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High-pressure Church-work

P E. Kretzmann

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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High-Pressure Church-Work.

There is a very significant article in the *New Republic* of June 10, 1931, the gist of which is reproduced in the August, 1931, number of the *Readers' Digest*. Its general line of thought is that of a similar article on porch-climbers in the *Forum* of April, 1931. Both articles speak at some length and with considerable frankness of high-powered salesmanship and of modern selling methods in general. And their conclusions are not at all favorable to this form of selling, with all the machinery that has been assembled to serve the end of this high-pressure salesmanship, which in its present form is a product of the World War.

The manner in which these high-powered campaigns are put on is ably described, not only in these two articles, but in a number of others which have lately appeared. It is not the fact of making use of legitimate means for publicity purposes that the writers deplore, but the manner in which newspaper- and radio-advertising is prostituted in inducing spending and discouraging thrift. The work of such men in invading the home is scored especially strongly because the salesmen who make use of this type of approach take advantage of the virtues of courtesy and hospitality which give them an undue opening. An encounter with such a salesman usually proceeds as follows. If the agent once manages to get into the house (or office), he will use his carefully rehearsed approach, his glib arguments, and persuasive oratory until the resistance of the prospective customer is worn down. In a great many cases the signature on the dotted line is received, and the article or commodity concerned is delivered. So far, so good—from the standpoint of the company. But then comes the aftermath, a resentment which increases with every instalment payment. Even if the article or set of books is good, the chances are that this particular salesman will never again make a sale at this stand unless the purchaser meekly yields to the spirit of this jazz age and makes a consistent effort to keep up with the Joneses. That is one aspect of the psychology of high-powered salesmanship.

Discussions of this kind may well give church-workers cause for thought, for similar phenomena are found also in church history. The psychology of religion in particular has investigated the great religious epidemics, such as the Great Awakening of about a century ago, due chiefly to the work of the Wesleys in England and to that of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards in America. Due to the character of the preaching affected by these hortatory evangelists great masses of people were aroused to a very high pitch of excitement, declaring their willingness to become members of the Church under circumstances of almost pathological intensity. Recent investigations into the field of these movements have uncovered by-products of

a morbid and even of a criminal nature, chiefly because of the emotional tendency of the appeal mainly employed. And even if this phase of such epidemics is not so strongly in evidence, there is always the danger of a mere emotional storm, with a reaction unfavorable to real understanding of church-membership and progress in church-work. In an evangelistic campaign of this kind which the present writer had occasion to witness a score of years ago, the number of those who "hit the sawdust trail" was given as slightly over ten thousand. But when a careful census of actual accessions in membership was made about a year later, the actual gain amounted to less than one per cent., although the machinery of the campaign had drawn upon the resources of practically all the Protestant (not the conservative Lutheran) churches of a large city.

It is but natural to ask: *How is the phenomenon of high-pressure church-work as evidenced by such campaigns to be explained?* What is its psychology? What good results, if any, can be ascribed to such procedures? How should serious-minded church-workers look upon efforts which savor of high-powered salesmanship in demanding recognition of the truth of the Gospel and in gaining new members for the Church?

Let us hasten to state here at once that any investigation of this kind does not intend to impugn the motives of workers who employ high-powered methods, as though such efforts in themselves had the concomitant of moral deficiency. Even in affairs of this world it would be rash to say that every promoter is insincere and acting merely from selfish motives. And who would want to cast a suspicion of this kind on John and Charles Wesley, on George Whitefield, on Jonathan Edwards, or even on "Gipsy" Smith? The fact that these men, at least in many respects, followed false leads, that they were misguided enthusiasts, that they preferred emotion to conviction, does not in itself militate against their sincerity.

But right here we have the very core of the phenomenon known as high-pressure church-work, namely, the use of emotionality or suggestibility in influencing people for a cause. "The essential characteristic of the process," as Gardner puts it (*Psychology and Preaching*, 210), "is that there is brought before the mind a presentation under such conditions as tend to secure its uncritical acceptance." The process may be far from reaching the stage of hysteria or hypnosis, the former being an abnormal nervous condition very favorable to the uncritical acceptance of ideas and the latter a state of abnormal suggestibility induced by the use of certain kinds of suggestion; and yet the fact of *abnormal* suggestion is the outstanding feature of all movements of this kind, from the Crusades to the present day. If we remember that the primary mental function, as here concerned, is belief, which means the acceptance of a presentation as true on the

basis of conviction, and then note the approach of high-pressure workers with their attempt to introduce ideas into the minds of men in such a way as to prevent any opposing idea or contrary feeling from entering their consciousness, we have the factor of the essential dangerousness of such a procedure in the spiritual field in its undisguised nakedness.

