

Wineskins Magazine

Change for the Sake of Change?

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Change for the Sake of Change?

by Rubel Shelly

March – August, 1994

Traditional wisdom holds that there is no value to change for its own sake. As with any number of elements of “traditional wisdom,” however, there is good reason to question such a dictum.

Of course the gospel message and divine appointments for the people of God cannot be changed. But what about methodologies? What about customary procedures for doing things? What about things that define our personal “comfort zones”?

In my observations of thriving local churches, I have observed for several years that change for the sake of change is usually a good thing. For example, I work with a church whose Worship Committee never uses the same order of worship from one Sunday to the next. Was it unsettling when such a procedure was initiated? Yes. Were there complaints? Yes. And the unsettledness and complaints were proof positive that moving away from predictability was overdue. Some of us had come to think that the way it had always been done was the only way it could be done with God’s favor.

It seems to be human nature that we confuse content with form, “essentials” with “non-essentials.” One of the reasons this happens is that we equate familiar things with right things. Thus the way I am accustomed to seeing or doing a thing becomes the only way a thing can be done.

The first time I witnessed a solo presentation of music in an assembly, I was offended. Upon reflection, I realized that what had been challenged that day was neither Scripture nor propriety but my limited range of experience. More recently still, it has dawned on me that singing is not per se an “element of worship” at all. Ephesians 5:19 requires that Christians speak praise and admonition to one another, and singing is one method of carrying out the requirement. If any form of the church’s speaking may be done solo (e.g., preaching), then all other forms (e.g., singing) may be done the same way.

The first time I saw a woman stand in a pulpit to speak during a church assembly was when I had preached in a revival service for a black congregation. Two women came down different aisles of the building, the local evangelist spoke with each of them, and he then led them together onto the stage. He explained that two sisters who had caused each other and the church considerable strife because of a personal clash between them had come to confess their sin. He then stepped aside, and both of the women tearfully expressed their regret for their sinful behavior. That was different from my write-it-on-a-card invitation response tradition. It was so obviously right, though, that I have adopted the procedure on many occasions since.

Whenever someone other than an elder makes an announcement and there is a protest, you can be sure that a perfectly good practice of having elders make announcements has become a liability. It has led someone to think that no one but elders have the right to share information.

Whenever someone (likely a visitor!) raises her hands during a song of praise and someone goes to the preacher to demand that a sermon against hand-raising be preached, custom has become law for the protesting party.

We have been guilty of stifling creativity and imposing limits where God has not by letting habit establish the norms in our churches. Maybe it would be a good idea to change something that is rather inconsequential as a test. If it reveals that a group is wed to tradition as though it were a divine norm, notice has been served that something has gone badly wrong.

So, yes, I believe in change for the sake of change. I believe in it for the sake of creating a mindset of openness and flexibility. If we do not cultivate such a spirit within a group of people, then attempting to change anything that is truly significant will never work. The attempt will throw the group into chaos and cripple its functioning.

It is surely better, then, to establish a mindset that is open to reform and change as norms rather than obstinance and intractability. When meaningful change is needed, the former mindset will have become the background for bringing it about. The latter will produce more fruitless battles in tradition-bound churches.

Founders & Destroyers

by Mike Cope

March – August, 1994

In his best-selling book *The Reckoning*, David Halberstam offers a close-up look at the Japanese attack on Detroit. How did the American auto industry lose so much ground so quickly? As you might imagine, a sizeable chunk of the book is devoted to Henry Ford.

Chapter Four is titled “The Founder.” It portrays Ford as a man ahead of his time. An incredible visionary. The man who put America to work.

Chapter Five is called “The Destroyer.” It, too, is about Henry Ford. Only here he is shown to be the man whose vision had frozen. He refused to permit others the freedom to press on with the same foresight and determination he had shown at an earlier point in his life.

Halberstam discusses the time Ford’s top engineers made a few much-needed improvements to the Model T. They produced a design that was a little lower and 12 inches longer. When they surprised him with the design he walked around it several times. Then he ripped off the left-hand door. Then the other door. After that he smashed the windshield, threw out the back seat, and bashed in the roof with his shoe. He said nothing.

When dealers told Ford that to continue competing with Chevy he needed to make changes in the ignition system, he replied, “You can have the changes over my dead body.” When dealers asked him to vary the color of the Model T, his reply was, “You can have them any color you want, boys, as long as they’re black.”

After engineers insisted that a six cylinder was needed, Ford’s son, Edsel, began working on a new engine. One day Edsel received a call from his father asking him to come see the new scrap conveyor, so he climbed to the top to see it work. The conveyor started, and the first thing riding up—on its way to becoming scrap junk—was the new engine. “Now don’t you try anything like that again. Don’t you ever, do you hear?” Ford screamed at his son.

How easily the founders can become the destroyers! Every generation faces the temptation to freeze its own discoveries and traditions and call them “the final frontier.” Anyone going beyond that is considered dangerous. No wonder Jesus faced so much opposition from many Pharisees!

Some continue to confuse the change that writers of Wineskins often call for. We never want to abandon the centrality of God’s Word or the fundamentals of biblical truth just for the sake of being creative and marketable. We would much prefer to be irrelevant than to be unfaithful!

But there is no reason why the church has to consider inflexibility a fruit of the Spirit! There is nothing sacred about human traditions and hackneyed customs.

What's driving the writers of this magazine to call for change is a passion for the church's mission. We desperately want to reach a new, changing world with the message of the gospel! Yesterday I received an order form from a company that has been using its magazine to blast Wineskins for its emphasis on change. I couldn't help but notice that their big back-page ad was offering Christian music on 8-track tapes! I guess I wasn't really surprised.

When we insist upon change, we're only saying that you can't sell 8-track tapes in a CD world! We don't want to alter the message on the tapes—only the way the message is presented.

Change—any change—comes with a bit of terror. We are for a while like a trapeze artist between the bars. We don't want to let go of one swinging bar until we can feel the next one. That nanosecond in between is frightening. It seems like a decade.

That's why we must continue to be people of faith! Even though our world is full of change, we must continue holding on to a God who remains the same (Hebrews 1:12).

Time is filled with swift transition—Naught of earth unmoved can stand—Build your hopes on things eternal, Hold to God's unchanging hand.

Two Generations, One Church: How to Make Peace

Mark Smith

March – August, 1994

Jerusalem, 538 B. C. Forty-eight years had passed since Nebuchadnezzar's army had utterly destroyed the Holy City, carrying all but the poorest of the poor into Babylonian captivity. For the faithful, these were years of penitence and prayer—prayers which were answered when the Medo-Persians defeated the Babylonians, allowing any Jew who so desired to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. After erecting shelters for themselves and an altar on which to sacrifice, they were ready to focus on long-term projects. There was no doubt in anybody's mind about which project headed the list. The single most important structure prior to the captivity would be the first structure rebuilt. Israel would have another temple. Plans would be drawn up and workers organized. It was a grand occasion. It was also one of the more unusual incidents recorded in Scripture.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: "He is good; his love to Israel endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away (Ezra 3:10-13).

Interesting, isn't it? One incident—the laying of the foundation for the second temple. Two completely different reactions—the young people shouted while the old people wept.

While we don't like to admit it, intergenerational tension is as old as humanity. By virtue of background and experience, youth and age inevitably see things differently. What youth finds exciting, age sometimes finds threatening. What age finds comfortable, youth finds dull. The result is that the relationship between the generations is always delicate. The potential for problems and misunderstandings always exists. To further complicate the modern situation, baby boomers are especially different. The gap between my generation (boomer class of '55) and that of our parents is wider than any generation gap in modern history. This was brought home to me at a recent workshop on worship styles. Twice during the day we broke into discussion groups. Our purpose was to formulate questions for the keynote speakers. As the discussion proceeded it was clear that two different philosophies existed in our group. One philosophy basically said, "The Bible allows us freedom to change in some areas. If the church is to survive, we must be willing to embrace change where circumstances demand it and God allows it." To a person, this was the attitude of the baby-boomers. The other philosophy basically said, "The Bible is very explicit about how worship is to be conducted and the Churches of Christ are doing worship right. If the church is to survive, we must resist change for it leads down the slippery slope to apostasy." This was the attitude of most of the older people in the group. As the discussion

unfolded it occurred to me that this group of people, all leaders in the church in one capacity or another, would have a very difficult time working and worshipping together on a consistent basis. Our philosophies were simply too divergent. When the issue is change in worship styles, the young people tend to shout for joy while the old people tend to weep.

Intergenerational tension presents a major threat to the future of the church. If, as a fellowship of God's people, we refuse to deal with it now, it may very well destroy us 10 years from now. While it may be an oversimplification, I believe the key to peace between the generations is one simple word — respect.

As a starting place, it is vital that we learn to respect one another's traditions. Some traditions are so widespread and pervasive that they are accepted cross-generationally without question. Other traditions tend to be generation-specific. In fact, each generation tends to define itself, in part, by developing traditions unique to itself. These are neither good nor bad. They simply reflect the natural impulse each generation feels to be different from the generation preceding. Just as my parents' generation fought to bring kitchens into the church house, my generation is fighting to bring contemporary sounding music into the assembly. It is important to us because it partially defines who we are. Unfortunately, new traditions tend to supplant old ones. At the very least, they compete for limited time and attention. When two generations hold to conflicting traditions, problems are almost inevitable. The solution is respect. One generation prefers the King James Bible. Another prefers the NIV. It's not that one is necessarily "right" and the other "wrong." Each generation is simply reflecting its tradition. It is pointless for one group to attempt to change the other in this area, for the attachment to tradition is emotional, not rational. Mutual respect enables the generations to differ without dividing.

