

## WILL THE CYCLE BE UNBROKEN ( A Review)

This book by Dr. Douglas Foster of Abilene Christian University is sub-headed, **Churches of Christ Face the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**. Bro. Foster is a leader in efforts to revise the history of our movement. He is an active promoter of the change agenda. His book is an apology for the promoters of change. It is intended to disarm and neutralize conservatives, by convincing them they just don't understand the real world and that they themselves are the root of our troubles. Dr. Foster seeks to sanitize Postmodernism and persuade us that it is the proper way for contemporary Christians to view the world and the church. He also labors to persuade conservatives that it is wrong for them to defend their faith and to resist those who would harm the church by imposing unscriptural changes to her faith, worship and practice. He insists that "Deep respect and love for (his) religious heritage and its roots in Scripture and the Spirit of Scripture prompted the writing of this book" (p. v). But those who read it may draw a different conclusion. Early he gives us warning that "as we seriously examine ourselves, we may have to relinquish understandings that hinder us from being the people God would have us to be" (p. vi). This is his purpose for writing.

Dr. Foster builds his case on numerous faulty assumptions:

- \* That Postmodernism is a legitimate world-view.
- \* That God will bless and accept its adherents.
- \* That all will have to eventually embrace it.
- \* That when division occurs, both parties are equally at fault. Postmoderns call this "moral equivalency." Paul says that factions can and do demonstrate those who are faithful to God and approved in his sight (I Cor. 11:19).
- \* That it is wrong to stand up for those Biblical principles we have long held. Yet God tells us to do just that (Jude 3).
- \* That those who introduced and forced instruments and missionary societies a century past, were not responsible, rather those who objected were to blame for the resulting division.
- \* That the church of the Savior can be forced into the mold created by religious sociologists and historians commonly described as "the sect to institution to disintegration cycle."
- \* He operates on faulty definitions of liberalism and conservatism as found in churches of Christ (p.11-12).
- \* He assumes those of the change movement are not actually liberal and those opposing them are radical ultraconservatives.

We learn how change agents view themselves. "Revitalization comes only when 'prophetic' individuals in the group are able to move beyond old ways of thinking and acting to create a new vision. Revitalization movements succeed when they are able to overcome and adapt to resistance and persuade a significant number of people to embrace their new understandings" (A. F. Wallace, p.7-8). Thus our change agents are succeeding by his description.

Dr. Foster assures us that "Theological liberalism...is not our problem today. Most true liberals left our fellowship long ago because of the conservative stance we take on everything..." (p. 12). This may have been true prior to 1980, but it is no longer the case. Liberal change agents are now safely entrenched in our schools and churches. True, our liberals do not openly deny the supernatural aspects of the Christian faith, but we do have men who subtly question the inerrancy of the Bible and propose new ways of viewing it that in effect deny its authority in determining the faith of the church.

A telling quote is found on page 9, "Since the 1960s, however, there has been a growing alienation between those who fear that some in Churches of Christ are moving away from essential truths, and those open to new ideas about everything from Bible study to worship styles." We should add to this, new ideas about the doctrine, what is acceptable worship? how is man saved? how do we view the Bible? can women occupy the pulpit? is there actually a place called hell? etc. etc.

Foster correctly notes that we "are experiencing the same kinds of tensions now dogging groups like the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod), the Seventh Day Adventists and especially the Southern Baptists..." (p. 13). In the Lutheran and Baptist brotherhoods the conservatives took the liberals to task and wrested control of their denominations and institutions from their hands. Among us it is liberals who are taking conservatives to task and are trying to wrest control of the future of the church from their hands.

The writer tells us, "We have a rich heritage that belongs to no other group..." (p. 59). Yet he and other change agents, holding a low view of the church, constantly find imagined flaws and hold them up for display. They bash the faith and

the success of those who went before them, planting the churches and schools they now occupy. They see the church of Christ as does the world; an inferior denomination. Those who view the church of Christ as the universal church which Christ built and is savior of, the writer speaks of as a third party of which he is not part (p. 43-48).

