

FUNCTIONAL FELLOWSHIP FOR EVANGELISM

Without seeking to minimize the aspect of "individualism" in respect to the experience of salvation, we approach the challenge of evangelism at this time from the angle of the "corporate" responsibility of the church. We need not take the time here to defend the assertion that evangelism is the responsibility of every congregation of believers wherever and whenever it exists. Our task is to think together about the "function" of a body of believers as it concerns the outreach into the world for the purpose of drawing people to Christ and into fellowship one with another.

The term "functional fellowship" appears to be well-chosen, for its stress is upon the complementary aspects of koinonia and action, upon togetherness and purpose, upon recognition of one another as fellow-members and as fellow-servants. This is, indeed, a true representation of the teaching of the New Testament concerning the life and movement of the church in this world.

What are we referring to when we speak of the function of the church? In its general sense, "function" has reference to the activities or operations expected of a person, organism or organization by virtue of its nature, structure, or status. Thus we may be speaking of the function of an organ of the body, or to something in nature (sun, stars), or to the fine arts (poetry, painting, music), or to anything that serves a definite purpose in the performance of a certain kind of work.

When we speak of the activity or operation of an organization we have reference to the way it does what is expected, or the manner in which it responds to external influences or circumstances. A study of the church in operation includes a survey of the activities of its committees, the pattern of its services, the amount of its annual donations. To ask whether the

church is at work is simply to be concerned with the effectiveness of the activities and with the involvement of all concerned.

When we speak of the "function" of the church the implication is clear that the body of believers is accomplishing the end for which it is designed and for which it exists. In any evaluation of the contemporary church it must therefore be asked whether a fellowship, or the practice of fellowship, actually fulfills the end for which it was conceived in the mind of God-- the end clearly implied in the history of the original church.

According to the Acts of the Apostles, the church has a two-fold purpose: first, mutual benefit in the fellowship; second, evangelization. That is, the function must include the internal values, apart from any immediate responsibility to those "without." The second part of the function must include the purposes related to those outside of the church. In addition to doing good to all men (Gal. 6:10), there is the task of evangelization-- preaching the gospel, carrying a witness, being salt and light. If one or both of these aspects are not present the fellowship is not functioning, regardless of the activity that is being carried on.

The question that now demands an answer is this: "What specific functions belong to the nature of the fellowship which experiences an outreach in evangelism?"

I. THE FELLOWSHIP FUNCTIONING IN PREPARATION FOR EVANGELISM

A. The Function of Preaching the Word.

"The concrete function of the empirical church is the divine service of preaching the Word and of administering the sacraments."¹ It is Bonhoeffer who makes this assertion in keeping with the theology of the Luthern Church, and others have echoed this Reformation truth, at least

as it relates to preaching. It may not be out of order for us to ask today, in a time of loud criticism of preaching and preachers, whether the time has not come for this concept to be revived in our congregations. The functioning fellowship is the membership gathered around the Word of God not for back-talk, or disputation, but to hear, consider, and test, but never to disregard the voice of God in the Word.

Preaching is a function of the Church divinely ordained for the welfare of the people within the membership. It is the means whereby Christians are exhorted to do the will of God, not only as individual parts of the body, but as a unified organism. True, there are isolated souls - invalids, the aged, the displaced - for whom there must be a meeting with God on individual terms, but this is not the pattern for the majority of believers. Nor is the coming into the fellowship to be thought of as an occasion for the individual Christian to hear the Word of God for himself apart from his relationship to other believers. For some, indeed, the congregation is seen in terms of its value for the individual; in a properly functioning fellowship, however, the entire body sees itself as being "under" the Word not only for personal benefit but, much more, for the strengthening of the whole body. From this faithful preaching must come a deepened sense of the love to Jesus, a concern to be truly under the Lordship of Christ, as well as a clarification of the faith of the Church.

Also, there must come an understanding of the significance of the present moment in the purpose of God. One of these contemporary issues is the rise of a "new paganism" with its outspoken magazines and audacious enunciation of unbiblical doctrines.² It is in this type of society that the Gospel is to be spoken, but we must not be frightened, for a battle with

evil is inevitable. Evangelism is not an encounter with passive souls; it is the proclamation in the face of militant ideologies. For this encounter with the world, the clear proclamation of the whole counsel of God is imperative.

