



IBFNA THE REVIEW

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Missions 101: Pastors, Churches and Missionaries

by Pastor Charles Dear



“History has demonstrated that compromise has increased as accountability to pastors and local churches has declined.”

There is nothing so crucial to the consistent testimony of a local church and its pastor than their relationships with para-church agencies: schools, social agencies and particularly mission boards and missionaries. It is this last area that will be the focus of this article, although the principles presented can be applied to any non-church organization engaged by a local church to extend its ministries.

First, we must begin with the need and responsibility to scrutinize any and all agencies engaged by churches. This is not only a necessity in an age of accountability, but also a Biblical principle to be applied to any and all ministries, whether they be local church or not. Two particular passages, among others, should shape our thinking on the subject:

I Thessalonians 5:21, 22 “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil.” and I John 4:1 “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”

Some will think it harsh to treat adjunct ministries with any degree of suspicion, but experience will demonstrate that both good people and good ministries can change and that we serve our own accountability well by putting others to the test of Scriptural principles and Christian ethics. Furthermore, any para-church organization whose professed objective is to serve the local churches should be willingly accountable to pastors and churches. History has demonstrated that compromise has increased as accountability to pastors and local churches has declined. For our purposes, this article will use a mission board as the model for evaluation.

Among the tools necessary for proper evaluation, pastors should have the current edition of a mission board’s Policies and Procedures (P’s and P’s), as well as its Articles of Faith. Much like a local church is measured by its Constitution and Articles of Faith, similar standards provide a good beginning point for evaluation. P’s and P’s reveal both a mission board’s philosophy of operation as well as its rules of the road in operations, including the relationship between the mission board, the missionary and his sending church and pastor.

A critical question every pastor and church should ask is whether any authority over the missionary is considered delegated to the mission board by the sending church. Among the boards used by many of our churches, several consider the authority of the board to supercede the authority of the sending church. Among these boards you will find the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE), Baptist Mid-Missions (BMM) and Baptist World Mission (BWM). While some argument to support delegation might be made for legal or tax issues, those who presume delegation of authority typically do not make such limited distinctions.

In a practical sense, this means that a mission board executive, field representative or field council can exercise more control over a missionary’s ministry than his sending church or pastor. In fact, there are decisions made, counsel given and directives imposed which may be completely unknown at home, unless the missionary risks relating

It should be noted that P’s and P’s are revised and updated from time to time, and we should have current copies at hand. It can also be useful to compare the changes made from one edition to the next to see what a mission board thought needed changing, sometimes revealing trends that may warn of concerns that may develop in the future.

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2004 PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

by Dr. Ralph Colas



“If you stay in the faith, you are going to get paid. I am now living in my reward”

The precept “Follow the Money Trail” is one that is very appropriate in our time as one checks the record of some leading television “super stars.” While the Jimmy Swaggarts and the Jim Bakkers may have moved into the background, others have stepped forward with bigger and flashier shows, thanks to the Internet, along with satellite and cable TV.

One of these is a former housewife/bookkeeper from Fenton, MO who only has a 12th grade education. Joyce Meyer is quick to declare that God has made her rich. Everything she has came from Him: the \$10 million corporate jet, her husband’s \$107,000 silver-gray Mercedes sedan, her \$2 million home and houses worth another \$2 million for her four children—all blessings, she says came “straight from the hand of God.”

Meyer heads one of the world’s largest television ministries. Her *Life in the Word* organization expects to take in more than \$95 million this year. She has taken her “prosperity through faith” message to millions. “If you stay in the faith, you are going to get paid. I am now living in my reward,” she told an audience in Detroit recently.

Interestingly, all of the Meyer family, including the four children’s spouses, draw paychecks from her ministry. But the way she spends money on herself and her family may violate federal law, some tax experts say. The law bars leaders of nonprofit groups from privately benefitting from the tax-free money they raise. Ms. Meyer and her attorney say she abides by all federal laws.

