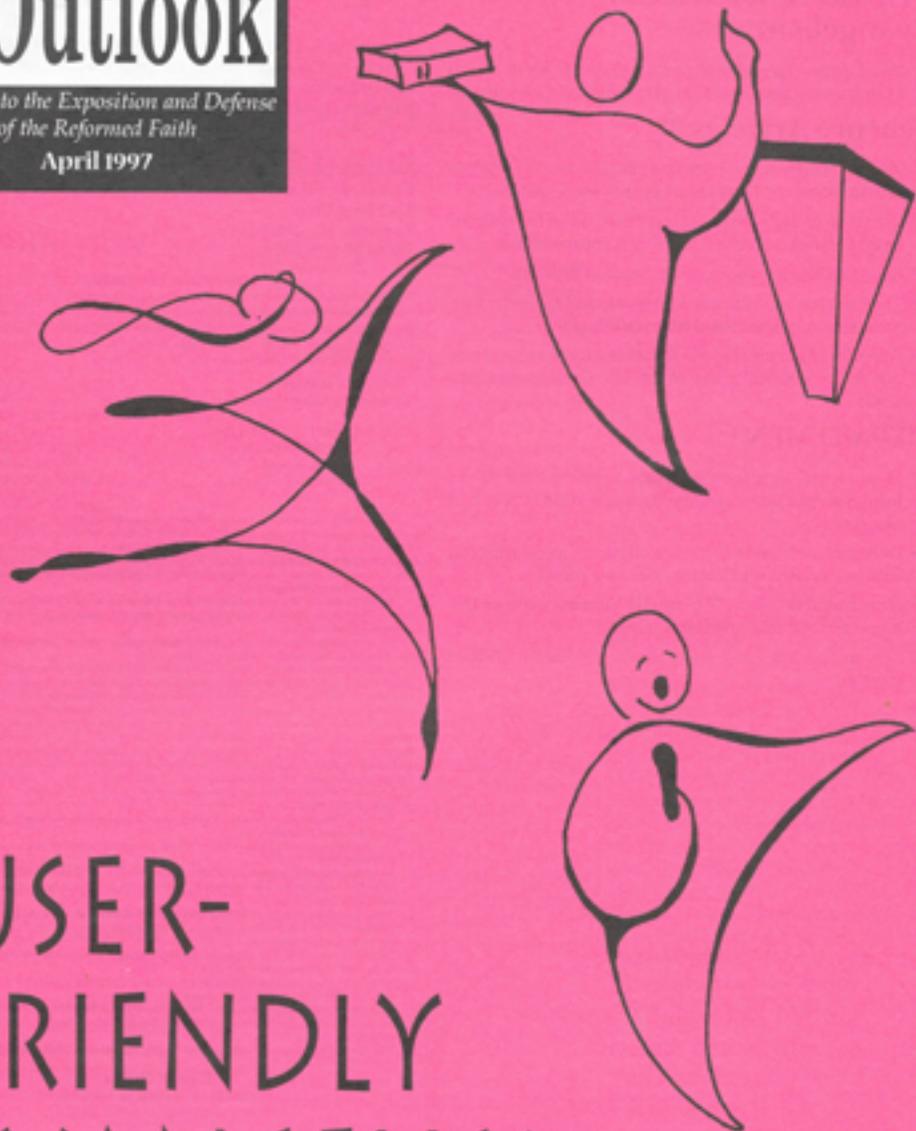


# THE Outlook

*Devoted to the Exposition and Defense  
of the Reformed Faith*

April 1997



USER-  
FRIENDLY  
EVANGELISM

## INTRODUCTION

The evangelistic mission of the church is not an option. In large measure it defines the church's existence and purpose. Yet this essential task of bringing the gospel to the world constitutes a perplexing challenge for the church today. How are lost people, in a society as secularized as our own, to be reached with the gospel? How can the church gain the ear of unsaved people who are so enamored with the power of technology and scientific knowhow? How does the church reach those who are completely out of touch with church teaching and church culture? Let's face it, most unbelievers would rather attend a funeral than attend a worship service. They recognize "church" as a foreign environment wherein they are socially and spiritually inept. Add to that the abuse some people have been subjected to by an uninvited visitor at their door, asking threatening questions about heaven and hell, besides the public scandals of some well-known television evangelists, and we see what a perplexing challenge evangelism is.

Consequently, many church leaders and pastors are ever on the lookout for a "model" approach to evangelism, one that is both successful and doable. What is sought is a method of evangelism that shows itself to be effective in reaching unsaved people and can be implemented within one's own church and ministry.

Today, in the minds of many, what is called "seeker-sensitive" evangelism represents such a model approach. It is a method of evangelism, turned into a movement, that is shaping the work of ministry and changing the ecclesiastical landscape in North America more than anything else since the rise of neo-Pentecostalism. It is not without its commendable features, which we will ex-

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plore in a subsequent article. But, if I may tip my hand at the outset, I also believe the seeker-sensitive approach to evangelism is infected with spiritual compromise and endangers the health of the church. What is more, the seeker-sensitive, or what some have dubbed the user-friendly movement, is making some Reformed people insecure or at least defensive about their life and practice as church. The question for debate, at the extremes, is whether this movement is a heaven-sent model which churches should emulate, or is it a modern idol that threatens to press us into its image?

### "How are lost people, in a society as secularized as our own, to be reached with the gospel?"

The user-friendly movement is making itself a visible presence in communities large and small across North America. Many churches of varying size are adopting, as best they can, this model for ministry. And it should be noted, if success is measured by numbers, many such churches are successful.

The seeker-sensitive or user-friendly movement offers a theology about church and evangelism. I think it also offers a distinctive theology about God and preaching, the latter bringing a crisis for the gospel itself.

In this article I want to get *inside the mind of user-friendly evangelism*, kind of a take off from a popular user-friendly title by Lee Strobel, "Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary." First, I propose to outline what the seeker-sensitive approach is; and then, secondly, look at five specific theological miscues in this

approach. In a subsequent article I hope to offer some observations for a Reformed approach to evangelism today.

## I. An Outline of the User-Friendly Approach

In giving a brief outline of what is involved in this new way of being church and doing evangelism, I will be focusing particularly upon Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. I choose Willow Creek because it is spearheading the movement. Moreover, the best resources are available about that church.

The co-founder and senior pastor of Willow Creek, Bill Hybels, believes that traditional churches fail to organize themselves according to spiritual gifts, and do not have proper discipleship mechanisms in place. Moreover, most traditional churches, according to Hybels, "do not understand or practice Biblical worship." They generally are just "teaching centers" that try to influence people primarily for an hour a week. They also tend to be seeker-hostile, meaning that they make no effort to welcome and minister to those outside of the church.<sup>1</sup>

The matter of providing an environment to which to bring a disillusioned former churchgoer or an outright atheist is really what set Hybels to rethinking how to do church and how to do evangelism. Having grown up in a typical CRC in Kalamazoo, Michigan during the sixties (he even attended Dordt College for two years), Hybels, reacting to some personally sour experiences in his home church, determined that the traditional church was seeker-hostile. It was a foreign, unfriendly, uncomfortable, utterly alien environment for unbelievers, whom he affectionately refers to as "unchurched Harrys" and "unchurched Marys." He determined that a type of gospel-service needed to be put into place where "seekers" could feel comfortable, that is, a service that is user-friendly. With that basic principle in mind, all aspects of ministry were scrutinized and run through the grid.

The result is that the church is completely restructured in order to be seeker-friendly or seeker-attractive. For Hybels this ought to begin with the church architecture: "unchurched Harry" isn't comfortable with anything that feels "churchy." Hence, the Willow Creek fa-

cilities do not look like "church"—you'll find no crosses, no steeples, no stained glass, no pipe organ. Instead, in the words of one author, what you find as you approach the campus is a massive but attractive edifice of concrete, steel, and glass beside a beautiful lake. The narthex is like stepping into a huge four-star-hotel-like atrium, which leads to an auditorium, filled with individual, well-cushioned movie theater seats.<sup>2</sup> Willow Creek feels more like a modern civic center than a church—and that's by design.

As for the seeker services themselves, each one is carefully crafted by Hybels and his ministry staff, and each is geared to appeal to the unchurched—both the ecclesiastically disenfranchised, as well as the hostile or skeptical unbeliever. Since "unchurched Harry" will likely visit a church only on a Sunday, if he visits a church at all, it is imperative that the seeker service takes place on Sundays. These services for seekers, according to Hybels, are not worship services; they are evangelistic services (this in part distinguishes Willow Creek from some other seeker-sensitive churches). Thus, there is no reciting of creeds, and no use of hymnals (in fact, designing songs for unbelievers to sing about God has proved to be a challenge). If a collection is taken, the unchurched are encouraged not to participate in that part of the service. Contemporary instrumentation and music, professional drama and multi-media, complement a message geared for the unchurched. According to Hybels, these media are attractive to "unchurched Harrys and Marys," and disarm them.

On that score, Hybels is insistent—and believes it is essential—that the church make use of a wide variety of artistic genres in order to communicate the gospel and make unchurched people more receptive to listen to the gospel. He does not, in his words, believe in the use of drama, or contemporary Christian music, or multi-media in order to "entertain" or "titillate," but since God is the master composer who created the arts, why should the church narrow its options and select a "talking head" as its only form of communicating the most important message on the planet? He states, "Even though preaching is the primary way the truth of God has been and should be communicated, we add texture and feeling and perspective to it

through the use of music and media and drama."

For Hybels, Willow Creek is simply following the pattern of the first-century church. He also believes that Willow Creek has recaptured the important theological point—that lost, wayward, irreligious people, in spite of their sin, really matter to God. The three parables in Luke 15 about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a missing son, make the point, says Hybels, that that which is missing really matters to somebody.<sup>3</sup> Integral to the program of finding the missing and the lost, is the lay witness of Willow Creek attendees, whose task it is to develop a friendship with Harry and share a verbal witness with him. Then Harry is invited to a weekend seeker service.

Perhaps the best single source for understanding the Willow Creek philosophy is Lee Strobel's book (which I mentioned earlier), *Inside the Mind of*

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*Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church.* Strobel is a teaching pastor at Willow Creek.

For many in our modern ecclesiastical climate, Willow Creek is the megachurch *par-excellence*. And the proof is in the pudding, as they say. Numbers don't lie. Willow Creek has the numbers. The church regularly has between 14,000 to 15,000 church and unchurched attendees on any given Sunday. They do baptism by the hundreds. Over 280,000 audiotapes are sold annually. Certainly by human standards, at least, it seems that Hybels and Willow Creek are a huge success. In fact, three times a year the church sponsors a conference at which over 500 church leaders from around the country gather to see how it is done. And in 1992 Willow Creek created the Willow Creek Association—which currently has a membership nearing a thousand churches—to provide support to other seeker-sensitive congregations. Many believe that Willow Creek is the model for doing church in the 21st century. It has already spearheaded a worldwide movement that is revolutionizing churches.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Five Miscues

I know that there are some people who respond to this with a wave of the hand. They say, "That's not reformed," or something similar to that, and are done with it. Others respond with unrestrained enthusiasm. Leaders at Christian Reformed Home Missions are so enthusiastic that they sent about a half-dozen copies of Strobel's book to each of the churches. I count myself in neither camp. I think we have to give the user-friendly movement our attention for at least three reasons: (1) because I believe more and more churches under the Reformed umbrella are trying to model the seeker-sensitive movement to some (detrimental) degree; (2) because inevitably our own people will become exposed to it and some of them will likely become intrigued by it; and (3) because if we disagree with this movement, then we need to know why, and we need to be prepared to offer a Biblical critique of it.

The movement miscues on at least five points, each of which merits our attention.

### 1. The Problem with Pragmatism.

My first concern is what I call the problem with pragmatism. In 1993 John MacArthur, Jr. published a book entitled, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, in which he severely critiques the user-friendly movement by showing its similarities to what became known as the "Down Grade" controversy in the ministry of Charles H. Spurgeon. Spurgeon warned the church of his day that Christianity was on the slope of decline, the gospel was on the downgrade. Christian leaders were becoming worldly and doctrinally inept; increasingly wishing to attract a crowd, the preachers and church leaders of the "Down Grade" resorted to using worldly models for doing ministry. Spurgeon believed that this constituted a forfeiture of the gospel itself, a selling out of evangelical truth; and, according to MacArthur, history has proved Spurgeon right.

