



# the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

## “LET THE GAMES BEGIN!”

George R. Hunsberger  
GOCN Coordinator

The work of the GOCN Ecclesiology Project is completed. The book written by the team of six has been finished. *Missional Church* is in the hands of the publisher!

And now there is the inevitable period of waiting. Months will pass before the manuscript sees the light of day as a finished publication. For team members Darrell Guder, Lois Barrett, Inagrace Dietterich, George Hunsberger, Alan Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder, that may mean time to pause and make sure they're ready to make public their portrait of what the church is like when it lives in light of its missionary nature! But it also opens a window of opportunity throughout the Gospel and Our Culture Network for aggressive work to begin toward a wide-ranging conversation about the *Missional Church* and its implications.

For three years, the six people engaged in the Ecclesiology Project met several times a year, for several days each time, to craft into one sustained argument the case for seeing the church in missional terms. This

meant being very contextual and rooted in the questions and issues presented by the North American setting. It meant rigorous theological and biblical work to discern the gospel's impact on the forms of the church. It meant exploring with imagination the new territory ahead for the church and being held accountable to paths the church has trod in other times and places. And it meant doing all that in a collegial way, marked at times by agony, at other times by ecstasy.

The issues with which the team has dealt are rumbling in all kinds of circles linked together in some way in the GOC Network: churches and pastors and regional synod staff in the Albany Synod of the Reformed Church in America, the American Baptist Churches' Evangelism Team, Doctor of Ministry initiatives and continuing education programs at a variety of seminaries, the focused perspective of several clusters of church consultants for whom theology and calling are not peripheral but central, denominational

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*"It meant  
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staff thinking in new ways about the missional identity of the churches for whom their corporate structures exist, small groups in congregations envisioning their future in this new world they know their congregations inhabit, local groups of pastors circled together for encouragement to nurture the forms of leadership that reach forward to the new days of the church ahead. The ferment is in places like Pennsylvania, Ontario, Colorado, Texas, Florida, New York, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, Wisconsin, Georgia, British Columbia..., and in churches that are Mennonite, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, independent, charismatic, united, ethnic, pluralist....

It is time for all of us to grow into being *Missional Church*. The book that is on its way offers a touchstone to stir the conversation about what that means and how we go there together. And conversation there must be. There are many issues that are yet to be resolved. And there is dreaming to be done about bridges we've yet to cross, experiments we've yet to make, and risks we've yet to run.

To carry the conversation forward, two initiatives are planned for the Fall.

#### *THE FOCUS OF THE ANNUAL GOCN CONSULTATION*

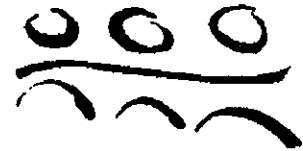
Darrell Guder, who served as team leader for the Ecclesiology Project, is designing the annual consultation around the thesis of the book. The theme will be "Missional Church: A Conversation About the Future of the Church in North America." While the book is not due to be published until after the consultation, the publisher (Wm. B. Eerdmans) has agreed to make available pre-publication copies of the manuscript for those who register for the consultation. That means that every participant will be able to read it in advance and arrive prepared to discuss it. Several specifically invited respondents, representing various ecclesial traditions, will initiate the conversation with their critique and interaction with the book. They will

engage the authors in dialogue about the implications of their work for churches in North America. All the participants will join that effort to give shape to steps toward renewal of the missional character of the churches. The consultation will be held at Techny Towers, Techny, Illinois (north of Chicago) on October 23-25, 1997, beginning with dinner on Thursday evening and concluding with lunch on Saturday. The registration fee of \$195.00 includes lodging, meals, the pre-publication manuscript and the published book sent later. (The registration fee for groups of three or more from a church or institution is \$180.00 each.)

