NICOTINE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Dedicated to Reformed Faith and Practice
Vol. 3 No. 2
April 1999

Church Growth in an Industrial Age

How big should American Presbyterianism be? To hear some church leaders from both mainline and sectarian denominations, you would think their tradition is thriving and primed for that best of all missions – the transformation of American culture. But statistics, which are one measure of bigness, suggest that Presbyterians are really kidding themselves, even after discounting the cheerleading that usually suffuses denominational bureaucrats' rhetoric. Contrast, for instance, the numbers of American Presbyterians and Lutherans, a somewhat disadvantageous comparison for the latter since they labored for over half of their New World existence under the handicap of not being Anglo and then for much of the twentieth century under suspicions of being loyal to the evilest empire in human history. And yet, Lutherans have managed to be bigger than Presbyterians in breath-taking proportions.

THE ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN Church, the communion of choice for one of the *NTJ*'s editors and of birth for the other, numbers approximately 22,000 members, not so good, but growth over the past few years has been encouraging. Then there is the Presbyterian Church of America with around 275,000 members, a figure that often tempts some Orthodox Presbyterians to break the tenth commandment. If we are such a good church, some lament, then why is the OPC so small? And what is the PCA doing right to be so big? But these questions don't make a whole lot of sense when we look at statistics for comparable Lutheran denominations. The Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Synod, which some Protestant observers say is the Lutheran equivalent of the OPC, has roughly 410,000 members, which means that this denomination – unknown to most conservative Presbyterians – is bigger than the OPC and the PCA put together. And then there is the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, the rough Lutheran equivalent of the PCA, meaning that it is a little more progressive, a little more affluent and a little more open to evangelicalism than the Wisconsin Synod. The Missouri Synod – hold on to your seats – has a whopping 2.5 million members.

WHICH MEANS THAT EVEN IF you put together all of the conservative Presbyterian and Reformed denominations that comprised the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches (NAPARC) before the Christian Reformed Church was removed, you would have only one conservative Calvinist in America for every five conservative Lutherans. And if we want to go all the way and include both mainline and sectarian Lutherans and Presbyterians, the statistics are even more staggering. The OPC, the PCA, and the mainline Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., only account for almost 2.4 million Americans who are willing to identify themselves with John Calvin. In contrast, membership in the Wisconsin Synod, Missouri Synod and the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, weighs in at roughly eight million church members. Which raises an interesting question about whether America is really more Lutheran than Presbyterian, a question so interesting that it may scare those Presbyterians who point to John Witherspoon's signature on the Declaration of Independence for comfort that even though this world is not their home, the United States sure provides superior accommodations.

BUT ASIDE FROM THE UNITED States' religious identity, these statistics should be sufficiently sobering to prompt another question among Presbyterians: where did we go wrong and why aren't we bigger? (Okay, two questions.) If American Presbyterianism had simply kept pace with the growth of the American population, where would that leave it? Here, out of respect to our old math teachers, we will show some of our work.

At the beginning of the 19th century there were roughly 20,000 Presbyterians in America, compared to the American population of 5.3 million. That equates to Presbyterians comprising about 4 per cent of the population. A century later Presbyterians had grown one-hundred fold, boosting membership up to a lusty two million. Not bad after a century of theological and regional divisions that undoubtedly set back Presbyterian growth. To be sure, immigration from Scotland throughout the nineteenth century helped to offset some of the losses stemming from doctrinal and political controversies. And yet, the American population had grown to 76 million by 1900, meaning

INSIDE

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.

Subscription orders, correspondence and manuscripts should be sent to 32 Benezet Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19118.