In 1988 *Charisma* magazine called Joyce Meyer “America’s most popular woman minister.” From a 15 minute St. Louis area radio show, her ministry is now reaching virtually every corner of the civilized world. “To give is godly,” Meyer said to the thousands gathered to hear her in Buffalo, N.Y., “Never fear giving too much in the name of God, even if it means you sacrifice buying meals during our three-day conference. Fear is the work of the devil.”

After her one-hour “sermon,” she made the same plea she has been making for more than 10 years, “Make your checks payable to Joyce Meyer Ministries/Life in the Word. And million is spelled M-I-L-L-I-O-N.” A lady on the East Coast gave Meyer stock worth that amount, and Ms. Meyer then asked for more. “I didn’t have that thing for five minutes, and I said, ‘OK, God. Next I’ll take \$5 million’.” At a following conference she asked for a \$7 million check. “That would

really bless me,” she said.

This TV star attracts her fans to her gatherings with promises of a free conference, but the entrance fee is \$50 per person. At St Louis more than 13,000 attended; and almost from the moment her followers enter one of her “free” conferences, she begins her pitch for their money. “God does not need our money. The giving thing is not for Him, it’s for us. I should not have to work to try to support myself.”

Meyer spends most of her three-day conferences bringing lessons on giving, and she is blunt when she addresses her seed-faith interpretation of the Bible. She says that those preachers who believe that to be godly is to be poor are the ones who have it wrong. “Why would God want all of His people poverty stricken, while all of the people that aren’t living for God have everything?” I think it is old religious thinking, and I believe the devil uses it to keep people from wanting to serve the Lord,” she declared.

However, Joyce Meyer is not alone in living lavishly. Others include Jan and Paul Crouch, owners of Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN). They earned \$855,000 last year and enjoy residing in a \$10 million, 80 acre ranch near Dallas and drive two Land Rovers. Two years ago the couple bought a \$5 million oceanfront estate in Newport Beach, CA.

Benny Hinn’s ministry exceeds \$90 million and 7 years ago acknowledged his salary was about \$1 million a year. He has a \$3.5 million home in the Los Angeles area and drives an \$80,000 Mercedes-Benz automobile. Then T. D. Jakes, who recently produced an R-rated movie, has mansions in

“Why would God want all of His people poverty stricken while all of the people that aren’t living for God have everything?”

Charleston, W. VA., and Dallas. *Time* magazine called him the best preacher in America back in 2001.

Robert Tilton is now rebounding after the scandal where he was exposed for telling his TV audience he personally prayed over their prayer requests but those letters were found in a trash bin after the money, food stamps and rings had been removed. He also was using a remote radio system with a receiver in his ear while someone back stage revealed the illness of individuals he supposedly “healed.” Now his ministry is taking in \$24 million a year, and Tilton is building a two-story home on a \$1.39 million oceanfront lot off Miami Beach where he parks his 50 foot yacht. **continued on page 3**

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"For years, I helped propagate an imposter, not a true gospel, but another gospel."

Then there are the Copelands, Kenneth and Gloria, with their "Believer's Voice of Victory" which claims to be seen by more than 76 million households on nearly 700 U. S. stations, as well as 135 international stations. Their annual revenue is more than \$70 million.

When one looks at these folk, often called "God's Superstars," Rodney Howard-Browne should not be ignored. He calls himself the "bartender of holy laughter." When this "evangelist" sweeps his arm toward the crowd, people appear "drunk on the Holy Spirit" and slide out of their chairs or dance in the aisles.

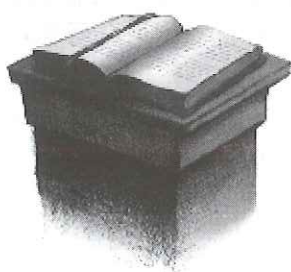
Rodney Howard-Browne and his wife oversee his \$16 million church, which they founded 8 years ago. The couple live in a six-bedroom, four-bath lakefront home in Tampa, which includes a dock, spa, pool and gazebo.

Many of these well-known leaders of the charismatic movement live in palatial mansions but also are chauffeured in long limousines, as well as flown around the world in their own jets, while being worshiped like Hollywood or sports celebrities. This is in sharp contrast to the apostle Paul's statement that he served "the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears..." (Acts 20:19).

