



A Surprising Return to Ancient Paths: *The Promise of Christian Camping*¹

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In my first invitation to share with participants at the Christian Camping International convention at Green Lake, Wisconsin, I had prepared to describe what we know about human learning and good learning environments—a sort of introductory lecture. For almost one day I listened and learned that CCI people didn't need my prepared lecture. I rewrote the lecture completely in the three hours before my address. I only needed to encourage you along the way to creating a consciousness that the Lord had already established within you.

This time I've got your number. I have come prepared to deal with tough issues. Few sectors of the Christian community are ready to face up to these issues. I speak to you as a key part of the education sector of the church.

Respect for Camping

Camping is a learning situation—an environment conducive to the many facets of human development. It is not to be equated with a school-like situation; it is to be respected and its potential for development of people recognized. Camping decisions—plans, procedures, activities—are educational decisions. Thus every decision, every action in camping implies a particular view of the future.

“A Surprising Return to Ancient Paths.” My address is both good news and bad news. The starting place is mostly bad news. A lot has happened since Green Lake, but I don't see enough recognition and girding up. I have three major points.

1. North American Christianity is too comfortable. The church is in the crucial stage of a new transformation—whether a new awakening, a reformation, a new polarization over issues of its purposes in the world, I cannot say. Like it or not, the ultimate question of all that we do in the name of the Lord is: Does it serve the church? Because of all sorts of weaknesses in the church and feelings of real or imagined superiority, the last thirty to fifty years might be called the rise of the parachurch movement. Perhaps we are now beginning the transition to closer relationship and greater accountability.

Symptoms of the change:

- Christ-centered social involvement; redemptive activism.
- A simpler lifestyle (see Ron Sider's writings).

¹Ted Ward. A Surprising Return to Ancient Paths. Address to Christian Camping International (CCI) convention. November 1, 1979. Location unknown.

- Increased sense of ministry of healing to a sick society. What is happening in the church gives hope for the future to a society beset with problems.
 - Interdependency—especially the willingness of parachurch operations to face their accountability to the whole body.
 - Less blatant individualism, “our way is best.”
 - Greater accountability and collectivization of the church (unity).
 - Reforms of leadership concepts and styles—judgment of secular styles of authoritarian and hierarchical leadership in the church.
 - Broader participation in leadership.
2. The whole world faces situations that will create more massive suffering and anxiety than ever before in modern times. (As I point out in June 29 *Christianity Today*, even those of us who eagerly await the return of Christ or the rapture must face up to this.) Here is a glimpse of the most probable future:
- *Family unity* is to become the most envied and controversial Christian distinctive.
 - Adjustment to a *simpler lifestyle* is easier for Christ-centered Christians than for secular people and secularized churchgoers.
 - Desperate search for public funds in a shrinking economy will precipitate *taxation* of private religious and educational property.
 - *Energy shortages*. One of the surest realities of our time. Possible migration to the South, abandonment of energy-inefficient buildings. Abandoned housing and job space accompanied by massive layoffs, reorganization industry, shortage of money.
 - *Famine*. New phenomenon: politically-induced famine in places such as Kampuchea, Cambodia, Sudan, Uganda, Zaire among many others. World agencies are increasingly unable to respond to “natural” famine. Overpopulation, under production. Paul Volker: “The standard of living of the average American must decline.” President Carter: “For the first time in history the majority of our people have the feeling that the next five years will be worse than the last five years.”
 - *Wars*. Instabilities abound around the world: Zimbabwe, Republic of South Africa, Iran, Jamaica, Argentina, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Afghanistan, and on and on. Also nuclear accidents are becoming more visible and common: Three Mile Island, South Indian Ocean.
 - *Continued erosion of moral values* (especially in North America). It is hard to be cheerful about any of this except for one key factor: As a matter of faith I believe that the church of Jesus Christ will respond constructively. “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Whichever of these two points we start with, they converge right here: the hope of the church is in the Lord of the universe. The convergence speaks of hope; the importance and value of his work in the world, the church.

