

## THE FORMULA FOR IMPACT

"These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...." (Acts 17:6b)

A Sermon by  
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What do you think of when you think of an impact? Do you think of a runaway truck that speeds down a hill, shears off a guard rail and plows into the side of a mountain? Or do you think of a burly full-back who hits the line for two tough yards and a first down? Or do you think of some system-cracking idea that takes a country or perhaps a continent by storm? Surely, it is the desire of Jesus for His church that His people make an impact on the world. Our Lord's heart therefore must have been warmed by those early Christians. Notice how they were heralded in the city of Thessalonica, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...."

But how to make an impact? This is our question, and I think on Laymen's Sunday it is a particularly fitting question. Textbooks on physics tell us that two factors are necessary for impact. There must be weight, or mass, and velocity, or speed. A ping-pong ball that drops onto a pile of feathers makes no impact because there is no weight. On the other hand, a huge boulder that inches against a tree makes no impact because there is no velocity. Weight and velocity - these same factors must obtain in a spiritual sense if we are to make an impact on the world for the sake of Christ.

We must have weight. Obviously, I do not speak here of the kind of weight that some of us would be glad to surrender for the cause. I speak, rather, of the weight of our convictions. We must be quick to acknowledge that our generation and our society alike are impatient with convictions. We prefer deeds to creeds. We would rather act than reflect. Have you noticed the growing number of institutions in our society that go out of their way to advertise that they are non-sectarian, presumably believing that they have made an advance over those institutions that are committed to a definite and particular point of view.

Two Hollywood starlets were sunning themselves on a beach in California. One turned to the other and said, "Have I shared with you my horoscope?" The other said, "I didn't know that you believed in astrology." Her friend replied, "I believe in everything - just a little bit."

This same impatience with conviction has invaded the Christian church. Foreigners have been described as contemporary posterity. If this be so, then the verdict of history on our time will be that we were long on motion and short on meaning. Consider the life of most any church in the western world today. Our mimeograph machines hum on into the night. Some wag has suggested that a strike at the A.B. Dick Company would paralyze the Christian church until it was settled. Our lights burn on toward the midnight hour seven nights a week. Our committees meet with unfailing regularity, and our programs click off smartly.

One does not rise to protest all of this. I'm well aware that the earliest Christians were not written up in a book entitled "The Thoughts of the Apostles," or "The Contemplations of the Apostles," but "The Acts of the Apostles." I am suggesting that the impact that the church is making on life around it is not in proportion to its busyness.

At the end of the day we are only as strong as our convictions. There are too many people going about in the name of Christ who do not know what they believe, trying to direct society towards goals that they have never defined. I am partial to George Santayana's insight when he said, "Our dignity is not in what we do, but in what we understand. The whole world is doing things."

Perhaps the place for the Christian to begin is with his understanding of Jesus Christ. There were questions that Peter Taylor Forsyth raised many decades ago that are still valid for us. Forsyth asked, speaking of Jesus Christ, "Is He our spiritual hero or our eternal Lord and God? Is He the prophet and champion of man's magnificent resource or is He the redeemer of man's spiritual poverty and moral wreck? Did He come to transfigure before men the great religious and ethical ideas or to infuse into men new power in the thorough final and Godlike sense of endowing them with a new and ransomed life? Did He refurbish humanity or redeem it? Did He release its best powers, or bestow them? That is the last issue, however we may blunt its edge or soften its exigency in particular cases. It is between a rational Christianity and a redemptive."<sup>1</sup>

What I'm pleading for here is not that we distribute more religious information, or that we work for doctrinal tidiness. I am suggesting that we will not make the impact that we ought to make on the world until we have had an encounter, have made a commitment, a surrender to this Jesus Christ. It is only after a man has experienced God that he can say, "I know whom I have believed." (2 Tim 1:12) Without such weight, we tend to be carried about with every wind that blows.

But we must also have velocity. How shall we translate this into spiritual terms? Shall we see velocity as standing for excitement, enthusiasm, passion? I've been in the cold caverns of Presbyterianism too

<sup>1</sup>P. T. Forsyth, The Person and Place of Jesus Christ, The Pilgrim Press. Boston, 1909. pps. 95-96.

long to dare to even hope for this! Besides, it has been my experience that religious enthusiasm tends to be short-lived. Let us take velocity to stand for the willingness to take the initiative for God's sake in the world.

