

Parodies of Piety

Everything
I Never Learned
in Sunday School

Author:
Jim Fowler

Illustrator:
Aaron Eskridge



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During the late 1980s and early 1990s four fellows met weekly for breakfast at Opal's Kitchen in Fallbrook, California. All four of us, Jeff Powell, Brett Stokes, Steve Walden and Jim Fowler had been involved in varying forms of fundamentalist Christianity, and had reacted to the absurdities and abuses we had observed. A cloud of cynicism encompassed much of our conversation, but it did not overcome the deep-seated awareness of the spiritual reality of the Christian gospel. Many, if not most, of the metaphorical similitudes in this volume were verbally suggested by the others who had far more illustrative and artistic minds than me. I was merely the word mechanic who took the mental pictures and constructed them into written form. Jeff, Brett, and Steve must be acknowledged as the creative originators of the seminal ideas that are expressed in many of these "parodies."

Since these parabolic parodies are so freighted with imagery, I knew their impact could be multiplied many fold by illustrative graphics. I solicited the assistance of a young artist, Aaron Eskridge, who was just out of high school and studying for an art career. Allowing him the freedom to express what he “saw” in each parody, Aaron illustrated the stories with exceptional line art, and provided the cover art in water color as well. Aaron Eskridge, now an artist and art instructor in Long Beach, California, must be acknowledged as the one whose illustrations make the thoughts in this volume “jump off the page.”

Jim Fowler

August, 2006

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INTRODUCTION

For several years now I have referred to this growing collection of analogies as my “parables manuscript.” While doing a study on the parables of Jesus, I realized how appropriate it was to refer to these as “parables,” for there is a distinct similarity of style and purpose with the parables that Jesus told. I found the trilogy of studies by Robert Capon (*The Parables of the Kingdom; The Parables of Grace; The Parables of Judgment*) to be most instructive in recognizing the contextual setting of Jesus’ parabolic teaching. The Jewish religious leaders were always listening in as Jesus told the parables. In most of the parables Jesus is exposing their religionism in contrast to the *modus operandi* of the Kingdom of grace that He came to establish. The parables in this volume are in the same venue as Jesus’ parables, for they are exposés of religious thinking and practice, in contrast to Christ’s kingdom operative by grace.

On most occasions Jesus did not provide any explanation of His parables, leaving them like “dangling modifiers” in His teaching. They served as “pictorial ponderables” which could implode within one’s thinking and explode misconceptions. They were puzzling and problematic; veiled with hidden meaning which was concealed in order to reveal. The parables of Jesus had a “back-handed impact” which “upset the apple-cart” of traditional religious thinking. What Jesus was advocating was 180 degrees opposite of the typical religious practice. With a subtle, dry humor, Jesus illustrated that “God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor our ways, His ways” (Isa. 55:8,9). Eventually the Palestinian religionists realized that Jesus was talking about them (Matt. 21:45), often making parodies of their piety, and they sought to silence Him.

What is a parody? A parody is a comic caricature, a ludicrous likeness, an absurd analogy, a ridiculous representation which exposes a particular reality by comparing it to another of a different order. Parodies can be a very useful verbal or literary tool to expose the “red herrings” of diversions which distract attention from real issues; to expose “hobby horses” whereby men keep reverting back to repetitive over-emphases without critical thought; to ex-

pose inane traditions which become familiar ruts wherein we fail to recognize the *absence d'esprit*. By the use of parody one can be direct yet subtle at the same time.

I am heartened that some rather respected personages have preceded me in employing satire and parody in caricaturing religious activities which were contemporary to them. Blaise Pascal exposed the Jesuits by showing the absurdity of their thinking and practice in analogical constructs. Soren Kierkegaard utilized parables and allegory to reveal pompous and fallacious activities in the Church of Denmark. Both were criticized for irreverence, but their writings exist to this day as valid examples of courageous men who stood up for veracity, integrity and genuine spirituality. I do not claim that my writings are of the same caliber as Pascal or Kierkegaard, but I am humbly willing to tread as they have trod, which sometimes means “stomping through the tulips.”

In his *Provincial Letters*, Blaise Pascal noted that

“there is a vast difference between laughing at Christianity and laughing at those who profane it by their extravagant opinions. It were impiety to

be wanting in respect for the verities which the Spirit of God has revealed; but it were no less impiety of another sort to be wanting in contempt for the falsities which the spirit of man opposes to them.”

“There are many things which deserve to be held up to ridicule and mockery, lest, by a serious refutation, we should attach a weight to them which they do not deserve.”

“...what is more fitted to raise a laugh than to see a matter so grave as that of Christianity decked out with fancies so grotesque...”

“...it is impossible to refrain from laughing.”

In documentation of his point Pascal quotes from Tertullian.

“...to treat them seriously would be to sanction them.”

“Can anything be more justly due to the vanity and weakness of these opinions than laughter?”

“Whether ought we to laugh at their folly, or deplore their blindness?”

There comes a time when we need to stand before the mirror to engage in some ecclesiastical self-examination. Those who are not willing to do so “deceive themselves,” and “their religion is worthless” (James 1:22-26). If we cannot or will not engage in self-

criticism, we become very in-grown and unhealthy. The body-religious today seems to be in a state of “denial,” unwilling to admit or deal with their “ingrown toenails.” Such a situation is an unhealthy situation that hobbles our effectiveness. The ecclesiastical community today is so myopic that it cannot detach itself from the extraneous criteria of self-image in order to be objective about its condition. Perhaps we need to follow Jesus’ advice to “take the log out of our own eye, before we seek to take the speck out of another’s eye” (Matt. 7:3-5).

It was the Scottish poet, Robbie Burns, who wrote in his poem, *To a Louse*,

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An’ foolish notion.”

Hopefully these parodies will allow us to “see ourselves as others see us,” and thus to be freed from some of our “foolish notions” and “blunders.”

I must admit that these parodies are a radical departure from the style of writing in which I often engage. In the past I have been accused of being a “cerebral mechanic” of thought, rather than a “metaphorical artist.” I have always been inclined to tighten down the “nuts and bolts” of theology, and disinclined to engage in analogical illustration, even in my preaching. Some have heard me declare that “analogy does not lead to good theology.” Why, then, do I now write such parodies? I like to think of these as an example of “reverse theology.” What is “reverse theology?” People have long been familiar with “reverse psychology,” and its attempts to emphasize what is wrong in a person’s behavioral actions in order to provide an incentive to make changes therein. “Reverse theology,” likewise attempts to emphasize the problems in ecclesiastical opinion and practice, in order to provide an intensified awareness of the inadequacies and an incentive to overcome the inconsistencies. Just as “reverse psychology” does not seem to work for all personalities, I am sure that “reverse theology” will not serve its intended purpose for a portion of the ecclesiastical population. There will be those who react with alarm, interpreting “reverse theology” as “negative theology” or “destructive theology,” but if

they will take a moment to glean the kernel of truth in these parodies, they will benefit therefrom. These parodies are loaded with theological import which most readers will understand as they read between the lines and note the resemblances of the analogies.

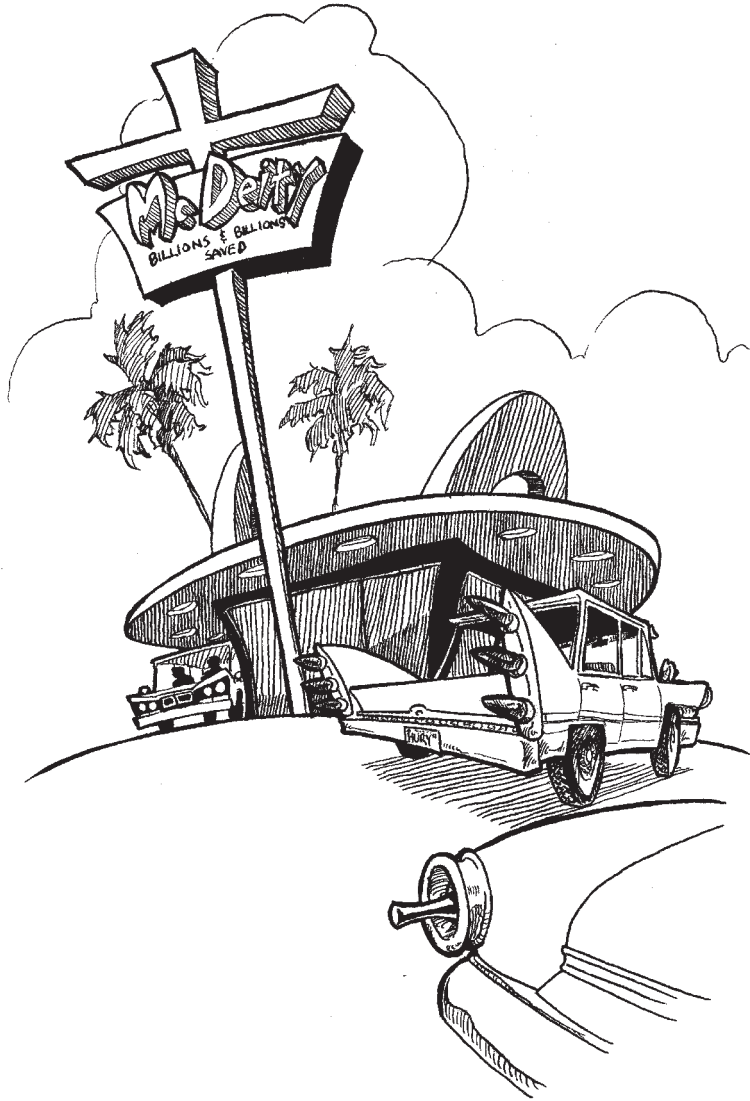
These parabolic parodies are purposefully short and pithy, for William Shakespeare explained that “brevity is the soul of wit.” It was not my purpose to be “sermonic,” or to use them as a “platform” for the promulgation of personal opinions. I have, therefore, elected to conclude each parody with a brief affirmative statement to “drive home” the point of the parody without being “preachy.” The purpose is simply to allow the reader to “get the idea,” and thus to leave an indelible impression that becomes a “dum-dum bullet” in the brain everytime one considers that subject.

You will never know how I have struggled to explain my heartfelt objective in writing and publishing these stories. As a pastor, I seek to point people to Jesus Christ and the gospel of grace. I do not seek to bash or destroy any legitimate constructs of Christian faith. Yes, there is caustic criticism within these parodies, but

I desire that it should serve as constructive criticism, rather than destructive criticism. I do not seek merely to attack or amuse, but to expose religious fallacies and edify genuine Christian believers.

“Charity may sometimes oblige us to ridicule the errors of men, that they may be induced to laugh at them in their turn, and renounce them.”

This statement by Augustine is certainly the spirit in which these parodies are written, and the purpose of their publication.



FRANCHISED RELIGION

I had always dreamed of owning a business of my own. A friend had advised that a franchise outlet of an existing chain with its developed support network was a wise business choice. Therefore, I was most interested in the advertisement which read:

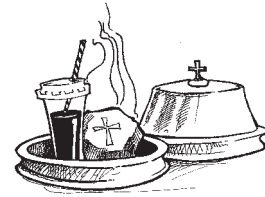
*“Franchises available – Sound business opportunity.
International corporation. Open one in your community.
Call 1-800-623-3489.”*

I made the call and agreed to visit one of their successful franchises with the district superintendent.

They had a unique marketing strategy encouraging people to “Look for the Golden Crosses.” Each establishment had a large lighted sign that read, “Billions and Billions Saved.”

The name of the company was “McDeity, Inc.,” a successful corporation indeed, with thousands of outlets in almost every country in the world.

Their product was pre-packaged meals, with convenient names that incorporated the McDeity motif: McWorship, McFellowship, McBible, McPrayer, McEvangelism, etc. “Just



unwrap and digest for your eternal health.” Kiddie meals were available for the children, conveniently boxed up with trinkets and prizes, to keep kids occupied and entertained.



The marketing support was exceptional with international publicity via television and other mediums. Seasonal promotions were used to attract sales. They often employed a colorful clown called Ronald McPreacher to parade around each establishment to attract attention.

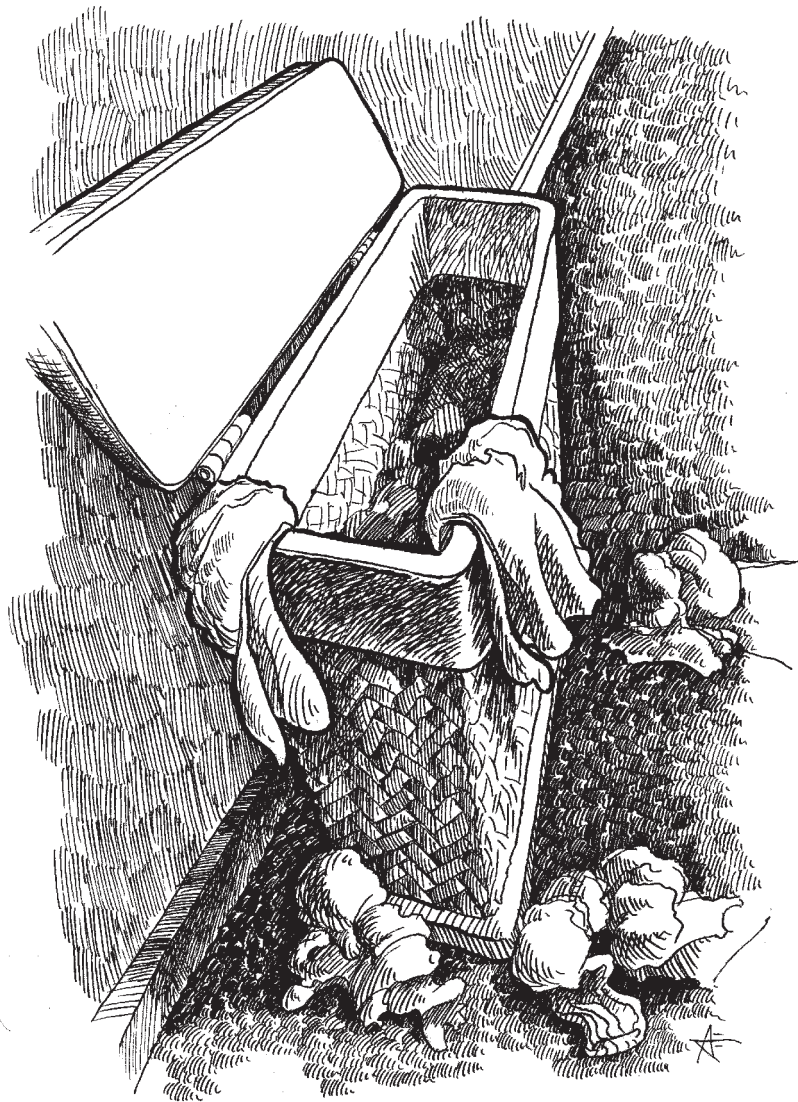
This distinctive fast-food franchise had initiated drive-up windows with drive-through service, tailor-made for a society of people intent on maintaining anonymity and getting “fed” quickly and inexpensively. “You don’t have to wait; You don’t have to relate.” “Welcome to McDeity. Can I take your order?”

But I was quite taken aback by this old lady standing outside of the establishment yelling, “Where’s the beef?” She was joined by other activists who were questioning the nutritional value of the McDeity product.

This was quite unsettling, and I began to question the ethical implications of buying into the “ground beef religion,” especially when society seems to be dying from physical, psychological and spiritual malnourishment.



My conscience will not allow me to participate in the perpetuation of franchised religion, but I still hunger for spiritual reality. The religious redundancy of the franchised establishments with their pre-designed formats and pre-packaged meals must be replaced with the newness and vitality of genuine Christian community.



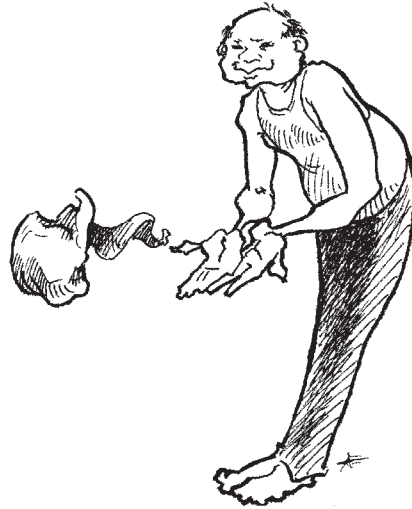
THE DIRTY LAUNDRY RITUAL

Living, as we do, in a dirty world, the clothing that I wear each day gets dirty – stained, sweaty and smelly. So with daily regularity I take off my dirty clothing, and piece and piece I carefully cast them toward a clothes basket that is placed quite conspicuously against a wall in our bedroom.

There was a time in my life when I did not do this; when my clothes dropped onto the floor wherever my body happened to be when that particular item of clothing was removed. But when I married, certain social adjustments had to be made, and personal habits were revamped. I could no longer live like a bachelor “pig.” I had to “clean up my act.”

So I was introduced to, and greatly encouraged to participate in, this ritual of putting my dirty clothes in a basket. I now

participate in that ritual every day, sometimes even more than once a day. I have perfected this ritual to a real “art-form.” It is performed in a specific sequence – first my shirt, then my pants, my left sock, my right sock, my undershirt, and then my B.V.D.’s. Each piece as it is removed is carefully wadded up and is cast with just the right arching trajectory, and with a calculated amount of thrust, toward the basket. Technique is important. The clothing wad has a tendency to unravel and create an aerodynamic drag effect that hinders its flight pattern toward the basket. Variety is essential or the ritual would become monotonous. Sometimes, therefore, I choose to do a ricochet shot off the wall; sometimes I stand on tiptoe and do a jump-shot over the corner of the dresser; sometimes I do a sky-hook or a behind-the-back shot.



