NICOTINE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Dedicated to Reformed Faith and Practice
Vol. 4 No. 4
October 2000

On the Roundness of Wheels; or Why I Am No Longer An Evangelical

Several titles suggested themselves to me as I prepared this article, of varying degrees of plagiaristic pomposity: "why I have possibly changed my mind"; "evangelical is perhaps not enough"; "a potential farewell to evangelicalism." I settled on the above, however, because it is both attention grabbing and, given my position at Confessional Reformed Seminary, Naberham, shocking (I hope!).

Before the reader turns away in disgust, however, let me explain exactly what I mean. I have come over the last eighteen months to regard describing myself as evangelical as both fairly meaningless and profoundly inadequate. The notion that the term is meaningless reflects the negative part of my journey: in the wider world, the media use the term "evangelical" to describe any individual or group with the zeal to win converts to a particular cause. Thus, we have evangelical Muslims, politicians, and even vacuum cleaner salesmen. Even in the theological world, however, the term has little, if any, meaningful content any more beyond referring to those who are allied with institutions which traditionally sport the name in their prospectuses and to those who express commitment to "the gospel," something which is frequently defined in vague, minimalist terms. Tired of being told that certain theological positions on God's knowledge of the future, on justification, on the eternal reality of hell, and on the fate of those who have never trusted in Christ cannot be considered "unevangelical" (despite the overwhelming historical evidence to the contrary), I am doing what Michael Palin's creation, Roger of the Raj, would call "the decent thing" and applying the term to myself. I don't like labels, but, from now on, "confessional Presbyterian" or "Reformed" are far better for me than "evangelical."

THE POSITIVE PART OF MY journey, however, has been determined by the fact that I have become convinced of the importance of certain things which have only marginal relevance to contemporary evangelicalism. Defining evangelicalism in terms of commitment to "the simple gospel" or "mere Christianity" is fair enough as far as it goes, and certainly captures something of the biblical teaching that one can be saved with very little knowledge indeed, but it also hides a number of real difficulties.

First, "the simple gospel" of salvation in Christ itself stands connected with a host of other doctrines. Yes, whoever confesses with their mouth that "Jesus is Lord" and believes in their heart that God raised him from the dead shall be saved; but, once believed, this "simple gospel" raises all sorts of questions concerning the identity of Jesus and of God, and the meaning of lordship and resurrection. A focus on the simple gospel might be enough for salvation, but salvation is different from spiritual maturity, and the latter, while unequivocally demanded by the New Testament writers, is inaccessible through a movement which refuses to provide solid content to the words of its basic message.

IN THIS CONTEXT, MY departure from evangelicalism has been brought about by three basic convictions: first, that the wheel does not need to be reinvented and that its best shape is indeed round; second, that marriages work best when they involve the husband and wife in a deepening knowledge of each other; and, third, that I don't want to take myself too seriously anymore.

Point one, then: the essential roundness of wheels. In the world of engineering, it would not be mechanically disastrous to reinvent the wheel every generation, simply rather pointless. If, however, each generation reinvented the wheel but failed to realize that the wheel needed to be round, the consequences would be catastrophic. So it is with Christianity. Each generation does not need to reinvent the church's doctrinal confession for itself; rather, it should adopt and develop the historic confession in a way which modestly acknowledges that this generation does not have all the answers but builds upon the insights of the past. This is a note that is absent from the new evangelicalism which, like the rest of the consumer-driven culture of the

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. Orders should be sent to 1167 Kerwood Circle, Oviedo, Florida, 32765.

Correspondence and manuscripts should be sent to 737 Red Alder Place, Escondido, California, 92027.

Submissions should not exceed 2,000 words.

West, is committed to defining itself in terms of its rejection of the past, a past of which, if the statements of its trendiest gurus are to be taken as typical of the movement as a whole, it has a minimal understanding. Built-in obsolescence is something which Marxists rightly see as a feature of advanced capitalist society, where the producers need to constantly create markets for their goods by stressing the superiority of the new and the irrelevance of the old. Postmodern evangelicals are simply an ideological manifestation of this, establishing their importance to the church through their uncritical trashing of the past and their arrogant promotion of themselves, their scholarship, their techniques, their personalities, and their ministries as the only hope for the church's future.

