

September 2003

September 2

Last month the Department of Education issued guidelines explaining for colleges and universities what harassment is and is not. Apparently some people thought that any time someone disagrees they're guilty of harassment. Said one observer, "This is a generation that has been taught that they have the right not to be offended. But if you teach students that they should never have their beliefs challenged, you're really undoing the process of education." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, August 14, 2003; A14).

Have you let your spiritual maturation become a victim of political correctness? Do you entertain only those religious ideas that make you feel good and never challenge you? Theologian Leonard Sweet says one of the reasons we have so much conflict in churches today is because we hang out only with people who agree with us. (Detroit Free Press, August 6, 2003; 3B)

Two centuries ago a French churchman, Francois Fenelon, wrote, "We should not seek those emotional publications which melt and sentimentalize the heart. We love ourselves under the pretense of loving God" ("Talking with God," p.8). Maybe that's why a good sermon comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

September 3, 2003

Just like everything else, Christian group activities that slowed down for summer are getting back into high gear.

I'm thinking about many who are getting back to weekly Bible class sessions...Back to regular times of group prayer...Back to business lunches, some which begin with spoken prayers...Back to conversations with believers about Christian casuistry...How should I as a person of faith handle this difficult issue? Back to that struggle of swimming upstream against forces that care little about morality and God.

What I've said is true for many of us, but the people I especially have in mind are many of the people who work in Washington D.C. Congress returns to work today. Throughout the federal government there is a lively Christian presence. Senators, congressmen, staffers, lobbyists, police...All quietly going about their work as sincere followers of Jesus Christ. All living examples that "My word that goes out from My mouth...will not return to Me empty" (Isaiah 55:11). Media won't report it, but I've seen it. Truth is, I've seen more engaged Christianity in Washington D.C. than I've seen in some congregations.

September 4, 2003

Paul Hill was willing to be executed for murdering an abortion doctor. "I expect a great reward in heaven."

St. Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men," an often invoked principle when state and religion are in conflict (Acts 5:29). But Peter said that when authorities had forbidden verbal witness to Jesus Christ. In his first epistle Peter urged persecuted Christians to obey God's commandments so that people outside the faith would find no grounds to criticize the conduct of followers of Jesus.

Obeying God becomes an idiosyncratic thing when you're not willing to obey the institutions God has established. Government is such an institution and it's authorized to punish evil through force (1Peter 2:14; Romans 13:7). How can a person take upon himself a function that God has given only to the government? To defend innocent life, Hill said, but spontaneous self-defense is different than Hill's premeditated killing. If the government is wrong, Peter says, "those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (4:19). I haven't found where the Bible authorizes us to become vigilantes for God.

September 5, 2003

Two blocks west or five blocks south. When I grew up, both sets of grandparents were close to home and we visited them all the time. I don't remember when it happened, but sometime this little kid figured out that Grandpa and Grandma actually were the parents of my parents. Those authority figures telling me how to live my life? They were kids too. They reprimand me? Hey, they were reprimanded by their parents. "Don't slam the door when you go out!" I bet they got yelled at for that too. Wow, was that great when it dawned on me that my parents were just grown up kids.

Sunday is "Grandparents Day." We didn't need an artificial day back then. We were at Grandma's and Grandpa's all the time and we truly did show them the greatest of respect. After all, they deserved it. They had to raise our parents! Moral of the story: Young moms and dads, with all your parenting books and parenting tapes, don't be obsessive about perfect parenting. If they haven't already, your kids will soon figure out that you were a kid too.

September 8, 2003

Since His eye is on the sparrow (Matthew 10:29), God sees you as a father sees his child (Psalm 103:13).

Unemployed? It hasn't been easy, but He's brought you this far and will help the rest of the way (1Kings 17:7-16).

Family is disarray? David was a man after God's heart but his son Absalom rebelled against him. "Call upon Me in the day of trouble" (Psalm 50:14).

Have you been lied to, slandered? "Their flattering lips speak with deception" (Psalm 12:2).

Whatever, He sees...and sometimes looks at you as He looked at Peter, sadly. You got yourself in this pickle. Will you admit it? But no means look from Him. Some stress the sovereignty of God. True, God is sovereign, but the dominant theme of

the biblical revelation is His presence, His compassion, His self-expression in His Son, the Man of Sorrows.

"Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap" (Psalm 113:5-7).

