

## **A Fire in the Belly**

**By Clyde M. Hughes**

Lincoln said, "Back in the days when I performed my part as a keelboatman, I made the acquaintance of a trifling little steamboat which used to bustle and puff and wheeze about the Sangamon River. It has a five-foot boiler and a seven-foot whistle, and every time it whistled, it stopped." Someone said, "A Christian is like a locomotive; a fire must be kindled in the belly of the thing before it will go." Jeremiah said, "I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary ... and I could not stay." Where do you get your fire from?

"Who am I? Why am I here?" said the contestant in the debate who was viciously attacked by his opponents. Actually, it wasn't such a bad approach. Probably, he was voicing these words so he could introduce himself, but how long has it been since you as a church asked, "Who are we? Why are we here?"

Isaac was an old shopkeeper. He was from the old country, where things are kept up and clean. Isaac prided himself with the condition of his shop. You could step in Isaac's store and find what you needed. Everything was arranged in neat rows and on clean shelves or tables. Signs were neatly printed to indicate the description of the merchandise displayed. It was a picture perfect shop. Every morning Isaac would come in well ahead of opening to dust and clean and rearrange the shelves. He was so proud of his store. Then one morning Isaac was dusting away, whistling as he worked. He was so pleased at his accomplishments that time for him to unlock the doors came and went unnoticed. And then it happened again. He was so engrossed with keeping things in order he forgot to open the doors. It got to be that he seldom saw a customer in his store. Isaac had rewritten the purpose of his store into administrative perfection rather than that of selling goods and servicing people.

What are you in business for? Church administrative experts tell us that the longer an institution is around, the less clear they are on their objectives. In other words, each succeeding generation has a differing viewpoint as to the purpose of the church. This explains why most growing churches are newer churches. They are clear in their goals and purposes.

Judging you by your music program, your building, youth program, your Sunday school program, and even your sermons; would an outsider understand that your purpose is that of winning souls? What do visitors detect as your primary reason-for-being?

"Why do you hate your mother?" were the first silly words asked by the District Superintendent to my Methodist friend who was interviewing for ordination to invoke some type of response that supposedly would be a window to his soul. If we'd begin our interviews like that we would have fewer ministers. But how do you feel when you read, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them all in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you..." Most likely, we have heard and read these words so often that it invokes a "ho-hum" feeling. I contend that the church that views itself as an evangelistic church allows the Great Commission to be their fire in the belly! A fire in the belly motivates and affects every element of the church's ministry.

A church that lives and breathes evangelism will have a different look and feel than a church that is dwelling in the past. Its programs will be intentional rather than incidental or traditional. In many of today's churches, if you asked, "Why do you read the secretary's report? Why do you have three songs and a prayer like a bad football game with three downs and a kick? Why does so and so teach the adult class?" you would very likely hear, "That's the way we've always done it." If you ask an evangelistic church, "Why does Bill teach the adult class," you might hear, "Because Bill is the most exciting teacher we've had. He lives and teaches a contagious Christian lifestyle." Why do you conduct your worship like you do?" Because we love what God has done for us and we want to demonstrate to visitors that it is exciting to serve God!" Evangelistic churches re-evaluate and focus all their activities around the question, "Does this approach support our goal of reaching the lost and discipling people?"

A young preacher had done his best in preparation and delivery of a significant sermon on communism. At lunch he was expressing his disappointment to an elder minister in the lack of a response as he gave the altar call afterwards. The wise old man responded, "Well, what did you expect them to do, come forward to join the FBI?" Evangelistic churches set goals, work, teach, preach, and structure all their activities to assist them in meeting their underlying objective. It doesn't take a genius to discover that if you want better stewardship, preach about Biblical examples of giving. If you want souls, preach and work evangelism?

As a kid growing up in West Virginia, I heard descriptions of some people as being "too big for their britches." This was used as a vague reference to someone growing beyond their rearing. The church on the day of Pentecost was birthed in evangelism. The International Pentecostal Church of Christ began with an evangelistic zeal. Somewhere along the way many of us grew beyond our rearing. The root, purpose, enthusiasm, and power of the early church all centered around the cause of evangelism.

There are two kinds of dying churches. I have observed other denominations in their decline. Once the virgin birth, literal resurrection, literal hell, inspiration of scripture, etc. are done away with and the acceptance of universalism (the teaching that man is universally redeemed without regard to repentance) sets in there is a different purpose in existing. This forfeiture of Biblical truth creates a climate where souls seemingly do not need Christ as a priority, thus sending the world to hell.

The other kind of church is simply a mirror image of the above. Their decline begins with the devaluation of a soul. Usually having an emphasis upon their own comfort, they lose the feel of Christ's estimation of a soul's worth. Although usually they attempt to compensate their lack of evangelistic zeal with an emotional counterpart, death begins its creep because the church has whistled out its meaningful purpose. As the heartbeat of God becomes a church's whimper, adherence to true Biblical truth is diminished. After all, how can a doctrinal system be valid once the centerpiece for truth disappears.

The dead liberal church is impotent because compromised truth devalues souls. The dead Pentecostal church is powerless because the devaluation of souls has compromised their truth. While one has appearances of spirituality, hell is still hell. It matters not to the soul in hell whether his path there began in a liberal church that preached no truth or around a "full gospel church" with compromised purposes. How dare we claim to be "full gospel" when we have ignored God's greatest passion, evangelism? The greatest service that could be rendered many Christian people would be to convert them to true Christianity.

How shall we reclaim a renewed vision? Ask, "Who are we?" Every church should have a mission statement which defines why the church exists! Most members can not articulate their reason-for-being in Biblical terms. Next, ask, "Why are we here?" You are there by Biblical mandate to seek and to save (point to the Saviour) that which is lost! Simply put, Christians are not soul winners because they are not inspired by the preaching to do it and are not trained by being told how to do it. The sermons preached from the pulpit and lessons taught from the podiums indicate your goals or lack of goals. Let the church's preaching and teaching be indicative of your passion for the lost. Conduct lessons and seminars on the Biblical injunctions of evangelism. While there are hundreds of books on the subject, the purpose and means of evangelism is found in the Word! Drum into your people a new cause: evangelism. Create a new image for the church. Most sinners will not attend most churches because they have enough problems without adopting the problems that the mannerisms of church members demonstrate! Create an exciting worshipful atmosphere. Life begets life! Death encourages death! Ask yourself, "Why would anyone want to come to this church and get saved?" If you haven't asked that question, they probably wouldn't want to come.

Evangelism, although it should be natural, is a challenge for most Christians. They will not do it unless motivated. Let's change that! The time has come for us to unlock the doors of the storehouse of God and exhibit to the world the wonderful goods and material on our nicely prepared shelves. Away with the museums of old saints. On with the workshops at the gates of Hell!