

RENEWAL



The Journal of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship in New England

Walter Ciesluk, Editor

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Evangelical Renewal Fellowship is the New England Association of The Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church

WILLING TO REPENT **Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Bentum**

I wanted to write this article in September when the issue was burning in my heart, but family matters had to come first and I had to put my writing aside. Fortunately they were the kind of family matters that were quite positive with my son going off to college and one of my daughters going on an international exchange program. But the issue grabbed my attention at Annual Conference and it still won't leave me alone. I am burdened by the need for evangelicals to repent, particularly in the area of homosexuality.

Let me explain. Through the efforts of Michael Pike, ERF sponsored Tim Wilkins from Cross Ministry to speak at our ERF dinner meeting and at dialogue sessions. Tim did an excellent job for us and we got lots of positive feedback. But at our ERF dinner Tim issued a powerful challenge for us as a movement. He challenged us to sponsor a resolution to repent of the way we have treated homosexuals in our congregations and in our community. The reasons are twofold. One is that evangelicals have not always been godly in talking or relating to or about homosexuals in our past. Reflecting on my own past in this matter I can see where this was true for me before I was aware of my insensitivity. The second reason is that if we are going to be heard as a movement concerning the destructive nature of the lifestyle, repentance will help show that we reject the lifestyle out of genuine love and not out of arrogance or bigotry.

Repentance is hard when you are passionate about something regardless of the issue. Sometimes our conviction blinds us to the truth of what might also be going on around us and the possible insensitivity and hurt that might be created. I remember after 9/11, I led a service of healing for church members after the terrible tragedy in our country. As part of the service I included a brief prayer of repentance for any part we might have had in unnecessarily fueling the hatred of the terrorists. After the service one of my members was furious with me for insinuating that we had anything to do with the attack. As I read my Bible and as I understand our human condition, I know the possibility is there and we are not free to simply ignore it.

This month I started reading a book that I purchased a while back called True Truth by Art Lindsley. I thought by its title that it was going to be a hardnosed, passionate book about proclaiming truth in our age. I was pleasantly surprised at the humility in which he approached his subject. Lindsley says, "Some Christians resist the idea that we can learn anything from 'those who are in error.' Yet it is good to learn everything we can about anything we can because each particular truth will lead us inevitably back to the God of truth. All truth is God's truth. We can afford to admit truth where we see it." He then goes on to quote at length B. B. Warfield who expounds on the need for humility before the truth. This, by itself, made the price of the book worthwhile!

Repentance and truth go hand in hand. Sometimes we need to repent so that we can see the truth. Sometimes we need to humble ourselves before the truth so that it can lead us to repentance. Either way, repentance is essential for our spiritual health and our relationship with God as well as for our witness to others. Arrogance or the perception of arrogance will not in the end win the day.

So, should we offer a resolution at Annual Conference leading the way to repent of our treatment of homosexual persons? As I said, it is an idea that will not let me go. But I do not feel adequate personally to make this kind of decision or even have our executive team make this decision. We do not want to do something like this with any kind of pretense. It needs to come from the heart as a movement from God to have the kind of power to make a difference in the life of our conference. I would covet any personal thoughts on this matter as we approach our board meeting in April.

Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Bentum is the Executive Coordinator of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship (ERF). He is an Elder in the New England Annual Conference, and pastor of Christ UMC, Lancaster, NH and St. John's UMC, Jefferson, NH.

A FIFTH ANNIVERSARY INVITATION AND CHALLENGE

Walter J. Ciesluk

This issue of the "Renewal Journal" marks the 5th anniversary of its publication. The first issue was published under the title of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship (ERF) Newsletter in December 2002. ERF initiated the publication of the quarterly "Renewal Journal" to feature articles and resources espousing an evangelical vision and perspective within the New England Annual Conference. In addition, to the Renewal Journal, ERF also distributes via email a monthly e-Bulletin and maintains a web site at www.RenewNE.org.