The tragedy is that there are folk in Bible-believing churches listening to these "TV Stars" and buying their books, tapes and videos, while being led down the primrose path of supporting these popular TV preachers. Meanwhile, these well-known televangelists continue to enjoy the fruit of proclaiming a "prosperity gospel" which suggests that God can be treated like a slot machine.

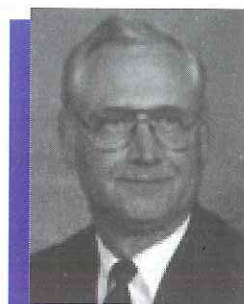
One who misled millions for many years, Jim Bakker, has now admitted he made a terrible mistake. He wrote, "For years, I helped propagate an imposter, not a true gospel, but another gospel. The prosperity message I preached did not line up with the tenor of the Scriptures." At least Bakker had enough honesty after many years of lies and deceit, to say, "I was wrong." When will any of the other popular men and women ministers acknowledge the same?

Do not forget the precept "Follow the Money Trail." ●



The Local Church and Missions

by Pastor Jerry Johnson



Did you know that a cat has 32 muscles in each ear, that tigers have striped skin not just striped fur or that a goldfish has a memory span of three seconds? It's also true that there are 336 dimples on a regulation golf ball and 118 ridges around the edge of a dime. Do you also know that the local church is God's vehicle for fulfilling the Great Commission?

If you've never taken time to count the ridges on a dime, there will be little difference in the world in which we live or work. If you've never thought, or if you've allowed others to think for you, about the local church's responsibilities for world evangelism, there will be a major impact on our ability to reach a lost world for Jesus Christ. Most of us who take the Bible seriously would instantly react against anyone who argued against local church sovereignty in missions; yet, too many times we surrender that sovereignty in the practical outworking of missions.

While serving as a director of a fundamental, local church, mission agency, I had occasion to speak frequently with pastors about their missionaries. The mission agency I was involved with was very careful to require the local church to maintain sovereignty and control over its missionary. But in trying to work with all too many pastors, I ran across the attitude that once a missionary was accepted as a candidate for missionary service by the agency, he or she was now my responsibility to care for, direct and train. It was almost as though the parent (the local church) had dropped off its child (the missionary candidate) to a boarding school (the mission agency) and now had only limited contact and influence. Oh yes, the "parent" would write letters, send care packages once in a while, pray for, and send money for the "child;" but as to actual training, direction and control over the "child," well that was now delegated to the "school." I have in my files a magazine article from a fundamental, faith mission executive where he actually uses a very similar analogy to describe the relationship that ought to exist between a local church, a mission agency and the missionary. He, in fact, advocates that the best philosophy is for the local church to "delegate its responsibility" for that local church's missionary to the mission agency. My understanding of biblical local church autonomy does not allow for that local church to delegate any of its authority and sovereignty to another person, school, fellowship or agency and still make the claim to be autonomous. Yet in speaking with many local church pastors, they also seem to have embraced that same pragmatic outlook for missions philosophy.

According to my Bible, it was the local church – and the local church alone – who selected candidates for missionary

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them to his church and pastor. Sometimes information is deliberately withheld in the hope that problems can be solved inside the "family."

A second vital piece of information for pastors and churches is a current copy of a Board's audited financial statement. Usually, a current copy from the previous year is the most recent edition available. Before anyone gets uneasy about this, let's agree that this is similar to what we do for our church members and is a vital part of a Board's accountability to pastors and churches. If someone is going to ask us for money, they should be willing to demonstrate a need. If we engage mission boards to help us send *our* missionaries then we are entitled to see how well they are handling *our* money for their support. Besides wading through all the dollars and cents, which usually amount in the millions, you want to read the auditor's comments about the report. An auditor, motivated by his own liability and professional reputation will list problems or questions he has about the report. One of the things that will become apparent is that agencies with greater assets are less inclined to heed the concerns of the pastors and churches they profess to serve.

Two other matters should be raised while we consider mission board finances. First, the financial report does not show all the assets of a mission board. Some boards, like ABWE, have other divisions in other countries which report their finances separately from the U.S. home office. Among additional assets we must also include property, such as churches owned by the board, as well as businesses and other para-church operations which may only be seen in field council minutes abroad.

