

Mission Accomplished

Or the Modest Newsletter with Some Achievements!

Medicine, Ministry, Arachnids, and AWANA: Part II

By Todd Mitchell

From Part I: Just as some hospitals are lending an air of legitimacy to alternative “medicine,” so have some churches lent an air of legitimacy to alternative ministry methods. Questioning alternative ministry methods which have become *de rigueur* is intolerant, insensitive, and at best a step backwards, if not off the deep end! The burden of proof is never on those who embrace the *status quo*. The burden of proof is always on the one seeking change – even change to the way it was *before*. The only way legitimate ministry can combat the entrenched absurdity of alternative “ministry” methods is to a.) show alternative “ministry” to be directly harmful, and/or b.) show alternative “ministry” to be indirectly harmful by obstructing the truly helpful. As the physician must anchor his arguments in science so must the pastor anchor his arguments in the Bible.

Let us now turn to a specific ministry which has become *de rigueur* in American Evangelicalism, namely AWANA. What is AWANA? It is a program that began in 1950 at the North Side Gospel Center in Chicago and boasts 10,480 churches in 111 countries.¹ The goal of AWANA is, “to equip churches to reach children and teenagers, and their families, with the gospel of Christ and train them to serve Him.”² AWANA activities include, “Clear, consistent presentation of the gospel; Bible memory – our cornerstone; Circle games exclusive to Awana; A fun approach to learning God's Word; Leadership training that is second to none; The church leaders of tomorrow trained to serve today; Evangelistic focus designed to reach unchurched [sic] youth and their families.”³

Many dear Christian brothers and sisters are involved in AWANA. I believe that their involvement is motivated by sincere love for God and for His people. They toil in a labor of love as they execute their duties as AWANA workers, and for that they deserve profound respect. Their tireless devotion is an example and a rebuke to me. I love them and frankly recoil at the prospect of offending them. But it is precisely my deep respect for them which gives me hope – hope that they might listen and dream of A Better Way. I am counting on this dear group, a powerhouse of the church, to take us there!

There is no doubt who bears the burden of proof in any argument over AWANA's worth. It is well accepted and many laud it as a great blessing. For instance, Steve Mason, Guitarist for *Jars of Clay*, writes, “Through Awana I was impacted by Scripture memory and learning the Bible.”⁴ Dr. James Merritt, former president of the SBC, writes, “Throughout the year we see so many kids saved, and the beautiful thing is not just how it reaches children but how it reaches the parents, too.”⁵ Statistics are impressive, too. As of May, 2004, over 15,932,902 Bible verses had been recited!⁶

Scripture memorization? Learning the Bible? Kids being saved? How could AWANA be anything other than a blessing?

I entreat you to put aside whatever good or bad experiences you may have had with AWANA and consider it thoughtfully. First, consider the evidence that AWANA really might be a legitimate, helpful ministry:

1. “Kids are being saved.”

Are they really being saved *because* of AWANA? What happened before AWANA? How did the Christian faith survive for thousands of years without it? Billy Graham's crusades claim countless people saved. Is this evidence for the legitimacy of his methods? Do we ignore what

¹As of May 2004. <http://www.awana.org/about/default.aspx?id=28>, Cited 17 Feb 2005. AWANA stands for, “Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed,” taken from 2 Timothy 2:15.

²“About AWANA,” <http://www.awana.org/about/default.aspx?id=17>, Cited 17 Feb 2005.

³<http://www.awana.org/about/default.aspx?id=127>, Cited 17 Feb 2005.

⁴<http://www.awana.org/about/default.aspx?id=20>, Cited 17 Feb 2005.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Based on the number of awards and current criteria for the awards. <http://www.awana.org/articles/default.aspx?id=28>, Cited 17 Feb 2005.

comes with the “saving?” What of the spiritual growth of the countless people who are “saved” right into the arms of those false teachers with whom he cooperates? Martin Luther was saved while in Romanism. Does this mean he should have remained Romanist, or that we should become Romanist? To say that Romanism on the whole was the cause of his conversion is to commit the fallacy of false cause, *non causa pro causa*. This is an easy fallacy to commit, especially by those who have already committed resources to the “cause.”

