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THIS WEEK'S SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

STRONGER CHURCHES — BETTER COMMUNITIES

Golden Text. — Let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ.

Phil. 1:27

THE LESSON AS A WHOLE

Approach to the Lesson

This week's lesson has been entitled "Stronger Churches—Better Communities." Now we are under no delusion that we are going to bring in the millennium. God has His own method of doing that. Nevertheless it is true that strong churches — churches with a clear testimony given in the power of the Holy Spirit — do have an uplifting influence in their communities, even if they are being persecuted.

It was so in Wesley's day in England. Eighteenth century England was ripe for judgment if moral conditions are any criterion, and attempts at reform were feeble and ineffective. But wherever the revival took hold, flagrant vices and abuses went into hiding as public conscience was stirred. More and more the Christian conscience influenced the national conscience; and mighty social moral reforms on a national scale became effective because they had popular support. Mary Alice Tenney presents this forcibly in her thoroughly documented book, "Blueprint for a Christian World" (Light and Life Press, Winona Lake, Ind., \$3).

For thirteen years I lived in a community where there were vigorous evangelical churches, strengthened by the presence of a splendid Christian college. It was the testimony even of unsaved people that they came to live in Wheaton "because it is a good place to bring up children." Not that there was no sin there — but the moral tone of the town was definitely superior.

If our churches are not making an impact on the community, there is something wrong.

Verse 1:27 — "They they that gladly received his word were baptized... were added..." Their glad reception of the Word made them willing to submit to the ordinance which identified them as followers of Christ. The "adding" was done by the Lord, and to the church (v. 47).

Verse 42. — "...the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." This close adherence was spontaneous, not a matter of discipline. These were the four, build-up exercises of the apostolic church. The definite article attached to all four of them suggests church practices.

Verse 43. — "And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders by the apostles." A church with the power of God resting on it is not ignored. It is something to be reckoned with (cf. 5:13). The signs were a validation of the apostles' message of a living Christ (2:33; 3:16; 4:10).

Verse 44. — "And all that believed... had all things common." A perfectly spontaneous undertaking, expressive of the love of Christ, which bound them together as brethren. The practicability of a continuance of the arrangement soon appeared doubtful.

Verse 45. — "And sold their possessions and goods... as every man had need." This also was quite voluntary (5:4), perhaps as an expedient to meet a special need.

Verse 46. — "Continuing daily... in the temple... breaking bread from house to house." The Temple was still their place of assembly. They did not regard the Christian faith as a schism from Judaism but as the perfecting of it. The

"breaking bread" in this verse seems to refer to the common meal. Home life was ennobled by the faith of Christ. Instead of "from house to house," read "at home."

Verse 47 — "Praising God and having favour... the Lord added... such as should be saved." Enmity was as yet confined to the rulers. The popular attitude was one of sympathetic interest. For "such as should be saved" read "such as were being saved." God made additions are always saved people. Man-made additions are a mixed multitude.

Phil. 1:27 — "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel... stand fast in one spirit with one mind striving together." The first part might be translated, "Conduct yourselves worthily of the gospel." (The Greek verb here, politeuo, has given us such terms as polity, politics, etc.) Instead of having ten opposing minds fighting for personal or sectarian viewpoints, we are called upon to rally with one mind around the faith of the gospel.

Verse 28 — "And in nothing terrified... an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation." The fearlessness of the Christian in the face of persecution is one of God's ways of assuring him of salvation, and of spelling out the condemnation of the persecutor.

Verse 29. — "It is given... not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." The apostle does not say that suffering is part of the price to be paid, but declares that it is a gift of divine grace.

Verse 30 — "Having the same conflict... in me." This verse explains the form of the verb in verse 29, which is "suffer along with." In the light of this verse we could now translate it, "suffer along with me." The Philippians had seen Paul's trial in Philippi (Acts. 16:19-24), and knew that he was now a prisoner in Rome. Paul throws out the same challenge to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:3).

1 Pet. 2:4 — "A living stone, disallowed... but chosen of God, and precious." The stone is, of course, Christ. (See vs. 6-8 and Psa. 118:22; Matt. 21:42-44; Acts. 4:11; Eph. 2:20.)

Verse 5 — "As lively stones... a spiritual house, an holy priesthood... spiritual sacrifices." For lively, read "living and insert with a view to, before an holy priesthood." The house is for the exercise of a priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people... shew forth the praises of him who hath called you." Every phrase calls for close study. The generation speaks of divine begetting. The priesthood of the believer is like Christ's linked with kingship. "Peculiar" does not mean queer, but "his special possession." So separated to Him, we are called to display His excellencies in lives of true holiness.

Verse 10. — "Not a people... now the people." Quoted from Hosea 2:23, where it refers to the restoration of rejected Israel. In Romans 9:25; 26, Paul uses it regarding the calling of the Gentiles. Here it applies to the Church, gathered from all nations, Jews and Gentiles.

The Heart of the Lesson. There is something amazingly spontaneous about every true work of God. It comes without organization, without advertising — although not without preparation. The time for organization arrives, but here again it is introduced to meet specific situations, as the appointments of the seven in Acts. 6:1-6.

Peter and the others did not plan a church or announce a campaign. Thrust out on the day of Pentecost, they suddenly found themselves with a church of three thousand members on their hands. But the Holy Spirit did not leave them floundering. They had a meeting place — the Temple. They had a very simple church order — teaching, fellowship, the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, and the prayers. They found themselves bound together in the love of Christ, so that everyone felt responsibility for everyone else, not only spiritually; but in material things. Their expression of that sense of oneness was community of goods, an expression which might succeed if all were well in a state of perfect love, but which soon proved impracticable among still imperfect saints.

A church whose members are living in such fashion as becomes the Gospel (Phil. 1:27) showing forth the excellencies of Christ (1 Pet. 2:9), will not be ignored. The fact that the world pays so little attention to us today is an eloquent and sad commentary on our spiritual condition. But even when there is opposition, a

display of the grace of Christ will always win favour among the common people (Acts 2:47). Nevertheless, we must neither court favor nor fear antagonism; but only see to it that we please God.

For the Church is not an earthly institution, but a heavenly. See by what designations of the Apostle Peter presents the true nature of the Church — "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people." Every one of these indicates a relationship with God, not with man. Indeed every one of these designations stresses the fact that we are set apart from the other men, and brought into a new and special relationship with God. Since grace has so elevated us and placed us in a position of such privilege, can we have any lower ambition than to "shew forth the praises of him who hath called [us]... out of darkness into his marvelous light?"

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