

NICOTINE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Dedicated to Reformed Faith and Practice

Vol. 2 No. 4

October 1998

The Bible: Authorized or Commodified?

What would happen if at the next General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) officers decided the denomination needed to adopt one translation of the Bible as its official version? Say, for the sake of uniformity in church documents, publications, and liturgy, in teaching, and for devotional purposes, the OPC determined that the church would be healthier if throughout all its gatherings, from family worship to the highest court, Orthodox Presbyterians agreed to use the same vernacular wording of God's holy word? Aside from giving even more momentum to the New-King-James-Version crowd, such a decision would touch off a round of arguments, some serious, and some with undoubtedly goofy overtones.

Many would avoid the issue of prudence and go straight for the jugular of church power. Does the General

Assembly have the right to make such a decision? If it may not prescribe a set liturgy for worship, what gives GA the right to select one biblical translation as the authorized OPC version? Even more divisive would be arguments for picking a specific translation. Some would favor the NKJV for its poetic cadence, despite its inferior manuscript sources. Others would make a strong pitch for the New American Standard Bible because of its linguistic accuracy, even though its prose is hardly mellifluous when read either silently or out loud. And others would prefer the New International Version – well – because so many Orthodox Presbyterians were involved in its translation, even though its style is hardly majestic. (What do you expect of eighth-grade English?).

CHANCES ARE THAT THE NIV would win, not on points, but on the economic technicality that most OPC congregations already use it as their pew Bible; to choose another translation, congregations would literally have to pay. Whether it would be paying dearly would depend on the size of the church – though with an average size of 100 members, Orthodox Presbyterian congregations would not find the expense of a new pew Bible paltry. Yet, as unseemly as the economic argument might be, it fits the situation in which conservative Protestants and evangelicals now find themselves. The bottom line for considering the various translations of the Bible is indeed the bottom line. Which version is in stock? Which has the greatest appeal to the largest market? And which has the greatest number of niche versions, that is, designer Bibles marketed for everyone from newly wed mothers to surfers for Christ? In other words, the criteria by which most Protestants pick a Bible is

its affordability and advertizing. The Bible is a commodity like none other in the bric-a-brac of religious trinkets. Sales continue to rise, versions (at least of the NIV) continue to proliferate, publishers continue to produce new commentaries, and biblical illiteracy continues to escalate. This is not to insinuate that some causal relationship exists between the commodification of the Bible and the American Protestant public's knowledge of it. But it is a tad ironic that since the 1880s when American Protestants abandoned one authorized version and handed over the publication and distribution of the Bible to the publishing business, biblical literacy and Bible sales have enjoyed an inverse relationship.

The commodification of the Bible is not an argument for a return to the good old days of the King James Version, though the damage done by newer translations to the uniformity and richness of biblical language is considerable. Instead, the current plight of Bible production does suggest that a return to older patterns of translation and publishing would be much healthier to the church. Instead of letting the market and sales reps determine the best version of the Bible, the church should be the one deciding in what form the word of God appears. After all, the Bible is the church's book. It is not a commodity but something the church has been ordained to teach and proclaim. That the business world dominated by the likes of Rupert Murdoch sets the agenda for the Bible is indicative of just how low low-church Protestants have sunk.

INSIDE

Oahu Dispatch 4

Bill Clinton in Red, White, and
Especially Blue 6

39 Alexander Hall 7

Second Hand Smoke 8

The *Nicotine Theological Journal* will likely be published four times a year. It is sponsored by the Old Life Theological Society, an association dedicated to recovering the riches of confessional Presbyterianism.

Co-Editors: John R. Muether and D. G. Hart.

Subscriptions: \$7 per year (\$9 Canadian); \$10 for institutions (\$12 Canadian). Back issues are \$3. Orders should be sent to 622 Orchid Lane, Altamonte Springs, FL, 32714.

Correspondence and manuscripts should be sent to 32 Benezet Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19118, or to the address above. Submissions should not exceed 2,000 words.