This all serves to warn us, says MacArthur, about what is happening in the evangelical community today. However, instead of modernism, which was the dragon Spurgeon sought to slay, today the dragon is pragmatism. According to MacArthur, when pragmatism supersedes theology and Biblical truth

in the life of the church, when "What works?" becomes the question before "What's Biblical?", then tragic results are inevitable. Success displaces an *unashamed proclamation of God's Word* and, consequently, church doctrine is sacrificed for church growth; attracting a crowd through various vehicles of entertainment supersedes a ministry of edification and spiritual growth, and truth yields to "what works"—or worse, truth is redefined as *what works*.

I believe MacArthur's concerns are on target. For example, Bill Hybels is the ultimate pragmatist. This is confirmed by Dr. G. A. Pritchard who has degrees in both the social sciences and theology. Pritchard spent two and a half years intensively studying Willow Creek. In making his study, he attended all Willow Creek services and its various programs during that two and a half-year period. He even transcribed a year of weekend messages (from June 1989 to May 1990) and did a content analysis of these talks, using a computer concordance to sort out thematic emphases. Besides all this, he interviewed countless Willow Creek staff people; he sorted through their written materials. The end result was a dissertation of more than 800 pages and 1,900 footnotes. Pritchard has recently published a simplified and abbreviated version of his dissertation entitled *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church*.

In Pritchard's analysis, Hybels will use any aspect of academia if it helps the cause. Hybels is particularly fond of psychology, business management, and a common-sense apologetic, while, curiously, he disdains education itself and doesn't have much use for seminary training. Seminaries are for book people, not people people. While the whole seeker-friendly movement may not be painted with that brush, the leaders of the movement at Willow Creek fit the portrait. Pragmatism has no time for academics; it is not interested in theology or the Christian past. It simply wants to know what works, what gets results. Productivity is the final authority. Hybels frankly admits his pragmatism: "I'm a pragmatist, and I measure things by whether or not they work."<sup>5</sup>

It is of course Hybels' prerogative if he wishes to be a pragmatist. But it is not his prerogative to think that's Chris-

tian. If what works is the standard, where does that leave Paul and Jesus? How is it that our Lord failed to grasp what seems intuitive to Hybels? Pragmatism forgets that it is God's prerogative to convert souls and make preaching fruitful. Once we start down the path of trying to "effect" results, that is, to preach the gospel not only faithfully but *fruitfully*, not only searchingly but *successfully*, then we have resorted to technique—and that's a bottomless pit. Technique displaces dependence upon God. Fruits of numbers displace fruits of faith.<sup>6</sup>

More narrowly focused, this pragmatism manifests itself in an infatuation with psychology, or what I prefer to call therapy. According to Pritchard, a therapeutic worldview dominates much of the Willow Creek program of ministry.<sup>7</sup> A gospel of self-fulfillment is a common theme in Hybels' weekend (seeker) mes-

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sages. Of course, self-fulfillment does not fit the categories of Scripture. But it does fit the categories of psychology.

MacArthur wonders how this pragmatism fits with the events in the early church surrounding Ananias and Sapphira. After all, "God's judgment against Ananias and Sapphira had an effect beyond the fellowship of believers: 'Great fear came upon ... all who had heard of these things' (Acts 5:11)." Verse 13 says that no one else dared to join them! "This is precisely the opposite of the user-friendly philosophy..." and the pragmatism that motivates it. "Instead of luring people to church by making them feel comfortable and secure, God used fear to keep unbelievers away."<sup>8</sup>

Pragmatism is merciless though. It cannot accept what does not work. It must plunge ahead. It must get the job done. The end justifies the means—so whatever means are popular will do. But you cannot serve both God and mam-

mon or in this case, God and pragmatism. We must either affirm the *Scripture alone* or no longer claim to be Protestants and evangelicals.

## **2. The Madness behind the Method.**

The second area of concern I have I call "the madness behind the method." No doubt user-friendly advocates would argue that there is a method to their madness. But what method? Can conversion be programmed? Can we orchestrate salvation? One wonders how Paul ever succeeded in his mission endeavors without George Bama's spate of books on marketing the church. MacArthur is blunt and to the point: "The simple reality is that one *cannot* follow a market-driven strategy and remain faithful to Scripture." Bama and friends seem to be of the mind that marketing is a spiritually neutral enterprise, as if it simply collates data and offers insight, thus giving the church tools for doing ministry to outsiders. But in fact marketing distorts how Christians view nonbelievers and the gospel because it really stands theology on its head. Instead of allowing the Scriptures to define nonbelievers for us, what their needs are, what obstacles stand in the way of conversion, the marketing method offers a horizontalistic, merely humanistic analysis of people and suggests—indeed urges—that the church try to address itself to their "felt needs" first and foremost. In this way the church and the gospel become products to be consumed. "Un-churched Harry" is left to think, "Well, I've tried everything else, why not 'try God'?"

This is backwards. The consumer becomes sovereign instead of God; and as David Wells states, this "sanctions a bad habit," for it "encourages us to indulge in constant internal inventory..., to ask ourselves perpetually whether the 'products' we are being offered meet our present 'felt needs.'"<sup>9</sup> The problem is that many "felt needs" are culturally created and driven, and thus illegitimate. Needs may be likened to children. Some are legitimate; others are illegitimate. Why should illegitimate children have sovereign rights over the legitimate children, that is, why should felt needs take precedence over the genuine needs of human beings as revealed in Scripture? When the church markets itself as offer-

ing the products to meet the felt needs of unbelievers, she in effect falls into worldliness, for the church is not a product, and doesn't market one. Rather, the church issues a proclamation. She declares the kingdom of God. She announces Christ's sovereignty over all of life—including the life of "unchurched Harry." She bids all to obediently surrender and submit to Him and to His Word. The church's business is truth, not profit—as Wells points out.

The claims of Christ are radical and uncompromising. Those who were attracted to Jesus because He satisfied their empty stomachs (meeting their felt needs) were soon set straight. Jesus was unafraid to speak the hard truth, which brought this consequence: "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66). Jesus obviously didn't know how to sell Himself. He lacked marketing savvy. But then His theology affirmed that God was sovereign, not Harry; and Jesus knew that no one could come to Him, unless the Father draws him (v. 44). Indeed, those whom the Father had drawn did not turn back; instead they said to Jesus: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

The marketing approach to evangelism is madness. It forgets who God is. As Karl Barth once wrote: "The word of God is not for sale; and therefore it has no need of shrewd salesmen. The word of God is not seeking patrons; therefore it refuses price cutting and bargaining.... It will ... not stoop to overcome resistance with bargain counter methods. Promoters' successes are sham victories; their crowded churches and the breathlessness of their audiences have nothing in common with the word of God."<sup>10</sup>

I trust we know why? For the Word of God is not interested in making God useful to us! The Christian faith isn't true because God can help us satisfy felt needs. Jesus Christ isn't a means to an end, whether that end be self-fulfillment or self-esteem or some other self-centered redemption. As Pritchard boldly states: "The bottom line why individuals should repent and worship God is because God deserves it."<sup>11</sup>

A marketed gospel is a truncated gospel at best! In trying to appeal to "unchurched Harry and Mary," where is there room for the message: "In this world you will have trouble," (John

16:33)? Or Peter's call to rejoice that we share in Christ's sufferings (1 Pet. 4:13)? Or Jesus' beatitude about being persecuted for righteousness sake (Matt. 5:10)? "The Lord did not promise fulfillment, or even relief, in this world, but only the next." Even Jesus suffered. "The goal of a Christian's life is faithfulness, not fulfillment."<sup>12</sup> A gospel that is marketed, however, can never be the gospel of Jesus Christ. By its very nature, it must mute the message in order to befriend an audience. This is the madness behind the method.

### 3. Image Isn't Everything.

Closely related to that is the question of image, our third concern. The church, obviously, never should give undue offense. But we need to say in the face of

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the user-friendly movement: Image isn't everything! For Hybels, and for churches like his, image is a "real big deal" (his words). Indeed, when you drive onto the campus of Willow Creek, you are driving into the lap of luxury. It is big and it is the best. Why? Because "unchurched Harry" cares a lot about appearance.

As intimated before, the services at Willow Creek are staged and choreographed. Image is important, very important. My question is simply this: Whose image? The image of Christ? Or the image of upscale, fat-wallet, white-corporate America? In other words, when you talk about image, whose image are you trying to emulate and attract? Willow Creek and other megachurches all conform to the same image: white, affluent, suburban baby boomers. Hybels himself has no qualms about this. His retort is simple and angular: to suggest that there might be something suspect in this is to accuse pastors of being deceived (unthinkable) and to blame God for the way He is leading those peoples.<sup>13</sup>

But Pritchard argues that two temptations lie embedded in the managing of images. The first danger is *manipulation*; in other words, in attempting to identify with "unchurched Harry," isn't the entire show a kind of *grand manipulation*—from the pop rock music, to the drama, to the choreographed message? Isn't it all to produce a certain kind of effect on Harry to get him where you want him? Stated crassly, isn't it the old bait and switch—Harry is baited with images he likes in order that you can slip him a message he resists? What does any of that have to do with the Biblical model of evangelism?

The second danger is outright *pretense*, that is, to fake it, to *perform*. This is especially a temptation for highly skilled orators like Hybels. "In any setting of self-conscious image management," writes Pritchard, "there is a sociological pressure to perform." Thus, what seems more real because of highly skilled communicators and a professionally orchestrated production, may in fact be pretense.<sup>14</sup> One may well ask, how does all this fit with what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:4: "We are not trying to please men but God"?

### 4. The Idolatry of God.

My fourth concern with user-friendly evangelism is what I call the idolatry of God. The doctrine of God that functions in much of this movement is lopsided at best and idolatrous at worst. David Wells has called attention to this better than anyone else I have read. In his superb book *God in the Wasteland*, Wells explains that the wasteland is evangelical theology, or we might say, the evangelical church, especially the user-friendly church. An enfeebled doctrine of God touches all theology. Writes Wells: "The fundamental problem ... is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common." God is marginalized. He has become weightless.<sup>15</sup>

No doubt user-friendly advocates would issue a disclaimer that they have not marginalized God. But God in His sovereignty and holiness hardly counts for any significant theme in its approach to "unchurched Harry" or in the preaching it offers to Harry. In Pritchard's analysis of Hybels' weekend seeker mes-

sages, he discovered, over the course of a year, "only four messages in which God's holiness was presented clearly ...."<sup>16</sup> The moral law was never explicated or used! The sermons themselves were topical, not expository. The messages were upbeat and positive, emphasizing God's love and immanence. What is rather strange about all this is that, according to surveys, "unchurched Harrys and Marys" generally believe that they are on good terms with God already. A full eight out of ten Americans believe that God loves them. 80 percent feel that God is close to them. George Gallup Jr. states that Americans believe in God, "but this God is often only an affirming one, not a demanding one."<sup>17</sup>

In that light, what "unchurched Harrys and Marys" need, even if it offends them, is to hear heart-searching messages on the strictness and severity of the law of God. The law's "function is to call the conscience into judgment and wound it with fear."<sup>18</sup> The law sets us up for gospel. Fearing condemnation we desire justification. We must fall into the Savior's arms in repentance. As Calvin said: "The law is like a mirror. In it we contemplate our weakness, then the iniquity arising from this, and finally the curse coming from both—just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face" (*Institutes* 2.7.7). Or in J. I. Packer's words: "Nobody can see what sin is till he has learned what God is."<sup>19</sup> The law must be preached to unbelievers.

The obvious rebut is that nonbelievers won't listen to such preaching. Perhaps! *But God makes "believers" out of such preaching!* And when that fails, then somewhere in our evangelistic efforts there needs to be a place for kicking the dust from our sandals in testimony against those who will not listen, and we move on. If that seems harsh to user-friendly ears, then we need to read the Gospels again (Matt. 10:14; Mk. 6:11; and Acts 13:51). But then again, John the Baptist's preaching doesn't exactly fit the upbeat, user-friendly, model either—calling Pharisees a "brood of vipers" and all (Lk. 3:7). Peter preached a sermon on Pentecost that fails the user-friendly test too, saying to his hearers about Jesus, "you, with wicked hands, slew him" (Acts 2:23, KJV).

