

FAIRY TALES, ANECDOTAL ANTICS, AND TRAGIC MAGIC: WHEN THE CHURCH MAKES BELIEF!

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“Warning! You are about to enter the no-spin zone!” With this formula the legendary Bill O'Reilly (but no longer employed by Fox News) always introduced his “*The O'Reilly Factor*” news and current affairs programme on Foxtel. I like to watch the Foxtel channel because it presents a perspective on America's domestic and international affairs we don't usually get here in Australia.

When it comes to entering most places of worship these days, I reckon we should change O'Reilly's message to, “Warning! You are about to enter the Big Spin Zone!” Now please do not get me wrong. There are a lot of beautiful and intelligent folks who go faithfully to church all their lives. They love God and are loved by the God who “looks at the heart” before He looks at the head. I think it is possible to “be saved” and not have all our theological ‘I's’ and ‘T's’ dotted and crossed. Thank God for that, otherwise none of us would be saved.

That sincerely said, the Scriptures enjoin us to love the Truth. We must “gird up the loins of our mind” (to use good old King James English), and put our brains into gear otherwise we'll be like children who are “tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine” and be fair game for quackery and deceit ([Eph. 4:14](#)). We are enjoined “to be renewed in our minds”, that is, to get God's perspective into our patterns of thinking and behaviour.

The apostle Paul predicted,

“For 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 they will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths” ([2 Timothy 4: 3-4](#)).

“The time will come” has surely arrived. Paul's expression “they will not endure sound doctrine” in the Greek text reads, “there will be a time when they will not bear with healthy teaching.” That word “healthy” is the word from which we get the word “hygiene”. If a desire to have “the

ears tickled" causes a turning "aside to myths" then no wonder we are so sickly. Hygienic teaching, that is, the sound words of Jesus and his apostles, is the antidote to spiritual sickness caused by anecdotal antics!

Let me illustrate a few of the fairy tales, anecdotal antics, and tragic magic I have personally encountered in Christian circles. Let's enter the "Big Spin Zone" and make belief for a bit.

A FAIRY TALE

It was just two weeks before Christmas. The pastor was preaching to his congregation, "Isn't God's love for us amazing? In order to save us and communicate His great love for us, God became one of us. God the Son became the God-Man."

He proceeded then to wax lyrical, "I mean, if God had wanted to communicate His great love for the birds (at which juncture he gestured with a wave of his hand and pointed outside the window to the trees and the blue sky) He could have taken wings and become a bird and cheeped in their language. That way the birds would have understood His love for them. Or, if He had wanted to communicate His great love for our four-footed friends (at which juncture he pointed to a guide dog lying at his master's feet in the second pew) God could have become a dog. But no! He wanted to save mankind. He loved you and me so much that He demonstrated His incredible love for us and became God incarnate. God Himself moved into the neighbourhood. Jesus was God in human skin! How amazing is His great love for us!"

Afterwards I said to the pastor, "Pastor, I am so glad you did not finish the verse!" He was rather puzzled at my remark. "What verse?" So I explained, "If I just heard you correctly, you said that God could have become a bird if He had wanted to save the birds. He could have become a four-footed dog, if he had wanted to communicate His love for dogs, but because of His great love for us He became a man and dressed Himself in human skin. Yes, I am so glad you did not finish the verse... He still looked quizzical. So I filled in the missing dots for him ...

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (Romans 1: 22-23).

"So, Pastor, if you had finished the verse you would have made God into a reptile, a real crawler!" I then went on to explain that by making the incorruptible God into a man, he had "**exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man**", because **Acts 2: 27,32** states that *Jesus was a corruptible man*,

"You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your holy one to undergo corruption ... This Jesus God raised up again ..."

The Bible says that in the tomb Jesus was a man in a state of corruption! Had God the Father not raised him up from death, he would have undergone permanent decay. Had God not raised him up from the dead Jesus would still be in the tomb.

