

Reformation  
& Revival



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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 6, Number 1 • Winter 1997

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## *Book Reviews*

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### *Holy Laughter and the Toronto Blessing: An Investigative Report*

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James A. Beverly

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan (1995).

184 pages, paper, \$10.99.

The intent of the author, professor of theology and ethics at the Ontario Theological Seminary in Toronto, is, as he states, “to provide some objective analysis of the heated debate both about the Toronto Blessing and Rodney Howard-Browne” (p. 7), the center figure in this perceived-by-some fulfillment of Joel 2 and the final restoration at the end times. The book is, therefore, an attempt to describe and evaluate the validity of the movement while providing the necessary historical information to make sense of it in context.

The strengths of the book are many. First, the author is to be highly commended for his objectivity; his careful and painstaking fact-gathering has allowed him to be neither commendatory to the point of misperception nor inaccurately denunciatory. In this area, Beverly has written for us not only a book on a controversial topic, but a model of proper research technique. From my biased viewpoint, it is an objective report, just as the title implies. Second, the author is to be commended for setting the Toronto Blessing in the larger context of the Vineyard Movement and the Kansas City Prophets Movement. Though the Kansas City Movement did not begin as a segment of the Vineyard Movement, being incorporated somewhat into it, the Toronto Blessing should be seen as an outgrowth of it in the Airport Vineyard in the city on January 20, 1994. The book, in this light, is a good history of the Vineyard Movement in the 1990s. Third, the author provides a very accurate

description of the "Toronto meetings" themselves in such a way that the reader can understand the nature of the controversial movement, both its structure and key leaders. Fourth, I found Beverly courageous in stating both the commendatory components of the "Blessing" as well as his, at times, painfully clear disappointments in it. Often criticism of the professedly divinely inspired has brought such ridicule that it has caused more tender folk to be less frank; on this score Beverly is a brave man. His zeal for righteousness; I believe, after reading the book several times and having thought about it even more, is due to the sincerity and integrity with which he undertook the task as a seeker of truth. Fifth, the bibliographic materials in the book prove excellent resources for further study. Additional materials have come from a variety of presses since this publication; yet, this is a good place to start.

The book begins with a brief description of the origins of the movement in the teachings of the South African charismatic, Rodney Howard-Browne, who came to the States in 1987, having been in the Rhema Bible Church in Johannesburg. He then isolates five interpretive options: a revivalist eschatological view, the most optimistic one; a renewalist noneschatological view; a mixed-blessing view; a negative view (it is not a blessing nor a revival or renewal at all); and a negative Antichrist view (it is of the Devil). Then follows a section on what the author feels are the criteria whereby a religious movement is to be judged, a ten-point list. In essence, Beverly feels that the movement passes the test on five points only; thus he advocates a centrist "mixed blessing view." The movement is to be commended for such things as for both its Trinitarian and Christocentric purity, its moral integrity, its embrace of classic orthodoxy, and its care for both the social and spiritual implications of the Gospel. Beverly has serious concerns about the other five tests; he questions its biblical purity, its understanding of

spirituality which tolerates simultaneously pride and perceptions of superiority over others in the body of Christ, its intolerance of diverse opinion, its prophetic component, and its anti-intellectual spirit.

Apart from how an individual might weigh a particular test of validity, I found two shortcomings in the book. First, though it was not his intent, it would have been helpful to consider the movement through the lens of its use of the Bible. Is the central text of the movement 1 Corinthians 1:20? In other words, Beverly's treatment is historical and theological, not exegetical. Second, while I am appreciative that Beverly sees five interpretive approaches to the movement, I found myself uncomfortable with the fourth view and did not fit, at times, in the third (I felt the squeeze particularly on page 104). I therefore conclude that the third view represents a spectrum of options, though finding good in bad and bad in good is not terribly incisive or insightful at times.

Stepping away from the book to look at the movement since the book's publication, several have offered their views on the movement. Clark H. Pinnock, who has ventured a positive evaluation, has cited such evidence as the desperate need in the churches for renewal, the fear of missing something that could be profitable, and the fact that physical manifestations have been evident in past movements of God ("Can't Tell God How and Where To Work," *Canadian Baptist* [March 1995], 9-10). Dennis Pollock has pointed to the joy that the phenomena have brought into the churches ("Laughter, Swoonings, and Other Strange Things," *Lamplighter* 15 [October 1994], 2-3). Beverly has cited elsewhere such positive kudos for the movement as its positive renewalist impact, its evangelistic fervor, its spirit of joyful celebration, and its essential evangelical theology ("Toronto's Mixed Blessing," *Christianity Today* 39 [September 11, 1995], 23-27). Stridently negative evalua-

tions of the movement have been offered by Hank Hanegraaf of the Christian Research Institute (*Christianity in Crisis*, 1993), John MacArthur (*Restless Faith* [particularly "Laughing Till It Hurts," 153-69], 1994), and in the Spiritual Counterfeits Project's *SPC Newsletter* (see "Holy Laughter or Strong Delusion," [19:2], pp. 1,4-5,8,13). Beverly provides (85-101) a summary of these negative concerns in a rather insightful manner.

