

Wineskins Magazine

Renewal and Relevancy

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Stop the World! I Want to Get On

*by Rubel Shelly
December, 1992*

The church has a vested interest in the world. While we do not love the world's ways, we love the world's people and want them to know Christ. This world is the arena of God's redemptive work through Christ and his spiritual body. Thus we are called to be both salt and light to a fallen and perishing world that has lost its way.

The paragraph above is simply another way of stating the Great Commission. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20a).

But we have gotten out of the communications loop with the world. We are talking mainly among ourselves about things that are of interest only to people who are already Christians.

Evangelism is about Christians being in contact with non-Christians. When we are as inept as we have proved ourselves to be in even talking with unbelievers, we ought not express surprise that we are having so little impact.

Missions researcher David Barrett says that 44 percent of the world's population has some acquaintance with Christianity through contact with the 33 percent of its people who confess Christ. This means that fully 23 percent of the world's population is completely untouched by Christianity; 1.2 billion people know nothing of the gospel of the grace of God. Among the 44 percent identified above, their acquaintance with Christianity is no greater than the average Christian's knowledge of Islam or Buddhism.

Barrett estimates that 99 percent of all Christian publishing addresses issues of concern only to people who are already believers, that 95 percent of all Christian ministries are for the benefit of Christians, and that 9 percent of all efforts at evangelism are aimed at people within the parts of the world that are already predominantly Christian.

Even in the United States, many mission efforts are targeted for overkill. For example, fully half of the population of California was Hispanic as of 1990 and the only city in the world with more Mexicans than Los Angeles is Mexico City. Yet a disproportionate percentage of mission projects in such settings still aim at English-speaking Anglos.

There is still too much of the pattern of "white flight" from inner- or mid-city areas impinged upon by African-Americans, Hispanics, or other ethnic groups. Why flee? Why not make that church's evangelistic focus those very groups in their neighborhoods – rather than mission works in Africa or Central America?

Then there is the wide-, wide world of turned-off, alienated, and disenfranchised from within the Christian community. A presentation of pure, Christ-centered gospel will bring many back into the fold who are wandering in the bleak wilderness of insipid theology, sectarian division, and rejection by churches that God meant to be safe places for broken people.

Can things be changed? Anyone who answers negatively must not believe in the power of God to work through his people. Of course, things can change. But we have to be aware of the need for change and open to God's power at work among us.

Think of what revolutionary changes have been produced in the political world since 1989. Do we think God is unable to produce equally dramatic results in the religious climate of the world? What limited faith we have!

At the dawn of a new year, take stock of where you are in relation to the world God loves. Ask what you are doing for the sake of being "all things to all men so that by all possible means" you might save some. Pray to God to make you sensitive to opportunities you may have missed in the past. And believe that he is still willing to do great things through surrendered and obedient lives.

Big Theologians Come in Small Packages

by Mike Cope
December, 1992

Who was he, this Jason? “Hey, that’s all right.”

It was one of those days when I was resenting Megan’s condition. I had taken my kids to a baseball card show. There’s nothing Matt would rather do than look at, trade, or buy baseball cards, and there’s nothing I’d rather do that be with him.

But I couldn’t be. I tried strolling Megan through the narrow aisles but she kept grabbing legs and then started trying for the cardboard gems: the Ken Griffey’s, the Will Clarks, and the Dave Justices.

So out we went to the playground. That’s where we met Jason. Six years old. A child for whom “20 Questions” is a way of life.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

“Her name is Megan.”

“Hey, you can swing next to me.”

“Well, she can’t handle that kind of swing very well. Let’s try this one with a safety bar.”

“Hey, you want to go in the tunnel with me?”

“Let me get her out of the swing and we’ll see.”

“Hey, how come you keep answering for her?”

“Megan doesn’t talk much.”

“She looks old enough to talk. Why doesn’t she?”

“Have you ever heard of being retarded?”

“No. Why doesn’t she talk?”

“Well, Megan is almost seven but in the way she thinks – and talks! – she is more like someone who’s two.”

“Hey, that’s all right. Megan, let’s go through the tunnel.”

I hate it when theologians come in such compact size! But Jason pretty much has it figured out. The 1990s version of the All-American kid is inadequate: the Rookie League all-star, the whiz-kid who reads at age three, the precocious survivor who thrives even if left “home alone.”

Not every child is an early reader, a spelling bee winner, or an Ozzie Smith on the little league field.

“Hey, that’s all right.” Jesus loves all the little children of the world!

Friendly Fire

*by Sandra W. Milholland
December, 1992*

You may be feeling a little angry about what's happening in Churches of Christ these days. After all, somebody's tampering with a religious paradigm that we've invested our lives in, and it's a serious matter.

Even if you're excited about the "winds of change" blowing through our movement, you may also be feeling frustrated, confused, even a little frightened that so many of the "church's teachings" are being challenged. Perhaps you've even felt sad, lonely, helpless . . . generally uneasy about the direction we're taking. So have I.

Brothers and sisters, I think we're grieving. All these feelings are a part of healthy grief. The Church of Christ – however we have each perceived it in the past – doesn't exist quite the same way it used to. It would be unnatural not to grieve, and inconsiderate of us not to allow each other to experience this grief process in our own unique ways.

But grieving has a positive side, and I'm experiencing that, also. Peace, contentment, renewed energy, hope, and something I think we're struggling with most: the development of a healthy sense of self apart from others.

There's an old saying that goes, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." And despite my optimism for our future, I'm concerned about what we are standing for as a body of people in transition right now. This moment in history.

The reason I'm concerned about this is because transition – or change – isn't a dynamic that will eventually end somewhere. Transition is ongoing. And we can't afford to remain a people who are known for what we don't believe in. ("Oh, I know you. You're the folks who don't believe in [fill in the blank].")

We've had it easy so far, because as we've persisted in fighting for what we don't believe in, we haven't had to accept responsibility for doing something about what we do believe in. Our message to the world has been vague, almost an afterthought. And most of our physical and emotional energy has been spent bickering among ourselves. We've wasted too much valuable time to continue this self-destruction.

Most of us bear the scars of friendly fire, and too many of our children are casualties. The strafing must cease. It's time to be proactive with one another rather than reactive against one another.

The True Church is not an end in itself. It's not a static entity that we will happen upon some day, or wrap our feeble minds around once and for all. It's a living, moving, changing organism, and we fulfill God's purposes for us as we move with it, not toward it.

Christ gave us a new commandment that's still new today: Love one another. Why? Because, he said, all men will know who you are – and whose you are – by the way you treat each other. In our good-faith efforts to combat the enemy, let's not continue to destroy ourselves with our own friendly fire.

God's voice can be heard in the winds of change that are blowing through his church today. He's trying to tell his children – one more time – what his will is for us.

Will we be still and listen? Will we be gracious toward one another at long last and glorify his name by our gentle treatment of one another? Will we be patient and longsuffering and allow one another to grieve? Will we be diligent through it all by living as a people who stand for specific things that the world can see and know because of the way we live among them?

Or will his message to us continue to go unnoticed against the roar of our own artillery? God help us.

