

The Dubious Prospect

or The Modest Newsletter Mostly Written by Joel, Since,
Presumably, Most Have Given up Writing for Lent

"These Forty Days of Lent"

found by Eric White

These forty days of Lent, O Lord,

With you we fast and pray;

Teach us to discipline our wills

And follow, Lord, your way.

As thirst and hunger you have known,

So teach us, gracious Lord,

To die to self and only live

By your most holy Word.

And through these days of penitence,

And through your Passion-tide,

For evermore, in life and death

O Lord, with us abide.

Abide with us, that so, this life

Of suffering once past,

An Easter of unending joy,

We may attain at last.

"The Enchantment of the Tree"

by Sophia A. White

There was once a tree that had a nest. One day I was looking out the window, and I saw it enchanted. I knew it was enchanted just because of the look of the giantess. The nest was the head of the giantess, the tree branches were her arms, the roots were her legs, and her toes the tips of the roots, (she was a barefooted giantess), and the trunk was her body.

I thought perhaps the enchantment would only last for one day, and I was correct. The next day I looked out the window, and she was gone.

The Dubious Aspect Now Follows . . . The Problem of Accountability

I first encountered the practice of accountability at Northland. I had seen similar stuff before, but not quite the avidly practiced and fully formed phenomenon of accountability. I haven't found it practiced quite the way it was there anywhere else either (nor devotions, for that matter, but that was a part of their idea of accountability and not a distinct phenomenon). I have had ambivalent feelings toward accountability and thought about it ever since I practiced it at Northland. My first accountability partner was my future brother-in-law, Andy Rupert. I count that a worthwhile experience because as a result of it he took up the practice of translating a verse from his Greek New Testament each day. I do not know if he still practices it, but I got him to do it for a while. He was in it to get to know me since I had interest in his sister (and his mother has entertained misgivings about my spiritual state pretty much steadily all the time she has known me). Andy shared neat things with me and I uttered the fatuous things I was wont to about how studying in Greek was like seeing it in technicolor rather than black and white and eventually the semester ended and the partnership was dissolved.

The next semester I had the admirable company of Mark Perry and there was fruitful accountability; but then, we were friends. We went down to Green Bay for the Spanish speaking stuff and competed in Greek and languished through counseling classes together. We had many things in common. Over the break we were encouraged to have accountability partners and I entered into partnership with Dan Olson and was very careful to have a good report to give him at the end. Because of my high regard for Dan Olson I have always felt immature and silly in comparison. I could not further fall in my esteem of his esteem.

The following semester I ended up being the accountability partner of another. I was made accountable for remembering the state of his relationship with a girl, which was no mean feat since the turmoil involved as much of his life as he was willing to let me view, for the most part. We really had very little in common, and I was cast adrift with regard to any true accountability. I may have had another partner for that fourth semester, but how can I remember with such promiscuity?

After this I was married and entered another and more exotic variety of accountability. I had a more positive outlook on accountability at this time, even so far as to mildly wish for

extramarital accountability and to think that perhaps it was my duty to have some accountability besides that which living with a woman would provide. I think wives provide accountability and that they should, but one doesn't get married for accountability, rather, accountability comes as a result of being married. Then, after four years of this state, I had a revelation, at least, what I believe to be a revelation, for the thought has come to me that will resolve all the ambivalence that I have about accountability. I don't like accountability because the whole argument for it is pragmatic and I wonder how good the pragmatic argument is. Once when I voiced my misgivings about it to Dan Olson, he told me that perhaps our need for accountability is an issue of maturity; we need it because our devotion to God is weak. I wasn't satisfied with that, but I didn't realize my dissatisfaction till several years later, such was the effect of his personage. Our devotion to God is not supposed to be weak, not motivated by what others will think of us. Besides, what bothered me about accountability was that it seemed artificial in some way, a forced and unnatural practice, something dreamed up by liberals or by sentimental fundamentalists, something with a proof text wrested to the destruction of the exponent, something that the rigorous Apostle would not have been able to endorse.

At last I believe I have the answer. After four years of marriage, after more than a year of bashing, after meeting weekly for a year with Daniel and somewhat less with Ryan, not for accountability, it has come to me that the problem with accountability is that it is a truncated form of friendship.

What do you think?

