

The Disciplines of a Community—The USCWM

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I believe it is time for our Central Staff Community to review its commitment to the Covenant. We have, in common with all other associations of human beings, whether vocational or avocational, a certain "organizational culture." What we are is in part the design of that culture. Our community in great part consists of such shared aspirations which both hold us together and hold us close to our perceived obligations to God and man.

If, however, as with any other human community, the purposes of these shared aspirations grow dull, if those purposes are outmoded by time, or if we unwittingly lose sight of what we understand God's will for us to be, then we suffer in a profound sense personally and as a group, whether we realize it or not.

We are not ignorant of Satan's devices, the Bible tells us. We ought to be able to realize that one of his most subtle methods with mature Christians is not the destruction of the Spirit through what might be called the "atrocious sins" but by picking away at our morale, doing so by causing us, like Cain, to derelict some little things, which become bigger things.

Jesus referred I believe to the vitality of the inner spirit when he said "He who is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in that which is much. But if you have not been faithful with worldly things, then how can you be entrusted with the true riches," Luke 16:xx. The context shows that the "little things" here were the matter of being scrupulous about the handling of money, while the "true riches" were probably the capacity to minister on a spiritual level. John tells us that within that little group listening to these words Judas was not faithful in his handling of the common purse. We know of course that his unfaithfulness led to a much more serious betrayal of trust.

A Review of Our Structure

Over the years we have gone to some lengths to try to gain some sort of general interpretation of God's will for us, as is expressed in the Biblical Covenant, summed up by Jesus as "to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as our selves," Luke xx:xx. For the sake of study and understanding of all Jesus meant we have set up eight "Fitness Committees" whose job it is to try to exposit four dimensions in both directions, upward love for God and outward love for man.

All this is spelled out in some detail in the series of articles I wrote for *Mission Frontiers* during this past year

called "The Secret Mission." I will try to get those chapters together for our further study as a group.

Darrell Dorr, as Center Coordinator, did an independent study course under the University, the outcome of which was his own best attempt to reflect the basic ideas behind these so-called eight dimensions of the covenant.

It is incorrect to talk as though the Center "has a 'covenant' to which members must subscribe." We have merely tried our best to understand the Biblical covenant upon which our faith rests, and have done so in as much practical detail as has seemed helpful. Those who are invited to be members of this community are extended that invitation in part on the basis of a clear awareness of the invited person's willingness and sense of God's call to join into a community with these common disciplines of perceived minimal obligation to the living God.

Anyone who is not willing to embrace these aspirations, to help others attain them and to be willing to be helped by other community members, simply is not invited to be a member of our team. A person's sense of belonging here, then consists of a continuing willingness and eagerness to be fulfilled both individually and as a group by zealous pursuit of these aspirations.

However, the pressures of everyday life, Jesus recognized, tend to cloud, obscure, destroy ideals of all kinds. We need daily renewal (this is why our morning meeting is the pinnacle of our survival as joyful, vital, healthy, eager believers. This is the meaning of the footwashing incident, as I understand it, in John xx. Our denial of this need - as in Peter's case - means ultimately that we can have no part in His fellowship or with each other. Unwillingness to be challenged by each other is an extremely serious weakness and will lead to a total breakdown of shared obligation in our life together.

Areas We Do Well to Keep Working On

In keeping with what we have already said, some of the most seemingly trivial areas of our shared aspirations may be the first to break down, and in so doing carry a great deal of guilt and depression and perhaps even bitterness into the rest of our lives together. It must be recognized that we cannot give up the pursuit of our shared aspirations without doing ourselves and other members of our community great harm. A key passage here is the dialogue in which God took Cain to task for his failure in a small area of life - "if you had done, right would not your countenance have been lifted up?" Our sense of cleanness before God depends vitally upon the

continuation of our commitment to what we have sensed already to be His will. I am not speaking here so much of what is normally called "sin" as I am of failure to continue to believe, to hope, to pursue, to keep trying. The forgiveness which is essential to joy and love for others does not come without daily, even hourly repentance and faith: this is our Spiritual Breathing. It is the life of brokenness and humility before our living Lord. It is a teachable spirit in these "little" areas, in which victory then undergirds victory in large matters of faith and life!