Hope Network Newsletter: A Disturbing Brotherhood Development

*by Lynn Anderson
December, 1992*

Something downright upsetting happened in Memphis a few weeks ago. Churned-up church folks descended on Graceland City from 20 states. Convincing speakers taught troubling classes, brought startling reports, and delivered unnerving lectures. Most sessions were packed. Registration swelled past 700. Ah, yes! This was a disturbing weekend. And may God grant us many more such disturbances. Forty different ministries came together in Memphis November 12-14 for the third Annual Conference on Ministries to the Poor and Homeless. (If you missed it, tapes are available from Riverside Productions, 2167 Mangum Road, Memphis, Tennessee 38134).

Harold Shank, preacher for the warm-hearted Highland Street church in Memphis, thinks the next great revival could break out among the poor! A lot of us think Shank may be right. Rick Atchley, preacher for the Richland Hills Church of Christ in Ft. Worth, Texas, said, "This conference really stretched me." Charley Middlebrook of the "now-becoming-famous" Impact Church of Christ in inner-city Houston, said, "This is the dawning of a new day, of a new direction in ministry among churches of Christ."

What We Saw

Frankly, I was not prepared for the way this conference body-slammed me! Since I work with a church that is anything but "inner city," I was somewhat of an outsider to the conference. I didn't really expect anything earth-shattering. Boy, was I wrong! My heart was touched, my head stretched, my conscience stabbed, and I repented many times. The conference was a real eye-opener. here are some things we saw:

1.) We saw tremendous progress in ministry to the poor. Many of the 40 ministries represented did not exist just five years ago. Harold Shank observed, "There is far more going on than most of us realized." And momentum is building.

Some examples: In Texas, the Richland Hills church, through the leadership of Jan Johnson, manages a million dollar grant from HUD. This keeps Jan and her team busy locating suitable housing and qualifying homeless applicants. Through these efforts, God is opening doors for evangelism, and lives are being changed.

In Tennessee, a young married couple, Drs. Bruce and Dale Woodall, are foregoing potentially lucrative medical practices and opting for county health work among the Appalachian poor. "We've discovered a mission field, right here in the USA," they explain.

As far away from Bruce and Dale as it is possible to get without leaving Tennessee, MACS (the Memphis Area Cooperative Services), sponsored by churches of Christ, cares for the inner-city

poor. MACS pioneered Life Skills Classes to upgrade the employability of the unemployed. This has opened the way for new inner-city churches in Memphis.

In San Francisco, the Metropolitan Church of Christ, led by Kinwood DeVore, serves inner-city poor. They work to rehabilitate ex-convicts and substance abusers, while supplying resources and counseling targeted to inner-city families.

In Houston, Charley Middlebrook and his team planted an inner-city church, the Impact Church of Christ. Here, young professionals combine with ministers to promote an exploding work among inner-city street people.

In Dallas, the Central Dallas Food Pantry supplies food, clothing, and life skills, plus medical and dental care to the inner-city poor. Work is shared by volunteers from several congregations. Nine months ago, Carey and Sophia Dowl, sponsored by the Preston Road church, planted the Central Dallas Church of Christ among their food-pantry friends. Already 25 people have been baptized.

Other stories came from Little Rock, New York, Atlanta, and other cities too numerous to mention. For a list of ministries to the poor among churches of Christ, contact MACS at 1930 Union Ave., Memphis, TN 38104, (901) 272-3700.

2.) We saw quality. First, in the conference itself. The sessions addressed key issues, accessing current and practical material from experienced people. No “brotherhood politics” or competing egos dampened the conference.

Among the presenters were Dr. Evertt Huffard of Harding Graduate School, who has for decades studied ministry in the urban setting. Jan Johnson, recently honored by the City of Ft. Worth for outstanding work among the homeless, presented a session on strategic planning that was worth the trip to Memphis.

Wayne Reed, formerly the director of MACS, is now in doctoral studies and coordinator of the HOPE program in New York City, and rewriting the Life-Skills curriculum taught across the nation by agencies of various backgrounds. His eye-opening session, repeated by popular demand, dismantled the traditional dichotomy between evangelism and social action.

3.) We saw a shift in emphasis. Several underscored “incarnational” ministry to the poor. As Evertt Huffard said, “We cannot bring the poor to us. We must go to them.” Most of these new ministries are going to the poor!

4.) We saw a colorful variety of ministry styles celebrating each other’s uniqueness.

5.) And, as Harold Shank observed, “We were surprised by gratitude.” Those who serve the poor hands-on poured out deep gratitude for the overwhelming interest and support of so many other Christians.

What We Gained

In a string of last-day conversations, hundreds recited what they gained from the conference. Some of the benefits they mentioned were:

1.) We gained awareness of the critical importance of compassion for the poor. The poor cry out from every city! And we heard God's heart cry out on their behalf. We sensed with Roger Greenway (*Cities: The New Mission Frontier*, p. 49), "There is a sense in which God stands on the side of the poor." Hear the voice of Amos, "I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor ... and deny justice to the oppressed" (Amos 2:6-7). And Isaiah, "Woe to those who make unjust laws, ... who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people ... (Isaiah 10:1-3). And James, "Weep and wail for the misery that is coming upon you ... Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you" (James 5:1-4). And Jesus, "He has sent me to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners ... to release the oppressed ..." (Luke 4:18-19).

Of course, Scripture does not romanticize or halo poverty. But mercy and salvation are so woven together in Scripture that, according to Greenway, p. 50, "If we wipe out poverty but neglect to tell the poor the Good News about Jesus Christ, we will have failed in our mission. And if we preach the gospel but ignore the plight of the poor, we are false prophets."

2.) We networked with people of like passion. Fulltime inner-city ministers often feel alone in their work. But fellowship with scores of colleagues from across the nation lifted their spirits. Everyone swapped resources and most headed back home to their ministries feeling much less alone and much better equipped.

3.) Those of us who are not involved hands-on with daily ministries to the poor definitely gained profound respect for the persons serving in our inner cities.

4.) We gained harmony. As Evertt Huffard said, "Nothing unifies Christians quite like ministry to the poor." We sensed no critical, argumentative, or divisive spirit. Differences shrivel alongside passion for the poor!

And Then Reflection

Yes, we've come a long way in the last few years, but most of us went home to reflect on the distance yet to go. Some reflections from my quiet corner:

1.) We must keep refining the theological underpinnings of our ministry to the poor. From Jerusalem on, distorted views of Jesus produced distorted expressions of the church. Ancient Gnostics stripped Jesus of his humanity, thus separating him from the concerns of physical experience. Ebionites and their kin stripped Jesus of his divinity and lost sight of their heavenly roots. Similar imbalance still stalks our streets. The fundamentalist movement overemphasized the deity of Jesus, focusing on "salvation and spiritual things." For them, ministry was preaching ideas that hopefully would filter down into society. But they neglected institutionalized injustice and shied away from social service. Interest in these things was tagged "social gospel,"

symptomatic of “demon liberalism.” Conversely, the classic liberal movement over-emphasized the humanity of Jesus, focusing so completely on the here and now, and so politicizing social issues that they lost their spiritual roots.

Prior to the fundamentalist/liberal controversies, Christians didn’t separate their mission into “evangelism” and “social concerns.” Now is the time to recover a balanced Christology, which blends mercy and evangelism. Jesus also balances compassion and justice. We are a compassionate people. From Amos to James, scripture calls to justice as well as to mercy; to release people from social suffering under oppressive systems, as well as from personal sin.