SPEAKING FOR MYSELF, I HAVE neither the time nor the inclination to be constantly reinventing the wheel because I am convinced that the classic design, namely, round, is basically sound; and so it is with my theology. Speaking personally, the catholic creeds and the Westminster Standards give what seem to me to be a basically correct framework for theology which can still be used today. This is not to say that I do not wish to address seriously the modern church situation and to think critically about how to evangelize in this day and generation; but it is to say that the basic boundaries of my reflection on this (eg. God is a trinity, the Bible is inspired and authoritative, unsaved humanity is sinful and in a state of rebellion against God, the priority of preaching in evangelism) are things about which I am convinced the tradition was basically correct and which are not simply cultural artifacts of no relevance in the modern day.

Point two: marriages work best when each partner develops a deeper understanding of the other. In a similar way, trying to build a theology or a church or a fellowship on "the simple gospel" or lowest-common-denominator-consensus dooms its protagonists to a lifetime of spiritual stuntedness. After all, the drowning man grabs the arm of the lifeguard to be saved; but if he then marries the lifeguard, he needs more knowledge than this first encounter can provide if the marriage is to be a success. In the same way, the simple gospel is all one needs to be saved; but when the reality of Christian life begins to bite, with its trials and temptations, I need to know who God is in more detail. I need to have confidence that the Bible tells one basic story of God's covenant fidelity to his people. I need to know that he spoke to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David; I need to know that the promise he gave to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ; I need to know that the current affliction of the church is temporary, that God has complete control over, and thus knowledge of the future, and that Christ will come again to make visible the victory won on Calvary's hill. I need, in short, to know about God's covenant, and I need to know that God is who he says he is. The Bible places God's fidelity, God's covenant, God's saving action in history, and God's continuing love for his people at the very center of the church's agenda.

Minimalist evangelicalism which stresses unity around the statement "Jesus is Lord" and which refuses to see that this statement becomes meaningless in the church's life unless what it does – and does not – imply are drawn out in the life and confession of the church, robs Christians of the deep thrill and excitement of knowing that they worship a God who is so much greater than even their wildest theological dreams.

POINT THREE: I DON'T BELIEVE in taking myself too seriously. Too much of modern evangelicalism is taken up with the individual self, placing I, me, mine at the very center of the universe: the individual seeks for a theology that meets his or her needs; a worship pattern which suits his or her tastes; a God who fits his or her expectations. Individualism and the cult of self-worship rule are okay, it would seem. These tendencies manifest themselves in a number of ways: some don't go to church, just read their Bible or go to a fellowship group; some who do go to church have no doctrine of what the church is, no real sense of their connection with the past and of the primary importance of corporate worship and fellowship even before individual acts of devotion (witness the emphasis in evangelical circles on the quiet time, rather than family devotional time or church meetings, as the central act of Christian godliness). The church has historically placed the corporate gathering, public reading and preaching of scripture, the corporate singing of songs of praise, and the administration of the sacraments at the heart of its

piety. Here we find expression of Christian identity, of believers as the body of Christ, which stands both in continuity with the past and in stark opposition to modern individualist anarchy.

These are notes, however, which evangelicalism has gradually silenced over the years, with its focus on the contemporary individual and his or her hang-ups as the measure of all things, from what the Bible means to what church worship should look like. The gravest danger I see to the next generation of Christians at the moment comes from the failure of college and university students to realize that Christianity is a corporate thing that was not invented by them and their friends last Sunday. These misconceptions make them indifferent towards joining local churches and getting their hands dirty in the corporate life of God's people. Evangelicalism, with its lack of ecclesiology and its emphasis on parachurch organizations, provides fertile ground for this problem. We should therefore not allow this evangelical culture to lead us to make the mistake of thinking the Saturday night youth meeting renders Sunday morning at church unnecessary. It does not, anymore than a diet coke and a Big Mac can substitute for real food.