Prior to the twentieth century authorized versions of the Bible were the norm. Of course, the authorized version, the KJV, involved the state in church life to a degree that has its own set of complications. But at least King James, whether we like it or not, was the head of the Church of England, not a business executive looking for new lines of merchandise. Whatever we think of the Protestant teaching about the godly magistrate and his duties to protect and nurse the church, most should concede that the stability and endurance of the KJV represents a form of Bible translation and publishing at the other end of the spectrum from the plasticity and variability of Zondervan's production and marketing of the NIV. In this respect, Thomas Nelson's NKJV is a misnomer and resembles the NIV more than its

seventeenth-century namesake.

THE KJV REMAINED THE standard Protestant Bible until the Church of England in the 1880s produced the Revised Version. Because Anglican leaders invited American cooperation in part, Protestant churches in the United States soon switched to the new version. To be sure, the Revised Version could not escape the business of marketing and publishing – university presses in England were granted permission to publish the RSV and some American publishers even came out with unauthorized editions. Even so, authorization by the church proved to be the barrier to crass commodification. The imprimatur of the church (or churches), not the copyright of the corporation, determined the genuine article from its unauthorized imitators.

A similar pattern followed the production of the American Revised Standard Version of 1937. It stemmed from a body of church leaders and Protestant academics, and it gained the authorization of the National Council of Churches which took charge of the task of publication and distribution. Only with the emergence of such modern speech versions as *Good News for Modern Man* and *The Living Bible* did publishers finally recognize the Bible for the commodity it could be. It only took the Dutch-American entrepreneurs at Zondervan to recognize that potential and produce the most widely used Bible never to have received the authorization of an ecclesiastical assembly.

PERHAPS THE CONTRAST between authorization and commodification presented here is too stark for some less market-sensitive tastes. Yet, the unwholesomeness of churches using a commodified version of the Bible was recently on display during the flap over plans for a gender-neutral version of the NIV (chances are

its prose would be as memorable – and for the same reasons – as the term “gender-neutral”). Executives at Zondervan, simply doing what they do best, figured the evangelical world was ready for a gender inclusive edition of their Bible. Since very few evangelical communions any longer oppose women's ordination, the thinking at Zondervan was plausible, even if they also intended to keep in print their gender exclusive edition, as well -- no sense cutting off any share of the market, neanderthal though it may be. But when the folks at *World* magazine and Focus on the Family got word of Zondervan's plans, the proverbial body waste hit the proverbial air circulator. Here was a brazen assault on family values. Here also was evidence of how much evangelicalism had caved into feminism and radical egalitarianism (as if the latter hasn't been an area of evangelical compromise ever since George Whitefield invaded American soil). In the words of James Dobson, who compared changing the words of Holy Writ to revising Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (now that is a sacred text!!), the sincere effort to produce an accurate translation of the Bible had been “hijacked by the spirit of the age, injecting feminist bias and language into the inspired text.” Dobson doesn't seem to consider that he may be giving into similar impulses when he broadcasts interviews with mainline Protestant church leaders whose family ministries he lauds; after all, those communions caved into feminist pressure by ordaining women long before the folks in charge of the NIV.

NOR DO THE “CONSERVATIVES” at *World* or Focus on the Family ever seem to consider what Zondervan has done by commodifying the Bible. The editors of *World* did not seem to object when Zondervan introduced the WoW! edition of the Bible, a version that includes the photos and comments by leading Christian Contemporary Music artists about their favorite passages of Scripture or favorite rooms of the house

for Quiet Times. (Never to miss a beat, a WWJD edition has also been released recently.) Now, of course, adding inferior notes to the Bible is not a new evangelical phenomenon. The Scofield Reference Bible which made Oxford University Press lots of money also comes to mind as guilty of compounding the foolishness of the gospel. Still, where were the evangelical cultural guardians when Twila Paris' thoughts about Ezekiel replaced the words of biblical scholars and churchmen in the notes of Scripture? Why isn't the WoW! (the exclamation mark must always be included) edition also a form of hijacking the Bible, this time by youth culture? But the commodification of the Bible, somehow, is less a threat than feminism. One can only presume that conservative evangelicals' uncritical endorsement of industrial capitalism blinds them to the vulgarity of giving the Bible more umph by appending the musings of musicians who couldn't tell the difference between the Pentateuch and the Apocrypha.