As Roger Greenway says, “Churches and mission agencies that hand out food and clothing month after month and year after year are not really tackling poverty. Things need to be done that will break the poverty cycle for individuals, families, and neighborhoods, and lift people to a level where they can provide for themselves adequately and with dignity” (p. 51).

2.) Our strategies also need further reflection. Bad methods can swallow good motives. Again, Greenway warns, “I’m deeply disturbed by the relief work carried on my organizations that year after year bring in money, material and personnel from places of affluence to places of poverty without accomplishing long-term changes in the lives of the poor ... There is a better way ... [the poor can be] ... not merely fed and clothed ... [but] empowered to meet their own needs, and the needs of their neighbors ...” (p. 55).

3.) Another reflection: Our isolation from others penalizes us. Churches of Christ need not reinvent the wheel. A giant network of resources, experiences, and role models is available from groups outside ourselves; groups with longer and larger experience. Shouldn’t we think about expanding our network?

4.) Finally, our goal must be to plant churches! In fact the consensus of those with long experience is that “viable, indigenous churches are the best – and maybe only – hope for the inner cities.” Political and sociological “solutions” flounder, and compound problems. The poor and homeless rarely vote. Thus elected officials do not really represent the poor. Social workers implement the legislation of the elected officials. Thus, legislative and welfare attempts to “fix” the inner city often combine the impersonal, the inept, and the inadequate.

But Jesus designed genuine churches differently. “My thesis is that Christian churches, motivated by the love of God and taught the essential principles and values of Christian community development, can become the most effective weapon against poverty and suffering in the city if they are planted and educated in a proper biblical manner” (Greenway, p. 56).

Whatever is done in the inner cities among the poor and homeless must not be mere social work. It must be clearly Christian. Motivated by Christian convictions. Conducted by Christian people. Known in the community as Christian undertakings and carried out through authentic relationships that demonstrate Jesus’ love.

One example of this: Recently, over breakfast, Tony Evans, minister of a large black church in the Oak Cliff district of Dallas told of a young man in his neighborhood who had been convicted

of theft and and sentenced to prison. Evans persuaded the judge to make the young man a ward of the church, rather than “to jail the boy and refine his criminal skills.” The young man learned life skills, got a job, and paid back the money he had stolen. he met Christ and became a productive member of society.

The judge then asked Evans, “Could you take 20 more boys?” A major impact is now being made on Oak Cliff and the approach has spread to a number of other cities. “When evangelism, relief, and development are joined ... there will be hope for the cities and a bright new day for church growth” (Greenway, p. 59).

The Future

We hear reports that future conferences may combine at least four major compassion-oriented ministry arms among churches of Christ. In past years, child-care agencies, prison ministries, teen work projects, substance abuse support groups and the poor/homeless ministries each staged separate conferences for their own networks. Sometimes this results in duplication of efforts. For example, an inner-city ministry may be serving a homeless mother She may be homeless because her husband in prison. He may be in prison for substance-related offenses. A child-care agency may be involved with their children. The value of a joint conference might eliminate some duplication. Networking and collaboration could increase effectiveness and decrease costs. Besides, these somewhat related ministries need the resources, encouragement, and momentum they could give each other.

The Memphis conference sent us away with hope. Several who came feeling alone and overwhelmed, left for home feeling part of a ground swell that could shape the future! Mark your calendar now for October 21-24, 1993, the Fourth Annual Conference on Ministries to the Poor and Homeless, at the Impact Church of Christ, Houston, Texas.

The Write Side: Bad Dreams

*by Steve Weathers
December, 1992*

Note: The following essay is an unsolicited submission which we believe provides some excellent food for thought. We are always eager to receive short works of fiction (2,000 words or less), poetry (one page or less), and essays (2,000 words or less) for evaluation as Write Side features.

The 10 lepers give me bad dreams.

The story is a familiar one. En route to Jerusalem and passing through Samaria, Christ encounters a band of walking corpses. maintaining the required sanitary margin, they call out to him from across the roadway: “Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us!” Without delay, Christ tells them to go and present themselves to the priest – the approved ritual for declaring oneself healed of the life-wasting illness. All 10 set out to obey Jesus’ command. “And as they went,” the Gospel writer says, “they were cleansed” (Luke 17:14).

Countless sermons have rendered the final scene in the episode unforgettable: only one of the now-restored lepers, a Samaritan, turns back to his benefactor in spontaneous praise. “Were not all 10 cleansed?” Christ asks the lone figure at his knees. “Where are the other nine?”

As I hear that last haunting question, my bad dream begins. In this nightmare, the restored leper peers into the face of the Master and answers, “Lord, you’ll have to overlook the other nine. You see, they’re strict followers of what is known as the Restoration Movement. They were afraid to add anything to your explicit commandment. You did say, after all, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priest.’ You said nothing about interrupting our journey to return here and offer thanks. Consequently, the other nine are still priest-bound.”

In my frightening reverie, the healed man continues: “Be it said to their credit, Lord, that they too almost turned back. When they looked down and saw that those missing digits had miraculously sprouted anew – when they realized their faces had blossomed with fine fresh noses – they too almost turned back in an act of spontaneous worship. But then they remembered their Restorationist roots. I overheard talk of ‘neither adding to nor taking away from the Lord’s commands.’ Some issued dark warnings about ‘unauthorized additions to worship.’ I heard heated debate on the prohibitive nature of God’s silence. And after the wrangling was over, all nine settled on a safe path: to do just what you had commanded, nothing more and nothing less.

“They disfellowshipped me,” the fellow says at last, shaking his head sadly, “when I called them ‘spiritual neurotics’ and turned back to find you.”

I often have such nightmares when reading the Bible. It’s because I so often see that if its characters had bound themselves by God’s silence the results could have been disastrous. The

beauty and moral of many Bible stories would have been marred or undermined by a strict Restorationist response.

I'm not suggesting, of course, that our movement's concerns are unbiblical. Far from it. Numerous verses stress conservatism, the merit of sticking to God-approved paths. That emphasis is unmistakable. But if there is a voice in Scripture crying for the restoration and maintenance of holy traditions – and there is – there is also a balancing, complementary voice. This other voice warns us how dangerous it can be, spiritually speaking, to play it safe. This other voice stresses the risks and uncertainties involved in meeting a living God. This other voice, in fact, insists that spontaneity and innovation are at times the only way to win heaven's blessing.

The Canaanite woman was innovative. She had no choice. With a demon-wracked daughter at home and the Nazarene giving her the silent treatment, she had to be creative. So she shouted. And she shouted. And she shouted some more – until Christ finally turned and faced her. yet, even then it was merely to clarify heaven's official policy: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," Jesus says to her firmly. "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (Matthew 15:24, 26). His message was clear: for the moment, at least, Canaanites need not apply.

