

## THE CONTAGIOUS CONGREGATION

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:3-10 RSV

I would like to read from the introduction section to the Book of Acts from the *Reach Out Bible*.

Picture yourself getting an "A" in the roughest math course of the semester...standing alone on a Rocky Mountain peak staring at breathtaking beauty...hitting a hole-in-one. Now picture yourself *not* being able to share these experiences with anyone. It would kill half the pleasure. After all, what good's an exciting game or trip without friends along? In the same way, if Christ lives within you, then talking about Him should be as natural as talking about your unexpected "A," or your winning touchdown, or that very special date you just had. Yet speaking out isn't that natural! Not at all. People say they don't want to "discuss religion." And often we over-react, thinking people are more defensive than they actually are. We quickly lose the desire to communicate Christ beyond our small circle of Christian friends.

If you are honest with yourselves you will admit that it is difficult to speak out. Very often the most important and rewarding things that we do are also the most difficult. Admitting you are a disciple of Jesus Christ and inviting someone else to taste and see that the Lord is good is one of those very difficult things. I do not minimize it for an instant. Why?

There are a number of reasons, but I want to give you several that I think are major, at least for this congregation as I perceive it. First of all we don't want to intrude on people. Nobody likes to jump in slinging Bible texts where they are not wanted. We are afraid people will be offended. Most of us, even though we are committed Christians, have been repulsed by well-meaning Christians who have come knocking on our doors and put a tract in our face and told us that unless we repent, hell is a certainty in the future. We are afraid to speak because we don't want others to think we think we are self-righteous or morally superior, that we are better or wiser people than those who do not believe.

We know that some people are so sensitive and so hostile to the Christian religion that we don't want to get into an argument. If we raise some questions, we are afraid we are going to have a negative reaction so we would rather drop it.

When I was in my early ministry, I was asked to visit a Jewish synagogue to discuss Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and I was delighted to accept. I had been raised in Brooklyn and many of my childhood friends were Jewish. Being a Seventh-day Adventist; I felt there was some common ground on which we could meet—the Sabbath, our health principles, etc.

The synagogue was packed that night and I realized that the upper most question in their minds was not anything I was talking about. Finally it came out and you could have heard a pin drop when the question was asked: "Why do you Christians say we Jews killed Christ and why have you used that claim as justification for all the horrendous crimes committed against the Jewish people by the Christian church down through the ages?"

I could feel the perspiration on my forehead. At first I was scared by the question because I sensed the hostility. Yet as we talked further, I realized it wasn't hostility that was coming through—it was shock, it was dismay, it was incomprehension. I very much appreciated that person being honest, open and courageous enough to get that question out on the floor and make a Christian pastor address the issue. I told them that as far as I was concerned, I do not believe that Jews killed Jesus Christ. If I am going to say that, I also have to say that Jews took him off the cross and with loving hands put him into a sepulcher, and it was Jewish people who started the Christian church, who gave their lives because they believed in him. The Bible's theology is that we all participated in the death of Christ because we are all sinners. It has nothing to do with racial or ethnic background. They felt better. But I realized that I would never have brought that question up myself because if I had I would have expected all kinds of negative reactions. Many of us sense that Jewish people and others do have some

## THE CONTAGIOUS CONGREGATION

basic resistance and hostility to the gospel, and in some cases, for very good reasons.

There may be other reasons—apathy, lack of spiritual vitality on the part of some people, being busy, shyness. I don't want you to feel guilty, because I am not attacking persons. We as a church are trying to attack a problem. In the next few sermons I will be talking about evangelism. I think that all of us who are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ want to think that we belong to a contagious congregation, but I also think that if we are honest many of us would have to admit that sometimes we belong to congregations that are quarantined so that nothing can get out.

A tremendous amount of research has been and is being done right now on the whole question of church growth and evangelism. We now know more about how to find that one lost sheep than we ever have, but some of us have been afraid of this emphasis. There are many Adventist pastors now attending church growth workshops, there are some getting doctorates at Fuller Theological Seminary in church growth, specializing in mission and outreach.

Some of us have been afraid because we know that there are dangers in a one-sided emphasis on church growth. You get into the numbers game; you try to measure the success of the church on the basis of dollars, buildings and baptisms. Anything that you can measure obviously becomes an index of success in this view, so you quantify the work of the church. When that happens, the qualitative, the life experience of what happens in the church, tends to get minimized and that isn't figured in the computation of whether a church is or is not healthy and growing. On the other hand it isn't a very good sign when the membership of the church is declining either. That's not supposed to be something we rejoice over.

