

"ON MAKING OTHER PEOPLE CHRISTIANS"

INTRODUCTION

There are bound to be some people in a congregation like this who are glad to be Christians themselves, but who would never do anything, either directly or indirectly, to make anyone else a Christian. They are glad to participate in the life of the Christian community, but they are not vitally interested in spreading that life to the rest of the world. Several things are responsible for this among them two things that I should like to discuss with you this morning - first, a natural shyness, and second, a cultivated broadmindedness. What I should like to do is to examine and explore both of these things with you, especially on this Sunday when we have before us the Festival of Missions being held in our own church.

I. SHYNESS

We Christians have a certain shyness about us when it comes to talking to others about the matters pertaining to our faith. For many, this shyness that we speak of, is rooted in a respect for the privacy of the individual. Most of us would agree that there are certain things, according to our understanding of other people - their rights, their dignity - that are a person's own private business and with which we would not dream of interfering. For instance, the person a man choses to marry is his own business, and it's a wise parent who recognizes this and leaves the decision entirely in his hands. The career a man choses to follow is his own private, personal decision and it's a bold man who attempts to tamper with it. We feel that the God a man choses to worship and the way in which he choses to worship Him is something that belongs to that inner area of his life which we consider to be the private sanctuary of the soul.

Up to a certain point this is good. Frankly, I appreciate this sort of shyness. I share it with you by temperament and by habit. Indeed, I should not be surprised if a case could be made for the fact that this silent reverence for the personal rights of another's privacy comes from Christianity, in one way or another, that it grows out of Christianity and is one of the fruits of its reverence for the dignity and integrity of every individual. If we had to chose between a shy person and an over-bearing aggressive person, I am sure that most of the people in this congregation would chose the shy person. We do not like to be put upon by other people.

In fact, I wish that some of the shyness which we Christians seem to have in such great abundance when it comes to sharing our faith with other could be diverted into some of the secular fields of our common life. I wish that some of it could be channeled into the field of advertising so that people in magazines and radio and television would be a little more cautious about entering into my own personal life trying to influence the kind of soap I use and which one of the airlines I should take should I respond to the late report from Florida and take a week's vacation in the south.

And yet when you stop to think about it....it is true that this shyness disappears when a man finds something so valuable, so meaningful that he is compelled to share it with others. For instance, if you are cured of a serious illness by a doctor, your shyness does not prevent you from recommending that doctor to another person: you do not hesitate to invade that area in another person's life. Or, if the

I think we appreciate more than our grandparents did what the great religions of the world have contributed to the spiritual life of humanity. We are not so likely to stand up and say, "See here.. we have all the TRUTH there is....there is no other than what we have". We have lost some of our spiritual arrogance that our predecessors had; we do not feel that we have this monopoly on the TRUTH....that God has never revealed anything of Himself to anybody but those who are within the Christian tradition. This is a good thing, at least in my judgment it is, and I imagine it is in yours because we more or less share a similar point of view on these things in this congregation. There are some in Christianity, I'm sure, who regret it. They are the ones who believe that all who are not Christians will burn in Hell forever. I find it difficult to believe this, and I'm sure you do too.

This growth in appreciation is good; however, the danger is that we may go from one extreme to another, the way a pendulum does. It may be that we may go from the position of the enthusiastic freshman who says "My college is the only college there is" to the disenchanted senior who says, "They're all alike, and one college is as good as another". There is a real danger at this point, and the danger is that we may not only grow into the mature point of view of the man who appreciates the best that religion has produced everywhere in the world, but also go so far as to slip into the attitude of a man like Toynbee who says that the four great religions of the world are variations on a single theme. There is a danger that we will go even further and say that one religion is as good as another, and so cut the ground right out from under any effort to spread Christianity to other people.

