

## RECIPROCITY: A WAY FOR SURVIVAL

I have read a thought provoking and informative book entitled, *The Spirit Level*, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. The authors deal with the impact of inequality upon society and its people. They look at how inequality affects health, environment, crimes, human behaviour, and the status of individuals. The authors claim at the end of the book that in order for society to be healthier, more economically sustainable, crime preventing, and peaceful there should be equality. The authors write, “Modern societies will depend increasingly on being creative, adaptable, inventive, well-informed and flexible communities, able to respond generously to each other and to the needs wherever they arise. Those are characteristics not of societies in hock to the rich, in which people are driven by status, insecurities, but populations used to working together and respecting each other as equals.” (p. 263) Both writers argued that if we work together to address inequality in our community, we can resolve some of our social problems. But can we be equal? Can everyone be equal? How do we see and understand equality?

Equality for me as a Tongan is about reciprocity. Reciprocity is defined by the dictionary as, “to give and receive.” In order for equality to exist there should be a desire to give and to receive. Those who have more than they need must have the generous heart to give and that would be the same expectation for the recipients. They are expecting to give back whatever they can offer as part of their commitment for equality. They receive freely and so they have to give back freely. There are two Tongan words that identify the meaning of reciprocity in a Tongan context, which are; “*femolimoli'i* and *fetoliaki*”. “*Femolimoli'i*” means, “to share your smallness” and “*Fetoliaki*” means, “To lift one’s burden”. On one hand “*femolimoli'i*” denotes the reality that we don’t have or know everything. Therefore, we need to be opened mind to receive as well as to give. On the other hand, “*fetoliaki*” refers to the willingness to share someone’s burden. Because everyone has burden it is therefore the responsibility of everyone to help each other’s burden. Both words explicate the understanding of reciprocity. The intention of giving is not the quantity but the quality of the giving. It means that it doesn’t matter how big or how small you give but the heart that goes with the giving. Every giving or contribution even very small giving will have a positive impact on someone’s need, and that is what “*femolimoli'i*” means. The same consequence will happen to someone’s burden, whether financial burden or health burden will be able to be lifted when there is a willingness to share and that is what “*fetoliaki*” means.

John Wesley advised his followers about the significance of giving as a way to minimize inequality in his society. In a letter he wrote in 1770, he writes, “The dangers of prosperity are great...if poverty contracts and depresses the mind, riches sap its fortitude, destroy its vigour, and nourish its caprices.” On his sermon on the subject of wealth he divided it into three main points, “Gain all you can! Save all you can! Give all you can.” John Wesley believed that in giving and sharing we can help someone’s poverty. We, the Methodists of today are the inheritors of this tradition. We are not only giving financially but we also give our time, our energy, our intellectual activity, our gifts of ministries, and our love for others. We are giving but at the same time receiving and we are not only receiving but are also at the same time giving. Because we do not have or know everything we are challenged to humble

ourselves and open our minds both to receive and to give. It is through reciprocal response that we can deal with inequality in our society as well as in our church.

It may be our church deals with many issues that involve equality and inequality. The fact of the matter is that we cannot all be equal, and we will never be equal in every way, but we can help and share with each other to minimise the inequalities in our church. One of the issues that we currently deal with in our church is the strengthening of church buildings meet new standard code. Obviously, we will try our best to deal with this issue equally, but this will not be easy. Some of our congregations are better resourced than others in terms of finance and membership, while others are struggling because of the lack of resources. While we are different in many ways we are called to share the burden with others in our church. This necessity for Christians to share will happen more easily if we proceed in a spirit of reciprocity. Reciprocity is not really about the quantity but about the quality. It is the quality of our giving and sharing that can make a difference in someone's life. *Femolimoli'i* and *fetoliaki* could be two values that shape an authentic reciprocity. Furthermore, an authentic reciprocity is only possible with a heart of love. Love is at the heart of the gospel and that is where reciprocity should be based. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 emphasises love as the most important of all the spiritual gifts. He suggests that if we do anything without love than we would be like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

People survive when the powerful have the will to share with the powerless in love, when the rich share with the poor in love, when the stronger give in to the weaker in love, and when we all have the common bond of giving and receiving from each other in love. I believe when we do not have the will to do this then life, and the quality of our church life together, will be at risk. Reciprocity, a way for survival.

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