

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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The language of heart, spirit, and hope

Heart-warming experiences of God's presence have played major parts in Christian history. Awe-inspiring religious experiences gave rise to many of our traditions. But today's mainline churches don't always help their members experience God's presence.

Much of our worship emphasizes words and concepts but not feelings. It aims at attendees' heads and fails to reach their hearts.

Experience speaks louder than doctrine

"The person with an experience is never at the mercy of the person with a doctrine," say the pentecostalists, whose name comes

from what Christians first experienced at Pentecost (Acts 2). We need to recognize the truth of this saying, even though few members of mainline churches would want to adopt the demonstrative style of worship that pentecostalists use, and few would want to give up our denominations' traditional high regard for the intellectual basis of faith.



Neither emotion nor experience alone is a reliable basis for faith, of course, and relying only on one's own personal experience or the experience of



"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

—Luke 24:32

"I went very unwillingly that evening to a Society in Aldersgate Street ... I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ,



Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that [Christ] had

taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

—John Wesley,
founder of Methodism

Longing for love

"At dusk one Saturday," reports a recent article in *The Dallas Morning News* (June 15), "devotees of a Hindu holy woman slip off their shoes and enter a North Dallas home, fragrant with incense and flickering with candles. Under a swath of blue brocade, the fireplace is converted to an altar with fruit, flowers, and photographs of [the] holy woman. ... 'She's the most Christ-like person I know,' says [one of the worshipers]. ... 'How many people do you know who come up and give you complete, unconditional love?'"



The article describes the woman's huge worldwide organization. "Many of her followers," the article tells us, are from "traditional Western religions, from Methodist to Catholic."

"There is so much longing in us . . ."

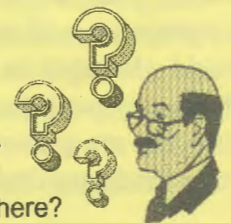


Central to this woman's message of unconditional love, the article says, is hugging and blessing. One of her followers tells why he believes the experience draws so many people. "There is so much longing in us to be loved, to be honored, to be held by someone," he explains. "And here was a woman who in her being said, 'I will show you what that is ...'"

Another follower says, "When you're around her, the intensity of your experience of God grows. ... I was weeping. I'm not a real devotional person, but I felt this thing in my heart, this crying out for God." The hugging and blessing by the holy woman touched the heart of one follower so strongly that she waited in line three times to experience it over and over. "What you find with her," this follower says, "you don't find anywhere else."

We need to pay attention

What's going on here? More important for us, what's not happening in our mainline churches, "from Methodist to Catholic," whose absence is leading many people to seek it elsewhere?



If the reactions described by this article were rare, we wouldn't need to worry about them, but they're not rare. We need to be concerned. The essence of Christianity is unconditional love, isn't it? Why do so many people feel they must leave our churches to experience it?

any one group is especially dangerous. We've seen that recently from the Branch Davidians, and throughout Christian history from other religious extremists.

Doctrinal statements, scripture, tradition, and reason furnish guidelines that we need for evaluating experience.



Enthusiasm comes from experience



Though experience can be misused, so can doctrine, reason, scripture, and tradition. And experience is vital for faith. Our ways of experiencing God's presence differ, but if we don't experience it during our congregation's worship, we'll probably give up on worship or look elsewhere. If we don't see God's action in our own lives and in the world around us, we won't find doctrines, scriptures, or other people's testimony

convincing. They may persuade us to join a church and take part in some of its activities, but they won't inspire enthusiasm or commitment. Seeing God is what makes us willing to go where God asks us to go.

"I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty ... I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'"
—Isaiah 6:1,8

Something important is missing

In his book *Fire from Heaven* (Addison Wesley, 1995), Harvard religion professor Harvey Cox suggests that mainline denominations' failure to help their members to experience God's presence and to respond openly may be a major factor in these denominations' decline.

Cox, who grew up as a Baptist but often attended a pentecostal church, has studied many kinds of congregations all over the world. He urges us to think about why pentecostal churches are growing when other kinds are declining.

Praise [God] with tambourine and dance; ... Praise [God] with clanging cymbals ...
—Psalm 150:4-5

Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord.
—Psalm 134:2

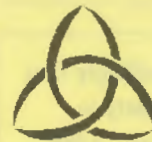
Pentecostal worship, Cox observes, usually features high-volume music and praise, bodily movement, personal testimonies, intense prayers for healing, and sermons full of stories and humorous

banter. Cox finds that today's pentecostals object to the coldness of conventional religion and the remoteness of the God it preaches. They emphasize the need for a personal experience of God. This emphasis gives them something in common with many Protestant liberals, Cox observes, which might surprise us, but there has been a crucial difference. "While the liberals liked to talk about the importance of religious experience," Cox points out, "the pentecostals seemed to generate it."



The pentecostal movement, in Harvey Cox's view, "has succeeded because it has spoken to the spiritual emptiness of our time by reaching beyond the levels of creed and ceremony into the core of human religiousness, into what might be called 'primal spirituality.'" It has reached, Cox says, into the image of God that is in every person.

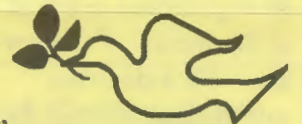
Primal speech, primal piety, primal hope



Pentecostals, in Cox's opinion, "have enabled countless people to recover, on a quite personal level, three dimensions of this elemental spirituality ... 'primal speech,' 'primal piety,' and 'primal hope,'" which play vital parts in faith.

