

Christianity in the Streets

At PALCON ten years ago I made a presentation in which I declared that holiness survives best in the streets. It doesn't fare very well in the classroom under an academic microscope. But it thrives out in the streets of the city where people are suffering and struggling to live. That is where it was meant to be-and that is where its claims are unquestioned.

Recently, I have come to believe that it is not only holiness that was meant for the streets. Christianity itself was designed to minister in the streets.

Several months ago I read a book by sociologist Rodney Stark. The book had a rather unassuming title: *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure Jesus Movement Became a Dominant World Religion*. It is a sociologist's attempt to show how it was possible for Christianity to grow from 12 persons to perhaps 33 million followers by AD 350.

I was tremendously impressed by the fact that some of the sociological explanations revealed profound Christian commitments. For example, one of the challenges that Rome was facing was a declining population-a serious problem for a nation. Part of the problem was the attitude toward women. Female infants were routinely exposed to the elements or simply thrown in the sewer. Consequently there was a deficit of women in the Roman Empire.

Not so in Christianity. Early Christians believed in the sanctity of life and cherished female infants. Women were well regarded in the early church and sometimes were leaders in the church.

Interestingly, the early church appeared to capitalize on a sociological reality-in mixed marriages the husband typically converts to the wife's religion, rather than the other way around. So, Christian girls married pagan men and converted many of them to Christianity.

But the growth, fundamentally, was not because of the sociological practice, but because of the value the followers of Jesus Christ placed on human life and their consequent esteem for women.

There are many examples like this in the book, but the one that affected me most profoundly was the response of Christians during plagues. In those days cities were not as large as modern day cities. When a plague would strike it would sometimes kill 30 to 40 percent of the population.

Those who were able, would flee the city until the plague was over. But Christians remained in the city to take care of their sick-and to care for pagans as well. Often people died simply because they were abandoned. If they had received care, many of them would have survived. When Christians cared for their sick, the stricken often survived. Likewise many of the pagans who were cared for by the Christians also survived.

So, when the plague was over, and the people who had left the city returned, they found a larger Christian population and a pagan population that was kindly disposed toward Christians. But, here again, the significant factor was the compassion Christians demonstrated because of their faith in Christ.

I want to make it plain that the Christians were not compassionate in order to evangelize. but they were compassionate because it was a natural characteristic of their Christian lifestyle.

When America was being settled, Christianity was on the frontier. In the 19th century the Church was busy founding colleges, hospitals, orphanages and other concerns that met the needs of the growing nation-including fighting slavery (It is significant that Charles E. Finney, the great evangelist, was an outspoken abolitionist). That was when Christianity in America was vigorous. That is when it became the religion of the land, even though the constitution had established the separation of church and state.

I find it more than a little interesting that in early centuries-and in recent ones-the church gained acceptance as a result of ministering to the physical, mental, and emotional needs of the populace.

I am coming to believe that the challenge to Christianity in America isn't the paganization of society. but the church's desertion of its responsibility for society and the people of its communities.

I doubt that any kind of cognitive evangelism is going to be effective in winning large numbers of Americans to Christ. The church might as well forget trying to learn some slick new way of talking people into becoming Christians. Oh, a few people will be convinced to follow Christ because of some kind of logical persuasion. But I doubt that America will be re-Christianized that way.

When Christians get back out in the streets of the world and start responding to whatever needs they encounter-when they demonstrate their faith, rather than trying to defend it-they will find a new responsiveness to the Christian message. Compassion is more persuasive than logic-and it is far more attractive!

Those of you who, for the past several decades, have been serving in areas of compassionate ministry, have been on the front line of effective Christian mission. I salute you and pray that God will use you to lead the Church of the Nazarene back into the streets of America, to demonstrate again the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Helping the church rediscover a compassionate Christian lifestyle will not be easy. Dr. Ken Crow, a sociologist who is the most competent research analyst I know, reminded me the other day that, "Deeply entrenched beliefs are never changed by the facts."

Just as pagans will never be convinced by the facts, neither will Christians be convinced by endless reasons why they should practice and support compassion. It will be the powerful witness of your ministry-written in lives transformed by God's miraculous grace-which will convince church people that compassion is a sign of authentic Christianity.

So please lead the church back to the streets of America. That is where the gospel flourishes.

—Given by Bill M. Sullivan during a morning plenary session at the 4th Quadrennial Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Conference, Colorado Springs, Colorado, October 31, 1998.