

Are We Trying to Sell Chicken? (4/5)

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The last two days, we have begun each of our reflections with a biblical text that seemed somehow to relate to the issues at hand. This morning, I shall follow the opposite approach, beginning with the situation and moving from it to Scripture. We have all heard statistics regarding the growth of the Hispanic population, and I shall not bore you with those. But we do need to look briefly at other figures, which depict the conditions under which most Hispanics live. Indeed, if the church is to respond effectively and faithfully to the Hispanic challenge, it must take into account the conditions in which Hispanics live as well as the Gospel by which the church itself lives.

Briefly stated, if we are to respond to the Hispanic challenge, we must realize the extent of poverty and its consequences in the Hispanic community.

Although there have been slight fluctuations, during the entire decade of the 80's the poverty rate among Hispanics remained between 29 and 30%. According to the census of 1990, this rate had declined to 26.2%—a figure which is still more than twice the rate for the rest of the population, 11.6%. When it comes to families below the poverty line, the figures are 23.4% for Hispanics, and 9.2% for non-Hispanics. Almost half of all Hispanics living in poverty are children, and Hispanic children are twice as likely as non-Hispanic children to live in poverty. The median earnings for Hispanic men in the labor force is \$14,000, and for Hispanic women it is \$9,900.

Furthermore, particularly in the case of Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans and Central Americans, there is a factor which the census does not take into account and which, if taken into account, would greatly increase the poverty level of Hispanics. Many Hispanic workers send a substantial portion of their income back to Puerto Rico, Mexico, or Central America, where they support elderly parents, children, spouses, or other relatives. Thus, many Hispanics have dependents who (since they do not reside in the U.S.) are not counted by the census—nor by the Internal Revenue Service—but who would clearly place them even further below the poverty level.

Bluntly stated, what this means is that the vast majority of Hispanics cannot afford to be United Methodists—at least, not the typical way in which people are United Methodist. Nor could they afford many of the Christian education programs, materials, and structures designed by most major denominations, even if such materials were in Spanish. We must think not only in terms of translation of materials, or of production of materials in Spanish. We must also think in terms of programs and structures that take into account the harsh economic reality in which most Hispanics live.

It is for this reason that we were warning yesterday against an ecclesiocentric understanding of mission. Such an ecclesiocentric understanding of mission has very practical consequences. If the reason we are turning to Hispanics (or to other minorities) is that we need more people to support our denominational programs, we will turn primarily to those Hispanics (or other

minorities) who are most likely to be able to support such programs, and who are most like us. Mission and church development will be based, not on who needs the Good News of Jesus Christ, but on who can afford to pay a full-time pastor, maintain a church building, and make a financial contribution to the denomination. This is what a friend of ours calls the Kentucky Fried Chicken theology of mission. When Kentucky Fried Chicken decides to open a franchise, it does so, not on the basis of who needs chicken, but on the basis of who can afford chicken. That is quite appropriate, for Kentucky Fried Chicken is in the business of selling chicken and making a profit. But we are not in the business of selling the Good News.

We belong to churches coming out of a reformation that criticized the medieval church for the practice of simony, that is, for buying and selling ecclesiastical offices. Yet, when our planning and our programs are determined by who can afford our version of the Good News, as if such news were an item in the marketplace, we come dangerously close to simony!

Obviously, we do not set out to do this. Still, there are many ways in which we unwittingly do it. Let me give a few examples.

Example one: We decide that we must respond to the Hispanic challenge. On that basis, we go out and do a population survey, and discover that in a certain area of the city there is a vast Hispanic population, and no mainline Protestant churches. We then go to the District Conference, or to the Annual Conference, and secure funds for new church development in that

area. In some areas of the United Methodist Church, by the time you count a full-time pastor and fringe benefits, physical facilities, and other supposedly necessary expenses, you need a budget of \$120,000. I do not know what the figure is for this area. Therefore, let's be conservative, and speak of \$50,000. The District commits itself to a four-year plan to develop a new Hispanic church and appoints a pastor. The pastor goes into the new community and works hard. At the end of the first year, she is proud to report that she has 20 new members. These are not simply United Methodists who transferred from another congregation. They are previously unchurched people who have decided to join the church. That is more new (*really* new) members than most majority-culture United Methodist churches can report. Let's be even more optimistic and suppose that half of all the working members of the church are tithers—again, there are few United Methodist Churches where half of the working members are tithers. Given the age profile of Hispanics in the US, probably at least four of these new members are (or should be) in school. Of the other 16, two are unemployed, and two are mothers of small children who are temporarily out of the labor market. Of the remaining 12, six are men, making the median earning of \$14,000 a year, and six are women, making \$9,900 a year. Therefore, in this unusual church in which half of all working members are tithers, their annual contribution is \$7,170. Let's continue being optimistic, and figure that this pastor manages to gain 20 new members every year for four years. The tithe of half of these members, plus the loose offering, will probably add to something like \$32,000 a year.

