

ALL HAT AND NO CATTLE

Evangelism and the Presbyterian Church

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Go down Highway 59 southwest from Houston. Six miles past Wharton and you'll come to Pierce Junction. Turn left. Across the way is a deteriorating ranch headquarters building. 'Shanghai' Pierce, who lived up to every stereotype of a Texas cattle baron, built it at the turn of the century. At the urging of the wife and his Scots ranch foreman, he also put up a clapboard chapel. Presbyterians used to conduct services there.

Once during a protracted meeting there the visiting preacher became quite agitated. The chapel builder hadn't come a single time. Seeing 'Shanghai'--all six feet four inches of him--striding along the board sidewalk, the preacher gathered courage for a confrontation. Stepping forward he pointed toward the little chapel. "Mr. Pierce," he pressed, "do you belong to that church?" The conversation is reported to have ended as quickly as it began. "Hell no, preacher, that church belongs to me!"

I. Our Program vs. God's Mission

Ministers in central Texas who speak loosely of "my church" do it only once if David Currie (The Presbyterian Outlook prayer writer) is in earshot. How well I remember! "It's our Lord's church; never forget it." Yet the proprietary sense dies slowly. Members easily see the congregation as their church; after all they built it, financed it, maintain it, and pay the preacher. For our part, we ministers approach our people with our program--based on our preferences, prejudices and parochialisms. Thus it is that the claims of God's total mission for his church are seldom preached or promoted. The 1978 Mission Consultation of the Presbyterian Church stands as a clear challenge to all of us who would limit our ministry to our program in our church.

Taken as a whole the Mission Consultation Report emphasizes three facets of God's one mission in the world through its church: 1) Proclamation/evangelism; 2) Compassion/social service, and 3) Justice/societal change.

According to the document, these are to be carried forward in partnership with others, with a spirit of reconciliation and undergirded by strong programs of education.

In churches I know and the Presbytery which I serve, God's mission has been preempted by our program. Our program focuses on the care and maintenance of the congregation and its members. To test this in your congregation, estimate quickly the per capita of members and money devoted to internal caring and serving; compare that to the number and amount directed to those outside your church in one or more of the three aspects of mission above. Do comments in recent literature describe your congregation--"preoccupation with church business," "concentration on serving the denomination," "narcissism in the churches," "altogether scandalous introversions of religious energy"?

Our program at best gives primary emphasis to one aspect of the total mission. A 1975 ecumenical poll of mainline ministers showed that they spend less time on issues of social justice and seeking new members than any other activity. My estimate of time and money spent by our congregations on the three facets of mission would be as follows: 1) Evangelism, 0-2%; 2) Social Service, 2-15%, and 3) Social action, 0-2%. Over the past twenty years, American congregations generally have come to a new and healthy stress on the mission of compassion/social service here at home as well as overseas. Meanwhile we neglect other parts of mission.

This means that we respond to the needs of persons in a limited way. While healing, feeding, and clothing persons is not insignificant, we are more often than not leaving off our agenda the mission of evangelism and societal change which address the distinctly human needs for dignity, opportunity, belonging, and a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose.

Except for limited social service outreach our programs are restricted to caring for our people in our congregation. The argument here is not that the maintenance and care of church members is misguided; to the contrary, it is essential and a necessary foundation upon which to build a missionary congregation. But God's mission is larger than our program and is a challenge to turn from ourselves to the world.

Our task now is to look in some detail at evangelism--one neglected aspect of God's total mission. (Elsewhere in this issue my fellow Brazos Presbyter Walter Davis examines the other dimension of God's mission generally ignored by our Presbyterian congregations--justice/societal change).

II. "All Hat and No Cattle"

Evangelism is one part of the total mission of the church. Its goal is that persons repent, trust Christ and follow him as obedient disciples in church and world.

God himself is the Evangelist. The church is called to be co-worker with him; some persons may have a special gift for evangelism (Ephesians 4:11). Evangelistic activity may be directed toward:

- a. the unevangelized within the church,
- b. our kind of people outside the congregation,
- c. persons socially and culturally somewhat different from us, and
- d. those further removed from us by language, culture, and nationality.

Between 1880 and 1960 evangelism was a high mission priority in the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The following activities characterized that commitment:

Planting new churches--Presbytery evangelists, home mission superintendents, church extension workers.

Chapels and outposts--Session outreach to nearby communities.