Where the fellowship functions according to the pattern ordained by the Spirit, the activity of proclamation to and in the congregation will go beyond the "letter" of the word to "spirit and life" (John 6:63). We need to be reminded that the cold orthodoxy in the post-reformation history of the Church affected the Memnonite constituency as well. Indeed, the Word as words was spoken, but it was like fuel without fire, as clouds without rain. Only when the Spirit of God stirs and engages, disturbs and challenges the fellowship, can there be the kind of function which produces blessing for those who need to hear and witness.

B. The Function of Teaching

Another fruit of attending to the Word in the congregation is the achievement of a consensus of evangelical truth and a concomitant opposition to false teaching. It was so in the early churches, for, as J.B. Philipps points out, it is not true that "all roads of the human spirit, however divergent, eventually lead home to Celestial Benevolence."³

In sociological terms, the function of the fellowship involves the assembly of believers which has an intention in time and space in that it is a bearer of an historical tradition. Now this tradition is not to be interpreted as being the carrying forward of some vague heritage. In as far as the Church has been built upon the Word of God and has sought to express this faith in its creeds and confessions, the Christian community rests solidly upon the fact of faith and the Word. As Elton Trueblood notes:

"It is time to challenge the confident talk about the radical discontinuity between our generation and all preceding ones."⁴ The evangelical movement is not something new; in fact, the spirit of evangelical Protestantism is as old as Christianity.⁵

Subjection to divine truth as given in the Word, as proclaimed for the pulpit, and as taught faithfully in the Church School, is achieved in the gathering of the fellowship. Without such knowledge, there cannot be a proclamation of a pure message, nor the deepened understanding of the faith which is proclaimed, though individuals here and there may find the truth and witness it on their own.

The kind of tolerance which allows portrayal of an "unorthodox Christ" or a "situational ethic" or a "liberal optimism" would never have received the approval of the apostles, nor should it have our support today. Only from commitment to truth can flow zeal for transmission of truth; only from fellowship with Christ can there precede a desire that others may have fellowship with that same Christ. With the apostle John we say, though not in the primary sense: "The life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness ... That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:2,3). Concerning the fellowship functioning in respect to truth John declares: "But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things ... Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning" (1 John 2:20,24).

C. The Function of "Life"

In his "Introduction" to Letters to Young Churches, J. B. Philipps points out the "essential spiritual core"⁶ of the primitive church as evidenced in the apostolic writings. Here is vitality - a living quality.

The fellowship of the early churches at their best was characterized by a deep awareness of life in God in contrast to the past state of being dead in trespasses and sins. It is clear, therefore, that our twentieth century church cannot hope to succeed in its mission unless it recreates that spirit of being alive in Christ, and a conviction of the continuing need of walking in newness of life (Rom. 6). "Such were some of you," said Paul to the Corinthians in contrasting their state with that of the heathen world around them, "but now you are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). An effective ministry to those "without" is inconceivable apart from this.

The vitality of life was further based upon the reasonable awareness of the importance of the other life. This present life, as the apostles and their followers saw it, is only an incident; the consummation is the main event. The world passes away, but he that does the will of God abides forever. The fellowship is therefore the locus of training not primarily for this world, but for the next. The believer is not to be deceived by or drawn into the ungodly world, but rather is to be strong to withstand the wiles of the devil. If today our emphasis is on being this - worldly and identifying ourselves with the "publicans and sinners" until the professing saint looks and acts like a sinner, we may have reason to lament the malfunctioning of our fellowship which soothes us in our backslidings, encourages rationalizations about our way of life, and ultimately causes us to become the house of hypocrites.

In the words of Trueblood, "The Gospel must seek to penetrate the world and all of its parts, but it cannot do so unless there is a sense in

which it is in contrast to the world."⁷ Let there be, therefore, a "style of life,"⁸ which will make the Christian practice distinguishable in a pagan world, in a time when few Christians stand out in any marked way. Paul would chide us today: "Are ye not carnal and walk as men?" (1 Cor. 3:3). Life and death are not the same; Church and world are not synonymous; the interaction within a living fellowship is different from the proximity of the dead in mere religiosity. How can the dead raise the dead anymore than the blind can lead the blind?

