

STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES TO EVANGELISM

by

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We live in a day when much is being said about the necessity to re-structure. The pessimist doesn't stop at this point; he insists that we eliminate completely the institutional church, for example. One thing that the youth have taught us is that some things have to be changed. But how?

When an engineer builds a bridge, he has to know all the pertinent data about the environment in order to make correct mathematical computations for beam strength, length, and even type of material. So must the mission strategist or the sociologist for that matter. To restructure it is necessary to know beforehand what exactly are the present structures. What functional role do they play? Do they still fit their purpose for existence?, etc.

In speaking of the structural obstacles to evangelism, therefore, I feel it is necessary to discuss three main approaches to structure -- the functional, the dimensional and the entity approach. Each approach involves structures which have become obstacles to evangelism. I am not referring to visible structures -- the fact that they are visible lessens the difficulty of dealing with them when they present problems. But I want to concentrate on those invisible structures which are nevertheless just as rigid and as much of an obstacle as if you could see them. These are all the more difficult and problematic because you can't see them. Marxists and missionaries, anthropologists and systems engineers all agree that structure -- structure of the human community -- is really central to their concern. Marxists, for example, complain that the institutional

church is like an invading parasite that sucks life from the society. They point out that the church took over more than half of all the land in Mexico prior to the Revolution, and that given half a chance, would take over everything.

Christians, on the other hand, claim that the communists, while experts at taking over governments, don't know how to run them. Anthropologists study the fascinating and visible structures of social behavior and publicly doubt if anyone is sophisticated enough to dare to meddle with those structures.

Systems engineers seem to have a more elaborate approach to structure. One, in speaking of a large metropolitan area such as San Francisco and its surrounding cities, compared it to the human body and its five systems. In speaking of the metabolic system of a city, for example, he made the observation that over a period of fifty years almost everything that comes in goes out again. The people come in; the people go out. Goods come in and go out again -- perhaps in some other form, or ground up and smashed up like automobiles and shipped out. They go out in tubes, or they evaporate into the air.

Then there is the arterial system that consists of the channels within which those things flow. The freeways, the railways, the thousands of pipes that run into a city -- these are arteries. You can only speed up the flow at best, but you cannot change the basic system.

The nervous system consists of the telecommunication system of the city which enables that vast complex as an organism to coordinate itself and its efforts. Sometimes that system breaks down, but in any case, such a system still exists.

There is also the enclosure system, the mere physical structure of the metropolitan area. Now you may not figure that the physical aspect of

a city is very systematic, but from the standpoint of systems engineers there is a good deal of system in it, and there may be more system in the future. It may be possible to build a city enclosed in a single building accommodating 250,000 people.

Somewhat embarrassedly systems engineers may also refer to the soul of the city -- the needs and aspirations that ripple across and which control a great deal of behavior. We might put fads into that category.

You notice that they don't speak of the brain of a city. It would seem that a city is one of the lower forms of life. It is an organism that functions somewhat like an amoeba without a lot of cerebral control. (I think we would object to that kind of centralized control were someone to propose it.) The city government only controls a tiny part of what goes on. The part not under its control also fits into a structure. However, many people cannot see this structure. They rebel at the thought of trying to get into something they can't understand. The hippie movement, for example, paints in vivid colors, for anyone able to get the message, the fact that there is a sizeable percentage of our people who refuse to be involved, to become a cog in a machine that they don't understand. They flee from the structures of society, which seem very artificial to them, and would construct their own world. Tens of thousands of Americans now live in 2,000 or so communes. No one knows how many such communities exist because only the very highly structured ones survive. It seems ironic that the hippie would escape one social structure only to build another. But you have to admit that the hippies can at least see a structure. They have produced it. At least it's optional, whereas the structure of the rest of society either cannot be seen or it is not optional. The complete copout of the hippie is not an alternative to most people.

