

## The Congregation's Ministry to the Congregation: Four Essential Aspects

Ezekiel 36:22-26    1 Peter 1:23-2:3    Matthew 18:1-14

**I:** -- First of all, the congregation is a **nursery for the newborn**. Peter writes, "Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." (1 Peter 2:2-3) When Peter addresses certain Christians as "newborn babes" he isn't finding fault at all. He isn't saying that newborn babes shouldn't be newborn or shouldn't be drinking pure spiritual milk. In everyday life nobody faults a baby for being a baby; nobody faults the 3-month old because he isn't 30 years old. It's normal for a baby to be a baby and be treated like a baby; it's wonderful to see a baby **eager** to drink pure milk.

Several times in Matthew's gospel Jesus angrily denounces those who make things difficult for the "little ones". "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin; it would be better for him if concrete blocks were tied to his feet and he were pitched into Lake Ontario." Ten seconds later Jesus, still upset, lets fly again. "See that you do not despise one of these little ones...it is not the will of my Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish." The "little ones" Jesus speaks of over and over and concerning whom he's so very protective; these "little ones" aren't 5-year olds; the "little ones" are adult men and women who happen to be new in the faith; the "little ones" are adults -- 30, 45, 60-years old -- who have only recently "bonded" with Jesus Christ. As old as they might be chronologically, they are yet spiritual neonates. They need milk, milk *only* for now, so that they may develop spiritually. Jesus never faults them for being mere "little ones". On the contrary, he deems them so very precious that he guarantees the severest retribution to anyone who inhibits in any way the spiritual growth of the newest disciple.

The babes-in-Christ have to be nursed. And the church is the nursery for newborns.

What do we expect from a nursery, any nursery? What would we expect if we were taking our own child to a nursery?

[1] Safety; safety first of all; safety above everything else. Safety is so very crucial within the congregation if only because danger abounds without it. Think of the most elemental confession found on the lips of the earliest Christians; "Jesus is Lord." But early-day "little ones" (and not-so-little ones)

clung to this truth when “**Caesar is lord**” was being screamed at them every day. When political authorities sneered, “We’ll show you who’s lord. We’ll show you in the coliseum where wild animals haven’t yet learned that Jesus is Lord; we’ll show you in the mines in whose damp darkness you are going to spend the rest of your lives; we’ll show you on unpopulated islands where you are going to be exiled until you rot” -- when this happened our Christian foreparents could only gasp out three simple words. And centuries later, when it was announced throughout Germany that “Hitler ist Fuehrer”, the same faithful cry went up from the same faithful few. What those who dislike saying “Jesus is Lord” seem not to understand is that to say “Jesus is Lord” is to say something about *him*, to be sure, but not only about him; it’s also to say something about *us who utter it* (by the grace of God we have been admitted to truth); it’s also to say something about *the world* (the world is not the kingdom of God but is riddled with falsehood, treachery and turbulence at all times).

In the midst of all the talk today about spirituality (how I wish we’d return to talking about faith, because “faith” always implies “Jesus Christ”) we must always remember that not all the spirits are holy. Unholy spirits are always ready to infest and infect. In many hymnals the words of the old hymn, “Jesus loves me, this I know, *for* the bible tells me so” have been changed to “Jesus loves me, this I know, *and* the bible tells me so”. The change of wording indicates that scripture is no longer acknowledged as the source and norm of our knowledge of God; at best scripture can only reflect what we think we can learn of God elsewhere. This is paganism.

Therefore the members of a congregation must ensure that there is safety in the congregation. It’s crucial that the congregation be a nursery where “little ones” are safe; crucial that *this* congregation be a nursery where “pure spiritual milk” is kept unsoured; crucial that *this* congregation nourish -- and never cause to stumble -- those “little ones” who have “tasted the kindness of the Lord” and who want only to become spiritual adults.

[2] Speaking of nourishment, nourishment is plainly the second thing we look for in a nursery. After all, babes remain in a nursery for quite a while; they have to be fed while they are there or else they won’t thrive.

Babes don’t get fed once; babes get fed small amounts frequently; babes get fed small amounts so very frequently that “frequently” amounts to “constantly”. They absorb nourishment cumulatively; the more they are fed, the greater their capacity to absorb; the greater their capacity to absorb, the more they are

fed. Plainly there's an incrementalism at work in the nourishing of babes.

Let's remember that however sophisticated most people are (and nearly everyone is sophisticated in at least one area of life), more often than not they are babes in Christ, "little ones". The nursery has to ensure nourishment. Pure spiritual milk must always be ready-to-hand.

[3] As much as safety and nourishment must be found in a nursery, so must affection. Everyone knows of the experiments -- and the conclusions of the experiments -- concerning babies who were picked up and those who were left crying; babies who were cuddled and those who were isolated; babies who were caressed and kissed and cooed to and those whose physical needs were attended to unfeelingly. Everyone knows the difference it made to the babies at the time, and more tellingly, what difference it came to make to the same person, now an adult, years later. Everyone knows that affection warming an infant makes the profoundest difference to the adult's self, the adult's self-esteem, self-confidence, resilience and adventuresomeness.