I am delaying any specific references for one more paragraph: I realize full well that in America our very upbringing somehow tends to engender a very independent spirit, which is partly a good thing, but which readily becomes an alienating attitude which keeps others and their ideas at bay, it becomes a resistance to authority, to the making of any promises, even in marriage, it underlies the rejection of parental, sibling, and even nuclear family obligations. We do not start out at zero, but at something way below zero, as we tackle the matter of shared aspirations and especially our threefold "embrace, help others, be helped."

Our morning meeting.

I have already referred to this as the most important point within our group discipline. The reason for saying this derives from the overarching fact that we cannot go daily (e.g. 5 days a week) into a small group in which the very first expectation is to share from our personal Bible study, without either keeping that personal activity vital or becoming a real phony and a washout. This is why we hold so high, as the very first item of the agenda—that is, the first ten minutes—this matter of the outflow from our morning, personal devotional life before the Lord.

We know by now, after ten years of experience, that those members who begin to slide at this precise point usually end up sliding all the way out of the group, often taking a few others into the maelstrom of disgruntledness and criticism and even bitterness before they are through. Even being late is a danger signal. It very often indicates that we have nothing to share ourselves and/or that we are not interested in this level of spiritual activity on the part of others. Yes, getting to these groups for the entire first ten minute period is usually a very significant thing, and failure very often is equally likely to be a significant warning signal to ourselves and to the other members of our group just what the state of our hearts really is.

As in all other things in which we perceive God's will: once our spirit is damaged, once we have stopped being willing and even eager to believe and obey, then "all the things we are supposed to do" become a legalistic burden, and as we say, we fall into bondage. The problem is not the existence of the aspiration to which we are committed. The problem is in our response to the Spirit in this area. Doing away with all aspirations only reduces our goals, it does not relieve us of obedience or defend us against legalistic bondage. One of the pitfalls of the secular psychologist is to try to tell people he is trying to counsel that there is no sin, and that guilt is the problem, when in fact that patient knows only too well that there is sin and that guilt is a symptom which cannot itself be directly "cured."

What minimal elements of expectation are there in the morning meeting? First to share what God has tried to tell us individually and as a group through His Word and His Works. Secondly to help others with a word of admonition or exhortation. Thirdly, to submit ourselves to a word of admonition from others, either in the group or by the leader (or other member of the group) at some other time. These small groups are the chief barometer of our closeness to the Lord, and as such are the keenest point of "early warning" of impending spiritual difficulty, as well as the most potent stepping stone to health and vitality in a victorious inner spirit.

Our shared discipline of the Frontier Fellowship.

We have for years now been producing a delightful daily devotional guide for the use of all those who wish to open their heart wide to the whole world of God's concern, in particular those still unreached people groups around the world. In recommending this to the general public within the evangelical church, we are in effect committing ourselves to it as well.

Since this concept arose after the Center was in existence for some time, this particular "daily devotional discipline" has never been elevated to an absolute essential. But I really feel we must do so. We must confront the fact that we cannot in good conscience, as a Center, be recommending this to everyone else if we are not in almost all cases trying our best to live up to the same ideal. Four minutes a day, is not going to kill anyone. Only if we are involved in some very urgent alternative can we in good conscience let this slip out of our lives.

This is not to say that it is something that is easy. It may be a hard discipline to achieve (it certainly has been for me, and I am no where near what I ought to be in this area) but it is not a big burden, unless we allow Satan to make it such, or unless we cease "to admonish one another daily while it is called today," Heb 3:13.

Our own staff is large enough so that our own loose change offering would possibly amount to almost a \$1,000 per month. I would like us to keep all such funds, from our own loose change, in a separate account, and then act in concert from time to time, on a voting basis, just as would a church-based fellowship, to disburse those funds as we see fit. If (as is not the case for very many of us) we participate in a local church Frontier Fellowship or have some other goal for our funds, then let us turn those funds in elsewhere, or designate them as we turn them in here. No problem. The real problem I see in this area is the damage to our own inner spirit if we flagrantly ignore the very ideal we are so devoutly and energetically proposing to others.

Furthermore, it is a matter of staff education that we wish to hold high this tiny daily obligation. All organizations make demands upon their people to be engaged in on-going education. This is one of those elements in our program.

Finally, though, how in the world can we intelligently assist other communities of believers to achieve a monthly fellowship meeting in which loose change giving helps to monitor daily discipline if we are not undergoing the essential

experience ourselves? Do you realize that something like 800 congregations have tried to institute this shared discipline and have given it up? Is it possible that our own indifference to the discipline in our own midst has contributed to our inability to help those churches achieve success in this themselves?

