

MINISTER'S FORUM

"LIGHT FROM THE OLD PATHS" Brian Borgman, Sierra Community Church

In my study there is a picture of Alice (from Wonderland) standing at a fork in the road. In the middle of the fork is the Cheshire cat, sitting in a tree. Alice inquisitively asks the cat, "Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?" The cat responds, "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." "I don't much care where-" replies Alice. "Then it does not matter which way you go," said the cat.

Many Christians face the same conundrum as Alice. In their Christian pilgrimage they are not quite sure which path to take. In fact, they do not really know where they are supposed to be going (except Heaven, of course). Furthermore, they don't much care where they should go, they just know that should be going somewhere. So, as Alice, they inquire. Their inquiry may take them on a jaunt to their local Christian bookstore in order to gather some gems of wisdom and guidance from the "experts." Surely the "experts" can help them decide which path they should travel.

In our day, the books are rolling off the presses faster than any time in history, and that must be most helpful for the Christian pilgrim looking for the right path. Or is it? Take a good look at what lines the shelves of most Christian bookstores. Some of it is very good to be sure! However, the average spiritual and devotional depth found in most Christian books would not be enough to drown a gnat, let alone satisfy a hungry heart. Pop-psychology integrated with Christian-ese has become the staple diet for most Christians, and the bookstores are glutted with it. Christian "How-To" books surpass in number those found in home improvement centers, not to mention, the hocus pocus which goes under the guise of "Spiritual Warfare."

If Christian books were food (and in a spiritual sense they are), we would be saturated

with a plethora of cotton candy and other tooth-decaying, gut-rotting junk food. The problem with junk food is that one thinks his tummy is full of food which will nourish the body, when in reality it is filled with garbage which short-changes the body.

God has done so much to instruct His people concerning the paths they should take, for their good and His glory. But the last few generations have been so obsessed with beasts, numbers, horns, demons, and how I can feel better about me, that they have become disinterested in the really good, satisfying, nourishing stuff. As a result, we accumulate teachers who crank out the junk food (see 2 Tim. 4:3-4), and we settle for the paths which satisfy curiosity, appear glamorously sensational, and offer the least resistance. Because of our ignorance of our Christian heritage, we stroll down new paths forged by blind guides, and fail to travel the old paths paved by proven guides.

J.I. Packer, in his wonderful book, A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life (Crossway, 1990), draws an excellent analogy between the redwoods of the California coast and the Puritans. The Puritans, like the redwoods, stand a giants of spritual strength, depth, and insight. Their writings, like none others, brilliantly bridge the gap between sound theology and practical Christian experience. For us today, they are there in print, as old paths, tried and true. (If you do not see this about the Puritans I suggest you read them for yourself, instead of allowing someone else to form your opinion of them). Packer himself describes the awesome influence the Puritan John Owen had on him. Is it no wonder that among contemporary authors, Packer stands head and shoulders above the vast majority?

As one who has been touched by the Holy Spirit through the old paths, let me encourage you to pick up a few of the old-timers. I guarantee you will be blessed by the light of these old paths.

If I may, I would like to give you some recommendations from the old paths. First, I

would start with J.C. Ryle's book Holiness (originally published in 1879, reprinted in 1979 by the Evangelical Press. Packer writes the preface.) Although Ryle falls outside of the Puritan era, he is a Puritan at heart and in his theology, and his book is powerful stuff. It is life-changing. I also heartily recommend Jonathan Edwards. The Banner of Truth has reprinted many of his books as single volumes, as well as a two volume collection of his works (The Works of Jonathan Edwards, 2 Volumes, Hickman edition). Some of the single volumes that deserve special attention are Religious Affections, On Revival, On Knowing Christ, and Charity and Its Fruit. Of course, the Puritan Thomas Watson's Body of Divinity (Banner of Truth) is an outstanding choice, and easy to read. For spiritual warfare, one would not want to miss Thomas Brooks' Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices (Puritan Paperback series, Banner of Truth). I would also recommend the expository works of Thomas Manton (Psalm 119, James, and Jude). Manton is smooth reading, great insight, and highly quotable. Finally, for me, the all-time Puritan classic is John Owen's Temptation and Sin (Volume 6 of his works, Banner of Truth). Owen is a chore to read, but he pays rich dividends. He is a physician of the soul, and a meticulous surgeon with the Word.

Discovering the old paths rescues us from Alice's dilemma. The old writers knew where they were headed, and they were saturated with the Word, which gives us direction. A life of godliness, which pleases our Savior, should be our desire, and we should utilize all that God has given for the journey. So take up the old paths, you will be glad that you did.