
RENEWAL



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LOST

Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Bentum

Like many Americans, my family has been glued to the TV every Wednesday night at 8:00pm to watch the latest edition in the TV series *Lost*. If you are not familiar with the show, it is about a group of survivors of a plane crash on an island who, because of the circumstances of their flight, are lost to the outside world. The story is intriguing because it is more than just an adventure. Every event connects and hints at a deeper meaning to their presence on this island. Through this series the word “lost” has become popular in American culture.

However, “lost” is a word not often heard in United Methodism, especially in the phrase, “lost without Christ”. The lostness of humanity is not often talked about or worse not even believed. When was the last time you heard (or preached) a sermon on the lostness of humanity without Christ? When was the last time you heard a leader at the conference or national level refer to the lostness of humanity? It makes United Methodists uncomfortable because it’s such a harsh and judgmental word and we like our theology nice and friendly. It was refreshing to hear Dr. Rose Sims speak unapologetically of the lost in her presentation at Renewal 2005.

The problem is not that lostness is not a part of our heritage as United Methodists. The Articles of Religion state concerning original sin: “Original sin . . . is the corruption of the nature of every man . . . whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.” The article does not use the word “lost”, but “very far gone” is certainly a strong equivalent! It was this conviction in early Methodism that gave part of the motive power to get out there and lead people to Christ. It also fueled the motive power to meet the physical and intellectual needs of people because they saw spiritual lostness tied up with lifestyle, behavior and understanding. This wholistic perspective gave Methodists a willingness to reach people on many levels.

I shouldn’t say that we have completely lost the word “lost”. We have kept the word “lost” in our vocabulary from our heritage when it comes to economic, political, cultural, or any other kinds of lostness while ignoring spiritual lostness. Without the primary conviction that people are lost without a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, our ability to help others in the other areas of lostness soon crumbles and becomes ineffectual. The good news simply becomes nice news without the desire to see people genuinely transformed from the inside out through saving power of Christ.

I believe that recovering the theology of lostness is crucial to renewal in New England. I agree with Luis Palau when he observed on a visit to New England that we live in a culture heavily influenced by unitarian universalism (that is with small “u’s” and is not a critique of any denomination). It is this strong undercurrent of unitarian universalism that has kept all Evangelicals in New England banging their heads against the wall wondering why successful forms of ministry done in others parts of the country do not seem to work here. The basic tenants of this belief are that Christ is not God and is only a good example and that God will lovingly bring everyone into heaven with him. Sound familiar? Although most United Methodists I have met are not strict about this belief and are quite sure some people are going to hell (or hope they do!) but it surely won’t be them or those close to them.

I love getting New Englanders in a Bible study and help them discover the truth for themselves. They are usually shocked by the claims of Christ, even though they have been repeating creeds and singing on the very same topics all of their lives. They are also shocked at God's justice and holiness and their consequences. They may have at least the first verse of *Amazing Grace* memorized, but the truth of the song is hard to comprehend when you have been steeped in unitarian universalism.

This past summer a friend of mine, a 12 year old girl, accepted Christ as her Lord and Savior at a summer camp I was working at. Shortly after that momentous day she came to me and said she no longer wanted to be a Christian. Her reason: she was now a Christian and the rest of her family was not. She did not want to go to heaven without them so she would rather not go at all. Her reasoning was hard to listen too but at least she understood the unpleasant reality of being lost without Christ.

We need to reclaim the reality of lostness in our preaching and teaching. It is the razor sharp truth that cuts through the pervasive lie of our New England culture. Without that truth the Good News of Christ will never come across as the great news that it is. Jesus will always come across as just an impossible example one has to live up to. The saving power of Jesus is hard to find when all we understand about Jesus is that he is simply an example to follow. As one of my staunch New England parishioners would sadly conclude after practically every Bible study I led with him in it, "Well, I guess I got to do better." He never seemed to get it. He could never seem to say with John Newton, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound . . . I once was lost but now am found."

Lost isn't just a fun TV show. Lost is the state of humanity without Christ. We will never be effective as a church until we tell the truth about our human condition to the world around us. The good news will never be heard until the bad news is clearly understood. Jesus said this about his purpose, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." It needs to be unapologetically our purpose too.