The Thursday evening meeting.

This has been intended from the beginning to be a low-key on-going means of staff education. Even more basic is the fact that we have set it aside as a time for us on a weekly basis to look back and see what God is doing over a longer period of time (longer than we do daily in the morning meeting). Any staff member who consistently fails in both attending and leaning into this meeting will lose a phenomenal amount of world-wide orientation per year. Unlike the average mission agency, we do not have a specific focus on a particular field or even set of fields. Our field is the world. We cannot be knowledgeable staff members, prepared to be good representatives of the Center either to ourselves or to outsiders if we consistently fall down in this area. Some of our older and more broadly experienced staff members may not need the education as much as others who are newer in the world of missions, but all of us need to keep up and need to see the outside world beyond the specific outreach of our own activities, but also in relation to our own activities.

Again, people who allow this meeting to become "a drag" are not likely to be as healthy and vital contributors to the overall well-being of our group as others. All of us have other pressing duties. I know that many times I have very reluctantly attended this meeting and yet found that the Lord had something very rich for me which I am glad I did not miss.

Our "personal ministry."

This phrase is our intended substitute for "support raising." It has from the beginning always been a hope that every member of our staff would effectively conduct a personal ministry to people outside our immediate fellowship. This includes our families, our friends, our supporters, visitors, and, not least, our assigned area of the country. The latter areas will, for the most part, eventually be decentralized out to the regional centers as the number of people we directly influence reaches closer to a million. And we will, in Pasadena, be left to concentrate more and more upon areas locally to us and perhaps some spheres denominationally defined.

It is not as though some of us have the unfortunate obligation to raise our own support, but that other lucky folks on our staff are so urgently needed or so alienated from other Christians and local fellowships that we let them off the hook. All along it has been our conviction that one of the most challenging and growing experiences we can undertake is personal ministry. There has never been a time when some of our staff members have not been aided in their financial needs by other members of our staff or by some of the very limited amount of undesignated funds that come in. But there has never been a time when we did not expect all staff members, no matter what their financial situation, to conduct a personal ministry, be it ever so small or unimpressive in its beginnings.

Some of the work we do is such that churches either do not want to support people in the work or are very reluctant to do

so—jobs which clearly "earn their keep" on a direct basis. In such areas the work may be so "unspiritual" (like cutting grass) that churches cannot bring themselves to support such activities and thus apparently "waste" their precious mission funds (which are often looked upon as sources of excitement and vision which will aid them in maintaining their mission giving).

Indeed, many churches with such logic actually adopt policies which prevent them from supporting anything but direct evangelism or activities overseas. It is our challenge to show such churches that to support a staff member here can quite possibly be a pipe line to more excitement and world-wide challenge than any one missionary anywhere could possibly provide. And, of course, it continues to be a fundamental aid to us to be a constant, spiritual challenge to the individuals who are on our *personal ministry* mailing lists. By this phrase I include every dimension thereof, from family, our own local community, our personal friends, to our geographical extension ministry.

This is the area of greatest possible personal fulfillment, and, of greatest growing pains. All other activities which we undertake are indirect by comparison, or are "mass media" by comparison. Here is where the rubber meets the road, as they say. Here is where what God is doing in our own lives can be a direct, maximum effect upon others. We are going to be weak missionaries if we are willing to be weak ministers in this area. This is merely a testing ground for some of us. If we fail effectively to love our own kind of people it is not likely that we will ever learn to love strange people in far away places. Doesn't that seem reasonable? Or are we like Charlie Brown: "I love mankind, it's people I can't stand."

Our daily assignment.

This is something very difficult to generalize about since we all do so many different things. I have already covered some of the disciplines we share in common. What about the major time of each day? Is it a spiritual wasteland or is it a spiritually alive experience each day? Do we do what we do "as unto the Lord" or are we wearing away at things "in our own strength" as they say?

