

The Contemporary Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

In our studies of Ephesians 4, we have learned that the church is not to be a pressure group to influence legislatures, or some kind of religious club intended to comfort and assuage the feelings of people in trouble. The unique character of the church is that it is the body of Christ. Its calling, therefore, is to declare and demonstrate the life that inhabits it. That is the life of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the church is a body whose purpose is to demonstrate and to declare the power of Christ in today's world.

The pattern of that function, as we have already seen, is that each unit of the body is to develop and exercise a distinct, divinely given gift or gifts. These gifts can be exercised in either of two directions – toward the world (life as we live it Monday through Saturday) – or toward the church (among the people of God, Sunday through Saturday). Now, to enable this work to go on smoothly and effectively, the mind of God has ordained a special support ministry consisting of four gifts. These are referred to in Verse 11,

... some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers [or, teaching pastors], {Eph 4:11 RSV}

As we focus on the details of these gifts with a view to understanding what this equipment is with which Christ has endowed his body, we must not lose sight of the supreme reason for the manifestation of these gifts. It is in order that the world might see Jesus Christ at work. It needs to come to grips with him, but it was never intended that the world should come to church to find him. The church should be in the world. It is only thus that the world will understand that Christ is not dead, is

not gone, and is not inactive. He is not off in some remote place far from the affairs of this world (heaven), and religious people are not trying to struggle on and do the best they can until he comes back again. This is never the divine intent. This is not the New Testament pattern. Christ is alive and has been at work in human society for twenty centuries.

Someone says, "Where? I don't see him. What's he doing? Where do you see Jesus Christ at work in our society today? What kind of work is he doing?" The answer is, "He is doing exactly what he did in the days of his flesh." The only difference is that he is no longer doing it through one solitary, earthly, physical body. He is doing it now through a corporate, complex body which exists around the world and permeates and penetrates every level of society. But it is the same exact ministry – to the same race, under the same conditions, facing the same attitudes and the same problems as when he was here in the flesh. Now he does it through a different kind of body. We need badly to understand that concept, for that is the church.

Now what is this ministry, specifically? What is Christ doing through his body today? Let us hear the answer from his own lips. One of the most dramatic scenes recorded in the New Testament is found in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel. Beginning in Verse 16, Luke says,

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the

prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” {Luke 4:16-21 RSV}

This is an account of our Lord’s return to his home town of Nazareth. He has been in Jerusalem, and Judea, and the cities around the lake of Galilee, with his headquarters in Capernaum. He has already gained a reputation throughout the land as a doer of good deeds and a worker of miracles. His fame has preceded him to his home town. Word has come back to Nazareth of the strange things this local boy was doing. They had heard much of his astonishing miracles. Now he has come home and they all know he will be in the synagogue on the sabbath. The whole town is out to hear him and they are anxiously hoping that he will do among them some of the miracles he has done in other cities. In the synagogue he calls for the book of Isaiah, turns deliberately to a passage in the 61st chapter predicting the miracles of the Messiah, reads it, closes the book, and says to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The townspeople were aghast. They said to themselves, “What does he mean? He hasn’t done anything yet. How does he mean this has been fulfilled? here are the miracles?”

Knowing this thought was in their hearts, he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself’; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do this also here in your own country,” {Luke 4:23 RSV}. Then he reminded them that, in the history of Israel, it was often true that when a prophet came back to his own country his people would not receive him. He reminds them of two clear examples of this, Elijah and Elisha. Why does he make this point when he does no miracles among them? He is attempting to

point out to them that the physical fulfillment of these predictions (of opening the eyes of the blind and healing of the lame, etc.) is not the sole intent of the Scriptures. Messiah merely begins on that level to capture attention and evoke trust, but he desires to help them to see that he has fulfilled his ministry only when he has reached the spirit and soul of man. It is this healing of the spirit of man which he is after.