It's no less the case in the nursery of faith. The babes among us have to be safeguarded, yes; nourished, yes; but always and everywhere cherished. Affection is as essential as food.

**II:** -- The congregation isn't nursery only; it's also a **school where we are to be taught**. Schools exist for teaching. Which is to say, *someone* has to be taught, and *something* has to be taught. Frequently we hear it said, "Faith is caught, not taught." It's said as though it were self-evidently the soul of wisdom. But it isn't self-evident; neither is it the soul of wisdom. At best it's a half-truth. The half-truth -- "faith is caught" -- is true in that faith is a living relationship with a living person, not an intellectual abstraction. "Faith is caught, not taught" is a half-truth *true* in that no relationship of person-with-person can ever be reduced to a teaching. But it's only a *half*-truth in that unless *something* is taught -- in fact, unless *much* is taught -- the person whom the truths describe can never be known. Those who insist that faith is caught, not taught; why do they never ask themselves why Jesus taught day-in and day-out throughout his earthly ministry? Jesus spent more time teaching than doing any other single thing. Shouldn't this tell us something?

At the very least it should tell us that events are not self-interpreting. *No event in world-occurrence is ever self-interpreting*. Jesus could never merely *do* something and then assume that everyone who observed him took home the correct meaning of what he had done. Quite the contrary: he always

assumed that they *weren't* going to take home the correct meaning of what he had done unless he told them. Prior to his death and after it Jesus *taught* any who would listen the meaning of his death. If he hadn't taught them the significance of his death they would assume that his death meant no more than the deaths of the two criminals crucified alongside him; no more than the deaths of miscreants whom the state executes. Not only would people not take home the correct meaning of Christ's activity; they would certainly take home the wrong meaning.

There's a story about Francis of Assisi that warms everyone's heart; it may or may not be a true story about St. Francis, but in any case it's a story that I don't like. A fellow-friar asked Francis to join him in preaching outdoors throughout the city. Francis consented, and then added, "But before we preach we are going to walk through the city." When they had finished walking through the city the fellow-friar asked him, "But when do we preach?" "We just did", replied Francis, "we just did." Oh, it's a honey-sweet story dripping with sentimentality, but it's only half-true. The half-truth, of course, is that the preacher's utterance and the preacher's life ought to be consistent. Fine. But no person's life, not even a saint's (Francis'), *not even Jesus Christ's* unambiguously declares the gospel. If Christ's life had bespoken the truth unambiguously, why would he have bothered to teach?

The mistake Francis is said to have made in Italy Mother Teresa never made in India. When Mother Teresa was awarded a Nobel Prize a Yugoslavian journalist (Mother Teresa was Yugoslavian herself) asked her why she rescued throwaway babies every night from garbage cans and took them to the Sisters of Charity orphanage. Mother Teresa didn't say, "Need you *ask* why?" She didn't say, "Isn't why I do it *obvious*? The meaning and motive of what I do; isn't it all *self-evident*?" Instead she replied in her trademark, measured manner, "I rescue throwaway babies for one reason: Jesus loves me." To be sure, it was only a one-sentence reply. None the less, she knew she had to *say* something to interpret her action to the journalist.

We always have to be taught. We have to be taught answers to life-questions inasmuch as the answers are important; crucial, in fact. And if the answers are crucial, so are the questions. Think of the questions, of some of them:

\*Who is God? He's the creator. However, scripture insists much more frequently that God is also the destroyer. What does this mean?

\*Why is it that Jesus describes his most intimate followers as possessed of the tiniest

faith?

\*Why do Christians regard as normative for faith and life an “older” testament that is four times longer than the “newer”? Why do we need the older at all? What would happen if we set it aside?

\*Why is it that the only physical description of Jesus that the apostles furnish is the fact that he was circumcised? (It matters not to our faith what Jesus looked like; it matters everything to our faith that he was, is and ever will be *a son of Israel*.)

\*Why did our Hebrew foreparents regard idolatry, murder and adultery as the three most heinous sins? Why do we modern degenerates regard murder as criminal, adultery as trivial, idolatry as nothing at all, and none of them as sin?

Jesus assumed that *truth isn't self-evident*. Jesus assumed, in other words, that the *meaning of the most obvious event isn't obvious at all*. Jesus assumed that we always have to be taught. The congregation is a school in which Christ's people are taught.

**III:** -- The congregation is also an **army that fights**. Christians today aren't ready to hear this. We don't mind being a nursery or a school; but an army, an army that fights? Aren't we followers of the Prince of Peace? Aren't we called to be peacemakers?

