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Missions and Missionaries

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

Having just returned from a two month tour in Africa, I have been more acutely aware of the problems of the third world. I have wondered if we Christians are really approaching their problems in a constructive way. In my 33 years as a Christian I have heard little in any mainline denominations about how we should conduct missions. It is also true that in my ecumenical peregrinations I have heard little about this subject. We assume that missionaries either do evangelism or medical practice. Yet as I traveled in South Africa, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Madagascar, as well as in Asia last year, I realized that they need us for other things. There is no question that in the past they needed trained evangelists. That day is over in almost all of the countries I have visited in the last twenty years. There are plenty of nationals who can evangelize much more effectively than most Westerners can. What they really need are people who can teach them to live as Christians in the highly complex world in which we live — what Paul called right living. Their national leaders are not teaching them.

Several years ago, shortly after the fall of communism, my wife and I were in Czechoslovakia. In Prague we attended a church that only a few years before had started with nine people. The membership at the time we attended was 1500. We were impressed by the entire service that lasted about three hours, but what really impressed us was the sermon that the pastor preached. It had to do with money. It was, however, more than a simple sermon about money and its evils. It was about how to function in a market economy. The pastor knew that his people had grown up under communism, therefore, they did not have the foggiest notion as to how capitalism worked. They were used to the communist system where almost everyone made low and almost equal salaries. If you were a surgeon you made about as much as the janitor, a teacher made about as much as the street sweeper. It was obvious that they had no hierarchy of worth concerning the value of commodities or education and skill.

What the pastor attempted to do was to outline the basic tenets of a market economy from a Christian perspective and how it works. Since the larger church only met once a month, he expected the small groups held weekly in the city to continue the teaching to provide a comprehensive understanding of the workings of a market economy. I felt the church was the ideal place to do this. If the state was to provide instruction, it would take too long and would not be as effective. I also knew that there was a shortage of teachers who knew enough about the subject to teach it. Was it important to the Christian community? You bet it was! Were the people interested? Yes, they were! But there were many more things they needed to know.

While I was in Zimbabwe a few weeks ago, I was asked to teach the biblical basis for sexual behavior. Why did they want me to do this? The answer is a simple one. Thirty percent of the population of Zimbabwe is HIV positive. Why? Because the bulk of the population are promiscuous. Males are highly promiscuous. It is not surprising that most of the Zimbabwean army is infected. Prostitutes are almost universally infected. Since there is no treatment, these people all will die within ten years. My teaching was, then, a message of life and death for a large part of the congregation. On one occasion in a rural church meeting under a tree, I spoke to a large congregation. That morning two men in that community had died of AIDS. I had everyone's attention.

My message was a simple one. It is that we are all called by God to be like Jesus. The scriptural basis for this conformation is Romans 8:28,29.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn."

I emphasized that Jesus was righteous. But it was necessary that I explain what it is to be righteous. I assured them that they were righteous if they knew Jesus as their Lord and Master, but being righteous and behaving righteously are two different things. The Lord expected us to behave righteously if we love Him. To obey we have to take right action and deal fairly with our neighbors. We have to have a servant's heart. I used the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet to demonstrate that we may be called to be self-denial. If we deny ourselves and put the best interests and welfare of our neighbors above our own, we are showing His love to the world.

I next told them all Christians have to be obedient to God's laws and Christ's commandments. Here I used the covenant passage from Exodus 19:5,6a.

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

In his teaching Jesus had commanded them to love God, love their neighbors, themselves and one another. But most importantly they were to show the world that they were obedient (John 8:31).

Although I had much more to say about being conformed to the image of our Lord, I digressed to emphasize the importance of being obedient to God's laws concerning sexual behavior. I then explained why it is important to understand the reasons God gave these laws.