I want you to know that I have become quite accomplished at the dynamics of this ritual. I perform it regularly, ritualistically, even religiously. It is quite a show, I guarantee you – but I grant no private or public showings.

Why do I engage in this ritual so regularly and religiously? I do not like the consequences of failing to perform it. Much wrath and verbal abuse might be poured down upon my person when and if I were to fail to practice the ritual. It is not worth the risk to neglect it. But, on the other hand, I have reached the point where there is a sense of accomplishment for having performed according to expectation. When I hit the basket with every article of clothing, I can strut around like a peacock, for I have that inner sense of well-being and self-affirmation: “I did it again! Another perfect job! Won’t she be pleased?”



But when I miss the basket (it happens!), there is a sense of disgust and failure, and I am obliged to go over, bend down, pick up the article of clothing, and try again.

I have discovered that things just go better in life when I perform the ritual regularly and religiously, and “do it right.” I can then pat myself on the back and say with Jack Horner, “Oh, what a good boy am I!”



Does this seem rather silly and petty? Somewhat like an inane illustration of apparent insanity? What do you think God must think of the inconsequential rituals that people engage in so religiously, day after day, and week after week? Do those repetitive religious rituals have any more value in the sight of God than the ritual which I practice so religiously?

Recognizing that to live as a sinful “pig” is not conducive to good social adjustment, many have decided to “clean up their act.” So they get “religious” and begin to participate in the regular ritual of attempting to remove the dirty laundry of their lives, to remove the stained and soiled coverings of their behavior, and deposit them in God’s forgiveness basket. Oh, the curious variety of contortions they go through: walking down aisles, kneeling at benches and so-called “altars,” raising their hands, uttering confessions, “praying through,” “crossing” themselves, attending services, giving percentages of their income, etc. The variations of these rituals are almost innumerable!

Day by day they throw their dirty apparel into the basket attempting to live a tidy Christian life. Some are quite accomplished in their religious performance. Their commitment level is high; their discipline is rigid; they have good techniques and execute according to precise rules and regulations. They are the ones who score high marks from the resident religious inspectors (otherwise known as “ministers” and “priests.”)

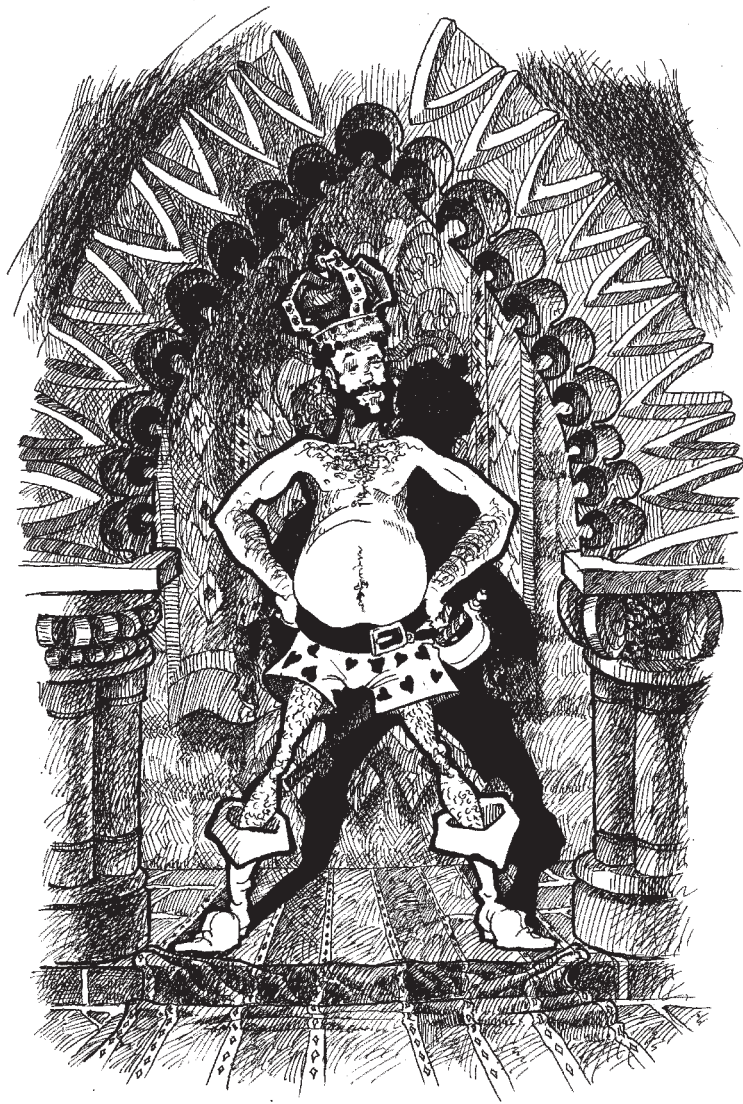
There are many, however, who are “missing the mark.” They are giving it their “best shot,” but they are failing miserably in aiming at the goal of perfection. Despite their best efforts they fall short of the performance which they perceive will earn them forgiveness and acceptance before God. Oh, the nagging guilt they experience for not being better achievers; for not being more successful in the proper removal of dirty laundry from their lives. Oh, the condemnation and wrath they expect from that One who watches over all such religious endeavors.

But, oh, the pride that swells up in the hearts and minds of those, who by their best persistent efforts, have temporarily performed up to the expectations imposed by that particular religious society. They await that phrase of acceptance from above: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” And failing to hear it, they perfect their aim and increase their efforts and try harder!

By this analogy I am suggesting that many of the religious activities which people engage in, are but empty and hollow attempts to deposit dirty laundry in the basket to please God. It is one thing to religiously deposit your dirty laundry in the clothes-

basket, but it is a completely different thing to engage in a form of the “Dirty Laundry Religion,” thinking that it is real, that it has benefit in the sight of God, that one’s eternal destiny is tied to one’s performance. That is tragic.

Repetitive rituals performed with religious regularity are, in and of themselves, of no value in the sight of God. They are merely meaningless and monotonous motions. Irrelevant repetition! But when such activity is equated with meritorious benefit before God, then the religious exercise has become detrimental, destructive and dangerous.



THE KING'S CLOTHES

Once upon a time there was a king. He was king over the vast kingdom of Ecclesiastica. This king was known far and wide for his vain delight in royal vestments.

Aware of his propensity to lust after the ego-satisfying need-fulfillment of “pomp and circumstance,” two enterprising con-artists offered to stitch for him some royal finery “fit for a king.” They explained that their product was so extraordinary and supernatural that it was visible only to the elite and knowledgeable, and invisible to those who “did not have eyes to see.” “Take my order,” begged the king. “Money is no object!”

The king's assistants in charge of “quality control” did not want to appear ignorant, unenlightened or unspiritual, so they went along with the con-game. They gushed with praise for the

non-existent garments. “Beautiful!” “Inspiring!” “Moving!” The citizens of the kingdom determined that it was in their best interest to “play the game” also. They, too, extolled the features of the fanciful and farcical finery.



Pompous pride outweighed practicality, prompting the king to organize a parade through the aisles of the kingdom. All the subjects were cowed by fear into saying nothing about the absence of clothing. They only repeated pious platitudes of respect for royalty.

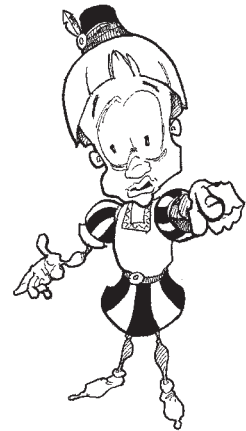
But one young child had not been “cued” for the pretense. When the king passed by him the child exclaimed, “The King doesn’t have any clothes on!” They attempted to “shush” him, but the unspeakable had been spoken and everyone knew.

Despite the exposure of his exposure, the king continued to play out the charade, declaring, “The procession must continue.”

With all due respect to Hans Christian Andersen and his germinal thought in the fairy-tale of “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” the retelling and adaptation of the story reveals much about the state of ecclesiasticism today.

The church is caught up in vested interests and in “pomp and circumstance.” Rather than being “clothed in righteousness,” the church is naked in its hypocrisy. Everyone is joining in the code-dependent denial of “I’m OK; you’re OK!” They are living a lie of self-delusion, and such behavior creates a fraudulent society of dysfunctional socialization.

Fear of ostracism and reprisal compels everyone to “play the game” and say nothing. Should anyone be inclined to speak out,

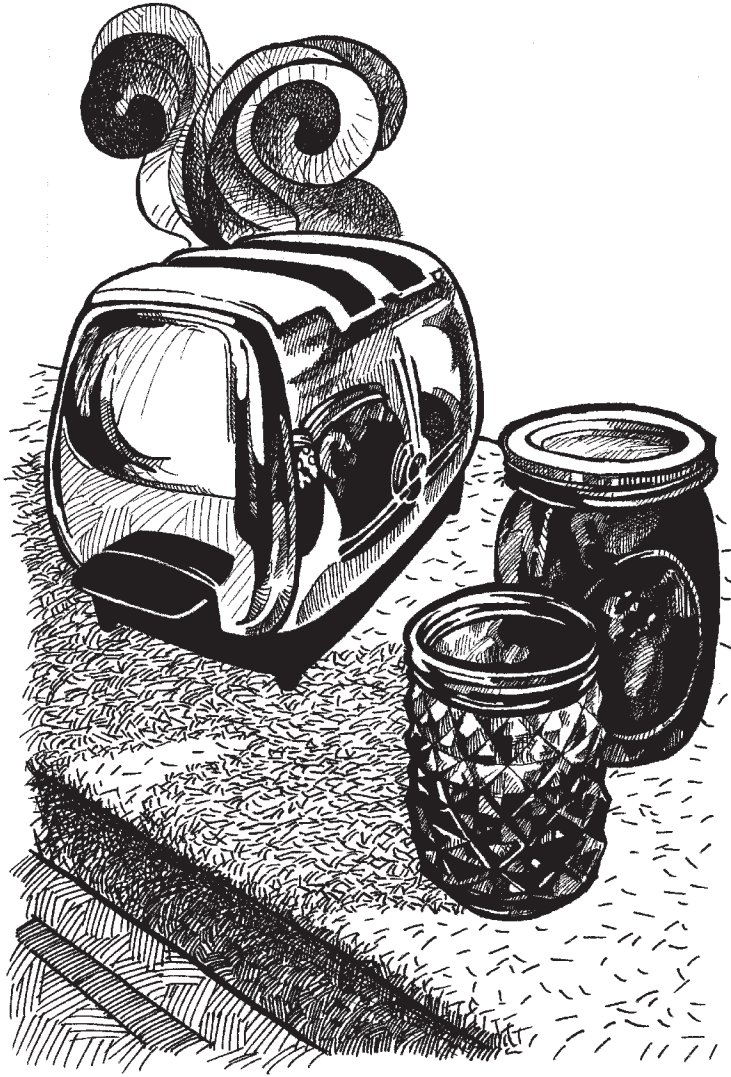


the damper of social consensus for the maintenance of the status-quo is applied. Criticism is out of order: “Don’t touch the Lord’s anointed” (I Chronicles 16:22).

Christians tend to see in their church whatever they want to see. It takes the innocence of a child, the “mouth of a babe,” or the intrepidity of a prophet to speak out and reveal the pretense.

The world around us already sees our nakedness, our lack of substance, as we parade our pompous piety. To continue the procession after the illusion of “being clothed and in our right mind” has been revealed, is fraudulent delusion enacted by a “de-luding influence” (II Thessalonians 2:11).

Jesus, Himself, said to one portion of His Church, “You are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.” (Revelation 3:17). He who has eyes to see and “ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:22).



THE JELLY BUSINESS

The primary problem in the jelly business has always been to achieve the proper temperature and consistency in order for the jelly to “gel.” One must avoid the liquified “runniness” of a failure to solidify as well as the rubbery consistency which fails to spread.

Beyond this, one of the most “sticky” issues in the jelly business has to do with the distinguishing of jellies and jams. Identification and labeling has been a source of much contention in the jelly business.

So it is in the making and marketing of “evan-jelly-calism.”

The labeling and identification of an “evangelical” or a “fundamentalist” has often created a temperature rise that has threatened the solidity of the entire “gel.”

Fundamentalists claim to be those who have substantive issues on which to chew. This, of course, creates a “jam.” Many have been the “strawberries” detected in the ensuing jam of fundamentalist interpretations of what they regard to be substantive issues.



Those who dislike all the seeds of substantive contention within the fundamentalistic jam are often relegated to the more insubstantial state of being labeled “evan-jelly-cals.” Unwilling to fight over the alleged primacy of gooseberries, strawberries or raspberries, the evangelicals occupy themselves, instead, with the smooth texture of the over-all consistency of their jelly-gospel. The taste must be pleasing and palatable in order to sell their product to the greatest number of people.



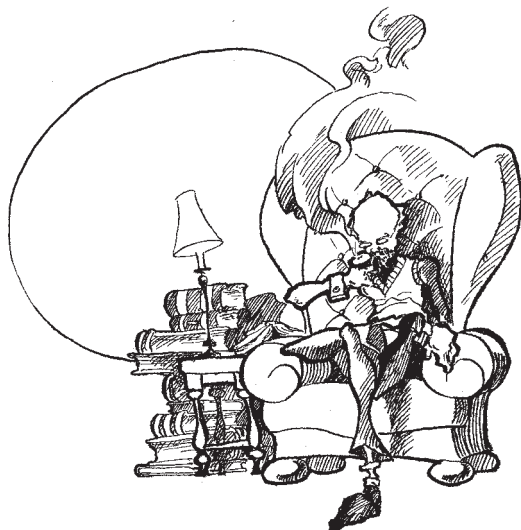
Who will volunteer to serve as negotiator in this “evan-jelly-cal” business? Who will restore harmony in evan-jelly-land? Where is that great jelly-inspector who will get us out of this jam?

WANTED: One with authority who will advise that the Evangel is Jesus Christ, and that the good news of the gospel is that the vital dynamic of the life of Jesus Christ is available to be lived out in individuals today.



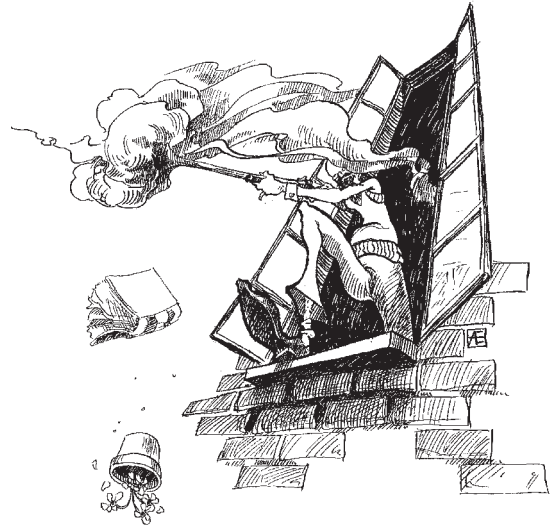
THE THEOLOGICAL SOLDIER

The bald-headed,
 bespectacled theologian
Sits in his cluttered cubicle
 of narrow thought,
Anguishing in labor pains
 as he tries to give birth
To a new Scriptural connotation,
 as yet untaught.



There musing
 over the monumental mass
Of theological trivia
 and religious misinformation,
He fervently concludes
 that God intends him
To combat this pseudo-theology
 with derogative exhortation.

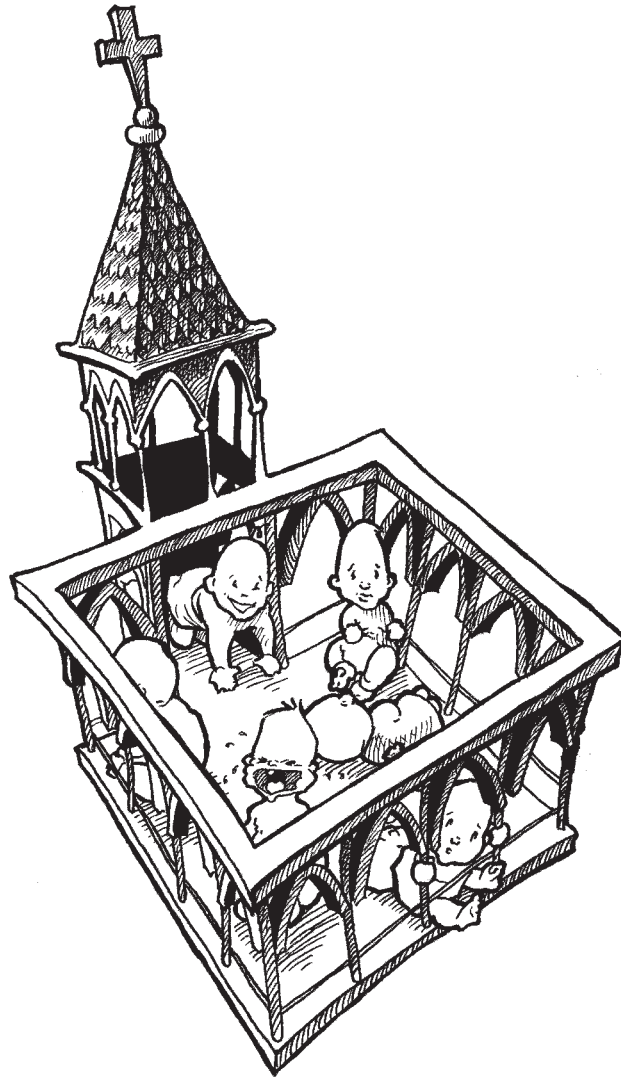
Then thoughtlessly stumbling
to the window
Of his cubicle of supposed
sound doctrinal action,
He triumphantly thrusts out
his theological musket
To open fire on what must surely
be a satanic faction.