Revival Meetings--Preachers holding special services and seeking decisions for Christ.

Visitation evangelism--lay persons visiting two by two in homes, recruiting church members (1930-1960).

Sunday Schools--teachers inviting, educating, and evangelizing.

The last two decades have not seen any change in the official teachings of the church on the work of evangelization. In fact, significant new affirmations have been made. The following may be taken as formal policy of the PCUS on

evangelism.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, X, 4: "Christ hath commissioned his church to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. All believers are, therefore, under obligation . . . to contribute by their prayers, gifts, and personal efforts, to the extension of the kingdom of Christ . . ."

The Directory for the Worship and Work of the Church, II, 217-1: "Evangelization is the primary and urgent task of the Church. All mankind is to be called to believe in Christ as savior, to repent and to obey Christ as Lord of all . . ."

A Declaration of Faith, VIII, 2: "We testify that God is at work here and now when people obey Christ's commission . . . We believe that, God sends us to tell all nations that Christ calls everyone to repentance and faith . . ."

One Mission Under God--Report of the Mission Consultation. Preface and I: "We reaffirm that the primary mission of the church is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ . . . As the human family continues to multiply so does the number of those to whom we have the joy of bringing the good news of salvation . . . In partnership with our fellow Christians we are called to seek and use every opportunity to take the gospel to every place."

Presbyterian people consistently echo such sentiments. Constituency surveys conducted during the 1970s at all court levels give evangelism a priority position of 1, 2, or 3 on all lists.

The last two decades suggest that Presbyterians are phasing out of the work of evangelism:

Sessions--Chapels, outposts, revivals, visitation, church school outreach have been dropped and few fresh approaches to sharing the gospel have been introduced.

Presbyteries--New church development was virtually non-existent for ten years. Presbyteries generally have elaborate structure and staff for nurture of church members, but few have staff or even committees to support and advance the work of evangelism.

General Assembly--The PCUS Mission Board in Atlanta has one staff person with limited money. For the GAMB evangelization is clearly not "the primary and urgent task" nor "the goal of all its work" (BOCO 217-1-2). Its newly drawn mission direction statements for proclamation/evangelism lack specificity and hold small promise of fresh advance.

The conclusion is inescapable. When it comes to evangelism, Presbyterians are as they say in Texas, "all hat and no cattle." Our rhetoric is presumptuous; the reality is pathetic.

III. The Distinctive Presbyterian Contribution: Restraint

After lecturing at Austin Seminary, one student insisted that I identify "the distinctive Presbyterian contribution to evangelism." Twice I passed. Finally, Henry

Quinius, former professor there, came to the rescue. From the rear in a stage whisper, he told all in one word--RESTRAINT.

"Restraint," "reluctance," "reticence," "reserve," "resistance," "recalcitrance." Somewhere along that spectrum you'll find the large majority of American Presbyterians. Why is this the case? There is no simple answer. The reasons are diverse--historical, theological, institutional, sociological, psychological, and personal.

Historical--In American church history it is easy to note times of theological and church rigidity followed by periods of spontaneous refreshment and renewal. Efforts have been made to guarantee and repeat these "revivals" by institutionalizing some of the methods and thought associated with them. We call this tendency "revivalism"; it is very much a reality in American church life today. Billy Graham, Campus Crusade, Evangelism Explosion, and numerous denominations operate with this ideology.

Open a conversation about evangelism in any Presbyterian church, and you will discover that most think of evangelism and revivalism as synonyms. Further, a number in every group make it very clear that if being concerned about evangelism means using the style and content of revivalism, they will have no part of it. I would estimate that 10 to 20% of Presbyterian church members joined precisely to separate themselves from that part of their personal history and that stream of American church life. Check around in your own church on this.

Theological--Major theologians of the last half century properly made war on revivalism with its substructure of individualism, pietism, and moralism. Unfortunately this 'tearing down' now largely successful among Presbyterian ministers has not been matched by equal energy devoted to 'building up' a proper understanding of evangelism.

Students continue emerging from our theological schools with a lack of certainty about the missionary and evangelistic calling of the church. They know what they are against in evangelism, but not what they are for. They can criticize others but are not equipped or motivated to think and act in a biblical and Reformed way in regard to evangelism. Given this theological vacuum, it is not surprising that more and more members and ministers are being drawn back into an evangelism undergirded with ideologies of fundamentalism and revivalism.

