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"Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down"

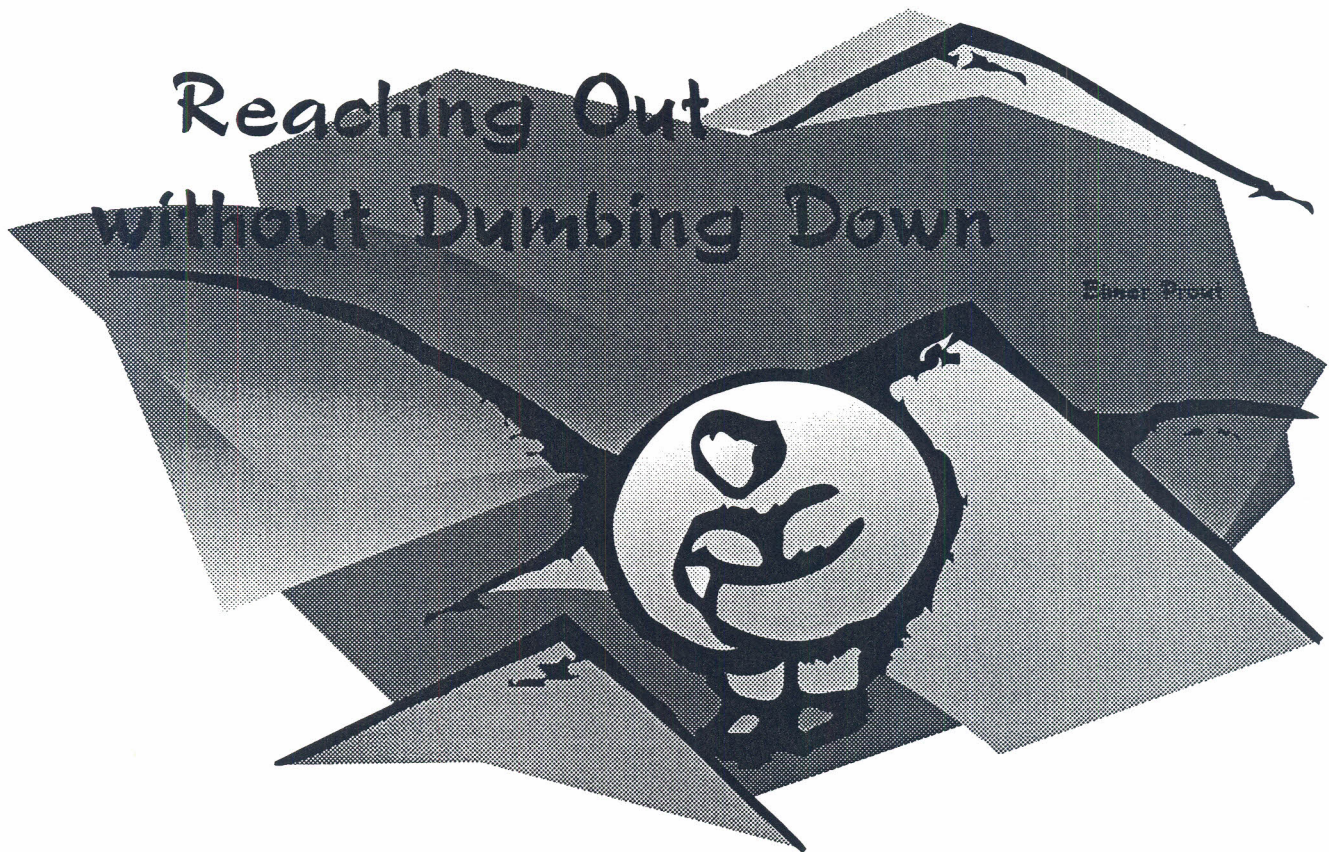
Elmer Prout

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Based on a class presented at the Pepperdine Lectures, April, 1996. The title is taken from the book of the same title by Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995).

The title of Marva Dawn's book is new. The challenge of reaching out without dumbing down is as old as God's initial revelation to humankind. The question has been and still is, How can God's spokespersons communicate the divine message in ways that are true to God's intention and that, at the same time, get through to human hearts?