Over the 5 year period, the bulk of the articles included in the Journal have been written by our Executive Coordinator, Tom Bentum and myself, as well as articles republished with permission from Good News Magazine. However, as the deadline approached for the preparation of the previous issue in September, I was home recuperating from surgery, and didn't feel much like writing. At the same time, Tom Bentum was overwhelmed with family and pastoral duties and wasn't able to write either. As a consequence, I turned to my son who is an elder in the Minnesota Annual Conference. I asked him if he had preached any sermons recently which could easily be modified into renewal and/or evangelical oriented articles. In response, he offered a sermon, entitled, "Christian Patriotism, which appeared in the September 2007 Journal and another sermon, entitled, "Work as Worship", which appears in this issue.

This experience gave me an idea for improving the Renewal Journal. I anticipated that our ERF pastors would on occasion address renewal, evangelical, biblical world view issues and topics in their sermons. If I could encourage 12 or more pastors to commit to converting one of their renewal-themed sermons into a Journal article once every 3 years, then I could enhance the quality and appeal of the Renewal Journal with a diversity of New England originated articles and plenty of new voices. It would be great for our readers to hear what more of ERF folks are thinking and saying on topics.

Doesn't seem like too big a burden to me! What do you think? Let me invite and challenge our ERF pastors to consider making such a commitment, namely turning a sermon into an article every few years. If you are even willing to submit a raw sermon, I will happy to help you edit it for the Journal. I would be pleased to hear if you are interested or think you can help. You can easily reach me at wjciesluk@comcast.net.

GUIDING LIGHTS

Steve Beard

According to a recent survey conducted for The Church Report, there are four United Methodist congregations in a line-up of the 50 most influential churches in America. Not surprisingly, both of the nation's largest United Methodist congregations—United Methodist Church of the Resurrection (Leawood, Kansas) and Windsor Village United Methodist Church (Houston, Texas)—were on the list. The two other major UM churches on the list are Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church (Montgomery, Alabama) and Ginghamburg United Methodist Church (Tipp City, Ohio). The only other mainline churches on the list were the Episcopal Trinity Church (Manhattan, New York) and the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) (Menlo Park, California).

The 2006 survey was emailed to leaders of more than 2,000 of the largest Protestant congregations in America by Dr. John Vaughan, a consultant with Church Growth Today. Participants were asked to recommend up to ten churches they considered to be among the nation's most influential.

According to The Church Report, "These churches are recommended by other church leaders as congregations that represent the passion and sense of mission mandated in the New Testament." Despite coming from different regional and socio-economic settings, there are several common denominators among the four "most influential" United Methodist congregations. They all take discipleship very seriously through small groups and support groups. Each congregation offers a wide variety of adult and youth ministries, as well as mission opportunities. All four churches make their sermons available online, support prison ministries, and conduct at least seven services weekly. Three of the four pastors are prolific authors, while the other one has been on television for almost fifteen years.

United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, pastored by Adam Hamilton (www.cor.org).

"We have three visions that are at the forefront of our ministry: Changing lives, transforming communities, and renewing the mainline church," Adam Hamilton told Good News. "Two out of three people who join our congregation self-identify as non-religious or nominally religious people before joining. Our aim is to help them know Christ, to grow in him, and to serve him daily.

The congregation will soon be launching a new satellite location of the church, as well as partnering with Wesley Theological Seminary to offer seminary level courses at the church aimed at equipping lay people for ministry.

"In renewing mainline Christianity we believe the twenty-first century is ripe for the Wesleyan approach to the gospel—characterized by what Bishop Scott Jones refers to as 'the extreme center,' or what Stanley Grenz and Brian McLaren refer to as a 'generous orthodoxy,'" says Hamilton. Those who want to see the ministry up-close can attend the congregation's annual Leadership Institute held in October. "We believe it is an exciting time to be United Methodists and that God has great things in store for our denomination," says Hamilton.

Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, pastored by John Ed Mathison (www.frazerumc.org).

