

## Young People's Forum (III.5)

Dear Young People,

You will recall that in the last installment I began a discussion of the manner in which we live the antithesis in relation to the people around us who are not believers. I mentioned that the fundamental command of the Scriptures is to love our neighbor as ourselves. I defined our neighbor as anyone with whom we come into contact and with whom we have some communication. We come into contact with hundreds of people on the street, on the metro, when we go shopping, when we go to Jurong Bird Park, etc. These people are not our neighbors, for we have nothing to do with them. But our neighbor is someone whom we meet and with whom we must have something to do. Perhaps he or she needs of help for some reason such as an injury through falling. Perhaps it is someone in the bus who strikes up a conversation with us – not very common in Singapore, but much more common here in the States. Perhaps we go to school with someone who is in our class. These people suddenly become our neighbors. Through his providence, God places such a person on our path, puts such a one in contact with us, and requires of us that we act as a neighbor towards such a one; that is, that we love such a one.

I think I mentioned too that to love our neighbor as ourselves means that we seek the good of that neighbor. And, while there are many ways that we are required to seek the good of that neighbor, the chief and most important good that neighbor has is his or her salvation. That means that while we give our neighbor such help as he or she may need, we always do so by our Christian witness to that neighbor. We bring groceries to a starving neighbor, but tell them that we bring these in the name of Christ who has shown mercy to us. And we tell them that it is our hope and prayer that they too will repent of their sin and seek mercy in the cross of Christ. In that way they will be one with us in the church of Christ.

That calling is proved by the fact that we love our neighbor as ourselves. We love ourselves, not by selfishness and self-seeking. I had a man in a congregation I served who thought that was the meaning. He bought the best shirts and suits for himself while his wife and family had to buy their clothes at the second-hand store. He had steak for his dinner, while his family had frankfurters – if they had any meat. He used butter, while his family could use only oleo. He had a nice car, but his wife and children had to walk. And so on, down the line. I thought this was a dreadful sin, and told him so.

We love our neighbor as ourselves because we are the objects of God's mercy and grace; he has saved us and made us his children. We love ourselves as children of our Father in heaven. We want others to be blessed as we are blessed. In our love for ourselves, we seek our own salvation by repenting of sin and obeying God. We tell our neighbors the same things that we seek for ourselves. We know that the only way of being children of God is through repentance and confession of God's truth. And so we tell others of our salvation and of their need for repentance and confessing the truth. That is the most important Christian witness there is.

We do not love our neighbors when we join with them in their sins and go with them to parties, movies and places of worldly pleasures. We do not love our neighbors when we hear them take God's name in vain and say nothing. The Psalmist sings in Psalm 119:63: "I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy

precepts.” That surely means that I am not a companion of those who do not fear God nor keep his commandments.

Companionship is friendship and even fellowship. Companionship means to do things together with one’s companion. It is to share activities and be able to talk together about things that count: important things, personal things, things that have to do with our calling in the world as children of God. Those that fear God are the only ones with whom we can have such companionship.

But someone will object: But we have to do with our classmates every day, all day and we must speak to them and share all sorts of activities with them. That is true. But that is different from being a companion with them. And somehow, in your actions and deeds, you must show those with whom you come into contact that you love God and serve him. It is necessary to be kind and helpful to others. It is important to be cheerful and pleasant. It is our calling to live an exemplary life so that the kind of life we live is its own powerful testimony. It is as important to explain to our classmates why we do not go to movies as it is to tell them that we do not do such things.

But we must also, when the opportunity presents itself speak to them of our faith and our desire that they come to church with us, turn from their sins and believe in Christ. It is not our calling to speak in every other word about spiritual things and about religion. One can, Jesus reminds us, cast one’s pearls before pigs (Matt. 7:4). But it is our calling so to let our light shine before men that others see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16). Notice that the emphasis does not fall on what we say, but rather on what we do.

Yet, in all our life with these neighbors and in all our talk and conversation, even in our debates and arguments, we must be pleasant and kind, not angry and trying to pick a fight. In the way we talk to others, we also witness. Cheerful and happy Christians witness by their cheerfulness and happiness. Grumpy and ornery Christians throw dark and scary shadows on Christianity in general and on the faith that we hold dear. Peace-loving Christians show that they live in peace with God and want to live in peace with their neighbors. Belligerent Christians who walk around with a chip on their shoulders do not recommend the gospel, but speak evil of it.

Also in class when the opportunity presents itself God’s people speak up when they have an opportunity to say something about their faith – also in class. I do not have any experience with how classes are taught in Singapore’s schools, but here in America questions are invited by the teacher, answers given and opportunity for discussion is a normal part of classroom learning. Even in our Seminary instruction we invited questions, opened the floor for discussions, and let others who were studying in our Seminary but who held different views from what we believed, say their piece.

I had a professor in college in philosophy who knew I was Protestant Reformed. He would rather frequently, when he taught something with which I disagreed, invite me to state my position. He would give me as much time as I wanted and then open the floor to discussion. After every one who had something to say had spoken, he would close the discussion and go on in his lecture. Many classmates would consult after class to learn more about what I believed.

Some professors, apparently unwilling to have anyone disagree with the, and being unwilling to engage in debate, would deny us the floor altogether if they knew we were Protestant Reformed. We did not mind that because we were, after all guests in a Christian Reformed college and we had to live with our professors and classmates in peace. But all certainly knew what we believed, or they would not have denied us the opportunity to say something.

It takes some measure of courage to live an antithetical life in the midst of the world. It is to be expected that we will face opposition and even mockery and hatred. It reminds me of a summer long ago when I was working to earn some money for school in the Grand Rapids Park Department. I was working with another young man from our church, and both of us bowed our heads and prayed before eating our lunches at noon break. Our superintendent and some of the other workers mocked and even tried to disturb us when we prayed. We spoke directly to those who mocked, but for the rest, we paid no attention. It was not all that long afterward that all our co-workers automatically waited in silence to eat their lunches until we had finished our prayers. And from time to time one of the workers would ask us about our faith.

The church is a great place to live, for in the church we can have and do have true companions.

With my love in the Lord,

Prof