Conclusion: Kids might be saved *in spite of* AWANA. Evidence of conversions in AWANA is not proof of its legitimacy.

2. Proven success at Bible memorization.

Did not the Pharisees excel at Bible memorization? Did they not win converts to their way? Yet Christ said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” (Mat 23:15)

Conclusion: Evidence of Bible memorization in AWANA is not proof of its legitimacy.

Obviously, none of this reasoning has yet proven AWANA to be harmful in any way. But it has proven the need for further investigation. For if AWANA is directly or indirectly harmful, then however noble its end, it is a means of desperation – our “tincture of tarantula.”

I have heard objections to AWANA running the gamut from the pledge (to the AWANA flag) to the use of “fun” in Christian education. Some of these objections may have merit, some may not. I will examine one and only one aspect of AWANA: the use of extrinsic motivation to train “the church leaders of tomorrow.”

What is extrinsic motivation? Extrinsic motivation is the deliberate use of rewards and punishments to condition people's behavior. Often known as, “the carrot and the stick,” it dominated American education until recently:

Behaviorists such as B.F. Skinner and Edward Thorndike based their theories on the idea that people, like other organisms, do only what they have been reinforced for doing. Their belief was that all human behavior is ultimately initiated by the external environment . . . Their work centered upon the concepts of rewards and punishments, reinforcement, and modification of behavior through extrinsic means. Our “traditional schools” -- those that developed during the industrial revolution and that became the basis of our formal system of public education – were based on these premises.⁷

AWANA does not use punishments, but it does use rewards to motivate children to memorize Bible verses, to invite friends to church, and even to pray.

For instance, *The Skipper Handbook* offers “Green Jewel 3” upon certification that the “clubber” has brought a visitor to Awana, told a Bible story, recited Col 1:3, and prayed for five nights. This synthetic jewel is placed in a crown-shaped device that displays the child's “rank” upon the uniform.⁸ “Clubbers” may also earn “AWANA Bucks” (that can be redeemed for merchandise) by attending Sunday School and bringing visitors, among other things.⁹ The official AWANA forum gives us a glimpse into the world of AWANA:

Official Awana awards for Sparks are crowns, jewels, and patches that are worn on the uniform. Ice cream parties, etc. are extra incentives offered by individual clubs. . . . Those who do not meet the challenge do not receive the reward. If we just gave to everyone regardless . . . they would never “try” to achieve or reach for the prize. Some will not get the reward but the next time they will reach higher and I am a firm believer that children only step up to the level that we require of them. If the bar is high they will reach high, if it is low they will not grow.¹⁰

⁷Julie Crotty, “Student Motivation,” <http://www.aea267.k12.ia.us/cia/motivation/motivation.html>, Cited 17 Feb 2005. Crotty is a “Consultant for Classroom Instructional Strategies and School Improvement” with Iowa public schools Area Education Agency 7.

⁸*Skipper Handbook*, (Streamwood,IL: Awana Clubs International, 1990), 44-47.

⁹<http://www.rivervalleyalliance.org/awana.htm#BUCKS>

¹⁰AWANA Forum, <http://www2.awana.org/cs/forums/76413/ShowPost.aspx>, Cited 17 Feb 2005. The rich irony in this statement is yet to be revealed. The first portion of this quote is from a writer identified as “mscav” and the second is from “Brenda.”

Who could object to rewards if they work so well? After all, is it not biblical to receive a reward for performing well in the Lord's service? After all, did not David say, "The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness?" (2 Sam 22:21) Was not Paul exhilarated at the prospect of receiving his crown at the end of his race? (2 Tim 4:8)

But then, if rewards are biblical, to what did Jesus object in Mathew 6? He described a certain type of reward almost like a judgment! And He described those who sought such rewards as, "hypocrites!" What if the rewards of AWANA are like *these* rewards?