It's here that I have another of my nightmares. For it's just here, you see, that Restorationist sentiments might have doomed that bedeviled girl. In my bad dream, the Canaanite woman is one of us. She has heard lesson after lesson on proper respect for God's ways. In one particularly memorable sermon she recalls the speaker saying, "When God states his terms for salvation, we have no right to ask that he make exceptions." That idea struck her as strange at the time. As a mother, after all, she knew how natural it is for a child to ask that exceptions to the rule be granted. But who was she to argue with the preacher? having now met with Christ's firm rebuff, she responds in keeping with that religious training she has received. Rather than press her suit with Jesus, rather than grapple with the living God will-to-will, she turns sadly away. A loyal Restorationist, she goes home to her still-demonic daughter without a fight.

No, that's not really the way the story ends. Fortunately, this Canaanite woman knew that God's dealings with humanity are not purely contractual. She knew that heaven's official policy is sometimes negotiable because the policy-maker is a living being – not an inflexible text. She knew too that the Lord has a lot of personality and that people with personality value spontaneity and innovation in others. So she hazarded a creative comeback: "... but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Matthew 15:27). And as a reward for quick thinking, the woman won the blessing she sought.

Restorationists have at times oversimplified the nature of spiritual living. We have, I'm afraid, so emphasized our Father's awesome sovereignty that we've lost sight of his breathtaking flexibility. That's not to say, of course, that our heritage is without virtue. To be sure, a nonchalant approach to God's requirements is disastrous. Many Bible people suffered for apathetic inattention to his demands. So the Restoration impulse can be both wise and valid. But doesn't an unbiased reading of Scripture tell us that knowing God is more complex than a game of "Simon Says"? Doesn't it suggest that we may be unsafe in following the Bible as a nervous

new chef might follow a cookbook? The Lord wants us to follow his recipe, I'm convinced, but he also allows for a spoonful of innovation and generous pinch of human spontaneity.

If he didn't, the Christian life could easily turn into a bad dream.

When Can an Exile Go Home?

by Phil Kinzer
December, 1992

In the aftermath of recent political changes, the chief Soviet prosecutor officially closed the 1974 treason case against Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn. This great author was expelled from the Soviet Union over 17 years ago by a decision of the Supreme Soviet. But prosecutor Nikolai Trubin now says he finds “no proof whatsoever testifying to any crime committed by Alexander Solzhenitsyn,” Tass news agency said.

Solzhenitsyn, now 72, is best known for his works *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago*. In those books he chronicled the lives of people sentenced under dictator Josef Stalin to forced-labor camps in Siberia. The stories he tells are from his own experiences.

His “crime” was his willingness to look at situations objectively and then write what he believed to be the truth. For decades that kind of attitude was more than the chiefs of the Communist Party could accept. Unfortunately, that is not uncommon; that attitude is more than many can accept.

The result of this whole episode is that Solzhenitsyn, who now lives in Vermont, is planning to return to his beloved Russia. With more open thinking prevailing there, he can go home. He can be accepted in a place where once he was held in great suspicion.

Any group of people can eventually become infected with the disease of closed-mindedness. It is easy to adopt the tendency of keeping traditions from being tampered with or looked at too closely. For some there is a comfort in keeping the status quo – no matter what that might be.

Churches are especially susceptible to that trend. There can arise guardians of the faith (as they see themselves) whose job it is to purge out anything that looks like it might bring about change. People who do not salute the banners of tradition then become suspect no matter how honest or studious they may have been in their approach.

Many have left their “home churches” during my lifetime looking for a place where openness receives praise rather than ridicule. But my guess is that a good number of those would love to return to their “homeland” if they thought they could come and be accepted as they are.

The good news is that fresher breezes are blowing through our churches. Openness to biblical changes seems to be on the rise. Though sweeping alterations in tradition may not be in our immediate future, willingness to study honestly and accept people with whom we may differ hopefully is. After all, those are the principles upon which our restoration heritage was built.

If we will help fan these fresher breezes some will stay home rather than going into exile somewhere else. Others, who now feel deported, might return. One's homeland is wonderful to experience when one can go there and be welcomed with open arms and breathe freely.

Book Review: God With Us – The Beginning of Renewal

by Larry James
December, 1992

Christmas in the church of my childhood meant no mention of Jesus' birth, except possibly to set us all straight about the fact that no one knew the actual date and that Scripture authorized no special observance in connection with the blessed event. While the entire world fixed its gaze on Bethlehem, we carefully avoided even a mention of the birth at this sensitive time of the year. While I understand the technical accuracy of the point my hometown church tried to make, I still regret missing out on the joy, as well as the annual opportunity for open-hearted celebration, I observed in every other Christian group in town.

Renewal begins with the incarnation of Jesus, the Messiah. To understand the miracle of Immanuel, "God with us," we must rush to Bethlehem and linger for a long while. Most of us who grew up in Churches of Christ live with a "Bethlehem deficiency." Our heritage unwittingly and unintentionally trained us to hurry past the miracle of Christ's birth to the "more important" facts and events of his life, death, and resurrection. Failure to appreciate the details of the birth blinds us to the larger implications of this most important truth positioned at the very center of our faith system: God loves people out of a heart as huge as all eternity. If the cross displays the depths to which the Creator stoops to rescue his loved ones, the manger of Bethlehem reveals the outer limits of his commitment to identify completely with those he seeks to save. As I face more frequently the inevitability of my own death, I possess unshakable confidence because I walk with a God who entered my world through a birth exactly like my own!

Rubel Shelly assists our understanding and, even more importantly, our appreciation of the miracle of Bethlehem in his new book, *What Child Is This? Witnesses to the Birth of Christ* (Howard Publishing Company, Inc., 1992, \$7.95.) Unashamedly presented as a "devotional look at the characters – both at the center and on the periphery – surrounding this incarnation," *What Child Is This?* transports the reader into the world of Jesus' arrival without losing touch with the world of our present battle. Divided into 12 sections, eight focused on the various personalities present or shortly after the birth, Shelly crafts an inspirational and informative survey of all that transpired when God broke into history with amazing commonness.

Shelly's subject matter tempers his predictable style of precision and analytical insight. While the book loses nothing in accuracy, careful scholarship, or analysis, its content communicates the power of God's grace in every chapter. Actually a collection of thematically-connected essays, each chapter stands on its own and, as I'll suggest below, provides provocative content for personal or group investigation. The character studies form the heart of the book with spotlight attention given with at least two chapters each to Mary, Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, the authorities, and the child himself. Helpful introductory and relevant concluding segments bracket the perceptive and inspirational character sketches.

Possibly because our heritage typically avoids any serious study of Mary (lest we appear to acknowledge the benefit of anything Catholic!), Shelly's treatment of Mary moved me deeply.

Setting the social, religious, and moral climate of Mary's day in a highly readable, historically plausible chapter, "A Frightened Little Girl," Shelly moves the reader into the world of the mother of God. Mary, the prototypical Jewish teenager, struggles heroically with her miraculous, atypical encounter with the very God of Israel. Blending biblical text with human imagination (a great way to read any part of Scripture), Shelly details not only the facts as we know them, but also the probable emotions the young virgin experienced as she accepted God's unusual will for her life. The author's sensitivity with what we know about the facts of the story opens up for the reader a number of unexpected insights about what may have been going on behind the story the text tells. In the third and final section devoted to Mary, "Some Paradoxes of Motherhood," Shelly demonstrates the rare ability to move quickly from the world of the first century back into the world of modern mothers to affirm and encourage hearts with unexpected insight surfaced by his careful and imaginative study. The three-part section focusing on Mary justifies the price of the book.