A thorough study of the historical setting of the New Testament Church shows that our present-day problems are not worse than the slavery, sexual immorality and cruelty of the early days of this Christian era. In that world the Church was triumphant. Let us not lament that our days are the "dregs of the ages" as though that is the cause of our ineffectiveness. Their faith can be our faith; their fire, our fire; their courage, our courage; their joy in service, our joy; their life, our life. The functional fellowship of the days of the "Acts" was a real experience, not a performance; not a code of practice, but "the invasion of their lives by a new quality of life altogether."⁹ This observation is confirmed by an expositor of a past generation who writes concerning the New Testament Church: "Such an organism, exercising its functions on the earth, is a manifestation so new that the sight of it must be a powerful means of bringing the world to faith in Him from whom it proceeds."¹⁰ As the living body of Christ, the Church is not only an aggregate of new creatures, but is itself a new creation in the midst of the old, fallen, dead world. The Gospel is therefore "in" the Church before it proceeds "from" the Church; the life first pulsates through the body before it manifests itself in the action

of the body as it serves others. With puzzled admiration the city of Jerusalem looked upon the Church in its midst, and seeing the new life, fear came upon every soul. "The people magnified them, and believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" (Acts 5:13,14).

The function of life is to reproduce. As the vine with its branches brings forth fruit, so Christians produce Christians. Such reproduction is impossible where spiritual life has dropped to a low ebb. The functioning fellowship has as its continuing burden the revival of that which is dying in response to the exhortation of the Lord of the churches: "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found thy works perfect before God" (Rev. 3:2). In a similar vein Paul exhorts: "And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed" (Rom. 13:11). On the basis of such divine words, it is urgent that the contemporary Church be moved upon by the Spirit of God in revival experiences. Unless we have been outside the circle of God's working entirely, we certainly can bring to mind many illustrations of the wonderful effects of such renewal. We are speaking not of the conversion of church members, but the reviving of those who are children of God, but who today are asleep and dying.

D. The Function of Love.

In a broad sense we have reference now to the spiritual priesthood of believers. "But ye are a chosen generation," writes Peter, "a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Peter 2:9). Although the regular and public performances of all

spiritual functions is entrusted to ministers appointed for this purpose, the functions unrelated to public acts can be done continually by all believers in the spirit of genuine concern at home and in public life. It appears that a new emphasis upon this aspect of Christianity is part of most great revivals of spiritual life. At the dawning of Pietism in Germany, Philipp Spener wrote in his Pia Desideria:

Every Christian is bound not only to offer himself and what he has, his prayer, thanksgiving, good works, alms, etc., but also industriously to study in the Word of the Lord, with the grace that is given him to teach others, especially those under his own roof, to chastise, exhort, convert, and edify them, to observe their life, pray for all, and insofar as possible be concerned about their salvation.¹¹

In Trueblood's contemporary language, the Church is "a fellowship of consciously inadequate persons who gather because they are weak, and scatter to serve because their unity with one another and with Christ has made them bold."¹²

When offended, Christians are to refrain from revenge; when prevailed upon, to give up their rights; when faced by their enemies, to seek to do good to them, thereby heaping coals of fire upon their heads. To the Thessalonian believers Paul wrote that this love which had been taught them by God, coupled with diligence in the execution of common daily duties, was the appropriate conduct in the presence of the people outside the fold of Christ (I Thess. 4:9, 12). The Potential of love is so amazing that Spener insists: "If we can therefore awaken a fervent love among our Christians, first toward one another and then toward all men (for these two brotherly affection and general love, must supplement each other according to II Peter 1:7), and put this love into practice, practically all that we desire will be accomplished."¹³

Few of us have explored the meaning and implications of Christ's intercessory prayer in relation to evangelism. According to John 17 unity among believers is solidly based upon and patterned after the love of the Father for His Son, Jesus, and this, in turn, leads to the expectation that the world may believe that the Father sent Jesus to save mankind. To the disciples in the upper room Jesus said: "This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you (John 15:12); to His Father Jesus prayed: "That they all may be one. . . that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:21). This function of love and unity is primary the structure of cooperative activity must serve to channel the expression of that love.

