

## **THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF HENRI NOUWEN WOUNDED "HEALER"...OR DECEIVER?**

Henri Nouwen, an increasingly popular Catholic author, describes the challenge of ministering to modern man in his book, *The Wounded Healer*. He sees the predicament of twentieth century man as *radically different* from that of people in previous generations. The role of the minister must change accordingly, he claims.

There are some fundamental concerns that must be explored. It appears that the author may believe in a *universal salvation*, because he gives no significant place to the preaching of the gospel. One must also conclude that he sees the gospel as inadequate to satisfy the needs of modern man. In addition, he apparently does not believe in an eternal, unchanging value system such as what God commands in His Word. These are grave concerns for the Christian!

### **The Problem of Modern Man**

Nouwen sees modern man as being "painfully aware that the same powers that enable man to create new life styles carry the potential for self-destruction" (p. 5). Thus, "for him, the problem is not that the future holds a new danger, such as a nuclear war, but that there might be no future at all" (p. 7).

Apparently, for Nouwen the gospel is not sufficient to deal with these contemporary concerns:

"Most Christian preaching is still based on the presupposition that man sees himself as meaningfully integrated with a history in which God came to us in the past, is living under us in the present, and will come to liberate us in the future. But when man's historical consciousness is broken, the whole Christian message seems like a lecture about the great pioneers to a boy on an acid trip." (p. 9)

"Christianity is not just challenged to adapt itself to a modern age, but is also challenged to ask itself whether its unarticulated suppositions can still form the basis for its redemptive **pretensions**." (p. 15, emphasis added)

The phrase "redemptive pretensions" ought to sound a theological alarm! Furthermore, the gospel of Jesus Christ is unchanging for all time, and it is indeed as sufficient and relevant as ever. In

fact, *it is the only hope for man, in modern times as well as ancient generations.* Nothing else provides solid hope for the future--an eternal future.

Yet Nouwen fails to see immortality in biblical terms, or at least to take it seriously as an answer to the questions of modern man. For "nuclear man," to use his term, "traditional modes of immortality have lost their connective power" (p. 13). Such modes include the "desire to live on in his children," or "nature," or even "**immortality in heaven**" (p. 13-14). Since when has eternal life in heaven been inadequate for God's children? The world has no such hope, but the believer does! But is Nouwen truly a Christian? One must seriously ask this question throughout his writing.

Another crucial concern is Nouwen's assertion that we live amidst a "fast-shifting value system" (p. 9), wherein no set of eternal values is available to provide answers to life's ultimate questions:

"A man confronted with all this and trying to make sense of it cannot possibly deceive himself with one idea, concept, or thought system which could bring these contrasting images together into one consistent outlook on life." (p. 11)

"Nuclear man no longer believes in anything that is always and everywhere true and valid." (p. 11)

Yet Scripture says, "Let God be true, and every man a liar" (Romans 3:4). God is eternal and unchanging. The gospel is forever true and unchanging. God's Word is eternal and sufficient. Does Nouwen have no grasp of Christian eschatology? Does he have no hope of the return of Christ, as promised in Scripture, the final consummation of history? Apparently these questions must all be answered "no." The hope in all of Nouwen's writings is not apparent!

Further describing modern man, the "rootless generation," Nouwen notes three fundamental problems which he believes are significant: inwardness, fatherlessness, and convulsiveness.

First, the "inward generation" is one "which gives absolute priority to the personal and which tends in a remarkable way to withdraw into the self" (p. 27). He notes the privatism and self-centeredness which result. Noting the popular self-oriented psychologies that abound even in the church, this observation contains some truth. Nouwen goes further in his explanation:

"No authority, no institution, no outer concrete reality has the power to relieve them of their anxiety and loneliness and

make them free. Therefore the only way is the inward way."  
(p. 28)

Man has always rebelled against outside authority by nature, so in a sense this observation is no surprise--and certainly not unique to the twentieth century. However, the *Christian* holds no such view, but has been regenerated. He is able to gratefully submit to *God's* authority, having repented and received salvation by grace.