When the law was given, Israel was leaving Egypt where all kinds of sexual activity was tolerated. Even brother and sister marriage was tolerated. This is unusual because incest has been taboo in all societies throughout all time. God also knew that His people were going into a land where sexual license was the rule. There was sacred prostitution in the temples of the people who lived there. They worshiped a goddess of fertility. They erected shrines where she could be worshiped. In such an environment they would be tempted. Sin is an infectious disease, so when we are in a morally polluted environment we can catch the disease. The infection occurs when we are tempted and succumb to the temptation. Satan uses sinful men as the vector. Knowing that temptation is a powerful thing, God gave them laws that were aimed at regulating sexual behavior. These laws forbade sex outside of marriage. Obedience to His laws was expected. If they were not obeyed, it was incumbent upon the community to punish offenders. God prescribed the punishments. These laws and their punishments for transgression are found in Exodus 20:14; Lev. 18:1-20, 22 and 29; and Lev. 20:10-23. Quite obviously they are from the Old Testament. Are we required to obey them? Yes. Jesus said he gave these laws real meaning (Matt. 5:17,18), so if we love him we can and will obey them.

God knew that sin has consequences. Sexual promiscuity spreads sexually transmitted diseases (STD's). Many of them were around when the Israelites left Egypt. Paleopathology has given us evidence that Egyptians had syphilis. Gonorrhea was a disease that was recognized in the Bible (Lev. 15:2-11). Interestingly the ordinance is addressed to men who have penile discharges with gonorrhea. It is possible that these same ordinances recognized the discharge of lymphogranuloma venereum. This disease causes infection of lymph nodes in the inguinal region (groin) which break down and drain pus. Another disease called granuloma inguinale causes large sores around the genitals and anus. These diseases would be classified as dreaded infectious skin diseases (Lev. 13:2-44). God knew that these diseases were spread by sexual promiscuity. His commandments and ordinances were designed to be public health measures, for God really does care about our bodily health. But more than that, He cares about our mental health. He knew that promiscuity affects the relationship of husbands and wives. Not only can husbands give venereal diseases to their wives, but promiscuity destroys the oneness of a marriage. Jealousy is a powerful emotion. Loss of trust destroys love. Children are secondary victims if infidelity causes separation and divorce. Kids don't do well with one parent.

In my sermon, I emphasized the importance of obeying God's commandments to avoid the most dreaded of STD's — AIDS. To avoid infection with this virus is a matter of life and death. It is universally fatal. The virus itself does not cause death, secondary infection does. I am going to use AIDS as the name for the disease frequently here because it describes the final outcome of the disease, i.e., the complex of infections that loss of our immune system's effectiveness allows.

When a person gets infected with AID's they may not know it. The initial symptoms may be so mild as to be ignored. The symptoms that do occur are characterized by fever, joint pain, muscle aches and tiredness. These symptoms last for one to twelve weeks. The infected person can then go for years until the virus has destroyed the immune system. Then they develop pneumonia, brain infections, infectious cancer (Burkitt's sarcoma), tertiary syphilis, tuberculosis or generalized herpes. Death is not pleasant for the infected person or their caretakers.

There are three strains of HIV. There is HIV 1 that most homosexuals and drug addicts get in the western world. In the underdeveloped world, HIV 2 is spread by heterosexual contact. Just recently a third strain (HIV 3) was identified in West Africa in Cameroon. It, too, is spread by heterosexual contacts. Promiscuity accelerates the spread.

It is not surprising that homosexuals spread the disease. There are studies that find that some homosexuals may have 1000 partners in a lifetime, but they are not the only promiscuous men. When I worked in venereal disease control for the US Public Health Service in the spring of 1947, we often had heterosexuals who had forty or more contacts while they were infectious with syphilis. One man gave us over 100 names of women who he had relations with over a three month period. He had infected 30 of them with syphilis. Prostitutes can have relations with as many as twenty men a day. They can spread the disease rapidly.

Is it no wonder that the Bible warns against consorting with prostitutes (Prov. 23:27)? I have already observed that the prostitutes on the streets of Harare or Nairobi have a high incidence of HIV infection. As a matter of fact, it exceeds 80%. Let us suppose that each one had sexual contact with five men a day. Let us then suppose they infect 10% of their contacts. It is not much higher, for there are other factors that determine infection. If we had 100 prostitutes, 80% of whom are infected, they would infect 0.5×80 or 40 men a day. If they did that seven days a week then in a week's time they would infect 280 men a week. Many of these men will go home and infect their wives. The infected wives will give birth to children who have a 50% rate of infection.

To illustrate the rapid spread of the disease, I cite a newspaper article in the Durban newspaper five years ago that reported 16,000 new cases of HIV each month in the province of Natal, South Africa.