#### *A SERIES OF INFORMAL GROUP CONVERSATIONS*

Beginning as early as September and continuing on beyond the consultation, small groups of all sorts are being invited to engage in a process of pre-publication conversations on the book. For this purpose, the pre-publication manuscripts will be made

available for groups of people wishing to participate in the "hearings" process. To participate, a group's members must be prepared to make the following commitments: 1) to pre-purchase the book along with the pre-publication manuscript for \$27, which includes postage and handling for both; 2) to read the manuscript in the light of specific questions that will be provided regarding the implications of the book; 3) to discuss the manuscript together in the group; 4) to formulate a group response that will contribute to a broader conversation about the themes of the book; and 5) to consider participating in the GOCN consultation in October on the themes of the book. Existing groups, or groups formed expressly for this purpose, are invited to contact George Hunsberger at the GOCN office for further information and to register their participation. ■



## The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter

a quarterly publication  
designed to encourage  
the encounter of the gospel  
with North American culture

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# WHENEVER YOU ENTER A HOUSE

Brian Cole,  
Appalachian Ministries Education Resource Center  
Berea, Kentucky

## *Reflections on Mark 6:7-13*

All good worship begins with confession. I would like to begin this reflection with a confession, as well. I am unnerved by this text. And not this story alone. All texts in the New Testament writings which suggest themselves as a "sending out" story, a passage on missions, always give me real pause. It is not the texts themselves, but the interpretations that have so often been attached to them by too many well-intended missionaries and those of us who support them and their work. In our attempts to proclaim Good News to new people and places, we have too often confused the core of Christ's message with our messages. "My cultural distinctives are preferred." "My economic system is God's will." "My life, my history and my experiences are the norm. You are the exception."

So what do we do? Abandon the text? Choose no longer to venture out, no longer to endeavor to encounter the stranger? Jettison Jesus' command to proclaim Good News for fear of doing more harm than good? Before we take such drastic steps, let's remember that I suggested it is not the text that causes the hurt, but how it has been misappropriated. I believe this text will offer the corrective needed for past abuses which occurred with its suggested blessing.

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Now, we need to begin with some commentary on Jesus' band of missionaries. Mark's Gospel gives us a rather dim view of Jesus' disciples, the twelve at least. They continually fail to grasp Jesus' mission, his understanding of a Messiah come to suffer and die. One develops the sense from reading Mark's story that Jesus is

handle such an unruly, foolish piece of news and fully grasp what it is that we are called to proclaim?

The disciples are also ill-prepared travelers, as well. Jesus' short packing list leaves them very much vulnerable sojourners. Your parents might say, "They have no business being out by themselves."

We, modern-day sojourners proclaiming Good News, often feel this story hinges on

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a very lonely teacher who fails to connect with his students. And yet, they are sent to proclaim Good News. Ill-prepared and resistant to his message, they are sent to proclaim it.

Why doesn't Jesus wait? Isn't this a rather foolish risk for such a fledgling effort? Aren't the disciples bound to get "off-message" and so distort the Good News? Or could we say that such risks always occur when the Good News is entrusted to the Church in every age? The disciples go with Jesus' authority, if not a clear grasp of his teaching. Surprisingly enough, the effort appears to be successful. Hopefully, you hear that with a sense of relief — with relief and recognition that we are facing a paradox that Jesus entrusts the Good News to those who barely recognize it for themselves. Jesus' risk brings into question our own struggles with deciding whose hands are able to carry Good News to others. Dare we say that one is ever prepared to

Jesus' words to "take nothing for the journey." In the midst of a manic consumer culture, we feel the critique of our materialism and world filled with provisions. If we seek to lighten our load, then surely we have heard the message which lingers in the story. To live simply, as modern-day ascetics, becomes the goal.

But before we congratulate ourselves, let me offer a suggestion that we have not yet heard all of the story. Now do not think I wish to encourage materialism and consumer consumption run amok. However, the call to simple living should not be confused with a call to retreat into extreme individualism and self-reliance.

