

## MINISTRY IS THE MAIN THING

I appreciate very much the opportunity to speak to you on this occasion tonight. Like other authors, I owe much to so many of you who publish, advertise, distribute, and sell what we write. The many long hours you put in are deeply appreciated.

Although I have had the privilege of speaking to this kind of group once before, very likely I will never have it again, so I have tried to think carefully about what I should say tonight. And this is what I want to say: The main thing is to keep the main thing as the main thing; and the main thing is ministry. So the main thing is to keep ministry as the main thing.

Now there are forces in our society today which are attacking the main thing. They attack me as an author; they attack <sup>MUSICIANS</sup> ~~singers~~; they attack publishers; they attack booksellers. One contemporary

analysis, and one which I think is true, characterizes our society as narcissistic. You may remember Narcissus. He was a handsome youth, proud of his own beauty. Many girls loved him but he paid no attention to any of them. The nymph Echo, one of those who loved him, was so hurt by his coldness toward her that she faded away, all but her voice. The gods were so angered by this that they made Narcissus fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of clear water. He was so much in love with himself that he could not leave the pool. Soon he pined away and died, and was changed into the flower we call the narcissus.

Contemporary society and the people in it, not excluding Christians are like Narcissus. They care little for others, they are egocentric, they are a law unto themselves, they want to be admired and entertained.

experience

Another secular writer describes our society this way: he says it is the new cult of madness wherein thinking is treated as a bad habit. "We have become the first people to proclaim their age the age of unreason. Reason and logic have, in fact, become dirty words--death words. They have been replaced by the life words feeling and impulse."

Taking ideas from both of these writers, I'd like to suggest that evangelicalism today gives itself too much to two things: experience and entertainment.

Secular writers have observed this. In a Time essay (Mar 13, 1972) Melvin Maddocks (the author) proclaimed our society as "the new cult of madness" wherein thinking is treated as a bad habit. "We have become the first people," he claimed, "to proclaim their age the age of unreason. 'Reason' and 'logic' have, in fact, become dirty words--death words. They have been replaced by the life words 'feeling' and 'impulse.' Consciousness--the rational--is presumed to be shallow, and unconsciousness--the irrational--to be always interesting, often profound and usually true."

In the <sup>rel.</sup> world, experience is king. (1) Liberalism has always said so. <sup>For the liberal,</sup> Devout feeling is the criterion of religious truth, and the test applied to it is the test of experience. As one liberal put it (Temple) "There is no such thing as revealed truth."

(2) <sup>Neo-orth.</sup> NO, in spite of its emphasis on God's initiative in revealing truth, was never able to shake off completely the hangover of liberal <sup>ism's</sup> subjectivism. So for Barth and others, revelation is found in the encounter, and its credibility is based on my say-so. (3) Bultman's new hermeneutic is also in King Experience's domain. He denies the meaning Scripture gives and imposes meanings on it which are external to Script. The text can mean what we wish it to mean. The Bible no longer rules us; we rule it. Egocentric interpretation provides the interpreter with his personal truth trip

But my concern today is what is happening in this regard in what ~~is rightly called~~ evangelicalism. (1) Experience is eroding the basis of evang. theology. CT quote. The Bible as final authority is not replaced, but experience's authority is equal, or almost equal, or sometimes superior. Interpersonal, relational, existential theol places emphasis on persons and the quality of their relationship in the family, ch, community, work. It stresses the need for Xns to understand how they tick psychologically and to learn to live within the interpersonal relationships of <sup>the</sup> family, ch, community, etc. Of course, the Bible does teach on these subjects, but when primary emphasis is placed on them to the neglect of teaching on God's great works ~~in~~ for man and in man (the cross, res, justif, sanc) then the pendulum has swung too far. <sup>Gen. vs Script exp</sup> ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ How do you get a crowd of evangelicals today? Put on a seminar on how to manage you family, or how to manage your finances, or how to manage your time, or how to manage yourself. But do Not, repeat, do not announce a Bible conference. Theology, the study of God, has been replaced by anthropology, the study of man. Revelation is redefined in terms of self-discovery. Sanctification becomes a game of psychological strip-tease in small group encounters.

Gen. vs Script exp -

A recent article in Xnty Today observed, <sup>accurately</sup> ~~correctly~~, that 4A  
"evangelicals are beginning to explore the possibility of an  
experientially based theology. Influenced by those who stress  
either a charismatic approach to faith or a relational approach,  
evangelicals are beginning to build their theologies around what it  
means for man to be in the presence of God." / The prescription  
for health that is increasingly being sounded from within  
evangelicalism is this: if the Church is ever again to set forth  
a relevant and ~~ade~~quate theology, it must begin not with reflection  
on the person of Christ but with reflection on our experience  
with him through the H.S."

Henry Mitchell, dir of Ecum Center for Black Ch Studies.

"Truth is in the book, praise God. But it's true for me cause  
mamma told me ....What mamma told me is more important than  
what the paper says. Scripture came to us orally, and then  
thru singing. The printed word is a substitute." 4B

Wm Bentley. "There is no totally objective revelation of truth."

