

Session to Session

... promoting the strengthening and
growth of Biblical Presbyterianism
in America ...

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Our Agenda: God's Glory

by John Wood

In his 1990 New Year's address to the people of Czechoslovakia, President Vaclav Havel made an intriguing observation. "We are living," he said, "in a decayed moral environment. We have become morally ill because we have become accustomed to saying one thing and thinking another." Note that he did not say "saying one thing and *doing* another," something children seem universally to note of their parents, but "saying one thing and *thinking* another," something far more insidious, as being hidden from any eyes by God's.

The cause in Czechoslovakia, of course, was fear of state terrorism if one should speak one's mind. But what is it that encourages this sort of cognitive dissonance, this most insidious form of hypocrisy within a Christian life, where we say one thing while thinking another? "I love you, Lord," springs more easily from our lips than from our hearts, and we speak and sing the liturgy of worship while in our minds we think, "I can't believe she's with him. . . . Why did they pick that hymn? . . . Did I lock the house?" We all do it. It's part of the struggle of flesh and spirit.

But are such moments mere distractions or mental habits? Are they an exception to the way we think or the rule? Reveries from which we shake ourselves awake, or the way we spend our time? Do we share with Paul the convictions that burst forth in doxology, convictions that possessed his heart and mind, and were incarnate in his ministry? The final words of his letter to the Romans are easier to say than think, but they are a prescription for moral and spiritual health, if only they possess our hearts and minds, and find expression in our ministries.

First, are you convinced that the Church's worship is the celebration of God? Paul performs an act of worship as he ascribes praise and glory to God: "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel . . . to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Romans 16:25, 27).

Our problem today is that too often worship is not planned with an eye to what God wants but to what people want. Marketing methods rather than biblical theology determine the shape of the liturgy. Of course, worship is to be in the language of the people; but rather than seeking to present the enduring message in contemporary language, are we not tending to begin with what is winsome and entertaining, and then slip in the gospel? One is reminded of Martin Marty's critique of

Robert Schuller's *Self-Esteem*: "Is not this a philosophy which makes room for God more than a theology that incorporates psychology?" So too we might ask of much contemporary church life designed to be "user-friendly" whether it is not entertainment which makes room for a gospel presentation more than biblical worship in a contemporary idiom.

Michael Cromartie, reviewing Nathan O. Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity*, observes that following the nineteenth-century revivals,

There was a downside to this religious fervor among the masses. The response of congregations to this anti-authoritarian, anti-centralist, and anti-elitist message began to dictate the contours of the message being proclaimed. A radical dependence on and sensitivity to the audience, caused the values of the listeners to shape the content of the message. . . . This "audience centered" approach was the beginning of a revolution in American religious life, the effects of which can still be seen today across the entire theological landscape. From codependency theories, couched in theological language, to pleas that the church be "market driven" (defined by one leader recently as, "focusing on what people are looking for from a ministry") to reformulations of a gospel of self-esteem, the

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Tongues Today? Part IV

by O. Palmer Robertson

New Testament tongues were a sign. They served as a signal from God concerning the fulfillment of particular prophecies about a dramatic change in the direction of God's procedure for working in the world.

God does not often surprise his people with something totally unexpected. He prepares them so that they can understand what he is doing. This rudimentary principle about the way of God's working in the world applies to the manifestation of the gift of tongues in New Testament times. Prophecy and fulfillment, preparation and realization work together for the edification and enlightenment of God's people.

An elder in a church outside Chicago does stunt-flying for a hobby. Taking a ride with a stunt pilot can be great fun, provided you are properly prepared.

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messages of many current popular religious leaders are dictated more by their attempt to be "receptor oriented" than by their critique of the *Zeitgeist*.

An amusing illustration of where this can lead is found in Richard John Neuhaus's *Freedom for Ministry*:

The worship folder at a recent church conference read: "dropping our defenses and pretenses we come together to encounter one another in the vulnerable love that acknowledges our interdependence in exposing the needs of our full humanity." No thanks, one is inclined to respond. . . . My defenses and pretenses have been painstakingly constructed over the years and are still very fragile. In exceptional circumstances of intimacy, I lower them with care; but to recklessly drop them at the bidding of people I met only that day smacks of promiscuity that is downright indecent. As to "exposing the needs of my full humanity," I am not sure what it means but I think there is a law against doing it in public places. But of course, the main reason this is not an invitation to worship at all, is that worship chiefly has to do not with encountering one another but with encountering God.