God is resetting the stage for the third act. The church is being shaken out into a new shape and form. The institutions of the church are being tested and sorted out. That which has value for this next great phase will survive and flourish, though likely in a new shape. Substance will emerge, forms will change. Let's get specific. This third point of my speech relates particularly to Christian camping. Is camping a parachurch agency or an integral function of the church? An intriguing question.

Today, there is much soul searching concerning the institutions that serve the church, especially in all levels and forms of Christian education. Recently, I facilitated a faculty workshop at a well-known Christian college. After developing together a list of the things that constitute the important features of a Christian learning environment, a professor said: "We aren't talking about anything a good Christian camp can't do." I had two reactions: 1) a Christian college ought to be about more than that. The comment was heard by some as a sarcastic reflection on Christian camping, and a belittling of the vision I have for the Christian college. 2) Christian colleges could learn a lot from the Christian camp; in fact, maybe Christian colleges would be better off if they were more like Christian camps. My conclusion was that even in the Christian college and even in the thinking of this or that liberal arts professor, when you get down to the matters of the retentive community, you think of Christian camping. *Christian camping is not only the finest imaginable setting for learning; Christian camping provides the finest imaginable environment for the church in community.*

- There is impending judgment on institutions that produce elitism within the church. *Service-oriented institutions* will survive.
- There is impending judgment on institutions that exalt bigness and human cleverness. *Humble institutions* will survive.
- There is impending judgment on institutions that lay up treasures on earth. Institutions whose ministries are *Spirit-oriented* will survive. "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:7-9).

But still, what has this to do with Christian camping? Consider two churches: (1) A rather new congregation meeting in homes and in a rented school cafeteria since its formation several years ago; now contemplating a building program; and (2) an older downtown church in a small city, facing the problem of heating and maintaining a huge property for less than 12 hours of use a week. The ideas being considered by both churches are so similar that I'll describe them as a composite yielding very similar advice:

- a) Each congregation is aware that family-based religious development begins in the home, with the church supporting and training parents.
- b) They are finding new satisfaction in more broadly shared leadership responsibilities throughout the church.
- c) They are committed only to invest in church property that has multi-use capabilities.

One way to summarize all this is that through commitment to values and experiences that were deepened through their involvement in camping, they are considering shared experience and possibly property with local camps. Multipurpose, all-weather buildings: a chapel, a multipurpose

food service and recreation building; convertible dormitories that serve either same-sex groups or family units planned for that time when vacation travel is impossible; recreation equipment pooled from the congregation's basements and garages plus some from distress auctions and recreation-only camps; gardening and food preservation resources and training, a library annex. Possibilities for camps: a school, special facilities for the elderly, pastoral training.

Shrinking budgets and remote locations may force some camps out of business, especially those that aren't tightly linked to church ministries. But experience and expertise from Christian camping is particularly needed now in the church, and leadership from CCI members can become even more valued in the years just ahead. The church began as an itinerant experience in close contact with the out-of-doors. What sort of future might be in store? Possibly a more central and omnibus function of the camp facility. The only protection against "future shock" is preparation (the parable of the ten virgins). The only preparation that makes sense is one that anticipates discontinuities.

What important values are embedded in these ancient paths to which we are returning?

- *The walk of Christian faith*—The praxis theme, action-reflection, emphasis on experience.
- *The walk of Christian fellowship*—We need each other. Learning is a social experience at its best.
- *The walk of Christian unity*—Note the Lord's Prayer for His disciples (John 17:6-26). We've been unnecessarily afraid of unity.
- *The walk of Christian love*—A matter of motives and visibility. They will know that we are Christian by our love. The non-manipulative, honest caring of Matthew 25.

This "return to ancient paths" is surprising many. The *ancient* path was a path of trials and endurance; but also a trail of confidence in God. The great American dream, indeed the dreams of all nations for technological development, seems to be going sour. Though the mists darken the path, we can still see the Trailmaster just ahead. Our confidence is that just ahead of us, within arm's reach, is the One who first walked that trail. He looks straight into our eyes and says, "Follow me."