Until God is recognized as Sovereign Creator and Lord who is holy, righteous and true, seekers will never *seek him as*

*sinner*; God will remain a God of therapy, domesticated and harmless. And that God is an idol. It's the idolatry of God.

## 5. No Place For Truth.

Finally, my last concern with the user-friendly method of evangelism zeros in on the role of theology in the life of the church, what Wells calls *No place for Truth*. *The user-friendly movement is mostly, if not altogether, disinterested in theology*. This goes back to its commitment to both pragmatism and the modern psychological worldview, so indicative of modernity. Pritchard found that Willow Creek staff are basically unable to "think

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critically with the categories and content of Christian theology."<sup>20</sup> The end result is that Christian truth gets abridged. Theology's tail is bobbed, with only a pathetic stump showing. We cannot help but ask, "What fills the void? What is an abridged Christian gospel, anyway?"

I do not question Hybels' considerable talents as a communicator or an evangelist. In hearing him speak, he clearly evidences supreme gifts of oratory. He can communicate with nonbelievers. "Unchurched Harrys" obviously need the simple gospel, the milk of the Word. But even the milk of the Word must remain *the Word*, and as milk we must present the *whole gospel*. Gospels of therapy do not qualify. If we bait unbelievers with gospels of self-fulfillment, then we betray our lack of confidence in the Word of God itself—that is, we demonstrate that we do not really believe that it is a means of grace, that it is the power of God unto salvation, that it is a hammer that crushes stony hearts, that it is God's own living voice!<sup>21</sup> When unchurched Homers and Hiliarys find the bait so appealing, why should they ever

switch to a gospel that is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23)?

The irony about the Willow Creek strategy is that most of the people who attend the weekend services need *edification, not evangelism*. Pritchard points out that "the majority of Willow Creek weekend attendees [about 85% to 90%] are "churched Larrys" who have already made a commitment to Christ." Even if it is granted that most of these "churched Larrys" are only "superficially church-ed," still, how are they going to grow up to maturity on a diet of Willow Creek's weekend fare? And I might add, the situation is worse at other user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, churches. At least Willow Creek offers mid-week *worship* services of edification that have substance (though the attendance is only about one-third the weekend size). Most user-friendly churches try to be seeker-sensitive at their regular Sunday *worship services*. Consequently, they end up doing neither the ministry of *edification* nor the ministry of *evangelism* very well. "Churched Larrys" are doomed to remain spiritual babies.<sup>22</sup> Without the meat of the Word, without theology, how can they mature, and why should they be anything but comfortable with their minimalist Christianity?<sup>23</sup>

In his book, *Dining with the Devil*, Os Guinness likewise bemoans the theological superficiality and lack of historical awareness in the user-friendly movement. Concerning the latter he writes, "This movement is particularly unaware of comparisons with earlier periods that could throw light on the possibilities and pitfalls we face today. Two periods, for example, would give fruitful parallels: the late eighteenth century and the story of European liberalism's engagement with the 'cultured despisers,' and the early nineteenth century and the story of American Evangelicalism's fateful sea-change ... [not only from Calvinism to Arminianism, but from] ... theology to experience, from truth to technique, from elites to populism, and from an emphasis on 'serving God' to an emphasis on 'servicing the self' in serving God."<sup>24</sup> Anyone who has studied the revivalism of Charles Finney knows how true this is.

*There is no place for truth* (the full-jagged-edged truth of Scripture) in the user-friendly philosophy. Theology is

disdained while "contextualization" becomes the be-all and end-all. As they say: Penny loafers for Penny loafers. Wingtips for Wingtips. Air Jordans for Air Jordans. But, notes Guinness, "the very reason why Penny Loafers speak better to other Penny Loafers than to Air Jordans and Wingtips is the reason why a Penny-Loafer gospel will never be the whole counsel of God."<sup>25</sup> Contextualization thus becomes a recipe for compromise and capitulation when "joining people where they are" is not just a first step in the process of bringing the gospel but also the last one. When the seeker-sensitive movement is done using all the insights and tools of modernity, all with great effect and success, is God any longer necessary? What happens when these new gods of modernity fail to work the magic of success in successive generations, do we invent new ones again? Guinness believes that many superchurches are simply artificially inflating themselves through technique and personality, but not with a message that converts, that is, not with the *truth of the gospel*.<sup>26</sup>

User-friendly evangelism is defective in its fundamental pretense, namely, its notion that lost sinners are actually seeking God, that unbelievers are seekers of the way, the truth and the life. What

about Romans 3:11? With its flawed doctrine of humanity, user-friendly evangelism misrepresents the enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and therefore minimizes the antithesis between church and world. This leads to the false idea that unbelievers can be coaxed, persuaded, wooed, or otherwise wheedled into the kingdom of God. I believe church leaders and pastors must look elsewhere for a "model" approach for evangelism today. Next time, the Lord willing, we will examine some strengths of the seeker-sensitive movement, and offer some observations for doing Reformed evangelism today.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Bill Hybels in *Christianity Today*, July 18, 1994, p. 22.
- 2 G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services-Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), p. 21.
- 3 G. A. Pritchard, op. cit., pp. 26-27.
- 4 *Christianity Today*, July 18, 1994, pp. 21-25. G. A. Pritchard, op. cit.
- 5 G. A. Pritchard, op. cit., p. 280.
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## Feature Articles

Daryl G. Hart

*This article was an address delivered at Chapel, January 28, 1997, Westminster Theological Seminary (PA).*

*Text: Titus 2 (NASV)*

The word "celebrate" has fallen on hard times these days. Here I am referring specifically to the use of the Word in the context of worship. It used to be that if we spoke of celebrating anything in worship, we usually thought of the Lord's Supper, though some Reformed folk prefer the word, "administer." But now the words "celebration" and "celebrative" apply to the whole service, not just one part of it that occurs at best once a month. To "celebrate" denotes a kind of worship that is upbeat, casual or informal, joyful, and

unrestrained. And part of the aim of this kind of worship is to alleviate the problems of traditional or older forms of worship that are too formal, too somber, and for some, too boring.

One of the ironies about celebrative worship is that it is the kind of service preferred by many who are strong proponents of family values and traditional morality. This is ironic because celebrations today are not what they used to be either. Celebration used to be associated with family occasions like birthdays and anniversaries, as well as with weddings and the subsequent festivities at the reception. Depending on a particular family's understanding of Christian liberty, these parties might include certain kinds of beverage refreshment. But no

matter what drinks were served, celebrations of an older sort rarely got out of hand, if only because of an assumption that immoderate displays of boisterousness were unseemly in a setting that included at least three generations of extended relations and close family friends.

Today, however, celebration, while still involving this small scale practice, also includes the mass gatherings of sporting events and rock concerts. Celebrating the home team's victory or the lead guitarist's riffs may still be restrained or moderate, but in the anonymity of a five-figure crowd, the excesses of celebration occur much more readily.

Yet these excesses do not deter the proponents of celebrative worship. In fact,

the practices of rock concerts have become the model for most worship celebrations as electric guitars, drum sets and singers with hand held mikes have pushed aside the Lord's Table, and as prolonged periods of singing have replaced confession of sin, assurance of pardon and the reading of the Decalogue. It is the music that sets the tone for the service and determines whether it is properly joyful. It may be an extreme, but the *rave mass* recently described in one evangelical magazine is the culmination of this desire for celebrative worship. This mass includes:

Several video screens display[ing] sacred and artistic images of Jesus, as well as disturbing scenes of war, starvation and human suffering, all at a frenetic MTV pace. Pumped-up dance music and live alternative bands provide dynamic periods of pulsating music that can whip the congregation into a dancing frenzy. The communion celebrant breaks the bread and shares the wine while barefoot and dressed in a simple white robe. The entire experience is a sensual delight or assault, depending on your perspective.

Without belaboring the point, the irony here is that no matter how soft rock music can become — as in the case of the Carpenters or Barry Manilow or even Pat Boone's latest release which is a foray into heavy metal — a fundamental antagonism exists between the family values which evangelicals promote, and the sensibility that contemporary popular music cultivates. As a recent writer put it, "There is no getting around it": the aims of traditional family values "are wholly at odds" with the cumulative message of rock culture. Why then would Christians who uphold the seriousness and discipline of Christian virtues encourage a steady diet of light and trivial forms of music?

Even more of a mystery is why some Christians would want expressions of celebration to dominate the services in which they worship God. Here, I have finally come to our text, the second chapter of Titus. This is not a passage that exegetes and theologians generally go to for understanding the nature of Christian worship. But then again, neither is our Lord's Great Commission which has become the proof text of late for doing

in worship whatever is necessary to reach all people. (Parenthetically, I should add that the Great Commission is not a bad text for thinking about worship if we recognize that it prescribes the two essential elements that God uses to speak to us, namely, *teaching* and *baptism*, or as some would have it, *Word and Sacrament*.) So please permit me to say a few words about this passage and what it might teach about worship.

## TITUS 2

### Verse One

I want to draw your attention first of all to verse one where Paul tells Titus to teach *what is fitting or appropriate for sound doctrine*. The point is a relatively obvious one, that our lives should accord with our profession of faith. I am now teaching the course on Dr. Machen and I have been struck once again by his in-

**"...the Great Commission is not a bad text for thinking about worship if we recognize that it prescribes the two essential elements that God uses to speak to us, namely, *teaching* and *baptism*..."**

sistence that Christianity is not a way of life, but a way of life founded upon doctrine, or teaching about who God is, who we are, and our need for a Savior. "So it is everywhere in the Bible," Machen wrote, "First doctrine, then life.... The Bible founds living everywhere squarely upon truth" [CFMW, 102]. We see this same kind of relationship in the Decalogue where God instructs the Israelites how they are to love God and to love their neighbors and premises this instruction upon His declaration, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This is why the *Shorter Catechism* says of the preface to the Ten Commandments that, "because God is the Lord and our God and Redeemer therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments." **Our way of life, in other words, stems from our theology, not the other way around.**

But is this any less true of worship, as if public worship were not part of Christian living? Jesus instructed the woman at the well in John 4 that she was to worship "in spirit and truth." Our Lord's point was that a new form of worship was emerging because a new epoch in redemptive history was also emerging. No longer would worship be confined to Jerusalem but all the nations would now be able to worship God where they lived. And no longer would worship be bloody and violent after Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Instead, worship would look and feel different because of Christ's final sacrifice.

The same point holds for Reformed worship. If we profess the truths of the Reformed Faith, our worship should reflect those truths. Or put another way, if our way of worship is indistinguishable from churches that do not teach and profess Reformed theology, either God's spirit is more at work in other communions than we imagine, or we have not thought hard enough about *the way theology shapes worship*. And if you wonder what I have in mind, I will only point to the Reformers' elimination of special music from worship and their insistence upon the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper compared to our choirs, solos and bi-monthly administration of the sacrament. Do we know something about the Reformed faith that Calvin and Zwingli did not, or is it the case that we have forgotten the point behind Reformed worship? I recently ran across a quote by a Southern Baptist about charismatic worship that puts this point about the connection between theology and worship nicely, "Charismatic believers have a right to develop their own worship to match their own theology and exegesis, and they have done this well. Noncharismatics should not thoughtlessly copy or imitate their worship formulae, unless they expect to enter the same 'Holy of Holies' in the same way. Instead, they should develop their worship rationale based on their scriptural understanding, and then sing up to their own theology!"

### Verses 2-12

If in verse one of Titus 2 we see the point about making our lives conform to our doctrine, something that includes worship, then throughout the rest of the

chapter we see the kind of qualities that our lives (and worship, I would argue) should display. What is striking is how repressed, to use the vernacular of our times, Paul wants believers to be. He commends older men in verse 2 to be temperate, dignified and sensible, among other things. In the same vein he says in verse 3 that older women should be reverent, moderate in their consumption of wine, and in verse 5 that they should teach younger women to be sensible along with exhibiting restraint in a number of other ways. And in verse 6 Paul also recommends that young men also be sensible. In verse 12 the apostle summarizes his teaching with, you guessed it, another exhortation toward self-control and seriousness. He writes that the grace of God teaches us to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires, and to live sensibly, righteously and godly" lives. And the reason for this self-control, moderation and seriousness is because it is behavior fitting our profession and our hope that our Lord will return at the end of this age. It is as if Paul has rewritten the old adage about cleanliness being next to godliness. For him self-control, moderation and seriousness are not only next to godliness but actually are expressions of it. And the reason is because we are people who know that this world is fading like the grass, who await a world to come, and so do not revel in the things of this life.

