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Editors' Notes

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Editors' Notes

D'ESTA LOVE AND STUART LOVE

Shortly after the Restoration Forum (XXII) at Rochester College, October 2004, David Fleer called your editors and enthusiastically reported to us the essential substance of, and positive and provocative reactions to, Leonard Allen's noteworthy essay on the future of the Restoration Movement delivered at that meeting. He felt, and we agreed, that this was a possibility—the nucleus—for an issue of *Leaven*. Assembled on that occasion were numerous persons from the three branches of the Stone-Campbell heritage—Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ. As we talked it became apparent that we needed to elicit thoughtful responses to Allen's essay from each of the branches of our common tradition—three probing analyses that would enrich us with historical, theological, and cultural insights. What follows in the Editors' Notes is Fleer's assessment of the event as well as a short guide, introductions if you please, of those who answered Allen's challenge. Fleer also introduces us to a bibliographic essay that parallels Allen's essay as well as a reflective article on the current sociological state of the status and roles of women as ministers in our heritage, especially pertaining to Churches of Christ. Fleer closes his editorial with comments on a sermon he has supplied and an encouragement to think liturgically about Christmas from Lee Magness.

We commend this issue to you. We believe you will be challenged by it. As we close our thoughts and pass the baton to Dr. Fleer, we want you to know that our opening issue for 2007 is on *The Church*, edited by C. Robert Wetzel and Phillip D. Kenneson. Other issues for 2007 include *Colossians*, edited by Ron Cox, *Jeremiah*, edited by Paul Watson, and *Missions* edited by Sonny Guild.

Please keep *Leaven* in your prayers.

When the city's newspaper picks up on a religion story, there's a good chance it's old news to insiders. So, when the religion editor for the *Detroit Free Press* recently ran a lead story on Emergent Church pastor, Rob Bell, we knew the word was out.¹

Bell stopped in Detroit on his nationwide "Everything is Spiritual" tour to preach about planets, stars, and God's creation of humanity. Overall, Bell sold out twenty-four of twenty-five shows in bars, clubs, and theaters across the United States. The idea is that Christianity, as we often see it, is outmoded. Postmodernity has taken hold in our culture and the church needs to adapt or die. Poking his finger in the eyes of fundamentalists, Bell argued that the Bible's message is more about helping the poor than personal success or a literal reading of the Creation story.

Long before Bell arrived in Detroit, before 11,000 persons began to attend his Grandville, Michigan church, and before 50,000 individuals weekly downloaded his online sermons, however, the best thinkers in the Restoration Movement were already engaged in constructive dialogue with the Emergent Church.

In recent years we have grown familiar with this kind of reflective and intelligent conversation. Not long ago Mark Noll, in a major review of the ongoing and creative work of Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes, noted that such self critical works are rare in Christian movements.² Rare, perhaps, but so healthy. Unlike

1. David Crumm, "His Message Packs the House: Preacher Electrifies Audiences," *Detroit Free Press*, July 30, 2006, B1, 7.

2. Mark A. Noll, "Rethinking Restorationism—A Review Article," *Reformed Journal* (November 1989): 15-21.

the conversation I heard recently amongst some academic colleagues. One said of Churches of Christ, “We are so self-loathing,” to which another immediately quipped, “And we don’t do that very well.”

The opposite of self-loathing is self-congratulation, a route that ignores dangerous signs and threatening obstacles. Leonard Allen, commended by Noll for taking an alternative path, continues this recent trend of critical self assessment in this issue’s lead essay. With similar verve, respondents honor Allen with honest critique, all looking to the future of the Movement in light of developments within Christianity and our culture.

Leonard Allen’s essay creates the same electricity felt when it was first presented at the Restoration Forum (XXII), Rochester College, October 2004. Allen sets out three challenges that face the Restoration Movement as we address the overwhelming changes posed by the realities of Postmodernism. First, new spiritual openings, which are visible, surprising, eclectic, and confused, are attractive to those with shriveled souls. Our Restorationist reflexes to these movements that distrust historical Christianity may be more reactionary than constructive as we continue to live in the long shadow of rationality. Second, our unity movement failed in part for lack of a rational consensus. This will set out an enormous challenge requiring a fundamental reorientation. Third, our anti-traditional tradition, seen in the opposition to creeds, will prove troublesome because tradition is inescapable and construes the way we shape reality.