Before immersing children in a sea of rewards – before the church systematically conditions their behavior with extrinsic motivation – we had better understand what Jesus meant. For surely, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Mat 18:6)

Voices, Univocal and Equivocal on Lynch's *Christ and Apollo* *by a Novice and a Bishop*

Summary

This is one of those mind heightening books that has to be read with absolute concentration. Every word counts. Every sentence is part of the argument. And there is no respite. This is indeed a book that will bear many readings. Lynch's thesis is that the literary imagination is at its best when it achieves its purposes by passing through the definite. The best literature is that which doesn't recoil from the limitations of our existence (time and frailty and ridiculousness) but instead provides us with the moment of insight exactly through those limitations. In short, Lynch is saying that the best literature is only written by the humble. From here he goes on to the evocatively beautiful conclusion that the literary imagination must have a theological dimension, and that this theological dimension is Christian. Yes, he is arguing that the best literature can only be written by believers, but he is not arguing this in the clumsy way that pedestrian Christians do. Lynch is not a Reconstruction Theonomist; he is a Catholic. The only problematic dimension of the book is its Aristotelian epistemology, but it is not so problematic that a Platonic epistemology could not live with Lynch's conclusions. We highly recommend this book to any Christian interested in a serious attempt to deal with a better understanding of literature. Here is an explanation of how the meek shall inherit the earth.

The Definite in Literature

It is one thing to elaborate a theory of what literature should do, but it is quite another to demonstrate that good literature actually does it, and has been doing it from the beginning. Lynch shows not only that good writers *can* write by utilizing the definite, but that the best literature requires it. His most convincing examples come from Greek Tragedy, where movement and change (and hence time) are the essence. The classical tragedies—Oedipus, Hamlet, King Lear—succeeded because they were all predicated on finitude.^k The reason for the failure of modern Tragedy is this lack of humility—modern playwrights and heroes fail to acknowledge limitation. But why should limitation be necessary for tragedy, and why should such a passage through the definite make it beautiful? Because it is precisely through this passage that you get the highest points. Let me sidetrack at this point on this subject of high points. By high points I mean a greater lucidity. So I began to wonder what I meant by using 'lucid' so often (I have it in my head anytime I think of cognitive passages and good literature). A greater awareness, I decided. This ties in with Lynch's cognitive passage. What

^k *The Novice*: Lynch takes his literary examples almost exclusively from drama, but I wonder what he would do with something like *Lord of the Rings*. Would it be too Romantic for him?—too glorifying of the West, especially since it triumphs? But the triumph of the West is the destruction of the Ring, and this does not occur until the very moment of Frodo's greatest weakness. Perhaps one could even say that the West triumphs because of that moment of weakness. So maybe Lynch's theory holds true for the idea of the "eucatastrophe" as well.

The Bishop: The question of *LOTR* is a good one. In his essay on fairy stories Tolkien intimates that English literary evaluations put too much weight on drama. I wonder why Lynch goes in for it so much. As if the heart of literature were to be found in poetry—which is not so improbable perhaps. Anyway, the idea of eucatastrophe is Christian, and there is not much trouble matching up Christianity with Lynch. We have our intensity distilled in the particulars, time limits us, circumstances limit us, our ridiculousness (Comedy) will limit us.

