



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Nine years ago Dr. Henry P. Van Dusen, former president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, wrote of what he called the “distinguishing characteristics” of a “new Christianity” which he felt would take over America. Although Dr. Van Dusen’s words were prophetic, very few of America’s church leaders understood the full impact of what he was talking about.

He said the new move would have at least six characteristics: (1) It will make a direct approach to people; it will be simple and sometimes without help of formality and beautiful sanctuaries. (2) It will promise immediate and transforming experiences with Christ. (3) It converts will be nurtured with an intimate group fellowship. (4) It will place a strong emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. (5) It will manifest totally dedicated lives seven days a week, with Christ as Lord of all life. (6) It will be a vigorous spiritual order — emotional, but not always excessively.

Nine years ago Americans had very little concept of such a “new Christianity.” But a lot of things were different nine years ago. Drugs, especially a drug culture for teenagers, were just coming on the national scene — and at the time presented no big danger. The Charismatic Renewal, that has since swept millions of complacent church members into an entirely new and revolutionary way of life, was just a fuzzy concept. Catholic Pentecostals were unheard of, and no one dreamed that the “Jesus Movement” would be so big that Time Magazine would call it the biggest revolution of the decade.

However, Van Dusen’s predictions were right on target. Millions of church members, caught in the rut of tradition and sameness, have gotten desperate enough to go beyond the stained glass windows and seek some kind of personal relationship with God which would meet the needs of their lives.

Three years ago Billy Graham estimated the existence of at least 50,000 organized home prayer groups in America who are ministering to formerly dead church members outside the ecclesiastical structure. Conservative estimates since then are that the number is now probably more like 200,000 groups — — meeting in homes, factories, universities, business offices and, yes, in some instances, even in church houses.

Church members are not the only ones in on this new emphasis. Multitudes of former skeptics, fed up with the emptiness of materialism and intellectualism, are turning to God for strength. Frustrated by the feeling of powerlessness, feeling lost in the crush of humanity, they are gathering in small home meetings where the individual still counts and where they can be honest without running the risk of being excommunicated or humiliated. Here, sitting around drinking coffee, they study the Bible, pray for each other, share problems in honesty, and expect miracles.

Few are disappointed.

Van Dusen called it a “new Christianity.” Actually it’s just the re-discovery of the eternal truths. One ordinary person plus God always equals extraordinary results.