

Red Letters

Living a Faith That Bleeds

By Tom Davis

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Introduction

An Apology ...

The Christian church owes an apology to the almost fifty million individuals in our world currently infected with HIV/AIDS.

Those of us who claim to follow Christ's teachings should be ashamed for what little we've done to help the countless millions of women, children, and orphans who have died or are dying. Entire nations are going up in flames while we watch them burn.

Bono and the supporters of the ONE Campaign are right to use words like "crisis" and "emergency" when talking about the situation in Africa. The continent is on fire with AIDS, and unless drastic action is taken, entire countries will be wiped off the face of the planet by this disease.

Sadly, the church has been slow to act in response to this crisis. Like the priest and Levite of Jesus' parable, we have passed by the man on the side of the road, too busy or too "holy" to involve ourselves in lending a helping hand.

Africa is indeed on fire. But as we argue or fuss about how it started and who should be saved first, thousands more children are orphaned each day. Every hour, another one thousand children will die. Did you know that you are just a short plane ride away from a world where eight-year-old girls prostitute themselves for food?

The true state of emergency lies within the church—it lies within us. It's *our* problem. We can't leave Africa's children lying by the side of the road as we

pass on by.

... *And a Hope*

The gospel I believe in offers a cup of cold water in Jesus' name. The only gospel worth living is the one that incarnates love. The only gospel worth giving our lives for is the one that elevates the needs of others above our own. That's what the "good news" is all about.

And thankfully, there is more good news. Though the church has been slow to move, things are improving. National and local church leaders are beginning to challenge congregations to think globally when they offer that cup of cold water. Christian organizations are responding with more and more boldness. Still, we have a lot to learn and a long way to go. History will judge our generation by how we responded to those in need. History will judge the church by how it responds. We have an opportunity to show the world just what it truly means to be Christ-followers.

We *can* make a difference. We *can* change the world. When we lead with compassion, we can move from apology to action. And out of action springs hope—hope *and* life.

So, for our mistakes ... I am sorry. But for our potential, for the impact you and I can have on a world in need ... I am hopeful.

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A Living Gospel

Go and do the same.

—Luke 10:37

Russians celebrate the arrival of spring in March. During a Russian spring, temperatures hover just above freezing during the day, which melts the graying snow—only so it can freeze again into a world-covering sheet of ice at night. There are no tiny blooms reaching up through the earth to try to touch the sun. No patches of green to add color to the bleak landscape.

It was one of these spring nights when ten of us were walking down a dark, icy sidewalk in Vladimir. A young boy darted across the street, heading straight toward us. He was twelve, maybe thirteen, dirty and wearing tattered rags. He was speaking Russian. Asking for something. Pleading, perhaps.

“Sorry, we don’t understand,” we said. It was no lie.

But we did understand the voices inside our heads that spoke with equal measures of cynicism and sad resignation. Just another worthless beggar. If we gave him money, he’d probably spend it on drugs or cigarettes. If the kid really wanted help, there are plenty of shelters that could feed him and offer a place to sleep.

We kept walking. But something inside fought to quiet the voices. Something inside challenged me to act in a way consistent with the Savior I

follow.

I turned, grabbed the translator by the arm, and went back after the boy. “Hey! Come back.” *What do I say?* I thought. *Where do you begin to reach out to someone in need?* “What’s your name?” I asked. “Kak tibya zavoot?” Dema, my translator, repeated in Russian. I got down on one knee so we were eye to eye.

“Kirill.”

He was no longer just a beggar on the street. He was a little boy with a name—a name shared by a Russian Orthodox saint. I looked into his eyes. He had a story to tell. A story filled with pain and heartache. A story marked by hunger and homelessness. He was shivering. Somehow he’d survived the cold Russian nights.

Just a little boy.

“Hi, Kirill. My name is Tom. How can I help you?” Dema translated for me with a rapid-fire smorgasbord of Russian words.

Kirill had run away from a dangerous situation. He hadn’t eaten in three days. He looked so frail standing there. All he wanted was a place to stay and some food.

“Would you help me?” he asked.

That stupid voice went off in my head again. The same voice that speaks to me when I happen upon a panhandler back home in the States. *He’ll probably just buy vodka if we give him money.* That inner voice—it’s mine. And it very well could be speaking the truth. But it’s not the voice I want to hear. I want to hear Jesus. Did he put conditions on the help he offered? A familiar story elbowed its

way past my hesitancy. A story of Jesus helping a woman caught in adultery. Jesus didn't refuse to help the woman because she might sin again. He forgave her and told her to sin no more. She was worth the risk. She was worth helping.

