

THE CHURCH MUST BE IN THE SOUP

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:13-16, RSV

My third year in college I decided to take a course just for the fun of it. I wanted something different that would also care for one of my requirements for graduation.

One of the required areas was applied arts. Since we had no auto mechanics or flying instruction at that time and since I already knew how to type, I decided to something a little crazy for those days—I took a course in cooking.

At the time I thought it would be limited to the laboratory—we would cook and then we would eat. I found out differently. One of the requirements was to cook for and host a formal dinner, setting the tables, etc. Anyway we made granola, casseroles, etc.

Then the day came to learn how to bake muffins. Being a man I was slower than the women in the class and I was getting nervous. As their muffins came out of the oven it was obvious that they had made some serious mistakes. None of the muffins were the right blend of firmness and moisture. They looked awful.

Finally my muffins were done. When I saw how firm they looked and how moist they felt, I was proud of myself; I even did a little bragging. With great anticipation and much salivating, I broke one open and buttered it. I took a big bite, chewed slowly and suddenly grimaced and spit it out in the sink.

Naturally the females in the lab went into hysteria. I went back over the recipe and discovered that instead of putting in a teaspoonful of salt I had put in a tablespoonful. What a difference it had made! It was inedible. I could not get over the fact that so little extra salt in a batch of muffins could make them unfit for human consumption.

It's a funny thing about salt: the moment it becomes very obvious in your food, its value is ruined. It is necessary for life; it is concentrated; pure salt never loses its flavor; it acts as a preservative; it is most often invisible. A little pinch of it goes a long, long way. When it becomes too obvious, however, it's awful!

In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is clear as to what he means by this phrase. Those who live the life of the Beatitudes are like salt in the earth. They are rare. They are powerful. But as they go out into the world, they must be careful the way they go. If they go too forcefully, too obviously, he seems to be saying, then they will ruin what they are trying to accomplish, what they are trying to flavor.

Several weeks ago my wife and I went out to dinner with another couple to a restaurant in Baltimore. One member of the other couple was not a Christian. As we were coming up to the entrance to the restaurant, a familiar sight and sound greeted us. It was a group of young people preaching earnestly; and several of them were mixing with the small crowd which had gathered to hear the old-time sermon. A fellow came up and handed me a tract and I said, "Save it for someone who needs it. I've read that and I believe it." "Are you a Christian, brother?" "Yes, I am," I said quietly. "Well, hallelujah! Praise the Lord!" People began turning around looking at us. I was embarrassed. I didn't want to be

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obtrusive about my faith at that point. The non-Christian who was with me said nothing, but in trying to put myself in his shoes, I could imagine the way it impacted on him. This kind of blatant pushiness turns many people off. They get the feeling that religion is being rammed down their throats.

In the next text where Jesus says you are the light of the world, he seems to be saying just the opposite. If there's one thing about light, it is that it is obvious. If you come into this sanctuary when all the lights are out and let one person light a match anywhere, you all see it. Light is useless if it is not obvious. Salt is useless if it is obvious. It is very interesting that he would use both of these images to try to say something to us about reaching out to the world. They are much in contrast.

Light and salt have some things in common. They are both designed to change the environment in which they are placed, not to have the environment change them. Once the light shines, you can increase the darkness all you want to, it makes no difference. The darkness cannot put out the light. Once the salt goes into the substance, the substance is changed and you can taste it.

They both seem to possess a dynamic quality which enables them to change the environment in which they are placed. Light is not the absence of darkness—darkness is the absence of light. One does not pour soup into salt; one pours salt into soup.

Jesus says, if the salt loses its taste, what good is it? If the light is put under a bushel, what good is it? That suggests to us that to the extent the church allows the world to come into it rather than pushing itself into the world, we lose both qualities which are described by the Beatitudes. We no longer can become the salt which Jesus wants. For example, in the Dead Sea, which is probably the saltiest body of water on earth, the salt is useless because it is totally mixed in with other minerals. Only when the salt is kept pure can it function.

If we would redeem the world, Jesus says, we have got to mix with it. We must be thrown into it. The church must be “in the soup.” It does not take much light or many grains of salt to do this.

While hermits don't make good evangelists for the gospel, I think the salt metaphor is warning us about making the gospel too obvious, too sensational. There is something about the church trying obvious ways to attract attention to itself that gives people the impression that what we are communicating to them is essentially an ego message. A humble witness can never be accused of attracting attention simply to itself.

As I read articles about television evangelism—the electronic church—most of the commentators in “secular” magazines accuse all television personalities of having a star complex and trying to create a kind of “fiefdom” of their own. Tens of millions of dollars, big institutions, glamour is associated with their evangelism. The minute this happens the world gets suspicious about the church and about those who are trying to be the salt of the earth.