"The Church is always on the battlefield...struggling to prevent the world from becoming the Church and the Church from becoming the world. The world is the world and the Church is the Church yet the Word of God must go forth from the Church in to all the world, proclaiming that the earth is the Lord's and all that therein is."—Eric Bonhoeffer.

Resistance, then, is part of our proclamation and at the center of our demonstration.

- **We resist experimenting with pagan ritual and practice;**
- **We resist radical feminism that blatantly stomps on the heart of our faith in the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit;**
- **We resist accommodating to the prevailing patterns of sexual promiscuity, serial marriage, and divorce;**
- **We resist condoning homosexual practice, blessing homosexual unions, and ordaining practicing homosexual persons;**
- **We resist consuming the world's goods without regard for the poor;**
- **We resist resigning ourselves to the injustices of racial, ethnic, gender and age prejudice;**
- **We resist ignoring the historic Church's longstanding protection of the unborn;**
- **We resist physicians assisting people to accomplishing their own death;**

In a word, we resist the moral/ethical relativism that is the operative dynamic of our culture.---from *The Romance and Power of Classical Christianity*, Maxie D. Dunnam

DR. ROSE SIMS SPEAKS ON “NEW LIFE FOR DYING CHURCHES” AT RENEWAL 2005

Walter Ciesluk

A noted Florida Conference evangelist, Dr. Rose Sims, was the featured speaker at the RENEWAL 2005 gathering which was held on March 11 & 12, 2005. She spoke to us for several hours on the topic of “new life for dying churches”, based on her life long experience in Christian ministry. Her vision is that the vital, alive church can turn America back to God. Dr. Rose proved to be a very dynamic and inspirational speaker and her presentation was a great experience. Her message should generate wide interest in all the United Methodist Churches in New England.

Dr. Rose emphasized that “from a fledgling sect after its organization in 1784, Methodism grew from a few thousand to the largest denomination in the land. It surpassed the Baptists by 20 percent, and had as many members as Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians combined. By 1850, more than one-fourth of all professing Christians in America were Methodist. Had that rate of increase continued for a few more generations, every man, woman, and child on the continent would have been won to Christ and been called a Methodist.”

Then Dr. Rose told us how it was done. It was accomplished with Wesley’s five point, foolproof, guaranteed, unyielding, ingredients for church growth:

You have nothing to do but save souls.

You have nothing to do but be a missionary church.

You have nothing to do but believe the Bible.

You have nothing to do but live a holy life.

You have nothing to do but make disciples of all men. (Then you have nothing left to do but rejoice.)

Some the specific items she emphasized as important to turning churches around are:

- Goals must be biblical, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, smart, and timely. The purpose of the church must be to seek and save the lost and make disciples.”
- Growth is the only evidence that there is life in a church. Growth is nothing more than trying new ideas, letting go of what doesn’t work, and keeping what does work. It is doing the undoable, trying the impossible, believing the unbelievable. Everyone has to dig into God’s Word and develop their prayer lives.
- Latent talent must be discovered and put to work. The work and message of the church needs be seen and heard everywhere, e.g., “hung on banners outside, put on posters in every merchant’s window, and advertised in the newspaper and on radio. The church members must share their dreams wherever they go. Word of mouth is always the cheapest and most effective advertisement.
- Honest mistakes are evidence that somebody tried something. The only ones who never make a mistake are those who do nothing, and that is the biggest mistake of all. Problems are only opportunities awaiting solutions, a wake-up call for creativity.
- Dying churches have great potential for renewal because the sturdy few who have survived the naysayers are usually those to whom their church is a priceless treasure, well worth paying any price to revive. They have learned that there are no mistakes in life, only lessons. They know that one unkind word may forever turn a lost soul from the church. Kind words are easy to speak and their echoes are endless. Before you speak, ask yourself, “Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary?”
- Wesley’s strategy read: “Be a missionary church.” The church must see the physical, emotional, spiritual, economic, and relational needs in the community and address them. And, of course, at every activity they need to present the way of salvation.

