

## Bonding

In discussing how to overcome culture shock, we have already mentioned the need for the missionary to reach out, to enter the new culture, to join the host team. Bonding is not something different from this; it is simply carrying the principles we have talked about to their deepest level of application. For joining the team is one step; developing deep bonds of love and mutuality between teammates is the next step.

Missionaries form a continuous spectrum in the degree to which they

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bond with the host people. On the one extreme are those few who remain isolated in a missionary subculture. In the broad center are those who participate in varying degrees with the host people. Their degree of participation will often be determined by the host people themselves, but they are on the team; they have been accepted. Finally, on the other end of the spectrum are those who fully bond with the people. At the outset, we can say as a generalization that the greater the degree of bonding, the more effective will be the missionary as a Christian witness. Thus bonding is to be encouraged. It is not only the final solution to culture shock; it is also a tremendous asset to one's ministry.

Remaining isolated in a missionary subculture is obviously undesirable. A subculture tends to become more and more ingrown, and less and less interested in things outside the group. There is a big difference between a subculture and a support group. A support group supports you as you reach out; a subculture encloses and isolates you. Missionaries must preserve the proper balance between retreating for support and reaching out for ministry.

Finding one's spot on the bonding spectrum is not a once-for-all matter. During their careers many missionaries will move back and forth along this spectrum depending on their family situation and the nature of their assignment. Missionaries with children usually find that a lesser degree of bonding is better for their family; unmarried missionaries can generally bond with the people to a greater degree.

The best time for bonding to begin is within the first few weeks of arrival on the field. It can happen later, but in those early days new missionaries are uniquely prepared and motivated for bonding. They are filled with anticipation and excitement; they desire acceptance; they have as yet had no bad experiences.

What is bonding? Bonding is a deep level of identification, wherein one feels himself at one with the host people. He feels comfortable among them. He spends much of his leisure time with them. He draws emotional support from their friendship. And these positive feelings are almost always reciprocated.

Even though bonding is desirable, it should not be made a rule for all. Some are temperamentally and emotionally unable to handle bonding. They should not be made to feel guilty by those who do bond fully.

By the same token, those who don't bond must never criticize those who do. Sadly, this often happens. Some criticize out of jealousy, when they see how easily the bonded missionary relates to the people. Others are suspicious, defensive; they feel threatened by the bonded missionary's success. Indeed, alienation from one's fellow missionaries is a

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price some have to pay for bonding.

The best way to facilitate bonding is to place the new missionary with a national family during the language learning period. New missionaries should never be pressured into this, especially if they are shy and diffident, or have families. It must remain a matter of choice. If a new missionary is uncertain whether he is the "bonding type," let him try it—let him take the risk. There is no shame if it doesn't work out. He can always come back into the mission guest house.

The rate of bonding also varies from person to person. Many do well with the "dive in" approach; others prefer to "get wet gradually." If in doubt, dive. There is no intrinsic advantage to prolonging the period of adaptation, and there is always the chance that one never will adapt as fully as he might have if he had just dived in to start with.

One of the main advantages of "diving in," to moving into a Nepali home, is that you, as a foreign missionary, become vulnerable; you have needs. You become dependent on your hosts for many things. This is very important in building a truly reciprocal relationship—the key to successful bonding. No longer are you simply the foreign expert with something to give. One of our mission nurses who had run a medical clinic for many years once broke her arm. When she went next day to the clinic with a cast on, people volunteered to help her do her work; they be-

friendened her in a new way. She said, "Breaking my arm changed my relationship with the Nepalis for the better. I wish I had broken it years ago."

Bonding is an identification with the people on a psychological level, as well as on a physical or external level. The external level is important as a sign of our desire to bond. We wear the national hat, we eat with our fingers, we learn the language and customs of the nationals, and in so doing we show them our respect. They naturally respond to this. They say of us: "That missionary understands us; he wants to be our friend."

Some new missionaries start out getting all the externals right, but they can't seem to go deeper than that. They often look askance at older missionaries who don't live exactly like the people do. But they themselves, after a few years of "doing things right," end up going home. True bonding never took place.

In other words, it is not enough to live like the people; we must also think like them. It is possible to live exactly like them, but be miles apart from them in mutual understanding, appreciation, and caring. After all, bonding isn't simply identification with some idealized cultural group; it is identification with individuals, real people. Bonding is personal.

Successful bonding does not require total identification or "going na-

tive." As we said earlier, this is impossible anyway. We will always be different.

