

THE GOSPEL & a network for encouraging the encounter in North America OUR CULTURE

“The Gospel As Public Truth”

North American Reflections on a British Consultation July 11–17, 1992

The Swanwick Consultation: Some Personal Reflections

*Howard J. Van Till,
Professor of Physics, Calvin College
Grand Rapids, Michigan*

We gathered at one place—the Hayes Conference Centre in the Derbyshire village of Swanwick. We were assembled for one central purpose—to deliberate regarding strategies for articulating the Gospel as public truth to contemporary Western culture. But we participants were by no means clones of a common archetype.

Diversity abounded. Although the majority of participants were from the UK, representatives from around the globe enriched the experience of all assembled. (At one plenary session the four speakers represented four continents.) A broad array of professions were represented by persons, young and old, drawn from numerous denominational communities. And theological perspectives differed immensely among persons of highly varied personalities, odysseys and agendas.

By midweek it appeared to some of us that these interesting diversities might degenerate into division and fragmentation. By design we had been organized into interest groups of approximately fifty persons in eight areas of concern: history, economics, arts, science, media, epistemology, education and medicine. Within these interest groups we were further subdivided into small discussion groups, each focusing on a selected list of topics or questions.

If our experience in the science section was typical, it was in the setting of these small groups that differences threatened to become divisions. Having been given a great deal of latitude in the use of our discussion time we tended to gravitate toward those questions that have long been problematic to Christian thought: How can we present God as the epitome of love and compassion when pain and suffering appear to have been built into the very fabric of the created world? (Concern regarding the scientific concept of common ancestry was directed not toward the goal of discrediting it, but of dealing candidly with its relevance to theological matters.)

Or, to cite a quite different concern, how dare we publicly present the Christian Gospel as *the* truth when the divisiveness and fragmentation among those who claim to be followers of Christ is already public knowledge? What constitutes the essential body of Gospel Truth as proclaimed by God, in distinction from the fabric of human cultural artifacts in which it is ordinarily clothed?

We found no simple answers to questions like these, but by the end of the week we found ourselves more able to discuss them in the presence of deep differences of perspective among those who held the Gospel central to their being.

How did this come about? I'm sure there were many factors, but I find myself returning in thought most frequently to the words of Archbishop Worlock in a midweek plenary session. How should we present the Gospel as public truth today? As I recall it, the heart of his answer was expressed in two guidelines: first, meet people where they are; second, present the Gospel as public truth by example and word. To

meet people where they are is to be compassionately knowledgeable of their needs as they are experienced, and to be humble enough to attend to *those* needs first. And in presenting the Gospel as public truth the sequence of example first and word second may be crucial. Perhaps the truth of the Gospel becomes public, not principally by the profundity of systematized articulation but by the humility and genuineness of compassionate action flowing from one's experience of God's action being true to his promises.

I suspect that most participants left the consultation with many significant questions for continuing reflection. If example takes priority over articulation, what is the role of the intellectual enterprise? In my own arena of natural science, what does it mean to meet scientifically trained people where they are? What example are we to set as professional scientists? With what words might that example be followed? How daring may we be as we seek to rearticulate the Gospel to a twentieth century Western world whose culture

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has been informed and shaped by the natural sciences? (One pastor who participated in our science discussions complained that we scientists were disappointingly conservative and timid in our deliberations.) How do we now gain true knowledge of God and his works? What is the proper epistemological function of Scripture in the formulation and evaluation of scientific theories? What is the proper epistemological role of information about the physical universe in the formulation and evaluation of theological theories? Good questions proceeding from a good consultation. □

The View from Western Canada

Alan Reynolds

*Pastor, University Hill United Church
Vancouver, British Columbia*

The Consultation of the British "Gospel and Our Culture" movement at Swanwick in July brought together a most diverse group—ecclesiastically, theologically, in age, race and profession. There were bishops (Anglican, Roman, Lutheran), moderators and past-moderators, pastors, professors of theology and religion, scientists, economists, musicians and artists, etc.

My "sub-group" of the "Arts Section" was titled "Aesthetics and Literary Criticism." Our discussion moved quickly to the post-modern condition and in particular the deconstructionism of Derrida.