POLITICAL ECONOMY ALONE, however, will not explain the flaws in evangelicals' preferences in biblical translations. Also notable is the evangelical commitment to soul winning. In contradiction to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, answer 90, evangelicals believe the reading of the word, not the preaching of it, is what makes the Bible a means of grace. The Bible functions as an amulet, and its charms are decipherable by any reader. For this reason the cheap and wide distribution of the Bible is a must. There is no need for the communion of the saints, for the preaching of the word by tested and rightly ordained male ministers, or for the learned summary of biblical truth in confessions or catechisms. (Zacharias Ursinus, we might add, wanted his *Heidelberg Catechism* printed and bound with the Bible so readers would have a proper understanding of God's word.) All that is necessary is the reader and his Bible. To paraphrase a line from *Field of*

Dreams, "if you make it affordable, they will come." Cheap and accessible editions of the Bible are for evangelicals the sole means of grace. Never mind that rates of literacy, though improved by the Protestant Reformation, were stupendously low up until the nineteenth century, or that cheap methods of printing did not exist prior to the 1820s. In other words, the fact that believers throughout the history of the church, both Protestant and Catholic, have depended on the ministry of the visible church for the knowledge and right understanding of the gospel troubles evangelicals very little, aside from what Scripture itself has to say about the ordained ministry of the church. The Bible belongs to the people, not to the church.

THUS, BY A STRANGE MIX OF evangelistic zeal and economic assumptions, the Bible in evangelical hands becomes a commodity to be cheaply exchanged and attractively packaged throughout the franchises of WalMart. The church has no authority to regulate the translation, publication, and distribution of the book she rightly claims as her own. In fact, the church for evangelicals is an impediment to the wonder-working power and profits of God's word. If the church took over the Bible business, souls would be lost and companies would go under. For that reason, most Americans think of the Bible, not as something special and sacred, but as a volume without which no home is complete. The Bible has become, in effect, like the Yellow Pages. Nine out of ten Americans may let their fingers do the worshiping, but that is no consolation if two out of ten Americans let their legs consistently take them to the weekly assembly of God's people where God's word is not only read but preached to the conversion and conviction of sinners, and to their comfort and growth in holiness.

WHAT THEN ARE COMMUNIONS like the OPC to do? Imagine the expense of producing a new translation of the Bible. How could a church of

roughly 22,000 members possibly afford to pay for the labors of scholars, let alone for printing, binding, and distribution? But isn't this the situation in which any number of denominations now find themselves, thanks to their forsaking their legitimate responsibilities as guardians of God's inspired word? By failing to think through the consequences of the market, churches let efficiency and affordability rule out considerations of office and church power. And even worse, by so focusing on the correct teaching and understanding of the Bible, many churches forgot to think about the form and distribution of the Bible.

Whether the gnostic impulse in American Protestantism or just a congenital evangelical docetism explains this disregard for the form, as opposed to the content, of Scripture, once again the effects of divorcing faith and practice are clearly visible. Conservative Protestants rightly revere the Bible. But their practice of letting the market commodify God's word betrays that reverence. It may not be a cure-all, but the doctrine of the visible church offers the appropriate brake on the separation of beliefs and practice, and of form and content. But whether readers agree with this installment of high church Presbyterianism, they should at least see that even the sometimes strange deliberations of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's General Assembly are a better arbiter of the Bible's shape and distribution than the board meetings of evangelical publishing executives.

Henry M. Lewis

SC 88

Oahu Dispatch

Sometimes it is hard to find a Reformed church, especially when the professing ones have gone native.

