

INSTEAD OF
RELEVANCE

PRESENTED

by

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on

The Back to God Hour

THE DENOMINATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF

THE REFORMED CHURCHES

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INSTEAD OF RELEVANCE

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.-Luke 24:45

One of the large news weeklies attracts new readers by assuring them that, if they read this magazine, when they talk, their friends will listen. That's what we want. We all want people to listen when we talk.

A husband likes to have his wife listen when he talks, and wives appreciate it when their husbands listen. Young people like to have their parents listen when they talk, and parents like their young to do the same. At a meeting, a person likes to have others listen respectfully when he stands up and makes his contribution. There is nothing we fear more than to say something that other people judge beside the point, ignorant, useless, and foolish.

So I guess we should have the church for feeling the same way. For the church is an institution that has been in communication business for several centuries, as you know. The church, then, has been very concerned with what has come to be called *relevance*. And this concern has about ruined it.

Maybe it's going a little far to say the concern for relevance has ruined the church, but this is the impression given by a book written some time ago by Peter Berger, titled *A Rumour of Angels*. It is a general indictment of the church in which he charges that it has been more impressed with cocktail party conversation than with the realities of authentic religion. He points out the folly of the church's attempt to tailor its message in terms of the so-called relevant.

His paragraph on the nature of relevance may well go down as a classic definition of this

ruthless concept, and at the risk of boring you, I am going to quote it at some length. After stating that relevance is a "very fragile business at best," he continues by saying:

It is not only the vagaries and sudden turns of external events that make it so. The organization of our cultural life creates the fragility. Relevance and timeliness are defined for society at large, primarily by the media of mass communication. These are afflicted with an incurable hunger for novelty. The relevancies they proclaim are at most by definition, extremely vulnerable to changing fashions and thus of generally short duration. As a result, the theologian ... who seeks to be and remain "with it," in terms of mass-communicated and mass communicable relevance, is predestined to find himself authoritatively put down as irrelevant very soon. Those who consider themselves too sophisticated for mass culture take their cues on relevance and timeliness from an assortment of intellectual cliques, which have their own communications system, characterized by fashions that are more tolerant but hardly more durable than those of the mass media.

This expose of the fragile, yet tyrannical nature of relevance by a man well versed in sociology and highly respected in intellectual circles is extremely valuable today. It is especially significant because many of the same thoughts contained in his book *A Rumour of Angels* were reiterated in a context in which they were of great relevance, if I may yet use the word. Speaking at a meeting of the Consultation on Church Union, Berger called the churches back to an authoritative proclamation

of their message. His invitation received wide publicity both in the secular and religious press. No doubt, Berger's analysis of the present church situation has raised as much interest as it has because it is merely an expression of what millions of regular churchgoers have been feeling for a long time.

But Berger's call for an authoritative voice from the church once again-and the hearty Amen's are coming from just about everywhere, especially from the pew-has a few built in problems. How can the church really speak with a voice of authority these days, when the great issues have been determined by others rather than by the church? Can it really shake off the deep desire for being relevant long enough to rediscover what its real message is?

Though Berger did not mention it when he spoke to COCU, and though his book, *A Rumour of Angels* does not mention it either, there is only one way to recapture the voice of authority that must be heard in times like these. In the Gospel according to Luke, the 24th chapter, there are several verses that may not be overlooked as we try to understand what the message of the church must be, and what it means to speak this message with authority. The context of these verses is one that is determined by two great Biblical events, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus.

At any rate, you can well understand that the time between Jesus' resurrection and His ascension into heaven was an extraordinarily important time for the church. For Jesus had completed everything that was necessary to make salvation possible for His people. He had beat death and hell and sin and was for all practical purposes already glorified;

though He still had to go into heaven and receive that glory fully. It was a time which, according to the Bible, was marked by mysterious appearances of Jesus. They were rather numerous, but they differed from appearances before. He suddenly was with His disciples and as suddenly He would be gone again. It was a time moreover which was direction setting for the church, for it was during this time that Jesus worked with His disciples and prepared them for the apostolic function they were soon to assume.