Craig Van Gelder's article in this newsletter last winter gave an excellent brief introduction to the post-modern phenomenon. But, like many others, I have tended to dismiss its spokespersons as exploiters of current chaos whose thought was without significant fruit or lasting importance. Others were deeply into post-modernism, but I was not alone in my resistance to their insistence on the significance of this contemporary reality. For two or three sessions, the conversation was "spirited," at times heated! When the decision was made to examine one or two "texts," it moved the focus from our own group dynamics to a picture of an Andy Warhol print titled "Green Disaster." It helped us to realize how

pervasive is the post-modern condition.

But we still went to our rooms that evening hopelessly divided. I came the next morning quite convinced that we could not produce the required "statement." I was convinced that at best there would be abstentions, probably several "minority" positions. But, with amazing grace, we did come up with a statement which gained the unanimous consent of the group.

At the end of the process, someone said, "We've all been changed!" My own (unspoken) response was, "I've been challenged, but *not* changed!" But I have been changed.

The Gospel and Our Culture Network should not quickly dismiss the significance of the post-modern condition. I now realize that it permeates every facet of our life today—from rock to art, to TV! We live in "post-modern times."

Not only is the post-modern phenomenon important, it is quite probably necessary. It may be that God is in fact breaking down the structures of our modern institutions, assumptions and cultural patterns, in order that the new may rise.

Right now it's difficult to see what that new may be. It will probably be as different from the "Modern" world view as the Modern was from the Medieval! □

British and American Comparisons

George R. Hunsberger

*Western Theological Seminary
Holland, Michigan*

I participated in the Gospel as Public Truth consultation with two eyes. With one eye I looked for help toward understanding Western culture and what it means for the gospel to engage it. In that respect the consultation was wonderfully stimulating. The prepublication papers (*The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*) set the stage for vigorous section conversations. I was in the Epistemology Section, which in the larger picture seemed to be striking at the heart of the issues being engaged in all the sections.

The somewhat consensual documents which emerged from that and other sections were probably not the

most important fruit of the meeting. The struggle across wide-ranging ecclesial lines and the intensity of conversations around the themes were the most noteworthy. Even outside the small group interactions in the section meetings, I found the greatest enrichment in numerous conversations with a fascinating array of people who were alive with deep and spontaneous conviction that the gospel engages us and our culture with a penetrating challenge. Shared though that conviction was, the visions emerging from it were brilliantly variegated. It was no monochrome meeting. Yet it possessed a centering power that signals a new momentum for the Gospel and Our Culture movement there.

I also had an eye toward the subtle or not-so-subtle distinctions between the British context and the North American one. I wanted to gain a sense of the way in which the Gospel and Our Culture movement in the U.K. is similar to or different from our movement in North America. I was not surprised to confirm that each movement has a basically similar orientation toward a fresh "missionary encounter of the gospel with our culture." But neither should it have surprised me to discover that there are several important points of distinction in the paths along which each movement is traveling. Several are worth mentioning here.

First, we in North America are much more anthropological and sociological in our approach. Perhaps this is because the movement here began among missiologists who have cut their teeth on notions of culture fashioned in the work of the social sciences. At Swanwick, uses of the term "culture" were mostly ambiguous and fuzzy. The term was never clarified and the diversity of its meanings clouded many of the conversations. It was sometimes equated with "civilization," which gave rise to a certain elitism ("culture is established by the best thinkers of a society and trickles down to the ordinary folks"). The term certainly did not have the sharpness of reference provided by American voices such as Paul Hiebert and Robert Schreiter who have set much of the pace for our

engagement of the issues of "culture" here.

Second, the British movement is more focused on the university and the engagement of governing principles in various academic disciplines. It may be that the American tradition of private, Christian, liberal arts higher education has meant that conversations around the integration of Christian faith and academic fields have had a longer and larger recent history. The nature of the British university system and the forms of the churches' connections to it may have something to do with the importance of this emphasis for that situation. I heard more than one report that such conversations have been missing in recent times in the British academic world, and the GOC initiatives are part of a reviving of some important ways to engage in dialogue with the society about Christian faith.

Third, by contrast, the American movement has been much more focused on ecclesiology and the recovery of the churches' missionary identity than was evident at this consultation. Perhaps that is because we in America are in the throes of a changing social climate in which we are newly thrust into ambiguities about our social position and importance. And because of that we are newly aware of the degree to which we have become accommodated to our culture. For us, finding our way as the community gripped by the gospel has become the most essential aspect of the Gospel and Our Culture agenda.