And, just by the way, is it not significant that every verse in the NT speaking about Jesus' resurrection says it was God the Father Who raised him up again? In Paul's foundational statement defining the Gospel he says that Christ "was buried, and He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures..." (**I Cor. 15: 4**).

Ask yourself this question: Did Jesus bury himself? No, he was passive, that is, he "was buried". Others performed the burial for him. Now ask yourself: Did Jesus raise himself up from the grave? The answer again is a clear no, for "He was raised". That is, Jesus was as passive when he was raised to life, as he was passive when he was buried. Somebody Else performed the resurrection for him! Every single verse speaking of the resurrection of Jesus testifies God raised him up. Jesus did not raise himself from the tomb. If God the Father had not done this mighty act for him Jesus would still be in the cold grip of death.

Now of course there is a wonderful sense in which Jesus did conquer the grave. God honoured Jesus' obedience and faith because he had been faithful to His Father all the way to the humiliating death on the cross. God rewarded Jesus' faithfulness. In this sense alone Jesus conquered the grave, but definitely not because he was himself God and could bring himself back to life. Jesus' exaltation is a reward for his obedience.

"Therefore God has highly exalted him..." (see Phil. 2:9-11).

Even now in his immortalised and exalted status at God's Right Hand in Heaven, Jesus does not live by the power of his own 'Deity' for,

"Indeed he was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God" 2 Cor. 13:4).

The Greek here is quite straightforward, just as your English translation simply states this truth. It reads that Jesus lives (present tense, right now as I type!) "out of", or "by", or "from", or "because of" (*ek*), the power of God the Father. Jesus does not live forever because he himself is Almighty God. He lives because God the Father, "who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light" has given and continues to give him his life and authority (I Tim. 6:16).

Ask yourself: How did Jesus get to the Right Hand of God his Father on High? Did he get there because he is God? Not at all. It is God the Father's doing. Christ's present status and glory is that which,

"He [i.e. "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory as per v. 17] brought about in Christ, when He raised him from the dead, and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come" (Eph. 1: 20).

Jesus' life right now in Heaven, and his authority, are *given* to him by God the Father. This surely should cause no argument?

Now back to our Pastor who foolishly exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for one of His creatures --- birds, dogs or reptiles --- just take your pick! You might judge my remarks to him as unkind, indeed a bit harsh. However, when such nonsense is peddled, I think my gentle reproof does not approach the apostle's strong warning. Paul says this big-spin preacher is a "fool" for exchanging the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of one of his creatures, albeit a corruptible man!

Indeed, it is no different to when Aaron took the gold given to him by the Israelites, "and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it into a molten calf; and they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt'" (Ex. 32:4).

Aaron says to Israel, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD” (v.5). Notice Aaron did not create a calf and call it by the name of some other idol-god. Rather, he has crafted a cow and called it YHVH! They did not believe they were worshipping a cow. They believed they were worshipping the true God whose Name was Yahweh. Their cow represented Yahweh God. Israel did not believe they were being idolatrous nor rejecting God. They simply made Him into an image of a cow and thought they were still worshipping Yahweh. But God was angry.

In the modern Church we wonder how the children of Israel could have been so dumb. But how is it that we have come to this point where we are such “fools” to exchange the “glory of the incorruptible God” into “the form of corruptible man” and not bat an eyelid at such make-believe?

Is God not a little upset when we have exchanged His incorruptible glory into the image and likeness of corruptible man? Has not the prophecy come to pass in our generation where we have turned aside to myths and think all the while they are God’s truth and our worship pleases Him?

AN ANECDOTAL ANTIC

Are you ready for some more “Big Spin Zone”? I once said to another pastor, “Can you please point me to a single verse in the entire Bible that teaches God is Three in One or One in Three?” He immediately shot back at me,

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28: 19).

I proceeded to ask him, “And how does this verse teach us that God is Three Persons in One Being?”

“Don’t you get it?” he asked, “We are to baptize in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. One name for the Three Persons in the holy Trinity.”

