

Setting Them Straight or the Modest Newsletter Putting It Like It Is

On the Evangelical Embrace of President George W. Bush

By Ryan J. Martin

Evangelicals, as a general rule, get very excited about having an evangelical President. It reminds me of my attitude as a small boy that I had toward *anything* I discovered was “Christian”. I would quickly run and tell my mother with glee, “Look, Mom, there’s a movie about Moses on!” Or, “Look, Mom, here’s a board game about the Bible!” American Christians tend to embrace sentimentally the idea that *misery loves company*. We have stepped out by faith and believed the gospel; now we want the intellectuals and the universities and the media and everyone else to affirm the validity of the gospel, as if their “authoritative” voice lends some kind of credence or respectability to religion.¹ It seems that it is just not quite sufficient that God himself has spoken. If any doubts that evangelicals (I am speaking in the broadest sense here) really act in this way, look at the way at which they pine after the intellectual centers of world. We bow before Cambridge and Oxford just like the rest of the world does. We will gladly disavow tenets otherwise crucial to the faith itself in order that the faith may be more acceptable to the academy.² It may just be me, but this seems to be counter-productive.

And this uncritical embrace seems to apply to the President as well. Now concerning this issue of an evangelical President of the United States, I am somewhat dismayed at the ways evangelicals unflinchingly embrace him. Right now it is currently vogue among the secular left to interpret the appeals President Bush has made to evangelicals as political (i.e., hardly genuine). It is not my intention to judge his sincerity in such gestures or comments. Yet I do intend to question his orthodoxy. Just what kind of evangelical is Mr. Bush?

For instance, consider President Bush’s comments concerning Islam. In 2001 the President said, “This year, Eid is celebrated at the same time as Hanukkah and Advent. So it's a good time for people of these great faiths, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, to remember how much we have in common: devotion to family, a commitment to care for those in need, a belief in God and His justice, and the hope for peace on earth.”³ What does this mean? I as a Christian see no real value in remembering “how much we have in common” with Islam or modern Judaism. We as Christians do *not* share a belief of God with Islam, or even with Judaism, for that matter. Consider the words of our great Founder to “Judaism”: “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God . . . You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (Jn 8:42, 44). Do the words of the President resonate with the words of the One he follows? My real problem here is not that the President said what he said, as much as that he says these things under the auspices of being a follower of Christ.

On September 10, 2002, he said, “In our war against terror, we must never lose sight of the values that makes our country so strong; the values of respect and tolerance. The value that we believe

¹On a only slightly related note, this is the only way I can explain how individuals like Kirk Cameron have any influence in evangelicalism.

²Sometimes this is more implicit than explicit. We evangelicals may be inerrantists, but we do not like to use the term.

³<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/ramadan/islam.html>, accessed 18Mar05.

that everybody ought to worship the Almighty, however they so choose.”⁴ Again the President speaks of our God as if it really does not matter how one reaches him, as long as they are making a grand go of it. But I do not believe “that everybody ought to the worship the Almighty, however they so choose.” Christians believe that everyone must bow before the Lord Jesus Christ, and if they do not in this life, they will in the next. “But what about religious freedom?” you may ask. Religious freedom was never saying that every religion was right. This is nonsensical and illogical (if every religion were true, then every religion would be wrong—religions tend to be, or at least tended to be, rather exclusive.). Religious freedom is my allowing people to be wrong, allowing them to chase after their illusions. Religious freedom is my realization that only God can work in the human heart, and that true saving faith cannot be legislated by earthly laws and rules. We cannot pass a law making everyone Christians, despite the grand dreams of Constantine.

On another occasion, while honoring the progress of the democratic efforts in Afghanistan, Mr. Bush remarked, “Islam is a vibrant faith. Millions of our fellow citizens are Muslim. We respect the faith. We honor its traditions. Our enemy does not. Our enemy don't [*sic*] follow the great traditions of Islam. They've hijacked a great religion.”⁵ What does President Bush mean when he says, “Islam is a vibrant faith”? True believers in Jesus Christ could not say something like that; they know from the joy and salvation they have known through Jesus Christ that no other faith could ever be so “vibrant.” Neither would they confess that Islam is characterized by an “alive” or “pulsating” faith. Would I be out of place to remind us that our Lord said, “I am the way, the truth, and the *life*”? And how are we supposed to “respect the [Islamic] faith”? Do we “honor [Islamic] traditions”? What honor is there in denying Christ in preference for “another prophet,” even set beside him? I as a believer could not find it within myself to make these kinds of statements.