Standing firm
as a dedicated Christian soldier,
He fires each round
and apologetically defends
What he considers
the true word of God,
Hoping through such tactical warfare
to make amends.

Having thoroughly bombarded
 all opponents
With his barrage
 of theological prate,
He scurries to his padded chair
 to say with Paul to Timothy,
“I have fought the good fight;
 I have kept the faith.”

This being the preoccupation
 of many self-made theologians,
Where is the broad-minded person,
 possibly labeled a religious “dove,”
Who with Christian ardor will say,
 “In essentials unity,
 In non-essentials liberty,
 In all things LOVE.”?



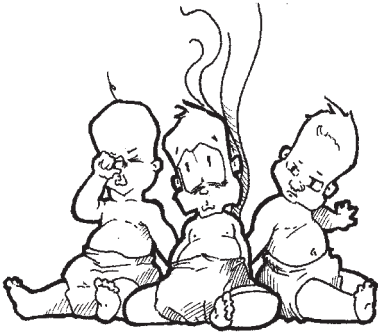
A NURSERY STORY

“Aren’t they cute?” gushed the visitor as she looked through the stained-glass at the children in the nursery. One has to admit that babies do provide a spontaneous form of creative expression and entertainment. But the ecclesiastical nursery is rampant with structured chaos indicative of early childhood, complete with short attention spans and selfish propensities.

In one corner children are listening to nursery-stories which have been told over and over for generation after generation. These stories develop imagination and conceptualization, but do they have any application to living?

Another group of children is clapping their hands and singing up-tempo music to the rhythmic accompaniment of an assort-

ment of “rattles.” It is obvious that they “feel” their music, as they sway with the beat and gesture with their hands.



A few of the children are attempting to make the transition from crawling on all fours to walking upright. Their underdeveloped peripatetic skills lead to many tumbles and falls.

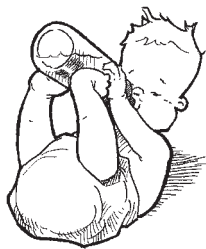
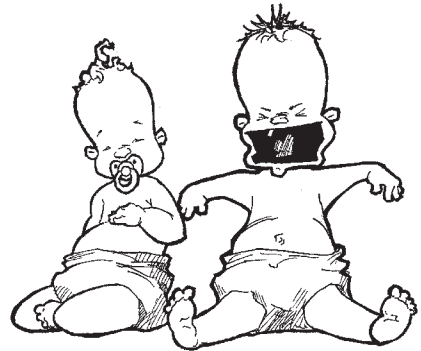
Emotions run high in the nursery. While some are squealing with delight, others are shrieking their selfish intent to control the toy that is presently in the possession of another. “Mine!” “Gimme, gimme!” The process of “getting along” and learning to share is often a slow process.

There are squabbles and spats and infighting, requiring conflict resolution and reconciliation. Injuries occasionally occur with consequent screaming and crying in



pain. But a kiss and a band-aid usually suffice to heal the “boo-boos” and “ouchies.” Supernatural healing indeed!

The nursery helpers are preparing bottles of milk for the bottle-babies. Other children are on “formulas” or are subjected to bland pablum or a variety of Gerber specialties.



Much of the fussing and crying is a result of tired infants who need some nap-time and rest. In the meantime pacifiers will have to suffice for those babes who think that their needs demand immediate attention. Thumbsuckers provide their own.

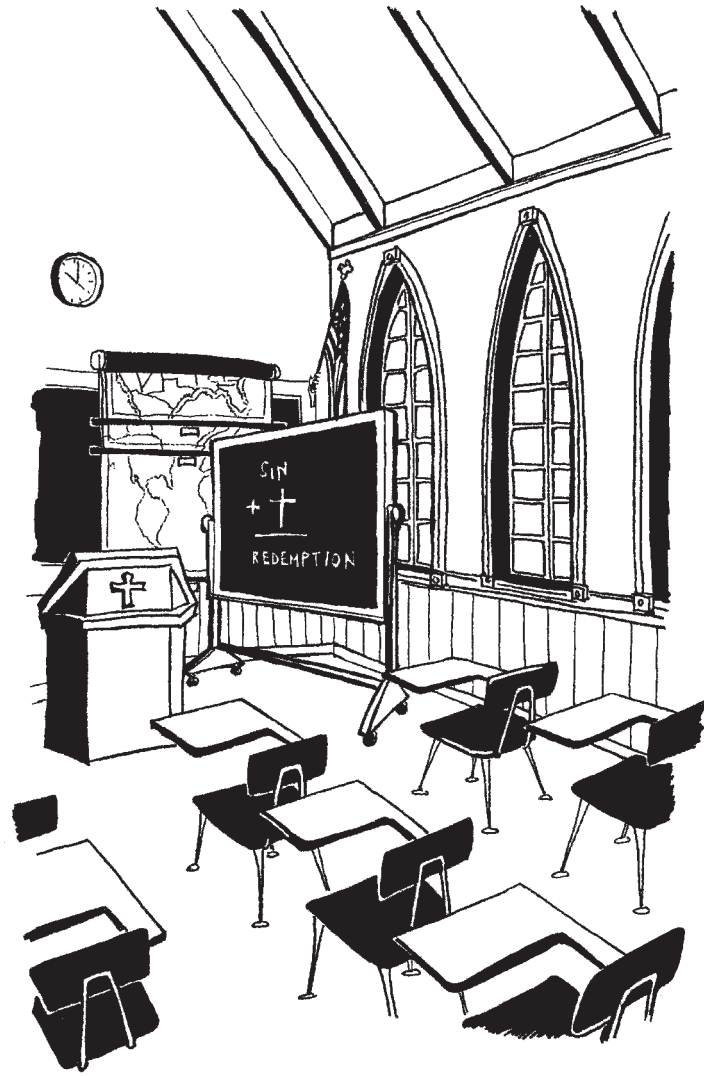
Much of nursery time is spent in clean-up, wiping faces, hands and snotty noses. Oh yes, there are the “accidents.” As ever, the attendants must suffer through the unenviable task of changing dirty diapers.

Baby-sitting is a weary assignment. Particularly when some of the babies have been in the nursery for as long as anyone can remember. The “Nursery-Roll” records go back for decades, and few there are who have ever “graduated” out of the nursery.

We observe here the tragedy of protracted infancy. The church was never intended to be a never-ending nursery for perpetual babies. Why have we tolerated or fostered this retarded growth process wherein many Christians remain spiritual babies?

The Apostle Paul lamented the fact that the Corinthians were still “babes in Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:1). His desire was to “present every man mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28).

Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews (perhaps also Paul) chided his readers for a failure to “grow up.” “...by this time you ought to be teachers, but you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.... Therefore, let us leave the elementary teaching about Christ, and let us press on to maturity” (Hebrews 5:12 - 6:2).

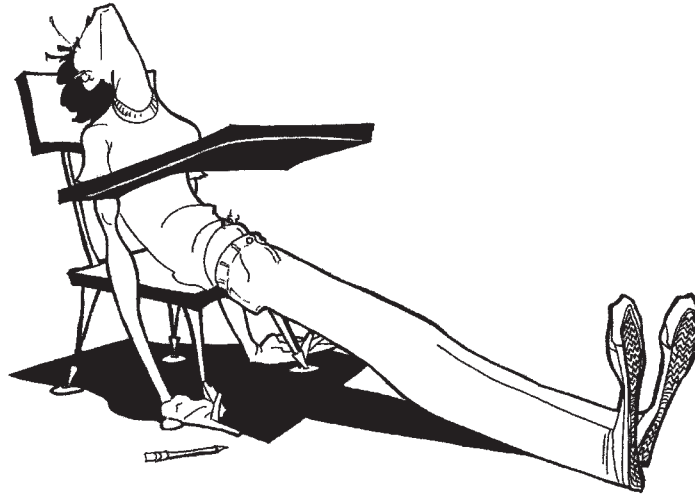


EVANGELICALISM 101

Educators today are decrying the need for remedial education. The problem seems to be that students are being passed on to the next level of education with inadequate skills in such basic subjects as reading, writing and arithmetic.

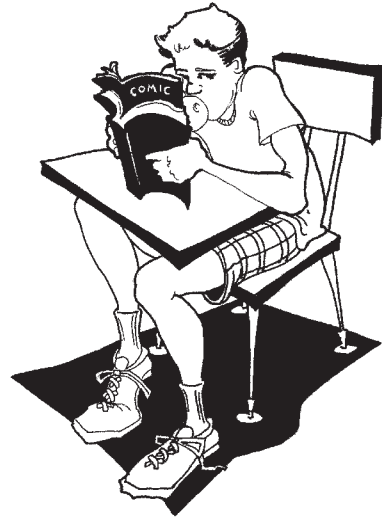
Many colleges and universities have found it necessary to offer remedial courses which teach students what they should have previously learned in secondary school. Such courses as “Math 101” and “English 101” are designed for the correction of faulty abilities in these educational disciplines. These courses are often non-credit courses for they are designed solely to remedy an educational deficiency.

It appears to me that much of the popular religious instruction in the church today has settled for teaching a course that



might be called “Evangelicalism 101.” It is a remedial gospel that deals predominantly with remedying a deficiency, correcting a sin-problem. This remedial gospel often begins in Genesis chapter three and concludes at the remedial redemptive action of Christ on the cross. This “fix-it” gospel of popular religion does not teach the real course of Christian life. On the authority of our mentor, the apostle Paul, we might affirm that this is “no gospel” at all (Galatians 1:7); it is a non-credit course.

The gospel requires the full-course which commences in Genesis chapter one with a recognition of God's intent for mankind, and the completed restoration of that divine intent by the life, death, resurrection, ascension and Pentecostal outpouring of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a fully credited course wherein the life and righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed and imparted to Christian believers. Christians need to understand the "abundant life" Jesus promised (John 10:10), and experience how that life is lived out in the practical situations of life.





BARNYARD ANTICS

While walking around the farm the other day I was observing the instinctual activities of the animals. What I saw was a composite representation of dysfunctional socialization.

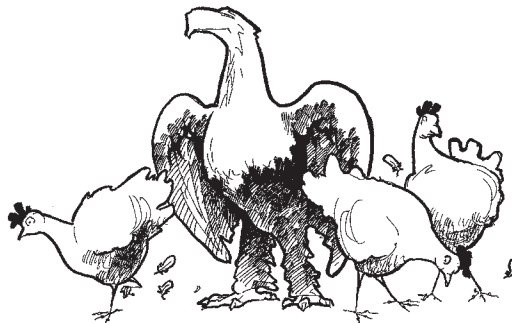
I observed a few work-horses doing most of the labor on the farm. With willing resolve they pulled more than their weight. They were gleaming with sweat from the energy expended by their powerful muscles.

Meanwhile a couple of donkeys were belligerently balking at what they were being asked to do. They were obstinately self-willed and had a mind of their own that never seemed to coincide with others.

The cows were laying in the pasture grass ruminating and masticating. Later they would be milked for the benefit of all the babes in the barnyard.

Several cats were lolling on narrow ledges enjoying the sunshine. A few strokes of affirmation and they were purring with praise. A couple of tom-cats were “mousing,” stalking their prey.

The dogs, being the rascals they are, would periodically harass the cats. They could be seen nipping at the heels of the other animals. The primary reason they are kept around is to guard the property and intimidate intruders.



There were elegant swans on the pond, feisty geese protecting their young and ducks waddling to and fro. But one unsettling sight was to see majestic eagles with clipped wings grubbing alongside of the turkeys.

The hens were clucking about their eggs, which would never serve their reproductive intent. The roosters were crowing about their prowess. About then the chicken-coop erupted in chaos. One hen had been wounded and the other chickens proceeded to peck her to death. A gruesome sight.

The goats were into everything, of course. It seems as though there is nothing they won't eat. But when they sensed danger, they formed a circle with heads pointed outward and ruthlessly kicked each other to death.

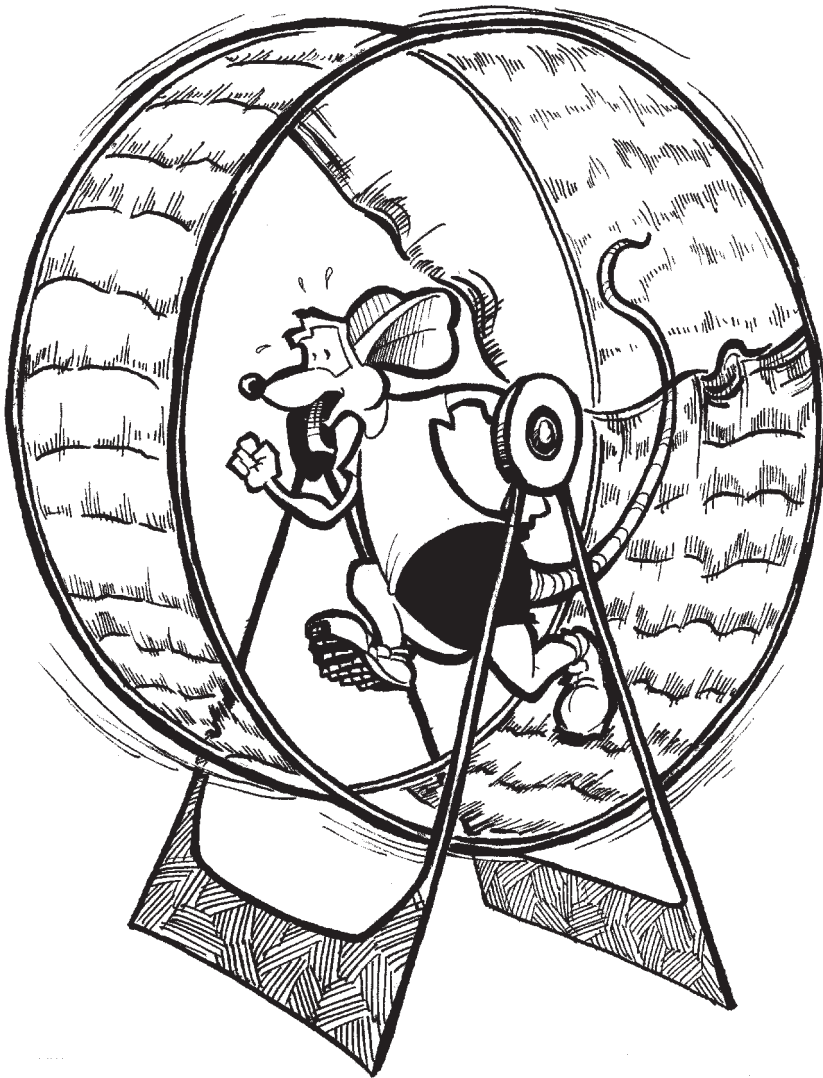


The pigs, as usual, were “throwing their weight around.” I guess that is why some refer to authorities with the slang designation of “pigs.” Is it not interesting, this propensity for authoritarianism? The lowest ranks rise up to the highest, insatiably power-hungry. Those who would liberate rise up to be the oppressors. It seems to be a never-ending cycle; the liberals eventually end up being the conservatives. Such is the perpetual system of man and his government and religion.

As you can see, my tour of the barnyard, and the observation therein were easily related to the ways of man, *l'homme animal* (1 Corinthians 2:14 - French translation). Giving tribute where tribute is due, George Orwell masterfully exposed this phenomena in his fairy-story, *Animal Farm*, from which these thoughts are loosely adapted. But the analogies are glaringly obvious as we relate these animalistic phenomena to the ecclesiastical *Animal Farm*.

What has happened to the ecclesiastical farm? The stained-glass barns that dot the landscape of our society contain some dirty barnyards. They are replete with an exhibition of animalistic behavior indicative of dysfunctional socialization.

Oh that *l'homme animal* might be transformed into a “holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (1 Peter 2:9,10), in order to manifest God’s character individually and within their interpersonal social relationships. Such was the purpose of Christ’s redemptive action.



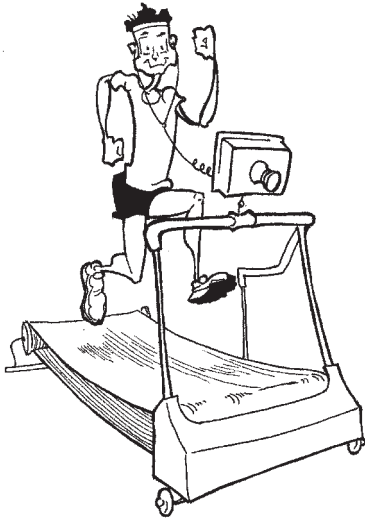
THE HEALTH CLUB

I did it! I made the commitment. I joined the local health club a few weeks ago.

They issued me a personalized membership card complete with photo and number. After going through the initiatory training in the use of all the equipment, I was given a personal training schedule. Regular attendance was greatly encouraged and a personal trainer was assigned to oversee my progress.

To be honest, the primary incentives for joining the health club were the social benefits; I like people! With enough self-discipline anyone can exercise on their own by walking, jogging, bicycling, etc. But I am one of those who needed that encouragement of, and accountability to, other people. So I paid my dues and joined the health club.