September 9, 2003

I hope you find this as encouraging as I do. I'm a professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis where Job#1 is training pastors for the church. There's been no lack of bad news for Christian churches. The sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. The gay bishop scandal in the Episcopal Church. Last week "USA Today" ran a story about battles over worship styles...contemporary or liturgical worship?...in my own denomination, the Lutheran Church -Missouri Synod. I could go on with more examples of bad news, but I have only this Minute.

Sunday Concordia Seminary began its 165th academic year with 178 new students and pushes our total enrollment toward 600.

"Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me...put into practice" (Philippians 4:8-9).

Our surging enrollment is encouragement that God has Good News for our hurting world.

September 10, 2003

Robert Fox escaped from the World Trade Center. "I will not want to live through this again," he wrote. "I will not want to wake up in a sweat from dreams about this. I don't want to watch the news again, to hear body counts...I don't want to let the emotions catch up to me and leave me a sobbing mess in the corner of a darkened room, but I know that I have no choice." (Allison Bottke, American Moments, p. 246)

At one level we don't want to go through this again, but at a deeper level of soul we know we must. We cannot forget how terrible evil is. The people fleeing the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center were covered with a grayish-white powder. That's the color of sheep, scared sheep fleeing evil. The remembrance of that evil reawakens our fears, makes our hearts race. "Come unto Me," says the Good Shepherd (Matthew 11:28). His life was and is a struggle against evil and God's righteous ways will win out.

Mr. Fox added, "I will pray as I have never prayed before." May we all.

September 11, 2003

We remember...

170 guests and workers were trapped in "Windows on the World," the restaurant on the 106th floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center. Christine Olender, an assistant to the restaurant's general manager, telephoned Port Authority police. "The fresh air is going down fast! I'm not exaggerating." "Ma'am, I know you're not exaggerating."

On the 64th floor of the same building, Patrick Hoey was told, "Stay near the stairwells and wait for the police to come up." Patrick and those with him waited for an hour and an half. He called again, "The smoke is getting kind of bad. We are contemplating going down the stairwell. Does that make sense?" "Yes. Try to get out," said the police. "All right. Bye," said Mr. Hoey.

There are countless more sad stories. We shall always remember.

"If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? The Lord tests the righteous, but His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. The Lord is righteous; He loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold His face." (Psalm 11:3, 5, 8)

September 12, 2003

What have you learned in the two years since 9-11?

My own list goes like this:

1. Evil exists and there are people who serve evil in ways both big and small.
2. Reason and love are not guaranteed to stop evil.
3. The purpose of the government is to use coercion and force to restrain evil.
4. Our government survived 9-11, which is one answer to the question, Where was God?
5. Our particular form of government needs involved citizens. Unfortunately, many are in selfish nah-nah land.
6. The church didn't have a lot of answers for what happened, a reminder that finally we live by faith, not by sight.
7. Theology, seeking to learn about God, is more imperative for all of us than ever.
8. What the church did have and demonstrated was countless acts of compassion.
9. In view of all that's happened, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ takes on renewed significance.
10. There is no reason for any one of us to be living without purpose.

That's what I've learned the past two years. What about you?

September 15, 2003

Monday, when you're back to the noise of life, it can be difficult to listen to just one person, to hear that one important voice amidst all the other voices. Phone calls, voice mail. E-mails, instant messages, snail mails. Beepers and Blackberries. Conversations on the run, interruptions. Too many voices, too much clamor.

The key to inner peace is to hear Christ's voice above all others. "I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Salvation is a gift, a grace given by God, not the result of our busy-ness, as important as today's busy-ness may be. Shutting out the clamor, the demands, even people some moments every hour is the only way to hear the one quiet, calming voice, to be graced with peace. When Solomon prayed for wisdom, he did not exhaust God's supply and neither can you.

In life's bewildering strife and eager rush

I lose so much of Thy sweet gentleness;

But in the peace and solace of this hush

Strengthen and sooth me with Thy blessedness;

Give to me what Thou wilt; here at Thy side,

Whate'er it be, I shall be satisfied.

September 16, 2003

It was wartime. The British had already burned Washington D.C. and now unleashed a horrific bombardment against Fort McHenry, the fort guarding the approach to Baltimore. Watching that 25-hour bombardment, a young Washington lawyer, Francis Scott Key, began a poem that he finished the evening of September 16, 1814. We call it, "the Star-Spangled Banner."

It's so easy for us to forget that the poem was written in a time of great anxiety, "a perilous night." Can you see? Is our flag still there? Those were no rhetorical questions then. That terrible assault could have taken the flag, the fort, and even the nation.