Fourth, the consultation seemed much more oriented toward tracing the roots of modernity and critiquing the turns in that development which have moved in ways contrary to the Christian gospel than toward the present cultural shifts and currents. Only slight attention was given in the more formal aspects of the consultation (the papers, the plenaries, and some of the sections) to the current movements pushing beyond modernity. Postmodernism was not dealt with adequately. In the consultation as a whole this ferment did show up in many smaller group or personal conversations, especially among the younger participants who feel them-

selves to be in a very different world of pluralism which no longer holds together in modernist ways.

Finally, the consultation had as its aim to "test the thesis that the Christian Gospel can provide a positive critique of contemporary Western culture, the basis of unity and coherence, and the possibility of a hopeful future for the public life of our society." It is hard to imagine such as the form of any serious proposal in the American setting. Perhaps it is the church's traditional role in British society which still provides the possibility there. But while the American movement shares a sense that the gospel must critique the culture and a sense of the legitimacy of believing that the gospel addresses the public life of the world, not just its private realm, it does not posture itself around the thesis that the Christian faith ought to provide "the basis of unity and coherence" for the society. That lingering hope for a restored Christendom arrangement does not strike us as either possible or preferable. We are more oriented toward learning new patterns for our "after Christendom" life in a pluralist place.

To be sure, the consultation itself did not give clear adherence to the thesis in this respect. The title of the meeting itself kept a certain ambiguity—what does "the gospel as public truth" mean?—but also a fascination and intrigue. It set the consultation to a hopeful exploration of what, exactly, it must mean to believe the gospel beyond a privatized form of faith and practice. That quest is certainly shared by the movements on both sides of the ocean! □

Weaving the New Creation

*A Review by George Brown, Jr.
Dean, Western Theological Seminary
Holland, Michigan*

Recently I have had an opportunity to read and begin processing Jim Fowler's latest book, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church* (Harper San Francisco, 1991). Here is a synopsis of the book which I believe

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will be very helpful to those interested in the GOCN agenda.

Introduction

The introduction identifies four themes that constitute the "warp and woof" of the weaving: (1) constructive knowing (in contrast to the separative/objective knowing of the Enlightenment); (2) vocation, understood as "finding a purpose for one's life that is part of the purposes of God" (p. 194); (3) retrieval and reconstitution of the church's understanding of the sovereignty of God; and (4) a "deep hopefulness" (p. xvi).

Chapter 1: "The Church and the Future: Images of Promise and Peril"

Fowler asks, "What kind of church is God calling us to be and become in the 1990s and the twenty-first century?" (pp. 3-4). He begins answering this question by tracing his own faith development in the context of world events from 1940-1990. He then offers seven sets of images of promise and peril—"expanded choices/homeless minds and hearts," "increased global awareness/fractured relationships and identity," "medical and technological mastery/new ills, escalating costs, and maldistribution of services," "nuclear disarmament/nuclear proliferation," "more American millionaires/debtors, armorers, street people, and economic colonialization," "revival of religion and the pluralism of faiths/rigidity, exclusivism, and false consciousness," and "radically endangered biosphere." He argues: "There is a parallel between the shift at the personal level from the Synthetic-Conventional to the Individuative-Reflective stage of faith and the cultural paradigm shift we associate with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century" (p. 21). He suggests that the new emerging cultural paradigm is structurally akin to the Conjunctive stage of faith.

Chapter 2: "The Divine Praxis in Biography and Narrative"

This chapter opens with a brief sketch of Abraham Lincoln's leadership as a "paramount example of the praxis of political leadership" (p. 29) and moves on to discuss Martin Luther King,

Jr., Thomas Merton, and Carlyle Marney in terms of prophetic vocation, text, and context. The chapter ends with the story of Suzanne Massie's crucial behind-the-scenes role in restoring dialogue between the US and the Soviet Union following the downing of the Korean Airlines 747 in 1983, in which Fowler links God's *praxis* with human vocation.