Submissions should not exceed 2,000 words.

that Presbyterians were down to only 2.5 per cent of the population. This is not encouraging news as American Presbyterians approach the next census. If denominational statistics are any indication, by Y2K Presbyterians will be down to a measly 1 per cent of America's citizenry. Maybe Presbyterians should favor the averaging technique advocated recently by Mayor Ed Rendell of Philadelphia for the next census, which bases population figures more on sociological trends than on forms filled out by real residents. Even so, in the best of times Presbyterians only accounted for 4 per cent of the population, the equivalent of roughly eleven million Presbyterians today. That might finally make Presbyterians more numerous than Lutherans. But it is small consolation for a theological and ecclesiastical tradition thought to be so dynamic, progressive and thoughtful. Nor does it squelch feelings of loneliness. If in ideal scenarios only four out of every 100 Americans is Presbyterian of some kind, where you go for fellowship in the surrounding sub-division looks almost as difficult as taking America captive for Christ.

PERHAPS PRESBYTERIANS' POOR numerical performance explains why the officers of various Presbyterian denominations have been experimenting with the techniques of church growth. This genre of reflection about the nature and ministry of the church is vast, redundant and easily ridiculed. For instance, in Rick Warren's highly popular *The Purpose Driven Church* (1995), which some conservative Presbyterians use without a second thought, the pastor of the highly acclaimed Saddleback Church observes the hang-ups of the unchurched that he and his staff have met. Unchurched don't like pitches for money, are suspicious of manipulation by fear, don't want to attend every church meeting, and don't want to stand up to introduce themselves. How about stupidity? Do the unchurched, for instance, have any hang-ups about pastors whose smarts are in question? Then why would Mr. Warren et al send out a letter to prospective church attenders informing them that Saddleback Church is a "group of happy people who have discovered the joy of the Christian lifestyle," enjoy "upbeat music with a contemporary flavor," and listen to "positive, practical" messages that provide encouragement each week? The last time we checked, the groups that used to perform at Super Bowl halftimes, like "Up With America," had been resoundingly canceled in favor of acts like Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder, perhaps not the most somber or serious of entertainers, but next to the positive-thinking, toe tapping, grin-wearing Christianity of church growth gurus like Warren these Motown stars look like Franz Kafka.

But aside from questions about what counts as "with it," church growth leaders don't seem to know much beyond the few "successful" megachurches where circumstances as much as "strategic thinking" (a favorite phrase in the literature) account for the large numbers. Take the case of the recent article in *Reformed Worship* where Charles Arn, the president of Church Growth, Inc., a company based in Monrovia, California, recommended to Christian Reformed Church officers and members (the CRC sponsors *Reformed Worship*) that they introduce another worship service in order to attract more people. Whether you call it a "seeker" service, "alternative," "contemporary," (why do these sound like radio broadcast formats?) or simply a "second" service, the question isn't whether to add one but when because Arn promises that the additional service will increase total attendance, total giving, and total conversions. Arn's piece is stunning if only because it reads like a parody of the church growth literature. He makes no reference whatsoever to theology nor does he consider the notion that God is the audience for worship, not seekers or the churched. Arn confirms every conservative's suspicions about contemporary worship simply being an exercise in the commodification of religion.

EVEN WORSE IS ARN'S TOTAL unfamiliarity with happenings in the CRC. During the same week that the Spring issue of *RW* came out, another CRC publication, *The Banner*, the weekly denominational magazine, reported that the denomination's membership had dropped to pre-1968 figures, down from an all-time high in 1991. What Arn seemed to miss, along with his editors at *RW*, is that at precisely the same time that the CRC has been experimenting with additional services and expanding its worship repertoire, the denomination has been losing members faster than any other

time in the church's 150-year history. So if church growth executives are so smart, how come the CRC's decline? No doubt, many church defenders will point to the controversy over women's ordination as partly responsible for membership loss. And indeed many congregations have left the CRC for the United Reformed Churches of North America precisely because of the older denomination's decision to ordain women. But one would think that the wonders of adding another service would more than make up for the loss of CRC members. If Arn's reasoning and examples are such sure bets, then the CRC should have at least maintained its 1990s levels. But such hard cases rarely impede the sky's-the-limit thinking of church growth's "experts."