In spite of his concern, however, Nouwen sees inwardness as a possible part of the solution:

"The inwardness of the coming generation can lead either to a higher level of hypocrisy or to the discovery of the reality of the unseen which can make for a new world." (p. 29-30)

But we don't know exactly what the "reality of the unseen" means for Nouwen. And his "new world" seems to have more in common with the futile hopes of the New Age movement, rather than the Christian's hope of glory.

Second is the problem of fatherlessness for a generation that is "becoming captive to itself" (p. 32) with peer groups defining the standards:

"...everyone who claims authority--because he is older, more mature, more intelligent or more powerful--is suspect from the very beginning" (p. 30).

Again, the nature of unredeemed man is to rebel against authority. The problem is not new! Nouwen goes on to describe disobedience as compared with nonconformity: "Not following fathers is quite different from not living up to the expectations of one's peers" (p. 33). The possible result, he claims, is that:

"We might witness the death of a future-oriented culture or--to use a theological term--the end of an eschatology." (p. 33)

Unbelievers never did have an "eschatology," a solid hope for an eternal future. But Christians always have and *still do*, despite Nouwen's assertions to the contrary.

Third and last, Nouwen notes the problem of "convulsiveness," wherein people today are unhappy and discontent, protesting the ways things are:

"Many young people are convinced that there is something terribly wrong with the world in which they live and that cooperation with existing models of living would constitute

betrayal of themselves." (p. 34)

"They know it shouldn't be that way, but they see no workable alternative." (p. 34)

"The generation to come is seeking desperately for a vision, an ideal to dedicate themselves to--a 'faith,' if you want." (p. 36)

Indeed there is something terribly wrong. It used to be called **sin**. Actually, it still is! But Nouwen doesn't see the need to mention it in his analysis of modern man's basic problem. The "workable alternative" is the same as it always has been: the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not simply "a faith...*if* you want," but "the faith delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

We cannot fail to conclude that Nouwen's diagnosis of the predicament of modern man is biblically unsound.

## **Jesus Christ: Revolutionary Mystic...or King of Kings?!**

Nouwen describes two ways in which man seeks liberation from his predicament: the mystical and the revolutionary. For both of these, he claims that:

"...life means breaking through the veil covering our human existence and following the vision that has become manifest to us." (p. 20)

But what vision? Any imaginations of the human heart? This is dangerous in view of the inherently sinful nature of man. Nowhere does Nouwen leave room for God's *revelation* to man. Instead, individual "visions" abound.

The "mystical" or "inner way" is one where man:

"...finds a center from which he can embrace all other beings at once and experience meaningful connections with all that exists." (p. 16)

This pantheism, which Nouwen fails to expose as inaccurate theology, is characteristic of both Hinduism and New Age theology, but certainly not of the Christian faith.

The "revolutionary" way is hardly better, as it offers no certain hope but seems rather to depend wholly on man (**not** God):

The revolutionary "believes that the situation is not irreversible and that a total reorientation of mankind is just as possible as is a total self-destruction." (p. 19)

Nouwen goes on to make the astounding claim that:

"...in Jesus the mystical and the revolutionary ways are not opposites, but two sides of the same human mode of experiential transcendence." (p. 19)

Furthermore, this author offers us a radically new definition of conversion as "the individual equivalent of revolution" (p. 19). Regeneration is certainly a total reorientation of the individual, but it hardly equates with Nouwen's beliefs, and his insistence that there is an ultimate uncertainty about the future. His writings reveal that for Nouwen, the future is entirely open. Nowhere does he acknowledge that God is sovereign and has a definite *plan* for the future that *will* be fulfilled.

Jesus Christ is neither "mystical" nor "revolutionary" as Nouwen has defined those terms above. He is God incarnate, King of Kings, providing redemption to those who believe that He died for their sins and rose from the dead.