Apparently, Jesus' appearances, though, were not all short and dramatic. Some of them were of somewhat lengthy character, so lengthy, that by the time He was to ascend, some of the disciples had grown accustomed enough to having Him around that they doubted. Matthew tells us that there was doubt among them. And the passage in Luke mentioned suggests that Jesus spent rather lengthy periods of time with His disciples instructing them. Isn't this what Luke 24: 44, 45 is saying? "Then he said to them, 'These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures'...."

We would have to agree, wouldn't we, that Jesus' actions during the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension should give us a clue about what the church is and what it should be doing and saying. And I suppose that we would have expected that Jesus would have spent a great deal of time lecturing. After all, He was an authority on so many things, having gone the distance all the way to hell

and back. He was the glorified Son of God. So we would naturally expect that the disciples would have kept careful notes and would have tried to preserve what He said.

But Jesus didn't just lecture. He had a textbook, and He used that textbook. That textbook was the Bible. His focus was on the Bible. To be sure, it was not the same Bible we have now, for the message the disciples later brought was not yet a part of it. It was the Old Testament. He taught from it. He showed how each section, the law, the prophets, and the psalms, was about Him and was fulfilled in His death and resurrection.

But the important thing for us to notice is the role of the Scripture in Jesus' teaching. For Him, this is what it meant to be one of His followers. To follow Jesus meant to read this book and understand it. The Scripture is the center.

Jesus, by His action, established the central principle that was to define true religion from that day onward. The religion of Jesus is the religion that is rooted in the Scripture. And today this means the book we have come to call the Bible. This is the Scripture today; it contains the writings of the law, the prophets, and the psalms, and in addition it contains the record of what the apostles taught after Pentecost when they had been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the Old and the New Testaments. This is the Scripture now.

So instead of relevance, the great controlling principle of life and speech within the true church must always be the message of the Word of God. And if you want to do yourself a favor, if you are looking for the truth and for

salvation, make sure you find a church where the message of the Bible is the overriding consideration. It is this message alone that can return to the voice of the church the clear ring of unmistakable authority.

I am quite aware that any call to return to the Bible can easily be ridiculed. It is not difficult to unearth uses of the Bible that have not furthered the Christian cause. Many have become disenchanted with a literalistic approach that has bred brittle religious attitudes and has made Christian love impossible. All this is true. But the issue today is so deep-seated and serious that we must not allow previous prejudices against the Scripture to keep us from living in obedience to it now. The alternatives are too frightening. Either the church will take Jesus' example with great seriousness and turn its attention to the Scripture, or it will continue to attempt to be relevant in the ordinary sense of that term. Then the issues will be determined by the mass media in many instances, or by some element of the educated community. Such relevance is doomed to be controlled by novelty and the voice of the prophets will be stilled.

And, you see, this call to return to the Bible is not a call to weird and strange activities. The Bible is not a book of magic, though some have used it that way, conjuring with its words and drawing strange conclusions from them. The Bible is not a book to pop open so that one can play games with the first text that meets his eye. The call to return to the Bible is not a call to abandon reason and the world and man and the present moment in history. Luke 24 shows something of the nature of this remarkable activity.

First of all, notice, please, that when Jesus used the Scripture, He used the whole Scripture. The law, the prophets and the psalms are mentioned. The Bible view of itself is not that it is a conglomeration of parts. It is a living, throbbing organism, written over many hundred of years by many people, yet with one unifying author, the Holy Spirit of God. So when we are reminded today that we are to return to the Scripture, this is not a call to pick and choose this and that, whatever strikes one's fancy on a piecemeal basis. But it is a call to enter into the living message that represents the intersection of heaven with earth.