At the end of the quadrennium the committee in charge of such matters gathers to evaluate the

work that has been done in church extension. At the same time that they began this particular Hispanic project, they also began three similar projects in growing suburban areas. These churches grew even faster than the Hispanic church. Obviously, most of their supposedly new members were transfers from other United Methodist churches, or from other denominations. But nobody takes that into account. What they see is that these churches are already covering all their expenses, and even have plans for building their own sanctuaries. The money for new church development is scarce. Where shall we place it? Obviously, there are better returns if it is placed in the development of new suburban areas.

And so, although we belong to churches that have rightly criticized the banking industry for redlining against minorities and against so-called transitional neighborhoods, what we are doing deserves no other name than ecclesiastical redlining!

Example two: Those people who are moving to the new suburban areas are leaving some of our great historic churches in the central city. This puts the Annual Conference in a quandary. It would be a disgrace to close First United Methodist Church, the mother church of Methodism in these parts! What will people say? We just can't close that church. On the other hand, to have to subsidize First United Methodist would be a similar disgrace. After all, the money that people give to the church is not for keeping museums! It is for purposes of witness, service, and mission.

But there is a solution. The reason why people are leaving First Methodist is that this is now a transitional neighborhood. Hispanics (or other minorities) are moving in. Our sense of mission requires that we do something about that growing Hispanic population. We already have the facilities downtown. Why not use them? Let's start a Hispanic ministry!

So, we take missionary funds, patch up the leaky roof on First Methodist, and appoint someone to start a new Hispanic congregation, so that the building will now be shared by the newly arrived Hispanics and the remnant of the old congregation. This already sets up a difficult dynamic. Many of those who have chosen to remain in First Methodist are the die-hards who love this building because their grandmother was baptized in it. Others have simply remained because they are trapped in the neighborhood. They must live on a fixed income, and the value of their property has dropped to such an extent that they cannot afford to move. Now in come these recent arrivals, To the eyes of many in the older congregation, they are the cause for the decline of the neighborhood and of the church. And now they are coming to take over even the church! Needless to say, such inter-group dynamics are not usually conducive to the best spirit of collaboration.

Suppose, however, that this is not a problem. Suppose even that the pastor appointed to work among Hispanics in this neighborhood is the same person who had such great success in my first example. Suppose further that the pastor of the older congregation is exceptionally wise, and that the transition is friendly and even cooperative. Missionary funds helped fix the roof at

the beginning of the arrangement. But who is going to pay for the heating and electric bill in this huge building, with a sanctuary for a thousand, and fifty classrooms and offices? Who will paint the building? Who will pay for the glass that will inevitably break in its two hundred windows? This pastor works hard, and she persuades her congregation that they must give sacrificially. Suppose that she has even greater success than in my previous example. Instead of 20 new members in the first year, she has 50. Again, half of those who work are willing to tithe, and even those who don't are willing to give sacrificially. That would probably produce between \$20,000 and \$25,000 a year.

But then the pastor has to convince the congregation that this money is needed to paint the building, and to pay for utilities. Not a cent can go into outreach and service to the community. The second year, she has to tell the congregation that the Annual Conference has cut the subsidy by \$15,000, and that they must make even greater sacrifices to fill the gap. Still, in spite of all their sacrifices, not a cent can go into witness and outreach. How long do you think that the people in that congregation will continue giving sacrificially?

Eventually, the day will come when a committee of the Annual Conference will meet, look at the figures, decide that this particular church is “not viable,” and begin taking steps to close it down. Now, however, it will be easier, for they will not be closing First United Methodist Church, but La Iglesia Metodista de San Pablo. There will be very few protests, and more people will be convinced that mission among Hispanics is a losing proposition.