Contextualizing Theology

There is much cant in these days about being relevant and contextualizing the timeless principles of theology in our own unique situation. Against this notion I advance two arguments. The first is that there is nothing altogether unique about our age, not even the excess of folly to which so-called theologians are willing to go. The basic condition of the human heart is quite the same in all ages. All that matters for the purposes of theology, that has its source in this sublunar world, flows from the heart of man. A quick glance at the theological documents of our day will serve to establish that mankind is still, as ever, utterly depraved and fatuously insistent on the same limited range of heretical ideas. Let us suppose there is more folly and even more depravity in this age than in another, which seems doubtful. Even if this were the case, it would not affect the way theology is done. Are we to suppose that we must make theology relevant by making it more foolish or more depraved? The standards for good theology do not change. Theology must remain the same if it corresponds to the immutable God. The doctrine of the Trinity cannot be altered so that it can be understood by the mind of someone who rides the subway every day from what it was for the troglodyte who had no commute because he had decided to retire from the world in order to give himself over to theology. The fallacy that those who advocate modern prevailing notions of contextualization and the idolatrous exaggeration of a person's situation in space and time is simply the fallacy that is known as materialism. The only changes that have occurred from the fourth century to the present are entirely external. Some will perhaps object at this point with the observation that the world of ideas that modern man inhabits is not quite the same and that this is essentially what the glorious contextualizers so keenly grasp. This is only possible if there are various alternative and equally valid worlds of

ideas for men to inhabit. Unfortunately for the contextualizers, this is another modern prevailing notion that will prove quite ephemeral upon actual scrutiny. There are not various alternative and equally valid worlds of ideas for men to inhabit because there are not various alternative and equally valid worlds for men to inhabit. At least not according to Christian theology. What is probably meant by the ambiguous term ‘world of ideas’ is not a world where the laws are governed by solid ideas such as prudence, duty, charity and so forth. Rather, what is meant by ideas are things such as the kind of currency in use, or the way a fellow gets water to his kitchen, or the method of transportation he uses to get to his place of employment. But these are not ideas let alone the sufficient components for a complete world. What they have is a notion that neatly truncates the essential aspects of the problem they are dealing with and their effrontery is seen in the urgent and fanatical manner they enjoin their solution. This brings me to my second argument.

My second argument is simply that timeless principles have not need of contextualization because they have no need of that medium which is essentially change. That medium is time which by definition is excluded from the aforementioned principles. They are timeless because they don’t change, and they are not reduced to something changeable because then they cease to be the principles that they are. What usually happens is that the contextualizers want theology to address the state of modern man, which it does without great alteration or restatement. But the contextualizers take the opportunity in framing the address to traduce theology so that it no longer is what it used to be. It is framed in such a way that it can no longer retain what it had.

The Ringing Telephone

In our house there is a sort of dread that springs up whenever the telephone rings. The ringing of the telephone is unexpected and undesired. We have also cultivated such a ridiculous attitude toward the ringing of the telephone that we will listen to it ring all five times until the answering machine starts up. Occasionally we answer the summons, but not regularly. While our attitude toward the telephone may be called distorted, fanatical or even absurd, it is not altogether without some small vindication. Here is my vindication: the telephone is a way of being where you are not. This has its advantages, especially for someone who works in customer service and deals with disproportionately disgruntled customers. Nevertheless I dislike and distrust the telephone. The telephone is a medium of communication of last resort. It will work for certain things. My trouble with it is that it has become too commonplace and just another of these terrible conveniences with which we defoliate the splendid growth of human relationships.

What I mean by saying that speaking to someone on the telephone is a way of not being where you are is that the limitations of only hearing someone’s voice cut off a great deal of communication. If we realize this, then we can realize the limitations of the telephone and the limitations of its uses. But the problem is that we do not realize this and hence modern promiscuous use that we make of that device. What I object to is the attempt to carry on relationships over a long distance by using the telephone. I do not think it can work. When we are trying to carry on a relationship over a long distance over the phone, we are trying to be where we are not and it simply doesn’t work. I think one of the reasons the telephone is used for long distance relationships is that the relationships are and remain shallow. I do not deny that in some cases relationships can be maintained as deep and good relationships over the phone, but I

doubt this is very prevalent, and the longer this sentence gets, the more I doubt it happens at all.

One of the reasons we exist in the body, it seems to me, is to be limited by space to the place where we are. In the place where we are there are other people in bodies. Does not the argument take shape naturally from these two observations? Let us not have disembodied relationships. Let us not make the phone an anti-human device.