Let's face it: for some, simple living is currently fashionable. However, the urge to forego materialism often simply trades it for a rampant individualism. A sturdy self-reliant, self-sufficient, me-and-my cabin mentality persists. "I do not only need few things, I also need few people." It is here that Jesus' instructions to the disciples no longer sound like a text on self-reliance.

Personally, I am not fearful of Jesus' rather limited packing list for the trip. The ascetic nature of it strikes a chord in me, a

call to be self-reliant and live off the land. My numerous sojourns to nearby monasteries always leaves this former Baptist yearning for the monastic life. What is fearful is that the instructions do not end. Instead, we are told not to forage for ourselves, but to be guests, utterly dependent on the hospitality of a stranger.

Jesus does not send out self-reliant ascetics, rather he sends ill-prepared itinerants, who are vulnerable ones on a mission. The hospitable strangers bring a vital communal link to the proclamation of Good News. The disciples receive Good News from strangers who risk on their behalf. So, poor planning and foolish recklessness becomes Good News. Instead of living simply, the disciples learn, as Kentuckian Wendell Berry has suggested, to live complexly.

It is a complex living movement that we modern-day missionaries need to nurture and support. We need to develop a way of seeing those new places and people as partners, vital links to our own survival. The complexity comes in our interdependence, our risk to be vulnerable, to allow the outcome of our mission to rest in the hands of another.

A complex living movement would call on us to support each other as we learn to live in the paradoxes that the Church too often deserts. To learn to be at home among strangers. To find nurture for my own discipleship among the gathered community. To link my future with your future and recognize that we enter a promised land together or we don't get there at all. To realize that as I need things less, I need people more.

The story offers us a new insight needed for our task as missionaries. It is not our call to enter new places with all the answers before hearing the questions, with an air of self-sufficiency, to come only to give, not receive, to understand the community entered as less than and needy. Instead, the call here is first to go out and get help, knowing our

survival and care depend on folks we haven't met yet.

Many folks serve in particular communities out of a sense of need. "They need me," we say. The Markan passage flips the whole understanding of need as it relates to being sent. It is the disciples who need to be welcomed, to be offered hospitality if they are to be sustained during their journey. The communal relationship replaces old models of the self-reliant missionary.

The placement of the story within Mark's Gospel should be noted, as well. Jesus has just encountered rejection among those in his own hometown. Their great sense of disbelief in his mission and work prevents any real expression of the Good News to take root there. Jesus, who comes preaching as one with authority is able to do no significant work in light of the resistance among his own. In this lesson, the disciples, a rather unlikely band with a rather bungled sense of the Good News, do extraordinary things in concert with rather unlikely fellow missionaries who are total strangers, but hospitable ones.

We should also take note that the disciples return to witness Jesus' miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Jesus had instructed the disciples to take no food for the journey. Their food would be provided through a different kind of "miracle" the miracle of food provided as gift to a stranger, as a risk of friendship.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, we find a consistent story unfolding that finds strangers and minor characters who enter in to bear witness to the Good News, while the disciples, the "insiders" and friends of Jesus, make themselves strangers to his work.

In recent years, both liberal and conservative Christian communities have continued to interpret Christian faith in wholly individualistic terms. Jesus' instructions for the journey remind us the journey is not a solitary one, but one begun as one stranger ventures out to other strangers. We go in need of welcome and care, to receive the Good News we go to share and proclaim. We go in search of partners, of hospitable strangers. ■

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

*An e-mail exchange on the GOCN Listserv*

### **Letter from Wayne Schwab**

Wally Hobbs asks, "What is authentic church?" in the March 1997 newsletter. I suspect this is the clue to authentic proclamation.

Authentic church is centered on mission. Usually, churches are centered on themselves with mission as an add-on. Is it not time to rediscover the church as the instrument or sign of the mission? Our proclamation usually ends with the hearer in the church, rather than in the world committed to live as a participant in Christ's mission.

