



WOW: Word Of the Week

Contagion

February 1, 2023

The word contagious is better known than the related word contagion. The Latin root meant contact. Contagion is usually used in a negative sense. "Personal hygiene slows the spread of common contagions." The word can refer to the spread of ideas or practices. The typically negative use is reflected in synonyms: infection, disease, blight.

This negative use was illustrated three years ago, when just as the COVID pandemic was beginning, our eldest son Michael and I recorded a video comparing the rapid spread of disease to the rapid spread of sin in our world. The contagion of sin! The parallel seemed obvious then, and is still valid. COVID was indeed a rapidly spreading disease that to this point has resulted in 670 million cases with 6.83 million deaths. In less than three years, at least 8-9% of the world population was infected, even as efforts were being made to slow the spread of COVID! Many believe that actual cases exceed reported cases.

According to virology experts, a contagion becomes unstoppable when an infected person infects at least two others, and all of those infected continue the multiplication, infecting at least two more as the virus spreads. The spread of the contagion is exponential. But, when the rate of spread is reduced to a single person, the spread of the virus stops. Note that it is not the number of persons contacted but the number of persons infected.

If sin grows in our world as a contagion, it also true that faith grows in our world as a contagion. A new believer is "infected" by a current believer. New believers develop faith in Christ through contact with those who have faith in Christ.

Pliny the Younger, governor of Pontus and Bithynia from AD 111-113, wrote several letters to the emperor Trajan. In one letter describing the spread of Christianity, Pliny compared it to a contagion.

Think with me! Many bemoan the slow spread of Christianity in today's world. Why does Christianity not spread like wildfire as it did in the early centuries of Christianity? Simple answer? Because it is not a contagion. We who seek to lead in evangelism struggle to convince Christians to share the gospel with at least one person each year, bringing another person to faith in Christ. Calling attention to Jesus' words in the Great Commission, "disciples who make more disciples," seems to fall on deaf ears in many churches.

Hundreds of church leaders do not consistently "infect" at least one other person. Thousands of church leaders and Christians have never had the experience of "infecting" two others with faith in Christ in a year. Yet, the spread of a contagion depends on one becoming two, two becoming four, four becoming eight, interminably!

Church growth is many-faceted – organic, spiritual, numeric. Numbers are not everything, but they are something. Luke recorded specific numbers in the early chapters of Acts. Decadal church doubling is minimal! How to get there? Begin in 2023 – each believer touched by my words, let's go forth in faith sharing faith, building faith, developing faith, becoming a spreading faith contagion. Will you pray?