

“...Be Holy because I Am Holy”: God’s Love and Mercy as the Basis for the Church’s Treatment of Diaspora Peoples

*Samuel Davis, William Carey University and Ronnie Davis, Cape Town
Baptist Seminary, Research Associate, University of Pretoria*

Abstract

People continue to move at an ever-increasing rate. Diaspora peoples impact nearly every major urban centre in the world. Unfortunately, those on the move—from either forced or voluntary migration—do not always experience welcome and peace in their new homes. Such hardship comes in varied expressions: xenophobic violence; patronising oversight; devaluation of humanity, and inability to communicate effectively to name a few. While such a sinful reality exists, the church finds itself positioned to engage those most often neglected within a community. God demands of his people an obedience that ultimately reflects his character: to “be holy because I am holy.” What does it mean to reflect the character of God—to imitate God—in one’s context? In this article, the authors argue that the call to imitate God is normative for the follower of Jesus. Further, such a command must be more than mimicking actions; rather, the Christian must reflect the character of God. In particular, the authors see God’s love and mercy as foundational attributes of God for the church to imitate to engage the diaspora community meaningfully. The article explores God’s mercy and grace in terms of the expression of compassion both in the acts of rescue and the establishment of community. Further, God’s love and mercy are seen in God’s expectations of his people to be a “blessing to all nations”. Having challenged the reader to hear the call to imitate God as normal, and to hearken to the call to imitate God as acts of obedience that flow from the attributes of God, the authors challenge the reader to heed the call to imitate God in practical expressions of love and mercy. God calls the church to imitate His love and mercy in three ways: incarnational acts of compassion that meet the immediate needs of the diaspora community; the intentional creation of community within the church that welcomes and incorporates believers from among diaspora peoples; and equipping the diaspora peoples in the church as missionaries.

1. Introduction

*“Looking through rose-coloured stained-glass windows;
Never allowing the world to come in.*

*Seeing no evil and feeling no pain.
Making the light as it comes from within so dim...
the light's so dim." Petra (1982)*

"...be holy because I am holy." ¹ (Lv 11:44; 1 Pt 1:16)

Prejudice continues to be expressed throughout the world. For many diaspora peoples prejudice too often dominates the experience of life in a new country although it may be encountered in a variety of expressions: xenophobic violence; patronising oversight; devaluation of humanity, to name a few. For many diaspora people, life is filled with uncertainty and need. For some, the move to a new place is one marked by fear of abuse or mistreatment. Such reality ought to be mitigated by the presence of the church. Truly, the followers of Jesus ought to make a significant difference in whatever location they are found. Those places where the church intersects with the immigrant should result in moments of profound demonstration of the breadth and depth of the love of God to all peoples in all places. With the repeated declaration "Be holy because I am holy" (Lv 11:44, 45; 19:2), God set a standard for his people that was to encompass the entirety of life. The declaration was not relegated to the "sacred" life of the tabernacle; rather, all life became declared "sacred" and set apart to God. This reality was made clear by God as he summarized his expectations: "You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own" (Lv 20:26). Lest followers of Jesus somehow perceive this command as relegated to the Old Testament community, one finds that the Holy Spirit repeated the command for the church through Peter: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy.' (1 Pt 1:14-16). This declaration remains God's standard for his people.

There is expectation, then, for the follower of Jesus to express clearly the character of God in all areas of life—in all one does. To imitate God demands one engage with others in a manner that also reflects God. The church, then, should be the true sanctuary of life to a people caught in the uncertainty of migration—whether voluntary or forced. The response to the needs of diaspora peoples, however, can often become reduced to a set of actions to undertake—almost in a checklist mentality. Food given, check... shelter provided, check... clothes found, check... and one can

add a great many more actions that are critically important from skills training to advocacy. While most help is needed and welcome, one should think critically of this simple cause-and-effect approach. Such engagement needs to move beyond a set of actions to express a fuller understanding of God’s command of his people to “be” holy. How does “holiness” that is imitative of the holiness of God in the life of the Christian—both individually and corporately—possibly impact those who find themselves displaced from a home country? Before considering practical steps for the church’s engagement with diaspora peoples, therefore, one needs first to grasp the significance of this command to imitate God. Simply stated, this expectation from God for his people is a statement of normativity for the Christian—to truly reflect the image of God in a broken world. While one can rightly state that God is beyond our ability to comprehend fully, God has revealed himself to us—through his word—so that one can gain a clearer picture of the expectations of this command. Having understood the call to imitate God, the follower of Jesus needs, second, to unpack aspects of God—in this case, the love and mercy of God—that speak directly to this challenge of engaging diaspora peoples to understand better the scope of such a call. Finally, having considered the call to imitate God and defined the nature of God’s love and mercy, one must explore appropriate actions for the church that reflect God’s love and mercy while considering the needs of diaspora peoples.

2. Hearing the Call to Be Imitators of God

Following the Exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel who had been rescued by God from a life of slavery and oppression gathered in the wilderness. God who delivered them, also offered covenant—the promise that they would be his people and he would be their God (see Ex. 29:45; Lev 26:12). In defining the nature of the life of his people, God established himself as the pattern or the model for their life. The expectation of holiness on the part of the Israelites was because God is holy. God’s people, then, were expected to imitate God. The call to “be holy because I am holy” consistently accompanied actions that would set Israel apart from all other nations. The uniqueness of God was seen, in part, in the unique life of God’s people. Imitation of God was commanded. The Holy Spirit provides a “holiness code” for the behaviour of the Israelites in Leviticus so that their actions of obedience might reflect their new nature as the people of God. God’s people were to be set apart from every other nation in the manner of their living—to be holy (Lv 20:26).