Another question to have answered is how much a mission board charges a missionary for home office support. While no one doubts that it costs money for mission boards to provide support services, you may not know that recent figures begin at \$250 a month and climb quickly upward. Combining that income from all the missionary families of one board together with all the direct support from churches, bequests, special gifts, endowments, annuities, etcetera, we can begin to understand why some mission boards need to employ financial institutions to help manage their assets and investments. Indeed, we should be alarmed by the recent trends of para-church organizations to directly solicit support from the people in our congregations, thereby bypassing the pastor and local church. Whether we practice "storehouse tithing" or not, there is a clear question of ethics versus pragmatism that needs serious attention.

Along with mission board finances, we must also pay close attention to the retirement programs offered to our missionaries. Let me hasten to add here that when asked, the typical new missionary has no idea what his retirement program will be. While we can understand the nobility of

sacrificial service that swells their hearts, we as pastors and sending churches must protect the welfare of our missionaries, their dependents and loved ones by helping them evaluate the alternatives.

Essentially there are two kinds of retirement that have been offered; one that is owned by the board and one that is owned by the missionary. The board-owned program pools together retirement contributions by all its missionaries and pays out according to a formula calculated on years of service and other factors. It is a Social Security type program, and like Social Security it will continue to pay as long as the missionaries live. However, also like Social Security, it will be cut in half when one missionary spouse dies; and

upon the death of the other spouse, whatever is left reverts back to the board's retirement account. It is a fact that missionaries who contribute to their own retirement for more than 12-15 years will never live long enough to recover all their principle and interest gained over that time, when they retire. The balance may help support other retirees or it will benefit the board. The alternative is a missionary-owned retirement program by which all principle and interest accrue to his benefit or to his estate and heirs. It seems strange that some mission boards still hesitate to move in this direction in a time when even the President of the United States sees merit in privatizing retirement.

Speaking of the President, there is one more thing that I have yet to find in any mission board's P's and P's—an Exit Strategy. First, let's check our philosophy of missions and examine the subject in the light of Biblical principle. We should begin by stating that a missionary has more in common with an evangelist than with a pastor. That is, there is the foremost work of evangelizing the lost only then to be followed up by church planting and training of workers. It should also be agreed that like the evangelist, a missionary's work is itinerant; i.e. they serve in a particular location for a limited period of time. The length of time may vary, of course, but when we review the journeys of the Apostle Paul in Acts, we see him minister in one place for a period of time and then move on to another place. He trained others to take his place or had others come to take his place, but ultimately, the indigenous policy took hold. Paul was never the pastor of one church.

The irony of our times is that pastors move more frequently than missionaries do. However, if we believe missionaries should be working themselves out of a job or, that missionaries should not be perpetually doing what church members can be taught to do as volunteers, we need to reconsider what missionary work has become and whether it is time for American missionaries to get out of the way of properly trained national leadership. While some may say that a country can never have too many missionaries, we should also realize that the Law of Diminishing Returns can set in

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"If we engage Mission Boards to help us send our missionaries then we are entitled to see how well they are handling our money for their support."

where we have stayed too long.

For example, let's consider the Philippines and the result of over 50 years of Baptist American missions there. While current figures are not available, it can be safely said that there are well over 1,000 Baptist churches in the Philippines. There are also at least two schools for training national pastors, evangelists and teachers, including offerings of graduate degrees from American schools by extension. There are also missionaries being sent from the Philippines to the Far East and other parts of the world. We could honestly ask what is the peculiar benefit of American missionaries continuing in long-term ministries there? The positive answer is that a country never has too many missionaries, especially American missionaries spending American dollars. The other answers, however, should give us pause to consider whether or not the Law of Diminishing Returns has set in.