Foster notes that a "growing number of writers, preachers and other thought-shapers have maintained that churches of Christ are experiencing an 'identity crisis.'...Old ways of thinking and doing are no longer appropriate or acceptable" (p. 53). This is a vivid portrayal of the author and his fellow promoters of change. "In the minds of some, our problems are the result of a new movement, often viewed as a conspiracy, that is seen as a conscious effort to change long-held beliefs and practices in Churches of Christ" (p. 55). "Lack of respect for Scripture is the chief accusation leveled against those seen as part of this 'new movement.'" "It is alleged that in an effort to be conformed to this world, such people are leaving clear scriptural teachings concerning matters such as the role of women in the church, the use of instrumental music in worship, the New Testament as a pattern for the church, the essential nature of immersion and opposition to denominations" (p. 55). Note that he understands clearly what the issues are and how many regard his team.

He seeks to dispel our fears assuring us that Christ's church will ever cease to exist. While this is true in the larger, general sense, it is not the case for specific areas and ages. What happened to the many flourishing churches in Asia Minor and North Africa, Palestine and Arabia? The iron fist of apostate Roman Catholicism crushed out most of them and the Muslims finished the task. Eighty-five percent of our churches were lost to digression a century ago. Such could certainly happen again...given the same circumstances. What was once the Belmont Church of Christ in Nashville is now the Belmont Church, a charismatic denominational body. Don Finto, an early change agent accomplished this transition.

Of schools and papers, he says, "There is a constant barrage of contradictory messages from the increasingly different institutions" (p. 68). This is especially true of ACU and Pepperdine and Lipscomb where we hear things that no one among us would have spoken 30 years ago. "There is no doubt in the minds of some that the Christian colleges have been a major source of what they view as apostasy" (p. 68). True! When criticized for their departures, "School officials have uniformly responded that while many externals have changed through the years, their faithfulness to the Christian ideals of the founders has not" (p. 70). Such declarations are based on their subjective view of what the founders had in mind, not what they said and did. He cites Dr. Royce Money of ACU who asserts that "every faculty member (of ACU) was deeply committed to Jesus Christ, the church and to the inspiration and authority of every word of Scripture" (p. 71). Read the books published by ACU's professors and draw your own conclusions...look at the product they are producing. To get the facts you would have to secure precise definitions of just what they mean by each of these fair sounding words.

Foster notes that "Part of the Restoration Movement...has a history of nervousness about and even hostility toward higher education" (p. 71). Perhaps he could explain why this is so. A century ago virtually all our schools embraced the digression and left the old paths. We look at what is happening now and see many of our schools reflecting the same inclination, especially ACU. He acknowledges that "Sociological data indicates that the more educated populations in American religion are the least conservative" (p. 71). Well said! He continues, "If any segment of the evangelical community has the opportunity to gain understanding of the present religious conflicts and to contribute to their resolution, it should be ...the social science faculties of the nation's evangelical colleges" (Robt. Wuthnow p. 72). "We must...encourage and support our godly, spiritual, committed scholars to grapple head-on with the difficult questions being posed in real-life situations. The questions are not simple, they will not go away, and they cannot be ignored. Our Christian schools and Christian scholars can and must be part of the solution" (pp. 72-73). He acts as though the church cannot exist without Christian university scholars. What did she do before they came into existence? If they all disappeared tomorrow, the church would survive...perhaps with fewer problems.

Schools like ACU wield tremendous power. Gospel papers have declined in influence. Widely traveled evangelists have largely disappeared. Few schools are now headed by preachers. Fewer and fewer of their teachers are serious gospel preachers who interact with congregations and are involved in building them up. They are professional scholars (mainly with denominational training and faith) and brotherhood critics. Peter Berger says, that intellectuals "are capable of the most mindless fanaticism" (p. 72). He cites William Banowsky, "the Abilene Christian Lectureship, then the largest of our gatherings, was the chief vehicle for the communication of ideas in Churches of Christ" (p. 73). The power of

the schools has eclipsed that of any congregation. Consider:

- \* Their vast accumulation of property.
- \* Large endowments.
- \* Their networks of communication with alumni and friends throughout the nation.
- \* Professional fund-raisers and mechanisms to attract funds from a large segment of the brotherhood.
- \* They are a large community of influential teachers, administrators and directors.
- \* They enjoy influential status in the community and even in local politics because of the large concentration of people on campus, employment, and economic spending power.
- \* Their large and ever increasing number of alumni.
- \* Their large student bodies.
- \* Their lectureships which draw people from throughout the country and by which their agendas are promoted.
- \* We see in ACU's leaders an ambition to speak and act on behalf of the entire brotherhood: Their active involvement in the Unity sessions with Christian Churches and Disciples of Christ, Dr. Money's symbolic apology to the Black Christians at Southwestern Christian College. Their sessions to effect reconciliation with the International Churches of Christ denomination.