Then, more recently were his comments about the late Pope John Paul II. Just after his death, President Bush referred to him as a “faithful servant of God.”⁶ On a 2001 visit to the Vatican, the President complimented the Pope on having “carried the message of the Gospel into 126 nations, and into the third millennium, always with courage, and with confidence. You have brought the love of God into the lives of men, and that good news is needed in every nation, and every age.”⁷ He honored John Paul II for being “the first modern Pope to enter a synagogue or visit an Islamic country. He has always combined the practice of tolerance with a passion for truth.”⁸ As for all of these comments about the pope, I believe that any evangelical who is in love

⁴<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020910-7.html>, accessed 18Mar05.

⁵<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021011-3.html>, accessed 18Mar05.

⁶<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/04/20050402-4.html>, accessed 22Apr05.

⁷<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/07/20010723-1.html>, accessed 22Apr05. President Bush had similar remarks on his April 9, 2005 radio address where he remarked, “During nearly three decades on the Chair of St. Peter, this Pope brought the gospel's message of hope and love and freedom to the far corners of the Earth” (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/04/20050409.html>, accessed 22Apr05).

⁸<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/03/20010322-14.html>, accessed 22Apr05.

with the true gospel of Jesus Christ will find themselves greatly concerned. How has the Pope been a “faithful servant of God”? Martin Luther and John Calvin would turn over in their graves to hear such statements coming from one who calls himself “an evangelical.” They would hardly see that the Pope has “carried the gospel” anywhere at all, let alone to “126 nations.” And while I acknowledge that the passing of Karol Wojtyla has left mainstream evangelicalism in something of an identity crisis,⁹ those who still ardently embrace the pure gospel of our Lord see absolutely no need for sentimentally remembering those who deny it.¹⁰ This is not to say that the President should have behaved badly in the Pope’s passing. I did not expect him to. But I do expect an evangelical to come short of affirming that the Pope was in a way doing gospel ministry.

Maybe I am just straining at gnats here, but I have serious problems with the kinds of statements given in this article. The impression received, among others, is one where God is accessed by whatever channel you choose. Let me also quickly add that President Bush has said some very good things affirming his faith in Jesus Christ.¹¹ But my main plea is for consistency. I know President Bush is a Republican, and that he has spent great energy wooing the “Christian Right.” But does this give us cause to embrace him so uncritically? If President Clinton would have said such things, they would have appeared in BJU’s “What in the World,” and we would have all bemoaned his “postmodern relativism.” Maybe we should be fair to both Republicans and Democrats. When a silly evangelical writes an article in *Christianity Today* affirming the virtue of the Roman church, we get upset, but we are much more forgiving of our President. If we criticize one, we should criticize the other for making the same kinds of comments. And may we never let our heads so spin with the trappings of power and prestige that we reject the very core foundation of our lives, the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its exclusivity and glory.

⁹See Uwe Siemon-Netto “He was My Pope, Too.”
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/114/16.0.html>.

¹⁰The Roman Catholic Church’s *Council of Trent* still echoes in our ears, whereby they anathematized “that the impious is justified by faith alone—if this means that nothing else is required by way of co-operation in the acquisition of the grace of justification, and that it is in no way necessary for a man to be prepared and disposed by the motion of his own will” (Bettenson, *Documents* 263). And we are also reminded of their veneration of Mary, doctrine of transubstantiation, infant baptism, priestly confessions, papal authority, etc.

¹¹And some bad things. Consider this statement in honor of Easter: “The universal message of Easter draws all Christian communities together. As families and friends gather to celebrate, we renew our commitment to follow the example of Jesus Christ in loving our neighbors and giving of ourselves for others” [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010413.html>, accessed 18Mar05]. That essentially says nothing.