In much the same way "The Devout Carpenter," a fairly long chapter about Joseph, does a terrific job of "getting into the head" of the confused, about-to-be-married, about-to-be-father. Anyone who preaches about Joseph (another character too often neglected in our churches) in a believable, contemporary manner should read this chapter. Shelly's style, imagination, and careful scholarship, so evident in much of the background assumptions undergirding the book, help the reader to experience in a new way the credibility of the ancient stories.

The hidden pageantry of the birth of Jesus, complete with all the characters surrounding the newborn king, reveals the radical, new thing God accomplishes with the arrival of his one and only son. The birth narratives require fresh and new attention at this crucial time of renewal and transition among our churches because these stories tell us who God is, about whom he is ultimately concerned, and how he expects us to respond to the world in which we live and serve. In their birth narratives Matthew and Luke present every essential element and aspect of the remainder of the story of Jesus. To understand Jesus in his ministry and death we must begin at Bethlehem. To grasp the expectations of our modern calling we must return to the weeks surrounding his birth and dedication. Throughout the book Shelly assists us in this necessary endeavor. For example, the shepherds directed to the manger by heavenly messengers put us on alert as to how this child will respond to people society rejects:

But God wanted shepherds nearest to his son on the night of his birth. It was as if their presence was meant to signify that God would, from now on, be nearest to the people others despised. he declared himself that night to be not only the Lord Almighty, but also the God of the Outcasts. True to that image, the babe adored by shepherds grew up to be called the Friend of Tax Collectors and Sinners. It was meant to be derision. I understand it as my basis for hope of eternal life ("God Comes to Unlikely People," page 110).

What Child Is This? provides the reader with practical insights, fresh historical and social sketches, challenging applications of old truths, and helpful new theological perceptions while doing a marvelous job of simply telling again the best story of all time. Because I value the book as essential reading, let me offer a few concluding suggestions as to how its use should be expanded in the church:

- 1.) Plan to read and study *What Child Is This?* during the fall quarter of 1993 in your adult or teen Sunday School class. Six to eight weeks spent in this material leading up to Christmas with supplemental information provided about how to get the most out of the season spiritually could bring revival to your group and to families within it.
- 2.) Make copies available for purchase in your congregation. Develop a personal study guide with a daily Bible reading for use beginning in late October through mid-December. Create the opportunity for personal study and meditation about the birth of our Lord.
- 3.) Buy a copy for your preacher! Take it from me, he needs some fresh material on the birth narratives. Besides, this book will renew his heart.
- 4.) Read this book to your children at home during the Christmas season. What wonderful conversations it will undoubtedly spark. Send it to your grown or college-age children and grandchildren. No story is more filled with mystery and wonder than this one. Nothing seems more necessary to health and well being today.

Raymond E. Brown begins his monumental *The Birth of the Messiah* (Doubleday & Company, 1977) by noting, "In some ways the narratives of Jesus' birth and infancy are the last frontier to be crossed in the relentless advance of the scientific (critical) approach to the Gospels" (page 7). While Brown and Shelly work with the same material in quite different ways and with vastly different purposes, *What Child Is This?* propels us far beyond this last, important frontier in our understanding and experience of God's good news.

Family Ministry is the Work of the Church

*by Don Hebbard
December, 1992*

He was a young Timothy of extraordinary ability and enthusiasm. His preaching and teaching brought him the praise and admiration of adults and peers in the church. There was a fire in his belly.

Then his world began to unravel. His ideal Christian home came unglued. A younger sister ran away from home. His parents divorced. The fire in his belly was the knowledge that his father was abusive and there was nothing he could do about it. So we ask, “What went wrong?”

For years I have heard well-intentioned – but somewhat confused – Christians struggle over the relationship between the church and the family. Like the Army medic watching the bridge over the River Kwai explode, we gasp, “Madness, simply madness!” How can we possibly separate church and family?

Yet church leaders are hesitant to begin family ministries. Education programs are warned not deal too heavily with family themes. Congregations are reluctant to conduct surveys on family needs. Leaders wonder when we can “get past this family stuff and back to real church work!”

What is family ministry? What role does it play in the life of the local church? Is family ministry really the work of the church?

Jesus redefined the family. Family in Christ is no longer limited to biological relations, it is expanded to spiritual relations (cf. Mark 3:31-35). The church is a “faith family.” In a world of disconnected, uprooted, and lonely people, the church becomes a place of acceptance, compassion, and healing.

Family ministry simply takes our Lord’s definition and puts flesh and bones on it. It is ministry to families of all types through prevention and therapy to bring holistic healing. It is directed to the church and the community through felt needs, to restore relationships on earth and with the Heavenly Father.

For 10 years I worked in the divorce capital of the world. I used to sit on the third floor of the courthouse in downtown Dallas and watch as couples ended their dreams. They sat on pews in the lobby waiting for their cases to be called. For many it was the first time they had been in a pew in years.

If asked, many would say they did not leave the church but the church left them. Perhaps an overstatement, but a valid point just the same. “The teaching just wasn’t relevant to the problems in our marriage.” “We were having all these difficulties and the last group we would tell would be church folks; it would be all over the place.” Or sadly, “We tried to tell, but they just didn’t believe us or know how to respond.”

Certainly all the blame for family problems cannot be laid at the feet of the local church. People are responsible for their own decisions. However, every local church can learn to deal more effectively with problems in the family.

When Jesus delivered his “final lesson” in Matthew 25, the apostles asked about judgment. he said, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was in prison and you came to see me.”

Roll that list forward 2,000 years. What would it look like today? “I was grieving and you listened. My wife and I were fighting and you helped us communicate. My son was on drugs and you helped us.” Needs-based ministry is not a contemporary concept, it is as old as the ministry of Jesus.

We recently conducted a family needs assessment with the congregation I serve. Of the 750 adults responding to the question “Do you or does someone in your family have a need for individual, marital or family counseling?” fully 50 percent answered, “Yes!” I do not believe this is unusually high in our movement today.

This situation calls for two responses. First, we must respond to the needs of “families that are headed toward waterfalls.” We need wise spiritual counsel that is rooted in the Word of God and understands the complex dynamics of families and family systems.

But family ministry is by definition primarily preventive. We need churches that are willing to get upstream and prevent these problems before they occur. We need forks in the river. This call to preventive family ministry is a mission that can no longer wait. Gone is the day of wringing hands and wondering “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” It may seem impossible to sweep back the ocean of family problems, but it is time to pick up the brooms.

When Jesus taught the crowds, they said, “He teaches like one having authority, not like the Scribes and the Pharisees!” When John the Baptist spoke, the crowds asked, “How should we live righteously before God?” These people responded to truth with questions on how they could change their behavior to live more pleasing before God.

For several years I had the opportunity of teaching a Christian Family Relations course at a local community college. The students were older, returning adults from all cultural, religious and social backgrounds. The task was to share the relevance of New Testament Christianity to daily family life. In five years never once did a student raise his hand and say, “I just don’t think the Bible is relevant to my life.” From agnostics to Buddhists, punk rockers to pilots, the typical response was, “I never knew that was in the Bible!”