AND WE HAVEN'T EVEN mentioned Lyle Schaller whose wisdom is legion in the pages of *Leadership* magazine, the religious publishing world's equivalent of NBC's "Today Show." What is amazing about Schaller's advice to pastors and church leaders is how unaware either he or his editors are that someone might have principled objections to such pragmatic ways of looking at the church and her ministry. It is as if pre-modernity never happened. Imagine a Calvinist still committed to the Solemn League and Covenant who believed an acknowledgment of Christ as Lord of the United States would solve America's woes, and you have a myopia that rivals Schaller's, with the big exception that the latter's are a lot more popular than the Covenanters. In other words, in the same way that die-hard Covenanters have reconciled their principles with the way things are, Schaller communicates no sense that things should be any other way than they now are.

For instance, in one article explaining the myths of church growth, Schaller pontificates that "the congregation averaging 150 at worship will need $16 to $18 per worshiper per weekend to pay all operational expenses, including missions." The "including missions" phrase is a nice touch. So much for giving till it hurts to spread the word far and wide. He continues that the congregation averaging 500 at worship will need between $20 and $30 per worshiper, and when congregations grow to 800 the figures goes up to $45. We suspect that one of the reasons why Schaller's views are so popular is because Christians so spiritualize the work of the church that they never take into account such practical concerns as how expenses go up when attendance increases (we even know academic administrators like that). But Schaller's general rules can't explain the experience of many congregations in the past whose members sacrificed, saved, and skimped – all for the good of the church and from a higher sense of duty. One has to wonder about the complacent, selfish, and undisciplined people flocking to Schaller's churches. Could it be that folks who want churches to meet their "felt needs" are also people who can't feel the needs of others or bother with any notion of higher purpose?

EQUALLY FRUSTRATING ABOUT Schaller's laws of modern church life are his reduction of rites and ceremonies with profound religious significance to mere mechanics of attracting and retaining worshipers with an income appropriate for a congregation's economy of scale. The larger and newer the church, Schaller glibly asserts, "the more time is required for music and intercessory prayer to transform that collection of individuals into a worshiping community." We were under the impression that Sabbath preparation was supposed to do some of that work, but how can you make such demands on today's seekers? Schaller continues that "the larger the crowd, and the greater the emphasis on teaching, the longer the sermon." But in long sermons preachers need to work in humor, "revealing personal anecdotes," and redundancy. One last liturgical tidbit from the former United Methodist minister: the larger the crowd, the longer the service. We could have already figured that out since prayer, song and sermons were going to take up more time in the larger church. But remember that Schaller believes in redundancy. "Forty to fifty minutes may be appropriate when attendance is under a hundred, but if it exceeds five hundred, that worship experience should probably be in the sixty-five to ninety minute range." Forgive us for grousing, but doesn't Christian teaching about human nature, let alone corporate worship, suggest that all people need the same thing when they assemble to praise God and to hear the gospel. Then why do some get more just because they are in a bigger church? Are word and sacrament more concentrated in a smaller setting? Such questions never seem to trouble Schaller. Success for him apparently has no reference beyond a functional, well staffed, prosperous church that is dispensing what its members want.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION might be one way of describing Schaller's notion of a good church, which is another way of saying that he and his church growth colleagues apply industrial and mechanical models to something that is fundamentally organic and mysterious, namely, the body of Christ. Schaller's models stem directly from modern business techniques and are one among many of the negative consequences resulting from the disestablishment of religion in the United States. One would think it still possible to resist such practices even while welcoming the freedom that comes with disestablishment. Equally puzzling is that none of the promoters of modern church growth techniques appear to be aware of what their methods do to Christianity itself. So standard is the distinction between form and content that contemporary church leaders hardly bother with the effects of certain practices upon the message communicated, both implicitly and explicitly.

This is one of the many worthwhile points made by Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street in their book, *Selling Out the Church* (1997). They also challenge the idea that numerical growth is a reliable indicator of a church's success. They write,

We suspect that judging success by measuring one's market share is solid business if you are Coca-Cola; we believe it is not a good idea for First Church at the corner of Main and Jefferson. Church marketers assume that numerical growth is "an indication that something exciting and meaningful is happening." It is interesting that this statement precedes [George] Barna's warning about the possible intoxicating effects of growth. He seems not to see that his assumption about growth contributes to such intoxication. . . . In other words, in a society that breeds both dissatisfaction and boredom and strips us of many traditional ways of living meaningfully, the growth of a particular church may be nothing more than an indicator that it has succeeded (for the moment) in providing two existential "products" that many people intensely desire: excitement and meaning. Of course, the excitement and meaning for which the church may be a temporary vehicle may have nothing whatsoever to do with the gospel.