As to my personal evaluation of the movement, I have no doubt that good can be found in it, so I must be, de facto, in the "mixed blessing" view of the whole thing, though I have deep concerns and even graver doubts. As support for my concerns, I have to cite only the changing perspective of the official Vineyard line on it particularly as seen in John Wimber. He is not one to minimize the blessings of charismatic phenomena; yet, he and the Vineyard Movement have withdrawn from it, citing its controversial animalistic manifestations (i.e., barking and roaring) as biblically unjustifiable while calling for a greater emphasis on Scripture (James A. Beverly, "Vineyard Severs Ties with 'Toronto Blessing' Church," *Christianity Today* 40 [January 8, 1996], 66).

My doubts arise from the following criticisms. First, the ease with which this movement, as well as the Vineyard and the Kansas City Movement, invokes the blessing of the Holy Spirit with such quickness, often forgetting the record of their own past history of admitted spiritual barrenness; the Spirit is used as a synonym for a solicitation to blind trust (see Beverly, pp. 41, 46-47).

Second, I find myself in hearty agreement with Beverly's assessment that the claim of miracles is not carefully monitored (Beverly believes that their understanding of signs and wonders is biblically flawed [pp. 157-58]).

Third, I am troubled by the absence and centrality of the preaching of the Word of God in "Blessing" meetings.

Though the meetings are structured or segmented into a time of praise (an hour), of testimony (30 minutes), of preaching (30 minutes to an hour), and ministry (2-4 hours), the emphasis is upon the last segment. Further, preaching is often storytelling and anecdotal; an emphasis on the explanation of the Bible at a serious level is absent (see Beverly's comments, p. 153). This emphasis seems to be out of keeping with Romans 10:14.

Fourth, Beverly's judgment that the movement, instead of having an elevated view of the Spirit, has a reductionistic, truncated view of the Deity is valid (153-55). To say that all the Holy Spirit is doing in Toronto is at the Airport Vineyard is hardly biblical; it is the opposite of spiritual insight and maturity. Admittedly, the problem of spiritual myopia is a widespread malady.

Fifth, while the gifts of the Spirit were given for the common good of the church in the assembly at worship, I found a profound emphasis on privatized religious experience and self-indulgence, not the edification of the body of the Savior. In this characteristic, the movement is more culture-affirming in a post-modern world than the otherness of biblical Christianity.

Sixth, a characteristic of the "blessing" phenomena, whether it be in barking, roaring, laughter, or an unconscious state, in which the possessor of them is without personal control, is unbiblical. Nowhere in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is one given the impression that the recipient of a gift or manifestation of God is not in full control of that gift.

Seventh, the phenomena of being slain in the Spirit have no precedent biblically. It seems an error to equate what Isaiah, Paul, and John experienced with the silliness of hilarity. The comparison with what the biblical characters saw (i.e., the glorious personage of Christ) with "carpet time, roaring, and laughter" is unwarranted.

Eighth, not only is preaching de-emphasized in the

“blessing,” but so also is the centrality of Christ (see Beverly, pp. 159-60). The centrality of the written Word and the living Word is a criterion of orthodoxy.

Ninth, the stress on laughter as an evidence of the manifestation of the Spirit’s presence is not biblical. Assuming Warren Smith to be correct in this (“Holy Laughter or Strong Delusion,” SPC Newsletter [19:2], pp. 5,8), the word “laughter,” which is not a synonym for joy, occurs forty times in the Bible, thirty-four times in the Old Testament and only six in the New Testament. Of the forty Old Testament references, twenty-two refer to scornful laughter; it is not a positive phenomena. Of the remaining eighteen, seven refer to Abraham and Sarah’s unbelief. Of the remaining eleven Old Testament texts, Solomon states that laughter is mad (Eccl. 2:2), that sorrow is better (7:3-4), that laughter is for the fool (7:6), and that a feast and wine is the time for it (10:19). The least you can say is that laughter is not the evidence of spiritual maturity in the Old Testament. Of the several references in the New Testament, it is mentioned in the context of warning (Luke 6:21,25 and James 4:9); Jesus pronounces a woe against laughter in Luke 6:25. Joy and blessedness in the Holy Scriptures are not the same as laughter. The former are settled states of the inner reflective spirit of one in Christ; the latter is a superficial, dangerous state indicative of the surrender of the mental faculties and an uncontrolled state.

Beverly’s advice is this: “To those who bark like a dog in worship, one might ask: ‘Would they not do more spiritual good to themselves reading the Gospel of John?’” (p. 160).

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### ***Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God***

Claude V. King and Henry T. Blackaby  
Nashville, Tennessee: Lifeway, 1990.  
224 pages, paper, \$10.95.

This recent workbook study by two Southern Baptists has become very popular in many evangelical circles. In my own denomination the book prompted one leader to praise it as changing the way in which we “do church.” I have been encouraged to make use of it by my denomination’s leadership, as well as by those in my church who have used the study. The overall purpose of the study seems to be very well-intentioned, as it seeks to help Christians expect to see God working in their lives, and to teach them how to know and do the will of God in their lives and in their churches.

