

Excerpt from Chapter Two

What Contagious Christian Movements Look Like

“Contagious” Christianity

Our final theme is Contagion. What makes Christianity contagious? We are sufficiently familiar with some of the answers, but four insights are worth repeating. 1) Contagious Christianity is imaginative Christianity. The less prosaic and the more interesting and imaginative the people experience faith’s communication, the more contagious it becomes. 2) Ministry that engages people’s issues, struggles, and felt needs is more contagious than generic stock presentations of the faith. 3) Enthusiastic Christians contribute to Christianity’s contagion. If you do not have enough enthusiastic people in your church, target for outreach some enthusiastic people in the community; they will bring their enthusiasm with them! 4) Growing churches, especially churches receiving converts from the world, are more exciting and contagious than stagnant and declining churches. You can feel the difference when you walk in.

Those four ways we know; but three others warrant some explanation.

Cultural Relevance

Culturally relevant expressions of Christianity are much more contagious than culturally alien expressions. The very early Christian movement had to schedule its first “council” to clarify and settle this important strategic principle. The first constellation of house churches—in Jerusalem, led by James, constituted a culturally Jewish expression of Christianity. Most (or all) of the believers in Jerusalem were Jews who affirmed Jesus as the promised Messiah. Keeping Judaism’s Sabbath laws and customs, and worshiping in Aramaic, were completely natural to them. Gentiles were very welcome in the Jerusalem church, if they submitted to circumcision, gave up their Gentile culture and adopted Jewish ways, and learned the Aramaic language.

There was, however, a problem. Up north in Antioch (the problems usually come from up north!), Gentiles were becoming disciples and were not submitting to circumcision, and so on. The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to straighten them out up in Antioch, but Barnabas fell in love with the movement in Antioch, as it was. So, as reported in Acts 16, James called a meeting in Jerusalem to settle the matter once and for all. James and his people, Paul and his people, and Peter and his people, comprised most of the delegates. Paul advocated a policy that contrasted with Jerusalem’s policy by almost 180 degrees. The faith should not impose one language

and one set of customs on other peoples; the faith was called to adapt to every tongue and culture on the face of the earth.

Paul's case prevailed, and the principle of (what came to be called) "indigenous" Christianity became the policy of the early Christian movement. Acts 16 reports the most important decision ever made to facilitate the expansion of Christianity—in every cultural context, in every age. But it would be an understatement to say that the Church has not consistently followed the policy.

For instance, people holding the Jerusalem view did not give up. Some of the "Judaizers" scattered across the Mediterranean world and planted Jewish-Christian churches—while challenging some of the Gentile churches, such as the church at Galatia, to adopt Jewish ways. Again, by some time in the second century, many of the Gentile churches adopted the Jerusalem paradigm in different clothing: the Latin language and Roman customs were now believed to be essential to Christianity's expression and were prerequisite to becoming a Christian, so rural peoples and "barbarian" peoples did not qualify. In time, however, St. Martin reached a rural people and St. Patrick reached a barbarian people by, and not without, recovering the indigenous principle.

Often, the Judaizing principle operates in more informal ways, short of official policy, in which Christian leaders simply assume that a specific dialect, and a sub-culture's customs and aesthetic, are necessary for Christian expression and experience. This was one problem that John Wesley observed in his Church of England in the eighteenth century. The "common people" did not speak establishment Christianity's language. They did not dress, conduct themselves, and enjoy the same kind of music that characterized polite, refined "Christian" society. How could such people become "real Christians?" You know the rest of the story. Methodism's approach began on the people's turf, and the approach adapted to the "common people's" style, language, aesthetics, and music, and a contagious movement emerged—of, by, and for the people that establishment Christianity had written off as unfit for Christianization.

We should not assume, in most of our churches, that we are at all past that problem today. Many secular people are not like "good church people," culturally, and they do not understand stained-glass voices and ecclesiastical jargon. In case you have not noticed, among the unwashed pagan masses, there is no epidemic interest in eighteenth century pipe organ music!

For what it is worth, the policy of cultural relevance has more theological warrant than might be obvious. As Jesus, in the Incarnation, took on Galilean culture and spoke Galilean folk-Hebrew, so his Body the Church is called to extend such incarnational expressions to every people. Then Paul modeled the way, as he became "all things to all people" that "some might be saved." The indigenous principle can be stated in one sentence. Each people's culture is the natural medium for expressing God's revelation to them.

Emotional Relevance

A second principle behind contagious Christianity is emotional relevance. The European Enlightenment taught that we human beings are unique creatures because we are rational creatures: while we still experience the emotions that we have inherited from our primitive forbears; education has come to lift us into the life of the mind. With the fading of the Enlightenment, and the rise of postmodernity, it is becoming apparent that the Enlightenment was wrong by almost 180 degrees. We are not basically rational creatures who sometimes feel; we are basically emotional creatures who sometimes think. (Even what we think about is influenced by our background emotional state, and how we think about it is influenced by our feelings at the time.)

This discovery is more-or-less a re-discovery. Even in the eighteenth century, when the Enlightenment's onslaught seemed unstoppable, the romantics found ways to speak to, and awaken, the heart—through poetry, fiction, art, and music. In that same century, Jonathan Edwards reflected upon the indispensable role of “religious affections” in Christian experience, and John Wesley defined Christianity as, substantially, a “religion of the heart.”

