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Reformation & REVIVAL

JOURNAL

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A Tale of Two Pieties: Nurture and Conversion in American Christianity

William B. Evans

Conservative American Protestantism is, it would seem, more divided than ever before. The old theological boundaries separating Calvinist from Arminian, and Methodist from Presbyterian from Baptist remain, and new issues have emerged (e.g. the so-called "New Perspective on Paul"). At the same time, a host of praxis-related divisions (e.g. the issue of worship style) have also arisen and many people do not have a clear sense of how to evaluate these issues or even determine what is at stake. The older theological categories of analysis often don't seem to do justice to the contours of current controversy. Often ignored in all this are profound differences in piety which have equally profound implications for one's conception of the Christian life, life in the church, how one is to worship, the raising of one's children, and so forth.

The purpose of this article is to explore the contours and implications of what may be called "models of piety." *Webster's Dictionary* defines *piety* as "religious devotion and reverence to God."[1] A model of piety, then, is a particular approach to relating to God, a style of being a Christian. Although these models involve theological content, they are much more than abstract ideas—they are ways of being Christian. In a sense, they are more fundamental than theological constructs. Within conservative American Protestantism, two quite distinct models of

piety have been at work since the beginning of the American Protestant experience. Moreover, these two models of piety color one's understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and also complicate relations between Christians, even within congregations that ostensibly hold to a uniform theology. The task at hand is to explore the dynamics, the strengths and weaknesses, and the implications of these models.

Certain challenges, of course, must be recognized at the outset. American Christians tend to grow up immersed in one particular approach to being Christian, and there is often the temptation to privilege one particular model of piety (namely one's own) as self-evidently correct. However, these are not just issues of right or wrong, but of emphasis and balance, of strengths and weaknesses on both sides. A further complication here is that these models of piety are accompanied by distinctive jargon. Why do Baptists and Presbyterians often have difficulty communicating with each other? Why do some conservative Presbyterians seem to be speaking a different language to one another? It is, at least in part, because they are often operating with different models of piety which are expressed in very different ways. Finally, conservative evangelical communities seem presently to lack the conceptual framework that might allow them to deal constructively with these differences. For the past century or so, American Evangelicals have been preoccupied, for good reason, with fidelity to Scripture and the threat of theological liberalism. That is to say, the symbolic boundaries have been primarily theological, and important historic differences in piety have often been ignored or "papered over" in the interests of evangelical unity.

American Protestantism has had two conflicting models of piety at work since the days of the Puritans in the early seventeenth century. Although a variety of terms have been used over the years for these approaches, they may be called the "nurture" model and the "conversionist" model.[2]

Briefly put, the nurture model views the Christian life as a matter of growth and development, of being nurtured in the faith at an early age. Believers who understand themselves in

these terms may not even be aware of precisely when their Christian life began. Indeed, on this model, people may grow up never knowing a time when they were not trusting in Christ. What really counts is the ongoing walk of faith. Thus, the metaphor of a "walk" or "pilgrimage" is especially favored by nurture-oriented Christians. The conversionist model, on the other hand, views the Christian life as having a momentous and even vivid inception as the person has a conversion experience in which he or she comes to a profound conviction of sin and then experiences the transforming grace of God in a decisive and "dateable" way. Most important for the conversionist is that transition from spiritual death to spiritual life.

THE NURTURE MODEL

The nurture model is rooted in the magisterial Protestant Reformation and the Catholic piety that preceded it. Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin were trying to reform the church of their time. They sought to take the best of the Catholic tradition and to cleanse it of medieval accretions rather than to overturn it wholesale. They were reformers, not revolutionaries, and so their piety reflected much of what had gone before. People were born into the saving context of the church and their faith was to be slowly and carefully nurtured by the ongoing ministry of the Church through catechesis, preaching, and the sacraments. While the Reformers recognized that there was a point at which a person moved from spiritual death to spiritual life, they did not regard this event as something that can be precisely quantified. From the standpoint of a person's internal psychology, it might be relatively uneventful. The ideal here was for a child to grow up in the bosom of mother church never knowing a time when he or she was not trusting in Christ for salvation. Nineteenth-century American theologian, John W. Nevin, whose 1840s-era treatment of these issues is highly insightful, wrote regarding this nurture-oriented piety:

> [I]t is counted not only possible, but altogether natural that children growing up in the bosom of the Church under the

faithful application of the means of grace should be quickened into spiritual life in a comparatively quiet way, and spring up numerously "as willows by the water-courses" to adorn the Christian profession, without being able at all to trace the process by which the glorious change has been effected.[3]