II. THE FELLOWSHIP FUNCTIONING IN THE PROGRAM OF EVANGELISM

It is true that often we are too introspective and preoccupied with the internal affairs of the Church to the point where the spiritual and social needs of society are being ignored. For that reason it is needful that the fellowship which is functioning for its own well-being looks outward and inquires concerning the meaning of the great commission for its time and place. The question may be phrased thus: "In what ways does the fellowship of believers function on behalf of a world lost in sin, dead in trespasses, away from God and without hope"?

A. Function of Prayer

It may seem out of order to place the function of prayer first, but is it not true that we can do nothing better than pray until we have prayed? Pray about what? First, we need to learn to pray with meaning and concern as Jesus taught: "Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in

heaven" (Mt. 6:9,10). What is the will of God? Peter answers: "The Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (1 Peter 3:9). Paul supports this: "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:3-5).

The point we need to make is that the evangelism procedure is more than a horizontal man to man involvement. It begins with the vertical relationship between God and responsive, believing individuals who feel with God for this world, and enter into dialog with God concerning lost sinners. These redeemed ones, supported by each other in the fellowship of believers, share the sense of urgency, and identify themselves with that revealed will of God. They find it impossible to shake the burden of a lost and perishing world. In their prayers the vision of the lost rises to haunt them. Both in private and in corporate prayers the blind stagger before them; the lame and the captives arouse their deepest sympathy. And so they pray, "Thy will, O God, must be done in earth. Souls must be saved; captives must be redeemed." From such prayers then proceed the appropriate overt actions of witness, help, and instruction, for not until the will of God is accomplished in the life of another can the believer be at rest.

A second aspect of intercessory prayer is the direct identification of the church with those specially called to make Christ known on the frontiers of the world. Paul praised the young Thessalonian believers that the word of the Lord had sounded out from them with the clarity of a trumpet into the surrounding territory (1 Thess. 1:8). The apostle then

adds a request concerning his own work of evangelism: "Brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you" (11 Thess. 3:1). Of the Colossians he asks: "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving; withal praying for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ" (Col. 4:2,3). Whether we understand the secret of prayer or not - that is, why God asks our cooperation by prayer in evangelism--the function of the Church demands that: "Supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men" (1 Tim. 2:1).

When Christians thus come together for prayer they are indirectly promoting union and love among themselves. "Never do they love one another so well as when they witness the outpouring of each other's heart in prayer. Their spirituality begets a feeling of confidence highly important to the prosperity of the Church."¹⁴

The right kind of prayer coming from the united soul of the fellowship moves God, not in the sense that His mind is changed or His will is altered, but in that He can properly bestow a blessing because His people are prepared to receive it. Charles G. Finney asserts: "Where there is a spirit of prayer, sinners must feel." Again, "When Christians pray in faith, the Spirit of God is poured out, and sinners are melted down and converted on the spot."¹⁵

A few years ago "Mennonite Life" carried a symposium on the question: How can Christian Community be Established in the City? Five men contributed to this discussion but not one of them mentioned the necessity of the function of prayer for evangelistic expansion. Many other aspects were

considered--relevance, involvement, house-gatherings,--but the idea that God moves upon men for salvation in answer to supplication and agonizing prayer appears to be unimportant or unknown.

B. Function of Evangelism Within The Congregation

It has been correctly observed that the functioning fellowship has four circles of influence: first, its own membership over whom it has the largest and most influence; second, those in the congregation, but not in the membership, who are prospects for conversion; third, those outside the congregation but living in the vicinity of the church and not necessarily aligned with any church; fourth, those in the environs beyond the church and in foreign lands for whom responsibility is felt in terms of evangelism.¹⁶

At this point it is in place to emphasize the responsibility within the first mentioned category--the evangelism of its own membership. It should not be necessary to be reminded of our heritage which teaches that only those who have received Christ in a personal way, with understanding and conviction of their lost condition, accompanied by faith in Christ who alone can save, are eligible to become members of the Christian fellowship. Yet, we may already be in that situation where we find it necessary to remedy the error of an unredeemed membership, in view of the possibility that we may be responsible for the false hopes entertained by those who are among us.

