



the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

In This Issue

This combined issue is not about September 11. But it certainly lives in its shadow. And sometimes shadows unmask and reveal as much as they hide.

There is one specific reflection growing out of the tragedy, or more to the point, out of American habits of talking about it since then. Bill Burrows (beginning on this page) is struck by the insular way in which the most prominent of media gurus have been commenting, oblivious to a wider world of which the United States is a part.

But beyond that, it's more a matter of the ways the event adds a measure of seriousness and pregnancy to our ongoing engagement with the gospel in our culture, and to our pursuit of the missional church. From our annual GOCN Consultation in October comes the presentation made by Chris Erdman on the way the Bible functions in the church to call out our continuing conversion (page 5). His own congregation is the tangible setting for his comments. Kent Miller's formal "response" to his presentation follows, underscoring the challenges the church faces at the present time (page 10).

At the consultation, Sally Morgenthaler gave a multimedia presentation on "Worship and Continual Conversion." An interview with Sally conducted by Songs4Worship.com (page 3) gets at many of the issues she raised and points in directions called for if we take the recovery of the missional character of the church seriously.

—the Editor

“American” Values Abroad

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Listening to programs like Leonard Lopate's New York & Company on National Public Radio, and reading the editorials in the New York Times in the wake of September 11th, I find myself amazed by the lack of cultural self-awareness among many Americans. Pundits, writers, and callers seem to have no sense that the kind of "neutrality" and "fair-mindedness" that they try to bring to issues like Western-Muslim relations emerge from a particular religio-cultural situation. They can't imagine their values as the objects of ridicule.

Indeed, the very Enlightenment principles that America's religious and secular progressives presuppose are the ones that many culturally and religiously sensitive people in the Middle East and elsewhere believe are responsible for the erosion of values in their societies. This is no excuse for condoning or sponsoring terrorism. It is, however, one of the reasons that religious ideals have been hijacked and drafted to serve diabolical purposes.

As a son of the Enlightenment, I would like to see us argue abroad for the Jeffersonian principles of freedom

of speech, and freedom both from and of religion. Instead of arguing this case, our consumer-driven entertainment industry, and pragmatic business culture bombards traditional societies with overt and covert messages that are anarchic in other contexts. Few seem to care how deep the resentment of our cultural invasion is in many societies.

It has been common to talk of our military and economic hegemony, and "blowback" from our support of dictators and groups like the Mujahadin in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union. We can see the results of working on the principle that the enemy of our enemy is our friend. It is far less common to hear serious analysis of the effects of our entertainment exports on other people's cultures.

Yet, if I am right, cultural "pollution" touches far more people, far more directly than any other American artifact or business. The profits gained by Hollywood in overseas markets equal, if not exceed, those of the arms industry. Our secular cultural leaders, however, have such a deeply held belief in free expression, that they hardly raise their voices on this

topic. Our religio-cultural left seems so intent on distancing itself from Jerry Falwell and Pat Roberston domestically, that it has little time to cast an eye abroad.

I carry no candles for the Taliban or for terrorists of any stripe, but as I listened to a call-in show with the head of the American Civil Liberties Union as the guest, I saw no evidence that she understood the depth of the animus toward her brand of secular constitutional theory. Both she and her host seemed unaware that truths we hold to be self-evident are anywhere in dispute. Neither reflected on the imposition of secular values through the trade in entertainment commodities by companies that care little whose crockery they are breaking.

What is needed in both the short and long term, is a sense on the part of the American populace and its intellectuals, on the right and the left, of the non-universality of our formulations of fundamental religious and human rights. We need to begin a major national debate about the quality and effect of our presence in the world. With a new level of self-awareness of our ideals and practices, and their effects on the rest of the world, we would be a much better partner in the encounters that are needed to deepen mutual comprehension among the world's religious and secular peoples. ■

[Reprinted from "Sightings" with permission of the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School.]



2001 CONSULTATION TAPES

*At the October 2001 Consultation on
The Continuing Conversion of the Church,
audio tapes were made of the presentations
of the main speakers and respondents.*

*These include Darrell Guder, Chris Erdman, Kent Miller,
Sally Morgenthaler, George Hunsberger, Doug Pagitt,
Al Roxburgh, and Lois Barrett.*

*We are making the set of
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An Interview with Sally Morgenthaler

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(As interviewed by Songs4Worship.com)

What is the one missing piece, one essential truth about worship that we must grasp if we are to move forward in the 21st century?