For the follower of Jesus, this command is made even more clear. Jesus, himself, will express a core element of discipleship in the act of sacrificially following: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). Later, Jesus will state this truth even more bluntly: “...anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:27, emphasis added). The Holy Spirit through John declares: “Whoever claims to live in him (Jesus), must walk as Jesus did” (1 Jn 2:6). There is a normalcy to obedience for the follower of Jesus, but that obedience is essentially an imitation of Jesus. Jesus is not only the object of our faith, but the “author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2) upon whom the Christian is to set their gaze so that they may run the race laid out for them. Jesus is the one who demonstrated faith as well as the one in whom our faith is placed so that we have a model to imitate. The disciple of Jesus is called to imitate Jesus in various areas of life: serve one another as Jesus served (Jn 13:12-15); love one another as Christ loved us (John 13:34); forgive one another as God has forgiven us (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), to name a few. 1 Pt 2:21 relates one of the more interesting pictures: when considering the enduring of suffering, the Holy Spirit reminds us that “...Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” The term translated “example”, *hypergrammos*, is a term for “drawing lines used to help children learning to write” (Schrenk, 1985: 119). Tracing lines to help a child learn to make letters correctly here challenges the disciple to see “the tracks that Christ has left as examples for us to follow, not in imitation, but in commitment to his way of suffering” (Ibid.). Every aspect of life is to be subject to the model of Christ. Jesus declares that those who love him—his disciples—will obey his commands (Jn 14:15). Jesus sets the agenda for his people. Jesus defines the expectations of his people. The follower of Jesus must follow Jesus!

The apostle Paul through the Holy Spirit admonished the church at Corinth to “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). A more literal rendering of the verse carries more force: “Become imitators of me just as I also (am) of Christ.” The word used—*mimētēs*—does carry the idea of intentional imitation. In this passage, the context calls into focus a variety of issues that had caused division in the church due to individual believers celebrating their freedom and causing others to stumble. The Holy Spirit through Paul challenges them to observe his actions to keep the focus on the glory of God so that many may be saved. Paul, then,

commands them to become imitators of him as he is an imitator of Christ. The authoritative pattern, however, is not simply Paul; rather, the ultimate goal is the imitation of Christ. One is an imitator of Paul only inasmuch as Paul is an imitator of Jesus. Obedience is intimately connected to the understanding of imitation as seen in the following verse where Paul rejoices in the church’s “holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.” Similar emphases can be found in the other occurrences of *mimētēs* as well as the verb form (*miméomai*—to imitate) especially in the other Pauline letters (1 Cor 4:16; Eph 5:1; 1 Th 1:6; 2:14) so that one can argue “The NT as a whole does not teach imitation in the primary sense of imitating an example but rather in the predominant sense of discipleship, i.e., of obedience to the word and will of the Lord...” (Michel, 1985:532).

While the act of imitating and the expression of holiness can rightly be described in terms of obedience to the commands of God, there is a critical element that must be understood. The action depends upon “being”. Consider the declaration of Paul to “imitate” him. The statement is most clearly a call to “become” an imitator. The force of the imperative combined with the intransitive nature of the verb brings an interesting perspective into focus—the emphasis is on the state of being more prior to the action. The verbal force is on becoming. The end objective is the imitation. The overall force, thus, can be expressed as an emphasis on a state of being resulting in obedience! Similarly, when considering the declaration of God to “be holy” the reality is that the actions do not define the child of God; rather, the nature of being holy defines the actions God commands. The “being” precedes the actions. Jesus declares to his disciples: “You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world...” (Mt 5:13a, 14a). These are statements of realities that have expected impacts and results in the manner of living. Consider the Holy Spirit’s admonition for the Christian in Ephesians: “Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus...” (Phlp 2:5) before the actions are stated. More clearly, consider the Holy Spirit’s declaration in Eph 5:1: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” The starting point is the call to imitate God in a manner of being—as dearly loved children—resulting in normative actions—a life of love—that were modelled by Christ! A step of being, then, exists that precedes the acts of imitation. This truth reminds the Christian that one is created in the image of God. For those who have been redeemed, the ability to reflect the

image of God has also been redeemed. The call to imitate, then, is a call to imitate the very character of God—to reflect the image of God. One must grasp the scope of this call to imitate the character of God so that one can obediently live a life of love and mercy.

3. Harkening the Call to be Imitators of God

God's command for Israel to be holy on the basis that God, Himself, is holy establishes the baseline of normativity of life for the follower of God. Discerning the depth of such a declaration and its role in the church's engagement with diaspora peoples, however, requires further intentional engagement. When tested by the Pharisees to provide the greatest commandment, Jesus replied that the first and greatest commandment is "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Mt 22:37). When considering one's responsibilities and actions toward others, the call to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt 22:39) tends to be the focus. The truth, however, is that the highest moral imperative for any human, and for the Christian in particular, is to love God (Winger, n.d); therefore, the love of neighbour rightly flows from the love of God. Love of God, however, is not simply abstract worship. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5 where God had already established this command as foundational for the life of the Israelites. God followed the declaration with instructions to saturate their life with these commands—teaching these laws to one's children, decorating one's house with them, and meditating daily upon them. Consider the scope of this imperative to love God in Deuteronomy—heart, soul, and strength. The Hebrew words used provide great insight for the follower of Jesus. Heart refers to the centre of all the parts of a person: the physical life; the intellect—not just one's knowledge, but how one makes sense of the world; emotions; and one's volitional process—the place where choices are made (often influenced by desire) (Bible Project "*Lev*", 2017). Soul describes the entirety of a person. Literally, the word means "throat" and refers to the whole person (Bible Project "*Nephesh*", 2017). Strength is the most important to grasp as the word is the adverb of degree that is usually translated as "very" or "much" and is used to magnify or intensify other words. In this context, it can intensify the total capacity—as much as possible! The Bible Project translates the term "muchness" as this final thing you use to love God is actually not a thing at all, but it is everything: every possibility, opportunity, and capacity that you have to honour God and loving neighbour (Bible Project "*Me'od*", 2018). The

Christian, then, is called to devote one’s whole body and mind, feelings and desires, futures and failure (with all one’s *heart*), **and** physical existence with all our capabilities and limitations (with all one’s *soul*), **and** to the greatest degree possible (with all one’s *strength*) (Bible Project, 2017 and 2018). Truly, the greatest moral imperative for the follower of Jesus is this command to love God. The call to imitate God, then, is intimately connected with the command to love God and becomes an act of worship. Imitation is not simply a list of actions to mimic but is directed by the very character of God. Love of God will be expressed in the treatment of one’s neighbour; however, the act of loving God does presuppose an understanding of God and impacts how the love of neighbours is fulfilled. Consider some foundational attributes of God that provide direction for the church’s engagement with diaspora peoples: love and mercy.