A second field of evangelism within the congregation concerns such families where only one of the parents is a believer. We are not left without guidance in such matters, for Peter exhorts the Christian women to proceed in a cautious, spiritual manner. The apostle, teaching the

congregations how to win an unsaved husband, writes: "In the same spirit you married women should adapt yourselves to your husbands, so that even if they do not obey the word of God they may be won to God without any word being spoken, simply by seeing the pure and reverent behavior of you, their wives. Your beauty should not be dependent on an elaborate coiffure, or on the wearing of jewellery or fine clothes, but on the inner personality--the unfading loveliness of a calm and gentle spirit, a thing very precious in the eyes of God. This was the secret of the beauty of the holy women of ancient times who trusted in God and were submissive to their husbands." (1 Peter 3:1-5 Phillips).

According to 1 Corinthians 7:14 (Phillips), Paul gives similar advice to believing mates: "For the unbelieving husband is, in a sense, consecrated by being joined to the person of his wife; the unbelieving wife is similarly "consecrated" by the Christian brother she has married. If this were not so then your children would bear the stains of paganism, whereas they are actually consecrated to God."

Recent thinking about evangelism is reviving this approach of "living" Christ before the unconverted. Stanley Mooneyham, coordinating director of the Congress of Evangelism held in Berlin in 1966, contributes the following critical observation:

Evangelism is simply sharing Christ with another person, and for this you do not need a theological degree. One reason laymen are not generally involved in evangelism is that they haven't mastered what we call our "techniques." IF I HAD MY WAY, I WOULD THROW OUT ALL THE BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS ON TECHNIQUES OF EVANGELISM... Because somehow we think that to be involved in evangelism you must master a system. But the Holy Spirit does not work through formulas and systems. The Holy Spirit works through men and women--through transformed lives. 17

The children of church families represent the third area of

evangelistic concern. In what way will the fellowship of believers function for their salvation? By virtue of the fact that they are in proximity to one or two believing parents, they have the advantage of learning the objective facts of redemption through Jesus Christ, as well as the manner in which they can appropriate the blessing of forgiveness. Seeing that our strongest emotions and most continuous solicitations focus on our children, the church needs to provide the most wholesome atmosphere for meaningful decisions. Although it is generally agreed among us that the home is the institution primarily responsible for the religious welfare of the child, there is sufficient evidence that the Church exerts a determinative supplementary influence. When parents are nurtured in their own faith, receive guidance as to ethical matters, accept instruction in the scriptural concepts of regeneration as it related to the young, then the fellowship is functioning well. When, in addition to this, opportunities are afforded for the child either to ask: "What must I do to be saved?", or to respond to a private or public evangelistic invitation, it is evident that evangelism is not merely a program to win underprivileged people in a mission or in the slum section of the city, but an effort which begins, though it does not end, with the salvation of our own flesh and blood.

The experiences of children such as Samuel bear out the fact that these young souls are "addressable" by God. "And the Lord called Samuel," writes ancient historian (1 Sam. 3:8). And children are "answerable", for young Samuel responded to the Lord: "Speak; for thy servant heareth." It should be noted that Eli instructed the child to answer in this way. Is this indoctrination? Is this the spoon-feeding which is criticized today? Some would tell us that the pliable will must not be forced; the

mind must not be given a set pattern. Let us face squarely our duty as a fellowship of believers of instilling the truth "line upon line, and precept upon precept" and in the crucial hour guide them in making the spiritual decisions which will determine their destiny on the side of Jesus Christ.