The Experience of the Beautiful

by Deborah Forteza

(Oh, the beauty of blogging to exercise the mind!...)

In the discussion of aesthetics, people have strong feelings in favor of one of two sides. Some believe that there is no such thing as absolute beauty, and thereby relegate all things to "matters of taste." In this view, everyone has the right to an opinion and all opinions are equally valid. One person's taste may differ from another's, but both are acceptable: there is no good and bad taste. This view has some strengths. First, we recognize that beauty cannot be objective. All human beings appreciate beauty in a subjective way, and therefore, it seems impossible to argue for an objective appreciation of beauty.¹² Another strength of this view is that it advocates egalitarianism; no view is better than another, and thus, no one is accused of elitism.¹³ Though this view has certain strengths, reality does not seem to correspond to this position. For example, any normal human being would have to acknowledge that a rainbow is beautiful. This seems to imply that there is something within man that intuitively tells him that something about rainbows is universally beautiful and that no one who has a soul should deny this. Now those who hold to the absence of absolute beauty would argue that some individuals indeed do deny the beauty of rainbows. While this is true, experience seems to corroborate that these individuals are either perverted or insane. Therefore, the question of why all men agree to the beauty of rainbows remains unanswered under the view that no such thing as absolute beauty exists.¹⁴

A second weakness of this view derives from what some people would deem one of its strengths: its egalitarianism. If indeed all sane men agree to the beauty of rainbows, and one perverted man attempted to deny this proposition, then this view does not provide a mechanism whereby to correct the fallacy of the pervert. In fact, this viewpoint is not even concerned about the reality of the beauty of the rainbow, because the pervert's opinion that the rainbow is ugly is just as valid as an affirmation that it is beautiful. Now this may be inconsequential to unbelievers, but this view presents a glaring problem for Christians. Whereas the unbeliever can fall into a rejection of truth without further consequences, a believer's rejection of truth forces him to deny something about God's revelation. If all truth is God's truth, then truth is vitally connected to God. For example, an unbeliever can affirm that roses are ugly without further consequence; yet when the Christian affirms that flowers are ugly he is denying God's truth. We know that roses are beautiful because this resonates in the souls of men of all times and places. Sometimes, God Himself points out in the Scriptures some things that are beautiful, for example, flowers.¹⁵ All of these factors seem to indicate that a Christian, of all people, should not affirm that there is no such thing as beauty that is absolute.

The believer, therefore, can hold to a second view with respect to beauty: the belief that there is absolute beauty. Those who hold this view assert that there is absolute beauty which

¹² Can a human being do anything objectively?

¹³ Elitism seems to be a bad word nowadays. [Editorial insertion: it is not so much a bad word, it seems to our sagacious editors, as it is a good word very badly used]

¹⁴ By the same token, this view does not explain the consensus among men concerning ugly and repulsive things.

¹⁵ Evidence of this is found, for example, in Christ's affirmation that Solomon's beautiful garments could not compare to the beauty of the lilies of the field (Mt.6:28-29).

dictates which things should seem beautiful and which should not.¹⁶ The Christian believes that God is the author of beauty, and therefore, it would seem logical that the Christian should also believe that beauty can be absolute. If beauty is within God's essence, then to the degree that a particular corresponds to this absolute, to that extent will it be beautiful. Although beauty can exist absolutely and does, man's appreciation of beauty is subjective.¹⁷ One significant problem in the discipline of aesthetics is the following: that because of man's sinfulness, no man is able to know exactly the whole of beauty in its absolute form. In other words, man cannot judge beauty accurately in every instance in the same way that he cannot know the whole counsel of God.

