

Wineskins Magazine

Nonsectarian Fellowship

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Contents

A Passion for Non-Sectarian Faith By Rubel Shelly

An Open Bible: A Double Edged Sword By Randy Harris

Hope Network Newsletter: Music That Makes Sense By Lynn Anderson

AfterGlow: Paring Down the Up-Yonder Roll By Phillip Morrison

Discovering a Forgotten Past By Michael Casey

We Preach Christ, Not Ourselves By Bill Love

A Dream Worth Keeping Alive By Max Lucado

Baptism: The Christian's Lie Detector By Mike Cope

A Passion for Non-sectarian Faith

*Editorial by Rubel Shelly
January – February, 1993*

It has been a decade since I wrote a book titled *I Just Want to Be a Christian*. The book set off a tiny firestorm of reaction that confirmed my fear of an entrenched sectarianism within the Church of Christ. It was my attempt to articulate an emerging concern for a faith in Christ that is larger than (and often contrary to) mere denominational loyalty.

Strange as it may sound to those who have observed us from the outside, our history in the American religious heritage is rooted in an appeal for religious unity based on nonsectarian Christianity. Nothing could be more incongruous than that a unity movement has become so divided, that an appeal for non-sectarianism could have become so sectarian. But it is the history of every reform movement in religious history: reformations quickly need reforming!

Wineskins, as declared unambiguously in the editorial statements of our first issue, is intended to be a catalyst for reform (i.e., bold and responsible change) within a heritage of reformers. The goal of “restoring the ancient faith and order” will always, when properly understood commit its adherents to an ongoing process. The restoration of New Testament Christianity will always be a goal to be sought and never an accomplishment to be applauded and defended.

As I sat down to write my editorial for this issue, I remembered the original version of the preface I wrote for *I Just Want to Be a Christian*. At the request of its publisher, I deleted the part of it that was most personal to me. I choose to share it here – essentially unedited and therefore “dated” in some of its chronological references – as an introduction to what others will write in this issue about undenominational Christianity.

Anyone who has ever written a book knows what an intensely personal experience it is. This even makes the task at hand something of a love-hat relationship; there is something the writer wants to say, but there are always hurdles in the path. Research on complex topics is a hurdle; time for writing is another; the sheer challenge of expression is still another. I have experienced and dealt with all these several times before in writing books on a variety of topics. But this book is different from the ones which have gone before in my experience.

As a matter of fact, this book has been such an intensely personal experience that the “Author’s Preface” to it takes the form of an autobiographical statement.

This book has been written in pain and with a sense of danger.

The pain of writing relates to several factors – some theological and some too personal for full expression in words. Yet I feel compelled to try to verbalize something of both sorts of pain.

This book offers criticism of something I love. It is not a pleasant thing to be involved in such a process. Some who hear the criticism will attribute my criticisms to hatred and attack my

devotion to the fellowship of believers with whom I am associated. They would as legitimately castigate my love for my children in view of criticism I have made of their behavior at certain times.

Some criticism is surely destructive and motivated by unworthy sentiments. There have been epithets hurled and books written by people leaving our brotherhood. They sounded bitter and cynical. They offered nothing positive as an alternative for what they criticized. They were simply waving goodbye in frustration and despair. Some might have been kept or reclaimed if we had been gentler in dealing with them. Even when duty calls for correction and rebuke, there must still be "great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2) rather than castigation and harshness. When we are so prone to begin our rebuke with public "exposure," threats, or even excommunication, let no one be surprised that outsiders do not see us as the modern-day extensions of Jesus' ministry (e.g., his treatment of Peter) or the restoration work done by Paul (e.g., handling doctrinal and moral problems at Corinth).

On the other hand, criticism can be offered which is designed to be constructive and which has been motivated by love. Even if one loves his children more than his own life, there are times when their behavior must be challenged. The child may not perceive the parent's love, but the parent must speak and act in the child's best interest and be misunderstood for a time.

The criticisms I have offered of our brotherhood are most often self-criticisms. I once moved among and was applauded by the people who are now my most violent critics. Though not a fortune teller, I looked ahead before speaking or writing on these matters and foresaw the men, papers, and geographical areas from which quick and severe reaction would come. There have been few surprises either in the persons or positions which have surfaced. I have sat in their council meetings; I know the strategy of attacking and defaming. I, too, have refused to hear, hurled my theological missiles, and thought myself "contending for the faith" all the while. I deserve the fate I have suffered at their hands, for it is right for one to reap as he has sowed.

Though many of the things I have had to say about a sectarian spirit, smug self-righteousness, and the like are primarily self-criticisms, they have been taken as personal attacks by many of those from whose company I have sought to sever myself. Perhaps it could be no other way – either for them or me.

There has been no small amount of pain involved in thinking through a number of topics which others had been allowed (by my intellectual lethargy) to decide for me. Working from uninformed dogma to personal conviction, from traditional posture to informed faith requires more openness, integrity, and humility than I am accustomed to having. To question the predominant sentiment of one's subculture is not an easy thing for a Jew, Roman Catholic, Buddhist, or me.

I grew up more interested at times in the party line than in the truth. A few preachers had more influence on me than the Word of God on certain issues. It was my fault more than theirs! I learned to think as they thought, believe as they believed, and preach as they preached. I advanced beyond many of my own age and background. I spoke in-house jargon to the appreciation of those who already believed as I did. The applause was heady.

Finally it dawned on me that preaching on the small range of issues important to my own kind in the coded language we used and with harsh manner toward all who dared disagree – even within our own brotherhood – was wrong. Even if I was right on every topic, the spirit of “setting all others at naught” and considering only those like me “the faithful church” was ungodly.

As I looked at the larger world of needy humanity outside my own fellowship, it began to dawn on me why they weren't hearing what we were saying. It was the spirit of Pharasaical smugness with which I was going to them that made it impossible for them to hear. The fault was mine rather than theirs!

Even to speak of the sort of spiritual struggle I have been going through smacks of a new form of arrogance. It may come across as simply shifting ground and now setting at naught the ones who set others at naught. After all, nothing is more inconsistent than the person who is trying to show tolerance to everyone except the intolerant. Nothing of the sort is intended, for such is not the spirit in which the book is written. In fact, over the past year an inordinate amount of my time has been spent in trying to go to, talk with, and clarify positions for those who stand to the theological right of me. I tell of the personal struggle only to help the reader who is unaware of it to understand how one who has been so sectarian in spirit can presume to speak against what he once exemplified to many.

The attacks from a few on the far right have been painful to bear. Worse still has been for some to read their attacks and to think their distortions and misrepresentations of my views are correct statements of them. For example, not one of these statements represents my view, yet all have been attributed to me: “He says anyone who is a member of any denomination is a Christian,” “He holds that one church is as good as another,” “He doesn't believe one has to be baptized to be saved,” “He advocates instrumental music and premillennialism,” “He thinks denominationalism is all right and that people can be parties to sectarian division without sinning in the process,” etc.

A final element of pain involved in writing this book has been the recent death of my father. Shortly after I had completed the second of three drafts of this volume, he entered the hospital, had exploratory surgery, and was found to have cancer of the pancreas. He lived three and one-half weeks. I spent as many of those precious days with him as possible. My mother, two brothers, and I were beside his bed in rotation or together for every moment during those three and one-half weeks. His mind was clear and sharp, and his concerns were for the needs of his wife and children before himself.

