

A *REASON* FOR THANKSGIVING?

As you know from previous announcements during our worship gatherings and in the newsletter, CCM recently offered an opportunity for our group to attend an afternoon of two fascinating lectures by nationally acclaimed religious scholar and author, Dr. D. Butler Bass, followed by a lovely dinner at highly praised *Pan y Vino*, a delightful Italian eatery, dearly beloved by local in-the-know Charlestonians. We had a good attendance. The opportunity was especially important because it is rare for us in South Carolina to be able to hear thoughtful presentations by people of Dr. Bass' stature.

But why was this particular presentation noteworthy? It is because Dr. Bass is an acknowledged expert in the area of religion and culture, *specifically* in *America*. When she spoke in Charleston, she followed up on her earlier book, *Christianity After Religion*, with insights from her latest book, entitled *Grounded*, which explores multiple reports that religion in America is rapidly declining as more and more people leave the conventional religion that continues to be advocated and dished out by major denominational churches. Some researchers have commented that the major denominations (and some that *aren't* so major!) continue unrelentingly to be examples of what Jesus described as “blind leaders of the blind,” seemingly incapable of moving beyond where they now are to a more promising stance of greater spiritual maturity. Outdated dogmas regularly are affirmed, creeds that say nothing at all about the transformative message of Jesus *still* are repeated, and young people are expected unblinkingly to say “amen” to an out-of-touch theology that Does not speak to them. So when they get old enough to leave home, they also leave the church as well. Because of this, researchers, we're told, indicate that the future for mainline denominational churches and religion in America is sliding into an abyss from which it will not be able to recover; so, eventually, American churches will become like those in Europe: great cathedrals with only 8 to 10 (if *that* many) elderly women—mostly in their 70s and 80s—in attendance. Usually, there are no men present, and not a single young person.

If what the research appears to be telling us is the destiny of the churches of the future, that, of course, is not exactly a cause for thanksgiving—in this season or in any other season!

However, Dr. Bass, based upon her own research as *well* as that from numerous other sources, believes that the future of religion in America has the potential to be much brighter. (Emphasize the word ‘potential’!) She believes that religion in our country is now simply undergoing a major transformation in how people understand and experience God. They are finding little enclaves in which they can move *beyond* their intransigent, outdated denominational monomania. Bass envisions the emergence of a *positive* spiritual revolution, a revitalized understanding of faith and its relationship to daily life that could have the power to change the world. Small, *progressive* church families are being formed throughout the country that provide an atmosphere *for* greater spiritual growth, a profound journey of becoming that is hidden within these tiny groups, a dynamic that is actually more *relevant* to daily life and, therefore, has the potential actually to be transformative. It is *they* that hold amazing promise for the future of religion, the *promise* of a more mature expression of faith. Actually, CCM *began* as one of those small-as-a-mustard-seed communities that embody promise for those who have the vision to see, embrace it, unstintingly support it, and grow *with* it.

I wonder: *Do* we see ourselves as being called of God to be a meaningful *part* of such a dynamic spiritual revolution? It is *the* most important thing in which *any* of us can become involved. It would render our efforts, in so many *other* areas, unnecessary, because churches would turn their attention away from mere ‘religiosity’ to focus on what *really* matters: loving God and one another—in a way that would help to distance us from needless divisions, injustices, prejudice, hatred, and even war. That which *truly* matters would at last be front and center.

It may mean that some of the inflexible, major denominational entities that have plateaued in vision and awareness of what *genuinely* matters eventually will die. But the Spirit of God, resident in small, intentional groups that choose to walk the “narrow way” advocated by Jesus instead of the “broad pathway” still populated by the masses, may more fully represent the kingdom of God present and among us in microcosm *now, here, already*, in a

fresh, more appealing way that some of the more conventional churches tend to resist.

But, again, *do* we see ourselves here at CCM as a part of God's great plan to help *revitalize* religious experience and practice here in the United States, an inconspicuous but powerful revolution that eventually could change for the better not *only* us—but the world? If so, do we see ourselves as *finally* being willing to put the kingdom of God *first* in our lives, to make it a priority above *ALL* other involvements?

I think Dr. Bass' hopeful prognosis for the future is an exciting possibility. But we need to realize that it *still* exists as *potential*—potential based upon our own availability and willingness to be a vital *part* of a plan to which God may be calling us.