3.1 God’s Character Embodied in Love and Mercy

As mentioned above, God’s initial command involves a declaration of his holiness—be holy because I am holy. Throughout Scripture, God is declared holy—most notably in the threefold declaration of heavenly beings: “holy, holy, holy” (see Is. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). The word highlights the uniqueness of God in contrast to all of creation. “God’s holiness expresses his divine perfection” (Procksch, 1985: 16). All attributes of God are expressions of God’s perfection. Due to space, not every attribute is considered here; rather, God’s attributes of love and mercy have been identified as particularly instructive for the church’s engagement of diaspora peoples.

As with holiness, love is not simply an action of God; rather, as the Holy Spirit declares in 1 John 4:8: “God is love.” Grudem considers God’s love to mean that God “eternally gives of himself to others,” (2020, 237). John 3:16 provides a perfect example of this understanding of God’s attribute of holy love: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God’s love, then, is eternally enacted.

God’s mercy—while often seen as a specific expression of love, can be defined as God’s “goodness toward those in misery and distress” (Grudem, 2020: 239). Quite often, mercy expresses an *undeserved* goodness. Throughout Scripture, one encounters humanity’s cry for divine mercy: in response to sin (Ps 51:1); for healing (Mk 10:47); on behalf of others (Mt 15:22); and for hope of salvation (Lk 18:13).

Other authors consider God's goodness to encompass both God's love and mercy. Within the discussion of God's holiness, constant goodness, and compassion, Oden mentions God's "unchanging love" (1967: 112). Oden also defines God's goodness, or "the divine goodness," as "that attribute through which God wills the happiness of creatures and desires to impart to creatures all the goodness they are capable of receiving" (1967: 116). Grudem considers God's goodness to mean that "God is the final standard of good and all that God is and does is worthy of approval" (Grudem, 2020: 236). In both definitions, one can see the relation of God's goodness to God's love and mercy. Although God's love and mercy exceed our human equivalent because God is infinite and holy, the follower of God is called to reflect these attributes in their lives. God has, thankfully, not left us clueless.

3.2 God's Compassion Expressed in Love and Mercy

God has expressed his love and mercy within the context of human history. In truth, the whole of salvation history is a narrative of God's extension of love and mercy intersecting human history—most notably in the history of the people of Israel and in the history of the church throughout the world. In the call to imitate God, God's demonstration of love and mercy provides invaluable insight. While one could explore a great number of illustrations and examples of God's expression of love and mercy, only two key aspects will be considered both for the sake of time and for their applicability regarding the church's response to diaspora peoples.

The first aspect to consider is God's role as the one who rescues. Throughout the biblical narrative, God redeems people. Whether in the deliverance of an individual or a people, God acts on behalf of humanity. The greatest example in the Old Testament is found in the Exodus story. God hears the cry of Israel who is oppressed by Egypt and bound in slavery. God's miraculous rescue of Israel from slavery establishes a new identity with the Israelites. Three impacts of the exodus event are noted in the biblical narrative. First, God used the event to identify himself to his people. Over forty times, the refrain, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt" is used so that it becomes the primary identification of God to Israel (Davis and Mulenga, 2022: 111). The description occurs at essentially every critical turning point for Israel: when calling a judge, before the start of the monarchy, as the prophets proclaim judgment, in the face of exile, in the anticipation of return from exile (Ibid.: 112). This expression of God's love and mercy is the foundational identity of

God to his people: the God who rescues! Second, this event becomes a foundational experience in the corporate worship of Israel as they are the people who were rescued (Ibid.). Finally, the remembrance of God’s merciful rescue provided confidence in times of suffering and trial (Ibid.). The climax of salvation history is seen in the sacrificial death of Jesus on behalf of all humanity. God rescues us from our sin, not based on our character, but because of his love and mercy. The primary expression of God’s love and mercy, then, is seen in the move to rescue.

A second crucial expression of God’s love and mercy is the creation of community. God not only rescues Israel but establishes a covenant with them and promises to be their God and for them to be his people. While God had made covenants with individuals (i.e., Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham), this occurrence was the initial covenant with a larger community—an entire people. God establishes an identity for his people connected to his holiness, but as an expression of his love and mercy. As God will remind Israel, they were not chosen because of their greatness, but because of God’s love: “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you...” (Dt 7:7-8a). In the New Testament, God creates a more expansive people in the church establishing both Jew and Gentile as one community. One can find many different expressions of this new reality: the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12ff), the household of God (Eph 2:19), living stones built into a spiritual house (1 Pt 2:5), a holy nation (1 Pt 2:9). A secondary expression of God’s love and mercy, then, is seen in the creation of community.

In considering the call to imitate God, both aspects of rescue and community must be considered. For diaspora peoples, both advocacy and family are needed.

3.3 God’s Commission Enacted in Love and Mercy

God’s love and mercy toward Israel was not seen only in the rescue from slavery and the creation of a new people, but also in commissioning his people with a purpose to make known the God of Israel. In the call of Abraham, God established the global perspective for his creation of a people—that all the peoples on earth might be blessed through him (Gn 12:3). Throughout the history of Israel, God welcomed other peoples, individually and corporately.² The presence of foreigners among the Israelites seems prevalent enough that God creates laws and regulations

regarding the treatment of foreigners in their midst (see Lv 19:33-34).