The issue goes beyond questions of the style and format of our public worship to include all aspects of church life. "Reaching out" is a daily opportunity; it is not a Sunday morning hobby. The life activities of God's gathered people include formal worship assemblies, evangelism, education, service, fellowship—whatever terms we may use to describe church body life. The intention of all those activities and efforts is to say clearly and convincingly:

*This is the Lord Jesus Christ;
This is his gospel;*

*This is the eternal life Jesus Christ gives;
This is the present daily life to which the Lord Jesus Christ calls all people.*

When the invitation to teach this class came along, it seemed like a snap. I had just read a good book with a clever title. That book is an up-to-the-minute discussion of the transdenominational worship and outreach wars that are being fought all across America today. I was concerned about the topic. I held some opinions on it and had even filed a bit of historical background. Therefore, I thought, I could pull together Prout's ready-made solution to the Church of Christ outreach and worship wars of the late twentieth century.

I was excited by the prospect. But even as the excitement grew, a phrase spoken years ago by a co-worker in Japan kept confronting me: "methods magic." It is that fine old Western attitude that says, Get the methods, refine them, put them to work, and the desired results are sure to follow! "Methods magic" caters to our confidence in the human ability to get all the details straight and to put them together effectively. We must face the fact, however, that whatever other purposes worship and outreach

may serve, they are not intended by God to foster human self-confidence.

“Methods magic” is a watchword for conservatives and liberals alike. “Keep the old language and forms, and great results are certain”; “Use new language and forms, and great results are certain.” This mindset sees methods, old or new, as the key to church life. Plans, methods, programs, conservation, innovation—all of those factors have a definite place in church life. But that place is neither primary nor determinative. No plan, method, or pattern—old or new, conservative or liberal—is the source of church life.

I had begun preparation for this class as if methods held their own spiritual power. My co-worker’s words reminded me that I must take time to identify the setting in which methods can serve a Christian purpose. Given our Western penchant for hurrying to the practical details, it is difficult for a church to spend time on matters that may appear to be mere theory. But unless we formulate and maintain a clear biblical and theological foundation for church life, our programs will soon join the clutter of discarded ideas that mark the path of the church over the past decades.

My remarks, therefore, will not give you a list of steps designed to bring either stability or innovation into congregational life. That kind of list has its place, but it comes much later. Rather, I will share with you something of my search for a biblical and theological foundation for church worship and outreach. The search is far from over. But at this point I will summarize it under three headings: Realism, Relevance, and Renewal.

Realism

We begin with biblical realism about the world in which we live and to which we reach out in the name of Christ. The world is fallen, broken, frustrated, and sin-filled. In this fallen world, we live as fallen people. Our outreach efforts run immediately into the reality of the sin-filled world and the rebellious human heart—our own hearts as well as “theirs.” The mixed results of the apostle Paul’s mission methods demonstrate how this reality impacts Christian outreach. Paul’s aim was to reach out with the gospel to as many people as he possibly could (see Rom 1:9, 13, 14; 15:19, 20). In pursuit of that goal, Paul made himself “a slave to everyone” and became “all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:19–23).

It is fair to say that Paul lived up to the ideal of incarnational outreach. We wish to do the same. The challenge we face is to hold that ideal in tension with the realism of Paul’s experience. His “all things to all people” did not guarantee that conversion to Christ would result. For example, Paul and Barnabas were “expelled” from Pisidian Antioch even though they spoke the language of the locals, observed their holy day, and used the same Scriptures (Acts 13:14–50). In Athens Paul was scorned in the lecture arena even though he quoted from a Greek poet in his presentation (Acts 17:28–34). Paul did not give up his efforts, but neither did he measure the validity or the value of his evangelism by the world’s reaction to it.

The ultimate demonstration of the harsh reality of incarnational outreach is the life of Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus Christ reached farthest; he identified most totally; he was rejected most completely (see John 1:11).

Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul show us a reality that we can trace throughout the Bible and through church history as well. I do not mention the pattern to foster defeatism or irresponsible evasion of outreach. Rather, I mention it to help us avoid the enervating sense of guilt that is produced by unrealistic, unbiblical expectations—expectations built on the idea that if our methods in worship and evangelism are truly effective, people will flock to our congregations. That view seems to contend that the church’s choice of correct methods is responsible for leading people to conversion. It says, in effect, that if people are not being converted, it is because the church is not reaching out in ways that touch people where they live.