SO, THEN, I AM (PROBABLY) NOT evangelical any more because I naively believe wheels are best shaped round, marriages involve deep, and deepening, personal knowledge, and I don't wish to take myself too seriously. Of course, minimalist evangelicalism and historic biblical Christianity are both theologies, in the same sense that my garden shed and the Taj Mahal are both buildings. But when it comes down to it, few people have come to appreciate the greatness of architecture through staring at my shed for any length of time. Yes, of course, something of Christianity can be captured in the "simple gospel"; but there is more, so much more.

Remember these two things, then: don't let talk of the simple gospel con you out of the full knowledge of your heavenly inheritance and the full joy you should have as a member of the body of Christ; and please don't call me an evangelical again. Given its range of meanings today, it doesn't even begin to describe the theology to which I am committed, and I here and now take my leave of the term and of the movement in its broadest, most senseless sense.

Martin Kenunu

SC88

_____

The Unconverted Calvin

Ask any living Calvinist if he believed in conversion and ninety-nine percent of the responses would be unabashedly affirmative. And yet, if you followed up with a question about where the Reformed creeds and catechisms teach about conversion, the answer would probably not be so swift or positive. One reason for the latter reaction might be that the Reformed confessions have very little to say about conversion per se. And when they do, they mean something very different from contemporary evangelical usage which regards conversion as synonymous with an instantaneous new birth or "born again" experience. For instance, the *Canons of Dort*, best known for outlining the mnemonic TULIP, describe true conversion as consisting of the external preaching of the gospel combined with the work of the Holy Spirit, who "powerfully illuminates" the mind, "pervades the inmost recesses of man; . . . opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised," and transforms the will from being "evil, disobedient, and refactory" to being "good, obedient, and pliable." That way of looking at conversion might satisfy the most zealous of low-church evangelists, until learning that Dort is not referring to a moment of crisis or decision but is actually describing the whole of the Christian life. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* puts it, "genuine repentance or conversion" consists of two things: "the dying-away of the old self, and the coming-to-life of the new" (Q&A 88). It is not clear whether the Westminster Standards mention conversion.

IRONICALLY, DESPITE THE Reformed tradition's teaching about conversion (or lack thereof), many conservative Presbyterians continue to speak of it as an experience of the born-again variety and ask prospective church members for a narrative of conversion. This is the consequence of almost 250 years of Presbyterian congeniality toward revivalism. This is the Jonathan Edwards School of Presbyterianism that looks upon his conversion as a model for genuine faith. While a student at Yale, Edwards recalled that he felt

> a calm, sweet Abstraction of Soul from all the Concerns of this World; and a kind of Vision, or fix'd Ideas and Imaginations, of being alone in the Mountains, or some solitary Wilderness, far from all Mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in GOD. The Sense I had of divine Things, would often of a sudden as it were, kindle up a sweet burning in my Heart; and ardor of my Soul, that I know not how to express.

For Edwards, as for most other believers who have come to faith through revivalism's direct appeals, conversion equals ecstasy.

But Edwards' mountain-top experience of God is a long way from the older Reformed notions of regeneration, repentance, and sanctification to which the term

conversion typically applies. For that reason, Edwards' conversion may not be the best model. Here is where many experimental Calvinists, uneasy already about elevating an ordinary human being's experience too high, would likely appeal to the apostle Paul, whose conversion on the way to Damascus makes Edwards' look like chopped liver. At the same time, however, appealing to Paul has the disadvantage of establishing a norm for conversion that is so exceptional that Reformed believers, who are supposed to believe in the closing of the canon and the cessation of miraculous signs, could never hope to experience Christ in any way.

FOR THIS REASON, A BETTER source for thoughts about conversion than Edwards' or Paul's experience is the man from whom Calvinists derive their name. Ironically, John Calvin does not serve the interests of revival-friendly Presbyterians well because the record does not show convincingly that the French Reformer had any experience that would qualify as a conversion or that might even be regarded as remarkable. According to William J. Bouwsma, whose biography of Calvin admittedly has not received unanimous endorsement from orthodox Reformed and Presbyterians, "religious conversion is a more problematic conception than is ordinarily recognized." As a "cultural artifact" or an "individual experience," it is an event that marks a "sharp break with the past." Accordingly, "life before conversion . . . is irrelevant except as preparation for this break or as a stimulus to repentance; life afterward is made new." Bouwsma argues, however, that evidence for a conversion of this type in Calvin's life is "negligible." Most biographers have cited a single passage from Calvin's commentary on the Psalms, written in 1557. It reads:

> God drew me from obscure and lowly beginnings and conferred on me that most honorable office of herald and minister of the Gospel. . . . What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years -- for I was so strongly devoted to the superstitions of the papacy that nothing less could draw me from such depths of mire. And so this mere taste of true godliness that I received set me on fire with such a desire to progress that I pursued the rest of my studies more coolly, although I did not give them up altogether. Before a year had slipped by anybody who longed for a purer doctrine kept on coming to learn from me, still a beginner, a raw recruit.

Bouwsma interprets this passage as nothing more than "a shift and quickening of his interests," certainly nothing incompatible with the evangelical humanism that many university students at Paris espoused, simply a willingness to be more teachable. In other words, there was no decisive break in Calvin with his former life until he ran afoul of Roman church authorities. But becoming a Protestant, something that was gradual and progressive, hardly qualifies as "going forward" at the time of an altar call or experiencing a unique and immediate sense of God's presence somewhere in the woods outside Paris. Protestantism was a reformation, not a revival. Evidence of its transformation came in the form of changes in doctrine, liturgy and church polity, not in hearts strangely or normally warmed.

AS BOUWSMA ALSO OBSERVES, Calvin was not enthusiastic about conversion as a precise event in his discussions of Christian piety. He "always emphasized the gradualness rather than the suddenness of conversion and the difficulty of making progress in the Christian life." In a statement that many contemporary Presbyterians would deem nonsensical, Calvin wrote that "we are converted little by little to God, and by stages." In his commentary on Acts, Calvin was even reluctant to attach much significance to Paul's encounter with Christ on the way to Damascus. "We now have Paul tamed," he wrote, "but not yet a disciple of Christ."

CONSEQUENTLY, BOUWSMA attributes more to family circumstances and educational influences than to the movement of the Spirit in explaining Calvin's move into the Protestant fold in 1535. The death of Calvin's mother and his subsequent exclusion from his father's household, according to Bouwsma, imparted a sense of homelessness that would later befit a French exile in Geneva. Then at Paris Calvin learned the three languages -- Latin, Greek and Hebrew -- that were so much a part of the Christian reform movement spearheaded by Erasmus. Bouwsma concludes that whatever conversion Calvin experienced it was not a radical break with his past but rather the fruit of personal, spiritual and intellectual seeds sown earlier in his life.

Whatever the merits of Bouwsma's historical scholarship, his point about Calvin's conversion or, better, evolution should not come as a shock to those who claim to follow in the French Reformer's spiritual footsteps. That it does amaze is testimony to the way that pietistic influences have eaten away Presbyterian and Reformed brain cells. Once upon a time the Calvinistic branch of Protestantism was not so gullible when it came to the gushes of emotion that are supposed to count for the work of the Spirit among revivalistically inclined Protestants. For most Presbyterians, affirmative answers to questions commonly asked at a public affirmation of faith were a sufficient gauge to a man or woman's standing before God. But these more formal and objective measures of Christian zeal began to look bland once the converts of the revivals of the First Great Awakening began to tell about the ways in which they had been slain by the Holy Ghost (as if they had, to borrow Luther's phrase, swallowed him, "feathers and all"). At that point, the great and ongoing struggle between dying to sin and living to righteousness was reduced to a moment, a crisis, a specific time when the convert experienced *Gawdah*. And ever since the eighteenth century when

Presbyterians began to look for signs of grace where no one had looked before, they not only started to insist on the kind of conversion narratives that make Calvin look like a non-evangelical, but they also introduced an element into their religious sensibility that would prove to be destructive of Reformed piety and worship. They began to insist upon experiences and encounters and restrictions and insights that their theology could not deliver. (This explains, by the way, the great disparity between the biblical and theological disciplines in Reformed theological education and the area of study misnamed as practical theology. Prospective pastors learn for two-thirds of their classes that it is God who saves his people and then are told that to be successful in the ministry they need to be enthusiastic, warm and caring. Go figure.)