This is why, as we seek to respond to the Hispanic challenge, we must be clearly aware that the cost is more than money. It will cost money, but that is only a minor part of it. The greater cost will be a total restructuring of how we understand the church to function and to grow. It will be a heavy emotional cost, for few institutions are more reluctant to change their structures and procedures than are the churches. And yet, it is these structures and procedures that once served the mission of the church that now impede it. And until we realize it, we shall only be touching the fringe of the problem.

The challenge, very simply put, is the following: if we are to reach the changing population of this country, we must be willing to give up our position and prestige as mainline churches. Or, in other words, we must ask ourselves if, in a society in which so many are marginalized, it is legitimate for a church to call itself at the same time “mainline” and “Christian.”

As I look at this situation, I find strange and significant parallels with the book of Acts. We have already dealt with the wonderful events of Pentecost, and also with the life of the early community. And though we wish it could be like that we see, yet, even in the book of Acts, not all is rosy. In chapter 5 Ananias and Sapphira drop dead for having lied to the Spirit. And in chapter 6 we are told that there were further problems:

Acts 6: 1-7

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing,

full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Let us look more clearly at the dynamics involved in these brief opening verses. First of all, it is important to understand that all these people are Jewish Christians. Those whom the text calls “Hebrews” are in reality Aramaic-speaking Jews, people from Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Those whom the text calls “Hellenists” are also Jews. But they have become much more Hellenized than their “Hebrew” counterparts. Most likely, they grew up away from Palestine, and they speak Greek much more fluently than Aramaic. The Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians are the leadership in the church. That is not surprising: they are the natives of the area. (Although they are also Galileans, and as such are marginalized by the “in” crowd in Jerusalem, as the Gospel and the early chapters of Acts have made abundantly clear.) They are the inheritors of the original proclamation of the Gospel. The Greek-speakers are the newcomers. That much is clear. Within the earliest church, the Hellenists are at a disadvantage.

So, the Greek-speaking portion of the congregation is somewhat marginal within the Jerusalem church—and also within the religious structure of the city as a whole. Their widows do not feel they are being fairly treated in receiving support from the whole congregation. And they are probably right.

There is murmuring. And the murmuring is against the leadership, against the twelve. Indeed, a few verses earlier Luke has told us that those who sold properties and brought the proceeds for the relief of the needy “laid them at the apostles’ feet.” The apostles were responsible for the management of resources, and if there was criticism, it was ultimately directed at them.

So, what do they do? They call a meeting of the whole congregation. They did not downgrade the problem. Today some would say that the problem is that some widows do not know their place. We have already given them something. Something is better than nothing. Let them be quiet and take what is given to them or go away and leave us alone. Today we would speak of “the problem of the widows,” or the “problem” of one ethnic minority or another. But the fact is that, if one reads the book of Acts as a whole, it is clear that the widows were not the problem. The problem was the Holy Spirit, who on that day of Pentecost was poured on all flesh, young and old, sons and daughters, and invited all to join, “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Panphilia, and the parts of Libya belonging to Cirene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians.”

The problem is not caused by the widows, or by the Hellenists, or by any ethnic minority. The problem is caused by that subversive Spirit of God, who bloweth from where the Spirit listens, and who destroys all our neat patterns and classifications. And, because the problem was caused by the Spirit, the leadership took it seriously and decided something needed to be done.

(Note also that the reason for moving them to action was that there was “murmuring.” They did not try to ignore the complaints of those who felt left out. They did not wait until somebody began picketing the church, nor even until a caucus was formed.)

The “something” to be done would involve a new administrative structure. The Twelve decide that they have the charge to proclaim the Gospel—evidently largely in Aramaic—and cannot in good conscience spend the time organizing the relief work for the widows. It is important that someone does that, however, and the present arrangement is unsatisfactory.

So, the leadership suggests that the congregation is to choose seven from among its members to carry out such tasks. And here comes the first great surprise. Today we have a solution for this kind of “problem.” If we are slightly enlightened, we appoint a token member to the committee dealing with the distribution of resources. If we are a little more enlightened, we set up a quota for such tokens. If we are still more enlightened, we allow those minority representatives to administer that part of the resources that we have set aside for them. But that is not what this congregation does. Those who are chosen all have Greek names. Some might be natives, but chances are most are not. At least one is listed as a proselyte from Antioch—a Gentile who had become a Jew. So, this congregation, where presumably the majority are still Aramaic-speaking, chooses leadership that empowers those who had been more marginal.

