

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE MIDLANDS

Unapologetically Christian, Unapologetically Progressive

Pastor's Paragraphs

RELIGIOUS ELITISM

It never fails. My use of the ungrammatical "it" in my last sentence refers to elitist attitudes in religion that seem never to be in short supply. But what does "elitist attitudes" mean? Throughout my ministry, I have encountered an amazing number of people who think that the religion to which *they* belong is the only "true" one. Other religions that do not share *their* beliefs and practices are not acceptable and often are even seen as enemies.

Recently, a mother contacted me and asked for my advice regarding, as she expressed it, her "apostate son" who had begun to read books on the major world religions. It seems that he found some insights in Buddhism and Hinduism that he thought were valid and helpful. "I brought my boy up right," the mother said. He was baptized a Christian and became a member of my Southern Baptist church nearly 25 years ago; but now, I fear that his mind will be contaminated with unacceptable ideas from non-Christian religions-you know, some of those pagan groups."

That dear lady had been taught in her church that being Southern Baptist is the only *legitimate* form of religious expression and that any other religion is not grounded in reality. She made it clear that she considered her own religion to be the *creme de la creme* expression of that which is ultimate and the only one that is valid-not just for herself, but for every person in every country throughout this world. "That's why we have missionaries," she explained, "to teach other people the only right way." That, my dear people, is what, in this article, I am calling religious elitism.

"What is your source of authority for believing that all of the major religions of the world except Christianity contain no valid truths?" I asked. "The Bible," she answered quickly. I responded, "Would it be helpful to know that the reported words of Jesus *in* the Bible seem to indicate that there *might* be a certain amount of *truth* embedded in some of the major religions of the world?" "But Jesus *never* indicated that," she retorted. "Are you *sure*?" I asked. "Positive," she insisted.

Our conversation lasted for nearly two hours before I convinced my caller that her chosen source of authority, the Judeo-Christian Bible, actually *does* contain a perspective quite different from the one she had been taught in her Southern Baptist church-a viewpoint enunciated by Jesus himself that would seem to allow her to free her adult son with an enquiring mind to explore the tenets of other

religions without fear.

The mother was startled when I told her that, in the Gospel of John, Jesus portrays himself as a Shepherd of sheep who are *not* limited to only one religious group or perspective. Indeed, John's Gospel tells us that, on one occasion, Jesus shocked some Pharisees who thought that they *alone* were the true people of God, and that other religious perspectives had little or no value. He told them pointedly, "I have sheep that do *not* belong to *this* fold...!" ("This fold" referred to Israel.) In other words, religious viewpoints held by groups other than the Israeli Jews should not be discounted, because some of *them* were Jesus' sheep, also. I cannot imagine a more salient response to the widespread elitism so prevalent among religious groups in our own day.

But if Jesus incarnated God's truth but lived his entire short life in Palestine and only influenced people who lived there, how could he claim that it is possible for religious groups in *other* areas to be his sheep, as well? Jesus could say that with confidence because no one can limit the activity of the Holy Spirit. The God who *is* Spirit, Jesus said, can be anywhere at any time. The Holy Spirit is like the wind: It blows *wherever* it wills. So, Jesus seemed to be telling the people of his day-and now ours- that God's Spirit is *already* active in locations and groups other than ours and, like a gentle breeze or mighty wind, can be in multiple places at the same time. The Spirit of God cannot be harnessed or constrained.

So, who can say with smug certainty that the Spirit of God has not been present in, for, and through the other great religions of the world? The outward *expression* of the Spirit's presence in different cultures may vary from ours, just as do their foods, manners, and other customs. But *underneath* those outward cultural differences, the major religions of the world can experience the Spirit of God energizing much that is within them, which could be why so many of them subscribe to values identical to those taught by Jesus.

I told the worried mother who called me that I myself, a committed follower of Jesus, have discovered helpful, vital insights in some of the great world religions, wisdom that seemed to be anchored solidly in the central value of love taught by Jesus.

