

It is good to be here in Denver. My wife and I came through this city 27 years ago for our honeymoon. We were on our way to Dillon, about 70 miles further west of here, where a friend had a cabin up in the mountains. We arrived at the cabin and I remember being disappointed because it didn't have a television. My wife had grown up on a farm so remote they couldn't even get a TV signal. She and her family attended a Baptist church, where they were expected to demonstrate their commitment to Jesus by foreswearing a temptation, such as smoking or drinking or dancing. My wife's family, ever the pragmatists, decided to give up television.

So when we walked into that cabin on our honeymoon and noticed there wasn't a television, I said to her, "How will we spend our time?"

Can you imagine a newlywed asking such a silly question?

So we found other ways to occupy our time—Bible study, prayer, and spiritual endeavors such as that.

What were you thinking we did?

Oh, I've heard about Baptists like you.

My wife and I, being true Christians, still don't have television. Though we do have several sinners for friends, so we can watch TV at their homes.

One of my friends phoned me not long ago to tell me they had purchased a 3-D television and wanted to know if I wanted to come over and watch a 3-D movie. I had never seen a 3-D movie before, having grown up watching the silent movies while the lady in the balcony played the organ. But my friend's four-year-old showed me how it worked. If you've seen a 3-D movie, you know it's quite fascinating. You watch it through special glasses.

It reminded me of when I was a kid and would go to the library in my hometown on rainy Saturday mornings and look at pictures through a stereoscope. The pictures had the same images side by side, differing just slightly in perspective and angle, which gave the two-dimensional picture a three-dimensional appearance. Stereoscopes were typically made of wood, with a little tin hood that fit around the eyes, and a wooden handle that came down, with a bracket that would hold the picture. Because stereoscopes were most popular in the late 1800's and early 1900's, most of the pictures dated to that period.

Sometimes an elderly person would be there, someone who had grown up in that era, looking at those images from their childhood and would reminisce aloud about those perfect days of long ago, which, of course, were only perfect in their memory. Then moving pictures were invented, and the stereoscope companies went out of business.

The new replaced the old, that unchanging principle. The new replaces the old. It is an inviolate rule, no matter how much we resist it, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us. The new replaces the old.

A month before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln, sent a letter to Congress in which he wrote, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”

It is sometimes difficult to know when we can rely upon the dogmas of the past and when the time has come to think anew. This is especially true in religion, when our fondness for life in the past sometimes compromises our ability to live in the future. We resist new light and fresh insights.

How many times have other Christians tried to pull you back to a dated, archaic spirituality? How many times have their “Thus sayeth the Lord...” crippled your spiritual progress?

Early Quakers, when they suspected another Quaker was running too far ahead of them, would say to that person, “You are running ahead of your Guide.” Or “You have gone beyond your Light.”

It was intended to give one pause, to check the impulse of moving beyond the majority's sense of divine leading. If someone, for instance, was teaching or saying something inconsistent with doctrine or the custom of the day, they would say to that Friend, "You are running ahead of your Guide." They would put the brakes on that person, you see. It was intended to be a powerful corrective, because you risked losing the support of your religious community.

Here's the interesting thing about it. In nearly every instance someone was told they had gone beyond their Light, or ran ahead of their Guide, in nearly every instance, time and history proved that person correct. They had not gone beyond their Light; the majority had lagged behind their Guide. They should not have said *Slow down!* to that person. They should have said *Hurry up!* to themselves. Remember this: Every moral, spiritual, ethical, and intellectual advancement was made by someone the rest of us were telling to slow down. They were thinking anew when we did not want them to think anew, when we were content to stick with the dogmas of our quiet past, even when those quiet dogmas did damage to people.

In April of 1963, when Martin Luther King, Jr. was imprisoned in the Birmingham jail, eight religious leaders of the city wrote an open letter to King entitled "A Call to Unity," and published it in the

newspaper. Friends, we perpetuate more wrong in the name of unity, we let more evil go unchallenged for the sake of unity than for any other reason. We will permit injustice after injustice to accrue simply to prevent any tension or disagreement from troubling our ranks. So these religious leaders of Birmingham, Alabama wrote a letter and named it “A Call to Unity.” In the letter they scolded King for his “untimely” demonstration. It was a polite way of telling King he had gone beyond his Light, that he had outrun God’s leading.

King responded with a beautiful letter—if you’re never read his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” you need to—in which he wrote, “Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see...that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’”

The church’s problem isn’t that we have gone beyond our Guide. The problem is that we have lagged far too far behind our Guide. Think of that for a moment, the preposterous notion that we can outrun God.

This unthinking commitment to the past and the entrenched mindset it represents, has surely caused more harm than good. It has demanded that men and women of good will make a butchery of their conscience, it has silenced prophets, it has kept us stuck in the yesteryear of a fabled goodness, preserving the sepia tones of a long-ago morality that excluded so many.

The idea that we can outrun God should be recognized for the lie it is, for it implies it is possible to run ahead of the very God who is constantly before us, always ahead of us, beckoning us toward a land and life we have only reluctantly entered. Not once, not once, has God ever said *Slow down* to someone pioneering the moral landscape. Not once. It is only the case, when we have finally dared enter the land of justice and freedom and pitched our tents, that God has said, “What took you so long?” Remember that when God led the Israelites by a pillar of fire, God was well in front of them, not behind them. God does not push us from behind, God pulls us from the front, beckons us from the future.

In 1942, a Baptist preacher named Clarence Jordan, deeply troubled by our nation’s racial injustice, moved to Americus, Georgia, where, with American Baptist missionaries, Martin and Mabel England, he began an interracial farming community that came to be known as Koinonia.

Koinonia became the target of repeated violence and bombings, but Jordan and his brave community continued to be a witness for racial equality, even though their appeals for legal and physical protection went unanswered. Now in all of that time, do you suppose God ever said to Jordan, "Slow down, Clarence Jordan, you are running ahead of me." Of course not. Of course not. God pulls us from the future.

Now let us be relevant. We can not let our generation off the hook. Today, too many in the church are telling gays and lesbians to wait, that we are not ready for them to enjoy the same rights we enjoy, the right to have as their life partner the person they cherish. When the matter is raised by those who can not keep silent while others are discriminated against, they are scolded for running ahead of their Guide, as if God is somehow honored by the relentless persecution of those whose sexual orientation differs from the majority. Some day, one day, we will cross that river and enter that land of liberty and justice for all and God will rightly say, "What took you so long?"

People say, "Oh, let us be patient. Let us wait. It will change for the better. Young people don't believe in discriminating against homosexuals. They will not continue our prejudices. Change will eventually come." People say that. I have said it. But now I say, "Why should our generation dismiss our responsibilities, putting upon the younger generation work that is rightly ours?"

We in the Church ought to be leading the charge for freedom. For we have borne witness, many of us firsthand, to the evils that occur when a minority is singled out for discrimination, when some people are denied a right the rest of us enjoy. Justice should not have to wait until some people die. The dogmas of our quiet past are inadequate. It is time to think anew, it is time to act anew, lest God say to us what God said to our ancestors, "What took you so long?"

I called the library this week. I said to the librarian, "When I was little, I would go there and look through this contraption at pictures. It was made of wood and tin. What was it called?"

The librarian said, "Oh, that was a stereoscope. We have one in our historical collection. We don't use it anymore."

That is as it should be. Some things belong in our historical collections, in our past. Other things belong to our faithful future. We do not run ahead of God, we can not run ahead of God. For God is the pillar of fire in front of us, not the dusty rut behind.