Today, we need a fuller recovery of a more holistic understanding of human nature, in part because many people in our communities are fighting an emotional war within, and they are being gradually destroyed by emotional forces—like pride, fear, sadness, anger, hate, jealousy, low self-esteem, and other feelings surging within them that are hijacking their lives. Furthermore, authentic Christian conversion involves emotional healing, as well as deliverance from a destructive emotional world into the new emotional world of the Kingdom of God, in which such emotions as gratitude, love, humility, peace, healthy self-esteem, and joy enter the convert's experience. The two characters in the film *The Bucket List* edge toward New Testament experiential reality when they agree on life's two most important questions: “Have you found joy in your life?”, and, “Have you brought joy to others?”

Effective churches begin where people are, including their emotional struggles and their aspirations for emotional freedom. Teaching, counseling, preaching, liturgy, evangelism, and other ministries are expressed with emotional sensitivity and relevance. Indeed, some of us are now suggesting, as Greg Clapper does in his new book, that *The Renewal of the Heart is the Mission of the Church*. Today, as the recovery ministries of many churches are learning to engage the emotional baggage that attaches to addiction, they are learning to minister to everyone with emotional relevance.

Radical Outreach

The contagion of culturally relevant Christianity and emotionally relevant Christianity are experienced fairly directly. Take the case of a young man, eight years ago, who is now one of our seminary students. Two Christian friends initiated several conversations with him, and then they invited him to a youth service. As he walked in, good news and hope were being celebrated through music that engaged him; the speaker spoke his language and seemed to understand people like him; and the message offered freedom from the “narcissism” and the “anger issues” that, as he reported, had “tied me up in knots.” He found himself responding, and he kept coming back, and he learned all he could; within several months, he was a man of faith. The church’s culturally and emotionally relevant ministry engaged him directly.

Another cause of contagion, however, is experienced more indirectly. I have called it Radical Outreach. This point begins very early in the Christian narrative. Jesus and his disciples ministered to blind people and deaf people and lame people, to mentally handicapped people and possessed people, lepers and Samaritans, tax collectors and zealots, and others. You might be surprised to hear that all of those populations, and some others, had one thing in common. The establishment institutional religion of the Temple had written them off. Indeed, the Temple’s policy prohibited such people from even entering the temple. Those populations, and others, were officially “hopeless.” This is the point: Christianity was conceived in the radical outreach that engaged allegedly hopeless people. It typically begins when we visit their turf, and when begin where they are, rather than where we’d like them to be.

As the Christian movement spread to the cities of the Roman Empire, it gradually took a more institutional form, and in time became more like the Temple. Rural populations were not urbane and were therefore hopeless. The Goths, the Visigoths, the Franks, the Vandals, the Frisians, the Vikings, and all of the Celtic peoples, including the Irish, were not Latin speaking, Roman enculturated people. Obviously, all of those barbarians were not civilized enough to become “Christianized.”

This book of tragedy has many chapters, but we do not need to recount the whole volume. Most churches today, in our nation and in our communities, assume that many types of people are unreachable; it would probably be impossible (they assume) for those people to become real Christians “like us”. To be specific: For many (or most) churches, pre-literate people, “hard living people,” co-habiting couples, homeless people, bikers, Goths, jet setters, mentally-ill people, Mandarin speakers, people with tattoos, addictive people, introverts, and many others need not apply.

Perceptions, whether they are accurate or not, take on their own reality and, when acted upon over time, become self-fulfilling prophecies. Take, as one case, the

church that had not reached out to any alcoholics within anyone's memory; so understandably, no alcoholics had become Christians in that church in many years. The leaders interpreted this fact to prove that alcoholics "are too far gone to become Christians."

But God can use such entrenched assumptions as an occasion for miracles. One woman in that church (a substantial giver, with some leverage) sold the board on inviting a local Alcoholics Anonymous group to use a room in the church for their weekly meetings. The woman cultivated several allies in the church, at least two with relatives in recovery, to join her in befriending the facility's new visitors. They prepared hot cocoa and donuts for the Thursday evening meetings, and they provided a nursery for the children. Many of the visitors warmed to the hospitality, and some of them accepted invitations to join their new "church friends" in Sunday morning worship. In time, several people in recovery joined the church as new Christians. Several of their families started coming, and then more addictive people, and then their families and friends.

The church started a Sunday school class for people in recovery, and then a second class, and support groups for co-dependent people and for adult children of alcoholics. Several long-time members surfaced, confessing that they had secretly battled addiction for a long time, and they now sought the miracles of sobriety and sanity. In time, miracles became almost commonplace in the church's life. One thirty-something, violence prone man with a criminal record became obviously transformed; he started helping in the youth ministry. A forty-something woman, who once had a "reputation," became an astonishingly caring Christian. Word about the "miracles" spread across the community grapevine. Many people in the community became more responsive. The church grew more than, at one time, it had even wanted to grow!

Using a metaphor borrowed from chemistry, this is "catalytic" growth. When an athlete takes in Creatine before a workout, the supplement catalyzes an energy source within muscles that permits two or three more bench presses, which in turn catalyzes more muscle growth. In my recent book *The Apostolic Congregation*, I commend the following theory: In every society, apparently, there is an establishment population, and there are "fringe" populations whom the establishment people regard as "impossible" or "hopeless." Catalytic Christian movements begin when some of the "hopeless" people are reached, and some of those people experience transparent life change. Such transformations catalyze spiritual openness in many other people, including establishment people, and the Faith now spreads, contagiously.