
RENEWAL



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Walter Ciesluk, Editor

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SO MANY RELIGIONS, SO LITTLE TIME

Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Bentum

We live in a time in our culture when the consideration of all the different religions in the world is like a trip to the mall. And what a big mall it is. There are so many different religions out there to explore and to mix and match to our taste and so little time to explore all the possibilities. For some that is an energizing thought, for most I think it is a source of intimidation and confusion.

I was fortunate when I worked in campus ministry in the early part of my career to work alongside of Dr. James Sire as he came on my secular college campuses to lecture or to debate religion and philosophy professors. At some point in his presentation he would sum up his argument by saying, "The only reason for believing something is that it is true." As a child of this culture, I still find that to be a shockingly bold statement.

Why is that so? Our culture has so divorced truth and belief, particularly when it comes to religion, that it seems odd to see the two words in the same sentence. To simplify the matter, when it comes to religious belief we are more comfortable talking about religion in two other categories. The first is whether or not it works. In other words, does it show one how to live a decent life with some ethical standards? The second is whether or not it satisfies some inner longing. There is nothing wrong comparing religious belief using those two categories, but as far as an ultimate reason for believing, they fall short. You are still left wondering how you actually measure whether something works or whether something is genuinely satisfactory. Truth is always lurking in the background!

The challenge concerning these two ways of measuring religion is that they both answer a distinctly different question than the truth question. They answer the question concerning which religion is better. Which religion is *better* at providing a way of life? Which religion is *better* at satisfying my inner longings? It is not long into a discussion of religions that someone will ask me how I know my religion is better than the others. My answer is that I really don't know which one is better. I am a Christian not primarily because I believe it is better, but because I believe it is true.

A couple of the fears that I believe cause us not to like to talk about religion in terms of its truth is that it seems to lead to being judgmental or argumentative. The opposite is actually true. To talk about whether a religion is better than another puts the discussion on a personal level and that can easily lead to being judgmental or fostering arguments. To put religious discussion on the truth level takes it out of the personal context so that it can be easily examined and discussed. A discussion of truth most naturally leads to respect for others as they seek the truth and therefore civility in conversation. Of course the standard cultural way of dealing with the discomfort of comparing belief systems is to say that all religions are basically the same, that they all have the same ethical standards and that they all point to the same God. It's almost like we are born with those phrases in our mouths!

This past summer I picked up a copy of Stephen Prothero's book *Religious Literacy*. Prothero teaches at Boston University and is by no means an evangelical. I picked up his book because in a magazine article he questioned the belief that there is such a thing as generic spirituality and that each religion is essentially the same. How refreshing!

His book turned out to be a good read and he traces the historical reasons behind why we Americans are so religiously illiterate today. Unfortunately the book is targeted at the college level because he believes the solution to our problem lies there. Perhaps Prethero's book is a sign that the door is opening in our culture for intelligent discussion of what we believe.

If we are going to be successful in our witness in this age, we need to have some understanding of what people believe and certainly part of that is to know about the religions that impact our neighbors. As I said in the opening, we treat religions like a shopping mall and mix and match to suite our taste, so just picking up a book in Buddhism or Islam is a start but not enough. We need to know the right questions to ask that lead us to genuine understanding of our neighbor's perspective. As followers of Jesus Christ, if we want a hearing, we need to be able to listen well.

One of the fears of learning about other religions is that it will dilute our own. If believing what is true is our primary goal, then we should have no fear. We need to let the truth lead us wherever it takes us. We need to be fellow seekers with our neighbors looking for the truth. If Jesus is indeed the Truth, then exploring truth will naturally lead us back to Him and we will be spiritually strengthened in the process.

I am pleased that we have Dr. Darrell Whiteman coming to New England to help us in this important task of understanding and reaching out across religious barriers to our neighbors. I believe he will give us the tools to think about what others believe and so that we can not only reach out in truth but also in love. Please join us at Renewal 2008 in Exeter, NH 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.

AN INVITATION AND CHALLENGE

Walter J. Ciesluk

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. At the same time, I am sure that there are many pastors interested and/or members in ERF, who have preached sermons recently which could easily be modified into Renewal Journal articles.

I anticipate 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. This would be a great way to improve the Renewal Journal.

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 be 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.

