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BOOK REVIEWS: THOSE FOR AND AGAINST THE CHANGE AGENDA

“THE JESUS PROPOSAL” (A REVIEW)

By John Waddey, Editor

This book was co-authored by Rubel Shelly and John O. York, ministers of the Family of God at Woodmont Hills. This church had its beginning as the Ashwood Church of Christ and gradually evolved to its present denominational status. It now bears little resemblance to a "traditional" church of Christ to which Rubel Shelly was added upon his baptism and for which he ministered for the first 25 years of his career. It is entirely appropriate that they have changed the name of their congregation from Church of Christ to The Family of God. They surely don't want to be mistakenly identified with us. Dr. York is Professor of Preaching and New Testament at David Lipscomb University in Nashville, a post he could not have filled prior to 20 years ago. The reader will conclude that Dr. York is the understudy and Dr. Shelly the leading actor in this production. In our day of Biblical illiteracy, books such as this are extremely dangerous. Uninformed brethren are conditioned to trust highly educated scholars to tell them what the Bible "really" means and how they should practice their faith. Men enamored with their own wisdom and worldly attainments find it easy to deceive such folks and promote their own desires as the ways of God.

The authors open their book with a recognition of the emergence of Postmodernism and tell us that "Christians from all denominations can benefit from this cultural shift" (i.e. from Modernism to Postmodernism). Their "relational faith" they believe will flourish in a postmodern environment (p. 9-10). "The 'proposal' of The Jesus Proposal is that Christians from all denominations can benefit from this cultural shift. In the Postmodern atmosphere of the 21st century, we can experience relational unity in Christ..." (p. 9-10). The authors have embraced the new Postmodern world view and this book reflects their endeavor to reshape the faith, worship and practice of the church according to that new philosophical standard (See p. 124-125). Paul's charge to the church is, "be not conformed to the world" (Rom. 12:2).

"The goal of this book is to address only one of the many issues raised by this Modern to Postmodern paradigm-shift" (p. 20). They quote with approval Tony Jones who contrasts Modern and Postmodern world views: "rational/experiential; scientific/spiritual; unanimity/pluralistic; exclusive/relative; egocentric/altruistic; individualistic/communal; functional/creative; industrial/environmental; local/global; compartmentalized/ holistic; relevant/authentic..." (p. 49). This is an overview of the new faith of these authors and their fellow change agents. They tell us "The healthier side of Postmodernism's rejection of rigid formulas in favor of blurred lines of distinction is not difficult to see and appreciate" (p. 125). Yet God expects his spiritual leaders to help His people make proper distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong (Lev. 10:10-11). Their warm admiration for Postmodernism is illustrated throughout the book.

They clearly accept virtually all denominational bodies as truly Christian, which implies an acceptance of denominationalism as a legitimate condition acceptable to God. This then implies that the church of Christ of which they still claim membership cannot be the one true church, but is itself a mere denominational body. The rest of the book bears out these conclusions.

Of the Bible, York says, "It was never intended as a document to be individually read and interpreted...For thousands of years it could only be heard and interpreted in the context of community" (p. 114-115). This is a vast assumption on their part. For over a thousand years the Catholic priest had the Bible in his possession. He told the lay folk what he wanted them to hear and believe. There was no room for discussion, only acceptance and submission. In this the authors

repudiate the great foundational principles of the Reformation which gave the Bible to every man in his own language. Do these men do all their study and research "in community" with the entire congregation? Would they affirm that God does not wish for the individual Christian to search the Scripture on his own? They are skeptical of our "Bible only" plea: "'Scripture only' can easily be turned into bibliolatry, worship of the book itself..." (p.29). Their view is that the Bible plus their uninspired assumptions and assertions of modern philosophy is the better way to practice religion.

While harshly criticizing our Restoration forebearers, they hold up Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley and Alexander Campbell as noble examples of generosity who "generally counted other believers who disagreed with them as family members within the larger family of God" (p. 65) Of course they fail to mention Luther's vehement disagreement with Ulrich Zwingli, Calvin's violent rejection and execution of Michael Servetus and the fact that he was the "unopposed dictator of the Geneva." They do not mention the cruel war of persecution waged against the Anabaptist disciples by Luther, Calvin as well as Catholics. Then fail to mention that Alexander Campbell refused to generously accept John Thomas whose schism produced the Christadelphian church, Sydney Rigdon who took several congregations into the Mormon movement and Jessie Ferguson who embraced Spiritism. They are selective in their facts and paint a distorted picture of the historical record.

