

An Interview With Dr. James M. Houston

by Dr. Art Lindsley

Dr. Lindsley: How did you come to Christ?

Dr. Houston: I was nurtured in a missionary family, deliberately giving my heart to God when I was eight years old, and baptized when I was twelve. But it was a childhood transition that had little crisis, as a babe awakens to the beginning of a day of sunshine.

Dr. Lindsley: If you had to list the top three needs of the church today, what would they be?

Dr. Houston: The top need is for the church to stop being 'institutionalized as church,' and to recover the amateur status of being 'lovers of God.' The professional strappings of 'church' also stumble many of us today. The second need is for 'being Christian,' rather than interpreting our Christian identity in activist terms and programs. For the nature of the triune God is communion, and from this the nature of the Church takes its identity also. The third need is for harmonious creative union between men and women in the life and service of the Church, not as rivals, nor as being alienated in 'politically correct' behaviors.

Dr. Lindsley: You have spent much time educating tomorrow's leaders. Can you outline the legacy you would want to leave them?

Dr. Houston: Like John the apostle, it would be: "love one another, for love is of God." So cultivate reverence and kindness as expressive of the uniqueness each one of us has before God. Never see then the Lord's people as "the crowd," but always having the potential to become "the beloved disciple." My greatest grief has been the way we abuse other Christians in the selfish pursuits and ambitions of "my own ministry."

Dr. Lindsley: As a founder of the C.S. Lewis Institute, what advice can you offer to those of us who are trying to be disciples of Christ in the Washington, D.C. area?

Dr. Houston: The C.S. Lewis Institute has been set upon a hill—'THE HILL' some may think of as the world's superpower—to be a light to the whole world. So as Paul enjoins the Christians of Rome, so he exhorts us: "in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:1-2). Significantly, it is to the Roman Christians the apostle emphasizes by "how much more" is the love and grace of God, than any human attitudes and expectations. So in view of all the pride, the scramble for the 'right' connections, the ambitions, the professional status, the political power, all being lobbied for in Washington's corridors of power, by "how much more" humility, the friendship of the poor, selflessness, and unpossessiveness should be the ministry of the C.S. Lewis Institute. Lewis himself speaks of himself as "never very 'high', nor very 'low', really just "a mere Christian", a "man of the foothills".

Dr. Lindsley: Of the many books you have written, which is your favorite? Your most important?

Dr. Houston: I do not consider myself to be a writer; just desirous to share some of the things I am learning on life's way. The original title of my book on prayer, *The Transforming Friendship: A Guide to Prayer* has been very helpful to me personally. My latest study on *The Mentored Life* has also reinforced my desire, like Richard Baxter (who coined the phrase) and Lewis, to remain also "a mere Christian."

Dr. Lindsley: What are the top five most influential books in your life other than the Bible?

Dr. Houston: One of my granddaughters is finding the Bible the most fulfilling book she has read. I wish the same for myself. But there have been books like

signposts on the pilgrim's road that have guided and refreshed my way. As a youth, it was Alexander MacLaren's *Biblical Sermons*. Later, it was John MacMurray's Gifford Lectures on "The Self as Agent" and "Persons in Relation," and also Michael Polanyi's, *Personal Knowledge*. John Zizoulas' *Being as Communion* has also been very significant. These have opened doors of perception that have shaped me more than I can tell.

Dr. Lindsley: How do you shape your devotional life?

Dr. Houston: Perhaps what has shaped me devotionally most of all is suffering, the need of patience and fortitude. For I have found God closest to me in the valleys rather than in the mountaintops, although He is there too. Prayer with others has always encouraged private prayer, so compassion has been a great dynamo of spiritual life, for it brings connectedness, openness to others, and thus a readiness to be 'open to God'. The Bible has been my greatest comfort and yet also my greatest challenge, for I am no 'innocent reader'. So the ethics of Bible reading have been a great struggle in my life.

Dr. Lindsley: What advice would you have for us on how to pursue Bible study and prayer?

Dr. Houston: I tend to be suspicious of all techniques and formal prescriptions for prayer and Bible Study. I see them as secularizing rather than as maintaining their necessary spirit of 'holiness' before God. But Murray McCheyne's framework of daily reading of Scripture has been helpful in the past. I have

also focused upon Psalm 119 for a whole year as conducive to cultivate a meditative posture, while dwelling upon the Lord's Prayer for several years was also formative. The daily use of Scripture Union's notes has been a lifetime habit for our daily family devotions. Prayer needs to be both a personal, solitary habit, as well as being a social habit. It grows with being self-honest and self-knowing. Humility, self-honesty and the acceptance of our own uniqueness before God, I have found essential for a life of prayer.

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

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