We also see here a marked emphasis upon the sacraments as "means of grace." That is, the sacraments were thought of as actually communicating grace. Baptism is the rite of initiation into the Christian Church. Of course, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, both Luther and Calvin regarded the efficacy of baptism as requiring faith,[4] but the key here is that for nurture piety, baptism is the point of entry into the church. In line with this, Luther and Calvin both had a vibrant baptismal piety. Luther, for example, wrote, "If, then, the holy sacrament of baptism is a thing so great, so gracious and full of comfort, we should pay earnest heed to thank God for it ceaselessly, joyfully, and from the heart, and to give him praise and honor."[5] Classic Reformed confessions follow in this line of thought as they place considerable emphasis on baptism as the point of reception into the visible church and as the beginning of a great pilgrimage of faith.[6] Likewise, the Eucharist or Lord's Supper is the sacrament of ongoing spiritual nourishment and blessing. It, too, is a means of grace, which actually communicates the saving presence of Christ. One need not go into the precise differences between various theories of the mode of Christ's presence—Roman Catholic transubstantiation, Lutheran consubstantiation, and the spiritual realism of Calvin and the Reformed confessions—to make the point that for nurture piety, the Lord's Supper is much more than a bare sign. It does something!

Along with this model of piety comes a distinctive view of the church. One becomes a Christian by being incorporated into the church as an organic unity, a body of Christ. This organic unity is not simply the aggregate sum of its individual parts. As John W. Nevin persistently maintained, the church is not a "sandheap" of individuals, and in a very real sense the church makes the individual rather than the individual

making the church. "The church," Nevin wrote, "is truly the mother of all her children. They do not impart life to her, but she imparts life to them."[7]

The nurture model also entails a view of worship. Worship is the people of God coming into God's presence as an organic unity. The primary purpose of worship is the glory of God and the nurture of God's people rather than evangelism. Often there is a preference for formality and liturgy as symbolizing the congregation's solidarity with the church universal throughout the world and through time. For example, the creeds of the church are often used because they are viewed as an expression of the doctrinal unity of the church through history. With regard to preaching, the Reformers and their immediate successors returned to the patristic practice of expository preaching through biblical books, in contrast to the medieval practice of homilies on lectionary texts and the later evangelical practice of preaching topically on aspects of individual salvation. They thought it important that people be nurtured in the whole counsel of God.[8] They desired churches that were steeped in the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation.

But what are the strengths and weaknesses of this model? One strength is that this nurture model is firmly rooted in the classical Christian tradition, both Catholic and Protestant, and it coheres well with the predominant New Testament metaphors for the church, which tend to be organic and corporate (e.g. the body of Christ, vine and the branches, family of God, etc.). Another strength is its recognition that God deals with people in different ways. It does not schematize a person's experience of becoming a Christian. While not excluding conversion experiences, it does not demand them either. Finally, the nurture model has been profitably influential in shaping the worship practices of God's people for much of Christian history.

But there are weaknesses here as well. A church context where this model predominates may well slip into nominalism, where members are Christians in name only. This is a particular problem when the church's responsibility to catechize

and instruct is shirked. Another weakness is a tendency to lapse into what H. Richard Niebuhr called the "Christ of Culture," that is, a penchant simply to equate the best of prevailing culture with Christianity.[9] There is a temptation to confuse cultural nurture with Christian nurture. If people fulfill the cultural expectations for middle-class respectability, especially in the American South where church involvement is still often a component of community status, they are often regarded as "good Christians." And so the nurture model has been particularly susceptible to the "Kantian reduction" of Christianity to ethics—i.e., Christianity is seen simply a matter of being a good person.

Another weakness here pertains to matters of worship and church organization. Because the nurture model often gives the nod to tradition, it can fall into the trap of "traditionalism." Organizational structures often become set in concrete, and worship can become an exercise in historic preservation rather than the heartfelt doxology of God's people. Nurture-piety oriented Christians must remember the warning of Yale historical theologian Jaroslav Pelikan: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."[10]

THE CONVERSIONIST MODEL

The conversionist model of piety, on the other hand, is distinguished by the conviction that every Christian must undergo a decisive and psychologically apparent change in which the person transitions from spiritual death to spiritual life. The history of this model begins with the Puritans of colonial America and continues with the distinctively American revivalist Protestant experience as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, one is dealing here with something prototypically American.