WE COULD NOT AGREE MORE with Kenneson and Street, even though it feels a little strange agreeing with mainline Protestants on ecclesiological matters. Yet, the emphasis on soul-winning and evangelism in conservative Protestant circles has fostered a vacuum about the church and her ministry, such that today's confessional Presbyterians like the Old Side Presbyterians who opposed George Whitefield have more in common with the established churches where traditional forms remain the norm than with itinerant revivalists who refused to let liturgy or polity compromise effectiveness.

YET, OUR AGREEMENT WITH such critiques of church growth only goes so far. Yes, faithfulness is different from and more important than effectiveness. But numbers are also important, not so much in the sense of the unsaved who need to be reached but the baptized who we let get away. Here again, the distinction between form and content is a factor. As much as the church needs to see how form alters content, she also needs to recover the ordained forms for growth. And the one reliable God-given method of growing the church is the natural and organic work of reproduction and the sacrament of baptism.

Once upon a time Reformed and Presbyterian communions planted new churches in a remarkably laid back way. Several families would move away from a community with an existing congregation to one where none existed. Once this group of like faith and practice grew to five families they would send word back to the office of home missions, the secretary of which would look for a pastor to shepherd the Reformed emigres. And the rest was history. The denomination would continue to support the new church until it grew to a size that was self-sustaining. Some of the new growth came from grafting believers from other traditions onto Reformed stock. Some came from the children who grew up in the new congregation and became families of their own. And, of course, some came from new converts to Christianity. This older model of church planting, as opposed to church growth, was inherently organic and covenantal. It ran along lines of familiarity; the core group had grown up in the particular Reformed communion. And it was zealous about retaining the covenant children. The church followed those members who had been reared in her bosom and the success of the new plant depended on another generation of believers remaining in the fold and owning their baptism.

IN OTHER WORDS, THE CORRECT method of growing the church is inherently agrarian, which explains in part our fondness for the farmer-poet, Wendell Berry. In arguably his most compelling book, *The Unsettling of America*, Berry contrasts industrialism and agrarianism in ways that we believe are remarkably apt for understanding the differences between the marketing methods of church growth experts and the covenantal/organic patterns of traditional church planting:

I conceive a strip-miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of the farmer. The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health – his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? . . . . The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work *as well* as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order – human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to the other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, "hard facts"; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind.

Not only does Berry highlight the differences between marketing models and covenantal patterns of church life, but he also underscores the fundamental difference between a minister who works according to the logic of church growth and the pastor and father who shepherd God's flock in the pastures of congregation and family.

AS FAR FETCHED AS AGRARIAN and organic methods of growing the church might seem to people far removed from the ways of the land or the social structures that farming fosters, a few other writers have also detected the applicability of Berry's

insights for the church and her ministry. For instance, Eugene H. Peterson says of the book from which we just quoted that every time Berry "writes 'farm' I substitute 'parish' or 'congregation.' It works every time." Which means that comparing church growth experts or their clerical sheep to industrialists is not any more far fetched than comparing a pastor's duties to those of a farmer. The kind of growth that church growthers look for has everything to do with numbers and solvency – what does it take to maintain a particular church enterprise; what are the demographics, what products need to be offered; how to generate brand loyalty? But the pastor's orientation, being different from that of a Walmart manager, looks upon the needs of his flock no matter how large, sees those needs from the perspective of spiritual and physical health whether the flock understands those needs in the same way, and looks for growth that is qualitative and lasting. Instead of looking for ways to attract outsiders, the pastor knows that his primary responsibility is to feed his own people and insure their growth in grace. Which may explain why so many church growth experts sound more like car salesmen than men of the cloth. And that may also explain why Peterson says that he has learned "more usable pastoral theology" from Berry than from any of "his academic professors." Which explains why we feel more comfortable telling seminary students to read Berry than to take most of the courses offered in practical theology at today's Protestant seminaries.

