

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE MIDLANDS

Unapologetically Christian, Unapologetically Progressive

Pastor's Paragraph

DO WE NEED REFORMATION?

While I was driving to an appointment, I heard a Muslim woman talking on the radio about why she sent her children to an Islamic religious school (Madrossa) and how, unbeknown to her at the time, the school taught her children hate and the duty to fight and die as members of ISIS. She said she was horrified when she discovered what had been taking place. “The *reason* I sent them to that school was so they could learn religion in order to go to *heaven* when they die.”

The woman’s statement sounded very familiar to me, because I have heard the *same* understanding of the purpose of Christianity expressed in many churches: that the message of Jesus was for us to “get saved” so we can “go to heaven when we die.”

Most people probably would be astounded to learn that going to heaven when we die was *not* a central theme expounded by Jesus. In fact, it was rarely even mentioned by Jesus! While such an understanding may be the main emphasis of much contemporary preaching and teaching, it distorts the centrality of Jesus’s *actual* message.

What then *was* the chief concern of Jesus’s proclamation? It was what he called “the kingdom of God”—not as a goal to be experienced *after* we die, but as a new and better quality of life *here and now*! Indeed, he made that explicit when he taught his followers to pray, “thy Kingdom come on *earth*”—that is, in our *current* life, as a *present* reality!

Even if we don’t usually talk about it, we all yearn at times for more than we are experiencing. Although our present experiences and

relationships may not necessarily be bad, we realize that they could be better. Even a relatively *good* marriage, a relatively *good* friendship, a relatively good relationship with a brother, sister, parent, child, grandchild, or other individual *could* be somewhat more fulfilling than it is—sometimes a *lot* more fulfilling! *Here's the point:* There is something deep within us that sometimes yearns to move from that which may be good to that which is better—or even from that which is better to that which is best. In our quieter moments, we *know* that there are aspects of our lives that are not maximally fulfilling; but we rarely act on that awareness in a way that might impact positively whatever is lacking.

Although the Bible tells us that we are made in the image of God, scripture does not give us a *definition* of the image of God. Personally, I believe that the still, small voice within us that yearns for more and better *is* the image of God, nudging us to move in the direction of the more abundant, more fulfilled life that God *always* has wanted to give us. In fact, we're told that Jesus cited that as the whole *purpose* of his ministry among us: to point us in the direction of life in *all* of its fullness. For him, to experience the reality of that more qualitative newness of life is not something that we need to postpone until after we die, it is something that is available *now*; and to *begin* to experience it now is what salvation is all about. That also is what he meant by “eternal life.”

We may not hear this in much preaching today, but, biblically, eternal life is not just about an endless life in the future; it is about a renewed *quality* of life that begins in the present. Eternal life is *the life of the Eternal*, the quality of life that God experiences that actually can be experienced by us human beings in *this* life.

Each October, many churches throughout the United States observe what is called Reformation Sunday. Unfortunately, that observance usually is focused *only* on a reformation that took place in the 16th century which attempted to bring about change in the Roman Catholic Church, an effort spurred by Martin Luther that resulted ultimately in the establishment of Protestant churches; so many Reformation Sunday observances leave the impression that reformation is only a *past* event. That is only partly true.

It would be more accurate to remember that there have been *many* efforts at reform—some successful, some not—that preceded *and* followed the so-called Protestant Reformation. A number of them are recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures; and we sometimes forget that, in the New Testament, Jesus *himself* was very much a reformer. Repeatedly, he challenged the Judaism of his day, disagreed with some prevailing interpretations of scripture and found unacceptable a number of solidly entrenched religious practices. He even denigrated many religious leaders—Scribes, Pharisees, even the chief priests—whom he thought were leading people astray.

We often overlook *Jesus's* prophetic efforts at reform by paying scant attention to statements such as “You have heard it said..., but *I* say to you...!” Moreover, the stinging accusation that many of the accepted and admired religious functionaries of his day were “blind leaders of the blind” was a costly attempt at reform, an effort to move people in the direction of constructive change. And don't forget the story of the so-called “cleansing of the Temple,” in which he asserted that God's house was being invaded by a “den of thieves,” all of whom he apparently drove away. Jesus—was a *reformer!*

So, today, when we at CCM attempt to *follow* Jesus, *one* aspect of living into that reality means that *we* need to be constructive reformers, too. Actually, if we take seriously the broad sweep of the scriptural witness, we will see, as did Jesus, that, rightly understood, reformation is a *continuing* reality. It can never be *only* a once-for-all-time *past* event, a *fait accompli*, something done only by someone who lived *before* us. Even *today*, we, as individuals *and* as a church, desperately need reform. Indeed, at a time when droves of individuals are *leaving* mainline churches, I think reform is critical if *authentic* Christianity is to survive. And, just maybe, each of *us* needs to experience constructive change if *we* want ever to experience more vibrant lives (salvation, eternal life).

As individuals, the reformation that we need most in order to experience the fuller, more qualitative life that Jesus said God wants to give us, is to do that which even the most dedicated among us rarely *ever* have done: to put the kingdom of God *first*, to make that an overarching priority that affects all that we do and say: our decision-making, the way in

which we see reality, the way we vote, and *even*, eventually, the way in which we think. That obviously is a lifelong task, which is why we need the constant support of a *good* church—the deep caring and encouragement of others who are on the same journey as we.