It is useful to begin with the early seventeenth-century Puritans. Puritanism was, it should be remembered, a "second-Reformation" movement involving those who believed that the process of reforming the church begun by Luther and

Calvin had stalled and needed to be completed. Moreover, they were working within a "state-church" context in which nearly everybody was a "Christian." And so the early Puritans came to America determined to purify the church of the vestiges of Catholicism and to ensure that the membership of the church was pure, that is, that church members were in fact true Christians. With the freedom to put their theology into practice, the Puritans of New England moved to require of new church members not only a knowledgeable profession of faith and good behavior (as was the previous Reformed practice), but also a convincing "relation" or narration of the work of grace within the person's soul.[11] This is the origin of the "testimony" which is so common in evangelical church circles.

But what would such a narrative look like? Here the New England Puritans drew upon the writings of the previous generation of English Puritan theologians such as John Preston, Richard Sibbes, and William Perkins who had sought to chronicle the "windings of the soul," that is, to describe the morphology of a genuine conversion experience. Perkins had identified ten stages of evangelical conversion to Christ.[12] Key among these was a knowledge of God's requirements (the law), a sense of one's unworthiness and the hopelessness of achieving salvation by one's own effort. Then there were the first glimmerings of faith, followed by the beginnings of assurance of one's salvation, and gradual transformation of life or sanctification.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the "relations" or conversion narratives presented tended to follow this morphology of conversion closely. Typically the person describes coming under conviction of sin, reaching a sense of hopelessness apart from Christ, then experiencing a lengthy period of struggle as he or she seeks to achieve assurance of salvation. Note the extraordinary subjectivity of the process! The critical answers are to be found within the human mind and heart. Largely missing are the comforting older objectivities, especially the sacraments.

Interestingly, this New England Puritan conversionist-narrative innovation incurred considerable opposition from

other English-speaking Protestants such as Richard Baxter, and especially from Presbyterians such as Samuel Rutherford and Robert Baille. They objected that it was impossible to test reliably such accounts of conversion, and they averred that in trying to judge internal spiritual reality, the New England Puritans were stepping boldly where angels feared to tread. Grace, they suggested, works in different people in different ways, and many true Christians might be quite unable to pinpoint a time of conversion.[13]

This New England system worked well enough for a generation or so. Many of those who came to the New World from England made professions of conversion and joined the church. Interestingly, many of their children did not. This was not because they were irreligious. Many of them sincerely embraced the truth of the Christian faith, but they could not honestly claim to have had the same sort of conversions their parents had experienced.[14] The psychological dynamic of their generation was considerably different.

The Great Awakening of the 1740s marks the next stage in the development of American conversionist piety. In this watershed event, robustly conversionist piety proliferated far beyond the confines of Puritan New England, and together with this piety came the development of preaching styles that were expressly designed to elicit conversions. Moreover, the conversion process itself was substantially streamlined in response to the needs of the hour. Each of these matters is worthy of discussion.

We see a shift in preaching style beginning in the late seventeenth century with Solomon Stoddard in Northampton, Massachusetts. Stoddard preached for conversion, and his preaching often focused on the individual's readiness for the final judgment.[15] Stoddard's grandson, Jonathan Edwards, is best known to the average American for that fixture of high-school literature anthologies, his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Something like the modern "hellfire and brimstone" sermon was starting to emerge. Edwards' friend, the English evangelist George Whitefield, brought remarkable communication skills and theatrical flair to the task of preaching as he exhorted his listeners to conversion.[16] The subject matter of preaching was also changing. In contrast to the early model of expository preaching through the canon of Scripture, sermons became more topical and focused upon the individual's experience of grace. They predominantly dealt with the elements of what is often called the *ordo salutis*.[17]

With Whitefield a new ministerial job description—that of itinerant evangelist—emerged. Whitefield spent his life on the road, rarely spending more than a few days in a given town or city. Under these circumstances, the lengthy Puritan conversion process which took place under the ongoing ministrations of a settled clergy needed to be streamlined, and Whitefield called for his listeners to experience the new birth then and there, insisting that those so converted would "feel" the experience.[18]

The third stage in the development of a distinctively American conversionist piety was the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century. The term *Second Great Awakening* is applied to the revivals that began in New England in the 1790s, to the frontier camp meeting revivals in Kentucky and Tennessee of the first decade of the nineteenth century, and to the revivals in upstate New York during the 1820s and 1830s associated with Charles Grandison Finney. Without Charles Finney in particular, American religion would look rather different today.

