

“THERE ARE TWO SUBJECTS I NEVER DISCUSS PUBLICLY...”

By Bill Vamos

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-3, 3:1-8

If we were to put the Old testament story of Jonah in contemporary language, the beginning might go something like this: “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ And Jonah responded, ‘Lord, there are two subjects that I never discuss publicly – religion and politics.’”

That phrase pretty well summarizes the attitude of Israel to which the Book of Jonah was written. God called Israel, as He summons us, to be His instruments in the redemption of both individuals and society. Jonah is sent not only to redeem the lives of the people of Nineveh, but to call the whole city to forsake its wickedness and begin a new life together. And when the King of Nineveh finally receives God’s message from a very reluctant Jonah, the King proclaims not only religious renewal, but also moral and political reform, ordering his people to turn both from their evil ways and from the violence which is in their hands. (verse 8 , chapter 3)

Today one of the smoke screens behind which we hide our lack of Christian witness is the question, “Does the church save souls or save society?” Dr. Clinton Marsh sharpened the question with these words: “Some would have the church step back from the social implications of the Gospel. Others ignore the personal message of salvation...For some, social action is the whole meal with a little bit of evangelism for after-dinner mints; for others, evangelism is the whole meal, with a little bit of social action only as an Alka-Seltzer to relieve any discomfort.”

Some time ago, at a meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, Christians from all over the world sought to integrate the personal and social expressions of Christian mission.

The conferees unanimously adopted a statement which speaks in the following terms of Christ’s coming to people: “To the individual He comes with power, to liberate him from every evil and sin, and from every threat of life or death...To the world He comes as the Lord of the universe, with deep compassion for the poor and the hungry, to liberate the powerless and oppressed. He also comes to the powerful and the oppressor, with mercy and judgment.”

God has called us to witness to the lives of individual people. And He also called us to bear witness in the midst of society. How can God possibly redeem His world without redeeming its social institutions? How can God reconcile people to each other without recreating their systems of social and political interaction? And how can we as Christians say that we care about the salvation of human beings but don’t care about what those human beings do to one another.

Elizabeth O'Connor has written some stirring words in her book, The New Community: If I am a writer and my consciousness has been raised so that I belong not to one community, but to many communities, then what I write about and how I write about it will be different than if I never felt my unity with the whole, or sensed my place in humankind's evolutionary movement. If I am a leader of retreats, I will help my retreatants to see not only the Christ who wipes away our tears, but also the Christ who waits outside the city gate where the garbage is dumped and nothing is familiar or respectable. If I am a legislator, I will look at the laws of the land and ask not how they serve a small segment of my country, but how they can serve all lands and my country's call to freedom and justice and equality. If I am a voter, I will be conscious of my responsibility to elect to office those who have a deep, abiding commitment to the oppressed. If I am a mother, I will raise children with informed hearts, as well as informed minds, not leaving to chance the development of empathy and compassion in them. If I am a teacher, the advanced students in my classroom will be encouraged to stop their own work to give slower students help in "catching up." If I am a real estate developer, I will guard my land in such a way that the poor and the rich can live on it together. All of this may sound utopian, but the new community will bear the mark of this kind of vision."

The contagious community of Christ will focus on social justice. And it will also reach out to each individual person who needs the Gospel of Christ. Those people who adopt the social concerns approach, about which Elizabeth O'Connor writes, are people who were initially won to Christ by the personal witness of Christians.

The Bible shows us a God who moves lovingly over every individual on earth. There is a passage of Scripture in Luke 15 that stirs up the Holy Fire in me. In Luke 15:7, Jesus says, *"There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent."* And later in this chapter those words are echoes. In verse 10 Jesus says: *"I tell you the angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents."*

Can you feel the spine-tingling excitement in these verses? One person, a sinner yet, gets a standing ovation from the angels of God, when she turns to Christ and commits her life. Prior to this momentous event you can sense that God has poured out everything, day after day wooing the sinner, until finally she repents, and then Heaven explodes with celebration.

Then can you realize that such total, loving pursuit follows every person in the world during every single moment?

The focus in this passage is on the outcast and the under-privileged, but somehow everyone is included. Just as soon as one sinner turns away from egotism and turns toward Christ and accepts Him, all of Heaven lights up and the angels of God dance for joy.

Once again, we are included. At one time or another, Heaven held a party to celebrate our commitment. Perhaps it is poised to celebrate right now, or very soon. And Christ Jesus is yearning to use our lives as channels through whom He can reach other people.

But the question is, how? How do we witness in a way that Christ can be real to others?

I'm going to suggest a practical process to follow. Begin by realizing that real witness to Christ is genuine and honest. It is "the real thing," quite the opposite of the acronym for effective evangelism which I am about to give you. The acronym is PLASTIC.

P stands for Pray. When we pray, we put our witness in the hands of God. We center ourselves in a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Our witness is often missing because of the fear of failure. Actually, success is simply making the effort and the rest is up to the Holy Spirit. Everybody begins the process of witnessing in fear (one-half of which is excitement). This shows that we really do understand what we are doing. The Holy Spirit is the evangelist and He is already seeking responsive hearts. You may find it helpful to pray words such as the following: "Lord, I am helpless without You. Apart from You I can do nothing at all. I am totally dependent upon You. Enable and empower me to be Your witness today." Pray this during your regular time of solitude, and spontaneously, whenever you can. P stands for pray, and

L stands for Listen: Listening to others is the Holy Spirit's way of preparing us to speak for Christ when He is ready for us to do so. Then, by His guidance, we can say something for our Lord which may catch fire within another. My experience is that the witness is second. Listening usually comes first.

