

## NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

Scripture Reading: Romans 1:1-5, 16, RSV

When you read the writings of the apostle Paul, especially the letters to the churches who were having some practical problems, you pick up three things:

- (1) Paul was very often ashamed of the churches to which he wrote;
- (2) Paul was often ashamed of some of the Christians in those churches;
- (3) Paul expressed many times his sense of shame about himself. But *never* was Paul ashamed of the gospel.

When you hear criticism of the church or its members, and criticism is something we can legitimately accept, you should understand that people can never indict the gospel. What they are doing is indicting the people in whom the gospel has not done its work. Paul was being modest when he said he was not ashamed of the gospel. I think what he really wanted to say was, "I am proud of the gospel. It is the power of God unto salvation. It is the only good news in town."

Recently I have attended two meetings that have given me a renewed sense of confidence and love for the gospel. I attended the meetings that were dealing with the nuclear arms problem. One of the meetings was sponsored by the First Baptist Church where President Carter attends and the other was out at Columbia sponsored by the Humanities Institute.

At both meetings William Sloan Coffin, Jr., of Riverside Church was the speaker and he reminded his hearers that Einstein pointed out long ago that the nuclear bomb means that everything has changed except the way man thinks. Coffin pointed out that we call our war machine the Defense Department but there is really no such thing because there is no defense against the nuclear war. We are talking about 20 minutes, Moscow to Washington. He went on to describe what would happen in a nuclear war. If one 20-megaton bomb were to be detonated over the city of Manhattan, within the first .001 of a second everything would light up to 150 million degrees Fahrenheit which is 10 times hotter than the core of the sun. Miles from the point of impact everything would vaporize: buildings, steel, people, whatever. There would be a crater over a mile wide out of solid granite. Anything within 20 miles would burn. Fifty miles away anyone who would see the flash would be permanently blinded. Within the next .001 of a second after the first 150 million degrees were to happen, a windstorm of 1,000 miles an hour, followed by a shock wave, would blow everything down within a 10-15 mile radius and completely destroy it. Beyond that would occur the genetic deformity, the impossibility of getting pure drinking water, the potential damage to the ozone layer which shields us from the ultraviolet rays of the sun and other disasters which we probably don't even know about now.

His message emphasized that the Christian church needs to be saying and doing something to keep such a catastrophe from occurring. Whether we can or not we don't know, but if we do nothing we will certainly be condemned for it. When I heard his message, I thought about Paul.

The only answer to such madness is the gospel. I'm ashamed of the world I live in because the world is now come to this. Most of us are ashamed of the communities in which we live. We're ashamed of

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many people with whom we live.

But can we say as Paul did, "Of one thing I will never be ashamed. I will never be ashamed of the gospel?"

There is no other solution for this madness, for the guilt and the pain, the death that we all endure. When it comes to Paul's concern for the city of Rome and our concern for the city of Washington and our evangelistic needs, it used to be the case that everybody (except for pagans and nonbelievers, of whom there weren't many) was proud of the gospel. They sensed that they were guilty and they sensed that the gospel could meet those needs.

But in the last 50 years a shift has taken place. The general mood now in our society is not so much one of guilt but one of doubt. In an atmosphere of doubt the gospel does not have the kind of pride that it used to. Now the gospel must make a case for whether or not it ought to be something people believe in. People are ashamed of the gospel. They no longer believe it. As Gallup discovered 25 years ago, it is still true that only 1 out of 4 Americans can name any one of the four gospels.

How do people deal with their guilt now that they no longer believe the gospel? The guilt is now being put someplace else; it is projected away: My society is making me feel guilty and it shouldn't. My parents raised me and I'm feeling guilty about things I shouldn't. Or it is explained away. People are going to psychiatrists who are trying to help them deal with their feelings of guilt but never go after the source of the problem and get forgiveness into the experience; just get rid of the feeling.

The significance of this change for our communicating the gospel cannot be overestimated and I don't think that most Adventists have awakened to the fact that the change has happened. "Guilt is like tinder that blazes when the spark of emotion is applied to it; whereas doubt is like a rust which can only be removed by careful polishing." (Donald Lord Soper, "Donald Soper on Preaching to Doubtters," **The Methodist Recorder** (May 24, 1962), quoted in Hunter III, *The Contagious Congregation*, p. 94.)

