

HEART-TO-HEART

November 1998

A Pastoral Letter From Richard J. Foster



Dear Friends,

Jesus, on the last and greatest day of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, stood up, crying out, “Let everyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. All who believe in me, as the Scripture has said, out of their innermost being shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). In this dramatic and prophetic act Jesus was heralding the coming of that great outpouring of the Spirit which came at Pentecost. And to this very day a mighty river of the Spirit is bursting forth from the hearts of women and men, boys and girls.

Ezekiel’s Vision of the River of God

Jesus’ prophetic word is prefigured in a great vision given to the prophet Ezekiel. The background is this. In July B.C. 586 the Babylonians breached the walls of the city of Jerusalem, and on 14 August the Temple, the holiest site of the Jewish people, was burned to the ground. Israel’s monarchy was ended; the City of David and the holy Temple of God were no more. But then, out of the ashes of this catastrophic destruction God gives Ezekiel—an exile in far away Babylon—a stunning series of visions which look to a future day of resurrection, restoration, and renewal for the people of God. These visions cover fully twelve chapters, and they are a marvelous description of life as it is meant to be lived under the effective reign of God (Ezek. 37-48).

Perhaps you are acquainted with Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones that are brought to life by the power of God. You may even recall his vision of a restored Temple and a renewed worship for the people of God. But you may not be as familiar with his startling vision of the River of God which flows out from under the threshold of this restored Temple of the Spirit. I say “startling” because everything surrounding this vision is about walls and stones, bricks and mortar. Then, suddenly, right in the midst of these static images, Ezekiel sees water pouring out from under the altar; the River of God flowing with life and power. It is a vision which looks both backward and forward: backward to the river flowing from the garden of Eden; forward to “the river of the water of life” which is flowing eternally through the middle of the New Jerusalem (Gen. 2:10, Rev. 22:1).

In Ezekiel’s vision a heavenly messenger takes him to the entrance of the temple and he sees “water . . . flowing from below the threshold of the temple.” He next escorts Ezekiel outside the temple court and shows him the River of God flowing out beyond the perimeter of the temple area. This, you see, is a River of life that simply cannot be confined to any religious system, no matter how worthy.

With a cord in his hand the messenger measures out one thousand cubits and he takes Ezekiel out into the water “and it was ankle-deep.” Measuring another thousand cubits he leads Ezekiel further out, “and it was knee-deep.” With a third measurement of a thousand cubits Ezekiel is taken further yet “and it was up to the waist.” With a final measurement of a thousand cubits Ezekiel discovers that “it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed.” You understand, I am sure, that regardless of how far we go into the realities of the Spirit, we can never exhaust God’s boundless resources.

Ezekiel then sees along the banks of the River of God “a great many trees on the one side and on the other.” Then the heavenly messenger tells him that beyond what he can see this water flows out

from Jerusalem toward the Dead Sea and that “when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. . . . and everything will live where the river goes” (Ezek. 47:1-9).

Everything the River Touches

What a marvelous vision for your life and mine. The River of God is flowing today. No one can stop it, and no one can contain it. It is a deep River of divine intimacy, a powerful River of holy living, a dancing River of jubilation in the Spirit, and a wide River of unconditional love for all peoples.

And the promise is that everything the River touches will live! Oh, my friend, may I urge you, as I urge myself, to step into the flow of this mighty River of God. Today. Now. Even as you read these words. Step into the River of God and then determine never to step out. This is a consciously chosen course of action that involves both group and individual life. Let it be for us, as Jesus says, that streams of living water will ever flow out of our innermost being.

At times we will be ankle-deep in the River. A little like children in a wading pool we laugh and sing and dance, and play. We are experiencing the Father-heart of God’s acceptance and pleasure and joy. And the brokenness of our spirit, the woundedness of our heart, the ache of our soul is healed. For everything the River touches will live!

At other times we will be knee-deep in the River. The knees often speak of the prayer life, and perhaps we now enter fuller experiences of asking and receiving, hearing and obeying. Praying simply becomes the natural and necessary way of living for us: seeing only what the Father sees, hearing only what the Father hears, doing only what the Father does. And a new serenity, a new firmness of life orientation, a new shalom pervades us inside and out. For everything the River touches will live!

Still other times we will be waist-deep in the River. The old versions use the word “loins” here, which suggest a deepening into the divine intimacy. We experience a secret, peaceful, loving inflow of God. Our Beloved takes us into the wedding-chamber as it were. And our responding love grows richer, stronger, more steady. For everything the River touches will live!

Then, too, we will have times when the waters rise and we are swimming—swimming in a River that cannot be crossed. Here we discover something of the limitless height and depth and width and breadth of God. We are carried by a current of life and power that is simply beyond us. We find that the impact of our actions far exceeds the work we have done. We know that a God-thing is happening. And we bow in wonder, adoration, and praise. For everything the River touches will live!

One small word of counsel: it is God, not us, who decides where we need to be in the River—ankle-deep, knee-deep, waist-deep, swimming. It is all under his direction. We must not try to plunge into the center current when we need to be splashing along the shore; nor should we stay in the comfort of the shallows when God is calling us out into the depths. God knows. We can trust him to place us where we need to be, when we need to be there. Our task is a simple one: with a conscious act of will we intend to stay in the River of God. For everything the River touches will live!