From among all the latest technologically advanced equipment, I have noticed that the most popular piece of equipment at my health club is a computer-synchronized walking/running machine. While holding on to the rails one can dial in the revolutions per minute so as to walk, jog or run

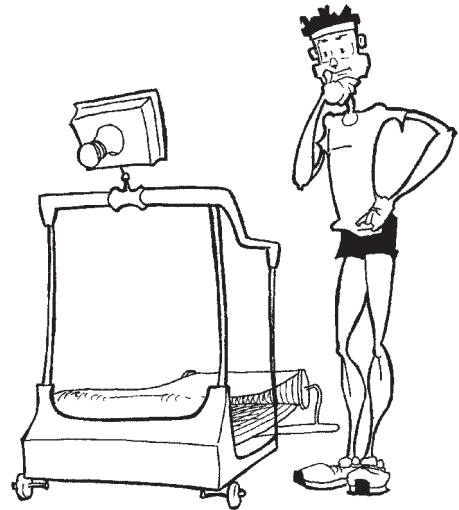


at their own pace. A button on the rail causes the incline to raise or lower, thus simulating hills and making the exercise more strenuous. The other option is to choose a pre-programmed workout mode.

Through your hand on the rail information is acquired so that there is a constant read-out of calories being burned per hour, heart-beats per minute and whether or not you are in your cardiac target-zone. Every participant is thoroughly monitored and all information is stored in the computer memory under your membership number: date, duration, etc.

If you choose the pre-programmed workout mode, then the color video screen asks you to choose from various scenery options: a nature walk complete with flowers, waterfalls, wildlife; a stroll on the beach with accompanying scenery; a hike through the mountains; a walk through the city, etc. The scenery goes past in accordance with your pace as you walk, jog or run; and it does seem to make the time go by faster. Eventually you see the same scenery going by again; it must be a circuitous course.

All the while as one engages in this exercise there is mood music being broadcast through the ear-phones, and this in accordance with the scenery one has selected. Periodically a computerized voice will speak to you over the music issuing motivational encouragement: “You can do it!” “Do your best.” “Breathe deep and hard.” “Commitment to exercise pays off in the end.” “The world belongs to the disciplined.”



Following your workout, you are asked to step on the scale. Your weight and measurements are duly recorded on your computer record. The Director of Health provides personal consultation and counsel: “You are not losing enough weight.” “There are many more inches to lose around waist, buttocks, thighs, etc.” “You need to come more often.” “You need to set a faster pace.” “What you need is more time on the treadmill.”

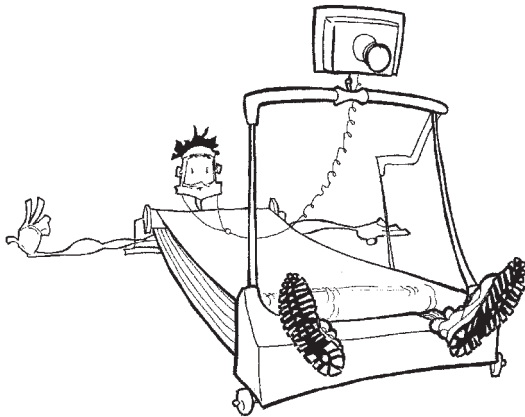


more inches to lose around waist, buttocks, thighs, etc.” “You need to come more often.” “You need to set a faster pace.” “What you need is more time on the treadmill.”

Aha! I suspected it for many weeks now. Despite the technological trappings, this machine is nothing more than a treadmill. It goes round and round, never goes anywhere and it is only “for the exercise.”

And I have been paying for the privilege of joining other disenchanting people in this sweat-shop, while everyone complains about getting nowhere despite their best dedicated commitment.

I am told that the duration of consistent participation in the program averages only six weeks. Most cannot endure the monotony of the regimen which produces such minimal results. But there are the “faithful few” who seem to find their identity in the exercise, and are thus willing to endure the masochistic training schedule in order to flaunt their “hard bodies.” These are those who advertise the virtues of continued attendance and rededication to the “program.”



For some reason, this entire scenario is reminiscent of that which transpires in a church. The church is envisioned by some as akin to a spiritual health club. The social benefits draw others into the club. New members are programmed into an exercise regimen. Regular attendance is encouraged for the weekly workouts.

But the workouts seem to be but a treadmill of “go, go, go and do, do, do for Jesus.” The motivational encouragements are “Do your best, and God will do the rest;” “God helps those who help themselves.” The pastoral counsel is: “What you need is more dedication and commitment.” “You need to come more often, and get more involved.” It is a tiring treadmill indeed! Going nowhere!

The church should be concerned for a person’s complete spiritual, psychological and physical health. But this must be more than going through the motions of a religious workout within the confines of a walled sanctuary with the artificial scenery of stained-glass windows. The Church must prepare people for meaningful participation in all levels of life; not involvement in ecclesiastical programs, but involvement in life – and that by the life of Jesus Christ in the Christian.



BODY-BUILDING

A visit to “God’s Gym” reveals that many are actively involved in body-building. It has become a competitive sport to see who can sculpt the biggest and most well-defined body. They almost seem to be obsessed with their physical appearance, and never satisfied unless they are becoming bigger and stronger.

The personal trainer constantly encourages the participants to “get with the program” and “work out.” By “pumping iron” they can “bulk up” and build muscle-mass. This requires the sweating exertion of many repetitions of weight-lifting with ever increasing weights. It is a disciplined regimen requiring great personal commitment and much work. “No pain; no gain” is their motto.

These body-builders endure the torturous “work-outs” in order to prepare for their next competition where they can display

their formed bodies. It is there that they assume their pose and flex the muscles of their shiny well-oiled bodies. Bulging with muscle definition they are judged by statistical analysis. Bigger is better!

In their intense desire to win these competitions some body-builders allow the end to justify the means. To gain an advantage over the others they seek to stimulate growth by taking steroids, growth hormones which alter the metabolic development of the muscle structure. They do so even when they know that physical consequences such as sterility and heart damage can occur, as well as the psychological consequences of volatility and depression.

When these body-abusing competitors are subjected to random drug-testing in the midst of a competition, it is revealed that they have unfairly bulked up the muscle-mass of their bodies.





They are exceedingly grieved and disgraced when the head judge disqualifies them, having proven them to be unfit.

The institutional church has approached “the building up of the Body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12) in a similar manner as many have approached physical body-building. Many of the “church-growth techniques” have been but counterfeit procedures to artificially stimulate growth and add statistical bulk to the ecclesiastical Body, believing that “bigger is better.” The result is a steroid enhanced religion – sterile and depressing, with a damaged heart.

The religious Body-builders assume their pose and flex their muscles to compete for who has the best form. They have “a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof” (II Tim. 3:5). Only Jesus

Christ can “cause the growth of the Body for the building up of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16), as Christians “exercise themselves unto godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7).

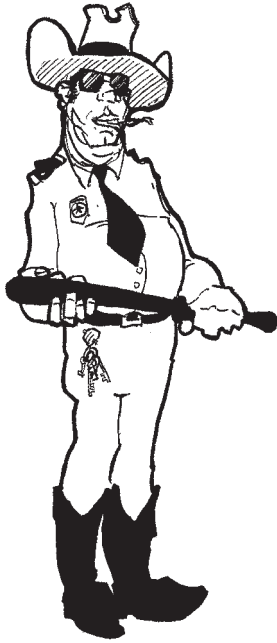
May the Judge of all mankind reveal that all the sweating exertion of “salvation by works” in order to build the Body of Christ is invalid and can only result in disqualification from the heavenly awards banquet.



THE CHAIN GANG

For some there was the slight semblance of the synchophonic sound of church bells. But it was, instead, the clanging of chains as the prisoners performed their duties.

Their day began with roll-call, responding to their assigned identification number. Then, dressed in the dreary uniformity that dissipates individuality, and manacled together in bondage, they marched out to perform their monotonous tasks. The obligatory service having been performed under the watchful eye of the taskmaster, the prisoners filed back into the vaulted dungeon to be fed a bland diet and to engage in the socialization of their chants. They were psyching themselves up for another day of the same regimen on the chain-gang.



Each day as they labored, a crusader on a nearby hill repetitively proclaimed, “Let my people go!” “Let my people go!” “What you are doing to my people is contrary to justice; it is cruel and unusual punishment.” “I have come to set you free!” “Exercise your right to walk out in freedom with me.”

This sounded like good news to the prisoners, yet there was little hope that such freedom could be effected until their sentence had been served. Whatever hope these men had was long-term and futuristic, for these men were “lifers.” Meanwhile, the law-enforcement officers who guarded them made every effort to keep the prisoners from hearing the daily proclamations of the rabblouser on the hill. They knew that what he was saying was true.

Very few exercised the right to walk away unto freedom. They were held not by the manacles of chains but by the captivity of their own minds.

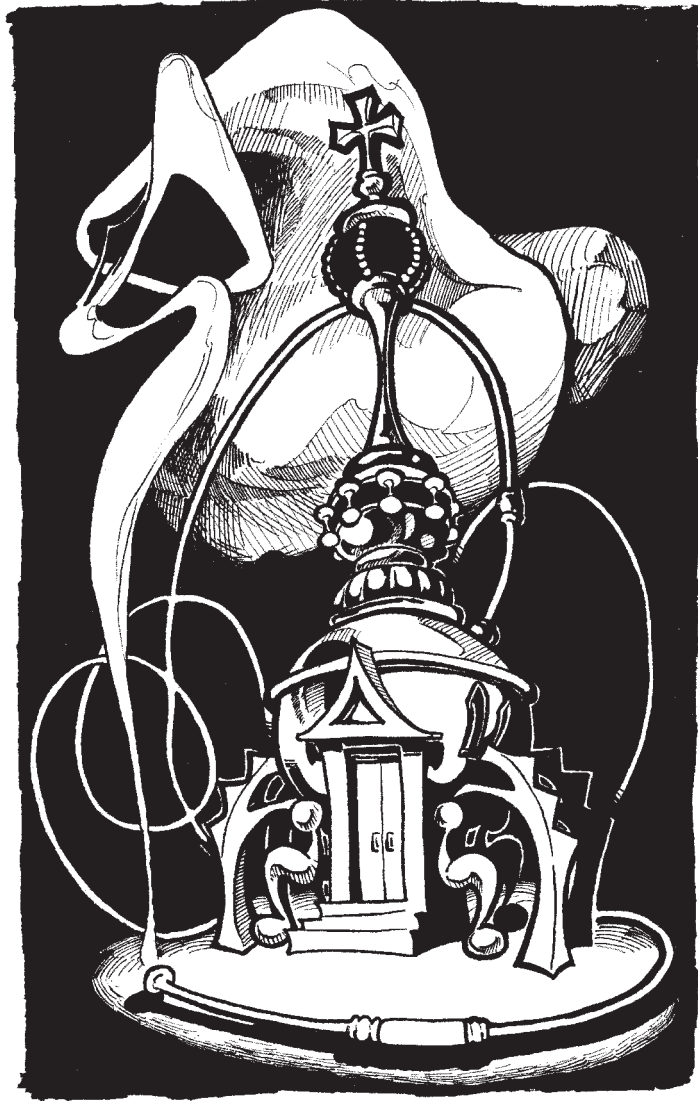
There was an initial enactment of this scenario when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. Moses was the designated leader to “set the people free.” A great exodus ensued, though few ever found their way to the land of freedom.

Today God’s people are enslaved in the bondage of religion. Individuality is dissipated; conformity is dictated. Attendance is mandated; performance is regulated. The roll is taken as we file back into our vaulted cathedrals to be “fed” a bland diet, and to engage in what we have been conditioned to call “worship.”

Jesus Christ, by His Spirit, still stands on Calvary hill, calling, “Let My people go!” “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). “I am the truth” (John 14:6). “I came that you might have life, and might have it abundantly” (John 10:10). “I am the life (John 14:6).

Few there are who leave the bondage of religion for the freedom of Christ’s life.





THE OPIUM DEN

A distinctive “air,” or should I say “aura,” hung over the smoke-filled room. Perhaps it was my own subjective apprehension, but I felt a sense of spiritual oppression as I stepped into the opium den. Nevertheless, I was curious to know what went on in such a place.

My first impressions were of a rather typical social phenomenon – persons gathering together for a common purpose and fulfilling a need for community. As a rather monotonous music played in the background, many were nodding their heads in agreement with the beat. A conscious, or perhaps unconscious, desire for conformity was evidenced in both action and attire of the participants.

In certain areas they would gather in small groups to commune together. Such appeared to be the result of one individual having possession of a particular substance which he was willing to share with others, thus creating a “following” (for a price, I am sure!).

Further examination of even more dimly lit areas, revealed less social structure. Caring less about the presence of others, individuals were seeking their own state of personal euphoria. With dulled sensitivity to what was transpiring around them, they would fixate on a particular object with a glassy-eyed stare and lapse into a tenuous state of consciousness.

How did these people get into this condition? How did they join this fraternity?

Drawn in by a search for “something more,” what at first was promised as an exciting stimulant



only later turned out to be an addictive depressant. Their dependence upon this controlling substance made its acquisition the supreme desire of their lives. They were living for that periodic “fix” to maintain that mystic “high.” Their occupational pursuits and personal relationships became less effective as they required more time to get more money to acquire more of the now deified drug.

It was thus that they “found their place” in this den, lapsing into a lethargic stupor. The dilated pupils of their eyes indicated a “drugged” and dying state.

Pathetic, indeed, to see such misused humanity!

Dare we suggest that the foregoing scenario has analogous parallels with religious activities? Are we to concur with Karl Marx in his oft-quoted statement that “religion is the opiate of the people?”

A participant in a support group for addictive recovery introduced himself by saying, “My name is , I am a drug addict,

and my drug of choice was religion.” I exercise the editorial confidentiality in refusing to divulge whether this group was Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous or Fundamentalists Anonymous, for their purposes here seem to overlap one another.

Is the need for such people (1) a more restrictive enforcement of prohibitions? (2) increased encouragement to “Just Say NO!”? (3) a more effective recovery program? (4) a transference of their dependency to a more effective God? Do not be controlled by “spirits,” but be controlled by the Holy Spirit, advises the Apostle Paul. (Ephesians 5:18)



BOMBSHELTERS

I hear them again!
The periodic defense warnings
which so regularly
on the first day of each week,
signal those persons
who have received the proper
Pavlovic training,
To retreat to their respective
stained-glass bombshelters.



The exodus begins!
Like neurotic ants they are running
To the specified mound,
which childhood training
has made almost instinctual,
to receive the particular brand
of theological anesthesia
there administered.

Within the sacred walls,
Huddled together
in a dark and musty corner,
they review the “current events”
of the world
and reiterate the recent propaganda
of the “enemy”
so as to plot
further withdrawal tactics.



Counter-tactics!
In hushed voices
they reaffirm the verity of their stand,
taking care to cloak such affirmations
in garbled semantics
so as not to cause offense
to those persons
Who are not members
of the "Party."

The scare is over!
They exit once again
into the harsh realities of the world,
covering their eyes
and repeating with renewed optimism,
"This world is not my home;
I'm just a passing through,
My treasures are laid up
somewhere beyond the blue."

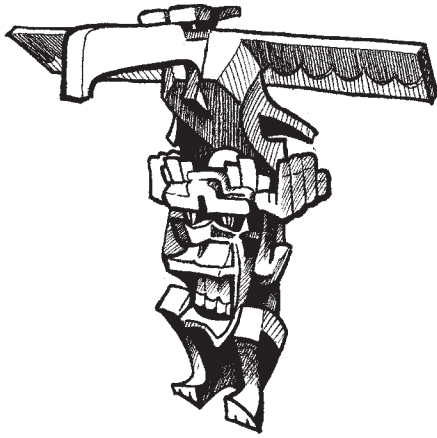


A TALE OF TOTEM-POLES

Fires burn in each settlement across the land. The sound of tom-toms can be heard in the background. It is the time for the perennial carving of totem-poles.

Congregating in our spired tee-pees, each group heatedly considers the essentials of their belief-system. After due consultation of these spirit-matters, consensus is achieved within each tribe as to how they will stack their totem-pole.

The meticulous carving begins. Every detail is important because each cut has implied meaning. Distinction must be achieved, even in the intensity of the painted colors. Extreme effort is made to make it appear life-like.



Duly carved and erected for all to see, the winged appendages give it the form of a cross. The totem-pole becomes our rallying-point – a point of social and religious identification. If you are willing to stack your totem-pole like we stack our totem-pole, then you can be a part of our tribe. But if you insist on any other conformity to your spiritual belief-system, then we are obliged to separate from you and to make war with you. It is a matter of honor for us to make every effort to cut down or otherwise topple your totem-pole. Any divergence, regarded as unorthodoxy, is to be condemned. Diversity cannot be condoned in such important spirituo-religious matters. It is a warring matter!

Oh, we are not really a violent people. We make every attempt to isolate ourselves in our separated enclaves of piety. But, at the same time, there is a sense of achievement and victory in attacking another's totem-pole, for we thereby identify the superiority of our own. In our contemporary sophistication, though,

we have, for the most part, modified our battles to the hurling of verbal barbs and vituperative condemnation. Our war-dances are more vociferous than our warring is ferocious.



Long live our totem-pole! It is the symbol of our belief and commitment. It is worth fighting for. We consider its integrity to be a life and death matter, necessitated to preserve our distinctive heritage, present identity and our hopes for the future.

Yes, we require due reverence to our totemic icon. We require precise initiatory rites, engage in periodic oaths of allegiance, and regularly involve ourselves in identification pow-wows surrounding our totem-pole.

You ask if we worship our totem-pole? Is it a deity-figure? How dare you infer that it is an idol, or that we engage in idolatry!

Do we not see an abundance of ideological idols in fundamentalist circles today? They are not carved of wood, but they are constructed of even harder material – molded in the “concrete” of inflexible minds. Nevertheless, they are lifeless icons. The fundamentals have been carefully analyzed, systematized, theologized and then fossilized in creedal “statements of faith.” Allegiance to this ideological construct is regarded as more important than a vital fellowship with Christ or other Christians. This is nothing less than idolatry; worship (attributing worth-ship) to an ideological idol. A.W. Tozer once defined idolatry as “the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.”