With our contemporary shift away from evangelistic services with its altar calls, we will need to provide other occasions where those who have received Jesus Christ in sincerity and simplicity in a personal counseling situation will give expression of their faith in the presence of other Christians. It is doubtful whether the mere recitation of a Bible verse is sufficient for such confession, for a genuine meeting with Christ in the salvation experience can be described, explained and shared in a fresh, meaningful, though elementary form. The basis for this concern is Romans 10:10: "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

We cannot leave this subject without raising the question about stirring up conviction of sin or sins within our children. All of us know from experience the deep emotions of sorrow and repentance accompanying evangelistic or revival services, for our personal faith may have been born in this kind of an environment, or we have seen the effects on others. No doubt some may feel that they were pressed to a profession of conversion by strong, emotional preaching and mournful pleading before they were mature enough to make a reasonable decision. Others look back to such a childhood experience with joy, knowing that the sense of sin was God-sent, and the Gospel of forgiveness was clearly presented, resulting in a bona fide commitment to Jesus Christ. Now is an opportune time to examine this matter again, lest our evident departure from older patterns of evangelism sets a new pattern which may neither be biblical nor fruitful.

There is one more group within the congregation that must somehow come under the prayerful influence of concerned members. I speak here of our young people. Many of them are recognized members of the fellowship, having made a verbal profession of their faith and testifying thereof in water baptism. But the prevalence of worldly practices, carnal attitudes, and obvious disinterest in things spiritual, lays upon us the burden of testing the work we have done leading to their supposed conversion, and building up their faith. True, we do not make the momentous spiritual decisions for them, but we do create an atmosphere in which they make judgments about their spiritual condition. Is our youth today led to believe that it is Christian in the fullest New Testament sense, when all the while the evidences of new life are scanty? Is it not time to function once more in intercessory prayer, biblical discipline, and conviction-saturated services, so that these young hearts may make their calling and election sure? (II Peter 1:10). In short, is the fellowship functioning for the salvation of our teen-age children?

C. Function of Reaching those "without"

In his first letter to the Thessalonian Christians Paul encouraged them to "walk honestly toward them that are without" (I Thess. 4:12). Who are these people "without"? As Phillips translates this section, the believers stand in a group over against "the world outside." As an apostle he was under a divine necessity to "speak the mystery of Christ" (Col. 4:3) to the world outside, and needed to have a "door of utterance" opened by God for this ministry. The majority of those outside the fold of Christ make no personal effort to expose themselves to the proclamation of the Gospel within the Church walls. How, then, shall the fellowship function on their behalf?

Some of these souls are on the periphery of church life; they are not inside, and yet they are not completely removed from the daily influence of Christians. Someone from the fellowship has the opportunity and responsibility to touch them in love and concern for Christ. A devoted public school teacher, for example, has access not only to children but also to non-christian parents, and as an "eye" of the body of Christ sees the undying, needy souls, and as a "mouth" speaks a word in season which sooner or later becomes the incorruptible seed by which souls are born again. Or it may be that factory worker who sees the young immigrant next to him in deep moral troubles, speaks a simple word of invitation to visit the service of his church, and rejoices when the proclamation of the Gospel penetrates the hungry heart resulting in another name being written into the book of life. These true-to-life incidents are but a small sample of what is actually taking place in many communities where a fellowship of believers functions normally. Obviously, these personal encounters with unsaved individuals must be supplemented by approaches to groups of unconverted people. In either case, the Church, filled with the magnificent obsession to do God's will, seeks to beseech those near its borders to be reconciled to God. We are speaking now of the fellowship in "dispersion" in as far as the secular occupation in the world demands immersion in an unredeemed world. Borne up by prayer, and assisted by words of encouragement and counsel, the Christian witness is the evangelist--a functioning member of a living body.

Such a ministry of evangelism is not only possible but mandatory for all who enter into the highways and byways of life. How can the Church function in an optimal way in isolation? How can it pass the cup of the water of life to thirsting souls whom it neglects or even refuses to touch

in the common daily life? As Mennonite Brethren constituencies we have in recent years confessed our deep sense of inadequacy and unreadiness to carry out our evangelistic responsibility to those of another cultural background. This is particularly true as rural folk move into the cities where the new pattern of life is not comfortable, somewhat like Saul's armour on young David. Perhaps the problem and challenge can be best presented by a quotation from the symposium mentioned above in which the question of outreach was discussed by leading Mennonite church workers. J. Lawrence Burkholder, in a review of the experiences of Mennonites in Boston, acknowledges that "Christian community" does not mean the gathering of "the lost sheep of the house of Menno," but the formation of a Church of believers from varied backgrounds.