If these are the kind of attributes we should display in our lives, why should our worship be any different? And yet these characteristics are the opposite of celebration, spontaneity and informality as our culture has come to understand them. Nevertheless, moderation, sensibility, and dignity are much closer to the traits that the writer to the Hebrews recommends as the proper response to God in worship. At the end of the 12th chapter the writer says that we should worship God with "reverence and awe." And the reason why we do so, he explains, is because "our God is a consuming fire." *Thus, seriousness and dignity, reverence and fear, are much more fitting for the sound doctrine of Reformed theology, than our culture's forms of celebration.* The reason is that Reformed theology, in its affirmation of God's holiness, transcendence and righteousness, honors and glorifies the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is indeed a consuming fire.

Now the problem with this understanding of what is fitting for sound doctrine is that it might make our worship little different from funeral services. But this analogy is not as much a problem as we might think. After all a funeral service for a professing believer can be a joyous time, one where we rejoice that a saint, in the language of the *Shorter Catechism*, has been "made perfect in holiness" and has passed "into glory." At the same time a funeral service is marked by sadness, not simply because we miss a loved one, but also because we know that death is the natural end of the estate of sin and misery. So too our worship should be characterized by joyful seriousness because the death of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, stands at the very center of our worship. We may rejoice in worship only because we know that Christ has conquered sin and death and has made a way for us to come boldly into God's presence. But at the same time we rejoice in a serious and circumspect way because we recognize that



Laurie Vanden Heuvel

In our discussions of music in the church, we have seen the fundamental importance of congregational singing mirrored in its divine provision and divine preservation. Today we focus upon a segment of the congregation which assists the congregation in song - the choir.

It is important at the outset to emphasize that, although choirs play an important role in church worship, they do not replace the singing congregation in any way. The choir as one part of the congregation inspires the other part of the congregation to greater zeal and skill in singing before God. The music of the choir is preface to, accompaniment of, or instruction in congregational singing. It is a helper, a "handmaid" in worship (to

our sin is what drove Christ to the cross. In other words, *reverence and awe, moderation and self-discipline are fitting for the sound doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

And this is in fact what usually happens in worship when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, in the old sense of the term. There we remember the death and resurrection of our Savior, our own unworthiness, and our complete dependence upon God's mercy in Christ. As Paul says in the next to last verse of Titus 2, Jesus Christ has redeemed us from "every lawless deed" and has "purified for himself a people for his own possession, zealous for good deeds." Only when that truth is firmly fixed in our hearts and minds will we be able to celebrate in a way that is fitting the sound doctrine that we confess and the God whom we worship.

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use an idea generated by the Rev. H. J. Kuiper, former editor of the *CRC Banner*).

## HANDMAIDS

But a "handmaid's" worth is not to be underestimated. Even though choirs are not a necessity in worship, they are legitimate and can be an asset. In his lecture to the first annual Calvin College Conference on Church Music, the late Rev. H. J. Kuiper said: "Because religion is rooted in man's heart, it is an emotional as well as an intellectual and practical matter. Therefore music can be used to intensify and purify our religious life. It is a gift of God and is designed to kindle lofty and holy emotions in the human breast though sinful man is in-

clined to pervert it to stir up base and lustful feelings. Feelings are to our religious life what wings are to a bird. The songs of faith make it easier for us to rise to heights of spiritual bliss. Without the songs of hope it is difficult to pierce the veil of the future and look out upon the glory that awaits the sons of God. Our souls find it difficult to lose themselves in the ecstasies of a holy love or of pure devotion until sacred music opens the floodgates of our inner life. It warms the heart, and the congealed waters of worship melt under its flame and begin to flow toward the sea of eternal praise to God. We regard sacred music as one of

**"...although choirs play an important role in church worship, they do not replace the singing congregation in any way."**

the valuable and indispensable means of grace which God has given His Church...." Rev. Kuiper stated further that the choir could aid a congregation significantly in its congregational singing and stimulate the adoration of the congregation by its own anthems of praise.

## OBJECTIONS

There are Christians, however, who object to the presence of a choir in the worship service for a variety of reasons. Some say that since there are only two parts to every worship service, 1) God speaking to the people through the minister and 2) the people speaking to God through congregational singing, prayers and offerings, there is no Biblical warrant for a part of the congregation to speak to another part of the congregation or to God on behalf of the congregation.

Paul answers this objection in two ways when he urges Christians to "speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." *First*, Paul authorizes members of the congregation (not just ministers) to speak God's Word to other members. This is what happens when the congregation or any part of it sings the words of the psalms or any other section of Scripture in which God is speaking. *Second*, Paul implies that part of the

membership may speak to another part of the membership by means of music in the church. For years Reformed congregations have allowed church organists (a part of the congregation) to "speak" to the rest of the congregation in preludes, offertories and postludes while at the same time forbidding a choir to "speak." That is not consistent.

Because some congregations have seen that inconsistency they have banned both organist and choir. Such action seems entirely opposed to the spirit and example of the Old Testament which was never negated by the New Testament. The Old Testament abounds with references to a great variety of musical instruments, songs and singers dedicated to the praise of God. It is incomprehensible to think that our God, who commanded and delighted in the instrumental music and the choirs of the Old Testament, would ban them in the New Testament. Such a thesis would require proof from the New Testament Scriptures of which none is available except the argument from silence.

Others argue that the elaborate arrangements for song by the Levitical singers in the temple service, which is spelled out in the Old Testament, is no warrant for having special singers in the services of the New Testament churches because it was part of the *symbolical* and *typical* character of Old Testament worship and therefore was *abolished by the redemption of Christ*. But as Rev. Kuiper has stated: "There was nothing *typical* in that singing of the Levites, as there was, for example, in the animal sacrifices and cleansings of the Old Testament sanctuary. If that singing was *typical*, if it belonged to the 'shadows' of the dispensation, we should abolish all singing in our New Testament worship. True, the song of the Levite choirs was characteristic of the Old Dispensation insofar that it was not supplemented by congregational singing. The church today is no longer in its minority and should not be silenced by any choir. But this does not mean that a part of the church, speaking for God (by singing the words of His Word - LVH) may not sing to the edification of the church as a whole; nor that a song of praise by the choir, speaking for the congregation to God may not be used...."

We should remember too that not only Levitical singers took leadership in Old

Testament worship. Ezra 2:64, 65 says: "The whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 menservants and maidservants; and they also had 200 men and women singers." The books of Chronicles abound with proof that by David's time the music program was well established as part of the temple ritual. I Chronicles 6 traces the lineage of chief musicians down even to Korah, the cousin of Moses and Aaron. The Old Testament music program boasted an impressive chorus and orchestra numbering 4,000, trained in 24 groups with directors and experts to maintain the traditions of the past and insure the continuing supply of musicians for the future.

**"The choir...helps to prepare hearts and minds for closer communion with God. It can also help to reinforce in song the message of the pastor."**

## THE ROLE OF THE CHOIR

The choirs in the church fill a dual role in the worshipping congregation.

*First*, the choir provides strength and leadership in the congregation's singing of psalms and hymns, the familiar and the unfamiliar. The choir also edifies the congregation by rendering artistic Biblical anthems of a degree of difficulty and in a manner not attainable by the congregation, thus providing a spiritual exhilaration which loosens the congregations from their earthly ties and cares and lifts them heavenward. The choir which sings with excellence, and in accord with principles discussed here in previous articles, helps to prepare hearts and minds for closer communion with God. It can also help to reinforce in song the message of the pastor.

## CONCLUSION

Prayer and praise accompany the proclamation of the Word in worship. Sometimes this prayer and praise is spoken; sometimes it is sung. When sung, prayer and praise can be enhanced by the excellent leadership of the organist and the choir - "handmaids" of the gospel, eager to do their Master's bidding.

## RODNEY HOWARD-BROWNE

Howard-Browne was in Australia during May 1995, and I took the opportunity of attending a meeting in the Melbourne Entertainment Centre on Monday afternoon, May 22, with a member of my congregation, who had also attended a Sunday morning service at Richmond Assembly of God (the sponsors of the visit) the previous day. I would say that about 3,300 were present, including many Pentecostal pastors. The large majority were of Pentecostal and charismatic persuasion, with a wide age-range represented.

The meeting lasted two hours and began with thirty minutes of singing (at high volume and repetitive in the modern fashion). Howard-Browne spoke for thirty minutes, as did Paula White, an American lady blessed through Howard-Browne. She claimed 50,000 converts in Los Angeles within three months, mainly children in marginalized areas. (There was reference to competitions in which one could win a bike, and to giving away 200,000 toys and Easter eggs, which makes me wonder a little about these converts.) During most of the rest of the time, Mrs. White laid hands on a large number of people who came forward to receive power, and who experienced prostration as a result. Only a couple of cases of (hysterical) laughter occurred. However, at the packed healing session on Wednesday night, attended by a friend, it was pandemonium among the 7,000 present.

While some may think that Holy Ghost fire, joy, and power is being poured afresh on God's people, the meeting was a disappointment and a cause of distress to us. It was evident that many longed to see the power of God released in their lives. Pentecostals are encouraged to see God's power evidenced in physical manifestations, and the people were ready to accept what occurred, especially after the hype associated with the anecdotal account of her work given by Mrs. White. It must have made most pastors feel pretty powerless, and it was not surprising that so many came forward.

Howard-Browne, who was born in 1961, has a background in the Faith Movement associated with Kenneth

Rowland S. Ward

Melbourne, Australia, has just had a number of experiences which only reinforce the fact that we have a tremendous privilege in simple, reverent worship and Christ-centered preaching based on proper exposition of Scripture.

You will recall the Roman church's teaching about indulgences prior to the Reformation in the sixteenth century—how God could be bought. Perhaps now, in this age of marketing, we are seeing how God can be sold—and we are seeing it in supposedly Bible-loving Protestant churches. The truth is that we can neither buy God nor sell him, and the man-centered religious activity of man is still idolatry.

This article provides some reactions to the recent Howard-Browne meetings, which are the common stuff of much discussion in Christian circles at present. The great need is for real discernment. I believe the Holy Spirit is grieved by the lack of applied discernment, not only among ordinary believers, but also among pastors and ministers. Phenomena that are at best of no spiritual value, and are at worst of pagan and cultic origin, are being accepted as evidences of the power of God. We are bartering the gospel for a mess of pottage, a bowl of soup.

### A LAUGHING REVIVAL?

In early 1994, a church near Toronto Airport in Canada experienced laughing, weeping, and even roaring like lions among its congregation, which belongs to the Vineyard Fellowship of charismatic churches associated with John Wimber. This experience, since dubbed "the Toronto blessing," is regarded by its supporters as a time of refreshing and renewal and as a prelude to mighty revival. The pastor of the Toronto church had himself received an "anointing" through a South African evangelist, Rodney Howard Browne, who had moved to the United States in 1987 and ministered to him in 1993.

Thousands of pastors have since visited Toronto, and the phenomenon has

spread around the globe. In Melbourne, Pentecostal groups promote it, and churches as diverse as Anglican and Reformed have been affected.

The story of the rise and spread of this teaching is found in several recent books, the following being the ones I have read: Dave Roberts, *The Toronto Blessing* (Kingsway, 189 pages); Guy Chevreau, *Catch the Fire* (Marshall Pickering, xii + 228 pages); Patrick Dixon, *Signs of Revival* (Kingsway, 349 pages); Mike Fearon, *A Breath of Fresh Air* (Eagle, viii + 258 pages).

Roberts and Fearon are British Christian journalists in sympathy with the movement. The books by them show a measure of concern about aspects of the movement and Howard-Browne in particular, but do not delve deeply into, nor follow through the logic of some of their concerns. Chevreau is a Baptist pastor from Toronto who has accepted the

**"...the 'Toronto blessing,' is regarded by its supporters as a time of refreshing and renewal and as a prelude to mighty revival."**

movement as from God.