"Kirill, here's money for food and a bus ride." We gave him the address to the ministry center for Children's HopeChest. There he would find help. We made arrangements for him and told the staff we would pay for whatever he needed.

Kirill took the money and walked off into the black night, fading into the distance like a ship on an uncertain journey.

I wondered what Jesus felt as he watched those he helped walk into the night. Did all of them live changed lives? Did they all stop sinning? Did they all hang on to the hope they had been missing?

About an hour later we received a phone call from the ministry center. Kirill had arrived and was receiving the care he needed. They would find him a place to live. Somewhere safe.

My cynical inner voice was silenced. I had only offered money for food and bus fare, but it was Jesus who had spoken to Kirill. He didn't need a translator to hear Jesus' words now. Kirill was tasting them in a meal. Feeling their touch in the comfort of a warm blanket. And resting on them in the hope and promise of a good tomorrow.

He was just a little boy.

And on that cold spring night in Vladimir, Russia, he was Jesus.

You may be wondering, *Was that a typo? Didn't Tom mean that he, Tom, was Jesus to Kirill?* Of course we're called to be like Jesus. Colossians 3:9–10

(NIV) tells us to put on the new self, which is being renewed “in the image of its Creator.” This is the basis of our spiritual formation, something Paul taught about with great passion and wisdom. And, yes, reaching out a helping hand to someone in need is one way we live out that Christlikeness.

But there is something else going on when we reach out to help the helpless—something unexpected. Something we often miss. Something that speaks not only to the process of becoming Christlike—to our spiritual formation—but also to the very truth of where we find Jesus.

Looking for Jesus

I’ve discovered a new way to live. Every morning when I get out of bed, I look for Jesus. No, not because I’ve misplaced Him. And I’m not talking about a feeling I get during prayer, or revelation that comes to me while reading Scripture. I’m talking about finding Jesus in the eyes of real people. In the eyes of the poor, the handicapped, the oppressed, the orphan, the homeless, the AIDS victim—the abandoned and the forgotten.

Throughout Scripture, Jesus identified with the poor in amazing ways. He was their champion, their advocate. He gave them purpose and meaning and hope. He held them in high esteem and blessed them. There is something deep and meaningful about this. In Matthew 25:40 Jesus said, “**Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.**” Was he truly saying that we will find him in the lives of the poor? This is a rich mystery.

We shouldn’t be surprised. Our God is indeed a God of mystery. Isaiah

55:8–11 says,

“I don’t think the way you think.

The way you work isn’t the way I work.”

God’s Decree.

“For as the sky soars high above earth,
so the way I work surpasses the way you work,
and the way I think is beyond the way you think.”

You don’t have to read very far into the New Testament before running head-on into one of the greatest of these mysteries. I don’t know about you, but I (and more than a few Jews in Jesus’ time) would have expected the King of the universe to be born in a palace—someplace worthy of his status. He would have slept on no less than four-hundred-thread-count Egyptian cotton crib sheets and rested his head on a down-filled, silk-wrapped pillow. The mobile above his crib would surely have been crafted of sparkling gems—white diamonds, red rubies, blue sapphires, and green emeralds. And all of the most respected people in society would visit this beautifully decorated nursery to worship him.

But that’s not how God did things. Jesus was born in a dirty, smelly, disgusting barn. He was laid not on a clean sheet, but in a manger—a feeding trough filled with animal snot and drool and their leftover, half-eaten food. He wasn’t welcomed to the world by great leaders, by rulers and officials and other members of the Lexus-drivers club. He was met by a bunch of lowly shepherds. Yes, three kings or wise men arrived from the east months later. But nobody even knew who they were.

Are you getting the picture? Jesus didn’t come to earth and identify with

the rich, the successful, and the most influential. He entered the world as a pauper. He entered the world not in the comfort of his parents' home, nor in the company of smiling relatives or even the safety of a hospital. He arrived in the humblest of places, in the lowliest of circumstances. God hid the mystery of the kingdom in the lives of the most needy.

Is it any wonder then, that Jesus associated himself with the “least of these”? That when we help them, we’re helping Jesus? God has tremendous love for those who are rejected, abandoned, and laughed at. This truth came clear to me when I started reading about the life of Mother Teresa. Read what she said:

The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved—they *are Jesus in disguise*.... [Through the] poor people I have an opportunity to be 24 hours a day with Jesus. Every AIDS victim is Jesus in a pitiful disguise; Jesus is in everyone.... [AIDS sufferers are] children of God [who] have been created for greater things. (1/13/86, *Time*)

In some crazy way, Jesus *is* the poor. When we find the “least of these,” we find him. If this doesn’t turn your theology upside down, I don’t know what will.