The realization that sacred space starts outside the sanctuary/worship center. If we cannot create sacred space in our daily lives, especially with our neighbors, co-workers, families,

orders, in our styles and expressions. We used to think of this problem as synonymous with traditional and/or liturgical settings, but I hear the most complaints about “boredom” from the praise and worship sector. There is a sameness to the songs, a numbing predictability to the format, and a disenchantment with what is perceived

from you. Make a commitment to calling them, to setting up a first worship planner gathering. And make that gathering, from the beginning, an offsite event: coffee house, Border’s bookstore, each other’s homes. Give yourselves a six-week lead time to the first service you’re planning. (Advent and Christmas would be a super

It will be those worship gatherings that do much more than a token effort to move from a human-focus to a God-focus that will be attractive to folks in the next decade.



strangers, then we can’t create anything inside church walls that will be authentic. This is not about perfection. It is about living lives that reflect God’s continual, redeeming, incarnate presence, not simply waiting for an event. One small step toward becoming more presence and less event oriented: encourage participants in your church community to share a meal, cup of coffee, or a ten minute conversation with someone new in their neighborhood or workplace each week. And encourage that time to be spent more in listening, more in discovery than talking. A good guideline: 70/30. Seventy per cent listening to their neighbor’s story and thirty per cent sharing their own story.

How should that kind of involvement impact corporate worship?

Worship for community needs to be planned in community. As we round the bend of the new millennium, many worship services and worshipers are on auto-pilot. There are ruts now several feet thick in our worship

to be a lack of content. There are also crescendoing rumblings about worship being equated with music. Where is the visual art? Where is the poetry, the lilt of a well-crafted litany? Where are the indigenous versions of creeds, confessions, laments, and thanksgivings?

There are several reasons why these elements are missing in our contemporary worship settings: adoption of a franchise mentality (“we’re doing the such-and-such model”); blindness to the creative gifts that exist within one’s own congregation; a lack of commitment to and intentionality about worship planning; the lone-ranger approach that seems to be attached at the hip to staff-driven ministry.

Here’s something that can start this week, before the next service, before you as a worship leader sit down (again!), alone with all those praise chorus CD’s: choose someone to help plan worship, someone with a solid, private worship life; someone who has very different artistic gifts

project to begin this commitment to community.) As soon as you can, extend the invitation to others. It’s the start of a whole new way both to craft and plan worship.

What has been the greatest challenge you’ve faced in ministry?

Worship practices reflect our theology of both God and worship. To not have a theology is to have a theology by default. And default theology is at best, maintenance. At worst, it is debilitating to the spiritual life of the congregation. As I see it, our theology can be divided into two camps: either God does it through us (salvation, sanctification, divine presence in worship, etc.), or we do it. If we’re in the second camp, worship is focused on us—our thoughts, our potential, our techniques. And it will be very much a monologue instead of a dialogue. If we pray, the prayers will be token...sort of, “this is a worship service and we’d better at least appear spiritual.” If we’re in the first camp, worship will a response to God’s work

and character. It will be a two-way conversation that includes a very honest look at who we are: conviction, confession, repentance, and lament as well as thanksgiving and praise.

Post-September 11, it will be much more difficult to sell a homo sapiens-centered service. I predict that those congregations that have eliminated historic elements and a transcendent feel will be scrambling to insert tokens of the past, of the substantive, into their services. But it will be those worship gatherings that do much more than a token effort to move from a human-focus to a God-focus that will be attractive to folks in the next decade.

What has been the most profound lesson you've learned about worship over the past few years?

Worship that emerges out of the people--their struggles, language, aesthetics, artistic gifts--is the best worship. Because then, it is truly authentic response. This is why I stress "worship *for* community is planned *in* community." God wants to come to us in the particular, not in the franchised or generic. He not only wants to know each one of us by name, but the name of each of the worshipping, discipling, evangelizing "peoples" he has formed on this planet. The most profound worship services I've participated in over the past few years are expressions of life lived 24/7, in particular communities. They are not the result of pre-fab formats that so-and-so is doing, or the wonder-programs of church staff. They are grassroots responses to God in the midst of the congregation and community.

What is the most common misunderstanding about worship you see in your own congregation and how have you tried to reshape it?

In my congregation, the average age is around 28. We thought we would "beat" the system, avoid all the "mistakes" that the boomer generation made with worship (the biggest of which was, "worship is about me.") But we didn't. And, shooting from the

hip, trying to be spontaneous in our worship planning has meant the very lack of intentionality that would have helped us to move worship God-ward. We have been too cool to get out the theology books, check out the history of worship, dig into the rich and diverse hymnology that's available. We thought that if we lit candles, if we had the trappings of God-focus, we could get by. Now we realize that we've got to roll up our sleeves, commit to educating ourselves about both worship and theology, and get past the cosmetics. Interestingly enough, this commitment has surfaced post-September 11. It's as if we were caught at our own game, caught with our theological and ceremonial britches down! In crises like our nation is experiencing, anything superficial is going to get weeded out really quickly.

What does 'worship lifestyle' mean to you?