In the Gospel of Mark, consider Jesus' encounter with the demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes. Following his deliverance, Jesus sent him out to tell his people about his rescue so that he went away and proclaimed throughout the cities of the region what Jesus had done (5:19-20). Following his resurrection, Jesus commissions his disciples to proclaim the gospel message to all regions (Ac 1:8) and to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19). As the church grew, this command to make disciples was not exclusive to Jewish believers; rather, every believer was commissioned. The design of God is new people entering the church community and being equipped to proclaim the gospel and make disciples. Any imitation of God's love and mercy, therefore, must also include the equipping for the purposes of God.

4. Heeding the Call to Be Imitators of God among Diaspora Peoples

The Christian is called to imitate God intentionally in one's life as a normal expression of one's faith. The command is not simply a duplication of action, but a reflection of the character of God enacted. God's love and mercy should be of particular focus as they are attributes most readily understood in the expression of God's engagement with humanity throughout history. While this expression of God's love and mercy by the church should be directed toward all people, at the present time, diaspora peoples typically fit into categories of greatest need. Why diaspora?

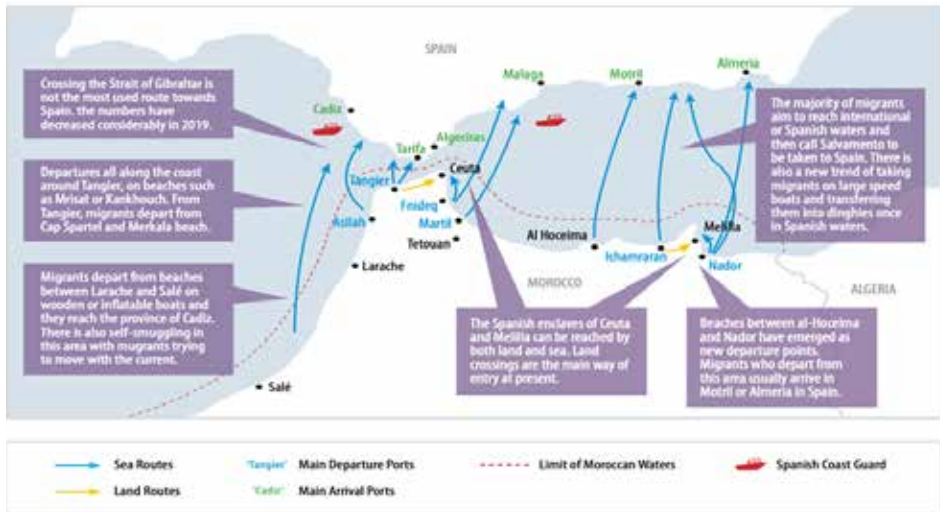
The growth of people on the move has increased exponentially across the globe through both forced and voluntary migration. This reality must be of interest to the church in Africa. Hamilton notes:

“In 2019, the number of uprooted people in sub-Saharan Africa reached record levels with 33.4 million people of concern to UNHCR [United Nations High Commission on Refugees]—39% of the global total including 6.3 million refugees—57% children—and 18.5 million IDPs [Internally Displaced Peoples].” (“Report”, 2023)

As indicated, diaspora does not mean that one has crossed a border into another country. As recent statistics from the UN highlight, seventy-five percent of all new IDPs are located in sub-Saharan Africa (Bullington, 2023). One does, however, encounter large numbers of African peoples seeking to cross borders into neighboring countries or beyond. Those people seeking to move out of Africa and into Europe risking their lives

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for the opportunity to provide a better life for their family or themselves. Hamilton (Blog 48, 2023) highlights the primary sea routes taken as an illustration of the difficulty of such journeys:



The success rate of such journeys is minimal as two or three of every five boats attempting to cross at Gibraltar are lost at sea (Ibid.). Those attempting a land crossing over the Sahara desert have an even higher fatality rate. While the desire to find a “land of plenty” fuels the attempts and many who fail become part of the growing resident migrant population (Ibid.), most migration is forced due to war or disaster.³

Migration within the continent is similarly marked by dangers and fatality. One family matriarch recently related the story of her family’s forced migration from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with her small children that included prolonged marches and even crossing the Zambezi River in makeshift boats made of cardboard (Etaka, 2023). Unfortunately, life for the African diaspora within a neighbouring African nation does not necessarily mean a life free of difficulty or marked by peace. Consider the difficulties experienced by African immigrants living in South Africa in 2022. In their world report for 2023 published earlier this year, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted a spike in xenophobic sentiments last year (HRW, 2023). With the continued effect of the lockdowns from COVID-19 felt in the economic downturns and growth in unemployment, many foreign nationals were seen as the source of the problem: “Vigilante groups such as ‘Operation Dudula’ and ‘Put South Africa First’, conducted door-to-door searches for undocumented foreign nationals groups”⁴ (Ibid.). While South Africa does have a strong record on legal rights

for refugees and asylum seekers and the United Nations High Council on Refugees (UNHRC) notes that although (as of April 2022) SA hosts over 240 000 refugees and asylum seekers, serious difficulties continue (highlighted by HRW's closing paragraph in their report on Xenophobia in SA) (Ibid.):

In mid-2022, some government refugee reception offices reopened for the first time since their 2020 closure. However, many refugees and asylum seekers faced language, access, or technical barriers to using the online system for applications or permit renewals. Despite the government's extensions of permit renewal deadlines several times between 2020 and 2022, the ongoing barriers to registration and documentation caused asylum seekers and refugees to face risks of evictions, police harassment, and deportation, as well as difficulties opening or maintaining bank accounts, accessing basic services, and enrolling their children in school.

The reality of such large movements of people both within Africa and from Africa to the world necessitates that the church act intentionally.