"The purpose of Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church is to make disciples for Jesus Christ," John Ed Mathison told Good News. "We strive to train and motivate every member to be an evangelist. We have set a goal to have at least 50 percent of our new members come on profession of faith." Frazer launched their state-of-the-art television ministry and studio in 1992 in order to take the message of Christ to the airwaves. Three years ago, they added their seventh service—conducted in Spanish—in order to reach out to the growing Hispanic community in their area. Mathison and his congregation have a great desire to incorporate new methods to communicate the timeless truth of Jesus to a new generation.

"We also have a strong emphasis on involving people in meaningful ministry," reports Mathison. "While the norm in churches is to have 20 percent of the people doing 80 percent of the work, we currently have 90 percent of our resident members involved in some specific ministry. We strive to teach and motivate that every member is a minister."

Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio, pastored by Michael Slaughter (www.ginghamsburg.org). “We are focusing on the three R’s of 21st century ministry: Relevance, Relationships, and Rigorous Mission,” Michael Slaughter told Good News. “We want to demonstrate the relevance of God’s redemptive work through Jesus Christ to post modern, pre-Christian people.”

Ginghamsburg was one of the first innovative churches to incorporate technology into its service, starting in 1994 with what they call “multi-sensory worship.” They have a media team of over 70 unpaid workers.

“We understand that discipleship at its core is developed through relationships found in authentic community and that the church exist for the purpose of being the hands and feet of Jesus in the world,” says Slaughter. The congregation is currently sponsoring a 3000-acre agricultural project in the Darfur region of the Sudan which feeds over 26,000 people in five displaced-persons camps. Ginghamsburg is also developing schools and child protection programs in the same area. “Our goal is to have every member spend at least one week in mission somewhere in the world,” says Slaughter.

Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, pastored by Kirbyjon Caldwell (www.kingdombuilders.com). Windsor Village has got to be one of the only congregations in America that actually lists Christian entrepreneurial organization, career initiative, and a real estate ministry as a part of its church activities. But that is a direct reflection of Pastor Kirbyjon Caldwell’s background as a fast-paced stock broker on Wall Street, as well as his vision to make a spiritual and tangible difference in his community.

“Prayer has been an essential part of the awesome acts the Lord has been able to accomplish through us for our community,” Caldwell says. “One of the best things we did at Windsor was to establish a passionate and efficacious prayer ministry. It has helped us discern and develop the Lord’s vision and strategic role for our church.” Caldwell and his congregation appear to be picking up the slack for the churches that are not responding. Windsor Village launched the Kingdom Builders’ Prayer Institute, a community outreach organization dedicated to prayer and intercession; The Power Center to address the educational, economical, social, spiritual, cultural, medical, and emotional needs of the community; and the Patrice House, which provides temporary emergency services and care for children who are at risk of and/or victims of neglect or abuse in their homes. That is just a few of the congregational endeavors in addition to their AIDS ministry, kids programs, and private Christian school.

Wesley’s concern. “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America,” John Wesley once said. “But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

These four congregations are holding fast to the original vision of Methodism—making disciples for Jesus Christ through preaching and good works. Each of them are working overtime to reach their communities with a vibrant and winsome witness for Christ. John Wesley would recognize their vitality and life-giving visions and be proud.

Steve Beard is the editor of Good News

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WORK AS WORSHIP

Rev. Gregory P. Ciesluk

This past September, we again observed Labor Day, a national holiday to honor the dignity of all workers. It was first observed in 1882 in New York City with a parade organized by a machinist and a carpenter.

What does Labor Day mean for us? We may have a tendency to see the day as little more than a welcomed break from "the daily grind." Perhaps, we see work, as it is to so many people, as simply a necessary evil. The goal in life is to put in enough time to eventually retire and relax and enjoy the golden years.