These hometown people had their expectations set on the physical alone. They wanted to see miracles. They refused to accept his intimation that the ultimate goal is the soul and spirit. That was continually the mistake of the Jews during our Lord’s ministry. The apostle tells us it was still a problem after the crucifixion. “The Jews,” he said, “seek after a sign,” {cf, 1 Cor 1:22}. Throughout our Lord’s ministry they continually hounded him for a sign. They wanted to see physical miracles and cared nothing for the deeper miracle of the healing of a soul. Someone has well pointed out that the miracles are also really parables. They are designed to teach us on the physical level what Christ is offering to do on the deeper level of the spirit. Those who hunger and thirst for physical miracles today are repeating this error of Israel. They are forever wanting to see something visible, something thrilling, something supernatural! – as if a work done in the interior of a man’s life is not as equally supernatural as something done to the outside. But our Lord points out to these folk at Nazareth that the predicted ministry has already been fulfilled in their midst by his presence among them. It finds its complete fulfillment when the things predicted occur in the spirit of an individual.

Now, read through again this quotation which describes the ministry of Christ as it was predicted by the prophet 725 years before our Lord was born. But read it, not as his ministry then, but as your ministry now – as what Jesus Christ intends to do and will do through you as a Christian in the middle of the 20th century. After all, remember what he said in John 14, “The works that I do, you shall do also, and greater works than these shall you do,” {cf, John 14:12a}. Greater in what way? Well, anything done in the realm of the spirit is greater than that done in the body. “Greater works than these shall you do, because I go to the Father,” {cf, John 14:12b RSV}. In other verses he shows us that his going to the Father results in the sending of the Spirit, and, through the ministry of the Holy

Spirit, there will be performed by the church throughout the ages far greater works than he did in the flesh, for they are works done in the very center of humanity, the spirit.

Look then at the passage again. There are five divisions of this ministry:

It begins with the phrase,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” {Luke 4:18a RSV}

Here then is a description of a Spirit-filled ministry. We hear much about the need for Spirit-filled lives today. Well, how do you know when the Spirit of God is at work in a life? Is it by some strange phenomenon that takes place? Is it by a miraculous manifestation that occurs? No, the Spirit-filled ministry will be this kind of a ministry described here. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” – that is the first thing.

What will the Spirit do? First, evangelize!

“... he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” {Luke 4:18b RSV}

That is the first task, the simple declaring of God’s actions among men. That’s evangelism. The good news is that God has not left the human race to struggle on in frustration, bewilderment, boredom, helplessness, and hopelessness. God has done something. God has entered the race, God has acted, God has gone to the cross, God has delivered mankind. God has acted, not merely spoken. He has done something. Those actions stand as unchangeable facts of history. To tell the story of them is to preach the good news.

To whom? Well, not to the rich, but to the poor. What does he mean? Does he mean only those poverty-stricken in material things? Are not the rich and wealthy to hear this? Obviously his meaning goes beyond the physical again. Remember the first words in the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest message ever delivered in the hearing of men? It begins with that remarkable recipe for happiness, the Beatitudes. “Blessed (happy) is the man, etc.” Our Lord begins with the poor. “Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God,” {cf, Matt 5:3}. Happy is the man who doesn’t have anything and knows it. Happy is the man who does not have any standing before God, does not have a long record of good deeds to rest upon and create a self-righteous attitude but

blessed is the man who comes before God and says, “I have nothing.” God is able then to give him the kingdom of God. That is why the gospel is to be preached to the poor in spirit.

Don’t waste your time talking to people who think they have everything they need. Look for those who have nothing. But don’t be misled by the fact that some pretend for awhile to have everything yet underneath there is a very hungry heart. Get down to that. Don’t waste your time with people who really feel they have everything. Talk to those who know they don’t.

Then look at the second thing, consisting of two factors.

“He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind,” {Luke 4:18c RSV}

Release and recovery. Liberty and light. Tell me, are there people who are captives today? Are there people who are blind today? Are there men and women bound by attitudes that hold them in captivity? No matter how they struggle against them they find themselves returning to the same unhappy outlook, the same poisonous, hate-filled, jealous, bitter expression. Are they captives? You meet them every week and so do I. Are there people who are blind? Are there men and women who think they are doing the right thing, perfectly sincere, honest people, who hope they are doing right and are trying to struggle through the best they can, but every time they turn around they discover that they have been doing wrong and they end up stumbling blindly from one episode to another, deeper and deeper into difficulty? Are not these people blind? Then they need this ministry of proclaiming release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind.

This is the ministry of teaching.

Remember that Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free,” {cf, John 8:32}. What sets people free? Telling them the truth, not telling them what they want to hear, but telling them what they need to hear. That is what sets people free.