Chapter 3: "God's Praxis: An Invitation to New Metaphors"

Fowler writes, "...I have concluded that in my writing and speaking from now on I can no longer rely so centrally upon the metaphor of God as sovereign" (p. 57). The chapter is an extended conversation with Sallie McFague's metaphors of Mother (Parent), Lover, and Friend for the Trinity. The conversation is both appreciative and critical of McFague's creative contributions. Fowler writes that McFague's understanding of "the Spirit as friend renders that dimension of God's *praxis* too passive and too much a function of a kind of multiplier effect on human goodwill" (p. 84).

Chapter 4: "Stages in Faith Consciousness"

The fourth chapter is a rather concise presentation of Fowler's understanding of faith in terms of construction and commitment and a condensed overview of the now familiar seven stages of faith.

Chapter 5: "The Christian Story in a New Key"

Following an introductory section on "vocation," Fowler moves to a weaving of the poetry of Brian Wren into a narrative tapestry of the Christian story, told in seven chapters that range from creation and fall to incarnation, church, and commonwealth of love and justice.

Chapter 6: "Public Church: Vision and Actuality"

A reporting of research undertaken by Fowler and Tom Frank, chapter six provides a survey of seven key characteristics of congregations that reflect their understanding of the public church. Fowler ends the chapter with his own first tentative reflections on their findings.

Chapter 7: "Ecclesiogenesis: Forming Personal and Public Faith"

Leonardo Boff's notion of ecclesiogenesis provides the point of departure for the final chapter of the book. Maria Harris' use of New Testament terms *kerygma*, *leitourgia*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *didache* (Fowler uses *paideia* in place of the latter) informs Fowler's approach to the formation of personal and public faith. He concludes by suggesting how this plays out at each faith stage.

Weaving the New Creation offers church educators resources for thinking about their leadership role in the church's teaching ministry on the threshold of the next century. Fowler's attention to public church parallels important work in congregational studies and extends C. Ellis Nelson's focus on the congregation as the agency of nurture and education. The relationship between public church and practical theology connects with Richard Osmer's view of the congregation's role in the three-fold ecology of the teaching office of the church and with Nelson's understanding of the congregation as the loci for practical theology.

The book comes in hardcover; 204 pages with index and a list price of \$17.95. □

Noting Recent Articles

These articles, which are either written by members of the Network or recommended by them, press forward important themes with which the Network is dealing.

Edward Dixon Junkin, "Up From the Grassroots: The Church in Transition," *Interpretation*, July 1992, pp. 271-280.

Bryant L. Myers, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Evangelical-Ecumenical Cooperation," *International Review of Mission*, July 1992, Vol. LXXXI, No. 323, pp. 397-407.

William H. Willimon, "When Prayer Goes Public," *The Christian Century*, April 15, 1992, pp. 388-390.

William H. Willimon, "Preaching the Gospel in an Awkward Age," *Journal For Preachers*, Easter 1992, Vol. XV, No. 3, pp. 2-7.

Owen F. Cummings, "Toward a Postliberal Religious Education," *The Living Light*, Summer 1992, pp. 315-324.

Robert S. Bilheimer, "Renewed Discipleship: The Church and the Churches in Contemporary America," *Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research: Occasional Papers*, No. 38, pp. 9-22.

Networkings

Notes on Linkages With Various Groups and Institutions

■ About 45 leaders from Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist, Presbyterian and other traditions gathered for the second year to encourage one another in the "Ministry of Daily Life" vision. They were hosted by the Washington Theological Consortium and author William Diehl. Task forces worked on clergy/laity issues, theological education, the movement's future, personal journeys, communications, and the 1993 gathering. GOCN Steering Group member Scott Young (Director of IVCF's Marketplace-West) helped launch this fellowship last year.

■ Scott Young is also involved in another emerging conversation. He and Rob Banks (professor at Fuller Theological Seminary) have helped organize a forum on "vernacular theology" within the context of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The project aims at researching patterns of people's everyday lives.

■ The GOCN is linking with Chicago-based SCUPE (Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education) as an organizational Associate for their biennial Congress on Urban Ministry scheduled for April 1994. Craig

Van Gelder and George Hunsberger represented the GOCN at the initial meeting of the Planning Committee for the Congress, co-chaired by Yvonne Delk of the Community Renewal Society of Chicago and Jim Wallis of the Sojourners Community of Washington, D.C.