But there is more. Given the political situation, empowering the Greek-speaking segment of the congregation may well have been a courageous thing to do. It implied a sharing of leadership with a new part of the community. It gave leadership to those who might raise even more questions about the church in the wider city. It would lead to strife and conflict that might possibly be avoided if the Apostles had refused to expand the leadership beyond their own small group.

You see, the Hellenists were not “respectable folk” in good Jewish society. Some of the more traditional Jews felt that they were not *real* Jews and should go back home. Some among the more nationalistic feared that, just as God had punished Israel in ancient times for lack of total obedience, so now God was punishing Israel, subjecting it to Roman rule, precisely because these Hellenists, these newcomers, were not as strict as they should be in their religious practices.

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One may well imagine the arguments that could have been adduced against appointing them. If the financial resources of the church are put in the hands of these outsiders, giving will surely go down! When you come to church to be fed, both spiritually and materially, do you want one of those people to be in charge of the table? If it were today, we could find a dozen reasons for not taking the radical steps that the early church took. And we would convince ourselves that we were doing it out of love for the church!

The twelve had an alternative. They could have refused to empower the Hellenists. They could have kept the purse strings. But, had they done so, the miracle glimpsed in Pentecost would have been undone.

But that is not all. Then comes the second great surprise. The Twelve had decided that they would give the management of resources to the Seven, and that they would keep for themselves the ministry of the Word and Prayer. But then, what does the very next verse, v. 8, say?

“And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.” And the result is that Stephen ends up preaching. The Twelve may have decided that the Seven would not preach. But the Spirit had other plans, so that the rest of chapter 6, and all of chapter 7, are taken up with the story of Stephen’s preaching (actually, his sermon is the longest in the entire book of Acts).

Then chapter 8 turns to Philip, another of the Seven who was not supposed to preach. And by chapter 9 our attention shifts again, focusing now, not on one of the Twelve, nor even on one of the Seven, but on one who was standing by during the martyrdom of Stephen.

You see, the Twelve are structural conservatives. They apparently believe that their task is to preserve the structure that existed in the beginning, perhaps with some minor adjustment. And

so in chapter one, even before they receive the Spirit, they attempt to elect another to fill the gap left by Judas. Jesus appointed twelve, and twelve we must be, says Peter. (Note also that Peter even sets up criteria for this election that several of the eleven did not meet: it must be somebody who had followed Jesus “beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken from us”—read the Gospel of Luke and see how many of the eleven met that criterion.) So they go about electing someone to keep the structure whole. But apparently the Spirit had other plans, for of that Matthias whom they elected we hear not one word more.

And now, although they are willing to give up the ministry of serving at tables, they are not ready to share the ministry of preaching the Word. But the Spirit is ready, “And Stephen, full of grace and power,” began preaching.

The significance of this is enormous, for there is a tendency in every church and in every denomination to think that there is a God-given structure, and that this structure must remain forever, perhaps with some minor adjustments. But no. The Twelve wanted to keep the ministry of the Word for themselves, and the Spirit had other plans.

Likewise, the Twelve asked that seven men be named, and the congregation did name seven *men*. Hopefully, if today we were dealing with an issue having to do with widows in the church, we would know better than naming seven men to deal with it! And that too is not simply the result of the modern world; it is also the work of the same Spirit who turned Stephen and Philip

into the preachers they were not supposed to be.

Then there is the third great surprise, the surprise of the entire book of Acts. Because the early church took the risk of responding to injustice by opening up its leadership, the mission progressed far beyond their own expectations. From the Hebrews to the Hellenists; from the Hellenists to the Gentiles. And who are we, but the spiritual descendants of those first Gentile Christians, outsiders brought in, not because the others really wanted them, but because the Spirit would not be thwarted?

The issues posed in this passage continue to this day. They continue at the level of the local congregation, and they continue at every level of the world-wide church. The issue is simply, are we willing to see leadership in the church going to groups that have formerly been excluded from such leadership, especially to groups whom the rest of society does not consider apt for leadership? Are we willing to be surprised by God? Are we willing to be surprised by that Holy Spirit who on the day of Pentecost made it possible for all to listen, each in their own tongue? Are we willing to be surprised by the God who took a handful of disciples and turned them into a multitude without number? God is willing. God is able. God is ready. The only question is, are we willing?