

WHO IS MY BROTHER? (A Review)

This is but one of many books on a wide range of subjects issued by Bro. LaGard Smith. The book is subtitled "Facing a Crisis of Identity and Fellowship." Bro. Smith was one of the first and still one of the few of our academic class who recognizes that we have a serious doctrinal apostasy among us. The thing that seemed to tilt the scales in his thinking was when numbers of young men began to question the essentiality of immersion for salvation and to fellowship as brothers in Christ those who had not been scripturally baptized. He describes the situation that has now blossomed into a major movement (the change movement) as a theological coup and a quiet revolution. Smith points out the duplicitous double-talk being offered by those who wish to stay among us but at the same time are willing and eager to fellowship those of various denominational bodies. He raises the question, "Is it because some among us are embarrassed to be part of the churches of Christ?" (p. 27). To the reviewer it seems he has found the root of their problem.

Bro. Smith approaches the subject of fellowship under five categories: Universal, Fellowship, Faith Fellowship, "In Christ" Fellowship, Conscience Fellowship and Congregational Fellowship. He offers helpful insights in each of these categories.

Among the valuable gems in the book are the following:

- a) "Enthusiastic disobedience is no more acceptable to God than unenthusiastic obedience." (p. 42).
- b) "To suggest that Jesus prayed for unity among all believers without further qualification would force us back to the clearly unacceptable conclusion that the saved and the unsaved are to be one in Christ" (p. 46).
- c) "What... has to be remembered about the early restoration leaders is that they did not have the luxury of hindsight as we do....In the process of emerging from traditional denominational think, they quite understandably had many false starts " (p. 48).
- d) "The story isn't about the need for greater harmony among saved ones in the kingdom... It's about a doctrinal departure of disastrous proportions..." (p. 50).
- e) In many Bible classes, "the diligent quest for an authoritative 'book, chapter and verse on such subjects as Christian Fellowship has been replaced by a discussion of books about the Book or, worse yet, by the latest psycho-babble on everything from marriage and parenting to dieting and co-dependency" (p. 52).
- f) "The real problem is the lack of substance in our sermons" (p. 53).
- g) "A biblically-illiterate church is a church perpetually poised on the brink of doctrinal disaster" (p. 53).
- h) He writes of "Satisfying the Church-Growth Feeding Frenzy." "Growth in the mega-churches was mostly an illusion. They weren't growing in real terms, only swelling." He depicts "the reverential pilgrimages to Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Community (Methodist) Church, the shrine of trendy church-growth thinking" (p. 56). We could add Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California with its Purpose Driven Program...blindly accepted by our promoters of change.

- i) Of the "new hermeneutics," which the agents of change have developed to be able to give some biblical credence to their doctrines and practices, he says, "If the face-value meaning of biblical passages is undermined by a liberalized theology, it doesn't take long for apostolic practice to become just so much historical baggage" (p. 58). "...the primary difference between the two hermeneutics was mirrored in the very precision with which the old was defined and the nebulous imprecision which clouded any definition of the new....The resulting Herculean struggle was between two competing standards: the old, objective; and the new, subjective"(p. 58).
- j) "We may no longer be people of the Book, but we are definitely people of the pendulum" (p. 58).
- k) One his most telling blows against the promoters of the new hermeneutic is his observation that "pro-gay theologians" and "pro-feminist theologians" resort to similar manipulations of the Biblical text to escape clear teachings that are unacceptable to them and their agenda (p. 59-62).
- l) "When pulling together means pulling away from God, a Christian must be willing to stand alone" (Margaret Troutt).
- m) He identifies the large involvement of our men in the Promise Keepers' meetings as a causative factor in the apostasy now upon us (p. 72).
- n) "From personal experience I can tell you that the extreme right and the extreme left can be equally divisive and mean-spirited"... "liberals may be more subtle in their divisiveness, but they can be no less exclusivistic and judgmental in their own sophisticated way than the hard-core, in-your face fellowship police and the radical right" (pp.152- 153).
- o) "Having decimated our own brothers through years of infighting, we have rendered ourselves unable to fight the real enemy and have left ourselves vulnerable to the world" (p. 154).
- p) "The current call for wide-open "in Christ" fellowship with all "whose faith is in the cross and whose eyes are on the Savior"—regardless of baptism—presents the most challenging threat of all to conscience fellowship" (p. 156).
- q) Of special value are his chapters on False Teachers (pp. 193-209) and his Open Letter to Max Lucado.

The author appears to be baffled and conflicted in his thinking about fellowship. He comes from an ultraconservative background among the non-cooperative churches and is now teaching in our most liberal "Christian University." At the time of writing he was worshiping with a very liberal congregation here at home and with a denominational body while living in England. His conservative upbringing asserts itself admirably, but the reality of his liberal associations is equally assertive. His book is a mixture of good insightful observations and weak, compromising, unwise thinking. He is willing to tackle hard and difficult questions but not always judicious in expressing his opinions.

The careful reader can find some useful thoughts in this book, but there is much that will be questioned and rejected.

JHW