In his efforts to define the currents within the brotherhood Foster provides us valuable descriptions of those who constitute our change movement. "The 'progressives' tend to be highly educated, well-read, and possess a high degree of social consciousness. Most would have supported **Mission** magazine before its demise...Many who participate in the yearly **Christian Scholars Conferences** would be include in this category...The 'pietistic' group tend to..be more open to cooperation with like-minded members of other churches, especially in benevolent works and in small group Bible studies and prayer meetings... 'Evangelicals' see themselves as part of the larger conservative-to -moderate constellation in American religion. Leaders attend interdenominational functions, such as minister's lectureships and church growth seminars. They are often more aware of trends and resources in the larger Evangelical world than they are of matters in Churches of Christ. Evangelical mega churches like Willow Creek in suburban Chicago tend to be their model...Ministers like Max Lucado and Mike Cope might be placed here"(p. 93-95).

Foster, like all liberals, tries to avoid being classed as such. They prefer to be viewed as "moderates." That leaves those who oppose them to be thought of as extremists. By comparing themselves with the most liberal element of the Protestant world, they can claim to be moderates. But they are comparing apples to oranges. They must be measured by the brotherhood of which they are part. Among Churches of Christ they are the ones on the left of the spectrum. He concedes that "Many insist that we are now facing the same kind of theological liberalism that led to division with the Christian Church a century ago. There are definite similarities...."(p. 97)

Foster rightly concedes "These tensions are the result of a fundamental shift now taking place in the world view of American society" (p. 100). He refers to Postmodernism. Rather than recognize this bankrupt view for what it is, change agents embrace it and seek to rearrange the church by its canons. Change agents are eager to abandon the basis on which they were educated for a system that is ridiculous on its very face. They seem determined to baptize this essentially pagan world view and make it their standard. The author labors to persuade his readers that Postmodernism is a healthy improvement over Modernism and the church will flourish better in it (p. 106). It "pushes people toward the realization that there must be something beyond the material and human." "The basic beliefs of the Modern world view, taken to their logical end, worked against Christianity"(p. 106). He forgets that true Christians did not take the concepts of modernism to such destructive ends. The same type of people who took modernism to an anti-Christian end are doing the same thing with Postmodernism. The logical end of Postmodernism is mysticism, emotionalism, relativism, subjectivism. He writes, "Only Christians have this message, and it is the only message that can truly satisfy the longings of 'Postmodern' people" (p. 107). But Postmoderns acknowledge no absolute truth! He tells us, "Christians in the Postmodern world must not avoid approaching the Scriptures with scholarly tools of study"(p. 121). But Postmoderns are not interested in scholarship. They prefer entertainment and subjective mystical experiences. What of those Christians without scholarly tools; the common folks of ages past and present? Can they not understand God's Word?

The author discusses instrumental music and why people in his camp are "reexamining their thinking on the matter." He redirects the discussion by making it a matter of conservative change agents viewing it from a Postmodern point of view (p. 109). "They simply have less confidence and may even be repelled by the self-satisfied, arrogant attitudes

that too often accompanied the conclusions reached with those arguments”(p. 109). “There are some who seem to think that by introducing instrumental music into worship they can improve the public’s perception of Churches of Christ as a narrow legalistic sect. They are willing to risk disruption of the body for the sake of a forced identity change”(p.109). True!

“All sides in our context are vitally interested in what an authoritative Bible says or does not say about it”(p. 109). But those who embrace postmodernism cannot acknowledge that there is an authoritative Bible by which to resolve things.

In discussing the role of women in the church he uses a smoke, shadows and mirrors approach to try to convince us that we have always had difference of opinion among us about women filling leadership roles in the church. He finds one example from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a sister Silena Holman who argued with David Lipscomb that women should fill these roles. He then lightly dismisses the role that women played in the apostasy of the Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches of that same era. To make his case that even “conservatives” disagree on the role of women, he cites, “The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and Christians for Biblical Equality,” two Protestant organizations and concludes “that the tensions most affecting our congregations are between conservatives and conservatives—not between liberals and conservatives.” Like Bill Clinton, it all depends on what he means by “liberal”(p. 110-111).