But what if someone were to ask me which major world religion I believe to be the *greatest* how would I choose? Despite my openness to and deep appreciation for *all* of the great religions of the world, I have come to the conclusion that the teaching of Jesus, preserved in Christianity, has an edge over the others. Why? Other religions, of course, teach love and compassion. But, for me, Jesus brought a depth dimension to love and loving that does not seem to be strongly emphasized in other religions: his clear call to love our *enemies*, not *just* the people who love *us*. That obviously involves the willingness to *forgive*. Jesus' passionate, compelling emphasis upon *forgiveness* and the *love of enemies* constitutes the most profound expression of what it means to

love deeply that I have encountered.

The mother who requested my help in relating to her "apostate son" called me back later to tell me that she had apologized to him for being somewhat myopic, "a bit short-sighted," as she put it, by trying to stop him from learning what the other great religions of the world have to say. I see that as commendable spiritual growth, admirable progress; but, if I were in a similar situation, I hope I would not only free her son to read and learn about other world religions, I actually would congratulate him for *wanting* to do so! After all, how many 25-year-olds would *care* what the religions of the world have to say? He appears to be several miles ahead of many of *us*.

May God help us *all* to use every opportunity to expand our consciousness and to deepen our understanding. Depending on the degree of our openness, who knows what new truth God may choose to impart to us!

Please remember, always; how much I love each one of you. You, too, are God's wonderful, priceless "sheep."

Your pastor and friend, John

IT'S HAPPENING AT CCM

October, 2018

As usual, our fellowship will gather this month on the 2nd and 4th Sunday.

Sunday, October 14 (2nd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. WORSHIP GATHERING

This morning, churches of many denominations will be observing what is called *Reformation Sunday*-recalling the time when Martin Luther attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church of which he was a vital part. Here at CCM, however, we will not be retreating back to the 16th century. *Our focus will be on what, if any, reforms might be helpful for us today.*

Since churches in *every* era have needed reform, 21st century churches are no exception. Major denominations are losing members with unprecedented rapidity. Also, on the part of some individuals, there is a great deal of hostility toward churches. Since our pastor is quite aware of dwindling church memberships and the anger and distaste some people have toward churches, he originally decided to entitle his sermon, "To Hell with Christianity!" That is a quotation from one of John's patients when he was pursuing doctoral studies. However, some people might not realize that title *is* a quotation rather than an insensitive exclamation from John, so he thought it might be helpful to *re-name* his sermon. The *new* title is "WHEN RELIGION IS A BURDEN." But he still plans to mention the individual who screamed "To Hell with Christianity," because the burden articulated to John continues to be a much too heavy, completely unnecessary load that huge numbers of churches constantly impose upon people today-an addition that renders those churches irrelevant and out of touch with the simple way of life taught by Jesus. Because many church members are victims without being aware of it, this topic needs to be *addressed*, and it will be at CCM!

An informal opportunity for discussion of these r m on will take place immediately after the worship service. (Out by about 12:00 noon)

Sunday, October 28 (4th Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. ENLIGHTENMENT GATHERING

(Definition Of Enlightenment: Enlightenment is gaining helpful insights or deeper understanding.)

Today, as we continue a contemporary version of the healing ministry of Jesus, we begin the forth in a series of sessions on how to manage stress *constructively*. Stress does not *have* to continue to *suppress* the effectiveness of our immune system, thereby damaging and even shortening our lives by everything from heart attacks and strokes to cancer as well as more minor but irritating inconveniences such as colds, flu, and multiple allergies. This series combines the results of potentially lifesaving scientific research and helpful spiritual wisdom to enable us to live fuller, more healthful lives, punctuated by much more deeply satisfying relationships.