What opens the eyes of the blind? Jesus said, “If any man follow me, he shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life,” {cf, John 8:12}. That is the ministry of discipling – getting people to follow, and obey, Jesus Christ. Not

merely to come and sing about him. Not simply to come into church and recite the creed or say the right things, but to actually obey him, even when every fiber in their being is crying out to disobey him. “If any man follow me, he shall not walk in darkness.” He’ll know where he is going. He’ll know how to get there. He’ll know whether what he is doing is right or wrong. “He shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life.” “If you walk in the light, as he is in the light, you have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s son, cleanses you from all sin,” {cf, 1 Jn 1:7}.

Obviously, this ministry is not something religious. It takes in all of life. It touches what we are doing every day of our lives. It involves us at our work, and in our home, and at school and shop and play, when we are awake and when we are asleep and in everything we do. This is the ministry that is committed to us.

Look at the next one:

**“to set at liberty those who are oppressed,”
{Luke 4:18d RSV}**

This is the ministry of healing, of counseling. Are there oppressed people today? Are there those under a burden of oppression, a weight in their lives which they can’t escape?

This last week a man drove 300 miles one way, 600 miles round trip, to tell me of a burden that was oppressing him. For over a year he had been crushed by an attitude of hate toward a man who had done him an injustice. He couldn’t get rid of it. He couldn’t eat and he couldn’t sleep. On two or three occasions he had barely stopped himself at the critical moment from committing murder. He came to talk about it, and as we talked I told him the truth. I proclaimed to him liberty for those who are oppressed. He acted upon it and a miracle was performed right before my eyes. I saw a man healed. I saw a burden lifted. I saw the poison of hate drain out of that man’s heart and the love of Jesus Christ come flooding in again. His whole attitude visibly changed. He went back home with a different look on his face and a different feeling in his heart – delivered, set free.

Now it didn’t take a pastor to do it, least of all me. Any Christian could have done it. He didn’t have to drive 600 miles to find someone to set him free. Or he shouldn’t have had to. Any Christian

who knew his Bible could have set him free, for this is the universal ministry of the gospel. This is part of the ministry that is committed to every person who is in the body of Christ – to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

The last one is:

**“to proclaim the acceptable year of the
Lord.” {Luke 4:19 RSV}**

That is one of the most remarkable statements of the Bible. If you look up the original passage in Isaiah from which our Lord is quoting you will discover that, in the original, there is a comma at this place. The sentence is not complete. In the original, it goes on to say, “and to declare the day of vengeance of our God;” {cf, Isa 61:2}. The Lord Jesus did not read the rest of that sentence. He closed the book at the comma and handed it back, saying, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” {cf, Luke 4:21b}. Thereby he implied that some of it is not yet fulfilled. There is a part that awaits the return of Christ. That will introduce the day of vengeance. But now is the acceptable time; today is the day of salvation.

There is nothing that people need to hear more than that. That is to explain what is happening to our world. That is to relieve the cold grip of fear that clutches at the hearts of thousands who get up every morning scared to death, not knowing what is happening in the world. They are afraid that it is out of control. They fear that God has lost control, if he ever had it. They need someone to proclaim to them the acceptable year of our Lord – the fact that God knows what he is doing, and, in our day and age, is permitting the gospel to go out and restraining the forces of evil. He will let them go only so far and then he puts a halt to them. He will let certain manifestations of evil occur and not others, in order that men might be able to hear this good news.

That is the whole explanation for some of the remarkable things that take place today as in Indonesia, where the Communists were all set to take over the government, but suddenly there is a strange, unexpected, totally unanticipated revolt, and, instead those who are opposed to Communism come in. Why did this happen? Because God is at work in human history and is restraining evil forces and permitting them to go only so far. He is running the world according to his timetable, and to-

day is the acceptable year of the Lord. It will go on until God's timetable comes to an end. We can set people's heart at rest by proclaiming this.

Are there fearful people today?

I don't know anything that is more widespread than fear. This is what is behind so much of the student unrest of our day and the rebellion that is present in the student world. This rebellion is a protest against fear, a fear so disembodied that it creates a sense of frustration because no one can get hold of it. It drives young people to do something desperate, to protest, to strike out, to defy these silent, invisible forces that threaten them on every side. You can't understand the student mind unless you understand that. They are desperately in need of someone to tell them about the acceptable year of the Lord.