The hippie communes in some ways are parallel to other communitarian developments in history, like, say, the many different kinds of Mennonite communities. An example is the Hutterian communities which in the last 25 years have really boomed in Montana and in Southern Canada. Yet it is a little ironic that these communities of Hutterians, for example, which began as completely isolated, independent communes are very highly respected nowadays by their neighbors and in fact could not easily exist apart from the larger world today. It is somewhat notorious in Montana that the Hutterites have the biggest single complex of farm machinery in the entire area. They practically have a monopoly. Other small farmers who are not capable of buying the multi-million dollar kind of machinery that farmers use today will sometimes lease equipment from the Hutterite communities. The Hutterites don't send their young people off to college, but they know how to master their machinery and to maintain it. And yet that machinery comes from outside their community. The point is that these communities that are manageable -- that you can see the size of -- really aren't complete. They aren't really independent. They cannot be independent. It is the lack of independence that brings a greater complexity into the picture.

Only relatively recently has there been any widespread reflection on structure by churchmen and theologians. There have been, of course, for many years spectacular examples of people who talked about the structure of society. One of the earliest is St. Augustine in his City of God. And what about that little known archbishop who spoke of progress in the 14th century? Thomas Moore's Utopia was not even mentioned in the recent movie about his life, "Man of All Seasons." Americans seem to be very edgy about Utopian thinking or any tinkering with the social machinery, even though the ideas are centuries old. There have always been rare individuals who

thought about restructuring society. But widespread tinkering, widespread thinking has been fairly recent.

I have spoken up to now on what you might call functional analyses of society, especially when I refer to the systems engineers' approach.

There is another approach to society which may be considered a dimensional analysis. For example fundamentalists, evangelicals, and others have often thought in terms of what you might call psychocentric salvation. That is to say, the salvation of individuals. The idea is, you save individuals and they will somehow save society. You don't have to worry about anything but the salvation of individuals. Now, there is a good deal of high-powered Biblical truth in this kind of thinking. I would not discredit thinking that centers on the salvation and the redemption of individuals. I couldn't get away with it even if I wanted to, and I don't want to. However, to suppose that the winning of souls one by one is all there is to the Great Commission would be a great mistake since most significant Christian movements have not been a phenomenon of individual conversions. But there is not time in this paper to discuss this particular matter further.

The second kind of thinking would be one notch above the psychocentric. Go from the individual to the group, to the fellowship of believers. There are, of course, many groups besides church communities, but let's focus on the churches. Anybody who thinks in terms of the community as the redemptive focus could be said to be involved in ecclesiocentric thinking. Ecclesiocentric thinking is now also passe. A new dirty word in theological vocabulary is the word "triumphalism," which means that the church is the one instrument of God, and all mankind is merely a feeder to the church. If we can get everybody into the church, then all the problems are solved. If not, we still have to keep working. This view sees

the church as central; society is then a vast, confused, unstructured multitude of individuals who are to be rescued, brought into the institutional church and structured in the church -- this is salvation. Such thinking is ecclesiocentric. Again, there is a great deal of very vital truth in the ecclesiocentric view, and I think the corrective of the redemptive community as balanced against psychocentric thinking is a most helpful thing. However, if you bog down here, it is quite possible for ecclesiocentric thinking to have a blindspot at the very point of the non-ecclesiastical structures of the Christian movement, to say nothing of those corresponding structures in society.

For example, Fuller is not an ecclesiastical institution. Many people involved in Christian work are employed by non-ecclesiastical organizations. There are many ecclesiastical types who think that Overseas Crusades, for example, shouldn't exist, or who wish it didn't exist. They feel such organizations are in competition with the denominational agencies and that the agencies of the denominations, being centralized in ecclesiastical structure, are the only legitimate way mission can be performed.

This type of thinking is prevalent in the World Council of Churches. The real Christian church consists, many ecumenicists believe, in a set of what I think of as vertical ecclesiastical structures of fellowship. Of course, the Christian movement is, and always has been, more than this -- very essentially more than this. Anybody who supposes that all of God's redemptive action down through history can be followed through the ecclesiastical structures alone just doesn't know his history. Such structures as Mount Hermon would simply not exist in that mentality.

