

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7444 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

NOVEMBER 2009

The following article was written by Leroy Garrett and was published in his "Essays" entitled "Soldier On!" Leroy was editor of "Restoration Review" for 30 years. He is a graduate of Princeton and holds a Ph.D from Harvard University and has been a noted lecturer in many colleges and universities since his retirement. He graciously granted permission to reprint this article.

IS OUR METHOD BECOMING THE MESSAGE?

To illustrate what I mean by this consider these comments about churches which might be heard in most any populous community. They are drawn from actual situations. Oh, you have in mind the big church out on the interstate. Wow, are they big! They have almost as many on their staff as our church has members. I read about it in the paper, this community church was having a Yo-Yo whiz, who could Yo-Yo over his head, behind his back and between his legs and quote Bible verses at the same time. I couldn't miss that! So I went, my first visit to that church. He was amazing. People in the audience called out chapter and verse, and he would quote the verse while Yo-Yoing!

Yes, it is sort of several churches in one. They have their Central Campus, then several sort of satellite congregations that they call "multi-sites." While each campus has its own staff, the super preacher at Central does most or all the preaching, by way of a large screen at each site. The sermon is somehow piped in by TV or satellite. All the sites, maybe 20,000 people in all, hear the big preacher at the same time, with multiple services on the weekend. They are really high-tech! As fate would have it, while I was writing this, you may not believe this! – I received an e-mail from my own church here in Denton, Texas that we are having an "End of Summer Celebration" tonight. The program includes a talent show followed by a ventriloquist. Because we no longer drive at night Ouida and I have not been attending Wednesday evening service. But a ventriloquist! How can I miss that? So we can add to the comments above, coming from the neighborhood. Yeah, I saw that advertised on the internet. I've never heard of a ventriloquist at a church before. Would that be like speaking in tongues? Gosh, I sure hate to miss that one, but I have to work.

You see what I mean – the methods become the message. And where and what is the message? We are so immersed in pragmatism and "church growth" and the "success" of big preachers and big churches that we may forget that we are to be followers of him who said, "If anyone would be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Then there was Paul the apostle who learned the cost of discipleship the hard way, who said, "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I to the world" (Gal.6:14). If the church is to be the body of Christ in the world, Spirit-filled and cross-shaped, it must stay "on the message" and that's the message, the cross of Christ. Satan is successful when he deceives us into being "men pleasers" catering to the world and its methods in order to be accepted by the world.

The church by its nature is sub-culture, called out from the world to be a holy people, different from the world. It is also anti-culture, at odds with the world, its values and its methods. Malcolm Muggeridge, that old British cynic turned Christian, who resolved to take Christ seriously, insisted that if Jesus were on earth today he would not use TV. His methods would be ever so simple, as they were before, while the power would be his message. That may be the problem. Even the church has hardly ever really taken the message all that seriously. I was recently reading Luke 24 and was impressed all over again how slow Jesus' own disciples were to believe. Verses 9-11 tell how five women reported to the disciples that they had been to Jesus' tomb and found him missing, and that an angel appeared telling them that he is risen, just as he said he would. The disciples did not believe them, accusing them of hallucinating, all five of them! Jesus had told them again, again, and again that it would happen just as it did. They just didn't get it. Does the church today really get it? If we did, our methods would be merely means to the end, not the end itself. The end would be the proclamation of Jesus as the risen Christ. The power would be the message, not in the methods. The message of the cross of Christ has always been, is now, and always will be, except for a few, foolishness to the world. Are we really "fools for Christ"?

–Leroy Garrett

IS RELIGION DESTROYING THE CHURCH?

The message of Isaiah was so important that in the very beginning of his prophesy God calls for both the heavens and the earth to hear. The first chapter of Isaiah is an indictment of Israel for their unfaithfulness but they did not know nor understand their condition (ver. 3). They were said to have abandoned the Lord, despised the Holy One of Israel and had turned away from Him. Their cities had been burned with fire, their land lay desolate and strangers were devouring their land in their presence. God had to send them a prophet to tell them what was going on right before their eyes. God said this great nation He had called out of slavery and redeemed them for a great purpose had become as useless as a watchman's hut in a cucumber field and as a shelter in a vineyard. Why did this condition exist and why were they not aware of their degenerate condition? Verses 11-15 answers this question: They were too busy being religious. In our language they were too busy going to church. God looked at their multitude of sacrifice, the burnt offerings of rams, and fat of fed cattle, their appearing before Him and trampling His courts, the offerings and the observance of new moons and Sabbaths, their spreading out their hands in prayer, and said "I am weary of this, I take no pleasure in them, I cannot endure the iniquity of your solemn assemblies, I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them, it is an abomination to Me." In fact He said He hated all they were doing. Israel had been chosen to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. Their purpose therefore was to tell the world about God and convince the world of His love. Paul in pointing out the failure of the nation (Rom. 2:17-24) reminds them of their failure to live up to their God appointed goals. They were to be a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, a corrector of the foolish and a teacher of the immature.

Unfortunately Israel never understood and accepted the purpose of their calling.