A Marker and a Future

These matters apply to groups and churches and organizations just as fully as to individuals. All of us associated with this “tail-lighting ministry” we call RENOVARÉ, for example, have experienced the full range of “ankle-knee-waist-swimming” adventures. We remember each experience with thanksgiving and praise.

In fact, we are coming upon a decade marker of sorts. On 21 November 1988 five of us signed the papers which made RENOVARÉ a properly recognized non-profit Corporation. Back then we had

only God and a laser printer. Since that day a decade ago over 18,000 have joined our ranks in one form or another. Fully 7,891 souls have signed the RENOVARÉ Covenant, indicating their conscious commitment to be disciples of Jesus Christ, learning (as Dallas Willard has taught us to say) to live our lives as Jesus would live our lives if Jesus were us. I thank God for each one, ever precious in God's sight, carrying as we do an "eternal weight of glory."

Over these ten years we have held some forty-four Regional Conferences, and nearly thirty other local conferences, special seminars, and retreats. At times we have laughed and danced. At other times we have been on our knees in prayerful consecration. Repeatedly we have felt the warmth and care of God's overwhelming love. Then, too, we have had times when we felt in over our heads, and, yet, in that very moment we were being carried along by a current and life not our own.

And what of the future? Oh, that question is easy to answer: it definitely feels like one of those "over our heads" times! All who read this pastoral letter know of our commitment to hold an International Conference in Houston next June 30 - July 3. (How I hope I will see you there!) This single event exceeds our entire annual budget. But, through a full year of prayerful discernment—watching doors open and signs given—we believe God has been saying to us, "It's time to swim." And so we have ventured out into the River where our feet no longer touch the bottom and we have been feeling the thrill of the current of God's love and power. This gives us confidence that the Houston Conference will be an especially God-kissed event.

Many other hopes and dreams dance in our heads. We have an Institute of Spiritual Formation on the drawing boards waiting for God's timing. In May 1999 I will be in England exploring the possibilities (and perhaps even participating in the launch) of a British expression of RENOVARÉ. Many other international venues are open doors before us: Australia, Germany, and Korea are among our top priorities.

Dallas Willard and I are working on the possible launch of a series of "Summits on Christian Spirituality" that we hope will help articulate the direction of spirituality in our day. We are looking to do these "Summit" gatherings in North America,

OUR FINANCIAL GUIDELINES

- We urge everyone to give first to their local church (or wherever they are being nurtured spiritually) and to the poor before ever giving to RENOVARÉ.
- An accountant oversees our financial records in accord with accepted accounting procedures and the highest professionalism.
- We will live within our means. One thing we refuse to do is overextend and overspend ourselves and then beg for God's people to bail us out. We believe that God will give us the money to do what we are being called to do. We feel it involves just as much faith to trust God for the money before a purchase as after a purchase. In fact, one way we discern God's will for the ministry of RENOVARÉ is through the financial support of his people.
- We believe in full disclosure at all times. Our financial reports are available to anyone upon request.
- We will receipt all donations.
- If we offer books, tapes, or other materials for a suggested contribution, we will receipt the amount given above the retail price of the product plus shipping and handling costs.
- When we make a purchase, we will pay the bill within thirty days. We refuse to subsidize this ministry on the backs of vendors.
- We will never sell or rent our mailing list.
- We are primarily a voluntary organization and as such we depend in large measure upon the sacrificial labors of many. If, however, we employ paid staff, they will receive equal pay for equal work.
- We will communicate our financial needs to our constituency as clearly and as truthfully as possible. We will not inflate or overstate our situation, nor create a crisis to boost income.
- We believe RENOVARÉ was initiated and continues to be sustained by God. While we are eager to follow the Divine whisper at every turn and work with all our might, it is God's business and not ours to prosper or end the work of RENOVARÉ. We rejoice either way.

South America, Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Australia/New Zealand. It is possible that they will be followed by a world gathering.

I could go on and on. In each case we are watching the flow of the River of God and seeing what part we have to play in it all.

Asking, Seeking, Knocking

All of this to say that we need your help as never before. Every dream needs funding. Not every dream, of course, is to be acted upon, and our commitment to you is to continue to prayerfully discern which dreams we should act upon and which we should let pass into oblivion. We believe that God will give us the money to do what we are being called to do.

This is where you come in. I am asking, seeking, knocking. Of God . . . and of you. Will you help us? You can say no, of course, and some because of life circumstances should say no. But many others need to say yes. Some can say yes in a small way. Others can say yes in a large way. But every yes is a YES to God. (Even those who must say no in a monetary sense can do so in the spirit of a mighty YES to God.)

Several friends of RENOVARÉ have joined together to set before us a \$26,000.00 matching challenge gift. (How very gracious and generous of them!) Therefore, every dollar you give to this work in the days ahead will be matched, thus doubling the good you do. This makes the present an optimum time for you to help us.

We all have a priority obligation to the poor and I urge you to give generously and joyfully to the poor. Then, I urge you to give generously and joyfully to wherever you are being nurtured spiritually—and I most fervently hope that RENOVARÉ is part of that network of spiritual nurture you are receiving.

God bless you and strengthen you at this beautiful season of the year. Remember: stay ever in the flow of the River of God. For everything the River touches shall live!

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

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self-addressed envelope.**

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