



My Church- Reaching Out

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Isaiah 54:2-6

Time is running out! All around us scientists, statesmen, politicians, even preachers are warning us that as a nation, as a world, we are living on borrowed time. Every sign in our world today points to the fact that we are living in a time when history shall culminate itself in catastrophic events. We are living in a time that is preceeding the entrance of God into history as He comes again to intervene in the affairs of man. All around the world people are madly digging holes, buying and building shelters, all to protect themselves from the polluted air of the universe. Our world has become a tinder box surrounded with the flames of destruction. And every time we put out the fire in one spot it bursts into flames again in some other area.

As a young man I spent a great deal of time in and around the Florida everglades. The soil in the "glades" during the dry seasons becomes like soft coal and will actually burn if ignited. Fire fighters would think they had the flames licked, but the fire would only go underground where it would smolder sometimes as long as a week beneath the surface before breaking to the top miles away. Often times it would be impossible to walk the earth in your bare feet because of the burning fire beneath the surface.

Our world has become like this. No sooner did we get the fire of the Second World War put out than it broke out again in Korea. Quenching that we found it blazing again in Hungary then in Palestine, then India, then Viet-nam, then Laos, then Cuba, then Africa, and now in Berlin. Where will it break out next? How soon will it be before the entire earth breaks into spontaneous combustion? When the Queen of England visited Ghana in East Africa the drums of the natives beat out her welcome in a solemn chant saying, "Walk softly, beautiful Queen, the ground is Hot."

In this changing, explosive, inflammable world, what is the mission

and the purpose of the Christian and the Church? Our obligations as Christians have become increasingly imperative. In the words of Frank Laubauch, either we "wake up or we blow up".

In many churches this morning the preachers will be splattering their congregations with meaningless platitudes and soft generalities telling them to "keep calm" and not to get excited, that "everything is alright", and that we shouldn't be "needlessly alarmed". But this is an alarming time! For too long a time have we remained calm and the world has rushed right on by us.

Our churches are going to have to reexamine their purpose and mission in the light of current events and 20th century situations. For too long our churches have been content to merely "mark time". For too long have we been content to follow obsolete procedures and mimic the past. The philosophy of "Gimme' that old time religion" may be basically sound. But the simple motive that it was "good for our mothers and fathers" is no longer sufficient. The time has come that we either progress, either we expand, either we reach out into the world--or we die; and drag the world down with us into our spiritual grave.

Peter Marshall's oft quoted pun that the "modern church reminds me of a man in a deep sea diver's outfit marching bravely into the bathroom to pull the stopper out of the bathtub", has too much truth in it to be very funny. Most churches, you know, never get down to the dirty business of cleaning up life's bad places. We get so wrapped up in ourselves and in those who are like us, that we forget and forsake our original mission which is to bring the saving, cleansing message of Christ to all people. For too long a time has the church shied away from the really pressing problems that face our world today--both social, political, and economic. For too long a time has the church turned its face away and walked by on the other side when confronted with the unsightly and usually offensive task of cleaning up a dirty world.

But I am convinced that the majority of God's people do not respect nor do they appreciate the church that refuses to cope with the problems that are facing the world today. I am convinced that the majority of God's people are sick and tired of a church that continues to cater to people's prejudices--and to their pocketbooks. They're sick of a pulpit and a preacher that is tongue-tied by the very string to which his salary check is attached. The world is longing for a strong and true voice that will stand up and say, "Thus saith the Lord".

It's not easy to be like this. It would be far easier for us to fall into the way that so many others have fallen into and allow our church to become nothing more than a glorified country club that caters only to the rich and the influential; and that has very few if any moral restrictions for its members.

It would be far easier for me, as a minister, not to deal with the dirty, the controversial, and the unpleasant in life. It would be far easier for me as the pastor of this church, to do the same as too many others have

done, and tone down the Gospel message, take no sides, enter into no controversy, voice no unpleasant or unpopular opinions, step on no toes, and denounce no sins. Do you think I come to you Sunday after Sunday, week after week, point out sin, causing controversy and conflict with my preaching just because I like to? Do you think it easy for me to stand in front of the people I love, the people who have called me as their spiritual undershepherd, and speak the Word of God as I interpret it with the help of God's Spirit?