So, I said, “It is a fundamental tenet of ‘orthodox’ Trinitarian confession that we must not ‘confuse the Persons, nor confound the Substance’. So when you give one name for Three Persons you

break your own orthodox confession by confusing three Persons in giving them one Name.”

I went on, “The personal name of the Father we know ... Yahweh. The name of the Son we know ... Jesus. But could you please tell me the name of the Holy Spirit?”

He said, “You know!” I responded that I did not know the Spirit’s personal name and needed help. He said, “You know!” I told him that I had read the Bible from cover to cover a few times, had been to the Churches of Christ theological college in Sydney, had tried to study the Scriptures seriously for a few decades but had yet to come across the personal name of ‘God the Spirit’ and would he be so kind as to please help me. Perhaps I had missed it?

Once again, but a little louder, he insisted, “You know!” I again confessed my ignorance of the personal name of the Holy Spirit. This went on, back and forth for possibly five minutes with him getting more and more insistent, “*You know! You know!*”

Finally, when I continued to press him he said, “Alright. I’ll tell you the name of the Holy Spirit. It’s ... it’s ... Holy Spirit!”

I must confess it took all of my inner strength not to burst out laughing, but this bloke was serious. It was not my intention to mock him or his belief, but I did want him to see the sadness of his position, particularly because he stands in front of the church and preaches it. So I said, “Well that’s interesting. The word “spirit” in both the Hebrew (*Ruach*) and the Greek (*Pneuma*) originals is sometimes translated “breath”, sometimes “wind”. Would you have any objection to calling the Holy Spirit, “the holy Breath” or perhaps, “the holy Wind”? I did not want to sound flippant. But sometimes a fairy tale has to be blown away with a bit of fairy dust!

I went on to explain to my pastor friend that now he was not only breaking the first fundamental tenet of his Trinitarian orthodoxy that we must not “confuse the persons” --- and by calling Three persons by one name is confusing the persons --- but we also are not to ‘confound the Substance’. Being able to give the personal names of the Father (Yahweh) and the Son (Jesus) but by being unable to supply the personal name of the Spirit, but rather by describing a Substance or an Essence (Spirit, Breath, Wind) he

was now compounding his initial error and “confounding the Substance”, too.

So my pastor friend, without ever having realised it, would have been condemned as a heretic by the early Church Councils for confusing the Persons and confounding the Substance!

Space here forbids me to fully expound why Matthew 28:19 does not support the doctrine of the Trinity, but a few brief comments are in order.

First, as always, context is crucial. What precedes this ‘triadic baptismal formula’? Verse 18 of course, where Jesus explains, **“All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.”** Verse 19 then follows, **“Go therefore ...”**

How does Jesus say he got his “authority”? He says it was “given” to him. And who gave Jesus his authority? The Father of course, as Jesus abundantly testified throughout his entire ministry. So, how can one who declares he functions by the conferred authority of another be co-equal with the one who bequeathed that authority? If Jesus were “co-equal” with God the Father he would have no need of being given it and could exercise it by his own power. And don’t forget Jesus is standing there and saying this in all of his resurrection glory. He is no longer in a state of humility or weakness, so it won’t do for my Trinitarian friends to now say, “Oh, but Jesus is speaking out of his humanity and not from his Deity.” As our resurrected Lord, Jesus says his authority is derived from God his Father.

What Jesus declares in this triadic baptismal formula is that he continues to function under the (singular) Name and authority of his Father. One name means one Person and not three, even according to official Trinitarian dogma, remember?

Throughout his entire life Jesus made it clear he did not function in his own name (John 5:43; 10:25). Jesus also taught the Spirit comes from the Father (John 15:26), hence Jesus and the Spirit function under the one Name of the Father. If Jesus functions under and because of the authority of His Father, then he functions “in the Name of the Father”.

Come to think of it, this is the consistent pattern throughout the entire NT. The Father is the source and origin of our salvation.

The Son is the agent through whom salvation comes to mankind, and thirdly, the Spirit of God makes the process available to us in experience,

"Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from Whom are all things and for Whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Messiah, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (I Cor. 8:6).

