

## "Broken Cisterns" By Arnold Cook

### Classic Christian Writings:

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As a church leader, I am concerned about the subject of revival. My background is conversion at the age of 11, in a dying church out in the country. Then at age 20 I was invited to go to a conference where the speaker gave messages on truths I had never heard before. God had moved me in His providence into a church that was in the middle of a revived state, and that church in Owen Sound has left on me an indelible imprint that has lasted and served me well over the years.

In that church I sensed the supernatural. I sensed it in their spontaneous evangelism. They had just finished a crusade of two weeks that was extended another four weeks because people kept getting saved. God also impressed upon me in that revived church the power of corporate prayer. I learned about radical deeper life teaching. God was there, transforming lives in a miraculous way. I had not known the Holy Spirit existed, but learning about Him, I gave myself fully over to the filling of the Holy Spirit. And it was a church given to missions. I heard my first missionary there. Some time afterward I was impacted by revival when I was in Regina, Saskatchewan, during the time of the Canadian Revival in 1971 and 1972. Some three years later we went to Lima, Peru and saw God working in a marvelous way. Two or three hundred people came to know Christ every month. There were two baptismal tanks on the platform of the church baptizing simultaneously every month. There was a hunger for God's Word among students greater than I had ever seen before.

That moving of God impacted not just the Christian community but also the secular community. It was learned that these evangelicals were honest people, something not commonly found in places like Lima, Peru. The airport couldn't find honest people for their security systems, so they took groups of Christians from evangelical churches to the airport in buses to run the whole immigration operation there because they were honest. Spiritual awakenings that impact society are a marvelous story!

Now at this stage in my life, valuing as I do the rich heritage I received from revived churches, I question: what will my generation pass on to the next generation in terms of bequeathing the supernatural? A great burden on my heart is: how can we pass on the supernatural?

#### Desperate Need For God's Visitation!

Today I see things happening in churches that concern me. I see church conflicts up and preaching on revival down. I see conflict resolution seminars popular; I see corporate prayer dying. I see infatuation with the social sciences high; I see theology being given benign neglect in many churches. Enthusiasm for structural renewal is high and strong, but hunger for spiritual renewal tends to be weak. I see transfer for church growth common; I see conversion church growth rather uncommon. The encouraging thing is I do hear the voices of some prophets crying out about such things.

We are in desperate need of God's visitation upon us! There is a tendency of organizations, including the Church, to begin strong and with a vision. They become a healthy, powerful movement. But eventually they begin to decline, and if that is not curbed and turned around, we drift on down to the stage where God lifts His hand and moves on with someone else. He writes over the top of those movements, "Ichabod--the Glory has departed." I see this happening, and my conclusion of the process is:

- (1) It is inevitable.
- (2) It can be curbed by strong, courageous, godly vision, making tough decisions on the downward path.
- (3) It can be reversed by God-sent revival and renewal.

Over history there is much evidence of what happens when God moves in spiritual awakenings. Out of that comes all kinds of new movements. God raises up His Church and moves on. I believe that is what needs to happen in our day.

Let us look at the passage in Jeremiah 2:9-13. Jeremiah's ministry stretched over the reign of five kings. He had served in the time of King Josiah, so he had seen revival and renewal in his day. But even though that revival was very important and very powerful, it only lasted until Josiah died.

In Jeremiah 2:11-13 is expressed Jeremiah's concern for his people: "Has a nation changed their gods, which are no gods? but My people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit. Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be very desolate, says the Lord. For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that cannot hold water."

Cisterns are necessary; they are legitimate; there is a proper use of cisterns. But the problem with cisterns is that although they are proper and useful for saving and catching rainwater for times when there is no water, they become a place of pollution and stagnation, and they ultimately become cracked and leak. In that condition they are useless.