good literature does is to take you through the limited moment in a way that makes you more aware of everything, not only the details we always experience, but the cosmic significance of them (or perhaps better, the idea they manifest). The moment is, as it were, placed in a system of order that excludes nothing, and we understand its place in relationship to that system. Lynch's comments on the moment of awareness in Comedy are better than his comments on Tragedy.¹ Tragedy shows our limitation in weakness and passes through it to that moment of awareness, but Comedy shows our limitation in ridiculousness and passes through it to a moment of amusement. In Tragedy, the awareness has to do with how much greater things are than ourselves, how sublime the universe and the forces and the Being that controls all things and transcends all things and us especially. In Comedy, which ends in marriage usually, our smallness does not evoke sublimity because there is no terror. Rather our smallness is a source of humor—*humor*, that word redolent of the fluids of our bodies which are so ridiculous. The awareness of Comedy is an awareness and embracing of our limitations, an awareness that can only delight the humble, the hobbitish. I like the term anamnesis, because this remembering is close to awareness and I can make connections. In Comedy, the surprise or the overly elaborate make the awareness come like glad dawn. Wonderful connections, that we do not deserve, attach us to the vastness that in Tragedy evokes terror and sublimity, but in Comedy evokes consent, cordial agreement and therefore must rather have to do with love and beauty.

Epistemology

The Bishop: It is as I feared—Lynch makes an argument for a Catholic/Aristotelian epistemology. He wants to put the ideas in the things themselves and limit access to them through the things themselves. This is not altogether unappealing. The literal world is good after all. What is compelling about the epistemology of Aquinas is that it seems so incarnational. And yet the ultimacy of Ideas, and the longing for immediate contact with them, which by Aristotelian epistemology would seem an illegitimate longing, is the longing to which I'd rather cling. So when Lynch asks the question in "The Definite" of who would not rather have beauty and understanding in finite and literal things, I wonder who but one with deformed ideals would?

The Novice: I am not sure I would say that Lynch's assertion in "The Definite" necessarily betrays a warped ideality. I think he is just reacting against the vagueness of abstraction again, and I think I sympathize with him. Who, after all, wants to see the abstraction of Beauty? I would much rather see a very beautiful being. How dull The Lord of the Rings would be if there were no Elves but only Beauty, no Gandalf but only Wisdom! Something in the human condition revolts against it and demands, if there is to be Wisdom at all, that it be given to us in the form of a particular wise being. Otherwise it means nothing to us.

The Bishop: What is so great about the elves is not that they are not Beauty, but how much they approximate Beauty - would they were more! If you think of these ideas as mere abstractions, ascending from the particular to a concept, then haven't you sold Plato out? Aren't these ideas, Beauty and Wisdom, more real than any particular manifestation of them we here know or imagine? In fact, Jesus is Beauty, Jesus is Wisdom, and better, far better than these. Why muck around with elves and Gandalf, who are only the shadows? Perhaps the answer is to accept with humility (which, being genuine, would involve gratitude) the limitations in which our existence is framed.

¹ *The Novice:* I am not as enthusiastic about Lynch's view of comedy as you are. The problem is that Lynch seems to glory in the Falstaffian kind of comedy, with its casting off of civility and restraint and proportion. Rather as if the "basic level of humanity" somehow meant "the best kind of humanity". Compare this to Jane Austen, who never delights in throwing away ideals but ridicules her characters because they fail to live up to ideals. Having said that, I must thank Lynch for his argument that things are funny because of congruity. His remarks on God and mud are provocative. Can we really say that saints slip on banana peels precisely because Christ is human? In some ways it seems irreverent to call the Incarnation a great divine Joke. But isn't that how it originally struck the Greeks? God becomes man—ridiculous! And therefore true.

The Bishop: I think you should view Lynch with less reserve. The definite and limited are definite and limited and come with definite limitations which Lynch has been hammering all along. I'd not say it is irreverent to call the incarnation a joke, for it is comic to send a baby into the territory of Rome and Herod the way Chesterton would tell it. And I'd not say that Lynch thinks the purpose of Comedy is to make us guffaw, merely. Being ridiculous is not like being disgusting. But loving what is ridiculous and limited underscores how it is loved for its own sake, and not merely admired.