In further analyzing this matter, let us follow the presentation of Gardner in his *Psychology and Preaching*, with certain references to the work of Howlett, Jordan, Sheridan, Squires, Wilson, and others. The two fundamental laws of ordinary suggestibility may be said to be the following: 1. Suggestibility varies inversely as the insistence of the personality upon maintaining its independence or autonomy without an unreasonable contrariness varies. 2. Suggestibility varies inversely as the mental equipment and organization of the person or persons concerned varies; for the wider the background of knowledge and the keener the logical ability, the more difficult will be the process of working conviction. The slightest reflection will show that, while all men may be said to be in some measure suggestible, yet the variety of suggestibility is very great, a fact which places upon the church-worker the double need of caution lest he at any time deliberately foster a suggestibility which will interfere with the purpose of all church-work, that of working conviction of the truth in the hearts of men.

From this it is immediately evident that the church-worker must distinguish most carefully between normal and abnormal, between legitimate and illegitimate suggestion. Thus the indirection of normal suggestion is perfectly legitimate since it excludes the feeling that any form of control is being forced upon the subject and, in fact, the most effective method often is a great show of frankness and straightforwardness, which is the very perfection of indirection, but may under no condition degenerate into mere selfish propaganda. For whatever else is done, it is essential to secure the confidence of the subject, not by an assumption of knowledge and authority which the church-worker, and in particular the preacher, does not possess, but by actual worth, by a mastery of subject-matter which will justify the confidence given by the subject. The point of sterling honesty cannot be too strongly emphasized at this juncture. Gardner writes (*op. cit.*, 226 f.): "The people often listen with rapt attention to one who has acquired a wide reputation as a great preacher, even though his utterances may be very commonplace and would be so regarded if they came from an obscure man. . . . A man of mediocre ability may by shrewd self-advertisement acquire on this ground an authority in religious and political bodies which would be laughable were it not so serious in its practical import. Sometimes a veritable charlatan secures in this way a greater influence over many people than men of

sound character and ripe wisdom can acquire. . . . Some men have a strange power to cast a spell over others. It is popularly called 'personal magnetism,' though that is by no means a descriptive phrase, only a name for our ignorance. Sometimes it seems to be a charming winsomeness that takes us willing captives; sometimes we feel a contagious enthusiasm which, like a pervasive warmth, penetrates and thaws out the frost of our indifference or even our opposition; sometimes we find ourselves quietly submitting without a struggle to the sheer dominating strength of a personality against which we feel it vain to strive. But whatever form this power takes, it seems so to master us by the inhibition of our individual rational powers that the ideas of the masterful personality are grafted upon our pliant minds."

A person who makes use of such means, especially if he deliberately emphasizes certain attractive features of his own personality, is apt to follow up his first success by trying to sway individuals and entire audiences by strong emotions or mighty passions, especially if he encourages certain peculiar prejudices and predilections held by the subject. If there is added a careful repetition, the motor impulse started by the first idea will have its pressure increased, until the sheer cumulative force will wear down the resistance of the subject. We must keep in mind that our aim is to produce *voluntary* action, the rational control of conduct consecrated by faith. If church-workers, even unconsciously, but especially by conscious, deliberate intention, precipitate into action before conviction has been wrought, such action will either be subsequently deplored and with difficulty be reconsidered and changed, or there will result an enfeeblement of will on the part of the subject which will be quite as disastrous as the untimely yielding itself. In connection with this thought Gardner remarks (p. 233): "This exactly describes the situation of thousands who to-day are enrolled as member of Christian churches and, while it enables the churches to make a brave show as to numerical strength, is one of the chief causes of the comparative lack of power of organized Christianity. I make bold to say that the disastrous results of this false psychological method are more general and more irremediable in the realm of religion than anywhere else."

These points are applicable, not only to the actual personal work of pastors and church-workers in general, but also to the various forms of church publicity, newspaper publicity, every other product of the printer's art, radio-broadcasting, street-car advertising, etc. *Unless church publicity is thoroughly honest as to form, content, and scope, and unless it can be attended by corresponding follow-up work and adequate education, it cannot be said to be legitimate from the standpoint of sound pedagogy.* Edwards (*Fundamental Principles of Learning and Study*, p. 67 f.) quotes with approval the words of James: "Every time a resolve or a fine glow of feeling evaporates

without bearing practical fruit is worse than a chance lost; it works so as positively to hinder future resolutions and emotions from taking the normal path of discharge. There is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly, concrete deed." And again, in developing the thought of the dependence of the feelings upon action, Edwards writes: "One of the fundamental things of which the educator must take advantage in developing the feeling habits of pupils [is here indicated]. Get him to act so that he will have the right feelings. Do not merely arouse the feeling. What one feels may be enjoyed as so much pleasure. One may have a thrill and wait expectantly for the next thrill, and the enjoying of the thrill be the sum and substance of the matter" (p. 146).