Our first session was a helpful introduction to the topic. The second session which dealt with happiness was, our pastor thought, *not* one of our most meaningful topics. Our last session on anger, however, was a blockbuster with most of our group almost literally sitting on the edge of our seats. Comments such as "powerful" and "I wouldn't want to have missed this" were overheard after the presentation and discussion.

This morning we will be dealing with a reality that we can't escape. The topic is "Heaven and Hell Can 8e Other People." Who hasn't had relationships that prove the truth of that assertion? Some people *add* to our stress, and others, thankfully, have an opposite affect-actually *de-stressing* us and helping us to have more healthful lives. Our *emphasis* in this session will be on nurturing and maintaining maximally *fulfilling* relationships. And, hey, who couldn't use a few more of *those*?

(Out between 11:30 a.m. and 12 noon, depending upon the extent of meaningful discussion our topic generates)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

WE REMEMBER

We remember and embrace, with thoughtfulness and prayer, our dear Gary and Margaret Davis upon the loss of Margaret's very special grandson, William (Billy) A. Tidwell, a fine student and an outstanding musician who died on September 21st at the age of 20.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next month, we look forward to entering and celebrating the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons- two of the most joyful times of the year. Please note that, during both November and December, *we will be gathering on the 1st and 3rd Sunday instead of the usual 2nd and 4th Sunday of the month.*

Our THANKSGIVING observance will take place on November 18th at 10:00 a.m. In December, we'll begin our celebration of the holiday season with our traditional CHRISTMAS FELLOWSHIP BRUNCH on Sunday, December 9th at 11:00 a.m. As always, it is important to make advance reservations for this important occasion. For your convenience, you can do so on the Sign-up Sheet on the Welcome Table at CCM on October 14th and 28th or November 11th and 18th, or you can call our pastor (331-9999) to have your name added to the list by November 18th. Please feel free to invite friends and other members of your family to join you for our brunch.

Finally, our ANNUAL CHRISTMAS WORSHIP GATHERING will be on Sunday, December 16th an extended service from 10:00 a.m. until about 11:30 a.m. with no discussion afterward. The Christmas service is being held a Sunday earlier than usual for the convenience of our members and friends who plan to be out of town during Christmas week. This will be our last gathering in 2018 and is always a meaningful time of togetherness.

WANT TO JOG YOUR MEMORY?

Following one of our worship gatherings or enlightenment sessions, it is not unusual to hear someone say to our pastor, "I wish I had been able to write down what you said about so-and-so." We can help you with that! At each of our gatherings, we will now have on the Welcome Table some sheets on which you can take notes as well as some pens with which to write. (Please return pens to the Welcome Table so that others will be able to use them later.) We hope that this opportunity to preserve something that you think could have potential value for you will add even more meaning to your CCM experiences.

CCM:

REDEFINING WHAT CHURCH CAN BE

WHEREVER YOU ARE, THE DIFFERENCE IS WORTH ANY DISTANCE!

Our Telephone:

Senior Pastor: (803) 331-9999. Our mobile cell phone is more reliable than our landline phone, because it is on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If no one answers, it usually means that our pastor is in a meeting, in a counseling session, doing regular spiritual mentoring, or is involved in some other form of ministry; but he will return your call as soon as possible, so please be sure to leave a message.

Our Websites:

CommunityChurchMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

or

CommunityChurchOfftheMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

Our Mailing Address: P.O. Box 6946, Columbia, S.C. 29260-6946

Our Location: CCM usually gathers on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month, and any changes will be noted in our monthly newsletter. Please join us at the gorgeous Seven Oaks Community Center in beautiful Seven Oaks Park, 200 Leisure Lane (between St. Andrews and Piney Grove roads, just off 1-26 West). When you enter the spacious parking lot, you'll see the main entrance to our newly renovated building on your right. Once you are inside the Reception Area, our meeting locality is on your left. For updates on our programming, to verify meeting times, to learn about changes in scheduling, or for any pastoral need, please feel free to call 331-9999, night or day.

ALWAYS, WE'RE HERE FOR YOU!