- A stranger should be greeted within three minutes of coming to a meeting, possibly even in the parking lot. We have all been to a new church where we felt as if we were attending someone else's family reunion. Every day you have two choices, to be happy or to be sad. Make it a habit to be happy.
- The church needs to program to the purpose, budget to the purpose, train to the purpose, and evaluate by the purpose. Of each program, ask, "Is it winning the lost and growing disciples, or are we only doing what some good atheist is probably already doing better?"
- The task of the pastor is to equip the laity for evangelism. This means intentionally training every convert not only how to win the lost, but to inspire, organize, and give leadership opportunities so that they can succeed. A church with a great spiritual vision can easily fail if the leader does not have a good work ethic. The church needs to encourage their leaders to get intentionally involved socially with the un-churched, invite them to dinner, take them to a ball game, be a friend with the specific intention of one day sharing Christ with them.
- Wesley said, "Believe God's word and live a holy life." Bible study and prayer needs to be spontaneous and become habitual and the purpose made clear.
- God does not care how we worship, whether the style is liturgical or less formal; whether we sing the grand old hymns or the new inspiring praise and worship songs. Raising your hand in worship is most meaningful when you also raise your hand to volunteer to teach, or visit, or witness, or even to clean the church.
- Primary in our purpose needs to be Wesley's admonition, "You have nothing to do but save souls and make disciples." So at the intermission of a dinner theater or bowling party, or some other outreach event, a layperson or the pastor should take five minutes to share an evangelistic message.
- Whenever the church of the Lord Jesus is turned loose in a community to help human beings and meet their needs and lift up the name of Jesus Christ, that church becomes indispensable in the community.

Dr. Rose told us how, over the past 40 years, she has put those principles to work in ordinary churches, often in seemingly impossible situations. As a consequence, she has had the joy of watching many dead and dying churches go from despair to hope, often leading the state in professions of faith. In seven years her last church in Trilby, Florida, went from 7 in attendance to 350 members, founded one of the larger missions in Florida, built a sanctuary seating 250, a life center, mission, education building, a youth center and missionary parsonage, all debt free, and packed the church with youth, children, singles, and families who were won to Jesus Christ.

As a result of her book, "New Life For Dying Churches", which won the worldwide award as best non-fiction by Christian Writers Fellowship International, she has been invited to speak and conduct church growth, youth, singles, and women's seminars in Australia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Cayman Island, England and in many national, state, district and local church conferences across America in many denominations. Her book has been filmed by Ken Anderson Films, gone into the six printing including Spanish and been made into an 8-hour Church Growth Video Seminar which has changed many churches from declining to dynamic. She has conducted many "Vision 2000" conferences, the International Church of God Conference, and clergy and youth conferences. She has appeared on 700 Club and TV and radio stations.

Dr. Sims has won the Circuit Rider Award from the United Methodists, their highest national award for church growth. If you would like to know more about Dr. Rose and her life's work, please see the very inspiring article, [Growing a Church with Love](#), by Rose Sims, which is available on line in the Jan/Feb 2004 issue of Good News magazine at www.goodnewsmag.org.

EXPERIENCING THE TRUTH OF SCRIPTURE

Robert E. Coleman

The dynamics of the Christian faith center in experiencing the truth of God's Word. Whether in individuals or mass revival movements, when the Scripture is believed, blessings come; when it is questioned or compromised, decline and ruin follow. This principle can be seen in operation throughout the history of the church. To bring it into focus, I want to look at the origin of the Methodist revival.

It can be said to have begun in John Wesley's search for personal faith, which climaxed at a small Moravian chapel on May 24, 1738. Notice how the Bible guided his quest. Waking early that morning, he read in his New Testament, "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises; that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Then he opened his Bible again. This time his eyes fell on the verses of Jesus: "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). All morning these promises kept running through his mind.