Key later wrote, "Through the clouds of the war the stars of that banner still shone in my view, and I saw the discomfited host of its assailants driven back in ignominy to their ships. Then, in the hour of deliverance, and joyful triumph, my heart spoke."

For over two centuries the price of our deliverance has been great. Truly, the flag would not wave today were it not for the kindness of heaven upon us. God, make us a nation of stronger character after Your righteousness.

September 17, 2003

Typos happen. Last Sunday I preached for my friend, Pastor Jim Rogers, in suburban St. Louis and there was a telling typo in one of the songs printed in the worship folder. "My Savior, my closet friend." Is Jesus your closet friend or your closest friend?

Another friend is Paul Clayton of Christian radio station, KFYO.AM. As the morning on-air personality, Paul has the job of beginning the broadcast day. That includes a lot of little details that we commoners know nothing about. Paul told me that he had signed on early in the morning a few weeks ago and began the broadcast day, playing Christian songs and doing Christian talk. Ten minutes or so later, a regular listener called the studio. "Paul, have you turned on the transmitter?"

If you and I have a meaningful message of faith, is the transmitter turned on for this Wednesday?

"In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15).

September 18, 2003

Back in science class, did you ever hand in an experiment and attribute the results to God? Of course not. A scientific understanding of the world depends upon natural cause and effect, things which we can discover and quantify. So when the media reports on Isabel, we hear about the natural phenomena of the storm, not about God.

Read the Bible, however, and you find yourself in a different worldview. "The Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and...a violent storm arose" (Jonah 1:4). The Lord's "way is in the whirlwind and the storm" (Nahum 1:3).

Two different worldviews...do they leave you spiritually schizophrenic? Is God involved or not? If God is to be relevant to your life in our scientific age, there must be some places where He steps into the closed world of scientific cause and effect and makes a difference. The Bible suggests several breakthrough places: The coming of His Son into flesh, sacraments, biblical revelation itself. And sometimes, if He so chooses, He can reach down and calm a storm like Isabel. Is your God involved?

September 19, 2003

A follow-up from my town of Collinsville, Illinois. A good while ago an adult book store tried to open at a prominent location in town. City officials, following their own convictions and the will of most citizens, used rezoning to block the attempt. Of course, the city was taken to court.

Last Tuesday a federal judge ruled in favor of the city. Collinsville city attorney Steve Giacoletto said, "We're elated...This case is about porn, pure and simple, not about forefathers fighting for free speech. In the food chain, porn is at the bottom." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 17, 2003; B1,4). Should there be an appeal, Giacoletto said, "The city will maintain its position for as long as it takes."

People can take a stand for moral values and win. Ask yourself, "Am I doing something in my life that makes a difference for the community's good?" If you believe in evolution, your presence here and now is pretty much a fluke. If, on the other hand, you believe in a Creator who put you here, you have divine purpose. You are not at the bottom of the food chain.

September 22, 2003

Chris Sayer of Greenwood, S.C. said, "I'm a Christian and it's against God's word for two people of the same sex to be married" (The Charlotte Observer, September 14, 2003; B1).

Most Americans are opposed to gay marriage and many, like Mr. Sayer, for Biblical reasons. Believers often throw up their hands in despair because the separation of church and state forbids biblical arguments in the public square.

No problem. Rational reasons abound for staying with traditional morality. Should the state go against millennia of history, should the state go against common sense, should the state presume to redefine a public institution, marriage, then no family life will be safe. Let the government redefine marriage, and you've given it precedent to dictate much more about how you and your family must live.

A "Federal Marriage Amendment" to the Constitution has been introduced in Congress. It defines marriage as between a man and a woman. Find out about it. Talk it up. The possibility of gay marriage is like an Isabel, threatening havoc to our most basic institution. Unlike Isabel, we can avert this destruction.

September 23, 2003

I still remember the blazing hot sun and the squishy ground beneath my feet from the recent rain. It was 25 years ago when church members took their young pastor to the Farm Progress Show.

Today the 50th annual Farm Progress Show opens on 1,500 acres northwest of Danville, Illinois. There will be some 360 exhibitors, showing off the latest in farm equipment, the newest seeds, field techniques, computer programs, and of course, a country music concert. Bring your check book and you can buy a combine, a silo, or a milking parlor. Financing available on the spot.

Most media isn't going to cover this, of course. We take for granted the miracle of American agriculture. For that matter, most of us take food for granted. How many of us are in the habit of saying grace before our meals? When TV shows us adults in underdeveloped countries scrambling for food, do we think that our national epidemic of obesity might reveal more than just a health problem? "Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good" (Psalm 135)...and let us help those whose table is bare.