## Ministry to Modern Man

It is only logical that Nouwen's definition of man's problem determines the solutions that he offers. First, let us look at what Nouwen claims that ministry is **not**:

"Teaching in this context does not mean telling **the old story** over and over again, but the offering of channels through which people can discover themselves, clarify their own experiences and find the niches in which the Word of God can take firm hold." (p. 40, emphasis added)

"It is not the task of the Christian leader to go around nervously trying to redeem people, to save them at the last minute, to put them on the right track. **For we are redeemed once and for all. The Christian leader is called to help others affirm this great news**, and to make visible in daily events the fact that behind the dirty curtain of our painful symptoms there is something great to be seen: the face of Him in whose image we are shaped." (p. 44, emphasis added)

This is a radical denial of the gospel's call to repentance. It smacks of universalism, the belief that *all men* are saved without the need to come to a saving knowledge of the truth. The Christian minister does not "nervously" run around attempting to redeem people at the "last minute," but faithfully preaches the gospel in the confidence that the Holy Spirit will bring about conviction, repentance, and redemption. Yet Nouwen exalts finding of *self* rather than reconciliation with *God*.

This last recognition is central to Nouwen's understanding of what ministry **is**, now that we have seen what it is **not**. He claims that the minister must be able to "articulate inner events," which means "to enter ourselves first of all into the center of our existence and become familiar with the complexities of our inner lives" (p. 38). Thereafter, "he who is able to articulate his own experience can offer himself to others as a source of clarification" (p. 38). This self-exploration and self-knowledge is an unbiblical substitute for self-confrontation and self-examination in accordance with God's eternal standards. Only God's Word can provide the correct "clarification" for man.

Nouwen also errs in his failure to see the depravity of man, in view of his exchange of the glory and worship of God for idols:

"For a man of prayer is, in the final analysis, the man who is able to recognize in others the face of the Messiah and make visible what was hidden, make touchable what was unreachable." (p. 47)

God's image is not merely "hidden" or "unreachable," waiting to be discovered. Man must be *recreated* in the image of Christ, and this only happens following regeneration. Nouwen's subtle (or perhaps blatant) universalism masks the need of man to be delivered from the power and consequences of his sin.

Finally, Nouwen summarizes the basic task of the minister:

"...by testing all he sees, hears and touches for its evangelical authority, he is able to change the course of history and lead his people away from their panic-stricken convulsions to the creative action that will make a better world." (p. 44)

Do not be deceived by the mention of "evangelical authority." We have already noted much serious distortion of biblical truth in Nouwen's teachings. Here again, he fails to stand on the eschatological hope of Christ returning and bringing history to a close. His hope is in a "better world" rather than in God's glorious eternal kingdom.

## **The Case of Mr. Harrison**

Nouwen describes at length the case of a man, Mr. Harrison, who awaits surgery--surgery that may end his life (and it does). Mr. Harrison is a tobacco farmer with a Baptist childhood background that he has obviously abandoned. A young seminary student, John, visits him at this critical time, but their conversation reveals that little hope is offered. Nouwen analyzes

the condition of Mr. Harrison, as well as how John might have responded in a more helpful manner. This example is helpful in understanding more of Nouwen's basic theology as well as his approach to ministry.

The condition of Mr. Harrison is diagnosed according to three basic concerns: (1) the "impersonal milieu," wherein he sees himself as a helpless and passive victim (p. 55-56); (2) his fears about death; and (3) his fears about life.

Mr. Harrison clearly states his fear of death, and the potential suffering that he expects to follow. Nouwen claims that:

"a man as lonely and desperate as Mr. Harrison probably could not draw on past experiences that had established in him an awareness of God's love and forgiveness" (p. 58).

"...it is likely that all the warnings, prohibitions, and admonitions of his childhood returned to him, and made the transgressions of his adulthood seem a heavy burden that could only lead to hell" (p. 59).

It is highly significant to note that Nouwen places no emphasis on proclaiming the gospel to this dying man. The second quote reveals the desperate need for salvation. The first quote strongly suggests a belief in universal salvation. Such an unbiblical, deceitful presupposition has potentially *eternal consequences* for the recipients of one's ministry.

