

STRAIGHTWAY

"And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him" [Mark 1:18].

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THE "LOW" AND "HIGH" CHURCH VS. "PEOPLE'S THEOLOGY"

by Dr. O. Talmadge Spence, Founder & President
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Methodism undoubtedly was born out of the spiritual decline of the Episcopal Church of England and Wales. It arose as the reaction of the individual and of the spiritual **subjective** against the destructive power of the **objective** in the community as manifested in the Church of England. As such the reaction was precious and undoubtedly a gift of God for the times. The "conversion" experience was forwarded for individual sinners. Even until today, "walking the aisle," to accept Christ as Savior continues, but probably with a weakness since its founding work by the Holy Spirit in the days of John Wesley and his workers. This Awakening, bringing into existence Methodism, penetrated nearly all Protestant churches, and even the Episcopal Church under the name of "Evangelicalism" or birth of the "Low Church" in the Episcopal Church of England. The "High" Church remains liturgical, formal, ceremonial, and sacerdotal in its worship. As a second reaction against the second decline of

the Protestant churches of that time this triumph, through Methodism, undoubtedly brought a great blessing.

Later on, both Methodism and the Salvation Army were accused of various antics in order to arouse the people to their "conversion" experience, including the shooting of pistols into the air just prior to the evening "evangelical" service, so as to stir the sinners to repentance.

However, as a result of the Awakening, a distinction was made between the "Low" and "High" Church, and the distinction was no doubt worthwhile to the Protestant "little people." John Wesley is given credit for the "Low" Church born into history.

We might observe the great Dutch theologian-statesman Abraham Kuyper in this regard. He lived in our previous century (1837-1920). Kuyper's credentials as a representative of "high" culture were impeccable: university founder, author of major theological works, and political leader who served for a time as prime

minister of the Netherlands. But while pastoring a small church in Beesd, from 1863-1868, he also regularly expressed an almost mystical sense of solidarity with what he referred to affectionately as “the little people,” treating their theological-spiritual sensitivities as an important touchstone for his own theological reflection. He noted the following: that “ordinary Christians (the “little people;” the “low” church) have often functioned as preservers of theological truth during times of heresy.” Prior to this pastorate, Kuyper graduated from the University of Leiden as a self-proclaimed theological modernist. However, when he entered the pastorate at Beesd, he met Pietje Baltus, an uneducated miller’s daughter, who strongly opposed his liberal preaching. Much to his own surprise, Kuyper was attracted by the faith of these simple folk and experienced a profound evangelical conversion. He describes this several years later.

I did not set myself against them, and I still thank my God that I made the choice I did. Their unwavering persistence has been a blessing for my heart, the rise of the morning star in my life. In

their simple language, they brought me to that absolute conviction in which alone my soul can find rest—the adoration and exaltation of a God who works all things, both to do and to will, according to his good pleasure (*Let Christ Be King: Reflections on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuyper* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1985), p. 49.

We should keep in mind that God does use “the little people” as they have been referred to in this article; and sometimes we are indeed surprised to see that “the little people” in what might be thought of as the “low” church are quite wise and discerning of spiritual things.

With these few observations we can honorably judge that there was and is a place in all times, for the biblical and testimonial voice of what is assumed to be ordinary Christians. However, in the Bible Christians are Christians; yea, all are called “saints.” But we persist in the terminology of this article in the sense we mean it. We need their practical observations, their simplistic spirituality, their guileless manner, their gentle sincerity, as well as their hearty opinions. In our time, we as Fundamentalists, do not listen enough to gain these voices and peoples. We must give more time to this seemingly “little” voice. The Intellectuals do not listen at all. But the “little” voice represents the grassroots of the orthopraxy of our time.

It is imperative, however, to proceed into a popular but false concept of the time as well. The “little people” and the “low” church are not the same as the “people” in “people’s theology.”

There is a very strong leveling trend at work today, in our generation, in

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artistic and intellectual life. The lines between “high” and “low” are being blurred. Graffiti, rap music, rock stars, and Nancy Drew Mysteries are treated equally with the writings of Homer, Chaucer, and Shakespeare. It is believed that the modern and popular texts are worthy of literary analysis. The universities, more and more, are adopting the “group sharing” of personal narratives. Where church authorities once commissioned scholarly studies before, they now rely on experiential reports from loosely structured “little groups.”