So to come back to our original question: just how big should Presbyterianism be in the United States? The obvious answer for Calvinists is that only God knows such things. But God's sovereignty in salvation does not mean that we are relativists when it comes to the means by which Christ's undershepherds minister in his name. Some methods are bad, not because they don't work, but because God hasn't determined to bless them. And the methods that God has promised to bless are the ones that take the covenant, sacraments, and procreation seriously. So if Presbyterians had done a better job of keeping their lambs in the fold, they would be a lot more numerous. Eleven million may be too optimistic, especially since charting demographics requires factoring in fertility rates, and raises the ugly specter of contraception. But the point isn't so much what is the ideal number for Presbyterian families whose quivers are full. Instead, it is why so few in the Presbyterian and evangelical worlds don't see that the natural methods of child-bearing and child-rearing are not only a surer guarantee of a bigger church than the marketing fare served up by church growth experts, but also that agrarian ways are a whole lot more God-honoring than the industrial ones pursued by almost every denominational home missions office in American Protestantism.

BUT THIS IS AN ESPECIALLY damning consideration for Presbyterians since they are supposed to believe in the covenant and the efficacy of its signs and seals. It is one thing if your theology is Arminian and you understand the Great Commission to be the calling of every professing Christian, but Presbyterians are supposed to know better. Then why is it that when the theological descendants of John Calvin start new churches in this day they show little difference from their Baptist, Methodist and mega-church competitors?

To the extent that Presbyterians follow the lead of industrial church growth they will really give their faith away. That phrase, "giving your faith away," used to be the lingo of evangelistic zeal. But the Presbyterian experience in America gives it a whole new meaning.

Townsend P. Levitt *SC88*

_____

39 Alexander Hall

Shameless Bill

One of the many ironies attending the Clinton-Lewinski affair is that as much as evangelicals and confessional Protestants have been outraged by the lack of outrage among Americans, those same proponents of character and morality have been equally lacking in indignation when it comes to another man named Bill, the patron saint of modern evangelicalism and itinerant evangelist extraordinaire, Billy Graham. To be sure, Mr. Graham has not engaged in the sexual misdeeds that have followed our president. In fact, his avoidance of both financial and sexual misconduct helps to account for his high and long lasting public approval ratings.

BUT MR. GRAHAM'S FANS HAVE long had to turn their heads when it came to some of his affairs, and here we have in mind much more than the way he was a puppet for the public relations purposes of various presidents before Clinton. Recently, for instance, we came across a devotional by Jim Sheard and Wally Armstrong, entitled *In His Grip*, that serves up golfing tips and biblical wisdom in equal proportions. The book has 125 separate one-page devotionals, one suspects because golfers have Quiet Times roughly every third day, each with a verse at the top, a few thoughts about golf and the biblical text, with a "Swing Thought" in conclusion; it is the format popularized by *Daily Bread* and *Today*.

Yet, the confusion of golf tips and

biblical guidance would be hilarious if it weren't so scary. The topics in the "Fundamentals for Golf and Life" section, for example, include "Grip on the Word," "A Live-Handed Grip," "The Live-Hands Drill," "Steadfast Position," "Alignment," "Power Sources," and "Muscle Tone." The constant theme is how much life is like golf. The text for "Alignment" is Col 1:9-13 and the devotional tells believing golfers that in the same way that alignment is crucial for shot-making, so focusing on Christ is crucial for aligning "our priorities to keep our heavenly Father at the center of our life." The Swing Thought that accompanies this particular devotion recommends placing an imaginary club on the ground and pointing it "directly at Jesus Christ." Then golfers, being tempted to break the second commandment, are supposed to ask these questions: "what do you feel [Jesus] expects of you? In what ways do you need to adjust your alignment? What must you do to focus more intently on him?"