Nouwen also describes another fear that troubles Mr. Harrison, "the fact that a chance to make his death his own would be taken away from him" (p. 58):

"Mr. Harrison was not just a bitter and hostile man, resistant to pastoral help. For a real minister he incarnates the truth that it belongs to the dignity of man to die a human death, to surrender life instead of allowing it to be taken away from him in a state of unconsciousness." (p. 75)

Biblically, there is no reason whatsoever to offer a person the opportunity to "make his death his own." Life and death are determined by the sovereign Lord alone. This is theological nonsense.

Besides fearing death, Mr. Harrison fears life, being isolated and having no one waiting for him--only more hard work. Nouwen laments that "death may be hell, but life no less" (p. 60). "Any option would have been fatal, condemnation either to hell or to hard work" (p. 61). This seriously defies Scripture. Perhaps Nouwen has abandoned belief in heaven and hell, but eternal

separation from God is no match whatsoever for **any** earthly sufferings. Mr. Harrison may indeed fear both life and death, but the answers to **both** fears are to be found in knowing Christ as Savior from sin. Our Lord gives solid hope both for strength in the present life and eternal glory.

How could John have been more helpful? Nouwen explores this at length, noting that John made a "serious attempt" to "apply the rules of nondirective counseling" (p. 62). "Nondirective counseling" is a contradiction in terms and a practice that is unbiblical. Nouwen goes on to claim that Mr. Harrison's condition "was not immediately clear and comprehensible" (p. 62), because even if one had many hours with the man, his understanding would still be very partial: "The mystery of one man is too immense and too profound to be explained by another man" (p. 62-63). He asks, "Can anyone change a man's ideas, feelings or perspectives a few hours before his death?" (p. 64). These statements are serious distortions of truth. God alone can fully search the heart of man (Jeremiah 17:10, Hebrews 4:12, 13). However, Scripture gives *enough* information about the basic nature of all men, so that this seminary student (John) should have known a great deal about Mr. Harrison's basic condition--dead in sins and trespasses and in need of reconciliation with God, among other things. Nouwen fails to recognize this basic knowledge of man that has been given in Scripture by our Creator. Instead, he sees his analysis of possible ministry as "an attempt to recognize in Mr. Harrison's condition the agony of all men: man's desperate cry for a human response from his brother" (p. 63).

That "human response" forms the core of Nouwen's teachings about ministry. He is concerned that people "often find their ministers distant men who do not want to burn their fingers" (p. 71). He sounds almost like the Lord's story of the shepherd looking for the lost sheep when he states that "forgetting the many for the one is a sign of true leadership" (p. 73). And to his credit, he does acknowledge the serious error of modern psychological counseling, wherein the counselor is a detached "professional" lacking personal involvement:

"After so much stress on the necessity of a leader to prevent his own personal feelings and attitudes from interfering in a helping relationship...it seems necessary to re-establish the basic principles that no one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded or even destroyed in the process." (p. 72)

Amen! However, while personal one-to-one involvement is central to the New Testament, Nouwen exalts "a man with a clear face who called him by his name and became his brother" (p. 64)



above the need for a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Relationship with *man* takes precedence over relationship with *God* in his system. Furthermore, in listing responses by other seminary students that Nouwen considers *inadequate*, one of them is: "I would have talked about death as a way to new life for a man who can put his faith in Christ" (p. 64). This response nails the real issue, but Nouwen disregards it as unimportant and insufficient.

Instead, he sees the minister's task as one of establishing a strong personal contact that strengthens the will to live and provides a solidarity even in death:

"John's task was...to strength his patient's desire to recover and to reinforce what little strength he had in the struggle for life...by making Mr. Harrison's dangerous generalization, 'Nothing and nobody is waiting for me,' untrue, by reducing it to a paralyzing self-complaint." (p. 65)

"A man can keep his sanity and stay alive as long as there is at least one person who is waiting for him. The mind of man can indeed rule his body even when there is little health left." (p. 66)

"It is indeed possible for man to be faithful in death, to express a solidarity based not just on a return to everyday life, but also on a participation in the death experience which belongs in the center of the human heart." (p. 69)

