

The Reward is More than Members (3/3)

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Throughout the history of the church, some of the most exciting things have happened, not at the traditional centers of the life of the church, but at the edges. Look again at the book of Acts. As you begin reading the story, you expect the church in Jerusalem to be the most important church of all, the one that has all the answers and tells all the others what they ought to believe and do. Actually, most of us read through the entire book of Acts with that expectation still in mind, and therefore we fail to see much of what is really happening in that story.

But look again at the story as Acts tells it. The very first great event of Acts, Pentecost, the event that many call the birth of the church, is precisely an event of openness to outsiders. At the beginning of the story, the followers of Jesus are all gathered in a room, meeting among themselves. At the end of the story --and Luke does not tell us how they got from one place to another-- they are outdoors, addressing a great crowd, and that crowd includes all sorts of people.

By the sixth chapter, as I said earlier today, we are dealing with the consequences of the addition of these new people to the community of faith. We are dealing not only with the problems caused by that addition but also with the structural changes required by it; and very

soon, as soon as Stephen starts preaching, we are dealing also with the increasing impact of Christianity on those around it. The result is martyrdom, persecution, dispersion, and growth.

But the growth is not only in numbers. If the story appears in Acts in chronological order, Philip, one of the seven, leads the way in preaching in Samaria and also in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. This happens in chapter 8. In chapter 9 we have, not only the conversion of Saul, but also of Ananias. Ananias was already a disciple. But it is in the challenge of going to Saul, whom he knows as a terrible scourge of the church, that Ananias hears of the Lord's great plan, "to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (9.15).

In chapter 10 we have what we usually call the conversion of Cornelius. But look again at the story in Acts. Is it only Cornelius who is converted? Is it only Cornelius and those of his household? The story, more than about Cornelius, is about the conversion of Peter, and even of the entire church. Peter has a vision that puzzles him and prepares him for the unexpected: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Still, he does not know what to expect. When he meets Cornelius, he tells his host quite openly that according to the law in which he has been brought up, he shouldn't even be there. He is breaking the law, and he is aware of it. He is willing to go to the house of Cornelius, and in so doing to break the law, because God has commanded him to do so --not because he feels any particular liking for Cornelius, nor even because Cornelius is a good prospect for church membership.

At the end of v. 33, Cornelius asks Peter to say whatever it was that God had commanded him to say. In v. 34, Peter starts with what amounts to his standard sermon --very similar to what he said at Pentecost, except that, in apparent deference to his hosts, he says that, "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." He is not given a chance to finish his sermon. While he is still preaching, the text tells us, they gave signs that the Holy Spirit had fallen upon them.

We usually read this passage in triumphalistic terms: one more step in the ever-widening circle of Christian outreach. What we miss is what the passage says about the Jewish Christians who had come with Peter. When they saw what was happening, they "were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." Peter himself, who had felt rather uneasy about entering this house, now feels compelled to ask, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" "So he ordered them to be baptized." The radically new thing that is taking place here is not so much that a few more people are being baptized. It is not even that, apart from the Ethiopian eunuch, these may be the first Gentiles to be converted. It is rather that the Church itself learns something about the Gospel that it had not really understood before: The Gospel is Good News for all people.

The point is made quite clear in chapter 11, where Peter returns to Jerusalem to hear criticism from the church there: "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Peter tells

them the story of what happened, and as a result, Luke tells us, "They praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!'"

In other words, what we have in these two crucial chapters of Acts is the conversion not only of the Gentiles but also, and especially, of Peter, of his Jewish Christian companions who went with him to Cornelius, and eventually of the entire church.

The story of the church's conversion continues throughout the book of Acts. Paul himself does not fully conceive his mission to the Gentiles the moment he is converted. On the contrary, he discovers his mission in the very act of fulfilling it. As a Latin American poet has put it, "wayfarer, there is no path; you make the path as you walk it."

We all know that had it not been for the mission to the Gentiles, we ourselves would not be Christian. But have you ever stopped to reflect on how much the church itself learned through that mission? Very little of our New Testament, if any, was written in Jerusalem. On the contrary, most of the New Testament was written precisely at that border between belief and unbelief that has always been the growing edge of the Christian church, not only numerically but also theologically.

True, the old establishment always thinks that it knows best, and the periphery even bows before it. Also true, sometimes the center has an important role to play by correcting

something that is taking place at the growing edge. Thus, the church in Jerusalem sends Peter and John to Samaria to check up on what Philip has been doing, and they do have something of value to add to Philip's ministry. But quite often it is the periphery that drives the center to new discoveries.