A man I talked to recently about the needs of communicating the gospel told me that he feels that we tend to be much too impatient about getting to the questions of theology when we talk about the gospel. We need to be far more patient with people and start where they are with their living conditions and their experiences in life and move very slowly into the theology.

Most thoughtful people today are infected by this doubt and when they see the Jim Joneses of the world and see how gullible some people are who follow them, it just reinforces their ridicule and their contempt for the gospel. I must admit that when I watch some TV preachers and see some things that are going on in the Christian church I'm ashamed. I don't want people to identify me with those things. I want them to be sharp enough to discriminate between what those people are doing, saying and believing and what I am committed to and what I stand for. But it is difficult to get people to see the difference.

So we're all lumped together—we're fanatics, we're gullible, we're paranoid. When Adventists feed that speculation about ourselves We cut off our opportunities to be of service to people in preaching the gospel. Let's not see the end of the world in gas lines, for example. Let's not start talking that way unless we really know what we are talking about because when people hear that they think we are

crazy.

There is one thing that needs to be said and that is that doubt is not merely an intellectual problem. It is not simply that they have read somewhere all of the problems believing in the existence of a personal God so now they no longer believe in it. We're whole beings; we have feelings and emotions. It has been well demonstrated that at this point of believing the gospel, emotions are critical. In my opinion, Christ does not have a chance on a purely abstract level. If we're just going to argue about the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ on an abstract level, I don't think Christ has a chance with most people. There are a few who might respond but that is not where most people are affected and touched. Beliefs and feelings are intertwined. If you change my beliefs you change my feelings. If you change my feelings you affect my beliefs. You can't get around it. Beliefs tend to structure and control feelings but feelings energize beliefs and nobody responds to the gospel unless his feelings have been touched.

I have been impressed with the response of the crowds in Poland to the Pope's visit there. It is not just on a purely intellectual level, if you have seen the TV reports. It is not that the Pope is reading an encyclical filled with theological profundity and people are listening to this and getting excited. No, he is not touching them on the cognitive level, although he is making some very significant statements. This is the Pope who is singing into the microphone a little bit flat (popes aren't supposed to sing), he laughs, he cries *in public*, he holds little children in his arms. The Polish people, who are perhaps the most devout Catholics in the world, are responding. Those who are not believers in Poland who happen to be in the crowd cannot help but be moved and affected and caught up in the faith and vitality of what's taking place. Even those doubters will come to faith more quickly in that kind of experience and atmosphere than they will hearing a good argument.

The message that the Pope is preaching is being mediated through his jokes, his humor as well as his pathos. His message is alive. They understand what he says not just because they hear and comprehend words but because they can feel the depth of his commitment and passion for what he is saying.

That is why Jesus told stories. Stories have a way of doing that to us; they pull us in; they make us feel what's happening, not just think about what is happening. When you hear the story of the prodigal son you feel something and it is that feeling combined with beliefs (and always emotion must be service of reason and beliefs) that cause you to respond.

There is a second way that doubt is dispelled in an atmosphere like ours. It is through the story, the preaching or through the personal relationships people have, there is a sense that comes through that the gospel is addressing them personally where they are, not just addressing a whole group of people but them personally. I love to hear people say, "I felt like you were talking to *me* this morning." People have accused me of violating confidences in my sermons when I have used an illustration but it had nothing to do with them. I was thinking about somebody else somewhere else, but as I thought about it the situation did fit them. Or people have asked me how I heard about such and such and I hadn't heard about it. Or people have said, "What you said this morning was an answer to prayer." I love to hear that because unless the gospel speaks to people in that personal way they will not respond.

Obviously that is related to a key element in sharing the gospel. Not only must the gospel speak to me

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personally but somehow it must go through me personally to other people. God has given me a task. I will never forget the first time I read the first chapter of Jeremiah. I was only a teenager. In that chapter there is a record of Jeremiah's call. Jeremiah is trying to give God a hard time. He says, "Look, I don't want to be a prophet. I know my history. I know what happens to prophets. Everyone of them's been killed. They have to get up and speak in front of large audiences. They have to live lonely lives. They get everybody mad at them. I don't want anything to do with being a prophet!" God says, "I'm sorry, but this is my plan. Before I formed you in the womb I had this plan. I ordained you a prophet to the nations." And Jeremiah protests, "I can't speak. I can't handle it." And the Lord says to him, "Don't just say to me that you are a young man. Do not be afraid. I will give you the words to speak. I will be with you."