That criticism, sincere though it undoubtedly is, does not nourish worship or evangelism in the long run. It is too introspective to turn us to God. We would do well to

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ask ourselves how our expectations stand up in the light of a verse like 2 Cor 4:4: "The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." Certainly, we must quote that verse humbly and apply it with caution. It is not an excuse for us to write the world off as blind and bound for hell. Nevertheless, rejection of the gospel is not always the result of the church's failure to reach out properly. It can also be the result of the unbeliever's choice.

Sympathy and realism must be held together in all our gospel efforts. Thus Paul was willing to die for Israel's salvation. But at the same time, he was not blind to Israel's determination to establish their own righteousness rather than to submit to God's (see Rom 9:1-3; 10:1-4).

As we reach out with the gospel, we must be open to innovations in methods. We must be willing to examine all of our customary practices in formal worship, fellowship, service, and the like. None of our traditions are exempt from thoroughgoing and continuing evaluation. But if we are not biblically realistic about the fallen, sinful world and the human heart, we will find ourselves under a cloud of disappointment that leads to pointless, rootless experimentation—if not to actual compromise of the gospel.

Relevance

Relevant: related to the matter at hand; to the point; pertinent. In our culture, the phrase "felt needs" goes hand in hand with the call for relevance.

The determination to be relevant is vital to the life of the church. The church began by responding directly to the felt needs of a multitude. "What shall we do?" . . . 'Repent. . .'" (Acts 2:37-39). Three thousand people felt the relevance of that reply and acted on it. The same pattern can be seen in the encounters of Philip and the Ethiopian, Peter and Cornelius, and Paul and the jailer (Acts 8; 10; 16). In each case the felt and expressed needs opened the door for the believers to give a relevant answer.

It is vital, however, to notice that the answers were not shaped by those felt needs. The content of the answers was not determined or defined by the wishes or the knowledge or the pain of the questioners. The believers heard the deep struggle voiced in the questions. They honored the intensity of those struggles. And then they went beyond the human sources of the cries. Their loyalty, their responsibility was to the life and will of the one who sent them to speak. Those believers were witnesses and spokes-

persons for the crucified and risen Christ. The content of their answers was determined by what they believed and knew about the Lord Jesus Christ.

The life of the church is lived at the point where the message of the Christ and the felt needs of people intersect. The church stands ready to help people negotiate that encounter redemptively. In Acts 2, 8, 10, and 16, the encounter was indeed redemptive. But those converts were not the only people who had felt needs. The temple authorities felt the need to prevent the testimony to the risen Christ (Acts 4:2; 5:28). Their encounter was not redemptive. In Athens people were eager to hear "the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21). Their curiosity gave Paul an opportunity to speak. As long as he spoke in religious generalities, the listeners' interest held. But when Paul moved to the Christian specific of judgment through the risen Christ, many sneered and turned away. Surely Paul was saddened to see those people turn away, but he had no choice: "I was resolved to know nothing while I was among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2-5). Paul's desire to be relevant—"all things to all people"—was held in the light of the fact that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Cor 1:18, 21).

We find a surprising bluntness in the words of Jesus to would-be followers. "Foxes have holes. . . . Let the dead bury the dead. . . . He who puts his hand to the plow . . ." (Luke 9:57-62). The rich young man was given no easy terms for kingdom life (Matt 19:16-22). Upon hearing Jesus' words about the bread of life, people said, "This is a hard saying; who can stomach it?" . . . Many of his disciples turned back" (John 6:60-66). The hard fact is

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that Jesus would not cater to the whims of the crowds. He would not bend to their understandings of relevance. He would not speak or act on their limited terms. Jesus constantly called his listeners to follow him beyond their felt needs into the new reality of the kingdom of God. He calls us to follow him on that same path, and commissions us to repeat the gospel call in his terms to the present world.