In Acts 15 we learn that certain individuals from Judea, that is, from the center, took it upon themselves to make certain that all new converts would adjust to the theology and practices of the center. So, Paul, Barnabas, and some others went to Jerusalem to settle the matter. The result was what is often called the Council of Jerusalem, which set the policies to be followed in the Gentile mission.

When considering that Council, however, three points are important. The first is that in that meeting in Jerusalem, the Jerusalem Christians learned more than did those who represented the mission to the Gentiles. The second is that, although the policies for the Gentile mission were supposedly set in that Council, it is clear from the letters of Paul that the mission soon exceeded the bounds of such policies (see, for instance, the question of meat sacrificed to idols and the way Paul deals with it in 1 Cor. 10). The third point is that, even though the church in Jerusalem apparently did not know it at the time, it would soon be Christians resulting from the Gentile mission who would become the financial mainstay for the entire Christian community, including that in Jerusalem --again, witness Paul's letters, and his insistence on the collection for Jerusalem.

What happened in New Testament times has happened throughout the history of the church. In the thirteenth century, when Western Christendom seemed to be at its best, with the papacy at the height of its power under Innocent III, the most abiding ecclesiastical reforms did not come from that all-powerful pope. They came rather from the relatively small town of Assisi, where the son of a merchant, a young man so out of touch with the realities of Italian power and politics that his friends called him "Frenchy" --Francesco--, took off the rich garments that his father had given him and dressed in a beggar's cloak and went to live and to preach among the poor. And now, centuries after the events, we know that of all the great things that Innocent III did --calling for a crusade, reorganizing much of the life and worship of the church, calling kings to task for their moral deviations-- none was as significant for the life of the church as recognizing and acknowledging the power in the beggar from Assisi. During that same thirteenth century, there were great universities in western Europe. Most famous among them was the University of Paris. Here was the center of Christian learning. Here were people trained with the greatest academic rigor of their time. If anyone in Western Christendom knew Christian tradition and theology, it was the theologians at the University of Paris.

Meanwhile, at the very edges of Western Christendom, in Sicily and in Spain, at the border between Christianity and Islam, a new challenge had been rising. Christian scholars had come into contact with the writings of Islam as well as with Arabic translations of Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers. Once translated into Latin, those writings made their way to the University of Paris. There some rejected them outright: Why should we worry about what

those infidels have to say? We have the great Christian tradition. We are the University of Paris. Others accepted the writings uncritically and soon found themselves beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. But a third group, the most creative, took up the challenge, saw it as an opportunity, and developed a theology that eventually opened the way for the modern world.

The pattern appears over and over again. Luther with his theses in the hick town of Wittenberg soon discovering that he had unleashed theological energies that he never suspected; Wesley reluctantly preaching to the miners in Bristol and discovering dimensions of the Gospel he had not imagined.

That may be precisely the reason why so-called "mainline" churches have so much difficulty with mission among Hispanics and other minorities. My own United Methodist Church has an outstanding record of missions in Korea, in Zaire, and in the Philippines. The Anglican communion has quite a record of missions in Africa and in India. The Episcopal Church itself has been quite active in Haiti and in Puerto Rico. But our record is not so good among minorities in our own backyard.

The reason usually given in the case of Hispanics is that, after all, Hispanics are already Roman Catholics. Our "mainline" churches take an ecumenical stance, and it would be anti-ecumenical to engage in sheep-stealing. It is interesting to me that some of the very people who say that a missionary initiative directed at Hispanics would be sheep-stealing are themselves trying to

increase the membership of their own congregations by enticing members of other congregations in the same denomination. As we know, that is how most of the flourishing suburban congregations came to be.

In any case, the excuse that all Hispanics are Roman Catholics will not hold water. Some years ago, I was seeking funding for a Hispanic project from a large Episcopal parish. The Rector gave me the usual line: "But, aren't all Hispanics Roman Catholics? Why should we engage in mission to them?" To which I simply replied: "Yes, all Hispanics are Roman Catholics. And all the English are Anglican." We got the money!

The fact is that, although most Hispanics share in a religiosity that has been profoundly shaped by Roman Catholicism, many have little or no relationship with the Church as an institution —in other words, they are Catholic in a very un-Catholic way. (Indeed, one of the phrases one hears commonly when one asks Hispanics about their religious convictions, is "*soy católico a mi manera*" --I am a Catholic after my own fashion.)