The people of Israel had come to a place where they completely ignored their God. Jeremiah 2:5 says they had "gone far from" Him, and verse 7 says they had made God's heritage an abomination. The priests were silent. The rulers had transgressed, and the prophets prophesied by other gods. This was a dark hour in the history of the people of Israel. They had forsaken God and substituted "cisterns" of their own making.

### **Substitutes For Reality In The Church Today**

I want to share with you a few things I see to be substitutes evangelicals today use to "get by." Obviously, however, although we think we are getting by, we are doing the thing Paul told us we ought not to do: we are comparing ourselves with ourselves (2 Cor. 10:12). We have the wrong standards for success. We feel we are very much alive because we are growing. But on closer scrutiny, we are probably growing in ways that are not very healthy.

Here are some of the substitutes I see. "Substitutes" is a mild word to use. You could use the word "idols." You could use the word in 2 Chronicles 7:14-- "wicked ways." It would be more correct.

(1) Let me start with endless technology. Technology has had a powerful effect on this particular generation. It is documented that this generation has seen change more rapidly than any other generation previously living on the face of the earth. This rapid change in technology has affected us as individuals and also affected the church in this fast-paced society.

Endless technology is a substitute for the supernatural intervention of God. There's always one more thing pastors can try; one more program, one more technology, one more gimmick. We resort to these and fail to allow God to intervene with the supernatural.

(2) The second would be: guiltless evangelism versus radical repentance. In eager effort for church growth, the Church in America has overdone in attempting to be "user friendly" and "seeker sensitive." People have been brought to know Christ without really facing up to their guilt and their sin. The way we come to know Christ puts an imprint on how we will grow in Christ. It is very hard to build a Christian life on a beginning without repentance.

(3) Thirdly, Christian counseling is replacing a second trip to the cross. Unless Christian counseling directs people to the cross, to death to self and to the fullness of the Holy Spirit, we are giving them an easy way around. It will be a temporary solution and they'll be back in the counseling room soon for more help, for another crutch. A return trip to the cross is needed to show that Christ not only died for us but that we died with Him and that we can be delivered from self and sin, and live the victorious life. Counseling does not always get one back to the cross.

(4) A fourth substitute is: manward homilies versus Godward preaching. That is, preaching down to man versus preaching up to God. Most people in the congregation are interested in self needs. The preacher knows this so he gives a little Scripture and a little psychology. He ministers to their felt needs and they go home with a temporary solution that lasts a few days. These people must be introduced to God! They must know Him! Many in the congregation do not know who the true God is.

(5) Another substitute would be professional mediation versus Biblical reconciliation. It is not uncommon in these days for a church or denomination to be caught up in litigation. There is a massive ignoring of 1 Corinthians 6, where Christians are instructed not to go to law before unbelievers. Churches and denominations, at least in Canada, are pouring a lot of money into professional mediation.

Do we forget that Christians have been given the message of reconciliation and the ministry of reconciliation? Too often we are bypassing it in our churches and going with professional mediation instead of what God has provided.

(6) Another substitute is small-group focused prayers versus corporate public intercession. Thank God for small groups; they are as old as the early church. But often in small-group prayer, what is prayed about is very much for community concerns and family concerns and personal concerns. It is not the kind of broad prayer that advances us in missions or carries the Church victoriously forward in this post-modern era.

(7) Another would be evangelical orthodoxy versus experiential Holy Spirit encounters. It is very easy to be evangelically orthodox and measure up to a statement of faith, but it is something else to lead our people into an experience with the Holy Spirit. He is the One who has been sent to form Christ in us and to make us holy and godly people. That is His assignment. We are not making enough progress with that.

(8) Another would be "kickback giving" versus Kingdom giving. A. B. Simpson preached a sermon one time called "Seven Kinds of Giving." Six kinds he designated as being self-centered. He said giving to the pastor's salary is not giving, for he is serving you and your family. Giving to the church organ is not giving, for that serves you, and he went down the line. He said that real giving, which is heroic giving, is giving outside of yourself, where there is no possibility of receiving something in return. This happens with missions giving, with inner-city giving, with evangelism. This is rather rare.