P.S. I'll be leading a tour to Germany next August 5-15. If you'd be interested in learning more, call Luther Tours at 1-888-458-8486.

September 24, 2003

"Are You Ready to Really Understand Abortion?" That's the title of Daryl Chen's article in the September issue of "Glamour" magazine and it's well worth reading. Chen writes about some abortion providers who call themselves the "November Gang." They offer intensive counseling to women who come to their clinics, and that counseling often includes spirituality. "What would you say to God right now? What do you think God would say back to you?" "When women request it," Chen writes, they can "pray over their fetuses, and even perform 'ad hoc' baptisms" (p.295). I wonder, is that compassionate...or cynical?

This approach of the November Gang is not appreciated by all. Chen writes, "Mainstream abortion rights proponents don't think that much candor is helpful" (p.295).

This article doesn't take sides, so both pro-choicers and pro-lifers can find justification for their respective and opposite positions. That said, the article also shows that some abortion providers have come to acknowledge that pro-life concerns about the emotional and spiritual well-being of the mother are valid. Here's hoping they'll keep coming to the conclusion that abortion is not the answer.

September 25, 2003

Along a walking path around Lake Harriet in Minneapolis, you can see a little, six-inch door at the base of a hollowed-out ash tree. That's the home of "Mr. Little Guy," an elf who took up residence there eight years ago. A path has been beaten to the door by children who bring letters to Mr. Little Guy, 1,500 of them a year, and every one gets answered.

AP reporter Gregg Aamot interviewed Mr. Little Guy, a 51-year-old family man who remains anonymous. "I don't think that all kids think they have somebody in their corner, so Mr. Little Guy is just a guy that's in their corner...Every letter finishes with 'I believe in you'" (Chicago Tribune, August 27, 2003; Sec. 2, pp. 1,8).

Compare that to this quotation from the September issue of Glamour magazine. Micaela wrote, "Deciding to have the abortion was a huge eye-opener. This may sound strange, but I felt I knew the being I was carrying. I felt he was my son. I even called him Ernesto. And Ernesto was my reminder that life was significant and that having an abortion was putting my life first" (Glamour, September 2003, p. 293).

September 26, 2003

To our Jewish friends, we say, "Happy New Year!" Rosh Hashanah begins this evening at sundown.

So this evening an observant Jew will pray, "Blessed are You Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this day." How often do Christian New Year's revelers delight to say such a prayer?

The highlight of Rosh Hashanah is the prayer of Unitaneh Tokef..."Who shall live and who shall die, who shall see ripe age and who shall not, who shall perish by fire and

who by water..." (George Robinson, "Essential Judaism," p. 94). Sober stuff. How many Christians think sober thoughts on New Year's?

Christians sometimes show ourselves hard-hearted and arrogant in speaking about what we believe. That's wrong (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). While biblically-based Christians believe Jesus is the only way to heaven (John 14:6), we can learn much from our Jewish brothers and sisters. Our Lord came from Judaism (Romans 1:3). Today they usher in their new year with devotion centered on their life before God. We can all learn from that devotion.

September 29, 2003

No reason for you to know this when you plunged into the new week, but in the calendar of the Christian church today is the day of "St. Michael and All Angels".

The archangel Michael shows up in the biblical books of Daniel (10:13-21, 12:1), Jude (9), and in Revelation 12:7-9, "There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down-that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."

Michael is our protector. Indeed, that's the task God's given to all the good angels. "He will command His angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:11).

Angels aren't objects of worship but servants of God. They get only one day of honor in the church calendar. Good thing God has them on duty more than one day a year for you and me.

September 30, 2003

The Washington Times reported that the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals recently sided with a New Jersey school saying a kindergarten student could not hand out pencils with the message "Jesus loves the little children." The school and court criticized the mother.

That surfaces two different theological views. Do we wait for a child to reach some age to make its own religious choices, or should parents instill religious viewpoints and practices in their children from infancy on?

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all our strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children." (Deuteronomy 6:5-6)

The position of the school and circuit court reminds me of communist countries where individual expressions of Christianity in public were discouraged and punished. The result was the vitality of both faith and national life tanked.

The wall of separation between church and state is a good thing but we need to allow a few windows in that wall so we can see both sides.

The court's decision is being appealed.

P.S. I've been thinking about publishing my Minutes in book form. Any thoughts?