

A Second Look at That “Ole Time Religion”* Ephesians 6:10-20

Introduction

This is my twenty-fourth year at Inter-denominational Theological Center (ITC), fourteen as Administrative Dean, Johnson C. Smith Seminary and ten as President. Without a doubt, the statement I have most often heard from students is, “I’m not going to let them take away my Jesus!” Essentially, they have declared satisfaction with the unexamined understandings of the Christian faith. Revelation, once given, does not change.

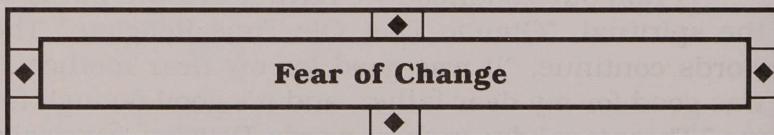
“Ole Time Religion”

From our childhood we have heard the words of the spiritual, “Gimme That Ole Time Religion.” The words continue, “It was good for my dear mother, it was good for my dear father, and it’s good enough for me.” There is validity in these words. Religion, especially the Christian faith, was singularly responsible for sustaining our forebears, bringing them through trials and tribulations. Christianity gave them a hope that

*September 1992

the trials of this life were only a part of living. Beyond the dark curtain of this existence is a bright tomorrow. Jesus, God's only Son, is this reality. I am not sure this is what we mean today when we talk about that "ole time religion."

Unfortunately, too much of what I see and hear is somehow that the "ole time religion" does not need to be subjected to God's constantly unfolding drama in human history. Our parents' understanding of the faith is all we need today. Religion, unlike the sciences, does not change. We tend to fear investigation when it comes to religion, and take refuge in propositions like, "I don't argue about religion; I just accept it." Sadly, we take comfort in our failure in this regard by saying, "Aunt Jane and Uncle Charlie do not want to hear about Tillich, Bultmann and Cone." I think we would be surprised to know what Aunt Jane and Uncle Charlie think. They would like to hear the depth of the gospel unfolded by preachers and teachers who know these theologians so well that they have internalized their meaning and can explain it. Additionally, they need to hear from persons whose lives are testaments of the meanings conveyed. Phoniness is transparent: Aunt Jane recognizes it instantly!



That with which we are wrestling when we hold to untested religious faith is fear of change. We argue, as did Parmenides, a fifth-century Greek philosopher, that change is illusory; life is an unswerving continuum.

Things as they are remain as they were. Anyone holding this ancient philosophy today is simply not abreast of the drama of human history. Within the last twenty years my personal experiences incontrovertibly refute such a belief.

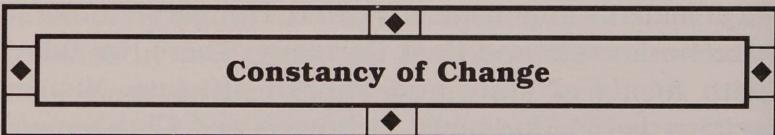
Last year Mrs. Costen and I spent the month of September in Kenya. Among our many experiences was a wonderful day at the Museum of Natural History in Nairobi. There, we saw the reality of the emergence of *homo sapiens*—humanity—from the evidence of archaeologists and paleontologists. We traveled through the Ngong Hills, the Rift Valley, along the Nile River in Tanzania, Kenya, Sudan and Egypt. There, scientists made their earthshaking discoveries concerning the dawn of humankind. Believe me when I tell you, everything changes.

Two years ago she and I traveled with a number of presidents and deans to Poland, Hungary, Rumania, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. There, we talked with heads of state and church officials. Visiting seminaries in Budapest, Debrecen and Cluj-Napoca, we saw libraries that date to the onset of the printing press; in fact, most of their books were of that vintage, completely void of recent research.

We visited before the Russians were driven completely from East Germany, before Hungary expelled them, before Czechoslovakia declared its independence, before *perestroika* had led to the independence of the Republics of the Soviet Union, before the Muslims and Serbs entered into armed warfare over unified Yugoslavia. The people of these great countries were caught in the crossfire of wanting to rid themselves of the known abuses of communist

oppression and fearful of the juggernaut-force of capitalistic domination. Truly, they were "between a rock and a hard place." Never in a million years would I have suspected that the changes in Eastern Europe would have occurred so quickly. Contrary to Parmenides and his modern counterparts, change is not illusory. Change, like taxes and death, is real, and only those who are oblivious to reality dare deny it.

We are aware of Abraham leaving Ur and venturing out in faith to an unknown land. Ur is in Babylon or modern Iraq. We know this oil-rich land along the Euphrates River has emerged from a desert sultanate to a highly technological modern power. Due to its current leader, Saddam Hussein, many of the world's military forces were drawn together to prevent this vicious Iraqi miscalculation.