Is this a relevant ministry? Is this something the world really needs? Or is it so much empty mouthing, so much theological twaddle? Is this something people are dying for, desperate and hungry for? I will leave it with you to answer. But if you see it as I do, you will know this is the greatest thing anyone can get involved in. This is the most exciting ministry that you could possibly have today. Take this list:

- Evangelizing,
- Teaching,
- Counseling,
- Explaining the times.

Note that you can fulfill this in either one of two directions. You can minister to the world or to the church, and both are desperately in need in this hour.

Perhaps someone says, "I can understand how you can evangelize the world, but surely you don't need to evangelize the church." There is nothing that needs it quite so badly! There are thousands, millions in church who need evangelizing. Even if they do have some glimpse of the truth, they only "see men as trees walking." Remember that blind man whom Jesus healed? At his first touch he saw "men as trees walking." He couldn't quite see them plainly, and our Lord touched him again and opened his eyes, {see Mark 8:23-25}. That is the picture of the man in church who needs evangelizing.

There are those in the world who need teaching. There are also those in the church who need

teaching, who need truth unfolded to them so that it is something vital. Not something they are trying to study in Sunday School class as a kind of option to life, but something which is the explanation for what is going on in their life.

There are those who need healing, both in the world and in church.

There are those who need the times explained to them, both in the world and in church.

Someone says, "When can one do this? After all, I have to earn a living. I don't have time to go around doing this kind of thing." There is an easy answer to that. Do it at work. Do it in your home. This is something that ought to be as natural and normal a part of life as anything else you do. Obviously the great majority of Christians spend most of their time doing the work of the world, and this is only right. It is as it should be. Not everyone is called to be a pastor or a preacher or an evangelist or even a teacher. The major preoccupation of any man's life is his daily employment. But, if Jesus Christ has no part in that major occupation of your life, then he is Lord only of the margins, the spare time, the leftovers!

Did you ever notice that the important figures of the Bible are not the monks and priests? They are shepherds and fishermen and tax gatherers and soldiers and politicians and tentmakers and physicians and carpenters. These are the ones who occupy the center of the stage. You can tell the good news about God's actions among men at a water cooler in an office or over a sandwich at lunch. You can heal a hurting heart in a car while you are driving home. You can teach the truth that frees and enlightens anywhere.

A Christian man told me this week that he is a member of an urban renewal committee in San Francisco, responsible for clearing up some of the slum areas of that city. In a meeting with this board, they were contemplating setting up a new housing project. They were facing the question of what to do with the people who were already there, living in tenements and flats. There was the feeling of, "That's their problem, let them take care of it." But this man spoke up and said, "No, it is not their problem. It is ours. We have no right to put in a housing project unless we face the responsibility of helping these people to find some other place to live. Christian compassion can do nothing less than that." He insisted on that, and, because he spoke up at the critical moment, he made the

committee face it. They did face it and are moving to meet the problem, and their lives are more free because of it.

You can quiet the fearful with a discussion of the times anywhere. All you need is a newspaper or a headline that calls attention to what is happening in the world, and immediately you have wonderful ground to bring up what God is doing in human society, and to break through with the good news.

We must never forget our Lord's story of the sheep and the goats, the judgment of believers. What is the point of the story? It is that we cannot evade activity. We must put our gifts to work. The Lord Jesus has given us a gift to be put to work. We dare not hide it in the ground as that unfaithful steward did in our Lords' parable, for we must meet him one day for an accounting. The question from his lips will be, "What did you do with the gift that was given you in the body of Christ?"

I am trying to face us with the seriousness of this. This is not an option. It is not something we can put aside or come back to at some later hour.

This is something that God himself has given us which we must come to grips with and about which we must be very, very serious. What gift do I have? Where am I exercising it? What am I doing about this? These are the questions that we need to face.

Our faith means nothing if it doesn't bring us to this place.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for these words that remind us you have not forgotten about this world of ours but are at work in it doing the same wonderful things that you did before. What an exciting thing to have a part in this. What a foolish thing that we should withhold ourselves from this ministry and busy ourselves thinking only about our problems and our life, our talent and our abilities when we have the call to invest ourselves in this kind of a program. Teach us to do thy will. In Jesus' name, Amen.