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TOUCH POINTS, RELATIONAL EVANGELISM IS ALL ABOUT FINDING AREAS OF COMMON GROUND

Liz Selzer

The groans were audible. The college students in my "Ideas and Issues" class were not overly excited about their latest assignment. I had asked them to have a conversation with someone who was not a Christian. "What if they won't talk to us?" voiced one frustrated student. "What if I don't even know anyone who is not a Christian?" asked another. *Uh-oh*, I thought. Just the response I feared. I was trying to teach the idea of listening for "touch points" (something in common between you and a person from a different background). It was a concept I'd learned in my counseling training. Might it also work while sharing faith? I naively hoped the idea would excite the class as much as it had me. Obviously, I was wrong.

"That's the beauty of this assignment," I improvised. "You don't have to perform an eloquent evangelistic speech at them. Instead, you create a safe place by listening and connecting. Most people will talk to you if they feel you're there to really listen to them without an agenda on your part to sell something." "So we're supposed to just *listen* to them? What if they start cutting down Christians or our beliefs? What are we supposed to do then?" demanded another student. "You just might find that listening lowers the need to be combative like that." I replied, hoping to lessen the anxiety in the room. "As you listen, seek out 'touch points' in what they say. Touch points are topics where you relate to another person's life, in other words, areas of common ground. You may be surprised that you have more in common with a non-Christian than you can imagine right now. These commonalities are the areas to build on for honest discussion."

This seemed to settle the students down, or maybe they had just resigned themselves to the fact that they were going to have to do this assignment. But at least it seemed doable. What would this assignment yield? I didn't know. I waited anxiously for the next class. I was grateful (and honestly, surprised) when they all returned the next week upbeat; the energy palpable. Every one had a motivating story to tell. One told of a Muslim associate who, after his views were genuinely heard, began asking questions about what the student believed. Another told of an atheist friend who, after seeing what values they shared and the student's respect for her as a person, was open to listening to the student's views and having future conversations with her. Another told of an agnostic acquaintance who began to see the uniqueness of Christianity as they discussed commonalities and differences of other religions.

The key to their success in having a genuine conversation was the fact that they *listened* first. Just listened. When they were listening without worrying about what they were going to say next, they were able to find common ground. Many admitted that this surprised them. They had assumed that a non-Christian would think about and value very different things, but this was not the case. Instead they had a number of things in common, things like the value of love and friendship, safety, and hope. They had indeed found the touch points that the assignment had asked them to find. What began as a bothersome homework assignment affected everyone of the students. Their enthusiasm also made an impact on me. I couldn't help but think that if this could work for students just trying to get a grade, how effective might it be for those with a missional mindset. In my work in ministry, a common question often emerges: How can we encourage those in our congregations to step out and use a relational approach to evangelism? The following steps have been helpful.

Listen. Really listen.

Listening requires us to be quiet-not only on the outside, but also on the inside. Attentive listening means we lessen distractions both outside and inside us. On the outside, it means that we keep our eyes on the person speaking to keep from being distracted by things going on around us. We focus on their words and not on the other noises in the room. On the inside, it means that we don't think about what we are going to say next. We concentrate on hearing what they're saying, verbally and nonverbally, sensing what's important to them, without mentally figuring out ways to correct them. To listen for the complete communication from other people, we need to:

- Hear the words they say.
- Be aware of how our past history with those words might affect how we hear the words and the meanings we assign to them. Our understanding of certain words may not be theirs.
- Notice body language. How comfortable are they? Do they seem attentive, nervous, or bored?
- Notice emotional cues (pitch of voice, facial expressions, eye contact). What does this tell us about how they feel about what they are saying?

All of these are clues that help us understand what the other person is really saying and helps us identify touch points we truly have in common. This has been a freeing notion for me. I used to (and still do at times) mentally concentrate on the next thing that I wanted to say, which, of course, required me to tune into my own thoughts and not what the other person was trying to convey. Often I miss the real point of what the other person is saying because I'm too caught up in what I'm about to say. But when all I do is listen, the conversation still progresses just fine, and I end up learning so much more than if I had spent my time crafting my next "clever" point. James puts it so well: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak."