We spent several hours going over the manuscript of this book. I discussed every major point in it with him. he taught me, encouraged me, and challenged me. Nothing in this book startled him, for he had grown up at the feet of A.G. Freed and N.B. Hardeman. He attended three years of high school and two years of college under them from 1921-1926. He met my mother during her two years of college under the same teachers in 1924-26.

Daddy's only chagrin over the points made in this book was in the realization of how far our brotherhood had strayed in his lifetime. His final request of me was that I complete and publish

this book without being intimidated by the opposition it would generate among a few. Thus the dedication of this volume to him.

I also spoke of a sense of danger in the writing of this book. What does that imply?

There is certainly the danger that the destructive critics of the church I love may use my criticisms for their purpose. While this is a danger, it is not a prohibitive one. A far greater danger, it seems to me, would be to allow a situation to develop where people must choose between prejudiced loyalty to the status quo in this brotherhood and the destructive criticisms which usually end up in “bailing out” on the thesis of restorationism.

*I would like for this book to represent a third option. While looking back over our theological and historical heritage, we need not think blind loyalty or total repudiation exhaust the possibilities for this generation. We have another course of action open to us: We can build on our strengths, engage in honest self-examination, learn where we have been ignorant, humble ourselves before God and men, and move confidently toward that unity and harmony of faith encouraged in the New Testament ... [Note: Material beginning at this point is published as “Author’s Preface” in *I Just Want to Be a Christian*.]*

I have no desire to be a “maverick” or to lead a movement. Although I have spoken above of the negative reaction from a few on the right, the overwhelming reaction of my brethren has been positive and encouraging. But I am not looking for anyone to follow me – only to think about these matters for himself. I certainly have no longing for martyrdom either!

A lot has happened in a decade. Most of it has been positive, and many have rallied to a renewal of commitment to the experiment of undenominational Christianity. But the process of renewal – and we must never forget that it is a process rather than an accomplishment – must always be stimulated. Reformation movements must always be reformed. A restoration movement can no more be started than it must be restored itself. Such is the nature of history, reality, and humankind.

In the pages that follow, you will be challenged to catch the dream of unity in Christ. You will be warned of the unsettling risks involved in doing so. And you will be thrilled to read of other efforts toward the same goal.

Since no weaker word can capture the depth of commitment required for such a task, I can only pray that God will give us a *passion* for nonsectarian faith.

An Open Bible: A Double Edged Sword

by Randall J. Harris

January – February, 1993

It is one of the most riveting scenes from church history. Martin Luther stands before the Diet of Worms with not only his career but his very life at stake. The pressure to recant his views is overwhelming. His answer in part was, “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason ... I do not accept the authority of popes and councils ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything ... God help me. Amen. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.”

As I have been striving to come to grips with the heart of the plea for undenominational Christianity I have come to reduce it to a very simple concept – an open Bible. But while the concept is simple, the implications are profound and Scripture ironically becomes a two-edged sword – the principle of both unity and division, as the above illustrates. It was Luther’s commitment to following Scripture wherever it led that made reconciliation and unity with the Catholic Church impossible.

The pledge to be answerable to Scripture and only Scripture can be a powerful source of unity, to be sure. Many of the sources of division among religious denominations disappear when one repudiates any source of authority other than the Bible. Many points of contention are rooted in different historical developments, liturgical traditions, and creedal formulations of some particular assembly of church leaders.

It was part of the real genius of the leaders of the American Restoration Movement to see the possibilities for unity if one could replace loyalty to a particular religious heritage with loyalty to Scripture. And indeed, the effort was at least partially successful in breaking down factions and unifying Christians from a variety of religious traditions around the Bible as the only religious authority.

This, then, is the heart of our movement. No man (whether pope, priest, guru, or preacher), or group of men (whether teaching office, society, or school faculty), or institution (whether church hierarchy or publishing house) has the right to compel the rest of us to accept their conclusions as the norm of faith. We answer to no one but God as he speaks through his Word. Every person has the awesome responsibility of answering to Scripture for himself or herself.

This is what it means to really have an open Bible. I sometimes fear that the most precious legacy of our heritage is in danger. Let me illustrate.

I once heard a thoughtful man reflecting on the changing whims of public opinion. He commented that during the segregationist days of the early and mid-1960s when he insisted that any child ought to be allowed to attend the school of his or her choice, he was considered a liberal and race-mixer. When he said exactly the same thing during the busing days of the late

'60s and early '70s, he was called a racist and a bigot. While his views never changed, they sounded very different given the changed context.

This reminded me of the story of one of my heroes from church history, Athanasius, who was involved in the Trinitarian controversies of the fourth century. While Athanasius never changed his view, he was exiled time and again as the opposing faction came into and then fell out of power. Unwilling to compromise for the sake of position, he paid the price as the political and theological winds shifted, as they so often do.

There will always be those who are so concerned with being “politically correct” that their views will be as changeable as the latest fad. We must be ever vigilant to see that our convictions are based on a sound reading of the Word of God and not the whims of the day.

Reading Scripture with purity of heart is not easy matter. One ought always to be suspicious when the interpretation of a text only serves to confirm one’s prejudice rather than speaking a word of judgment or calling for transformation. Too often our reading of the life of Christ does more to transform him into our image than to call for renewal within our life and world.

But being co-opted by our culture is not the only threat to the open Bible heritage. We can also be co-opted by our own religious heritage. It is not enough to repudiate papal control over biblical interpretation. We must be equally critical of the interpretive tradition of our own religious group. Commitment to an open Bible demands that even the most cherished views passed on to us by our spiritual forefathers must be subjected to the harsh light of Scripture. If faithfulness to Scripture means refusing to accept some doctrine on the authority of Augustine or Calvin or Barth, it must also mean refusing to do so on the authority of Campbell, Lipscomb, Wallace, or any other person.

Our movement began with the idealism that people could become simple New Testament Christians and that all Christians could be unified on the basis of the Bible if all human creeds were repudiated. It has now become apparent that this idealism was overly optimistic. Men and women of good will, equally serious and talented in their study of Scripture, have not been able to come to total agreement. So what are we to do? Surely the answer is not to return to what we originally deplored. That is, we dare not ask that people abandon their own study of Scripture and blindly accept our conclusions so that there will be no disagreement. This would surely cut us off from the source of continual spiritual renewal. An open Bible never can mean that we study the Bible and show how everyone else is completely wrong and how we are totally right. The Bible doesn’t just correct and rebuke others. It must speak to us.

No, I prefer to retain as the most central aspect of our religious identity, a truly open Bible, and with it a tolerance for diversity of interpretation. It may well be that in the discussion among spiritual people with a deep reverence for Scripture we may all come to a clearer understanding and more transforming encounter with the God of Scripture. If the Bibles are closed, and the conclusions are set in stone, where is the hope of God’s transforming power?

I am appalled at how much we take for granted today. The public reading of Scripture has largely disappeared from our assemblies, and biblical literacy appears down. Worse still, among some,

familiarity has bred complacency if not contempt. We are so sure we know what the Bible says that our ears are dulled to hearing God's Word afresh. If spiritual renewal happens among us, it will begin with renewed zeal to hear the Word.

I am well aware that an open Bible is a threat as well as a blessing. When people truly study the Bible with an open heart and open mind, we cannot guarantee they will come to the same conclusions we hold. But it is the fundamental conviction of my ministry that if the Word of God is allowed to dwell freely in our midst, it will work with power. "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise."

