

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7844 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

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MYTHS, LIES AND RELIGIOUS STUPIDITY

Sometime ago John Stossel, ABC 20/20 anchorman and consumer advocate released a book entitled *Myths, Lies And Downright Stupidity* in which he discussed various untruths most people accept without question. Columnist Walter Williams' comment on the book was: "John Stossel exposes the false basis for the public fright often caused by uninformed media and academic elite." Recently author Gary DeMar wrote a book entitled *Myths, Lies, and Half-Truths* in which he discusses "the flawed thinking many Christians have learned from a secular culture bent on minimizing the influence of God's kingdom on earth". The flawed thinking of those who are "adulterating the Word of God" (II Cor. 4:2), is running rampant in the religious world today. C.S. Lewis in *An Experiment in Criticism* shows how "myths have the power to captivate the imagination, move people and exercise great power over them". When we read the Greek and Roman myths we wonder how anyone could be captivated by such absurd stories. Yet a greater wonder is how so many Christians today are captivated and turned aside to myths concerning the Scriptures. Myths can be detrimental to the faith when they are substituted for the truth. Webster describes a myth as "a traditional story of historical events that serves to unfold a view of a people, a practice or belief, a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone, an unfounded or false notion". The danger of myths in relation to Scripture is that they have a basis in truth, but are embellished and twisted until they become accepted as the truth itself. Many Christians who have never studied the Bible for themselves on a subject will accept and adamantly defend a myth as the truth. The Apostle Paul warns: "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn aside to myths. (II Tim. 4:3). He further warns that there will be those "speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron" (I Tim. 4:2).

There are numerous myths concerning the Bible that are harmless and in no way affect our salvation, such as the belief that the fruit in the garden was an apple (no fruit is specified), that Jonah was swallowed by a whale (it was a "great fish") and that angels have wings (they do not), that Delilah cut Samson's hair (she "called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of hair" Judges 16:19), that Jesus sweat great drops of blood ("His sweat became *like* drops of blood" Luke 22:44), that there were three magi (the number is not stated in Scripture) and they visited baby Jesus the night of his birth (When they arrived Mary and Joseph were in a house, Matt. 2:11). There is little danger in Christians believing these myths, but there is a danger when we adopt myths as truths in areas of little importance we will adopt myths in areas of great importance.

Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in an interesting book entitled *More Jesus Less Religion* discusses three myths the church has to deal with today: The myth of problem-free living basically says that when people accept Christ this causes all problems to vanish. A strong faith will protect you from problems and pain. The myth of "instant peace" this myth, they say, "denies reality by saying 'if I'm truly faithful, I will not experience grief, sorrow, anger, or confusion in the face of tragedy or loss. Instead, I will keep my chin up, my eyes dry, my lips smiling, so others will see how strong I am as a Christian. When tragedy strikes, true believers should have real peace about it.'" The third myth is the Pollyanna myth which says "Everything that happens to me is good". Although God allows "bad" things He does not cause them. He produces something good from bad things that happen but He does not cause them in the life of the Christian.

Myths, Lies and Religious Stupidity are not something peculiar to our generation. Bernard McGinn, professor of Historical Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School has written a book entitled *Anti-Christ, Two Thousand Years Of The Human Fascination With Evil* in which he traces ridiculous beliefs concerning prophecy and the anti-Christ from the days of the "Church Fathers" (who lived a generation or so after the Apostles) down to our present day. Church Father Hippolytus (A.D. 170-236) predicted the world would end in A.D. 500, based on his analysis of the dimensions of Noah's Ark. A prime example of early religious idiocy is found in Augustine's *The City Of God* where he states "the Nicene Council (directed by Constantine in 324) decreed that all Christians must stand when praying on Sunday or during the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost." Also Constantine proclaimed that the Nicene Creed was inspired by God. Augustine wrote Constantine proclaimed "That which has commended itself to the judgment of three hundred bishops cannot be other than the doctrine of God; seeing the Holy Spirit dwelling in the minds of so many dignified persons has effectively enlightened them respecting the divine will". Attributing certain actions to Divine revelation is a common tactic of the purveyors of the ridiculous today. James Eugene Ewing, who was the father of the "seed faith" program introduced by Oral Roberts decades ago, and successfully used by such shysters as T. L. Osborn, Robert Tilton, and "Rev. Ike", sent thousands of letters to gullible believers telling them "God's Holy Spirit instructed us to send Bible faith handkerchiefs to people's homes and as a result, miracles of blessings occur". They were instructed to place the handkerchief under their side of the bed and the "power of heaven" would descend on the person after they mailed their needs to his ministry. One mailing included a \$10,000.00 "faith check" with God as the bank president, Christ as the bank vice president and the Holy Spirit as the bank treasurer, which was "to be placed in your wallet until blessings unfold". With computer created letters and electronic mass mailings few Christians are exempt from such mailings today.

