

STOPPING THE INSANITY

by Paul E. Hamilton

Today, a friend of mine asked me to do him a favor. He is a recovering alcoholic and needed a ride to the local Probation and Parole office. He needed to talk with his parole officer to let her know that he had, once again, fallen into the destructive cycle of alcoholism. I know that it was very difficult for him to admit his fall, but I was proud of him that he was willing to be honest about it. While waiting with him in the lobby, I found myself surrounded by other people who were there to report as well. I was not bothered, afraid, or offended by being there at all, yet I did find my “people watching” experience quite enlightening.

As I sat there with my friend, I watched and listened as some of the people in the waiting room complained. They complained about having to report and they complained about their assigned parole officers. A short time later, I listened as one young man said something that truly got me thinking. He said “Like coming here is going to stop me from doing it again?” His comment really got me thinking. Obviously, this system of punishment and accountability is not really working if this man is just going to commit the same crime again. Now, I don’t claim to have all the answers to stopping crime, nor do I have any new ideas on rehabilitating criminals. I must say though, that this comment really started an internal conversation within myself.

Why do we continue to do something that isn’t working? Why do we continue to do the same thing over and over and over again and expect a different result? Isn’t that the Alcoholics Anonymous definition of insanity? It truly broke my heart to see the indifference in this young man’s life. There was no evidence of repentance for whatever landed him in the probation or parole system. There was no evidence of change, no evidence of caring, and no evidence of hope. Yes, he was

there as required, but he was only going through the motions.

My thoughts shifted from our nation's correctional system to the current state of the church in America. First, humor me for a moment and let me explain how I have arrived at this point in my life. Growing up, my parents religiously took me to church. We were there Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night and any other day or night the doors were open. I attended Sunday School, Church Training, R.A.'s (that's Royal Ambassador's for those of you outside the Baptist church) and youth group each week. I am very blessed to have the spiritual foundation that was given to me and I know it has helped shape me into who I am today. After getting married, (and yes, we met each other at a Baptist camp!) my wife, Jamie, and I felt led by God to leave the Baptist denomination and explore God's will for our life. After a time of diligently seeking the Lord, we began to attend Life Christian Center, a local nondenominational church in St. Louis. For eight years, we were taught about the full life offered through the power of the Holy Spirit. I witnessed a lot of great things happen in the lives of people, and we experienced a lot of personal growth. It was also during this time that Jamie and I felt a calling by God to serve Him in ministry.

Jamie and I, by a divine calling, started Hole in the Roof Ministry Center in August, 1998. I can truly say that it was during this time that God began to challenge my "solid" beliefs about how ministry was to be done. In addition, I was compelled by the Holy Spirit to truthfully evaluate what role the local church should be functioning in that ministry. Many of the things that God was showing me in His Word, seemed to contradict a large number of church growth books, church growth seminars, and speakers. I have spent time praying, reading, and studying what the Bible says about "church". I have spent time listening to the hearts, minds, and souls of those who function outside of the four walls of the church. These are people who have been hurt by churches as well as those who attend them. They have been shunned, abused, and

ignored. Most of these people refuse to step inside the doors of a church, but their love for Jesus is very strong.

For those of you who attend church each week, it may come as a shock to learn that there is a growing trend in our society to move away from the “traditional” congregational church. According to research done by the Barna Institute in 2000, 70% of Christians in America receive their primary spiritual instruction through the local church. In 2006, that number dropped to 60%. This same study predicts that this percentage will drop to 35% within the next 20 years. What worked for our father’s church (the Baby Boomers) and their father’s church (the Builders), is becoming ineffective in the faith of my generation (the Baby Busters) and that of my children’s generation (the Mosaics). I am in no way saying that the Gospel, God, Jesus, the Holy Bible, or the Christian faith is ineffective. What I am saying is the methods used in prior generations are not working as effectively anymore.

In our culture of technological advances, the world has become more connected, and yet, at the same time, has become more separate and individualized. It is a fact that more and more couples meet on the Internet now than ever before. I watch as my kids interact with their friends via e-mail, cell phones, instant messaging, myspace.com, and other similar internet communities. Even though we are able to communicate in an instant, the biggest longing most people express now, more than ever, is the need to feel part of a community. While we live in a world of hyperbole, where everything is supersized, more and more people are reaching out and looking for that individual touch from another human soul.

Our society is looking for the true community that can only be found in and through Jesus Christ, yet most non-Christians will tell you that the church today is irrelevant. The reason they feel that way is that we, as Christians, have allowed ourselves to spend too much time looking inward. We have forgotten that we are not the “consumers” of the church, but

we are all the “employees”. This concept may seem strange to many people who are accustomed to traditional church styles. Most parishioners look at their Pastor(s) as the employee of the church. They view themselves as the consumers who come to church to get something from the individual they are paying to be the minister. They also expect their minister to serve the needs of the surrounding community as well. I mean, isn’t that what they are paying him for? Well, nothing could be farther from the truth. How do we change our mindset from consumers to employees? To do this we look into the Scriptures. In James 2:14 - 17, we are told:

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

To put it simply, we need to be doers and not takers. Consumers are takers. They take the goods and services offered to them and use them to their benefit. Employees are doers. They are the ones who work to produce what is used by the consumers. Never has this point been made more clear to me than just last month during our Bread of Life Outreach. In one day, I had the opportunity to reach into the lives of two hurting individuals during their most darkest moments. One man tearfully told me about how his wife’s diabetes was out of control and she no longer had feeling in her legs from the knee caps down. He also told me how he was probably going to jail for violating his probation, and he was scared about who would take care of his wife. A short time later, I talked to a woman whose brother’s grandson was shot and robbed for his tennis shoes just two days prior. The grandson had just been awarded a college basketball scholarship to a major university and now he was paralyzed from the waist down due to the gunshot wound to his back. Even though both of these wonderful people came to our Bread of Life Outreach for food,

their biggest needs were a gentle loving touch, a shoulder to cry on, and a word of prayer and encouragement. More than the food, they needed to feel a true community of caring Christians. If I had not been acting as an employee, these two individuals would have gone away broken hearted and empty. The consumer asks “What’s in it for me?” and “How will this benefit me?” The employee looks to meet the needs of the consumer and does something about it.

Forget about slick marketing plans, building bigger buildings, or breaking attendance records. We need to put action to our faith and start being doers. It is then, we can reach out and change the lives of those around us who are paralyzed by this world’s insanity.