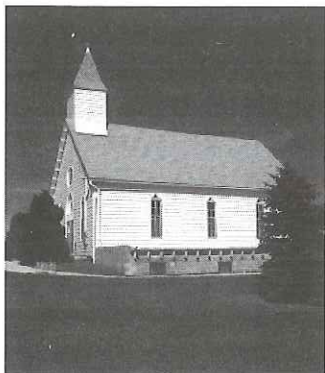
Some years ago I had occasion to discuss the subject of American missionaries with a national school executive. My question was about concerns that newer American missionaries coming to that particular country were different from the former generation that had established the churches and school in that country. His hesitation to answer the question said as much as his explanation. Up until some 30 years ago, the doctrine and principles taught by the earlier missionaries had been well established with the nationals. Churches were

preaching sound doctrine, separation was practically applied, and evangelistic and church planting ministries flourished. Even towards the end of that former generation's term of service, geographical isolation helped to insulate them from the changes already beginning to destroy the schools and church here at home. However, the globalism of our day and the new wave of contemporary American missionaries arriving on their shores now introduced areas of compromise that had been steadfastly fought and defeated before. Their impact could overwhelmingly change both churches and schools and undermine decades of faithful ministry and training. That is clearly a "diminishing return." We may actually reach a point where it will become obvious that such a mission field would have been better served to have been closed for American missionaries.

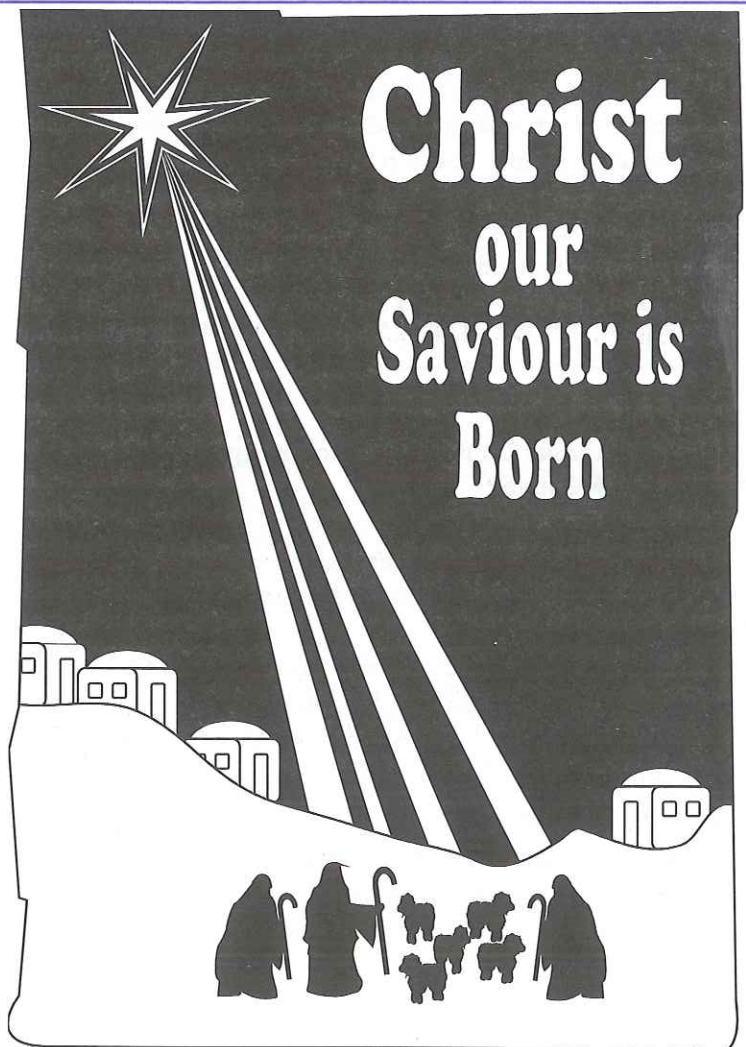
This is not a matter to be handed off to some experts to consider. This is all about what it means to be a pastor, providing godly leadership to the congregations of Baptist churches. In a vacuum of accountability, schools, agencies and boards can become self-serving bodies more interested in perpetuating their own existence, gathering wealth and wielding power than serving the churches. In the past they were the instruments of Conventionalism that undermined the autonomy of local churches, and we cannot simply stand by and watch it happen all over again.