We may frown on the tactics of such connoisseurs of the ridiculous as James Ewing and his money raising schemes, but running him a close second is the fact that the modern church has become a cadre of fundraisers and an organization of beggars. Jesus Christ does not beg. Why, then, does his body, his representatives beg. Preachers spend much pulpit time begging for “freewill offerings”. The church does not need freewill offerings; it needs “predestinated giving”. Beggars are a pathetic sight to see. The American church has no power and little influence because they are beggars. No one pays a great deal of attention to organizations that have so little discipline that they must spend huge amounts of time begging for money. The identifying mark of failure in life is begging. It is an accepted custom for congregations to make down payments on buildings then struggle for twenty years to make mortgage payments, calling it “supporting the work of the Lord” (the Lord that dwells not in temples made by man’s hands). No wonder the myth of an imminent rapture is so popular. The rapture would relieve God’s people from the pressure of paying off heavy debts.

Prophecy preachers have for years stamped deep impressions on the hopes and fears of sincere people with their presentation of myths, lies and idiocy regarding the so-called rapture, the anti-Christ, the great tribulation, rebuilding the temple, the Middle East wars, the second coming of Christ, the end of the world, the birth of a red heifer in Israel (an event which tantalized many modern prophecy preachers and was reported at length in *Newsweek*), the Y2K scare, and a host of tantalizing tales of the terrestrial. We do not have to read professor McGinn’s book *Anti-Christ, Two Thousand Years Of The Human Fascination With Evil* to know this. In our own day we have heard Pat Robertson in his 1995 fundraiser for the 700 Club warn that “your dollars may not do any good in five years...” Jack Van Impe, popular Bible prophecy teacher said the world will end between “2001 and 2012”, In 1926 Oswald J. Smith, a leading missionary statesman of his day set the date of the Antichrist and Armageddon as 1933. Then there is, of course, Hal Lindsey’s best selling prophecy books beginning with *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1977 in which he warned readers to “make no plans beyond 1985” and continuing with his latest works of fiction, saying the same things, only changing the dates. John F. Walvoord, former president of Dallas Theological Seminar authored the book *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crises* in 1974 and revised it in 1990 to correct some false prophecies, predicted that a ten-nation Mediterranean confederacy was about to arise whose leader would force Israel to make peace with the Arabs and this, he wrote “will mark the end of the time of the Gentiles and the beginning of the final years of history”. What more can we say about Chuck Smith (1981), Edgar Wisenant (1988 then 1989) Charles Dyer (Oct. 28, 1992), Herold Camping (1984) and a host of other date-setters and prophets of doom and the latest: *Left Behind* series. William M. Alnor in *Soothsayers Of The Second Advent* stated it well: “Soothsayers have done damage to immature believers and many have been wounded by numerous false predictions”.

The world has enough reason to reject, resist and ridicule the church today when you consider some of the sensational shenanigans of some religious groups, and listen to the shallow and mediocre preaching from many of our pulpits. Just when you think that carnal religion has reached its lowest point of the ridiculous, something else appears on the horizon. In the realm of the spiritual twilight zone we witnessed, not so long ago, the craze concerning angels. Shelves on religious bookstores were filled with books on angels. The December 27, 1993 issue of *Time Magazine* graced their cover with a full-winged, baby faced, female angel and devoted at least eight full pages plus illustrations to the subject of angels. The article stated that “suddenly the heavenly host is upon us, and in this New Age a grass-roots revolution of the spirit has all sorts of people asking all sorts of questions about angels”. The *Watchman Expositor* said: “Americans are seeking supernatural information from encounters with angels. Many, including Christians, claim to have learned doctrine from the heavenly messengers”.

Another example of the idiocy of religious ridiculousness was the rage of the *Bible Code*. The so called Bible Code claimed that for three thousand years a code in the Bible had remained hidden. Now it has been unlocked by computer and it supposedly revealed the future. It was said the code foretold both Kennedy assassinations, the Oklahoma City bombing, the election of Bill Clinton and everything from World War II to Watergate, from the Holocaust to Hiroshima, the moon landing to the collision of a comet with Jupiter. At least four books on the Code appeared on religious bookstore shelves: *The Bible Code* by Michael Drosnin, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, three by prophecy preachers: *Cracking the Bible Code* by Jeffrey Satinover, *The Signature of God* by Grant Jeffrey, and *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* by Bruce Metzger.

Another plunge into the ridiculous was recorded by the September 17 issue of *The Charlotte Observer* in an interview with left-leaning evangelical Baptist author and preacher, Tony Campolo, who was President Clinton’s spiritual advisor. Campolo followed Jim Ball’s silly fad, WWJD (What would Jesus do? And later what would Jesus drive?) and answered the question: What would Jesus do about Iraq and other issues such as: Gays and Lesbians, Abortion, The death penalty and Muslims. His answer as to what Jesus would do would have pleased any liberal left-wing politician.

It is not just Evangelicals and Fundamentalist that is connoisseurs of religious idiocy. A prime example is the movement in the Roman Catholic Church, widely publicized by *Newsweek*, urging the Pope to proclaim Mary as co-redeemer. Also on the internet, *Ynet news.com* was a recent article with the by line “The hassidim are flying to Uman,” which stated: “12,000 Israelis will travel for Rosh Hashana to the grave of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov in the Ukrainian city of Uman, where the essence will be the Rosh Hashana prayers on the grave of the righteous Breslov”.