Respect is also needed when considering each generation's contributions. Every member is needed for the body of Christ to function properly. The hand cannot say to the foot, "I don't need you." Likewise the eye to the ear. In the modern church the young cannot say to the old, "I don't need you," nor can the old say it to the young. The truth is we need each other—desperately. Remove young Christians from the influence of more mature brethren and they will become a cult-like movement that will probably go into error. Remove mature brethren from the influence of the young and they will become a dead church. Neither is pleasing to God. In order for the body to function as it should, every member must work in conjunction with every other member, allowing various strengths and weaknesses to offset each other to the glory of God. In other words, we must respect the contributions of every member, especially when tension exists in the relationship. It is relatively easy for one young person to appreciate the contributions of another young person. The young intuitively understand each other. What's needed is for young people to appreciate the contributions of the old and for the old to appreciate the contributions of the young. Something which can only be accomplished in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Respect is also vital regarding each generation's sincerity. I once had a man question my love for the lost because I wasn't using the method of evangelism he preferred. He honestly felt the method he was using was vastly superior to mine. I honestly disagreed. His eagerness to doubt my sincerity made it very difficult for us to have a God-honoring relationship. He considered me unspiritual. I considered him a Pharisee. One can question my intelligence, my judgment, my wisdom, my maturity, and anything else along those lines. I won't react too negatively. I might

even agree. However, question my sincerity and I'm ready to fight. I have a great many flaws, but insincerity is not one of them. I assume that other people are as sensitive in this area as I am. It is nearly impossible to have a relationship with an individual who assumes you are insincere. It is also nearly impossible for differing generations to peacefully coexist if they are continually questioning each other's sincerity. We may have differing preferences regarding worship styles, translations, evangelistic methods, preaching styles, and a host of other things. In all things, we must assume that those whose preferences differ from ours love God, his Word, and his church.

I thank God for the generations that have preceded mine. Their faithfulness helped create the conditions that have made my generation what it is. At the same time, I have no desire to slavishly imitate the traditions of those who preceded me. To attempt such would be unnatural and unwise. For good or bad, every generation longs to build its own unique temple. The spiritual temple built by my generation may not compare with those of previous generations, but it beats having no temple at all. Fighting one another over expediencies will only hinder whatever good might be accomplished.

There is no honor in trumpeting relationships that come naturally. If we love those that agree with us, what do we more than others? God is honored when we work at relationships that do not come naturally. The Jews in Ezra's day didn't have identical feelings about the new temple. It could not compare in grandeur with the first temple, causing disappointment among the old. On the other hand, to the generation which had not seen the first temple, its beauty was beyond description. In spite of their differing feelings, the generations worked together as one. Our goal should be the same—to work together as one in spite of the fact that sometimes the young people shout while the old people weep. The key is mutual respect.

Change to What?

by Sandra Woodroof Millholland
March – August, 1994

How I wish we could visit personally about change. And church. And everything those concepts imply. If you are excited about the freedom to speak of change within the Churches of Christ, we could dream and plan together about what God is doing and going to continue to do with his people. We could wonder with great anticipation about the special part each of us will play in his plan.

If you are discouraged, confused, maybe a little sad about the potential problems change may bring within our movement (Where will it all end?, you might be thinking), I would hope our discussion would give you two things: a strong sense of peace that God is in charge and all is well, and a renewed commitment and appreciation for the task to which we've been called.

I have to warn you, though. If we really could sit and visit face to face I'd be tempted to talk to you about things like cybernetic processes, holons, deviation-amplifying deviation-dampening positive and negative feedback loops, equilibrium, balance, homeostasis, morphogenesis, equifinality, viability, and steady-state.

You may not be interested in those concepts, but knowing about them would help make some sense out of what's happening in the church today. Don't worry. I won't spend any more time on Systems Theory except to say that those dynamics are biblical and they keep living systems, like the church, active and fully functioning. Let it suffice to say that I'm excited and optimistic about where we are and who we are becoming.

As we begin our discussion on change it will first be helpful for you to think for a moment about church. What is *church*?

Most of us would readily say that church is people, but we act as if church is somewhere we go, something we do, an opportunity for benevolence. We treat each other as if church is an organization with written and unwritten by-laws, rules, regulations, and exclusive membership rights.

These descriptions are an over-simplification, of course, but before we can understand change and how it impacts church, we need to bring to our awareness the all-important difference between organization and *organism*. I'll say more about this later.

Now let's talk about change. Change is a process. It's active. Ongoing. Change is a means toward an ultimate end, not an end in itself. Healthy systems don't change just for the sake of changing, they change out of necessity.

Organizations might survive for a little while without change, but living organisms, or systems, cannot. When living systems refuse to change, when so much pressure is exerted that change is

impossible, when the system has a rule that rules cannot be changed, that system will either die from a lack of emotional energy, or tear itself apart from energy of the wrong kind. I've seen churches do both of these things, haven't you?

Change only becomes overwhelming when people don't have the knowledge, the skills, or the resources to adapt to it, and I see the church at an important place in history. What will we do with the inevitable change inherent in this living system we call church? What rules will we have about changing the rules of tradition we've imposed upon ourselves?

We need not despair over our petty disagreements and differences. On the contrary. We can rejoice in them. They are healthy and good when dealt with lovingly. It's appropriate for people who care about the Lord and who want to do his will to think about and question the status quo. These interactions open up opportunities to submit to one another. They encourage accountability and we all need other Christians to be accountable to and for. Healthy living systems have many differences among their parts and they use those differences to perfect the whole. It's called growth.

Growth ceases, however, when we use our differences against each other. I call that friendly fire. In an earlier article with that title I tried to remind us that while we as a church are bickering among ourselves about all the ways we don't want to change, wounded souls are bleeding to death and our children are going elsewhere for spiritual nourishment. We cannot be known for what we don't believe in if we expect to survive as a church.

The Lord's church will always survive, you say. True. But I'm not sure the Church of Christ will. And we shouldn't survive if we aren't accomplishing God's purpose for his church. If we spend all our energy debating method and never get around to mission we should expect defeat. The race is there and someone will run it successfully. I just hope we're not found at the starting line arguing about the order of events, how to hold the baton, or who's running anchor.

When I think of some of the silly things we argue about, I'm reminded of the scribes, the Pharisees, and the rulers of the temple. They meant well. They were good people, most of them, but they lacked vision. They were rule-bound and, consequently, ineffectual. I thought Christ came to *change* all that.

I work in a maximum security prison. Every day I go in harm's way, and every day I counsel all day long with men who have raped, murdered, molested children, sold and abused drugs, and much, much more. I am truly blessed. These men need the Lord. They don't know him. And I have the privilege of telling them about him. Their previous life circumstances are not the reason they are in prison; sin is. When I see what he can do in their lives it makes me ashamed of us for strafing each other over the "letter of the law" while forgetting — or ignoring — the Spirit with which it was given.

You didn't think you wanted to talk about those strange words I mentioned back in the third paragraph, but we've talked about them anyway. And it boils down to this: Praise God that we are changing as a church. If we don't, we'll die. Pray that we can agree to disagree. "Change to What?" That's an oxymoron. The church won't change *to* anything. It wasn't perfect at Antioch

and it's not perfect now. It's imperfect people living and growing and always in a state of becoming more and more what God intended his church to be. Hopefully we're smart enough to learn from the mistakes of the past, and hopefully we won't keep doing what isn't working well for us.

Most of what we worry about religiously won't make any difference in 10,000 years. Most of it won't make any difference a century from now. What will make a difference today, tomorrow, and forever is how we treat one another for the world to see, and whether or not we take Christ to a lost and dying world. It's that simple. Do I hear Amen?

Loneliness and Community: An Interview With Henri Nouwen

by Darryl Tippens
March – August, 1994

EDITORS' NOTE: *Henri Nouwen, author of more than 30 books including **The Return of the Prodigal Son, In the Name of Jesus, and Life of the Beloved**, is an international authority on the spiritual life. Born in the Netherlands, today he lives and serves in the L'Arche community called Daybreak near Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Darryl Tippens conducted this interview at Daybreak on December 29, 1993.*

TIPPENS: I am interested in the fact that your words transcend denominational boundaries. Like C. S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, and a few others in our day, you have been able to reach a broad spectrum of Christian believers. Has this been one of your goals?

NOUWEN: First of all, I am very grateful that I am in touch with so many different church groups. I am always very moved by the fact that so many people—practically over the spectrum of the Christian world—are responding to my writing. I never consciously tried to do that. It's much more a gift I'm grateful for. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that I am trying to articulate the movement of the Spirit within me, and I try to be very faithful to my own journey. Although I am a committed Catholic priest, and nowhere hide that fact, my focus is very much a spiritual journey.

I have always felt that if I am very personal and connected with what I myself am living, my writing will transcend ecclesial boundaries. I really believe that what we finally want is to know God, as God has come to be known through Jesus. Knowledge is knowledge of the heart—the Spirit—I would say. It is the Spirit in us who reveals God. I have tried to stay very focused on that sort of question.

TIPPENS: I see a paradox in your work. On the one hand you are profoundly personal and confessional. Yet that very personal touch leads to community. Is it true that the more personal we are, the more universal we become?

NOUWEN: That's very true. One way I express it is through the famous example of Jesus going onto the mountain for prayer. In the morning he gathers his Apostles and calls them all by name, and in the afternoon with his Apostles he goes out to minister. This is the spiritual order of things. Where does it all start? In intimate community with God. If you meet God in solitude, you discover the God you meet is the God who embraces all people. Once you are in communion with God, you have the eyes to see and the ears to hear other people in whom God has also found a dwelling place.

I feel strongly that the God we meet in solitude is always the God who calls us to community. On the other hand, if you start with community and want to be faithful to community, you have to realize that what binds you together is not mutual compatibility or common tasks, but God. In order to stay in touch with that call to community, we always have to return to solitude.