This general trend is dangerous. There is a difference between important and unimportant literature. Both experts and amateurs are thought to be equal; they are not. You cannot make the common the classical in any area of life, in any science of life, in any artform of life, and in any person of life.

The most endangered species of our time is that which has heretofore survived the critics and ravages of time and audiences. Where do we think we are going with these new but false heroes? Whether it be sports or books, we are on a bad road in our time in history.

In theology, the “people” title was given through Liberation Theology, born in South America and raised in Europe through Romanism and desperate guerrilla soldiers and philosophical apostates. The Jesuits took the lead as the pope stood in jeopardy. In science, we are watching the otherwise genius mind studying chaos and chance instead of law, order, design, purpose, and beauty. The “People’s Republic” of communism; the “People’s Churches;” and the “People’s Public Policy” have all brought spiritual and intellectual death to those who had sought that which was biblical and right and good. This is also the time of “tacky theology” and “tacky orthopraxy” of that

theology. Of course, we need a revival; what else has the power to change us in our time? Some are actually writing books, under the division of Christianity that claims that we should “think of many of Jesus’ parables as a kind of sanctified tackiness.” Have we lost our dictionary of this word? Well, let us read the definition again: “not tasteful or fashion-able; dowdy; out-of-date; shabby in appearance; a tacky, jerry-built housing development; gaudy; flashy; showy.” (Webster).

Some have thought that Jesus borrowed “tacky” mundane images; referring to buried treasures, loans, coins, sheep, seeds, oil lamps, and daily wages in a vineyard. No! These are viable areas of life; this is the world in which we live and function and we must become responsible to in every generation. This is not a “tacky” situation.

In these days of “cheap grace” and “easy believism” we can see that a new (**neo**) definition of Christianity is being sold in the markets of evangelism and tongues and gifts. They have lowered the noble Gospel as they raised worldliness. This will not do; this will not stand!

Quite ironically, the Anglican archbishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, recently argued that “evangelical liturgical and spiritual tastes have tended toward ‘fast food rather than haute cuisine.’” He continues: “More people go to discos than to high opera and one of the courageous things about evangelicals is their ability to embrace bad taste for the sake of the gospel.” It is really not “courage” but “risk,” Mr. Holloway.

We must seek God concerning the revival we desperately need; but in the meantime, we must not compromise our convictions while waiting for God to act as we have prayed.

Words of Gratitude



Dr. O. Talmadge Spence, in behalf of his family, expresses his deep appreciation for all expressions made at this time in behalf of the sudden illness of his dear wife, "Dr. Joye." She is stable and resting in the Arms and Promises of Almighty God awaiting His Will.

Dear Christian Friend:

So many of our dear friends have sent cards, letters, telephone calls, cablegrams, telegrams, and other indirect enquiries of our dear wife, Joye, I thought the Lord would be pleased for me, as her husband, to give this 30-day medical journal of how God has graciously answered our prayers and your prayers since her massive stroke. We have received inquiries and prayer promises from all parts of the world.

We sincerely believe that God has really performed a miracle, not of a charismatic display, but a quiet accomplishment through His love and grace.

All we desire to do in this testimony is give our Heavenly Father the praise for His mercy, love, and power. We also desire for all of you, as our Christian friends, to continue to pray that God will restore Joye to His purpose for her future and that of our family.

O. Talmadge Spence

Thirty-Days With God

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|----------------|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| February 20 | — | 8:30 PM, with her friends of the Katharina Society, she was stricken down with a massive stroke in their presence. Taken to Intensive Care at Wake Medical Center, Raleigh, NC. |
| February 21 | — | 4:30 PM, surgery for the removal of her blood clot from the brain. |
| February 22 | — | 9:00 AM, the coma passes. |
| February 23-27 | — | Each day consciousness of memories increasingly return. |
| February 28 | — | Tracheotomy put in place. |
| March 5 | — | Leaves Intensive Care to Recovery Hospital; adjoining hospital. Improves daily in spite of the threat of Pneumonia and fever. |
| March 13 | — | Enters Rehabilitation Hospital; adjoining Wake Medical Center. |
| March 15 | — | Oxygen, intravenous, and cathartic tubes withdrawn. Communicates her first words to husband and daughter. |
| March 20 | — | Tracheotomy removed. |
| March 26 | — | Home! |
| April 16 | — | Hospital Return! |
| May 14 | — | Home Again. |

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