Oh, that we might recognize our spiritual unity in Christ Jesus and return to a common worship of God in Christ.



THOSE TERRIFYING TERRORISTS

The terrorists have struck again! Is there no end to their acts of violence which result in such carnage and destruction? Over and over again we read of the bombings, hijackings, sabotage and massacres. They have no respect for human life, only for their particular ideological cause, and are willing to kill innocent people to attract attention to their cause.

Theirs is the “warfare of the weak.” They do not have the common decency to identify themselves and engage in open conflict. They are unwilling to abide by the rules of “fair play” and to “fight fair,” bringing their ideas into the arena of reasonable discussion and allowing them to be weighed on their own merits by a pluralistic society. Instead they attempt to bring about forced social change in accord with their minority views by instilling terror and creating paranoia and fear in people.

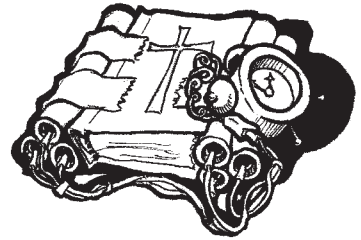
They sneak around in pretense and deceit engaging in clandestine and surreptitious activities planning their surprise attacks. They attempt to disrupt, to destabilize, in the hopes that “the powers that be” will capitulate to their demands. The end justifies the means!



Their tactics are so disconcerting to the general population. Why should a few radical fanatics be allowed to create fearful uncertainty in the midst of a society that desires the security of a pluralistic status-quo? But it is extremely difficult for society to defend themselves against the “cheap shots” of the terrorists.

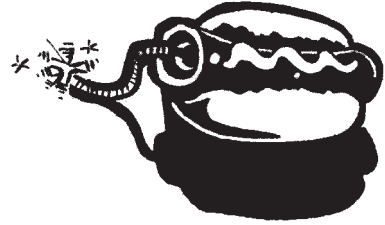
What, or who, is behind all this destructive terrorizing, anyway?

May I be so bold as to suggest that it is fostered and fueled by the philosophical mind-set of “fundamentalism.” Whether it be religious, political or nationalistic ideology, adherents of a particular view-point attempt to “convert” others to their narrowly-defined thinking. They structure their fundamental ideas into a belief-system, demanding almost idolatrous reverence and commitment to such, as this is where they now find their identity. It then becomes their *raison d’être* to protect and preserve the fundamentals of their belief-system, which they believe to be absolutely true and inviolable.



For this reason, it is a truism that “fundamentalists always fight.” This is readily apparent among the Muslim fundamentalists of the Middle East, the Hindu fundamentalists of Sri-Lanka, the Christian fundamentalists of Ireland, or Marxist fundamentalists in various confrontational hot-spots around the world. On a more covert level we observe the Christian fundamentalists of the U.S.A. fighting ideological battles over particular doctrines and social issues, periodically erupting into overt physical violence.

Fundamentalists are essentially terrorists! They will stop at nothing in order to defend and advance their ideology. They will live and die for their cause, often considering it an honor to be persecuted or martyred in the line of duty. Their fanaticism leads them to take the law into their own hands and to violate the rights of others. Disagreement is disallowed, as they have deified their “holy cause.”



Solutions to these often violent ideological struggles are not easily ascertained. Prejudices and false-identities die hard. Without a doubt, there will be additional conflict and bloodshed. But it is incumbent that we commence to instruct men to broaden their horizons of thought and to inculcate personal spiritual values of love and toleration. It is imperative that we understand that people are more important than ideas!

God save us from the terrorists!



ARCHAEOLOGICAL DIGGINGS

The sign on the gate of the fenced enclosure read “Tel-Evangelica – sponsored by the International Foundation of Christian Archaeology.” There in the rolling Judean hills I was joining my first archaeological dig and looking forward with great anticipation to what we might discover. After orientation to the site and instruction as to acceptable procedures of excavation and recording, we began the tedious process of digging.

Tel-Evangelica was a site, the remains of which dated back to the early Christian era. The superstructure of the buildings had long since fallen down and were no longer “fitly joined together.” Although previous researchers had discovered evidence of the “cornerstone,” our primary objective was to carefully excavate and analyze the subterranean foundations of the building.

The historical details derived from our excavation were most interesting. Dating of ancient artifacts is often difficult, but by cross-examination with other historical data we concluded that the remains dated from the early decades of the first century A.D.

From what appeared to the untrained eye to be rather insignificant clues, the scholars were able to develop conclusions as to the theological beliefs of these peoples. It appears they had a rather mystic concept of Christological immanence, i.e. that Christ lived in them. The ruins from later civilizations indicate that this theological concept was soon discarded for more traditional cultic formulations.



The intent of the I.F.C.A. is to construct a large arched museum building over these ruins in order to allow for a perpetual re-

membrance of these peoples and their culture. This will also allow for continued study and conjecture referent to their historical and theological foundations.

So it is that churches today have become much like museums – overarching covers for archaeological expeditions into the historical and theological foundations of Christianity. They continue to dig for hidden details in order to apologetically defend their findings. As a combined historical/theological society, they perpetuate the remembrance of a by-gone era.



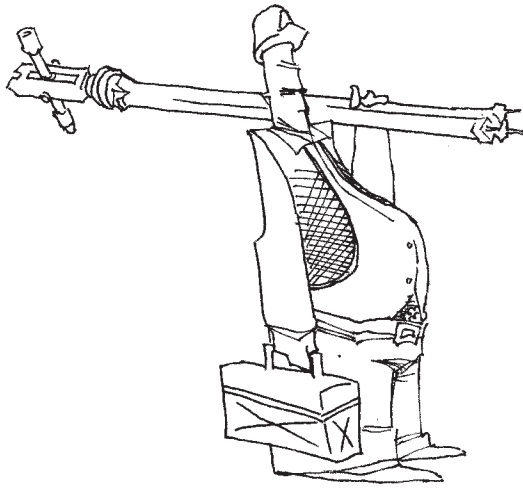
Have we lost all perspective of our being “living stones” of a “spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5) being “fitly joined together.... into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:21,22)? Christianity is not dry and dusty archaeological observations. Rather, Christianity is the dynamic manifestation of the life of the risen Lord Jesus (11 Corinthians 4:10,11) in believers of every age.



THE LAND DISPUTE

Many centuries ago in the old country a parcel of land was identified and acquired. The old land deed duly records that the property boundary ran “from the large rock on the southeast corner, west to the sea, north to the top of the hill, east to the large oak tree, and south again to the large rock.” Without precision instruments to measure latitudinal and longitudinal bearings and the exact degrees of direction, this type of land demarcation was common in old land deeds. The large rock that marked the southeast corner of the piece of property was immovable and served as the fixed point of bearing for the position of the parcel.

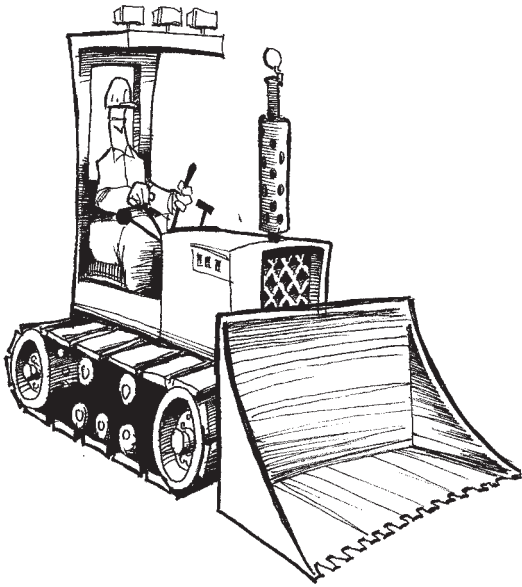
As the years went by the property was passed down by inheritance from generation to generation. The heirs were under the mistaken impression that the cornerstone was on the northwest corner of the lot. The time came when the heirs decided to develop



the property commercially. Extensive planning and constructive transpired. An entire city division was built, complete with residences, apartments, and several large churches. Everything was oriented around, and attention directed to, the large cornerstone to the northwest.

When the regional government decided to modernize the land maps of the region, a surveyor was sent to update the boundary demarcations. He took measurements, drove stakes, and recorded his findings. The report concluded that the entire development had been constructed on the wrong parcel of land. The owners and developers were shocked and dismayed. Needless to say, a land dispute ensued and litigation has continued for years as to the culpability for such misdirected development.

Meanwhile, over the years, a few simple souls have been living on the original parcel of land. Without ornate accommodations they reside at the top of the hill enjoying the majestic view of the rock on the southeast corner, the ocean to the southwest, and the ancient oak tree to the east. Like their predecessors and ancestors before them, they seem to be quite disinterested in the legalities of land descriptions and the commercialization of physical developments. They prefer instead to appreciate the serene beauty of life on the hill.

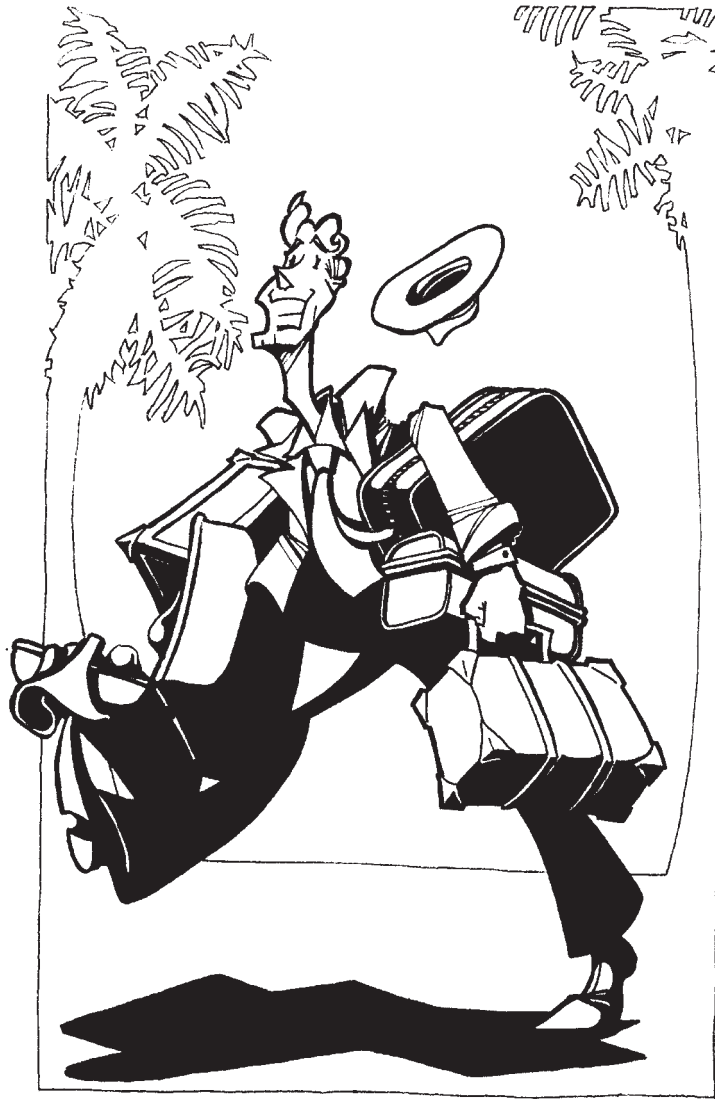


Organized institutional religion has thought for many centuries that it was rightly oriented to the cornerstone of Christianity in Jesus Christ. They have developed an ecclesiastical community, the city of "Christendom," complete with crystal cathedrals.

Imagine their dismay when they are informed that they have constructed their religious city in the wrong direction, and are not rightly related to the “cornerstone.” What they thought was their “land” does not belong to them.

All along a few Christians have lived simply in the “land of promise” (Heb. 11:9), recognizing they are “build up as a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5), the “house of God” (Heb. 10:21; Eph. 2:19), with “Christ Jesus being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20) thereof. They reside on “Mount Zion, in the city of the living God” (Heb. 12:22), “the city whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10), enjoying the life of Jesus Christ.

Will the religious heirs give up all their materialistic assets and construction plans in exchange for the simplicity of enjoying life in the land, city and house that is spiritually available in Jesus Christ?



A TRIP TO PARADISE

“A TRIP TO PARADISE – SIGN UP HERE!” Extolling the virtues of the island paradise of Tahiti, the promoter explained that this was truly where “real life” was to be found.

His listener was intrigued by the prospect of living in this island paradise. Convinced that he would like to go there, he was advised by the promoter as to the procedures by which he might take up the offer to receive an “open ticket” to Tahiti.

As the precise date for departure was indefinite, the aspiring traveller spent the majority of his meditative moments dreaming of what it would be like when he arrived there. His thoughts so dwelt upon his destination that he wrote many a sonnet and put them to music to express his hopeful joy. Over and over again he engaged in a repetitive review of the details of the flight: the lift-off into the

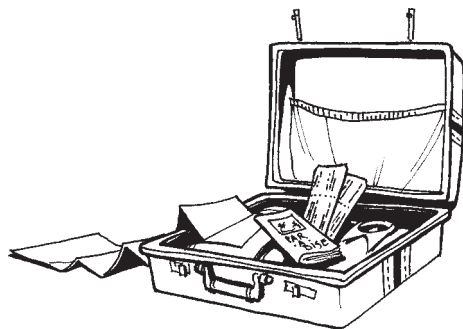
clouds, the scheduled intermediary stop and the eventual landing. “I’ll fly away, O Lordy, I’ll fly away,” was the tune on his heart.

Expectations for the trip were so high that the anticipatory traveller began eagerly to solicit others to join him on the trip. Convinced that such life in paradise was the in the best interest of all, he accepted this as his *cause celebre*. He, himself, became a promoter, waving his ticket before those who would look and listen, advertising the “good life” that he had discovered, albeit so distant and yet to be realized.



Is not much of Christian teaching today parodied in this parable? Is that the good news of the gospel – a ticket to paradise? Is the *raison d’etre* of the Christian simply to be an itinerant travel agent to convince others to take the trip?

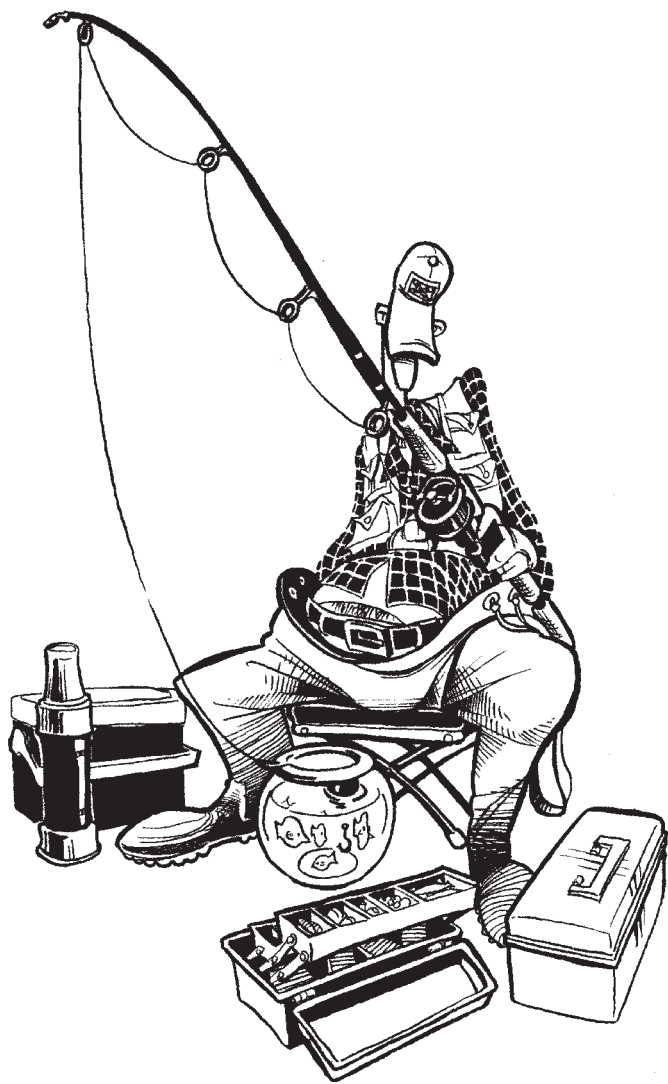
Is it any wonder that Christians today seem to have such a difficult time dealing with their present lives here on earth? Their past is forgotten; their future is expected; but the present is but the edgy monotony of waiting on “stand-by.” Christians have “checked-out” of their present situation. They have “checked-in” their baggage of sin at the baggage-counter (altar), and they are holding onto their redemption coupons while waiting for the flight. Huddled in the waiting-lounge of earthly existence, they sing together, “This world is not my home; I’m just a passing through; My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue.”



The good news of the gospel is that the dynamic life of Jesus Christ affects us and is effective in us today! We look not just for a future realization, but rejoice in the restoration of humanity as God intended, since God has come to dwell in us (II Cor 6:16). We have Christ in us, the expectation of manifesting the glorious character of God on earth today (Col. 1:27).

The evangelicalism which relegates the spiritual life only to heavenly expectation, and the futuristic eschatology which fails to account for present realization and participation in the life of Christ, have fostered the inability of Christians dealing with the trials and tribulations of life on earth presently. Such misrepresentation of the gospel has failed to instill an awareness of the importance of Christian growth and development today.

Now is the time and here is the place for godly Christian living, in order to demonstrate the glory of God for which we were created (Isa. 43:7).