The authors are to be commended for their desire to help people see God at work in their lives and to be a part of that work. They seem to have a sincere desire to help make God real to believers. Faith must certainly be experiential, as we are to both glorify God *and* to enjoy Him forever. Notably, there is also a stated commitment to the authority of the Scriptures (p. 9).

All of this aside, there is a foundational flaw that moves through the study. There is not a clear definition of what is meant by the “will of God.” The line between God’s revealed will in the Scriptures and His specific will in a particular circumstance (i.e., Providence) is blurred. One gets the impression that our *understanding* of God’s specific will for a situation can be (if their steps are followed) just as authoritative as God’s revealed will in the Scriptures. This leads me to the following concerns about this study.

**A Deficient Understanding of the Sufficiency of Scripture**

In our day when the sufficiency of Scripture is being attacked, the phrase, "God spoke to me" should be one that we labor to define and use with great caution. It is not clear what is meant by that phrase, and many use it to claim special revelation from God. King and Blackaby use many similar phrases regarding God speaking, which for them mean extrabiblical words that are *de facto* on par with Scripture. This comes out clearly when they admonish us that we "Do not take a word from God lightly" (p. 37), meaning an extrabiblical word for direction in life. Their admonishment is admirable, but their premise is false (i.e., God speaks extrabiblical words). Their premise is based upon their seven "realities" of experiencing God, of which number four states: "God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways." Here prayer, circumstances and the church are placed on equal footing with Scripture, if they are but guided by Scripture. This is the same rationale used by those who hold that new prophecies are valid and authoritative if they simply do not contradict Scripture. A helpful corrective here is the article, "Does God Speak Today Apart From the Bible?" by Fowler White in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Moody, 1996).

The rest of the study goes on to detail God "speaking," mainly through prayer, circumstances, and the church. There is a fundamental confusion here of the difference between God *speaking* authoritatively, finally, and sufficiently, and God *guiding* His people in specific situations. The biblical position seems to be that God *speaks* by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, *period*. However, the concern of the Scriptures is not to tell a Christian to go left or right at a fork in the road. The primary concern is with aligning our lives with God's revealed will in the Scriptures, with regard to faith, holiness and putting sin to death. These other con-

cerns about God's will in the details of life actually fall into place as we first concern ourselves with what we *know* God has said (Matt. 6:33).

**An Over-Concern with God's Mystical Leading**

In the authors' desire to help us see and experience God at work in our world, they have missed what is to be our primary concern. Specifically this is to be continually asking, "What say the Scriptures, and how shall we then live?" (*semper reformanda*). Their primary concern is with God's mystical leading in "fork-in-the-road" decisions, rather than with God's revealed requirements for righteousness. The scriptural concern is for holiness before these other experiences of God. The authors seem to be ignoring the "foghorn" of the written Word which they themselves often blow, and are listening in every other place with a stethoscope for the "whisper" of the voice of God.

Does God guide through impressions? Absolutely, if we mean the impressions that His Spirit makes upon us with His Word in convincing, convicting and comforting. Does He guide in specific situations? Most certainly! In fact the biblical position is that God is guiding *everything*. I am not to be overly concerned with whether I should go left or right (if there is no ethical or scriptural obligation). The question is rather, "Am I right with God, as I go right or left?" I would encourage readers to examine a previous article in this journal by Jim Elliff on being "Led By the Spirit" (Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 1994).

**A Deficient Understanding of Sanctification**

The authors assume too much with regard to our sanctified impressions and reasonings about God's workings. They state that "When my relationship [with God] is as it ought to be, I will always be in fellowship with the Father" (p. 49). Aside from this statement being a truism, the real

problem is that my relationship with God (in this life) will never be as it *ought* to be. This means that I must have great humility regarding my pronouncements of God's guidance. For instance, it is better to say, "As best as I can tell, this is where God is leading me to go to school," rather than, "God has spoken to me and told me to go to this school." We must always leave room for sin's corrupting effects upon our impressions and our reasonings of God's specific will for the choices and circumstances of life. This was painfully brought home recently when a pastor in my denomination claimed healing for his wife who then died a short time after the claim was made.

#### **A False Assertion That God Always Reveals His Providence**

Based upon Amos 3:7, the authors assert that "Whenever God gets ready to do something, He always reveals to a person or His people what He is going to do" (p. 21). But surely this passage in Amos deals with God's speaking *uniquely* through His prophets regarding His judgment, not His providential guidance in the lives of believers. This passage in its context is meant to tell us that God always warns before He strikes. However, God clearly does *not* always reveal what He is doing or even about to do. His providential plan is often a mystery until He does it! The authors seem to view God as working in "spurts" rather than working continually in and through all things for His glory and our good. There is also an underlying assumption here that God is still revealing Himself today just as He did through the prophets and the apostles. But unless the canon is open, He is not speaking new revelations, though His Word still speaks loudly, clearly, and sufficiently.

