

a plea for balance

by J Buckingham

THE EVENING SERVICE at the large Episcopal church in Orlando, Florida, was preceded by a covered-dish supper. Since I had finger-lickin'-good chicken on my hands, I felt the need to wash up before going in the sanctuary where I was to speak. I spotted a men's room and asked my wife to wait while I stepped inside.

Seconds later I was back. "Didn't you wash your hands?" she asked.

"I couldn't get to the washbasin," I said. Then, noticing her puzzled look, I pulled her toward the door. "Look in. You'll see why."

"What's wrong with you," she gaped, holding back. "I'm not going to look in a men's room, even if it is Episcopalian."

But I pulled the door open anyway, and then she understood. The room was filled, piled from floor to ceiling with cardboard boxes—containing paper towels.

I supposed the room was being used for storage; it was only by standing on tiptoe and peeking that I could see the water.

The episode is symbolic of what I often see in the Kingdom ministry. People come to church, seeking something that will wash away their sin, lift their burdens, replace their misery with joy, and give hope for life. They come seeking living water, but are often handed paper towels instead.

That's not to say towels are not part of the Gospel. They are, just as the various gifts of the Spirit are important to ministry. But the Gospel is more than towels, it is also water. And water is essential to cleaning dirty hands, while towels are merely desirable.

Now I'm delighted many churches are stocking charismatic towels. Some of them even use them. But to overstock and so block the way to the water is just as tragic as filling the men's room with water so that whoever opens the door gets flooded.

The Formula: What the church needs today (and what I feel God is bringing to pass) is a balance between water and towels. I find the

formula for this balance given in Romans 15:18-19. Here Paul says the Gospel (Good News) is made up of three ingredients: (1) Word, (2) deed, and (3) mighty signs and wonders by the power of the Spirit of God.

If we were to break this balanced formula down into a New Testament word study, it would come out something like this:

(Word) *kerugma*—the proclamation of the Good News;

(deed) *koinonia*—the fellowship of the brethren;

(signs and wonders) *charisma*—the supernatural gifts of God.

But the Good News is unbalanced when a church or denomination majors on one or two of these without giving equal emphasis to the rest.

The first years of my life were spent as a member of a very liberal, social-action type community church which was part Presbyterian and part Unity. They majored on *koinonia* (deed).

Later, through the ministry of the Fundamentalists (Fightin' Fundys), I became involved with the Evangelicals. Through their preaching, I recognized my need for repentance and commitment to Jesus Christ. Here the major thrust was the *kerugma* (Word).

After pastoring a number of years in a Southern Baptist church, I realized there was even more than the *koinonia* and the *kerugma*; there was the *charisma*. I burst headlong into the fullness of the Holy Spirit and entered a whole new dimension of my life.

Now, as I look out over the Kingdom, I find it basically divided into these same three camps: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Pentecostals. Although God is indeed working in all

three camps, the Kingdom is not one or the other, it is all three balanced together.

Most evangelical churches have built their ministry on the *kerugma*, the proclamation of the Good News. On the cornerstone of the seminary I attended in Fort Worth, Texas, are chiseled the words of Jesus in Matthew 10: "And as ye go, preach . . ."

The first chapel message I heard after getting to the seminary was on that subject. We were not to be just seminarians. We were to be preachers of the Word, in season and out. It was a good message, and I thank God for it. I still praise God for those who preach the pure, unadulterated Word of God. We desperately need a return to an emphasis on the inspiration of the Bible, the Lordship of Christ, the crucified life, and the walk of faith—all of which have been hallmarks of evangelical preaching.

But to build a church, or a ministry, on the *kerugma* alone is like trying to milk a cow while sitting on a one-legged stool. You'll draw milk as long as you stay put and the cow doesn't flick her tail. But let the slightest disturbance come along, and you're in for a nasty fall.

One-Man Show: Evangelicals are notorious for their one-legged-stool concepts. Most of their churches have been built on a strong doctrine of preaching the Word. However, most of them are also One-Man Show operations, built not only on preaching, but on the preacher as well. The pastor's name is prominently displayed on the church sign, the fleet of buses, and in the weekly ad run in the newspaper. (I remember a church in Indiana where the pastor's name on the front lawn sign was of equal size with the name of the church. Inside the vestibule hung a huge portrait of the same hallowed man, while the name of Jesus was relegated to the hymn books and Bibles).