Further, who is the primary missionary of today? The usual answer is the local congregation. Is it not the truth, rather, that all of the baptized in each of the arenas of their daily lives are the most effective missionaries of today? What a congregation does as a body is seldom as effective in realizing God's reign as what the individual Christian can do.

A parable: Two men control what is done with 80% of the chlorofluorocarbons (if I've got the right name for the ozone "killers") in today's world.

When our proclamation is about joining the mission rather than the church we will be heard better, I suspect. When our proclamation reaches for good news for one's work life, one's home life, one's community life, one's life in the wider communities of city/county/state/nation/world, and one's leisure, as well as one's church, we will be heard better, I suspect.

### **Comment from George Hunsberger**

Thanks for these reflections. I fully agree with the directions you go with this. Well, except for the one caveat that multiple personal work-world missional actions of believers ARE the presence and witness of the congregation. That is to say, the congregation as a body of people, present where that body happens to be in the fabric of society, not the congregation as merely the institutional structures and programs.

*Continued on page 8*

# THE END OF CHRISTENDOM AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY

By Douglas John Hall. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International. Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series. x, 69 pp., paper, \$9.95.

Reviewed by Wayne A. Holst  
University of Calgary  
Alberta, Canada

For the past quarter century Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has been challenging the contemporary North American Christian Church to re-imagine itself in profoundly different ways. By means of inspiring lectures, books and articles (which reveal him as contextually attuned, widely read and resourceful) Hall has encouraged the Church to reassess its relationship to modern culture, articulate a theology that addresses the realities of our time and develop a new understanding of its mission.

Hall urges twentieth century Mainline Protestantism in particular to abandon the fetters with which it has been encumbered through long identification with the traditional cultural establishments of Europe and North America. He calls this shackling 'sixteen hundred years of Constantinian Christianity.' The faith as we know it compromised much when it became the recognised religion of a declining empire and then of the developing nations of the old and new worlds. To survive, new understandings and expressions of this faith, unencumbered with past culture and religion, must emerge.

The time has come, Hall affirms, for Christians to *disengage* from society in order to liberate the Church from the conventions of culture religion and to rediscover the essential Christian values. The purpose of this disestablishment, he maintains, is in order to *reengage* society with the salt, yeast and light of a refined, pristine Christianity. The pre-Constantinian Church, Anabaptist Christianity and even Judaism provide us with models and styles of what a truly liberated church might be.

Hall's message is contextually grounded in the cultures he addresses. This means, for example, that while the American context does not provide the central content of the Christian message, it does provide the matrix or forum in which that message must be put (cf. his book, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). Thinking the faith brings the gospel into dialogue with today's major issues, and clearly goes beyond the mere perpetuation of ancient dogmas which no longer speak to our age. The message we receive from this Christian past is therefore not 'Repeat what we have said!' but rather 'Do what we have done.' History shows that the influence of theologians as diverse as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Kierkegaard, etc., was due precisely to their ability to articulate the faith that thoughtfully engaged the central issues of their particular eras. Hall sees his end of the twentieth century mission as being little different from the theological task of his perceptive predecessors.

The author contends that North American society continues to be dominated by a belief in manifest destiny and the assumption that progress is inevitable. Progress implies quantitative and territorial expansion. Traditional theological liberalism certainly believed this. Now, various forms of evangelical conservatism are dominant, and many of its working assumptions assume the same values. In such a view, not only is Christianity going to enjoy a still greater future, but it alone deserves such a destiny, for it is superior to any other faith. It's qualitative superiority is demonstrated by its quantitative success and its quantitative success is because of its qualitative superiority (p. 14). Church growth, spiritual possibility thinking and megachurch strategies are but a contemporary expression of 'Christian Century' advocates of a hundred years ago.

The death knell of societal progress thinking and Church member/ institutional growth has been sounding for some time; but the churches—mainline and conservative evangelical alike—have operated with a 'business as usual' approach, acting and hoping as though things would turn around. Decline has continued, nonetheless, and it is inevitable. We must face honestly this current era of financial and numerical erosion of once powerful movements and denominations, seeing it as part of God's *design*, not our failure, and as an exciting opportunity for theological and institutional renewal.