The First Great Awakening was a Calvinistic revival. George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards believed that conversion was a work of God, and that revivals were due to the sovereign work of God's Spirit. Finney, however, was part of the broader trend of the period away from Calvinism with its notions of divine sovereignty. Increasingly, Americans believed that the people are sovereign, both in matters of politics and religion. This process has been termed by Notre Dame church historian Nathan Hatch, "the democratization of American religion."[19] In line with this, Finney believed that there was nothing miraculous about conversions and revivals. They are simply the result of the application of appropriate techniques. Regarding revival, Finney wrote, "It is not a miracle, or dependent on a

miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means."[20] And so Finney developed what he called his "New Measures" approach to eliciting conversions—a direct and accessible style of preaching, evocative and emotional public prayers by women, house-to-house canvassing of neighborhoods, and the use of the "anxious bench" (the direct precursor of the "altar call"), to which the unconverted were invited where they contemplated their sins under the direct gaze of the evangelist. Clearly, the intent was to manipulate the emotions and so to induce a conversion experience.[21]

By this point, the scenery is starting to look familiar for conversionist Christians. This approach to evangelism was further honed by later evangelists such as D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and most recently, Billy Graham. Moody pioneered the use of music in the revival context. Billy Sunday further quantified the process, with intense focus on numbers and the economics of revival crusades. Graham revitalized mass revivalism in the late 1940s with well-organized, technologically-savvy evangelistic crusades and scripted altar calls.[22] It should be apparent from this that American conversionist piety has developed in symbiotic relationship with a revivalism which sought to elicit conversion.

According to the conversionist model of piety, then, a person becomes a Christian through a vivid and dateable conversion experience. Along with this come certain theological corollaries which stand in tension with the nurture model. For the conversionist, the church is simply the aggregate or sum total of those who have experienced conversion. The sacraments are not means of grace. At best they symbolize a conversion already experienced. Moreover, the chief purpose of worship is evangelism. For this reason, many American churches, especially in the Baptist tradition, end every worship service with an altar call.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the conversionist model? One strength clearly is the fact that conversionist piety takes the question of Christian identity seriously. That is, it recognizes the distinction between the church and the

world and a person's need for an experience of God's grace. It challenges the complacency of nominal Christians who, frankly, need to be challenged. Furthermore, conversionist piety has unified Christians from across a wide range of denominational boundaries through a common understanding of the experience of God's grace, and it has empowered many laypeople to become actively involved in evangelism through church and parachurch ministries.

But there are also weaknesses. First, there is the tendency toward excessive subjectivity. The Puritans encouraged people to look within themselves for the evidence of God's sovereign work. More recent revivalists call upon people to look within for the evidence of their own self-motivated decision for Christ. This is a heavy burden to lay on people. The danger here, of course, is that in such intense focus on the subjective self, one can lose sight of Christ.

Another problem is that conversionist piety tends to try to schematize a reality that all too often does not correspond to a single morphology. As was noted above, the early Puritan morphology of conversion did not translate well into the subsequent New England cultural environment. Likewise, Whitefield's notion of conversion as an intense emotional experience was at best reductionistic and often inaccurate. The way a person comes to faith in Christ is influenced by a host of historical, psychological, and cultural factors, and one single morphology is simply not going to cover this reality.

Another potential problem is that conversionist piety can often lead to an episodic view of the Christian life, as if the Christian life is a series of isolated, punctiliar "mountain-top experiences"—conversion, followed by rededication of one's life, followed by the re-rededication of one's life, and so forth. But the prevailing New Testament conception of the Christian life is that of a "walk." That is, it is a matter of day-in, day-out faithfulness.

Finally, conversionist piety has often led people to lose sight of the biblical purpose of worship. A careful reading of the New Testament suggests that true worship is first and foremost the people of God, the body of Christ, coming into the

saving presence of an almighty and holy God. But when the purpose of worship becomes evangelism and evoking conversion experiences, several unfortunate things happen. First, there is a "dumbing down" of worship content which prevents God's people from growing in grace as they should, a process rightly and eloquently decried recently by Lutheran theologian Marva Dawn.[23] Second, this model often leads to a pragmatic, "anything goes" approach to worship where the worship experience of God's people is hijacked in favor of whatever spectacle is thought to bring people in. Those subjected to such practices often sense that something vital has been lost, even if they can't put their finger on precisely what it is. Third, it often leads to a failure to preach the "whole counsel of God"—the comprehensive witness of Scripture—with a resulting loss of content and corporate spiritual maturity.