But what *is* a “good” church? It is one that regularly inspires us to keep our focus on the *key* to living the fulfilled life: putting the kingdom of God first in our daily round. *Not* to do that has consequences. We will *not* experience a maximally fulfilling life. But *to* make the kingdom of God a priority in everyday life has benefits. Medical research indicates that most of us will need fewer medications—for anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Our relationships will tend to be deeper and more qualitative; and, on average, we will tend to live up to seven years longer than if we were to ignore spiritual values and have no meaningful spiritual community. It seems that there are good reasons why Jesus tried to move us in the direction of *individual* reformation. We not only find healing for ourselves, we become agents for the healing of the world.

But individual reformation is only a *part* of the equation, because people can attend and even be active in a church *without* growing spiritually. So, as Kierkegaard pointed out centuries ago, churches need continuing reformation, too. I believe that they need consciously and deliberately to move away from the present inordinate emphasis upon creeds, dogmas, and so-called “right” thinking. After all, none of those human constructs can encompass the sacred. Mere words can never capture or domesticate the Holy.

As you have heard me say on many occasions, Jesus was not a teacher of theology—a systematic “right” or “sound” way of believing that will make us acceptable to God. Rather, he taught a *way of life*, a spirituality characterized by growth toward giving and receiving love *in increasingly mature ways*. And, as most of you know, *Jesus’s* approach, not a rigid focus on doctrinal conformity, is what we emphasize here at CCM. Instead of asking you to put your mind in chains to some supposedly “correct” set of beliefs, often influenced primarily by church councils or some well-meaning reformer from the past, we encourage and free you

to remain open to where the Spirit of God may be leading you in the *present*.

I believe that people today are leaving major denominational churches in large numbers because they no longer find inordinate emphasis on old creeds and dogmas relevant—and *definitely* not life-changing. Actually, I salute such people for their honesty as well as their thinking for themselves, for “loving God with their mind” and not *just* with their heart. But I would suggest to them that, instead of *leaving* church, they might become constructive reformers, as did Jesus himself, thereby creating churches in which people’s God-given spiritual hunger for a better, more fulfilling life, characterized by deeper, more fulfilling relationships, can be satisfied and substituted for the emptiness of doctrinal conformity.

It appears that all of us, both individually *and* collectively, need reformation as a *continuing* endeavor to which we are still called, even in the *present*. The past is the past. The question is: to what is the God who makes all things new calling us *now*? So we invite all of our members and friends to become a part of that exhilarating reality as we seek to incarnate it in our life together at CCM.

Takers, anyone?

As you answer that question for yourself, remember: I deeply love and believe in each of you.

Your pastor and friend,

John

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN OCTOBER

A Handy Summary

A Note to Our Visitors: *Our fellowship ordinarily gathers on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month. Any deviation from that custom will be announced at one of our gatherings, in our newsletter, and on our website.*

Sunday, October 9 (2nd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. SPIRITUAL GROWTH GATHERING

No one can *mature* spiritually without *growing*, so, for everyone who takes his or her spiritually journey seriously, each month, CCM offers an opportunity to grow *toward* maturity; and today is our opportunity in October. This gathering will be a time when all of us can begin that journey anew, because it marks the beginning of a new series that can help to clarify some important aspects of the Christian pilgrimage. We're calling it **REDISCOVERING THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY.**

There will be no book to read. Instead, we will use a brief video (DVD) presentation followed by an opportunity to discuss what we've seen. Finally, John will give his own "take" on the topic for the day.

In our first session we'll highlight the difference between two very different approaches to growing toward spiritual health and wholeness. It will be a much-needed contrast of fundamentalism with a more mature approach that was taught and lived by Jesus. Unfortunately, many people have been taught that fundamentalism *is* the way that Jesus

taught. But today, you'll be able to learn the *difference* between the two, and you'll discover how one approach seriously *inhibits* spiritual growth, while the other frees us to experience it!

Come discover how exciting it can be to grow spiritually, to experience the joy of new insights, and the liberating relief one can have by sharing Christ's own journey into wholeness. We'll adjourn between 11:30 a.m. and 12 noon.

Sunday, October 16 (3rd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. WORSHIP GATHERING

The word worship originally meant "worthship;" so, when we gather today, we'll be declaring the *worth*, the *value* of relating the totality of our life to God. We'll do so by looking at the importance of reform (constructive change) in our individual lives and in the life of our church.

We are particularly fortunate to have as our guest proclaimer, Dr. Carl Evans, a treasured friend of CCM and a frequent presence in our pulpit. As valued professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at USC, he has contributed significantly to the life of countless students as well as to the community at large; and, since his retirement, he has continued to impact our lives and those of numerous others by his tireless involvement in various forms of ministry. So we look forward to having him with us in worship today.

We'll have our usual informal discussion of the sermon following worship and will adjourn by about 12 noon.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

PLEASE NOTE THESE CHANGES!

As indicated in our last newsletter, our usual practice of gathering together on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month will be different in October and November. In *those* two months, we'll be meeting on the 2nd and 3rd Sunday. In *December*, we'll return to our usual practice of gathering on the 2nd and 4th Sunday. If you haven't already done so, you might want to mark these dates on your calendar.

The events for October, of course, are outlined in this newsletter. In November, we'll have our second spiritual growth gathering on the 13th, and will have our annual Thanksgiving worship and the celebration of Holy Communion on the 20th. You may want to reserve these dates on your calendar.