The example of the Lord Jesus Christ and the impact of his replies bring us back to the necessity of clear thinking about relevance. Who is qualified to identify basic human needs in contrast to mere felt needs? Who will determine the extent to which felt needs measure the message with which we reach out? Who can formulate the answers in terms that are faithful to the Lord Christ and his gospel? "Instead of continuing to interpret the gospel story through the language and categories of the world, the church must now interpret the world through the language and categories of the gospel."¹ Observes Dawn:

Many churches who want desperately to attract people to Christ miss the point by offering worship so shallow that not enough of Christ is proclaimed to engender lasting belief. . . . If, in their attempts to revitalize worship, churches merely speed it up and lower its substance, then they trivialize both God and the neighbor. They don't respect their neighbors enough to offer them the solid food of God's fullness.²

If we are to be truly relevant in gospel terms, we will not hesitate to follow the apostle Paul in becoming "all things to all people." But before we set out on that route of adaptation, we must join the apostle in the unshakable determination to know nothing but Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and exalted.

Renewal and Repentance

At this point in my presentation, I wanted to have another *R*—Realism, Relevance . . . Restoration! That sounded fine to me. It was right in tune with our church history since the time of Thomas and Alexander Campbell. It was in line with my personal church experience, as well. Three *Rs* with Restoration as the climax! But the more I tried that word, the taste of it just wasn't right. It did not fit with what I am convinced needs to be said if we are to reach out without dumbing down.

"Restoration" does not fit here because, in my experience, we have spoken of restoration too much in terms of actions, patterns, and systems that are accomplished by human effort and skill. We 1) identify the first-century pattern, 2) work up the plan, and 3) set up the program—outline it logically, present it forcefully. Sounds great until we see that that path takes us back dangerously close to "methods magic." It makes us little more than an echo of the world and its trust in systems analysis and other human improvement techniques. The church is not to be an echo, but a voice.

As I set that *R* word aside, two other words surfaced in my mind: Renewal and Repentance. I pondered which would be better. Suddenly the light dawned—if we are to reach out without dumbing down, we will have to both repent and allow God to renew us. Far, far too long have we followed the path of do-it-yourself religion. Repentance means that we will turn from that approach and humbly open ourselves to God. We will seek to have his hand on us in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of the Son of God. That transformation will, by God's grace, be individual, congregational, and churchwide.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:17–18)

When we seek to allow the Lord's hand to be upon us in this way, Paul's words will come true among us:

But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" (1 Cor 14:24, 25)

To the extent that our focus on what we call "restoration" has centered our attention on our ability to "do restoration"—to that extent, it has held us back from repentance, from the self-abandonment through which God carries on his work of renewal.

I have found great clarification of this point in Henri Nouwen's little book *In the Name of Jesus*. In these "Reflections on Christian Leadership," Nouwen reviews his transition from the academic setting of Harvard and other universities to his work with the mentally handicapped in Toronto's Daybreak communities. Nouwen says:

In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again. Relationships, connections, reputations could no longer be counted on. . . . This experience . . . forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim the unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.³

It seems to me that we in Churches of Christ stand at a similar point of transition. For years we have reached out as a fellowship with a message centered in the call, "Restore the first-century church." Our intentions were undoubtedly sincere. But our message was often expressed in terms of ourselves as the church that "does restoration things, shows restoration things, proves restoration things, and builds restoration things." In other words, we have reached out with a message of our self-perceived relevance. We have suggested, if not actually claimed, that our Restoration plea is the relevant word capable of restoring unity to a divided church and meaning to personal lives through membership in that restored church. It hasn't worked, of course. It is time that we repent of our trust in restorationism. Repent and, in line with Henri Nouwen's transition, "start our church life all over again."

Our true identity is not to be found in the things we claim to have done or to be able to do. Rather, true Christian identity is found in the willingness "to stand in this world with nothing to offer but . . . [our] vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love."⁴

Conclusion

"Methods magic," as I said at the beginning, is the method of choice for both conservatives and liberals who think in terms of finding some pattern or plan that will

guarantee that the church will make an impact on society. Whether people are moving to the left or to the right, the "methods magic" approach keeps the focus on human thought, skill, and action. "Practical" is the watchword. "Let's do something!" is the password.

In the following quotation, with which I close, substitute the words "the church" for "Christian leaders."

Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance. Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them. Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness because, before we know it, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject. But when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative.⁵

It is intimacy with the risen, living, interceding Christ that alone can enable us to reach out without dumbing down.

ELMER PROUT is minister of the Church of Christ in Graton, California.

Notes

¹George Lindbeck, quoted in Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 231.

²Dawn, 280–81.

³Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 16.

⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

⁵*Ibid.*, 31–32.