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# Heart-to-Heart

A Pastoral Letter from Chris Webb

Bringing the Church to the churches  
**RENOVARÉ**

MAY 2008

Dear Friends,

“Superficiality is the curse of our age.” When Richard Foster wrote these opening words of *Celebration of Discipline*, he may well have suspected that a generation later they would still ring true. What he certainly didn’t anticipate, however, was the impact his writing would have for the next three decades on a church caught up in the culture of “surface living.”

It is hard for some of us to remember just how startlingly radical *Celebration* was when first published in 1978. Today, spiritual formation is hot news. The shelves in Christian book stores groan with the weight of books on the spiritual disciplines. An increasing number of churches are appointing spiritual formation pastors. Evangelicals talk with easy familiarity about great Christians of the past such as Thomas à Kempis, Brother Lawrence, Mother Julian of Norwich, Francis of Assisi, and Teresa of Avila, and are often (though not always!) immersed in their outlook and ideas in a way that would once have been unthinkable. The liturgical churches are rediscovering the depth and importance of spiritual practices, which have always been there in the background but too often seemed to lack vitality and purpose. Across the whole spectrum of church life we are finding common ground with one another in the pursuit of Christlike living and learning to share—and receive—the riches of our different traditions.

This year RENOVARÉ is celebrating *Celebration*: 2008 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary since its first publication. During all those years, *Celebration* has never once been out of print—it is one of only a handful of contemporary books (of any kind, not just Christian books) to have achieved this distinction. It has sold over two million copies worldwide and been translated into some two score languages. It is recommended reading in countless colleges and seminaries. It has been recognized and honored by the Christian media and publishing industry as one of the most influential Christian books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and many believe it will endure further to become one of the great classics of Christian writing.

But for many of us, impressive as this is, the real significance of *Celebration of Discipline* lies in the personal impact it has had on our lives. I can remember well the spring evening in Wales when I first began to read it. As I have related elsewhere, I practiced Zen Buddhism before coming to faith in Christ, and, since committing myself to life as a disciple of Jesus, I had been struggling to reconcile what seemed to be a very intellectual, academic faith with the spiritual hunger in my heart. In fact, I had not been succeeding; I spent many months caught halfway between Christ and Buddha, sincerely desiring to



walk faithfully with Jesus but unable to live without the depth of spirituality I had found in Zen. I can remember the almost physical feeling of shock I experienced when I turned the page in the first chapter of Richard's book and read, at the top of the next page, "Chapter Two: The Discipline of Meditation." In a moment of blinding revelation, I realized what now seems so painfully obvious: that following Jesus is a *spiritual* journey. The meditation Richard described, rooted firmly in the Scriptures and the experience of the Church across the centuries, was in many ways quite unlike that which I had been taught in Zen. It focused the gaze, not within, but without, on Jesus. Zen sought to perceive the illusory nature of reality, and so achieve detachment from it. Christian meditation opens us to the possibility of God's transforming grace in both our lives and our world, and so encourages us rather to embrace the world around us in hope. And yet . . . here was someone whose writing was so clearly rooted in the gospel of Christ and yet knew what it meant to explore and experience spiritual depth. I can remember thinking, "I didn't know Christians did this!" Looking back, it seems to me that my conversion to Christ, begun when I made a decision "in theory" to follow Jesus some months before, only crystallized, completed, that evening. Now, I felt, I can really follow without reservation.

I devoured the rest of the book. I still have it with me, now a 20-year-old, battered copy replete with underlinings and notes. The cover is a little grubby. Pages have fallen out and been carefully taped back in. But it's still going strong. I am encouraged to believe, if I am careful with it, that it might outlive me and end up in the hands and hearts of my children.