Spot the touch points

Touch points are areas of common ground, places to explore further. As the other person is speaking, listen for things where your life experience touches theirs:

- A specific topic (growth of the Internet, parenthood)
- An emotion (anger, frustration, tiredness)
- Specific people (siblings, mentors, Mother Teresa)
- Past experiences (losses, successes, challenges)

Touch points might include relationships with spouses, parents, or friends; life changes such as losing a job or moving to another state; suffering in all the ways it shows up in our lives; the emptiness we might feel at times; the hypocrisy of some Christians; the longing for love and acceptance; the appreciation of nature; issues with shame or guilt, common values and morals. When you spot a touch point, you can return the conversation to that common ground.

Once I was talking with a woman who was a devout Hindu. I thought we would have nothing in common. After all, she believed in multiple gods and Karma. But I decided to listen to her and try to understand how this seemingly intelligent woman could be so "mised." What happened forever changed my perspective on relating to people of other faiths. We began to talk about our children, our spouses, our frustration with the speed at which life was moving, our dislike of the constantly windy weather, our busyness, and even our desire for hope for the future. This woman was not as different from me as I had thought. A genuine bond was formed through our common emotions and experiences that still exists today. She has not given up all of her Hindu beliefs, but we have had open conversations about God's grace and the gift of Christ's unconditional love, and how that can give hope to all of God's creation. As Paul says: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible" (1 Corinthians 9: 19).

Affirm those areas of agreement

Initially, we want to gain more information than just the one sentence of interest on a touch point. A more rounded picture of what the other person thinks on a subject will allow us to relate to them more fully and effectively. One way is to simply paraphrase what they say. This not only checks our understanding, but allows them to hear for themselves what they have said. Often they will correct our perception or add additional information. The great thing about

paraphrasing is we don't have to be thinking ahead about the next question or our next response, we can just summarize what they're saying. This shows them that we have really been listening. One of the best gifts we can offer other people is to help them feel that they have truly been heard.

Again, we need to be careful not to be tempted to give them immediate counter points to everything we do not agree with. I know this can be very difficult because this is where I personally really have to bite my tongue. Disagreeing too quickly can shut down the conversation. If we can continue listening without verbal judgment, however, the conversation continues and our bond is strengthened. If they feel we are really listening to them, they are affirmed. Often this will open the door for them to be willing to listen to us. But that usually comes later.

To build on a touch point, once we have really heard what the other person has to say on the subject, find and comment on the area where you agree. For instance, we might both like the same sports team or television program. We might both have challenges in communicating with our children. As we talk further, we may uncover that both of us suffer with secret issues of insecurity. Even though you may not agree with all they say about a topic, you can still build on a touch point. For instance, we may not agree with the way someone disciplines his or her children, but we can both agree on the touch point of how much we love our children. Or we may not agree with a view that "all good people end up in heaven regardless of their beliefs," but we can agree on the touch points of the desire to be good, the desire to understand what happens after death, and the desire to go to an enjoyable place when we die.

Take the next step

After affirming the areas of common ground, expand on them. For instance, if we have discovered that another person has a desire to find purpose in their life, we can encourage them to talk more about this desire and then share that we have the same desire. We can discuss what that desire looks like in practical real-life examples, and what we have or have not done about it so far. We can talk about what Christians believe about life purpose and why. It's in this context that Peter says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3: 15).

We don't have to tell others that we think they are bad for the beliefs they currently hold. This type of judgmentalism is a turn-off in most of our current culture and will often prevent any real communication in the future. Faith means we can allow others to discover what might be lacking in their beliefs in time. We usually don't have to rush it. The goal is to continue with the conversation, not stop it short. Instead, engage them in the joy or peace that we have found. Explain why we have the hope we enjoy, and if asked, share with them how they too can find it. Listening and keying in on touch points opens an important door to the power of genuine relationship with others. Whether we know it or not, all of us encounter those who are not Christians. Our society is increasingly filled with those who don't know God. These are simple steps that anyone can try. The relationships and fruitful dialogue that open doors in the future are well worth the effort.

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HOW WIDE IS THE NARROW GATE?

Rev. Gregory P. Ciesluk

Christ has opened the door to salvation, to new life now and life everlasting in heaven, to all who would receive it. But the door is narrow, requiring more than a casual interest, but a responsiveness to and focus on God, a striving to hold on to God's promise by faith and trust, and not by hard work and despair. Thus, let us remember that the gospel of grace is for us all, but calls us all to pursue God's gift with our whole hearts.