So, community always calls us back to solitude, and solitude always calls us to community. Community and solitude, both, are essential elements of ministry and witnessing.

Ministry is about witnessing. I witness to the one I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears and touched with my own hands. I touched that person, first of all in my solitude, but secondly in my life with others. And so I find myself speaking about Jesus out of my solitude but also out of my community.

This is very much what the life of Jesus was about. Jesus ministers out of his communion with God. “All that I heard from my father I say to you, all that I am doing is what the father sent me to do.” Jesus’ ministry comes out of a very intimate relationship with God.

At the same time Jesus always acts with others. The first thing he does is call people around him, and together they go out and minister. It’s not just Jesus alone. It’s Jesus with his Apostles from the very beginning. When he sends them out, he sends them two by two.

Ministry is witnessing to a God whom I meet in solitude and community. Many people create a false tension between the two, as if some people are for solitude and others are for community. If you want to know anything about community, you have to realize that the contemplative side is essential. Community without retreating and quiet time never survives.

TIPPENS: Most people who read your works are very busy. Many are married with children, and they feel extremely pressed for time. What do you say to people who think that your ideas about solitude are a wonderful, but unattainable, ideal?

NOUWEN: First, I want to say that solitude is an essential element for the spiritual health of a child. If we only stimulate our children—keep them busy with endless stories with no space to be alone—that’s not good.

A sense of solitude is one of the most beautiful things that parents can give a child. It doesn’t mean leaving the child alone, but it does mean creating safe spaces where the child can be with other people. It does mean directing their attention to God.

My grandmother was very strong on this point. She would say to me, “If you can just shut up for 15 minutes—or just 15 seconds. If you are not able to be silent, you will not be able to speak well.” She would say, “Life is not entertainment. Life is not distraction.” Obviously a child can never conceive solitude if his parents aren’t living it somewhere themselves. I don’t mean that to be alone you have to get down on your knees for an hour in a yoga posture. I’m not saying that.

I am talking about an atmosphere where people are safe together even when they don’t entertain each other. Reading with children is also an enormous gift to them. It’s a great honor to invite children to read with adults.

Secondly, I want to stress that there is nothing so important in the family as the sacred quality of the meal. Few families know much about meals. At Daybreak the meal is the most communal place. After the meal we pray together and we share some music.

Community means that people come together around the table, not just to feed their bodies, but to feed their minds and their relationships. Good families always ritualize the table. You can say, “This is a Christmas meal; this is a birthday meal.”

What are the rituals? How do you set the table? Are there candles on the table? Does someone say a prayer before the meal? Do you turn off the television? Do you say, “No telephone calls, we’re just going to be together even if for an hour?”

We should say, “We will prepare the meal together. You set the table. You do the dishes. You set flowers on the table.” I’m talking about the whole culture of the meal. How do we eat? Do we just get it over as soon as possible, or do we say there’s a first course which we finish first, then a second course, and so forth? The table has to be ritualized.

My mind is filled with memories of special meal times. At Christmas we went to church at midnight, and afterwards we had breakfast in the middle of the night. And it was always a tradition to invite one or two guests who didn’t have a family.

Just a few weeks ago my father invited us all to Holland. After I celebrated the Eucharist, we visited my mother’s grave, then he took all of us to a restaurant. During the meal my father welcomed us formally and said, “We’re glad you are here. These are some of the things we are grateful for, etc.” That is community.

A third point I want to make concerns how families spend their time. Television is obviously an enormous intruder. Quite often people say they have no time, but in fact they waste a lot of time on things that are not healthy. They go to bed much too late. There’s no discipline concerning the stimulating things that come into the home—telephones, television, and people who just walk in. What kind of structure is there? You cannot say. “Anybody who wants to interrupt me can do so.” In my family we were not allowed to receive a phone call during dinner. Disconnect the phone. People can call back.

There are very simple, contemplative rituals. To busy people I suggest a little booklet of daily readings from Scripture. I say to them, “Every morning before you get up, read the Gospel of the day. That’s all you have to do. Spend just two minutes thinking about it, and say, ‘This is the Gospel of the day. I will pray for the people that I will meet today.’” I don’t think that’s too much to ask.

Or, you can say, “Let’s read the Gospel together at the table.” Or, you can take it to work. You can read it at noon time or just before your lunch hour, alone or with a friend. If you are a businessman or a medical worker, you and a colleague can come together for five minutes to read the Gospel. After half a year, your life will have a different tone to it. It’s simple, but it will keep your spirit focused. Solitude, community, and ministry are certainly not just for celibates! Celibates also have a hard time keeping up.

TIPPENS: I want to mention some words that characterize your books for me: confessional, honest, relevant, psychological, truthful about the human condition, incarnational, imitation of Christ, holy. Would you agree with these descriptions?

NOUWEN: Yes, they are very true. These words are really there in my works. But for “the imitation of Christ” I tend to use the word “discipleship.” We are called to follow Jesus, to be disciples of Jesus. “Psychological.” I am a psychologist by training. I definitely hope to have integrated some of that training into my writing. I try to identify the spiritual movements; but if you call it “psychological,” then you might think that I am primarily focusing on the relationship between people and the emotions.

Obviously I do use a lot of psychological insights, but I try constantly to show how the Spirit works in us. I try to stay close to a “spiritual dynamics” rather than a “psycho-dynamics.” People in the Western world are very sophisticated, but they know very little about the movements of the Spirit in us.

Now the movements of the Spirit obviously deeply affect our emotions and our body, but the heart has its own separate, spiritual territory. That’s why I wrote *Life of the Beloved* which tries to describe a spiritual dynamics according to these four words: taken, blessed, broken, and given.

What is the life of those who call themselves the children of God? We are the beloved of God. What does the life of the beloved of God look like? The beloved is chosen by God; he is blessed by God; he is broken, and he is given to the world. You can identify these movements every day. You can go through a day and ask, “Where did I feel chosen today? When did I feel blessed? Where was I broken? Where was my pain today? Where did I become a gift to others?”

If you are sensitive to these things, you realize that the Spirit of Jesus is at work in you in every relationship, in every movement, when you eat, drink, play, or whatever you do in the name of Christ.

TIPPENS: There is currently a debate, especially among Evangelicals, over the “triumph of the therapeutic” in religion. Is this a concern?

NOUWEN: I am very concerned about this issue. I have a doctoral degree in psychology. With it, I went to the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. I remember how I spent a lot of time helping people see that Scripture has its own language that shouldn’t be replaced by psychological language. We finally end up talking about different things.

The word covenant, for instance, is a very beautiful word, but it’s different from the word contract. In psychology we talk about a “contract” with a patient. Other biblical words are very powerful: patience, endurance, perseverance, fortitude, and presence. These words have very deep roots. We have to let these concepts touch us very deeply.

I have a problem with the word “relevant.” I want to be relevant, but not in the wrong way. I don’t want to be a “relevant” writer. I want to be fruitful. I want my work to create space where people can meet God, rather than give them something they can “apply” to their daily life.

If you make religion “relevant” by showing how spiritual truths are affecting your daily life, you might end up commercializing things. In a strange way the spiritual life isn’t “useful” or “successful.” But it is meant to be fruitful. And fruitfulness comes out of brokenness, you know.

The soil becomes fruitful when you break it up with the plow, and the human heart bears fruit when it suffers. A child is born when two people are vulnerable to each other. Jesus on the cross is vulnerable, and out of that vulnerable body comes blood and water. Jesus is not a relevant figure at all. That's the temptation of the devil: "Turn stones into bread! Be relevant!"

The attempt to be relevant can be misunderstood, as if religion works in the service of society, when religion is really a criticism of society.

TIPPENS: What are your projects and interests today?

NOUWEN: I am a member of the community of Daybreak which is very committed to my writing. I am leaving today for Germany in order to write. The community sends me formally. They don't just give me a half-year off. They bless me. They say, "We send you in the name of this community to write." My writing continues to be a central part of my vocation.

Currently I am working on a yearbook, one meditation for each day of the year. These short meditations give me a chance to reflect on my own life and struggles. Writing is not just a job. It helps me to pray. It's a way of being.

I also want to write a small book about these three words: solitude, community, and ministry. Now I've talked about them all the way through my career. But I am eager to write this text.

Some of your questions about family are really very good. How do you practice solitude, community, or ministry when you are busy with kids, changing diapers or whatever? It's very important to reclaim these three terms not just as nice concepts for monks, priests, or ministers, but for people who are lawyers, doctors, and those with families.

I am also becoming very close to a group of trapeze artists in a German circus. I travel with them a week or two each year. I went to the circus with my 90-year-old dad and became a fan. I was very impressed by this group of five South African artists. [Pointing to a photograph]. Those three are fliers; those two are catchers.

I learned that the trapeze is like an icon for the spiritual life. It has a lot to do with trust, friendship, discipline, community, and skill—all the things you talk about in the spiritual life. If you really want freedom, flying through the air is incredible freedom, but it demands enormous discipline!

[Continuing to comment on the photo] This man has to trust the other totally. He's just keeping his hands open, and the catcher has to find the flier. The flier is not allowed to find the catcher. The catcher has to be there for him. This makes me think that in the spiritual life we have to trust that God will catch us when we have the courage to choose the freedom to fly. In the spiritual life you have to trust that, if you let go, God will be there to catch you.

I do not want to use the trapeze act too much for spiritual applications; I just want to tell the story. These trapeze artists do not think primarily in religious terms, but they are spiritual

people—very loving, caring, forgiving, fun-loving, but also disciplined and faithful. I want to describe their lives and show their beauty in a story.

TIPPENS: Most universities have abandoned any notion of spiritual roots. Having taught at Harvard, Yale, and Notre Dame, do you have thoughts about higher education today? Is an authentic Christian university possible?

