

HEART TO HEART

November, 1994

A Pastoral Letter from Richard J. Foster



Dear Friends,

We hear shrill voices from all quarters warning of crises of all sorts. The crisis in world hunger! Crisis in the political arena! Environmental crisis! Financial crisis! Urban crisis! Crisis in the family! And I am sure there is much to be said in all these areas, and more. But we so often fail to see the dire predicament—crisis if you will—we are facing in the area of Christian spirituality.

To begin with, we have a whole proliferation of spiritualities not rooted in Jesus Christ which have sprung up out of the desperate hunger for something—anything—that offers even the slimmest hope of leading people into spiritual reality. Some are so silly that you have to shake your head in astonishment. Many draw from old animistic religions which rightly call us to a respect for creation, but then move into an unqualified reverence of creation, and finally into an unholy deification of creation.

These spiritualities are a smorgasbord of beliefs—some foolish, some more sophisticated—however they hold a common pantheistic base which begins by saying "God is in creation" and moves to affirming "Creation is God" and finally ends up with the idolatry of "I am God." In virtually all cases these spiritualities lack the great biblical confession of the transcendence of God, that is, God is above and beyond us in every way. The Bible always holds in creative tension God's utter transcendence (God is wholly other than us) with his wonderful immanence (God has freely chosen to draw near to us, to commune with us, to teach us, and to shepherd us).

The reasons for this explosion of spiritualities is varied and complex, but clearly a contributing factor has been Christianity's failure in the twentieth century to show forth a profound spirituality that is deeply rooted in the resurrected Christ and which offers a living and vital union with him in the midst of everyday life. There are obvious exceptions to this—I think of the American writer A. W. Tozer, the Chinese preacher Watchman Nee, and the living example of Mother Teresa of Calcutta—but these sterling examples only underscore our overall poverty of spirit. The tragedy—and the real crisis—is that our churches today have been taken over by what Dr. Dallas Willard calls a "Theology of Sin Management." Let me give you just two examples of how this has worked its way out in our day.

REJECTING CHRIST AS TEACHER

At the turn of the century there was a huge debate among Christians called the Modernist/Fundamentalist controversy. There were many dimensions to this struggle, but the thing I want to focus upon here is how both groups ended up rejecting Christ as our pattern for living. The modernists said, "We reject Jesus as the Son of God but affirm him as a great moral teacher." Now, the truth of the matter is that they meant "teacher" only in the sense of someone who taught ethical things about loving enemies, etc., but not in the sense of someone you should pattern your life after with appropriate disciplines of prayer, solitude, fasting, and more that conform to the overall way Christ himself lived when here in the flesh.

Fundamentalists reacted strongly to the liberal notion of Jesus as merely a "great moral teacher" and distanced themselves from any idea of Jesus as Teacher. Therefore, when they stressed orthodox theological formulation (i.e. the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, etc.) they failed to connect this with a way of life that imitates Jesus as our Teacher for living. The result was an almost total loss of the ancient practice of the imitatio Christus, the imitation of Christ. (There is a reason, you see, why Thomas à Kempis' book *The*

Imitation of Christ has been the unchallenged devotional masterpiece for Christians in every century since its publication except our own.)

We still suffer from this rejection of Jesus as Teacher by both the left and the right. It is a crisis in our spirituality. Without a way of living patterned in its general outlines upon the way Jesus himself lived when among us in human form with disciplines appropriate for that life, we simply will not be able to introduce people into the abundant life Jesus welcomes us to experience.