CONCLUSION

And so there are these two competing models of piety—a nurture model and a conversionist model. Each has strengths and weaknesses. Both are doubtless represented among the readers of this journal, and many of those readers have probably experienced the disconnects and communication problems that often result from the interplay of these models. This writer experienced a vivid example of such problems a number of years ago when a student approached me in tears after class one day. It turned out that she was a Presbyterian and was extraordinarily serious about her faith. She was dating a Baptist and was being given the distinct impression by his family that, because she had not gone forward at an altar call and had a decisive and dateable conversion experience, she was not really a Christian. I explained to her that there are different models of piety at work in American Protestantism, that these models have strengths and weaknesses, and that her own heritage as a covenant child was valuable.

What lessons can be learned from this brief historical survey? I am convinced that a knowledge of the history and tendencies of these models of piety can be of tremendous help as we seek to be both faithful and charitable Christians. It can,

first of all, provide us with a better knowledge of, and appreciation for, the strong points of our own traditions. Likewise, it also alerts us to their weaknesses and blind spots, and helps us to watch out for potential problems. Second, it helps us to understand the language and concerns of Christians who come from backgrounds different than our own. It is important, after all, for conversionist- and nurture-oriented Christians to communicate with each other. And finally, it should lead to humility. These models of piety are, after all, only provisional and imperfect human attempts to understand the manner in which the marvelous grace of an infinite God grasps us and transforms us into new creatures. That blessed reality outstrips our human language and concepts. And that is as it should be.

Author

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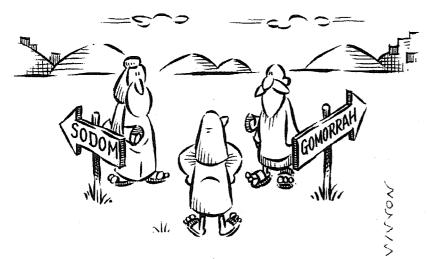
Notes

1. *Webster's II New College Dictionary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 833.

2. Many will recognize here the "ideal type" method of analysis associated with the work of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and H. Richard Niebuhr. Here recurring patterns and affinities are distilled from extensive obser-

vation of social phenomena. While no single individual may fit a "type" completely, the usefulness of such typology lies in the way it illumines underlying logic and recurring tendencies. The typology presented in this article owes much to John W. Nevin's programmatic distinction between the "system of the anxious bench" and the "system of the catechism." See his *The Anxious Bench*, 2nd edition (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1844).

Parenthetically, the presence of a third model—a "humanistic" model of piety—since the mid-eighteenth century should also be noted. This third model values human rational, creative, and social autonomy as sacred, and owes more to the Enlightenment impulse than to the classical Christian tradition.

3. Nevin, John W. *The Anxious Bench*, 68. See also the similar sentiment expressed by Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 10.

4. Either the faith of the parents as the early Luther maintained, or of the infant itself per the later Luther, or the baptized person experiences the efficacy of baptism at the point of faith as Calvin and the Westminster Confession argue. See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, translator Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 348-370; John Calvin, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 20:20; Westminster Confession of Faith, 28.6.

5. Martin Luther, *Treatise on Baptism*, quoted in Hugh Thomson Kerr, Jr., *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1943), 170.

6. See Belgic Confession, Article 34; Westminster Confession of Faith, 28.1.

7. Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, 67.

8. On this homiletical practice, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, revised edition. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), 63-83.

9. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 83-115.

10. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

11. Standard works on this subject include Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1963); and Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). See also David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepard: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 94-101.

12. Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 68.

13. See Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 105-112; Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narrative*, 81-116; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), 78.

14. See Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 113-38; Miller, *Colony to Province*, 82-92.

15. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 162.

16. See Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

17. Old, *Worship*, 84-86.

18. See Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, "Introduction," in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, edited by Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xxviii.

19. See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

20. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, in Edwin S. Gaustad, editor, *A Documentary History of Religion in America: To the Civil War* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 337.

21. On Finney, see Keith Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

22. The literature on revivalism is extensive. Intriguing recent works dealing with the topic include Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Lyle Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); and Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

23. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down : A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

... AND REMEMBER, IT'S IMPORTANT THAT
OUR MESSAGE IS RELEVANT, AND THAT
WE FIND WAYS TO RELATE TO OUR HEARERS...

What benefits the body is called medicine; what benefits the soul, discipline.

ST. AUGUSTINE

It is very rare for the spirituality of a group of Christians to exceed that of its leaders.

JOHN BENTON