... When I arrived on the Island

(Oahu) I decided to go looking for a church as one of the first items of business. I had heard that there were several PCA churches on the Island, so I looked them up in the phone book. Interestingly, I noted that none of them had the word "Presbyterian" in their church name. That should have clued me in to a potential problem right away, but I failed to see it immediately. I went to the first one, called Trinity Church, Leeward. I walked in and was struck by the number of people wearing flip-flops, shorts, t-shirts, etc. at the morning worship service (a fact of Hawaiian church life I have gotten used to, although not all churches are as brazen about it). I struck up a conversation with a gentleman who I later found out has been nominated to be one of the church elders. He asked me what kind of church I was looking for and I said emphatically, "REFORMED." He states that there are three PCA churches on the Island, and if I'm looking for something Reformed that is pretty much all I'll get. He then proceeds to proudly tell me that many, if not most of the people in this church probably don't even know that this is a Presbyterian church, or what that means. They "kinda get Reformed theology without knowing it." I asked him if there was any Sunday School. He informed me that there usually is one, but they recently finished the adult class and to celebrate, that day the adults were going down the street to a little restaurant and having some coffee and breakfast and just talking during the Sunday School hour!

PONDERING ALL THESE THINGS in my heart, I sat down for the morning worship. Several people got up in front with guitars and tambourines (shaped like the Christian fish symbol!) and we proceeded to sing our way through a bunch of church campfire ditties and single sentences lifted from the Psalms. Every once in a while a part of a Psalm would be read before a song, and I noticed that it was always a "happy verse." For instance, they would read Psalm 63:3-4: "Because Your

lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. Thus will I bless you while I live." They would never read farther, so they always missed important parts of the Psalm, such as 63:9: "But those who seek my life, to destroy it, Shall go into the lower parts of the earth. They shall fall by the sword; they shall be a portion for jackals." It amazes me how people read the Bible so that they only have about a 1/3 Bible. I call it a 1/3 Bible because probably about 2/3's of it seems off limits to modern evangelicals (too much wrath, law, harshness, etc. for them, so they just ignore it and read "happy verses").

After this exercise was done it was time for the children's message. I had to sit for 10 minutes and listen to a lesson given at about the preschool level to a bunch of kids who came up to the front. . . .

Next came the sermon. I listened hard, because I had just been told that I would be getting Reformed theology without even knowing it. Well, he was right. By the end of the sermon I didn't know I had gotten any Reformed theology. Hey, wait a minute. Maybe I *didn't* get any Reformed theology! What I clearly knew, however, was that I had just sat through a worship service and sermon that was a carbon copy of just about any of 200 non-denominational churches on the Island. . . .

The next Sunday I traveled to the other side of the Island to go to another PCA church; Trinity Church, Windward. It was almost as if I had walked into the same church. Little was different, right on down to the pedantic children's message. . . . I looked for the Reformed distinctive in this church, but I guess they must have had some kind of gnostic Reformed theology and you had to be initiated or have some special knowledge to find it. I struck up a conversation with a gentleman afterward who said, "Oh, you're looking for a church. Isn't that fun?" Nope. No fun. Then he started telling me that I might want to check out a

church called Calvary by the Sea, a Lutheran church. He told me how it was right on the beach and the wall behind the pulpit was one big glass wall so you looked out over the ocean while the pastor preached. Then he said I might really like to go to their Tuesday night meeting. I was eager to hear more, thinking perhaps this was some great discipleship group. He said, "They call it 'emotional gymnasium.' You can go and share whatever is happening with you and let it all hang out, and it's okay because everyone else is doing the same. I started going there when I was going through a divorce with my first wife." . . .

I FIGURED MAYBE THE THIRD time is the charm. So I trudged off to the third and last of the PCA churches on the Island. This might have been the worst of them all. I sat down for worship and the guitar-slinging worship leaders got up (with shorts and flip-flops on) and the first words said in the service were as follows: "Why should you never play cards in the jungle? Because there's cheetahs there." I kid you not. That was the call to worship. Wherein the worship leader revealed two things that he is ignorant of: 1) the natural habitat of the cheetah, which is *not* the jungle, and 2) the proper reverence for God in His worship. I suffered through the same ditties, and everything else sans the children's message (all of the children were off at their own "Superchurch" – maybe I should have gone there because I was clearly at the "run-of-the-mill church"). The sermon wandered into antinomian land. He made statements such as "Grace is good news, rules are not good news" and he referred to a missionary as "too Old Testament, paying too much attention to 'shalt nots.'" . . . The sermon was concluded with a prayer which included a petition asking God to help us deny ourselves "things that You *feel* are wrong for us." It's bad enough that we have an evangelical generation that operates almost solely on feeling. Now we want to make God into one who *feels* certain things are wrong, rather than a God

who decrees right and wrong, good and evil; a God whose very holiness defines the boundaries of these things; a God without whom none of those things would make any sense. . . .