In the afternoon he went to the stately St. Paul's Cathedral, where he was especially moved by the choir's singing of Psalm 130: "Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice." The final verse seemed to stir the soul: "O Israel, trust in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption." Those words were still echoing in his mind as he made his way to the little meeting on Aldersgate Street. We are not told how the service progressed, though it is known that the lesson that evening spoke of the transformation resulting from the new birth. As the young clergyman listened, about a quarter before nine something happened. He explained it this way:

"While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." Wesley then "testified openly" to all what he felt in his heart. Having witnessed to those present, he went with some friends to tell his good news to his brother Charles, who lay sick in a house nearby. Rushing into his room, John exclaimed, "I believe! I believe!" Then, typifying their unbounded joy, they joined in singing a hymn. From such heartfelt assurance, Methodism was born. The biblical theology that Wesley had long espoused and preached had come alive; it was no longer a mere orthodox conviction, it was an experience.

Spiritual authority

What gave authenticity to Wesley's experience was the witness of the Spirit to God's Word in his heart. The Scriptures had become central in his thinking even before his conversion. In fact, they were instrumental in bringing him to know salvation. While at Oxford, with others in the Holy Club, he had resolved to take the Bible as "their whole and sole rule," it being "their one desire and design to be downright Bible-Christians."

Thereafter this determination permeated his whole ministry, as is evident from the constant appeal to Scripture in his writing and preaching. "The Bible is my standard of language as well as sentiment," he said. Indeed, it was "the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion." Endeavoring to be "a man of one book. Yes, I am a Bible bigot," he asserted. "I follow it in all things, both great and small."

His practice was the reflection of a conviction that the Bible was fully inspired by God. Biblical passages were often referred to as the very words of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, according to Wesley, "nothing which is written therein can be censured or rejected." He believed that the Bible was "infallibly true," and "The Word of God which remaineth forever." "If there be one falsehood in that book," he wrote, "it did not come from the God of truth."

Out of this confidence came his commitment to the doctrines of historic evangelical Christianity. Though he did not draw up a lengthy creedal statement like the more traditional churches, he did take from his Anglican heritage a simple confession of faith in his "Articles of Religion." This, with his forty-four standard sermons and Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, constituted the Methodist "standards" of doctrine.

To be sure, the catholic spirit of Wesley cut across all sectarianism and bigotry. But there was no toleration of heresy. Methodist preachers were carefully examined in the doctrines of the church before being sent out to preach. The model deed to Methodist properties stipulated that the premises could be used for worship only so long as the doctrinal standards were faithfully observed.

Today's challenge

The Wesleyan movement flowed out of this kind of theological stamina. It was a marriage of scriptural authority and Christian experience that produced an evangelical awakening which swept over England, spread to America, and birthed a great church.

Born along with a passion for evangelism, the Methodists soon grew to be the largest denomination in the land, outnumbering the Baptists, their nearest rival, by 20 percent, and numbering as many members as all Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians combined. Astounding! About fifty years from the time the first Methodists set foot on these shores, more than a quarter of all professing Christians in America, Protestant or Catholic, belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church. Had the rate of increase continued for a few more generations, every man, woman, and child on the continent would have been won to Christ and called a Methodist. How do you account for such phenomenal growth? Surely many factors entered into it, but running through them all was the dynamic of people genuinely experiencing the truth of Holy Scripture.

As the years lengthened, however, the momentum subsided, and by the turn of the twentieth century, decline of church vitality was painfully evident, a trend that has drastically accelerated in recent years. Higher critical humanistic views of Scripture have generally undermined the earlier confidence in the Bible; liberal theological agendas have gained ascendancy in church conferences and publications; permissive pluralistic, libertarian attitudes now give little room for Christian discipline and holiness; well orchestrated budget drives and building programs have largely replaced the once dominant zeal for evangelism and world missions.

Not surprisingly, many heartbroken Methodists have left the church to enrich other ministries. The loss of more than two million members in the past two decades is the greatest loss in so short a period ever sustained by an American denomination. And though some leaders have expressed alarm and called for renewal, by and large the cancer of theological apostasy that eats at the vitals of evangelical truth is not being addressed, least of all in United Methodist colleges and seminaries.

It is not easy to keep Christian experience in line with Scripture. The difficulty may be more pronounced with those coming from an Armenian theology which emphasizes individual freedom of the will. For this reason, Methodists must be especially careful not to stray from their heritage of faith in an absolutely truthful Bible. And while the danger may not be as obvious within the Reformed tradition, the temptation to take liberty with Scripture is no less real.