I don't know why that chapter hit me that way but I think the Holy Spirit had something to do with it. When I read those words I just felt an overwhelming conviction that those words were not just speaking to Jeremiah but were being reincarnated by speaking to me. I knew then that someday I would have to be standing here doing this. That's how strong it was.

It seems to me that every person who accepts the gospel in his life must feel that same kind of personal conviction or he can't possibly be, in any sense, a witness for what Christ has done. You must feel that deeply, not just intellectualize it. If a quiz were given to us, we could all answer correctly that Christians are supposed to go out and be witnesses but you don't feel it. You don't feel God speaking to you personally.

When we are proud of the gospel and feel this call personally and it has done something in our lives, then the forgiveness, the cleansing and the peace we need can be communicated with conviction to other people.

It is interesting that studies have shown that people who do doubt (and that's most people) are affected primarily by something that maybe a lot of us wouldn't think of. Dean Kelly, who wrote the book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, points out that two things seem to be very clear and outstanding as to why people respond to certain churches.

- (1) The churches that are growing make demands upon people for serious commitments.
- (2) Their advocates make great sacrifices for the cause that they believe in.

Most people are not sophisticated enough to distinguish between an Adventist, a Baptist, Moonie or Hare Krishna. They are just presented with a smorgasbord of beliefs set out on the table of the mass media; they are lined up in front of this tremendous buffet of religious beliefs and they are told to pick one. Most of them are not sophisticated enough to go through in a systematic way and analyze each system's beliefs and then come up with a conclusion. That is not the way that most people come to believe. What we have found is that people choose to believe the teachings that are backed up by sacrificing members. That is the primary reason for their decision. They are convinced that the person who has related the gospel to them really means business in his/her own life. It is not just a token thing.

The danger on the other side of that is that there are some people who are committed and who are

sacrificing but they go too far. That is to say that they present a "holier than thou" attitude. I'm not talking about the healthy Christian who goes to jail or who is martyred for his beliefs. I'm talking about the kind of Christian who makes it plain to every non-Christian he encounters (and sometimes to a lot of other Christians) that he is a little better, a little holier, than other people. When that happens people are turned off. Research has shown that the main reason they are turned off is that they can't identify with you. You're not human like the rest of us. You must not have the same needs or the same problems. You've got a halo instead of hair. When they can't identify with you they can't believe you.

There is another compliment people pay me once in a while—at least I think it's a compliment. They say, "You don't act like a minister." I think what they mean is: black suit, black tie, white shirt, hug the Bible and look serious all the time. What I think they are really saying is what Kelly and some other commentators have pointed out: That if you're holier than the rest of the people, you can't reach them. If you come across that differently then you're not a needy human being; you're something else that came from another planet, maybe heaven. This does not dispel their doubts; it only reinforces them.

If I were to pick out an age group in the church that has the biggest problem with doubt, with being ashamed of the gospel, I would have to say it's our young people as a group. I got into this last week in my sermon for the 8th grade graduates of Sligo Adventist School. I don't think it's any secret to us that the young Seventh-day Adventist tends to be ashamed of the gospel. He hardly wants anybody to know he believes it.

For some religion is synonymous with a lot of rules and regulations that they can't understand. For others it's lust, the fact that it isn't cool to look like you are dedicated to anything so old-fashioned as religion. To some they don't want to look holier than thou—that's the preacher's kid syndrome. Why if you're the son of a minister, you must be holy, just like if you're the son of a doctor, you must be healthy, or the son of a teacher who must be brilliant. It turns them off. I don't blame them. I don't want to come across to other people as being holier than they are. It's not true. If that's what comes across, then I am living a lie.

So this Carpenter from Nazareth, whose hands and feet were spiked to a tree for love of us, we're ashamed of him. I'm comforted to say that Paul had the same problem with young people, and he wrote about it in the second epistle to Timothy. He made a personal appeal to Timothy in the first chapter of the second letter and I would especially like for the young people to concentrate on what he says, because even the first century church was wrestling with this sense of shame that we are talking about:

...God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, and therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Timothy 1:7-12, RSV.)

May each of us be able to say that today.