

"RECEIVING AND GIVING"

INTRODUCTION If a minister has a keynote message in his bones and on his heart, Homecoming Sunday would be the time to turn it loose. The Summer is past. A new season beckons. Anticipation runs high as we turn the corner and face a new season. The organ is in. The Sunday School program looks stronger than in previous years. We haven't lost too many people during the Summer to the suburbs. The heat bill of last Spring of \$14.00 was paid in August. Generally speaking then, things are looking good.

My message to you today would be in the way of a challenge, as we ready ourselves for the tasks of another year of service and worship in this place, in this great city which is the greatest mission field in the world. And for the text for the sermon I have taken a line from the book of Hebrews (Hebrews 5: 12 NEB) to get us launched:

".....and by this time you ought to be teachers...."

DEVELOPMENT It was report card time and a couple of students were discussing their grades. "What did you get in Math" "I got a B". "What did you get in chemistry?" "He gave me an A". "What did she give you in French?". She fouled me up and gave me a D". When a student fails to "get it", he can always blame the teacher. And I suppose that when a teacher fails to put her subject over she can always blame the student. Teacher-pupils tensions have engaged the mind and enraged the emotions in more than one generation.

Now, regarding the background of our text. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews apparently felt that his readers were somewhat dull and thick. After introducing Christ to the Jewish Christians as a priest after the order of Melchizedek, he pauses and then goes on:

"About Melchizedek we have much to say - much that is difficult to explain - now that you have grown so dull of hearing. For indeed, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the ABC's of God's oracles over again".

At times we have a tendency to idealize the early church, but the cause back then was beset by many of the problems that hamper us even today. And one such problem was how to take Christians who were dominantly passive in their knowledge of God and transform them into dominantly active Christians. "By this time" perhaps twenty or thirty years - "you ought to be teachers". In other words, you've been on the receiving end of r a long time - taking in. And now it's time you got over the line and started giving out.

GRANTED: IMPORTANT TO TAKE IN Before going any further, let me say that there is an important sense in which one should never stop taking in. One of the cardinal glories of the Christian faith is its inexhaustibility. St. Gregory once said this of the Bible: "Scripture is a stream in which an elephant can swim and a lamb can wade". Scholars have worked the pages of holy writ for centuries and still they are able to make fresh soundings and new discoveries. I like the motto that I saw in a little lobster shack in a fishing village in Maine: "There are as many fish in the sea as ever came out of it".

Moreover, we can never master Jesus Christ. He is ever greater, by whatever measurement, than we have thought him to be. And surely we can never stop learning how to relate the mind of Christ as we understand it to life as it is lived with us and around us. So there is this sense in which we can never reach an absolute point where we do not need to take in more. "It's what you learn after you know it all that count!"

FROM PASSIVE RECEPTIVITY TO ACTIVE OBEDIENCE

But, on the other hand, it belongs to the good order of things to recognize that the mission of the church can be accomplished, humanly speaking, only as Christian people like ourselves cross over the line from what you might call passive receptivity to a measure of active obedience. "By this time you ought to be teachers". Those who have received must give. Those who have been served must serve. Those who have been told must tell. Those who have been encouraged must encourage. Those who have been taught must teach. This applies to all of us - men and women alike - old and young. It is not enough to simply "take in" and never "put out" - and to leave the putting out to the faithful fifteen percent of workers in any congregation. It's time for the other eighty-five percent to take hold.

During my seminary days in Boston I acquired a deep admiration for an upper-class man who demonstrated many splendid gifts and who upon his graduation decided to take a small church not very far from the city of Boston where he had been a student for several years. I remember running in to him in the refectory one noon hour after lunch shortly after his decision had been made and I automatically assumed that following graduation he would go on for another degree since his field of service would be so close by. When I asked him about this his answer surprised me. He said, "I'm not planning to be back in September and work for another degree." With a twinkle in his eye, he added, "I think I know more than the average layman now". He had been studying for nineteen years since the age of six. It was his judgement that he had taken in long enough and it was now time to get busy and put out. "By this time....you ought to be teachers".

I often stop to think about how many wonderful people come in here on Sunday morning across any given year - sit here, worship here, "taking in". I often wonder how many of them ever really get tied in to a church here in the city, tied in to the extent that they are doing more "putting out" than "taking in". How can a minister motivate people to leave the ranks of the dominantly passive and become active, responsible, obedient to a higher claim? How? It's a question I have wrestled with many times over the years, and have been wrestling anew with it again in recent weeks. Perhaps you have some thoughts on this. I'd like to know what they are. Let me share some of mine with you.

I. APPEAL TO NEED TO MATURE

First, he can appeal to the need to mature. Little children come into the world and everything they need is anticipated for them, and it's there - ready and waiting for them. When they come to the table, it's set. When they go to bed, it's made. When it's time for school, it's there. However, as they mature, unless they are spoiled, they will gradually come to assume responsibility for what they had previously taken for granted.

Likewise, everyone who becomes a Christian finds that all things have been readied for him, that his needs have been anticipated. He needed a friend to bring him, a Bible to guide him, preaching to direct him, sacraments to nourish him, a church to receive him, forms of worship - liturgy and music - to lift him, inspire him, steady him, patterns of mission to engage him. But he matures in the Christian faith only as he comes to the point where he assumes responsibility to secure for others what he found waiting for him.

The ads are all pulling in the other direction. If we believe the ads, the happy people are the consumers - whether it's a can of beer, a new suit, or following the sun to Florida or the islands. According to a lot of what Madison Avenue says, the good life is the life that shucks responsibility and indulges itself in

consumption without end. But from within the Christian interpretation of life, not to mention life at large - it is clear that the constructive and joyful life is the life that assumes responsibility. It is better to create than to consume. A person should determine to put back at least as much as he has taken out.