"The Local Church" continued from page 3

service (Acts 13:1-4), who trained missionary candidates (Acts 11:22-25; Ephesians 4:11-15), who sent out missionaries (Acts 13:1-4; Acts 15:3), who sought to enhance the lives and ministries of their missionaries (Romans 15:24; 3 John 5,6; Colossians 4:2-4; Philippians 4:15-16; and others), and who held their missionaries accountable for their works (Acts 14:25-28; Acts 15:1-35). Outside groups, such as schools and agencies, may assist local churches in any of these endeavors; but it is the local church that must make the active determination in every one of these areas if it would seek to fulfill God's mandate for world evangelization biblically. If missions is to see God's fullest blessing (and how the task of world evangelism desperately needs to see God's power and blessing manifest today), the local church pastor must take a more hands on approach to working with his missionaries and not allow others or the heavy burden of local church ministries to distract him from doing God's work God's way. ●



"According to my Bible, it was the local church – and the local church alone – who selected candidates for missionary service"



Apostasy Crosses the River Styx...

and is coming to a church near you

When people begin to turn away from the Truth, I'm sure that they never realize the journey they begin with one solitary, small step. Just a little bit of compromise, just a one-time giving in on something that couldn't possibly have any serious implications, is exactly the deceit of Satan that starts good people on a path that takes them much farther than they ever anticipated. Who would think that any church professing to be Christian would ever dabble in the things of Satan?

Dateline: Philadelphia, November 5, 2004,

Two Episcopal Priests Admit Being Druids

A married couple, who were Episcopal priests, had been ministering "...to local Druids, people who follow pre-Christian practices of worshipping the sun, venerating the earth, and holding trees sacred." Their explanation was that they were "...active as Druid leaders to reach out to marginal Christians.. to help others who had lost connection to the Church find a way to reconnect..." Part of their outreach was an Internet message board directed towards "New Age religious seekers." The invitation on the message board was extended to those "who believe in the underlying unity of all faiths that follow the ideals of love for the Divine, love for sister and brother human beings, and doing harm to no one." Also posted on the Internet were Druidic liturgies offered for the purpose of using them to develop feminist liturgies, presumably for use in Episcopal churches.

Well, after all, it is the Episcopal Church, isn't it? Aren't they the vanguard of religious "exploratory thinking," including feminist and homosexual causes? Yes, but they are not alone.



Dateline: Philadelphia, November 13, 2004,

You're Invited to a Reiki Share for Pastors

An e-mail invitation was sent to a number of Lutheran (ELCA) pastors in Northeast Philadelphia to come to a special presentation of Reiki. Never heard of it? Read on.

"There will be a Reiki Share for pastors. Reiki is a form of energy work, and there are a couple of people exploring possibilities in terms of using Reiki within our churches. We set up for a Sunday afternoon to see what a difference could be made when pastors were at their low ebb. We are also exploring possibilities of a few pastors becoming Reiki masters, again to see the difference."

For those of you unfamiliar with the term, Reiki uses its practitioners to "channel" energy and healing, "and is a powerful life-changing experience for growth along your spiritual path." Another form of Eastern religion, it was developed by Hawayo Takata and has not only come to America, but also is being recommended to Lutheran pastors as a relaxation technique.

Perhaps the most poignant words of the latter invitation say it all: "All you have to do is be open to it." Those words are not limited to these radical heretics who are pressing the envelop towards Satanism and Eastern Mysticism. They are the words that first ring a sympathetic chord in the heart of a pastor, evangelist or teacher who does not see the destination of what appears to be harmless compromise today. Once compromise has begun, it is nearly impossible to halt or even slow down, unless the travelers can be made to realize that the bridge is out at the end of the road. ●

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Individual message tapes - \$5.00 each

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Quantity Time Speaker & Message Title

Tuesday, June 22

- _____ 11:00 a.m. Scott Reeves - "Christ: The Champion of Our Cause"
- _____ 1:30 p.m. Williard Benedict - "From Turbulence to Triumph"
- _____ 1:30 p.m. James Juvinall - "How Pure is Your Church?"
- _____ 7:00 p.m. Richard Harris - "Alliance or Allegiance?"