I have noticed that those who are repelled by any suggestion that the congregation is an army are repelled by the notion of fighting. I have noticed too, however, that the same people who abhor any Christian reference to fighting will fight instantly if Canada Revenue Agency gets their income-tax assessment wrong (or is suspected of getting it wrong). They will fight instantly if their child is awarded a low grade on a school-project. They will fight instantly as soon as they hear that their employer has plans to alter working conditions or compensation or holidays. After all, their cause is right and therefore righteous.

How much more is at stake when the truth of Jesus Christ collides with the falsehoods of the evil one. How much more is at stake when someone is victimised and rendered a casualty in the midst of that spiritual warfare she was never even aware of -- or may have been aware of. No wonder Paul picks up the metaphor of soldiering and urges the congregation in Ephesus to put on the *whole* armour of God: shield, shoes, helmet, breastplate, sword. (Eph. 6:10-17) There's nothing God-honouring about being an

unnecessary victim.

No wonder too that Paul reminds young Timothy that soldiering entails hardship, sacrifice, singlemindedness, “training in godliness”. No wonder he gathers it all up by urging the young man always to “fight the good fight of the faith.” (2 Tim. 2:3-4; 1 Tim. 6:12; 4:7) We can’t fight unless we have first trained!

Training? Many church-folk today see no point to training just because they see no virtue in fighting. They think that conflict is always and everywhere sub-Christian because non-loving. And they are wrong.

**(i)** In the first place our Lord leaves us no choice: if we are going to be *disciples* then we are going to be *soldiers* in that conflict which erupts the moment his flag of truth is planted in the citadel of a hostile world. Since the master was immersed in conflict every day, what makes his followers think they won’t be or shouldn’t be?

**(ii)** In the second place those who regard all conflict as sub-Christian because unloving fail to see that spiritual conflict arises on account of love’s energy. God *is* love; Jesus is the Incarnation of God’s nature; Jesus is immersed in conflict every day just because love is resisted every day, love is contradicted every day, love is savaged every day. What kind of love is it that won’t persist in the face of opposition? won’t contend to vindicate the slandered and relieve the oppressed? won’t fend off every effort of lovelessness to victimise and abandon? Love that won’t persist and contend; love that refuses to fight is simply no love at all.

**(iii)** In the third place the most love-filled heart knows that there *is* a place for godly resistance. There is a time and a place to dig in our heels and stiffen our spine in the name of Jesus Christ. When Martin Luther, grief-stricken at the horrible abuses in the church of his day, finally stopped weeping and decided to *do* something, he discussed what he planned to do with Professor Jerome Schurff of Wittenberg University. Schurff was professor in the faculty of law. He was one of the brightest stars in the Wittenberg U. firmament. Professor Jerome Schurff agreed with Luther that the abuses were dreadful. Schurff, however, was aghast at what Luther planned to do. “Don’t do that!” he cried, “You’ll renders us all targets here; we’ll all be in trouble in Wittenberg. The authorities will never put up with it!” “And if they *have* to put up with it?” Luther replied, “if they *have* to?”

To live in the company of Jesus Christ is never to relish conflict for the sake of conflict; but it is to

share his conflict. To live in the company of Jesus Christ is to share love's struggle in the face of unlove's aggression.

**IV: --** The congregation is also a **hospital for the wounded**. When the apostle Paul discusses the different ministries to be exercised in any one congregation he mentions healing. (1 Cor. 12) If healing is to be exercised within the congregation, then the congregation is a hospital.

We must be sure to understand that there is no shame in being hospitalised just because there is no shame in being wounded. The fact that we are wounded simply confirms the truth that we are soldiers in Christ's army and have recently been on the front lines. Spiritual conflict is no less debilitating than any other kind of conflict.

One military facility for the battle-worn is the Rest and Recreation Centre. "R&R" centres are not merely for military personnel who have broken a leg or fractured a skull; "R&R" centres principally accommodate those who have been under immense stress, are frazzled, and need to move behind the front for a while in order to recuperate. During World War II all submarine crews were given as much time off to recuperate as they spent on patrol. A month-long patrol at sea was always followed by a month's rest ashore. No one ever suggested there was something shameful in the men's need for rest.

Rest. Jesus invites us, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:30) "Rest", however, has a special force in scripture; "rest" in scripture doesn't have the modern sense of "vegging", utter inactivity. Rest, rather, has to do with restoration. "Come to me, all who are bone-weary and worn down and frazzled and fractured and frantic; come to me, for with me there is restoration."

We should note that our Lord's winsome invitation, "Come unto me...", isn't an invitation at all; it's a command. "Come", "you come", "you come now" -- it's plainly an imperative; he *commands* us to come to him for restoration. To say that it's a command is to say there's no option here. We *must* go to him for restoration, just because he knows that his soldiers are beaten up, and once beaten up aren't much use until restored.

In other words, providing hospital care for Christ's wounded is as much the congregation's ministry to the congregation as is being a nursery where newborns are nurtured, and a school where learners are taught, and an army where soldiers are trained and in which they fight the good fight of the faith until that

day when we say with the apostle,

**I have fought the good fight,**

**I have finished the race,**

**I have kept the faith.**

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