RETHINKING EVANGELISM

A second major area contributing to our crisis in spirituality has to do with the way evangelism developed in our century. Without wanting in any way to depreciate the sacrificial efforts of myriads of evangelists and all the good that has come from those efforts, we must say that evangelism in our day has focused almost entirely upon how to get people into heaven when they die. As a result evangelism in our day has reached the point of diminishing returns for thoughtful people have to ask, "What am I to be converted to?" And even in the more recent controversy over "Lordship Salvation" (whether you "accept Jesus as your Savior" or whether you must "accept Jesus as your Savior and Lord"), the issue has remained one of discovering what things are essential for getting into heaven when we die.¹

To be sure, getting into heaven is an issue of great significance. But it is never the center of Jesus' call to discipleship, and is, in fact, cared for when we accept his call to be his disciple. The good news of the gospel is, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"; that is, "accept Jesus as your life," be yoked together with him, walking "in his steps," and imitating him who is "the way, the truth, and the life."

This "eternal life" which is to "know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" concerns itself less with getting us into heaven than it does with getting heaven into us. And so we enter into this ongoing life, this life "born from above," this life given by the grace of God which is unearned and unearnable, this life in which we are saved by his death and live by his resurrection, this life that progresses from faith to faith—from the faith we have to the faith we are about to receive, this life of growth in grace in which we are increasingly formed and conformed into the image of Christ. When this eternal life takes hold; when righteous, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit pervades everything; when out of our innermost being flows love and joy and peace and all the fruit of the Spirit; we find that death becomes merely a minor transition from this life to greater Life.

There are two great theological words that capture what I have been describing: justification (dealing with our acceptance and right standing with God) and sanctification (dealing with our growth in grace into the likeness of Christ). The point I want to make here is that justification and sanctification are like two sides to the same door: you enter into the experience of both as you go through the door. It isn't like we can get one without the other. To say this does not mean that we are perfect the moment we are yoked to Christ in discipleship. Far from it. But it does mean that we sign up for the whole deal when we commit ourselves to Christ.

When Jesus gave us his "Great Commission" manifesto he was not referring to evangelism as we narrowly define it. He called us to make "disciples of all peoples" and to "teach them to observe all things whatsoever I command you." The best way I have of describing the idea of "disciple" is by our English word "apprentice." For a time I was an apprentice electrician and my job was to go with the journeyman and listen to what the journeyman said and observe what the journeyman did and try to do it the way the journeyman did it. So it is in our life with Christ. We are yoked to him, listening, watching, and doing.

In this way we will develop what Thomas à Kempis calls "a familiar friendship with Jesus." And in so doing we will have a vital spirituality that will welcome people into "the depths of Jesus Christ." This is what people hunger for today. This is what will revitalize Christians and bring in the revival for which we all long. This is what will overcome the superficial spiritualities of our day that are groping for reality. May God allow us to enter so deeply into this way of walking and living that we will be like a city set on a hill radiating his life and light.

NOW, TO MORE MUNDANE MATTERS

So much has occurred since I last wrote. In the spring I had an exhausting and marvelous trip to England, Sweden, and Germany. In each place I was touched by the receptiveness of so many. I was particularly impressed with the British Christian scene and their eager embrace of the RENOVARÉ vision. It seemed like people understood almost instinctively what I was talking about. Perhaps it has to do with deeper historical roots. At any rate we are actively discussing a British RENOVARÉ that would be fully British in leadership and expression. To accomplish this will take a huge outlay of time and energy, especially initially, so prayers for wisdom are in order.

This summer we made the move to Denver, Colorado—families and office—and feel positioned well for ministry here in the U.S. and beyond, even with the new airport still nonfunctional! Just in case you have yet to write down our new office address: 8 Inverness Drive East, Suite 102, Englewood, CO 80112-5609.

Donn Thomas and I had delightful times leading RENOVARÉ Retreats. We were together in Colorado Springs where people were incredibly gracious as I was dealing with my brother's illness, and then Donn took over at the retreat in Kansas City so I could care for family matters in the wake of my brother's death.

We have had some wonderful RENOVARÉ Regional Conferences this fall. In Portland, Oregon, I was encouraged by the vigorous efforts of schools like Western Seminary, Warner Pacific College, and Western Evangelical Seminary to incorporate serious Spiritual Formation into their curriculum. In Hammond, Indiana, I was touched by a wonderful contingent of pastors seeking hard after God. In Edmonds, Washington, I found Methodists in large numbers really seeking the kind of life with God that was true of John Wesley and his early societies. And in Salem, Oregon, I saw a hungering for discipleship that almost took my breath away.