Such problems are not unique to American churches, and are thus less an expression of democratization than of the refusal of man to bow the knee to God—even in worship, where he pretends to do just that. Martyn Lloyd-Jones silenced such market-driven suggestions at Westminster Chapel in London, with the modest proposal that the church announce that he would preach the next Sunday in a bathing suit. C. S. Lewis made the racier suggestion that if the sole purpose is drawing a crowd, we should simply make striptease part of the liturgy.

Am I simply being irascible? Am I not denying the principle of God's stooping down in the Incarnation to meet us where we are? Not at all. The Incarnation meets our need, it does not pander to our rebellion.

Romans 16:25-27, the doxological conclusion of this powerful epistle, is the closing of a theological loop that begins in chapter one, where Paul tells us that the essence of our problem is that we have turned our backs on God's glory and chosen instead to worship the creature. This letter is written to show us how God has, through Christ, made it possible for us again to worship and serve him. If the Christian Church designs worship according to marketing rather than biblical principles, it has again turned its back on God's glory.

People will worship—we must worship. The question is, whom will we worship? Athletes? Rock stars? Watch the film of an audience at a football game or rock concert. You will see people "lost in wonder, love and praise." They are worshipping. The Church must be the place where people go, not to be entertained, but to worship God.

Secondly, are you convinced that the Church's witness is the proclamation of Jesus Christ? The way that God establishes us in right relation to him is through the good news of Jesus

Christ. "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (Rom. 16:25). There are many good things that would seduce us away from the gospel. We are deeply concerned about moral issues of the day such as abortion and pornography. The temptation is to let these become the themes of our preaching. But then we are merely preaching morality which cannot save. We may convince people to reform their behavior, but it will not change their hearts and make them right with God. Only the gospel can do that. And if we don't preach it, who will? Abortion and infanticide existed in the first century, but the New Testament does not directly address them because its focus is not upon penultimate, but upon ultimate issues.

Are we then to be silent? No. The Christian is to be active and vocal in the marketplace. But the Church is not the marketplace. It does not exist to do everything; it is not the family or the society. The Church is the worshipping community that proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

Again, many of us have strong political convictions. The danger is of abusing our position to push our political views, again losing sight of Christ. We have witnessed the trivialization of mainline churches that became religious house organs for the Democratic Party. May God save the PCA from the trivialization of becoming a house organ of the Republican Party. We are not a political action group. We are the Church of Jesus Christ.

In the university, the mouths of Christians have often been closed by an appeal to the criterion of verifiability—the idea that if you cannot at least falsify a proposition, that proposition is meaningless. So all metaphysical talk loses credibility as a topic of rational discourse. Never mind that Wittgenstein showed early on that the criterion fails its own test. Everyone needs a starting point and the criterion is that starting point, an article of faith in most academic circles. So forget about theology, don't bother with apologetics. It is all, they say, meaningless because unprovable.

John Wisdom's haunting parable of the invisible gardener is frequently invoked to frighten Christians into silence. But Wisdom, true to his name, points our way in an essay entitled, "The Logic of God." He invites us to propose for discussion, not classical arguments for the existence of God, but rather the statement, "In Jesus God was incarnate." His argument runs like this:

The words, "In Nero God was incarnate" are not without any meaning; one who utters them makes a statement, he makes a statement which is absurd and *against* all reason and therefore *not* beyond the scope of reason. Now if a statement is not beyond the scope of reason then any logically parallel statement is also not beyond the scope of reason. . . . The statement, "In Jesus God was incarnate," is logically parallel to "In Nero God was incarnate." The latter we noticed is not beyond the scope of reason. Therefore the statement "In Jesus God was incarnate" is not beyond the scope of reason.

The problem of the invisible gardener is answered by the incarnation. In the fullness of time, the gardener entered the garden, and there were witnesses. Whatever Professor Wisdom's interest in all of this, his is an invaluable reminder that our message is of Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, are you convinced that the Church's work should have as its aim the obedience of faith among all nations? This gospel which establishes us is "revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him" (Rom. 16:26).

Statistics can be made to say almost anything. When we see a growing church that proclaims the gospel we say, "It just goes to show that if you faithfully proclaim the doctrines of grace, God will honor his word in church growth." If, however, we see a growing church that denies the gospel, we say, "It just goes to show that people are so spiritually hungry that even if you give them the watered-down gruel of humanism, they'll pack the place out."