THE DANGER, OF COURSE, IN such a book is that it either elevates golf or belittles Christ. If Christ can fix the game of life, is that really the same as the way the local golf pro fixes your follow through? Isn't sin a little bit more dangerous than a sand bunker? And isn't forgiveness just a tad more significant than "giving" that three-foot put to your partner/ competitor?

So what does this have to do with Billy Graham? Well, Mr. Graham has written the introduction. We are sure it is not the first time, nor will it be the last that he endorses such sophistry. But why isn't he held accountable for belittling the gospel in this way? If he is supposed to be such a great religious leader why don't evangelicals fault him for comparing the second person of the Trinity's ministry of making our lives "abundant, worthwhile, and fruitful" to the good golf instructor who corrects swing fundamentals? The answer probably has something to do with the money that evangelicals make off Billy Graham-endorsed products, like the editors at Word who tapped Mr. Graham to write this introduction. But can anyone imagine Pope John Paul II or Mother Theresa (when she was alive) writing an introduction to a book that trivialized the work of Christ in such a manner? And why doesn't Mr. Graham have the sense to entertain the possibility that if Christ must be the focus of our lives as Christians, golf may not be the best analogy for facilitating such concentration since the game can become a distraction, especially if it prevents golfers from sanctifying the Sabbath as that nettlesome fourth commandment exhorts.

BUT MR. GRAHAM'S LACK OF discernment does not end with introductions to stupid books. Recently, *Christianity Today* ran a feature on two of his children under the question of which one would inherit Billy's legacy. The article may say more about the editors at *CT* than about Graham, though the whole effect speaks volumes about late twentieth-century evangelicalism. The story features a picture of Franklin Graham, the heir apparent, sitting on a Harley, wearing a baseball cap and leather jacket, with the prominent graphic, "Not Your Father's Evangelist." Hah hah. The photo might have been funnier had not Chuck Swindoll already issued a poster with him on a Harley, also in a leather jacket, with the title, "The Sermonator."

But if Franklin Graham is not our father's evangelist, he may not be his own father's either, if the *CT* story is accurate, since it goes on to highlight the work of Franklin's sister, Ann Graham Lotz, whom her father calls "the best preacher in the family." Now, of course, few in the evangelical world will react to this statement since ordination has never really mattered to Mr. Graham and so his calling his daughter a "preacher," let alone a great one, does not necessarily involve the laying on of hands (though the *CT* writer does use the image of anointing several times). But why do Protestants and Catholics, who do have definite views about ordination being restricted to gifted males, let Graham get away with such ideas? Could it be because they don't really take him seriously, and regard him as the old unleashed dog in the neighborhood, whose teeth are gone and is too feeble to bark?

NOT THE MOST FLATTERING image of the man many Americans put right up there with the Pope on lists of the most influential, sincere and pious. But those polls do say something, and chances are that what they say is not all that flattering for the nation which many consider the most religious on earth, and especially for the communions that serve the Americans who rank Billy Graham so highly. If Mr. Graham is undiscerning, then how discerning are those who give him a free ride?

_____

It's the Deity, Stupid!

We were interested to read recently in *The New Republic* about what the Clinton Impeachment is doing to the Republican Party ("Going To Extremes," Jan 4 & 11, 1999). It seems that many of the moderates who voted to impeach were scared by the threat of being challenged in 2000 by evangelical Republicans in the primaries. For instance, within twenty-four hours after Corning, New York's congressman, Amo Houghton announced he would vote against the articles of impeachment, Jim Pierce, the pastor of Love Church in Corning, decided he would run against Houghton next year. According to one

Democratic staffer on Capitol Hill, "It's hard to imagine that one wing nut could turn enough votes to bring down the president of the United States." But that is just what Pierce is supposed to have done to Republican moderates and what explains the House's vote on December 12th.

DAVID GRANN, WHO WROTE this story for *TNR*, caught up with Pierce at his home one Sunday afternoon in late December. There he found the Reverend Pierce "sitting in his living room with his six kids, watching the Buffalo Bills game and eating ice cream." Grann's article goes on to portray Pierce as a guy who is more at home among the John Birchers, Lyndon LaRouchers or Randall Terryites than in the respectable Republican Party (as if the folks at *TNR* really consider the Republican Party very respectable).