All of sub-Saharan Africa is involved in the epidemic, and HIV has spread like wildfire in Thailand, India, Viet Nam, Cambodia, and all over the rest of Southeast Asia. The mobility of carriers is the reason for the worldwide spread of the disease. The rapid spread of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa was traced back to a homosexual steward who worked for Air France. He infected men all along his routes. Some of them were long distance truck drivers in the same area. They then spread it into the heterosexual population via prostitutes, and the epidemic

was on. The 30,000,000 or more people who have HIV infections at present are the fruit of man's promiscuity. Both homosexual and heterosexual men are very promiscuous if they are not restrained by the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit's fruit of self-control restrains man's human nature which gives rise to his promiscuity.

Some years ago I wrote a book called *Why Morality*. I never published it because I formatted it wrong. When I wrote it, I declared that God's laws have utility. When I told some of my friends, they convinced me that I was wrong in proposing the utility of God's laws as a reason for obeying them. Utilitarianism is a philosophy that seems contrary to the authority of the Bible since it asserts that the rightness or wrongness of any act is determined by its consequences. These consequences must promote happiness for the actor and for those affected by the act if it is to have utility. Christianity objects to strict utilitarianism because although some judgments about acts can be derived from judgments about their creation of desirable states of affairs, others cannot. In utilitarianism there is no moral obligation or duty. Christianity asserts that we have a moral obligation to obey God's laws.

Christianity should not, however, reject the utility of God's laws. Actions have consequences, and disobedience to God's laws brings pain immediately or in due course. Obedience brings blessings and disobedience brings curses (Deut. 30:15-18). God gave us laws to obey. Most of them are absolute and should not be relativized. Many liberal theologians, especially Joseph Fletcher, have said that God's laws are relative. Their views have profoundly influenced two generations of the populace. It was only natural that loose interpretation of these ethics has led to hedonism. It is no surprise that in the 60's many of that generation were led to believe the hedonistic philosophy that "if it feels good do it." That philosophy profoundly influences their behavior now 30+ years later.

In Zimbabwe I honored their request and preached on all of God's laws that had to do with sexuality. All congregations listened intently, but had trouble believing that people would have sexual relations with animals. They did not disagree with the biblical prohibition of homosexuality.

I have related my experiences because I believe that the church is derelict in its duty to promote morality. The watchman is not sounding the alarm (Ezek. 3:17:18).

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood."

Sin is transgression against God's laws. Sin has consequences and we are obligated to warn sinners. We are still accountable to God to do so. The Bible is

a guide to right living and we are not preaching right living. When we do not preach right living we are shirking our responsibility as watchmen. In Uganda they are preaching and teaching biblical sexual ethics. It is the only country in Africa that has lowered the infection rate of HIV (AIDS).

It seems then that we have to do more than proclaim the Gospel. We also need to proclaim the laws and ordinances of God. Salvation is not enough. People coming out of a pagan society have all kinds of misbeliefs and misbehaviors. Most of them have learned these wrong ideas during their formative years. Their present and future are governed by these erroneous ideas. Our mission efforts have to recognize that although we are teaching them to sew, to use drip irrigation, and to set up cooperative loan institutions, we also have to teach them the rules of right living.

We cannot expect countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, or India to establish a market economy, when we have not taught them to be honest and to control greed. Capitalism does not work if the populace lacks moral controls. I am convinced that democracy works best in countries that are primarily Christian. De Toqueville said that the United States and its market economy will survive as long as the people are good. He believed our goodness grew out of our Christian faith. Sadly, today we see an erosion of our goodness. This has come about for the reasons cited above. We have disputed the authority of the Bible, and we have not taught the rules of right living to our children. God ordered us to do so in Deuteronomy 4:5 and 6:6-9. We have not obeyed him, and are reaping the harvest of our dereliction.

As I write this I have the uneasy feeling that I am "blowing in the wind." What I write will not bear fruit. It is frustrating to see our nation and its populace dashing merrily off to their destruction believing that morality does not matter. I know that the only thing that will change our headlong rush to destruction is prayer and repentance. A few leaders in the evangelical world have tried to mobilize us to pray. But more needs to be done. I harp on this point because God's word has told us

". . . if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

We are his people called by his name, let us do it.