There is a cultural resistance among Hispanics, born out of five hundred years of cultural struggle, who are trying to define and to keep an identity in conditions of cultural imperialism and even ethnocide. There is a pride in our way of being ourselves, which baffles churches or any other institutions that seek to shape us by means of their own preconceived mold. Even among those Hispanics who are active and participating members of the Roman Catholic

Church, there is something called "*religiosidad popular*" --popular religiosity-- that does not quite fit the canons of "normative" Roman Catholicism.

This "*religiosidad popular*," which several Hispanic Catholic theologians, pastors, and scholars see as a very positive thing, is quite resistant to the dictates of ecclesiastical authority. And that is one of the reasons why, until very recently, the Roman Catholic hierarchy has had so much difficulty taking the Hispanic challenge seriously. That is one of the reasons why, until very recently, the higher echelons of the hierarchy in this country have been closed to Hispanics. And that is also one of the reasons why, from the very beginning of the *conquista* to this day, so many of the best Roman Catholic Hispanic leaders have lived at the very edge of obedience, constantly risking an order of public silence or even the charge of heresy.

It is only as it accepts the Hispanic way of being a Catholic, the "*yo soy católico a mi manera*," that the Roman Catholic Church is really able to win and to hold the souls of Latin Americans and of Hispanics in this country.

This, however, is a very risky business, for the more the Roman Catholic Church allows and even encourages such a thing, the more it is threatened at the very core of its traditional understanding of catholicity, which has had more to do with universality than with catholicity as I defined it last night.

And that is also the real reason why, in our so-called "mainline" denominations, one so often hears that there is no need for mission among Hispanics. The real reason is not that we want to avoid any semblance of sheep-stealing. The real reason is not that most Hispanics are Roman Catholic. The real reason is that the so-called "mainline" denominations are in fact "old-line," that we do not want to change, that we are afraid of change, and that a certain intuition tells us that, were we to undertake significant mission among Hispanics and to be successful at it, our own mainline or rather old-line denominations would have to change.

That is why our old-line denominations are so successful in mission, as long as there is salt water in between. But when mission involves bringing different people into **our** fold, right here at home, things are different. Salt water acts as a buffer, so that the center can be insulated from whatever is happening at the periphery and not be **really** challenged by it. But when the periphery is close at home, when it is people who live in our own midst, we are afraid that they may tell us that there is a different way of being United Methodist, or Presbyterian, or Lutheran. And therefore, we make certain that mission flows only in one direction: that the center can affect the periphery but not vice versa. We translate materials into Spanish. We give money to support a Hispanic mission. We appoint a Hispanic pastor to go out there and work among Hispanics. And then we wonder why our translations are not read, why our money brings so little result, and why our Hispanic pastors become frustrated and decide to go elsewhere.

And so the Hispanic community is left without the resources that our faith and our churches could offer.

But the loss is not only in the Hispanic community. Our so-called "mainline" churches also suffer a serious loss. People wonder what is happening to the mainline churches, why our membership is declining, why our vitality is not what it used to be. There are many explanations, each with a certain degree of truth. But ultimately, the reason why we are declining is that we have lost our sense of mission and, in so doing, have lost one of the great sources from which the church has traditionally been renewed.

Think, for instance, of what would have happened to Christianity had it not been for the Gentile mission. The New Testament makes it quite clear that the Gentile mission was not entirely painless. In fact, the church in Jerusalem was quite threatened, and there were many in it who opposed the mission altogether. Yet it was in the Gentile mission that the church discovered dimensions of the Gospel it could not even have suspected from traditional, secure Jerusalem.

Think, on the other hand, of the excitement that could be ours if our churches regained their sense of mission, if our communion tables were really signs of the time when "they will come from the East and the West, from the North and the South, and sit at the table with the Lord."

Think for a moment what would happen to your denomination --whatever that may be-- if tomorrow there were an influx of Hispanics saying "*somos episcopales a nuestra manera*" --we are Episcopalians after our own fashion; or "*somos metodistas a nuestra manera*"; or "*somos luteranos a nuestra manera*"; or "*somos presbiterianos a nuestra manera*."

Probably there would be a great hue and cry --just as there were those who took it upon themselves to go from Judea to Antioch to tell people there that if they were not exactly like believers in Jerusalem, they were not true believers.

Fortunately, there were in Jerusalem those who saw things differently. Although they were part of the original Christian community, they were open to whatever it was that the Spirit was doing in their time. And, thanks to them, the church became what it did.

Suppose, just suppose, that one of our denominations were willing to pay the price that I tried to describe earlier. Suppose that such a denomination were willing to risk its prestige as a respectable middle-class denomination. Suppose such a denomination came to the point that it had a significant, active, and fully participant Hispanic constituency. What would be the result?

