

Melva's Corner

ARE YOU COMFORTABLE?

January 15, 2007

(II Corinthians 1:3-4)

Central Truth: “Oh, I don’t think I’d be comfortable with that!”

First, let me say that this is an article that I would normally reserve for our ‘Learning Tree’ feature. But I believe it is also appropriate for our ‘Weekly Inspirational Message,’ as we start the new year. So here we go.

When did “comfort” become the great American pastime? When did people begin feeling entitled to refuse something they weren’t “comfortable” with? We’re doing a word-study today on the word “comfort,” a word that really has pestered me recently.

Comfort, I suspect, is the gear that drives the Church Merry-Go-Round — that is, our churches’ continual swapping of members. Most of us seldom ask how many gains in our own church’s membership are conversions, and how many are transferring membership from another local congregation? Let’s consider the term comfort.

Definition #1: “Comfort” meaning the absence of stress. If we say we’re not “comfortable” with praise teams or applauding a baptism or door-knocking evangelism, we probably just mean that we’re uneasy, that we have a little cognitive dissonance. We’re not judging rightness or wrongness, we’re just uneasy with it, it is not our preference.

Comfort as the absence of stress is extremely important when you’re hoping to get the un-churched churched. People who don’t wear ties, who don’t understand our jargon, or who don’t have nice clothes are likely to see a visit to some of our churches as pretty stressful. We should take away as much stress as we can for our visitors. Absence of stress is a good and reasonable definition of comfort.

Definition #2, though, is to use comfort as a lo-fat substitute for conscience . . . for hearing voice of the Holy Spirit.

Using comfort as a euphemism . . . you see, it's more polite in America to say "I'm not comfortable with that" than to say, "I object. That's wrong." Mind you, I agree that America should be more polite, that it needs more civility and less Road Rage, more of Miss Manners and less of Howard Stern. However, a lot of "I'm not comfortable with that" is a soft soap by people who don't want to offend a sinful world.

In a culture that believes its bad form to say "That's wrong." It's uncool to say "I can't do that in good conscience." But it's OK to say, "I'm not comfortable with that."

Using the comfort zone as conscience, using the comfort zone to placate the Holy Spirit. Interesting. The irony is that discomfort is a voice of conscience. We're supposed to be uncomfortable if we find a wallet full of money and are tempted to keep it. We're supposed to be uncomfortable if we've lied. Conviction by the Holy Spirit should always bring discomfort.

Discomfort can also be a warning in the presence of wrong. We teach children to avoid molestation by telling them, "Don't let anyone touch you in places you're uncomfortable." That's good advice. We adults can use discomfort as a moral warning system. We should be uncomfortable hearing obscenities in a movie, we should be uncomfortable watching gratuitous sex and mayhem in a movie and if we are not, something is wrong. To be comfortable and accepting of all that — is a dangerous condition morally.

Definition #3: Comfort as the idolatry of one's own preference. I remember one time, the Holy Spirit spoke to me of a couple headed for divorce. One of the partners was threatening to walk out and was strongly rumored to be carrying on an affair. The Holy Spirit said I was to phone this person who seemed to be the main offender, to express concern and ask for a conference. I was turned down cheerfully, neatly, decisively, with the phrase, "Oh, I don't think I'd be comfortable with that."

I just about had to bite my tongue. I knew that if I lashed out, there'd be no hope of getting the person into counseling, bringing persuasion of sin, or rebuilding the marriage. But how much I

wanted to say, “Oh, you’re not comfortable! Surprise, surprise, when you deserve to be called down for adultery and marriage-wrecking. God doesn’t necessarily want you to be comfortable, He wants you to be good. He wants a broken and a contrite heart, not spineless pandering to your foolish sense of comfort.” No, I didn’t say that out loud. It wasn’t just this person’s brazenness that upset me, it was the absolute confidence that one person is not entitled to make another person uncomfortable, even if one of them has the obligations of a spiritual leader. Well, the story finally ended well with the reconciliation of the marriage . . . because that’s what the Holy Spirit wanted in this case.

Definition #4: In the Bible, what is comfort? Comfort is consolation: and this is a strong term. Psalm 119:50, “My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.” Isa 40:1 “Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” II Corinthians 1:3-4 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”

These scriptures describe the kind of comfort that churches ought to be providing. “Come to me, all ye weak and heavy-laden,” says Jesus, and we ought to welcome them on His behalf. And we have to do it often enough that the word gets out that the church is in the consolation business. If you’ve learned that you have cancer, is church the place you’d come? If you feel guilty for taking kickbacks from a company you deal with, is church the place you’d come? If your daughter is pregnant out of wedlock? If your son made his girlfriend pregnant out of wedlock? If your spouse is cheating on you? If your parent has Alzheimer’s? Is church the place you’d come? When the church gets into the serious business of comforting and healing, people will come. That is the sense in which a church should be comfortable.

In the Bible, comfort is not “consumerism.” It is not the wimpy idolatry of one’s own preference. So I’m impatient when our churches huddle in their comfort zones. I’m unhappy with the way we seem to have rewritten Acts 17:10 — “Now the Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians, for they examined the

scriptures daily to see whether they could be comfortable with the things Paul had said.” When we do search the scriptures, we find that actually it’s a dangerous thing to be “at ease in the world.” This is not our home!

I can’t find examples in the New Testament of people being uncomfortable with the gospel. Enraged, yes. Furious, confused, threatened, scandalized, and homicidal because of the gospel, but never just uncomfortable. And I don’t find any promises to Christians that they will be comfortable. Comforted, yes. Christians are promised joy, peace that surpasses understanding, the comfort of the Holy Spirit, the companionship of Jesus and a place in heaven. But they’re never told that they’ll be comfortable. In fact, they’re warned that the world will hate them.

We’re ready now to answer the question I’ve implied in the title. How do we minister in the Church that’s comfortable, that paradoxical congregation where so many place membership?

First, we bring them around again and again to scripture, where God sets out His expectations and promises us a spirit of courage that will let us meet them.

Second, we model courage, we model godly risk-taking, we step out of our own comfort zones because of our love for God.

Third, we listen carefully to the immature, to the “weaker brother” or sister of Romans 14, and do all we can so that we do not cause them to stumble through a violation of conscience.

Finally, we must remind one another to keep perspective. We remind folks that there is a comfort that is genuine consolation, but there is also a kind of comfort that is apathy and self-love. We point out that there is discomfort that is the voice of conscience, but there is also discomfort that is only an insult to God.

In a world system that still persecute and murders Christians . . . where satan still prowls looking for God’s people to devour, we must not let preferences, habits, and trivialities divide us from other Christians or distract us from the urgent work of the Kingdom, especially if our only reason is that we are merely uncomfortable.

Scriptural References:

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