But this prevailing attitude and the goal is somewhat at odds with a Christian perspective of work. Christians have a special reason to celebrate Labor Day, which honors the fundamental dignity of workers, because we worship a God who labored to make the world. In the early pages of the Bible in Genesis 1 and 2 we find a journal of God's work. Eugene Peterson writes, "The Bible begins with an announcement. *"In the beginning, God created..." not sat majestic in the heavens. He created. He did something. He made something. He fashioned the heavens and the earth. The week of creation was a week of work.* God is a worker. Throughout the Bible, the Scriptures describe God as a shepherd, potter/craftworker, builder and architect, weaver, gardener, farmer, musician, and artist.

And in crowning act of creation, God created human beings in His image. He created them to be workers like himself. When God made Adam and Eve, He gave them work to do: cultivating and caring for the earth. From the dawn of creation, human beings have been partners with God, engaged in work. *We need to be engaged in creative and purposeful activity for it is fundamental to the essence of who we are.*

In the ancient world, the Greeks and Romans looked upon manual work as a curse, something for lower classes and slaves. But Christianity changed all of that. Christians viewed work as a high calling—a calling to be co-workers with God in unfolding the rich potential of His creation. You see, we are made in the image of God and as such we are made to work—to create, to shape, to bring order out of disorder.

This high view of work can be traced throughout the history of the Church. In the Middle Ages, the guild movement grew out of the Church. It set standards for good workmanship and encouraged members to take satisfaction in the results of their labor. The guilds became the forerunner of the modern labor movement.

Later, during the Reformation, Martin Luther preached that all work should be done to the glory of God. Whether ministering the Gospel or scrubbing floors, any honest work is pleasing to the Lord. Out of this conviction grew the Protestant work ethic.

Christians were also active on behalf of workers in the early days of the industrial revolution, when factories were "dark satanic mills," to borrow a phrase from Sir William Blake. In those days, work in factories and coal mines was hard and dangerous. Men, women, and children were practically slaves—sometimes even chained to machines.

Then John Wesley came preaching and teaching the Gospel throughout England. He came not to the upper classes, but to the laboring classes—to men whose faces were black with coal dust, women whose dresses were patched and faded.

John Wesley preached to them—and in the process, he pricked the conscience of the whole nation.

Two of Wesley's disciples, William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury, were inspired to work for legislation that would clean up abuses in the workplace. At their urging, the British parliament passed child-labor laws, safety laws, and minimum-wage laws.

But here in America we've lost the Christian connection with the labor movement. In many countries, however, from Canada to Poland, that tradition still remains strong.

In his earthly life, God's Son demonstrated the dignity of work by the work that he did. Not only did Jesus employ images of work (from weddings, funerals, parties building construction, farming, buying and selling) in his parables of

God's kingdom, Jesus spent most of His life engaged in manual labor having learned the carpentry trade from his earthly father Joseph.

In the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, there is a memorable and somewhat humorous scene that is a welcomed break from the horrific brutality of Jesus' passion. And this moment hints at the high value God places on work. The scene shows Jesus at work finishing a table. His mother comes over to examine it. Her opinion? The table is too high. Not to worry, Jesus responds; He'll build tall chairs to go with it. Mary is not convinced. As she walks away, she mutters, "It'll never catch on."

Yes, Jesus spent most of His life engaged in manual labor. Back in Galilee in the second century, the Christian apologist Justin Martyr said that during his lifetime it was still common to see farmers using plows made by the carpenter Jesus of Nazareth.

In his book, titled *The Call*, theologian Os Guinness reminds us that even the humblest work is important if it is done *for God*. "How intriguing," Guinness writes, "to think of Jesus' plow rather than His Cross—to wonder what it was that made His plows and yokes last and stand out." Clearly, they must have been very well made if they were still in use in the second century.

And here is the essence of the connection between work and worship. Tasks of work can be transformed into acts of worship when they are simply offered to God. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he writes, "*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him... Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.*" When we engage in work, when we do it with an eye toward pleasing God, when we do it as an expression of gratitude for what God has given us, when we offer it to God as a sacrifice, our work is an act of worship. And our lives become, with the linking of work and prayer, a living sacrifice.