If John followed Nouwen's plan, then supposedly he and Mr. Harrison would become "two men who reawaken in each other the deepest human intuition, that life is eternal and cannot be made futile by a biological process." (p. 69)

Personal contact and involvement is important. So is the person's hopeful attitude in the face of illness. But all of Nouwen's counsel is totally hopeless in the face of death *apart from Christ, which will result in eternal separation from God, not eternal life*. Life is **not** eternal apart from Christ, as suggested by the final quote above. And a Christian man **cannot** be "faithful in death" for a man who does not know Christ as Savior. There is no solidarity between believer and unbeliever in the death experience, but rather a chasm that only God can reach across by bringing the unbeliever to salvation. Nouwen's suggestions are highly deceptive and unbiblical.

Besides personal contact, Nouwen stresses the need for faith in the value and meaning of life..."even in the face of despair and death" (p. 74). Yet there is no such faith, no such value, no

such meaning apart from a saving knowledge of Christ! Nouwen does say that hope is "anchored not just in the soul of the individual but in God's self-disclosure in history" (p. 76), "grounded in the historic Christ-event which is understood as a definite breach in the deterministic chain of human trial and error, and as a dramatic affirmation that there is light on the other side of darkness" (p. 76). It sounds *almost* orthodox, but the coming of Christ is **so much more** than a mere "breach in the deterministic chain...." God's sovereign control existed *before* the incarnation, as well as during and certainly forever after. That sovereignty contrasts sharply with what Nouwen postulates as "the deterministic chain." Furthermore, the coming of Christ was prophesied for centuries. As for being a light on the other side of darkness, Christ indeed is that light for those who trust Him as Savior. But for those who do not, He brings judgment. Nouwen gives no place to God's judgment of the unsaved.

Just where does Jesus Christ fit into Nouwen's thoughts? He asks and answers the question himself:

"How could we speak about Christian leadership without mentioning Jesus Christ, His life, His crucifixion and His resurrection? The only answer is: He has been here from the first page of this chapter. The understanding of Mr. Harrison's condition and the search for a creative response were based on God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This revelation shows in the paralyzing condition of Mr. Harrison, the condition of man. It also reveals to us the possibility of following Christ in a faithful waiting for another beyond the boundaries which separate life from death"...*"since God has become man, it is man who has the power to lead his fellow man to freedom"* (p. 71, emphasis added)

Furthermore, Nouwen defines leadership as "an act of discipleship in which we follow the hard road of Christ, who entered death with nothing but bare hope" (p. 77).

We must carefully question Nouwen's conclusions, despite the fact that he seems to acknowledge Christ's life, death, and resurrection. First, Nouwen does not understand Mr. Harrison's condition of being dead in sins and trespasses. Second, man cannot wait for an unbeliever beyond death. Third, although man has the responsibility to preach and witness, it is *God*, acting in Christ, who leads his fellow man to freedom. Finally, Christ had so very much more than "bare hope" at the cross! *Being God*, He knew in advance what He faced, why He faced it, and the final results. Nouwen does not give proper place to the gospel in his analysis of how to effectively minister to others.

## The "Wounded Healer"

The theme of Nouwen's book is concerned with the minister's ability "to make his wounds into a major source of his healing power" (p. 83):

"He (the minister) is called to be the wounded healer, the one who must look after his own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others." (p. 82)

More specifically, these "wounds" include "alienation," "separation," "isolation," and "loneliness" (p. 83), all closely related themes.

Taking comfort in the assurances of Scripture, the believer should be rather shocked at Nouwen's statement that "the Christian way of life does not take away our loneliness; it protects and cherishes it as a precious gift" (p. 84). After all, he says, "the painful awareness of loneliness is an invitation to transcend our limitations and look beyond the boundaries of our existence" (p. 84). Contrary to the Lord's promise that He will *never leave you nor forsake you*, Nouwen states that *nothing and no one* "will ever be able to satisfy our desire to be released from our lonely condition" (p. 84). In addition, "nobody, and nothing can live up to our absolutistic expectations" even though we keep hoping for, among other things on a very long list, "the book which will explain everything" (p. 85). Nouwen is dead wrong in all of this. The believer *does* have a "book which will explain everything," and that is God's Word. He also has an eternal relationship with his Creator, and a unity with others who belong to God's family. Nouwen's statements destroy hope if taken seriously.