THE REVIVALIST IMPULSE IN American Protestantism has played itself out in such a way that many conservative Presbyterians and Reformed fail to remember that God executes his decrees through the works of creation *and* providence. Revivalism is good at affirming God's creative power, that is, his ability to create *ex nihilo*, such as when he breaths new life into a heart of stone. But it stumbles over God's providential power in ordering things through secondary causes. For this reason, revivalist Protestantism demands that John Calvin had to undergo a conversion, a dramatic change of life, in order to demonstrate God's work in his life. A person is either alive or dead, and to go from the wretched state of the latter to the exalted state of the former requires a monumental form of divine intervention. But if God superintends all things in the lives of his saints, even down to the hairs on their heads, then it could just as likely be the case that the movement from spiritual death to spiritual life is gradual and life-long. It may begin a particular moment, though the movement of the Spirit being fairly invisible is hard to detect. But it may also come in fits and starts that depend on such secondary causes as family, school and especially church. It may even be something that is inherited, such as in the case of Isaac, the model covenant child who grew up never having known otherwise than that he was a child of God. Indeed, the damage that revivalist Protestantism does to a proper understanding of baptism and any notion of covenantal religion is huge, to put it mildly, but that's a subject for another time.

IN THE END, TWO THINGS ARE pretty clear. One is that Calvin's understanding of conversion was wrapped up with his conception of the Christian life and the ministry of the church. Take away his understanding of conversion as a life long slow process of dying to self and living to Christ, and you have a hard time holding on to his image of the church as mother, whose nurture is necessary to the Christian throughout his whole life. Immediate, one-time-fix conversions, in other words, leave little room for the means of grace in the word preached and the sacraments administered. This is why the Christian life for those who experience the crisis-styled conversions is usually little more than Bible reading (i.e. the search for daily guidance), seeking other converts (i.e., witnessing) and spiritual retreats where batteries get recharged. Conversion of the quick variety lacks an understanding of the sin that still pervades the believing heart and the need of that heart for forgiveness week-in and week-out.

THE SECOND THING THAT IS clear is that the prevailing conception of conversion in American Presbyterian and evangelical circles is a novelty in the history of Western Christianity, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant. The idea of an immediate encounter with God through a crisis experience began in the North American British colonies in the eighteenth century and has been the norm for most Protestants ever since. If contemporary Presbyterians and Reformed are ever going to recover some of the depths of Calvin's theology, worship and piety, they will have to get over their crush on the First Great Awakening. Awakenings may change individuals. But what is often missed is that they also change churches. And that's because revivals feature a form of Christianity in which the church, her clergy, creeds, and worship are peripheral. Many conservative Reformed and Presbyterians in the United States might be willing to do the American thing and minimize the importance of office and liturgy. The hope at least is that if they can see revivalism as an intrinsic threat to their theology, they might reconsider the parts of their confessions and catechisms that talk about conversion in the right manner.

Henry M. Lewis

SC88

_____

39 Alexander Hall

Coffee, Tea or Tobacco?

The contradictions of caffeine were the subject of recent thoughts by Martin Marty in his *Christian Century* column (July 19-26, 2000): "Like red wine, which we biblical literalists are commanded to take now and then, coffee, unanticipated in the scriptures, offers both an enhancement of and a threat to health. A recent issue of *Time* summarizes coffee's contradictory potentials. Between 1986 and 2000 scientists warned that coffee may cause – hold on to your cups – phobias, panic attacks, heart attacks, stress,

osteoporosis, hypertension, higher cholesterol levels, delayed conception, miscarriages, and underweight babies. Between 1988 and 2000 scientists promised that coffee might help prevent – pour another cup – asthma, colon and rectal cancer, impotence, mental sluggishness, fatal car accidents, suicide, gallstones, heart disease, and Parkinson's disease."

MARTY THE LUTHERAN cleverly solves this paradox by invoking Luther. "That coffee is *simul*taneously justifiable and sinful triggered thought of one of our favorite Lutheran formulas: that the human made right with God is *simul justus et peccator* – at the same time justified and a sinner." He explains: "The human is *justus* only in the eye of God, but remains *peccator* in the world's view. The coffee is *justus* to those of us who enjoy it, and *peccator* to those scrupulous about ingesting anything potentially harmful."

