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Visitation Evangelism in American Churches

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(Concluded)

Evaluation of the Visitation Method

IN keeping with the proposition that it is impossible for any one evangelism method to apply perfectly to any and all circumstances, consideration is now given to points of strength and weakness in the basic visitation procedure. What was this evangelism technique capable of contributing to the work of the church and the ongoing program of the kingdom of Christ? What may have been expected of the plan but should not have been required? Reduced to its barest essentials, visitation evangelism was this: (1) laymen, (2) visiting prospects in their homes, (3) to appeal for decision to Christian faith and life. Evaluation is made under three corresponding headings: (1) the use of lay strength, (2) the appeal to decision, and (3) the problem of integration.

1. *The Use of Lay Strength.* When pastors of the churches were asked their opinion regarding points of strength and weakness in the visitation method, the factor of strength they most frequently mentioned first was the use of lay power. One might have expected pastors first to judge the plan from other points of view; but not so. The harnessing of lay potential for evangelistic endeavor was considered of chief importance. There was perceived in the replies a note of jubilation, a sense of pastoral relief, that a method could be found for exercising and expressing the body of Christ in this way.

Mass evangelism methods depended largely for their appeal on a limited number of prominent speakers, with the individual Christian, for the most part, affected passively. The visitation method, working from the opposite direction, sought its base of operational strength in the broad group of men and women composing the church membership. It put laymen to work in the crucial task of winning people. The effort was considered beneficial in three respects:

a. The witness borne by laymen speaking to other laymen in regard to Christ and the Christian faith was considered to be more

effective than the witness of the pastor. The prospective member's reaction is taken to be: "The clergyman is a professional religionist. You would expect him to speak about religion. This layman comes with no vested interest; he must be genuinely interested in the faith and in me." That such an effect is actual has been demonstrated by Shope in his study of 120 persons won to church membership in Pittsburgh in 1947. In a large majority of instances lay influence was shown to have been more effective initially in the winning of new members than was any direct exertion on the part of pastors.¹

b. Accruing to the participating member himself, the spiritual gain was considered equally important. No longer was the layman a mere passive observer in the pew; now he was co-participant in the campaigns of the Kingdom. To him belonged also the spiritual rewards of the campaign: a refurbished faith and a re-awakened consecration. The replies of pastors indicated the conviction of some that such benefits in themselves, without any other gains, would be justification for use of the plan.

c. Beyond the benefit pertaining to prospect and participant, there was seen also a strengthening of the broader base of lay membership. The church constituency at large was seen to experience a more direct involvement in the affairs of the Kingdom, as they supported the program with their prayers and were concerned with the more mechanical features of the method.

The utilization of lay strength thus appeared to stand solidly to the credit of the visitation plan.

2. *The Appeal for Decision.* A second basic feature of the visitation method was the appeal for decision. Visitors entered assigned homes, in order to appeal for a decision to believe in Christ and to join the church. Was such procedure valid? Could any or all commitments gained through such procedure be expected to remain firm and permanent and to lead to increasing consecration and a fuller expression of Christian faith? The question involves a basic issue within the philosophy of evangelism.

¹ John H. Shope, "The Agencies and Techniques Used for Winning New Members for the Protestant Churches in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in 1947" (the University of Pittsburgh: an unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1949), *passim*.

Evangelism, whether defined in a broad or in a narrow sense, implies a bringing to decision for or against Christ. The World Council of Churches, at Amsterdam, defined exangelism, in part, as ". . . the privilege of so making Christ known to men that each is confronted with the necessity of making a personal decision, Yes or No" (Crossland, p. 148).²

The intent of the evangelism method, whatever its form, is to provide a setting in which such confrontation may take place, the invitation be extended, the decision made. Sweazey writes: "People are naturally inclined to put off making up their minds until some crisis forces them to it. Evangelism arranges for that crisis" (p. 125).

To ascertain the optimum time and setting for such appeal to decision is a problem of both prime importance and extreme difficulty. Varieties of religious experiences make the process of religious commitment infinitely complicated. Zahniser describes the difficulty:

Conversion should not be prematurely sought or urged. . . . To urge decision too soon is likely to result in suspicion and antagonism or to produce a nominal decision which has little depth of meaning. . . . This does not mean at all, pressure should never be made for such decisions. It certainly should. It is only a question of when it should occur. Few cases will be brought to decision without more or less of it. Delayed conversion can frequently be brought through by persistent urging by the right person at the right time in the right way. Nor does it mean that one should ever hesitate to give a word of testimony for Christ to a comparative stranger when the opportunity is afforded, or even to press for a decision for Christ if he finds a background of Christian training and understanding. What is being impressed here, is that there is a psychological process which must be permitted to work itself out. (*CE*, pp. 93 f.)

The visitation evangelism program was seen to blanket relatively large numbers of individuals in a short span of time. As commonly practiced, it called for the appeal to decision in every instance. Workers were instructed not to regard their mission as

² For details see Bibliography.

accomplished unless they had extended the call to faith in Christ and to church membership.