Today's spiritual seekers are looking for moral authority, meaningful community, transcendent mystery and meaning, says Hall (pp. 57-65). For the church to speak truly to the needs of moderns it must 'stand off,' rediscover its true heritage and accept itself as marginal and alien. It must relearn the meaning of the crucified way, of being 'fools for Christ,' of being 'in' but not 'of' the world. Moderns are seeking meaning beyond progress. The church can offer something the world cannot give by rediscovering the possibilities of littleness. God is interested chiefly in minorities, in remnants (see Hall's book, *The Future of the Church*, pp. 34-35). Hall's message is a prophetic call for radical change in Christian *thought, profession and confession*. But his is also a vision of bold future witness and hope for the church.

*The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* represents not so much a further expansion as a valuable recapitulation of Hall's lifetime of thought. What he has taken almost four decades and many words to define during a remarkably productive career he here condenses and distills with precision and clarity into less than seventy pages of text. For some, this book will provide a valuable first encounter with Hall that encourages further reading of his more extensive studies. For others, this book will draw together the essence of Hall's pivotal ideas previously encountered elsewhere.

*The End of Christendom* raises

questions and challenges many of the ideas about Christian faith and the institutional church that the faithful hold dear. Pastors, denominational executives, seminary teachers and those who have grown comfortable with the security benefits of church leadership and church going as we have known it may read Hall with curiosity but be hesitant to hazard following his biblically based prescriptions. To challenge the status quo risks alienating many of the people the church considers it's own. However, the process of disestablishment that Hall advocates offers the church new and hopeful possibilities for regaining its prophetic role in a world much in need of a vital and viable counter-cultural spirituality.

Hall's writing attempts to probe the heart of Christian faith, bereft of its cultural and institutional trappings. He asks penetrating questions about how the central message of the faith can be purposefully expressed in the contemporary church. Hall is not a trained sociologist but a highly intuitive reader and interpreter of modern North American culture. His propositions lack the empirical substance of a Reginald Bibby. Yet, his prescriptive vision and insights provide much material for reflection, discussion and debate. It would be helpful if Hall could be more specific about the forms a future disestablished and prophetic church might take. ■



# MP, MDL, FAW or WHAT?

*Pete Hammond  
IVCF Marketplace Division  
Madison, Wisconsin*

How do you describe the life of faith among the people of God in their jobs or careers?

Over the past fifteen years I have been focused on what many refer to as "Marketplace Ministry" (MP). That is even the name of my work unit within InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. It is also the name used by a variety of other ministry organizations around the country in places like Boston, San Diego, Dallas and Spokane, Washington. I have struggled with its limitations. I belong to a coalition that seeks to identify itself in this area with the term "Ministry in Daily Life" (MDL). The oldest publication in the field is called "Faith At Work (FAW).

All of these require explanation. None captures and communicates the vision quickly. It is a struggle for each leader in the field.

But, at second glance, it is a reminder that the Christian faith is so profound that slogans, bumper sticker language or modern sound bites just don't do the job. Capturing what it means to be loved and forgiven by Christ and then invited to grow and serve Him in every dimension of life cannot be done in cryptic language.

But I also think that the struggle is also a hint at the problem of neglect within the church. Few "pewsitters" view themselves as bold agents of the kingdom of God in their workplace. Passivity in the pew is reinforced by the power of the pulpit as contrasting points of identity among Christians. The more we exalt our clergy, the more at risk they are to being addicted to their positions, while the rest of the congregation almost unconsciously off-load all the work of the kingdom. This dynamic is devastating to both groups.