Such churches are usually referred to as Dr. Soandso's church. But let Dr. Soandso get hit by a flicking cow's tail, and the church is in for a nasty fall and perhaps a split. Or, let him get up and go to a bigger cow, and the church begins to tumble—unless they can get another D.D. to quickly sit on the toppling stool. Body ministry is simply unheard of.

The same is true with many evangelical ministries. In fact, the organizations are usually called by the name of the preacher-founder and actually become an extension of his (or her) ego. Their magazines appear with their pictures, varying in pose from squatting in a wheat field to kneeling in the empty tomb ("praying just for you"), plastered all over every page. Their books flood the market with their faces smiling at you from the front cover under such titles as *God's Big Cheese*, or *Humility and How I Attained It*.

This is not to say there is not a place for such ministries. But it is to say that since they are one-legged milking stools, they're bound to tip over when the milker gets up to leave. For instance, whatever happened to the Billy Sunday Evangelistic Association after he died? And for that matter, did you know that Spurgeon's huge tabernacle now sits virtually empty since the milker has left?

The *kerugma* is not enough. Paul says the Gospel is more than Word, it is deed. *Koinonia*.

Yet, a church built on *koinonia* alone is simply another one-legged milking stool, for it has no foundation in the Word. Many so-called liberal churches have majored on *koinonia*, and neglected the strong preaching of the Word of God which brings needed balance.

Who?: Such a situation gave rise to a statement I once heard a college professor ask from the pulpit of a liberal church: "Who are you? You're not spiritual enough to be a church, yet you're too spiritual to be a country club. Who are you?" They didn't know either. All they knew was they had just enough religion to keep them from enjoying sin, but not enough to make them happy in righteousness.

Churches majoring on *koinonia* often have an abundance of social-action groups. They lobby for slum clearance and better housing. They join demonstration marches for world peace and civil rights. They open communes and coffeehouses. They have lots of hayrides and usually genuinely love their neighbor as well as the brethren. But they invariably die on the vine, for there is no power to attract people and no preaching to show them the way of repentance and faith. Thus their organization becomes little more than a group of do-gooders preaching a kind of watered-down humanism.

There is great need for *koinonia* in the Body today. The thing that first drew me to the power of God was the love I felt in a group of Spirit-filled people. But when this love becomes ingrown, it is perverted. Actually, a church cannot have real fellowship until Christ is the Head, and this comes only through hearing the *kerugma*. Otherwise, all we have is togetherness.

You can take two tomcats, tie their tails together, drape them across a clothesline and you have "togetherness." But there's a lot of difference between this and "fellowship."

So often we think that just getting together is "fellowship." At most church functions, even in prayer groups, people come together like marbles. They just bump into one another and ricochet 'round the room. Conversation is at a shallow level—the weather, the ball game, church activities, or even an impersonal discussion of a certain Bible passage. But as for exposing oneself—becoming transparent and seeking ministry—that's a different story. Yet when the meeting is over, they bounce down the steps like marbles poured out of a jar, saying, "Wasn't that good fellowship."

No, fellowship, real fellowship, is men and women coming together like grapes . . . crushed . . . knowing each other's sins and failures and weaknesses . . . with skins of ego broken . . . the rich, fragrant, exhilarating juices of life mingling with the wine of sharing, understanding, accepting, forgiving, and caring.

Fellowship is the fusing of personalities in the Presence and Person of Jesus Christ. It occurs only when men and women meet together in Jesus' name. So there can really be no fellowship without the *kerugma*.

"That which we have seen and heard declare (*kerugma*) we unto you that you may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us" (1 John 1:3).

Paul gives a final ingredient that balances out the Gospel message. Not only by Word and deed, he says, but "through mighty signs and wonders by the power of the Spirit of God." *Charisma*.

The Missing Ingredient: As an evangelical, I tried desperately to balance my desire for *koinonia* with my zeal in preaching the *kerugma*. Yet my stool kept tipping over. Something was missing. Then, five years ago, I was baptized in the Holy Spirit and found the missing ingredient. The supernatural power of God.

