

Our Responsibility To Witness For Christ 1

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[0 : 00] Well, there are certain things that you're required to do as a Christian, and they're simple commands. I want you to know that I was up at 5.45 this morning to say morning prayer, because I was staying in the monastery at missions, and one of the things they think is important is that you should say prayer seven times a day, and that any church that doesn't is in the church.

And I would be prepared to debate that point, but I wasn't given the opportunity, strangely enough. But nevertheless, there are certain things which become, I mean, obviously the sincerity and the devotion of these men is impressive.

And I keep thinking about what are the things that it's important for us to be obedient to here in this congregation? What do we understand to be clearly and unmistakably the will of God for us as a congregation?

And we take it that baptism is important, that you are to repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, and that if you haven't been baptized, you should consider that a clear and explicit command to consider.

We also consider it to be a clear and explicit command that we are to do this in remembrance of Christ's death until he comes.

[1 : 48] And so we're very clear about the fact that we have this command and we are gathered, as it were, tonight in order to be obedient to that command in partaking of the Lord's Supper until he comes.

We're all fairly clear on the command to love one another and so fulfill the law of Christ. And though we talk about that in fairly vague terms and perhaps aren't always clear about what it means, the possibility is presented to us fairly regularly.

But there is a further command which I have very much in my mind and heart, and that is that one of the very explicit commands for any church is to go into all the world and preach the gospel and make disciples, and that we have the responsibility to evangelize, that is, to seek to win people the personal faith in Jesus Christ.

That is unmistakably a command that we are given. And I want just to tell you some of the things about how that command is being understood, simply because a lot of peculiar things happened to me this week.

Somebody, the primate was here, who's the top Anglican in Canada, and he was asked about, I mean, people think he's pretty stiff and formal, not our primate.

[3 : 31] Somebody told him that the Pope was pretty stiff and formal, and seemed to be fairly conservative, and that he wasn't really moving with the church the way the church ought to be moving these days.

And he said, well, the thing to watch is this. He said, the largest Catholic church in the world, with the most bishops, is in what country?

Do you know what it is? It's Brazil. And the bishop is going to meet, the Pope is going to meet the bishops of Brazil sometime fairly soon.

And he suggested that that may have quite an influence, because they don't represent the kind of conservatism that the Pope is representing, and that there's liable to be a great breakthrough when he confronts these men and recognizes that in the modern-day church that Brazil is going to be heard from.

And as you know, it's been very politically involved and very much identified with the poor, and very far from a lot of the strict kind of North Atlantic conservatism that has characterized a Pope who was brought up in Poland.

[4 : 55] So he said that that's going to be one of the exciting places that you want to watch, because that's going to be quite a confrontation. But then he went on to talk a little bit about the Anglican Church, and pointed out things that I think are a delight to know.

And one of us, that at least up until the time of Idi Amin, and things have been so torn apart since then, it's hard to know, but that the church in Uganda, the Anglican Church in Uganda, was numerically larger than the Anglican Church in Canada.

that it's a very devout church, and a very admirable and spiritual church, and that it really is quite a striking place to be.

He went on to say that the church in Nigeria probably has more active Anglicans than the Church of England in England, that Anglicanism has taken hold there in quite a remarkable way, so that most of the best Anglicans are now Africans, which is a very strange anomaly indeed.

And this last outpost of the British Empire, which we hold together here on the west coast of Canada, may not represent the actual forefront of Anglicanism, or of the preaching of the gospel.

[6 : 26] It's a missionary situation in its own right, but it's impressive to hear these statistics from other churches. And then I bought Time magazine this week to see what it had to say, and the Pope has gone to Africa.

But one of the people quoted most extensively in Africa was an Anglican bishop, Desmond Tutu, and this is what he had to say about the African situation.

He said 53 million of the 460 million inhabitants in Africa are Roman Catholic. 53 million of the 460 million are Roman Catholics.

But it says that Christianity as a whole in Africa is growing by 6 million people, or more than 5% a year.

Its largest numerical increase in history is it is estimated that there will be 400 million Christians out of a total African population of 800 million by the end of this century.

[7 : 42] So that if you're interested in numbers, the Christian church is growing faster now than it ever has in all of history. Now you can use your shrewd mathematical minds to explain that all the way, but there is a certain reality to it which is inescapable.

He said also of Africa, this is Bishop Tutu, the Anglican bishop, it is also the historical battleground between Islam and Christianity, the world's two most powerful monotheistic faiths, so that in this growing situation there is a very real encounter between two significant and powerful faiths, backed by a great deal of money, both of them.