At the heart of the planning for the Congress is the affirmation that, "Cities are harbingers of our future, they now speak to what the world is becoming without personal conversion and social transformation. But cities also exemplify the new community that must be constructed out of our diversity. The experience of the urban churches, in our failures and successes, is the grist for the mill of new creation—spiritually, socially, culturally, economically, and politically..."

"Our social order is breaking down; the urban church is eyewitness to that reality. At the same time, a new vision is begging to be born. The churches of our cities are becoming a gathering point for that exploration. At their best, our urban faith communities can become vital experiments in the gospel and pioneers for the larger society."

■ Conversations with members of the Management Team of the British Gospel and Our Culture Programme and with leaders of The Gospel and Cultures Trust in New Zealand have explored the suggestion that our sister movements in these and other places work more closely as a "network of networks." Each movement senses it must maintain a very particular character in order to engage its own cultural setting. But there is a strong desire to learn from each other. And where we engage the common elements that span across Western cultures, there are obvious needs for collaboration. Upcoming visits to the U.S.A. by members of the leadership of each of the other movements promise fruitful developments along these lines.

FEBRUARY

18-20

(see p. 3)

Recent Books Serve the GOCN Agenda

Following is a rather random list of books recently published (or noticed) which touch in some particular way on the Gospel and Our Culture agenda. Their wide range shows that the ferment on these issues has become considerable, even where a fully missiological way of engaging the issues is not immediately apparent. All of us in the network would be helped by more detailed reflections on these or other books of importance to our common concerns. Your brief "notes" (one paragraph) or "reviews" (400-500 words) are invited for future editions of the newsletter.

Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*. Fortress, 1992.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. Crossroad, 1992. (144 pp., \$15.95.)

David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. (263 pp.)

J. Andrew Kirk, *Loosing the Chains: Religion as Opium and Liberation*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1992. (201 pp.)

Frederic B. Burnham, ed., *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*. Harper and Row, 1989. (112 pp.)

Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.

Reginald W. Bibby and Donald C. Posterski, *Teen Trends: A Nation in Motion*. Stoddart, 1992. (332 pp., CAN \$17.95.)

Robert E. Vander Vennen, ed., *Church and Canadian Culture*. University Press of America, 1991.

William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Preaching to Strangers: Evangelism in Today's World*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. (144 pp.)

- James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars*. Basic Books, 1991. (416 pp., \$25.00 cloth.)
- Stanley Hauerwas and John H. Westerhoff, eds., *Schooling Christians*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992. (281 pp., \$22.95)
- Michael Warren, *Communications and Cultural Analysis: A Religious View*. Bergin and Garvey, 1992. (184 pp., \$42.95.)
- Kenneth Leach, *The Eye of the Storm: Living Spiritually in the Real World*. HarperCollins, 1992.
- Tony Campolo, *Wake Up America! Answering God's Radical Call While Living in the Real World*. Zondervan, 1991. (188 pp.)
- F. Clark Power and Daniel K. Lapsley, eds., *The Challenge of Pluralism: Education, Politics and Values*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1992. (272 pp., \$32.95.)
- Joseph Runzo, ed., *Ethics, Religion, and the Good Society: New Directions in a Pluralistic World*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. (189 pp.)
- Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World*. Simon and Schuster, 1992. (238 pp.)
- Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia*. InterVarsity Press, 1992. (170 pp.)
- Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision: An Ecumenical Strategy for Congregational Evangelism*. WCC Publications, 1992. (55 pp.)
- Raymond Fung, *Evangelistically Yours: Ecumenical Letters on Contemporary Evangelism*. WCC Publications, 1992. (260 pp.)
- Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier*. Alban Institute, 1991. (92 pp.)
- Newell Williams, ed., *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991.
- Susan Littwin, *The Postponed Generation: Why America's Grown-up Kids Are Growing Up Later*. William Morrow, 1986. (252 pp.)

GOCN Working Groups Get Under Way

The initial meetings of three Working Groups were held in Chicago in October. A core of 3-5 people in each worked for two days to sharpen the focus for the Working Groups. A general conviction that the work envisioned for each is interdependent on the work of the other two compelled the groups to concentrate first on shaping the overall vision for the Network. They fashioned a preliminary mission statement which sees the Network as a "collaborative association of Christian leaders from various communions" who work together to discern the North American church's missional calling in light of the interaction between gospel, culture and church.

