

FOOLS RUSH IN WHERE MONKEYS FEAR TO TREAD

December 2009

SOME WEEKS AGO a friend forwarded me a link to the blog of an American Christian academic. Now, at the risk of protesting too much, I must stress that I don't read blogs—I really don't read blogs—unless, that is, they are sent to me by someone else. Sufficient to my own life is the tedium and banality contained therein; I really have no interest in compounding such with the tedium and banality contained in the lives of other people.

This blog, however, caught my eye, not so much for the specific post to which I had been referred, but because, as I glanced in boredom at the various other posts this person had archived, I noted that part of the stock-in-trade of this particular chap was criticism of Reformed evangelicals as smug and arrogant. This did not bother me, nor did the lack of imagination: hitting the Reformed in such a way in today's Emergent circles is a bit like calling Obama a "Marxist" in a speech to a branch meeting of the

John Birch Society—you may not actually know what you are talking about, but the crowd will love it, and you certainly won't have to buy your own drinks at the bar afterward.

What amused me was not the obvious playing to the gallery; no, what was so funny was the self-description in the little bar off to the side, where I was assured that the gent concerned was “a widely-recognized authority” in his own field, a “witty speaker,” and a figure of some importance, with appearances everywhere from national radio and TV to local churches. The irony was clearly lost on the author—railing against Reformed smugness on one half of the web page, while describing himself as a very witty and important person on the other; but, hey, sensitivity to the ironic is generally not a strong point of the Earnest But “Witty” Progressive Brigade.

Now, it is one thing to have others write commendations of you for a book cover or conference brochure—perhaps necessary evils in the cut-throat world of publishing and conferences; and nobody should believe them, least of all the objects of such patent flannel; but to say it about yourself implies that you might actually believe the propaganda, that maybe you yourself are just a wee bit arrogant and smug. And, remember, this chap wasn't even Reformed. I shudder to think how much worse he might be if he endorsed the Westminster Standards or the Three Forms of Unity. One can only assume that the kind of man who describes himself on his own website as “witty” is likely to be the same kind of man who laughs at his own jokes and, quite probably, applauds himself at the end of his own speeches—behavior that was previously the exclusive preserve of politicians, Hollywood stars, and chimpanzees.

Yet this example is just one more piece of Christian absurdity in this topsy-turvy world where anything is now possible. What

next, I wonder? Will black become white? Will the pope cease to be Catholic? Will woodland bears start to use public conveniences? And will Dutch people start listing Belgium as their first choice destination for holidays? Indeed, on the same day I received the above link, I was directed by another friend to a website where an individual had put up on a social network page a public announcement that he was “humbled” by a reference to himself or herself on a well-known theologian’s blog. Curiouser and curiouser, I thought: being humbled usually involves becoming more self-effacing, making oneself more invisible, bringing less attention to oneself. At least, that’s what the Oxford Dictionary implies; but, hey-ho, maybe Webster’s is different?

This person had no doubt asked himself how he might best demonstrate this self-effacement. “Perhaps I should send a private note of thanks to the person concerned, expressing quiet appreciation for his kind reference to me,” he no doubt reflected; but then, suddenly, a light bulb must have clicked on in his head—“No. I know what I’ll do. I’ll announce my humility on my Facebook page! Surely it is hard to imagine a more humble and less attention-seeking move? And, yes, while I’m logged on, I’ll also mention it on the very web page where said well-known theologian originally puffed me, just to make sure that everybody knows how humbled I truly am.”

Don’t laugh—this really happened, and, what’s more, the absurdity of the story does not end there. The well-known theologian’s website to which our humble friend had taken us also contained a link to another person’s site, this time to a recorded interview with—guess who?—the well-known theologian himself! The subject? The importance of the books written by himself! ’Tis true—for you could not possibly make this stuff up.

But the sordid tales of the inverted morality of the Christian web are seemingly limitless. The self-absorption on display here called to my mind yet another web page I am sometimes directed to visit by friends, where the only subject ever discussed seems to be the author's own contribution to Christian thought, and, very occasionally, the critical interaction of others with his earth-shattering insights (none of his critics understand him and are generally idiots or wicked or both). As one colleague describes said page: see me here, hear me there, stroke my ego everywhere. Indeed, this page always brings to my mind the tale of the apocryphal Cambridge don who used to warble on and on about himself in tutorials until one day, in a moment of humility, he turned to his hapless students and declared, "Well, that's enough about me; let's talk about you for a change. What do you think of my books?" But then the owner of this website is a "leading scholar," a claim that must be true because he himself tells us so on his very own web page; and he should know because he is, after all, a "leading scholar." And you thought the noise at a chimpanzee's tea party could be deafening.

Let's stop there a minute. This is madness. Is this where we have come with our Christian use of the web? Men who make careers in part out of bashing the complacency and arrogance of those with whose theology they disagree, yet who applaud themselves on blogs and twitters they have built solely for their own deification? Young men who are so humbled by flattering references that they just have to spread the word of their contribution all over the web like some dodgy rash they picked up in the tropics? And established writers who are so insecure that they feel the need to direct others to places where they are puffed and pushed as the next big thing? I repeat: this is madness, stark staring, conceited,

smug, self-glorifying madness of the most pike-staffingly obvious and shameful variety.