The truth is that I don't know. Nobody knows. That is precisely the risk of mission. We set out on a new venture, not knowing exactly where we are going, what changes will come about, and trusting that the God of whose love we witness will also guide us into the future.

At another level, however, I can make certain educated guesses. I can make some guesses on the basis of what I find in the Hispanic church that I often miss in the churches in my own denomination, which reflect the dominant culture.

There is a measure of exaggeration and even of romanization in what I am about to say. I have purposefully exaggerated some content to make the point clearer. But, in spite of possible exaggeration, I believe that the central point of my remark is true.

The thing I miss most is the sense of family. When I go to a United Methodist Church of the dominant culture, there is much talk about families-not about family. The church is understood as a conglomerate of families. The church has programs for families. We have family suppers and family nights.

When I go to a Hispanic Protestant church, there is also much talk of family. But it is the family of God, to which we all belong. I submit to you that this understanding of the role of "family" in Christian life is closer to what we find in the New Testament. And I also submit to you that in a society such as ours, with so many broken families, so much movement from place to place, and so many lonely people, the New Testament view of the family of God --the view that I find expressed also in many a Hispanic church-- has much to commend it.

Secondly, when I go to a Hispanic church, I find people who draw much of their sense of identity from the church. I find believers who realize that much of the culture around them is opposed to the values and perspectives of their faith and that they therefore need support from the church, not only to make them feel good or religious, but especially and above all, to keep them on the right track in a world where there are so many influences pulling them away from the Gospel of justice and of love. In many cases, they are people who do not amount to much in the eyes of society, and for whom the church is therefore the embodiment of the Good News that, in the eyes of God, they are somebody. I seldom, if ever, find men and women who identify themselves as lawyers, teachers, realtors, or women who identify themselves as somebody's wife or widow. Rather, as in the New Testament, I find believers whose primary understanding of themselves is as believers.

Thirdly, when I go to a Hispanic church, I go to a fiesta. In all our churches we say that we "celebrate" communion. And yet many of our services look more like a funeral than like a celebration. In many of our churches we say that we have exciting Good News, yet we act as if the news is old and stale. Everything must take place according to script. If anything unexpected happens, we are embarrassed. When I look at the New Testament, or at the church in any of its best times, I see people excited about what God is doing. Expressing it, yes, in all sorts of liturgies, "high" and "low." That is not the point. The point is that there is a sense of the presence of God, of the mystery of God, and above all, of the joy of God.

As I look to the future, I see a time when the church will increasingly have to learn how to live without the support of society around it, and that time is now. I see a time when it will no longer be taken for granted that being a Christian is a good thing, expected of most decent middle-class folk.

I see a time when only those churches will survive that will have learned how to be a church in the midst of a hostile society, or at least one that is indifferent.

I see a future when those churches that will survive see themselves as the family of God, even in a society that may live by other values.

I see a future when only those churches will survive whose members identify themselves, first of all, as believers rather than as lawyers, realtors, or even seminary professors. I see a future when only those churches will survive that have learned to celebrate the Gospel, to celebrate spontaneously, to celebrate even in the midst of pain and uncertainty.

I see a future when only those churches will survive that have acquired some of the characteristics that I see right now in so many Hispanic churches. I trust the Episcopal Church, as well as the United Methodist Church, will be part of that future.

In dealing with the challenge of Hispanics and other minorities, we often look at demographic figures, and our own declining statistics, and then tell ourselves that the way to reverse our decline is to begin Hispanic and other minority ministries. But it is not just a matter of all these people out there who could be church members, at a time when church membership is declining. It is rather the opportunity to bring into the communion of the church precisely those people who can tell us why church membership is declining.

In dealing with the challenge of Hispanics and other minorities, we often think that what we have to do is recover our evangelistic zeal. But it is not just a matter of trying to recover our flagging zeal in order to reach Hispanics. It is rather that the very presence of these heretofore excluded minorities would bring with it a renewal of the entire church.

In dealing with the present crisis in theology and in civil society, where theology seems to be disconnected from life, we often think that what we have to do is bring our great theological heritage to Hispanics and other minorities who have not traditionally had the chance to enjoy that heritage. We then begin programs of translation, in this case from English into Spanish, thus making our heritage available to Hispanics. But it is not just a matter of taking our theology and translating it into Spanish. It is rather a matter of allowing the unique perspectives that Hispanics can bring to bear on the Gospel to enliven our theology and make it more fully catholic.