(9) One more substitute is the new cross versus the old cross. It was A. W. Tozer who commented on the old and the new. He commented, "The new cross does not slay the sinner; it redirects him. It gears him up into a cleaner and jollier way of living and saves his self-respect. To the self-assertive, it says, 'Come and assert yourself in Christ.' To the egoist it says, 'Come and do your boasting in the Lord.' To the thrill seeker it says, 'Come and enjoy the thrill of Christian fellowship....'"

"But the old cross is a symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of the human being. The man in Roman times who took up his cross and started down the road had already said goodbye to his friends. He was not coming back. He was not going to have his life redirected; he was going out to have it ended. The cross made no compromise, modified nothing, spared nothing; it slew all the man, completely and for good...."

We are getting the people these days to a cross that's been sanitized and polished and is a cross which does not deal with self, like the "old rugged cross." We all know that the cross is the major stumbling point. It's hard to be "user friendly" and have a religion with a cross in it. But we're trying desperately to do that, and quite unsuccessfully.

(10) We are worshiping worship instead of worshipping God. We go round and round about worship and what kind of worship makes sense to us. We even argue about it. We forget that worship is for God and not for ourselves.

### **We're Not Getting By With Substitutes**

How long will the evangelical church continue to get by with substitutes? The truth of the matter is, we are not getting by! In the beginning God spoke very clearly about substitutes. He rejected Cain's offering as being unacceptable and He received the offering of Abel. In the Second Commandment, God reinforced that: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing..." (Exodus 20:4). In Acts 8:18-24 we read that Simon, the former sorcerer, was severely rebuked because he "thought that the gift of God [the Holy Ghost] may be purchased with money." In Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, God reminds us of the early churches that were trying to get by on substitutes after only 35 or 40 years, and five of them were called to "Repent!"

We must understand that through substitutes we are robbing God of His glory. He has said, "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God..." (Exodus 20:5). "I will not give My glory to another" (Isaiah 42:8). We are robbing Him of His glory with our efforts with substitutes. We are misleading our people with these substitutes. We're giving the impression that all is well. All is not well. We're trying to get by with broken cisterns.

We must realize we are paying a very high price for substitutes--a high price with our children, in terms of losing them because they have never seen the supernatural in the lives of their parents. That will not carry Christianity into their generation. Christianity is always only one generation from extinction. Take the land of Turkey, the great Bible land of the New Testament. Today there are five or six hundred Christians among 60 million people in Turkey. Christianity can become extinct. We can not get by with substitutes.

At my stage in life, I am making much of Psalm 71:17,18: "O God, Thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared Thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and greyheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have showed Thy strength unto this generation and Thy power to every one that is to come." I used to think that we were responsible for only one generation, the one we're in. That's no longer what I believe. We're responsible for this generation and for the next one, our children's generation. We must pass the faith on to them, and lately I've added another generation, our grandchildren.

God is a God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He's a God who keeps His covenant to a thousand generations, and His plan from the beginning was to have one generation pass it on to the next generation and on and on. We cannot lose a single generation.

#### **What's The Secret?**

The secret is found in words like "wondrous works," "power" and "mighty works"--these are the phrases which reflect the whole matter of the supernatural. Our children and our grandchildren must see the supernatural in our lives if they're going to embrace the faith in their generation. Augustine said that every generation must stand on the shoulders of the previous generation and reach higher and reach farther. That's my prayer for all of us.

When I came into office six years ago my vision was to see revival in our churches; to see godly leadership especially at the local church level; and missions. I was assured I would have the support of my age group for these three goals. Over these five or six years, the most affirmation I have received on the first two points has come from younger pastors just starting in. I am encouraged by that.

Oh, God, we've been paying a high price for substitutes! Send out pastors and leaders who will teach their people and move the Church into renewal and revival, we pray, in Jesus' Name!