But if we have in view a little struggling church that is faithful to the gospel, we say, "It just goes to show that 'No servant is greater than his master.' As Jesus said, 'If they persecuted me they will persecute you.' If you faithfully proclaim God's word you should not expect to be popular." And finally, if we are speaking of a struggling little Unitarian church, we say, "Well, it just goes to show that if you don't preach the Word, no one will come." We don't know what we're talking about. We don't know what God is doing.

But statistics do say something. Luke uses them unabashedly in Acts. Paul was heart-broken if people were not saved and he moved on to the next town, even as our Lord had instructed his disciples to do. If you have been ministering fruitlessly your heart should be broken. Jesus said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8). No matter how correct your theology, how biblical your view of worship, if your ministry is fruitless, where is the proof of God's owning your ministry?

I am not suggesting that if you are not involved in a large church you are not faithful. Most of us will never serve in large churches. The godliest minister I have ever known is my father. He never pastored a large church. *Leadership* magazine never sought him out for an interview. The Fuller Church Growth people don't know his name. But as a child, I watched him and my dear mother daily plead with God for the salvation of their children, the congregation, their neighborhood, and the world. God's glory in the salvation of his people was their passion, and though they never saw what some of us have been blessed to see, every year they stood back and rejoiced in those whom God had drawn to himself through them. There were never so many, that they became proud, but always enough that they knew God was in it.

Perhaps the most moving moment for me at any General Assembly was a few years ago in Knoxville, when James Kennedy told us what he had been doing since his arrival. He had shared the gospel with the taxi driver who drove him from

the airport to his hotel, with the maid who cleaned his room, with waitresses and others.

I believe that same gospel and have been trained in Kennedy's own Evangelism Explosion. But as he spoke I realized with growing consternation that although I'd been in town as long as he, I'd not told anyone about Jesus. Why? Because it wasn't on my mind. I wasn't thinking about it as I came to the General Assembly. I had a different agenda.

"We have become morally ill, because we have become accustomed to saying one thing and thinking another." Paul's corrective is to have as our agenda God's glory, convinced that the Church's worship is the celebration of God, the Church's witness is the proclamation of Christ, and the Church's work is aimed at the obedience of faith among all the nations.

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Want to go for a little spin? Sure, let's go up! Just don't surprise me with any unexpected maneuvers. Okay, let's start with a little loop. But be prepared. Your skin will feel as though it's about to pull right through the skeletal outline of your face.

Because you have been forewarned, you aren't bothered at all by the inside loop and the outside loop. You've been prepared. In a much more reasonable fashion, God prepares his people for what's coming in the realm of redemption. He doesn't startle his people with surprises.

God did not suddenly introduce the phenomenon of tongues as something new on the day of Pentecost. Old Testament prophecies set the stage for the tongues that were to come.

You know of Peter's reference to the prophecy of Joel. When the twelve apostles began to speak in languages they had never studied, Peter indicated that they were fulfilling Joel's prophecy. Joel had prepared God's people for that moment by stating that in the last days God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. He prophesied that sons and daughters would *speak in tongues*.

Is that what Joel said? No, that is not what Joel said. What did Joel say? He said that sons and daughters would *prophesy*. Yet Pentecost is clearly characterized as the great day for tongues-speaking.

Has Peter perverted Scripture? Has he twisted Joel's prophecy to make it say what he wanted to hear? No, Peter has not twisted Scripture. But his application of Joel's prophecy to "tongues" points to a basic understanding about the nature of tongues. Tongues must be regarded as a subset of prophecy.

So Joel's prediction about prophecy in the last days gave some preparation for the phenomenon of tongues. From Peter's application of Joel's words on the day of Pentecost, it

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becomes clear that tongues are a form of prophecy.
But even more significant for understanding the basic nature of tongues is the citation from Isaiah by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 14:21. His Old Testament quotation actually refers to "other tongues."
"Tongues" are mentioned explicitly in the Old Testament no less than three times. Three different authors in three different books of the Old Testament explicitly prophesy about tongues. In each case, the Old Testament scriptures indicate that tongues are a covenantal curse for Israel.
Paul quotes one of these prophecies about tongues in

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I Corinthians 14:20-22. He says:
Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. [verse 20]
The people of Corinth were being childish about their use of the gift of tongues. They were using this gift from God as though it were a toy. They didn't care whether or not others understood the meaning of the tongues.
Paul says, "Stop being childish." A gift of God may be used in a childish way. Paul urges the Corinthians to stop being childish in their tongue-speaking. He grounds his admonition in an Old Testament scripture that speaks about "other tongues."
This article will be continued in the next issue of Session to Session.

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