NOUWEN: First of all, I wouldn't be here if I hadn't gone through the university. I am very grateful for my own education as well as for my years of teaching at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. I still believe that the university is a place where people can develop their minds and learn skills, but also they can develop their personalities and their spiritual life.

For me the university has always been an ideal context for spiritual formation. I always felt that if you want to offer spiritual formation at the university, you can. It is not that the university as such is against spiritual formation. It is just that often the university does not know how to integrate spiritual formation within its academic disciplines.

I must also say that the university is an enormously competitive place. It lives by an ethic of upward mobility. It says, "You have to make it in life. You have to be better. You have to be a doctor or a lawyer or whatever, and you have to show that you can do it." That's the world. The university has become a place that prepares you for the fights in the world.

But a university with a Christian or a spiritual side to it is good when it allows the people to realize that the deepest human values are beyond competition, that Jesus was into "downward mobility." He took the descending way. He talked about humility, forgiveness, and healing.

A university education is very important. Here in our community, I work hard to get people into higher education, so that some of our people take degrees in theology or social work. I am not anti-intellectual. Just the opposite! I'm not saying, "Go to a nice little community and spend the rest of your life there." When a young man comes to work with us, after a few years I say, "Why don't you go and get a degree?" You have to be as prudent as snakes and gentle as doves.

Now some universities, more than others, are able to live with the tension between downward and upward mobility, the tension between ambition and humility, and so forth. Next fall I'll be teaching at the university, and I feel very welcome there.

The people there are good and caring people who love Christ and the gospel. But also they have to raise scholarships, give grades, compete, and get students. It's also a very worldly operation. I don't think it's so bad that the tension exists.

The great teachers are always those who can live the tension. They are not criticizing everybody, they're not complaining. They give young people a vision. In my own family my father was always saying to me, "Be sure that you make a difference in the world. Be sure that I can be proud of you." And my mother would say, "Be sure you stay close to Jesus." (And my father agrees with my mother!) Yes, it's a competitive world, but where is your heart?

TIPPENS: Could you comment on the importance of spiritual direction and mentoring in your life? Who were the key people who gave you spiritual direction?

NOUWEN: My first experience of mentoring was at the Menninger Clinic. I was very deeply shaped by the experience of being mentored through supervision. I probably would never have become the kind of teacher that I became if I hadn't been at the Menninger Clinic. Just the fact that they took me so seriously! I wrote two pages, and they wrote four pages of notes in response. I suddenly realized that people took me seriously, that I had something to say.

Secondly, Jean Vanier became an extremely important figure in my life when I met him in 1981. I didn't go to L'Arche because of the movement. I didn't know anything about the L'Arche community. But I met Jean Vanier, and the man radiated something and he gave me a lot of his attention. Suddenly I felt I had a teacher. Now, after many years, our relation is a little less intimate. We don't see each other that much. But, again, he was transparent and full of the love of Christ.

Another man was Pere Thomas Philippe, a Dominican priest and co-founder of L'Arche. He died last year. He was my spiritual director in the strict sense of the word. When I went through very difficult periods and had to deal with feelings of depression, rejection, abandonment and inner anguish, he was there to guide me. I only saw him a few times a year, but those occasions were very important.

People have filled an enormously important role in my life—more than books! For me, it's not the formal advising or the therapy that meant so much. It was more the fact that someone committed himself or herself to me. They were really interested in my life;; they wanted to know what I was doing; they followed me; they dared to confront and challenge me.

The people who most affected me were the ones who got right in there with me, who cried with me, but who also had a certain authority, who dared to say what needed saying.

In this community I find enormous spiritual support through a group that I am part of. There are two or three who really help me think about my life. I am very influenced, dependent upon, and inspired by people who are with me. And I also try to be that for others, to hang in there with them.

TIPPENS: Dorothy Day has written a book called *The Long Loneliness*. Is that an apt description of ministry? Or does community solve the problem of loneliness?

NOUWEN: The best of community does give one a deep sense of belonging and well-being; and in that sense community takes away loneliness. But on another level community allows you to experience a deeper loneliness. It is precisely when you are loved a lot that you might realize a second loneliness which is not to be solved but lived. This second loneliness is an existential loneliness that belongs to the basis of our being. It's where we are unfulfilled because only God can fill us.

The paradox is that quite often in community you get in touch with this second loneliness. In community, where you have all the affection you could ever dream of, you feel that there is a place where even community cannot reach. That's a very important experience. In that loneliness, which is like a dark night of the soul, you learn that God is greater than community.

And it's good because that kind of suffering makes me realize that the community is not the final destination.

How to Serve New Wine Without Getting Skinned

by Mark Frost

March – August, 1994

It was one of those cartoons that brings a smile to your face not because it's knee-slapping hilarious, but because it's so invariably true. It showed a group of elders meeting with a young minister. "Our last preacher finally convinced us that this church needed to change," one of them was saying, "so, we changed preachers!" Reading that cartoon moved me once again to thank the grace of God and the patience of the brethren that I'm still ministering to the same congregation after 15 years. After all, this 40-year-old, traditional church didn't exactly include "change agent" in my job description when I signed on. Yet I am convinced that meaningful change is possible in such a church. Over the past few years, we've learned a lot about how to implement change, most of it by first discovering how not to do it. Let me share some things that have been helpful to us.

First, we have learned that changes are most likely to succeed when they are in harmony with the church's mission as perceived by the membership. Anything that promotes this perceived purpose will be warmly embraced; anything else will provoke something similar to the human body's immune response: the "infection" will be surrounded, isolated, immobilized, and destroyed. The problem is often that the congregation's perceived mission is not only unstated; it is also only loosely connected to the biblical mission for the church. In the Detroit area, where I live, many congregations were started by Southerners who came north after World War II to work in the auto factories.

Understandably, an unspoken mission of many of these churches became to provide a safe haven of southern culture in a confusing and hostile environment. That's why many churches in this area still cling to traditions that were the norm in the rural South in the '40s and '50s, even after many southern churches abandoned them. The first task, then, is to examine the unstated agendas that presently guide the congregation, then call it to a more biblical understanding of its mission.

To help accomplish this, we have an elders' and deacons' retreat twice a year. At each one, we spend time talking over our priorities, plans, and progress. We study and pray together we share our thoughts, fears, goals, and dreams. In our retreats, we've used ideas from books like Robert Dale's *To Dream Again* to help us shape our vision. To rekindle a vision for growth among our members, we asked John Ellas, from the Center for Church Growth, to conduct a diagnostic study of our congregation. I have also tried to preach and teach on the church's purpose regularly. To begin setting the stage for a small-group ministry, for instance, I took six months to preach through the first three chapters of Ephesians, emphasizing the communal dimension of Christian life. We haven't yet arrived at as clear a vision as we should, but we do know this: without a common understanding of God's purpose, any changes we make are destined to be cosmetic, short-lived, and divisive.

As we move toward a biblical vision, we try to connect the changes we make to our growing sense of mission. If a change is seen merely as a means to favor one person's preferences over

another's, it will be resisted. But if the change is clearly presented as a means of fulfilling our mission, people will accept it, even if it causes discomfort. A year ago, we decided to use one regular song leader of Sunday mornings instead of rotating the task among several leaders. The move was ripe with possibilities for hurt feelings and charges of favoritism. But we worked hard at communicating the reasons for the change: greater continuity and quality in our worship, making it more meaningful and more understandable to newcomers. Since they understood how the new system fit into our mission, all of the other song leaders, including two of our elders, willingly supported the change.

Not only is it important for the leadership to know the purpose behind a change; it is crucial that they also "buy in" to it. At one of our first leadership retreats, we decided we needed greater variety in our worship assemblies. A couple of weeks later, a song was led while the Lord's Supper was being passed. Reaction was swift and strong, leading to a hastily called elders' meeting. John, the elder with the greatest seniority, spoke first.

"Personally, I'm very uncomfortable with it," he began. I listened incredulously as, one by one, the four other elders echoed his sentiment. It seemed certain that what I considered to be an innocuous change would be squashed by the high command! I was totally unprepared for what came next. John spoke again.

"None of us like it," he said, "but that's not the issue. The question is, Does it help us reach our goals?" Again, the four other elders voiced their agreement, and we were free to try the concept again. Because they were committed to the purpose behind the change, they were able to act independently of their personal feelings.

Another incident showed us what happens when the leadership approves an idea, but doesn't buy into the concept. Two deacons suggested that we play a good, *a cappella* song in the auditorium just before the assembly. It would be a signal for people to begin finding a seat, and it would help center their minds on worship. In addition, we could use it to acquaint our people with contemporary songs. I brought the idea before the elders near the end of a long meeting. They hurriedly said we could try the idea and then evaluate it. I could tell they had some unspoken concerns, but I chose to ignore their signals. I was anxious to get on with it, and could see little value in asking for negative input. We announced the plan to our members, but didn't spend much time getting a "buy in" from them either. The result was predictable. The first time the tape was played, strong objections were raised and the elders moved quickly to scrap the idea. Time spent getting the leadership and the congregation tuned in to the reason for the change might have resulted in a much different outcome.

That episode taught us another valuable lesson. We already knew that it is best to try new ideas for a short time, followed by an evaluation. Through this incident, we learned that before entering a trial period, three very important questions must receive clear answers. The first is, What period of time constitutes a "fair trial" for this concept? In the absence of an agreed-upon answer, the tacit response becomes "until the first wave of criticism." The second question is, Who will evaluate the concept at the end of the trial period? The default answer is, "The elders, in emergency session." Finally, we must answer, How will we know whether the change

succeeded or failed? In the absence of other criteria, the standard is usually the likes and dislikes of the leadership. The result of leaving these key questions unanswered is polarization and strife.