At the moment, it means getting to know the neighbors on my block that have lived here the 19 years I have, but haven't somehow been important enough for me to visit. Like the Pakistani neighbors at the end of the block. Why did it take fifteen bullet holes being pumped into their house on September 13 for me to show up on their doorstep? Preacher, heal thyself!

This is kind of the desert island question. What are the five essentials you could not do without in worship ministry?

The Psalms, some kind of confession, art ("praying with your eyes open"), silence, and a really good band.

What role does prayer play in the corporate worship experience? Do you feel prayer is given its due in worship? How so?

Those in the Anglican/Episcopalian traditions have services that are about 75 percent prayer. To experience these services is to be catapulted into divine conversation, a conversation many of us are craving because it is one of the things that we have

sacrificed in the rush to relevancy. One crucial facet of Christian worship is our covenantal relationship with God through Christ. All relationships, but especially those that are covenant-based, require constant communication. The value of each party is affirmed, promises are made, wrongs identified and grieved, and intents made clear. This is what Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, David, Hannah, and the early Christians knew so well. Worship's primary focus is God, but God is divinely involved in the conversation and responds to our adoration, thanksgiving, and repentance with His love, care, assurance, and forgiveness.

I recommend that every worship leader read *Leading in Prayer: A Workbook for Worship*, by Hughes Old (Eerdmans, 1995). This is a thorough, inspiring work detailing all the varieties of prayer, their histories, and examples. Those of us who are crafting contemporary worship expressions especially need to be aware of the great repertoire of "vertical conversation" and be intentional about repackaging and reinstating some of these old forms into our weekly worship orders. ■

You can find Sally Morgenthaler on the web at <www.sacramentis.com>.

[This article was provided courtesy of Song4Worship.com. For more information about this article and others like it, visit www.Songs4Worship.com.]



REFILLING STONE JARS

Some Biblical Practices for the Continuing Conversion of the Church

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Christendom offered the church many advantages. It would be foolish and wrong to dismiss the historical fact of the Christian hegemony in the West as a mistake. It was, in many ways, a natural result of the gospel's engagement with culture. The Christian mission, which springs forth from its joyous preoccupation with the reign of God, is, among other things, a world-building enterprise. As Peter Berger has argued, "the world-building potency of religion" can never be restricted to the construction of private worlds of meaning for sub-groups within a larger society (*The Sacred Canopy*, 134).

While Christendom blinded the church to the ways the gospel would become domesticated to causes subversive and many times antithetical to the reign of God, it nevertheless is a product of a genuine Christian missionary impulse. Yet it was this domestication of the gospel (by a church too long enamored with its cultural and political privilege) that seduced the church away from its preoccupation with the mission of God and toward a mode of being in which it understood itself as a dispenser of religious benefits to a largely Christianized culture. Unwittingly the church was seduced into believing that it essentially controlled God's gospel and God's reign—brokering, marketing, managing, and enforcing God's salvation and justice. That wild, free, and quite unmanageable form of speech that rocked the temples and palaces and marketplaces of the ancient world has been too long domesticated and subordinated to other supposedly more "relevant" forms of speech.

The continuing conversion of the church requires us to enter, again and again, the world of biblical speech into order to allow God's Word to rearrange our lives according to its particular way of understanding the world.

What might this work of conversion through the power of the biblical text look like in a local congregation? My job is to risk an answer to this daunting question. I'll do so two ways. First, I will offer a witness to our adventure into this work as a particular Presbyterian congregation. And second,

I will offer that witness by entering the Bible itself—that is, trying to allow a text to interpret our experience and evoke the converting practices we are trying to put into play with various levels of success and failure. Frankly, I'm not always sure of my steps, but I know the path I seek: a way of listening to the Bible that is more playful and free, hoping to practice a posture of greater humility before the text. I'm not so much interested in bridging the distance between the ancient and current worlds. I think that was a mistake of modernity. And I'm certainly not (at least consciously) interested in making the Bible more credible to our ears. Rather, I hope to find a way to let the text have its way with

us, interrogating and converting us—that is, making us more credible to the peculiar way the Bible understands the world. The biblical text that shapes the way I understand

the journey of our conversion as a congregation is the story of conversion narrated in John 2—the ministry of Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

When wine gives out

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus changed water into wine. It was a sign of that greatest of transitions, that grand hinge in world history, which turns on the revelation of God's self in Jesus Christ. People awakened that morning and went about the business of the day living within the old order of things, but by day's end they were living within the new thing God has begun in the world in and through Jesus Christ.