By now astute readers should know where our thoughts are heading. Marty offers a Lutheran defense of smoking. While the politically correct scientific establishment may be slower in revealing the physical benefits of smoking and while we have advocated the benefits to the soul more than the body in these pages, Marty's analogy applies just as well to nicotine as it does to caffeine. Curiously, however, Marty doesn't go there. For him, apparently, nicotine remains simply and unredeemably *peccator*. What prompts Marty's hesitation to take his thinking to its logical conclusion? Why does he refuse to love the Lord and smoke boldly? Perhaps a clue is found in his conclusion, where he takes a swipe at lovers of the decaffeinated bean. "I can think of some good analogies between that blahness and all kinds of contemporary religion." This suggests to us that while caffeine may jolt the Lutheran in Marty, nicotine merely renders him a modernist.

———

Traditionalists All

Sometime ago, we ran a piece that defended Presbyterian sectarianism ("Sectarians All," *NTJ* 2.2). Among the concerns that prompted that essay was the idea that generic Christianity is somehow more biblical than creedal varieties of the faith. As an organ of Presbyterian confessionalism, the *NTJ* has no truck for Reformed folk who believe a lowest-common denominator evangelicalism is more faithful to the Bible than we nabobs of negativist Presbyterianism. Still, the idea persists among most American Protestants that because creeds are human documents, they are not really reliable and so any church that relies upon a confession of faith is actually interfering with God's direct revelation to man in the Bible. In other words, the Bible is the only authority. Creeds are at best subordinate or secondary, at worst, a tyrannical infringement upon Christian liberty. In sum, Protestant confessionalism is unbecoming because it lets in the back door what Catholics use to guard the front door, namely, church tradition.

THE EDITORS THOUGHT THE essay was brilliant and so ran the piece. Had they known about the following excerpt, they might not have had to bother with the long-winded and desultory remarks of Mr. Lewis. The comments that follow are from W. G. T. Shedd, professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary (NY) in the late nineteenth century, the one exception that proves the rule about no good thing coming out of New York Presbyterianism. It is from an essay he wrote during debates about confessional revision during the 1890s, a process eventually accomplished in 1903, despite the opposition of Princeton's Benjamin Warfield and Shedd, and that facilitated the northern Presbyterian Church's merger in 1906 with the Arminian body, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Here Shedd states succinctly how naive is the view of anyone who thinks his or her views are biblical and hence free from tradition compared to strict creedalists whose notions are supposedly defective because subservient to tradition.

Of course Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith. But this particular way of appealing to Scripture is specious and fallacious. In the first place, it assumes that Calvinism is not Scriptural, an assumption which the Presbyterian Church has never granted. . . . Secondly, this kind of appeal to Scripture is only an appeal to Scripture as the reviser understands it. "Scripture" properly means the interpretation of Scripture; that is, the contents of Scripture as reached by human investigation and exegesis. Creeds, like commentaries, are Scripture studied and explained, and not the mere abstract and unexplained book as it lies on the counter of the Bible House. The infallible Word of God is expounded by the fallible mind of man, and hence the variety of expositions embodied in the denominational creeds. But every interpreter claims to have understood the Scriptures correctly, and, consequently, claims that his creed is Scriptural, and if so, that it is the infallible truth of God. The Arminian appeals to the Articles of Wesley as the rule of faith, because he believes them to be the true explanation of the inspired Bible. . . . The Calvinist appeals to the creeds of Heidelberg, Dort, and Westminster as the rule of faith, because he regards them as the accurate exegesis of the revealed Word of God. By the 'Bible' these parties, as well as all others who appeal to the Bible, mean their understanding of the Bible. There is no such thing as that abstract Scripture to which the revisionist of whom we are speaking appeals; that is, Scripture apart from any and all interpretation of it. When, therefore, the advocate of revision demands that the Westminster Confession be "conformed to Scripture", he means conformation to Scripture as he and those like him read and explain it. It is impossible to make abstract Scripture the rule of faith for either an individual or a denomination. No Christian body has ever subscribed to the Bible merely as a printed book. A person who should write his name on the blank leaf of the Bible and say that his doctrinal belief was between the covers, would convey no definite information as to his creed.