And this will mean, we might as well remember, that the church, if it is to live out of the Scripture again, is going to have to engage in some deep and hard study of this great book. There is nothing simple about this process at all. So don't think we are talking about a simple retreat from reality. This is an advance into the greatest reality available to us today. The reality of the Bible.

Secondly, this call to return to the Scripture is not a call to engage in an action that will be successful because men are able to understand the Bible so well, and all they need to do is read it and work with it and everything will be all right. No. As a matter of fact, man cannot understand the Scripture unless Jesus helps. And that is what Jesus did when He was with His disciples during the days between His resurrection and ascension. He opened their minds. This must occur today, too. Jesus must open our minds. He does that now through the power of His Holy Spirit.

Thus, any return to the Bible must begin with a confession of sin and blindness, and

must be accompanied by prayer. "O God, open my mind. O God, open our minds as we work together through this glorious book." Hundreds have read the Bible and even studied it without believing in the enlightening power of Jesus. They did not even believe Jesus was alive. They thought He was still dead, and they studied the Bible with that point of view, so their minds were darker than the tomb they thought Jesus still rested in.

Nothing good can come out of that kind of study of the Scripture. So the church, too, can never expect to gain anything when it returns to the Scripture, unless it does so in the fulness of its confession of faith. It must believe that Jesus suffered, bled, died for the sins of His people, and He rose again and ascended into heaven, and now sends His Spirit into the hearts of all who ask for that Spirit. And in the power of the Spirit, with minds opened by the Spirit, the church must return and listen and teach the message that is in that great book.

Finally, there is this about this return to the Scripture: the object of all study of the Scripture is the discovery of Christ. This was the burden of Jesus' own teaching during those remarkable days He taught His disciples. I don't think there had been little study of the Scripture in Jesus' day. Why, there were men who studied it day in and day out, and you wouldn't believe what they made the Scripture say. They did tricks with the Scripture that were enough to keep many of Jesus' fellow countrymen in the slave grip of legalism that drained all of the joy out of their religion.

But when Jesus was with His disciples He opened their minds and showed them that

entire Bible was about Him. This is the message of Luke 24. He showed them how every part of the Scripture was a testimony to the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is what the Bible is still about. When the church studies the Word of God and proclaims it, it brings the message men must hear about Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavily laden and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) It is possible to do exactly that as people live out of the Word of God. Then they meet Jesus. And once they meet Him, their lives open up to new opportunities and they start living to the glory of God.

Well, all this can take the place of relevance. So long as the church makes relevance its goal, it will continue to look foolish. Instead of relevance, there must be a return to the Scripture. Enlightened by the Holy Spirit of the living Christ, the people of God must use the only book, and they must study it and proclaim it and live out of it.

I don't know where you go to church, but I just hope for your sake that it's a church that is living joyfully out of the Scripture. The church that lives out of the Bible that is enlightened by the Holy Spirit of Christ, and proclaims the joyful message of Jesus is more than relevant. It's real. It's the real thing. It's real enough to save you from hell. And bring you to heaven. That kind of religion is extremely important. Wouldnt you agree?

PRAYER

Lord, it's thrilling to let our mortal's wander as we have today back to the time when Jesus met with His disciples. We are grateful that we have a record of that important meeting. Somehow we feel that in those conversations the seeds of true Christianity were planted. And we still benefit from what happened then.

Help us learn from these meetings. Give the Holy Spirit and illumine us now as we turn once again to the Scripture. As we understand that genuine religion is forever bound to a book, to the book, to the Bible. May we be humble enough to read it. In that book, and obey it enough to believe it and obey it.

Let that book govern our conduct; of what is really important. Let that book give us the direction we need in order to meet the challenge of this day. Let that book overwhelm us with the provision of divine love. And let that book fill us with fear of judgment. So, in the fulfillment of its message may we be saved. Through Christ, Amen.

Prepared for broadcast by Dr. Joel Neddcrhood,
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