

# The Church Speaks to the Community

– John Poole –

---

*The Church is not to merely attend to the surrounding community, but is itself to be a Community demonstrating God's Kingdom life. It is here, in this witness, that the Church finds its greatest ministry.*

---

The crucified Lord was now risen from the dead, having triumphed gloriously over sin, death, and hell. He had ascended into heaven and in response to His request, the Father had poured forth the Spirit on the one hundred and twenty who waited with prayer and praise. The news of unusual happenings spread throughout the city of Jerusalem, and a great crowd of perplexed, wondering people came together to be challenged by Peter and the rest of the apostles to "repent and be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit." Three thousand responded joyfully to the invitation to save themselves from the generation without direction and enter into a new life.

Now, the question became - "How would these individuals, some, followers of Jesus since the beginning Of His ministry, many newly convinced of His lordship, continue the work that He had begun. God had so loved the world that He had sent His only begotten Son that men might find their way out of the darkness Into the Kingdom of light. In what manner would those Who followed Him continue this ministry? What course of action would be taken? How would they tackle the job of showing to the people in Jerusalem the love and forgiveness of God? How would they confront the wrongs and injustices with which they were surrounded? What would they say to the corrupt political and religious systems that flourished in their country? All of these questions and many like them demand our attention and consideration if we are to adequately answer the challenge - "How does the local church relate to the community?"

## **FOLLOWING JESUS' EXAMPLE**

To gain insight into the situation, it is necessary to go back to the life and ministry of Jesus. Remember, those who came after Him were taught to do and act as He had during His earthly life. They were not called upon to develop programs and ideas of their own, but rather to follow in His steps. He was for them the great example; they were to go and do as He had done. It is at this point that many of us have made a serious mistake. In our desire to maintain the teaching of the deity of Christ, we have neglected the fact that He was here to be an example. He was more than an example, true, but an example He was. He expected that His instructions would be

obeyed, and the pattern of ministry that He had set forth before His followers would be carried on.

Remember the situation. Jesus had come to earth as the representative of another government. He was an ambassador of the Kingdom of Heaven here on the earth. When He entered His ministry there were a number of different courses of action that He could have followed to show the difference between the government that He represented and the government under which the people lived. He could have spent all of His time dealing with the corrupt religious system that was everywhere prevalent. Or, He could have spent all of His time speaking out against the injustices that abounded on every hand and under which the Jewish people were forced to live. He could have endeavored to stage a political revolution, or tried to reform the religious system. But what did He do?

First of all, He did indeed speak out against the religious hypocrites on many occasions. He did talk about the day of justice that would come for those who were denied their rights and freedoms. However, there can be no argument about the fact that the main emphasis of His ministry was *the building of an alternate community*. He spent the largest part of His time laying the foundation in the lives of the apostles, for the inaugurating of the Kingdom of God on the earth. He was working to produce an example of what life is like lived under the reign of God. He would establish a working model, something men could look at and see, and then say, "That is what it's all about. We can see it in operation."

It was to **this** end He labored, persuading those who followed Him that the most important thing in their lives was to learn how to relate to God and to one another. He was building a Kingdom where men would learn to give up their lives for one another in genuine love. He made it quite clear. He was different and so was the Kingdom. In an age of rebellion, He was under authority and teaching that principle. In an age marked by selfishness, He showed the joy of giving. Surrounded by people with a lack of self-control, He was disciplined in His life style. He did not simply speak about alternatives, He was an alternative. To follow Him was to embrace a new way of living. He called men to live under a new government, and showed by His own life that to come under the authority of the Father was to have a joy that was full, peace that could not be taken away by the world, and a righteousness that was genuine, not simply religious.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF AN ALTERNATE SOCIETY**

It is not surprising then that after the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, those who followed Him continued the pattern that He had begun as described in Acts 2:

All whose faith had drawn them together hold everything in common: they would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required. With one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the temple and breaking bread in private houses shared their meals with unaffected joy, and they praised God and enjoyed the favor of the whole people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those whom He was saving.

In the middle of the city of Jerusalem a new Jerusalem was taking shape - an alternate society was coming together. By the demonstration of a new way of life, these early believers were prepared to challenge the life style, habits and customs of the people who surrounded them. Just as in the personal ministry of Jesus, in the middle of a greedy, grasping world of "me-firsters" there were living a caring, sharing people who obviously loved God and others.

This is the way in which our fellowship of believers has chosen to speak to the community that surrounds us. Because we were scattered over a large geographical area and located in numerous cities and towns, the question of how to relate to the community has been one that was totally Ignored for years, or at best a source of bewilderment through other periods. But more recently, the same question has become a source of excitement and action. After numerous false starts, we have become convinced that we cannot significantly challenge the life of the community in which we live until we first have a viable alternative to offer the *individuals* who sit in the confusion and frustration of the world.

When I speak of offering an alternative to worldly people, I am not talking about the issue of heaven. Since this is not the place for a discussion of life after death, it should be sufficient to say that telling people that "we know where we are going when we die" is not the power-packed statement of decision that we have thought it was. What must be shown is that a true alternative exists here on the earth. Talk about heaven and what it will be like "up there" is not going to do the job. People must be *shown* that a better way of life exists here on this earth. How can men be expected to believe that an all-powerful God can produce a utopia in the sky but cannot get His own people to live together in peace and joy here on the earth? What are we showing to them? What can we say to people who are tired of easy word answers to the practical problems of' this world.

Everybody has his idea of what should be done. There is no shortage of suggestions or solutions. But where are the people who have lived out a workable answer to the difficulties that confront the people of our nation day after day? The politicians, the religious leaders, even the rabble-rousers all cry with loud voices and people grow weary and cease to listen to promises that are not kept - clouds with no rain, wells without water. Is the answer for us to add our voice to the others and shout more loudly than they do? Is it enough for us to say that we are right and all

the others are wrong? Is telling people that Jesus is the answer sufficient to meet the needs of people surrounded by hurts, poverty, prejudice, violence, and injustice?

I submit that in a country such as ours, more words about Christ and His Kingdom will not effect the long sought result. We must be a living demonstration of the Kingdom that Jesus founded on this earth. Most Americans have heard something of the Gospel message but few of them have ever actually *seen* the Gospel in action, fleshed out in the lives of real people. A true nationwide awakening awaits the production of such communities of faith.

We are learning something else. When you start to think in terms of living out the message of the Gospel, you soon become aware that this must be done in plurality. I am not speaking now of individual witnessing, but of the witness of the corporate man. Although one changed life is an effective tool in God's hands, the demonstration of the message in a people who have learned to live together under His authority will have a greater impact. The true test of my conversion is not only how it changes my relationship to God, but how does it effect my relationship with others?

Let's take a look at all of this in practical terms. For the Church to function with integrity, we must have answers to the problems that confront the citizens of our nation. We have to face the question, "How does the Kingdom of God speak to the issues of the day?" "In what concrete way can we demonstrate to the world around us that there is a better way?"

*JOHN POOLE was the senior pastor of The Gospel Temple in Philadelphia at the time this article first appeared (New Wine, July-August, 1975)*

*This article appears here with the expressed permission of CSM publishing.*