If it is true that "the joy of the Lord is your strength," then it is very crucial that we measure our workday by its joy content. The joyless day is not a strong day, obviously. We cannot do our work well if we do not undertake it as a holy privilege, an assignment coming to us from the Living God Himself, in which we "fight the good fight." To be joyful in our work does not mean happy. Happiness can be described as a mood which is the direct result of fulfilled expectations, hopes, or longings. If we get what we want we are happy. But in our workday we may be frustrated a good deal of the time. The words we type may come out wrong, the things we expect may turn out differently, the plans we have made may be interrupted by higher levels of responsibility, etc. Happiness blinks out at such times, totally. But Jesus, "for the joy set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame..." Paul was singing in prison. Even Superbowl football players endure a huge amount of pain and travail in order to try to win the game. Speaking of travail, child-birth is a perfect example of joy plus pain minus happiness at many points!

In our present circumstances we are a community in which we have very few people with the gifts and skill and experience of being able to manage other people effectively. We, most of us, do not have any effective manager over us. By that I mean, most everyone needs someone to pace him, encourage him, help him to keep his priorities straight *throughout the day*. We simply lack the people on our team with that kind of intermediate skill. We are almost all amateurs in this sense.

What this means, then, is that we are, most of us, daily up against a vast host of horrors. That is, we have a LIST. The list grows longer each day, not shorter. It seems impossible to cover. We are led astray practically every moment of each day, if we do not watch out, due to the amorphous task we have been assigned. Anyone working directly under Art or Barney is lucky. Those two are experienced managers.

It is a great gift and a great burden, to be a manager. What is a manager? Someone who manages himself well? Not necessarily. The prim, tidy person may have the least sympathy for others who cannot do as well by themselves. It is not normal, it is not common, it is not even a reasonable goal to try to manager yourself with complete success without the help of others. God did not intend it. That is why we need consciously to "submit" ourselves to the help of others, others over us, others along side us, others under us. ANYONE who can help us achieve the goals of our task are welcome to help us, are needed to help us. And even then a great deal of our typical school-experience has taught us to believe that we must work things out without others' help or we're no good. That is a bad education, yet it is built into the very structure of the schooling process!

They say that if you are trying to form a good habit that it is very important to tell others what you are seeking to do (e.g. quit smoking) and that if you don't enlist others' help you are not likely to achieve your goal. Thus, around the center, even the jobs we do all day long are necessarily the subject of healthy group process. Don't resist that kind of help, ask for it, treasure it. Whatever you do don't think you are a failure if you need others to hold you accountable to do the most difficult things first each day, etc.

Chances are each task we have has some less exciting chores connected with it. It may take more spiritual insight than we have at any given moment to be highly motivated to do some of these things. Join the club. One very important kind of analysis of our jobs (to be undertaken eventually with someone else, probably someone over you) is to figure out what ought to happen every day, and begin to develop the discipline of never letting a day go by that those daily milestones are not gotten out of the way before going home, which may mean to do them first before we do the things which may at the moment be more excited about.

Actually, any job looks more exciting if it is compared to something we don't want to do. If we become weary in well-doing we will find ourselves day-dreaming about all the things we might be doing, usually things that are more immediately gratifying. Actually, though, paradoxically, it is the tough jobs well done that give us the greatest sense of fulfillment, not the wallowing in wants. In fact it is almost a truism that those things which we think we would like better to do would become very tiring if we had nothing else do. This is the common experience of the "day off" - we find we no longer

have the motivation to do "all those other things" when the moment comes that we really are shielded from the daily duties of life, and at the end of the time find we have gotten very little done.

The Drama of True Obedience

Underlying everything which has been mentioned above is the drama of obedience. Here is where many things come together. However, the very concept of obedience is difficult for children of the Reformation, brought up on "Gospel" not "Law" (which is more often misused than properly understood). And, the concept of *obedience in community* is even more difficult for the children of the Pietist tradition, with its marvellous (and yet incomplete) emphasis on the personal "experience of the believer," as a phenomenon of individual conversion and growth.

That is, I feel I need to append a few notes here on obedience because most American believers do not live in community. That is, they do not regard their own families as a community of faith and authority, and they do not understand their office responsibilities in that light either. For them, for years, from the time they first left home and went to college, perhaps, the already strained ties with their parents (in terms of parental authority) were finally ended forever, and they were free adults, under no obligation to anyone except in so far as they might have to do certain things in order to get certain things from their parents, teachers, etc. Any kind of authority which could command them beyond their own best interests is tyranny. Then marriage, for the boy, terminates parental authority (in the U.S.A.) absolutely if anything is left of it at all.