What Jesus wants us to see in the metaphor of the salt is that we are to be in the midst of things but not to be necessarily in the center of things. It must be admitted that there are times when you can't help being in the center but when you self-consciously go after that kind of attention you destroy the witness of the gospel.

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The light metaphor is also telling us something which is that in our fear of being too obvious, let's not be so timid that nobody even knows we are around. God wants us to act in his name. He wants us to do heroic, courageous deeds for the sake of the gospel, not deeds which attempt to build us up, but deeds which call attention to the claims which Jesus Christ has upon the human race.

I must tell you that there is very often a kind of unintelligent timidity. Many of us are apologetic about speaking for our faith. We get "burned" by the salt. For example, I went to a restaurant a year ago with some friends who are very much influenced by the charismatic movement. In San Francisco we dined in a fashionable restaurant which was crowded at the time. [A member of the party] said, "Because we want to witness for the Lord, when we go out to eat we hold hands and say grace out loud." I said, "That's fine. I've done that myself in a few places." However I was unprepared for the way that the grace was going to be said. He spoke his prayer so loudly that everybody in that restaurant heard it. I heard the forks in that place stop on the plates. When that happens and I am so embarrassed, I am tempted to offer prayer while pretending that I have a headache or that I'm rubbing sleepy seeds out of my eyes. Too much salt tempts us to turn out the light!

We are in the minority in this world as Christians and very definitely a minority as Seventh-day Adventists. We feel insulated from the world, cut off by a high wall. If we are serious about our faith, we will speak somehow. Sometimes it will be in very subtle, quiet ways but other times when it is appropriate or when requested by other people, our speaking out will be vocal, public, unflinching.

If we think only in terms of numbers, which we have a tendency to do, we will be intimidated; but that's why Jesus used the salt and the light metaphors for witnessing. Isn't it ridiculous for a flashlight to say, "I don't want to go out into that great big darkness; I'm only a little light." Put that light on a lamp stand, Jesus says, and it will give light to the whole house. Isn't it silly for the salt to say, "There are just a few grains of us here. How can we change this great, big pot of soup? How can we make any impact?" This is a cursed way for the Christian to think. It always puts God's people in the role of having an inferiority complex. Numbers are not the point in the gospel. It is which group of people possess the dynamic of love, of grace, of forgiveness, of truth. I fall into it myself. I keep saying to myself, "How can we make an impact on a large city? How can we do anything here? We're so outnumbered." Think of the Christians in China—900,000,000 people and the Christians represent only a small percentage of that number. Jesus says, "Don't worry about that. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."

When we do take those words seriously and believe and act upon them it is amazing what can happen. Sometimes the amazing things that happen are not obvious but frequently they come to light. We will find that when we act in confidence and faith that the Lord is right when he speaks of the power of the salt.

I had an experience as a teenager that demonstrated this for me and I don't want ever to forget it. When Ron Halvorsen and I first became Adventists, we decided to hold some meetings in a storefront in Brooklyn. In our youthful enthusiasm we wanted to do something for our friends who were not Christians. They never went to church and a few of them would end up as "hit" men for the mob and they were then assassinated themselves.

We started holding meetings in this storefront, and somehow a reporter heard about it and thought

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there might be a story in what we were trying to do. He came to the fourth meeting. Ron and I were doing all of the preaching and the reporter prepared a story which had big headlines: "Teenage gangsters turn evangelists." Following that we were interviewed by Virginia Graham on *Food for Thought*, a TV program. This was heady stuff for 14-year-old kids.

The lesson that I learned from that was: Never underestimate what can happen if, with sincerity of heart, you try to do something to witness for your faith. Even if we hadn't gotten all of the publicity, we had a tremendous, experience. God was able to use that in a way that none of us could have anticipated.

We have to believe with all of our hearts that there are people out "there" hungry to hear the Word of God, hungry to hear a word of hope, of comfort, of assurance, of forgiveness. Sometimes we don't realize how hungry they are but just offer them a crumb and find out how much they are willing to eat and how much time they will take to do it.

This must be natural, comfortable and honest. One member of our church, as an experiment, decided to send announcements to the people with whom he works and invited them to join a noontime discussion group on religion. About 15-20 people came out. A lot of them were interested in having just a praise and prayer service and charismatic thing. Once they realized this was going to be a serious investigation of the Scriptures and a quiet time to discuss even what agnostics wanted to bring up, they left and the group pared down to a basic, solid number. It is amazing the kind of people who will respond to that kind of simple, quiet invitation. They don't feel like anyone is imposing on them. Nobody is being insulting. When we finally allow our salt to get out of the shaker, those kinds of things do happen.

We must be courageous, Jesus says, and believe that we are the salt of the earth. Those who walk with God, who have the assurance of his presence in their lives will not be afraid. They will know that they are God's salt in the soup of the world. I hope that is something each of us can experience now.