It is always *from* the Father, *through* the Son, *by* God's Spirit. Knowing this simple and consistent NT principle will keep us from the anecdotal antics of my pastor friend in the "Big Spin Zone".

SOME TRAGIC MAGIC

For the third time let's enter the "Big Spin Zone".

A certain man stood up in a meeting and openly stated that I was "guilty of dividing God up". He announced, "Our essential belief is that God is Triune. God has always existed from the beginning in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. But you (i.e. Greg) are guilty of dividing God up."

I couldn't believe my ears. I thought, if that isn't the pot calling the kettle black! Afterwards I approached him and said, "Did I hear you correctly allege that I am dividing God up? As a Biblical monotheist I plead guilty to the charge of believing the God of the Bible is a Single (undivided) Individual Self, but on the other hand, you confess belief in a Triune God Who is Three Persons in One Godhead."

Hmm ... *who* is trying to divide 1 by 3? *Who* is trying to make 3 fit into 1? Who are the real multiplication and division experts in our midst? Unitarian monotheists who know that God cannot be divided and that "I the LORD change not", and Who on His own testimony states, "I am not a man, nor the son of man", know nothing of such tri-theistic sums of division and addition.

Now the amazing thing is that this man before he became a pastor was an accountant. He should know all about numbers and additions and divisions. But now he has entered the realm of theology he has a get out clause. He can wave the magic wand and say, "But Greg, *it's a mystery*. Although I can't explain

it, you will just have to believe that God can be Three Persons in One!"

Ah, I get it. When the accountant becomes a theologian he can wave the magic wand and say, "But in the realm of the Spirit and Eternity numbers don't mean anything." He can just make up his own new mathematical rules. For 1 can be 3 and 3 can be 1 and its just ... well, it's just a mystery that defies explanation or normal understanding. In his previous profession, if he had been caught diddling the books this way, he would have suffered serious penalties and been prosecuted by the laws of the land! He possibly may have spent time in 'the clinger' for fraud. So why should he get away with such tragic magic by fiddling with the Bible's clear statements, where thousands of times God is one Single Individual Self? I continued by saying to him,

"The thing that puzzles me the most is that you claim to speak for Jesus who Himself was not a Trinitarian. He confessed that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is One LORD (definitely not three Lords) ([Mark 12:29f](#)). The scribe replied, "[Right Teacher, you have truly stated He is One and there is no one else besides Him.](#)" You will note our Lord and Master said this is, "[the first and the great commandment](#)", and we are to love "*Him*" (not Us, not We Three) with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. What gives you the authority to claim to speak for Him when you won't keep *the first commandment*, and yes, *the great commandment* Jesus re-affirmed to this Jewish scribe? Why won't you listen to Jesus' own Unitarian monotheistic creed that the God of Israel is "one LORD"? What gives you the authority to disobey the Unitarian creed Jesus Himself endorsed? Jesus clearly believed his Father "is the only true God" and that he himself is "the Christ whom that one God has commissioned ([John 17:3](#)). Why won't you make Jesus' faith your confession?"

This man is a pastor within Churches of Christ so I then pressed upon him our wonderful Churches of Christ heritage, "[No creed but Christ](#)" and, "[Where the Bible speaks we speak, and where the Bible is silent we are silent.](#)"

Sadly such tragic magic is all the rage in our modern creeds

today. It seems that if you can believe 1 is really 3, and 3 really equals 1, then you can believe anything.

“Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it. The Greek mind, dying, came to a transmigrated life in the theology and liturgy of the Church; the Greek language, having reigned for centuries over philosophy, became the vehicle of Christian literature and ritual ... Christianity was the last great creation of the ancient pagan world.”
(Will Durant, *Caesar & Christ: The Story of Civilization*, Vol. 3, 1944).

Few today are aware of the extent to which fairy tales, anecdotal antics and tragic magic --- i.e. paganism! --- have been imported into the Christian story. Few, it seems, understand how adept we have been at making our own belief! Wouldn't it be wonderful to enter “The no spin zone” where the Christian Faith is concerned?