Because of the sophisticated studies that are being done and the tools we have, more and more congregations are asking: "With capable pastors who are good preachers, with new buildings that are attractive, with outstanding music and exciting worship, why does the church not grow?"

I think we need to ask ourselves the same question.

One answer to that question comes from the church growth people, and I am not sure that I agree with all of them (but I haven't read them all either). I want to quote from one book which I have read recently:

Most people in a community never know what a congregation has to offer or that it wants to share it, unless people from the congregation leave the church and enter the neighborhood, to engage others in caring friendship and meaningful conversation and so open up the faith and life of the congregation as a live option to undisciplined people. (*The Contagious Congregation*, George G. Hunter, III, Abingdon Press, 1979)

There is another reason why the church does not grow: There are people, not shy, not timid, but who are too courageous, too forward and too brusque, try to evangelize in ways that are outmoded, tacky, lack class and are totally unrelated to the culture of the people to whom they are speaking.

I remember sending a member of my family a book when I was a teenager. I thought the book had a lot of good things to say. But my relative wrote back to me saying: "Don't send me any more of those books. The writing is so bad, the ideas are so poorly reasoned, I can't stand to read the thing." That really crushed me. But it was the first time I started to realize that the books I thought were helpful would not be viewed in the same way by everyone else.

We need to understand what evangelism is. Most people either swear by the word or at it. If we are going to get contagious about our faith, we need an adequate understanding of what evangelism is in the New Testament biblical sense.

There are five kinds of ministries that are often called evangelism. I want to discuss each of them and then recommend the one that I think really is closest to the biblical concept of evangelism, but the

others are extremely important.

The first one might be put under the heading, "Let us help you." This is the ministry of loving, Christian presence in the community among the poor—those who are struggling with basic needs. If you were to ask this group of Christian disciples how they were doing evangelism, they would give you a report on the number of people whom they have helped. Mother Teresa is an example of this in the Roman Catholic Church of helping people where the needs are. Jesus spent a lot of time doing this with people.

A second concept of ministry that is often called evangelism is the other way around: "Let God help you." Oral Roberts is known for saying, "Something good is going to happen to you today." Robert Schuller is another example of this kind of ministry. They tell people that if they let God intervene in their lives, they will have self-confidence, positive outlooks, find healing and a cheerful spirit, etc. This is a biblically valid ministry. But is it evangelism in the fullest sense of the word in the New Testament?

A third ministry is what we call "Hear the Word." Preaching, proclaiming the Good News, telling the story of the gospel of Jesus. In this particular view, the idea is that once you have proclaimed, you have evangelized. The response of people is inconsequential. You measure your success in this kind of evangelizing by counting the number of countries you have entered with a missionary, the number of television or radio stations you are on, the number of people who have access to what you are trying to say; therefore when this happens you have preached the gospel, you have done evangelism. That is an important ministry and it is biblically valid, but is it evangelism in the fullest sense of the word?

A fourth ministry is "Make a decision." This is what we call crusade evangelism among evangelicals. Billy Graham is an example of this concept. You hold meetings and you have a target audience and in those meetings you go for a decision. You want a specific decision about a person's relationship to Jesus Christ. That's a ministry and an important one. But In the opinion of many church growth scholars, this is not evangelism yet.

The one that is recommended, and I am inclined to agree with it, is: "Become Christian Disciples." There are two objectives: (1) That people become lifetime followers of Jesus Christ, and (2) That they be incorporated into a local congregation. In other words if Billy Graham gets decisions in a meeting from people to become Christians and they never join a local church, they have never been evangelized. Do you understand what I am saying? If they are never bonded to the church, then evangelism has not happened. The key point here is that this approach means that it is impossible to do evangelism apart from the local church. Crusade meetings can't do it. They are a part of it; they may lead up to it; they may be an aspect of it but they are not the whole picture. The scriptural basis for this is found in the great commission, Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (RSV)

"Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" presupposes that after they have been baptized there is a bonding to the church, a growth in the fellowship, a sense of belonging to the family that has never been possible until they actually enter the life of a local congregation. Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great church historian, has said that there is considerable evidence that as many people responded to the preaching of the early church on the basis of the fellowship of the believers as did on the basis of the proclamation they heard in public meetings. The quality of the congregation's life became one of the forces. Without that evangelism cannot take place. This means that when a meeting ends or decisions are made or even when people are baptized, we don't necessarily have evangelism. That does not mean that the other things are incorrect or that they are weak. It is simply

## THE CONTAGIOUS CONGREGATION

to say that they are essential; they are rooted in the scripture and they achieve much for people. But achieving a loving presence among other people that never gets beyond that to giving them the most loving gift possible—the gospel—is not evangelism in the New Testament sense. Social workers can do that. People who are just good neighbors can do that. People who sense the Spirit of God coming into their lives at a crucial point, who feel they must make a decision—that by itself is never be an end in itself. But if these objectives who hear the word, not enough and can are ends in themselves rather than means to the end of making them disciples, they cannot be considered evangelism in the biblical sense of the word.

I have had to wrestle with this idea myself: It sounds like you are loving people for very manipulative, selfish reasons. In other words I am going to be a caring and loving neighbor because I want to get you into the church. You can construe it that way if you are not careful. That is not what Christians are trying to say. We are saying that when you love people for themselves, the most authentic, enduring act of love you can render to those people is to invite them and to help them become disciples of Jesus Christ. Anything short of that is really not to love them for themselves, at least from the Christian's perspective. The focus then is on discipling people, bonding them to a local church life and to a fellowship. All of these other things are a part of the picture, but this is the central focus. They find their importance and their meaning in relationship to this.

We are not talking about manipulating people or psyching them or maneuvering them—we are trying to make faith in Jesus Christ a live option. We want to interpret clearly to them what it is we are so committed to, keep it in their consciousness, be models of it in our own lives.

With this definition of evangelism, there are people, therefore, who are on the church books who are not disciples. They are not part of the fellowship. They have not been bonded and the attrition rate in most churches indicates that somewhere along the line they made a decision and were baptized but the evangelistic definition in the New Testament sense never happened in their lives.

We are trying to tell people that Christ's mission is to set them free. Unless they experience that freedom and the fellowship of the church, they have never been evangelized.

There are four turnings then when a person is completely discipled:

- (1) He obviously must turn to Jesus Christ as a Person, as God.
- (2) He must turn to the Christian life and message.
- (3) He must turn to the local church.
- (4) He must turn to the world in love and service.

When that happens we have done evangelism. It is believed that most of the people who have spiritual problems in the local church have taken one or two of these turnings but they have not taken all of them.

There are some key facts which have emerged from the research:

- (1) It is assumed that most people who become disciples of Christ respond to a stranger who gives an invitation. The fact of the matter is that the vast majority of those people who become Christians have received the invitation to do so from a close relative or friend.
- (2) Another assumption is that the conversation was preplanned and artificially contrived. Again, the research indicates that in the vast majority of cases, the subject of Christianity comes up spontaneously; it is not contrived. It is something that happens naturally and everyone is comfortable with it. Very often the person who is inquiring about the Christian faith is brought to somebody else or to a group to have it explained fully.

## THE CONTAGIOUS CONGREGATION

The key is not to use one method, not to start where people are supposed to be in your mind, but to start where **they** are. The point of contact between the gospel and people is their needs. (We will talk about that more in later sermons.) All the fundamental human needs, the Bible says, are met in Jesus Christ. Everybody has something raging within him or her. What the Bible is trying to get us to see and proclaim to people is that the theater of that battle is in every person and we have to find out where it is. When we do, we have made a contact between the gospel and those people.

When I was 14 years old the gospel spoke to my needs in a very dramatic way. I had gone through a personal upheaval. I was lonely. I needed people to love and care and support me. But I must tell you that the point of contact between Jesus Christ and me when I was 14 years old is no longer the point of contact. What won me then cannot win me now. If I had missed my opportunity then and the contact was coming to me now at my age and with what I have been through, it would take a totally different approach and different people to pull it off. On a footnote to that, what won me is not able to keep me either. That is what Paul is saying in Hebrews when he says we have to leave these elementary doctrines and go onto maturity. This is just killing us.

In the next few weeks I want to discuss from the scriptures what it will take to make us really contagious for Christ and get us out of the quarantine of the Sligo Church.