II. FUTURE OF CHURCH

How can a minister motivate his people to leave the ranks of the dominantly passive and become dominantly active and responsible? He can appeal to the need to mature. Then, too, he can appeal to them on the basis of the future of the church and the Christian interpretation of life. The Christian faith is always within one generation of extinction. Miss one generation and we might as well figure it's all over - sell our property and call it quits. The story must be continuously told. The witness must be continuously borne. And what we are about as a church takes place essentially on two fronts, and on both we need actively committed and dedicated people.

The first front is the home base where we find the church in its concentrated form. Let us never assume in an activist age that we can get along without an adequate home base - a place where the worth of God is celebrated in divine worship, a place where the faith is consciously and deliberately taught, a place where we form a life together - a fellowship, if you will - mutually supporting and undergirding each other under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Worship - education - fellowship.

Why should we assume that there will be a church school there for our children without also assuming that someday we should take our turn teaching? Why should we assume that there will always be ushers here on a Sunday morning to show us to our seats without ever assuming that someday we should usher? Why should we always assume that there will be a choir "up front" here to help lead in our worship without ever assuming that if we can sing we should give up a night each week to come and practice - and Sunday mornings at ten o'clock also. Why should we assume that the coffee will be served at the fellowship hour without also assuming that we should do our turn there, too? Why should we assume that we have the right to expect the Communion elements to be offered without assuming a turn to help make the necessary preparations. Why should we assume that we have the right to be the beneficiaries of a number of different committees, often meeting late into the night, without ever assuming that it belongs to our Christian life to take a turn on some committee ourselves. ~~It frankly bothers me that~~ there is this tendency in all of us to reap the benefits of the institution without assuming responsibility for it.

The church does not happen along as easily as some might think - especially here in New York City. Some years ago G. Campbell Morgan was visiting in southwest British Columbia in one of the most famous cherry orchards in the world. As he looked about him and saw those cherries in profusion, large in size, he said to the grower: "Anyone can see that cherries are easily grown here". The fruit grower replied firmly, "Dr. Morgan, we are fighting for the life of those cherries 365 days a year!" That's the way it is - 365 days of the year the church fights for its very survival in this urban, secular society.

OTHER FRONT

The other front, of course, is out there where the church is diffused. Diffused in the form of its members as they live in this house, work in this office, this shop, that school, that business. All that we do for Jesus Christ should never be seen as taking place exclusively within the context of an institution. The church "concentrated" needs the church "diffused".

There was a letter in the New York Times last January that told how subway stations are decorated in Russia. Instead of having station platforms and passageways that are bland like so many of ours are, apparently great effort is expended to decorate with good art the various underground appointments of the Moscow transit system. This is where we need great art - not in heavy concentration in museums, but out there where people throng and mass in all of the dailiness of life. Wouldn't it be a great thing if there were an ElGreco hanging somewhere in the Tombs? Or a patient in NY Hospital could look at a VanGogh? It is well that we have museums. We need these points of concentration, but the life and power of enduring art is sorely needed where life's routine takes its heaviest toll.

The writer of the letter went on to suggest that perhaps the major corporations of the city could take responsibility for decorating a given subway station. How exciting it would be if the institutions around here would take this on for the 86th Street station of the IRT. In the midst of our mindless haste, instead of having to look at an ad for a deodorant we might find our better selves being called to the surface at the sight of a durable piece of art.

My point is this: so, too, the church needs to be diffused. The church concentrated is not enough. When our members go out they carry the name, the vision, the love of Christ wherever they go. My friend, if you are not a missionary, it may be that you need one! When did you last try to "Christify" your office? Or when was the last time you called somebody's hand who spoke disparagingly of a black, brown or yellow person in your presence? Where you live and where you work is your unique exposure to the needs of people - and this is where you must be active as well. The pity is that so often we feel that because we have a few professionals here and there saying prayers and leading in worship and a few towering spires that all is well and this is all the city needs. I am suggesting and confessing to you again as a professional that there are accesses that you have to critical areas of this city's life that no minister or priest or rabbi could ever penetrate, and if he did - chances are he wouldn't know what to do!

III. LOYALTY TO CHRIST Finally, in terms of this necessary motivation, he can appeal to their loyalty to Christ. The two critical words of the Christian experience are "come" and "go". "Come unto me". "Go ye therefore". For the true disciple, the serious Christian, Jesus Christ is both a point of arrival and a point of departure.

Ask yourself why the original twelve did so well and the early church grew so rapidly and I think you will find that it had much to do with the way in which they avoided what someone has called the "snare of preparation". They were sent out without undue delay. They took in more effectively because they were putting out more consistently. This is the rhythm of the Christian life. If everyone served Christ as faithfully as I, how well would Jesus Christ be served. This is the question each needs to take a look at.

CONCLUSION Recently I came upon an interesting advertisement that called attention to a new series of recordings that come with one part missing. These are sonatas, concertos and symphonies. If you are a violinist, you buy a symphony that has a large violin part. Out of respect for your neighbor, you first close the window, turn the record player on top volume, get out your fiddle and play along with one of the celebrated maestros of the world. The records come with your part missing. Unless each plays his part, the symphony is not complete.

Unless each person in our fellowship plays his part and plays it loud, strong - for all to hear - the symphony of worship and of service in this church will not be complete. It will suffer. "By this time....you ought to be teachers". Many of you have been taking in for a long, long time. I'd say it's time you started putting out.

PRAYER Lord, the truth can sometimes hurt and we don't always want to hear it. Make us willing to do our part. Within this church and beyond its walls, help us to serve thee well - strong, faithfully, vibrantly. And convince us of the truth our Lord lived, taught and for which he died: it is more blessed to give than to receive. This, we are coming to see, is what makes the difference in life. Amen