We've learned that all change generates opposition. But the mere existence of criticism doesn't kill innovation. The way the criticism is received and managed makes the difference between temporary and lasting change. The scriptural guideline is found in Paul's instruction to Timothy: "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct" (2 Timothy 2:24-25). Obedience to this standard means refusing to attach derisive labels, such as "legalist" or "traditionalist," to opponents. Some who oppose change may be legalists, but many are not. It is a sin against the body of Christ to place a derogatory tag on what may be nothing more than a difference in personality type.

It is important to show opponents the respect of listening carefully to all concerns that are presented in an appropriate manner. Thankfully, our elders have learned that they must not respond positively to temper tantrums, ultimatums, and power plays. But when sincere brothers or sisters have been pushed out of their comfort zone by a change our leaders have learned to listen. Periodically, the elders divide up and conduct feedback sessions in each of our zones. At these meetings, all comments about changes we've made are encouraged. When a person claims scriptural support for their objection, the elders are quick to schedule a Bible study session with them.

Personally, I am learning that those who oppose change are necessary to me, and to the body. Mike, another of our elders, is the most evangelistic person in the congregation. He has a heart that longs to reach the lost with good news. But his personality is quite different from mine. Often, we find ourselves on opposite sides of issues, especially with regard to change. When we notice that beginning to happen, we know it's time for us to take a couple of hours to talk things over and pray together. The Lord has used these sessions in a powerful way to mold and refine me. Mike's honesty has often helped me face my own pride and stubbornness. His perspective has enabled me to present my ideas in a way that exhibits sensitivity to those who are uncomfortable with change. I've learned that when I listen closely to the concerns of my brother's heart, the two of us have a chance to work for a "win/win" solution. If I refuse to listen or treat his "big deals" as "no big deal," the best we can hope for is "win/lose." More typically, we end up with "lose/lose."

We've discovered the value of honoring fellow-believers regardless of their feelings toward change. Recently, we held a banquet to honor our "senior saints." The elders' wives prepared the meal and the elders served it. Then Gordon, an elder with an "aw shucks" Oklahoma demeanor, addressed the silver-haired crowd. He expressed appreciation for their hard work and dedication. Then he added, "We know that in many ways, this congregation is far different from the one you worked so hard to build. At a time when you had expected to sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labor, you are being called upon to accept many disturbing changes. The Lord has not changed, but the world has. We want your grandchildren and great-grandchildren to be people of faith, just as you are. For that to happen, we must change the way we communicate the gospel. We beg for your understanding." In a loving way, Gordon was able to tie the changes we were making into a

powerful value held by our senior citizens: the desire to see their faith passed down to future generations.

Our handling of change has been imperfect, at best. While some have been disturbed by the rapidity of change, others are frustrated with how slowly it has gone. Those who would like to see the changes come more quickly might have been happier if we had simply planted a new, more contemporary congregation. And no doubt some others would have been happy to see them go. But by working together, we have benefitted from each other's strengths and compensated for each other's weaknesses.

Together, we are witnessing a steady stream of new members coming to know the Lord, who are also beginning to understand what genuine Christian community is all about. And thanks to the grace of God and the patience of brothers and sisters, I'm still privileged to be a part of it all.

Kurt Cobain: The Breaking of a Fragile Idol

by Milton Jones

March – August, 1994

Flags were flying at half-mast when we attended the Pepperdine Lectures earlier this year. At first, they were flying because of the death of Mrs. Frank Seaver, the generous benefactor of the university. Later, they were flying because of the death of President Nixon. However, a local paper had talked to some young people who thought the flags were lowered because of the death of Kurt Cobain.

Kurt Cobain? You must be kidding. Why would young people think that flags would be affected because of him? Don't they listen to the media? Yes, they do and this is exactly why they thought the flags were because of him. In the media that penetrates their world whether it is MTV or *The Rolling Stone*, no death had caused such media attention in their lifetime. But I have to admit, it wasn't just their media that was affected. In my daily newspaper there has been much more about the death of Kurt Cobain than the death of Richard Nixon.

But then again, I live in Seattle. I was reading an article the other day that mentioned my city. It said, "Are Seattleites the ancestors of the Incas or maybe the last of Socrates' alleged highly advanced Atlanteans? They must be, for it is they who have found the secret to eternal life." What's the secret to eternal life? The paper wasn't talking about anything religious. No, the article was about grunge rock. Seattle is now the world's capital of music, at least if you are talking about rock music. Recently, Big Brother, of the band that played with Janis Joplin, said there has been nothing like the music scene in Seattle since the '60s in San Francisco.

And, as a result of this grunge music explosion, we are becoming the mecca of what has been called Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1983). Seattle has become the place where the Baby Busters gather and find a unique brand of rock and roll. We have even had to get the Seattle Times to publish dress codes in the paper for restaurants so people like me will know how to dress or what places to avoid. Some restaurants prefer people with orange hair and nose rings.

And the event that has most recently focused the attention of the whole world on our city is the death of one of the two most recognizable figures of this generation. Kurt Cobain took a shotgun and killed himself. If you still don't know who he was, he was the lead singer of Nirvana. He was a tragic figure who had been a hoodlum as a youth, was doing cocaine and heroin, was bisexual, and had been singing about suicide for years.

Why would a generation look to him as a hero? Jessica Scharer said, "I don't think that our generation has speakers, or leaders. Who would they be? That woman on MTV? Or Winona Ryder? Come on. I think maybe we're too cynical to follow people like that." And so they turn to musicians like Kurt Cobain or Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam who is probably a little more responsible than Cobain but whose biggest hit was "Jeremy." In fact, "Jeremy" was song of the year last year on MTV. The video is about a school-age kid whom everyone ridicules. His

response is to go to school and blow out his brains. Many have called the anthem of Generation X Eddie Vedder's "I'm Still Alive." In this song, being alive after all of the anxieties of life seems like quite an accomplishment if not the goal of life. So Vedder belts out "I... I... I'm Still Alive" as if existence sums up meaning. But on the other hand, the song does mark the difference in him and Cobain.

Not since the '60s when I let my hair grow have I seen anything that has prompted more of a generation gap than Kurt Cobain's death. It has divided our city and divided our generations. The very Baby Boomers who heralded The Who's "My Generation" which cried out "I hope I die before I get old!" Andy Rooney blows up on television to ask how could anyone with any sense consider this guy a hero. His editorial incensed and infuriated Generation X. This generation tells me they now know how my generation felt at the death of John Kennedy. Letters to the editor in the Seattle Times from people my age have been belittling Cobain and trying to prove that he was no hero. I had been amening most of them until I read one from a mother. She said that maybe we should quit putting him down so much and listen to our kids to find out why they think he was a hero. I think that mom had some valid advice.

What made the kids listen to Cobain? Why was he a hero? Primarily, it was not because of his lifestyle or even that his message was so "right." No, he was a hero because his songs boldly spoke out and told how a generation was feeling. He was a hero because he sang what was in many young people's hearts. His was a voice that spoke for the Generation Xers, who are killing themselves at higher rates than any comparable age group in all preceding generations. And even for those who are not suicidal, he voiced the despair that comes from living in the shadow of AIDS, being squeezed out of the job market, no support from a traditional family unit, no basis for ethics from a Judeo-Christian belief, firearms everywhere, and a world totally in upheaval from the turmoils of change. And even for the Busters who could break through and get a bigger piece of the pie, they end up echoing Cobain's words, "I do not want what I have got. What's wrong with me?"

As I have reflected on the death of Kurt Cobain and seen the plight of this new generation, two things have pierced me as a Christian.

First of all, it is the hopelessness of Generation X. This is the first American generation who will not have it as good as the previous one economically. That, coupled with all of the atrocities and diseases of our society, have uprooted any hope from a group of people who are all around us every day.

Traig Holtz of Notre Dame stated on the death of Kurt Cobain, "This blank generation has lost a very important part and now we must deal with ourselves. We must come to grips with the fact that our generation has grown up to be more confused and angry than any previous generation. Kurt was a precious person and an incredible songwriter. We should have seen it coming. He is missed. A huge vacuum has been created."

The vacuum that is in this generation, I believe, is a vacuum that only Jesus can fill. If a lack of hope is the problem and the main heartfelt concern of a generation of Americans today, don't we have something to offer? Isn't hope still one of our "Big Three?"

It may take some listening and bridge building to patch up this generation gap, but with some sensitive communication there is hope. I saw the church become irrelevant and insensitive in approaching the generation gap of a few decades ago. The cost was that we lost a large portion of a generation in the church. I don't want that to happen again.

The second striking realization of this whole scenario has been to see the power of music in creating a world view.

The way Baby Boomers and Busters view music is different from previous generations. Pre-Baby Boomers associated music primarily with entertainment. But for those after them, music became more than simply entertainment but a way to grasp a world view. We saw in the '60s how the "music people" led the thinking that forged a world view of the Boomers much more than the statesmen who were speaking in traditional political power circles. Today, from a generation who more than ever feels powerless, musicians have once again become the heralds of the popular world view. Therefore, when Generation X turns on the music, it is not only entertaining them, but it is also teaching them how to think.

Jeff Gilbert, Senior Editor for The Rocket and Guitar World, stated, "You look to the music for salvation; and if the music isn't there, you have nothing."

Doug Murren, the author of Baby Boomerang, states that with this generation music is around seven times more effective in communication than our traditional verbal speeches or sermons. As a result, how this generation evaluates a gathering may be different from another generation. One generation may leave church saying, "I learned a lot," and they are thinking of the sermon. Generation X may leave saying, "I was really moved to Jesus," and they are thinking about the music.

Generation X is going to listen to music whether we like it or not. The question is not whether they are going to listen to music, it is what kind of music are they going to listen to? As I reflect on this whole situation, I have never been more convinced of the power and the need for contemporary Christian music. It can perhaps be the best way to communicate and evangelize a generation that hasn't been listening to the gospel. It can be more than entertainment, it can shape a whole world view toward the gospel.