And, speaking of taking away one's breath, I was overcome by the power-filled worship at our recent Board of Trustees meeting following the Salem conference. As Donn Thomas led us in worship I (who seldom cry) began weeping and wept even more as Marti Ensign preached and was completely overcome as Bill Vaswig led us in the Lord's Supper. Actually we were all touched to one extent or another, weeping and laughing and enjoying God. For me something happened deep inside that I am still coming to understand.

At this meeting we approved three new team members: Gayle Withnell of Salem, Oregon (Christian Missionary Alliance), Bob Howey of Denver, Colorado (Presbyterian), and Emilie Griffin of New Orleans,

OUR FINANCIAL GUIDELINES

- We urge everyone to give first to their local church (or wherever they are being nurtured spiritually) and to the poor before ever giving to RENOVARÉ.
- An accountant oversees our financial records in accord with accepted accounting procedures and the highest professionalism.
- We will live within our means. One thing we refuse to do is overextend and overspend ourselves and then beg for God's people to bail us out. We believe that God will give us the money to do what we are being called to do. We feel it involves just as much faith to trust God for the money before a purchase as after a purchase. In fact, one way we discern God's will for the ministry of RENOVARÉ is through the financial support of his people.
- We believe in full disclosure at all times. Our financial reports are available to anyone upon request.
- We will receipt all donations.
- If we offer books, tapes, or other materials for a suggested contribution, we will receipt the amount given above the retail price of the product plus shipping and handling costs.
- When we make a purchase, we will pay the bill within thirty days. We refuse to subsidize this ministry on the backs of vendors.
- We will never sell or rent our mailing list.
- We are primarily a voluntary organization and as such we depend in large measure upon the sacrificial labors of many. If, however, we employ paid staff, they will receive equal pay for equal work.
- We will communicate our financial needs to our constituency as clearly and as truthfully as possible. We will not inflate or overstate our situation, nor create a crisis to boost income.
- We believe RENOVARÉ was initiated and continues to be sustained by God. While we are eager to follow the Divine whisper at every turn and work with all our might, it is God's business and not ours to prosper or end the work of RENOVARÉ. We rejoice either way.

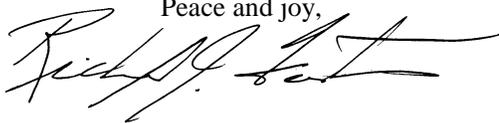
Louisiana (Roman Catholic). I am thrilled at the resources they will bring, adding to the efforts of the seven that are already in place.

We also approved the establishment of RENOVARÉ Local Conferences where an individual team member will come to a local church setting to work for renewal. Hopefully this will help groups who are not prepared to sponsor a Regional Conference as well as groups wanting follow-up experiences to the Regional Conference. Call or write for more information.

Also, we discussed a National Conference . . . and the need to develop new resources . . . and growing staff needs to meet the demands . . . and the open doors in various countries . . . and . . . and . . . and . . .

We are laboring with all our might to speak to the crisis in spirituality that we feel so keenly. To continue we need your financial support. Pray, will you, about this ministry and what it means to you. And out of an ever enlarged heart will you give generously, joyously, and sacrificially.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

P.S. Want to have a RENOVARÉ Local Conference, a RENOVARÉ Retreat, or a RENOVARÉ Regional Conference in your area? Call us at 303-792-0152 and we'll discuss it with you.

P.P.S. We try to send materials only to those who desire them, and so once a year we give opportunity for people to request that their name be removed from our mailing list. If that is your wish, feel free to check the appropriate box on the attached form and return it to us.

¹Dallas Willard explores this issue in detail in a forthcoming book on the kingdom of God.

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