How does the church intersect with such movements of people? What is the role of the church toward the foreigner, the migrant, the diaspora? God commanded action of Israel that provided guidelines for the church: *"When the alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."* (Lv 19:33-34). "This verse is a particularly strong example of the unbreakable connection in Leviticus between the moral force of the law ('love the alien as yourself') and the very being of God, 'I am the Lord your God'" (TOW, ____). Note that the reasoning for these actions is based upon the identity of Israel as the people of God. God simply states the rationale as his being—I am the LORD your God. Do not oppress any foreigner in your midst because one belongs to a God who is holy. Several actions are mentioned. First, they are forbidden to mistreat the foreigner. Second, they are commanded to include them into community; moreover, they are instructed to love the foreigner as themselves. Overall, they are reminded of God's love and mercy toward them when they were slaves and are called to enact that same response to the alien in their midst. In the New Testament, one finds examples of God's love and mercy towards foreigners in Jesus' healing of the centurion's servant (Lk 7:1-10), his discussion with

the woman at the well (Jn 4:1-45), and the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), and his healing of the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter (Mk 7:24-29). Arguably, the following also display God’s love and mercy towards foreigners: God leading Peter to visit the centurion’s home (Ac 10), guiding Philip to the eunuch reading through Isaiah (Ac 8:26-39), setting aside Paul for ministry to the gentiles (note “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you gentiles”; Eph 3:1), and performing the miracle at Pentecost (Ac 2:1-41). Every command God has ever given for His people to not overlook foreigners, or which commissions His followers to go to foreigners, and all the Bible’s statements of the breadth of God’s love for all peoples reflect God’s love for the foreigner as well as the people of any given land (consider Jn 3:16). In considering God’s love and mercy, the church in responding to diaspora peoples must act with compassion, create community, and commission for ministry.

4.1 Incarnational Compassion

The sentiment can be expressed that one cannot hear the gospel clearly when one is hungry (or choose any number of human needs). To that end, the church that seeks to imitate the love and mercy of God towards the foreigner, the immigrant, and the diaspora people, must express compassion such as has been modelled by God. Very often, these peoples experience times of greatest need during their journeys to their eventual new communities. The church should bear in mind, however, that although these foreigners have arrived in a “safe” place to live, it does not mean that they no longer have need.

God’s compassionate expression of his love and mercy is most clearly noted in his redemptive activity toward his people. Such actions involved not only the deliverance from sin, but also the rescue from slavery. Historically, Christians (often in connection to the church) have led both combating societal evils such as slavery (Dickerson, 2019: 139-160) and also creating societal benefits such as free public schooling (Ibid.: 161-175), hospitals (Ibid.: 107-125), and higher education (Ibid., 87-106). To seek human flourishing is not counter to the gospel proclamation; rather, the two move together in step with love and mercy.

Consider a couple of relevant passages from the New Testament. In the story of the good Samaritan, after the expert of the law who questioned Jesus responds by acknowledging that the Samaritan behaved in a neighbourly manner, Jesus said, “You go, and do likewise” (Lk 10:37).

This command isn't just applicable to that one man at that one time but, rather, is a call to be heeded by every follower of Jesus. Christians should act as proper neighbours, loving our neighbours as ourselves (v. 27), knowing that such an act crosses cultural, ethnic, and national boundaries. Concerning the scope of such love, the parable itself provides the example of caring for the needs of one another in emergencies (and one can argue that Christians should show love in less dramatic circumstances as well). Second, although it does not mention the sojourner or foreigner, James 1:27 highlights the importance of caring for the disenfranchised of the community, in this case, the widows and the orphans.⁵ "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (Ja 1:27). This verse does not simply speak of only visiting the widows and orphans but rather of caring for them "in their affliction," essentially loving them as (one should) a neighbour. While not a specific call for the treatment of diaspora people, the verse does not specify that orphans and widows must come from a single people group or nationality, thus implying they may come from any and all people groups and nationalities. The emphasis, again, is on the disenfranchised—and the foreigner in a community is often considered outside the concerns of the larger society. The church, then, is charged with engaging the needs of the diaspora community as acts of love and mercy. But, to understand the needs, one must engage with the community. Often the need expressed is not what the church may first consider. One example is noted from a pastor who had recently moved to Cape Town from another province in response to a call. In conversation around ministry plans, he indicated that he wanted to start an AIDS ministry since that was a huge need in the area whence he came. After moving through the community with a needs survey, no one in the community mentioned AIDS ministry as a need; rather, the concern was for the children of the community. As a result of this information, the pastor became involved at the local primary school, resulting in both a meaningful impact for families and an unprecedented welcome by the community.

Note, again, God's instructions to Israel regarding the treatment of the foreigner in their midst. Not only were they to avoid mistreating the alien, but to love them as themselves. God continues with practical instructions to ensure they have access to food: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings

of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God” (Lv 23:22). Part of the responsibility of the church is to ensure that those within their community have their basic needs met (here the community of faith in particular, but applicable to those with whom one engages regularly).

Stories exist of challenges and encouragement for the African diaspora both outside of the content and those within the content. In considering the African diaspora in Europe, Hamilton notes the condition of the church in Italy where “churches are present in almost every location where one might find immigrants” (Blog 37, 2022) and work is engaged; however, the church at large is suffering from “compassion fatigue, which happens when people and systems become overwhelmed for a significant length of time” (Ibid.). The Italian context is not unique in that one finds essentially four types of immigrants in the diaspora: (1) legal migrants; (2) those awaiting judgment on their asylum applications; (3) those who have been denied asylum and are now in the country illegally; and (4) those who are under the control of traffickers and are working in either farms or the brothels (Ibid.). One problem for the church is that the categories are not neatly discerned as all are found in the same neighbourhoods, each with a very significant need. How, then, does the church begin to move redemptively in such a context in the face of compassion fatigue and significant needs? Hamilton argues for three actions: better networking among churches—even beyond the local context—to coordinate (and share) the work more effectively; the global church must recognize the destination site of immigrants as a critical mission field as these areas are often easier to access than the countries of origin; greater partnership between African churches in diaspora to serve as intermediaries in developing relationships with indigenous European churches (Ibid). These recommendations are valid for those engaging African diaspora within the continent as well.