He has expertise in church history and one third of his book traces experiences in the times of revival associated with the name of Jonathan Edwards, with a view to showing that what is now happening is parallel. Dixon is a well-regarded medical doctor who spends a quarter of his book giving a history of "emotional faith." Interestingly, he refers to the "big revival" in the Scottish Hebrides in 1949 led by Duncan Campbell (p.185), which would be far differently assessed by the evangelical preachers of the Free Church of Scotland. He also discusses medical perspectives and includes a useful thirty-five page appendix written by Bill Jackson of the Vineyard in mid-1994.

Hagin and Kenneth Copeland. He was an assistant pastor in a vast Rhema church in Johannesburg belonging to this stream before moving to the United States. These men are much closer to New Age concepts than to Christianity, and they are in fact positively heretical on such fundamental teachings as the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the nature of faith (as the charismatic writer D. R. McConnell has ably documented in *A Different Gospel* [Hendrickson, 1988, xix + 195 pages]).

Howard-Browne did not say anything out of the way in Pentecostal circles when I heard him speak. But, while he may or may not agree with the heretical Hagin/Copeland concepts, he has not criticized his friends either. In May 1993, Howard-Browne engaged in what can only be described as a slapstick comedy routine with Copeland, which was climaxed by Howard-Browne being rendered prostrate by Copeland. If it hadn't been so blasphemous, it would have been a simply ludicrous performance. I have seen the video of this myself, and Fearon refers to it in his book (p. 122). Fearon thinks that Howard-Browne's association with Copeland is "unwise," but he does not doubt that he was seeing "genuine spiritual activity at work"—a lack of discernment common in the literature. Howard-Browne has written several books, although they are not very substantial in size or content. *Flowing in the Holy Ghost* (1991, vii + 109 pages) and *The Touch of God* (ix + 169 pages) are the main ones. There is nothing in them that the average Pentecostal would balk at, although one wonders about the following incident (from *The Touch of God*, page 101):

When I went to pray for a dear brother sitting to the left of me, he stood up and hugged me. Then he told me that he had died several years ago and had left his body for a time and was caught up into glory. He said he knew what was happening [in the meeting] was real because he had witnessed that same presence of the Holy Ghost—the glory of God—when he crossed over to the other side.

The same credulity applies widely. The Morwell Assembly of God church bulletin (April 2, 1995) reports that a man and his dog fell to the footpath under

the power of God when walking past Northside Assembly of God. But is this really of the Holy Spirit? The Melbourne *Herald-Sun* for May 21, 1995 (p. 8 of *Encore Supplement*), has a brief article about Sir William Keys's treatment for cancer at the hands of a Buddhist healer in Beijing, and you would think he was describing the symptoms typical at Howard-Browne meetings (including the desire to laugh). As Don Prout has said, "This is a solemn reminder that there are other explanations besides the touch of God for the unusual manifestations." Howard-Browne, as I heard him, speaks simply and quite slowly, pacing up and down as he talks. He is a master of one-liners that get cheers, but they do not always work well on reflection. Some pastors are "not fishers of men, but keepers of the aquarium," he said to applause, yet pastors *are* to feed and care for the people. He can be very critical of people in charismatic churches who fake or misuse the supernatural gifts. He can also be very critical of more traditional Christians—indeed, the word *hate* was used in reference to them at one meeting, to applause. He didn't raise his voice all that much, but he used it to great effect.

Howard-Browne does not represent anything particularly new. The message I heard was classic Pentecostalism with less Scripture than is usually the case. The Scripture text was Acts 1:8, and the argument was that power was promised, that speaking in tongues was not the be-all and end-all that some thought, and that great revival was near at hand. The little lady from America had believed God and found it come to pass, and we needed rebuke for our lack of success—"Some of you need to give up your theology because it doesn't work." And so, after the hype from Mrs. White, it was not surprising that large numbers came forward to receive the anointing, evidenced by prostration.

One must thank Howard-Browne for highlighting the failure of Pentecostalism to deliver, and its consequent need to be repeatedly hyped up. However, he leads these churches even further down the path of subjectivism. This is a most disturbing trend for the future of vital godliness. Assuredly the Spirit is being grieved.

## A BRIEF ASSESSMENT

Even if we grant that God may restore extraordinary gifts to the church, when we measure what is offered today against the Scriptures, we find but a pale reflection of the original.

### 1. The claimed spiritual gifts

At Pentecost, other human languages were spoken, but today's tongues are a kind of utterance that is not in general recognizable as human language.

The Bible teaches that edification accrues to the speaker in tongues in every case, but to the audience only if interpreted, thereby showing that the speaker always knows the meaning of his words;

**"Even if we grant that God may restore extraordinary gifts to the church, when we measure what is offered today against the Scriptures, we find but a pale reflection of the original."**

but today's supposed speaker in tongues does not know what he is saying. Hence we see that edification is redefined as a feeling or emotion and substituted for the intelligent engagement of the mind with the Word of God under the blessing of the Spirit.

Prophecy today is subject to imperfection, while healings, insofar as they are established, are generally of the functional disorder type, which we would expect to be affected by religious change. We do not need to say that God does not heal today, but we do need to reject a healing doctrine built on faulty foundations.

Scripture is plain that not all believers had the extraordinary gifts in New Testament times. Thus, it is wrong for some people today to insist that all Christians should have them.

Belief is stretched beyond all reason in the recounting and explaining of current phenomena. I'm afraid the world can see more clearly than many of those who profess to be children of light.

### 2. Two-stage theology

The assumption is that one first becomes a believer and then receives

power for witness as a second step. Thus, Howard-Browne claims to have been converted at age five and baptized in the Spirit at age eight. But the Scriptures are explicit that *whoever* believes will have as it were a fountain of living water within him; that *whoever* believes is born of the Spirit; that by Spirit-baptism we are *all* brought into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13); and that the experience of transition from old to new in the case of the apostles is not normative. In short, those born of God are not deformed at birth.

Rather than going through a crisis second stage, every believer needs to go on being filled with the Spirit; that is, he

**"The Spirit does not lead us beyond Christ but to Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."**

needs to grow in grace and knowledge, and this is to be reflected in growing maturity, particularly in relationships (Eph. 5:19ff.). The hunger for God is met not by the promise of a second empowering stage in Christian experience, but by exposure to the Word of God and growing discovery of the riches that every believer, even the simplest, has in Christ. The Spirit does not lead us *beyond* Christ but *to* Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. When we find the pearl of great price we are not called to lay it aside because there is something bigger and better on the horizon.

### 3. Attention on self

In practice, charismatic teaching puts man at the center. Its thought is really that self-fulfillment and happiness are our right or are at least to be expected. God exists for man, not man for God. The Monday meeting that I attended, which had special reference to pastors, did not involve preaching about Christ—and, indeed, there was virtually no prayer, and virtually no reverence for God in the Biblical sense. The focus was very much along the lines of self-empowerment and converting the world. And of course the idea of a shortcut to be instantly on fire for God was not far away.

### 4. Natural, not spiritual

Charismatic teaching seeks to satisfy hunger for God's presence with the crumb of physical manifestations. It does not attempt to plumb the depths of the significance of the Cross, but stresses simplicity in presenting the gospel. Usually Arminian in theology, it has a decisionist mentality which gives little room in practice for the Spirit at the point of conversion. Howard-Browne teaches the literal transference of an anointing, as literal as the *ex opere operato* theory of medieval Catholicism. Although it is stressed that God does the work, it is inevitable that "gifted" individuals become key factors and attain a certain "guru" status.

These models of "anointed" preachers become a measure of one's own inadequacy. Like some at Corinth in Paul's day, they are so rich and so full (even though they assure you that they are humble) that their devotees must often feel crushed and like failures. The desire for empowerment increases and the hope of some undeniable demonstration rises, yet it is a treadmill that one can never safely get off—unless one falls back into the arms of Christ.

As the energy drains away, as the hype wears off, what does the prostration achieve? What does the laughter amount to? Some believers will press on, encouraged in witness, because of what they consider to be a sign of God's presence; others will end up disillusioned. Assuredly Protestantism, so-called, needs a reformation, for it is fast reverting to paganism.

### 5. The witness of history

In undoubted movements of the Spirit in earlier times, physical manifestations occurred as people experienced conviction of sin and/or religious emotion, and

this is perfectly natural. The wise preachers down played the significance of these things and put all the emphasis on the spiritual conviction issuing in a changed life. Today there is not much emphasis on repentance in the Biblical sense, while the physical manifestations are actually encouraged and regarded as likely proofs of God's presence in blessing.

In short, Iain Murray is right to state in his generous review of Chevreau's book in the *Banner of Truth* (March 1995): "When weighed in the balance of history, and still more important in the balance of Scripture, there is too much in Pentecostalism which positively encourages the temporary and illusory."

### CONCLUSION

Revival is not worked up by man, and when it comes through the sovereign moving of the Spirit, it is evidenced by prostration of the spirit in true repentance, not by people lying on the floor smiling, running about on all fours like dogs, or laughing uncontrollably. The prejudice of many outside the church, that Christians are simply out for money or are people who leave their minds as they enter the front door, is all too frequently confirmed today. Let us work and pray for a change in the situation, for true reformation and revival—and certainly for the gift of discernment.

*Dr. Ward is the pastor of three congregations in Melbourne, Australia, belonging to the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia.*

*Reprinted with permission from New Horizons, February, 1996.*

The Board of the Reformed Heritage Christian School Association is inviting applications for a **full-time teacher** (grades 4-6) which will begin in August of 1997. Successful applicants must be committed to the Reformed faith, Biblical inerrancy, 6-day creation, male headship, the antithesis between Christianity and the world, and covenantal theology. Reformed Heritage Christian School is located in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Applicants should send a letter of application and resume to: Tom Nagel, 18230 Michigan Avenue, Three Rivers, MI 49093. For more information, call: 616-279-7373.

**J**ohn Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was published in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1536. In our modern age, when some Christians go around saying that God is love (that's true) but seem embarrassed about His other attributes (holiness, righteousness, little things like that), Calvin's work, taken to heart and mind, is a wonderful antidote.

Let me note just three of the challenges that Calvin's masterpiece throws out to Christians today. One concerns theology proper, a second deals with ways to glorify God through our work, and a third is wrapped up with that ugly but inescapable word *politics*.

In theology, Calvin's emphasis on God's sovereignty helped to keep the Reformation from falling back into the human-centeredness that is natural to us. Today, many Christians slide back and forth between a humanistic sense that we are lords of creation and a fatalistic sense that we are lowly worms.

## FAR WORSE AND FAR BETTER

But Calvin shows how our condition is far worse than we tend to admit to ourselves, since we are such sinners, but at the same time far better, since God does not allow our salvation to wither on the vine.

Calvin's writing shows us how to be both completely realistic and completely optimistic. Although Calvin is sometimes portrayed as a theorist only, he emphasized the importance of observation: "We ought not rack our brains about God; but rather, we should contemplate him in his works."

How, then, should we live? At what should we work?

When it comes to looking at careers and callings, Calvin's contention that God reigns everywhere and human beings can serve God in every area of life—

church, civil government, school, agriculture, art, and business — made a vital difference four centuries ago.

There was no need to be a monk or a nun to get closer to heaven; God could be glorified in normal work and family activities. Calvin's teaching led directly to what has become known as the "Protestant work ethic," because he unleashed individual initiative and encouraged entrepreneurship.

Today, some Christians still think that being a pastor or a missionary is fulltime Christian service, but that those who sit at a business desk or fix a car are far lower in God's economy. Not so: God can be glorified in all activities, even—gasp!—journalism.

Now, to politics. In various writings Calvin showed from Scripture that Christians should obey even unjust laws, except when doing so means disobeying an explicit command of God.

But what happens when local and national governments disagree? In grievous situations resistance to an unlawful state act, if led by "lesser magistrates" such as local leaders, could be a justifiable maintenance of true law.

This concept was discussed and debated for generations. A book written in 1579 by one of Calvin's followers, *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* (Vindication Against Tyrants), proclaimed a right to rebel; it was still being read in the 1760s, according to John Adams, and it helped to convince Christian colonial leaders to plunge ahead.

