

OUR IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

By Wade M. Nye

“Father, may they be one that the world may believe.”

My wife Charlene and I recently came to Florida to “retire” and to see how God might use us. We came with a dream—some say an impossible one. We arrived at this dream in a variety of ways, but it’s summed up by this prayer of Jesus for His church.

The Church’s PR Problem

We began our mission by meeting pastors and talking with unbelievers. From our conversations it appears folks out there have a declining interest in what the church down the street has to say. They tend to either ignore us or ridicule us. Pastors are frustrated that their congregation isn’t reaching their neighbors. Some experts tell us the church in our land is experiencing a huge PR problem.

One cause is our divisions. We don’t sing “all one body, we,” anymore. How can we with a straight face? Consider these realities:

- Neighboring churches don’t talk much to each other.
- We have the embarrassment of denominationalism on one hand and churches that brag, “we are independent,” on the other.
- Many struggling congregations are unable to bring themselves to pool their resources.

Another issue is the low commitment level of the average church-goer. Am I the only one who notices a lessening urgency to win the lost or the decline of prayer meetings and the numbers attending them? A pastor recently confided to us that for churches in his city, “it’s all about the Christian and not about the Christ.” It’s hard to miss how folks, even church folks, tend to prefer their privacy today. This may explain why Pastors tell us it’s difficult getting their folks to join small groups.

The Agape Principle

"We have a great mission, the greatest ever, and it's doable if we entrust ourselves to Jesus' principle, found in His words, "love one another as I have loved you that the world may believe." By the way, have you noticed it's a command, not a suggestion?

Christ embraced Moses' old covenant imperatives to love God completely and love our neighbor fairly, but then added a third, love one another sacrificially. If we take His agape imperative seriously, we will gladly lay down our egos and preferences on the altar of His love and unity. It is that kind of discipleship that legitimizes our witness. He gave no other. And here's the best part. He promises a great payoff. Not only won't we be ignored, the world will know to whom we belong and come to know Him.

Jesus took a little used term for love, *agape*, gave it a tough new meaning and baptized it in his shed blood. It took His tough *agape* to save the world. It will take our tough *agape* to win it. Jesus' *agape* principle is a new way of doing church. It calls for a journey of love inward to find Jesus in our sisters and brothers, then a journey outward to include our neighbors in that love. It requires a "team-first" attitude, and perhaps the sacrifice of various traditions and doctrines—not necessary ones, such as the authority of Scripture, just divisive ones.

Isn't it time we tapped into the power of this biblical principle? We know it works, because the early believers in Jerusalem made it work.

In a few chapters of Acts, Luke records how First Church Jerusalem distinguished herself from First Church Main Street. We read of frequent healings, startling answers to prayer, a joyful *esprit d'corps*, rewarding fellowship (*koinonia*), provision for needy brethren, spirited worship; and, surprise, surprise, great PR. The bottom line was "God added to their number daily". Wouldn't you have loved being members of that church?

What were the keys to their success? Luke lists at least three: 1) Devotion to the apostles' teaching, 2) Commitment to *koinonia*, featuring frequent shared meals) 3) Dedication to prayer.

Luke doesn't tell us what the apostles' taught them, but in light of their commitment to *agape*, *koinonia* and prayer, those subjects must have headed their syllabus.

This *agape* they lived is not the touchy-feely, hoey-goey stuff mistaken for love in many circles these days. They followed the idea John articulated years later: *You show your love for the God you can't see, when you love the brother you can.* These disciples laid down their lives and their egos for each other and for their Lord. It's hard to imagine them sitting around arguing doctrine. They were too busy living it. That's not to say Christians must agree on every point. I am mistaken if I believe I can only love the brother who agrees with me. Didn't Paul argue that it's precisely our diversity that strengthens Christ's body? But for the *agape* principle to work, His command must trump our preferences.

The Jerusalem Church made a big impression on their neighbors. Luke reports that, "They had the favor of everyone." Like night moths outside a bright window, observers on the outside wanted in, and many of them were baptized.

Strangely absent from Luke's list of church activities are social and evangelistic outreach programs. Perhaps the reason is that they flow so naturally from the Holy Spirit at work in Christ's *agape* principle.

Is it Possible?

The Early church used the *agape* principle effectively, turning pagan Rome upside down in a few centuries. The unchanging Christ prayed at God's right hand for them. He prays for us as well. When we catch this vision to be in one accord, pray with Him, watch out! He will send the Spirit again, baptizing us with an outpouring of *agape* that will flow out into the world.

What if our neighbors heard rumors of infectious joy and mutual caring over at First Church? What if congregations, who had been desperately competing for members, began to cooperate in a variety of ventures? Might outsiders echo the admiration of the 2nd century pagan, who wrote, "Behold how those Christians love one another?" The power of the *agape* principle could enable the church to realize her call to be the salt of the earth, creating in others thirst for the Living Water.

But can modern Christians embrace this kind of discipleship, so foreign to our culture? It won't happen overnight, but we can begin moving in that direction. For example, Paul urged believers to fulfill this *agape* principle, calling it the "law of Christ", by bearing one another's burdens. In today's church that's difficult. How can I support my brother in his trials or heartaches? I hardly know him? Will he trust me to share his struggles? We have seen evidence of church leaders viewing their flock as ministers in training, not sponges to soak up information. They are taking seriously a new item in their job description: *enabling the flock to interact at deeper levels*.

We have no illusions. Tradition and cultural norms hold us captive. We Americans love our rugged individualism and independence. I will have to get over the notion that it's my shining little light that is the beacon on the hill. When we bring our lights together, however, they burn brightly and Christ's Church is transformed from a collection of isolated individuals into a living body.

Charlene and I know Christian leaders here in Florida who are tired of doing the same old things and getting the same tired results. They are prepared to heed the advice of the wit who warned, "We must hang together or, most assuredly, we will hang separately." They no longer will promote a "Jesus and me" attitude which excludes "Jesus and us". They seem ready for unbelievers to take notice and for admiration to displace derision.

Finally, we are encouraged that this "impossible" dream is not really ours but His and that with Him all things are possible.

Will you join up to make this dream come true?