At this point I was desperate. I asked this pastor if he knew of anyone else on the Island, other than the PCA churches, who taught Reformed theology (not that the PCA churches really teach it, but they think they do). He told me that there was one Bible church. He described the pastor as teaching a lot of Puritan theology and his sermon titles sounded like long Puritan sermon titles. This excited me and I quickly wrote down the name of the church. . . . I walked into the Honolulu Bible Church fully expecting to be disappointed, given my experience on the Island to that point. I sat down and looked around me. There was a pew Bible. I picked it up. NKJV. Bonus point. A little red book next to the Bible caught my eye. Trembling, I picked it up. The Trinity Psalter! My heart started to beat a little faster. Did they really use this? . . . I glanced at the Sunday School notes from the lady sitting next to me. It was an outline on the differences in church polity between Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches. Wow. . . . I noticed a lot of people carrying New Geneva Study Bibles. Another bonus point

THE PASTOR GOT UP TO OPEN the service by reading the Scripture passage that would be preached upon that morning. . . . Then he said, "Now please stand and turn in your Psalters to Psalm 68." . . . We were using the Psalter and opening with my favorite Psalm for singing, "The Battle Hymn of the Huguenots." We also used the Psalter one other time in the morning service. No ditties, no choruses, no partial songs. . . . The morning sermon was one hour long. No one seemed to care. Not even the young children, all of whom stayed in the service I went to the evening service . . . and they used the Psalter again. The service was again opened with the

Scripture that was going to be preached on. The evening sermon was on election and entitled "The God Who Chooses." It lasted 45 minutes and no one seemed to care. I walked in the little church bookstore and found all kinds of Reformed and Puritan books. . . . I started talking around and found out that there were a whole bunch of other PCA and OPC people in this church who had come to the Island and had a similar experience to mine. They all had gone to the PCA churches and either toured to each one or stayed at one for a while and were frankly horrified by the lack of Reformed teaching and the "happy-clappy" worship.

I spoke to the pastor, who has been there some years now. He comes from a fundamentalist background but became Reformed some years back, basically a Reformed Baptist in outlook. He brought that theology with him when he came to this church. . . . The pastor told me that he was excited that there were PCA churches on the Island when he came here. Not having any experience with the PCA before but understanding the PCA to be a conservative and reformed Presbyterian denomination, he wanted to work together with them to have a significant Reformed witness on the Island. He had all the PCA pastors over to his house to explore options, and as his wife puts it, "it became obvious in less than an hour that they were spinning in a totally different direction than we were." They were not interested in any overt, Reformed witness or joint ministry work. . . . They stated that they were trying to reach the unchurched on the Hawaii. But they have trampled on the Reformed heritage and squandered it by becoming like every other non-denominational church on the Island and not offering the great doctrines of sovereign grace (i.e. the gospel in its fullest expression) to the people of Hawaii. When it became apparent to my pastor that a large number of the members of one of the PCA churches had started coming to

his church, he wrote a letter to the pastor of the PCA church expressing his concern that these individuals were coming and stating that they felt they were not getting true, Reformed theology at the PCA church. The PCA pastor sent back a somewhat hostile letter stating that he preaches Reformed theology but those going to the Honolulu Bible Church must be malcontents who are looking for something special. . . .

I HAVE SINCE COME TO LEARN that my pastor has recently come to a paedobaptist position, which he now is planning to begin teaching the church (which should be interesting given the large contingent of those from a fundamentalist background). He eventually hopes to have the church become a Presbyterian Church, although I don't think he will affiliate with the PCA! Perhaps with a smaller group such as the OPC or RPCUS. . . . So, the Lord has graciously led me to a Reformed, Psalm-singing congregation. Now my wife can come to Hawaii. . . .