As we read and study the gospels, we are confronted with the cost of following Jesus, with the heavy demands of discipleship: Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem; Leave the dead to bury the dead; Whoever put his hand to the plow and turns back is not fit; Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; Shake the dust off your feet; Go and do likewise; One thing is needful; Beware of all covetousness; Sell your possessions and give alms; Be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour; I came to bring fire to the earth, not peace, but division.

At this point, there just may be an accumulated sense of burden mounting among us and certainly in the ears and hearts of those listening to Jesus. This brings us to the question of utmost importance on the minds of listeners and certainly one we wonder about: "Will only a few be saved?" What is your view on salvation? Do you believe many will be saved, or only a few?

Some believe that everyone, or nearly everyone, will be saved. From the Bible, they might base their hope in God's promises:

- "...See I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5);
- ... that is Jesus who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through His holy prophets (Acts 3:21);
- ...that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Ephesians 1:10).

On the contrary, others believe that only a few will be saved. From the Bible, they might base this belief on the fact that Jesus spoke plainly about hell and judgment. Why else would Jesus warn us through so many parables and teachings? Why else would Jesus even use people like Judas Iscariot—of whom he said, "It would be better for that man if he had never been born (Mark 14:21)"—to get his point across? Clearly, Jesus was concerned that some people risked being separated from his Father and condemned to a place of "wailing and grinding of teeth" (Matthew 24:51).

So which is it? Will everyone, or nearly everyone be saved? Or will the number of God's redeemed children be few?

The Challenge of our Culture

We live in a society where the "I'm okay, you're okay" philosophy has led many of us to believe that the greatest sin is intolerance of others. The deepest blessing, so we're told, will come when we accept everyone, with no judgments made about beliefs or behavior. This cultural mindset has been so deeply engrained in us that we tend to see God as all-accepting. We are likely to say that surely many, even most, people will go to heaven.

But, how many will be saved? We really have no idea. The answer, as in most cases, probably lies in the middle between "absolutely everyone" and "only a chosen few." Only God knows for sure! When someone in the crowd asked Jesus this question, it is interesting that he chose to not answer directly. Instead, he said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." Jesus shifts the focus from "how many" will be saved to focus on where we stand with the Lord.

Where Do We Stand with the Lord?

So the more important question appears to be, “Where do we stand with the Lord? The door to salvation is wide open, but it’s still narrow. Jesus says, “Strive to enter through the narrow door...” Are you striving so to enter the narrow door? The word Jesus uses here to “strive” means to fight, to struggle, to agonize over, to strain every nerve. Are you making every effort within your power to grab a hold of God’s gracious gift? Are you agonizing within your spirit to please the Lord and be found approved above all else?

Is your pursuit of eternal life such a single-minded focus that it gives order to life’s priorities? Is there a stumbling block that stand in the way to complete dedication of yourself to God? from walking humbly, yet unashamedly through that door?

If you sense the Lord speaking to your heart, if you sense your spirit being quickened by God’s Spirit, do not resist any further and do not delay. It is time to move toward Jesus as he is moving toward you. The “striving” God wants from us is the effort to remain rooted in faith and trust, not hard work or despair.

Jesus’ arms are always open wide. He is always beckoning us to come to him and receive his grace. He knows that we will never be at peace as long as we believe salvation is something we have to earn. Yet, he will withhold a measure of peace as long as we are resisting his grace, holding part of us back from complete dedication.

Jesus invites us to come to the feast not because our lives are perfect but because we have freely embraced his gift of mercy. All he asks us to do is strive to hold on to him. All he asks is that we hold on to our confidence that he will never abandon us. God loves us immeasurably. So trust His grace and live completely, wholeheartedly in it. Then, the narrow door will open wide for you.

How many will be saved? In short, it is simply poor judgment—and potentially very risky—to take the whole question lightly. In other words, if we are going to err at all, we would do best to err on the side of “the few,” even as we hope and pray that many will come.

The Bottom Line

A story goes that a man died and met Jesus at the gates of heaven. Jesus asked, “tell me about your life and I will judge whether I will open the gates of heaven to you. The man replied, “I was married for 50 years to my wife and I was faithful to her throughout my life. I attended church most Sundays and supported the ministry with my money. I used my gifts and talents to serve in my local church. Then, Jesus said, ‘that’s wonderful, but that is not enough. What else? At this point the man was discouraged and said in desperation, “At the rate I’m going, it’s only by the grace of God that I’ll ever get into heaven.” And with that, Jesus opened the gates and welcomed him in.