According to Burkholder, the small congregation of professors and students in Boston found itself on a "high level Mennonite plateau" but without a clear vision or sense of mission. His confession may well be the expression of some of us who seemingly cannot find a solution to the problem of evangelization from a Mennonite Brethren base of operations:

Having come together on a basis provided by a common "background", we now need a "foreground," which will provide the basis for the reconstituting of our membership in dedication, discipline, mission and sacrifice. We need a vision of what God wants us to be in this situation. We believe in mission, but we have no clear mission. We have a sense of calling, but we have not heard the clear voice of the Lord. We believe in discipline, but we are not disciplined as a body. We are covenanted to Christ and to each other, but our covenant is not clearly defined. We believe in evangelism, but we have not a single convert so far to show. . . . We are men and women of faith, but we would have a hard time explaining what we believe to non-Christians of whom there are thousands in our university setting.¹⁸

While we search for a way in which to touch the world near us for Christ; while we discuss, analyze, compare, and lament our ineffectiveness, our neighbors and acquaintances slip into the darkness of eternity without

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in the common daily life? As Mennonite Brethren constituencies we have in recent years confessed our deep sense of inadequacy and unreadiness to carry out our evangelistic responsibility to those of another cultural background. This is particularly true as rural folk move into the cities where the new pattern of life is not comfortable, somewhat like Saul's armour on young David. Perhaps the problem and challenge can be best presented by a quotation from the symposium mentioned above in which the question of outreach was discussed by leading Mennonite church workers. J. Lawrence Burkholder, in a review of the experiences of Mennonites in Boston, acknowledges that "Christian community" does not mean the gathering of "the lost sheep of the house of Menno," but the formation of a Church of believers from varied backgrounds.

According to Burkholder, the small congregation of professors and students in Boston found itself on a "high level Mennonite plateau" but without a clear vision or sense of mission. His confession may well be the expression of some of us who seemingly cannot find a solution to the problem of evangelization from a Mennonite Brethren base of operations:

Having come together on a basis provided by a common "background", we now need a "foreground," which will provide the basis for the reconstituting of our membership in dedication, discipline, mission and sacrifice. We need a vision of what God wants us to be in this situation. We believe in mission, but we have no clear mission. We have a sense of calling, but we have not heard the clear voice of the Lord. We believe in discipline, but we are not disciplined as a body. We are covenanted to Christ and to each other, but our covenant is not clearly defined. We believe in evangelism, but we have not a single convert so far to show. . . . We are men and women of faith, but we would have a hard time explaining what we believe to non-Christians of whom there are thousands in our university setting.¹⁸

While we search for a way in which to touch the world near us for Christ; while we discuss, analyze, compare, and lament our ineffectiveness, our neighbors and acquaintances slip into the darkness of eternity without

Christ, without hope, and without God. Who of us will dare to strike out in a new path of biblical, Spirit-filled action. I say "new" path, because the "old" path of human calculations, of statistical comparisons, and of superficial conversions is proving to lead only to frustration and deep inner dissatisfaction for the Church. Have we forgotten that the book of "The Acts" follows upon the "Gospels"? Did not one author, Luke, write in his version of the life of Jesus Christ that the risen Saviour said: "Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:47-49)? Have we never read: "And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31)?

Where there is a common "background" in the fellowship of repentance, faith, and devotion to Jesus Christ, coupled with a "foreground" of the vision of a world in unbelief under the jurisdiction of the "god of this world" (II Cor. 4:4), the invitation extended to men to be reconciled to God will not be fruitless where the Spirit of God is allowed to fill, empower and direct the individual believer and the Church.

D. Function of Evangelistic Extension to those "beyond"

In a day when our concepts of "ministry" and "Gospel" are broadening, it would be inconsistent to continue thinking of evangelism in terms of our efforts only for those who are geographically and socially near to us. Paul speaks of his enlarged vision of the gospel-work when he tells the Corinthians that his purpose is "to preach the gospel in the regions beyond" them (II Cor. 10:16). In a similar passage in Romans we read: "I have fully

preached the gospel of Christ. Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, and where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation: but as it is written, To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand" (Rom. 15:19-21). Such a bold endeavor on Paul's part can not be successful, however, apart from the deep involvement of the Church, and so he requests their help in prayer: "I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me" (Rom. 15:30).