The church can easily become an institution that tends to be preoccupied with its own preservation. All its resources are directed inward. Hence, its presence in each community is no more than that of being just one more organization competing for space, loyalty, support and significance. Outsiders are suspect of its motives. Its own members are drawn further inward for its own benefit. Hence, service outward toward the city, our jobs and other organizations becomes weakened, or even quietly resisted. The challenge of Christian living in the world is marginalized, oversimplified or diminished. No wonder we struggle for terminology to capture the vision!

As I have listened and labored to find ways to turn this around, a variety of issues have surfaced. Often they are illustrated by key terms of faith. Here is a grocery list of phrases that describe important pieces of this vision. I have italicized key words that are used in a variety of phrases or slogans. They tend to be biblical terms.

*Discipleship* at work, during the week, everyday, for everybody.

*Spirituality* in everyday life, in the workplace, in your job, in citizenship.

*Everyday* faith, spirituality, discipleship, servanthood.

*Reconnecting* Sunday & Monday, faith and work, worship and work or career.

*Faith* everyday, seven days a week, at work, on the job.

*Ministry* in daily life, for the rest of the church, at work, of all the baptized, of the laity.

*Marketplace* ministry, missionaries, Christians, faith, discipleship, servanthood.

*The Priesthood* of all believers or *priests* at work or on the job, in the workplace.

*The church* in the world, scattered, Monday through Friday, at your workplace.  
*Ordained* laity, pew-sitters or ordination for every believer, all the baptized.  
*Worship* in your work, job, career.

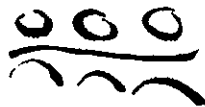
While its begins to feel complicated, it also hints at the richness of the subject. There is much food for thought about how every follower of Christ is to learn and live out their faith in every dimension of life—including their jobs. If we can begin to affirm that truth, I think the church will become much “saltier” in our culture, and our witness will become much more powerful. It could also relieve our pastor-teachers and release them back to their primary role as internists in the body of Christ who specialize in “equipping all the saints for ministry.”

What are you thinking about the life of faith for Harry and Sally pew-sitter? What terminology moves you toward whole-life discipleship?

The Lord *is* with you. ■

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## NETWORKINGS



**Randall Prior of Australia** writes on behalf of the **Victorian Council of Churches' Gospel and Cultures Commission**. He indicates the publication of a book which he edited on their behalf, entitled *Gospel and Cultures—Initial Explorations in the Australian Context*. An introduction and sixteen chapters are organized around several points of reference: theological and historical perspectives, indigenous Australia, Anglo-Saxon Australia, and other ethnic cultures. The book is available for A\$20.00 plus postage and can be ordered by writing to 6 Fowler Street, Wattle Park, Victoria, Australia 3128. Randall's letter concludes: “Through my own direct personal links with GOCN and my association with the Melbourne-based Forum on Faith and Society, I continue to follow keenly the progress of the movement in North America and appreciate the quality of the work which is being done over there. Here in Australia, the Victorian Council of Churches is the only ecumenical body which has initiated a Gospel and Cultures Commission, and I personally continue to find this field of work both challenging and

stimulating. Like yourselves, we are now looking at the best ways in which to promote the issues at congregational level.”

**The 1997 Gathering of the Reformed Spirituality Network** will be held July 23-25 on the campus of Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. The theme is “Where in the World is Reformed Spirituality?” and it will examine the dynamic relationship between culture and Reformed spirituality. Speakers include Charles Marks of Indianapolis, Indiana, Marilyn Borst of Houston, Texas, and John Bell of the Iona Community in Scotland. For information, contact Tom Schwanda, 616-940-0476 or <tomschw@iserv.net>.