Finally, the issue is not one of doctrine, but of biblical faith. Whatever our theological stance, the natural tendency of human nature is to take the course of least resistance. To exercise faith in the promises of grace requires complete obedience to the Word of God. The world, the flesh, and the devil will always seek to impugn or, at least, belittle the demands of Scripture

Thankfully, we do not have to be intimidated. The Spirit of truth who inspired the Word will prove its validity in the experience of every person who will trust Him. The Bible was not written just to give us information; it was written to change our lives. This is the challenge of Scripture-to actually take to heart its transforming power. Experience does not ever replace the authority of God's Word, but it does make it come alive. This is the dynamic of spiritual revival, and, oh, how much we need it today. Merely giving intellectual assent to the Scripture is not enough. Indeed, this is the danger of a correct theology without experiencing the truth. Such subterfuge can breed smug complacency and leads to hypocrisy, like that of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Nothing is more dead or more disdained by the watching world than lifeless orthodoxy.

So let us seek in humility by the Spirit of grace to hold together the two so easily divided-biblical authority and Christian experience. In their unity is the beauty and the power of redemptive truth.

Robert E. Coleman is the former director of the School of World Mission and Evangelism and Professor of Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of many books including The Master Plan of Evangelism (Revell), Nothing to Do But Save Souls (Wesley Heritage Press), and The Coming Revival (Crossway).

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NEW ENGLAND ANNUAL CONFERENCE PREVIEW

Deborah Botham

There's an attractive Powerpoint presentation on the Conference web page – a preview of sorts of the 2005 Annual Conference. The second slide says, "Transformed by the Holy Spirit, we will become united in trust as we boldly proclaim Christ to the world." As a first-timer, I will be looking for evidence of the passion and energy that we all need to rise above administrative chores and commit ourselves to proclaim the Good News. Most of you are probably old hands at this conference business, adept at choosing the dialogue sessions and learning centers which speak to your particular interests. But for those of us who are not "in the know", here's a brief rundown on this year's offerings.

The session on Budget, Mission Shares, and Health Insurance is self-explanatory. The payment of mission shares appears to arouse some controversy, and the rising costs of health insurance are of a concern to our clergy. All congregations are eager to hear plans for the Conference Capital Campaign, and that group may provide us with the preliminary information we need to take back to our local church families.

Reports by the Conference Transformation Team and Congregational Development group address the growing desire to grow our churches not only in number, but also in renewed spiritual commitment. There is a real interest in planting new churches, and the Development group will bring us information about those plans.

Our diverse populations create new challenges for pastors and congregations alike, and the Cross Cultural/Crossracial Ministry dialogue session will allow needs and challenges to be voiced. Sessions on Stewardship and Youth Ministries are of interest to every congregation – in a perfect world, we'd have attendees divide and conquer to accumulate as much information as possible.

Resolution 204 – Divesting from companies that are supporting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories – will be the topic of another session. General Conference constitutional amendments being discussed involve election of delegates, defining conference authority over home missionaries, and the introduction of enabling legislation among others.

Learning Centers run the gamut, from detailed information about UMCOR, the importance of missions in the local church, and ministering to families. The BU School of Theology group Sacred Worth will facilitate discussion on the "welcoming and reconciling" movements in the UMC. There's also an intriguing Learning Center opportunity focused on the role of contemporary music and worship in presenting the Gospel message.

All these activities are surrounded by opportunities for prayer, worship and fellowship. We are called to be faithful servants, but we are also called to be "awake". There are many who would reduce our Holy and mighty God to one of us. Even the Upper Room Disciplines several weeks ago had a meditation that encouraged us to imagine God as Our Mother soaking in a tub and then sitting in her rocking chair, content to watch her children do nice things for one another. As we seek to uphold the Word of God and speak His Truth, it is important to engage in conversation with those who disagree with us. God does indeed love each and every one, and wills that not one be lost. That is why we must sing out the Good News of Jesus Christ. But God is not to be made light of. His promises are sure – those that speak life to us, and those that warn us of the dangers of disobedience. May God bless each one who makes the trek to Gordon College, and may His Truth resonate in each heart as we gather in love and a desire to do His will.