It is noteworthy that both in the early Anabaptist history and the rise of Pietism we see an unprecedented involvement in missions.¹⁹ Later, when new streams of spiritual life flowed into the Mennonite churches of Russia in the mid-nineteenth century, the efforts to win unregenerate Mennonites to Christ was coupled with joyful participation in an outreach to people beyond the borders of Russia.²⁰ Our own history as evangelically-minded Mennonites in America gives further illustration of this well-balanced religious program. It remains for us as a third or fourth generation of Mennonites in America to demonstrate before men and God our readiness and ability, through the Spirit, to carry out the two-fold function of winning souls at home and saving souls "beyond." This could well be the hour for soul-searching and repentance in the face of new interest in missionary endeavor. Pastors, where are our "home-grown" missionaries? Or do we have to import zealous Christians destined for some foreign service in order to feel good about being involved in missionary service? Experience and observation teaches that orthodox preaching and teaching does not automatically lead to concern about the extension of the kingdom of God. We know of churches where the last few decades are a glorious story of renewal, edifi-

cation, and involvement in the proclamation of the Gospel to those near at hand and those afar off. And where the spiritual level has dropped so low in our circles that renewal cannot take place from within, God has His means of stirring the Church from the outside--a visiting missionary, a gospel broadcast, a book or a compassionate lay worker from another denomination. Some of us are the fruit of such God-inspired invasions of our dead orthodoxies. Let God be praised that it happens. Yet, some of us fear the "pollution" of our streams, for that is the way we regard the presence of outsiders in our churches or denomination. Could Anabaptism have survived without the coming of Pietism; could Russian Mennonitism have done anything worthwhile for God without Moravian influence or Edward Wuest's soul-searching preaching and personal work? Whom will God send among us today for our good?

CONCLUSION

In the setting of this conference it may be expedient to complete this presentation without setting down a series of final judgments as to the challenges facing the larger body which we represent and the local fellowships from which we come. Instead, let us consider carefully and honestly the basic issue of "function" as it emerges from our fresh, unbiased immersion in the New Testament pattern of the Church, and let us promise before God that we--ministers and laymen--are ready to follow Jesus and submit to the Spirit in order that the "incendiary fellowship"²¹ or, as we are saying today, the "functioning fellowship" may be a reality in this generation. To that end may we come under the benediction of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians: "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may

know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead" (Eph. 1:17-20).

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Functional Fellowship for Evangelism

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio (London: Collins, 1963), p. 155.
- ²Elton Trueblood, The Incendiary Fellowship (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) p. 19.
- ³J.B. Phillips, Letters to Young Churches (New York: The Macmillan Company 1951), p. xiii.
- ⁴Trueblood, op. cit., p. 26.
- ⁵See a discussion of this thesis in High Kerr's Positive Protestantism (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963).
- ⁶Phillips, op. cit., p. xii.
- ⁷Trueblood, op. cit., p. 27.
- ⁸George Webber, The Congregation in Mission (New York: Abingdon Press, 196 p. 117.
- ⁹Phillips, op. cit., p. xiv.
- ¹⁰Frederick Louis Godet, Commentary on the Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, n.d.), II, p. 341.
- ¹¹Philip Jacob Spener, Pia Desideria, trans., and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 94.
- ¹²Trueblood, op. cit., p. 31.
- ¹³Spener, op. cit., p. 96.
- ¹⁴Charles G. Finney, Revival Lectures (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 136.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 138.
- ¹⁶Webber, op. cit., p. 124.
- ¹⁷Stanley Mooneyham, "Evangelical Changes in a World of Certainties," World Vision, XII (1968), p. 5.
- ¹⁸J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Symposium: How Can Christian Community be Established in the City?" Mennonite Life, XIX (1964), No. 1, p. 18.
- ¹⁹A.J. Klassen (ed.), The Church in Mission (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature Mennonite Brethren Church, 1967), pp. 85 - 133.
- ²⁰Ibid., ch. 9.
- ²¹Trueblood, op. cit., p. 14.