Nathan J. Hoeldtke

SC88

Bill Clinton in Red, White, and Especially Blue

Of the several disadvantages of growing up in a fundamentalist home, one was the ability of my father to detect off-color humor a mile away. (Sure, the promoters of family values would see this as a virtue. But, then again, they are the ones responsible for the Family Channel where firm parental guidance is little different from parental naivete.) I can remember those rare nights when for some reason my brother had been sufficiently well-behaved to merit staying up late – it also needs to be added that it was

Friday night. And then around 11:30 we would gain access into the sophisticated adult world of "The Tonight Show" and hear the urbane (to us) humor of Johnny Carson. We would listen to Fred McMahon announce the evening's guests and cherish the prospects of seeing Buddy Rich or Don Rickles.

BUT WE KNEW ONE OBSTACLE lay in the way of our making it past midnight. It was Carson's monologue. If Johnny went blue – the showbiz vernacular for telling dirty jokes – then we knew dad would get up from his recliner and turn the TV off, thus forcing an abrupt end to the quality time around the tube. Sometimes Carson's allusions to parts of the female anatomy would be tame enough to keep our father in his seat – he no doubt enjoyed Carson and wanted to see the same guests that we did. (By the way, it helped if dad fell asleep. But there would be hell to pay if he woke up to a dirty joke. And could you be really sure that he was asleep?) But in those cases where the jokes were only a shade blue, the pressure I felt was even greater than if Carson had gone ahead and told a crude one-liner. I couldn't stand not knowing when my father would turn off the TV. And so, in some cases I would be the one to make the first move. It wasn't because I objected to the humor, nor was it even a case of trying to protect my innocent dad from the dirty jokes that I had come to hear at school (often repeated from "The Tonight Show"). Instead, it was simply a desire to end my misery. I could not bear hearing off color jokes in my dad's presence. If I laughed I would certainly disappoint if not anger him. If I didn't then why bother watching?

MEMORIES OF MY YOUTHFUL late night discomfort have come back to me over the past eight months, first as a trickle, and now as a virtual geyser, as the sordid and tawdry details of our President and his intern have absorbed

the nation and its media. Through it all I know that my aging fundamentalist parents sit glued to the TV, not because they are so interested in Bill Clinton's sex life (though as registered Republicans these incidents have no doubt confirmed their prejudices). Rather, it is their habit to watch at least ninety minutes of news each night, first the local variety at 6:00, then the national edition at 6:30 – I think they still watch Peter Jennings, who has had his own intern problems, because their local news of choice comes from the ABC affiliate and they don't have remote control. Then, they finish off the day with a dose of local news at 11:00, complete with that evening's murders, fires, and woes of the Major League Baseball's closest franchise.

THROUGH IT ALL, MY DEAR, devout conservative independent Baptist parents have had to hear about parts of the human body and sexual positions that had Johnny Carson ever mentioned my dad would have likely not only turned off the TV, but put it out by the curb for the next trash pick-up. I feel this obligation to go home at certain times of the evening so I can be there to turn off my parents' TV. Many people have talked about how parents are going to explain the President's actions to their children. But what about former fundamentalists like me? Who is going to explain it to our parents? I want to protect my parents from the evening news which is now pornographic. They don't need to know about oral sex or stained cocktail dresses. Their lives, innocent though they may have been, would have been complete without such carnal knowledge. And this is the source of my complaint against our President. His sexual life is his business, though I can see its repercussions for the body politic and his ability to govern. But do my parents have to know? Couldn't he have thought about all those fundamentalists out there who had never dreamed that sexual desire could take such bodily form?

Now, part of the problem may be mine. I could be suffering from the same naivete that Hamlet exhibited when he denied that his mother was a sexual creature. In other words, I may think my parents so sexually innocent that I can't conceive of their sexual intimacy, let alone the fact that they did produce two sons. They both grew up on farms and probably know a lot more about sex than I can ever fathom. Still, if they felt the obligation to protect me from Johnny going blue, I feel a similar responsibility to protect them from Bill Clinton, who should be turning red.

Townsend Levitt

SC88

39 Alexander Hall

Get Your Cracker Jacks!

