

1-1-1982

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Recommended Citation

Allen, Ronald D. (1982) "A Contagion of Caring," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 53, Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol53/iss1/3>

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A Contagion of Caring

RONALD D. ALLEN

Evangelism never seemed to be an "issue" in the New Testament. That is to say, one does not find the apostles urging, exhorting, scolding, planning, and organizing for evangelistic programs. In the early church, evangelism was somehow assumed, and it functioned without special meetings for revival, special witnessing seminars, or renewal weekends. Evangelism happened! Issuing naturally from that community of believers as light from the sun, it was spontaneous and contagious.

It was, as Rufus Jones described in *The Inner Life*, Christ's way of propagating the truth — the way that inherently fits the inner life and spirit of the gospel of the kingdom. It was the way of personal contagion. Instead of founding an institution, or organizing an official society, or forming a system, or creating external machinery, Christ counted almost wholly upon the spontaneous and dynamic influence of life upon life, of personality upon personality. He would produce a new world, a new social order, through the transmissive character of a contagion of caring.

Evangelism is, as Elton Trueblood says, that natural effort of every Christian to lead men and women to a direct acquaintance with Jesus Christ. The formula is that, by coming into contact with the central fire of Christ, the individual is personally enkindled so that he, in turn, enkindles those whom he touches.

Evangelism is not so much a specialized profession as a basic Christian vocation. While some are by the grace of God far more successful than others, no one who names the name of Christ is ever free from the requirement that he engage in it with all the powers at his disposal.

It was just such an irrepressible expression of new life and power in the living Christ that gave rise to the Quaker explosion almost three and one-half centuries ago. Those early

Friends claimed to be primitive Christianity revived. The vigor of the evidence of those early years supports their claim.

Wherever the Spirit moves with freshness and power upon persons there is a dynamic sense of contagious spontaneity as life touches life. It's exciting to realize that in our time, Friends are experiencing once again the growth that is so inescapable as you read the Book of Acts. Because of recovered spiritual health, new converts are being added to the fellowship of believers with robust regularity.

Evangelism is inevitable when there is deep spiritual vitality. You can't suppress it. As a healthy organism, the church, and particularly the fellowship of those believers known as Friends, will naturally demonstrate the normal dynamic of growth. In fact the failure to grow, to deepen our spiritual roots and to mature into producing the fruit of the Christ-life, is an indication that something is wrong.

To fail to grow may be an indication that the body is suffering an illness. There are a wide variety of diseases which may afflict a fellowship. For example, a very familiar affliction is "koinoniaitis." While it is common to fellowships of all sizes, it is especially prevalent among small groups. Its symptoms do not seem to be severe, but many times it is fatal. "Koinoniaitis" is the turning inward of a group, away from the world to the security and warmth of familiar associations. While some ministry outside itself may continue for a season, inevitably this illness causes such a retreat to established relationships that members scarcely realize they are "freezing out" newcomers as they bask in the warmth of the inner circle. Esoteric language and ritual often prove to be intimidating enough to discourage even the most ardent seeker.

Another effective deterrent to life and growth is ignorance. It's strange that a movement so radically grounded in Scripture as Friends would ever manifest this hindrance. It was said of George Fox that he could write the Bible from memory. The early Friends' thrust of Christ-empowered men and women rested firmly upon a knowledge of the will and way of God gleaned from Scripture. Certainly if a person doesn't know how to reproduce spiritual life, or that it's even a possibility, he will have difficulty demonstrating the necessary understand-

ing. It's hard to make babies if you don't know how. From the evidence, it seems there are some fellowships which don't know how.

Immaturity is another reason for lack of growth. Just as in the physical world a certain level of development is necessary for reproduction, so it is true for the spiritual plane. To grow up in Christ implies not only individual growth but corporate development as well. When we use the word "growth" we can mean several things: for instance, it can mean either obesity or maturity. We can discuss growth in terms of just simply getting bigger — and that may mean getting fat — or we can define growth as maturing development. It takes maturity to reproduce. Many failures for Friends in the area of growth can be directly traced back to immaturity.

What are we saying is the result of health? Growth — the continuing, natural expression of being alive in Christ with the consequence of producing spiritual fruit. When I'm asked, "What in the world is a Friends Meeting?" I tell people that we are a John 15 church. Not only do we get our name from this chapter of John's gospel (v. 15), but I believe also an understanding of what it means to be alive. It says we are to bear fruit. What is spiritual fruit according to the Bible?

Christian character is fruit. (Gal. 5:22, 23)

Practical holiness of life is fruit. (Rom. 6:22)

Generous sharing of what we have is fruit. (Rom. 15:28)

Winning others to Christ and helping them grow is fruit. (Rom. 1:13)

Praising and thanking God is fruit. (Heb. 13:15)

This list is probably not exhaustive, but it does clarify an important point. Growth is normal for a healthy church; in fact it is necessary if we are to fulfill our calling. And growth means much more than just getting bigger. It is easier to measure conversion growth than forms of consecration growth because we can count heads. So there is a tendency to respond to most discussions of growth, especially those in which conversion growth has high visibility, as though someone had diminished the vital expression of vigorous spiritual health to a trophy hunt or a scalp-taking session. Growth is more than adding up bodies, but something is wrong if numerical growth

is not also part of the over-all picture. And certainly there will be different demonstrations of fruitfulness according to the climate and soil in which we are planted.