When you come right down to it (and I'm trying now to be as objective and honest as I can be, realizing, of course, that in speaking about these things one cannot be entirely objective, for one cannot discard his affections and loyalties) - but trying to be objective, isn't it true to say that as far as the religions of the world go, they are not all alike, and one is not as good as another. For example, the religion that demands the sacrifice of an innocent child is not as good a religion as that which asks the sacrifice of a contrite heart. The religion that consigns thousands of men to the ranks of "untouchables" is not as good a religion as one that draws all men into one family and claims that all people are children of the living God. A religion that depends upon the power of the sword and the violence that goes with it is not as good as the religion that depends upon the power of love and the influence of good over evil.

WHERE HAS RELIGION REACHED ITS TRUE MATURITY?

One of our difficulties in all of this is that we sometimes ask the wrong question. We are likely to ask, which of the religions of the world is the absolutely true one? as though all of the other religions were completely untrue. The question we should be asking is the question put to us by C. S. Lewis in a book written several years ago entitled, "Surprised By Joy". C. S. Lewis is one of our standing Christian thinkers; you may recognize him as the author of "The Screwtape Letters", or "Your God is Too Small". The question as he puts it is this: It is not where is there one religion that has all the truth over against all the others that have none....but rather, where has religion reached its true maturity?

That is the question. Where.....if anywhere, is the religion in which all the glimpses, intimations and hints of the Divine Revelation toward which the aspirations of men and women have been moving, where if anywhere is there a religion in which all these have reached their fulfillment and come to a culmination which we can call the TRUTH?

His answer will interest you. "There are only two answers" he says, "either in Hinduism or in Christianity". He indicates two possible choices. And he goes on to say this: "Everything else is either a preparation for, or a vulgarization of, one of these." Now most of us, including myself, have neither the time, the inclination, nor the opportunity to study Hinduism first-hand, and consequently we are not prepared to stand as a judge, holding these two great religions in either hand....weighing them as in a balance. C. S. Lewis is better prepared than most of us; he knows a good deal about the religions of the East and the thing that he said about Hinduism was something like this. Hinduism falls short at this point: it has never made a real marriage between the spiritual ideals which are high and lofty in its life, and the practices and performances of its cult. On the one hand, he says, you can find a Brahmin, drawn entirely apart from the world, meditating in the forest upon the highest things of heaven, and, within a half mile from where he sits, temple prostitution, cruelty, poverty, disease and all other sorts of monstrosities.

He then turns to that life recorded in the Gospels, the life of Him who made the real marriage between the highest spiritual ideals mankind has ever known and the human situation in which we find ourselves. And the culmination of what he says in defense of Christianity is the thing that most of us feel more and more with each year that passes in our lives....the culmination of everything is in Jesus. "No person" he says, "was like the person depicted in these Gospels...." and then using that phrase I have but before you on other occasions "lit by a light from another world".

And this is where Christianity enjoys its uniqueness among the other religions of the world. For it has a Man - a man who fulfilled all that man was ever meant to be. It has a Man in whom the love of God was made real and the will of God made plain. It has a cross on which the evil of the world was conquered by the mystery of the love of God. And it has a God who became a Man that men might become Sons of God. It has a strange power, that can and does on occasion, more often that you and I have any idea, change the lives of people bringing them from darkness into light.

Is it then a denial of the shyness which we appreciate, or the broadmindedness which we have so carefully cultivated, to say that Christianity must be offered to all. Is it too much to expect that people who have come into real and intimate contact with Jesus will not be satisfied until they have said to their friends and their neighbors, and by representatives that they can send throughout the world: come....see a man, unlike any other that every lived....in whom manhood and the Godhead meet together in one sublime act of liberating love. Come....see that man and see what life and light he can bring into your life.

This - we should be saying far more than we are. When was the last time you said it to another person?

LET US PRAY:

Save us, O God, for such excessive shyness that we dare not share with other Him who is the Life and Light of our lives. Keep our minds open to the Truth, wheresoever it is revealed, to let us not lose him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus Christ our Master and our God.