Don't kid yourself! It would be far easier for me to do as some would have me to do; to relegate myself to the position of executive secretary of the church organization, for me to merely scratch your itching ears, for me to merely act as a fund raiser for the church budget. This would be far easier for me than to come to you week after week and attempt to call you back to God.

But I come to you in this manner because I love you. I come because I have an obligation both to you and to God to be true to the Scriptures and to try to interpret them to you in the light of the world in which we live. "But if the watchman sees the sword approaching and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned. . . . his blood will I require at the watchman's hand." (Ezek. 33:6).

I have directed my ministry this way because I feel very strongly the obligation that I have before God to this church. I can do no other. I have no other choice than to point out to you God's way. If I do otherwise, I am being untrue to my trust and unfair to you who have called me to interpret God's Word to your hungry hearts. And because of this, I will never be satisfied for our church to remain just as "ordinary" church. Paul cautioned young Timothy, "Timothy, don't let them make an ordinary preacher out of you!" Not only have I taken his advice to my own heart, but I am passing it on to you as a church. Don't let the world make of us an "ordinary church". We must reach out. We must extend our ministry. We must encircle the globe.

It was the prophet Isaiah, who cast his eye at the little tent in the desert that was standing pitifully alone in the face of an oncoming storm. And Isaiah called out, as he saw the flapping canvass, the sagging roof, the slack supporting ropes, the shallow tent pegs—"Pull up your tent pegs. Lengthen your cords. And then drive your stakes deep into the earth." And the message of God rings clear and true to us today. The winds of worldliness, the winds of adversity, the winds of temptation and defeat, the winds of war, the winds of discouragement, the winds of indifference are all bearing down on God's church today. And God's message to us this morning is this, "Spare not, lengthen thy cords and strengthen thy stakes". My church—reaching out.

MY CHURCH—REACHING OUT INTO THE LIVES OF ITS MEMBERS.

At an associational meeting the moderator was hearing the reports

from the various churches on their activities for the year. He had heard from all the churches of their increases in giving, of their increasing number of baptisms, of their enlarged programs, of their extended ministries. When all had finished the moderator said, "We have heard from all the churches but one. The pastor could not attend but he sent this note: 'Our church averaged the same in attendance this year as it did last year. Our membership is the same. Our gifts have remained the same. No one died. No one was baptized. No one answered a call to special service. We request the prayers of the brethren that we might continue to hold our own.'"

But the church that is reaching out will never be content to just hold its own. Our church has come a long way during the past 50 years. We have come a long way in the past four years. Despite the handful of people who would hold us back and keep us trying to do the things they say were good enough for "grandma and grandpa", we have progressed. I'm proud of our church because of its extended ministry into the lives of its members.

Last Wednesday night in our midweek service I quoted some figures that showed that whereas 4 years ago the brunt of the financial burden of the church was being borne by only a handful of people, today we have more than 70 families who are contributing in substantial amounts to the financial program of this church. We've had more than a 100% increase during these years in those who are giving a tithe of their income. I'm proud of our church for all its evidence of increased growth among its members.

There have been some who have suggested that we should return to the old way of doing things. And I am thinking in particular of the way in which our spiritual leaders are elected. There are some who feel that the officers of the church should be elected on the basis of popularity, influence, and business ability rather than on the basis of their spirituality alone. I am convinced that our church stands strong and true today as a lighthouse for the Gospel of Christ in our community because we have demanded that before a man can be elected a deacon he must first prove himself in all points as a man of God. We have demanded that first of all he must show the outward fruits of his contact with God before he comes into this hallowed position as a deacon. I'm thankful that our church has adopted such a Bible centered program and I hope and pray that they will never choose to deviate from it.

