

Enthusiasm

I was pastoring in a small village, and a new pastor arrived in town. He opened up a church building that had been sitting empty for some time, hoping to plant a new church. To engender some interest, he decided to have a revival meeting, so he obtained permission to use a vacant lot on the main street and began setting up a stage and chairs. The lot was fairly large, and he was able to arrange seating for about 300 people. He had large speakers, a great sound system, and several mics. He began his revival on a Saturday morning at about 9:00. I lived a few blocks away, and I heard what sounded to be a large crowd gathering in that vacant lot, and I hurried over to see what was going on. There was nobody there except for the young pastor and one or two others. The music, the clapping, and all the rest was just a recording of another revival. From time to time the pastor would stand up to speak, but I didn't stay long enough to hear what he had to say. The revival lasted all day, for I could hear the noise until early evening. I am quite sure that the neighbours across the street were not impressed. I was a few blocks away, and the noise was loud enough to be disturbing to me. A few days later I happened to meet a colleague of his, someone from the same denomination, and I commented on what had happened. His colleague said to me, "He has a lot of enthusiasm." I don't think he meant it in a positive sense.

Normally, enthusiasm is a positive trait for a person, but that has not always been so. In the 1650s to say that someone was enthusiastic was considered to be a criticism. An enthusiastic person was one who showed "excessive religious emotion," to the point that they were irritating. The pejorative sense of the word has almost entirely disappeared, although I think the colleague of the "enthusiastic" pastor had got it right. The young pastor had gone a bit too far, and, sadly, his efforts at planting a church failed shortly afterward.

The word, "enthusiasm," has its origins in the Greek language, and the Greek root from which we get our word means "to be inspired or possessed by a god, and, thus, to experience ecstasy." In the 1650s, when the word was used pejoratively, the Puritans, who were a rather reserved group, were suspicious of anyone who expressed too much religious emotion, for they thought that such people had become conceited as they claimed special revelation from God. Too much enthusiasm was thought to be a dangerous thing.

And yet, no enthusiasm at all should be a warning sign to us that perhaps we are not moved by the things of God. If we never have any emotion at all when it comes to God and his work in this world, our faith might be growing cold. If we never feel inspired by God to participate in his work, perhaps it is because we are ignoring his presence in our lives.

I don't think we need to set up 300 chairs in a vacant lot and hold a revival which lasts all day Saturday. Still, I do admire this enthusiastic young pastor because he was willing to put himself out there and even be criticized and mocked because he felt so strongly that people know the message of salvation and come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. He may have been a little misguided when it came to putting his enthusiasm into practice, but his heart was in the right place.

This young pastor was part of the Pentecostal movement, and Pentecostals tend to be a little more aware of the moving of the Holy Spirit than the average Christian. Part of their culture is to be conscious of how the Holy Spirit might be working around them. Maybe that can make them overly enthusiastic (at least from the perspective of a staid, northern European, Reformed person), but, at the same time, it may well be that they sense that the Holy Spirit is moving, and they want to be part of that movement.

It doesn't seem improbable that we can get so caught up in being "rational" about our faith that we miss opportunities to join in the Spirit's work. We do have a tendency to reason and plan before we act, and if we do not see the way clear and if we cannot remove all obstacles, our tendency is to do nothing. But let's not forget that what we may perceive as giant rocks in the roadway are nothing more than little pebbles to the Holy Spirit. There is no such thing as an obstacle to the Spirit, and when he begins to move, wonderful things can happen.

Are we enthusiastic enough? If to be enthusiastic is to be possessed by God, then, according to Scripture, we are all enthusiastic because the Holy Spirit dwells in all who believe in Jesus Christ. But the Spirit does not force us to act; rather he moves us, and, it seems, we do have the power to grieve the Holy Spirit when we do not follow his urging (Ephesians 4:30. Paul says this in the context of our sinning, but we can extrapolate this to following his lead as well.) When we keep in step with the Spirit, however, we are hearing his calling and urging, and we are responding by showing our enthusiasm.

As I reflect on the attempts of the enthusiastic pastor, I believe that he was following the Spirit's leading. What he chose to do might have been somewhat unhelpful, but he sensed the Spirit calling him to bring the gospel to that village. He would have been well served to have had a conversation with some of his colleagues and trusted friends before he set up 300 chairs, for they may have guided him in a bit different direction. But he was enthusiastic, and that is not a bad thing.

Pastor Gary