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Review of Robert Cornwall's book, "Called to Bless: Finding Hope by Reclaiming Our Spiritual Roots"

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Called to Bless: Finding Hope by Reclaiming Our Spiritual Roots

By Robert D. Cornwall
Cascade Books (Eugene, OR., 2021)

Called to Bless provides a theologically informed case study, based on the author's experiences in churches, as lifelong member, ordained minister, church historian, and ecumenical advocate. It is intended to show individual Christians, pastors, church leaders, and congregations how to find a fruitful balance between their past traditions and their Christian witness for the future while living faithfully in the present. Reflection questions for individuals and congregations that follow each chapter are designed to help readers as they respond to the challenges they meet.

Cornwall's life as a Christian has been widely varied. Soon after birth, he was baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church and continued in that ecclesial tradition until high school years. As time went on his spiritual journey has taken him into a wide range of denominational traditions: "Episcopalian, Pentecostal, Baptist, Presbyterian, Evangelical Covenant, and two varieties of the Stone-Campbell Movement, while developing strong friendships with members of the third branch" (82). His undergraduate studies were at Northwest Christian University (now Bucknell University) in Eugene, Oregon, and his seminary studies and a doctorate in church history were done at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Throughout this book, Cornwall affirms that he has retained important features from each of these traditions and found ways of incorporating them into his ongoing ministry.

Throughout his career, Cornwall's theological interests and pastoral activities have extended far beyond the immediate circle of activities occasioned by his academic and churchly duties. In this book, he hopes to encourage and guide many others as they too seek to be a blessing in their own settings.

When Cornwall wrote the book, he was pastor of Central Woodward Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), in Troy, Michigan, soon to retire following his pastorate (that had begun in 2008) in this historic congregation whose name highlighted its long history in the heart of Detroit some twenty miles distant. In 1979, when the congregation moved to Troy, its connections with its Detroit life still were strong, but gradually those ties had diminished, and its members were increasingly ready to define the congregation's life in new ways.

In 2019 Cornwall took a sabbatical leave from his pastoral duties, using this time to revisit sites important to the spiritual traditions that remained active in his ongoing ministry. Following his return to Troy, he preached a series of sermons based on these studies and then used them as the foundation for classes that his congregation could use as it strengthened its future-directed course of action. His convictions grew ever stronger that for pastors and churches alike qualities from their beginnings—their spiritual DNA—and their purposes for the future both are dynamic factors that can help them live purposefully and faithfully as their lives unfold.

Although Cornwall believes that institutional beginnings are important in shaping later histories, he has chosen a biblical story as the founding vision for the churchly traditions he

discusses. That story, found in Genesis 12:1-2, tells of the moment when God called Abraham, instructing him to go to a land that God would show. There God would make his name great and make him a blessing to the nations. Throughout *Called to Bless* Cornwall cites other scriptural passages that renew this Abrahamic foundation for the people whom God has chosen.

While Cornwall has retained features from the several churchly traditions he describes throughout the book, his primary loyalties are to the influence of the Stone-Campbell movement, which has been his ecclesial home for the greater part of his adult life, and to the Pentecostal tradition that he encountered during his adolescent years. The author also believes that the specific histories of congregations and denominations also are important. Therefore, in 2013 five years after beginning his ministry with the Central Woodward Christian Church, he spent time at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society (then located in Nashville, Tennessee) doing research on Edgar Dewitt Jones, the congregation's founding pastor and a leading figure throughout the Disciples of Christ at that time. As a result of this study, Cornwall came to understand the congregation's historical in addition to its biblical anchor in the tradition of Abraham.

His example is encouraging me to focus some of my own research activities on the leading persons and episodes in the history of Central Christian Church in Indianapolis, where I am a member, as we look forward to celebrating the bicentennial anniversary of our founding, which occurred in 1833. What chapters from our past should we reaffirm and carry forward into the future, and what elements from our congregation's past, and from the Stone-Campbell tradition, no longer are useful as we seek to be a blessing for our city and the world in time to come? I am especially interested in finding out how Central became "the liberal church in downtown Indianapolis," as Lyle Schaller reported it to be in his study of downtown Indianapolis congregations in the 1970s.

As he concludes this chapter, "A Founding Vision," Cornwall refers to the idea of wholeness which is the way that Disciples currently are discussing ideas and practices that in the past have been referenced by the word unity. He cites leaders from two Disciples generations, theologian Clark M. Williamson (now deceased) and former General Minister and President, Sharon E. Watkins. Study questions at the close of this chapter would be very helpful for people wanting to explore such matters in their own lives in the church.

Another place where Cornwall's expository pattern is clear is the chapter where he compares Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone with Sister Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the Foursquare Gospel Church. Early in this chapter he writes that a "close look at Christian history will reveal many examples of reform movements that emerged in a moment of crisis or transition and called the church back to its original vision." After citing the Franciscan order as a restorationist movement, and then Luther and Zwingli, he turns to the Campbells who early in the nineteenth century "concluded that the church of their day had strayed too far from Jesus' original vision. They also felt a call to restore the church to what they called the 'ancient order of things.' By that term they were referring to the church order and purpose they discerned to be present in the New Testament. They began their work of peeling away the accumulated 'stuff' that now obscured the church's sense of purpose" (43-44).

What these Disciples reformers did early in the nineteenth century, Cornwall continues, Sister Aimee and the Azusa Street Revival did in the early twentieth. “In many ways,” he continues, Sister Aimee’s theology is different from my own, but her restorationist vision reminds us that God’s Spirit does move in the church, setting and restoring things to their original settings” (46). Unfortunately, Cornwall writes later in the book, the emphasis on speaking in tongues has also led to new divisions that in their own ways impeded the churches as they sought to bring healing and health to the people of the world.

One enduring gift of the Pentecostal movement, Cornwall notes, was the work of one of the leaders of the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, an African American Holiness preacher named William Seymour. He offered a message of “radical egalitarianism” that crossed racial-ethnic divisions and socioeconomic lines. Contrary to practice of most other churches, leaders in the Pentecostal movement allowed women to preach in their churches and administer the sacraments (74, 5). Cornwall encourages his readers to focus attention on the renewal of the Holy Spirit in their own lives and their larger relations within the churches that continue to be divided from one another. In this way, he hopes, we can find new, Spirit-filled ways to overcome the powers that keep us divided.

At this point, he opens the door to a more complex discussion that increasingly commands the attention of people around the world. More and more, what we need to be doing is “to extend [our] vision of unity beyond the Christian faith.” He has discovered that “interfaith conversations are best served when we respect the differences that exist between our religious traditions. While Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their faith traditions back to Abraham (and beyond), that doesn’t mean that we look at things the same way.” The differences are even greater when we include people from the Dharmic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, but even these differences, Cornwall affirms. “don’t prevent us from having fruitful conversations or finding points of agreement, especially on matters of social justice and integrity of creation” (86-7).

In his final chapter, “What’s in a Name—Discovering Spiritual DNA,” Cornwall again uses the congregation he was serving as he wrote this book as a case study that illustrates the process he has discussed throughout the book. Beginning with the story of Abraham and responding faithfully to new challenges throughout its history, a congregation can become a blessing in new ways in years to come.

Called to Bless: Finding Hope by Reclaiming Our Spiritual Roots discusses complex, challenging issues facing churches and, to some degree, other faith communities. May it guide and inspire congregations and church leaders everywhere as they seek to bless the world in which they live and work.

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