

A PLEA FOR PERSONAL EVANGELISM

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 14, 1971 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee.

We live in wonderful times, so far as progress in many fields is concerned. We live in wonderful times, so far as progress in the church is concerned. This is true in all three areas of the work of the church: Evangelism, Edification, and Benevolence. When we look back twenty, or thirty, or even forty years, as some of us can, we realize that tremendous strides have been made in the work of the Lord.

In no area has progress been more evident than in the area of evangelism. For example, many more missionaries have gone in recent years to both foreign and home mission fields. In addition, most congregations are far more active in doing personal work than they were a few short years ago. Many congregations have a very active and effective program of personal visitation. This is partially a result of a number of fine books that have been written in this field. The first of these was Otis Gatewood's *You Can Do Personal Work*, followed by other such outstanding books as Ivan Stewart's *From House To House*, Jack Exum's *The Glory of the Ordinary* and Fred Walker's *Following Through For Christ*. Also very helpful in pointing out the need for personal work, as well as in making many valuable suggestions as to how it should be done, is the relatively new *Personal Evangelism* magazine.

Other evidences of the progress that has been made are the many effective tools that have been developed. The Jule Miller film strips have been widely used and with great effect. Thousands of cottage meetings have been conducted and thousands of people have been led to understand and obey the gospel. Too, there has been the printing of many appealing tracts and other printed materials. Correspondence courses have been developed, and have been widely used throughout the land. The Herald of Truth radio and television programs, as well as World Radio, have also played a part in contacting people, and interesting them in further study of the scriptures. All of these are solid evidences of the concern that 20th century Christians have for the souls of others and also of their determination to do something about this need.

God's Fellow-Workers

At this point I would like to turn to the scriptures and read a few words from the pen of the apostle Paul, as he wrote to the Corinthian church: "I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: but each shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow-workers: ye are God's husbandry, God's building." (I Cor. 3:6-9). Notice especially the very high honor paid to those who carry the gospel message to others. Whether in pulpit or in private visitation, those who teach others about Christ are "God's fellow-workers."

In the same chapter the apostle Paul further said, "Know ye not that ye are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, and such are ye." (I Cor. 16-17). It is almost frightening to the Christian to realize how exalted a position he occupies by reason of the fact that he is a child of God. The Holy Spirit guided Paul to describe each Christian as a "temple of God." What responsibilities that places upon each one of us!

The apostle Paul further said in this same great chapter, "For all things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." (I Cor. 3:21-23). Because Christ belonged to God, the future belonged to him. Because we belong to Christ, the future belongs to us. What a thrilling realization it is to know that "all things are ours" because we are part of God's family and actively involved in the advancement of his Cause.

Motivation

What are the motives which cause people to engage in personal evangelism? There are many possible motivations, some of which are worthy, some unworthy. For example, a person might engage actively in personal work out of a feeling of sheer duty. If this is the only motivation, it is likely that his work will be dull and ineffective. It is also possible that one might engage in a visitation program simply because of the expectation of others. If the only motivation is that one has been asked to do it and does not feel free to say no, it is likely that his work will be less than enthusiastic. One might even be motivated by his own desire for self-advancement, or ego-satisfaction, for there are those who engage in many activities simply because they afford some opportunity to be noticed. Such motivation would be most unworthy.

Are there some right motives for engaging in personal work? The answer, of course, is a decided yes, and these motives can be easily stated. The most meaningful motivation for engaging in personal evangelism is a deep love for the Lord. Along with the love of the Lord, there must also be the love of the souls of men. If Christ means something in one's own life, he will be overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude, and will want to share his blessings with others. When these two motives are clearly understood and strongly felt, the Christian will have the desire to use his talents, his resources and his time in personal evangelism.

There are many hindrances which keep people from being effective personal workers. First, there is a very general preoccupation with other activities and other thoughts. No one is free of other obligations. Especially are those who have unusual talents and abilities involved in many other activities. Often these other involvements crowd out a personal involvement in this phase of the Lord's work. The only means of removing this hindrance is to realize the importance of talking with others about their souls, and the making of a decision on the basis of priorities and values.

A second hindrance is the very common feeling of inadequacy to do this work. Lack of confidence, however, can be overcome by study and preparation. We also need to realize that "I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me," as Paul expressed the matter. (Phil. 4:13). A third hindrance is the inactivity of other members of the Lord's family. When one must lead out on his own, he feels hesitant and timid. A fourth hindrance is a lack of faith that God will bless our efforts, and that others will heed the message which we carry. Finally, I would mention a lack of commitment and dedication to Christ as possibly the deepest hindrance of all. If we truly love the Lord and are deeply dedicated to his Cause, we will want to engage in personal work.