We live in a day when the Bible has become a coffee table book. It is nice to look at but rarely explored. Even in our churches, people are hungering for answers to the great “how” questions. How does this verse impact my marriage? How does the Bible define the way we get along? How does rigorous study of the text define my ethics?

Family ministry seeks to illuminate the biblical text with rigor and application that reeks of real life. It can challenge a church with a fresh new excitement about exploring God's word. Suddenly, men and women are convicted again to want to go "back to the Bible."

Spend a day in divorce court. Stand outside a day care at 6:30 in the morning and watch the cars line up before it opens. Sit in an aids clinic or inner-city hospital. Look into the glazed-over eyes of the driver next to you in traffic. You will see incredible needs and the tragic search for answers.

Jesus met a Samaritan woman at the well and revealed to her not only the secrets of her life, but the secrets of the kingdom. He challenges us to a model of ministry that "learns to sit by the wells." For some of us that may first involve heavy doses of listening and crawling into the skins of other people. For others, it may involve visiting for the first time the pain and imperfection in our own life. "Well sitting" is a dangerous threat to the status quo in the life of the church and the life of the church leader.

Is family ministry a part of the mission of the church? Scarlett O'Hara runs frantically to the Atlanta railroad yard in search of a doctor to deliver a baby. The camera pans across acres of suffering soldiers and one exhausted old doctor. "Come with you? Look around you child. No morphine, no bandages – they're dying right in front of my eyes!"

The time for debate is over. Our families are dying right before our eyes. Family ministry is not an option for any church today. It is something every church will do. They will do it well or they will do it poorly, but they will do it.

Should We Be Concerned About Relevance?

*by Allen Mann
December, 1992*

We moved to Manila, Philippines, a sprawling, bustling, third-world city of 11 million, in May of 1985. The intense tropical heat of summer was waning and the freshness and inconvenience of the rainy season was dawning as we located housing and began our language study. God led my wife and me to our first receptive soul in a matter of weeks, and a young lady named Pamela was immersed into Christ.

Armed with our Bibles, a few Filipino expressions, and a lot of cultural ignorance, we began trying to plant a church. I had to rely on the Filipino Christians to teach me what methods would reach their countrymen. They taught me how to relate to them so I could share Jesus with their family and friends.

I learned about Filipino TV shows, Filipino humor, local basketball heroes, movie stars, and many other things that would help me communicate the message of Jesus to their time and place. When our American brothers visited the church, they would typically talk about how refreshing and “different” our worship was. They accepted these differences as necessary to our task of relating to the Filipino people in their own cultural setting.

I was not accused of being “wrong” or “liberal” simply because my methods were culturally relevant to the people among whom I was working. Yet these very tags are hung on American churches who try to be relevant to their culture in the 1990s. They are accused of embracing heresy: “the new hermeneutic.”

More often than not, what is going on has nothing to do with theological liberalism or a hermeneutic that challenges the authority of Scripture. It is simply old missionary methodology brought home. Some of our churches are finally beginning to apply sound mission principles in our local settings. Let me explain.

When I was studying to be a missionary, I was urged to apply the mission methods of Paul in the context of the Philippines. I was told that I needed to become “all things to all men so that I might by all possible means save some.” This is a sound biblical principle and one that all properly trained missionaries try to follow.

Missionaries stress the importance of learning the language and culture of the people they have chosen to evangelize. They need to make Jesus relevant and understandable to the people they approach. They cannot win others to Jesus if they cannot communicate with them in a way that can be understood. They cannot share Jesus with others if they are offensive or irrelevant to their life situations.

When in the Philippines, we did not have a Sunday evening service. When asked about this practice by visiting Americans, I explained that our morning service lasted in excess of two

hours, and that our people were simply too poor to travel back and forth to the meeting place twice in one day. The American Christians said, "That makes sense."

We did not use the name "Church of Christ" in identifying ourselves because that name in the local language would associate us with an indigenous Filipino cult by the same name. The visiting Americans said, "That makes sense."

Missionaries have been non-traditional and unconventional in their methodology for years. People generally agree that these methods are valid attempts by missionaries to be relevant to their new culture. The thinking seems to be that, moving to a foreign country, one is reasonably expected to be different from his past because he is in a new culture. Missionaries are typically not accused of embracing the values of the new culture simply because they adapt their methods to it in order to share the Good News of Jesus.

When I teach Filipinos that Jesus is greater than all the evil spirits they believe in, I am not accused of believing in evil spirits. I believe in Jesus and affirm that his power is greater than anything or anyone that stands over against him! That is the message my statement communicates to my Filipino hearers. In America, I would affirm that Jesus is greater than our fears, anxieties, and problems. It is the same message made culturally relevant to different audiences.

The primary reason for our lack of growth and even our declining membership is that we are out of touch with our culture. We have a 1950s rural methodology and tradition in a 1992 urban culture. The "change" some are decrying is simply an attempt to relate to people of our time and place in an understandable way. We are trying to learn their language and culture in the same way missionaries have for years in foreign settings. Without embracing their values, we are only trying to be intelligible and "user-friendly" to people who need to know Jesus.

I do not believe our culture is rejecting the message we preach. Neither do I believe that we should change or abandon our message. The challenge for us is to be faithful to the gospel without being wed to irrelevant ways of doing things. God cannot be honored with anything less.

The Pain of It All

by Larry Bridgesmith
December, 1992

The young Catholic priest was disarmingly attractive. His middle-aged mentor was equally distinctive in bearing and demeanor. Neither wore traditional vestments or collars. Only their language gave them away.

I was alone and sitting at the table next to the one where they were seated by the host. If I had been with my usual lunch companions, I probably would not have noticed the two men. However, sitting merely inches away, there was nothing I could do to void overhearing their intimate conversation.

The young priest began by assuring his older friend that he had just visited his therapist and that things were going as well as could be expected. The young man noted that there were areas of his life in which he found happiness. He enjoyed working with life's victims: the AIDS afflicted, the homeless, and the orphaned. In those activities he found purpose and value.

However, the frustrations of religious life which brought on depression and the need for professional help came from the liturgy of his church. He spoke passionately of worship forms frozen in time, of a generation of believers without a means of praise and of traditions which have assumed an importance not originally intended before worship activities became sacraments.

The older priest urged patience. Consolation came in the form of personal encouragement and referral to monastic retreats where the young priest could find spiritual renewal and emotional healing. yet, through the calm and measured tones this uninvited eavesdropper could hear the desperation in his voice. The older man knew that he was dealing with a victim, not a survivor. The young priest had already given up. He was looking to regain his self-esteem. His religious fire already had been extinguished. He had lost all hope that the church to which he committed his life would reach out in love and ministry to the prodigal sons and daughters of this age. His hope for spiritual renewal and worship revival in this era now seemed like distant and foolish childhood dreams. All the older man could suggest was, "Hang on." But the thread to which he clung was meager and frayed. The young priest's grasp was weak.

Beyond the poignancy of the portrait, I was troubled by its parallels. How many worshippers had shared similar concerns with me? Born of a different faith and fellowship, how many times have I heard parallel pleas about relevancy, revitalization, and renewal? Most distressingly, how many times have I witnessed "young priests" simply let go of the thread that tied them to the Church of Christ?

