

# The God of new things (and old ones, too)

By DEAN MERRILL

Three candidates were being considered for a sales job. The personnel manager, fresh from a seminar on interview tech-

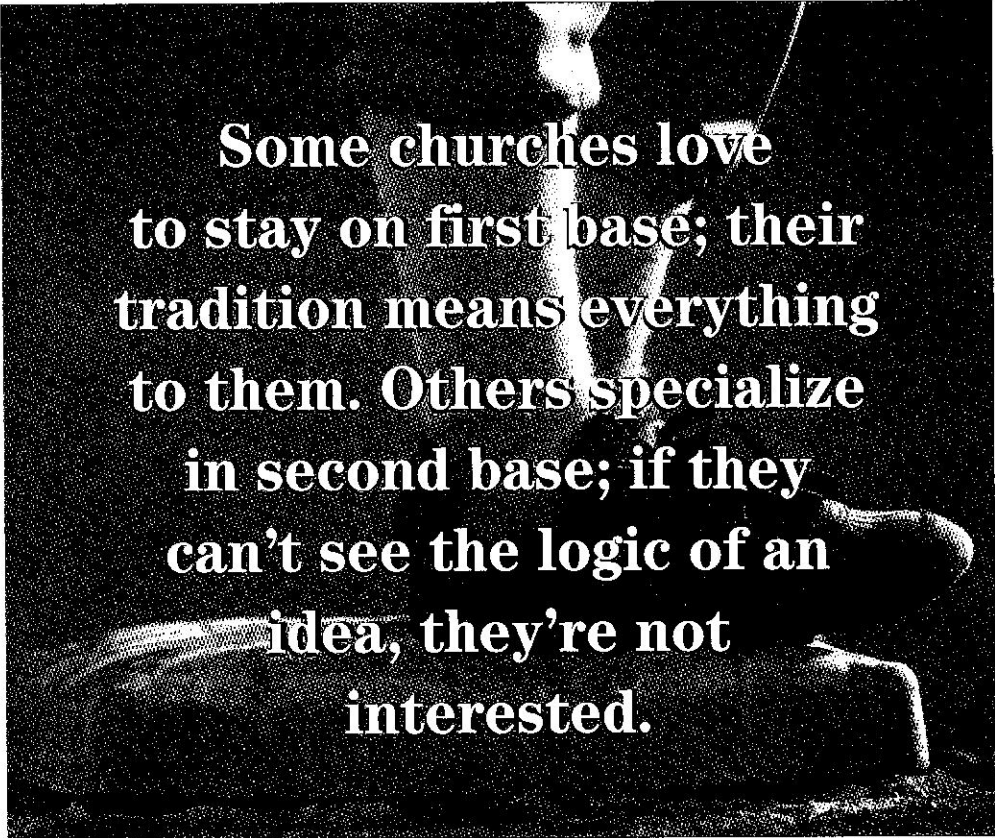
been a great boon to humanity."

The second person came up with an equally high-tech answer: "The MRI. It lets doctors see inside our bodies and diagnose all kinds of problems without requiring surgery.

"Well, it keeps the cold things cold, and the hot things hot."

That didn't help at all. "So...?" the interviewer probed.

With a touch of mystery the fellow replied, "How does it know?"



**Some churches love to stay on first base; their tradition means everything to them. Others specialize in second base; if they can't see the logic of an idea, they're not interested.**

## Then versus now

If someone were to ask you what is the most important, strategic element of your church, would you choose something big or small? Costly or inexpensive? Complex or simple? New or old?

If you're by nature a progressive type, you'll go for some recent innovation: the new praise-and-worship music, for example, or your pastor's intelligent preaching based on better education, or new outreaches to specialty groups such as young parents, teenagers, single moms, or business leaders. You're a little embarrassed by the old-time stories of Pentecostal churches "across the tracks," where preachers yelled and handkerchiefs waved and babies squaled during the service (no nurseries back then). You prefer, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" (Isaiah 43:18,19, NIV).

On the other hand, you may be more of a traditionalist. You hold fond memories of the olden days: the fervent prayer, the calls to holy living, the wholesale dependence upon God when there was no other resource. You worry that churches in the 1990s are losing something, getting too smart for their own good.

niques, posed this question: "What would you say has been the greatest invention of the 20th century and why?"

The first applicant paused for a moment and then replied, "The computer. It can do so many amazing calculations in a split second. It's

It's marvelous."

The third applicant, a man from the north woods, sat with a puzzled look on his face. Finally he answered, "The Thermos."

The interviewer was dumbfounded. "The Thermos. Why do you say that?"

Would the Azusa Street forefathers even recognize us today? What happened to the raw, blazing fire of the past? You recommend reading a little farther in Isaiah to the passage that says, "Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago" (Isaiah 46:8,9).

So which is better. Organ or synthesizer?

Hymns from a book, or choruses on a screen?

*King James* or *The New Living Translation*?

Midweek service at church or small groups in homes?

This old/new issue comes up a hundred different ways, and we are prone to simplify, even though we know better in our heads: *old=bad, new=good*. Or the other way around.

### **Yesterday wasn't perfect**

The truth is, yesterday's church was a mixture of good and bad, superior and inferior...and so is today's. God, who is timeless, was advancing His kingdom back then despite human flaws. He is having to do the same in 1997.

While old-timers may have been legalistic at times, we have to ask ourselves whether we have swung to the opposite extreme, where almost anything goes. Do we draw a line against any form of entertainment? Is there *anything* unique about our observance of the Lord's Day? Do the words "sin" and "purity" even ring a bell with us anymore?

While letting the truth stand unaltered, we cannot afford to be rigid on methods, however, like the Duke of Cambridge. One hundred years ago he said, "Any change, at any time, for any reason, is to be deplored." He was a military general of the old school whose outdated tactics cost the British dearly during the Crimean War. He insisted on fighting battles the way they had always been fought—and that was that.

Reformers tried to reason with him throughout his career, and got nowhere. Finally in 1895, the secretary of war had to fire him—even though the old gentleman was a grandson of King George III (our country's nemesis during the Revolution).

I have always appreciated the bal-

ance represented in Youth for Christ's original motto: "Geared to the Times, Anchored to the Rock." The essence of the gospel is unchanging; we had better not tamper with it. The presentation of the gospel, however, is fair game for

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## The God of new things

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constant updating. Old is good, but so is new.

### What is the goal?

John Wesley, energizer of the Methodist revival in the 1700s (and thus a grandfather of the Pentecostal awakening), used to talk about four foundations for truth and vitality in the church. One of Wesley's current interpreters, church historian Dr. Richard Lovelace, writes, "Imagine a baseball diamond. Home plate is Scripture. First base is tradition. Second base is reason, and third base is experience. Different parts of American evangelicalism have given differing weight to these four elements."

Some churches love to stay on first base; their tradition means everything to them. Others specialize in second base; if they can't see the logic of an idea, they're not interested. We Pentecostals tend to like third base—"the hot corner," as sports-writers call it. We "sit loose to tradition and sometimes even to common sense," says Lovelace. We "are radically open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup>

But the rules insist that only the runners crossing home plate (Scripture) get counted on the scoreboard. The rest is just chasing around the infield. What matters in the end is not whether an idea, a sermon, a program, a song, or a manifestation is old or new, but whether it is in line with God's agenda. He uses computers and Thermos bottles, "Victory in Jesus" as well as "Jesus, Your Name Is Power," altar calls and evangelistic drama. He summons us to get beyond the old versus new questions and focus on what's truly important. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lovelace, "Recovering Our Balance," *Charisma* (August 1987), p.80.

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