Wednesday, June 23

- _____ 10:00 a.m. Gary Freely - "A Good Soldier of Jesus Christ"
- _____ 11:00 a.m. Matt Olson - "Consider Him"
- _____ 7:00 p.m. Kevin Bauder - "The Suffering of the Scripture"

Thursday, June 24

- _____ 10:00 a.m. Mike McCubbins - "In Defense of the Gospel"
- _____ 11:00 a.m. Matt Olson - "Be Ye Holy"
- _____ 1:30 p.m. Thomas Zempel - Workshop on Counseling
- _____ 2:30 p.m. Business Meeting
- _____ 7:00 p.m. Jeff Bailey - "Our Unfinished Task"

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"America Has Spoken"

"America Has Spoken" was the headline of the Philadelphia Inquirer after the election of Nov. 2.

We can be thankful to our God on the way America spoke. Political pundits tell us that the overwhelming cause of the vote for George W. Bush was because of respect for "moral values." Probably, the Massachusetts Supreme Court did us a favor by ordering the legislature to pass a law permitting gay marriage. We don't much like judges who believe they have a right to become tyrants. It is clear that at long last, many Christian Conservatives decided they had to take part in the political process of our beloved country and, thank God, they did.

Now, to the crux of it. George Bush was despised by the Left for (a) his religious convictions; (b) his willingness to take preemptive military action unilaterally, if necessary; (c) his refusal to cede national sovereignty to the United Nations; (d) his support of Israel over the Palestinians; and (e) his opposition to abortion. Election 2004 was not about electing John Kerry; it was about defeating George Bush. Almost half of Kerry voters polled admitted their vote was aimed at defeating Bush rather than electing Kerry — "Anybody But Bush" meant exactly that. If the Democratic National Committee (DNC) had run Bozo the Clown, the election would not have been much different. The issues were clear cut, and President Bush clung tenaciously to his position. I think God rewarded him for doing so. I believe the real cause of the victory was the prayers of God's people, and the fact that they were willing to put feet to their prayers and go to the polls.

By all logical reasoning, the President should have lost. The opposition used every means possible to get out their message. They stooped to some new lows. Hollywood was lined up with them as Michael Moore, Cher, Barbara Streisand, Jane Fonda, the Dixie Chicks, Bruce Springsteen and a host of other entertainers gave full support to oust Bush. Millionaires like George Soros did all they could do to defeat him. The news media discarded any pretense of neutrality. For twenty-one straight days, the Philadelphia Inquirer ran editorials showering praise and endorsements on Kerry. The DNC used and abused the minorities of America to do their bidding. But in spite of it all, George W. Bush won convincingly. I know the Left would not agree with me, but I still believe God did it.

As usual, the DNC will find anything possible to blame rather than be honest with themselves. They are already blaming Kerry, saying that he was not a good candidate. In truth, for what they wanted him to do, I think he was a very good candidate. He was anti-war, anti-business, anti-America, and anti-religion; and he did a good job of articulating it. Probably the best thing I have heard from a Democratic analyst, speaking at the National Press Club on Friday, was that

by Dr. Richard Harris



"Perhaps the Democrats ought to send their children to Bible School."

"perhaps the Democrats ought to send their children to Bible School." I know he said this with "tongue in cheek," but he came the closest to anyone else I have heard on the subject of why they lost.

I close with this brief challenge and warning. Fundamental Christians have been given more time to fulfill the great commission. Let's not drop the ball. Perhaps some Americans actually will begin to come to Bible school, and we need to encourage them to do so. Pastors, we must inform our people on the moral and spiritual issues of the day. Let's not play church but mean business for God. ●



CHRISTMAS YESTERDAY AND TODAY

by Pastor Church Edwards

The heat of summer is past; the color of fall has faded, and the night brings on a chill that causes one to realize that it is wintertime again. As a child, this time of year produced an excitement that was overwhelming. The days shortened as the anticipation grew. Soon the rush of preparation would replace the calm of this intervening time. This change of season filled the mailbox with catalogs—the ritual of the coffee table began and was repeated daily, which caused the Sears Toy Catalog to become worn and dog-eared as we children filled our minds with what became the dreams of Christmas.