Institutional--There are over 300,000 Protestant congregations in the USA. They average about 250 members. Integral members report that their congregation is like an extended family--supporting and caring for them and theirs from birth to death. Further, they find in them significant belonging, positions of esteem, and opportunities to serve.

When integral members are asked about reaching out to invite others into their church, a regular response is "our church is large enough." For these persons inviting and including new persons is not unlike adopting a new member of a family. It is a decision to share love, influence and power--or put negatively, it is to risk losing one's own place in a settled system. This can be overdrawn, but such factors do operate in discouraging a true openness to letting outsiders in.

Another institutional deterrent to evangelism is found in member expectations of their pastoral leader. They want their needs met. They give the preacher negative strokes if they aren't, and positive if they are. The pressure on the pastor in all congregations is to take care of his own. Relatively little pressure is on for evangelism or justice concerns which deal with persons outside and unknown to the

members. No wonder ministers give less time to new member visiting and social issues than to other matters.

Sociological--My grandfather, E. E. Hendrick, was educated and had his first pastorate in Texas. Then after twenty years as a traveling evangelist for the Presbyterian Church USA he settled down in West Tennessee. One of my father's vivid memories is of "Papa" telling about efforts at evangelistic outreach in Milan. He began going door to door and even went visiting up on Second Street. At that point he was discreetly advised to curb his zeal. "They're not our kind of people." (Wouldn't a survey reveal that every Protestant pastor has been so counseled at least once in his ministry?)

Protestant congregations tend to be made up of persons who are all relatively alike in race, income, education, etc. When reaching out to the community is discussed, a deep suspicion lurks in many minds that such activity will alter the social class composition of their church. Serious efforts to share the gospel with all or many persons has potentially radical implications--it may, if successful, undermine in-group cohesiveness or even alter the social position of people and congregations in the community.

Psychological--Over the past half century psychology has had an immense impact on the practice of ministry. As a result ministers and laypersons have become increasingly sensitive to the feelings and needs of people around them. This coupled with the high regard and respect for persons our church teaches makes imperialistic and indoctrinative approaches to evangelism repugnant. If evangelism means trampling on the sensibilities of others--buttonholing, cajoling, meetings, pushiness--we will have no part of it. Given our stereotypes, we actually think evangelism and that type of behavior go together.

Personal--If we assume that evangelism means sharing our faith or speaking to another person about the good news, our deep inside reaction is one of insecurity. We don't feel sure of where to begin such a conversation or what to say once under way. We wonder about the appropriateness of intruding on another person with religious talk--as important as our own faith may be to us.

Beyond this anxiety there may be a deeper problem. If we are to tell good news, we must know good news; if we have no or little faith, it's hard to share faith. The empirical reality of every church is that there are--as pointed out long ago--unconverted persons in pulpit and pew. Such persons will inevitably put on the brakes when it comes to evangelism.

Presbyterian "restraint" in evangelism is buttressed from many sides. It is not the fault of seminaries, national boards, pastors, or presbytery executives. It is a system-wide malaise. All of us are part of the problem; all of us can do something about it.

Earlier this year I founded and am now the "beloved leader" of the Presbyterian Institute for Evangelism and Church Development. The aim is to remove during the 1980s as many of the restraints on evangelism as possible. At the end of the decade we hope to have made a modest contribution, along with persons like yourself, to the discovery of a vital evangelism to which Presbyterians in North America will commit large resources of time, energy and money. I resist here the temptation to share the comprehensive strategy this entails. Instead, in an effort to move a few steps toward this large goal, let me offer a few thoughts about the ministerial conscience and the climate of your congregation.

IV. Conscience and Evangelism

What is needed is a positive conscience about evangelism. A positive conscience is the result of voluntarily accepting a set of beliefs and behaviors; being freely chosen they will be cheerfully and rationally pursued. If you want to make a solid contribution to evangelism, you need a profound and deep conviction that sharing the gospel is a matter of urgent importance.

My own positive conscience on this subject emerged over an extended period in the early 1970s. As pastor in downtown Beaumont, Texas, I was immersed in social outreach ministries. My congregation was declining in membership. For reasons still unclear an invitation came to deliver the 1973 Settles Lectures on mission and evangelism at Austin Seminary. Just at that time I was granted leave to accept a Merrill Fellowship for a semester at Harvard Divinity School. There, under the tutelage of Dr. James Fowler, I began afresh to sort out my thinking on evangelism. The result surprised me. From the ecumenical theology and developmental psychology in which I was immersed, I first clarified and then convinced myself that evangelism was at the very core of God's purpose for the church and the human family. A year or so after the lectures were delivered, the PCUS denominational Council on Evangelism--E. T. Thompson, Dick Hardie, Bob Henderson, and others--asked me to write Opening the Door of Faith as a study book for church leaders. Out of this entire process of intellectual and personal wrestling, a compellingly positive conscience grew in my psyche. Its emergence did not diminish my commitment to social ministry but properly supplemented it.