Yet, one thing escaped Grann's notice. He could have made Pierce look far worse if he knew anything about the Ten Commandments. If Pierce and other evangelical members of the Religious Right are so worked up about a president who breaks the seventh and ninth commandments (as Calvinists count them, namely, adultery and lying), why aren't they themselves more observant of the First Table, the one that includes keeping the Sabbath holy. We concede that there is considerable diversity among Protestants about how Sunday should be observed, even among those adherents of the Westminster Standards, whose teachings are pretty clear about Sabbath-keeping. But not too long ago the Puritan view dominated sectarian Protestantism, such that boys who grew up in fundamentalist homes and had never heard of John Calvin or Oliver Cromwell knew that they weren't allowed to play in Little League Baseball games on Sundays or even watch sports on TV.

HOW A LOOSER IDEA OF THE Lord's Day came to prevail among conservative Protestants is a good topic for some industrious graduate student (who should, we might add, be independently wealthy because the subject will not likely be that attractive on the job market). But the larger concern is how evangelicals and other conservatives can be so dogged in their adherence to the last six commandments and willfully disregard the first four which have to do with idolatry, blasphemy and keeping the Sabbath day holy. In fact, we would even go so far as to suggest that strictness in loving God (i.e., the first four commandments) is inversely proportional to the moralism of loving neighbors (the second six).

Which may explain why evangelicals are so law-and-order in politics and so laissez faire in worship. Our recommendation to the religious right is that if they want to fix this inconsistency (we are tempted to call it hypocrisy), they should start to picket the nearest Mormon Tabernacle as often as they do the local abortion clinic. Of course, the other solution is a loving God who overlooks the sins of idolatry, blasphemy and Sabbath desecration as much as he forgives the sins of murder, fornication, stealing, and lying. But that would put evangelicals in the same camp as liberals, a position that confessional Presbyterians have been suspecting for at least two centuries.

_____

WWJD Update

In a previous issue we mentioned the ubiquitous What Would Jesus Do? (WWJD) moniker in connection with the commodifiable piety of American evangelicalism. But we do not want our readers to be ignorant of the most recent vulgarities to be associated with our Lord's name and example. Not content with a bracelet, or a version of the Bible, WWJD promoters have started a whole new line of products. They now have a board game, a youth leaders' kit, t-shirt, baseball cap, tote bag, and the ever handy Bible cover, though the low-tech character of these items, we doubt, will generate huge profits. One piece of merchandise that will likely succeed is the WWJD-CD, with songs from the top fifteen Christian Contemporary Music artists, and comes complete with a bracelet and NIV WWJD Bible. To be sure, by evangelical entrepeneurial standards, these offerings are modest. But they do reflect a certain marketing savvy that is not content with only a cheesy little bracelet that retails for $9.95.

THE ONE HOPEFUL OUTCOME IN this latest example of evangelical profanity (after all, the Third Commandment requires the holy and reverent, not commercial, use of God's name, title, attributes, ordinances, word, and works), is the recent word of how teens in Southern California have adapted the WWJD slogan for their own ends. Instead of using the bracelet to show that they are loyal followers of Christ, some adolescents have changed WWJD from a question into the assertion, "We Want Jack Daniels." Don't get us wrong. Our delight in this practice does not mean that we endorse teenage drinking apart from parental supervision. The encouragement we derive from this news only extends to the humorous irony of using evangelical kitsch for something as anti-evangelical as drinking Tennessee sour mash whiskey. It also confirms our suspicion that evangelicals hardly ever understand the dynamics of the market – it giveth large numbers, but it also taketh away larger truths.