#### **A Deficient Understanding of How God Is Known**

The authors state that "knowing God comes only through experience" (p. 57). The problem is that we all do not have

the same "experience" with God, but we do have the same Word from God that tells us clearly who He is and what He requires of us. We come to know God not through some burning bush experience, but rather through *faith* in what God has told us about Himself in His written Word. This faith is "experienced" as obedience flows from that faith. As Jesus said, "If you love Me you will obey My commands." For the authors, experience, not faith, has become the foundation of our relationship with God. The reality of the Christian life is that I often do not "experience" God, but I am called to trust God—especially when I do not experience Him! The authors also state that "I know God more intimately as He reveals Himself to me through my experiences with Him" (p. 57). But is this really the biblical pattern for knowing God? Where is the New Testament pattern for knowing God through our experiences (however this may be defined) with Him? The New Testament pattern for knowing God is through Jesus Christ as He is revealed in the written Word as it is *read, preached, taught, believed, and lived*—all in the power of the Spirit. The New Testament writers do not call us to experience seeking as the foundation of our relationship with God. God does not first say, "Experience Me," but rather, "Trust Me." But we do know that true faith will sooner or later produce an "experience" with God.

#### **Imprecise or Simply Wrong Theological Statements**

In one of the author's anecdotes we are told that "No one will ask after spiritual matters unless God is at work in his life. When you see someone seeking God or asking about spiritual matters, you are seeing God at work" (p. 26). Always? Are there not many who have a surface interest in spiritual matters, and yet in the end have no desire for Christ as Lord? Did not many follow Jesus for a time, only to walk away? Simple interest in God or spiritual matters is not a guarantee that God is drawing a particular person.

However, we still ought to follow up any interest an unbeliever may show in God and make no judgments as to whether God is behind their interest.

The authors also state, "With God working through that servant, he or she can do anything God can do. Wow! Unlimited potential!" (p. 17). Really? Anything? Clearly this is not so. Surely God can do anything He desires to do through us, but that does not mean that I can do anything God can do. I cannot know everything, I cannot be everywhere at one time, I cannot uphold all things, nor can I forgive sins, just to name a few. The authors would likely agree with my objections, but we should expect more precise language from men in such prominent teaching roles as theirs. Many of their statements are contradicted by other, more biblical, statements which they make, and one is left wondering which to believe. In fact, I found the entire study a frequent mixture of sound biblical counsel and the not-so-sound.

### Conclusion

We certainly ought to be a people who expect great things from God and attempt great things for God. We should always plead with God to rend the heavens and come down and do awesome things that we *did not expect* (Isa. 64:3), and to be always taking the kingdom by force (Matt. 11:12). Yet, as J. I. Packer asked at a recent denominational meeting I attended, "What does your church need most?" His answer was, "Your personal holiness." God is shouting to the church to "Be holy as I am holy," but we are so hard of hearing that this is only a muddled whisper in our ears.

This study was for me like a lifeline that was meant for a good purpose, but it is tangled in so many knots that I would have to spend too much time untangling it to make much use of it.

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### *Two Cities, Two Loves*

James Montgomery Boice

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996.

279 pages, cloth, \$19.95.

The esteemed author and pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, Dr. James Montgomery Boice, has written more than thirty books, most of which are expositional commentaries of various sorts. Several have been based upon clearly delineated doctrinal themes. All have been carefully framed by the the lens of Scripture. This present book is no exception, though strictly speaking it is not an expositional commentary, except in several chapters which are based directly upon Old Testament material.

Boice is profoundly alarmed. He believes the modern evangelical church has sold itself out to modernity at several crucial points. This is nowhere more apparent, he believes, than regarding how we have fought the "culture wars" of the last several decades. Calls to "reclaim America's soul" or to "take back America" are commonplace. The general assumption behind all of these movements is that America was once a Christian nation, a concept infrequently explained and often ill-defined. With this approach Christians and churches are *directly* urged to lobby Washington, to work for the recovery of traditional values (?) and to elect godly Christian leaders (this is usually determined by some kind of litmus test for moral and political correctness). But is this the right way for the church to respond to an increasingly man-centered culture?

Boice believes that several parallels should be seen between our times and those of the fifth century when the Roman Empire collapsed (410 A.D.). When that ancient culture came to an agonizing terminus, what were Christians urged to do? As Rome fell into barbarian hands, what hap-

pened to the church? She had been far too closely aligned with the forces of Rome for her own good. Now she was very quickly reduced to being a minor component in a society that no longer respected her as part of the alliance of government and church. The response that, to some extent at least, rescued the church from a false turn at this point came from St. Augustine. To Augustine's views, expressed in his classic, *The City of God*, Boice turns our attention in his book, suggesting that once again we must understand history as the outworking of one great universal principle—there are two rival and different cities, formed by two completely different loves. These two cities are the earthly city, which is defined best by love of self and contempt towards God, and the city of God, its rival, which is defined best by love for God, even to the contempt of the self.