The point is this: When my head was straight on evangelism, then my heart's commitment could follow; now having set my hand to the evangelism plow, I'm not about to turn back because I've come to intellectual clarity and deep conviction about it. This head, heart, hand trilogy is important. Not everyone will work through it in the same sequence, but my own hunch is that confusion in the head is the first hurdle that most Presbyterian preachers need to jump. Until our intellectual--theological--problems are worked through, our commitment and action will stay at a low level.

Here are some thoughts on moving yourself toward a positive conscience:

Put yourself in a position where you have to think about evangelism.--Organize a ministers' study group, teach adult classes, sign up for a Presbytery evangelism committee, preach several sermons, write editorials for your newsletter, etc. Take continuing education courses. Map out a schedule for a year that has continuous opportunities for you to contribute and discuss what you are learning.

Search out the strongest writers on transmitting Christian faith to others.--Stick to mainliners. Secure books by Al Krass, Orlando Costas, Gabriel Fackre, Ellis Nelson. Search the materials of Barth, Brunner, the Niehurs, Tillich, Moltmann, Pannenberg to see what they have to say about the church's evangelistic calling. Avoid the neo-evangelicals in the field; evangelism that will motivate the majority of Presbyterians will be grown in the garden of ecumenical not fundamentalist theology. Developing a positive conscience about evangelism will be a several-year process. Chart your own path. Stay on it until the light dawns.

V. Climate and Evangelism

St. Philip Presbyterian Church is located in the Galleria area of Houston. The pastor of this 1,000 member church, Samuel W. T. Lanham, III, recently developed a positive conscience on evangelism. To help thirty key leaders move in the same direction, he scheduled an eight-hour four-week workshop on evangelism last Fall.

St. Philip Church has a climate of opinion which is quite favorable to social ministry. In our discussions there, it came out that this was not always so; it is a product of the last ten to fifteen years. Some remembered how the change came. The former pastor had taken a leadership stance from the pulpit, prayers and hymns reinforced the sermons, adult classes studied social issues, budget folk evaluated possible service projects, members visited and worked in areas where church contributions were sent.

The thirty leaders in the evangelism workshop evidenced all of the "restraints" typical of Presbyterians. They predicted that most of the congregation shared their hesitancy. But much of this was overcome as the workshop went on. We searched for and found faith and good news in the Bible, ourselves, and St. Philip Church. We identified persons who were to us a source of sadness because as far as we could tell they were without the gospel. We remembered how participating in St. Philip Church boosted our own faith, gave us hope and inspired us to love. Before it was over the group really wanted to open up and reach out so that more and more people could come to know the good things of Christ in the community of St. Philip.

I shared a few methods with them--especially Richard Armstrong's new book on Service Evangelism. They have begun some programs, but their fundamental decision is to work initially to create a church-wide climate favorable to evangelism. This is being undertaken as a several year process by a fifty member task force! No one wants to displace the positive commitment of St. Philip Church to social ministry; however, they do want an equally strong emphasis on evangelism.

VI. Conclusion

God is calling his church to one mission with three aspects: 1) Proclamation/evangelism; 2) Compassion/social service, and 3) Justice/societal change.

In a remarkable fashion these imperatives correspond to the needs of persons. Societal change responds to the desire for self-determination, opportunity and dignity. Social service speaks to the need of all people for food, shelter, and security. Evangelism relates to human yearnings for ultimate meaning, a sense of purpose and significant belonging.

Resistance to God's mission is great and system wide. However, by seeking to re-educate our own consciences and by striving to create a congregational climate open to the world, we can begin where we are to turn the church inside out. God and many colleagues will make common cause with us.

Out this way we know all about "kickers" and drugstore cowboys--suited up for all the world as if they were into ranching and cattle--big hat, boots and all. When it comes to evangelism, too often Presbyterians are all "duded out" with big talk. Surely the time has come to move from pretence to the real thing.