FISHING IN A FISHBOWL

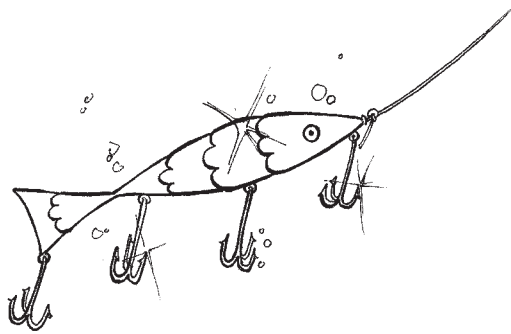
Have you ever seen anything so foolish as someone fishing in a fishbowl?

May I suggest an even more absurd situation wherein the owners of the fishbowl put fish in the fishbowl and hire a commercial fisherman to catch the fish in the bowl so as to make them legitimate members of the fishbowl?

This appears to be what many churches do on a semi-annual basis as they schedule their “revivals” or “evangelistic meetings.”

The fish in the big ocean of the world are not jumping at the opportunity to be placed in an ecclesiastical fishbowl. They are not desirous of being put behind glass, even if it is stained-glass. They are wise to the lures of the average Sunday fisherman.

But the caretakers of the fishbowl feel obligated to make a special effort to bring the fish of the world into their fishbowl, at least semi-annually in the Spring and in the Fall. They carefully research the availability of the most successful big-name commercial fisherman whose services they feel they can afford and whose schedule coincides. This evangelistic fisherman, known for his success in “fishing for men,” brings his tried and true lures to fish in this little fishbowl.



A few unsuspecting fish in the sea that surrounds that particular fishbowl are entrapped, netted or otherwise snared to join the local members of the fishbowl, in order to be fished for by the commercial fisherman. If they are “caught” by the cunning lures of

this foreign fisherman, they will be expected to become contented and faithful members of the school of fish that inhabit that particular fishbowl. There they will be fished for again and again, Sunday after Sunday, even though “caught.”

I told you this was a silly story!

How else will the fishbowl be replenished? Perhaps we should do away with the entire fishbowl mentality, and recognize that Christianity has to do with the restoration of functional humanity.

Jesus did not say, “I came that you might join a fishbowl and swim eternally contented in circles.” Rather, He said, “I came that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)



WHAT AM I BID?

The auctioneer extolled the virtues of the item before him, carefully noting its finer features. His resonant voice and gesticulated enthusiasm had the audience hanging on his every word. This man knew how to control a crowd; he was a master manipulator. Choosing just the right moment of intensity, he opened the bidding. “And what am I bid for this priceless piece?” His banter had a rapid, staccato-like beat and a sing-song cadence that seemed designed to excite and elicit an impulsive response.

But there were few bidders in the first round. So, without missing a beat, the undaunted auctioneer interjected, “Don’t pass up the opportunity, my friends. There may not be another. This is a one of a kind, limited edition. Don’t go home without it.” And without pause he opened another round of bidding.



A hand went up here, another there, but again the bidding was painfully slow, almost like pulling teeth. So, taking another slight interlude to catch his breath, the auctioneer noted the necessity of this item in everyone's life. He explained the regret that would be suffered if people did not take advantage of the opportunity right now. "You can't do without it. Don't pass it up. Act now; it's your last chance. I have five; who'll make it six? I have six; who'll make it seven? It's now or never, folks. It's your last chance to get in. Going.....Going..... Gone! The gavel banged to signify the conclusion of the bidding.

Is this not reminiscent of the pressurized public invitation that is used to conclude many preacher's sermons week after week? Those extended evangelistic invitations have an uncanny resemblance to an auction of men's souls.

Master manipulators, those ministers are trained to be. With increasing volume and rapidity of speech they build their message to a peak of intensity that plies upon the sensitivities of people's emotions. The "Invitation Hymn" is selected for its particular cadence and solemnity in order to appeal for an impulsive and subjective "decision" of the moment, regarded to be decisive for eternity. Many wonder later whatever possessed them to act so impulsively, and resolve never again to make a decision while caught up in an emotional pitch and the hypnotic effects of crowd hysteria.

We need to reconsider the settled seriousness by which any person should make such a decision to invest their entire life and stake their eternal destiny upon the personal receipt of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of their life.





EVANGELISTIC RAPE

I saw him in the shadows eyeing passers-by for an unsuspecting victim, one he thought he could overpower and conquer. Approaching her, he engaged her in pleasantries of conversation designed to win her confidence. By skillful suggestion, he maneuvered her into an isolated place. Had she understood what was happening, she might have screamed, but the subtlety of his moves caught her off guard.

Soon he had overpowered her weak defenses, subdued her and effectively gagged her, disallowing any response. With disrespect verging on contempt, he tore away at her, exposing her with rapacious swipes at her character. Eventually he threatened that the only way she could save her life was to consent to his intents. Though not consenting, she merely acquiesced and went through the motions in order to preserve her life.

Having penetrated the private reserve of her being, he left her wounded, demoralized and violated, reeling from this violent assault. The perpetrator of this crime abruptly ran off with a heady “rush” of conquest. He probably returned to his cohorts in crime, bragging that he had “scored” another “hit,” for such is the statistical advantage that one gains in the gang of serial rapists with which these criminals associate.

What was the victim to do now? Report it? Join a rape victims support group to seek catharsis and encouragement? Forget it? Impossible! Whatever she does, she will live with the painful consequences for the rest of her life.



The physical portrayal of a spiritual assault reveals it for what it is – “evangelistic rape!” Another person had been accosted, assaulted and violated by a religious rapist intent only on victimizing, on “scoring” to gain statistical advantage.

So-called evangelistic methods often employed by overzealous religionists need to be exposed for what they really are – assaults! Their motivations are just as impure as the physical rapist: desires for dominance, conquest, self-satisfaction, a false sense of identity, statistical advantage, etc. They have no respect for personhood; they treat people as mere objects. There is no relationship established, just mechanical acts of self-satisfaction. There is no love, just violence, as they violate another's intimate spiritual privacy.

Another person has been scarred for life, unable to enjoy God's intended blessings. What God intended to be so beautiful and beneficial has been befouled by this violent act.

Evangelism must be the sharing of the love of the Evangel, Jesus Christ, and that within the context of genuine personal relationships. Christians must remember that the reproduction of spiritual life is never forced or coerced by "evangelistic rape," but is always a result of God's loving initiative to draw another to Himself by His Spirit.



RECORDS OF CONQUEST

Have you ever noticed how those engaged in violent acts upon others are inclined to “keep score” of their deeds? Carefully counting and recording their conquests, they boast of their bravery and make public display of their prowess.

Primitive, cannibalistic peoples around the world often kept collections of the heads or other body parts of their victims. Their blood-thirsty feats were publicly displayed, and sometimes even developed into a gruesome, but lucrative, trade market in shrunken heads.

Native American Indians were known to attach the dried scalps of those they had killed on their belts. Thus they displayed their manly valor as a warrior.

Game hunters hunt and kill animals in the wild. Mounted by the taxidermists, the carcasses of the dead animals become trophies of their conquests.

Football players bang and careen into an opposing line of contestants. Throughout the season decals are affixed to the helmets of defensive players, counting and displaying the number of tackles and quarterback “sacks” they have achieved against their opponents.

The criminal often brags to his cohorts in crime of the number of robberies, rapes and murders he has committed. Such acts are regarded with merit in the sick subculture of criminality.

The foot soldier serving in the infantry notches the barrel or the butt of his rifle for every enemy soldier killed in battle. When not in war they are given “expert marksman” badges instead.



The fighter pilot engaged in aerial combat paints insignias on the side of his plane to signify enemy planes shot down and destroyed. Those with the most “kills” are regarded as “aces.”

In wartime the government attempts to keep careful statistical record of the number of enemy killed. These figures, not always accurate and often inflated, are often used for propaganda purposes to project successful campaigns and to enhance patriotic support of the war-effort. Individual soldiers and units of soldiers are “decorated” with medals of honor for their successful militaristic triumphs. Others are encouraged to emulate those who immolate.

These are but a few examples of mankind’s propensity to keep records of conquest – to document death and destruction. It is an ego-building exercise and often affords social honor to the heroes. The trophies gained and the rewards given become incentives for others to engage in similar achievement of prowess and the same violent actions.

The similarities are too close to avoid noting the same record-keeping propensity within the institutional church. This is particularly true of fundamentalist religion which considers itself to be at war with all other ideologies not completely in accord with its own. “Conversions” are therefore considered as victories of conquest, *tours de force* directed unto the hoped for *coup de grace* of their ideological enemies. Numerical record-keeping is regarded as essential for propaganda purposes to document the



vanquishing of the foe. Fortunately, these often inaccurate and inflated evangelistic statistics are frequently but speculative victories – merely the braggadocio utilized to convey the pretense of imminent triumph, and to solicit others to join the *cause celebre*, regarded as “fighting for the faith.”

Genuine Christians must forego this mindset of war and conquest over ideological differences. We must repent of our combative and bellicose ways. Our objective is to humbly share the good news of the restoration of functional humanity in Jesus Christ.



IS GOD FOR SALE?

He had prepared himself for a career in marketing and sales. With an M.B.A. from a major university, he set out to implement the schemes and techniques he had learned on how to get rich and make a name for himself.

Everyone said he was a “natural salesman.” With the charisma of his personality he could gain people’s confidence, pitch his product and come on hard with the “closing.” He had a natural knack for employing just the right coercive persuasion without being thought of as a high-pressure salesman. He seldom lost a sale.

His product? Well, it was somewhat difficult to define. He had been variously identified as an insurance salesman selling eternal fire insurance. Another explained that he was a real-estate agent selling heavenly real estate. On another occasion he was

introduced as a broker selling commodities and futures. Many considered him to be selling memberships for the community social club.



Did it matter? He was a “natural salesman” with something to sell, making a living off of “sales.” That is just part of the supply and demand of the capitalistic system, isn’t it?

But the question must be asked, “Is God for sale?”

Religion is often viewed today as the big-business which offers the God-product. It allegedly comes in many brands and is operative by many different techniques.



Religious hucksters are hawking their wares, making outlandish claims for the supernatural qualities of their product. Promoters pack in the crowds (and their money) as

they sell their latest program and their particular ideological belief-system. Packaged salvation will be dispensed for a price.

Why did the Apostle Paul say, “we are not like many, peddling the word of God” (II Corinthians 2:17)? Christianity has nothing to do with something to sell, rather Someone to give – the grace of God made available in His Son, Jesus Christ.

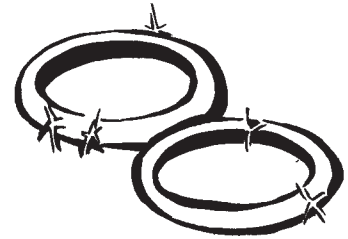


WEDDING RINGS

“With this ring I thee wed...
And I promise myself to thee...
As long as we both shall live.”

These were the words of the vow that the young couple made to each other in the midst of their wedding ceremony. They placed the rings which they had so carefully selected, on each other's left ring finger, and were duly married as the minister pronounced them to be husband and wife.

They proudly displayed their rings to family members and friends after the ceremony to demonstrate that they were married. In the days, weeks, months and years that followed, whenever someone would ask



if they were married, they always proudly displayed their wedding rings.

One day they were challenged as to whether the acquisition of, exchange of, and wearing of wedding bands necessarily made them married. They had to admit that the wedding rings were but outward and visible signs of the legal covenanted relationship that they had entered into on the date of their marriage. In marriage they were intimately united as one, but the rings served merely as symbols by which they publicly proclaimed that they were unashamedly married to one another. The rings did not make them married.



Likewise, neither does baptism make a person a Christian. There is no spiritual regeneration effected in the public and symbolic act of baptism. Water baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual reality of union with Jesus Christ. In that our spirit has been overwhelmed by the Spirit of Christ (baptism in the Spirit), this is subsequently externally represented as our body is overwhelmed by water – the outward signifying the internal, but not effecting such. In water baptism we unashamedly publicly proclaim our spiritual union with Jesus Christ, but the physical act of baptism does not effect our spiritual salvation, anymore than the wearing of a wedding ring effects marriage.



PRESTO-CHANGO!

“Once a pig, now a cow,” said the Jewish fellow as he began to eat a ham sandwich at the local deli.

“Once a Ford, now a Ferrari,” reasoned the cash-strapped college student as he purchased an automobile for transportation to school.

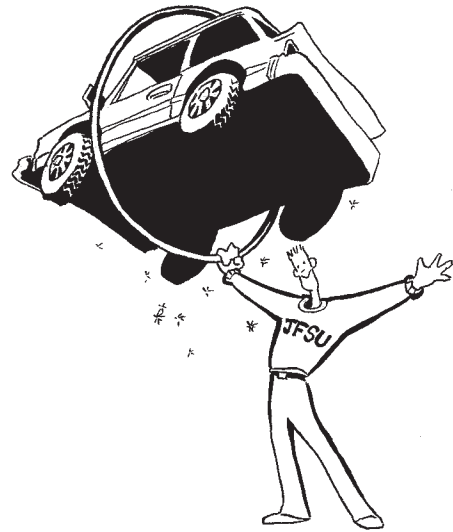
“Once a cracker, now the body of Jesus.” “Once grape juice, now the blood of Jesus,” intoned the priest as he presented his eucharistic incantation.

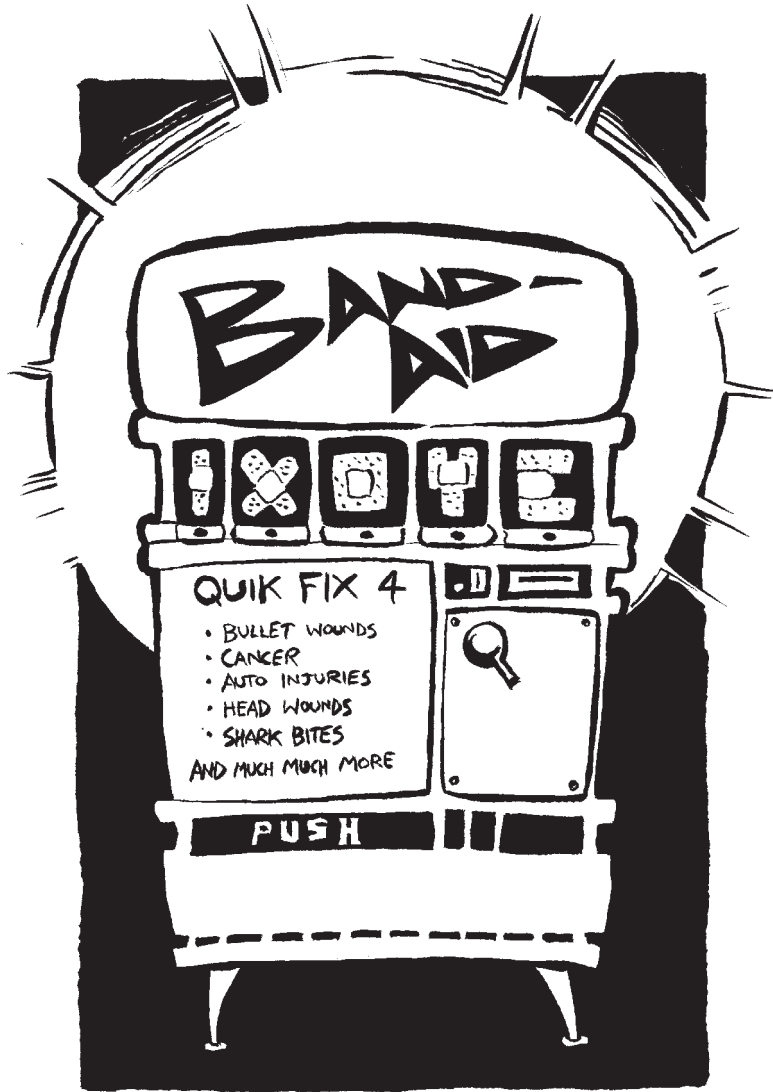




Most modern people are skeptical of the illusory and make-believe transformations often preceded by the pronouncement of “abracadabra” or “presto-chango!” Are you one of those who has a difficult time believing in magical metamorphosis or mystical transformation of substance? These are often the superstitious mysteries of religion.

Honesty and scientific integrity demand that we admit that the substance has not been transformed, but can be said to symbolically represent another entity. It is only reasonable that this is what Jesus meant when He said, “This is My body, ... This is My blood” (Mark 14:22-24)





THE PUSH-BUTTON BAND-AID DISPENSER

The sign read, “Cancer-ward – Third Floor.” I walked up the stairs, acknowledged my presence at the nurse’s station and entered through the swinging doors.

I had expected a quiet, sterile, almost somber place, but the ward was teeming with people. Concerned family and friends were entering and exiting the patient’s rooms and were milling around in the hallway. Many were frantically seeking help for their loved ones, willing to consider any promise of healing that might be proffered.

What caught my attention above all, though, was the long line of persons standing at the “Push-button Band-aid Dispenser.”



Concern was written all over their faces. Fidgeting anxiously, they could not wait to get to the dispenser. There was a sense of urgency; time was of the essence. In went their coin; out came the band-aid; and they hurried back to the patient's room.

This struck me as quite incongruous. Why are they putting band-aids on cancer? Do they not understand that cancer is caused by mutant cells and generally requires more radical means of treatment than covering exposed sores?



The cancer-ward of this world is also full of people suffering from the cancer of sin. Whenever that cancer breaks through into physical expression, family and friends often run for the quick-fix dispenser.

They insert their urgent prayer requests: “Please pray for so and so ; they are real sick; please pray real hard!” Prayer becomes the last-minute, push-button technique, with a desire to see an immediate covering on the open wound. This is often no more than putting a band-aid on cancer; it may cover the sore for the sake of the on-lookers, but it does not solve the problem.