Under the Authority of Elders Foster tells us that our views were “influenced heavily by what historian A. Trachtenberg called ‘the incorporation of America.’” My understanding of the leadership role of elders is based on what I read in Acts 20, Heb. 13:17, I Pet. 5:2-3, etc. He blithely observes that “people who live in a Postmodern world, who do not see the Bible through the lenses of the Enlightenment era, are questioning older authoritarian assumptions concerning the nature of church leadership”(p. 114). A church will have leadership! If elders are stripped of their authority to lead, then other leaders will arise. In change churches it is “the senior minister” and his staff of professionals who often plan, direct and decide for the congregation. The powerless elders are rubber stamps for them, much like denominational deacons are to their pastor.

In discussing the “new hermeneutic,” Foster compares change agents with unbelieving theological liberals of the religious world. His purpose is to persuade us that our professors are no threat to our faith since they do not flatly deny the authority of the Bible, miracles, etc. But he compares apples and oranges. The term “liberal” must have a point of comparison. Granted, a conservative among Methodists is a liberal in our brotherhood. And our liberal is a conservative among the Methodists. But we are not concerned with Methodists and their theological views. Promoters of change are certainly more liberal in their views and practices than their contemporaries in mainstream churches of Christ. Foster’s project attempts to make a false teaching wolf resemble a sheep that should be welcomed in our midst! (p. 115-117).

Foster likens those who oppose his change movement with Daniel Sommer and his associates who issued their Sand Creek Declaration calling for separation in the late 1880s. This of course is pejorative. Bro. Sommer was a factious man whose hand was against every man. If we are following his steps, then we too must be factious. He also cites Ira Rice whose method most in the mainstream of the church rejected. He could have cited David Lipscomb and scores of other good men, of moderate spirit, who were forced to make the same call for separation when the progressives of their days abandoned the Biblical foundation (p. 117). He cites J. H. Garrison’s response to those who called for a separation from the liberals a century past. “What is the use of any religious body talking about Christian unity on a broad scale for the whole religious world, while it is divided on questions of Tweedledee and Tweedledum?”(p. 118). Garrison was a leading spokesman among the liberals of his day and his words and sentiments have been borrowed and used by most change agents (p. 118). He assures us that “the strongest calls for division appear to be coming from extreme traditionalists opposed to any modification of established beliefs and practices.....”(p. 119)

All change agents cite Bro. T. B. Larimore as they encourage us to sit silently while they are engaged in changing the church, capturing congregations, church buildings and schools. Bro. Larimore chose to devote himself to evangelism rather than taking a strong stand against those who were abandoning the restoration plea and corrupting the faith in his day. He did have sufficient conviction to pitch his tent with the conservative brethren of the churches of Christ rather than with the progressives of the Disciples of Christ. He was faced with questions such as, “How should we worship in order to please God? Or are we allowed to tamper with the structure of Christ’s sacred church? (p. 121). Foster concludes “To Larimore those issues were not worth dividing the body of Christ”(p. 157). This is what he wants us to conclude about the innovations of the change movement. He does not consider the possibility that Bro. Larimore was

naive about what was happening to the church of his day...just as many are naive today. Perhaps his personality was such that he could not bring himself to confront those who were leaving the ancient gospel way. It is reasonable to ask if Larimore's actions reflected a spirit of faithful discipleship? If every member of the conservative churches had responded as did he, what would have been the result? Would we even exist today? Would all have been swept into apostasy? Does Foster think such would have been the preferable course? Is that what he wants for today? He naively asserts, "if everyone had had T. B. Larimore's attitude, the problems would never have been blown up into divisive issues in the first place" (p. 158). Either he doesn't know or chooses not to mention that the progressive brethren did not have that sweet, passive spirit. They were determined to have instruments in our churches and all participating in their Societies. If our brethren had stood by passively, would all have been lost. The same is true today. He mentions that progressives of the church in Sherman Texas where Larimore visited, were meeting at separate times from the conservatives (p.152). Our change agents use their "alternative services" to get a foot hold in a conservative church. A year later the "pro-instrument faction withdrew to form what they called the First Christian Church" (p. 152). If our change folks cannot take the property, they eventually leave to be free to do as they wish.

Dr. Foster wants you to believe, "Our struggle, then in the Churches of Christ is not between liberals and conservatives; it is between Modern conservatives and Postmodern conservatives" (p. 122) "We ought not to fear the move into the Postmodern world..." (p.122). This is the real thesis of his book and it should be rejected. JHW