So what am I saying, that Richard Foster changed my life? No. Jesus changed my life. But—and there are so many others who could say this too—Jesus used *Celebration of Discipline* to make that change possible. In his introduction to the revised edition of 1988, Richard wrote, "I am struck even more profoundly that God can take something so inadequate, so imperfect, so foolish as words on paper and use them to transform lives . . . It is a miracle of grace and points to the fact that, if there is anything in these pages that ministers life to you, it did not come from me." Perhaps a future day will see the founding of the Church of St. Richard, and the earth will quake to the mighty marching of the Fosterites. I, though, will not be one of them, and neither, I sincerely hope, will you! To the end, I will be following *Jesus* . . . and I will always be grateful for the way Richard's writing has helped me do that.

Celebrating 30 years of *Celebration* means not only looking back at the impact of this book, though; it also means looking forward to the future. God has been working amongst his people in the most surprising ways these last three decades, not least in the coming together of God's people from across the traditions of the church and in the growing emphasis on spiritual formation in so many Christian communities, and many of us are now living in great anticipation of what might be coming next. In Houston, Texas, October 2-4, 2008, RENOVARÉ will be holding a significant conference marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Celebration of Discipline's* publication: *Life with God: CELEBRATING LIFELONG DISCIPLESHIP*. In October we will discern how the emerging spiritual formation movement might develop and help shape the church over this next generation. We are looking forward to first-class contributions from an excellent group of plenary speakers—Richard Foster, John Ortberg, Ron Sider, Dallas Willard, and Lauren Winner—together with a wide range of workshops and some inspiring worship. I hope many of you will be able to join us for this groundbreaking event, as we look together into the future which God is bringing. See the enclosed brochure for details.

But as we look ahead, it is clear that we still have a long journey to travel. The challenge 30 years ago was two-fold: (1) to open up the riches of the Christian spiritual tradition to a church which had become largely alienated from it, and (2) to encourage Christians to use that wealth of experience to engage in a serious and intentional process of spiritual formation so that they might be formed into the character of Christ and so that we might realistically call ourselves *disciples* of Jesus Christ, and not admirers only. The publication of *Celebration* came at the beginning of a contemporary spiritual formation movement that is in danger of meeting the first part of this challenge far more successfully than the second.

Writing, preaching, and teaching about the spiritual disciplines is now widespread. The great Christian classics are more available and accessible than ever. The churches have become comfortable with the language of formation and intentionality. But the utter devotion to the way of Christ that lies at the heart of spiritual formation seems to elude too many. The classics are more often bought and quoted than actually *read* and *wrestled* with. Too often, our eloquent teaching and preaching far outstrips our practice. And while we might applaud a church for appointing a Spiritual Formation Pastor, it begs the question: what are the *other* pastors doing? In many churches formation and intentional discipleship remain electives for the enthusiastic rather than requisites of the core curriculum.

Abba Poemen, one of the Desert Fathers, said 1,500 years ago of his generation: "People are talking to perfection, but they do precious little about it." The same danger presents itself to us. The church is experiencing a renaissance in the teaching of spirituality. But this teaching is only the first step, not the last: transformation does not come from

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- 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 volunteer 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.

knowledge alone, but from the openness to grace that knowledge makes possible—and that openness entails engagement in the fierce inner struggles by which the spirit is molded into the image of Christ. This is not, and never will be, an easy path; it is the narrow gate and hard road of which Jesus warned us (Matt. 7:14). But it is the only way to life. So we must courageously act, live, *do*; we must become a church of practitioners, not simply professors.

“The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people,” wrote Richard in the first chapter of *Celebration*, “but for deep people.” This is a word that speaks to us. Us, not the other folks in our churches, or cities, or denominations. We cannot make others deep; we cannot even make them want to be deep. But we can commit ourselves, heart and soul, to a life’s work of immersing ourselves in the depths of Christ. To quote one last time from *Celebration*: “Let us be among those who believe that the inner transformation of our lives is a goal worthy of our best effort.”

Every blessing,

*Christopher S Webb*

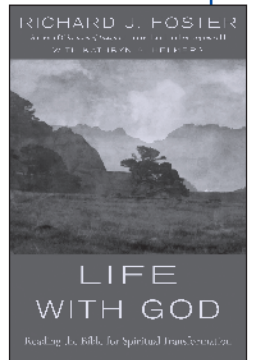
Christopher S. Webb, TSSF

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