One must, however, remember that God is the God who rescues and moves, and not think that everything is dependent upon our abilities and resources alone. One encouraging story is found in the context of the diaspora community in South Africa. The lockdowns that accompanied the COVID-19 protocols for South Africa were particularly hard for the diaspora community. The protocols enacted from mid-March 2020 required that every person stay on their property except to shop for food or medicine, or to go to an “essential” job. Many of the diaspora community did not have such jobs as most were encouraged to be entrepreneurs so

ran booths or shops in the community. One missionary who had been teaching a free English class in one of the city halls suddenly found that all her students were severely impacted. While they reached out to her for help, she was at a loss and called all to pray together for God's provision. Almost simultaneously, an individual from the missionary's home country reached out asking specifically about the diaspora community. When the missionary was able to relate to the situation, the individual committed themselves to challenge other church members from their community. As a result, donations began to arrive. Another problem remained, however, as one could not gather in groups even for some form of food distribution. The missionary, however, contacted a local grocery store chain and enacted a plan to purchase vouchers that could be sent to the phones of the class members. Every week people prayed, donations arrived, and vouchers were purchased. This process continued for the entire six months of the strict lockdown! (G. Davis, 2023). Like the manna in the wilderness, over 200 people were fed by the acts of compassion imitating the love and mercy of God.

Other compassionate acts of love and mercy can be expressed. For example, advocacy for immigrants in the face of laws that need to be challenged or even connecting those seeking asylum with groups such as refugee rights lawyers. Sometimes, immigrants struggle to obtain medical care; in response, churches can organize clinics utilizing local doctors. Acts of compassion allow the church to move from an isolated institution to an incarnational people among those in need. Such acts become imitative of God because they engage need redemptively while expressing concretely love and mercy. The act of compassion should never be the end goal in and of itself; rather, the goal is the worship and edification of God. Therefore, the church must seek to create genuine community.

4.2 Intentional Community

God establishes new family and communities of faith. The impact of such community can be noted in the terminology used by God. The Holy Spirit through John reminds us "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! *And that is what we are!* ..." (1 Jn 3:1, emphasis added). Throughout the New Testament familial language is used for those in the church. Such language is truly reflective of the new community God has created. If the church is to imitate the love and mercy of God toward diaspora people, then a goal must be the

invitation and inclusion into the family of God for all who have been redeemed by Christ and are following God.

For the church, genuine community is only possible among people of faith. Those who have been redeemed and follow Jesus have a unique fellowship. For true community to be established between the church and diaspora people near them, engagement must include the proclamation of the gospel as well. The presence of diaspora peoples in a city provides a unique opportunity for the church in the fulfilment of the great commission. While one may not easily go to all nations, the urban church is finding that “all nations” are coming to their neighbourhoods! Consider the World Watch list for 2023 produced by Open Doors. Of the 50 countries where Christians face the most persecution and hardship because of their faith, 19 are in Africa including 5 of the top 10 most difficult nations.⁶ (Open Doors, 2023). People from each of these African nations (and over 40 for the entire 50) are living in Johannesburg! (Holiday, 2023). While not every urban centre will have such a large representation, each will have people from nations that missionaries cannot easily enter. A missiological shift must take place for the church, then, as their own cities and communities become an “international” mission field. One of the largest mission sending agencies in the world enacted a major shift beginning in the late 90s and strengthening today when they moved “to a people-group strategy... dissolving regional structure overseas to function through overlapping global affinity groups... in order to release missionaries to engage the unreached people groups of the diaspora” (Rankin, 2015: 199). Diaspora has changed the global dynamic of people groups around the world. This truth is critical for the church to grasp. To help create a greater understanding of the implications of this reality for the continent of Africa, the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism held a special Diaspora Consultation on Africans in Diaspora and Diaspora in Africa last year in Cape Town.⁷ The urban church—especially in diaspora destinations such as South Africa—is uniquely positioned to engage the nations with the gospel. Quite simply, the church is presented with “great opportunities for ministry when people move from countries where there is little freedom to present the gospel to other countries that have no such limitations. For example, there is greater freedom to evangelize Moroccans in Spain, Turks in Germany, and Chinese in South Africa than in their home countries” (Downs, 2015: 78). If the church desires to imitate the love and mercy of God as demonstrated by God’s creation of community of all peoples, then the church must take seriously this

opportunity the growth in the diaspora has provided. It is fair to note that not every member of the diaspora is outside the community of faith. Due to the continued persecution of Christians on the continent--1 in 5 Christians in Africa experience some form of persecution (Open Doors, 2023)—many Christians have been forced to leave their homes; therefore, the church can welcome Christian brothers and sisters from diaspora into full fellowship.

Genuine community also demands meaningful shifts in perspective. Consider two critical shifts. First, the foreigner amid the church cannot be seen by the larger fellowship as only the recipient of the church's help. Recall God's command to Israel that "...the alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself..." (Lev. 19:34a). While help and aid can most certainly be rendered—and ought to be if there is need in the body, one cannot be seen only as a project of help. Rather, the church must see the diaspora believers as full members of the community serving within the body by exercising their ministry gifts for God's glory and kingdom. Second, inclusion of diaspora within the church body must move beyond surface diversity. Sometimes a church might celebrate the various peoples within the congregation without really providing depth of community. In one instance, a church celebrated that they had elected elders from among the diaspora in the church; however, upon deeper probing, the church did not really allow those elders to function in that capacity within the larger congregation but unconsciously limited ministry to their language/people groups within the church. Thankfully, that is no longer the reality, but it required the leadership to develop a healthier and more biblical understanding of the church as the body—all its members working together. Stevens expresses this goal well in his biblical theological examination of the church as God's "New Humanity" (2012). He provides a "special focus on being a church of the nations and for the nations... particular emphasis is placed on the crucial importance of shaping our corporate identity as God's multi-ethnic people" (Ibid.: 107).⁸ As part of the body of Christ, every member of a local congregation has gifts given by the Spirit to be exercised in the church for the glory of God and the advancement of God's kingdom and mission. The church must equip all members for ministry and provide space for service.