The *NTJ* adds its hearty "amen" to the claim that McGwire, Sosa, Ripken, and (the *other*) David Wells all conspired to make it a splendid year for baseball. Our interest in the national pastime was rekindled despite the failures of our favorite teams and the trying of our patience by the sport's relentless commercialization. The glitz of Fox Sports' ultra-hip telecasts and Mike Piazza's high profile pursuit of a \$100 million contract reinforce our conviction that baseball at its best is now to be found in minor league ballparks.

IN THESE QUAIN AND asymmetrical stadiums that have yet to rent their names to major corporate sponsors, there are hopeful signs that local culture is not completely dead. For example, the ads that color the outfield walls are not for Home Depot

or Chili's but rather for car dealerships and radio stations. Moreover, smoking is not completely banned, and so a good four-inning cigar can enhance the viewing pleasure. And then there are the creative promotions of local owners. This past summer we attended "Bark in the Park," where dogs were admitted to watch the Colorado Springs SkySox and "Gashouse Gang Thursday," where the local utility company sponsored free general admission for fans of the Jackson (Mississippi) Generals.

ONE PROMOTION THAT WE missed has an owner facing possible legal trouble. According to *USA Today* (August 28, 1998), the American Civil Liberties Union and the Maryland Civil Rights Commission are challenging the Hagerstown Suns' regular Sunday promotion of discounted admission to fans who come to the games carrying church bulletins. It seems as though this entails discrimination based on religion. The team's general manager is downplaying the controversy. "We're not trying to put people in churches, we're trying to put them in the ballpark. This is about business, not religion." A local Christian pastor sees it more ominously. The ACLU protest is "an act of anger against God and people of faith," claims Rev. Randy Buchman. "Too many folks today want tolerance of their own right but are intolerant of anyone who expresses any faith."

Of course, Rev. Buchman has it exactly wrong. What he means to say is that the ACLU is intolerant of Christians who, by going to the ballpark on Sunday, *refuse* to express their faith. The promotion's real crime is its privileging of one form of Sabbath-breaking over another, this being a battle of competing versions of secularism. If the ACLU were genuinely concerned about religious discrimination, perhaps it should take up the cause of Christians whose religious convictions prevent them

from attending baseball games on the Lord's Day. Then again, it may be difficult these days to secure a client willing to make that claim. Consider this notice that appeared in the recent program of a PCA church on the very Lord's Day when the morning sermon topic was the fourth commandment (names changed to protect the guilty):

BRAVES GAME TODAY! Join friends from Providence Church for an afternoon of baseball -- the Braves vs. The Cubs -- after the service today. We have a group of upper tier tickets at \$12 each. The game starts at 1:35 pm. If you'd like to attend, see Fred Faithful or Tim Truthful after the service. *Seats are limited.*

Forgotten Fruit of the Spirit

October (permit us to brag that we have thus far published every issue of the *NTJ* on time) is National Sarcasm Awareness Month. We're not sure what that means. But sarcasm awareness at least suggests an ability to distinguish it from cynicism.

THIS IS OF PARTICULAR importance to us of late, because each of the editors has been accused of cynicism, although in neither case did it owe to the sin of editing this journal. One of us had the audacity to suggest that banners in public worship might violate the second commandment, at least as the Reformed have understood it. The other claimed that to his admittedly tin-ear, the light rock of most contemporary praise songs reminds him of nothing so much as Barry Manilow. We admit that both comments came in the form of sarcasm. But that is not the same as cynicism, and it is a testimony both to the therapeutic demands and the rhetorical bankruptcy of our time that Christians are having trouble telling the difference.

A good place to begin is by reading Ralph Wood's recent essay, "In Defense of Disbelief" (*First Things*, Oct. 1998). The Christian faith, argues Wood, is necessarily an act also of disbelief. The *credimus* (we believe) is always accompanied by the *damnamus* (we reject), "because the cross of Christ demands our disbelief in all sentimental substitutes, not least the saccharine and sappy counterfeits in contemporary worship." We agree with Professor Wood, especially his analysis of worship. We have had the opportunity to express ourselves more fully on that topic in a twelve-part series currently appearing in *The Outlook*. Here we would simply add that the "triumph of triviality" in Reformed worship -- including banners and praise songs (which are more authentic respectively in Roman Catholic and Pentecostal liturgies) -- not only permits ridicule but at times demands it. Thus our occasional employment of sarcastic delivery systems.