Boice shows how these two cities move along different paths toward two completely different ends. Yet, while this happens in history, the citizens of the city of God must live their lives *within* the city of man. They must live in this city with integrity, and they should strive to be renewing agents. This was the model Augustine gave, and Boice is convinced that it is the right model for the church again.

In analyzing where the church is in the present milieu Boice shockingly suggests that "Evangelicals may be the most worldly people in America" today (p. 28). He adds, "Evangelical churches are growing, but they no longer have anything distinct to offer. They are popular in many places, but the prophetic, challenging voice of the Christian preacher and teacher, which has been the glory and strength of the church in all past ages, has been lost" (p. 28). What is needed, if this is a true appraisal of things in the 1990s? Boice answers succinctly and powerfully:

What is needed is a generation of Christians who know the Bible well enough and obey it radically enough to be a new

people of new society to stand over against the world and its system. To recall Augustine, they must become a people who "love God, even to the contempt of self" (p. 29).

This dire analysis is too strong for the happy-clappy church growth gurus of our time. Yet the numbers these same gurus give us do not lie. Fifty-one percent of American evangelicals say that "there is no absolute truth." And eighty percent plus say that in the matter of salvation "God helps those who help themselves." (This error is the Pelagian heresy of Augustine's time. Evangelicals have a doctrine of man, that in effect says, "Be all you can be!" The Bible's doctrine is, "Just as I am, without one plea!")

But what does Boice mean by this reference to modern barbarians? He tells us the dictionary meaning of barbarian is "a person who lacks artistic and literary culture." This definition, he adds, is not adequate for our concerns (p. 29). He suggests the following definition: "A barbarian is a person who lives by power and for pleasure rather than by and for principle" (p. 29). If this is true then not only are the barbarians leading our government and teaching our children but they develop and lead many of our modern seminaries, serve on the boards of our churches, and even preach in our pulpits! As Pogo, the wise old opossum cartoon character, noted years ago, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

After Boice opens up the subject of the collapse of our culture he shows how this subject of two humanities works itself out in biblical narrative in the stories of Nineveh and Enoch, Babylon and Jerusalem, and Daniel living as God's man within Babylon. In each of these chapters Boice uses his expository style to good effect.

In the longest section of the book the two cities of our day are carefully analyzed and strikingly contrasted. Boice suggests that the pattern example for how we ought to live in faith in the midst of a hostile culture is to be seen in

Nehemiah. Here we have a godly man serving in the court of a pagan leader, living outside of the blessings of the holy commonwealth, yet still serving God faithfully, without compromise.

Jim Boice argues, cogently, I believe, that we have a misplaced confidence in politics among evangelicals in our day. I found it sadly amusing, in this same vein, that the National Association of Evangelicals, prior to the recent national elections, sent a mailing telling its constituents that the Bible spoke of Christian obligation to true citizenship. The letter suggested that the church, its leadership and its members needed to get involved in this true biblical citizenship by registering to vote. The unspoken implication in all of this, and the theme of the preponderance of literature that was mailed before the election, was that only one political party was really worthy of the Christian citizen's vote. And by all means the Christian must vote or be disobedient to God. I pondered this blatant political move and the references to citizenship by reminding myself that the last time I checked my concordance the only clear reference to *citizenship* in the New Testament had nothing to do with citizenship in the American political state. But what am I to do? Am I a citizen of this present city of man? Drop out and have nothing to do with this present order? Mobilize opinion for my views of the "Christian" position on certain issues? Boice offers five wise guidelines that he calls "balanced statements to keep in mind." These are:

1) Church and state must be separate from each other, in the sense that the church must not control national policy and the state must neither establish nor limit free exercise of religion. But this does not mean that the state is independent of God or that either church or state is unanswerable to the other for how it carries out its functions.

2) Christians are free to seek elected office, and some should be encouraged to do so. But elected officials do not

have to be Christians to be effective leaders, and merely being a Christian does not in itself qualify one for any office.

3) The Bible gives Christians guidelines for approaching national and social problems, and Christians will seek to be consistently biblical in all their thoughts and actions. But the Bible does not necessarily give specific answers to problems, and reasoning from a biblical principle to a specific public policy must be done carefully.

4) In attempting to advance a specific proposal Christians must depend on moral persuasion, asking God through prayer to give their reasoning favor with those having different points of view. They must not retreat from this high calling to tactics of mere naked pressure or coercion.

5) Christians must think, work and pray effectively, trying always to place their specific programs within the framework of an overall Christian world-and-life view. But they must also strive no less personally to model the reality suggested (pp. 234-36).

Boice concludes this fine book by developing a strategy based consciously upon the words of Micah 6:8: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." He concludes:

The world is waiting . . . for Christians to be Christians. Most people do not want to hear about Christianity. They do not want to be reconciled to God. That is part of what it means to be in an unsaved condition. But they do want you to be what you profess to be as a Christian, and they expect to see good come from it. The world looks to Christians for more than we credit it for (p. 241).

Editor

***Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church***

Donald S. Whitney  
 Chicago: Moody, 1996.  
 216 pages, paper, \$10.99.