One missionary schoolteacher living in a Nepali village made an almost total adaptation to the local people. She lived exactly as they did—except for one thing: she owned a plastic bucket. That plastic bucket was the talk of the village women. The missionary was indeed different from them!

But that missionary teacher did know what was required to bond with those village women. That is, she had genuine love for them, a desire to be with them, a willingness to serve them, to sacrifice for them. If we manifest these things, then it will matter little whether we wear the national cap, whether we eat Western food once a day, whether we have two or twenty shirts in our cupboard, or whether we own a plastic bucket.

Since bonding is an identification with the host people on a psychological level, we need to know what are the components of such identification. First is a willingness to see things from the people's point of view, to get inside their minds. This means that we start where they are at. For example, if they have "felt needs," we start there, even though those may not be their real needs. Second is respect and appreciation for the people and their cultural heritage. Third is a desire to receive from

them, to learn from them, along with the acknowledgment that they have much of value to give us. Fourth is reciprocity, mutuality. Even as we seek to enter their lives, we invite them into ours. This means that we are open and welcoming. Fifth, and most important of all by far, is love—specifically love from the Holy Spirit. When these five components are present, real identification, real bonding has taken place.

In the process we do not lose or give up our own identity. We remain unique bearers of the good news of the gospel. Neither must we identify in every way with our hosts. We cannot identify with them, for instance, in those aspects of their culture which are contrary to Scripture: caste observance, debasement of women, bribery, and of course, the worship of false gods and idols. We must retain our objectivity, our ability to discriminate. But if we have identified with them in most other ways, bonding will occur. And when it does, we will have reached the hearts of the people. The barriers of foreignness, of misunderstanding, of different lifestyles will have been removed. The people will be ready to listen to us. We, in turn, will be able to communicate the gospel to them in the most effective way possible. This, above all, is why bonding is so important.

It is often difficult for nationals to enter into our lives the way we seek

to enter theirs. We shouldn't expect them to. They have had no exposure to our culture apart from us and from movies and magazines. They can't imagine what life is really like in the more developed nations. I recall when one of our closest Nepali friends went to a conference for itinerant evangelists in Amsterdam some years back. It was his first time in the West. He said to us, "My goodness, now I know what you gave up to come to Nepal!" It would help moderate our "rich missionary" image if more of our national colleagues could visit the West.

It is often assumed that missionaries from the Third World will have a much easier time bonding with the host people than missionaries from the First World. But, in fact, this is not the case. Many times Third World missionaries have a much greater problem establishing close relationships with the people. In Hindu culture, for example, it is extremely difficult for Indian missionaries to bond with those of other castes, even within their own country. Korean and Japanese missionaries are not automatically welcomed in Nepal simply because they are from Asia. They have just as much difficulty bonding with Nepalis as Westerners do—perhaps more, because they come from mono-ethnic societies and aren't used to mixing with those of other cultures. So don't buy the false line that only Third World missionaries can relate to the people of Third

World countries, and that therefore First World missionaries should stay at home!

When we bond or identify with the host people, we are simply following the example of Paul and Jesus. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "To the Jews I became like a Jew.... To those under the law I became like one under the law.... To the weak I became weak.... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Co 9:20,22). Paul identified with the people of whichever group he was trying to reach. In doing this, he never compromised on fundamentals. But in all else he was prepared to. He had Timothy circumcised, not for salvation, but so that he would be more acceptable to the Jews (Ac 16:3).

Jesus is our primary example of identification. He forsook the prerogatives of heaven and made himself like us—even the lowest among us, a servant. He shared our predicament in everything except our sinfulness. He paid a high price; he gave his life as a sacrifice. In all of this, he is a model for us. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21).

This is what is meant when missionaries speak of the "incarnational model." It is the fullest manifestation of all we have been talking about. When we come to the people in sacrificial love we are modeling the incarnation. The people may or may not see our sacrifice, but they will

sense it. It may involve family separation, broken health, physical deprivation, the loss of advantage, reputation, security, even life. But it is this kind of sacrifice and the love which motivates it that wins people to Christ.

As we seek the Holy Spirit's help to model these aspects of Christ's incarnation, let us also seek to model Christ's character. This is our first and primary calling—"to be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Ro 8:29). Without this conformity, all else is empty words. As one old man said to a missionary: "We have heard much preaching. Can you show us the life of your Lord Jesus?"