4.3 Equipping for Missions and Commissioning as Missionaries

The continued growth of diaspora movements globally provides another

unique opportunity for the church: equipping the next generations of missionaries. Just as one expression of God’s love and mercy was his desire for all nations to be blessed through his people as seen in Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples, the church that imitates God faithfully, must also have a desire for all to come to be saved. One aspect of the church’s intersection with the diaspora in their midst that must be considered is the potential missional impact. This impact can be illustrated with three perspectives.

The first dimension to consider (hinted above) is the opportunity to equip the diaspora within the church to reach the immigrant population in one’s own city. Anyone who engages in compassion ministry can express as truth that word of help travels quickly.⁹ This word travels because of the connectedness of the diaspora community. The church needs to understand that the gospel can also be spread along these same lines of communication. To facilitate such communication, the church must take the task of equipping and training seriously. In one Bible study group of Congolese women earlier this year, the teacher spent a few weeks providing evangelism training. During the following week’s Bible study, the entire group went into the community to have gospel conversations. The excitement among the members was tangible! They had shared the gospel with fellow diaspora effectively and competently as obedient followers of Jesus. Among the young adult group of a local church in Cape Town, one member of the Young Adult Bible study who is from Angola and is studying at a local college began taking the material taught, translating it into Portuguese, and leading a Bible study at the campus of his school. While many people groups are present in a city, the easiest way of engagement is still through someone from the same people group with the same language abilities. Hamilton notes that in the context of Morocco, the African diaspora has more freedom to engage the diaspora community with the gospel than the established church (Blog 52, 2023)! As the church welcomes the diaspora into the local body of Christ, the church must equip those who come to faith to be able to share this gospel message with others—especially their diaspora community—and see them as local missionaries.

A second dimension of training to consider involves those immigrants who are only in the church for a season and intend to return home. Many of the larger urban centres host universities and colleges that attract international students. While those students are members of a local church, the church

must ensure that they are equipping them to think missionally. When they return home, they will have opportunities for new engagement. Upon the completion of studies, many will be seen with a higher status than when they left home. Many will have new areas of influence and opportunity. The church must equip the students to serve God faithfully in their new circumstances. This shift requires that the church train those members as missionaries to engage in the missionary task. Further, the church should take the role of a sending church with those who are going. The same young man from Angola mentioned above travelled home recently for three weeks between semesters and had the opportunity to lead three Bible studies. The local discipleship leader has been intentional in equipping all the members to share the gospel and disciple others. This young man is a business student but has new opportunities as he travels home. Those immigrants who immigrate for short-term work provide another example. One church in a small town in South Africa had a surprising number of Filipino members who were working as engineers and construction experts on a power plant. These workers explained that they regularly travelled to countries for work which lasted 1-4 years. One of the Filipino workers explained that he saw himself as a missionary with his construction work as a platform. The church needs to help more members gain such a perspective. The church needs to gain this perspective!

A final group for consideration is those who will be leaving the church for other destinations. These may be diaspora members of the church that will resettle in the country that is not their place of origin or these may be local members who will be immigrating to a new country. The African church has a tremendous capacity to impact the global community. Hamilton argues that “the mantle of ministry is being passed from the West to the South, and Africa is ready to heed the call. It is truly a historic moment” (Blog 38, 2022). He cites three key observations (Ibid.): (1) “the African church has an incredible influence on the lives of her migratory members... If disciplined properly, these [workers and students] will travel legally around the globe... each being a transmission agent of the gospel” (Ibid.); (2) “the African church has perhaps the largest mission-sending capacity of any continent... As Africans, they can go almost anywhere and find support upon arrival. Why? Because African migrants are literally everywhere”¹⁰. (Ibid.); (3) “the African church is becoming well established in many migrant transit locations... making a difference in the lives of migrants, her members are ministering to their neighbors [sic],

and many are coming to faith” (Ibid.). The church needs to become more intentional in training its young adults as missionaries as this demographic is most likely to immigrate. One growing trend and potential for African students is the opportunity to study abroad as many nations in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia are actively recruiting students from African nations for their state universities (Hamilton, “Report”, 2023). If the church is to capture God’s passion for the lost and God’s desire to see “all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all...” (1 Tim 2:3b-6a), then the imitation of God’s love and mercy toward the diaspora must include actively equipping them to reach the nations.

5. Conclusion

The call to love one’s neighbour is best expressed as it flows from one’s love of God. Similarly, the expectation to imitate God is best expressed when it precedes actions with imitation of the attributes of God. Humanity’s creation in the image of God provides the foundation for the ability of the Christian to reflect God’s character, to be salt, to be light, and to be holy because God is holy. God’s attributes of love and mercy, then, are foundation in the expression to love one’s neighbour!

In the current environment, one’s neighbour is increasingly likely to be a member of the global diaspora. These neighbours often face unique challenges and needs while bringing unique abilities and perspectives. As the church moves to engage with the diaspora, the call to model God’s love and mercy must be heard, hearkened, and heeded. One must hear with understanding the expectation to imitate the LORD. One must hear with a desire to unpack the meaning and implications of patterning one’s life after Jesus. One must also, however, hearken the call to imitate. Beyond hearing to understand, one must hear with the intention to obey (compare words, 2023). Grasping the expanse of God’s love and mercy through God’s expression of compassion, acts of redemption, and commission to service. Ultimately, having an understanding and intention to obey proves meaningless if one does not heed the call. Truly, the church is placed to reflect godly love and mercy to the diaspora in its midst.

To heed such a call should instruct the missiology of the church. The expectation of this call not only includes the engagement in meaningful advocacy on behalf of the diaspora to combat injustices they face and

acts of compassion that addresses their needs and challenges, but it also includes the diaspora into the local body of Christ.