Can you show me from the New Testament that I'm supposed to officially join anything? . . . If I come and worship as often as the members . . . if I fellowship with these believers as much as anyone else, if I profit from the teaching and other ministries of the church, and if I actively demonstrate love for my brothers and sisters . . . why should I join the church (p. 43)?

When these questions were posed to Dr. Donald Whitney by a new Christian, he realized that his typical pastoral responses were nothing more than unchallenged assumptions. Pastors, myself included, meet similar objections ever more frequently. This young Christian's modern attitudes about church membership extend well beyond himself, gaining popularity in today's self-centered and consumer-driven society. Because we live in an era of unprecedented individualism, we must be able to deal soundly with challenges regarding baptism, membership, worship, giving, and preaching.

Prompted by these questions, Whitney did thorough research looking for biblical answers. The result is an eminently readable resource for the church in general, and a useful reference for the pastor in particular. This book makes a full and convincing case for practicing the corporate disciplines within a local church.

The reader acquainted with the author's books will recognize the format of *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*. Whitney's method is definitively Puritan. Each chapter title is a question: "Why Go to Church?", "Why Seek Baptism in

the Church?", "Why Listen to Preaching in the Church?", "Why Fellowship with the Church?" The question posed is then answered systematically with complete annotation and accompanying Scripture index. But, beware: Whitney doesn't allow the reader the comfort of abstract answers. The final portion of each chapter points truth directly at the reader's life: "What are you going to do now that you know the truth?"

Because other books on this subject tend to be denominationally committed, their audience is more narrowly defined. While never compromising a sound biblical and theological foundation, Whitney avoids nonessential sectarian issues and thereby gives a useful gift to a larger Christian audience.

*Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* is altogether a powerful declaration of the importance of the local church. Many believers, plagued by an allergic reaction to the word "commitment," will be spiritually challenged.

Whitney does this candidly without representing the church as hypoallergenic; he doesn't deny local church problems. But he does declare that "with all its faults, because of Christ there is no more to enjoy in the church than the world dreams of" (p. 13). In his first book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Whitney brought personal disciplines front and center, but he reminded us that they were not to be practiced in isolation from the local church. Pastors will be delighted to find seed here for a series of messages on the church. Who knows? They might even cure some allergy-sufferers.

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*How the Irish Saved Civilization*

Thomas Cahill

New York: Doubleday, 1995.

246 pages, cloth, \$22.50.

This book has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list as a cloth title, and now currently finds its way onto the same list as a paperback. Don't let this put you off. Buy this wonderful book, and by all means read it. I guarantee you that you will have trouble putting it down once you begin reading. It is one of the most genuinely interesting books of the year, especially if you do not have a very high opinion of Irish culture and history. If you are Irish I assure you that you will be even harder to live with after you have read Cahill! (You might even want to see the recent Irish movie, *Michael Collins*. You will watch it with some measure of respect and sadness if you better understand the centuries of Irish oppression.)

The author of this engaging and refreshing book is director of religious publishing at Doubleday. Cahill studied at Union Theological Seminary, New York, and is a distinguished historical and religious scholar. In addition to these impressive credentials he writes exceptionally well; thus we have the rarity of a bestseller which is an exceptional work of popular scholarship at the same time.

From the fall of Rome in 410 A.D. to the rise of Charlemagne (the "dark ages"), serious learning, impressive culture and European scholarship virtually vanished. Many of the great written works of the earlier Greek and Roman eras were destroyed. All might have been lost, as Cahill shows, except for the heroic role of the Irish. Here devout men and women of sincere Christian faith, following the lead of one of the great Christians of all ages, Patricius (or as he came to be known, St. Patrick), gave themselves to both preservation

and propagation of serious learning and faith. Cahill shows how these Irish scholars not only conserved civilization but helped to shape the medieval mind and thus Western culture and the church.

I will guess that most readers of this publication have almost no knowledge of Ireland or of the Christian history associated with it. Furthermore, I suspect that most readers know even less about the godly St. Patrick, a man of true faith and consistent piety. Cahill, in several chapters of marvelously written prose, introduces you to Patricius. He became, after a lengthy stay in Gaul, the first missionary bishop in Christian history. Cahill writes, regarding this unmistakable fact:

In truth, even Paul, the great missionary apostle, though he endured all the miseries of classical travel for the sake of the Gospel, never himself ventured beyond the Greco-Roman Ecumene. Thomas, presumed apostle to India, though traveling perhaps beyond the official Ecumene, would have proselytized an ancient civilization with many ties to the Greek world. So Patrick was really a first—the first missionary to barbarians beyond the reach of Roman law. The step he took was as bold as Columbus's, and a thousand times more humane. He himself was aware of its radical nature. "The Gospel," he reminded his accusers late in his life, "has been preached to the point beyond which there is no one"—nothing but the ocean. Nor was he blind to his dangers, for even in his last years "every day I am ready to be murdered, betrayed, enslaved—whatever may come my way. But I am not afraid of any of these things, because of the promises of heaven; for I have put myself in the hands of God Almighty" (p. 108).