The same equation is in place for the holiest saint all the way to the most flawed sinner. It’s only by the grace of God that any of us can hope to receive eternal life. By the same grace of God that gave Jesus Christ to suffer death on the cross for our pardon and forgiveness, let us give our lives without reservation to know and serve Christ as living sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

How wide is the narrow gate? Wide enough that anyone who desires to be saved can receive God’s generous gift. But narrow enough that those who approach God with only a casual interest may find himself left out after all is said and done.

This article is based on a sermon recently preached by Rev. Gregory Ciesluk. It relies heavily on a meditation from the Word Among Us website. You can find some wonderful meditations on scripture at www.wau.org. Rev. Ciesluk, is an Elder in the Minnesota Annual Conference, and pastor of Norton Park UMC, Duluth, MN and Northwood UMC, Esko, MN.

PRAYING CONTINUALLY

Robbin R. Grill

Jesus tells us in Luke 18:1 that we should pray always, continually, without ceasing. This means we should pray at home, at work, when we relax, when we eat, at times of joy and at times of sorrow. We should keep on praying without ceasing! If we are honest with ourselves, frequently we pray when we can do nothing else. But prayer should be our way of life... always...continually. But how do we do it? The Bible tells us that there are two main ways to help us pray continually:

1. Give thanks to God in all circumstances.
2. Always see Christ in any of our neighbors or those we come in contact with.

How do we give thanks in all circumstances? It is said that giving thanks at all times is the “formula of happiness” presented in the bible. We should be joyful always! And the way to be joyful is to pray continually. And the way to pray continually is to give thanks to God always, in all circumstances, for everything.

It is simple: give thanks to God, with joy, always, for everything, in all circumstances. On a sunny day: give thanks to God. On a rainy day: give thanks to God. On a stormy day. Even the thunder and lightning are gifts from God. When we eat or work or play we should thank God. If we are sick or in need, or have great problems we need to thank God. God cares so much about us that He has even counted all the hairs on our heads. (Matthew 10:30) And giving thanks to God with joy, is the first main step for sickness or problems to be solved.

Some people do just the opposite. Instead of giving thanks to God, always with joy, they are complaining constantly. If it snows, they have to shovel it. If it rains, they get wet. Even if it is a beautiful sunny day, they complain because they are working and can't enjoy it. Instead of always praying and praising God, they are always slandering God, as if He would prepare just the wrong thing for them! And as a result they are always sad, instead of always being happy... on earth!

To give thanks to God always, with joy, is the way to pray continually. “Trust in God” is the message of every page of the Old Testament. In the New, it is “Faith in Christ.”

Jesus repeats thirteen times in Matthew 25:31-46 that we should always see Christ in our neighbors. When we prepare meals for our family or for others, are we preparing them for Christ. One hour of work is an hour of prayer if we do it for Jesus. When we give food to the hungry (or clothing or shelter) we give it to Jesus. When we deny a smile or do something wrongful to someone we are doing it to Jesus.

Jesus comes to us every day in ways and attire we would never imagine. He wants to be with us. And remember what He said in Matthew 25:40.....”...Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.” We will be happier on earth... praying and touching Jesus any time we deal with anyone of our neighbors. And that's constant prayer, praying without ceasing! And that's the glorious life Jesus wants us to have!!

Robbin Grill is the coordinator of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship (ERF) prayer ministry.

UPPER ROOM LIVING PRAYER CENTER

Every year at Conference we answer telephones for the Upper Room Living Prayer Center. We like to have at least three people in the room at all times: one to answer the phone and two to pray. This year we will be answering phones from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Friday, June 13th and Saturday, June 14th. Are you willing to spend an hour helping those in need? Please contact Robbin Grill at robbin@rrgcpa.com or by phone during the day at (603) 228-0695 or evenings at (603)0796-2661. Sign-up sheets will also be available at the ERF meeting in April.

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION, A REVISITATION

Rev. Joseph Beardsley

My pathway into United Methodist orders included transfer from another denomination. Part of my warm welcome was The Course on our doctrine. This in turn led me to that often-controversial tenet on Christian Perfection.