Hope Network Newsletter: Music that Makes Sense

Doing Business in the Coin of the Realm

by Lynn Anderson

January – February, 1993

My two sons and I headed into the Rockies to conquer a few more “fourteeners.” The first morning we drove till we ran out of road, then hiked uphill for half a day and tented for the night. Next day we day-packed several hours up even steeper trails, climbing far above the timberline. Solitude at last!

But as we scrambled around a final switch-back, we spied a lone figure on the summit. We shouted a greeting. No answer. Closer range solved the mystery. He was signing off-key and “bobbing to the beat,” totally enraptured in a world of music from his Walkman headphones!

Rock music? Deep in the wilderness? Why? Because he is part of a new culture that takes its “tunes” wherever it goes. Music is actually the most powerful language of the culture.

Music is the coin of the realm!

Music’s appeal is nothing new, of course. Since the days of Jubal, we’ve loved it! But never before has music been the cultural force it has become in our times. A hundred years ago an occasional musician came through and filled a concert hall for a couple of hours. On special occasions, friends gathered around the fire to “pick and sing.” Sundays they heard “church music.”

Then sound recordings exploded on our ears. Until dens, automobiles, bedrooms, offices, and malls are flooded with music. And now portable Walkman stereo sound follows us into the wilderness! Today, music is indeed “the coin of the realm.”

Alan Bloom in his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, asserted that the most powerful influence in the lives of young people is their music, more powerful than parents, than school, even than peers. Bloom said, “If, in our culture, we do not communicate with the young through music, we simply do not communicate.”

Some of the strongest role models of the culture, for good or ill, are musicians. From Elvis to Madonna, music is power. No wonder someone said, “Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who writes her laws.”

Music is not the universal language.

An old saw says, “Music is the Universal Language.” Music may be universally appealing, but music is *not* “the universal language!” In fact, various subcultures are set off from each other by

their music, especially among youth. an adolescent can expect to be clearly “out” of a given group if he or she is “into” the wrong music.

Adult subcultures cluster around music, too. At the world congress on evangelism in Manila in 1989, Barbara King introduced me to the small but growing field of study called “ethno-musicology.” Ethno-musicologists count eight major distinct music groups on our planet. Among our own Euro-American musical kinfolk, we find country music, rock music, classical music, mariachi, reggae, etc. They tell me Bill Clinton’s home state has “rock, Bach and razor-bach.” Music may flourish universally, but music is definitely not a universal language.

Is your church ‘alive with the sound of music’?

In workshops, I frequently ask, “When you’re driving down the freeway and flip on the radio, how many of you will likely select country western? Let me see a show of hands. How many rock? Easy listening? Acid rock? How many actually listen to a classical station?” I have run this poll all over the country and roughly five percent listen to “classical music.” Yet, have you noticed, in a lot of “middle-of-the-road_ congregations the “classicals” appear to plan the worship assemblies! No wonder many-church goers find “church music” boring and unrelated to life. And for the unchurched visitor, our music is a foreign language.

Try planning a worship service in a church made of several subcultures spread across several generations. What songs will connect with them all? Usually the entire congregation is subjected to the tastes of the minority who happen to be in control. This leaves the rest scrambling to “translate” or else feeling emotionally left out!

And, if a sensitive song leader chooses music to connect with the heart language of the fringe folks or the unchurched, then the “control” people get upset. The folks who don’t connect with the music of the “control” group just fade away. Folks with traditional music tastes may not even notice they have gone, much less understand why.

Not vanilla and strawberry, but a Baskin-Robbins world

Back where I grew up most people were first generation western Europeans, same color, similar values, common life-style. Possibly it was like that for you in Muleshoe, Texas, or Sweet Lips, Tennessee, or Pumpkin Corner, Illinois. But not now, not by a long shot!

During 1991, I officed in Las Colinas, a yuppie suburb of Dallas, on the seventh floor of a business tower. En route from the parking garage to my office door, some mornings I heard five different languages! These languages represent differing value systems, cultures, world views. If the church connects with this new Baskin-Robbins world, it must speak a variety of “musical heart languages.”

Variety of musical languages

By musical languages, I mean two things: idioms and formats. Musical format is the way in which we present the music, including “presentational” music (where the audience listens and

the singers present) and participatory music (when we all participate or sing together). Other formats include such variety as congregational singing (where everybody sings together), antiphonal singing (when we sing to each other), choral music (a group presents singing to an audience), and solos.

On the other hand, different musical idioms, or forms and styles of music, include such things as classical, traditional, Stamps-Baxter. And contemporary music, such as country, rock, pop, etc. Idiom is the *type of music*. *Format is the style of presentation*.

A new song

In addition to the call of culture and heart language for a variety in idiom and format, we mention a “spiritual” reason. When we look through Scripture, new songs are frequently written to encompass expanding experiences with God. New songs express new spiritual vistas. Wineskins of the old songs may not stretch around the vintage of new spiritual growth.

No-brainer music

In a research project across the country, ABC radio discovered another need for new songs. ABC discovered that once a song is heard 10 times, listeners no longer pay attention to its meaning. Even the excellent “old” hymns must often be recast in alternative arrangements, or illustrated visually, or sung with new emphasis, to recover meaning afresh.

Without variety, music which was once living worship falls into “meaningless repetitions.” With over-familiarity, songs come in our ears and out our mouths without ever touching our hearts.

Contemporary music

To connect with today’s heart language, we will need more contemporary music. Contemporary simply means “that which is common right now, current.” Even so-called “classical” music was contemporary somewhere, sometime. Though Fanny Crosby’s beloved hymns are traditional to us now, they were “contemporary” about a hundred years ago. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach was “contemporary” in his day, although we now call it classical.

In order to communicate in the changing heart languages of the people, musical styles in worship must also keep changing.

Baskin-Robbins music in the Bible

Changing music in worship makes us nervous, however. Among churches of Christ, we hold long-standing and deeply-entrenched traditions about acceptable and non-acceptable music. But most of us are not afraid to go where the Bible takes us. So let’s ask Scripture to diminish our fears.

One Sunday a four-person worship team led us in some new songs with words projected on screen. Since no sheet music was available, they sang the four parts using amplifying mikes, so

each worshipper in the congregation could follow the part most comfortable to him or her. The “song service” that morning was mostly congregational singing; however, a trio sang to the congregation during the Lord’s supper. A number of people affirmed, “Sure the Lord was in this place today!”

Later in the week, a card from an out-of-state visitor reached me, written in ball-point pen with such intensity that the point broke through the card at some places. “Why do you do these things? Why four song leaders? Isn’t one biblical enough? Why do some people sing while others listen? Why not all sing together like the Bible says in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3?”

I couldn’t wait to check those texts to see if I’d missed something last time through! I opened to Ephesians 5:19-20 and found these words, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.” I didn’t find four song leaders in the passage. I didn’t even find *one* song leader!

I found something else: *several different musical idioms!* Psalms. Hymns. Spiritual songs.

And I also found *several different musical formats!* “Speak to one another.” My parents taught me it was rude to speak when someone else was speaking to me. Ephesians 5 actually says that (at least some of the time) *one group of people sings while another group listens*. That can happen in several different formats: solos, trios, antiphonal singing, quartets, in addition to “everybody singing at once.”

Then I flipped over and Colossians 3:16 to see what I had missed there: “Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Combining Colossians with Ephesians, I found three purposes for music in worship. First, *exaltation* – “to the Lord.” In the biggest and oldest songbook in print, 150 psalms are addressed “to the Lord.” A significant but subtle shift in many worship assemblies recently has us singing more *to* God, not merely to each other *about* God.