As heirs of the liberal progressives of the Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches, these and other changes agents look to Alexander Campbell's Lunenburg Letters for their proof that unimmersed members of denominational churches are accepted by God and thus must be recognized by us. Following his observations on Campbell's Lunenburg Letters, Shelly writes, "we have come full circle to the question yet again in the larger Christian culture" (p. 128). This demonstrates that they are ready to follow the same path as their Disciples predecessors of a century past. They forget that Campbell is not our authority nor are his carelessly written thoughts our scripture. He will not be our judge in eternity.

To justify their ecumenical position, Shelly says, that David Lipscomb "Preached not only for both instrumental and a cappella churches among Disciples/Churches of Christ, for Methodists and other denominations" (p. 176). This is a gross and deliberate distortion to try to trade on the good name of Bro. Lipscomb. No man fought against apostasy of the Disciples of Christ/Christian Churches or contested the errors of denominationalism more than David Lipscomb. They dishonor his name and record by implying that he did what they are doing. I too have preached in Methodist, Catholic and Christian Churches, but it was not an endorsement of their error or acceptance of them as our spiritual equals.

A CATALOG OF THEIR ERRORS

- Repentance before faith (p. 137).
- Salvation by faith-grace before baptism.
- Baptism as a public token of one's salvation by faith.
- Open membership.
- Dismissal of doctrine as of importance.
- Unscriptural worship is accepted by God if based on good intentions (Matt. 7:21).
- Instrumental music in worship.
- Corruption of the Lord's Supper.
- Acceptance of women in roles of public leadership in the church
- Sowing discord and disruption in the body of Christ
- Failure to respect the authority of Christ as expressed in his Word.
- Acceptance of and promotion of a denominational view of Christianity.
- A low view of the Church of Christ, shamefully treating her, as of no more value than a man-made denomination.

- They do great harm to the church for which Christ died by laying profane hands on her faith and practices, daring to change them and encouraging others to do the same.
- Hateful, sarcastic depictions of their brethren... thus violating the law of love.
- Ingratitude toward fellow-Christians who went before them
- They practice and promote ecumenism, i.e., Christian fellowship with those denominational bodies whose faith and practice are contrary to the expressed will of Christ.

QUOTES WORTH NOTING

- "2,000 years ago, the Word became flesh in the person of...Jesus. In our own time the Word must become flesh in the members of Christ's spiritual body, the church" (p. 19). An interesting statement, totally absent in Scripture and presumptuous indeed.
- "We believe that there was likely as much theological diversity in the first and second-century churches as there is among Christian denominations today" (p. 209). How reckless and unfounded!
- His closing words are that churches of Christ must work "in partnership and affirmation with its sister societies of believers in Christ (i.e. denominational bodies) (p. 219).
- "But denominations are not sinful per se" (p. 63). "More than that, they are surely inevitable and potentially valuable" (p. 63). Why then does he fault us for the divisions that have arisen among us?
- "If we genuinely believe the presence of the Holy Spirit makes the church 'God's temple (I Cor. 3:16-17), surely it does not stretch our faith too far to affirm that he is able to preserve, expand and adapt the church to different historical situation across time" (p. 77). This being their view they surely would have had no problem accepting the structural organization of the International (Boston) Church of Christ or the Roman Catholic Church.
- "Or is there evidence that the Holy Spirit not only honors but creates diversity in the body? Is it possible that the Spirit of God can work with denominations today very much as he did with local churches or city churches in the first century? (p. 77).
- On p. 72 Bro. Shelly envisions the one universal church composed of all denominational bodies including churches of Christ. This is not a new concept, for 200 years it has been used by denominationalists to justify their system. They use the vine and the branches argument for the same purpose. It is to be expected that denominationalists use such specious arguments to justify their unscriptural belief and practice. It is shameful that a gospel preacher of over 40 years experience would do the same.
- "We would argue that it is wrong to deny fellowship to anyone who gives evidence of seeking God in good faith through Jesus Christ..." (p. 135). Note that he embraces open membership and fellowship. Such was a plank in the platform of the liberal Disciples of Christ in 1900-1925.
- "...the Church of Christ is a Bible-believing fellowship which affirms Jesus as the Son of God who died and was raised to atone for human sins and who gives eternal life to all those who are in him" (p. 148) "...strictly from a biblical perspective, any group satisfying the standards of that first simple definition is a church that belongs to Christ no matter what name is over its door or how garbled its doctrine and/or moral life may be" (p. 149-150). This is pure ecumenism. This is the full-flower of Bro. Shelly's doctrine and his book, "I Just Want to be a Christian."
- In responding to the complaint, "If they (denominations) are doing the job right-especially if they're making more converts than we are-then we have no justification for our existence," he says, "In some settings, that is probably correct" (p. 164). Since then the Roman Catholic church is increasing faster than Woodmont Hills, so also the Latter Day Saints, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and many Charismatic churches, by his logic the Woodmont Hills church has no right to exist.
- "Another issue about which many in our culture are more concerned than baptism or the Lord's Supper is the ministry options for females in the church...everyone will have to address this issue...Christians will have to learn to live together lovingly with one another and respect a variety of views " (p. 189). "The Bible can hardly be used to argue against women ministering, using the God-given talents, speaking in the Christian assemblies, administering church programs, singing congregationally, small groups or solo, reading Scripture...testifying, teaching sub-groups

