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## **Frank C. Laubach and the Challenge of Literary Evangelism**

**J. Gregory Lawson**

The legacy of Frank Charles Laubach, 1884–1970, will continue to be influential for many years to come. As a result of the development of the “Each One Teach One” approach to literacy education, millions of people have learned to read and enjoy a more meaningful life. For Laubach, literacy education was an extension of his Christianity. Although many secular agencies have adopted Laubach’s method of literacy education, the challenge remains for the contemporary Church to fill this void. Literary education presents a tremendous opportunity in the areas of evangelism, and church growth. This article addresses Laubach’s view of the importance of literacy evangelism.

Laubach strongly believed Christians should engage in evangelism. He writes of the main task of evangelism as winning souls:

Preaching the gospel is a means of bringing men to surrender to Christ. If it fails to win men, then the missionary cannot say, as some do, “I have done my part, and now it is up to the sinner to repent.” The missionary has not done his part, nor can he wash his hands of the sinner, until he has explored all the means of fishing for men.<sup>1</sup>

To Laubach, literacy education should be an integral part of a strategy of evangelism: “While ‘Each One Teach One’ began thirty-five years ago as a way to teach and win non-Christians in

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illiterate areas, it now begins to reveal immensely other possibilities as a means of witnessing for Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Laubach discovered that people can win others to Christ if they teach them lovingly and witness right after each lesson “while the iron is hot.”<sup>3</sup> For this to take place, the student and teacher must have a Christ-like relationship. He notes, “More important than any specific service is the genuine love and sympathy of the teacher. Illiterates know intuitively whether we love them as brothers or whether we look down upon them.”<sup>4</sup>

Since many illiterates live in difficult circumstances, they are sensitive to patronizing attitudes on the part of the teacher. Laubach says this is the reason why the teacher should view the illiterate with an attitude of equality. Also, the teacher should sit down beside the illiterate as he or she teaches the student. It is never proper to stand above them. The teacher should continually pray during the time of instruction that the learner have the greatest hour of his or her life. A humble and loving spirit in the teacher will always be received by the illiterate.<sup>5</sup> Laubach realizes that this attitude is necessary for a successful literacy campaign. “The spirit of Christlike sympathy,” he explains, “is the one indispensable factor for a successful literacy campaign, for it is the only spirit that carries on permanently, in spite of any obstacles.”<sup>6</sup>

Laubach believed it was necessary to see the illiterates as children of God for whom Christ died. He affirmed that God is seeking the illiterates and waiting for the teacher to win them to salvation. This is the method Christ used.<sup>7</sup> Laubach remarks, “We need to practice the gospel which we preach as Christ did. They turn to us in throngs whenever we open their blind eyes.”<sup>8</sup> God is doing His part in the world and expecting Christians to enter the doors that are wide open.

According to Laubach, the perfect way to lead the blind lost world to Christ is to love them and act like Christ. The illiterates need to know that Jesus loves and sympathizes with them and that He can help them as He met the needs of the hungry, sick and blind in His own day. The teacher does not need to plead for Jesus, but present Him where the poor, lost, groping, despairing,

starving multitudes can see Him in all His radiant love. It is important to present Jesus in a personal way so the people can get a close look at His love.<sup>9</sup> Laubach acknowledged that the most convincing reason Christians should engage in "Each One Teach One" is because they can put Christ in the hearts of their students while putting knowledge in their heads.<sup>10</sup>

Laubach was convinced every Christian should believe in literacy evangelism. He felt God believed in this method more than anyone. Laubach says, "He who died for the desperate, illiterate, hungry multitudes and said He had compassion on them is not only with this movement, He started it."<sup>11</sup> Laubach went on to say that if this movement is of God, nothing can stop it and if anything ever came from God, this movement did.<sup>12</sup>

A major part of Laubach's ministry was to help mobilize the Church for missions. "It is essential," he says, "for the church to train and send men and women who can reveal the love of Christ in their hearts by relieving suffering and meeting needs as Jesus did."<sup>13</sup> This is followed by witnessing for Jesus and His Kingdom's purpose.

Since there were many people within the churches who desired a way to serve Christ, Laubach envisioned churches as the logical place to begin an "Each One Teach One" literacy education program. "There needs to be department of 'Each One Teach One' in every church, both at home and abroad."<sup>14</sup> Churches need to be stirred and directed toward concerted action.<sup>15</sup>

Laubach indicated that it was essential for literacy campaigns to insist that the teaching of the lowest class of people available remain on the conscience of the church.<sup>16</sup> He believed the church should search for different kinds of illiterates, including illiterate adults of all races, foreign people who cannot speak or read English, drop-outs from school, children who are likely to drop out of school and need remedial reading, retarded children and adults in institutions, prisoners and juvenile delinquents.<sup>17</sup>

Laubach believed the Church has the machinery and personnel to succeed in this vast missionary effort.<sup>18</sup> He gives several reasons why the church must assume the leading role in an "Each

One Teach One" literacy campaign. First, it is "real" Christianity. This type of Christianity is not only directed upward, but outward. Second, this is a way that the remainder of the world can be won to Christ. Third, the Church has men and women who are called to go and help the world. Fourth, many Americans believe in free enterprise with private individuals doing all they can do, with help from the government only when or where necessary. Fifth, the only profit the Church seeks is the salvation of souls. Sixth, Christians need this service for their own soul's ministry. Seventh, millions of people want to see Christianity engaged in an all-out world action. Laubach concluded that the Christian Church is ripe for this bold missionary challenge.<sup>19</sup>

Laubach warned that the Christian church must face the missionary challenge of illiteracy or accept the dangerous consequences of inaction. He declares, "If the Christian church fails to do the job, it will be done without any religious influence. Indeed, it is pretty sure to be antireligious."<sup>20</sup> The Christian Church has the Spirit of Christ who gives power to serve and win the illiterate masses and, in doing so, shape the future of the world by winning the world to Christ.<sup>21</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Frank C. Laubach, July 1949, The Laubach Collection, Special Collections, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse.

2. Frank C. Laubach, *How to Teach One and Win One for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1964), 21.
3. Frank C. Laubach, *Christian, Save Your World* (Syracuse: New Readers Press, 1969), 5.
4. Frank C. Laubach, *Teaching the World To Read* (New York: Friendship Press, 1947), 112–113.
5. *Ibid.*, 113.
6. *Ibid.*, 115.
7. Frank C. Laubach, *Literacy As Evangelism* (Syracuse: Laubach Literacy Fund, n.d.), 17.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Laubach, *How to Teach One and Win One For Christ*, 39.
10. Laubach, *Forty Years With the Silent Billion*, (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1970), 478.
11. Frank C. Laubach, “How Can They Read Unless Someone Teaches Them?” The Laubach Collection, Special Collections, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Laubach, *How To Teach One and Win One For Christ*, 40.
14. Laubach, *Christian, Save Your World*, 14.
15. Frank C. Laubach and Robert S. Laubach, *Toward World Literacy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1960), 102.
16. Laubach, *Teaching the World To Read*, 126.
17. Laubach, *Christian, Save Your World*, 15.
18. *Ibid.*, 5.
19. Frank C. Laubach, *Wake Up Or Blow Up* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1951), 143–144.
20. Laubach, *Teaching the World To Read*, 127.
21. *Ibid.*, 128.