Second, I found *edification* – “teaching one another.” It is very difficult to learn while we are talking. We must listen to learn. To “teach with songs,” some listen while others sing.

Third, I found *communication* – “*speak* to one another with songs.” Thus, rather than *forbidding* singing groups in worship, Scripture actually *enjoins* them.

In 1 Corinthians 14:26, I found something else that I had not included in my old sermons on worship in assemblies: *solos*. “When you come together, *one of you* has a hymn (RSV). (Or ” word of instruction, tongue, prophecy,” etc.) “Speak *one at a time*” (v. 27). If worshippers are to “speak one at a time,” with a tongue, an interpretation, or a prophecy, then when some Christian brings a song, he or she also should “speak” solo.

So as it turned out, I’m thankful for my critical visitor’s card. It drove me to discover that rather than commanding us to “all sing at one time,” Scripture actually says exactly the opposite! Much tension over music could be avoided if, instead of asking “What am I comfortable with?” or

“How did we do it last year?” we would simply ask, “*What does the Bible say?*” Biblical, scriptural worship is liberating. Powerful. Alive! We are, after all, a people of the Book.

“Yes, but what about ...?”

Healthy change welcomes questions. Here are some questions I have heard concerning changes of musical format and idiom in worship:

1) *Isn't this faddish-ness?* After a century of congregational singing, must we now introduce singing groups just because others are? Think about this: We started congregational singing because *someone else was doing it*. The pejorative word “faddish” can simply be a negative way of saying “current” or “in touch.”

How many worshippers drove to your church last Sunday in a 1950 automobile? I drove one in 1958, but I haven't owned one since. Today's cars are better, more appropriate for our times. Of course, we do not simply want to jump on faddish bandwagons, but we must be authentic and effective. Fear of “faddishness” must not drive us to “Amishness.”

2) *Does not scripture command all Christians to sing?* Of course. One great treasure of our heritage is congregational singing. When congregational singing is vibrant and alive, some who hear it for the first time are enchanted. That is wonderful. But Scripture does not command *all of us to sing at once*. In Scripture, congregational singing is augmented with presentations by solos or singing groups.

3) *Where does Scripture “command” singing groups and multiple song leaders?* The same place it “commands” congregational singing and one song leader! One song leader and congregational singing is not the *only biblical way* to worship; it is simply *one cultural way*.

Where I grew up, churches of Christ didn't have church buildings, so we didn't have the “assembly rules” which have grown up around church buildings. We didn't always have designated song leaders. In fact, different people in the congregation might start songs, sometimes even a woman! The first time I saw a song leader stand up front and beat time with hand motions, I didn't know what was going on. I wondered if he was chasing mosquitoes! And I wondered where Scripture “authorized” that!

4) This next question is on a more serious note: *If we use singing groups and solos in worship, is there not a danger this will become entertainment, rather than worship?* Yes! Singing in worship must never degenerate to the level of entertainment. Christians don't come to worship to be entertained.

But there is another way to look at this. What does “entertaining” mean? In part, at least, it means “interesting.” Why do you prefer some Bible class teachers over others? Because they are more *interesting*, right? We love the preacher who sometimes uses humor and who tells stories well. We listen to him better and learn more because he is entertaining!

One biblical purpose of singing is edification (teaching) and another is communication (speaking). Since good teaching and good communication involve elements of entertainment, good music will naturally be somewhat “entertaining.”

5) *Will not singing groups and solos exalt persons and puff egos?* Yes, oh yes! And so will preaching. Eldering. Song leading. Even bedpan service can be done in order to be thought “humble” and “sincere.” Most major blessings of God can be distorted. In fact the more “spiritual” the blessing, the more vulnerable to distortion.

6) *Will not the congregation be passive, while only leaders express their worship?* If we *only* hear solos or singing groups – yes! Hundreds of churches across the country have become so dependent on a choir, a soloist, or instrumentation that their attempts at congregational singing are pitiful. Churches of Christ definitely don’t want to lose our rich and precious tradition of congregational singing. But at curcial moments and occasions congregations can be powerfully engaged by musical presentations.

7) *Will not these kinds of changes upset some people?* No question about! The story of the people of God in Scripture is a story of repeated change, which usually disturbed some people. Why did some Israelites want to return to Egypt? Why was Paul stoned at Lystra? What was so disturbing about Stephen? Why was the book of Galatians written? Why the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15? And *why did they crucify Jesus?*

We must, of course, be very sensitive to beloved brothers and sisters uncomfortable with change. I feel deeply troubled when would-be prophets march out and trample over the hearts of Christians who are not yet ready to move at the prophets’ pace.

On the flip side, little growth or progress comes without painful stretching of wineskins! And “long-time Christians” or those “uncomfortable with change” are not licensed to consider their own interest over others either. This is also immature insensitivity.

You tell me. What should we do when young people are leaving us in droves because we are not connecting with their heart language and when hundreds of searchers check out our churches but don’t come back because they don’t understand the “foreign language?” Whose needs and feelings matter most to God? We must learn to navigate the white waters between the needs of the young and the searching, on the one hand, and the feelings of those uncomfortable with change, on the other.

Conclusions

Finally, let us summarize what we are not saying. As we call for new musical *formats*, we are not implying these should replace congregational singing, nor replace a cappella singing; neither are we advocating instrumental music.

And as we call for contemporary musical *idioms* we are not suggesting that we trash traditional hymns. Memory is a great treasure. Traditional hymns maintain ties with the past and preserve faith history.

Let us also summarize what we are saying:

1) We are calling for some new ways of “doing music” in worship so as to connect with the new and varied heart languages of our culture.

2) At times, singing groups can do what congregational singing cannot do. The special communion trio I mentioned earlier sang, “Create in me a clean heart, Oh God.” The congregation did not know that particular song, so the trio sang it to us and expressed emotions for which the congregation knew no song. The congregation sat profoundly moved and with uplifted faces as tears rolled.

3) Singing groups can connect with a culture who are watchers and listeners, but not participators. The average person that comes in from the world as a guest on our pews is used to being “sung to.”

4) Variety in musical idioms and formats enters people’s hearts through many different doors. Congregational singing is one beautiful and powerful means of expression. Presentations by singing groups is another.

5) A variety of musical idioms and formats connects with a wider variety of people in our culture. How many people in your own church are hanging in only because they have learned to survive your tastes? Out of loving concern for them, why not move outside your tastes and comfort zones? In so doing you may also connect with a wider circle of unchurched seekers. This is Paul’s sentiment when he says, “I have become all things to all men that by all means I might save some.”

6) Music that makes sense will harness the power of contemporary music for the Lord. Why let the devil have it all? The real and central reason for variety of musical idiom and format in worship is because the Bible calls for it!

Some Christian friends here in the DFW Metroplex invited their unchurched next-door neighbor to visit church with them. Monday afternoon, over the back fence, they eagerly fished for her impressions. “It was nice,” she said.

“Nice?”

“Well, you won’t be offended if I get honest? Where in the world did you get that weird music?”

Could that have been your church? or mine?

Discovering a Forgotten Past

by Michael Casey

January – February, 1993

Michael Casey, Associate Professor of Communication, Pepperdine University, reviews C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1993)

Until recently biblical scholars have dominated the intellectual scene in churches of Christ. The biblical scholars knew the original languages of the text and were expected to confirm the truths of the restoration movement. In reality the scholars often challenged, or at least reexamined those truths. Changes that they and others initiated have overtaken both the scholars and the church. Now that we recognize the reality of change, Allen and a variety of other historians have taken over the leading scholarly role. In the midst of this change the historians can give the church a sense of identity, direction, and tradition.