Being Controlled

I am heartily weary of the notion that being addicted to caffeine is unspiritual. It is so unreasonable that it merits some exposure and castigation. The argument is that if you are addicted to anything you are controlled by it. Let me make a nice little *reductio ad absurdum*. Headline: Caffeine Addict Arrested for Bank Robbery to Get Money for Beans. Is this not a silly idea about control? Is a person who drinks coffee or the abominable Mountain Dew addicted? Well, if they don't get their coffee or abominable Mountain Dew they get headaches and they tremble. I get that when I try to fast, and yes, I am still having green tea so it is not because I don't get caffeine. And I can go for 12 hours without any caffeine and feel fine. Am I addicted to food? The whole notion that depending on caffeine means you are controlled by it is spurious.

I am not saying that you cannot overindulge in coffee or the abominable Mountain Dew. I believe that is reprehensible and that you should not do that anymore than you should overindulge in food. It is unfortunate that people think that if you drink coffee you naturally drink an excessive amount. It is more than unfortunate, it is a caricature. But the fact that drinking caffeine regularly results in a sort of dependence on it does not mean that it is a dependence that is not broken with a little trouble nor does it mean that caffeine controls your life. You will have a similar sort of dependence with comparable consequences for withdrawal if you make use of a clock all the time or if you make use of a calendar for your appointments. We must all admit that there are things that each of us depends on for the proper functioning of our body. That some of us should carry on about the extra things some of the rest of us depend on for the proper functioning of our body as if these extra things were unnatural is an excess.

One hates to brag, but I have never slept in a class in all the years I have spent being in the classroom, except for one in high school before I drank caffeine and one particularly tedious class in Baptist History --but I am not inclined to count that as a legitimate class. Of course, this remarkable feat of mine may also be due to the fact that I have an addiction to sleep that I regularly encourage, but I think it was also done with a careful use of the caffeine which God provides.

The Bible teaches that we must not be controlled by anything, and this follows if we are to be self-controlled as a fruit of the Spirit. Now 'anything' can mean food, it seems to me. Fine, we are not controlled by food. Does this mean we are never hungry? Does this mean that we don't plan to eat regularly? Let us say that anything also means clocks or schedules. Does this mean that we never feel the constraint to be on time or the pressure of a schedule? Perhaps you will say that what we feel is the constraint of courtesy and that is really self-denial and not control. Well then, let us say that under such categories I place my use of caffeine as well. I am denying myself the freedom from caffeine in order to be awake, in order to pay attention to other people, in order to function with their schedules and timing courteously. "O ho ho ho ho!" You will say, being given to your own excesses even though not to caffeine. But you must admit, I

have you there!

Of course, I drink coffee because I enjoy it. That is why I don't take caffeine pills or something unnatural like that. I drink hot drinks because I prefer them to cold drinks and I dislike drinking mere water. Water was made for baths, not for a civilized beverage. These hot beverages can have caffeine or not, or even be so unnatural as to have the caffeine God put in there removed; but they are not unspiritual potions. Let us not become like the cultic Mormons in our assertions about these glorious beverages. Let us not be so materialistic!

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

This latest spate of sanctimonious argumentation, besides being flawed in all the ways I have previously complained about, seems to have also fallen into the greater presumption of hortatory conclusions. Could you spare us? Will you now further presume to instruct us? Specious, sophisticated and, moreover, a most subtle sycophant, the person who perpetrates these lavishly spurious aggregations of words is altogether too parsimonious in his regard for the considerations of others. Such people as this author will always be among us, no doubt, and will probably never desist from foisting their festering fallacies on decent people, even during Lent. But the duty of good editors is to staunch such egregious prolixity with judiciously contemptuous letters of rejection. Let us have a break!

Sincerely,
I. M. Miffed

Dear U. R. Miffed,

We appreciate your annoyance, so overwhelmingly expressed. That you are most sincere in your entreaty, we can have no doubt. And that hardens the resolve of our will to continue unopposed to the flow of opinions. After all, where would we be without your correspondence?

Truly,
The Editor

A Quotation

Pain, then, which plunges like a sword through creation, leaving on the one side cringing and degraded animals and on the other side heroes and saints, is one of those facts of universal experience which are peculiarly intractable from the point of view of a merely materialistic philosophy.

Evelyn Underhill in *Mysticism*