Christian perfection was steadfastly lifted up by John Wesley and kept before us by God and our Bishops. Each year the question was asked of us, 'Do you expect to be made perfect in this life?' In response, it would receive the bold affirmative answer. We found it in hymnbook headings. The subject, also related to Sanctification, was a consistent one for Candidacy Mentor relationships.

Perfection? I guessed I had more to learn; how slowly, if ever did I come to an appreciation of it. Meanwhile I am grateful:

First for Wesley's faithfulness to his early roots, including his Oxford 'Holy Club' experience. Here he and Charles became more familiar with the area of Early Patristic study (approximately 2nd-4th C, C.E.). These were the often-persecuted heroes of the early Church Councils. Macarius, desert father 'of Egypt, played a large part for Wesley, but there were others, including St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, 4th C.

At some point, 18th Century controversy seemed to eclipse ancient sources. By default, Wesley was expected to speak for them. As in our day, the ancients sadly came to be read by few. Virginia W. Callahan explains why for Gregory (as for Wesley) the terms 'Christian' and 'Perfection' belong together: [p. 93 in Gregory, Ascetical Works] 'Perfection' is just the start of a whole new world of fruitful study, including more awareness of Eastern Orthodoxy.

I am grateful second and finally for the Wesley's ministry to the masses. Here Christian Perfection worked more as a practical doctrine. Today we might call it 'spiritual growth,' or as Charles said it, being 'changed from glory into glory.' Sweeping revival also included essentials of a devotional approach to Scripture and a positive human partnership in salvation (synergism).

Early church wisdom is being recovered in our day; in this, United Methodist Thomas Oden is a major force. We may find that our traditions are deeper-rooted and branching more widely.

Rev. Joseph Beardsley is a retired Elder in the New England Annual Conference. He is currently a Natural Church Development coach and a member of Commission on Archives and History.

RECENT BOOKS ON CHRISTIANITY AND RENEWAL

The Faith Given Once, For All, What Christians Believe, Why They Believe It, and Why It Matters, Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, Zondervan, Copyright 2008

In this book, the authors identify the unshakable tenets of the faith that Christians have believed through the centuries, truths that offer a ground for faith in uncertain times, hope and joy for those who despair, and reconciliation for a world at war with God and itself. The book first presents an overview of the challenges facing the church today, and then moves on to specific core issues. Chapter builds on chapter, from "God Is" to "He Has Spoken" to "Truth" and then on to "Last Things." The question of why so many people accuse the Christian faith of being "dry and brittle" is especially covered. One answer the authors give is the church's "failure to teach what the faith is." In the end, the authors call the church to rediscover the "joy of orthodoxy," to renew the surrounding culture and to rethink how we live out faith. "If there's ever been a time in which renewal was essential, it is today," they say.

The Case for the Real Jesus, A Journalist Investigates Current Attacks on the Identity of Christ, Lee Strobel, Zondervan, Copyright 2007

From college classrooms to bestselling books to the Internet, the historic picture of Jesus is under an intellectual onslaught. This fierce attack on the traditional portrait of Christ has confused spiritual seekers and created doubt among many Christians. But can these radical new claims and revisionist theories stand up to sober scrutiny? In this book, the author focuses on rediscovering the "real" Jesus. He addresses six major challenges and claims: that a "different Jesus" is seen in ancient documents that seem as credible as the four canonical gospels; that tampering by the church has damaged the Bible's portrayal of Jesus; that new explanations refute Jesus' resurrection; that Christianity copied pagan religions regarding Jesus; that Jesus didn't fulfill messianic prophecies; and that contemporary people should be able to choose what to believe about Jesus. The book addresses these issues via interviews with experts to refute each objection, offering readers top evangelical scholarship revealed in everyday language while challenging the claims of contemporary liberal writers. In summary, the author says, "none of these seemingly daunting challenges turned out to be close calls... they were systematically dismantled by scholars... with facts, logic and evidence."

