in which God has led me — sometimes for several years, I have had answers to all but one of my questions to God over the years as He has led me in new directions.

An important aspect of caring about yourself is being able to say No; the alternative to filling one’s life with things done well for God is to fill it with a lot of things done rather less well. So, if you don’t say No when you know you are not going to be able to express your love for your neighbour in the way in which God would want you to do, you are going to let your neighbour, and God, down. Of course, God sometimes says, ‘This time I do want you to show your love for this neighbour and I will give you the strength — or the space in your life — to do this.’ Like Moses or Gideon or Jonah, we may think that we are not the right person to do what God wants in a situation but, if God wants us to do something, He will always give us the support to do it, whether directly from him or through another person.

Being a seven day a week Christian is also filled with enthusiasm — I mentioned the unit with whom I worked where everyone was so enthusiastic. The word ‘enthusiasm’ comes from a Greek word meaning ‘to be possessed by a god.’ Some people find enthusiasm frightening because it involves emotional involvement in doing things; yet we never do things really well if we are not emotionally involved in them, whether they involve going to the moon, living with someone, bringing up children or doing an exam. No serious scientist now sees science as a cold, abstract subject — all successful, and some less successful, scientists are emotionally committed to what they do. But just because extremists in both science and religion can be emotionally committed to untenable or unrealistic positions does not mean that scientists and Christians should not be emotionally committed to what they believe in. Indeed, I would argue that, without an emotional commitment, you cannot be a Christian both because you have to have an emotional commitment to love anyone and because what God did for us is so emotionally overwhelming that it is impossible not to have an emotional response to it if you recognise what He did.

Perhaps most importantly, trying to be a seven day a week Christian has brought me many of the fruits of the Spirit; they may not all be apparent all the time but they have all become more and more a part of my life as time has gone on. Terry¹ prompted me to reflect on this recently when he spoke about the fruits of the Spirit and throughout his sermon one person was in my mind — a Christian whom I met over ten years ago and who has been bringing people

¹Terry Hepworth, Minister, Lee Mount Baptist Church.

to Christ ever since he became a Christian. When I first met him he was an inspired preacher but he had few of the fruits of the Spirit; yet, over the past ten years, he has undergone a complete transformation — he is at peace with God, at peace with his neighbour and at peace with himself and he is a real inspiration to speak with.

So, in the end, my testimony is that the path of being a seven day a week Christian is one that will probably be strewn with failures but it will also bring a great many rewards including the fruits of the Spirit in this life as well as the rewards of the next.

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