Jesus, in the parable of the talents, instructs his followers to invest what God has given them and develop the potential that has come from the Lord's hand. When we are faithful in the smallest of things, we will be rewarded with greater responsibilities. As we give away what God has entrusted to us, as we invest ourselves, we will grow more fully into his likeness and we will receive even more gifts.

Today, Christians typically exalt spiritual work above manual work. After all, what's making a plow compared with preaching to multitudes, feeding the five thousand, or raising someone from the dead? But the very fact that Jesus did make plows—and made them well—suggests that any work can be done to the glory of God. Any work can be a genuine calling. A calling, Guinness writes, is anything we do "as a response to God's summons and service." When God calls us to some task—even if it's something the world sees as lowly—that task is invested with what Guinness calls "the splendor of the ordinary."

Can we see the work that we do in this way? "the splendor of the ordinary." When we speak about work, we may have the tendency to focus almost exclusively to our paid employment. But to speak of work biblically is to see work broadly. John Stott defines work as "*the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community, and glory to God.*" Whether we read to our children or discipline them, help them with their homework or chauffeur them to soccer practice, serve on a committee at church, school, or in our community, carry out necessary ordinary household tasks of cleaning, cooking, shopping, paying bills, home maintenance, property management, working in the garden, mowing the lawn, or shoveling the snow, caring for a neighbor in need, and yes, carrying out the responsibilities of our paid employment, we are engaged in the many and varied expressions of work. And all of these expressions of work, mundane or exciting, complicated or simple, small or large, common or uncommon, when done "for the Lord" are transformed into acts of worship, a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Otherwise, much of life's activity becomes a drudgery or a chore. "Drudgery done for ourselves or for other human audiences will always be drudgery," Guinness writes, but "drudgery done for God is lifted and changed." Accepting drudgery is one of the ways we practice discipleship—learning to offer it up sacrificially to God. "We look for the big

things to do—[but] Jesus took a towel and washed the disciples' feet," Guinness writes. "We like to speak and act out of the rare moments of inspiration—[but] He requires our obedience in the routine, the unseen, and the thankless." We, His followers, must be willing to take on the humble and thankless tasks as well—and not become impatient with changing diapers, doing homework, or taking out the trash. The task before us may appear somewhat unimportant or trivial, but the person doing it is never unimportant or trivial, as these things are mysteriously veiled as the means to worship God.

In other words, we serve God in our everyday tasks. Martin Luther understood this when he wrote, "The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays -- not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship." Martin Luther preached that all work should be done to the glory of God and when it is, that work is pleasing to the Lord.

This partnership with God is dramatized in our worship celebration at the Lord's table. Having heard the summons of God through the reading of Scripture and the proclamation of God's Word, we offer our prayers... and our gifts. Our gifts come in many forms- our gifts of service, our financial gifts, the fruit of our labor... our very lives- all expressions of gratitude for what God has already provided to us. And also on this table, we offer to God the gifts of bread and wine. If we trace the process of baking bread, we will uncover planting seed, tilling soil, harvesting wheat, milling flour, kneading dough, and baking bread. If we trace the process of making wine, we will uncover an aging process, a process of fermentation, crushing grapes, harvesting grapes, pruning vines, watering and tilling soil, and planting seed. Are not these gifts of bread and wine but gifts of the earth from God prepared with the fruit of human labor? A divine-human partnership, like Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, who reconciled humanity to God in himself. And through these gifts we offer back to God, God feeds us with the Bread of Life and the cup of salvation. He strengthens us to keep living in God's gracious way and giving ourselves away in his service. God's work. Our worship.

At the communion table and in the world, in our daily living, in our ordinary and extraordinary tasks, with our hearts, our minds, and yes, our hands, our work, in partnership with God, offered as a sacrifice to God, directed to the glory of God, is transformed into a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God.

If you are frustrated in your job or with your boss, if you think the work you have to do is beneath you, if your daily tasks seem to be meaningless or insignificant, just remember that for a season the One who turned water into wine and raised the dead to life . . . also made wooden plows and quality wooden plows at that.