There is another level above that of ecclesiocentric thinking. Again there is a good deal of truth in this viewpoint also, but it might be easiest to define it by caricaturizing it with some of those who are involved

in it. These are they who wonder out loud and stridently if it wouldn't be possible just to focus on society itself and forget the church. Society is the real structure. These people quote that somewhat obscure Biblical verse, "God so loved the world," and they say, "Let the Church die. We don't need the Church." These people feel that the institutional church is an obstacle to conversion. There is an element of truth in this. For many people, the institutional church, as it is, is an obstacle to conversion. This type of thinking I have called sociocentric thinking. It is centered in society. Society is the thing about which God is concerned. The church is only a scaffolding at best, a momentary redemptive tool. The sooner we can get rid of it, the better, in order to get on with our job of saving the society. But even these social activists who have espoused have been surprised by another level of thinking which has emerged even more recently. This is the fourth level.

The psychocentric, the ecclesiocentric, the sociocentric -- each level of thinking embraces something larger. All of these thinkers have been upset by the recent outcry in terms of ecology. Don't look now, but there are other living things in this world beside human beings, thinkers on this fourth level assert. Not only are there many things that can be conquered, that can be used, but there is a system to them. We do well to be respectful about that system. We must take it into account. We cannot survive without it. The fact that we are dependent upon it to an alarming degree has recently been suddenly brought to our attention. I was reading a book by Professor Paul Ehrlich, of Stanford University, on the subject of population and ecology. He had some most deplorable and depressing statistics about the whale. By 1940 the blue whale had been endangered as a species; by 1964 the fin whale, and by 1970 the sperm whale is well on its way to the same state. We are well on the road to eliminating these monstrous beasts that have been in the ocean since the

beginning of time! I don't know what this does to your theology. We don't have a lot of ecological theology, but we're going to have to develop it. No doubt in a few years we'll have a professor of the theology of ecology on our Fuller staff. This is a larger sphere of thinking. Christians especially should be willing to recognize it as essential. Call this biocentric thinking, if you wish, where man is only part of the life that is essential to maintain.

There is yet another more comprehensive level to which we must refer, especially when speaking to theologically oriented people, and that is the level of theocentric thinking. Theocentric thinking would in effect embrace all of the other types of thinking in their right proportions. It would not run off on a tangent on any one, neither on psychocentric, ecclesiocentric, sociocentric or biocentric thinking.

I remember hearing a man (not a Christian theologian) say years ago, "It may be, just may be, man is not the most important form of life." His champions were the bacteria. They are hardier. They can survive in all kinds of circumstances fatal to human beings. They are more numerous. Today he could add that they may outlast the human beings. This thinking is biocentric. Various other names may be given it, but in any case, it is another approach to the structure of humanity -- a dimensional approach to society or to the structures with which we have to deal.

Another kind of analysis from the functional and the dimensional may be the entity analysis, though this is not a good title for the concept. As I look at society and mankind -- I must admit I am sub-bio at this point -- I am just looking at man. I see in the ordered hierarchies of mankind two different major kinds of structures which I have called in a recent article modalities and sodalities. Actually these are names for rather common things. It is somehow true that the word for church, for

example, is used in so many different ways you might as well dump it, if you want to be precise. Then I have used the word modality to refer to the churches. The word modality in my vocabulary refers to any group of human beings within which there is no distinction as to age and sex. It is a reproducible community that can survive and propagate. It is like a small town or like a geographic complex of human beings. The town or area is a mode; its structure is a modality. Modes in the study of statistics are humps, you see. And if when you run across on the demographic axis of the United States you come to a city, you find a hump. This hump is called a mode, and its structure is a modality. Now a church is a sub-modality; it is a complete community of human beings. If it isn't complete, as to all ages and both sexes, it may have a modality structure, but it isn't a modality. Inter-Varsity and Young Life are not modalities because they have age distinction in their membership. I am not complaining about this; their structure is not superior because of this. In fact I have chosen another word for that structure in which there is some distinction as to age or sex -- sodality. Now you will find both of these words very vaguely defined in the dictionary.