God wants us to pray and to express the concern of our heart to Him. God answers prayer! But our prayers must be more than going to the “push-button band-aid dispenser.”



TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

“Taxation without representation” was the issue that led the colonists of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to instigate the Boston Tea Party of December 16, 1773, an incident which helped to precipitate the American Revolution.

The entire system of taxation by the British was regarded as oppressive. Distant authorities exerting their power, exacting the taxes, the expenditure of which would bring little or no benefit to those paying. In fact, the taxes were being misspent and were being used to perpetuate an antiquated and corrupt government system.



That situation led God-fearing colonists to defy the governing powers. “Pay with no say” was intolerable. Upon the arrival of three ships laden with tea into the Boston harbor, defiant colonists costumed as native Indians, boarded the ships and dumped the tea in the sea.

Will Christians ever act as assertively to address a similar intolerable and oppressive situation within authoritarian ecclesiasticism? Perhaps it is time to dump the big “T” of tithing into the “C” of conspiracy!

The pressure to tithe at least ten percent of one’s income is also a method of funding used by power-hungry authorities to line their own pockets and to perpetuate an antiquated and corrupt system of ecclesiasticism.

Legislated tithing has no place in the new covenant dynamics of the Church of Jesus Christ, wherein “the law is written upon our hearts” (Heb. 8:10; 10:6). Christian giving is not mandated by percentages. Christian giving is not to be manipulated by ecclesiastical authorities utilizing emotional appeals to create guilt incentives.

Christian giving is the opportunity afforded to every Christian to be the vessel through which the giving character of God’s grace continues to be expressed. In the midst of our personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ, we consider what He wants to give of that which is His already; how much, to whom, and when. “Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart” (II Cor. 9:7), in accordance “as he may prosper” (I Cor. 16:2).





POCKET PALS

Billy and Jimmy were pals. On one of their daily escapades, the two young boys found a couple of polished stones. Their imagination ran wild. They were sure that these stones must be extremely valuable, and that they had magical powers.

A pact was made between them, whereby they promised to each keep one stone and to keep it with them at all times. If either lost the stone in his possession, they were sure that the magical powers would disappear. Daily they checked with each other to make sure that the other had his stone safely in his possession.

A heated argument ensued one day concerning the safe-keeping of their possessions. You may not think it was a big issue, but the boys considered these stones to be supernaturally powerful and invested with infinite value.

Jimmy was concerned that Billy was not being very responsible about protecting the stone in his possession. Billy considered Jimmy to be almost paranoid about keeping his prized possession safe.

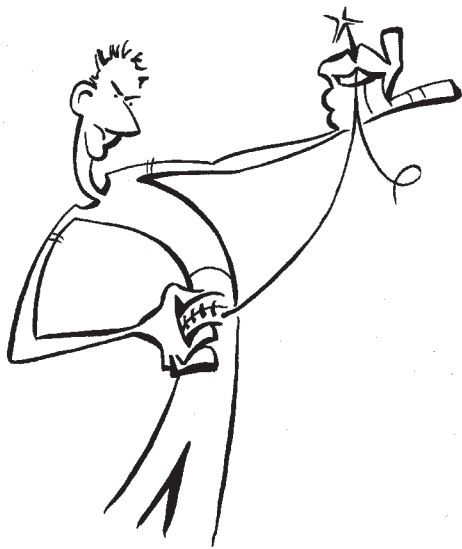
Billy argued that his pockets were particularly deep. The special stone was secure in his pocket and he could not lose it. In fact, he confidently boasted that the object of adoration was so permanently placed in his pocket that “even God couldn’t get it out.” Without worry he went about his playing without any thought of losing the object, sure that it was safely kept.



Jimmy was not so sure, either about the safety of the stone in Billy’s pocket or in his own. “What if the magical stone did fall out and get lost out of your pocket?” Jimmy asked Billy. It is always interesting how little boys think, but Billy’s reply employed some interesting reasoning. “If it ever does

get out,” he responded, “then that just shows that it was not in my pocket and never had been there.” Try to figure that one out! Jimmy couldn’t.

Jimmy was quite convinced that it was possible for the special stones to be separated from either of their pockets. “If it was placed into their pocket, it could surely also be removed from their pocket,” was his reasoning. If neglected it might fall out. It might be removed by the one who put it in, by a thief, or “even by God.”



So Jimmy was constantly checking on the security of the stone entrusted to him. He felt a keen sense of responsibility to make sure it did not get lost. Anxiously he engaged in repetitive actions to push the object deeper into his pocket, even going so far as to stitch up his pocket opening so it could not fall out.

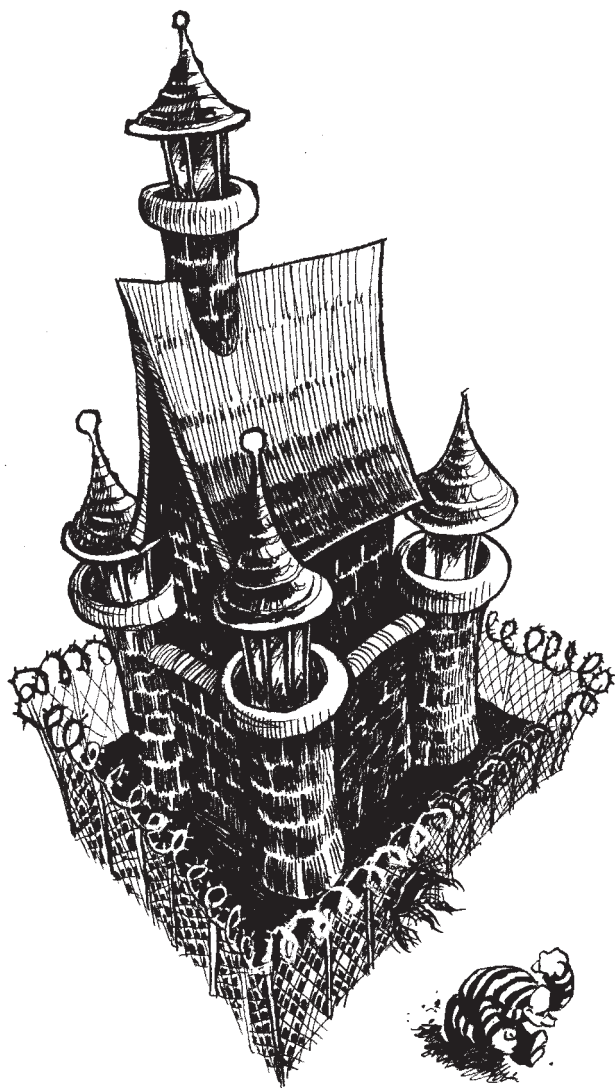


Billy and Jimmy ceased to enjoy what they had found. The mutual enjoyment of their prized possessions was marred by the incessant bickering about the safety of the stones. The contention over this issue of the security of their sacred stones was dividing them. These pals almost severed their friendship arguing over the permanency of the possessions in their pockets.

If this seems like the silliest of childish arguments, may I suggest that it represents a theological argument that has spanned the centuries. Instead of “stones in their pockets” the theologians must have “rocks in their heads” to have spent so much time and

energy arguing over the “eternal security” of one’s soul and whether a Christian is “once saved, always saved.”

Salvation is not an object or an entity that can be enclosed in one’s spiritual pocket, or even possessed in one’s heart. Rather, salvation is the dynamic life and activity of the Savior, Jesus Christ, functioning within the Christian as he/she is receptive to such in faith. Security is “in Christ,” not in theological arguments of permanency.



MAXIMUM SECURITY

The young man got up from his seat, walked down the walkway, and the gate swung shut behind him. It was then that he saw the sign: “Maximum Eternal Security Prison – Sponsored and maintained by the State of Baptistical Calvinism.”

After sitting through the initial counseling session, the new inmate agreed to accept the regimen and abide by the rules. Indeed, in the days and weeks and years to follow he would prove himself to be a model prisoner. He answered all the roll-calls, exercised when it was his time to do so, worked in the shop, and ate the food offered to him without complaint.

This man was a “lifer.” He was committed to this maximum security facility for the rest of his life. There was no opportunity for rehabilitation, parole or release. It was, as the saying goes, a case

where this young man was “locked up, and they threw away the keys.” Once incarcerated, always incarcerated!



Periodically, on the first day of each week, the frocked guard came by each cell to assure the prisoners that all efforts were being made for their safe-keeping and well-being. He uttered ceremonious platitudes encouraging them to accept their situation and the comfort of such security wherein all their needs were taken care of, and cautioned them not to attempt to get out.

On one occasion the word got out that another “lifer” had escaped the confines of his secure environs by cutting through the barbed-wire fence. The inmates were assembled in the prison-yard, and the guards explained that the escapee had never really been a true “lifer,” or he would never have escaped. Such circular logic seems to make sense for those involved in such cerebral “lock-down.”

The minds of many Christians are “securely locked” into a rigid doctrinal position on “eternal security.” They are confined and imprisoned in static cells of theological thought. Imprisoned by the bars of their belief-system, they are unable to experience the genuine Christian freedom wherein Christians are to live by the vital dynamic of Christ’s life. “It was for freedom that Christ set us free” (Gal. 5:1).



Security is a basic need of mankind, but it cannot be satisfied by closed-ended theological explanations. The Christian’s security is to be “in Christ;” in a dynamic spiritual union with the living Lord Jesus, who indwells us by His Spirit and desires to express His life and character through our behavior. Thus we experience the freedom of functioning as God intended, unto His glory.

Is it not ironic that in the entirety of the New Testament Scriptures (NASB), there is no reference to “security.” There are, however, two references in the book of Acts to persons being “locked in jail securely” (Acts 5:23; 16:23). These caused me to ponder the parable above. The remaining New Testament references pertain to “making the grave secure” (Matt. 27:64-66), which could be another analogy.





REBOUND

The basketball game was proceeding at a frenzied pace. Receiving a pass from his teammate, the hometown guard dribbled toward center court. The defending team was employing a full-court press, so our player faked to the left and drove hard to the right, dribbling to within fifteen feet of the basket. There he attempted a one-handed jump shot which ricocheted off the glass and caromed straight up off the front of the rim.

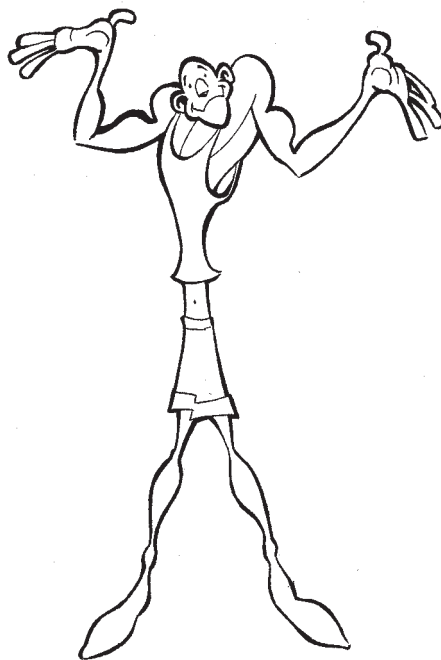
Amazed that he has missed the mark, our player stops in his tracks, his upper torso hanging limp in dejection. Looking toward the coach, he sobs his apologies and laments his failure.



"I'm sorry coach," he cries. "I'll try to do better." But focusing on the error only has a reverse effect that causes him to question his competency and capabilities as a ballplayer and hinders his subsequent endeavors.

Ridiculous? Certainly!

But so is the other extreme, the player who, having missed the mark, shrugs his shoulders and says, "So what? Big deal!" Repressing the actuality of his inadequate performance, he turns down court with a grin, glibly mouthing that flip-pant cliché, "You win some; you lose some." Such a fatalistic repression and refusal to admit responsibility is equally inappropriate in pursuing the objective of the basketball game.



On the other hand, the seasoned ballplayer has his reflexes conditioned to respond to those times when he misses the mark (as all players do!). Although never intending to miss, when he does so it does not shatter his identity as a basketball player. His basketball abilities are still intact: he is still on the team and in the game. He has heard the coach yell many times in situations like this, "Rebound!" He is conditioned to follow through. At the very split second when he recognizes that the ball is not going to penetrate the cords of the net, he continues toward the goal to put the ball up again. There is but a momentary cognition of having missed the mark, during which his reflexes admit and concur with the appearance of temporary failure. But continuing his drive unabashed, he is lifted above the others to take that ball as it bounces off the rim and stuff it through the





hoop. Victory is imminent in such a pattern of continuity which expresses a singleness of resolve to pursue the ultimate objective.

Are there not times when we as Christians feel as though we are in a “full-court press?” Life is proceeding at a frenzied pace. Our Christian expressions appear to “miss the mark.”

Witness the many Christians who respond in repetitive rituals of confessional apologies. Their confessions are but lamentations of

wrong-doing that would seem to impinge upon the integrity and mercies of God. Focusing on their failures, they continue to wallow in the quagmire of sin and defeat.

Equally incongruous are those Christians who gloss over their transgressions. Refusing to admit personal responsibility, they often ascribe their sin to divine inevitability and culpability.

The relaxed Christian who understands his imputed identity and imparted resources in Christ, is not shattered by sin nor does he repress the reality of it. The momentary cognition of the inadequate manifestation of who he really is, suffices as the confessional agreement that God expects. Having thus “rebounded,” he continues with a singleness of vision to be and do all that God intends to be and do in him.



MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO

It had been several years since we had visited the local zoo, so I decided to take the family for an outing to see the animals. The variety of animals in God's creation is utterly amazing.

Our family seems to enjoy the primate exhibit more than any other in the zoo. Being the highest order of the animal kingdom, the monkeys, lemurs, chimpanzees, apes, baboons and gorillas are often extremely entertaining.

The visitors to the primate exhibit make it doubly entertaining. They can be observed imitating and mimicking the actions and gestures of the primates. Some were making funny faces and sticking out their tongues. Others were scratching their sides, jumping



up and down, and screeching. It was a case of “monkey see, monkey do,” as they “aped” the behavior of the animals.

I could not help but consider the fact that many Christians conceive of Christian living as just

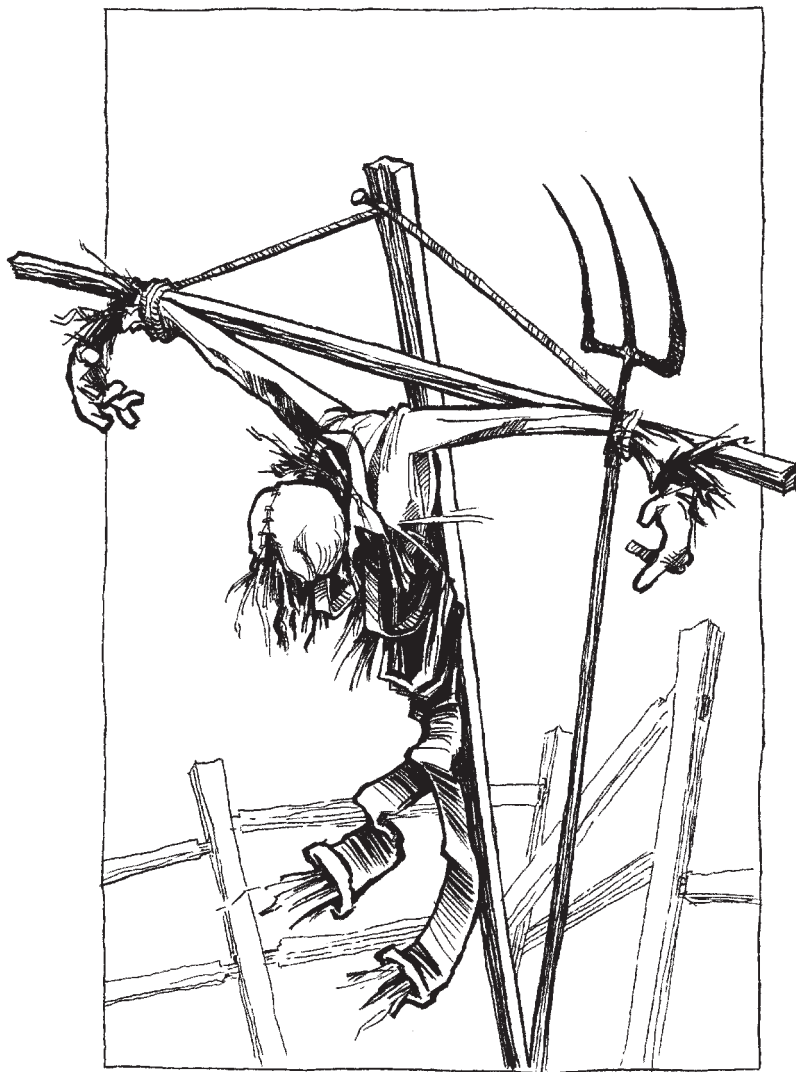
an imitation of behavior. Granted, the object of their observation is of a higher order, but the principle is the same.

Jesus Christ is regarded by many Christians to be the behavioral example for Christian living. Christians are encouraged to be responsible for “the imitation of



Christ” (a la Thomas a Kempis), in order to walk “in His steps” (a la Charles Sheldon), in order to be “like Christ” (a la Andrew Murray). If this be the case, then the Christian life is but a higher form of “monkey see, monkey do,” as Christians attempt to “ape” the behavior of Jesus Christ.

The Christian life was never intended to be an attempted “imitation” of the life of Jesus Christ, but is clearly explained by the apostle Paul as the “manifestation of the life of Jesus in our mortal bodies” (II Cor. 4:10,11).