The Novice: You should not dismiss the Elves so quickly, flawed though they may be. We agree that there is real Beauty, and other real Ideas—but how do we arrive at a knowledge of them? Lynch argues that it is impossible to know them unless they are given to us in finite form. My example of this was the Elves; your example is Christ. They are the same example. In both cases we are not given an abstraction but a concrete particular, a person or Person. The abstraction may be real apart from the particulars, but we can only grasp it through the particulars. Trying to imagine Beauty apart from beautiful Ones is vain, unsatisfying, and ridiculous.

The Bishop: Now you are agreeing with the epistemology of Lynch! I thought you were a Platonist. Those apostates at St. Thomas will turn you away from the true religion! You should stop thinking of the Real as abstractions. 'Abstraction' is the very derogatory term that Aquinas uses when he cracks down on Plato. The Real IS much more than its shadows and approximations are. Particulars yearn for complete reality, they attain it to the degree that they approach the ideal. And there perhaps, I have inadvertently advanced toward making Lynch acceptable. For if we regard what is around us in humility, with cordial consent to its being, we find ourselves loving it for what it is, as the one with most being loves it.^m We find ourselves grateful to be particular and yearning, not for ourselves, but for that which IS. And so the literary imagination, in taking us through our situation, can merge with the theological imagination when it brings us the moment of Awareness, which cannot be untouched by Wonder, and must therefore result in Worship. And then, let not any Christian condemn us for Novel Reading!ⁿ

The Novice: You have said nothing with which I do not agree, except for the charge of Thomism, which is unfounded. We should keep in mind all facets of Plato's epistemology, not just the one about the Ideas being more real than the particulars! Nothing could run more contrary to Lynch's argument, or your footnote on time and eternity, than Plato's rejection of limitation. Plato counsels us to forsake particulars and seek the Ideas without them. His epistemology leaves no room for an Incarnation or for the cordial consent to particular being. He rightly encapsulates the yearning for Reality, but he is mistaken about the way to reach that Reality. The only point at which I am uncomfortable with Lynch is his assertion that particulars comprise the Ideas—that if the particulars were different than they are, the Idea would no longer be what it is. It is as if an Idea were incomplete until it had bodied forth into all possible particulars. But if that were the case, the number of particulars being infinite, an Idea would never really be. It would always be becoming. Can we have just half of the equation and say that each particular is a full manifestation of an Idea, which can manifest itself in a thousand different particulars and still be the same? But if one particular was really a manifestation of the whole, why would we need many particulars? We don't need maples, oaks, birches, pines, willows, and elms to get the idea of treeness, do we?

The Bishop: What Lynch is after is that the idea is attached to the particulars in such a way as to be inaccessible without them. So if they change, it is because there is another idea attached that is being manifested. But Lynch can't say that since the Ideas are in the particular, then each particular has an Idea. I don't know why Aristotle would want to switch to that from Platonism, which is a good indication that I am missing something because

^m You will have to excuse me for waxing Edwardian, but once you read Edwards, there is no escaping him. He is awfully compelling and the sooner you get around to reading him, the clearer your thinking will be on anything you read him on. His definition of virtue is 'cordial consent of being to being in general.' What he means is that there is a heartfelt agreement (or union, for love, as somebody whom I cannot recall reminds us, is a sort of union) of the particular with the original. His argument is that since nothing is as fully as God is (Edwards will wash away any sorry modified realism that might build up), virtue, therefore, is love of God.

^d I keep thinking of the quotation from Lewis that Time-fixed teacher of yours read: the present as the point at which time touches eternity. For eternity is a fullness of being. We do not exist in the past or the future, the fullness of our being we enjoy in the present. Do you see that we have such fullness in a way that is passing from us? Because it is passing from us it is possible that we do not notice what we have. But if we are humble and grateful for the fullness of being we have in the present, not straining out of it backward or forward, then this endless supply of time flows through us fully. It is how we exist. Though I really believe that this present body is going to be left behind for something greater and better in eternity, I also believe we will always have limitations. Our joy, and our freedom, is not to be found apart from them, but in the illimitable things they give us. Like my pet definition of freedom (finding one's place within an order that excludes nothing—elaborated after reading Barfield and Lewis, or unconsciously plagiarized from somewhere), it only requires Awareness. We seek for endlessness somewhere, but we don't realize we have it.