But yet there is more. There is another phenomenon on web pages that seems closely akin to these direct puffs of one's own greatness; and that is greatness by proxy. Sufferers of this syndrome develop the uncontrollable habit of continually using the language of intimate friendship about everybody who is perceived to be anybody, thereby making themselves seem to be close to the movers and shakers of the theological world. In such conversations and on such blogs, contacts of only recent and superficial vintage are referenced familiarly as "Dave" or "Geoff" or "my mate, Kev." With such people, every passing acquaintance is an intellectual intimate; and names casually picked up at lunch, by nightfall are intentionally dropped on personal blog sites, as every pushy arriviste and aspiring parvenu strains to project an image of inner-circle savvy to their needy blog followers.

This is truly a land beyond satire. It is the very antithesis of the attitude of an agnostic lady I knew in the nineteen-eighties who, when asked where her son went to university, would always reply, "Oh, to a small college in East Anglia," because she feared that the more precise explanation—the University of Cambridge—would bring too much attention to her family and be seen as a way of puffing up herself and belittling others. She was truly modest and fiercely private. Such a different attitude to the "me first and only" exhibitionism found on the web—the Christian web!—today. As I said, book blurbs are one thing; but here we have a world where we have not just eliminated the middle man by producing the phenomenon of the self-blurber; we have then taken it one stage further—we have eliminated the need for the very book whose existence was, traditionally, the necessary precondition of such a

blurb. All that is left is the Onanistic self-aggrandizement of those who proclaim themselves “humble” and “witty,” and “leading scholars.” Sheer virtual Onanism. No wonder their eyesight is so bad they seem blind to their problem.

Now, none of us should be arrogant and complacent about this. I am always mindful of the great line from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, when T. E. Lawrence refers to his own ambivalence to public acclaim: “There was a craving to be famous; and a horror of being known to like being known.” Lawrence clearly struggled with fame; and even more so with the fear that his enjoyment of fame might become known; but let’s remember how high the bar was set for him. He had, after all, led the Arab Revolt and was one of the few people who could be justifiably described as a living legend; his work, military and literary, was truly monumental; he hadn’t just launched a blog page where he could talk about “my old buddy, Big Winnie” and “my beers with Gertrude,” and post pics with captions such as “Here’s one of me in Damascus with Faisal and the lads.”

If Lawrence had real grounds for his struggle because he had really achieved significance, the same is surely not true for any of us. We mediocrities struggle at a different level, hoping that our own petty contributions, irrelevant and ephemeral as they are, will be puffed up and acknowledged by others; and, in a sense, there is nothing we can do about that. I am a man divided against myself; I want to be the center of attention because I am a fallen human being; I want others to know that I am the special one; and as long as the new me and the old me are bound together in a single, somatic unity, I will forever be at war with myself. What I can do, however, is have the decency to be ashamed of my drive to self-promotion and my craving for attention and for flattery

and not indulge it as if it were actually a virtue or a true guide to my real merit. I am not humble, so I should not pretend to be so but rather confess it in private, seeking forgiveness and sanctification. And, negatively, I must avoid doing certain things. I must not proudly announce my humility on the Internet so that all can gasp in wonder at my self-effacement. I must make sure I never refer to myself as a scholar. I must not tell people how wonderful I am. I must resist the temptation to laugh at my own jokes. I must not applaud my own speeches. I must deny myself the pleasure of posting other people's overblown flattery of me on my own website, let alone writing such about myself. I must never make myself big by clinging to the coattails of another. In short, I must never take myself too seriously. Not even chimpanzees do that.



Some weeks back I noted a leading Emergent web page that spends its time telling the reader how important and radical (in the Starbucks latte drinking sense of the word) the particular person who writes on it is. I raised the question of how, in the marketplace of ideas, Christians can promote the good and the true without promoting themselves. In this context, I'm struck by the following comment from good old P. T. Forsyth, scarcely a conservative evangelical but a whole lot wiser than the Emergent person on said website, and any who are tempted to think too highly of themselves, whatever their theological conviction: "The work of the ministry labors under one heavy disadvantage when we regard it as a profession and compare it with other professions. In these, experience brings facility, a sense of mastery in the subject, self-satisfaction, self-confidence; but in our subject the more we pursue it, the more we enter into it, so much the

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more are we cast down with the overwhelming sense, not only of our insufficiency, but of our unworthiness. Of course, in the technique of our work we acquire a certain ease. We learn to speak more or less freely and aptly. We learn the knack of handling a text, of conducting church work, or dealing with men, and the like. If it were only texts or men we had to handle! But we have to handle the gospel. We have to lift up Christ—a Christ who is the death of natural self-confidence—a humiliating, even a crushing Christ; and we are not always alive to our uplifting and resurrection in Him. We have to handle a gospel that is a new rebuke to us every step we gain in intimacy with it. There is no real intimacy with the gospel that does not mean a new sense of God's holiness, and it may be long before we realize that the same holiness that condemns is that which saves. There is no new insight into the cross that does not bring, whatever else come with it, a deeper sense of the solemn holiness of the love that meets us there. And there is no new sense of the holy God that does not arrest His name upon our unclean lips. If our very repentance is to be repented of, and we should be forgiven much in our very prayers, how shall we be proud, or even pleased, with what we may think a success in our preaching? So that we are not surprised that some preachers, after what the public calls a most brilliant and impressive discourse, retire . . . to humble themselves before God, to ask forgiveness for the poor message, and to call themselves most unprofitable servants—yea, even when they knew themselves that they had “done well.” The more we grasp our gospel the more it abashes us.¹

If PTF is on target, then the kind of self-promotion in which evangelicals, emergent, Reformed, whatever, routinely indulge speaks volumes about our grasp of the holiness of God, the truly radical nature of the gospel, and the stupidity of any attitude on our part other than humility. Web page self-promotionists beware!

1. P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 71.