## EARTHLY POWER SHOULD BE LIMITED

New Englanders contended fiercely, as 17th-century minister John Cotton had said, that all power on earth should be limited; 18th-century Calvinist ministers such as

Marvin Olasky

Francis Makemie and Samuel Davies carried such doctrines into New York, Virginia and other colonies.

The rebels of 1776, of course, had mixed motives: the British called them an amalgam of "Presbyterians and smugglers." But both factions combined to criticize mainline thinkers such as English jurist Blackstone, who wrote that the power of those in authority was "transcendent and absolute...sovereign and uncontrollable." The colonists' belief in limited government impelled many to act resolutely to limit it.

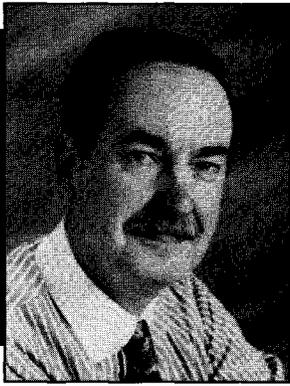
## ARROGANCE ON DISPLAY

In 1997, Christian lesser magistrates in both US federal and state capitals will have great opportunity to "just say no" to ungodly decrees concerning abortion and other matters. When will a governor and state legislature refuse to enforce federal edicts aimed at unborn children? Will US senators stand up against Supreme Court nominees who will not make a commitment to giving endangered unborn children at least as much protection as endangered animal species?

To learn more about the arrogance of humankind, tune in during the remainder of this century. To learn more about the majesty of God, turn the pages of Calvin's *Institutes*.

This article was reprinted with permission from the Nov. 1996 issue of *World*. Marvin Olasky is editor of *World*.





Cal Thomas

Three weeks ago, Selwa Roosevelt, who was Ronald Reagan's chief of protocol and is now described as a "Washington journalist" (she did cover Embassy Row parties 20 years ago), wrote a column for *The Washington Post*. In it she made a claim we have heard before, that if the Republican Party fails to abandon its pro-life position, more women will join the ranks of the Democrats and the "gender gap" will become permanent, dooming the GOP to minority status.

*New York Times* columnist Frank Rich, whose experience as that newspaper's reviewer of Broadway shows has qualified him to write farce on the op-ed page, sees Republican opposition to abortion as an attempt by conservatives to promote misogyny and bring back the bustle. Both Roosevelt and Rich suggest that abortion is the wedge that drove "moderate" women into the arms of Bill Clinton (a frightening metaphor).

One problem with Roosevelt's argument: It isn't true. According to The Roper Center's post-election survey of voters as they left polling stations around the country, the electorate remains "in a generally conservative mood." On the incendiary issue of abortion, polling revealed that an overwhelming majority in most states want at least some restrictions placed on the procedure. Kansas was a typical example of voter sentiment nationally. While only 11 percent of those polled would outlaw abortions in all cases, an additional 21 percent said they should be legal in "few" cases and 36 percent want them legal in "most" cases. That means that in Kansas, 68 percent of those surveyed support at least some limitations on abortion on demand.

The data from the Roper Poll show the voting patterns are more complex than male-female, pro-life-pro-choice and even Democrat-Republican. While

single women "are one of the most Democratic subgroups in the country, married women, especially those with children in the home, tend to be much more Republican than their single sisters.

The problem for Republicans is not their message, which was good enough to win three presidential elections and the Congress twice in a row. The problem is that the GOP lacks a messenger who can connect with women voters. With a candidate who stands squarely on conservative principles, including the social ones, Republicans can win back the 27 percent of self-described "conservatives" who voted for Clinton last November.

**"On the incendiary issue of abortion, polling revealed that an overwhelming majority in most states want at least some restrictions placed on the procedure."**

As the Roper analysis concludes: "One reason (Bob) Dole failed to get a healthier margin from conservatives and Republicans is that his message never resonated with them. When we asked voters if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, 'Bob Dole never gave me a good reason to vote for him,' 56 percent agreed. Even within his base ... of Republicans and conservatives, a large segment of these cohorts also agreed that the Dole message was not an adequate reason to support him."

Abandoning the social issues, especially abortion, contrary to what Roosevelt suggests, would doom the Republican Party again to permanent minority status because those social conservatives who now support Republicans would leave the party. There are not

enough pro-choice Republicans to take their place.

The new GOP chairman, Jim Nicholson, understands this. In an interview, he told me that there will be more, not less, discussion of social issues, including the necessity of faith in God, ethics and morality "because that's where the breakdown (of culture) occurs, especially in urban areas. It would be irresponsible for us as a party to jettison these issues."

President Clinton has prospered politically because he is like a parent who allows a child to eat his dessert instead of his vegetables, to keep the child happy. Seeking such short-term approval leads to nutritional deficiency. Clinton's pandering to voters' feelings instead of tending to society's ultimate needs garners high polling numbers. And for him, that's enough.

Republicans must show they have answers to every question raised about abortion—from who will help the woman to who will care for the child should he or she remain "unwanted." If the GOP can win that argument, then it can shift the focus to the ultimate question: Why would you want to kill a baby when everything is in place to help you and the child? That will change the dynamic of the abortion debate.

*Los Angeles Times Syndicate*

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## The Shepherd's Staff

A Column for Elders & Deacons

John R. Sittema

*Jennifer and Bill had been married for a few years. Their fights had become more intense in recent months, their "happy times" fewer and of shorter duration. They'd been attending your church for that entire time. Their background had been one of superficial religiosity, yet they had testified to a genuine experience of conversion when they had come before the elders for a profession of faith interview. They freely admitted at that time to having little knowledge of the Bible, but were sure they would grow in their knowledge over time. You've never seen them in any class, Bible study group, or care group since that time, although they do attend church quite regularly. You receive a "courtesy call" from them to inform you that they will be divorcing due to "irreconcilable differences," and, to avoid awkwardness, that they plan to attend different churches in the future. They make it clear that they consider their decision to be quite matter-of-fact, and seem quite surprised when you express genuine sadness and real concern over their decision, and insist upon a meeting with them to talk about Biblical teachings in the matter. Bill made the point most clear: "This isn't a religious or church issue. We just don't get along. It's not like its unusual or illegal or anything!"*

*Theresa couldn't understand why the elders wanted to talk to her about her habit of gossip. After all, gossip was normal conversation. Gossip columnists made millions writing about it; Oprah and all the other talk show hosts and hostesses profited from it. Besides, all her neighbors did it. "Why pick on me?" she wondered. "There's nothing wrong with innocent gossip!"*

*Frank and Francie had come to you, their elder, for pre-marital counseling. She was new in your area and had been attending your church with Frank for several months. During your preliminary questioning and conversation, Francie tells you she is a member of the Jehovah's Witness church and has been for some years. Frank interrupts with the comment that "backgrounds don't matter and church names don't matter. What matters is that we both worship God as we understand Him and that we were faithful in our respective churches." He looks at you and asks, rather confrontationally, "Right?"*

*George had asked you to meet him for breakfast. He had sounded disturbed over the phone, and looked even more distraught when you met him. "Bob," he says, "You've just got to do something about William from the Chevy shop. His language is just horrible. He curses all the time. Now, he's begun to pad his bills with all sorts of nonsense charges, and when I inquired about them he accused me of trying to welsch on my debts. I can't talk to him about these things; I'm not very good at confrontation. You're his elder. You've just got to do something about his sinning!"*

**U**sed to be that one could turn on the program "Jeopardy!" and watch otherwise intelligent and well-read people stutter and stammer at the simplest Bible questions. I was always amazed that there were bright people who didn't know the four Gospels, for example. But now it seems that such ignorance is becoming more and more characteristic of church people. A recent report in a Presbyterian magazine I saw indicated that several respondents to a church questionnaire actually thought that an epistle was the feminine counterpart to an apostle. And, while sitting in a church of my own denomination a few years back, I heard a preacher confuse Onesimus (from Philemon) and Onesiphorus (from II Tim. 1) in a sermon entitled, "Lessons on Friendship." He excused his lack of preparation with the glib statement that these were two alternate spellings of the same name. With such preaching, I guess it's no wonder that ignorance reigns among many people of the pew.

We could spend many pages examining each of the case studies with which this article began, for each presents a host of interesting and difficult pastoral issues. *But I wish to tug on a single thread that runs through all these stories: the horrible consequences of a lack of Biblical knowledge among the people of God.* In each, whether the presenting problem is divorce, gossip, the doctrinal deviations of the cult, or interpersonal incompetence, the foundational problem is the same. *These people do not know the Bible, nor how it applies to the details of their daily living.*

Reformed churches today are not immune to the crisis brought about by the lack of Scriptural knowledge among God's people. A recent "convert" to the Reformed faith, a friend of mine who is a perceptive student of the faith and of the faithful, recently expressed to me shock and dismay at this matter. He told me he had expected to find Reformed folk well-schooled and knowledgeable, although perhaps not as emotionally warm and expressive about their faith. What he found was quite different than his expectations. In his experience, he found Reformed people to be remarkably ignorant about the Bible, while deluding themselves about the level of their knowledge. Sadly, I must concur. I often find that people who are well-trained in the creeds of the Reformed faith, are, at the very same time, remarkably ignorant of Scripture and the prac-

tical implications of its teachings. Nowhere is this more evident than in the arena of the Biblically-shaped practices of interpersonal relationships, where God's people are to implement obediently what the Bible says about confronting sin in one another, calling each other to confession and repentance, and helping one another unto restoration. In my experience, Reformed people simply don't know what the Bible says about such things, nor the first thing to do about it.

## IGNORANCE BREEDS SPIRITUAL IMPOTENCE

The prophet Hosea cries, "my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge" (4:6). Ignorance of God's Word always leads to destruction because it brings about a secondary problem, spiritual impotence, which renders the believer incapable of resisting the devil's treachery in the power of the Word of God, the sword of the Spirit.

We also need not wonder about the cause of such ignorance and impotence. Although we have Bible study societies and groups in most churches, they are often not well-attended (especially the men's groups). Further, most of us have heard from our people that they are too busy these days to have the kind of regular devotional family worship times that marked the faithful in times past. And, grateful as we may be for generally good attendance at worship services in an age of declining participation, let us not become complacent about that either. In most churches, "good attendance" still means that a large group of the people neglect worship on any given Sunday. Finally, if you want to sense the depth of the crisis, take a personal poll among, say, 25 people you know in the Reformed churches. Ask them what they've been reading lately. I'd wager you'll get depressed, if not out and out ill.

## ELDERS MUST LEAD

In such times as these, allow me to suggest a simple strategy of action for local elders. Commit now to spend time in study and prayer in one month at an elder's meeting on the subject, "the knowledge of God's Word in our congregation." Under Roman numeral "I" below, I offer a suggested list of readings and assignments for the men in your eldership, to be done in preparation for the

meeting. In Roman numeral "II" I offer some brief and encouraging summaries from Scripture to focus and organize your study. Read and study the suggested passages more fully during your meeting, and discuss the practical steps you as elders can take to stimulate growth in the Word among your people. Focus, please, on action items, e.g. "What will we DO because of what this passage says?" Finally, in Roman numeral "III" I offer a few discussion-starters, intended to push you along the path of a developing pastoral strategy. Use them as you see fit.

### I In preparation

First, read Psalm 19:7ff and Psalm 119 (yes, the whole thing! The significance of this psalm is not its famous length, but what it says!). In regard to the former passage, make a list, on a legal pad, of the synonyms used for the Word of God, and another list to describe the Word's effective power and spiritual benefits. In regard to Psalm 119, identify and write down the main theme, subject, or prayer of each of the 22 sections. What does each teach us about God's Word? What does each command the believer to do?

Also, study II Timothy 3:10 — 4:5. On paper, identify the functions and benefits of the Word in the life of the church and of the believer.

### II During the meeting, discuss the implications of the following:

The Bible teaches us the urgency of the congregation knowing God's Word:

- 1) Because it is truth! (John 17:7);
- 2) Because it is God's power unto salvation (Romans 1:16-17);
- 3) Because it is profitable in Christian living (II Tim. 3:16);
- 4) Because it is necessary in order to be born again! (I Peter 1:23);
- 5) Because it is impossible to belong to Christ without belonging to His Word. (John 15:7);
- 6) Because without it, death is the result! (Amos 8:11-14).