Thankfully, some landed in sister congregations more open to the renewing work of the Spirit in our age. Others felt forced to fellowship with denominational alternatives seemingly more suited

to their search for spiritual awakening. Tragically, some “dropped out” altogether and no longer claim Christ as King. What responsibility do I have for the choices they made?

Jesus’ personal encounters spanned the religious spectrum from the established protectors of the status quo to the disenfranchised and the spiritual outcasts. His message rarely varied. To each he instructed submission to the living God and loving others as yourself. Our religious turmoil is the product of violating one or the other of these core Christian principles.

Often we worship our notions of righteousness and established correctness. Jesus said, “Love God with all your heart.” It is deceptively easy to place our sense of what is right on the throne of our heart. Jesus admonishes us to empty ourselves and allow the constantly transforming work of his Spirit to change us into new creatures. The process of spiritual transformation never stops, unless we choose for it to do so. To accept any moment in time as perfect without further need for change is idolatry. Our deepest need is to love and submit to the God who created us, knows what is best for us, and wants us to continue to become like him. This requires constant change and renewal.

The other cause of religious turmoil is self-centered lovelessness. Even “right-thinking” people can cause disharmony by their insensitivity to those who do not “have it quite right.” The elder brother had done all the right things. But when his prodigal brother returned home, his jealous, unforgiving spirit spoiled the great reunion. The father spent little time trying to make things palatable for his oldest son. The return of the lost one with all his faults was of far greater moment than the selfish “pity party” of the son who had done everything right.

May God help us stop discarding the “young priests” among us. may we learn to love God and let him change us. May we learn to love as we have been loved. May we always remember that Christ was the young priest of his day and that the religious establishment was unable to accept him for who he really was.

Recovering the Priority of God

*by Bruce H. Leafblad; introduction by Jeff Nelson, feature editor
December, 1992*

Glen Eyrie, Colorado is a perfect setting for a worship leaders' seminar. The first time I attended, Bruce Leafblad was the guest resource speaker. I was transformed by his teaching because he introduced me to a concept he called Revelation and Response. When a revelation is discovered a response is not only appropriate but necessary. "This is why sermons get heard and not lived," Leafblad said. The revelation is there but the response never happens.

"Recovering the Priority of God" is a foundation of any Christian or church who wants to learn better how to practice the presence of God.

God is the first priority of the church. Not people. Not ministry. Not growth. Not success. God and God alone occupies the place of ultimate and absolute priority in the church.

However, this biblical ideal does not receive much attention in the highly people-centered, growth-dominated, success-oriented American church of today. From our preaching, our writing, and our lifestyle, it would appear that today's church is preoccupied with other matters.

While the historic theology that forms the doctrinal basis of the majority of American churches today will undoubtedly grant the supreme position of priority to God himself, the words and actions of the present-day church would seriously call into question the actual practice of such a theology today.

It may be nothing more than a still, small voice, but many in the church are hearing a clear call to the recovery of God as first priority – over everything and in everything. The priority of God is not an option in Scripture, nor can it be anything but the very centerpiece of Christian belief and practice in the contemporary church. If the church expects to be all that it is intended to be, God must be first. If the church is once again to become salt and light in an increasingly darkened and decadent culture, it must recover the priority of God.

Worship and the Priority of God

What, then, is the connection between the priority of God and worship? Worship is predicated upon the reality of God's being in the supreme position in relation to everything that exists within the created order. Worship is a personal, human expression of that relationship by which we honor and praise God as supreme. The results of such worship include a greater understanding of who this unique God is and an increased desire to make him first in all of life.

Consider the names and titles by which we address God in our worship. These all explicitly or implicitly reveal a God who is first and ultimate in his being – a God before whom we, together with all of creation, assume a place of humble stature.

As *King*, he is ultimate; the King of kings, and we approach him as loyal, contented subjects.

As *Lord*, he is supreme, the Lord of lords, and we come into his presence bowing and kneeling.

As *Master*, he is one, and we all honor him as willing servants.

As *Father*, he is alone, the true Father of us all, and we come to him as loving children.

As *Creator*, God is the solitary source by whom everything was made, and we come before him as lowly creatures.

As *Savior*, he is unique, for there is no other savior, and we celebrate him as the One who alone has rescued us out of our helpless and hopeless condition.

Worship and the Character of God

Not only does our worship express God's superior position in relation to all that he has made, but in our worship we affirm the superiority of God's character set against the backdrop of humanity's universal moral failure. In our worship, we extol those divine virtues and draw upon his wealth of virtue by which our lives are restored to more and more Christ-like reflections of his moral perfections and by which our weakness of character is replaced by divine strength ...

Much about our worship is centered on God's perfect character and his superlative attributes. Hence, our worship is an acknowledgment of God's exclusive superiority in power, authority, and every positive moral and spiritual quality. Because he is God and no other, we worship him. Because he is who he is – superior to everything he has made, unlimited in power, unrivaled in excellence, unsurpassed in beauty, unequaled in moral perfection, and unmatched in love and grace and compassion – we worship him and him alone, giving him the priority over everything.

The Priority of God in Our Pursuits

Worship rightly understood is not merely a response to God, but it is very much a pursuit of God. Moses was confronted by God, and his response was a desire for more of him. Near the end of his life, Paul, the apostle who had such a rich relationship with the Lord, prayed that he might know Christ even more fully. This seeking is truly normal when one has tasted and seen that the Lord is good ...

Is this what today's church is seeking? Is this the one only passion of American Christianity? Or has a lust for growth become the new priority of the '90s? The priority of God in the pursuits of the church must not be surrendered to any rival – friendly or otherwise. Seeking first the kingdom of God will always be a pursuit of God and his reign in our lives, and it must ever remain the first, the primary, and the all-consuming pursuit for those who belong to Christ ...

The Priority of God in Our Values

The meaning of worship is also understood in terms of personal and corporate values and value systems. Worship is spiritual action by which the church affirms God to be first priority in its values. Whatever or whomever we value most highly gives shape to the rest of our value system. By nature, our value systems are structured from the top down – that is, from the highest to the lowest value.

By definition, whatever or whomever one values most highly – that is one’s god. True worship is that spiritual action in which the God of the Bible is affirmed to be the highest value. In the Scriptures, God is everywhere assumed and affirmed to be the ultimate value beside whom there is none of equal value and beyond whom there is none of greater value. The One who created all things is revealed to be of greater value than all of those things that he created ...

In the first commandment, God requires that we shall have no other gods before or besides him. No other objects of worship are appropriate to the reality of one true God who alone qualifies for such reverence. The English word worship – actually a shortened form of “worth-ship” – gives additional strength to this aspect of our understanding. To worship God is to treasure him more highly than any other person, thing, cause, or enterprise in all of life.

The Priority of God in Our Affections

In Matthew 6:21, Jesus states a principle that is applicable to more than one aspect of life: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” We take this principle to mean that what one values, one will cherish. A man will pour his heart into that which he values most. A woman will invest her deepest affections in that which she most highly treasures ...

The biblical scheme of affections consistently positions love at the head of the list. In the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4,5), in the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29,30), and in Paul’s famous discourse (1 Corinthians 13), we see this uniform perspective on love as the greatest affection. From this biblical material, we derive this simple yet significant piece of theo-logic: If God is first in our values, he will also be first in our affections ...