THE UNINTENDED CREATION OF a new market for America's distilling industry by the popularity of WWJD merchandise reminds us of H. L. Mencken's description and assessment of one of evangelicalism's heroes, the revivalist, Billy Sunday. The bad boy of Baltimore's remarks are not only

fitting because of the similarities he noted between the consumption of liquor and mass, urban evangelism, but also because Mencken recognized, as few have, the vulgar depths to which Christianity descends once defined apart from the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his people the benefits of redemption. In 1916 Mencken wrote,

As for his extraordinary success in drawing crowds and in performing the hollow magic commonly called conversion, it should be easily explicable to anyone who has seen him in action. His impressiveness, to the vegetal mind, lies in two things, the first being the sheer clatter and ferocity of his style and the second being his utter lack of those transparent pretensions to intellectual superiority and other worldliness which mark the average evangelical divine. In other words, he does not preach down at his flock from the heights of an assumed moral superiority – i.e. inexperience of the common sorrows and temptations of the world – but discharges his message as man to man, reaching easily for buttonholes, jogging in the ribs, slapping on the back. The difference here noted is abysmal. Whatever the average man's respect for the cloth, he cannot rid himself of the feeling that the holy man in the pulpit is, in many important respects, a man unlike himself, and hence, one but faintly familiar with the difficulties of life as he has to live it, and a somewhat feeble theoretician in his ideas about ways and means of meeting and overcoming those difficulties. The white choker, this stonehead, marks off a separate caste, almost a separate species. The cleric is one who is protected by his very office, from the grosser deviltries of the world; his aura is a sort of psychic monastery; his advice is not that of a practical man, with the scars of combat on him, but that of a dreamer wrapped in aseptic cotton.

Not so Dr. Sunday. Even setting aside his painstaking avoidance of anything suggesting clerical garb and his indulgence in obviously unclerical gyration on his sacred stump, he comes down so palpably to the level of his audience, both in the matter and the manner of his discourse, that he quickly disarms the old suspicion of the holy clerk and gets the discussion going on the familiar and easy terms of a debate in a barroom. The raciness of his slang is not the whole story by any means; his attitude of mind lies behind it, and is more important. That attitude of mind is precisely the attitude of mind of the people he is trying to reach. It is marked, above all, by a contemptuous disregard of the theoretical and mystifying; an angry casting aside of what may be called the ecclesiastical mask, an eagerness to reduce all the abstrusities of Christian theology to a few and simple and (to the ingenuous) self-evident propositions of religion a practical, an imminent, an everyday concern. And he accomplishes this business (so often attempted and with such sorry lack of success, by other preachers) simply and solely because his experience of the world, in point of fact, is that of the average man, because he sees things from the pew instead of from the pulpit, because he is not, in truth, a preacher at all, but merely a convert preaching.

THOSE REFLECTIONS STILL seem an accurate depiction of the evangelical parachurch, no matter how far removed from evangelism. Perhaps with the new use of WWJD, evangelicalism has finally reached its literal barroom level.

SC88

Second Hand Smoke

The following short piece by John Updike, "Beer Can," first appeared in the New Yorker *(January 1964) and later in the author's* Assorted Prose *(Knopf, 1965). We reprint it with appreciation for the author's aesthetic sensibility and his suspicions about technology, both of which should accompany an Old Lifer's discerning use of this present life.*

This seems to be an era of gratuitous inventions and negative improvements. Consider the beer can. It was beautiful – as beautiful as the clothespin, as inevitable as the wine bottle, as dignified and reassuring as the fire hydrant. A tranquil cylinder of delightfully resonant metal, it could be opened in an instant, requiring only the application of a handy gadget freely dispensed by every grocer. Who can forget the small, symmetrical thrill of those two triangular punctures, the dainty *pffff*, the little crest of suds that foamed eagerly in the exultation of release? Now we are given, instead, a top beetling with an ugly, shmoo-shaped "tab," which, after fiercely resisting the tugging, bleeding fingers of the thirsty man, threatens his lips with a dangerous and hideous hole. However, we have discovered a way to thwart Progress, usually so unthwartable. *Turn the beer can upside down and open the bottom.* The bottom is still the way the top used to be. True, this operation gives the beer an unsettling jolt, and the sight of a consistently inverted beer can might make people edgy, not to say queasy. But the latter difficulty could be eliminated if manufacturers would design cans that looked the same whichever end was up, like playing cards. What we need is Progress with an escape hatch.

SC88