Allen's newest book is the most significant of the four that he has authored or co-authored for ACU Press. It shows that far more diversity existed in the restoration tradition than previous historians have acknowledged. The book is also significant because Allen's distant voices also have far greater breadth of view than previously admitted.

What will surprise many readers is that these distant voices are not negative about the primitive church. In fact the opposite is true; they are all enthusiastic supporters of the search for the primitive church. They did not all agree about the specifics, but they all favored the concept of the primitive church and tried to emphasize neglected aspects of it. As the church changes some of their ideas have begun to speak again and find a legitimate place. That alone will make Allen's book controversial, because it challenges the supremacy of many privileged and powerful ideas of the movement.

Two of the most thought-provoking chapters focus on the role of women in the church. Chapter four, "Your Daughters Shall Prophesy," traces some of the early female preachers or exhorters of the early restoration movement. Nancy Towle and others were motivated by the Great Commission to take the gospel to the world. The idea that females were to be passive in the church and defer to males was "contrary to the word of God." Interested readers should also consult Louis Billington, "Female Laborers in the Church': Women Preachers in the Northeastern United States, 1790-1840" *Journal of American Studies*, 369-394, a source Allen overlooks.

Chapter 17, "The New Woman," tells the story of the remarkable Silena Holman who battled David Lipscomb and other male leaders who wanted to keep women in their place. This chapter was excerpted in an earlier issue of *Wineskins* ([August, 1992](#)).

One of the most troubling questions for restorationists has been the question of who is a Christian or who can Christians fellowship. Chapters on, "The True Measure of Fellowship," and

“Who is a Christian?” will provoke those who have comfortable answers to rethink them. For most, baptism is the key to these questions, but for both Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell it was not so simple. Both recognized some of the unimmersed as Christians. They also thought that the presence of Christian virtues or spirituality in people was a sign that they were Christians.

In a similar vein, Chapter 21, “What Is the Gospel?” tells the important story of K.C. Moser who was ostracized for years for emphasizing grace and the centrality of Christ instead of a rote, mechanical “plan of salvation.” Moser tried to restore the central biblical message that God, not man, saves. If one is more interested in Moser, read Michael Casey, “K.C. Moser: A Path-breaking Preacher,” *Leaven* 2 (Spring 1992), 41-43.

Many in the church are troubled by the authoritarian, bureaucratic models of leadership that are predominant. As a child I complained of this to my mother. She responded that elders were in control because that was the biblical model and nothing could be done to change it. Chapter 14, “Faithful Shepherds,” explodes that myth. David Lipscomb and other restoration leaders opposed the “corporate” model of the eldership. The elders had no authority or power except that of “moral authority rooted in character and faithfulness.” Church decisions should be made by the church as a whole, not by “arbitrary rulings” from the elders. The corporate model is so strongly rooted in today’s church that I suspect most will be shocked by this chapter and consider Lipscomb’s ideas unworkable.

One of the current topics of discussion by many preachers and scholars in the church is the role of rationalism or reason. Underlying several chapters of this book is this same theme. Chapter two discusses the revivals at Cane Ridge. The next chapter explores Stone’s call for unity based on the Spirit rather than on all believers agreeing on what the Bible teaches (what Stone described as “Head Union”). Robert Richardson’s ideas on the Holy Spirit, unity and spirituality are explored in Chapters 9, 10, and 11.

Another insidious effect of the rationalism of the Restoration Movement has been our inability to deal with differences and division. The reasoning goes like this: If all people are to understand the Bible in exactly the same way, then those who differ from our understanding are in error. Because they see things differently from us, then it’s too bad for them. They must come to believe the Bible exactly the way we do and repent of their ideas. As the Restoration Movement began to fracture and divide, people were forced to choose the “correct” side.

T.B. Larimore is a notable example of one who tried to defy the natural tendency of our rationalism to divide us. Chapter 20, “How to Deal with Division,” explores Larimore’s refreshing and exceptional example of resisting division.

In several chapters Allen leaves out many crucial sources that will help teachers and interested readers to place the stories in a more understandable context. Often Allen tells the story so briefly that one wishes there was more, so the discerning reader will want to consult Allen’s sources and others as well. For example, in connection with Chapter 12, “The Peaceable Kingdom,” a reader should also consult Michael Casey, “From Pacifism to Patriotism: The Emergence of Civil Religion in the Churches of Christ,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (July

1992), 376-390 and David Edwin Harrell, Jr. *Quest for a Christian America* (Nashville: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), especially Chapter 5, “Pacifism and Patriotism – The Cleavage Deepens.”

Because of the brevity of the chapters and significance of the themes, I would suggest that Sunday School teachers and discussion leaders circulate copies of the original sources that Allen cites to class members the week before a chapter is taught. Most of the original sources and most of the articles and books are available at any of the Christian colleges. Many preachers or church libraries will also have these materials.

Read this book. Use it in your church classes and discussion groups. Allen shows that restorationism need not be abandoned in this time of change. Instead it can be a creative force and assist thoughtful change as people seek the truths of Scripture. The church is at a crossroads which many see as offering a dead restorationism or vacuous tame Christianity. Allen points to a third way – a way in which our own restoration heritage engages us and helps us in that search for authentic biblical Christianity in today’s world.

We Preach Christ, Not Ourselves

by Bill Love

January – February, 1993

Tall and articulate, smooth and dynamic, entertaining, inspiring – he could move you from laughter to tears and back before you knew what happened. He spoke of power over life's battles, of ways to develop a winning attitude, of goal setting, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. He said pain is life's indicator that something is wrong. If one simply claims salvation he or she can escape pain and suffering altogether. According to his gospel, Jesus served and suffered so that we might be all we can be and reign victoriously in regal splendor. The religion he offered sold like cotton candy at a county fair: it satisfied the sweet tooth, melted in the mouth and was never hard to swallow.

Such a person was the leader of Paul's enemies in the church of Corinth. By contrast, the apostle was totally unimpressive. Physically he was anything but imposing. Paul was not drawn to the rhetorical fads of his day: pretty phrases with amusing alliteration, pleasing rhymes and surprising word plays. His gospel did not focus on the development of human potential. He started with the dark and disturbing news that humanity is alienated from God, guilty before the judge and doomed to suffer the wages of sin.

According to Paul, Jesus did not come to congratulate mankind on its impressive achievements and potential. He served and suffered to reconcile men and women to God and to make them servants like himself. Jesus was despised and rejected; he died on a criminal's cross. The cross laid open the heart of God. Nothing else could have shown how much God loves his wayward children.

Paul spoke in moving terms of Jesus' resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). If he was not raised the Christian's hope was vain. If Jesus was not raised his disciples were still in their sins and alienated from God. "But," Paul shouted in victory, "Christ has, in fact, been raised ... We shall all be raised, in a moment ... at the last trumpet! ... The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

In short, Paul rejoiced in what God had done in Jesus Christ, not in his own achievements or in the merits of the church. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" – that was the essence of Paul's good news. The gospel is about God's mighty deed of salvation, not about human wisdom, human plans, human organization, or human achievement. Paul succinctly expressed his reaction to the "super apostle" critics in 2 Corinthians 4:5: "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for his sake."