I. Love People

There are three simple things which are absolutely fundamental in doing personal work. First, there must be a deep, genuine love for people. The Old Testament word hesed and the New Testament word agape both suggest a kind of love that Christians must feel for others. It is a steadfast love, a concern for the good of all men, an unconditional love. It involves a willingness to love the unlovely. It involves loving those who may resent and mistreat us. It is the kind of love that God has for all men: the evil as well as the good. It is a dedication of one's heart and mind to do that which is good for all men.

Christ had such compassion. The story of the Good Samaritan shows how that, though people of high position may pass by on the other side, it is Christ's will that we stop and offer help to those who are in need. Christ's story of the Prodigal Son is another way in which he showed God's limitless love, even for those who are rebellious and wayward. Christ's love for men was also shown in the manner in which he healed many who were unfortunate. Remember, for example, his tender concern for the woman with the issue of blood who sought to touch his garment in the midst of a crowd. Remember also Christ's willingness to take time even for the children when they pressed about him. Still another example of his concern for people was his willingness to talk at some length with the woman by the well in Samaria. As a result of this conversation her life was channeled in a new direction, and through her the village from which she came was brought to hear Christ.

Perhaps no better way can be found to convey this primacy of love than to remember Christ's response to the young man who asked him concerning the greatest commandment of all. Jesus answered, "The first is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31). On another occasion Jesus said to his disciples, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34-35). The first prerequisite, then, for engaging in this vital work of bringing men to Christ is a love for their souls. Without this love there is little chance of success.

II. Know Their Needs

The second absolute requirement of effective personal work is a careful analysis of the needs of men. When one knocks upon a door, he is likely to find any one of several pressing needs. He must be sensitive to see the needs that are there and to determine ways in which the Christian can be of help. Among these great pressing needs of our day are such things as the fact that the American family is in a serious crisis. Many families are about to break up because of tension between husband and wife. Many other families are in turmoil because of tension between parents and children. Many young people are abandoning the basic concepts of family life. This crisis situation in many a home offers a great opportunity for Christian help.

Another of the needs is found in the emptiness with which secularism, materialism, and sensualism reward those who follow these paths. Among those whom the Christian may visit there are those who have tried these roads, only to find that they are dead-end streets. Man needs something better for which to love. There is also a general disillusionment in our day concerning such problems of society as war, pollution, a burgeoning welfare program and the like. Many people are discouraged as they look toward the future. As Christians, we can give them a new outlook on the future.

Then, there is the great loneliness that burdens so many millions of people in our land today. Especially is this true of those who are elderly or those who have been bereaved. There is a hunger for attention, for kindness, for concern, for encouragement and for love. There are also many whose lives have been warped by the great negative emotions of fear, guilt, hatred, frustration, and failure.

These needs are very deep needs and Christ has very real answers. Finally, there is the greatest need of all: the need for forgiveness, for salvation, and for purpose in one's life. As the Christian engages in personal work, he is wise to move slowly. Follow up an initial contact with many other contacts, until he knows the deep, basic needs of the one about whom he is concerned. Then, and only then, is

he in a position to bring the help that Christ can afford. Christ has the answer to every problem that human beings face. It is the Christian's responsibility to learn the need and then to supply Christ's answer.

III. Help Them

With a deep love for all men in our hearts, after a careful analysis of their needs, let us set out to help them. Specifically, let each one of us resolve to choose some individual, or family, whom we can know in depth and whom we can help. This undertaking will not be accomplished in a day, or a week, or a month, or even possibly within a year. It is so big an undertaking that it may require months or even years to build such ties of closeness and friendship that we will ultimately be able to bring them to know the Lord in the full sense. We cannot reach this great goal, however, without making a start. That start involves the choosing of someone and then, step-by-step, following through until the goal is achieved.

Conclusion

We Christians have something that the world needs and needs desperately. Christ gives purpose to man's life. When he becomes a Christian he has a new set of values by which to live, a new set of standards by which to be guided. He has a new destiny toward which to strive. He also has the assurance that his sins are forgiven, and that he need be burdened down no longer by feelings of guilt. His fears are taken away, because when he is a Christian everything will turn out all right. He can rise above the attitudes of hatred and animosity, so common in the world about him. He realizes his own importance, an eternal soul, worth more than the whole world. Where there was once despair there is a song in his heart. He is God's child and he is going ultimately to spend eternity with God.

What meaning there is in the final paragraph of the little book of James, "If any of you err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he who converteth a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins." (James 5:19-20). What joy there is, what satisfaction, in being a part of God's great family, the church, and of using one's self to help others know the joy of eternal salvation. What could possibly be more important than this?