There’s a story told about an incredible transformation in an old monastery because people lived out these truths. M. Scott Peck recounted the story in his book *The Different Drum*.

The story takes place in an orthodox monastery in Eastern Europe, sometime in the early twentieth century. The monastery was in danger of being shut down. For centuries it had been the house of a great monastic order, but after hundreds of years of persecution, and in an age when many people

believed orthodoxy was no longer relevant, the abbot and four monks found themselves to be the last members of the order. The branch houses were long gone, and even in this one remaining location, the five monks hadn't been successful in attracting new members. Each of these monks was over the age of seventy. It didn't take a mathematical genius to see that the order was doomed. This caused the monks a great deal of worry and anguish, but they remained faithful: every day they diligently, if sullenly, carried on their work.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a local rabbi occasionally used for retreat and contemplation. One day it occurred to the abbot to ask the rabbi if he had any advice on how to save the monastery.

When the rabbi saw the abbot coming up the path, he went out to greet him. But when the abbot asked his question, the rabbi could only grieve with him. "I know how it is," he said. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." The old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. When the time came for the abbot to leave, they embraced each other.

"It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice that you can give me, that would help save my dying order?"

"No, I'm sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that one of you is the Messiah."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered

around him to ask, “What did the rabbi say?”

“He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just wept and read the Torah together. He did say something as I was leaving—something cryptic: ‘the Messiah is one of you.’”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any significance to the rabbi’s words.

The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us here at the monastery? Which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. After all, he’s been our leader for over twenty years. But if he meant Father Abbot, why didn’t he say so? He might have meant Brother Thomas. Thomas is so gentle and kind; we all know that he’s truly a holy man.

Certainly he didn’t mean Brother David! David gets so crotchety. Then again, even though Brother David is a thorn in our flesh, he’s nearly always right. Exceedingly right.

Well, the rabbi couldn’t possibly have meant Aloysius. Aloysius is so passive, a real nobody. But he does have a gift for always being here when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Aloysius is the Messiah.

Well, I know one thing for sure. The rabbi certainly didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. But what if he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? Oh God, I pray that it’s not me. I wouldn’t know how to be the Messiah.

As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, people occasionally visited the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn or to wander along some of its paths. As they did, without even being conscious of it, they sensed an aura of extraordinary respect that radiated from the monks and permeated the atmosphere surrounding the monastery. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, people began to come back more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Some of the younger folks who came to visit the monastery started talking with the monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. Within just a few years the monastery had become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's cryptic gift, a vibrant center of light.

Does this story sound familiar? It should. Both the Old and the New Testaments tell similar stories—taking care of strangers, caring for those in need, and treating others like they could be angels in disguise.

Little Christs

You may be asking, "Well, what other way is there?" There have always been *two* ways. C. S. Lewis wrote, "the Church just exists to help people be little Christs." I certainly have met individuals and church families who live this out. But

all too often, those of us who call ourselves Christians live in direct opposition to what Christ said we should do.

Living out the gospel is hard work. It's easy to talk about it. Any of us can sit in church and sing warm, happy worship songs that make us feel good. We can nod agreeably with the pastor's wisdom. And sometimes we can even drop a few extra dollars into the offering basket. But it's not so easy to actually go and *do* what Jesus said to do.

Jesus calls us to live in ways that go against our natural inclinations. For example, I don't have the easiest time living out this verse: "I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves"(Matt. 5:44–45).

Frankly, I want my enemies to burn. I want them to suffer for the wrong they did to me. I want revenge. That's my initial response. My human response. But because I have been redeemed by Jesus' sacrifice, the truth of the living Christ who is ordering my life challenges that response. I (sometimes slowly, often painfully) embrace that truth and learn to say no to my human response and yes to what Christ wants me to do.

Most of my life I have prayed that these sorts of transformations would occur almost magically. That I would wake up one day and be a totally different person. That all of my desires would be godly. That I would have a natural inclination to deny myself, pick up my cross, and follow Jesus. That I would suddenly just love my enemy. But it didn't happen like that.

Transformation *did* occur when I would hear the words of Jesus and obey them, no matter how I felt. The more I obeyed, the more I was transformed. I was becoming a different person because I was *living* myself into it. I was becoming the words I saw on the page. The words Jesus himself spoke.

What if all Christ-followers lived the Red Letter words in the Bible—Jesus' words? What if we offered the hungry something to eat, gave one of our many coats to someone who was cold, and truly loved *all* our neighbors as ourselves? How radically different would our lives be? How different would our *world* be if Christians were really living as little Christs?

That's what this book is about. Learning to live a faith that is so real, you bleed Jesus. Here's how to start: Look for Jesus every morning in the eyes of the people you meet. And then look for him in the mirror.