In the New Testament the Pharisees and Sadducees became the prime example of Israel's failure. The Sadducees sold out to materialism and ritual. The Pharisees produced a dead religion although they were in search of a means to reach a level of acceptance with God. The Pharisees were a very close-knit club. Their answer for pleasing God was "become like us". Their message, to put it in modern language: "believe like us, dress like us, act like us, like what we like and don't like what we don't like." In church language: if you want God to change your life come to us. We have a nice building, a great musical program, an outstanding youth program with a hippy young youth director and a great staff to serve you. Anything in the world that attracts you we can provide the same, just come and get it. As a result of this thinking the modern church's target has been the church itself, not the decaying society around us. When the church becomes self serving, as most churches today are, those on the outside who are not a part of a religious club, are turning to New Age crystals and self-enlightenment resulting in all sorts of crazy stuff about God. As far back as 2001 a survey by *The Christian Science Monitor* reported that the number of Americans who have "no religious preference" doubled from 1990 to 2001. George Barna reported in *State of the Church* that in the last decade the unchurched population grew from 24 to 34 percent. He is now reporting that 47 percent of the American population attend church. This says these that make up the 47 percent are "religious". The religious in the time of Isaiah and later in the time of Christ would certainly exceed that number, and their rituals were condemned.

Looking back at the trend the modern church has taken, we have seen the Church Growth Movement, the Mega Church, the Church planting phase, the Contemporary life-style Christian, and the Purpose Driven Church programs which result in the religious world being over run with consultants, para-church ministries, publishing houses, conventions and seminars. Also religious publishing houses and book stores offering answers to any problem the church member may have and how to overcome any problem they may face. Remember God declared all the activity of Israel to be worthless, although they were doing the very things God had commanded them to do. The trouble was they were doing it to be religious and not spiritual. In the gospels Christ condemns the religious leaders for the same reason. The religious system today has tended to measure success by the same standard used by the world. Rather than living out the gospel before the world, today's religious system has patterned their lives after the world. The words of Paul to the church in Corinth have for the most part been neglected and forgotten: "God has chosen the foolish things of the world...the weak things of the world...the base things of the world and the despised that He might nullify the things that are" (I Cor.1:27,28). We see ourselves as more sophisticated than they, representatives of both the wisdom of our age and the wisdom of God. Far from being despised by our culture, we expect and often receive the praise of the culture. Paul's instruction to them was to uphold the truth of God in every domain of life: marriage, money, spiritual gifts, attitude toward unbelievers, harmony between believers, worship and discipline. Alexander Schmemmann in *The East and the West May Yet Meet* wrote of the schizophrenia that characterizes the religion in

America today: "People tend to be unaware that their Sunday worship service, from beginning to end, repudiates the culture that they daily uphold as their way of life." It is sad that the effort of churches today to be "relevant" brings about their irrelevance. When we take the values of the world and try to use them in God's work we lose our reason for existing.

The church as a whole, has gone over to a "practical" ministry that stresses psychology, psychiatry, counseling, recreation, and services geared to meet our every real or imagined need in order to face the stress and conflict of modern society. Its preaching is tailored to gaining interest on a superficial level not to solid doctrinal teaching. Because sin is unpopular it talks of codependency, victim-hood and other like psychological garbage. The modern church seems to have forgotten that the greatest need of people is to know God, not what God can do for them.

Today's modern up to date churches that allow the secular culture to set the agenda for their modern organization they call church, should look at the Jewish religion in the time of Christ. When it came to organized religion, none could hold a candle to the Jews. Ephesus had its Diana, Samaria had Simon the Sorcerer, Paphas had Elymas the magician, Athens had its unknown God, Corinth had its temple prostitutes, Rome had its Emperor Caesar...but Jerusalem...Jerusalem had its temple, its priesthood, its law, its ritual, its sacrifices and could boast of 4000 years of being the people of God. They had the best, most elaborate, best located, most magnificent physical plant in town. Their priesthood surpassed Roman Catholics, their ritual and pageantry would have made Episcopalians take a back seat, they were more organized than the Baptist, more reformed than the Presbyterians, more traditional than the Methodist, and more refined than the Lutherans. They were about as legal concerning the law as the church of Christ is about the New Testament and about as independent as the Christian church. They kept the Sabbath better than the Seventh Day Adventists. Their worship would have made Charismatics jealous. They sang psalms and chanted and praised and prayed, they raised their hands and clapped and danced and offered sacrifices and burnt incense. About any practice that is found in organized religion today finds its roots in O.T. Judaism, yet it was worthless! Not that God established something of no value but that the intent of God had been lost centuries before. Christ and the Apostles stood against such a system

It is sad to see those who are committed to the modern religious machine so caught up in what A.W. Tozer, over sixty years ago, described as "the monstrous heresy that noise, size, activity, and bluster make men dear to God." This was the problem of Jewish religion which God rejected. The modern religion with all its committees, boards, councils, administrators, directors and a host of professionals with various titles, which is passed off as the Lord's church, has made the same fatal mistake the Jews made. The modern church is powered by a mixture of faith, psychology and politics held together with the nuts and bolts of conformity, guided by motivational research instead of the Spirit of God and is concerned with pleasing man rather than pleasing God. Isaiah's word to Israel, who had a form of godliness, but denied its power was: "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean...come now, and let us reason together... Truly the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Chap. 1:16-20).