of the church's membership (whether female, male or mixed) (p. 189). After such an affirmation, what do you suppose their next step will be?

- "What if objective truth isn't so scientifically objective at all...?" "What if the goal is not to be doctrinally sound?" (p. 31). "We long to believe in the spiritual, in truth that is above reason..." (p. 32). Would you have ever expected to hear such foolish thinking from a gospel preacher of a church of Christ? Such thinking will lead to a black hole of error.

FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS

This book is filled with faulty assumptions which are common to all promoters of the change agenda:

- They assume they have found something new, when it is really only the ancient errors of denominationalism.
- They present "unity in diversity" as their new solution to the problems of division in the church. But this is the old doctrine of Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett.
- They assume that churches of Christ (other than their band) know nothing of salvation by the grace of God enunciated 40 years ago.
- They falsely assume that traditional preachers teach salvation by works of human merit?
- They falsely assume that we believe in baptismal regeneration or water salvation.
- They mistakenly assume that traditional congregations still practice racial segregation and discrimination.
- They assume that a Postmodern approach to religion is better than the ancient way of Christ.
- They assume that denominationalism is acceptable to Christ, even though it is contrary to his prayer for his church (John 17:20-21) and the teaching of his apostles (I Cor. 1:10-13).
- They assume that baptism is not essential to a sinner's salvation (Acts 22:16).
- They assume that God will wink at those who tamper with his expressed will (Rev. 22:18-19) and tolerate those who teach a different doctrine than that recorded in the New Testament (II John 9-11).
- They assume that churches founded by mortal men are of equal value with the church founded by Christ.
- They assume the prerogative of bending the facts of history to justify their errant position.
- They assume that churches of Christ will not survive in the Postmodern age unless they embrace their agenda for change.
- They assume that past and present generations of preachers in churches of Christ did not have a proper view of the Christian religion, such as the authors have attained.
- They assume that doctrine should not be a factor in deciding whom we shall fellowship (II John 9).

In fairness we must acknowledge one of the few truths found in this book, "Oneness with Christ and his body is enhanced by means of a commitment to and pursuit of doctrinal purity within the revealed will of God in Holy Scripture" (p. 93). Yet this goes contrary to their previous assertions that emphasis on doctrinal purity is the root of our problems.

The authors operate on the premise that their assertion is sufficient to establish a proposition that is God-approved. It is fair to say this book is a project of self-justification by two preachers who have abandoned New Testament Christianity and embraced a denominational kind of religion. The authors remind us of freshmen at a state college, ready to throw away everything that Mom and Dad believed and try anything new and different which promises a new thrill. They are proud of their humility, proud of their ecumenical spirit and their scholarly attainments. They are proud that they have broken lose of Biblical restraints and most of all, proud they are not like other believing conservative sinners (Luke 18:9-14).

They think they have found a precedent for changing or ignoring God's will for the faith, worship and practice of his church. Shelly cites the case from Hezekiah's day, when "a multitude of the people...had not cleaned themselves, yet they ate the passover otherwise then prescribed" (II Chron.

30:18:a). "But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, 'The good Lord pardon all who set their hearts to seek God...even though not in accordance with the sanctuary's rules of cleanness: The Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people" (II Chron. 30:18b-20) (p. 196). But this proves too much. It is the old "Situationism" of Joseph Fletcher and Harvey Cox. It means that God's will must give way to man's necessity or circumstance. An exception does not invalidate a rule. If so, no ordinance of God must be obeyed by anyone.

Whatever else may be said for this book, its message demonstrates that the authors have no love or concern for the body of believers known as churches of Christ. They are not longer faithful members of that body. Their hearts and home are now in denominationalism, whether they will openly admit it or not.

We should view them as Paul viewed Hymenaeus and Alexander, men who have made shipwreck of the faith. Like Demas they have loved the present religious world more than the ancient way of Christ. The authors are proceeding down a road that takes them farther and farther from God's appointed ways. I tell you even weeping they are enemies of Christ's beloved church (Phil 3: 18).

JHW