He said, one of the astonishing things about the growth of Christianity in Africa is that it increased dramatically after colonialism ended.

One would have thought, says South Africa's Anglican bishop, Desmond Tutu, that Christianity, having come with foreigners, would have been rejected when independence came and the church would have declined.

In 1960, Africa was only about 30% Christian. In 1980, it's nearly half Christian. He goes on to say, more important, most experts agree, is the record of the Christian missionaries.

[9 : 19] Now this is a very important point to me. I don't know what it is to you, but it's important to me. According to one theory, the past stereotype that missionaries were deeply disliked and distrusted stemmed from colonists, not from the Africans.

Africans are still surprised and touched by the willingness of missionaries to struggle in the hinterlands, helping to dig wells, teaching, reading, and writing, commanding, life-giving sacks of grain during periods of famine, risking their lives trying to cure the sick.

Well, I have been brought up at university in anthropology classes and sociology classes and history classes saying all that the Christian missionaries had done to vitiate Africa and how genuinely they had been the instrument of colonialist, capitalist, imperialism, and that therefore that the history was as yet untold of all the damage that the missionaries had done.

But now these are leading and responsible authorities saying that in fact history has demonstrated that the opposite is true and that the stability of Africa today is largely the result of Christian, the measure of stability Africa has, I know it's not high, is largely the result of missionary endeavor.

He talks about the struggle with Islam, which he says he doesn't think is really acceptable to Africans, nor does he think communism is.

[11 : 09] He says for the African the spiritual realm is real and something that is materialistic and atheistic like Marxism, whilst it may have a superficial attraction where there is a lot of oppression

and injustice, cannot satisfy the deep longing of the African psyche.

Well, it's just a fascinating story of Christianity in Africa and of the fact that where the Christian church has taken the responsibility to go out and make disciples, that something that has shaped the direction of history has taken place.

Well, I receive other periodicals and I want just to give you another couple of examples, simply not because you probably don't know them, some of you I suspect do know about this, but there's a major conference on evangelism being held this summer and one of the papers in preparation for it is looking at evangelism in Asia and the Pacific Islands among people who predominantly were traditional folk religions had maintained, had been the order of the day.

And they're writing about how to reach these people and he says, a careful look, now we've moved from Africa to the Pacific Islands just so you keep up with your geography, a careful look shows that traditional folk religions often survive among people who have become Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindus.

At first, this appears to be illogical and contradictory. How can one believe both in Christ and in spirit, ancestors, divination, magic, astrology, and the like?

[13:19] both often exist side by side because they are used to answer different human questions and to solve different problems.

He says of folk religion, it tends to focus on human uncertainties, on the crises of this life. Why do people die unexpectedly?

How can we escape plagues, earthquakes, droughts, and other disasters? How can we discern the future to guarantee success to our ventures and to avoid accidents?

Christian converts from traditional religions find in Christ their salvation, hope, and joy. But what should they do now that they are Christians when they seek guidance or face crises?

What does the preacher or missionary say when they ask should we hunt to the north or to the east? Should we go today or tomorrow in order to get gain?

[14:28] In the old days, our diviners asked the spirits who told us where the animals were and we used magic to compel them to come to us. But now we are Christians and we want to know where the Christian God wants us to hunt.

too often Western Christians have left this domain to accident or chance or secularized it by turning it over to science.

It's not surprising, then, that many Christians from tribal societies continue to use their old methods to solve human crises when the church fails to give them a truly Christian approach.

Well, tribal religion in Shaughnessy is very similar. There is a need to deal with immediate crises and a religion that can cope with personal tragedies, but the higher concepts of the Christian life, of forgiveness and faith and eternal life, are some of the things that haven't really penetrated.

And the whole concept of a way of life which is dominated by personal obedience to Jesus Christ is something that we haven't worked out very well in our super sophisticated Pacific Rim society.

[16:02] We haven't done it. So that we, in a sense, are one of the Pacific islands fighting with folk and tribal religion and trying to establish the reality of the Christian faith and work out the meaning of the Christian faith here.

Another area which is in some ways similar again is the study they're doing in terms of how do you reach Jews in order to bring them to faith in Christ.

And part of the report they give is that most groups studying the relationship between Jews and Christians note a growing rate of assimilation, intermarriage, secularization among their respective Jewish communities.

There's been a drop in synagogue attendance, the observation of festivals and traditional customs, an increasing number of Jews would describe themselves as agnostics or atheists.