Do we need anything more in the Christian church than the recovery of initiative? We have been playing a defensive game so long - not acting, but merely re-acting. Let the New Testament metaphors instruct us here. Jesus speaks of his people as the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and the leaven of the loaf. Salt says to the meat, "Be seasoned!"; light says to the darkness, "Be gone!"; leaven says to the loaf, "Get up, whether you want to get up or not!"

The arch enemy here is that pernicious word, "adjustment." Paul said to the Romans, "Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewal of your mind...." (Rom 12:2) Phillips renders these words, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold...." When will we wake up to discover that it is possible for a man, or a church to make a good adjustment to a bad situation?

The classical illustration of this for me is the story of Jonah. Jonah, you will recall, was asked to go to preach to the people of Nineveh. Because of deep-seated religious and racial prejudice he chose instead to flee the directive of God and make his way toward Tarshish. Here is a man who made a very fine adjustment to his situation. We are told that he went down and bought his ticket; he made a good economic adjustment. There is no indication that he tried to hassle for a ministerial discount! When he got on board he did not involve himself in one of those wild bon voyage parties to the disturbance of his neighbors; he made a good social adjustment. And the record tells us that he immediately went down to his own quarters and was there but a short time before he fell fast asleep; he made a very fine physical adjustment. But God stirred the swells of the deep and invoked the winds from the vast expanses of his heavens to shake that ship and eventually to bring this man back to his proper destiny as a prophet of the Lord. I wonder who the best adjusted man was in Sodom or Gomorrah before those cities fell. It is not our mandate to fit in, but to stand out.

The church in the "Book of Acts" was anything but a defensive church. It did not see itself as being in the world simply to co-exist with evil but rather to win the world for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. Some of you, I'm sure, will remember those television quiz shows of a decade or so ago, those shows that were so widely received until it was discovered that they had more rigging than the Mayflower. I confess having been drawn to the one that came on late Sunday evening where two contestants were to be found in separate isolation booths. The suave master of ceremonies would ask a question of one. The answer would be given. Of the second man he would ask, "Did you hear the answer?" Mopping his brow, biting his nails, the nervous candidate for a big prize would say, "I did." Then came the question, "Do you accept it or do you challenge it?"

This is God's question to the church. Do you see the discrimination around you that makes a mockery of justice? In all honesty we must say, "Yes, I see it." Then the question, "Do you accept it or do you challenge it?" "Do you see the poverty on every side that binds like a heavy chain?" "Yes, I see it." "Do you accept it or do you challenge it?" "Do you see all the lewdness, the pleasure-mindedness, the pornography, the evil that seems to be settling over our nation?" "Yes, I see it." "Do you accept it or do you challenge it?" "Do you see across the world the multiplied millions of people who live and die totally unmindful of God's love and grace?" "Yes, I see them." "Do you accept it or do you challenge it?" Anything that ought not be, need not be. We are called upon to put the stubborn ounces of our weight against all that lives in opposition to the Will of God.

Weight and velocity - At the risk of disappointing those who thought they were going to get away with simply a two point sermon this morning, I dare to suggest that a third factor is needed. It is really implicit all the way - namely, contact. If we had the weight of a mountain and the speed of a jet and there was no contact there would be no impact.

Where does the contact take place between the church and the world? I'd like to speak more fully to this in another sermon later on. Suffice it to say for now that it is basic to my understanding of the church that this contact does not happen primarily in the church, and that it happens not through the clergy but through the laymen. The point of contact is where the layman lives and works and studies and fraternizes and politics and "coffee breaks" and commutes. If it doesn't happen there, it doesn't happen. You have the ministry. It is commonly assumed that the clergy have the ministry and that the laymen ought to help the ministers with their jobs. The trust is just the opposite. You have the ministry and it is our job as clergymen to enable you to do it effectively. If the lost provinces of government and labor and management and education and the arts, are to be recovered for God, they will be recovered through you. I hope as long as I am your minister that you will never say to me of yourself, "I am just a layman." I hope that no woman will ever say to me as a member of this church, "I am only a housewife." Do not demean your possibilities, for you live and work where the action is and where the impact can take place!

In closing I should like to ask of you one thing. Tomorrow morning before you begin your work-a-day week - if you're a housewife, before you begin your chores in the home; if you're a student, before you trudge off to your first class; if you're a business man, before you begin to work through that first pile of correspondence, sit down and ask yourself these three short questions:

If not me, whom?  
If not here, where?  
If not now, when?

Closing Prayer

Lord, look with favor upon Thy people at worship  
now before Thee.  
Give us a hint of the influence we might exert  
for Thee had we Thy kingdom and its righteousness  
uppermost in mind.  
And help us to make it uppermost  
For Jesus' sake. Amen.

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