Have you listened to what your kids are listening to? Instead of condemning it in the beginning, why not listen and then talk? If there is a voice of despair in the hearts of our kids, it's better to know it than to avoid it. And there is plenty of hope with Jesus. And instead of simply trying to get them to quit listening to something, why not try giving them a better alternative? I still think we can overcome with good.

A Review of Jurassic Park

by Dale Pauls

March – August, 1994

At first you hear only a snorting sound, but you see nothing. You sense you're being stalked, but still you see nothing. Then you look again, and there—between the ferns—the creature is: large dark eyes watching you coldly, never blinking, a crocodile head, jaws open with rows of razor-sharp teeth. It is the beast's eerie unearthly stillness, the coldness of it all, that strikes terror into your soul. Welcome to Jurassic Park.

By now it seems the whole world has been to see *Jurassic Park*, the blockbuster movie directed by Steven Spielberg and based on the novel by Michael Crichton. In the movie Jurassic Park is the name of an amusement park, but not just any amusement park. Jurassic refers to the geological age when dinosaurs reigned on earth. And on a secluded island, one hundred miles or so off the west coast of Costa Rica, an eccentric multi-millionaire deranged by the glories of science has created an amusement park stocked with live dinosaurs. His scientists have mastered the arts of genetic engineering and computerized gene sequencing and have recreated dinosaurs from DNA fragments trapped in amber almost 200 million years old, so the story goes.

They're all there on this island: tyrannosaurs, brontosaurus, pterodactyls, velociraptors, and a whole mega-menagerie of a long lost past. One of the most terrifying is the dilophosaurus, standing 10 feet tall, with black spots on a yellow body, and a V-shaped black-and-red crest on its head. It (I cannot bring myself to say he or she) gives a soft hooting cry like an owl, but it secretes a toxin from glands in its mouth that it can spit at you with deadly accuracy at a range of 50 feet or more. Your skin immediately begins to tingle and burn. Then you feel sudden excruciating pain in your eyes. The pain stabs into the back of your skull. You begin to wheeze; your breath comes in thin whistles. Waves of nausea and dizziness sweep over you. And the dinosaur saunters over to finish you off at its leisure.

All this the movie vividly portrays, and most viewers will concede that they have never quite seen anything like it before. Yet readers of Michael Crichton's book may feel somehow disappointed by the movie. Steven Spielberg took a great book and from it crafted a good movie. He skirts the whole matter of chaos theory which is so central to the book. Evidently Spielberg felt that chaos theory defies comprehension by the average moviegoer, but by making this decision and others like it he missed an opportunity to have created really great cinema.

I say this as a Spielberg fan who knows that he's capable of extraordinary work. His direction of *The Color Purple* and the enormously underrated *Empire of the Sun* is close to transcendent, and his Academy-Award-winning *Schindler's List* sets new standards for cinematic excellence. With *Jurassic Park*, however, Spielberg devoted so much of his \$65 million budget to technological wizardry that he apparently cut corners elsewhere. For instance he tried to shoot every dialogue scene in no more than five takes. It's not surprising that there are scenes where the dialogue is not clear. Likewise, the casting was fine but uninspired. Sam Neill, Laura Dern, and Jeff Goldblum perform their roles adequately but do not have the acting presence it would have taken

to counterbalance the dinosaurs and remind the audience that the really significant story is, as always, the human story. Spielberg seems himself so mesmerized by the dinosaurs that he misses the more important human drama: the dynamic struggle going on in the pages of Crichton's *Jurassic Park* for the soul of Western society.

The problem becomes most evident in Spielberg's portrayal of John Hammond, the deranged multi-millionaire whose feverish imagination gave birth to this nightmare island. In the book Hammond, with his limitless faith in science and capitalism, represents what is most crass and immoral about society. He irresponsibly twists genetic engineering to make a buck—millions in fact. He subscribes to the thoroughly modern credo that if it can be done it should be done, and all the more so if enormous money can be made. And he comes to an appropriate end. In the movie version, as played by Richard Attenborough, Hammond is just a magnificent showman, a Walt Disney nineties-style, everyone's favorite uncle, an irrepressible timeless kid with the newest and best toys on the block. And he escapes unscathed by his monumental folly.

Having said all this, Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* still treats its audience to a rollicking good time at the movies. The special effects are spectacular, and the dinosaurs are convincing. They have personality and steal the show from their human colleagues. In one scene, these magnificent creatures emerge out of the mists of dawn in a transcendent moment of ethereal beauty, and you feel that you have been transported in time back to the age when dinosaurs ruled the earth.

As a Christian observer, I was immediately struck by the parallels between *Jurassic Park* (in particular the Crichton version) and John's Apocalypse. In both, evil turns bestial.

When John describes evil on earth, he thinks of monsters—huge, hideous, multi-headed beasts. Coming out of the sea. Coming out of the earth. Forcing worship of Imperial Rome on small household gatherings of beleaguered Christians. Coming at them from every direction. And it all seemed so civilized. Rome was legendary for good government and high civilization. All that was Roman was so disciplined, so skillfully administered, so successful. All one had to do was look at its aqueducts, its amphitheaters, its arches, its well-drilled armies, its marvelous system of law. Everywhere there were signatures of the glory of Rome. Rome was synonymous with culture. It was the cultural paradigm of its day. It explained everything, validated everything, and controlled everything. And all it asked you to do was offer a pinch of incense to the emperor. But John is saying that if you could see it as it really is, it is monstrous.

Today it's not the glory of Rome that is worshipped. The cultural paradigm in our age is science. It explains everything, validates everything, and controls everything. To contemporize the scene, label the first beast of Revelation 13 *Science* and the second beast *Quantification*. We believe in what can be counted, listed, and sharply delineated. The second beast makes us worship the first. We trust only what can be verified and replicated in a lab. We understand Scripture, people, faith, and God only as science dictates. We reduce Scripture to a few formulas. We evaluate people by how much they are worth. We understand faith primarily as a set of facts; it is so much harder to quantify trust. And we limit God to what we can understand. We turn his revelation of himself through narrative story, letters and apocalyptic visions into rules and regulations. We want precise laws for everything, and to get them, we will dare to transform God's Scripture into something he did not intend it to be.

As a result, we are good at mastering the immediate situation and dreadful at anticipating consequences. As abstractions, the facts seem so clear; in real life, they can be hideous and deforming. We thrill to our accomplishment; hardly anyone stoops to ask whether something should be accomplished or not. If it can be done, it naturally follows that it should be done. But the dinosaurs may not stay inside the electrified fences—truth may escape our man-made categories—and then what?

The real lessons of Crichton's *Jurassic Park* come from its resident conscience, chaos theoretician Ian Malcolm. Nature is much more complex than many scientists are willing to accept. Formulas break down. Events are unpredictable; in fact, there are vast categories of phenomena that are inherently unpredictable. There are always flaws in the system. Sudden changes occur — and without warning—and are built into the very fabric of existence. There is no way to account for all the variables. Inevitably instabilities emerge in all structures. Life escapes all barriers. Life breaks free. Life always expands to new territories. The monsters will escape, and if everything else could be controlled, there is no way to factor in human duplicity. The challenge to humans that is both realistic and appropriate is to acquire a mature spirituality — level of trust in God — that makes reasonable life possible in a world of constant change.

All these issues the film version skirts, and so a great book becomes a good movie. Perhaps its viewers will become readers, and a satisfactory feast for the eyes may become a satisfying feast for the soul. Crichton's *Jurassic Park* is, in many ways, an Apocalypse for our time. It reminds us that only God can explain, validate, and control. When we turn such power over to anything else, beasts come out of the earth. Whenever anything other than God becomes the ultimate paradigm through which we view reality evil turns bestial. Whenever anything other than God becomes our primary source of identity, security, and satisfaction, it becomes monstrous.

It may seem colorful and interesting, but if you could really see it, it is ugly and hideous. It may give a soft hooting cry like an owl, but listen again, and you will hear a low reptilian hiss. And it will spit poison in your eye.

Memories of Promised Land

by Carmen Perry Beaubeaux
March – August, 1994

Ever wonder why everyone says the moon is full when it looks so empty—empty as a big, lit-up stadium the night before the game? Gramps told me that’s what the moon is for—to make us wonder. Folks who remember Gramps say that I am an awful lot like him. And sometimes they don’t mean so well by that. You see, Gramps was *peculiar*. Some even say he may have been, well... sort of crazy. I asked Grandma about that talk. She laughed, “Well, Jake, I don’t reckon he’s crazy but I do have my suspicions that he’s been tetched by the hand of God.”

The fishermen agree with Grandma. On the summer of my twelfth birthday and the last I would spend with Gramps, he made a clean sweep at the county fishing contest for the tenth straight year. I held on to his gear so he could go down to the dock to accept the trophy and pose for photos. But while I stood watching all of the fuss, I began to feel crowded. Pressing around me were dozens of fishermen breathing over my shoulders, even hunkered down on their knees trying to sneak a glimpse of the legendary “secret lure” that Gramps supposedly kept hidden in the depths of his tackle box! Gus Peterson, a local and one of the hunkered, stood up saying, “Now, you can’t blame us Jake! You know this here tackle box is the fisherman’s Ark of the Covenant in these parts!” Now, Gramps taught me everything I know about fishing, which to this day isn’t much, so don’t think that I didn’t have hopes that this birthday of mine might be the occasion he would reveal to me his mysterious and highly prized “secret lure.”