The observance of these principles is all the more important since in church-work we are usually working with assemblies, in which the so-called psychology of audiences plays a very prominent part. Moreover, our audiences are ordinarily purposive assemblies, the people coming together for a definite object. It is so easy to make the inspiration of such a gathering one of the mere emotional type, with appeals addressed to the feelings alone, after the manner of the hortatory preacher or exhorter. It often means the use of deliberate restraint *to keep the appeal on the intellectual plane*; for that is what real inspiration in church-work should amount to. If the leader of such an assembly deliberately welds the conglomerates into an *emotional unit*, then the powerful influence of crowd suggestion may work havoc in defeating the ends of conviction. Let us once more quote Gardner (*loc. cit.*, 245 f.): "These frequent large aggregations of people, in which . . . collective suggestion is greater and the units are more readily fused than in smaller ones, constitute one of the most effective means of developing and strengthening the consciousness of the unity of men in an age of specialization of individuals and groups; *if only the process of psychic fusion can be kept from going to the excess which effaces the sense of individual responsibility, disintegrates and weakens personality, and results in hurtful collective action. . . .* If the emotional tide runs so high as to submerge the intellectual life and drown all definite ideas in its flood, the second purpose as well as the first is wholly defeated. No sentiment is then developed, no ideal is established, but only a thirst is created for wild and senseless emotional intoxication, which is disorganizing and debilitating in its effect upon personality."

What may we learn from this discussion of high-powered salesmanship and high-pressure work, especially in the field of the Church's endeavor to spread the Kingdom? In the first place, it might be well for us to speak of "winning souls" rather than of "saving souls." It

is true that the latter expression is found in the Bible, as when St. Paul speaks of the possibility of saving some of the members of his own race, Rom. 11, 14, and when he tells his pupil Timothy: "In doing this, thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee," 1 Tim. 4, 16. But in both cases the idea of "saving" is that which we commonly associate with an act rescuing and does not conflict with the proper sense of Scripture. The phrase "saving souls" has, in sectarian circles, gained a connotation which at least seems to place the burden of the rescue from eternal death upon the church-worker, especially if prayer is regarded as a means of saving and the "wrestling" for a soul is a feature of revivals. The Bible tells us that Christ saved the souls of all men from sin, death, and the power of the devil. "God will save Zion," Ps. 69, 35. "He [the Messiah] shall save the needy," Ps. 72, 13. "The Lord, their God, shall save them in that day as the flock of His people," Zech. 9, 16. "He shall save His people from their sins," Matt. 1, 21. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," 1 Tim. 1, 15. "The Son of Man is come to save that which was lost," Matt. 18, 11. — But of men the Scripture says, of their labor of love to bring the knowledge of salvation to others: "He that winneth souls is wise," Prov. 11, 30. "If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother," Matt. 18, 15. "That I might gain the more; . . . that I might gain them that are under the Law; . . . that I might by all means save some," 1 Cor. 9, 19. 20. 22.

In the second place, the right kind of publicity certainly has the sanction of Scripture. Some of the Bible phrases used in modern church-advertising, it is true, are torn from their proper connection, as Jer. 50, 2, where a special prophecy against Babylon is quoted. But we have the Great Commission, Mark 16, 15 and Matt. 28, 19, to which we may well add Luke 12, 3: "Whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear shall be proclaimed upon the housetops." Cp. Matt. 10, 27. But all publicity connected with the Church of Jesus Christ must be in conformity with the dignity and importance of His message of salvation. Levity in publicity as well as in the pulpit cannot be too strongly condemned. And just as important is the consideration that the publicity of the bulletin-board, of the poster, of the hand-bill, of the circular letter, of the radio announcement, be backed up by solid and sound Bible-preaching and -teaching. It is dishonest to make a claim concerning the full preaching of the Word of God, also according to the confessions of the Lutheran Church, and then present a message which is nothing but a diluted solution of the truth. We are to preach *Law and Gospel, sin and grace*, and make it a *personal message*, so that in either case the hearer will gain the conviction: I am the man. Glittering generalities and oratorical verbosity are not in agreement with the specimens of preaching offered in the Bible, either in the gospels or in the Book of Acts.