I went back and checked that passage in Matthew 10 which is inscribed on the library cornerstone at the seminary. "As ye go, preach . . ." But for some reason, the architect had left off the rest of the verse—the third leg of the milking stool. "As ye go, preach, saying The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils . . ." HALLELUJAH!

When Paul came to Corinth he was fresh from defeat on Mars Hill. There he had preached the Word with little result. Thus he said to the Corinthians, "And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in DEMONSTRATION OF THE SPIRIT AND OF POWER." (1 Cor. 2:3-4).

Later he told those same Corinthians, "For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power" (1 Cor. 4:20).

The writer of Hebrews, in talking about the inability to escape if we neglect so great a salvation, went on to say that the Good News was first "spoken by the Lord" and later confirmed with "signs and wonders and with divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost" (Heb. 2:3-4).

That's the third leg of the milking stool. That's water and towels combined for cleansing.

Grinning through the Goo: Yet there is often a tragic imbalance even among charismatics. Many are attempting to build a theology on an experience alone. That's not enough. It's like eating only the meringue on a pie, getting it all over our faces, grinning through the goo and saying, "Hallelujah!"

But meringue never satisfies by itself. It takes also the foundation crust of the *kerugma* and the fruit filling of the *koinonia*. As the evangelicals have been guilty of majoring on the Word and neglecting the fruit of the Spirit and the power of God; as liberals have been guilty of majoring on the fruit of the Spirit and neglecting the Word and the gifts; so the Pentecostals (and some charismatics) have been guilty of majoring on the gifts (especially tongues) and neglecting the "weightier matters of the law." The Gospel is more than meringue and signs and wonders. It is the crust of the *kerugma* which stabilizes and the fruit filling of the *koinonia* which nourishes, binds together, and sends out to serve.

A charismatic friend from Oregon wrote recently, saying, "A church of miracle-fevered, tongues-speaking, prophesying babes is dangerous to have around." He's right.

I remember remarking to a local Baptist pastor that I'd rather try to restrain a fanatic than resurrect a corpse. He said, "Not me. A corpse won't stab you in the back."

Ouch!

But my Oregon friend also said, "People not saved cannot understand the Holy Ghost. People not filled with the Holy Ghost cannot praise and worship. People who don't worship cannot understand God's moving by His Spirit." So, it takes a balanced Gospel to lead and feed, and in-between the extremes of folly and fanaticism lies the way of God.

Balancing the Scales: My plea to my fellow evangelicals is: "Don't tell us charismatics we may not express the gifts of the Spirit. Let every man be part of the Body, free to worship and serve as God leads—and that includes tongues, healings, miracles, the whole bit. Don't quench the Spirit, forbid to speak in tongues, and so limit the Gospel to water and pie-crust."

My plea to charismatics is: "Don't tell the other members of the Body of Christ they 'HAVE TO' speak in tongues, prophesy, or lay hands on the sick. (One fuzzy-faced young zealot was actually heard saying he wished Billy Graham spoke in tongues so he could be an effective preacher.) Like Paul, I wish all spoke in tongues as I do. But I also recognize the tremendous ministry the Holy Spirit has in some of my non-tongues-speaking brothers and sisters. I deeply appreciate the work of both the evangelicals and the liberals and count them as fellow laborers in the Master's vineyard. So to charismatics I say, "Don't limit the Gospel to towels and meringue, either."

Eight 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. I was then a go-getter Baptist pastor and was hotly offended by the remarks of this "liberal," asking why we needed a "new Christianity." Now, on the other side of an experience with the Holy Spirit, I see his words were actually prophetic.

He said the new move would have at least six characteristics: (1) It will make 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 (*kerugma*). (3) Its converts will be nurtured with an intimate group fellowship (*koinonia*). (4) It will place a strong emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit (*charisma*). (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.

I now see these as the balance that God is establishing in His Kingdom ministries. The power of the *charisma* draws the people, as it did at Pentecost. The Word of the *kerugma* convicts of sin and wins to Jesus, as it did at Pentecost. The *koinonia* keeps the body united, serving together in love. So it was in the early church, and so it is now becoming again.