For some, this awareness of the season was already underway as parents were preparing for the annual Christmas musical. Children sat respectfully and listened as the choir repeated over-and-over the music of the season, and parents dutifully sang while watching the behavior of potentially rambunctious children. It was after Thanksgiving that the certainty of Christmas' approach was confirmed in one's mind as the Sunday school departments began the tedious task of preparing for the annual Sunday school Christmas program. (Today I am certain that our teachers viewed this season with fear and trepidation because of the PKs, DKs, and MKs who tested the very core of each of those in charge). It was through this ritual that the story of Christmas was ever ingrained in our being.

During this time of growing-up, there was not a person who considered the possibility that a short ten years would pass and the seeds of an attack upon this ritual would be planted. Within

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a generation, this would blossom forth producing the fruit which would engulf most of the society including the subset of the society from which the ritual came. Yet this is what has taken place as society is successfully making this a secular holiday season.

Matthew 1:21, "thou shalt call his name Jesus" was proclaimed countless number of times as the songs rang forth and as choirs and youth told the story. In pulpits across this land the story of the birth of a Savior was announced as if by the angel himself. But it would seem that along the way the rite of the "coffee table" swallowed the ritual of the choir and the recitations of the young people. The joy of the birth of the Christ-child was replaced by the joy of the products of the catalog. The scenes of a tree, colorful lights, moving figures and a fanciful story of a jolly Saint and a reindeer with a red nose overwhelmed the pictures of the stable birth and its simplicity. The reality of one story was lost in the presence of fictional characters made real through the re-enforcement of the society as a whole.

In pulpits across this land, whether liberal or fundamental, the story of Matthew 1 will sound forth this year. We will all be refreshed because we have heard again the familiar refrains of song and Scripture; and we will be directed to the words of Luke 2:10, "I bring you good tidings of great joy," or Matthew 2:10, "they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." Then we will return to our homes to practice the ritual of the season, the ritual of the "coffee table" come alive, the joy of the cultural Christmas.

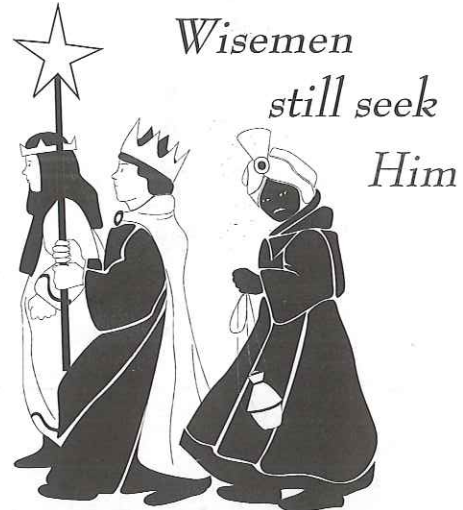
The story presented through the years by these rituals is incomplete and may be the reason that, in the minds of many, the ceremony is finished by the joy of the tree and the presents. The truth is that the story is finished by another tree and the events recorded for us in Matthew 28, especially verse 8. The tree is coarse and ugly. It is empty of all except the traces of a horrendous death. But, not only is the tree empty, the tomb is as

well. It is as they left the tomb "with fear and great joy" that the story of Christmas is finished. With this, the power of the joy of Christmas is alive with the joy that the work of salvation has been completed. The joy of the temporal is replaced by the joy of the eternal as salvation has been completed by the work of the Savior (Jesus) who in obedience completed the work of redemption and reconciliation. The joy of the birth is fully realized in the joy of the resurrection, and the power of both is to be seen in the life of the church. It was the preaching of this that brought "great joy" in Acts 8, and it was the conversion of the Gentiles through the birth, death, and resurrection in Acts 15 that produced "great joy."



Pastor Church Edwards

It would be tragic this Christmas if we who know and believe that this season is not a ritual or a season of trappings and stories, allow the cultural fruit to dominate. Regardless of the struggle, in spite of the gains made by the army of Satan to remove the reality of Christmas, let us bring forth the joy of a Savior—a living Savior.



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