Under that rubric, each of the Working Groups found a distinctive role. The Culture/Society Group identified five problematic issues needing clarity for our engagement of a rapidly diversifying and fragmenting cultural context. These include; 1) social systems as expressions of culture and locations of power; 2) religion as a social function of culture; 3) the dynamics of cultural change; 4) unity and diversity in a multicultural setting; and 5) the symbols and media of our culture's popular expressions.

The Gospel/Theology Group will engage in theological conversation, research and writing which addresses from a missiological perspective both the pluralism and marginalization of North American Christianity. To achieve this end, it will devote its attention particularly to the question, "What is the gospel in our context?" Another way of raising the same issue is to ask, "Who is Jesus Christ for our context?" These ways of framing the question imply three more specific questions: 1) How does the living Word of God in Scripture give the church its missional identity as proclaimer and sign of God's reign today? 2) How does one sift through the breadth of the Christian tradition to nourish and inform the

missional identity of the church today? and 3) How does our cultural context affect and illumine the way we identify and proclaim the gospel? The group intends its work to be a service to the whole church in its calling to do theology, not merely an abstract or academic exercise.

The Church/Mission Group is shaping its role around the question: How must we develop and live out a missiologically oriented ecclesiology for North American Christian communities, taking into consideration our various traditions, our local contexts and our overall cultural milieu? The Group will seek to provide collegial encouragement for pastors, congregations and denominational leaders in their efforts to grasp the rapidly changing social and cultural setting and to form patterns of corporate life which faithfully embody and announce the gospel of Jesus Christ in the United States and Canada.

Each of the three Working Groups identified some work already in progress on these themes, projected initial projects and conversations on the most immediate issues, planned for appropriate initiatives to be taken in the future, and shaped ways to welcome other interested people into the collaborative work as it unfolds. The Groups will meet in connection with the February 1993 GOCN Consultation where they will each provide several seminars growing out of their work. They will meet together again in the fall of 1993.

Ways to Get Involved

Two initiatives are presently emerging within the Church/Mission Working Group which provide opportunities for involvement. First, the Group is seeking to identify pastors, congregations, and other local expressions of Christian community self-consciously addressing the issues of the Gospel and Our Culture agenda in order to develop collegial sharing and partnering among them and to draw from their experiences models for renewal and faithfulness in the present setting. Your interest in that should be indicated to John R. "Pete" Hendrick, Austin Theological Seminary, 100 East 27th Street, Austin,

TX 78705, telephone 512-472-6736.

Second, the Group is looking for persons from non-Western cultures who live with and minister to people shaped by Western culture. These cross-cultural missionaries and leaders can bring a much needed analysis and perspective to the relation between the gospel and our culture. If you are such a person, or if you know any such person, please send name, address, telephone number and the nature of the ministry location (pastor, educator, layperson, etc.) to Rev. Dan Devadatta, Daybreak Church, 2930 Dove Road, Grapevine, TX 76051, telephone and fax: 817-329-0442.

Beyond these specific items, Network members who wish to propose ways they would like to be involved in the work emerging in any of the three groups may address their statements of interest to GOCN Coordinator George Hunsberger at the GOCN address. □

A Great Commission Church in a Post-Modern Age

A Pastoral Letter to Church Officers
Stephen Eyre
Crestview Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

Recently I was reading some selections from Francis DeSales, a Seventeenth Century preacher, in *Leadership* magazine. The theme of the article was how to experience God's presence. DeSales writes, "Alas we do not see God, who is present with us. Although faith assures us of his presence, yet because we do not behold him with our eyes, we too often forget him and behave as though he were very far away."

If it was difficult to have the experience of the presence of God in the Seventeenth Century, I believe that it is even more difficult today. Two vast cultural forces are at work that contribute to our spiritual blindness: Constantinianism and Modernity.

In the Fourth Century the Roman Emperor Constantine saw a cross in the sky before a major battle and heard the

words "By this sign, conquer." After his victory, in gratitude for the perceived divine aid, he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. That was the beginning of Christendom. While it may have made being a Christian immeasurably less dangerous, it made following Jesus Christ immeasurably more difficult.