Such procedure would undoubtedly find some whom Zahniser describes above. Having procrastinated in spiritual matters, or having been brought to the point of decision through some other channel or even through the brief interview itself, they might be ready to say yes or no to Christ and His kingdom. At the same time such standardized, blanket procedure would, in all likelihood, force the issue on others poorly prepared at the time of visitation for making such a far-reaching decision. The result for some, presumably, would be a perfunctory decision, in effect an obstacle to possible later wholehearted commitment to the Christian life. One pastor referred to such ill-timed appeal as "a burning over of the ground." The briefly trained and largely unskilled lay worker would find himself hard pressed for the discernment necessary to judge the spiritual ripeness of the time. Instruction to call for decision in every case would lead some workers simply to take refuge in the mechanics of the plan, short-circuiting real spiritual purpose and appealing for mere church membership.

Here the widely accepted use of the decision card appeared to work to the detriment of the method. One secretary instructed his workers:

When you feel that the prospect is ready to act, take your pencil and check the decision you want him to make. Hand him the card with a pencil, have him read the requested decision, and ask for his signature. This visualizes the proposition, and a pencil in his hand helps him to act. If he hesitates, visit about the decision while he is looking at the card. If he offers to return the card unsigned, suggest that he keep it because you hope he will soon be ready to make his decision. At any moment when he is convinced and his conscience and judgment indicate what he should do, he may decide. If the workers tactfully present the decision card near the close of every friendly visit, they should return with the recorded decision of forty per cent of all their prospects. (Black and Woodbury, p. 6)

In all fairness it should be stated that this instruction was preceded by information concerning the deeper spiritual purposes of the visit. Here the question arises whether spiritual purpose could

well survive if such mechanical procedure were left to unskilled workers. The average lay visitor in whose hands the success or failure of the program rests probably is not able to resist the temptation to neglect the evidence of things hoped for in favor of the more immediate evidence of names carried back to the membership roll.

This blanket appeal for quick decision without fear and trembling as to the individual's spiritual need appears to be a basic shortcoming in the visitation plan as commonly advocated.

It is being overcome, in part, by the National Christian Teaching Mission, which is gaining in strength on the American scene. Its method, an outgrowth of an educational mission in the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., was adopted by the Federal Council of Churches in 1944 and developed under the principal leadership of Harry C. Munro, Harry M. Kalas, and Paul L. Sturges. Here the emphasis was on spiritual *cultivation* of the prospect, in anticipation of subsequent commitment of faith. Its objectives were, first, to draw the person to be won into the fellowship of church organizations, where ties of friendship might be established and the processes of Christian living observed; then to draw him into the educational program, where the implications of commitment might become more thoroughly understood; and, finally, to assist in integrating him, with the aid of fellowship ties already established, into the ongoing program of the church, once commitment was made.

The National Christian Teaching Mission and visitation evangelism were seen, in effect, to be complementary methods, each addressed to a specific area in the evangelism process. The teaching mission emphasized spiritual cultivation and conditioning, while visitation evangelism stressed the process of commitment itself. Under the evangelism program of the National Council of Churches, use of the two methods in combination was advocated, with the further addition of the preaching mission technique. A schedule such as the following was proposed: first, a teaching mission, extending over a twelve- or fifteen-month period; then, a visitation evangelism program, conducted in one week's time; and, finally, an inspirational preaching mission. Under such a plan, it seems, visitation evangelism would be conducted on a more

limited basis than normally. It would carry the appeal for decision to those whose spiritual background and needs were more thoroughly known.

A moderate and cautious use of visitation evangelism, in combination with other methods of spiritual cultivation, might lessen the danger of "burning over the ground" and direct the bold vigor of its appeal for decision into the most effective channels in the work of the Kingdom.

3. *The Problem of Integration.* The final point of evaluation considers the need for integration of newly won Christians into the program of the Christian church and community.

Apparently visitation evangelism was able to touch powerful springs of psychological and social appeal within the urban culture. It viewed the home on the urban scene in the light of its function as a unit of consumption in the industrial economy. Borrowing techniques from the business world, it knocked at the door to gain an entrance for Christ. It considered the problems of the urban family—the pressures of working and buying under the impersonal market system, the disintegrative stresses under the associational patterns of daily existence. Then, through the lips of ordinary laymen, it offered the Christian faith as a transcendent and integrative answer to those problems. The reaction was powerful. Men and women willingly committed themselves to what appeared to meet their deep-seated needs.

But if the Christian faith was, indeed, to be an integrative force in the face of disintegrative problems, then the newly won Christians must themselves be integrated into the program of the church and the Christian community. The end of evangelism was not a single transaction. Here, by virtue of its limited philosophical objective, visitation evangelism was often allowed to lose much of what it had appeared to gain. Pastors were quick to admit that between the process of commitment in the home and a further expression of the Christian faith in the church and community life a great gulf existed. Books such as Archibald's *Establishing the Converts* indicated the growing awareness that the evangelism method could be successful only to the point that the churches were able to lead their converts forward to a full expression of the life in Christ.

At the time of survey, churches were again experimenting. One church, through its department of spiritual life, was now advocating workable methods for the reclaiming of inactive members. "Deeper life Sunday," "deeper life pledge cards," "see you in church," and "give God a chance" programs sounded vaguely reminiscent of the evangelism experiments of the 1920's. It was seriously to be doubted whether such extensions of mechanical method could answer the basic problem involved.

Here again the slowly rising influence of the National Christian Teaching Mission was observed. With its particular emphasis on church orientation as well as on education this method appeared to be addressing itself more squarely to the basic problem; it was speaking with growing force in an area where visitation evangelism was unable to speak.

Again it was in combination with complementary methods of evangelistic endeavor that visitation evangelism appeared best able to bring its compelling social leverage to bear for the work of the Kingdom.

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