In order to illustrate problems which might arise, as related to structure, I want to speak from various geographical bases. Japan is a group of people, 100,000,000 strong, within which there is a Christian constituency of 1/2 of 1%. Somehow there is an obstacle to our evangelism in Japan; we haven't really succeeded; we haven't gotten in there. Let's face it! The average missionary there does not even have a good command of the Japanese language because the Christian community is so limited. There are a lot of curious things about Japan. Something is wrong, and I am not even supposing or suggesting that I know the answer. Moreover, I don't want to be criticized for omitting references to spiritual factors,

such as that the problem is spiritual, and that somehow the missionaries haven't prayed enough. I don't mean that they shouldn't pray or they don't need to pray, but I don't think that's the crucial problem. In Japan, as a matter of fact, about as many people are being led into churches as in any other country of the world. But the church doesn't grow. The missionaries gripe about this. For a period of months I have been working with a missionary from Japan who wrote his thesis about the problem of conserving the converts, and the many obstacles to evangelism that are confronted there. I learned a good deal about Japan in this period after which I asked him to describe to me the traditional Japanese social structure -- what it was like, what it did for people, the services performed. Then I asked him, "Now, when someone has a birthday, what do you do on Sunday morning in the Sunday School? Suppose it is a ten-year old or an eleven-year old. What do you do?"

"We call them up in front, and they put ten pennies in or they put eleven pennies in, depending upon their age," he said.

"Aha. That is just what they did back in Texas." (This is a Southern Baptist Church I am talking about). So I asked him, "Do you mean to say that an eleven-year old puts in eleven pennies and the ten-year old puts in ten pennies?"

He looked at me somewhat mystified. "Yes."

Talk about structure being invisible! It just so happens that the eleventh year is a very major birthday in Japan. And at that very time the eleven-year old in a Southern Baptist Sunday School feels somewhat shortchanged. There is an invisible wound in his heart. The Sunday School teacher doesn't notice it. The missionary doesn't notice it. Nobody notices it!

Why make a big point out of that? With a hundred million people in

Japan, why make a big-to-do about the eleventh birthday? There are a hundred other ways in which the Occidental Church, as it protrudes itself into Japanese society, unconsciously invisibly offends the Japanese way of life. Why don't the churches grow to more than 40 members in Japan? Perhaps I shouldn't criticize the missionaries to Japan, having not even been to Japan myself, yet I wonder why some of them and many pastors spend all their energies trying to make their churches bigger because in the United States a "good" church is bigger than forty members? It would be just as easy to plant more forty-member churches -- much easier -- than to make forty-member churches bigger. Why? Because there is something about the traditional priesthood in the Japanese society that requires a priest to visit in the homes far more than any American pastor is expected to. There are services and all kinds of other church activities which take place in the homes, and the people in Japan apparently instinctively feel that if they get more than forty members per church, they won't be properly pastored in the way they expect. Therefore they don't want more members. Now what are you going to do? Fight the system? Or start more forty-member churches? And so on.

In a recent Japanese government census, in response to the question, "Who do you consider to be the greatest religious leader in history?" 72% of the people said Jesus Christ. We have done more than touch the hem of the garment in Japan, but there are obstacles to our evangelism.

Let's move to India. In India there are twelve million Christians. That's really great! Those Christians are all over India. In many cases they are highly educated people. They come to this country. They are sophisticated. They are university presidents. They are heads of corporations. They have gone all over India. But 98% of them come from the untouchable class. But you say that the castes have been abolished in India.

It is illegal even to use the word I used. These people are called Harijans today. It is a touchy point. But there is a middle caste group in India, numbering 350,000,000 people, among whom there is not 1/100th of 1 percent Christian. As a matter of fact, the few that have become Christians have gone down into the depressed class of society and have joined the Harijan churches there. Not very many in the last 150 years have done this. There are invisible obstacles to middle caste people becoming members of these Harijan churches. All of the churches in India, except for the Syrian tradition in the State of Kerala are composed of former untouchables. Now, it is no easier to get a member from the middle caste, 350,000,000 group, into one of the existing churches in India than it would be for three black pastors to go knocking on white men's doors in Louisiana asking those people to join the black church. It might seem that I'm using an exaggerated case. It is an exaggeration only in the sense that it is much tougher in India for a man to make that kind of step than for a white man in Louisiana to join a black church. These are very real obstacles to evangelism. On the other hand, however, we have reports that 100,000,000 people in the middle caste in India are very favorable to Christianity. They would walk into the door of a church tomorrow that represented their kind of people. We are up against an American anti-caste attitude that demands that these people join the Harijan churches.

China, Africa -- many other similar examples exist -- but these are sufficient to point out that obstacles need not be spiritual. They may be structural.