It would surprise you to know just how many of our people have responded to this type of ministry and are growing in Christian grace and knowledge. It would surprise you to find out just how many of our young couples, without fan-fare or hoo-rah, have begun to tithe during the past year, who have begun to take an active part in the work of the church, who have begun reading their Bibles and praying with increasing earnestness. I thank God for a church that believes in a ministry that reaches deep into the lives of its members. For it is here, that the real church exists.

Not in the pulpit, but in the lives of the men and the women who walk the streets of our city and town as children of God. You are the real preachers, the real missionaries, the real witnesses for Christ. Let's drive our tent pegs deep and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus.

BUT THERE IS MORE, MY CHURCH—REACHING OUT INTO THE WORLD AROUND.

I visited in a home this past week to try to persuade a man to turn his life over to the will of God. As I was leaving he said, "I won't promise you anything, but I sure do appreciate you coming." And the thought came to me as it has come before: "Is this my fate? As a spokesman for God, is this what I have been trained for? Is this what I have dedicated my life to? To go through life being respected, being appreciated, but not heeded?"

Is this to be the fate of our church? That her preachments are to fall of unheeding ears. That her teachings are to go unapplied in a world full of sin? Are you satisfied with your church being relegated to the status of a "respectable" institution? Are you satisfied just to remain "deeply appreciated" but never heeded in matters of importance?

It was Peter who said, "Lord, to whom else can we go, Thou hast the words of eternal life?" The church does have the words of eternal life! As the bride of Christ she holds the key to all the world's ills and troubles! But if we continue to profane God's House. If we continue to make of it something other than God intended for it to become? If we continue to blow an uncertain sound on the warning trumpet--then to whom can the world look for guidance and direction? Are we satisfied to let our message go unheard and unheeded? This has become the fate of most churches, you know. The ordinary downtown church is far more like a country club or a civic organization than a temple of God.

But I am convinced that our people do not want our church to become just another respected, tolerated, appreciated institution within the community.

Frankly, I don't care whether I'm liked or respected--just as long as I'm listened to. Frankly I don't care how unpopular or how disliked I am with certain elements, just as long as I'm able to interpret the Word of God to people who are willing to listen with open minds and ears that hear.

We need men and women who are willing to give their lives that the message of Christ be sent out into the world beyond. How thankful I was last Sunday night when one of our own young men stepped out during the invitation and publically dedicated his life to the ministry. How I long for more of our young men and women to make this same decision. It's not easy. And the prospects for the future hold anything but brightness. The future could well hold suffering, persecution, even death for those who are determined to do the will of God.

When John Hus was a young man it is reported that he prayed, "Oh Lord, set me on fire! Make me a burning torch for thee! Let me burn out for thee!" Little did he realize that this prayer would be answered literally when he was tied to a stake at the age of 44 and burning faggots were placed about his feet and he was literally burned alive--a burning torch for Christ.

My church--reaching out. It is not easy. It is not popular. But the Gospel of Christ must be presented to all, through the spoken word and through the lived example of Christian men and women. I am not satisfied with our church remaining a "respectable" institution in our community, nor in our world. We must be more. We must be heard. We must be heeded. I'm not satisfied with mere toleration. We have the words of eternal life. We must give them to a world that is on fire, a world that is living on borrowed time.

Voltaire, the French philosopher, once quipped, "I never go into a church, but I always tip my hat when I pass by". But no one tipped their hat to Jesus. They crucified Him. And when He is presented today, in His true form, they crucify Him and all those who call themselves by His name again. Only this time it is in sly and subtle ways that elongates pain and confuses the issues at hand. That great English poet, Studdert-Kennedy, put it this way:

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree.
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep;
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed Him by.
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and would not give Him pain,
They only passed on down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus Cried, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do';
And still it rained the winter rain that chilled him through and through.
The crowds went home and left the street without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against the wall, and cried for Calvary.

Are you willing to leave Him there? Tolerated? Put up with? But unheeded and unheard? Christianity is not easy and devotion always costs. It may mean persecution? It may mean unpopularity? It may mean financial hardship? It may even mean death? But Jesus gave his life for you, how can you do less than to give your all to Him? Jesus died for you, how can you do other than to live for Him?

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