———

Consumerism as Philanthropy

The "commercialization of Christmas" is hardly a new concern for those Christians who believe that there are loftier themes to observe during the season. After all, Charlie Brown's search for the "true meaning" of Christmas, some thirty-five years old now, is getting rather long in the tooth. Still, as timeworn as this cliché seems, one is never quite prepared for the brazenness of Christmas advertising of late. In recent years the over-the-top award winner may be the irony-enhanced ad for LA Gear. With Christmas music in the background we watch through subdued lighting and a soft-focused camera as a teenage boy opens a gift in slow motion. The anti-Rockwell punch line is a mockery of the spirit of giving as the youngster exults in a new pair of $100 sneakers.

AS SHOCKING AS THAT SEEMS, Christian sensibility is assaulted by a more subtly offensive advertising campaign that we should expect to see launched between Thanksgiving and Christmas. This is the American Express series that profiles charities that serve the poor, the homeless and other less fortunates. Stevie Wonder and other pop celebrities exhort us to "give people a chance to get back on their feet" by using our AmEx card, thus joining its "Charge Against Hunger" program. For all we know, the charities featured are legitimate ones that perform genuine acts of service. What is objectionable is AmEx's willingness to profit from them. Tugging at our heartstrings, these ads tell us to help the poor by spending more. This is commodification ratcheted to a new level as consumerism *becomes* philanthropy.

Of course, this theme is not relegated to Christmas. Consider Amy Grant's role as a spokeswoman for Target (a few years ago, before the fall). Do you want to help your neighborhoods and communities? Well, Amy gushes, the good news is that you are, whenever you shop at Target, which devotes a portion of its profits to local communities. There is unintended irony in her appeal, because there are few greater threats to neighborhoods, communities and indeed any sense of local culture than what some have dubbed the "Walmartization" of America. By offering lower prices, convenient hours, huge inventories, and other economic efficiencies, corporate capitalism is ripping apart the fabric of local economies. Yet Miss Grant encourages us to shop at Target, in the interests of the very communities that Target, K-Mart, and the likes are destroying.

Politically active Christians are rightly vexed at the secularization of American culture, but too often they locate that noxious trend narrowly in the encroachments of the federal government upon families, churches and neighborhoods. We would do well to consider the damage wrought by corporate capitalism that transfers the art of giving into the love of spending, conflating acquisitiveness with generosity, and preaching that faith without consumption is dead.

EVEN CHARLIE BROWN WOULD concede that LA Gear's cynicism at least possessed the virtue of honesty.

———

Democratic Follies

First there were the comparisons of John McCain to the anti-Christ. Then there was the Republican Party's version of the Rainbow Coalition in Philadelphia. Then came the kiss, that is, Al Gore's smooch of his gyrating wife. Next was the gaff by Lazio during the debate with Hilary that prompted the women of New York City to think the Republican candidate had physically assaulted a woman who could probably not distinguish between a Yankees' and Mets' baseball cap and would likely try to wear both if she thought it would help. Finally, there was the whopper of the son of Richard Daley complaining about voting irregularities.

'Tis the season of presidential politics, when democracy (at least the American variety) shows just how gullible the voters are even while preening itself as the best form of government since God overturned the fascists building the tower of Babel. At times like this, a dollop of H. L. Mencken is a fitting remedy, since his attitude of amusement creates less strain than the despair that seems more appropriate. Of democracy, Mencken wrote:

> The mob has its flatterers and bosh-mongers; the king has his courtiers. But there is a difference, and I think it is important. The courtier, at his worst, at least performs his genuflections before one who is theoretically his superior, and is surely not less than his equal. He does not have to abase himself before swine with whom, ordinarily, he would disdain to have any traffic. He is not compelled to pretend that he is a worse man than he really is. He needn't hold his nose in order to approach his benefactor. Thus he may go into office without having dealt his honor a fatal wound, and once he is in, he is under no pressure to sacrifice it further, and may nurse it back to health and vigor. His sovereign, at worst, has a certain respect for it, and hesitates to strain it unduly; the mob has no sensitiveness on that point, and, indeed, no knowledge that it exists. The courtier's sovereign, in other words, is apt to be a man of honor himself. When in 1848 or thereabout, Wilhelm I of Prussia was offered the imperial crown by a so-called parliament of his subjects, he refused it on the ground that he could take it only from his equals, *i.e.*, from the sovereign princes of the *Reich*. To the democrats of the world this attitude was puzzling, and on reflection it began to seem contemptible and offensive. But that was not to be marveled at. To a democrat any attitude based upon a concept of honor, dignity and integrity seems contemptible and offensive. . . .
>
> To sum up: the essential objection to feudalism (the perfect antithesis to democracy) was that it imposed degrading acts and attitudes upon the vassal; the essential objection to democracy is that, with few exceptions, it imposes degrading acts and attitudes upon the men responsible for the welfare and dignity of the state. The

former was compelled to do homage to his suzerain, who was very apt to be a brute and an ignoramus. The latter are compelled to do homage to their constituents, who in overwhelming majority are certain to be both.

Some readers might think this kind of thing cynical. And there are those believers who prefer the posture of irony that Reinhold Niebuhr assumed when defending liberal democracy during the middle of the Cold War. But we here at the *NTJ* prefer Mencken's humor to Niebuhr's sobriety. The Baltimore journalist, who thought the Old Testament psalms among the most beautiful poetry in human history, seems to follow the sentiments of the Psalmist who wrote, "Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his Annointed. . . . He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them" (Ps 2: 1-2, 4).

SC88

Second Hand Smoke

The following excerpt, written by Joseph Epstein, was originally published in the American Scholar, *and can be found in his collection of essays entitled* A Line Out for A Walk: Familiar Essays *(1991).*

I cannot recall the exact moment when I decided to become a regular smoker. Doubtless it was linked to the realization that I was not destined to win glory as a high school athlete. The seal was set on this realization late one afternoon deep in the autumn of my fifteenth year. A fairly lowly sub on our school's frosh-soph basketball team, I was seated at my accustomed place toward the end of the bench next to a boy named Les Handler in the drafty gym of Kelvyn Park High School on the west side of Chicago. Les and I only rarely got into games, a situation to which I had become sadly resigned but to which Les could not quite reconcile himself. Sitting there on the bench, he had become a gonfalonier of g*rievance, or* a not highly witty order I am bound to report, and as each game progressed he provided me with a running commentary in which he didn't mind remark*ing that many* of the boys who played head of us on our own team were really quite (I euphamize) excrementitious.

Les was going on in this vein at Kelvyn Park that dark autumn afternoon when, with four and a half minutes left to play and our team well ahead, Coach Eugene Fricker called out, "Epstein, Handler." We left our places on the end of the bench to take up a position of readiness, on one knee, awaiting a time-out or a foul so that we could go into the game. Four and a half minutes, for us, was a substantial block of time -- substantial and potentially delightful; it stretched out before us luxuriously, like the promise of a weekend with, say, Rita Hayworth. Except that no time-out was called nor any foul committed, and as the buzzer sounded for the end of the game, Les Handler and I were still in empty readiness on one knee alongside Coach Fricker.

Dressing in the dank Kelvyn Park locker room, neither of us spoke. I, sunk in despondency, had nothing to say. Les had already used up all his profanity in his game-time commentary; besides, the English language was deficient in that it failed to provide words adequate to his anger. Now dressed, we went off together, not wishing to ride home with the other team members. All that was left to us by way of giving vent to our extreme frustration was to break training. Not that anyone cared if we did, you understand, but it seemed the least we could do. We were too youthful to buy liquor; drugs had not yet come on the scene. Instead, wearing leather jackets and carrying our gym bags, we walked into a corner mom-and-pop grocery store and emerged with two Pepsi-Colas, a box of Dolly Madison Chocolate-covered doughnuts, and a pack of Lucky Strikes. It would not be the last time that a cigarette would present itself as a consolation.

SC88