The Bible demands that ELDERS, especially, be thoroughly versed in Bible knowledge and application skills. Consider the following (admittedly limited) specifics:

- 1) Titus 1:9 says of every elder that he "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught,

so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."

- 2) I Tim. 3:2 requires ALL elders to be able to teach, and II Tim. 2:2 links such teaching with the apostolic subject matter of the written Word.
- 3) II Tim. 3:16 through II Tim. 4:5 contain a number of explicit assignments for pastoral elders who work with the Word among the people of God. List them and identify the duties of each.
- 4) I John 4:1 requires that we be able to "test the spirits" of the age, discerning the difference between false prophets and true, i.e. Biblical prophecy. This is especially true of elders who must help God's people "test the spirits" of our age in regard to such practices and issues as marriage and divorce. To do so requires comprehensive and practical knowledge of Matt. 5:27-32, Matt. 19:1-12, I Cor. 7, Eph. 5:21ff.

### III Additional questions for discussion

- 1) What sort of Bible STUDY (as distinct from a casual devotional reading program) are you involved in currently? Have a volunteer elder describe the method he uses to analyze and study a passage of Scripture in preparation for teaching it. Use a recent example of his teaching preparation, and include references to the reference material used, the other passages studied in cross-referencing the key passage.
- 2) How can you as elders stimulate the study of the Word among the people of your congregation? Analyze what classes you have offered in the last 12 months to equip them to study. Analyze the study options you currently offer, and the percentage of the people involved in each. Analyze the preaching you hear from week to week, and discuss whether the format of it has the added benefit of teaching the people of God a method of studying Scripture, comparing Scripture with Scripture. You may wish to suggest some adaptation to accomplish this emphasis.

*Dr. Sittema is pastor of Bethel CRC in Dallas, TX and recently authored the book With a Shepherds Heart, published through The Reformed Fellowship.*

## Past Times



*W. Robert Godfrey*

The movie *Evita* opened in theaters in Argentina in February. Several theaters were attacked and a variety of protests were mounted. The critics of the movie were not objecting to the moral life of Madonna, the movie's star, or to the artistic quality of the film and its music. They were protesting the movie's somewhat negative portrayal of Eva Peron.

Eva Peron was the wife of Argentine president and dictator, Juan Peron. She was first lady just six years, until her death in 1952 at the age of 33. Over forty years later she still inspires the passions of many in Argentina. She also inspired a successful American composer to write a musical about her, a musical that was a hit both on the stage and as a movie. What about *Evita* evokes such passion long after her death? And, more importantly, what does our interest in *Evita* tell us about our culture and ourselves?

Eva Peron was born in 1919, illegitimate and poor. In every way she grew up far from power and from the cultural life of Buenos Aires. She moved to the capital and used her meager talents and several alliances with influential men to develop a modest career in acting. Then she met Juan Peron, a powerful figure in the Argentine military and government, and became his mistress in 1944.

*Evita* soon became an important figure in the Peronist movement. She became a fiery and effective orator, captivating sometimes more than a million listeners as she spoke from the balcony of the palace called the Casa Rosada. She became a symbol of success and hope as she dressed in the elegance of Christian Dior, covered herself with jewels and bleached her hair to a golden tone. She came to have great influence on Juan Peron signaled by their marriage in 1945, to which all his advisers objected.

Yet there was more to *Evita*. She was not just another wife or another speaker for a fascist dictator. She used her power to help the poor. In 1949 she officially inaugurated her Foundation for the needy. Often she was in her office for seventeen hours a day meeting with poor people and granting their requests. In the first half of 1951 she "gave away twenty-five thousand houses and almost three million packages containing medicine, furniture, clothing, bicycles and toys." She loved to give sewing machines (reminiscent of her mother who kept the family fed by sewing when *Evita* was young) and dentures (to enhance the dignity of the poor). She always gave more than was asked saying that she wanted to create dissatisfaction among the poor so that they would strive to escape their plight.

*Evita's* economics may not have been good and the Peronists may have harmed the Argentine economy in a variety of ways, but her desire to help the poor was genuine. Something of that spirit is captured in the musical when *Evita* sings, "Don't cry for me Argentina for I am ordinary, unimportant and undeserving of such attention - unless we all are. I think we all are."

Her concern for the poor led many of them to call her Santa *Evita*, St. *Evita*. Many to this day have pictures of her in their homes next to a picture of the Virgin Mary. In the two years after her death, the Vatican received around 40,000 letters from Argentines claiming that they had experienced miracles through the intercession of *Evita* and asking the pope to declare her a saint.<sup>2</sup>

Was *Evita* saint or monster? Was she the mother of the poor or ruthless politician? She was probably something of each. In that way she exemplifies something of the mystery of fallen humanity

- motivated and acting in ways that are an unfathomable combination of factors.

Still we may ask if the *Evita* of history as well as the *Evita* of the musical can tell us anything about the culture in which we live. *Evita*, I fear, stands as an icon of the quick fix to which our culture is so devoted - if there is a problem, there must be a way to solve it immediately. In politics the quick fix may be revolution or a constitutional amendment to balance the budget. In economics it may be gifts to the poor or going on the gold standard. In education it may be giving teachers tests or lowering class size. In medicine it may be millions for AIDS research or requiring photo ID's for teen smokers. Now some of these ideas may be good, but they may also reflect an outlook on life that says problems are simple and can be simply and quickly solved. In fact, however, many problems are very complex and can be effected, if at all, only by long and difficult solutions.

Those looking for the quick fix often seek a leader who promises it. *Evita* was such a leader - speaking powerfully and helping the poor. But if she had lived more than her six years as first lady would her efforts have been revealed as surface, not really helping in a deep, long-lasting way?

Political life in America seems diseased with the idea of the quick fix. Problems with Social Security, Medicare and budget deficits get sound-bite solutions from politicians running for office. But the politicians speak this way because the electorate does not want to hear about the real extent of the difficulties or to make hard decisions to move toward improvement.

For those devoted to the quick fix the demand is meaning through emotion. Life becomes theater and catharsis is salvation. To gather on the Plaza de Mayo with *Evita* and a million others brings meaning to life. To feel the wild enthusiasm of the impassioned speaker and the crowds response, to laugh and cry there, gives hope and meaning. Or does it really?

The quick fix of emotion seems to dominate our society from the plague of drugs to the "benign" joy of sports for endless hours. Sports are theater where nothing really important happens, but emotions are stimulated.

The life of the church has also been greatly affected by the notion of the quick fix. Church services more and

more share the character of the theater. The leader is responsible not just to lead worship, but to direct emotions. From holy laughter to sentimental tears worship becomes the catharsis of comedy or tragedy. The service itself and its emotions become the meaning of the church and one is left wondering, "Where is God?" Some believe that they feel the powerful presence of God in the excitement of the church/theater, but is that the living God of holiness and order or just self-induced enthusiasm?

Such worship - increasingly undisciplined and emotional - has the effect of undermining the disciplines of the Christian life generally. A careful study of the Bible and the catechism seems dull compared to a class on self-esteem. The disciplines of prayer and devotion seem flat compared to singing choruses. The life-long struggle against sin and toward holiness is not as exciting as meetings in a stadium. Yet life has many problems and responsibilities that require steadiness, constancy and commitment. The church will not really help people in either the short-term or the long-term if it reinforces the idea that transient emotions and a quick fix are the Christian way. Living with disappointment, temptation, sickness and all the vagaries of life requires strength that does not come from oft-stimulated emotions, but from the Biblical disciplines of the Christian life.

Evita may have been for the poor a briefly encouraging comet in the Argentine heavens and *Evita* the musical may provide a theatrical catharsis for its audience. But the profound solutions to the problems of a culture must be sought elsewhere. The failure of *Evita* is captured in the words of the musical: "But who is this Santa Evita?...She had her moments; she had some style...You let down your people, Evita. You were supposed to have been immortal - that's all they wanted - but in the end you could not deliver." Only Jesus Christ is immortal and only the truth and disciplines of His church give real hope and help to us and to the generations to come.

## FOOTNOTES

1 Tomas Eloy Martinez, *Santa Evita*, New York (Knopf), 1997, p. 56.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

**Dr. Godfrey** is Professor of Church History and President of Westminster Seminary in CA.



# What We Believe

Cornelis P. Vanema

One of the characteristic features of dispensationalism is its insistence upon a "literal" reading of the Bible. In the history of dispensationalism, many of its advocates have alleged that alternative millennial views reflect a *low* view of the Scripture's authority because they do not follow a literal hermeneutic.<sup>1</sup> Especially when it comes to the prophecies of the Bible that relate to the earthly people of God, Israel, dispensationalists insist that these be read literally. Correspondingly, it is often argued that alternative readings of these prophecies undermine the authority of the Bible by an illegitimate "spiritualizing" of them and their promises.

This emphasis upon a literal hermeneutic is closely linked to the distinction drawn within dispensationalism between God's earthly people, Israel, and His heavenly people, the church. The prophecies and promises of the Bible that relate to Israel *must correspond to the nature of Israel as a distinct people*. Because Israel is a national and ethnic entity with a literal, concrete identity and history, whatever Scriptural promises refer to her must be equally literal and concrete. Thus, if the language of the Scriptures is to be rightly interpreted, it must always be taken in its literal meaning, unless this proves to be impossible.

## THE HERMENEUTIC OF "LITERALISM"

In order to evaluate the dispensational hermeneutic of "literalism," it is necessary to define more precisely what is meant by a "literal" reading of the Bible. Opinions vary among dispensationalists themselves as to the nature of a literal reading.

It is interesting to observe that, even in the case of Scofield and the classic

form of dispensationalism, the emphasis upon a literal hermeneutic was somewhat qualified. According to Scofield, the *historical* books of the Bible are not only literally true but often also of "allegorical" or "spiritual" significance. A historical event, like the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael, is literally true, but it may also have further meaning and significance (compare Gal. 4:23-31). However, in the case of the *prophetic* books of the Bible, Scofield insisted that

**"It is interesting to observe that, even in the case of Scofield and the classic form of dispensationalism, the emphasis upon a literal hermeneutic was somewhat qualified."**

in them "we reach the ground of *absolute literalness*. Figures are often found in the prophecies, but the figure invariably has a literal fulfillment. *Not one instance* exists of a 'spiritual' or figurative fulfillment of prophecy...Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel always Israel, Zion always Zion...Prophecies may never be spiritualized, but are always literal."<sup>2</sup>

This statement represents a strong literalist hermeneutic: all of the prophecies in the Scripture are said to have a literal fulfillment. Whenever these prophecies are not interpreted literally, but figuratively, Scofield would claim that this necessarily distorts their meaning. However, he also concedes, at least with respect to historical passages, that the events recorded may be interpreted also in terms of their spiritual meaning.

Among later dispensationalist authors, further attempts have been made to define what is meant by a literal

hermeneutic. Two representative definitions have been given by Charles C. Ryrie in his *Dispensationalism Today*<sup>3</sup> and Paul Lee Tan in his *The Interpretation of Prophecy*.<sup>4</sup>

Ryrie gives the following account of the dispensationalist position:

Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation. This means interpretation which gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking.<sup>5</sup>

In his exposition of this claim, Ryrie goes on to argue that this emphasis upon the "normal usage" is really the equivalent of a grammatical and historical interpretation of the text. It takes words in their "normal," "plain" or "ordinary" sense.

Tan's definition of this hermeneutic is quite similar:

To "interpret" means to explain the original sense of a speaker or writer. To interpret "literally" means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to the normal, customary, and proper usages of words and language. Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language.<sup>6</sup>

Like Ryrie, Tan seems to want to argue that a literal reading of the biblical texts is equivalent to a grammatical-historical reading, a reading that simply takes the words and language of the text in their ordinary, common and plain meaning.

Despite the variations among even these definitions of a literal reading, then, the primary claim of dispensationalism is that the biblical texts be read in their plain, ordinary, or literal sense, especially when these texts speak of God's earthly people, Israel, and when they make promises respecting Israel. Though the presence of non-literal and figurative language is not completely denied — Scofield even acknowledges the presence of "spiritualizing" interpretations of historical events — the first rule for any reading of a biblical text is that it be read in the most literal way possible.