His impressive critics were preaching themselves as their gospel. Only in biting sarcasm did Paul compare resumes with these super apostles (2 Corinthians 11). His conclusion after listing his achievements? "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." He illustrated his point by painting a picture of himself in a ridiculous situation. The full story is told in Acts 9. The Jews in Damascus were still fuming because their young champion had deserted their ranks

to become a Christian and preach Jesus Christ. They persuaded King Aretas to issue orders that Paul was not to leave the city. So one night some of Paul's brothers let him down over the wall through out outside window by a rope and a basket. Was Paul bragging about this humiliation? No, I think he saw a great deal of humor in the story. Because Paul gloried in the Lord, he could laugh at himself.

This retelling of the Damascus story was even more meaningful because Paul had written a few chapters earlier of the great dignity he felt in preaching the gospel. "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." No greater honor could be bestowed on any person! But not honor as the world defines it. Can you imagine a dignitary like the Secretary of State exiting a city that way, an ambassador in a basket?

How did Paul come to this position of spiritual and mental health? What enabled Paul to take the Lord's gospel so seriously and himself not so seriously? Again, it was not his own achievement. "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2). Before the gospel ever made its way into Paul's sermons it ripped his own life apart and put it back together again.

After his own agonizing disintegration and the miracle of new life in Christ Paul had no need to promote himself. His whole life was devoted exclusively to preaching the "Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Because of the cross there was no room left in Paul's thinking for building his own kingdom, his own image, his own constituency, or his own big church. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians, James Denney wrote that preaching the true gospel glorifies God only.

If he [the preacher] wishes to do anything else at the same time, the manifestation will not take effect. If he wishes, in the very act of preaching, to conciliate a class, or an interest; to create an opinion in favour of his own learning, ability, or eloquence; to enlist sympathy for a cause or an institution which is only accidentally connected with the Gospel, – the truth will not be seen, and it will not tell.

Through the centuries proclaimers in all Christian traditions have promoted other agendas along with the gospel. We in the American Restoration Movement are no exception. Those among us who first called for non-denominational Christianity were men of broad vision, deep faith and considerable learning. Two who exerted strong formative influences on our thinking were Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott. One was a great scholar, the other our first great evangelist. They believed if disciples from all denominations could come together in one great body of Christ then God would be glorified, the world would be converted and the millennium would come. In order to bring about this great achievement they began emphasizing more and more the need to reform and unite the churches by the patterns in the Scripture. Campbell gave himself to restoring "the Ancient Order," which he viewed in terms of church membership,

worship, nomenclature, organization, and mission. Scott devoted himself to restoring “the Ancient Gospel” in answer to the sinner’s question: “What must I do to be saved?”

Scott’s preaching had a double emphasis. He preached that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. This proposition he called “the Golden Oracle.” he also preached a plan of obedience to the gospel by which every reasonable person could be saved. On the frontier at the time many were saying that only the elect could be saved, or only those who had special ecstatic experiences. Scott showed the process of salvation to be a logical, sensible plan any penitent sinner could follow Campbell explained Scott’s achievement:

Brother Walter Scott, who in the fall of 1827, arranged the several items of faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life, restored them in this order to the church under the title of ancient gospel, and preached it successfully to the world ... (Walter Scott, The Gospel Restored, p. vi.)

Scott’s clarifications were a godsend to many a despairing person who was unable to feel secure in election or have ecstatic experiences. Many of us know the “five finger exercise” which later evolved in our Restoration Movement: hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized. This later version lays even less emphasis on divine action in salvation since all five steps are made by human effort.

It seems apparent that Scott and Campbell were true servants of God with genuine motives. Unlike the “super apostles” in Corinth, they were sincerely devoted to the kingdom’s cause. Nevertheless, as a consequence of their emphasis on the Restoration agenda, Paul’s core gospel of “Christ crucified” became a mere assumption for Scott and Campbell. In Scott’s preaching he defined the gospel message, not in terms of God’s mighty act of atonement on Golgotha, but as the good news that one can be saved by accepting the proposition: “Jesus is the Messiah.” It seems clear that, for many who responded, conversion happened not so much as the result of a personal encounter with the crucified and risen Lord as by a process of rational assent. For Campbell and Scott, “the Ancient Gospel” was not God’s mighty deeds at Calvary and the open tomb, but the clearly outlined human response set forth by Scott. For many heirs of Scott and Campbell the “gospel plan of salvation” became essentially a human achievement of obedience.

In their later days Scott and Campbell had heated conflict over who had restored what. Our great men were also proud men. Even the best of us wants credit for his achievements and is irritated if others get it.

The situation in Corinth long ago and the story of our beginnings on the American frontier not so long ago can give us perspective on what we are presenting as the gospel and why. Several questions arise. “Does our message resemble more the slick sophistries of the super apostles at Corinth or the gospel of the apostle weak in himself but strong in the crucified?” “Do we have a sense of humor about our own limitations and blunders?” “To what or to whom are people converted when they respond to our teaching?” “What hidden agendas, noble or ignoble, distort the gospel we preach?” And perhaps the most telling question of all: “Who is center stage in our gospel and who gets the glory?” To the last question Paul’s answer was plain and unequivocal: “I was determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

A Dream Worth Keeping Alive

Liking the Fruit But Not the Orchard

by Max Lucado

January – February, 1993

Go with me to Berlin, Germany and the 1936 Olympics. Adolph Hitler has been upstaged by a young black American. Each of Jesse Owens' four gold medals is a denunciation of the Nazi claim of superiority. But the real story of the 1936 Olympics is not the medals of Jesse Owens. It is the message of camaraderie between Owens and a German Athlete named Lutz Long.

The two athletes competed in the long jump. Jesse Owens almost disqualified himself because he kept stepping past the board as he jumped. Before his final attempt, Lutz Long, the German, took him aside and made a suggestion: Why not place a towel six inches before the take-off board to avoid fouling? Owens followed the advice and qualified easily.

The two men dueled in the finals that afternoon. On his final jump, Owens defeated Long and set an Olympic record of 26 feet, five and one-half inches. The German crowd was stunned. Hitler was silent. But Lutz Long was thrilled. He rushed over, held Owens' hand high, and shouted "Jesse Owens! Jesse Owens!" The two competitors left the arena arm-in-arm, modeling the principle of tolerance:

When the achievement of the goal is more important than the name of the victor, rivals become friends. (From *Sports Illustrated Classic, Fall 1991, p. 22.*)

Unity results from the relentless pursuit of a common dream. Cooperation flourishes when the aspiration is elevated above competition.

Mountain climbers can tell you. They know a clear view of the peak stimulates teamwork. Soldiers know this. To fight together they must agree upon the name of the enemy and the importance of victory. Hospital staffs will testify. When physicians compete, strife results. But when personal agendas are surrendered before the greater good of helping people, the result is a community of recovery.

For the best example of this principle, however, don't go to Berlin. Don't talk to mountain climbers, soldiers, or doctors. Go instead to a small village called Capernaum and enter a small house occupied by Jesus and his disciples. Listen as the Master asks them a question:

"What were you arguing about on the road?"

The disciples' faces flush. Not red with anger, but pink with embarrassment. They had argued. About doctrine? No. Over strategy? Not that, either. Ethics and values? Sorry. No, they had argued about which of them was the greatest.

Peter thought he was, (he'd walked on water). John laid claim to the top slot, (he was Jesus' favorite). Andrew boasted he was the greatest, (after all, he introduced Jesus and Peter).

They were jockeying for position. Remarkable. But not as remarkable as Jesus' response to them.