Naturally there is wine at a wedding, for wine gladdens the human heart (Psalm 104.15). But of course, as happens on this side of heaven, all good things come to an end: "the wine gave out" (v. 3). At some point in life we come to the limit of human ability. Our resources dry up, people die, fail, betray us . . . so do our dreams. The congregation I serve knows this all too well. A relatively young congregation, birthed just over thirty years ago as a mission to Fresno State University, we have struggled to live out that calling. Those who started the congregation were idealistic pio-

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neers from First Presbyterian Church downtown, but who, though quite aware of the massive cultural shifts taking place in America in the 60's and 70's, did church essentially the same way they and previous generations had done church for centuries. We have never found a way to reach all but a small trickle of already Christian students at Fresno State, and have struggled to hang on to our relevance among the dwindling percentage of churched Presbyterians in one of the fastest growing communities in California. Despite all the apparent optimism of a congregation hoping their relatively new pastor will lead them to the heights they've always dreamed about, I know the day will come when their misplaced hopes will run dry, worry will set in, blaming, and of course as is the custom with Presbyterians the most anxiously energetic among us will push us for committees and task forces to initiate a new day in salvation history—the strategic planning process! One day we will know the truth: we're out of wine. The

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party, as we've known it, is over.

In the crisis at Cana, Jesus' mother, like all of us when we find ourselves or our world in trouble, begs him to act. When the crisis comes, our church too, I expect, will pray. We'll pray for more volunteers, more evangelistic sermons like when Dr. Sanders was here, more people to participate in Walk to Emmaus. We'll pray desperately and specifically.

But Jesus refuses to be prodded to act by an appeal to human need, no matter how desperate. Jesus is unafraid to leave the church in a liminal moment. He shows no anxiety as he places us in a mysterious, risky, creative, transformational moment in which we are free from the past and unsure of the future. Frankly, this moment frightens me because it frightens the people I serve. We long to go back to the glory days. And our prayers and programs for church renewal are essentially that—a longing to return to the past, a past that worked, a past that was predictable. But it's a past that is no more. Intuitively, I think that most of us know that, but we haven't been helped to grieve its death, and we have little faith that new life can arise from its ashes.

Living with uncertainty

“When wine runs out” people leave the party, and

that's not necessarily a good thing when it comes to church. Trouble is, that's exactly what's happening to the Presbyterian Church (USA) in general, and our congregation wonders just how long we can buck the trend.

This creates great pressure for our members, our leaders, and our pastoral staff. In order to maintain our place at the center, to be appealing, relevant, and useful to society, to guard our people from the pain of such a displacement, and from the angst of the liminal moment, I, for one, am tempted to embrace the roles assigned to me by anxious people. They would have me become a psychologist, a sociologist, a corporate top-gun; a clinician, a chaplain, a coach, a marketer. They want my sermons to become a way to provide group therapy, sell a few handy principles for better living, cast institutional vision, or articulate a strategy for success. Few voices challenge me to study the Bible more, read the Church Fathers and Mothers, pray, wrestle demons, care for souls, speak or enact the Word of God at the unjust and idolatrous shiny new RiverPark Mall, a migrant workers' camp, city hall, or the free speech area at Fresno State.

It is in Jesus' mother that I hear a different voice urging me to embrace courageously my true vocation. “Do whatever he tells you,” she tells the servants (v. 5). It's just what I and other pastors need from “mother.” She reminds us that we, the church, can't presume to know what Jesus is doing to us or where Jesus is taking us; we are only servants, who must hang our very existence on our obedience to “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Like it or not, we servants have no warrant to speak anything other than what we are authorized to speak. We are, therefore, a community that is unapologetically “narrative”—that is, we are a textual, scripted, *Scriptured*-people, deriving our shape from “what he tells [us].”

It's strange that in a nation rocked by the challenge September 11th brings to all our American presumptions to certainty and security, we pastors apparently have so little to offer that differs from the words that fill the media. Our role has been reduced to tacking Bible verses onto the larger, more relevant narratives of nationalism and consumerism; we feel compelled to do whatever it takes to keep the party going. And by the look of things, the flag-draped sanctuaries and patriotic liturgies of my colleagues are packing people in again. The mother of Jesus binds me vocationally to a different narrative. She tells me that the only way to sponsor a true break with the withering reductionisms plaguing the church is for the servants to stop trying to keep the party going. People, we're out of wine for God's sake! And there's nothing more important now than being genuinely shaped by the Bible.

The perplexity that is so terribly evident in people whose happy North American certainties and securities lie in shattered ruins, steers me to the words of another “mother” of the church: “As ministers we ought to speak of God,” said Karl Barth. “We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the

glory” (*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 186).

The narrative before us, the conversion of water into wine, teaches that holding ourselves to this daring yet humiliating version of the pastoral vocation is the hinge upon which conversion to the broader missional vocation of the church turns.

The domestication of the holy

Central to the unfolding drama of God’s unveiling glory at Cana of Galilee stand six stone jars (John 2.6). They serve as a visible reminder of the great ritual apparatus designed by God and maintained by the Temple and its priests. The whole system was intended to consecrate Israel as a holy nation in the midst of a sinful and idolatrous world, and to serve as an engine for God’s saving mission. But over time, God’s promises suffered reductionism and reification. Both Torah and Temple then, like the church’s Bible and worship now, were too often domesticated to prevailing political and religious ideologies. This is an inevitable consequence of institutionalism.