Aristotle was a reasonably intelligent fellow. So to your questions about trees etc, I say, Aristotle doesn't have a good answer, nor does Lynch.

I do like what Lynch says at one point about the particular leading us through it to the Idea. It is that moment of awareness, when we go beyond the veil and grasp the Real. Where we differ is that I hope to grasp the real sometime (this would be mysticism) directly and without mediation. And this is Platonic. He is the one
Mysticism is traced to always.

The Christic Imagination

The Bishop: Originally I was afraid that Lynch was going to make the argument that Catholics (in my experience) like to level at Platonism, that it is simply Gnosticism. But his chapters on the theological & Christian imagination are good and evocative. This idea that there are levels of being is Platonic. And the idea that limitations are good is one a Platonist can work with, as long as we can still admit that there can be immediate contact with Reality. After all, the direct contact of the mystic is a rapture; they do not ascend to it but are taken up. So for effort such as Lynch examines, there are always limitations. And only humility will give us good literature, because only humility will allow us to accept and embrace the limitations fully, with all the imagination. This is full seemly to me. For in these last chapters the ideas he advances grow in beauty. There is serenity in finding theology, the Wisdom of God, at the heart of this great division of the humanities.^o There is rest that is like coming home when one comes to the end of a book that claims the world must be understood Christianly. And it is not a narrowing claim such as one is used to hearing clumsily made by those who usually say such things. But there is all the vast promise of that far, green country Frodo glimpses on a morning after rain.

The Novice: Ultimately, I don't think that your Platonism is reconcilable with what Lynch is arguing, at least not as long as you insist upon immediate contact with the transcendent. This is the very thing that Lynch refuses to allow is possible. And I do not think that it is possible, even in the world of the mystic. When the mystic experiences God, he cannot experience all of God but only as much of God as he is capable of experiencing. But what is the finite apprehension of the infinite other than a mediated apprehension? It is mediated in the sense that the mystic is not given everything, but only that which can be contained by his own form and nature, which is the medium. Knowledge of the Deity always meets the filter of the recipient's own spiritual capacities. In this sense God must always become finite before He can approach us. We see this primarily in the Incarnation. From that point forward (or backward, if you count theophanies as being particular Christophanies), God is always apprehended by humans through the medium of the finite particular. Isn't this the meaning of John 1? "No man hath seen the Father [God the Reality, who transcends even universals] at any time; the only begotten Son [the "Particular"], who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath revealed him." "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." This much, at least, I gathered from Lynch—that in Christ the Transcendent and the finite meet and interpenetrate one another harmoniously. Combine that with the fact that "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father"—that when we know God, we know through Christ—and it becomes impossible to speak of truly "immediate contact" with the Trinity, because all must be experienced through the Infinite-in-the-Finite Christ.

Conclusion

And so we have concluded, have we not, that Lynch's book is one of those books that will bear at least a few re-readings. His arguments are good, his conclusions seem mostly sound, and they certainly provide a useful approach for evaluating literature.

^o The Novice: I am not so sure about the "Christic dimension" in literature, and the idea of everything "being" Christ. Catholics need to be more careful about how they use the "be"-verb. They have already proved themselves incapable of distinguishing its imaginative dimension from its literal one in their confusion over the Eucharist. I wonder if the mistake of Lynch and the medieval exegetes is precisely this: that they see, imaginatively, the identification of all things with Christ, and then they fail to ask themselves on which level of being that identification is real. It is like saying "The King is the State" and then concluding that the State has a stomachache because the King does.