"LOOK TO THE ANT"

(The Book of Proverbs, chapter 6, verse 6)

Any moment now the city bus should arrive belching and burping in the distance. It should lumber to a stop here with its motor grumbling and complaining-disgorge some passengers and hiss open its jaws to invite more hapless folk into its steamy interior. Then off it should roar off down the road leaving behind a cloud of red Amazon dust.

Pastor José stood waiting here at the bus stop along the dusty road shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Other potential passengers waited with him seeking refuge from the blistering equatorial sun in the shadow of a utility pole. As the sun marked its passage through the cloudless blue sky the shadow of the pole slowly shifted like a sun dial gnomon, requiring everyone in the line to shuffle a bit to accompany the shade. José gazed vacantly about him by the side of the road in the torrid little Brazilian town and waited more hopefully than expectantly for the bus. It could arrive anytime-or it may already have passed- according to the notoriously flexible schedule it generally followed. He glanced at his fellow travelers, the trash along the road, the few clay tile-roofed homes shut up tight against the noon day heat, and found little to occupy his thoughts.

A barely imperceptible movement at his feet caught his eye and proved to be a procession of ants marching below in ragged formation. *"Olá, meus pequeninos!"* "What are you guys up to?" he said. The other persons in line turned inquiringly towards him. Ignoring them, José turned his attention to the ants. The little insects seemed to be coming from the brush alongside of the road before disappearing somewhere ahead. Tirelessly they tramped on and on, indefatigable in the tropical heat. "*Wow, what a sermon topic*," thought José. *Look at them! Laboring in this heat with singleness of purpose. Every one of them cooperating – no one out of line!* "Here was and inspiration for this Sunday's sermon! And so he began to pass the time fleshing out his sermon outline with Scripture verses and illustrations. Feeling immensely satisfied with himself, José glanced down again. Wait a minute, what was that? The ants were bearing on their backs a huge dead cockroach. It was enormous and must have represented tons of weight to these dedicated little workers. Yet they marched uncomplaining on to some far distant ant hill with a goal to provide for the community. What an example! If only the church could labor like that. If only we could "look to the ant" and carry our burden; each and every member giving his all for the common good. Pastor José's sermon became better and better in his mind as he meditated on this message God had given him from nature.

But wait, there's more! Examining the procession more closely, José perceived that on top of the cockroach, on top of the ants were a number of other ants. Unseen by their fellows below, they scurried about furiously on top of the carcass of the unfortunate cockroach. They waived their antennae wildly. It was difficult to determine exactly how many of them there were and they seemed identical in appearance to the other ants-nothing distinguishing about them at all. Well, how do they fit into this scheme-into this message? Where did they come from? How did they manage to get there up on top, out of sight of their colleagues? What did they accomplish other than add their weight to the burden? They weren't along side nor were they up in front of their buddies. Suddenly like a flash out of the brilliant summer sky came the answer! They were administrative ants. In some mysterious way they fit into the overall plan of things.

Perhaps fifteen years ago Evangelical Christianity began a love affair with corporate management. This marriage between faith and management motivated evangelical entrepreneurs and resulted in a deluge of books, articles, and seminars which promoted an analytical approach

to the articles of faith. The promoters and producers associated with this movement and their audiences continue to adhere to the principle that every aspect of Christian relationships: marriages, family life, churches, prayer life and bedroom performance can be enhanced by the application of management principles. It is no longer sufficient to slip quietly to a comfortable corner with a cup of coffee and prayerfully read one's Bible. Effective Bible study seems to require a collection of outlines, rulers, highlighters in various hues and a dictionary. Church ministries seem to require preparation by means of tedious seminars in which congregants are required to sit on hard metal chairs under fluorescent lights and watch endless overhead presentations. Church budgets become an exercise in bookkeeping rather than faith.

But haven't ants marched since the Garden of Eden? Haven't they gone about their business even if it meant carting heavy cockroaches down to the anthill! Hasn't God revealed Himself throughout the ages to His creatures by means of creation and conscience? God has capacitated those whom He has called to build His church and has miraculously built His church with foolish faith in the face of worldly wisdom. Be cautious of the Gospel according to Dilbert.

The sheep congregate quite naturally and even reproduce. The church has spread throughout the ages-many times in spite of management schemes. Singleness of purpose and selflessness are inherent in God's people. When leadership marches in front of, or even better, alongside the members, it reinforces purpose and encourages by example. Let's look to the ant. Those tiny folk have a message for us.