His solution to competition? Accept one another. The answer to arguments? Acceptance. Not agreement – acceptance. Not unanimity – acceptance. Not negotiation, arbitration, or elaboration. Those might come later, but only after the first step – acceptance. In fact, Jesus felt so strongly about acceptance that he used the word four times in one sentence:

“Whoever *accepts* a child like this in my name *accepts* me. And whoever *accepts* me *accepts* the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

Such an answer troubles John. Too simplistic. The Son of Thunder was unacquainted with tolerance. Why, you just don't go around “accepting” people. Fences have to be built. Boundaries are a necessary part of religion. Case in point? John has one:

“Teacher, we saw someone using your name to force demons out of a person. We told him to stop because he does not belong to our group” (Mark 9:38).

John is faced with a dilemma. He and the other disciples had run into someone who was doing some incredible stuff. This man was casting out demons, and this was the very act the disciples had trouble doing (Mark 9:20). He was changing lives. And, what's more, the man was giving the credit to God. He was doing his work in the name of Christ!

Everything about him was so right. Right results. Right heart. But there was one problem. He was from the wrong group.

John wants to know if he did the right thing. John's not cocky, he's confused. So are many good people today. What do you do about good things being done by people in some other group? How do you respond when you like the fruit, but not the orchard? When you are impressed with the crop, but you don't trust the farm? When the results are unquestionable, but the seminary is? What do you do when somebody in another church, denomination, or movement is doing great works?

I've asked those questions. I am deeply appreciative of my heritage. It was through a small, west Texas Church of Christ that I came to know the Nazarene, the cross, and the Word. But through the years, my faith has been supplemented by people of other groups.

A Pentecostal taught me about prayer. An Anglican by the name of C.S. Lewis put muscle in my faith. A Baptist helped me understand grace.

One Presbyterian, Steve Brown, taught me about God's sovereignty while another, Frederick Buechner, taught me about God's passion. An ex-Catholic priest, Brennan Manning, convinced

me that Jesus is relentlessly tender. Jim Dobson has helped my fathering, and Chuck Swindoll has helped my preaching. And on and on the list continues.

Only when I get Home will I learn the name of a radio preacher whose message steered me back to Christ. On a cold December day in 1978, I heard him describe the cross. He could have been a Quaker, or an angel, or both for all I know. But something about what he said caused me to drive the pick-up truck off the side of the road and rededicate my life to Christ.

What do you do when you see great things done by folks of other groups? Not divisive things, not heretical things, but good things which give glory to God?

A similar question is found in, of all places, Numbers chapter 11. Moses needs help. There are too many people to lead. God calms his fears and assures Moses the people will be cared for:

“So Moses went out to the people and told them what the Lord had said. He gathered 70 of the older leaders together and had them stand around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses. The Lord took some of the spirit of Moses and he gave it to the 70 leaders. With the spirit in them they prophesied but just that one time” (Numbers 11:24).

Now note carefully verse 26: “Two men named Eldad and Nedad were also listed as leaders. But they did not go to the tent. They stayed in the camp but the Spirit was also given to them. They prophesied in the camp. A young man ran to Moses and said, “Eldad and Nedad are prophesying in the camp.”

Get the picture? Two men are prophesying without the proper pedigree. They didn't go through the right procedure. They received the Spirit without attending the meeting. That troubled Joshua. “Joshua, the son of Nun, said, ‘Moses, my master, stop them’ ” (verse 29).

A carbon copy of that situation in Mark 9. Loose cannons that need to be secured. Good preaching but improper preparation. How can they be legitimate? They missed the orientation session. They can't have the Spirit of God! They weren't in the tent when the instructions were given.

“Joshua, Joshua,” we want to say, “don't you know God can do what he wants? He can give his Spirit to anybody at any time. It's up to him.”

Easy to say when looking at Joshua. Harder to say when looking in the mirror. There's a bit of Joshua in most of us.

Moses' response is for all us Joshuas. “Are you jealous for me? I wish all the Lord's people could prophesy. I wish the Lord would give his Spirit to all of them” (verse 29).

Moses isn't resentful or jealous – he's grateful. He knows the size of the task. Moses needs all the help he can get. Moses refuses to be God's screen door. He knows the authority of God. God can work where he wants with whom he wants. Even if it is with those of some group other than ours.

This topic of tolerance surfaced in our home Bible study one night not long ago. Somebody said, "You know, I grew up in the Church of Christ and we were taught that we were the only ones going to heaven." That comment didn't surprise me, but the oens which followed did. "I grew up in the Baptist Church, and we were taught the same thing," said one. "I grew up in the Catholic Church and I was taught that," chimed another. Then a Pentecostal said he'd been trained the same way.

We religious folk like fences. Fences define. Fences clarify. And, what's more, fences empower. Where there is a fence there is a gate. And where there is a gate, there is a gatekeeper. Someone gets to sit at the gate and monitor those who would enter. Pretty heady stuff. A powerful job. Too powerful, Jesus says, for any of us to handle.

Let's return to Jesus' response to John. Remember, John has just asked him about a man who was doing good things. He was doing those things in the right name, but he was not from the right group.

Before talking about what Jesus said to John, note what he didn't say.

First, Jesus did not say, "John, if the people are nice, they are in." Generous gestures and benevolent acts are not necessarily a sign of a disciple. Just because the Lion's Club is giving out toys at Christmas, that doesn't mean the club or its members are Christians. Just because the Hare Kirshnas are feeding some people does not mean they are the honored ones of God.

Nor did Jesus say, "John, if the people agree with your opinions, they are in." If unanimity of opinion was necessary for fellowship, this would have been a perfect time for Jesus to say so. But he didn't. Jesus didn't hand John a book of regulations by which to measure every candidate; he gave no checklist to be followed.

Look at what Jesus did say: "Don't stop him, because anyone who uses my name to do powerful things will not easily say evil things about me" (Mark 9:39).

Jesus considered the man's ministry worthy. And when we examine our Lord's comments, we see why. Jesus was impressed with the man's pure faith and his powerful fruit. His answer offers us a crucial lesson on studied tolerance. How should you respond to a good heart which comes from a different religious heritage?

First, look at the fruit. Is it good? Is it healthy? Is the person helping or hurting people? Production is more important than pedigree. The fruit is more important than the name of the orchard. If the person is bearing fruit, be grateful! A good tree cannot produce bad fruit (Matthew 7:14), so be thankful that God is at work in groups other than yours.

But look also at the faith.

Jesus was accepting of this man's work because it was done in the name of Christ. What does it mean to do something "in the name of Jesus"? This man was using the name of Christ to do

powerful things. What does that mean? It means you are under the authority of and empowered by that name.

For example, if I go to a car dealership and say I want a free car, they are going to laugh at me. If, however, I go with a letter written and signed by the owner of the dealership granting me a free car, then I drive off in a free car. Why? Because I am there under the authority of – and empowered by – the owner.

The Master says we should examine the man's faith. If the man has faith in God and is empowered by God, that's reason enough for us to accept his work.

You mean he doesn't have to be in my group? That's right.

He doesn't have to share my background? He doesn't.

He doesn't have to see everything the way I do? Does anyone?

What is important is his fruit and his faith. Later, a much more temperate Son of Thunder would reduce it to this: "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God has God living in him" (1 John 4:15).

Ironic. The one who challenged the simple answer of the Master eventually rendered the simplest answer himself.

It should be simple. Where there is faith, repentance, and the new birth, there is a Christian. When I meet a man whose faith is in the cross and whose eyes are on the Savior, I meet a brother. We will still have differences. But that does not mean we cannot have fellowship.