The church is truly positioned in a “great commission” moment in time. God’s perspectives often seem contrary to what seems obvious to humanity. Consider the story of Jericho from the book of Judges. In chapter six, the reader is informed that the city “was tightly shut up... No one went out and no one came in” (6:1). While this description is presented as if it was a problem, God responds “See I have delivered Jericho into your hands...” (6:2). God had gathered all the people into one place and provided a plan. For many, the increasing presence of diaspora in a city is seen as a problem; however, one might rightly declare that God has gathered all the peoples into one place! In light of the diaspora, the church must plan for all three types of diaspora missions as outlined by Wan (*as cited in* Downs, 2015: 78):

1. Missions to the diaspora: reaching the diaspora groups themselves
2. Missions through the diaspora: diaspora Christians reaching out to their kinsmen wherever they are.
3. Missions by and beyond the diaspora: motivating and mobilizing diaspora Christians for cross-cultural missions.

In John 4:4, the Holy Spirit relates that Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” Despite generations of animosity between Jews and Samaritans and the lack of understanding by his disciples, Jesus looks upon the woman at the well and the Samaritans of the town with compassion. The result of Jesus’ detour was many of the Samaritans in that town believed in him (v. 39-42). In considering the diaspora in its midst, may the church heed Jesus words to his disciples: “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (v. 35b).

6. Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotes are from the *New International Version* (NIV)
2. One finds instances of both individuals such as Rahab (Jos 6:22) and Ruth as well as entire people groups such as the Gibeonites (Jos 9). Although the Gibeonites acted with deception to fool the Israelites into entering a covenant with them, God does not punish Israel. To the contrary, God honours the commitment of Israel when they move to rescue the Gibeonites from persecution

(Jos 10) as well as avenging the Gibeonites after Saul had persecuted them (2 Sm 21). The Gibeonites acted to create a covenant with Israel because they had heard of the LORD (see verses 9-10, 24). Rahab had similar statements concerning the LORD (see Jos 2:9-11). A common theme seems to be those peoples who recognize God and seek God are welcomed.

3. UNHCR highlighted several “major situations or operations in Africa in 2019” (Moving from North and West to East and South): MALI—164,500 Malian refugees; 844,400 IDPs in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Western Nigeria; 40,000 returnees; NIGERIA—285,000 refugees in the Lake Chad region; 2.3 million IDPs in Northeastern Nigeria, north Cameroon, and Southwest Chad; CAMEROON—54,300 Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria; 670,400 IDPs in Southwest and Northwest Cameroon; DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO—916,800 Congolese refugees and asylum seekers; 5.01 million internally displaced; 2.1 million IDP returnees; 58% children; CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC—610,300 refugees; 669,900 internally displaced; 137,200 refugee and IDP returnees; SOUTH SUDAN—2.2 million South Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries; 1.67 million internally displaced; 99,800 refugee returnees; 276,500 IDP returnees; 63% children; SOMALIA—773,800 Somali refugees in neighbouring countries and Yemen; 2.65 million internally displaced; 6,200 refugee returnees; BURUNDI—333,600 Burundian refugees in neighbouring countries; 33,300 internally displaced; 21,200 refugee returnees. (Hamilton “Report”, 2023).

4. The HRW report also noted “Xenophobic sentiments in the country were further reinforced by prominent political figures... In January 2022, [one politician] visited restaurants in Johannesburg’s Mall of Africa to assess the ratio of South African to foreign nationals employed by businesses there” (HRW, 2023).

5. For a more complete examination of this passage and its implications for the church, see R Davis, “Pure Religion.” *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology*. Issue 23 (2014), 1-15. For a similar focus on engaging the disenfranchised, see R Davis, “‘But I tell you...’ Implications of Jesus’ Instruction on the Value of Life in Matthew 5:21-26 for Christians in a Polarized Society.” *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology*, Issue 30 (2021), 146-171.

6. 2. Somalia; 4. Eritrea; 5. Libya; 6. Nigeria; 10. Sudan.

7. Previous consultation was held to consider European diaspora and this year a consultation was held in Seoul to consider the impact of diaspora in Asia and Asians in diaspora.

8. In considering Paul’s statements on the equality of all people within the church (*cf.* Col 3:11; Gl 3:28), Stevens argues that the levelling of status for men/women;

slave/freed; Jew/Gentile does not level all distinctions of culture or ethnicity; rather, he notes that these distinctions “*must no longer have primary defining force*” (2011: 121, emphasis in original). He further clarifies that “Christ calls us past our ethnicity, but not out of our ethnicity. Furthermore, the renewal of the New Humanity is not *irrespective* of differences of ethnicity and culture, but inclusive of such differences” (Ibid., emphasis in original).

9. Hamilton notes that this reality of the rapid multiplication in compassion ministries is also compounded by African culture that demands hospitality is shown to the neighbour. Small African diaspora churches in Spain, for example, struggle with the tension between caring for the community’s needs and the congregation’s needs noting “If an African comes to your door, it would be a sin... culturally and biblically... to turn them away. But... there will be ten tomorrow if they help one today. Those ten would turn to a hundred the next day. Without some measure of control, every church would become overwhelmed” (Blog 53, 2023). Hamilton went on to note that their solution was insightful: “Their solution was to make it known that they did not engage in public service to the migrant community. But... with incredible wisdom... they encouraged their members to seek ways to love their neighbours. They found that the congregation, being migrants, themselves, knew how to best care for their friends and co-workers. By resourcing their members to do that kind of ministry, they empowered them to hare the gospel with a high level of credibility and effectiveness” (Ibid.)

10. In considering the presence of African migrants around the globe, Hamilton relates “a joke told around Mali that when Neil Armstrong planted the US flag on the moon, a Soninke tapped him on the should and asked him if he wanted to buy another one!” (Blog 38, 2022)

11. For a more complete engagement on the topic, see Wan’s foundational work: *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*, revised edition (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011).

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Author’s Declaration

The author declares that there is no financial gain or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced him/her in the writing of this article.

Email: ronnie@ctbs.org.za