My youngest daughter was telling me about an event at school. I interrupted her about half way through and said: "Susan, slow down your talking too fast. To which she replied, "No I'm not, Dad, you're just listening too slowly." She was right. I believe there would be more new Christians won if we would keep praying for the Holy Spirit's power to change us, from slow listeners to being aware of others and tuned into them. We should frequently pray using words such as these: "Come, Holy Spirit, and listen to others through me."

P stands for Pray. L stands for Listen, and

A stands for Accept. It doesn't matter how hard we work at sharing Christ with others if we don't accept them unconditionally as persons. All too often, what passes for Christian witness is actually looking down one's nose at other people, with the vain hope that, by our words to them, we can somehow raise them up to our level.

Sometimes our words are like, "Lord, make me a soul-winner to the exclusion of all else. Let all men feel uncomfortable in my presence. Deliver me from the temptation to read novels, enjoy music, stand and stare. Let me never waste time in un-evangelistic conversation. Let me not be slow to tell others their faults. Deliver me from the weary

process of getting to know people and offering friendship. May every week add more jewels to my crown.”

That kind of witness is an effort to see how many souls I can hang in my trophy case. And no matter what we say, the other person hears this: “Gee, I wish you could be as good as I am, you good-for-nothing sinner.” When we approach another person in self-righteousness, he isn’t a person to us at all. He is a potential victim, a “prospect”, a dehumanized religious statistic.

When our witness is authentic, we accept other people just as they are. Every human being constantly cries out: “I want to be somebody and I want to be loved.” When you let people know that they are somebody to you and loved by you, they may well be open to hearing of the One who considers every human being the most important person in the world and who loves people so much that He gave His own life for them.

P stands for Pray. L stands for Listen. A stands for Accept, and

S stands for Support. Whenever we witness to Christ, action and words are partners. Meeting the many kinds of human need and sharing the Good News of Christ are the two arms with which we reach out to win others.

There was a lady living in the suburbs who used to watch one of her neighbors go to work each morning while she washed her breakfast dishes. She had invited him to church many times and given him religious tracts. Often, as she watched him, she said to herself, “There goes a man without God.” Then she began to be aware that God’s love is extended to all - that Christ died for all. One morning watching her neighbor leave for work, the truth broke through! She found herself saying, “There goes a man whom God loves!” This is the only foundation for Christian witness – a real concern for the needs of people and an attitude that embraces God’s love for them.

If I am witnessing to a person who is unemployed and do nothing to try to help him find a job, then my witness is dishonest. If I speak of Christ to someone who is divorced, and don’t invite the person to a social event at my house or recommend a good singles group, how can that person ever believe me? We will be witnessing to people who have all kinds of pain in their lives. They need our support as well as our words about Christ.

P stands for Pray. L stands for Listen. A stands for Accept. S stands for Support. And

I stands for Tell.

- Tell the story of what Christ means to you.
- Tell the message of the Gospel as you understand it.
- Mention Scripture passages that reflect the seeking love of Christ.
- Offer tangible symbols which can be used to remember the Gospel message.
- Invite commitment.

- Don't push! People are being readied by the Holy Spirit. Do risk speaking for Christ in response to a viable opportunity. See others as persons, not as prospects.
- If your cup of life is currently overflowing with inspiration, that will make your witness easier to do, but it is not essential for us to be inspired in order to share our faith. The cup of Christ is the one cup that overflows when it is empty. Or to use a familiar image, the fire of the Gospel burns in our lives even then we are not warmed by it. I believe the crucifixion and the words. *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* accompanied by the triumphant words: *"It is finished"* illustrate my meaning.
- As you tell the story of the Gospel, I have one additional suggestion – be ready for the Holy Spirit to guide you in unexpected ways to surprising results.

P is for Pray. L is for listen. A is for Accept. S is for Support. T is for Tell. And,

I is for Identify.

A real Christian witness can only come from one person who knows he is a sinner to another person with whom he is willing to stand in common human weakness. The witness for Christ gets in the skin of other people. Eugene Debs once said: "Years ago I recognized my kinship with all human beings. I said then and I say now that while there is a lower class, I am of it; while there is a criminal class, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

When the person with whom you are sharing Christ makes excuses, remember how easy it is for you to run from God. When she uses intellectual arguments against the Gospel, think how adept you are at creating a smokescreen to snuff out the fire of Christ. When the person speaks of a time of sorrow or suffering, and then says: "If Jesus Christ loves me, then why do I suffer so? And why do the innocent die?" Let them know that you have the same questions and you don't know the answer. But you do know that Jesus Christ cares about every human need and always helps us when things go wrong, giving us strength and healing.

P stands for Pray. L stands for listen. A stands for Accept. S stands for Support. T stands for Tell. I stands for Identify. And,

C stands for Concentrate.

Use eye contact. Lean toward the person. Don't fold your arms in front of you, or look around during the conversation. Don't glance at your watch. There are all very simple suggestions. They are practical ways to help focus one's attention on the other person, giving them your respect.

PRAY
LISTEN
ACCEPT
SUPPORT

TELL
IDENTIFY
CONCENTRATE

It may be that all of those suggestions can be summarized in one sentence, which includes a quote from D.T. Niles: “(Christian witness) is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread.”