▀ **Primal speech** was in earlier times called "ecstatic utterance" and "speaking in tongues." Today it is more often called "praying in the Spirit." It is a language of the heart. Cox sees it as a response to the lack of ecstasy that is a glaring feature of our era's spiritual crisis. To Cox it "represents the core of all pentecostal conviction:

that the Spirit of God needs no mediators but is available to anyone in an intense, immediate, indeed interior way."



Religious experience of this kind, in Cox's view, is not irrational. It is a way of knowing that goes beyond everyday awareness. It is experience that most people find risky but also long for. To risk it, people need to feel they are in safe surroundings among like-minded people. Most worship in today's mainline churches doesn't provide this.



▀ **Primal piety** is expressed in some kinds of praise, supplication, and insight that have been important in all

Ecstasy, risk, and action— we need them right away

"People need spiritual ecstasy, a sense of communion with God, a feeling of being caught up in the hands of One who [can] sustain them in trouble and direct them in times of confusion." That's the view that American Baptist evangelist Tony Campolo expresses in his book *Can Mainline Denominations Make a Comeback?* (Judson Press, 1995).



Preaching is crucial

In Campolo's view, preaching plays an essential role in creating this needed sense of communion with God. "Spirituality alone does not make someone an effective leader of a congregation," he reminds us. "Our churches ... need people who can communicate the gospel message in ways that are both intelligible and interesting."



Campolo isn't alone in saying this. Lay church members also say continually that inspiring preaching is what they need most from their pastors. Maybe we need to give preaching ability much higher priority than we now do, in the training, appointing, and rewarding of our pastors.

We must risk speaking for God

Campolo assures his readers, however, that in stressing the importance of experiencing God's presence he is not advocating mere feel-good religion. "Mainline churches," he says emphatically, "cannot and should not diminish their prophetic ministry in an attempt to become more palatable to a culture of narcissism. ... Only a prophetic church that takes all the risks necessary to be such a church has any chance of living out the twenty-first century."



Action leads to spirituality

Churches can't wait to make their members spiritual before embarking on these risky ministries, Campolo warns. "There are those who would claim that people should become spiritual *before* they act," he observes, "but I believe that people become spiritual *because* they act. It is in the context of action that the kind of transforming reflection that makes us truly Christian takes place."



The time is ripe but short

"The time is ripe," Tony Campolo believes, "for a renewal of mainline denominations, but the time is short as well." Their survival, he says, depends on church leaders' recognizing that the local church must again become the main agent for theological reflection, program planning, and missionary efforts.

Many other perceptive Christians are also seeing and saying these things. Will we hear them before it's too late?

religions throughout human history. They include trance, vision, healing, dreams, and dance. They form a universal human language.

▪ **Primal hope** is Cox's name for the "refusal to believe that what we see is all there is or could be." It is an orientation to the future but not a detailed plan for the future. It sustains us even when particular hopes don't pan out.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ... By faith we understand that ... what is seen was made from things that are not visible.
—Hebrews 11:1-3

Spiritual lava erupting from our depths

Harvey Cox believes that "the unanticipated reappearance of primal spirituality in our time tells us a lot about who we human beings are as we approach the twenty-first century." We see that secular explanations of life are inadequate, but we are wary of religious dogmas and institutions. Cox sees primal spirituality as spiritual lava that is erupting from deep within us.



Why did religious ecstasy ever disappear from mainline religion? According to Cox, John Wesley said it was because "dry, formal, orthodox men" began to make fun of such ecstasy because they didn't personally experience it.

Ecstatic religious experience, Cox reminds us, has often been called mental aberration, fakery, or mere showmanship. Theologians and preachers, he observes, have tended to condemn it as suspect for many reasons. More often they have merely ignored it, which "the vast class chasm between most pentecostals and most theologians makes relatively easy." Cox believes, however, that pentecostalism, the religion of the poor and the unlettered, may be closer to the highest forms of traditional Christian experience than are the practices of today's more prestigious denominations.

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; ... what is low and despised ... to shame the strong.
—1 Corinthians 1:27-28

How do we need to change?

Do those of us who are United Methodists, Southern Baptists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans,

Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and members of other mainline churches need to become pentecostals? I don't think so. We're probably where we are because mainline churches, not pentecostal ones, best fit our ways of receiving and expressing faith.



We need to look honestly, however, at why pentecostal churches are growing when mainline ones aren't. We may have become the dry, formal, and thus ineffective Christians that Wesley warned about.

We probably don't need to start speaking in tongues, but we can't keep speaking only in

abstract, emotionless ways. We must recognize that neither official belief statements, ready-made prayers, nor sermons expressed in academic or literary style can substitute for the excitement of experiencing God's presence. We need to promote that excitement by speaking the language of heart, spirit, hope, and love. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

A desert journey



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**The language of heart,
spirit, and hope**

The lectionary—a prescription for deadness?

For their sermon topics, many pastors follow the Common Lectionary, a list of scriptures used by several denominations. For each Sunday the list has Old and New Testament scriptures that relate to the current part of the church year.



Use of the lectionary lets worship be planned in advance with all parts focused on the same topic, and it exposes attenders to the whole scope of the Bible. But using the lectionary can turn sermon-writing into a mere mental exercise. The day's topic won't necessarily be what the preacher feels most strongly led by God to say, or what God most wants brought to the congregation's attention. I suspect that our increased use of the lectionary has removed a lot of the passion and spirit that effective worship needs. What do you think?

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