So let us remember that all labor derives its true dignity as a reflection of the Creator. And that whatever we do, in word or deed, we need to do it all to the glory of God.

This article is based on a sermon recently preached by Rev. Gregory Ciesluk. Rev. Ciesluk, is an Elder in the Minnesota Annual Conference, and pastor of Norton Park UMC, Duluth, MN and Northwood UMC, Esko, MN. Much of the source material comes from the work of Charles Colson and his Breakpoint commentaries. You may find daily Breakpoint commentaries as well as an archive of past commentaries at www.breakpoint.org.

THE ACTS OF PRAYER

Alan R. Grill

Prayer should be a very natural and integral part of a Believer's life. Scripture tells us to pray without ceasing. Since we are God's children, Brothers and Sisters of our risen Savior Jesus Christ, we should have no problem coming before the Throne of Grace to speak to God. It should be as easy as talking to a dear friend. However, there are times we do not know what to say or how to say it. There are several models we can use and adapt to our particular needs and circumstances. One of them can be found in Scripture: the prayer Jesus taught His Disciples which we call the Lord's Prayer. Another is based on the acronym ACTS which I first heard expounded by Pastor Bill Hybells, Pastor of the Willow Creek Fellowship Church.

A stands for Adoration. It is the attitude that we as the creatures acknowledge towards our Creator. We need to come before God with praise and thanksgiving for all His mercy and grace. He is the One we worship and adore.

C stands for Confession. For me this is the hard part and if you forgive me for being presumptuous, it is probably difficult for most of us. But we must confess our sins. While I believe that God hears all our prayers, I also know that if we are not in a right relationship with God He will not answer our prayers. And un-confessed sin keeps us from being in that right relationship with our Father. And simply asking God to "forgive my sins" does not cut it. We must name each sin as we ask for forgiveness. The Good News is that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" 1 John 1:9

T stands for Thanksgiving. We need to thank God for all the blessings and mercy He has bestowed on us. We need to thank Him for all answered prayer even if the answer was not quite what we wanted. We need also, as James reminds us, to be thankful for all the trials and temptations that come into our lives. We need to be especially thankful for God the Father sending His Son Jesus to die for us so that our sins are forgiven and raising Him from the dead so that we may have Eternal Life. We also need to thank Him for giving us the Holy Spirit.

S stands for Supplication. It is the one optional part of this model. After we come before God with Adoration, Confessing our sins, Thanking Him for His Mercy, then and only then are we in the correct frame of mind to ask God for what we want. Then and only then is God ready to answer our requests. But, as I say, this is completely optional. How wonderful it would be if we just came before our Father just to adore and thank Him, confessing our sins with no strings attached.

I hope this has been of some help to you in promoting your prayer life

Alan Grill is part of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship Prayer Ministry.

BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY

Walter J. Ciesluk

The Advent season is upon us and we prepare to again celebrate Christmas in remembrance of the birth of Jesus Christ. The Apostles Creed declares, "He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary." The doctrine of the virgin birth has been believed by the church from the beginning. Ignatius, who lived at the start of the second century, wrote to the Ephesians: "For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb by Mary, according to a dispensation, of the seed of David but also of the Holy Ghost." The virgin birth is necessary to support the biblical witness that Jesus Christ was the eternal Son of God, and is without sin.

On the other hand, the doctrine of the virgin birth is also one that has become controversial in modern times. Today, many Christian clergy and lay persons believe that it really doesn't matter whether Jesus was born of a virgin or not. However, the late Dr. D. James Kennedy, Coral Ridge Ministries, has made it very clear in his preaching that denial of the virgin birth totally subverts the entire Christian gospel. Specifically

1. If Jesus was not born of a virgin then the New Testament narratives are proved untrue and unreliable.
2. Mary is stained with the sin of unchastity.
3. Jesus was mistaken about His paternity.
4. Jesus was then and therefore an illegitimate child.
5. He is consequently not the God-man or Son of God.
6. He was then a sinner like the rest of us.
7. As a sinner, Jesus is not the divine Redeemer.
8. We have then no Savior at all.
9. We are yet in our sins and without forgiveness.
10. We have no hope after death.
11. There is no mediator between God and man.
12. If there is no Second Person, there is no Trinity at all.
13. Christ should have prayed, "Father, forgive us", not "Forgive them", for He was a sinner like the rest.