In close connection with this point we mention, in the third place, the need of thorough indoctrination. Scripture itself fixes the minimum requirements for admission into the membership of the Christian Church, and no faithful pastor may set these aside in the interest of numbers. The Bible gives the following objectives for the teaching of religion: Knowledge of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world, Acts 8, 37; 16, 31; a life of sanctification, 1 Thess. 4, 3; the ability to examine oneself before partaking of the Lord's Supper, 1 Cor. 11, 29; a constant growth in the knowledge of the truth, Heb. 5, 12—6, 3; Eph. 4, 14—16; the ability to distinguish between truth and error, 1 John 4, 1 ff.; readiness to defend the truth, 1 Pet. 3, 15; contending for the faith, Jude 3. If we reduce these requirements, we do so at our own peril and that of the Church for which we profess to be working. *Indoctrinated* hearts is the demand of Scripture, and high-pressure church-work may never have the objective of gaining numbers at the expense of sound indoctrination.

In the fourth place, it is at least a matter of grave doubt whether the objects of the Church are served best by means of campaigns, drives, and similar plans and contrivances, no matter how well-meaning are the people who suggest them and possibly work heart and soul for them. Projects of this kind almost invariably mean forcing the issue, even if temporary success is registered. Supersalesmanship will almost certainly have negative results in the end; for the resentment wrought by jazz methods will come to the surface after the effect of suggestion is worn off. The pedagogical slogan of the Bible may well be put into the words: Education is a slow process. Our Lord Himself says concerning the work of the Kingdom: "First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear," Mark 4, 28. The same thought is contained in the famous saying of the Apostle Paul: "How shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? . . . So, then, faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God," Rom. 10, 14, 17. And the entire idea of high-pressure church-work is scored by the same apostle when he writes: "So, then, it is not of him that willeth nor of him that runneth, but of God, that showeth mercy," Rom. 9, 16. — Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the Lord does not sanction a blind going forward. He does indeed speak of a faith that moves mountains, but that is the confidence resting upon the promises of His Word, not upon schemes which collide with clear principles of His eternal will. His references to the person who intends to build a tower and does not sit down first to count the cost and to the king who intends to wage war and does not consider first whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand, Luke 14, 28—33, are well known, and they are in keeping with His pedagogy throughout the Bible.

In the last place, high-pressure church-work must be looked upon with suspicion because it almost invariably links a big project with certain names of men. Luther showed the right attitude when he refused to have his work associated with his name as long as this meant identification with his person, and it was only when he could definitely expound his position concerning the *doctrine* which was connected with his name that he consented to the designation Lutheran for the old Apostolic Church as it had been cleansed through the work of the Reformation. This is in entire agreement with the Holy Scriptures. Not the person should be in the foreground, but the message; if the message is lost in the identity of the person, there is something wrong. The Apostle Paul writes: "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake," 2 Cor. 4, 5. This is in agreement with his words written just a few months before: "Who, then, is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So, then, is neither he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth, but God, that giveth the increase," 1 Cor. 3, 5—7. Herein the apostle agrees with John the Baptist, who plainly stated: "He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease. He that cometh from above is above all; he that is of the earth is earthly and speaketh of the earth; He that cometh from heaven is above all," John 3, 30. 31. If the work of the Church is done in this spirit, then the motto of our Church can and will truly stand: SOLI DEO GLORIA!

P. E. KREZTMANN.

Dispositionen über die von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Serie alttestamentlicher Texte.

Zweiundzwanzigster Sonntag nach Trinitatis.

Gen. 50, 15—21.

Joseph ist ein Vorbild unsers Heilandes Jesu Christi. Wie Joseph, den sein Vater lieber hatte als seine andern Söhne, von diesen verkauft und in Jammer und Elend hineingeschickt wurde, Gott aber diese böse Tat gebrauchte, um viel Volks, ja Josephs eigene Brüder vom Hungertode zu erretten, so ist Christus, Gottes des Vaters lieber Sohn, von seinen eigenen Brüdern im Fleisch verkauft, mit größter Schmach und bitterstem Leiden überhäuft worden; aber Gott hat diese schändliche Tat gebraucht, seinen ewigen Ratschluß zur Erlösung der Menschheit auszuführen. — Joseph ist auch ein Vorbild eines jeden treuen Christen. Wie Joseph gottselig gelebt hat, so der Christ; wie es dem Joseph gegangen ist, so auch dem Christen: Der Gerechte muß viel leiden; aber