In 1969, University Presbyterian Church began as a

formulate a new sense of direction and vision. And they used that work to call a new pastor to lead them. What I found when I came and began serving alongside them, were bright, energetic people with tremendous resources, who rightly recognized that something had died among them. They rightly recognized that their sense of mission had been reduced and domesticated to the maintenance of a religious organization, and for answers they looked where any good American would look—to various technologies, programs, and tactics. But for me, and for them too—though they wouldn’t have put it this way—what was missing was the presence of the Bible as that wild, free, winnowing, and liberating Word of God, the text that continually re-evangelizes us, converting us to the mission of God. The engine for our early days of mission in this particular place had become little more than a holy anchor, itself domesticated, tamed, and harnessed for petty uses. It’s not that our people didn’t believe in the centrality of the Bible for their life together. It’s just that, like those six stone water jars in Cana, it had lost its missional power among us.

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handful of men and women intoxicated with a profound sense of mission to northeast Fresno. With land on the edge of the city, tucked amid the vineyards and orchards of California’s Great Valley, and adjacent to the new Campus of California State University, Fresno, we’d pressed ourselves to the edge of mission. These pioneers were not content to stay in the city and wait for college students, faculty, and others moving north to come to us; they went to them. They met and prayed in a field. They worshipped with the Methodists until they could break ground and erect a small multipurpose room that would serve as sanctuary, classroom, and fellowship hall. And they read the Bible for inspiration and guidance for their life together, and to fill their minds with material that would keep them true to their sense of what we would call today, their “missional vocation.”

It was a bold experiment and within thirty years the congregation had established itself with one of the finest music programs in the city and possessed an enviable church campus on prime acreage in one of the fastest growing population centers in California. But when I arrived several years ago, the congregation still had no viable mission or ministry to the university. They’d put good money and time into demographic studies that helped them

Re-filling old stone jars

I’m intrigued by the way Jesus encounters this kind of domestication of the holy, the way he approaches old stone jars. He doesn’t shatter them, and so dispose of Moses. Instead, he re-appropriates them. He re-fills them and transforms the contents. The water in the old stone jars becomes a sign of God’s free grace that will not be domesticated, limited, or controlled. It becomes God’s new wine.

Our relatively young congregation had come to the point where the wine was gone. And we were desperately seeking ways to keep the party going. Privileged with a gifted associate pastor bored with current modes of trying to keep the church relevant, an intern from the nearby Mennonite seminary who’s been reading missional church stuff for several years, and several key elders who have been willing to reconsider the power of the Bible to convert us to our broader missional vision, we have learned a great deal about what it may take to let Jesus re-fill the old stone jars of our domesticated Bibles.

There are a number of things we’ve done that have created an intentionality about our commitment to living our lives as a Scripture-shaped community—one that “listens to Jesus.” For example, we’ve gone to using the Lectionary for our preaching (a move that’s taken a good deal of explaining

to a free-wheeling evangelical California congregation; for those resisters, the recent Lectionary readings at this time of national crisis have spoken with such immediacy, that they are now true believers). We have also worked to give Scripture a genuine place in committee meetings, and to give a more intentional shape to our worship liturgies in both our traditional and postmodern services. And we've tried to form one new community of young adults, which we called the *NewSong Community*, as an intentional experiment which tested the effect of the Bible on missional formation or what we are calling today, "conversion."

Our experience with the *NewSong Community*, made up of primarily churched, young adults who are conditioned by postmodernity, has taught us at least five ways the church resists Jesus' reappropriation of old stone jars. Our encoun-

with the great Reformation doctrines for me as a Reformed theologian to suggest that "Scripture Alone" isn't sufficient for the conversion of the church today. But in our day, it is a break necessary for the conversion of the church. We have learned, for example, that believers can't understand what the Bible means by "losing one's life" by simply reading the text. But when they experience giving up upper-middle-class privilege and security, even for a few hours, and serve the poor and marginalized, their embodiment of the text interprets the text.

We have also learned that subverting the way our people relate to time makes a difference. In addition to reappropriating the Lectionary for preaching and teaching, we are reappropriating the practice of the Christian year. In this way we live with the Bible over the seasons of the year.

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ter with these forms of resistance has also led us to corresponding practices, which we hope will help guide our people along the journey of conversion.

1. *Because the Bible is terribly captive, we practice reading the Bible "on the street."* In the process of working among churched postmodern young adults, we learned that simply reading the Bible together is not enough to engender new ecclesial forms and/or new acts of discipleship. The Bible is so terribly reduced, tamed, and domesticated by our cultural history and the church's captivity to that history. What we discovered is that a pastoral leader must create "separate spaces" (cf. MacIntyre's vision of a new monasticism in *After Virtue*; Lindbeck's "social enclaves" in *The Nature of Doctrine*) where we can instruct and form each other in particularly Christian beliefs and practices.