Reasons for Disbelief:

The main reason people have trouble believing in the virgin birth of Jesus is because they deny all miracles. It has not dawned on them that, if a personal Creator God exists, miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then Jesus' virginal conception and birth are possible. Instead, skeptical people reason that people in Jesus' time believed in miracles because they were ignorant of the amazing scientific discoveries made since then. The ancients weren't as knowledgeable as we are about the laws of nature and, therefore, they supposed all sorts of things to be miracles, which really were not. True, Joseph was not as acquainted with the scientific method as we, but, he was no fool. When he discovered that Mary was found to be with child, he didn't say, "Oh, it's probably a virgin birth. It's no doubt the Holy Spirit who has done this to her. Instead, he thought about putting her away, because he assumed that she had been unchaste. It took a visit from the angel, Gabriel, to convince him that the child was of the Holy Spirit.

Another reason that some people give for rejecting the virgin birth is because of its similarity to various pagan myths. It has long been known that there were many supposed virgin or miraculous births presented in the many legends and mythologies of the ancient world. They contain stories of a god or goddess being born into the world by sexual relations between some heavenly being and an earthly woman, or by some adulterous affair among the gods and goddesses. Some people claim that the Gospel writers made up the story of the virgin birth of Jesus from the mythology of the day. However, a careful comparison of the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth with the many miraculous

birth stories in pagan literature reveals some important differences. First, the accounts of Jesus' virgin birth show none of characteristics of the myth literature." Matthew and Luke are written as history--not mythology. They mention places, people, and events that can be verified through normal methods of historical and archaeological investigation. The beginning of Luke's gospel "reads very much like prefaces to other generally reliable historical and biographical works of antiquity." Thus, there is a clear difference in style between the gospels and pagan myths.

Another difference can be seen in the religious nature of these stories. The pagan myths are polytheistic; the gospels, monotheistic. The miraculous birth stories in pagan literature usually focus on a god's lust for some mortal woman. Since this lust is typically gratified through sexual relations, the resulting conception and birth are hardly virginal. Thus, the pagan stories are in stark contrast to the description of Jesus' virginal conception in the gospels. These two differences between the gospel accounts of Jesus' miraculous birth and the birth stories in pagan literature, make it very hard to believe that the gospel writers were influenced by mythology.

Scriptural Revelation:

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, make it abundantly clear that Christ was born of a virgin and conceived by the Holy Spirit. The very first promise, that God gave of the gospel is found in Genesis 3:15, which foretells the virgin birth. There we read that God promises to "send a redeemer, the seed of a woman, who would bruise the head of and destroy the serpent who had brought the curse upon the earth." In so doing, He Himself would endure a mortal wound. "The seed of a woman" is a unique term which does not appear anywhere else in the Old Testament; any other reference is always to the seed of a man. Further on in the Old Testament, the virgin birth is even more clearly spelled out. In Isaiah 7:14 we read, "Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

In the New Testament, Matthew and Luke make it very clear that Jesus was born of a virgin. It is interesting to note that Matthew and Luke are the two who teach the doctrine of the virgin birth and are also the two who give the genealogy of Christ. They see no conflict between His genealogy and His miraculous conception. For example, we read in Matthew that Joseph did not beget Jesus. Instead, he was merely the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born. Luke also says that when Jesus, reached 30 years of age, "being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph." So both Matthew and Luke go out of their way to make absolutely clear that Jesus was not the son of Joseph.