2

King experience uses our testimonies to give the impression that experience creates truth rather than attests to truth."I exp. it, so it must be right." Look at the change my exp brought, therefore it must be valid." I can't deny my own exp." But you can test it. Dare I remind you of the words of a beloved hymn. XJ lives today. walks, talks. salv to impart. in my heart. To be sure, there is the witness of the S in my heart, and Jesus does walk and talk with me, but these exp do not make the res true. He is alive whether or not I ever exp this great truth. Compare Jesus Loves me. Testimonies can confirm truth, but they do not create truth. Also testimonies can deceive, for one can have a valid and real exp which is not a scriptural exp, and then use the testimony of it to imply or openly state that it is desirable, even scriptural, for everybody to have that exp. The only valid test of exp is simply: Is it Scriptural? And the only way to apply this test accurately is to study the Scriptures and know what experiences please God. A testimony to be edifying must be a testimony of the truth which God has already revealed in His written, living Word. But the day in which we live presses us to put our faith in him who is exp, rather than in Him who is truth.



6

Of course there are important experiences related to the Christian life. Conversion itself, prayer, the leading of the Lord for example, but even these must be compatible with the written Word or they are not the proper experiences for a believer. What can we do to help bring experience into its proper place in relation to God's Word? See to it that what we write, sing, <sup>or</sup> portary, publish or sell <sup>edifies, i.e. builds up</sup> educates first and foremost in the knowledge of God<sup>s</sup> as revealed in the written living Word. When taking leave of the Ephesian elders, Paul did not commit them to some experience or even to the imitation of his own experience, but to the Lord and to the word of his grace which is able to build them up. The same formula will work today.

The craze for entertainment is another characteristic of our narcissistic ~~age~~.society. Last week a well-known Christian leader <sup>decried</sup> ~~bewailed~~ our indifference to the millions and millions of people on the brink of starvation while nations spend so much on armament. I ~~do not~~ criticize that, but wonder if it would have aroused the same sympathetic response had he bewailed spending 225 million on the TV rights for the Olympic games. Or had he mentioned that the grain used to make alcoholic beverages in the US in one year could feed 20,000,000 people for one year? Or dare I ~~even mention~~ <sup>would his remarks have been published if he focused on</sup> what is indicated about our priorities when churches change services so as not to conflict with the Superbowl?

Of course, entertainment can have a proper place in one's life, but when that constitutes almost the total diet it becomes a serious matter. It is serious because the content of what is communicated is usually experience; the idea is usually thin; and the procedure for communicating is usually repetition to the point of monotony. This is too often true whether the medium be written, musical or audio-visual. An expert in communications in a recent interview in US NEWS and World Report

(Jan 19, 1981) reported some astounding findings. He said: "So the temptation is very great for teachers to substitute for real learning something that's fairly jazzy and that will immediately capture the attention of kids." Learning requires prerequisites. TV does not build on what precedes. Neither, he said, do audio-visual aids. "...the high degree of visual stimulation, such as you get with these audio-visual media, tends to distract attention away from language. ...we become more sensitive to visual representations and less to language. . . . the word and all it stands for loses prestige, power and relevance." These are important statements for Christians who desire to communicate. The words of the Bible and those words building on other words from that Bible ~~are~~ <sup>must be kept</sup> primary if we are to have communication that builds and lasts.

What is the import of what I have dared to say to a group like this? Simply this: the main thing is ministry, ministry that educates and edifies and we ought to take and make the most of the time we have. We cannot afford to traffic in trivia or be involved in the insignificant. <sup>or multiply the mediocre.</sup> But, it is objected, we must scratch people where they itch. No, we must cure what causes the itch, ~~and~~ And too often that is what is happening. If I am to minister, then I must know what people need, not nec. what they ask for and then lead them into the truth which will meet that need.

My typewriter, your publishing house, your music, your bookstore, each is a school, a classroom, the means of educating and edifying. <sup>Good schools educate--that's the main thing.</sup> A school that does not educate ought to go out of business. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ Extra curricular activities are just that--extra to the main thing. Perhaps useful and even with some educational value, but extra, and not the main thing.

There is a healthy trend developing in many of our public and private schools today. Many of them are refusing to sell junk food in their vending machines. Christian bookstores might well emulate this. What is junk food. Full of sugar to make you like it something that gives you a quick but temporary lift, then it puts you to sleep. It lacks substantial nourishment and creates a craving for more of the same.

Ten years ago I had to give up sugar. The withdrawal from ice cream, pies, cakes was not easy. But I'm glad I did it. I feel, act, think better; and I like what I eat now. And occ. I allow myself a dip of ice cream.

The Xn public is largely on a sugar diet. We must help them to get onto the solid meat of the Word, for this is our ministry- to mature people in the knowledge of the truth. Whatever by your job in this pipeline of communication called CBA, I hope you will make every effort to keep the main thing the main thing.