We learned first-hand that intentional, missional formation requires a concentration and discipline which can challenge the prevailing forms of Christian identity and practice so deeply shaped by the church's experience in the West. Our churches have become so acculturated, accommodated, and reduced that they are no longer real incubators of evangelical life. The best way we found to open these believers up to fuller readings of Scripture was to take them outside the confines of the church campus in which they had learned the faith. Reading the Bible together at a local mall, for example, enabled them to read with new eyes, and begin to imagine daring new acts of discipleship.

2. *Because Scripture alone is not enough, we are cultivating new (for us) Christian practices.* It will sound like a break

For several years people resisted and resented me telling them not to put away their Christmas trees on the day after Christmas. "Putting the tree at the curb or back into its box on December 26th may be fine for your neighbor who follows the commercial calendar, but it's not fine for you," I tell them. "You are a Christian, and for you Christmas has only just begun." Over the years, we've begun to notice ways we're settling into the gospel's rhythm, defining ourselves by an alternative narrative than the ones commonly handed to us. This past year, for example, several elders helped shift our approach to stewardship to more faithfully reflect the Christian year. No longer a fall, fundraising campaign, Christian seasons like Advent and Epiphany, Lent and Pentecost offer to us whole new ways of exploring the implications of stewardship for our lives as disciples. Moreover, not only has our teaching of stewardship begun to take its shape from the biblical narrative, but so have our planning, implementation, and evaluation of the church budget.

3. *Because genuine community is immensely difficult, we have a new appreciation for patience and the power of time.* We continue to learn, in many different ways, that the move to more intentional forms of Christian community is a frightening move for most people. We are used to living compartmentalized lives. Frankly, this is where the *NewSong Community* experiment failed. At a spring retreat at a coastal beach house, this small, emerging community began to see that what they were reading in Scripture and what they had begun to live out together was going to demand a more risky step into communal life than they had

ever experienced before. The new wine before them, they wanted the old. Discipleship had never confronted them with this kind of public change; the only changes demanded of them had been characteristically Western—that is, they were private and personal. The challenge too steep, the new wine too unfamiliar, the community folded. I think they were disappointed with their inability to take the next step and frightened about what would be required of them if they continued to meet. I was disappointed with my inability to coach them through this important moment. But that was last spring. Interestingly, within the last month, several members of that community have begun meeting again, this time not on the church campus, but in a dorm lounge at the university.

What we thought was a failure, may not be such a failure after all. Just like the unnamed servants in our text, these servants may be taking their own orders from Jesus and beginning to refill the old stone jars themselves.

4. Because the mind is contested space, we seed the imagination with the biblical material. Talk about the imagination is not talk about daydreaming. Rather it is

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about the way the human mind necessarily creates ways of interpreting the world around it. All ways of knowing are mediated by the imagination, and paradigm-building is part and parcel of this mediation process. Paradigms function as filtering lenses (compare Calvin's notion of "the spectacles") through which we make sense of, imagine, and construe the world. The awareness that the imagination works this way does not infer that what is imagined is necessarily true. Rather, the paradigm-building function of the imagination can and does serve as the organ of fiction and deceit. This is not only important for matters of theology but also for matters of ethics. One need only think of the way Hitler, Pol Pot, and Milosevic manipulated ideological lore to feed the genocidal imaginations of killers.

We have learned that missional conversion will necessitate the practice of vigilant attentiveness to the power of the imagination. For example, during the first weeks after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we were deeply aware of the many "texts" funding the imaginations of our congregation. I was alarmed by the way nationalistic texts absorbed the imagina-

tions of our people into the particular way they interpreted the situation. Our pastoral staff has literally clung to the Lectionary readings, distrusting even our own abilities to choose the texts for public exposition. What I think we modeled for our people was a way of living under the biblical text, of taking its peculiar way of understanding the world as more important than our own knee-jerk reactions. The church heard Jeremiah describing scenes of buildings collapsing, heart-breaking grief. We watched Jesus sit down with tax collectors and sinners, while the Pharisees stood at a distance and nursed their hatred. And we found that the Bible gathered our stories into a larger narrative of God's involvement in the world, for the sake of the world rather than our narrow nationalistic impulses.

We have chosen the discipline of voicing God's counter-world that lives in and through no other text than the Bible. "The philosophers," wrote Marx in 1845, "have only interpreted the world, in various ways—the point, however, is to change it." We believe and go about our work under the assumption that "the most powerful way to change the world is precisely by interpreting it" (Garrett Green, *Imaging God*, 152).

