

Peatross - Hook Interview

1) Cecil, I don't think you'll ever know the impact your writings have had influencing the direction and thought of the current restoration movement. For just a minute, get out your crystal ball and tell us (the good and the bad) what you see evolving in our fellowship today.

Fred, your evaluation of my influence is generous; however, it is understandable that my name is unknown amid the academics and on the lecture circuits. My views have been influenced by the thousands of good people God has sent into my life since my retirement from congregational ministry. Since no publisher would handle my writings, I did it myself with the help of concerned persons. So people have had to contact me in order to get the more than 75,000 books I have distributed. I think I have heard from the heart of our people in this time of restudy and redirection.

Thousands of these disciples, in spite of loving their heritage, have been stifled and suffocated by our traditions which have taken the force of law. They have struggled within an in-bred system which has injected itself as a sort of mediator between them and God. They feel that organized religion has failed them. They see it as an organization, operated by professionals and directed by a board of elders, seeking to hold claim on their gifts, talents, money, and energy so that their work as disciples is directed, controlled, and often bottle-necked by the system. Like a gas-guzzling bus that consumes all the fuel just carrying the driver, they see the congregation expending itself and its resources in self-perpetuation with little effective outreach. So the ancient house-church concept that emphasizes personal contact and private ministries is regaining favor among them. And it reaffirms the purpose of gatherings for mutual edification rather than a formal "worship service." Numerous congregations are now dividing into home groups for Sunday evening or midweek gatherings. This trend should accelerate.

Though there is a contest between those working for needed change and those who think none is needed, our people are becoming less confrontational, focusing more on Jesus than doctrinal quibbles, and are displaying more of his loving attitude. That is great cause for optimism.

Our "rediscovery of the Holy Spirit" has had positive influence, but it is now taking a doubtful course in leading into subjectivity. We have been inclined toward logic (Campbell's "head religion") but are now giving credence to feelings (Stone's "heart religion.") "I feel that God has told me to say/do this or that" or other such statements are now being heard in an effort to add authenticity to the thing being taught or done. Thus textual authenticity is being undermined by subjectivity.

Also, our "rediscovery of grace" has been a mixed blessing. It has opened the door for the teaching of the total sovereignty of God over the will of man. We are hearing that our salvation is totally a work of God -- that he gives helpless sinners of his choosing both repentance and faith, then secures their salvation and controls their conduct through his

Spirit. So it is all God's work. We can do good works, but they are in response to salvation and have no effect on our salvation, according to what we are hearing.

In counteraction to the popular futurist "end times" predictions being heard, preterist eschatology (covenant eschatology, fulfilled prophecy, "A.D. 70 theories") are gaining ground. Understanding that all of Jesus' prophecies have been fulfilled already makes better sense of so many Scriptures. It almost becomes as a new message. Many books are now being written promoting the preterist viewpoint. I venture to predict a far-reaching and exciting restudy of this perspective.

2) Are there any lessons from church history to steer us through the minefields of the future?

The ideal of the Stone-Campbell Movement was to unite the warring factions of the Christian religion through their acceptance of each other, not by starting a "one-true-church." The ideal met much approval but could not thrive in any group. This ideal of reformation drew many converts into the Movement. It thrived as a unity movement until disciples began to interpret Jesus' will as a legal code. A code of law demands a pattern. When variation from the supposed pattern is thought to have occurred, then restoration of the original pattern becomes the goal. Legalism, patternism, and restorationism brought defeat to the reformers' aims and Jesus' work of creating one body. The sincerest of disciples could not agree on what the law taught, what comprised the pattern, or if/when the original was restored. Thus the Movement was shattered into fragments by stepping into that minefield. It can never produce unity. There is optimism that we are beginning to escape the enslavement to such a supposed system of law, pattern, and restoration.

3) What are the spiritual hazards of being a leader in the coming decade?

Churches do not hire men to reform them! They want confirmation, not reformation. How many men can you think of who brought needed change while depending upon the congregation for their support? The spiritual reformer is persecuted while living and venerated after his death. That speaks of the hazards of leadership.

It is a painful time for our congregations and their leaders. All segments of our divided movement must face with honesty our status as sects or denominations. We will have to eat a lot of humble pie. A denomination claims to be a part of the whole church. A sect claims to be the whole church. Take your pick! There is no such thing as the one, true church in a separate form. If it exists at all, it must necessarily consist of the saved people in separated groups. Brave leadership will have to come to grips with that even as Stone and Campbell did.

When we come to understand this concept, it will change our whole perspective. Our aim will no longer be to convert people from one splinter group to another or to maintain our own. We will have to orient ourselves to convert people to Christ rather than to a

distinctive group. Leaders, are prepared for this? Some are standing tall in this role already. It will require patience, persistence, and prayer.

4) Let me change the subject and talk briefly about our spiritual formation. It's so easy for leaders and ministers to busy themselves to the point of personal neglect. How can we stay spiritually fit and secondly, how can we accurately assess our spiritual vital signs?

For several years about fifty years ago I had eleven sermons and classes per week plus other duties! For two years I had eighteen! In times past preachers did not have time to study. They just prepared lessons. When all is going out of a battery with none coming in, it goes dead. So preachers formerly had to move often, or they burned out completely. Now, congregations generally are more considerate to give the minister opportunities to recharge. But still the burnout rate is high.

The preacher needs time with his family. He needs understanding and support. He needs money to buy books and time to read them. He needs times to relax and also time to attend seminars and lectureships. When tension builds within him as each weekend and/or elders' meeting approaches, he is in physical, psychological, and spiritual peril.

5) And finally, in your opinion, what is the most pressing need of the hour? Thanks, Cecil for all you do for Him. When I receive your responses, I will post and let you know.

The first thing that comes to my mind is "de-centralization." Religion has been too much centered at a church building and with all it represents. I now encourage each person to use his/her talents in private ministry. Whatever constructive thing you can do best and enjoy doing most can be used as your ministry to God. This does not eliminate work with others in the congregation, but neither does it need connection with the organized system. One needs no elder permission or assignment to carry on his/her ministry. You can support your own ministry without apology. If others wish to help in any manner, that is acceptable, but one does not need to call for help to do what God has gifted him/her to do. Neither must one give his dedicated money to the church, where it is consumed mainly by real estate and salaries, then ask for permission and help to carry on his/her ministry.

Since my retirement from congregational ministry, I can testify that my private ministry (with volunteer help from many others) has been the most effective and rewarding effort of my career. And, due to the nature of my writings, if I had waited for a congregation to sponsor it, undoubtedly, I would still be waiting.

This concept makes religion personal and practical and best utilizes both the individual and his/her abilities and money.

In my estimation, our Movement is much healthier than it was in my youth. Better times are ahead. Yet, since the church is an ever-changing living entity, it will need constant reformation. (June 2002) []