As a result the churches have, many of the newer ones, tried in one way or another gingerly to "put back" what has been "taken out." But this is very delicate and they are easily labelled as "cultic" if they go too far. As John Dawson has observed, Satan brought about the Jonestown orgy, with its "missionary" dimension, its "Lord's Supper" dimension, and its Christian community dimension, all a sham, precisely to discredit what is right in these areas. Boy are Americans leary of anyone trying to tell them what to do - it is seen as legitimate only within some kind of a mutually beneficial contract. Bargaining not a relationship is the key element for Americans.

Obedience itself.

It is high drama, as well as a shaking experience spiritually, to read of the garden of Gethsemani experience in which Jesus said, "Take this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." Not all obedience is that grim or difficult, but all obedience, rightly understood, does involve yielding in faith to what God wants us to do. This is turn brings up the subject, "How do we know the will of God," which is so perplexing, especially during our years in college when we must suffer along without any immediate supervisor - who could tell us what to do, help us deal with our priorities, remind us of them, etc.

In the Bible the phrase "the obedience of faith" is very basic from Genesis to Revelation. That is what we intend here when we speak of "true obedience." The word obedience may be defined in various ways, but true or real obedience in what we say here is intended to refer to the meaning behind the

Biblical phrase "obedience of faith." One of our staff members years ago came up with the conclusion that

Faith is not the confidence that God will do for us what we want Him to do. It is the confidence that we can do what He wants us to do and let Him take care of the consequences.

Faith incorporates the will of God. It often conflicts with what our immediate desires may be. The obedience of faith is thus often the giving up of our will for His, yielding to God's will rather than our own.

Obedience in community.

Ah, now this gets more complicated. Most evangelicals have learned a few set phrases that they know will defend them from "aggression" by anyone in church (or in a mission structure) who would invade the sacred precincts of their own decision making: "the Lord told me," "I really feel the Lord wants me to....," "I'm going to have to pray about that...." What is happening is that we are elevating a truth - that God's will is primary - to a mechanism of defending ourselves from ever hearing His will from or through any human authority structure. Oh, it is true that many young people nowadays are pushed further. They dare not announce the Lord's will for themselves if they have not yet made the rounds to talk to other people and, oh yes, a few older people. But in such a process they are listening to advice, not orders, and they can pick and choose, edit out anything they don't like, and present a package to their friends which will back them up in their conclusions.

Well, why not? A "free student" really is adrift on the seas of life. His parents (in America) do not expect to have anything to say. They can express disapproval, but must be very careful lest they "drive away" these young people into whose lives they have poured so many years of time and effort and patience and forgiveness - and money. But the free student can always pick himself up and go to some other less-demanding church. Oh, how many young people have learned to skirt, just out of reach, many highly committed older leaders, in a kind of wistful shall-I-or-shall-I-not mood of uncommitment which lengthens on and on. Some never marry for that reason, or try to found a marriage which is non-binding in many ways.

It takes great, real faith to obey God - even in so simple a circumstance as telling the truth. It is necessary to believe that God will take care of the circumstances if we do not lie to get our way, or to defend ourselves from criticism. Well, the same kind of faith, the same, rare reality is necessary when we find ourselves having to "obey" someone who is "over us." This phenomenon comes up mostly in a Christian organization. Most churches don't tell people what to do, they just try to persuade them. There is no way you can "disobey" in the average local church. You can be uncooperative, you can leave, but you are never subject to the accusation of having disobeyed. Most secular authority structures are not conceived of by evangelicals as possessing any divine authority (despite Paul's admonitions to slaves to obey their masters "as unto the Lord"). Thus, only when someone joins YWAM or OM or some other Christian structure does this issue ever come up. In fact, most evangelical missions go very lightly in their handling of people who are in their own

minds essentially volunteers, who get guidance "directly" from God.

The application.

All this merely means that the disciplines of our community, or any community of faith, are going to be a constant battle of difficulty or sinews of strength, depending upon how they are viewed. If they are to be bargained about, measured moment by moment by our own best interests, we will be burdened down by a vast legalistic mass of unpleasant duties. If they are taken as aspirations we are to embrace as God's will for us in this particular community, they can be a way of life. They can be changed, improved, modified, but if we insist, each one of us, in being able to decide how they can be changed, we will simply be going on our own way as self-guided individuals. There will be no community, only an association of people caught up in a religion of self-realization.