**A note from our friends in New Zealand:** “The Gospel and Cultures Trust in New Zealand now has established a web site at URL <<http://www.voyager.co.nz/~dozer>> under the title *The Network for Gospel and Culture*. Here we have attempted to present a basic introduction to the G & C theme and to provide addresses where those interested can explore further. Our aim is to bait the hook. We welcome contributions and comments so please feel free to e-mail me, John Flett at <[dozer@voyager.co.nz](mailto:dozer@voyager.co.nz)> with any suggestions” (*New Slant*, April 1997). ■

### Announcing the Annual GOCN Consultation

#### **MISSIONAL CHURCH: A Conversation about the Future of the Church in North America**

Dinner on Thursday, October 23 through lunch on Saturday, October 25, 1997

Techny Towers, Techny, Illinois

Registration fee: US\$195.00 / Groups of three or more: US\$180.00

Includes meals, lodging, preliminary manuscript copy of the book and published copy when available

This consultation will consist of conversation on the newest book in the GOCN series, *Missional Church*. Darrell Guder, leader of the six person writing team will coordinate the meeting. Although the book will not be published before the consultation, the publishers have agreed to make pre-publication copies of the manuscript available in September.

Registration forms will be sent out soon, but those wishing to register early may send their name, address, institution, phone, fax and e-mail numbers with payment to: Judy Bos, GOCN, 101 E. 13th Street, Holland, MI 49423, Fax 616-392-7717, e-mail, [judybos@hayburn.com](mailto:judybos@hayburn.com).

**LETTERS** *continued from page 5*

The latter forms and structures are of course always going to be true of any gathered group. But for us in our time, they have become distorted and have displaced the church, rightly understood as a body of people sent on a mission. We have in its place an attitude that the church is a "vendor of religious services and goods." This is the most fundamental of problems in the churches of North America, but also throughout the world, I'm discovering.

**Response from Wally Hobbs**

Thanks to Wayne and to George for their comments following upon my remarks in the recent Newsletter regarding "authentic church." I just received both messages, so I'm responding without a whole lot of reflection.

Those who read the piece in the Newsletter may recall I was reporting that the question "What is authentic church?" was one of several topics addressed in a local (Buffalo NY) discussion about Gospel and Culture shortly after the March '96 general conference in Chicago. It was an authentic question, as a matter of fact! None of us, least of all I, pretended that he or she had "the" answer. Many among us, however, were willing (of course) to offer a variety of observations ranging from the well considered to the let's-see-where-this-may-take-us. I for one am now very anxious to see the Ecclesiology Project's analyses (forthcoming), and to engage the discussion at the next consultation in October. So I'm delighted that Wayne picked up on the topic as he did.

Several of George's remarks in his response to Wayne's post speak for me. I'm not partial to Wayne's perspective, if I understand him correctly (always a huge IF!) that "...all of the baptized in each of the arenas of their daily lives are the most effective missionaries of today[.] What a congregation

does as a body is seldom as effective in realizing God's reign as what the individual Christian can do." Rather, I'm of the view that the individualism which so thoroughly permeates North American culture has distorted North American Christianity's understanding not only of the substance of the Gospel but also of how it is to be "proclaimed" (communicated) and why that way. To many Christians (not Wayne as I read him, I hasten to say), church is what George so compellingly describes as the "vendor of religious services and goods." Church is program and activity, and it exists to meet my needs. Serious believers recognize that this crass view of the church as vendor is invalid, but many still do not shake the underlying individualism which fuels that view. To a large number of concerned Christians today, discipleship and evangelism are essentially personal, individual responsibilities. Cooperation and collaboration may be useful and at times perhaps even functionally necessary. But at bottom, effective mission reduces to individual commitment and obedience.

Mission however, I submit, is congregational, not individual. As I understand the Word, the biblical *ekklesia*, the concrete local assembly, is the incarnation of God in particular time and place. It is the Body of Christ and, like all living bodies, it is made up of many distinct but vitally inseparable parts — whose "most excellent" responsibility and privilege is to love one another! By THIS will all others know that we are the Master's disciples, that he is Lord indeed. By this will those who are not reconciled to God "hear" the Good News that he is in their world, and understand that he invites them into his.

Heady complex stuff. As an academically struggling but plainly intrigued student told a colleague of mine who was tutoring him in philosophy, "Gee, Doc, a guy could write a book about this." ■



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