THE SCARECROW WHO TRIED TO COMMIT SUICIDE

The farmer in the big house had planted a large summer garden, and was anticipating a bountiful crop of fruit and vegetables. As soon as he completed the planting the crows were circling the plot and scavenging for seed.

To protect his interests, the enterprising farmer decided to construct a scarecrow. Taking two sticks, he attached them together in the form of a cross. Wrapping some straw around the sticks for fill, he then dressed the scarecrow with a bright-colored shirt and placed an old straw hat on top of the upright. He propped an old pitchfork up against the cross-member to make it look more real. His intent, of course, was to deceive the birds by

making the scarecrow look like a human being. Though lifeless, the animals might think the scarecrow was alive and could chase them off at any moment.

But then, like his cousin from Oz, the scarecrow took on a life of his own. He was determined to be the best scarecrow that any scarecrow could be. He wanted to perform perfectly for his maker. His resolve seemed to work for the first few days, but then the crows and other scavengers were venturing closer and closer to the newly planted furrows. The scarecrow struggled to look more alive and intimidating, but the crows were bold and persistent. Venturing down to forage seed and first-fruits without consequence, they soon were landing on his outstretched arms and nesting in his hat.

The scarecrow felt so inadequate and ashamed of his poor performance, like such a failure. He tried to be more active, to jump and flail his arms and shout and scream. Neighboring scarecrows encouraged him to have more dedication and commitment, or to attend a seminar on “How to be a More Effective Scarecrow.” All of his best efforts were to no avail. Unable to overcome his inadequa-



cies and inabilities, the sincere scarecrow determined to muster up all his energy, grasp the pitchfork, and thrust it through his torso in an act of honorable suicide. This too failed. Unable to make the wooden cross-member bend, he could not get his arm around to perform this final act. He died of frustration and faded away in decomposition under the heat of the sun and the elements.

I have observed a similar scenario in the garden of Christian living where the seed of Christian living is supposed to germinate and produce fruit. Christians are often determined to be the best Christians they can be, and to perform perfectly for their Maker. To explain their inadequacies they often construct in their minds a “straw-man” called “self,” who often goes by other aliases such as “old man” or “old sin nature.” This bogey-man is perceived to be real, to be alive within them, to be themselves, supposedly hindering them from perfect Christian performance and allowing the intrusion of fleshly self-indulgence.

Soon these Christians are trying their hardest to shout out the persistent intrusions. They dedicate and commit themselves to engage in activities to be better Christians and to overcome. Out of frustration, they try to masochistically beat themselves over the head, to pommel themselves, to “buffet their bodies.” The ecclesiastical farm-hands encourage self-destructive actions to “die to self,” to “put self to death,” to “mortify your members,” with the promise that such acts will effect victorious Christian living and fruitfulness. In response to such, Christians often attempt

the impossible; they attempt to “crucify themselves” in a suicidal or homicidal act toward a “straw-man.” Self-crucifixion is always an impossible act because the wooden cross-member will not bend!

The “self” against which Christians often struggle is a “straw-man,” whose demise can never be effected by any self-effort of attempting to “die to self.” Rather, Christians need to realize that “the old man has been crucified” (Rom. 6:6), that they have “put on the new man” (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:11) in Christ Jesus, and as “new creatures in Christ” (II Cor. 5:17) they are to allow Him to live as He wills in their life. This is not to deny that there are propensities of the flesh which prompt self-oriented and selfish behavior, misrepresentative of our spiritual identity in Christ. We need to recognize that “the Spirit sets its desires against the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). We live by the life of Another! “It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).



P. M. S.

Watch out! Stand clear! Give her a wide berth! She has all the symptoms of the classic diagnosis of P.M.S. She is irritable, disagreeable and hostile. She wants her own way and cannot be appeased. She is constantly ranting and raving, screaming:

“No one understands me.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Don’t you dare cross me.”

“I know I am right...”

...don’t buck me.”

...don’t confront me.”

...don’t question me.”

...don’t analyze me.”



“I don’t care if I don’t make sense.”

“I don’t care if I’m not logical.”

“I know I am emotional, subjective and my feelings are running wild.”

“The present is unbearable, but this time will soon pass. It must be endured. Relief from this present tribulation is assuredly imminent.”

“I’m just waiting for that future period when everything will come to pass.”

Does this sound familiar?

Much of the church today seems to be afflicted and plagued by religious P.M.S. The complete, technical diagnosis is “Pre-Millennial Syndrome.”

This condition is characterized by a sense of hopelessness that everything is “out of kilter” and cannot be resolved until the

future sanitizing of a utopian “period.” Such a millennial menstruation is imminent, but in the meantime the malady must be endured.

What is the cure for this debilitating disease?



Theological practitioners must accept responsibility for misdiagnosis and perpetuating the discriminatory fallacy of this collective theological neurosis. The church must forsake the hormonally induced narcissism and neurosis of the “Pre-Millennial Syndrome,” and recognize that her present health and well-being is assured by the “finished work” of Christ (John 19:30).



THE JALOPY AND THE JAGUAR

Belching black smoke and periodically back-firing, the old jalopy rattled down the road. The owner had driven this car for many years, but it was thoroughly worn-out. People were beginning to shake their heads in derision when he drove by; he was a blight to the road. The paint was peeling, the body was full of dents; the car looked like a wounded survivor of a demolition

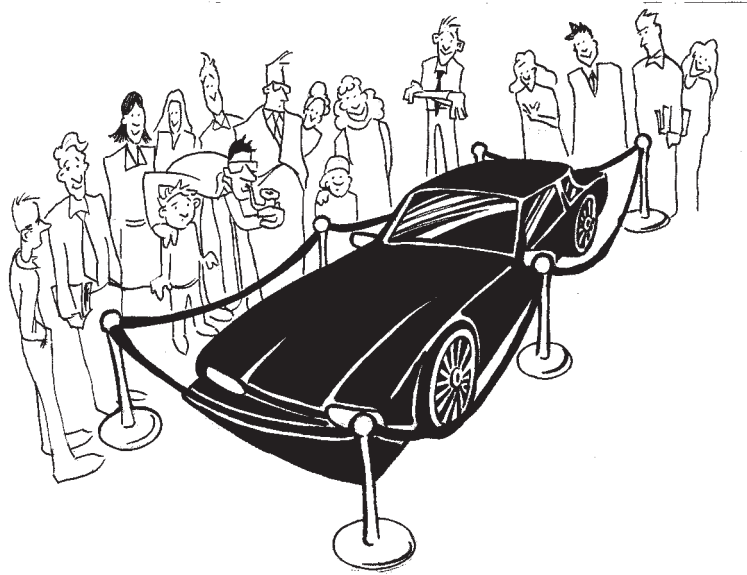


derby. Flat tires were an almost weekly routine. And talk about uncomfortable: the springs poked through the seats and the wind poured through the cracks in the windows.

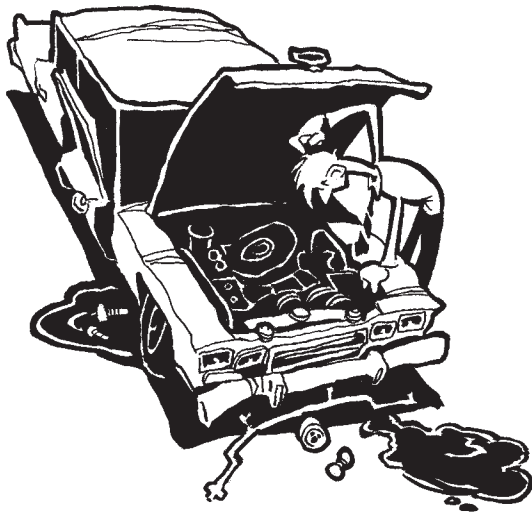
All of this was detrimental to the owner's mental and emotional disposition. It was so frustrating to try to keep this car going. There were times when he would kick the car, scream at it and swear to get rid of that "rattle-trap."



What a surprise, then, when a gracious Benefactor presented him with a brand-new British Jaguar. The lines were so sleek, the lacquered finish so smooth; it was a beautiful hand-crafted machine. As a proud new owner he waxed it and pampered it. He could hardly believe that powerful engine which made so little noise, the new leather upholstery which was so comfortable, and the smooth ride on those new radial tires. Besides that, it came complete with a lifetime service guarantee!



Not wanting to let it get scratched or worn-out, the proud owner parked the Jaguar in the garage and determined to use it only on special occasions. He would back it out each Sunday morning and drive it to church. There he would testify about the benevolence of the Benefactor, and praise the features of his new car. Everyone was invited to look at the car which was on exhibit and inspect its intricate details. Then the owner returned the Jaguar to the garage.



All week long the suppressionist owner continued to drive the jalopy, which did not run any better than before. It continued to have flat tires. The rattles were just as irritating. It sputtered; it back-fired; it continued to heat-up and boil-over. It was all he could do to hold it together and keep it going, having wired up the muffler, taped the windows and put

extra cushions on the seats. The owner was just as frustrated and agitated as before, and continued to gripe and complain about the complications of his life.

The Benefactor arrived one day to question the recipient of his gift. “I gave you a new Jaguar. Why do you insist on driving that old jalopy? Why don’t you tow that jalopy off to the auto-graveyard and let it die? It has no antique value and needs simply to be junked and scrapped. It is time that you begin to enjoy your new car!”

Christians have “put off the old man” and “put on the new man” (Ephesians 4:22,24; Colossians 3:9,10). “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (II Corinthians 5:17). If that be true for us, let us recognize that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not of ourselves” (II Corinthians 4:7).



SELF-SERVE CHRISTIANITY

Forgive me a moment of nostalgic reminiscence... Remember the days when the proprietor at the mercantile, the clerk at the grocery market and the attendant at the gas-station would take the time to really “serve” the customer? They regarded pleasant, helpful service to be their primary responsibility, whereby they might maintain loyal, satisfied customers. Their mottoes were displayed on the wall: “Service with a smile.” “The customer is always right.”

Today, ours is a society of convenience stores, fast-foods and self-service. Aptly referred to as the “Me-generation,” we want just what we want, and we want it “now” for the least price.

Ours is the age of supermarket shopping. We choose the product of our choice from a selection of multitudinous varieties.

Willing to purchase not only what we need but almost everything we want, we expect to find everything at one location and a complete stock of every variety. We prefer that it be on “sale,” or at least have a rebate, for we refuse to pay the full price. We resent having to wait; we expect immediate service. Increasingly we are demanding that the commodities be delivered to our door.

Remember when our mothers and grandmothers would shop at the local grocery for fresh food items, or go down into the food cellar to get “canned” food items from the previous season? They would spend hours, sometimes days, preparing meals for the family and friends. Mealtimes were a time of meaningful family fellowship and personal interaction.

Fewer and fewer family meals are prepared today. When mealtime approaches we pile in the car to drive to restaurant row. “Let’s take a vote. What sounds good to us today?” Sampling the delicacies of the innumerable food preparation establishments, we cater to whatever suits our “taste” at the moment. There are ethnic emphases, culinary specialties, a smorgasbord to appease every appetite.

Needing fuel for the automobile, we stop at the gas station. Remember how the friendly attendant used to come out and check the oil and water, wash the windows and pump the gas? We even used to call it a “service station.” Few are willing to pay the additional price for full-service anymore. Instead we pull up to the “self-serve” island to “pump and pay.” Having taken on fuel for the week, we drive off in a hurry to the next convenient, self-serve satisfaction of our every desire.



It is not difficult to liken the foregoing shift in consumerism to the contemporary ecclesiastical situation. This is the age of “supermarket Christianity” where we shop around for the commodities we desire. Though unwilling to “pay the price,” we demand satisfaction of every perceived need and immediate delivery.

The institutional church has catered to such consumer Christianity by attempting to offer a smorgasbord of every delicacy on restaurant row. “Where shall we go to get ‘fed’ today?” Some even conceive of a gas-station Christianity where people can “pump and pay” for a weekly spiritual “fill-up.”

Whether it be the pleasant personal service of the past or the self-service style of the present, the entire concept of a consumer-oriented Christianity must be challenged. Are we consumers demanding to be served, or are we Christians, indwelt by Jesus Christ, living and loving to serve the needs of others?

Self-service Christianity is an abomination! Let us return to real Christian service with a smile.



DEAD IN THE WATER

She had been christened the S.S. Ecclesiástica. The ship-builders had constructed her with the most up-to-date nautical technology with which to ply the world's seas and call on ports far and wide. Equipped with computerized stabilizers and navigational equipment, she was the envy of sailors the world over.

On her maiden voyage, laden with precious cargo to be distributed throughout the world, she functioned as intended. On subsequent sailings many peoples in ports around the globe were privileged to observe this jewel of the fleet.

Many years afterwards, the ship was sailing in the open seas, when all of a sudden it lost all power. None of the equipment would function. The navigational equipment was useless. The communication equipment was silent. The ship was "dead in the water."



What a frightening experience to be adrift at sea and subject to the capricious natural elements of the winds and the waves. The frantic sailors were lighting flares to send distress signals. The helmsman was standing in the pulpit scanning the horizon for passing ships or the sight of land. The compass was of little value, for any sailor knows that you cannot steer a ship unless it is moving!

What this ecclesiastical ship needs is to reinstate the Lord Jesus Christ as the pilot of the ship. Only then can the power of the Holy Spirit be restored, and the crew can ascertain their course by the compass of divine direction.





GARGOYLES

They were preparing to build a new cathedral and the designers were desirous of utilizing architectural patterns from European cathedrals of centuries past. It was determined that gargoyles should be sculpted, which would serve as spouts for rain-water to run off at a distance from the edifice rather than down the sides. This was the purpose of gargoyles on such cathedrals as the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.

A sculptor was commissioned to shape the gargoyles into fierce animalistic forms. Creating such ugly and grotesque statuary would at the same time serve the purpose of identification with the local animistic religions, who would perceive that the gargoyles would scare off any evil spirits that might approach.

The cathedral was constructed over a period of many years and duly dedicated. It was regarded as the foremost symbol of the Church in the area. Visitors came from far and wide to ponder and photograph the cathedral and its unique gargoyles.

Religion is a gargoyle! It is an accretion upon the spiritual building of the Church of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:20,21). It is a spout that diverts true appreciation of the “water of life” (John 4:14) in Jesus Christ.

The farcical and fictional form that religion attaches to the edifice of Christianity, serves as a grotesque caricature of God’s creation. Religion caters to the superstitions of men, encouraging them to use it to scare off evil spirits, rather than to personally know the Spirit of God.

Christianity is the beautiful reality of the life of Jesus Christ. Do not be deceived by the ugly gargoyles of religion.



POSTSCRIPT

Some readers may feel that the foregoing parodies have been a destructive decimation of their religion. They may be wondering, “What is left of Christianity and the Church after all these pins have been knocked down in this bowling alley of parodic analogy?” Some may think that I have acted like the proverbial “bull in a china closet,” destroying the fine and fragile constructs of Christian religion. Has this been but an iconoclastic rampage which has left the ecclesiastical stage littered with debris?

Some might allege that I am guilty of church-bashing or Christian-bashing. Not so! I might plead guilty to tradition-bashing or religion-bashing, but not to the former charges. Christianity is not comprised of traditional beliefs or practices. Such becomes religion! The English word “religion” is derived from the Latin words “*religare*” or “*religio*” which refer to being “bound up.” Jesus did

not come to bind us up in religious rituals of devotion or tie us down to moralistic codes of rules and regulations. Jesus said, “you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). “I am the...truth” (John 14:6). “If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). Christianity is not religion! Christianity is the dynamic life of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian life is the freedom to be and do all that Jesus Christ wants to be and do in and through the Christian unto the glory of God.

What I have attempted to do is to peel off the flaky layers from the pungent onion of ecclesiastic practice today. I have peeled off the peripherals of program and procedure and false piety. What is left at the center? The Person of Jesus Christ. The essential core of Christianity is the living Person of Jesus. Christianity is the ontological reality of the spiritual Being of Jesus Christ, rather than epistemological compilations or ecclesiastical formulations. We must return to a Christocentric theology that asserts as Paul did that Christianity is “Jesus Christ + nothing!” The essential reality of the Christian gospel remains intact, for Christianity is the

dynamic indwelling presence of the life of the risen Lord Jesus, and the living out of His divine character in Christian behavior.

Let me assure you that I am unashamedly a Christian, personally identified with Jesus Christ. Along with Paul I affirm that “Christ is my life” (Col. 3:4); “For me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21); “Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). My focus on Jesus Christ necessitates my exposing that which has served to cover Him up – the accretions of tradition, the fallacious ecclesiastical formations, the improper priorities of religion. I invite you to stand with me in affirming the centrality of Jesus Christ in the Christian life and in the Church. Christianity is Christ!

There are many Christians today who are disheartened, fed-up and “burned-out” with their ecclesiastical experience of “churchianity.” They still love God and still confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but they are longing for meaningful spiritual reality. For them, perhaps these stories can serve as a “cleansing of the temple” which drives out the merchandisers of improper beliefs and practices which are being “sold” to many unsuspecting religious

people today. I believe that there are many others like me who desire the fullness of the spiritual reality that is in Jesus Christ alone, and who desire the simple singularity of focus on Jesus Christ in their worship of Him.

What is left? The spiritual reality of the life of Jesus Christ is the only hope for mankind. I have unashamedly attempted to scrape off the barnacles of religion so that Christians might “fix their eyes upon Jesus” (Heb. 12:2).



These “Parodies of Piety” drip with the cynicism of self-criticism. Those unable to be self-critical are destined to the perpetuation of their persistent problems. Pastor Jim Fowler does not seek to destroy the genuine piety of the church, but hopes that these parodies will serve as constructive self-criticism.

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