Herein lies the problem: while the standard exists, man may be able to discern it in some instances, but he does not know it in all instances, and therefore man will subjectively employ his flawed understanding of the standard when judging whether a particular is beautiful. Because God has revealed to man certain things that are beautiful and has created man in His image, man has a rough idea of what beauty consists in. By learning to appreciate these beautiful things, man may understand more thoroughly what beauty entails.¹⁸ If this is true, then, man should not look for objective criteria in beauty (though some may become apparent), but rather he should seek a personal acquaintance with beauty in all of its variegated manifestations.¹⁹

A Quotation

found by Jillian Ross

First, God has assuredly promised his grace to the humble (I Peter 5:5), that is, to those who lament and despair of themselves. But no man can be thoroughly humbled until he knows that his salvation is utterly beyond his powers, devices, endeavors, will, and works, and depends entirely on the choice, will, and work of another, namely, of God alone. For as long as he is persuaded that he himself can do even the least thing toward his salvation, he retains some self-confidence and does not altogether despair of himself, and therefore he is not humbled before God, but presumes that there is – or at least hopes or desires that there may be – some place, time, and work for him, by which he may at length attain to salvation. But when a man has no doubt that everything depends on the will of God, then he completely despairs of himself and chooses nothing for himself, but waits for God to work; then he has come close to grace, and can be saved.

— Martin Luther, *On the bondage of the Will* (p.137 of the LCC edition).

¹⁶ If a man, then, looks at a particular and sees it as beautiful when in reality it is not, then he has bad taste.

¹⁷ As asked before, can man do anything objectively?

¹⁸ In other words, man needs to develop good taste.

¹⁹ Thank you, Joel for this phrase (and the rest of the help on this paper, and Rachel also for her thought provoking questions and comments)!

Lilith Read
by Joel Zartman

George MacDonald's works always end in a way that is very satisfying. At least, I have always found the way he ends his stories very satisfying, even, and especially, *The Princess and Curdie*. The last chapter of *Lilith* is worth printing out and having framed, along with quotations from Jonathan Edwards and John Owen and such worthy reminders. To me, the conclusion of the book is so good that it outweighs the fact that all the book is a sustained argument for Universalism. Fortunately, MacDonald is not so concerned with making a point as he is with making a story.

Perhaps I am wrong in this surmise, but it seems to me whenever people have misguided points to make, but subordinate them to the interest of making a good story, they undermine their misguided point. I have found this to be true in reading Ursula K Le Guin whose dualistic ideology is not allowed to take over the telling of the story, for all that it governs the plot (*The Left Hand of Darkness* & the *Earthsea* trilogy). A reverse illustration would be Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, for at least to me, it was a real drag. There should have been less lecturing and more bug zapping action.

Perhaps you can help me in this regard, for I am still ambivalent regarding a good story that tries to perpetrate a bad point. It is κάλος- well crafted or beautiful, but is it also αγαθος - good? Here is the heart of the trouble in MacDonald's words:

“Nothing will ever close that wound,” he answered, with a sigh “It must eat into her heart! Annihilation itself is no death to evil. Only good where evil was, is evil dead. An evil thing must live with its evil until it chooses to be good. That alone is the slaying of evil.” (153)

In order for good to triumph, all evil must be purged out, and so every person and creature must at last be made good. Every evil thing must choose to be good at last or the battle goes on. I have a theory that this is another variety of dualism (perhaps I smell dualism too much, but it is such a popular explanation that it is hard to avoid smelling). I think it is dualism because of the high and significant permanence that evil is given. Where my theory founders is when Lewis gets a hold of the ideas of George MacDonald and helps him draw the logical conclusions to disprove universalism. In the ninth chapter of *The Great Divorce* Lewis meets George MacDonald. By the thirteenth chapter their conversation comes around to Universalism, and it seems to me that if you put it all together what the character of MacDonald says is that Universalism is untenable because our choices must have real consequences. There has to be an eternal and infinite consequence for the rejection of an eternal and infinite good.

When it comes to consequences, good books are that way. They have to work according to the true rules in order to be truly good whether the author consciously realizes this or not. This is what I think saves them, for while living in the prison of the body, they somehow have a hold on the idea. It is a very Platonic and anti-universalist notion. Speaking of Plato, I'd like to close with a Platonic quotation that is worthwhile but not altogether germane:

We stood for a moment at the gate whence issued roaring the radiant river. I know not whence came the stones that fashioned it, but among them I saw the prototypes of all the gems I had loved on earth—far more beautiful than they, for these were living stone—such in which I saw, not the intent alone, but the intender too, not the idea alone, but the imbodier present, the operant outsender: nothing in this kingdom was dead, nothing was mere, nothing only a thing (250).