

## A LITTLE THEOLOGICAL JAZZ

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I squirmed in my chair like a five-year-old needing to go to the potty. A heaviness around my neck and shoulders caused my breathing to be irregular. Was I the only one feeling this way? As I looked around the room everyone else looked comfortable. I was perplexed at the gradual and intensified invasion of discomfort. What was the source of this annoyance?

I was surrounded by young, bright and enthusiastic college students during a quiet and picturesque weekend retreat. Of all places, serenity should be my sentiment. I was agitated and certain my bladder was not the source of my restlessness. One moment was spent listening to the message of the conference speaker, the next trying to analyze my inner dissonance; my wavering attention tuned in and out.

I departed the conference with a suitcase full of laundry, a bedroll, and a haunting sense of anxiety. Minutes after pulling on to the interstate, I turned on the car radio looking for some mental relief. After the first mile of driving, I had scanned and rejected a smorgasbord of choices: rock (hard, soft and oldies), Country (rock and western), Classical, Talk and even Gospel. I was just about to turn it off when one last push of the button tuned in a Jazz station.

It was strangely like a shot of fresh air to oxygen-deprived lungs. Strange, because I have never been a jazz lover or much of a listener, especially not of the abstract, avant-garde styles of jazz. That was the type of tune I had selected.

As the seemingly undetectable melody lines interlaced everchanging rhythms, I marvelled at the therapeutic effect. In an unexpected way this music was open and inviting, allowing me to breathe, to think and to explore. This music was different in that it had no repetitious melodic and lyrical refrains, oversimplifying life into ten words or less. This music was not trying to convince me to buy someone's goods, services or ideology. The reason for the weekend's wriggling and writhing was just becoming clear.

Two days of vexing and repressive words prescribed a world view in which every question had an answer, every problem had a solution and everything fit neatly into its place. The source of these words, the "guru" of "how to have a successful life and ministry", clearly revealed his was a simple, correct and "one size fits all" truth. I felt like a size 9 1/2 D crammed into a 7 AA.

Let the music play! Cymbals lightly ringing, changing rhythms, piano notes wandering, chasing one another, a melody flirting with tarrying, and then, open spaces of sweet silence, fleeting harmonies, dissonance, counter melodies and antiphonal chaos resolved.

Was this music? Not the kind we want to teach to a Sunday School class or sing around the campfire. Yes, music, but not the kind I would have as a steady diet. On this day, it was more like an exotic dessert; when tasted, the pallet of aesthetic taste and mental appreciation awakened.

This musical "angel unaware" allowed much needed space for my mind and soul to compose my melodies, harmonies, measures of rest and clashing notes. *This* freedom to create was so much more challenging and refreshing than some simple push-button, pre-programmed synthesized song. The little ten minute interlude of musical refreshment was my antidote for two days of a theology that suffocated.

How we frail and finite creatures can be so presumptuous as to neatly arrange God, universe, life and eternity into our schematic is befuddling. Where is the sense of mystery and awe as we ponder the Infinite? Is it all so clear and simple? Could a dose of humility be in order as we consider the Apostle Paul's perspective, "Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror."

Every time I reflect on this experience I have some twinge of guilt and self-doubt if I am honest. Part of the replay involves my looking around the room and asking, "Does anyone feel what I am feeling?" Maybe I am missing something or spiritually disabled. Maybe I am wrong. I am sure there will be other occasion for my wriggling and writhing and I am not sure how to handle such situations.

I must admit there are times when a simple outlined religion, where I am free from wrestling with the complexities of life and the unknown, is appealing. Insecurities lead me to objectify the subjective and yearn for neatly packaged answers, not unlike the recipients of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

The Galatian Christians, who lived in a pagan environment, were easy prey for the troublemakers from Jerusalem because their struggle with their faith left them feeling insecure and vulnerable. The Gospel message advocated by those itinerate missionaries was not only a gross perversion but also an alluring offer of security.

It seems the Jerusalem party duped those "senseless Galatians" to follow a set of Jewish customs and rituals, the uppermost being circumcision. Why an adult Gentile would choose to adopt such a tradition brings to mind the term "masochism." Or maybe this could be a painful example of how far people will go to secure an outward and visible "proof" of one's right standing with God. The agitators from Jerusalem in Paul's day and some advertising agency in our day may have understood a characteristic of humanity unbound by time and space.

In recent months television and radio commercials have employed an intriguing approach. One TV ad for an automobile has the sleek and shining product on display while the words of the narrator scroll down the screen. The oft-repeated refrain is "Tell me. . ." The narration, which is supposedly from the perspective of the carshopping consumer, lethargically requests that someone tell him which car to buy. The message, between the lines, is that it is a waste of time and energy to think about the multiple issues of making a purchase. It is easier to let someone else make

the decision. "Tell me what to buy. . .I have the money."