WANTED! PRAYER TEAM MEMBERS

"Pray without ceasing.".....1 Th. 5:17. ERF has a very small prayer team. Wouldn't you like to be part of it? We live in a world that needs prayer. As we prepare to attend Annual Conference, we need to surround all the delegates in prayer. Anyone desiring to become part of the prayer team should contact our prayer coordinator, Robbin R. Grill, Tel: (603) 796-2661, E-mail: randagrill@hotmail.com. The prayer team will be having a specific focus for prayer each month. If you would like specific names lifted in prayer, please contact Robbin and your request will be added to the prayer list. To God be the glory.....

THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS

Walter Ciesluk

In this day and age, everyone seems to have something to say about Jesus and it is easy for someone to become very confused about who He is. If we talk to a Buddhist or Hindu, they may acknowledge Jesus as a great holy man or enlightened teacher, but nothing more. Most Jews may concede that Jesus may have been a revolutionary rabbi, but clearly not Israel's promised Messiah. A Muslim will have great respect for Jesus as a prophet, but will deny that he was ever executed on a cross. Many biblical and theological scholars have not helped the situation very much by publishing numerous books in recent years, providing a myriad of viewpoints, some troubling, some puzzling, which tend to regard Jesus as a teaching sage, a religious genius, or a social revolutionary. In contrast, Christians claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Lord and Savior. And finally, the popular media seems to enjoy exploiting this great disparity of opinions and belittling those who have strong views about the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus Christ. In this kind of environment, it is very understandable why the un-churched and even some members of our churches can become skeptical, uninterested, and indifferent to Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?"

The truth of the matter is that Jesus himself made a lot of statements suggesting that he knew very well who he was. Although, He didn't go around saying the words, I am God, everywhere He went, it is clear from all He taught and claimed, that He was conscious of being a man who possessed the attributes of God." These attributes are reflected in much of His teaching which centered on Himself. "I am the way the truth and the life. "No man comes to the Father but by me." "If you deny me before man, I will deny you before my father." "I am the bread of life, he that comes to me shall never hunger." "He that believes in me has everlasting life." "He that has seen Me has seen the father, I am the door, by Me if any man enter in he shall be saved." "I that speak to you am He, the Messiah." "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" As C.S. Lewis says, "If all these things that Jesus said about himself are true, He clearly is of God and deserves our utmost attention and allegiance. Otherwise, he is a complete madman or liar, not worthy of our respect and attention. He is either a lunatic or the Savior of the world."

The reason that we Christians can confidently say that Jesus is the Savior of the World is because the apostles and others witnessed a resurrected Jesus after his crucifixion, and began to proclaim Him as Lord and Savior to all the nations. The physical resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Christianity. Without the resurrection, we, the church, are just another social club, community charity, non-profit organization, another system of morality. Because of the resurrection, we can trust in the teachings and promises of Christ. We can trust what he says about biblical authority, forgiveness of sins, requirements for salvation, moral and ethical behavior, and eternal life. We can also take heart that there is strong evidence that the resurrection did indeed occur, and that we have very rational basis for our faith. First, the resurrection is the only plausible explanation for the empty grave. After He rose from the dead, Jesus appeared at least ten times to those who had known him and to as many as 500 people at one time. The resurrection is the only reasonable explanation for the miraculous growth of the Christian church, which was born in the very city where Jesus was publicly killed and buried. And, finally, the transformed lives of the disciples from discouragement and fear to boldness, courage, and a willingness to die for their faith can not be explained apart from their conviction that Jesus Christ was truly raised from the dead.

As a Christian lay person, I become upset when I find that many contemporary Christian pastors are timid, equivocal, or evasive about boldly declaring the truth about Jesus. Sermons and pronouncements which espouse pluralistic or universal views of salvation, reflect skepticism about His miraculous birth and resurrection, undermine the historical Christian faith and make it impotent. I believe that the church must continue to uphold the centrality and exclusivity of Jesus in the Gospel, and defend the truth of the resurrection and the authority of scripture. We must make it clear to all who hear that because of our sinful nature, we are separated from God and lost without a Savior, that God loved us so much that He provided us that Savior in the person of His son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross as a substitute payment for our sins, and that our relationship with God can be restored by a profession of faith in His redeeming life, death, and resurrection. With such a faith, we will be moved to worship, pray, and study the scriptures passionately, will strive to keep God's moral law, will be empowered to be witnesses for the gospel, and will be inspired to advocate and work for social justice. If some claim that there are other ways to God, we need to declare that we are sure of only one way. Unless, we do this boldly, I believe that confusion about Jesus will continue in our churches and widespread general apathy and indifference to Him will remain in our communities.