The Witness of Mary:

Possibly the best evidence for the virgin birth is the witness of Mary herself. Mary could very simply have stopped the torture and the agony of the crucifixion. Jesus was crucified because He claimed that God was His Father. If it were a lie, and Jesus was not virgin-born, then Mary could have stepped forward at any time and have said, "I will tell you who His father is!" She could have undermined all His amazing claims and saved Him from the cross. She didn't do that because she knew the truth.

Walter J. Ciesluk is the Communications Coordinator of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship (ERF). He is a member of Aldersgate United Methodist Church, Chelmsford, MA. Much of the source material for this article comes from a sermon on the Virgin Birth prepared in 2001 by the late Dr. D. J. Kennedy, Coral Ridge Ministries, Fort Lauderdale, FL. This article was originally published in the first edition of the Renewal Journal. It is republished in this fifth anniversary edition for reflection as the Advent season approaches.

RECENT BOOKS ON CHRISTIANITY AND RENEWAL

Guarding the Gospel, Biblical Faith and the Future of United Methodism, James V. Heidinger II, Living Streams Publications, Copyright 2007

Every mainline denomination in North America has experienced the emergence of renewed ministries, because each has been infected by the same virus. The feverish symptoms of this infection are quite similar in the various communions. They are: membership loss, lack of spiritual vitality, loss of the authority of Scripture, decline in world missions, doctrinal confusion and revisionism, pro-homosexual activism, and the embracing of trendy, fad theologies. This book is a compilation of editorials and articles by the author that have appeared in the pages of Good News magazine in recent years. They are republished at this time because they speak to the themes that continue in their relevance today. The author continues to remind us always of the authority of Scripture, the seriousness of sin, and the centrality of the cross. This book is a dependable guidebook for the continuing renewal of the United Methodist Church.

The Mission of God, Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative, Christopher J. H. Wright, Intervarsity Press Academic, Copyright 2006

Most Christians would agree that the Bible provides a basis for mission. But Christopher Wright boldly maintains that mission is bigger than that--there is in fact a missional basis for the Bible! The entire Bible is generated by and is all about God's mission. In order to understand the Bible, we need a missional hermeneutic of the Bible, an interpretive perspective that is in tune with this great missional theme. We need to see the "big picture" of God's mission and how the familiar bits and pieces fit into the grand narrative of Scripture.

Beginning with the Old Testament and the groundwork it lays for understanding who God is, what he has called his people to be and do, and how the nations fit into God's mission, Wright gives us a new hermeneutical perspective on Scripture. This new perspective provides a solid and expansive basis for holistic mission. Wright emphasizes throughout a holistic mission as the proper shape of Christian mission. God's mission is to reclaim the world--and that includes the created order--and God's people have a designated role to play in that mission.

Beyond the Badge, A Spiritual Survival Guide for Cops and Their Families, Charles Ferrara, Living Streams Publications, Copyright 2006

Good News recently announced the sixth printing of Beyond the Badge: a Spiritual Survival Guide for Cops and Their Families by Charles Ferrara. In this book, former cop and police chaplain, Chuck Ferrara, shows that demands made upon an officer of the law are enormous, and to be successful officers need spiritual guidance and strength that comes from knowing and following Christ.

Good News believes that police officers everywhere can benefit from reading this book. Their hope is that churches all across America will provide this book for them. Share this vision with your pastor or missions committee in your local church. Most small towns have no more than five or six police officers. A local church could provide real ministry to their entire police department for a very small investment.

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Purpose Statement

Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord, the Confessing Movement exists to enable the United Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity, and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ

ERF Executive Team (1 July 2007-30 June 2009)

Executive Coordinator: **Pastor Tom Bentum**

Communications Coordinator: **Walter Ciesluk**

Prayer Coordinator: **Robbin Grill**

Reform Coordinator: **Pastor Brian Wood**

RENEWAL Conference Director: **Pastor Tom Bentum**

Secretary/Treasurer: **Gail Ciesluk**

At Large Member: **Pastor Mike Pike**