Allen centers his closing thoughts in the context of our post-denominational age where new churches are springing up everywhere. Christians of all stripes are being forced to disengage from old habits that once made them feel at home in America. Allen contends that Churches of the Restoration heritage should become “missionary congregations” in our chaotic and dysfunctional culture. Fledgling models like the Emergent Church and instances in the Christian Church are places where the gospel is being brought to people through an authentic incarnation. Allen ends with an emphasis on a few of our theological traditions that may serve us well as we move into postmodern times.

In response to Allen’s heuristic essay, Churches of Christ provide the context for **KEITH HUEY** who uses David Edwin Harrell’s grid of “progressive/conservative” to navigate this stream’s daunting kaleidoscope of convictions. Filling in detail from primary sources, engaging other Church of Christ historians, and providing his own crisp analysis, Huey creates a reflective and articulate dialogue, always within earshot of what matters most.

At places Huey challenges Allen. Stone and Richardson, for example, are distant voices and “the Churches of Christ have been overwhelmingly dominated by alternative visions” and are therefore not prepared for Stone and Richardson’s spirit-centered approach. Huey further prods, “Unless we move beyond our auditoriums and embrace a missional ethos, we are unlikely to trust the Spirit; unless we trust the Spirit, we will never experience the unity of the Spirit.”

Huey raises two reverberating questions. First, if we employ the changes suggested by Allen and others, will we still be the Churches of Christ? Second, if our heritage permits significant reforms, will we have the fortitude to embrace them? Huey’s response and caveats create a remarkably stimulating discussion that shows deep gratitude for God’s work thus far and dependence on God for the future.

NEWELL WILLIAMS responds to Allen from the vantage of the Disciples of Christ. Struck by personal similarities to Allen’s vocational history, Williams claims that this recognition is all the more striking because, “this is where many similarities end.” Following Allen’s lead, Williams begins his remarks with a candid disclosure of his own perspective and eventually sets out three challenges to Allen’s thesis. Williams puts additional weight on Barton Stone’s response to spiritual hunger and emphasis on unity and proposes that Campbell be read, not as “anti-tradition,” but as “anti-sectarian.” Williams contends that a century of separate histories has made a profound difference in how the Disciples read their heritage including their segregation from southern America, the less educated, and other cultural factors. Thus, Williams sees the Stone-Campbell theological heritage “not so much a source of challenges, but a rich array of resources for

responding to the challenges of the postmodern era.”

PAUL BLOWERS, in basic agreement with Allen's thesis, interprets from the vantage point of Christian Churches the significance that “the Enlightenment meta-narrative has effectively collapsed, that we are living in a brave new world where Christians must be acutely aware of the *traditioned* character of their faith, yet also of the inevitable impact of cultural location and particularized perspectives on their ongoing interpretation of that faith...” How rare to find such substantive and divergent responses to a seminal essay.

Further, **KATHY PULLEY** argues that given the challenges facing churches today those with the greatest chance for survival will be ones who welcome the creativity and gifts of all members, including women. She provides three heuristic “types” of church responses to women's ministry, focusing on the one most engaged by the current cultural shifts. The heart of Pulley's essay interacts with the question, “What theological and cultural factors are influencing these churches?” Readers will be delighted by this article's clear style, wide scope, and wise observations.

DOUG FOSTER enhances this issue with a review of the literature characterized by a breadth and importance that will certainly stimulate “further reading.” Foster organizes the annotated bibliography into six sections that parallel Allen's essay: postmodernism, our rational roots, unity, tradition, new understandings of church, and tradition in service to us during these times. Readers likely will focus on one review and then scan to another, appreciating Foster's devotion to scholarship and the Restoration Movement as their appetites grow.

The issue continues with a sermon by the guest editor, **DAVID FLEER**, which attempts to address indirectly our heritage in light of current challenges. Working with Ephesians 5.15-21, the sermon respects the preaching characteristic of the early twentieth century while it looks for ways to move into the world imagined for today's Christians. In a word, the sermon attempts to embody some of the essays' theoretical work.

Finally, in yet another and different vein, **LEE MAGNESS** turns our attention to Christmas with another creative liturgical reading entitled “Cradle and Cross.”

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