

Questions Leaders Should Ask Themselves

by E. LeBron Fairbanks

How can we live together within this diverse Christian community in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?

I wrote this question 35 years ago, early in my ministry at European Nazarene Bible College. Students were living on the small multi-cultural campus on the Swiss-German border while studying Bible and theology in English, their second language. Their first languages were different and cultural traditions varied regarding ways of meeting and greeting each other as well as the food they preferred to eat in the dining hall. Expectations and preferences of how instructors were to teach the course material became the focus of numerous discussions.

Living together as a Christian family in a diverse community in Europe prepared me for a later cross-cultural assignment in Asia. Following Don Owens, founding president of Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, I found myself challenged with leading a very culturally diverse graduate level theological seminary of the Church of the Nazarene, and again asking the earlier question.

In the midst of working with graduate students from diverse economically strong or weak countries, where Christians numbered in the 2-3 percent range within the religious or philosophical landscape, and where rice was often cooked and eaten differently, another question arose:

If, in Christ, all things are made new, then how does our relationship to Christ convert or transform the way we live and lead in a Christian community of faith?

What phenomenal lessons I learned about life together in Christian communities!

I'm not so sure where or when it hit me. Along the journey, I began to realize the questions I was asking myself and seeking to answer related not only to cross-cultural educational institutions, but also to local congregations and even to individual Christian families:

In conflict situations, when good and godly people differ and sometimes collide over vision and values, how can I lead in these situations, really lead (and serve) with the mind of Christ?

How does my testimony of holiness of heart and life transform the way I live in and lead a faith community?

In the midst of conflicting expectations, multiple constituents, differing denominational backgrounds, various levels of maturity, and multicultural perspectives, how can we live together and lead with the mind of Christ? How does our holiness testimony reflect itself in our family relationships and in our leadership lifestyle?

In the context of our life situations and leadership assignments, we are often placed in close Christian community. We quickly become aware of others' strengths and weaknesses. Our own personality differences soon become obvious. Our specific life and leadership settings become a dynamic laboratory for learning how to live together as God's family.

Life together causes us to ask:

In these situations, how do we respond to conflict under pressure? Do we reflect the mind of Christ, or is our response no different from the person who makes no profession of faith?

Two passages from Paul's prison epistles challenge me when I am confronted with good and godly people who differ with me—even collide with me—over the vision and values of our ministry assignments. "Whatever happens," Paul admonishes us, "conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27). This challenge is also given to the Ephesian church in 4:1 when he urges the believers to "Live a life worthy of the calling you have received."

In light of this, we consider:

How can we live together as Christians so that our relationships will be redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling word of God in Christ?

The entire fourth chapter of Ephesians speaks directly to this question (and to the other questions asked above). Spend time reading the six chapters of this "prison epistle." Then focus in on Ephesians chapters 4 and 5. We are to be "imitators of God" and "live a life of love" (5:1-2) in leading and living together as the people of God. When we do not live like this, we grieve the Holy Spirit (4:30a). Relationships within a faith community are intensely theological. God himself inspires and empowers this holiness lifestyle within us, calling us and enabling us to "walk worthy" of our calling (see also 5:15-21).

Ephesians 4:25-32 instructs us about how we are to live and lead with the mind of Christ. We are co-laborers together in the body of Christ. The people with whom we work are God's own creation. Because of this fundamental Christian conviction, we can be honest with the believers; immediate in dealing with conflict; up-building with our words; and forgiving, even when others do not forgive us. Words and deeds done by others to us must never be permitted to create bitterness and resentment within us.

When we ignore our "family" relationship within the faith community and treat those with whom we live and work as "means to an end" or persons to be manipulated for our purposes, Satan gets a *foothold* into the fellowship. The enemy of our soul laughs at unresolved conflict and divides the *community of the king*.

Our words are to be channels of God's grace to others (Ephesians 4:30). Dialogue, for Paul, is a sacrament. God's forgiveness frees us to take the initiative in forgiving those who hurt us.

We now begin to see more clearly the means by which we "maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). In so doing, we walk, live, and lead worthy of our calling as leaders in our homes, schools, workplaces, and congregations.