## EVALUATING THE HERMENEUTIC OF "LITERALISM"

Undoubtedly, there is a great deal more that could be said, and there is even a considerable diversity among dispensationalist authors, on the subject of a literal reading of the Bible. Indeed, the history of dispensationalism could well be written from the point of view of its hermeneutic. Differences in the understanding and application of the hermeneutic of literalism are evident in the differences between the earliest and classic forms of dispensationalism, and more recent revisionist and progressive forms. However, we will take these definitions as a fair representation of the predominant view among dispensationalists.

### The "literal" meaning of "literal"

There are two problems that immediately stand out, when considering these typical definitions of a literal hermeneutic.

The first problem is the tacit acknowledgment that a literal reading of the text need not exclude a "spiritual" meaning or "figurative" and "symbolical" language in the biblical texts. In the original position of Scofield himself, a somewhat arbitrary distinction is made between the historical and prophetic texts in the Bible. This distinction is made in order to allow, in the case of historical texts, that they may have a literal and spiritual meaning. Though Scofield maintains that this is never possible in the case of prophetic texts, there seems to be no reason why this could not be the case, when it is acknowledged to be possible in the case of historical texts. Why can historical texts that speak of "Jerusalem" have a spiritual meaning, while prophetic texts that speak of "Jerusalem" must invariably have a literal meaning? Furthermore, both Ryrie and Tan also acknowledge that the "literal" reading of a text may not exclude the presence often of figurative or symbolical words and phrases. The presence of such "non-literal" elements indicates that it is somewhat simplistic and misleading to insist that texts always be read "literally."

But there is a *second* and even more fundamental problem. In these definitions of a literal hermeneutic, the attempt is made to identify this hermeneutic with a *grammatical-historical reading* of the text. And this grammatical-historical reading is in turn identified with a reading that takes words and the language in their "normal" or "plain" meaning. The problem with this approach is that it begs the question of what "literal," "normal," or "plain" mean! This can be illustrated by considering the "literal" meaning of "literal."

Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, it has been commonplace to speak of a grammatical-historical reading of the biblical texts. A grammatical-historical reading of the biblical texts is one which takes the words, phrases, syntax and context of the biblical texts seriously (hence, "grammatical"). A grammatical-historical reading of the texts is also one which takes the historical setting and timing of the texts into careful consideration (hence, "historical"). This approach was set over against the common Medieval approach to the biblical texts which distinguished, in addition to the literal or historical meaning of a text, three further levels of meaning: the tropological or moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical (ultimate or eschatological) sense.<sup>7</sup> Against this Medieval doctrine of a fourfold-sense of the biblical texts, the Reformers spoke of the *sensus literalis*, the literal sense of the text. When a text is read according to the rules of language and grammar, and when the historical circumstances pertinent to the text are properly appreciated, the text's literal and only meaning will be determined.<sup>8</sup>

However, this grammatical-historical hermeneutic understood the language of *sensus literalis* in the strict, literal sense of these words. The language, *sensus literalis*, is a Latin expression which means "the sense of/according to the letter." That is to say, the texts are to be read as letters, as language, and therefore according to the rules that ordinarily and appropriately apply to the usages and forms of language. This means, therefore, that if the text is poetry, it should be read, "according to the letter," as poetry. If the text is historical narrative, recounting events that occurred in a particular time and place, it is to be read, "according to the letter," as histori-

cal narrative. If the text uses forms of speech — symbols, figures, metaphor, simile, comparison and hyperbole—it is to be read, “according to the letter,” treating such forms in the appropriate manner. The basic idea is that, when the biblical texts are reading in terms of their literal meaning, they are read *in accordance with all of the appropriate rules and norms that are “according to the letter.”*

## CONCLUSION

In terms of the claims of dispensationalism, therefore, the literal, plain or normal reading of a text really begs the question entirely as to what that sense is. To say that the “literal” meaning of biblical prophecy and promises must always be the most plain, concrete and obvious meaning, is to *prejudge* the meaning of these texts before actually reading them “according to the letter,” that is, according to the rules that obtain for the kind of language being used.

To illustrate more concretely the illegitimacy of dispensationalism’s understanding of a literal hermeneutic, I would like in my next article to consider three problem areas in its application: first, the relation between Old Testament prophecy or promise and its New Testament fulfillment; second, the subject of biblical typology; and third, the oft-repeated claim that non-dispensationalists illegitimately “spiritualize” the biblical promises regarding the new earth. Each of these problem areas shows how unworkable and unhelpful it is to say that a “literal” hermeneutic is one which looks for the “plain” or “normal” sense of the biblical texts.

*A complete set of footnotes next month.*

## Book Review

**IN THE FACE OF GOD** by Michael Horton. Dallas, TX: Word Pub., 1996. Pp xvi + 241. \$18.99. Reviewed by **Steven Van Eck**.

Michael Horton tackles the topic of spirituality with the vigor approaching a Luther tacking his 95 Theses on Wittenburg’s door. He takes up the cudgel against pop culture’s invasion into the church and the decline of a Biblical informed spirituality. Horton suggests the search for the sacred has ended up with finding more paganism in Christianity than one may want to admit. He demonstrates clearly that culture influences the church so frequently that, sometimes, we can no longer tell the difference. We see it when the church adopts a marketing mentality, substitutes a pop psychology for the gospel, or simply caters to felt needs rather than straightforwardly proclaiming the historic gospel. The result is a spirituality which rejects “confession of sin and dependence upon God alone for complete redemption.”

People want to “experience” God but not through the revelation of God’s Word. A burning concern in the average church does not ask if we are aware of our depravity and sin in the presence of a holy God. NO! We must all go home with feelings of ecstasy, jubilant “worship” and a service that “just makes me feel closer to God.” Horton exposes the gnostic origins of this fallacy which has displaced Biblical worship. Horton illustrates how God has been replaced by the god of self who is worshiped by means of liturgy and sermons which satisfy the new god. Pointing out the gnostic affinity in Pentecostal circles for a “creedless” Christ, Horton also shows the extremist views which fully embody ancient gnostic and pagan views and, yet, are all justified under the mesmerizing rubric of a “personal relationship with Jesus.” Yes, mysticism lives! and is embodied in the thought of those who claim the label “evangelical,” but are NOT.

Having strayed from orthodoxy in many points, it is not surprising to see in the church the forms of ancient heresy now hooded and heralded as the wisdom of men for “growing closer to

God.” Impatient with old-fashioned doctrine, the clamor today is for more of “what works” or “what Jesus means to me” rather than for a focus on the objective character of God whose saving work in Christ is understood and received by faith alone. Indeed, as Horton notes, the church is moving further away from the self-revealing God in Christ revealed in the gospel. The trend of the spirit of the age is observed in theology, hymns, liturgy and worship “styles.” “Style of worship” is the new buzz-word which really means: what pleases me, or what I want. The question of what Scripture declares on this issue is considered not to be pertinent. Horton deftly analyzes this point and observes, “the contemporary worship style, in which music plays an important part, is now viewed by many as the only means of grace.” He correctly diagnoses the problem many face today where the Word and Sacrament are no longer the means through which God speaks to His people with the promise of grace. Somehow the spiritual technicians today have been able to shift the focus of worship from God to the celebrant—the god within each of us. Gnostic inroads have all but paved over the trail that leads the sinner to the Christ of Calvary plainly mapped out in the Scripture.

Errors of the Perfectionist stripe enshrine the Calvinistic churches which once were faithful to classic orthodoxy. Inroads by classically mystical views are not met with protest, but those people who are genuinely orthodox are met with howling protests because they have transgressed the sacred commandment of “thou shalt be tolerant.” For the sake of tolerance the historic Christ of Scripture is being bundled and sold to people by claimants of “higher knowledge” and offers of spiritual “well-being.” But, the sale is invalid.

Relationships take precedence over redemptive grace in the new spirituality! After all, the *individual* is most important. Awash with the influence of Romanticism which has cast a glaucoma-like pale over evangelicalism, the church increasingly is in danger of serving up a gospel devoid of the Christ of Calvary.

A return to apostolic preaching of God's Good News is what Horton calls for. If we preach *relationships*, then we substitute another gospel for the revealed Truth and it will, in the end, bring death, not life and holiness in Christ.

Horton illumines the discussion of the aspects of worship with Reformational insight and cites the contemporary church for its shift from a focus on the glory and majesty of God to the participant's "experience" of worship which, of course, *must* be stimulating and celebrative. Little wonder that today's church wants "up-beat music" rather than stodgy old (and theology-filled) hymns. Even the Holy Spirit serves the cause by displacing the centrality of Christ to give way to the experiences of recipients of the Spirit who seek and receive signs and wonders and repetitively prattle about the Lord "speaking to them." What was learned from the Reformers has been fully obscured in some places by Holiness, Keswick and Pentecostal theology in which ancient mysticism can clearly be traced.

As astutely as he points out these gnostic tendencies, Horton clearly points us to the "Word of the cross" through which genuine spirituality is realized. This intimacy with God is attained only in the saving work of the Incarnate Son of God whose gospel is declared in Scripture. We find this fellowship with God only through forgiveness granted to those who by faith are united to Christ in His death, burial and resurrection.

Horton's book deserves a place next to the classics of this century — *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer and an earlier work, *Christianity and Liberalism* by J. Gresham Machen. However, the message of these earlier classics, particularly Machen's, has not been listened to by many as was also true of Martin Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will* or Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Perhaps it would be better to liken Horton's *In the Face of God* to Luther's 95 Theses posted on Wittenberg's door which sparked a Reformation. If Horton's work were similarly acted upon, we would have a "rediscovery" of the Reformation which was a period in which the church once again was able to seek the face of God in Jesus Christ as He is declared in the Word of God. This is needed today.

**QUITO, Ecuador (EP)** — Guiquita Waewae, leader of the small band of Waodani tribespeople who killed five missionaries on January 8, 1956, died Feb. 11 in Ecuador's Amazonian jungle. He was 80. Waewae led his people to leave their violent lifestyle and embrace the Christian faith. He urged his people not to be known as Aucas (meaning "savage"), but by their own name Waodani, which means "the people."

**LONDON, England (EP)** — Attendance at Church of England Sunday services dropped 36,000 between 1994 and 1995 — the steepest decline in two decades. If that decline continues, total regular attendance will drop below one million by the end of the year. Church figures are down in many categories, including number of baptisms, and number of Easter and Christmas communions.

**BOSTON, Mass. (EP)** — A federal appeals court has ruled that HIV-positive people who show no symptoms of AIDS are covered by the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. The US Court of Appeals for the First Circuit in Boston ruled March 5 that a dentist violated the law when he refused to treat an HIV-positive woman in his office. Dr. Randon Bragdon argued that his longstanding practice was to treat patients with infectious diseases in a hospital operating room rather than in his office, and said that treating the woman in his office posed a health and safety risk. The court rejected his argument, saying he failed to cite "a single confirmed instance of HIV transmission to a dentist."

**AUSTIN, Tex. (EP)** — The Internal Revenue Service seized the house of missing atheist leader Madalyn Murray O'Hair Feb. 18 to pay \$250,000 in back taxes. O'Hair, whose 1962 lawsuit led the Supreme Court to ban state-sponsored school prayer, disappeared in late 1995. The IRS plans to auction the house and its contents to cover outstanding taxes from 1986, 1987 and 1988. One of O'Hair's sons and an adopted daughter are also missing, as are hundreds of thousands of dollars in funds from atheist organizations controlled by O'Hair.

**DALLAS, Tex. (EP)** — A Texas postal worker was arrested for running an Internet pornography service that brought in \$500,000 a month from subscribers eager to access its 150,000-photo library. The *Dallas Morning News* reported that Bentley Frank Ives faces a felony charge of possession of child pornography and a misdemeanor charge of promoting obscene material.

**TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (EP)** — A former pastor who killed an abortionist and his assistant outside a Pensacola abortion clinic will die for the crime, Florida's highest court ruled March 6. Defrocked minister Paul Hill faces the electric chair for the murders of Dr. John Britton and driver James Barrett on June 29, 1994. During his trial Hill acted as his own attorney, called no witnesses, and offered no evidence in his defense. In the appeal, the Florida Supreme Court rejected arguments that Hill should not have been allowed to defend himself. The court also ruled that the trial judge was right to forbid the use of the "necessity defense," under which Hill would have argued that his actions were necessary to save human lives — the lives of unborn children.