Then later, at home, when we stood back to see how the new trophy looked perched on the mantle with the others, Gramps laid his hand firm on my shoulder. I knew my moment had come. “Jake, I suspect that digging through my tackle is wearing you out, so here’s my secret. Some folks say that any fool can catch a fish. Well, I take that advice as inspiration. So, all of these trophies you see assembled here are bonifide proof of my position as the greatest fool in four counties.” That’s it, boy. That is the hook! Then he laughed the way he did—big and rough—like when you ride your bike on the railroad tracks. It shakes you up and pulls you in and there’s no turning back. We laughed till our bellies hurt!

“Crazy” or “tetched” didn’t seem to scare off folks any more than fish. On warm summer evenings Gramps told stories from the front porch to anyone who wanted to stop by and listen. Most of his stories were funny, some were sad—it all depended on the weather. Gramps said, “The tale should suit the climate so the hearers will remember.” But I think he just meant to be hospitable. The elements were always the guests of honor in Gramps’ mind. He knew them like family. He knew what they were doing and where they were going before they were even there. That left cause for some irritation among the neighboring farmers. The same storms that came through and beat down their crops never touched his own. During times of widespread drought, tiny rain clouds formed over his fields, filled his furrows and cisterns and then vanished. As a result he never had to replant a crop, stump out a tornado-ravaged orchard, or haul water to parched corn. “Promise Land” as Gramps called his farm, almost ran itself. Mom told me that when she was a little girl walking down the dirt road on her way to school, each farmer would

stop his work in the fields to see what she wore as she passed by. If she carried an umbrella they would cover their haystacks. If she had a slicker, galoshes, and an umbrella they would cover their haystacks and gather the livestock into their barns.

Gramps loved the rain best. As often as it came to visit he would sit on the front porch as it thundered from the clouds, gurgled along the gutters, and drizzled down the lattice, listening in a manner most folks reserve for church. One such time, he sat in his bentwood rocker with his eyes closed and hands still and folded round his harmonica. Suddenly he leaned forward as if he were expecting someone. “You hear him, Jake?” I shrugged, “Hear who? Opening one eye, he gave me a sideways glance that made me feel young. Then he grinned and settled back into his former position and almost whispered, “The path of water is holy ground. Listen...the footsteps of God.”

So it came as no surprise that on the night of the day of his death, the rain came to pay respects. As the big, quiet party wound down and the rest of the family helped the church folks gather up the last of their empty pie pans and well-meaning sentiments, I went off to my room, pulled the covers over my head, and tried not to cry. But the rain tapping at the window brought to me Gramps’ whispered voice...you-can-cry-you-can-cry-you-can-cry. “You can cry for her,” he said, kneeling beside me in the cornfield where I buried my rabbit, Gomer.’ “If you can’t let your soul run naked down the street once in a while, folks might forget that you have one. You can cry, boy.” Silent hot tears ran down my face and neck into my pillow and into my prayers.

Being a godly man, Gramps honored the Word by giving Bible names to most everything. The old, run-down Ford he christened Methuselah; the chicken coop he called Babel; and the old rooster who waged a war with Grandma, spurring her leg, he cursed with the name of Satan (who remains the only living thing he ever really took a shot at. The old oak tree he named Moses because “The Lord placed it in the center of Promise Land.” Grandma argued that one with him because, she said, “Moses never set foot into the promised land.” Gramps dished back that he thought Moses should have been allowed into the promised land and this was his humble way of protesting that point with the Almighty.

And so, on restless summer nights folks drove in from all over to gather beneath Moses. Draped in half-melted corn-starched babies, they came for a cool rest on the white porch steps. They came to listen to a barnyard story or about the condition of the skies—to laugh and clap when Gramps lured the young ‘ns to dance over the lawn like sweaty marionettes clumsily strung to the tune of his harmonica. When finally exhausted, they curled up in bundles on the porch boards and wearily rode into slumber on the rumble of familiar voices and clattering crickets chanting in unison their wonder of the moon. What else is there to do in the company of one who had been “etched by the hand of God?”

Hope Network Newsletter: Thieves of Courage

by Lynn Anderson
March – August, 1994

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died at the age of 36. On a drizzly, cold morning he was buried in a pauper's grave. His wife did not even attend the funeral. There ended the agony of the man and began the glory of the artist.

Mozart had lived much of his life in mental torture. He floundered in moral and relational chaos. But in spite of major flaws in the man's character, at least one special virtue lay close to his soul. Part of the reason Mozart ended up in a pauper's grave was, according to legend, because he said, "I will not write what they want to buy. I will write what I hear." Such was Mozart's artistic integrity. Question: Can any preacher of the Word do less? Dare we neglect "what we hear" to live and preach only what "they will buy?"

How can I put the finger on my own private crisis in character? What specific thieves most often steal our courage? From the constellations of factors which conspire to soften our spines and buckle our knees, I identify here just three specifics which I constantly battle in my own heart.

SOFT MOTIVES

First, soft motives often pilfer our courage. Each spring semester I begin teaching my Abilene Christian University graduate course in ministry by asking the students why they want to be ministers. As they respond, we list the motives on the board.

PLATITUDINOUS IDEALISM

The list often begins with platitudinous idealism. They usually assume such "correct" answers are expected. This lasts only a few minutes, however, till some student sniffs out what is going on. Then the list becomes more honest, sometimes brutally so, even sliding to self-flagellation at the bottom of the list:

- "I'm a natural speaker, and preaching is a sure way to get an audience."
- "I love to be front and center."
- "It's not too hard, and I'm basically lazy."
- "I like to be in control."
- "My parents groomed me for it, and everybody in our church expects it."

Then the discussion usually slows to a more reflective pace, revealing their fears about ministry.

- "There is little money or prestige in it."
- "There is little security and no retirement or perks."
- "I'm not sure I can make my mark in ministry."
- "I don't like living in a fishbowl."

HIGHER MOTIVES

As the discussion unfolds, the mood usually shifts again, toward higher motives:

- “Doing something as important as the ministry will give me a sense of worth.”
- “I think it will be very fulfilling to make a difference in the world.”
- “I love people.”
- “This seems to be where my gifts lie.”

At first blush these motives seem noble and altruistic. But most classes contain a veteran or two who smile wryly at the idealism. From their own experience, they can recite volumes on shattered dreams, numbing discouragement, swamps of low self-esteem, wracking painful criticism and disappointments, and other inner destroyers which have dogged their ministries and long since exhausted the motivating energy of superficial “do-goodism.”

So the list continues:

- “The world is in such a mess, and lost.”
- “The Great Commission demands it.”
- “I’ve got to be a soul-winner; God is pleased with nothing less.”
- “The need is so great.”

These motives are more substantial. But again, the veterans usually strip them back for what they are—guilt, religiosity, fear, desire to be significant.

GREED

My motives have run this gamut. I suspect that if you have been in ministry very long, so have yours. And the disheartening fact is that I keep recycling the list. My experience confirms Henri Nouwen’s observation that much ministry is marked by anger and greed. Greed? Yes, not necessarily greed for money, but for attention, respect, well-being, self-worth, or fulfillment. Sometimes it’s good to be doing something worthwhile, to receive spiritual blessing.

ANGER

And the anger? Anger begins to build because nothing works. The people don’t respond well, or they perform poorly or won’t cooperate or appreciate. Sometimes the anger is aimed at the church or whoever it was that got us into this. At times the anger becomes self-directed at our own ineptness, or laziness, or ineffectiveness, or low motivation, or poor prayer life, or downright sinfulness, or some other ill-defined issue.

GUILT

In not a few preachers, the anger eventually identifies God as the “culprit.” He is the one who sucked you into this. He cooked up this whole system that doesn’t work. He is the one who doesn’t deliver according to my expectations. Here, guilt often joins anger in a toxic combination. “How can I let myself become so bitter toward people whom I am supposed to love? And, horror of horrors, will lightning strike me because I feel angry with Almighty God?” So greed and anger and guilt feed each other.

HEART OF THE MOTIVE—GOD’S GLORY

What has happened? Usually, we have not worked the list far enough, not gone to the heart of the motive. The glory of God is the focus of life, and the nature of God the central motive for ministry. The Westminster Shorter Catechism is right on the mark when it states, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” This is not true because it is in the catechism, rather someone put it in the catechism because it is true!

In Ephesians, the apostle Paul underscores God’s glory as the motive of ministry: “He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight...that we might be for the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:4,12, italics mine). “In him we were also chosen...for the praise of his glory,” and he sealed us with “a seal, the promised Holy Spirit...to the praise of his glory!” (Ephesians 1:11-14, italics mine). “To him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Ephesians 3:21). When our hearts look for this motive, our eyes can see it in nearly every chapter of the Bible.

Looking back across the Old Testament, even the most dull eye cannot miss God’s glory in the call of the ancient prophets. Glory dominates each scenario. For them, ministry was not a choice made from evaluation of human giftedness or longing for personal or religious fulfillment—not even refined altruism. Their ministry was to the glory of God!

Witness Isaiah, for example. “I saw the lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.” The flying seraphim shouted, “Holy, holy, holy is the lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” In the midst of this earth-shaking, soul-shattering encounter with the Almighty, Isaiah’s personal aspirations came unraveled. Isaiah himself comprehended his own “unravelment,” and sensed the “undone-ness” all around him, in his world full of “unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:1-5).

Only after God’s purifying red-hot coal had touched our fallen friend, was Isaiah able to hear the call of God—only then was Isaiah able to respond. But his response was to God. Not to the clamor of human need, not to the inner longing to earn self-worth, but to the awesome glory of the holy One.

Ray Anderson stands on this bedrock truth when he declares “Ministry is to God on behalf of people, not to people on behalf of God.” Otherwise, contends Anderson, God’s ministry often falls prey to pragmatism and utilitarianism and winds up being measured by “what works” and “what people think they need” rather than in terms of the will and the glory of God. Thus, when the glory of God is the measure of ministry, discouragement and disillusionment are less serious threats to the minister who feels very ordinary.