What might some first-century Galatians, twentieth-century college retreat participants, and car-buying consumers from an automobile manufacturer's viewpoint, have in common? Tell me!

Over the years I have teetered on and fallen off the tightrope while attempting to keep a balance between providing students with a low-cost, user-friendly Christianity and confronting the often disconcerting agnosticism which is inevitable when entering the realm of The Holy, who can "do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine."

A recent and mildly disappointing discussion, with a former student and short-term missionary reminded me of the overhead highwire. In so many words, the dedicated and intelligent young Christian woman acclaimed the preaching expertise of her pastor who could "tell it like it is, lay it on the line clear and simple, really giving you something to take with you."

I did not know exactly what she meant and was a little afraid to ask. I am all for clarity, conviction and charity. It was strange that while she spoke everyone else in the room looked comfortable, but I had this sudden craving for a jazz tune.

A recurring theme in the discoveries of several scientists who work in the field of developmental psychology is that college-age students are in a stage of life where they have a "conformist" way of relating to the world. Typical of the conformist style is:

1. Using either/or categories; one view point as right and others wrong.
2. Making decisions on the basis of what others expect.
3. Conforming to the roles and expectations of the group with whom he or she is with at the moment.
4. Respecting the authority of designated leaders so long as they are personally trustworthy and "look the part".
5. Stereotyped views of others.
6. Wanting to know the rules.

The highly sought answer to a pervasive collegiate question, "Who am I" is often found in the clear cut, simplistic viewpoints of others especially from authorities who look the part. If this is true, there is an explanation for why one conference speaker from the past has had such a successful career. "Tell me. . ." The refrain is alive and well.

Collegians are in a period of early adult transition, a time of being in the adult world but not of it. Away from home for the first extended period, students are allowed, if not forced, to develop their independence and self-identity.

Ideological commitment provides a strategy for working out identity and making the transition from childhood to adult responsibility. An ideology simplifies the world by an understandable scheme. It helps provide answers to questions. Erik Erikson pointed out that ideology can be a very positive force. It can free energies

from confusion and provide a channel for students to make a better world.

A healthy, fine-tuned ideology for which one has strong convictions can be only a beat away from idolatry. I can think of former students who gave their heart to an ideology or theological doctrine as their focus and source of security. It is much easier to understand and manage a doctrine than to understand and manage a trust relationship with the Spirit of God. In defense of those usually well-meaning people, there is probably a little "senseless Galatian" in all of us.

Several years ago I gave my mother a Christmas gift. It was a replica of da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. I know she kept it in her bedroom closet for years and eventually got rid of it. It may sound strange that a Christian mother who loves her son would not display a picture of such significance given to her as a Christmas gift. I am not hurt by whatever she did with the picture.

My mother is an artist. Although her art is only a hobby, she is talented. Over the years she has used pencil, charcoal, watercolor and oils to create a variety of attractive pictures. She enjoys her art.

I think I know the reason my mother put aside my gift. Embarrassed to admit the truth and tempted to claim temporary insanity, I gave my mother a paint-by-number picture. For those unfamiliar with this genre, a paint-by-number picture has the subject completely drawn on the canvas with numbers in every space indicating precisely which color of paint to use. (Paint is included in the package.) My mother was beyond the paint-by-number method. And even if she was not, she loved to create her own pictures, experimenting and exploring all types of shapes, shadows and colors from across the spectrum.

At the risk of being presumptuous, I think some music, art and theological perspectives are in the paint-by-number category. Simple rules and formulas can be helpful for beginners. Similarly, the Apostle Paul advised the Galatians about how the Law is like a tutor, a guide pointing in the correct direction toward maturity. Even a young child wants to take the brushes and paints and venture beyond tutelage to express creativity.

Our Savior had many confrontations with religionists, the stringent paint-by-number sort of His day, who had life down to a science. To some, His words were seemingly life-threatening while to others life-giving. For reasons unknown, not everyone would get in step with His music.

Our tastes, temperaments and perspective are shaped by many factors, both good and bad. We do differ greatly from one another even within one faith community. What sounds like a monotone to one may be a beautiful note to another. Paint-by-number pictures may even make some contribution to the art world as well. It is difficult to understand our fellow human beings, who like us, have unique blends of strengths, weaknesses, insights, blind spots, gifts, etc.

What is truly right or wrong, good, better or best—who is to say? Certainly not everything is equally healthy and true. To a large part, it comes down to being true

to one's heart, soul and mind: intellectual integrity.

A time will come when, due to various circumstances, my urge to wriggle will strike again. I will want to retreat into my own little theological jazz. Probably then, more than ever, will a prayer for guidance be needed:

"Tell me, just tell me over and over again, how I might know your truth; the truth that will set me free!"