To *fulfill* our enormous potential here at CCM to make a marvelously substantial contribution to the revitalization of religion and life in ourselves and in America, we will all need to pull together, to *be* here in body, mind and heart, every time we gather—to take that holy time with the *great* physician at *least* as seriously as we would an appointment with an *earthly* physician. As you know, we currently gather *only* two times a month; so it is critical, if we *truly* want to be God's instrument, to pencil in on our calendar those important two days, reserving two hours for what matters most in life, that we ourselves can profit from the encounter *and* to be a part of God's process of renewal. That would mean being serious enough about our spiritual welfare and that of others to plan all *other* activities *around* those two holy times, not during them. The goal, to be specific, is twofold: First, the revitalization of our *own* spiritual journey and, second, the frequently neglected spiritual revitalization of the members of our *own family*—lifting our marriages, our relationship to our own children, grandchildren, and relatives to a higher, more fulfilling level than ever before. That wonderful prospect will not be realized unless we work *toward* it; but both aspects of the twofold goal are enormously important opportunities, pregnant with exciting potential! Two days out of an entire month are not a lot, but, if we take them seriously, they *can* be a vital, necessary part of the transformative process; and our *combined* influence on others with whom we and our families come in contact, Jesus taught, is what

enables the kingdom of God to become more fully a *reality* in the world. It is the huge, beautiful tree that grows from a tiny mustard seed!

We're been told that God calls us in different ways at different times, but always, *always* God "stands at the door of our lives and knocks," awaiting our willingness to *open* the door. And when we do, that is when great and marvelous things begin to happen!

If we take seriously Dr. Bass' strong belief that a gigantic spiritual revolution in our lives and in America awaits *our response*, that is, indeed, good news. What appeared to be *bad* news about a multitude of dying churches becomes, suddenly, a thrilling, compelling open door of opportunity. Moreover, as we enter our annual season of Thanksgiving, we now have something of epoch-making significance for which truly to give thanks: to be able to be included in the activity of a loving God who said, "Behold, I make all things—*new!*"

So then, in the words of the hymn writer, let us

Rise up, people of God;
have done with *lesser* things!
Join heart and soul and mind and strength
to serve the King of kings!

With love and best wishes for a truly amazing Thanksgiving,

**Your pastor and friend,
John**

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT CCM?

Sunday, November 8 (2nd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. GROWING UP SPIRITUALY

One has only to read most of the books in the New Testament to see that both Paul *and* Jesus spent a lot of time encouraging their followers to grow up—to *mature* spiritually; otherwise, they would experience only a 'form' of

religion without experiencing its potential power. Is what Jesus and Paul observed in their day true of people in *our* day? I think *so*. In the south, many churches still have fairly good attendance on the part of a number of people; but, for the majority, their *quality of life* has not changed for the better. Many 1st century people were not willing regularly to invest the time and effort to *experience* constructive change, but many *were*—and reaped the benefits. Since human nature usually does not change for the better *automatically*, what Jesus and Paul observed in the 1st century is probably true for many of us in the 21st century.

So to enable people to answer helpfully to the call of Paul and Jesus to get ‘off the treadmill,’ so to speak, and actually *experience* a more qualitative life instead of a watered-down, less-effective form of spirituality, CCM provides an opportunity, not just to hear and ponder a challenging presentation, but actually to be able to interact with John and others in the group—even to *interrupt* the presentation while it is in progress, if you wish, to make comments and ask questions.

We will continue that constructive process today as we continue our exploration of what it means to become a truly *progressive* Christian instead of merely a conventional one, to experience greater meaning in our spiritual journey instead of experiencing only minimal value.

We invite you to join us for the journey. (We’re usually out by about 11:30 a.m., but if the discussion is *extraordinarily* focused and lively, we sometimes will adjourn at 12 noon.

Sunday, November 22 (4th Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. ANNUAL THANKSGIVING WORSHIP GATHERING

Today, we begin a journey into the joyful holiday season of Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas—one of the three most holy (the word ‘holy’ means *set apart for a special purpose* times of the year.

When we gather, John will share with us a seasonal message entitled “AN *ALTERNATIVE* THANKSGIVING.” Alternative? What in the world is an *alternative* Thanksgiving? All we can tell you now is that it is a particularly

meaningful way to observe the season, one that is surprisingly different—maybe even unconventional. It's straight from scripture, but almost universally overlooked! So join us for the occasion, and bring your family and friends. As you know, we try never to waste your time!

As is our custom on Thanksgiving and Christmas Sundays, we do not have our usual talk-back to the message after worship; so we'll be getting out earlier than usual today—probably by 11:30 a.m. or before.