In the Eighteenth Century we entered the Modern Age. Building on the pillars of autonomous human reason, autonomous individualism and moral relativism a whole new way of looking at the world was constructed. While Modernity brought great technological "progress," symbolized to my mind by the Mac Computer and McDonald's hamburger chain, it also brought wide-spread spiritual degeneration.

The problems created by Constantinianism come from a merging of the State and the Church. The ultimate result of the wedding is that it created a civil religion with God as the official deity of the State. God's presence was lost in the institutional structures of society. Just as a person became a citizen of the State at birth, one also automatically became a member of the Church. Instead of personal conversion and a life of faith, knowing God was merely a matter of obeying the laws of the State and following the religious requirements of the Church.

Modernity, among other things, was a reaction to Constantinianism. Feeling oppressed by the vast institutional structures of a thousand years of Christendom, the framers of the Modern Age sought to build a secular society. The goal was to escape from the monolithic presence of the Church and at the same time create new forms of democratic government liberating society from the entrenched rule of "divine-right" elites comprised of the royal families of Europe.

In the process of creating the Modern world, God was culturally exiled. Education and research were conducted without reference to God's Revelation; personal fulfillment was sought now without a sense of membership in God's people; and rules for

morality were conceived without a concern for God's will. In the end these efforts are proving to be disaster. (The collapse of Marxism and the Soviet Union are graphic examples.)

Constantinianism in our culture has been dying a slow death for a couple of hundred years under the barrage of Modernism. However, it still hangs on the minds of some who expect the government, our education and our entertainment to be "Christian." It expresses itself in others who see the primary role of the church as that of changing society.

Likewise Modernity is dying a slow death as it is now revealing its bankruptcy. Moral relativism provides no foundation to answer such issues as sexual preferences, abortion on demand, pornography and child molestation; autonomous individualism provides no help as we face the crushing sense of isolation that comes as families break apart for reasons that those involved in it don't even understand. Science with all its impressive knowledge of the physical universe provides no answers to the question "Why?" that humans need in order to live meaningfully. As a result, more and more people succumb to despair, depression and drugs.

As Constantinianism and Modernity pass away, they have left an even more devastating spiritual legacy—the sense of God's absence. Constantinianism absents God since being conceived to be synonymous with the cultural structures, God vanishes in cultural immanence. Modernity absents God as one exiled to the borders of our cultural institutions and mental consciousness. Who expects to meet God in the day to day issues of life?

At the end of the Twentieth Century we are moving into a new era as the Soviet Union collapses and Modernity and Constantinianism die. No one knows what the "New Order" will look like. It will be a time of uncertainty and darkness as a new underlying vision for the world is hammered out.

However, it is an exciting time to be a Christian. Perhaps now we can get on with being the People of God. In this time of change, the Church, the

community of God's people needs to take on higher profile. What are we supposed to be and do as the Church? How are we different from the world (culture) in which we live?

Let's not assume that we really understand these things. If the struggle is to know God, follow Jesus and make disciples of the nations, then we have some hard thinking to do. We can't continue to do "business" as usual.

And who knows, perhaps a strong Church that is following Jesus Christ will be salt and light? And perhaps, not because it is our goal but because it is the way God works, we will have a major impact on what the vision of the "New Order" will be. □

Notable Quotables

Martin Marty in his newsletter Context, December 1, 1992, Vol. 24, No. 21, pp. 1-2.

"I...have a theory that the story of fundamentalist-evangelical-pentecostal booms is one that can be told in such expansive language that one overlooks the opposition such religious phenomena encounter in an uncongenial world. This theory has a corollary: that the mainstream crisis is not so much one of statistics as it is one of cultural location—of no longer 'running the show'—and of substance: what is mainstream religion about? And that fundamentalist churches, though statistically prosperous, have similar problems of cultural location—of inept participation in partly 'running the show'—and of substance: what is fundamentalism about?"

This newsletter is produced and mailed by Western Theological Seminary as a contribution to the Gospel and Our Culture Network. Communications regarding the Network or items submitted for publication in the Newsletter should be sent to the Coordinator and Editor, George R. Hunsberger, 86 E. 12th Street, Holland, MI 49423, telephone 616-392-8555, fax 616-392-7717. Requests for a free subscription to the Newsletter may be sent to Ms. Holli Rook at the same address.

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Western Theological Seminary
86 East 12th Street
Holland, MI 49423

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