Constancy of Change

The purpose of these illustrations is to dramatize the constancy of change. The same is true in the field of religion. Biblical scholarship has advanced light years since discovering valuable scrolls in a cave overlooking the Dead Sea. Think about the radical changes in the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican I and II in the 1960s. That "ole time religion," like the moth, has undergone metamorphoses. Mama and Daddy would hardly recognize it today, and they would be the first to sanction the changes.

It is not complimentary for mature theological students, many of whom have expertise in computer

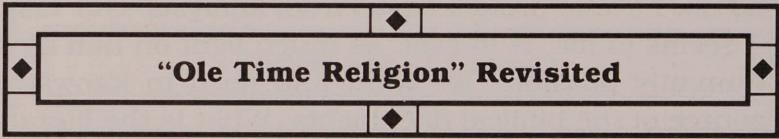
skills, to enter seminary averring their resistance to change. It is not becoming if their only reason for being in seminary is to perpetuate Sunday School beliefs, feeding congregations tasteless pseudo-religious porridge, void of content and meaning. As far as we know, Jesus' worldview extended from Dan in the South to Beersheba in the North, a distance of about 153 miles from the Mediterranean in the West to the Transjordan in the East. In other words, Jesus' exposure was to an area about the same as that along Interstate 85 from Atlanta to the South Carolina border.

Religion is not an isolated engagement; it is that craving within the human breast causing the spirit to clamor for something better and deserving one's complete loyalty. As Christians, we believe Jesus Christ is the One who fulfills this definition of religion. Jesus the Christ is God's most complete manifestation. We do not have to protect Jesus from analysis. Our task, it seems to me, is to cast as much light on him as is humanly possible. We want and need to know the source of the biblical documents. What is the literary form in which the books of the Bible were written? Does this document comport with known facts of the historical period? What particular gifts and unique interpretations do the biblical writers give to their sources as they redact them for their own time? What is the meaning of the text when it was written and what is its hermeneutics?

We need to probe the depths of our Christian faith for meaning relative to the myriad problems confronting us in 1992. While homosexuality has always been an expression of the human condition, it has never occupied center stage as it does today. Is this subject

related to our faith? For that matter, how does our faith relate to sexuality? Does it address the issue of the seeming overexposure of obscenity in modern media? What about the matter of HIV/AIDS? In this country the easy answers to AIDS are unclean hyperdermic needles and homosexuality as the causes of this scourge. In Africa, where it is spreading pandemically, the cause is primarily *machismo*, the stud syndrome.

We have barely begun to identify issues for which we need solutions, biblically and otherwise. For example, what are the biblical implications of family disintegration? What about genetic engineering? What about experimentation where the weakened body is frozen and restored at a later date? Are there implications here for medical ethics?



"Ole Time Religion" Revisited

What I am saying to you, students and faculty, is no matter how halcyon was the good, "ole time religion," it simply is not good enough. The principles are there. The basic truths are there. The potential solutions are there. What is different is the contextualization, the existential setting, the worldview of this modern age. It does no good to talk about the good old days, the good "ole time religion," mama's religion. This might have served well in that period but today it only confuses. This is why many of our churches are empty. We are not addressing the inner pain of today's people. We are passing on too many pious platitudes and empty

solutions. We need to take our congregations seriously, preparing them with our best, giving probing and meaningful sermons. When this occurs, our churches become more relevant.

As President of this Institution, I desire to see it develop completely. Such a theological school must have a great faculty, one that is well prepared, engaged in research, loves to teach and, above all else, has an abiding love for the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ. ITC has such a faculty.

A great institution has great students. *Great students* are those who cannot sleep fast enough to return to the library or classroom for additional learning. *Great students* are conscious of their need to be scholars. *Great students* are more interested in advancing their knowledge than in being overly concerned about their grades. *Great students* have integrity, are honest in their relations, publicly and privately, work hard to advance and communicate their achievements by word and deed, and finally, *great students* are those committed to noble ideas, lofty goals and community vitalization.

Conclusion

I challenge you today to stop trying to protect Jesus from academic incursions. I challenge you to spend more time learning to unravel the unsearchable riches of our Christian faith, and less time practicing your "hoop." I challenge you to learn what the good "ole time religion" has to teach, but use it only as a

way-station along the path of addressing today's questions. The gospel is the answer; however, today the context is different. Your task is to know the difference.

Since I expect ITC to become an uncontested scholarly community, no one would dare think of doing less than the best or resisting learning because they are afraid somebody will "steal their Jesus." If he can be "stolen," he was probably "weighed in the balance and found wanting." A crippled Jesus makes for crippled Christians. Do not keep an emaciated image of Jesus whom you can control, but rather the resurrected image of Jesus as *Christus Victor*—the Liberator of humanity!