

I'd Rather Do It Myself!

The Gotham Bowl was an attempt to bring post-season college football to New York. The first year there was never a game. Oregon State agreed to play; but they couldn't find another team to play. The following year, Baylor beat Utah State, 24-9.

Utah State was undefeated and was considered in the ratings for #1 in the nation. Baylor had a 5-5 record (Hey! They were scraping the bottom of the barrel!)

Utah State had an All-American defensive tackle named Merlin Olsen, who would go on to anchor the famed "Fearsome Foursome" defensive line of the LA Rams. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1982. He stood 6' 5" and weighed 270. On December 9, 1961, he played opposite a Baylor offensive guard: 5' 10"; 185.

Herby Atkins was a cocky little guy; and wasn't intimidated. On the first play of the game, the teams lined up, and Herby looked up and said, 'Merlin, it's an honor and a privilege to play against the most outstanding lineman in America, but we're fixing to trap your (bleep).' " Baylor's All-American running back, Ronnie Bull gained twelve yards on that play, right over Merlin Olsen.

It was pretty much that way all day. Herbie Atkins manhandled Olsen. Just before half-time, Ronnie Bull broke what would have been a 70-yard touchdown. He was in the clear, but fumbled the ball out of bounds on the 15.

The next Monday, several of us were talking with Ronnie before class, and somebody asked, "What happened? Was it just so cold you couldn't feel the ball?"

Ronnie laughed and said, "No. Just before the ball was snapped, I heard Herby say, "Come on, Merlin. Hit me like an All-American!" and then the ball was snapped, and I jumped over Herby laying on top of Merlin. I was laughing so hard I dropped the ball!"

Things aren't always as they seem. Nobody told Herby Atkins Merlin Olson was invincible, and the laws of physics were defied.

Laws of physics and of human nature, when rigidly held, can block achievement if nobody dares question them; and, those who do question them are considered irrational idealists; out of touch with reality, even dangerous. People like Orville and Wilbur Wright. "If God had meant us to fly, he'd have given us wings!" An elder in my student church in western Oklahoma told me in all seriousness that Neil Armstrong didn't walk on the moon. It was all filmed in Arizona. He said, "Man will never storm the gates of heaven in a rocket ship." He taught adult Sunday School.

You see, it also happens in religion. You may know some people: hard-headed, inflexible, always right. I can think of four dangers to such rigid dogma:

First, it indicates incomplete faith. The focus typically is narrow: usually one

issue. Early in Church history a church leader named Marcion had trouble understanding how Jesus could be both human and divine, so he denied the incarnation and the resurrection, and said Jesus was merely human. Except from that point (and he refused to compromise), his teaching was quite orthodox. It was heresy, not because it was totally wrong, but because it was incomplete.

A second danger in rigid doctrine is its threat to the unity of the Body. Most church divisions are over one or two issues. In 1905 it was whether to use musical instruments in the church, and whether Sunday School should use printed curriculum or just the Bible. In 1955, it was whether the church's missionaries to China should remain neutral, or oppose Mao Zedong's new communist regime. None of these issues relate directly to biblical doctrines. In fact, the 1955 division came directly out of partisan politics—a mass paranoia called "McCarthyism". And it divided the fastest growing movement within the Body of Christ; a movement, ironically, that still envisions itself a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

Some of those who are most sure of their faith are the most destructive. Remember Jim Jones and David Koresh? Rigid certainty, touted as the deepest expression of faith, actually is the antithesis of faith, and frequently is but a smoke screen behind which a person denies [especially to himself] an incomplete faith.

A third danger: rigid certainty inhibits the work of the Holy Spirit. God has great difficulty communicating with a heart as hard as stone.

In John's gospel is the story of a blind man healed on the Sabbath. A rigid principle of Judaism—the sabbath—was violated! The man was questioned endlessly; but all he could say was, "All I know is that, whereas I was blind, now I see."

"Well, who is this one who allegedly healed you?" "He's a prophet."

The Pharisees say he's a ringer. "Everybody knows the man who was blind from birth. You're a look-alike; this is a sham! So, they call the man's parents. "Is this your son?" "Yes, he's the one!" So, they question him again, and finally he says,

(JOHN 9:27-34 NRSV) *"I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"* ²⁸*Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."* ³⁰*The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.* ³¹*We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."* ³⁴*They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.*

Notice the progression of the inquest: at first, the Pharisees are offended. The sabbath has been profaned. Then, they're hostile; they attempt to deny the miracle: either this man is not the one he says he is, or he was never blind to begin with.

Then they try to trap him by having him repeat the details again; and finally, this kangaroo court deteriorates to the level of vilifying the witness. The Pharisees remain obstinate, even with the evidence of their error standing before them.

Have you ever had a two-year-old in your home? There still are Pharisees; in fact, most of us, at one time or another, exhibit some degree of Pharisaism.

A final caution regarding rigid dogma is a blindness to the reality that we may be wrong. What if we defend our position loyally and defiantly—and then discover at the last judgement that the Baptists had it right all the time!

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "For now we know in part... Now we see as if through a flawed pane of glass..." But, praise be to God! The point of John's story is that faith is not about being right or wrong. Those who were right were wrong!

(John 9:35-38 NRSV) Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

Notice another progression: as the interrogation grows increasingly hostile, see how the man's faith develops. He begins, "The man they call Jesus put mud on my eyes..." Then, "Who do you think he is?" "He's a prophet."

As the interrogation gets more antagonistic, the rigid religious rules contradict the man's experience. So, risking excommunication, he says "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." Do you see the progression: first, he's a man; "This man called Jesus..." "a prophet..." "...if he were not from God..."

So they kick him out. Removed from the shackles of religious rules the man is free to encounter Jesus: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "I believe." And that faith was not the result of religious teaching, but of his encounter with Jesus.

Faith is not about "being right or wrong." It's not about knowing certain doctrines or being able to regurgitate certain Bible verses. It's not about content at all. That's a major reason people have crises of faith. When our faith seems inadequate, it probably is because we have understood faith as a set of beliefs to be held; and the stronger we hold those beliefs, so we're told, the stronger is our faith.

But Christian faith is not a system of beliefs. It's a relationship; and it begins with a response to the question Jesus asked the man who had been born blind: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" "He's right in front of you." "Lord, I believe." When belief becomes a verb, we call it faith.

Faith is not a confidence in correct doctrine. It's a quality confidence in the credibility of a person, that we live on the basis of that confidence—we live as if we really believe what we say we believe—regardless of the presence or absence of tangible evidence. Do you believe?