The success of St. Patrick's mission is almost beyond belief. Cahill notes that "In his last years, he could probably

look out over an Ireland transformed by his teaching” (p. 109). His labors ended the Irish slave trade and stopped virtually all violence, including murder and intertribal warfare. His pattern of life and teaching influenced and “reminded the Irish that the virtues of lifelong faithfulness, courage, and generosity were actually attainable by ordinary human beings and that the sword was not the only instrument for structuring a society” (p. 110). Sadly, during Patrick’s lifetime, the Britons were already making war against the Irish. Cahill notes that as rising petty kings rushed in to fill the power vacuum left by Roman departure they attacked peaceful Ireland, seeking to carve out new domains for their rule.

When thousands of newly baptized Irish Christians were captured and taken back to Britain, Patrick wrote an impassioned appeal for their return. He wrote to British Christians as brothers in Christ. Sadly, Christians in Britain ignored his appeal, laughing at him in derision. During this episode we see something of the heart of Patrick when he wrote:

In sadness and grief, shall I cry aloud. O most lovely and loving brethren and sons whom I have begotten in Christ (I cannot number them), what shall I do for you? I am not worthy to come to the aid of either God or men. The wickedness of the wicked has prevailed against us. We are become as it were strangers. Can it be that they do not believe that we have received one baptism or that we have one God and Father? Is it a shameful thing in their eyes that we have been born in Ireland? (p. 112).

These fifth-century British Christians found his behavior so unlike their own that they were forced to create stories about him that called into question his godly character. By this time the assumption of most was that Roman and Christian were virtually synonymous. (Thus, what has a

bishop in Ireland to say to “real” Christians in Britain? Snobbery and separation are *not* new in the church.)

What is so amazing about Patrick is that during the middle thirty years of the fifth century, while the old Roman Empire was coming apart, Ireland was being transformed through Patrick’s faithful missionary efforts! Listen to Cahill once again:

Once the emperor (i.e., Constantine) had conferred on Christianity its position of privilege, most Romans had little difficulty in reading this sign of the times for what it was and grasping that their own best interest lay in church membership. Though it would be cynical and ahistorical to conclude that conversions to Christianity in late antiquity were made only for the sake of political advancement or social convenience, it would be naive to imagine that Christianity swept the empire only because of its evident superiority. . . . from the time of Constantine, the vast majority of Christian converts were fairly superficial people. . . .

Patrick, unable to offer worldly improvement to prospective converts, had to find a way of connecting his message to their deepest concerns. It was a challenge that no one had had to face since the days when Christianity was new and women and slaves had flocked to it as a way of life that raised their status and dignity as human beings. In order to rediscover the amazing connection that Patrick made between the Gospel story and Irish life, we need to delve into the consciousness of the Irish people at this singular hinge in their history (pp. 125-26).

What Patrick did was to explain the triune God and the Cross in such a way as to demonstrate the love of God powerfully. He declared that no further human sacrifices were needed from the Irish, except the sacrifice of themselves

spiritually in service to God. Why? God had sent His own Son, and His once-for-all death on the cross satisfied God fully. This story, as Cahill notes, met the deepest needs of the Irish in a remarkable way. (It still does meet the deepest needs of people if we will but find ways to preach this same Gospel with power and clarity in our own culture.) As Cahill notes, the text “Let this [same] mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” became the guiding light of the church in Ireland. The results were magnificent, as the remainder of this wonderful book demonstrates.

Cahill concludes by showing what we can learn from the Irish, and from the fifth century in particular. He wants to offer hope in the midst of despair at the end of the twentieth century. Don’t let his more liberal theological notion of the brotherhood of all mankind keep you from the significant truth that he offers about a truly Christian response to our times. He observes that history might well be divided between the Romans and the Catholics. The Romans are rich and powerful, the Catholics (i.e., those with a universal view of the world from God’s perspective) affirm that God alone will provide and that God is over all. Cahill concludes:

The twenty-first century, prophesied Malraux, will be spiritual or it will not be. If our civilization is to be saved—forget about our civilization, which, as Patrick would say, may pass “in a moment like a cloud or smoke that is scattered by the wind”—if we are to be saved, it will not be by Romans but by saints (p. 218).

I quarrel with Cahill’s more liberal theological conclusion only slightly. Our civilization is passing away, maybe sooner than later. The response to this fall must be spiritual. Just look at all the spiritual answers being offered in our own time. This is becoming even more increasingly obvious with every day. The question for evangelicals is really what *kind*

of spirituality will frame the future of what is left when this present civilization crumbles? Will it be a spirituality shaped by modernity and Roman power, or will it be a spirituality more like that of St. Patrick? Will it be a spirituality that is Catholic and outward looking, leaning upon God alone, believing that in the word of the Cross is true power, or will it be the spirituality of compromised and worldly churches which give back to the culture the very things that are destroying it? That really is the question for evangelical leaders to ponder, and Cahill will help them do it.