True unity is not achieved by leaving our differences hidden, but by dealing with them in the open meadow of Christ's mercy. I have brothers and sisters with whom I do not agree on the role of women, the meaning of baptism, the place of millennialism. But our uncommon ground is a barren island compared to the great continent of common ground we share. If we can agree on the majestic uniqueness of Christ, don't we share enough to accept one another?

If he is with pure heart calling God his father, can't I call him my brother? That's not to say concerns shouldn't be shared and ideas be exchanged. That is to say, however, that fellowship is not found in common opinions but in a common Savior.

And if we never agree, can't we agree to disagree? If God can tolerate my mistakes, can't I tolerate a few myself? If God can overlook my errors, can't I do the same? If God allows me, with my foibles and failures to call him Father, shouldn't I extend the same grace to others?

If God doesn't demand perfection, should I?

“They are God’s servants,” Paul reminds, “not yours. They are responsible to him, not to you. Let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. And God is able to make them do as they should” (Romans 14:4).

“If your heart beats with my heart in love and loyalty to Christ,” wrote John Wesley, “give me your hand.”

A final thought. a few months ago, I was in Chicago speaking at the Willow Creek Community Church, an immense non-denominational fellowship. Each evening before the assembly a group of elders would meet to pray with me.

I asked the elders to tell me about themselves. “I used to be a Baptist, but now I’m just a Christian,” one shared “I grew up a Methodist,” stated another, “but now I’m simply a believer.” “I was Dutch-Reformed,” said a third, “but now I just follow Jesus.” And this went on around the table. Both nights.

And both nights I thought to myself, “That’s our line!” That’s what we in churches of Christ are supposed to say. What I heard in Chicago must have been akin to what early restorationists heard all around the country: “We aren’t the only Christians, but we are Christians, only.”

What if that became our plea again? What if once again we were known for building bridges and tearing down fences?

Jesus’ final prayer before his disciples was that we be one (John 17:21). Would he offer a prayer which couldn’t be answered?

Lutz Long and Jesse Owens went from being rivals to being friends. Why? Because the achievement of the goal was more important than the name of the victor.

May God help us do the same.

Baptism: The Christian Lie Detector

by Mike Cope

January – February, 1993

Haven't you at times wanted a fool-proof method to detect lies? Would it have been nice to bring a trial-by-ordeal similar to Numbers 5 to the Clarence Thomas – Anita Hill conflict or the William Kennedy Smith trial? Wouldn't you like to have a *urim* and *thummim* to tell you which of your kids is giving you the real lowdown?

For Christians there is a lie detector. It reminds them of the truth, cutting through the lies that Satan tries to press on them. It exposes the potholes of fibs and points the way back to the pavement of truth.

This lie detector is baptism. Usually when Scripture discusses baptism, it isn't for an evangelistic purpose. Rather, it's a trump card played by the author to remind Christ-followers of the truth they had committed themselves to. Christian living is a constant ownership of the commitment made in baptism.

Without the reminder of baptism, we are vulnerable to the trash heaped on us from below. Note how a return to the water can help expose falsehoods like these:

Salvation is the Result of Human Endeavor

Has there been a more ancient, more stubborn, more camouflaged heresy than legalism? In its baldest form, it claims that salvation is the pay given in return for good works.

But legalism rarely comes out that way. No one wears a T-shirt proclaiming: "Legalist – and proud of it!" No, legalism is disguised by people who talk about God and his grace out of one side of their mouths. But out of the other side they hint that a person must become a Jew through circumcision and keeping the law in order to be a full-fledged believer. Their undermining of Paul probably didn't have a "Paul is a heretic" tone but more of a "Paul's a good man, but he doesn't give you the full scoop" tone.

If we could hear these false teachers instead of our stereotypes of them they would sound fairly orthodox, conservative, safe, and loyal. But according to Paul, they taught absolute heresy. Don't believe it, no matter who teaches it – even if the spokesperson is an angel (Galatians 1:8). In the third chapter, Paul claims that salvation is understood not by focusing on Moses and the law but by examining Abraham and faith.

Then comes his reminder: "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:26-28).

Baptism is the lie detector: we can't be saved because of our own works, orthodoxy, or zeal. While baptism taught us that there must be obedience to receive God's gift on God's terms, salvation is still a free gift! Baptism showed us that we can't earn salvation, that we can only be recipients of God's grace.

Of course we can ruin even that beautiful truth by making all our focus on "the doctrine of baptism," narrowly defined as its form and function. (Note several "gospel tracts" on baptism that have no mention of the cross or imputed righteousness.)

Baptism is an expression of an obedient, active faith – faith in the saving work of God in Christ. In baptism we were "clothed with Christ" – the only clothing that can cover the nakedness of our sinful lives. Whenever we witness a baptism it reminds us that we won't be saved because of our own righteous rags but because of the wonderful wardrobe of righteousness that Jesus has offered us.

Salvation Doesn't Impinge on Your Life

There is another lie that won't die: that I don't have to deal with sin in my life because I'm saved by grace. This is the lie of sloppy, lazy discipleship. It's worded well in Romans 6:1: "What then are we to say? Should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound?"

You know Paul's unequivocal answer: "By no means!" And again baptism is the 100-watt bulb that exposes the darkness of this lie. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (6:3-4).

As William Willimon put it so well, "Baptism is nothing less than death and nothing less than the creation of a new being who lives by a radically different system of obedience, servanthood, and community." Repentance is a daily return to baptism because baptism is a beginning (of a new person) as much as it is an ending (of the old person). Its goal is the reshaping of our sinful, proud selves into people who look like God intends.

God will take me "just as I am" – but he won't leave me that way. He draws us away from the values and behavior of this world to values and behavior of the kingdom.

Whenever we see someone immersed into Christ, we are reminded that our whole life has been redefined. We now live not as we please but as God pleases.

Salvation is a Private Affair

There are all kinds of people who are willing to be children of God but have no interest in being brothers and sisters with the other children. Remember the old ditty?

*To live above with saints we love –
Oh, that will be glory.*

*But to dwell below with saints we know –
Now, that's another story.*

Some don't have the time; some don't have the patience for the "unenlightened"; and others don't have the stomach for the hypocrisy. So they try to turn the Christian voyage into a solo tour.

There's a problem with this voyage, though: It isn't the one you signed up for at baptism. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body," writes Paul, "so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

When the Spirit baptized us, we were grafted into a body, included in a group of believers. We belong to these other people. We have different spiritual gifts in this body – along with different octane levels, different opinions, different backgrounds, and different maturity levels. But we are still – as baptism reminds us – one body.

Your Life Doesn't Matter

There is a perfect set-up for feelings of failure and worthlessness when a society defines success in terms of beauty, wealth, power, and control. Too many people get edged out of that formula:

- *the teenager who knows that she doesn't have Miss America features and shapes;*
- *the preacher who works quietly but faithfully in a small, off-the-interstate church;*
- *the single divorcee who wonders if she's a bad person since her marriage didn't last;*
- *the sixty-two year-old who just took early retirement – which seemed to be the only alternative to just being laid off – even though he has always gotten his sense of self worth from his job.*

"Your life doesn't count," Satan whispers.

But that lie is confronted by the baptismal event: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7).

You are not a nobody! You have been made an heir of the King of the universe! You are part of a royal family. Your identity comes not from the mirror in the bathroom but from the reflection in the water of baptism.

Without the liquid lie detector of baptism we might have no way to test the falsehoods floating around. A regular trip back to the water might be good for all of us!