When God cut Isaiah’s orders, they were not contingent on results through human responsiveness. In fact, he armed Isaiah with such a dangerous message that it would actually damage human hearts if they rejected it. Besides, God told Isaiah that the people would not listen. And to top it all off, when Isaiah asked how long before his ministry would get results, God said to stay and preach “until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged” (Isaiah 6:11). From a purely human perspective, Isaiah’s mission was to be an exercise in futility.

But at the very heart of Isaiah's motivation, God planted the ever-active antidote to discouragement, bitterness, and disillusionment. For Isaiah, ministry was not primarily to man on behalf of God, but to God, on behalf of man. God wanted Isaiah to be faithful, whether or not he was successful! And as long as Isaiah and I understand that God's glory is the object of ministry and the measure of ministry, there is never lasting cause for despair over my lack of accomplishments.

DIVIDED HEARTS

A second vampire which sucks away the life-blood of our integrity and thus of our courage is a divided heart. Even after we have nailed down our motives and our call, scarcely an hour will pass without some distraction, worthy or unworthy, waving banners to attract our affections. Some of these may appear innocent, but they are deadly enemies. They entice us eventually to look somewhere besides to God for the focus of life. The distraction may seem even "spiritually promising" at first, but don't be fooled. God is All; Jehovah Jireh provides, and we are blessed. Blessings follow blessings when we depend on God for our courage.

DISTORTION

However, even the blessings of God can become addictive if they are distorted to become the focus of life. Very subtly, the blessing can become more precious to us than God who gave it. Kahlil Gibran understands this well: "The lust for comfort, that stealthy thing that enters the house a guest, and then becomes a host, and then a master." And when the blessing becomes the object, we'll take short cuts to get it. Paradoxically, the more we become addicted to blessings, the further we distance ourselves from their real source. One day we may wind up going through the right motions and intoning the right incantations externally, yet we will be inwardly hollow, having lost touch with both the blessing and the source. People in our pews sense this hollowness, and it fuels the crisis of trust.

IDOLATRY

The God of blessing did not say, "Use me to get your blessings." He said, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3) and "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). He did not even bribe us with promises of personal fulfillment if we do what is right. He just said, "I am the way: Follow Me!" He even promised further that "everyone who wants to live a godly life... will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). In addition, when we stray, God himself "disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness" (Hebrews 12:10). Ironically, knowing the ropes like we do, even though our hearts may go bad inside us, still on the outside we will be able to work the church system well—so well, in fact, that it will not only tolerate our sellout, but unwittingly support our idolatry.

SELF-DELUSION

Eventually we can even bamboozle ourselves (at least in the Golden Calf moments of religious euphoria) into thinking we are still on the upward way. Here again we may be dangerously close to dismantling our very capacity to believe. Don't forget, Jesus said, "How can you believe if you make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?" He could have said, "How can you feel good?" but he didn't. He could have said, "How can you go on?" but he didn't. He could have said, "How can you hide it from the people?" but he didn't. He could have said, "How can you succeed?" but he didn't. He said, "How can you believe?"

John Henry Jewett understood self-delusion:

Whatever creates in me a sense of power tends to make me atheistic. How? When I become conscious of the possession of any power, I begin to think of myself as a cause rather than an effect. I can stir human hearts, I can move my fellow men. Recognizing myself as a power, I begin to think of myself as a creator, a cause; and ignoring all other causes. I lapse into an atheism which leaves out God.

In this state, moral and ethical courage will play on rubbery legs if they have not already been benched, or kicked off the team all together. A divided heart “doth make cowards of us all.”

DIMMED HOPE

When I don't have the guts to walk straight, I had best begin asking, “What am I really about—knowing Christ or self-protectionism? The glory of God or my own personal well-being?” Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters.” If we don't abandon one or the other, sooner or later we will disintegrate. The shell may go on looking just fine. We may continue to hold the respect of people, keep our forum, and cling to the security of our position. But the fire will have gone out, and we will further feed the crisis of trust. Thus at subtle but profound levels, rather than help, we will actually dim the hopes of people we face each Sunday.

HIDDEN SIN

Soft motives then lead frequently to divided hearts. And these two inevitably lead to a third interloper that saps our courage: Hidden Sin. Burton Coffman, a veteran minister, pointed this out in a very earthy way when he was in his 70s a decade ago. He heard me preach a sermon in which I suggested that faith is, at its taproot, a decision of the will. After the sermon Burton beelined to me and boomed, “Decision of the will. That's right, boy. It's also a moral decision.”

I asked him to help me understand more of what he meant.

“Well,” he explained, “we have a way of adjusting our theology to fit our morality. For example, you show me a preacher who is getting too sophisticated and broad-minded for the gospel, and I'll show you a preacher who may be shackled up with his secretary!”

Burton understood how hidden sin which is not dealt with buckles the knees of courage. All varieties of hidden sin have that effect, not just the scarlet sin in Coffman's colorful quote.

“NAGGING FLAWS”

At first, my pet sin and yours will likely seem to be no big deal. Only a nagging flaw! We all have faults, right? But sooner or later comes the downside. As one brother said, “My cute little yapping puppy became a fullgrown rabid Doberman pinscher.” Although King David's hidden sin may not be the same as yours or mine, still he discovered this principle in spades. I believe Psalms 38 was written somewhere between Uriah's death and Nathan's confrontation. The euphoria of new adultery had worn off. Possibly David had looked across many a breakfast table at Bathsheba's morning ordinariness.

Most importantly, surely David had locked eyes with a broken-hearted, but offended Holy God. “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me” (Psalms 38:1-2). How can we face God’s terrible holiness while we are nurturing a rebellion, whether the sin is scarlet or any other color of the rainbow? It makes no difference. Sin not dealt with, big or small, is an affront to God’s holiness.

SOCIAL SHALLOWS

As David said, “My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away” (Psalms 38:11). David, is it really they who stay away from you, or you who avoid them? Years ago and far away, a co-worker with whom I had felt very close subtly began moving toward more impersonal conversation and slowly distanced himself socially from me. I searched my soul wondering if I had offended him. Then he began avoiding group devotions, even subtly making light of the need our staff felt for such times. He explained that he was wired differently and “that emotional sort of thing” was not how he got his spiritual batteries charged. He even implied that some of us were imposing our needs on the rest of the group. Self-doubt wobbled me. Time revealed, however, that this brother had drifted into the grip of gross immorality. Of course he did not want to be close to his fellow ministers and open with them, much less approach closer to the gaze of the Holy One.

FACE TO FACE

A lot of us who talk a great deal about God would be scared to death if we saw him face to face. Yet, that is where we preachers are called to live, face to face with him in all his terrifying holiness. This posture is incompatible with hidden sin. But it is the secret of humility, of hope, and of freshness. Such openness lies at the heart of the Isaiah experience and the experience of all men of God. The only thing that may take more courage than “preaching what I hear,” is to stare into the eyes of a Holy God whose Word penetrates my very soul! I cannot escape the force of that realization. But, to see God is to see myself more clearly and to walk with fresh vitality.

Believe me, I know! I, too, have cycled through spells when the veneer was thick and glossy on the outside, but in my heart I was terrified of God. Out of a sort of “psychological self-protection,” at times I even allowed myself to not even believe in him. I have traveled through tunnels of darkness, outwardly gregarious, but intimate and open with no one. Have you? The name of this sin is irrelevant. The impact our sin might have on our reputation is beside the point, too. The size of the sin is not as important as the size of the grip it has on us.

BOTTOM LINE:

Am I willing to deal with sin which is buckling the knees of my courage, distancing me from people, separating me from God, and resulting finally in stale and impotent pseudo-ministry? Make no mistake about it. Hidden sin will always sap our courage. The only way back to courage is confession and repentance. Oh, the wonderful release and renewal available through genuine repentance, confession, and forgiveness. Lost courage regained. Fresh vitality restored! “Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him” (Psalms 32:6). This is God’s promise for the journey!

AfterGlow: Change Where it is Needed

*by Phillip Morrison
May – August, 1994*

“I’m disturbed because you fellows keep talking about change. I don’t think we need to change a thing.” The caller, an old friend, was polite but firm.

“You may be right, “ I replied. “Tell me about the church where you preach. Is everything going well?”

“Everything’s great,” he said, “we’re blowin’ and goin’.”

“Then I’m inclined to agree with you. If everything is great, maybe you don’t need to change anything. But where I worship there are still some things we need to improve, some changes we need to make.”

Why do people find change so threatening? I first pondered that question as a teenage, fledgling preacher for a country church. I was appalled to find a water bucket—metal, of course, with a metal dipper—parked at the preacher’s feet. My inexperience made concentration hard enough without children and adults alike coming in a steady parade to get a drink. And they all managed to clang the dipper against the side of the bucket!

The surprise of finding the water bucket was nothing compared to my shock at the resistance when I tried to get it moved. The back of the little building was no more than 50 feet away, but it might as well have been 50 miles. The building had been there since before the Civil War. Union soldiers had bivouacked there and carved their initials in the homemade benches. No one could remember when there hadn’t been a water bucket on the podium. And no one else was interested in moving it.

Where a church puts its water bucket is hardly a salvation issue. But a church so set in its ways that it will not adapt to changing needs may miss the opportunity to lead people to Jesus.

Change is often threatening because it is new. While the specific change may involve something new, the principle of change is as old as mankind. When God called Noah to build an ark, or Abraham to go to a new land, or Moses to lead God’s people, he was directing them to make more sweeping changes than we could imagine.

Jesus, however, calls us to make even greater changes—to change our minds, our hearts, our loyalties, our way of looking at everything. People who have been called to make such a drastic change that it can only be described as being born again should never again be afraid of change.

To advocate changing something just to prove that we can is spiritual immaturity. So is the stubborn refusal to make changes that are clearly needed. May God protect us from both extremes.