What's So Great About Christianity, Dinesh D'Souza, Regnery Publishing, Copyright 2007

Is Christianity obsolete? Can an intelligent, educated person really believe the Bible? Or do the atheists have it right? Has Christianity been disproven by science, debunked as a force for good, and discredited as a guide to morality? In this book, the author looks at Christianity with a questioning eye, but treats atheists with equal skepticism. The result is a book that will challenge the assumptions of both believers and doubters and affirm that there really is, indeed, something great about Christianity. The author discusses such topics as:

- Why Christianity explains what modern science tells us about the universe and our origins-that matter was created out of nothing, that light preceded the sun-better than atheism does;
- How Christianity created the framework for modern science, so that Christianity and science are not irreconcilable, but science and atheism might be;
- Why the alleged sins of Christianity-the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Galileo affair ("an atheist's fable")-are vastly overblown;
- Why atheist regimes are responsible for the greatest mass murders of history;
- Why evolution does not threaten Christian belief, but actually supports the "argument from design";
- Why atheists fear the Big Bang theory and the "anthropic principle" of the universe, which are keystones of modern astronomy and physics;
- How Christianity explains consciousness and free will, which atheists have to deny;
- Why ultimately you can't have the values of Western civilization without the Christianity that gave it birth.

This book is excellent for the seeker, the skeptic, and the believer who wants to defend his faith.

RENEWAL 2008

The World Has Come to Us: Understanding and Reaching Out To The New Religions in Our Neighborhood
A Conference with Rev. Dr. Darrell Whiteman, The Mission Society

Exeter United Methodist Church, Exeter, New Hampshire

April 4 & 5, 2008

Sponsored by the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship

Saturday Seminar

Our seminar is held at Exeter UMC, Exeter, NH. A time of prayer for the seminar and our Annual Conference will begin before the seminar officially begins. Everyone is welcome! Dr. Darrell Whiteman will be our main presenter for the day. Dr. Whiteman is a former UM missionary to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and a former professor of cultural anthropology. He currently works with The Mission Society training missionaries worldwide. We are fortunate to have him give an analysis of our own culture and how to reach out with the Gospel in the midst of all its diversity. You can find out more about him on our website at www.renewne.org. We are also pleased to have Walter Fenton from Good News to share with us what is happening for the sake of renewal around our nation and what new directions we might take.

Saturday Program: 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

The Saturday seminar will be held at Exeter United Methodist Church, 307 Epping Road, Exeter, NH. Pre-conference prayer begins at 8:00 a.m. and registration opens at 8:30 a.m. The program agenda is opening worship (9:00 a.m.), presentation by Walter Fenton of Good News (9:30 a.m.), plenary session with Dr. Whiteman (10:00 a.m.), fellowship lunch (12:00 noon), plenary session continued with Dr. Whiteman (1:30 p.m.),.

Friday Evening Program: 7 p.m-9 p.m.

Friday evening at 7 p.m., the board meeting for ERF will take place at the Best Western, The Inn at Hampton, 815 Lafayette Rd. (US. Rt.1), Hampton, NH. All members of ERF are members of the board. Anyone may attend the board meeting, but only members may vote. The board meeting will consist of worship and prayer, hearing reports of ERF leaders, consideration of possible Annual Conference legislation, and goal setting for the future.

Accommodations

The conference will take place at the Exeter United Methodist Church, 307 Epping Road, Exeter, NH. Directions to Exeter UMC Directions to the church can be found on the home page of www.renewne.org. If you would like to stay in the area overnight on Friday, We have negotiated a special rate at Best Western The Inn at Hampton, 815 Lafayette Road (US Rt. 1), Hampton, NH for Friday night of \$79 if you make your reservation by March 14. Just call (603) 926-6771 and be sure to tell them you are with the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship. Information and directions to the hotel can be found at on the home page of www.renewne.org.

Purpose

The purpose of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship is to promote renewal in The New England Annual Conference through confessing the apostolic faith in Jesus Christ. We can be found on the web at www.renewne.org or you can call Tom Bentum at 603-788-2734.

For more information contact Tom Bentum at 603-788-2734 or Tbentum@clergy.net.

Cut Out and Mail:

FAMILY REGISTRATION FORM

Friday Evening	Number of People ___ times \$5 = \$ _____
Saturday	People ___ times \$25 = \$ _____
Fellowship Lunch	People ___ times \$10 = \$ _____
Extra Gift to ERF	= \$ _____
	Total \$ _____

Make checks payable to Evangelical Renewal Fellowship and send to Gail Ciesluk, 4 Draycoach Dr., Chelmsford, MA 01824.

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Congregation: _____

Evangelical Renewal Fellowship

16 Church St.

Lancaster, NH 03584

603-788-2734

Web site: www.RenewNE.org

E-mail: tbentum@clergy.net

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**