Dynamic outreach and advance for Friends is tied to the word "relationship." People will move in and out of our Meetings for many reasons, but they will stay for only one — relationship. Relationship is the glue of fellowship. It is both horizontal and vertical. Our expression of love — love that has its origin in God — is the base of commonality upon which all relationship is established. Luke's gospel (9:48) makes it clear that our care for others is the measure of our greatness. It is the stance of one who will serve, not lord it over someone else. It is the stance of one who will lift up, not put down, another. It is seeking to minister as one who asks the question, "How can I help?" rather than stating the imperative, "Here is the answer!"

For a long time I strenuously resisted an idea of evangelism which suggested that Jesus taught his disciples to hide in the bushes and, whenever a likely candidate came by, to jump out and grab him and say, "Do you want to be saved?" Gasping for breath, the poor victim likely as not nodded yes, he wanted to be saved — saved from being choked to death by those who would save him. I guess I can even remember some well-meaning souls demonstrating that strategy. However, as I began to carefully search Scripture for evangelism techniques, I began to understand that Jesus and his followers didn't way-lay people, but ministered to them as they met them while going in the way. The only needs Jesus didn't meet were unconfessed needs. And Jesus dealt with each in a different way. To one blind man he simply touched his eyes and he could see, to another Jesus first spit in some mud and applied that to his eyes. Some needed one touch, others needed a second. Evangelism if it is Christ-like is concerned more for the person than for any statistical chart or stereotyped methodology. Evangelism, someone once said, is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. Even more than that, it is true that you can't give to others what you yourself don't possess.

You may evangelize by the witness of a life-style that is consistent day in and day out. Like a gentle unstoppable

glacier, this witness powerfully moves and rearranges everything in its path. But proclamation of spiritual verities is also an important expression of evangelism. "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14 ASV). At some time in every relationship with an unbeliever there is an appropriate moment when we must stand ready to give a reason for the faith that is within us. All too often people have come to us hungry with their need and hopeful to have us share with them the bread of life, only to have us timidly back away lest we offend. The world is far more ready to receive the gospel than the church is willing to share it.

Even persuasion evangelism has a place. If we would shout a warning to someone about to be hit by a car, or if we would be willing to rescue someone who is drowning, is it any less appropriate for us to exercise concern over his spiritual welfare? Dare we question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" when it comes to the needs of the heart, however willing we might be to feed, clothe, and educate him? Friends are discovering increasingly that to be on the spiritual offensive doesn't mean one has to be obnoxious. In fact nothing can be more welcome than to lovingly press home the claims of Christ.

All across the Society of Friends there are bright beacons of light and power. Here and there, pockets of life are bursting forth in newness. Families are being restored as broken and jagged relationships are being healed. Destructive and possessive habits of drug addiction have fallen away as people have discovered an infinitely greater way to meet their needs. Material needs, emotional overloads, crippled relationships, and the spiritually bankrupt are being met with life in the everlasting gospel of the living Christ. We confess that in our weakness, his strength is made perfect. There is an expectancy and growing confidence as we bear witness to this fresh outpouring of God upon a Friends movement that is being reborn.

In reflecting upon the Meetings I have pastored and upon those I have visited and studied in the last six years I find several common characteristics among those that are growing:

1. There is a basic commitment to Christ as Savior and Lord.
2. The Bible is affirmed as God's authoritative message. Worship, study, and work center on the Scriptures.
3. It is affirmed that God speaks through his Spirit and that as persons are filled and guided by the Spirit, their lives are empowered.
4. It is recognized that every believer is a minister. The call to salvation is a call to service.
5. It is emphasized that the Gospel is for the total person.
6. It is affirmed that the mandate of the Great Commission to make disciples of Christ is our marching orders.
7. A high level of commitment is expected from those belonging to the fellowship. For example many Meetings are expressing their expectations in the form of queries and/or disciplines. In my Meeting we suggest that there are five basic disciplines for the believer:
 - a) Daily prayer and worship. We can do far more than pray, but we can do nothing until we pray. Saturate everything with prayer and praise.
 - b) Daily study of the Holy Scriptures. Get into the Word and let the Word get into you. See the Bible from the perspective of life and life from the perspective of the Bible.
 - c) Regular, responsible participation in the total life of the church — worship, study, fellowship, and service.
 - d) Daily, share in a consistent and appropriate manner your faith in Jesus Christ. Witness in attitudes, actions, thoughts, and conversation.
 - e) Practice total stewardship of time, talents, and treasure. If the Old Testament law required a tithe of a tenth, what does New Testament love require? My tithe is a seed I sow, not a debt I owe. Jesus is Lord of all or not at all!

And we suggest that all Quaker queries are based on two questions: "What is necessary and what is sufficient for me as I seek to live out God's will for my life?"

8. A high level of unity exists, not just in objectives and goals, but in affection and care as well. People in thriving fellowships truly love one another. It doesn't mean they are perfect; it does mean they are committed to one another's success in the Christian life.
9. An additional characteristic not as common, though gaining momentum, is that growing, healthy Meetings tend to start new Meetings.

Almost every Meeting has "warts." No one has arrived. But all too often we forget that the Apostles and early Friends were no less human than we are, no less subject to temptation, no less dogged by human weakness and inadequacy. Quite frankly, they had none of the so-called advantages we enjoy in today's resource-filled world. Their world was no less hostile to the Gospel than ours. Yet their faithful witness, their natural joyful expression of what they had found in Christ, turned their world upside down. Friends today are increasingly re-discovering the dynamic of a contagion of caring that is centered in Christ and grounded in Scripture. Admittedly we have much room for improvement, but the good news is that we are progressing, and we have yet to glimpse what God will eventually do through us in this time and place. There are no shortcuts in the kingdom of God. We do not make the church grow and thrive — we let it grow (1 Cor. 3:7). Ours is the responsibility of stewards and servants. And for us as for earlier Friends movements, the bottom line is radical obedience issuing in joyful witness.