RECENT BOOKS ON TRENDS IN CHRISTIANITY

Evangelism for Normal People, Good News for Those Looking for a Fresh Approach, John P. Bowen, Augsburg Fortress, Copyright 2002

This book was written by noted author and teacher, John P. Bowen, professor at Wycliffe College, an Anglican seminary at the University of Toronto. Previously, he worked for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for more than 20 years. The book takes a fresh look at doing relational evangelism and what it means to witness to one's faith. It explains how one can get beyond all the negative images, stereotypes, guilt, and intimidation frequently associated with evangelism, and demonstrates that evangelism is something that all Christians can do as a "normal" part of being a follower of Christ. The author's presentation is clearly written, well argued, thoroughly biblical, and very practical. The descriptions and examples presented in the book will help our understanding of the Trinity, the Gospel, the Christian community, and our mission and life in the world. The book will make you think about what you believe about Jesus and the church, heaven and hell, the Bible, and the Gospel message, as well as about what God wants to be doing in and through your life. The book also includes questions for reflection and group discussion. This book can be a valuable resource for any church and any Christian seeking to find a way to enhance their efforts in this very important ministry.

Breaking the Da Vinci Code, Answers to the Questions Everybody's Asking, Darrell L. Bock, Ph.D., Nelson Books, Copyright 2004

Many who have read the New York Times best-seller *The Da Vinci Code* have questions that arise from the seven codes-expressed or implied-in Dan Brown's book. In *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everyone's Asking*, Darrell Bock, Ph.D., responds to the novelist's claims using central ancient texts and answers the following questions: Who was Mary Magdalene? Was Jesus Married? Would Jesus Being Single be Un-Jewish? Do the So-Called Secret Gnostic Gospels Help Us Understand Jesus? What Is the Remaining Relevance of *The Da Vinci Code*? Darrell Bock's research uncovers the origins of these codes by focusing on the 325 years immediately following the birth of Christ, for the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* rise or fall on the basis of things emerging from this period. *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* distinguishes fictitious entertainment from historical elements of the Christian faith. For by seeing these differences, one can break the Da Vinci code. Ultimately, though, there is another code lurking behind the pages of this novel. Most readers of the novel have no idea that this other code is there. *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, though, will lead readers to discover why this novel has become something of a public phenomenon and why the issues it raises are worthy of careful study and reflection. Every Christian who has read Dan Brown's "*The Da Vinci Code*" needs to read this book, and also bring it to the attention of any of their friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors who may also have been exposed to the Da Vinci code.

Streams of Renewal, Welcoming New Life Into United Methodism, Edited by James V. Heidinger II and Steve Beard, Living Streams Publications, Copyright 2004

This book provides a collection of essays and articles, which were compiled to highlight the life giving renewal within United Methodism and to encourage us to tap into streams of living water that are offered from Jesus Christ. "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink—John 7:37. The book is segmented into six sections with a collection of essays in the following categories: Revitalizing United Methodism; Congregational Vibrancy; The Global Witness; Warm Hearted Faith; Why Theology Matters; and Moving Forward. Contributing authors include Boyce Bowdon, Maxie Dunnam, Charles Keysor, Thomas C. Oden, and Rose Sims, William Willimon, and N.T. Wright. The diverse essays in this volume focus on classical Christianity, John Wesley, the Bible, church growth, the Alpha course, the virgin birth, Cuban Methodism, caring for the poor, the cross, the resurrection, and the need for a new generation of leaders. These are the kinds of issues that can encourage a new era of faithfulness and discipleship within United Methodism. I encourage everyone interested in renewal of the United Methodist church to read this book.

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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 2005-30 June 2007)

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