To worship God aright is to give him our first, best love. This love properly belongs to God and to no other. To love anyone or anything else more than God is idolatry. Worship is the highest form of love – a love we give exclusively to God. In true worship we declare and express the priority of God in our affections.

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your mind
and with all your strength (Mark 12:30).*

In true worship, love is the supreme affection, and God is the exclusive object of our greatest love. At its center, this divine-human encounter we call worship is a love affair of the highest and holiest order. We value, we cherish, we praise, we celebrate, we receive the love of God that has rescued and redeemed us and that continues to pursue us day after day; and we respond to

that love by declaring and expressing our deepest, our highest, our strongest, our first, best love to the Lover of our souls ...

The Priority of God in Our Commitments

If what we value most we come to love most, then what we value and love most is that to which we become most committed. In worship, we commit ourselves to God as first priority in our lives. We commit ourselves to him as to no other. By such action, we come to grips with the truth that we are his, that he owns us, that we belong exclusively to him by virtue of creation and redemption.

Commitment is that process by which values and affections are translated into concrete and decisive actions. Commitment begins with the attitudes of humility and yieldedness, both of which are expressed in a continual succession of decisions that subsequently precipitate action ...

The Christian lifestyle is one of submission to the will of God, one of continual obedience to his leadership. This is not to be viewed as irksome or burdensome, however; the believer knows that such submission is a path of great joy and true freedom. It is the eager submission that two lovers grant each other in the act of love ...

Some Observations

First, we should all rejoice and praise God for the worship renewal that is taking place in many churches. God is at work restoring the vision of himself and renewing the worship life of many congregations.

Second, it can be easily observed that the form and forms of this renewal are not everywhere the same. In church history, no major renewal has ever come from forms and formats, and so it is today. In some places, little change of externals has taken place, while great changes in spirit, life, vitality, and spiritual energy abound. In other places, many new forms have been added to the traditional heritage of the church, and a blending of old and new is characteristic. In all such settings, however, the heart of the renewal is, as it has always been, a work of the Holy Spirit of God restoring to the church something the church has lost.

Third, alongside the genuine spiritual renewal of worship that has been observed is another movement in American worship that may have little or nothing to do with genuine renewal, although there may be many similar external changes present. This is essentially a “wineskin” movement in which major changes in the wineskins – the externals – of worship are being introduced. This liturgical reconstruction is variously motivated by interests in contemporaneity and relevance to modern society, concerns regarding church growth, or merely an imitation of some “more successful” church that is doing some new things. It is possible to totally redo a congregation’s worship service, replacing its basic format, forms, and style with a totally new set, and yet be entirely outside the renewing work of the Spirit.

Conclusion

While it may be that certain new forms are needed in the worship of today's congregations and that certain traditions of the past may need to be replaced, it is equally likely that certain abandoned forms of the past are greatly needed in the present, and that other traditional forms of the church may be as relevant today as they have ever been. In either case, the great need of the church today is neither to cling to the old or to create the new forms and formats. Our greatest need today is to recover the priority of God in our worship and in the whole of life. The wineskin issues are totally secondary to the more pressing need for the new wine of the Spirit. The crisis in worship today is not a crisis of form but of spirituality.

When worship renewal comes, the congregation pursues God himself as its ultimate objective. God himself is treasured above any experience, any feeling, or any result of worship. Love to God will be the dominant affection expressed through the various forms of worship. Fresh commitment to God is the common response of the entire worshipping community. Worship becomes an end in itself rather than the means to some other end. Worship will be experienced as a relationship with God being dynamically acted out rather than merely being a function of the church.

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AfterGlow: United By One

Phillip Morrison
December, 1992

Following the songs of the season and readings from Scripture, the preacher addressed the audience of 7,000. His message was straight from Scripture. “I am not calling you to be a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Presbyterian, or an Episcopalian,” he said, “I am inviting you to be a Christian. I’m not asking you to join this church, but I do encourage you to find a Bible-believing, Bible-preaching, Bible-practicing church and get involved in it.”

I wanted to jump up from my seat in the balcony, wave my arms, call time out, and shout, “Wait a minute! That’s our line! That’s our message!” That *is* our message, but we have no monopoly over it, no exclusive right to it. Thank God for truth, wherever and by whomever it is preached. It may be that others have begun to see the joy of that message while we have been losing sight of its purity.

A friend told of visiting a country which, until a short time before, was behind the Iron Curtain. A citizen of that country who had recently become a Christian asked my friend if he was associated with a certain church project in the United States. The American was surprised by the question, and distressed to learn that his new acquaintance couldn’t have fellowship with those associated with that work. Some well-meaning brother deserves praise for going to a foreign land and helping a man become a Christian. He is not to be praised for making a particular brand of sectarian. That’s wrong, whether done by someone else or by us.

Robertson McQuilkin observed, “It is easier to go to a consistent extreme than to stay in the center of biblical tension.”

Extremism, whether consistent or inconsistent, has been with us for a long time. Christians in Galatia had been set free from law by the grace of God, but some of them found such good news so hard to believe that they still tried to be justified by keeping the law. They had their circumcision and their non-circumcision cults, their Holy Day and non-Holy Day sects. Those allegiances didn’t determine their relationship with Christ. “What counts,” Paul declared, “is a new creation” (Galatians 6:15).

But even Paul, though an apostle of the Lord, did not find it easy to live in the center of biblical tension. He described himself as pulled in one direction by his sinful nature and in another by the call of God (Romans 7:7-25). After giving us this intimate look into the core of his soul, Paul appears to reach an impasse: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). Then, he gives a ringing, victorious answer: “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).

It is not Christ who has divided us into one-cup and multiple-cup churches. He hasn’t told us what journals to read, what schools to attend, what versions of the Bible to use, which projects to

support, how to organize our mission and benevolent programs. It is our sinful nature which gives birth to such divisions.

In the recent presidential campaign, candidates accused each other of “just not getting it.” There is a spiritual sense in which a lot of us “just don’t get it,” but we keep trying to achieve perfect understanding and obedience. Living in the center of biblical tension requires more precise focus on our Lord, not more complete knowledge or more perfect works. Maybe we’re not supposed to get *it* but to get him.

The Write Side: Change of Heart

*by Sonya Colvert
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Lord, so many times I find myself content with my religion.
It is easy, compact, and all the pieces fit nicely together.
But somewhere in the back of my heart, tucked away tight,
You whisper to me.

Gently you urge me towards a change of heart
and a renewal of spirit.
And I feel your presence
and know the need for change.
But I am bound to my traditions
and comfortable in my ways.
Yet, you speak to me.

You say that change is born
in the heart, and when full
grown, brings new life.
And renewal of life allows change to happen freely.
Lord, I want that
change of heart;
I want to listen only to you.
Take my will away.

Make my heart tender
and receptive to your words.
And give me a
determination to carry out
your will in my life.
Take away the chains that
bind me to my traditions,
And keep my spirit
attuned to your will.

Let me feel new life that is
born of your Spirit.
help me to see your will through open eyes.
May the freedom of Christ
break loose every chain.
Lord, mold me daily
in your image.