THIS IS RELIGIOUS SKEPTICISM, according to Wood, but it is not cynicism. "Christian disbelief does not mean a principled doubting of everything. Such radical skepticism soon slides into a cynicism altogether as sentimental and self-serving as the easy optimism it rejects. Christian disbelief is, instead, a positive testing of what is true and false by a single criterion: 'By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God' (1 John 4:2-3)."

The difference, then, is that cynicism is disbelief unconnected with belief. It is the flip side of sentimentalism, a belief without accompanying disbelief. Religious skepticism is endowed with both. More careful attention to this distinction will enhance our observance of Sarcasm Awareness Month. More importantly, Wood's religious skepticism, seasoned with sarcasm, will

protect our faith from false gospels and surrogate hopes.

Would Jesus Write for the *NTJ*?

We fully agree with the recent assertion by Ralph Wood regarding the uniqueness of Christ's ministry. In the aforementioned article (sometimes we really do read more than *FT*), Wood writes that "those who have turned the WWJD acronym into a fashion item . . . ignore this fundamental distinction between Christ's objective work and our appropriation of it. As the Son of God slain for the sins of the world, Jesus has a life qualitatively different from ours." This explains in part our great embarrassment at learning that in our last issue (July 1998) we may have given a different impression. The author of "Theology for Pre-Schoolers" was not Christ Schlect, but Chris Schlect, the dean of New St. Andrews Academy and contributing editor of *Credenda Agenda*, whose responsibilities, though important, in no way remind us of our Lord's duties as prophet, priest and king. Not only do we affirm that Christ's earthly ministry is complete, except for whatever happens at his second advent. But we have reason to suspect that he would not have written for our little shoe-string venture had his first advent coincided with desk-top publishing and the Old Life Theological Society.

WE APOLOGIZE TO MR. SCHLECT and our readers for this error. And should the *NTJ* ever be indexed, we hope this correction will be observed.
SC88

Second Hand Smoke

We know that not all NTJ readers are

smokers. But the following from From Peter L. Berger, "Furtive Smokers – and What They Tell Us About America," Commentary [June 1994] suggests why the anti-smoking lobby may be as dangerous as second-hand smoke.

There are scenes – sometimes dramatic, sometimes quite ordinary – which can disclose the inner essence of an entire society. Thousands of people holding their breath in a Spanish arena as the matador, sword drawn, advances toward the bull in the moment of truth. A rainy evening in a Swiss city, with no car in sight, as a few pedestrians patiently wait for the light to change to green before crossing the street. Now, with both Spain and Switzerland being sucked into the homogenizing culture of the new Europe, these two images may become obsolete, to be replaced by others more pertinent to the new realities.

IN AMERICA THE PROTOTYPICAL scene used to be the solitary cowboy riding off into the sunset, or alternatively, deputized as sheriff, riding into town to set things right. Despite the complaints of sundry communitarians about the excesses of individualism in America, that image too no longer seems pertinent. A new one suggests itself, and the recent harsh winter adds poignancy to it: a group of people huddled together in the snow outside an office building, furtively puffing on their cigarettes. Passers-by ignore them or make mocking remarks. The smokers do not respond, unless it is to apologize for not being able to kick the habit. The apologies do not seem to placate the contemptuous passers-by.

. . . [I]t is clear that, at least today, the depiction of American society as overly individualistic is a gross distortion. This is not a nation of rugged individualists, but of timid joiners, petulant victims, and self-

denigrating conformists. Under a continuing rhetoric of individual autonomy and rights, an insidious collectivism is becoming the new norm.

TO ANYONE DRIVEN TO ASK one last question about those furtive smokers in the snow – can these people be *Americans*? – the answer, alas, is that they provide a frighteningly accurate picture of what this country has already become and an even more frightening harbinger. SC88