Editor

### *How Shall We Reach Them?*

Michael Green and Alister McGrath

Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995.

235 pages, paper, \$9.99.

**M**y grandfather says that to be successful in the United States, all a preacher needs is a distinguished title and a British accent. Whatever the reason, British theologians and writers are hot, and two of the hottest have hurried off this book intended to help more common North American folk, like you and me, get a handle on what it means to be evangelistic in a pluralistic, “celebrate-diversity” kind of world.

Right from the start, one realizes that this book will be a helpful tool, even if not a classic. Green and McGrath have made up their minds to get apologetics out of the ethereal world of esoteric vocabulary and endless debates about method and onto the streets. This is an apologetics manual written in the vernacular and designed to do something which seems rarely to come up in more academic volumes—lead people to faith in Christ.

The book’s subtitle reads “Defending and Communicating

the Christian Faith to Nonbelievers.” Green and McGrath combine their various experiences to give a balanced view of both the typical nonbeliever’s post-modern composition and the believer’s appropriate, biblical sense of responsibility and expectation toward evangelistic ministry.

Alister McGrath’s, insight into Western culture is stimulating and profound. And for a theologian, he seems remarkably approachable. He evidences this concern for everyman in his down-to-earth description of the evangelistic impulse:

Evangelism rests on the basic human desire to want to share the good things of life. We do not evangelize to dominate people, to score points off them, or to assert our superiority to them. If those motivations have been there in the past, then the church needs to repent of them. The real reason for evangelism is generosity—the basic human desire to share something precious and satisfying with those who matter to us. It is like one beggar telling another where to find bread. . . . “Taste and see that the Lord is good,” wrote the Psalmist. (p. 5)

The point of apologetics, McGrath and Green suggest, is to build bridges to people untouched by the Gospel. It is the job of “setting out the attractiveness of Christian faith” and “clearing away the obstacles on a person’s road to faith.” Without succumbing to a mechanistic view of evangelism, both authors paint the optimistic picture of Christian witness as normal and exciting.

McGrath’s analytical skills come forcefully into view as he provides perspectives on the kinds of people around us. His categories are thankfully neither filled with psychobabble nor too vague to be helpful. As if standing on a busy corner in London or Vancouver, he describes the different people who might pass by and gives helpful hints on devel-

oping relationships and conversations with them.

Some of his practical advice includes developing a thirty-second summary presentation of the Gospel, learning to explain the attractiveness of the Gospel well *and accurately*, and cultivating useful culture-watching habits.

Michael Green draws on his pastoral experience to submit two particularly helpful chapters on dealing with people’s objections to the Gospel. He says most skeptics have hangups in one or more of four categories. They have cultural baggage which prejudices them against “traditional” religion; they have hard memories of small injustices at the hands of Christians; they have intellectual objections; or they are tied up emotionally in the demands of Christ and the justice of God.

Green also offers a scathing review of popular pluralism, exposing its logical inconsistencies and showing the sheer superiority of Christian thinking over the current establishment. It is ammunition that anyone dealing with pseudointellectual babybusters ought to have in his cartridge belt.

Maybe the most attractive feature of the book is the large section submitted by others whose ministries are directed toward particular groups of non-Christians. Included are chapters on building bridges to New Agers, Hindus and other Easterners, Muslims, and Jews. For many of us who live in metropolitan areas, these influences are normal daily course, and the people who attach their devotion to them are our neighbors.

Before you rush out and buy this book for everyone involved in evangelistic ministry in your church, a couple of caveats are in order.

First, regarding the book itself. It annoyed me to be tutored in the basic motivations for evangelism, as if the anticipated readers were some version of the “frozen chosen.” Then I realized that both authors are in the Church of England and are writing to people in mainline denomina-

tions, many of whom haven't had a thing to say about the Gospel for decades.

Apart from that, the book was written from lectures that Green and McGrath delivered together, but the style and flow do not always hang together well. In the end, *How Shall We Reach Them?* feels much more like a systems manual than the authors probably intended.

Given the schematic feel of the book, the authors or editors could have done much more with the bibliography. They criticize academic apologists for being too esoteric, but all they offer is books written for academia. And it is not noted.

The second warning has to do with Michael Green himself. Though solidly orthodox in many respects, he has fallen in with a fashionable group, the most notable of whom is John Stott, who deny the immortality of those whom God will judge and condemn to the lake of fire. The annihilationist view of judgment does not come up in this book, though it factors prominently other places (see Green's 1990 work, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*).

Unlike other, more cautious, evangelicals who hold this view, however, Green extends himself even further in the direction of quasi-universalists like Clark Pinnock and Sir Norman Anderson. At one point in *Evangelism Through the Local Church* he posits the likelihood that God will save some people who have never heard the Gospel of Christ (pp. 76-77).

A pastor or ministry leader might therefore want to do some reading before recommending Green, without any qualifications, to his people.

Given the lack of street-level help for enthusiastic evangelists, however, *How Shall We Reach Them?* deserves a look. And maybe the look will encourage more books on evangelizing this modern world.

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