Applying his teaching specifically to the minister, Nouwen notes that his "professional impact on others is diminishing," that he is "called to speak to the ultimate concerns of life" but "only reluctantly admitted to the spot where decisions are made" (p. 85). Thus he encounters a unique type of "professional" loneliness.

This common experience of human loneliness, as proposed by Nouwen, is central to understanding his idea of the "wounded healer." Being a "wounded healer" does not involve a "spiritual exhibitionism" wherein the minister simply states that he has the same problems as everyone else, but no answers (p. 88). So far, so good. The minister must indeed offer answers to the flock under his care--*God's answers*. And he must do so with compassion, because all are equal before the cross; all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). However, that isn't Nouwen's reasoning at all:

"Making one's own wounds a source of healing, therefore, does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains but for a constant willingness to see one's own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all men share." (p. 88)

By this description, the "wounded healer" has no better answers than the "spiritual exhibitionist!" The man of God, by striking contrast, must offer clear exhortation, warning, and encouragement based on the infallible Word of God. Perhaps his own personal struggles will assist him in ministering compassionately to others, but the real foundation for the hope he offers must come from God's revelation in Scripture.

Nouwen also discusses a necessity for "human withdrawal," which he claims is difficult "because it forces us to face directly our own condition in all its beauty as well as misery" (p. 91). This is so even though "hospitality is the ability to pay attention to the guest," and "this is very difficult, since we are preoccupied with our own needs" (p. 89). But he explains:

"Paradoxically, by withdrawing into ourselves, not out of self-pity but out of humility, we create the space for another to be himself and to come to us on his own terms." (p. 91)

Nouwen goes on to support this proposal by quoting a Jungian counselor who insists that **God** created by self-withdrawal! This is theologically preposterous and seriously defies Scripture. (In addition, Carl Jung's theories cannot be trusted; he rejected the gospel and was seriously involved in the occult.) The Christian must demonstrate humility, but not to "create space" for another to "be himself."

Finally, Nouwen discusses his "wounded healer" in terms of responding to human pain. He says that:

"We are waiting for a Liberator...a Messiah who will free us from hatred and oppression, from racism and war...who will let peace and justice take their rightful place." (p. 81)

The Messiah, Jesus Christ, has already come and will return. He has already set believers free...*from sin*. He has given believers *peace with God*, the only peace that really matters. God has justified the believer by sheer grace. Nouwen's quote seems more concerned with earthly terrors than with man's need for redemption. In responding to the pain of others, here is how Nouwen describes the minister's role:

"A minister is not a doctor whose primary task is to take away pain. Rather, he deepens the pain to a level where it can be **shared.**" (p. 92, emphasis added)

"Perhaps the main task of the minister is to prevent people from suffering for the wrong reasons," such as the belief that life should be free from fear, loneliness, confusion, and doubt. Ministry, therefore, "is a very confronting service. It does not allow people to live with **illusions of immortality** and wholeness. It keeps reminding others that they are mortal and broken, but also that with the recognition of this condition, liberation starts." (p. 93)

How tragically contrary to the hope of the gospel! Yes, the minister must share in the real life suffering of those under his care. Yes, he cannot take away that pain, but rather must offer hope in the midst of trials, and exhort his people to respond righteously as they suffer. But fear, loneliness, confusion, and doubt **are the wrong reasons** for suffering! The believer must joyfully endure suffering for the cause of Christ. Fear of man, loneliness, confusion, and doubt are not essential characteristics of the mature believer's life, although he is not sinless during this earthly life. More seriously, the phrase "illusions of immortality" as used here is theologically intolerable. The believer holds no "illusions" of immortality, but has the assurance of eternal life! Nouwen does not offer any sort of liberation here, but promotes a system of thought that wars against the hope of the gospel. *Both pastors and laymen alike are to be warned against this aberrant theology!*

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