5. Because current pastoral support structures are inadequate, we are forming new ad hoc "schools." Lastly, we have learned that missional leadership intent on forming missional communities at this time of cultural upheaval cannot be sustained in isolation, and that the current models for pastoral training (the seminary) and pastoral support (our staff relationships, ministerial associations, and presbyteries) are inadequate. My intensive work with the seminary intern who was my partner in the *NewSong* experiment, and my weekly Monday morning Starbucks meetings with our associate pastor have proven that the experience of collegial leadership—less focused on programmatic details, techniques and methodologies, and more on what it means to attend to the dynamics of who we are as leaders and what societal shifts may mean for ourselves and the people we seek to serve—is what we need in order to sustain a re-visioned pastoral vocation. I am now seeking ways to work with others in our area in order to construct an "enclave" of pastoral leaders who can help socialize its members into particularly missional outlooks and practices.

Who really knows

Leading the church through this period of transition and upheaval cannot be managed in conventional ways. At this point in history, we can't avoid the difficult and humiliating task of negotiating the strange and often dark paths through this liminal moment by trying to drag the church back into ecclesial forms representative of life within Christendom.

The Cana story instructs us here too. Those hosting the party thought they were in charge—hosts can be denominational executives, the General Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries, and Sessions (for those of us who are Presby-

terian); hosts can be power players in the congregation; hosts can be pastors; hosts can be dominant cultures. The point is, regardless of who the hosts are, they may be so busy with their “hosting” of the party and with their anxiety over its premature ending, and so angry over the loss of their privileged position of power, that they miss a holy transaction.

This is good news for preachers like me. It lashed me to the mast, and stops my ears against the siren voices. I’m told that hosts—the big important people with much to do—don’t know where the new wine comes from (v. 9). I’m told that all this grace is transacted quietly, out-of-the-way, hidden from the main attraction of the day. Neither hosts nor guests are privy to the work of Jesus and his servants—those little preachers like me who carry the Word week in and week out.

There is gospel here. It hints at the Incarnation itself: an infant, born to an unwed mother, far from the busyness and self-importance of the hosts, the Palace politicians and Temple priests. I like to think that the Christians who early listened to this story liked it very much. And I think the Johannine writer wanted them to like it. Hearing it, they recognized that the wonderful thing taking place in and through Jesus Christ happened with hardly a ripple in the vast ocean of the Roman Empire. *Water* was becoming *wine*, God was on the move, a new day was dawning, God’s converting power was making old things new, and neither the High Priest in Jerusalem nor Caesar in Rome were in on it.

But *they* were, these little Christians, most of them poor and insignificant. The little preachers “who had drawn the water *knew*,” . . . *they* knew!

I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that the conversion of the church in our day will be transacted in much the same way: little, insignificant, hidden servants who weekly devote themselves to the sometimes thankless task of going to the well of Scripture, drawing out its new wine, and serving it to the hosts. Maybe we can’t do without the architects and engineers and scientists who can show us how to build great programs and maximize our resources for church growth. But this text emboldens me in the face of all the intimidating technology and its glittering promises that I find so alluring. I must bind myself to the vision of the text. Being out of wine isn’t a production problem that needs better management. It’s a crisis that opens us up to our gaping reductionisms and our over-reliance on lesser things. The gospel is that old, strange texts, too long reduced by the Powers, are being freshly reappropriated by Jesus and his little servants.

Yes, the party’s over. Things can never be what they once were. But I think that among the people of God who meet at the corner of Cedar and Roberts, there are signs that we’re starting a party of a whole new order. The taste of new wine is calling us to brave new acts of discipleship. This may be the first sign we’ve had in a long time that Jesus is on the move again. ■

Response to Chris Erdman

Kent Miller
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana

Upon a first reading of Chris’s paper there were some techniques that seemed to stand out. If you look at his points 1 through 5, I think you could read those as techniques that Chris has had some success with in the context of his local fellowship, and you might try to replicate them in your own fellowships.

I don’t think that’s how he wants you to read them. He is not presenting formulas to us. He is presenting his own practices as suggestions that will need to be tested, and held with an open hand rather than a clenched fist. I don’t want to focus on formulas or techniques in the context of what he is

presenting. That’s not the most fundamental message that he has for us or that the Lord has for us today.

I think there is a very profound message that comes through in the transcript and in what Chris has said to us. The way in which I would state that insight is the inadequacy of the church for the task at hand. He talked about the shift of the environment in which the church operates. I think that this is not simply a passage that we are moving through from one state of equilibrium to another state of equilibrium. Such thinking may be just as fallacious as thinking that we can go back to the old equilibrium. We are in a context that is not about moving

to the next equilibrium. It is about living in what Peter Vaill has called ‘permanent white water’—the context of ongoing turbulence (*Managing as a Performing Art: New Ideas for a World of Chaotic Change*, Jossey-Bass, 1989).