In such a spiritual vacuum, there should be a great opportunity for presenting the claims of Christ. However, as all the groups point out, there are enormous barriers which make it difficult for any Jew to consider, let alone accept, the gospel, the treatments of Jews by Christians over the centuries, the division of the church, the rivalry of Jewish missions, the presentation of the gospel in terms of Greek rather than Hebraic thought, and the impact of a Gentile cultural pattern on Jewish believers.

[17:50] So you see, again, the intriguing problem there is involved in seeking to win Jewish people to faith in Christ.

Now, I tell you that because the thing that I want just to say to you tonight is that I think that it's terribly important important, that we preach Christ to the Pacific Islands, that we preach Christ to the native peoples, that we preach Christ to the Jews, that we preach Christ to the tribal and folk religions, that we preach Christ to the post-Christian nations of the North Atlantic, as they call themselves, that this is terribly important.

we have that very specific responsibility. I think the Bible relieves us of considerable responsibility by not making us responsible that people should hear or believe.

That's not our responsibility. But that we should be able to proclaim Christ and to testify to Christ is clearly our responsibility. so that a church like St. John's, Shaughnessy, has a twofold responsibility.

First, we live in the midst of a missionary situation which we need to understand and be able to work with in the essential business of proclaiming Christ.

[19 : 39] secondly, we have the responsibility to aid and encourage other people who are going beyond the local tribe to make Christ known in other parts of the world.

That is our responsibility to preach Christ to make him known. Now, it is generally considered to be the most terrible violation of people's integrity to suggest to a Jew that he needs to come to believe in Jesus Christ.

It's considered a terrible thing to approach the native peoples of Canada and suggest that they too might believe in Jesus Christ. it's considered to be almost totally unacceptable within the local scheme here in this community even to suggest to people that they are being called to a deep personal commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior in their lives.

It raises all sorts of problems when you start to do that. and so most people back away from doing it. When you back away from it, the first thing that you do is you demonstrate your disobedience because you're commanded to do it.

The second thing that I think you do is you back away from the only hope the human race has. you may consider that to be a presumptuous and doctrinaire statement.

[21 : 36] And I don't, you know, I would love to discuss it with you, but I don't think it is. Because, you see, what Christianity maintains is that there is such a thing as truth.

And that truth we confront in the person of Jesus Christ. That's the nature of the truth. It is him. And if we back away from that, it means that we're saying to the world, you can believe what you like, you can be as sincere as you like, you can be as devout as you like, you can be as religious as you like, but it doesn't lead anywhere, because ultimately there is nothing but what you like.

There is no reality outside of yourself. And so the Christian has this deep responsibility to bear witness to the person of Jesus Christ before all people of every culture.

The third thing I think we do is we sell ourselves short. And that is that the purpose of our own lives is to be a servant of God.

It's not to live for our own personal fulfillment. It's not to live primarily for ourselves. And you can never and I can never discover what it means to be a servant of God unless we take it upon ourselves to do the work that he's given us to do.

[23 : 33] And the work that he's given us to do is primarily to present Christ to people. And in the very doing of that we find out about ourselves, about our weaknesses, about the reality of our love, about our indiscretions, about our own disobedience, about our own failure.

We discover all about ourselves when we seek to do that. And most of your friends are glad to help you discover it if you're being a bit of juice. Because the first person they will attack is you.

But even if Christianity is true, I couldn't accept it from the likes of you. And that's an enormous help in terms of us having to come to terms with ourselves as servants of Jesus Christ.

Now, I think there is room for all the grace and all the love and all the wisdom and all the philosophy and all the anthropology, sociology, epistemology, psychology, or anything else that you want to be involved in.

The dynamic process which is precipitated when you confront people with Jesus Christ. I don't think there is anything more significant that you can do.

[25 : 10] And that's why I think we have to take that command seriously, that that's part of our lives. And to become aware of who we are and to become aware of what the truth is in Christ and to become deeply aware of who our fellow man is, whether he is the spiritual man from darkest Africa, whether he is the tribal religionist from the Pacific Islands, whether he's the sophisticated Jew from New York City, or whether he's a member of the Shaughnessy tribe.

The confrontation is the point at which we discover the reality and grandeur, if you want, of our fellow men, the reality of ourselves in terms of the purposes of God, and the reality of what God has said in Jesus Christ.

That's why I think we have to take very seriously the command to go and make disciples and preach the gospel and tell people about Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.