There is uncertainty, but when I say uncertainty I don’t mean to abandon the notion of God’s sovereignty. I want to embrace God’s sovereignty and providence while recognizing that I am finite and do not see the fullness of that. My perception of my current circumstances is clouded by uncertainty. The mental models I have are found wanting. The most maddening part of all this is that

when I look at the church and the world, I see that God's patterns of blessing really seem to defy my theology and my theories. I get angry with God and say, "How dare You defy my theological categories?"

So the question I want to bring to you—and this is really a point of discussion because I want to learn from you—is, What would it mean for the church to embrace uncertainty and its own inadequacy? I think Chris and I are bringing a similar message in this regard. What would it mean for the church to embrace uncertainty and inadequacy not as a temporary phenomenon but as part of the 'permanent white water' in which we find ourselves?

I have four observations. In our uncertainty and inadequacy.....

1. *We recognize that brokenness and weakness are the pattern of the kingdom of God.* In the midst of our uncertainty and inadequacy, we can see the possibility of meekness as demonstrated by Christ Himself.

2. *We recognize the necessity of revelation and that we have to encounter Scripture as authoritative.* We hold our own understandings of Scripture as tentative. We enter into diversity recognizing that it's in the context of diversity that our understandings expand and we can become self-critical. This is true not only for the diversity within the church but also holds as we bring the Word to nonbelievers and encounter the Scripture together with them. For me, reading Scripture with nonbelievers has been one of the most meaningful contexts in which to look at the life of Christ in recent years.

The greater the uncertainty we are experiencing the higher is the level of abstraction we need for guidance in our walk. Because of uncertainty, we may come to some of the major themes of Scripture and grasp them in ways that we previously did not. Precisely because we are dealing with such a heightened level of uncertainty, we need themes like God's love, grace,

and holiness. We need those kinds of big-picture themes for assurance.

3. *We recognize the necessity of community.* Under modernity community was largely optional. Knowing was impersonal. In the context of postmodernity, we have given up that optimistic view of our own knowledge and must be open to the self-criticism that I mentioned earlier. Community is a context for overcoming the limitations of my own perspective.

Only under uncertainty do we need open-ended commitments to one another. The reasons we have organizations—not only the church, but organizations in general—is because of uncertainty. It is only in the context of uncertainty that our relationships move beyond being strictly transactional. If we fully understood the world and could anticipate all possible contingencies, our relationships would be simply transactional. We wouldn't truly have to enter into open-ended commitments to one another. Under uncertainty, we move beyond transactional relationships to actual community.

4. *We recognize that much of the learning that we have is tacit and personal.* To the extent that it is tacit and personal, the only conveyance of

that knowledge is through the process of discipleship. It cannot be codified. We cannot transact in this knowledge. It has to be modeled. It has to be lived together. This calls us back to the model that Christ has shared with us.

My thesis then is this: by embracing uncertainty and our own inadequacy for the missional calling God has given to us, we discover His purpose in our current predicament.

I thought it would be inappropriate if we did anything except finish with Scripture, when that is in fact what we are focusing on during this session. Chris brought us to a text that talks about stone jars. I'd like to bring us to a text that also speaks of containers—earthen containers that also are for God's glory. Let me read this text to you from 2 Corinthians 4: 6-7. I would like for us, if possible, through the work of God's Spirit this morning, to hear this text in a new way.

"For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." ■

WORTH NOTING...

" In Chris Erdman's article, he mentions the subversive potential of a community that lives by a different calendar—the liturgical year. His friend Ed Searcy pastors a congregation in Vancouver, BC which has produced for its own use a calendar that includes on each page a liturgical season rather than a "month." A limited number of these calendars are being made available for \$14 plus 7% sales tax Canada or \$10 plus 7% sales tax U.S. For further information check out the website at www.thechristiancalendar.com.

*" Eerdmans Publishing has just released a book entitled *A Scandalous Prophet: The Way of Mission After Newbigin*. Edited by Thomas F. Foust, George R. Hunsberger, J. Andrew Kirk and Werner Ustorf, it contains essays presented at a colloquium held at Selby Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England, shortly after Newbigin's death. The book contains a comprehensive bibliography of Newbigin's works and responses to them, compiled by Thomas F. Foust and George R. Hunsberger.*

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Ministry For All !

Pete Hammond

Who is a "minister"?

Pastors are.

They practice the *ministry of identity*. Their work is among believers.

They are called to help us learn about our potential in Christ.

I need this ministry to prevent *amnesia*—

that disease of the mind that causes me to forget who I am as a Christian.

But I am a minister too!

I practice the *ministry of vitality*. My work is in the world.

I am called to be salt, light and leaven in a sick and broken society, Monday thru Saturday.

My ministry protects the world from *anemia* —

that disease of the blood that slowly robs the system of its health.

All Christians are in the *ministry!*