

FEATURE ARTICLE

US vs. THEM

by Bill Moller

During the 2004 Presidential campaign, I found myself deeply troubled by the rhetoric bellowing from the candidates. It seemed the debates, interviews and commercials were oozing with cunning subtleties specifically designed to poison the thoughts of those less-than-discerning listeners. The participants artfully twisted the truth and pressed their opponents into distorted molds which then could be easily displayed and properly ridiculed. An US vs. THEM relationship seemed to be their goal. The issues of family values, abortion, faith-based initiatives, separation of church and state, the war in Iraq, the funding of social security, and gay rights were heaved back and forth like hot ingots which left scars wherever they landed.

By the time the political conventions had come and gone, I was convinced I was in the *Twilight Zone*, and someone had turned the clock back thirty or forty years. The evening news was filled with reports about protestors and the latest death tolls from the war. Images of the 1968 and 1972 elections kept shooting through my mind like an acid flashback at Woodstock. Life seemed so simple back then, but now the issues were growing and distorting, and the solutions appeared more nebulous than ever.

As I listened to the politicians and the commentators, I wondered how this group of intelligent, well-educated, socially aware, culturally savvy individuals could take a stance so diametrically opposed to my own. It was at that moment I realized I needed a better understanding of the "opposition." I tend to be a little right of center on most issues, and I had heard all the conservative political arguments and Christian social apologetics. However, I was woefully ignorant of the rationale behind the liberal perspective.

So I headed for my local book store. Intent on keeping my focus, I walked briskly past the lattés and the muffins, around the self-help and the diet books and arrived at what some would call the "boring shelves"; biography, history and religion. Choosing the right books was difficult. I didn't want to read what the pundits were saying. I had heard enough rhetoric. So I searched for what I'll call "off-beat" authors – those who might provide a more authentic view rather than just repeating the "party line".

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SPECIAL INTERVIEW

with **Jim Winder** creator of
The Hard But Right Way

I regularly drive several hours to see a concert or hear a noted speaker. So my recent trip to the Ocean Grove Tabernacle to catch a musical event was not unusual for me. What was exceptional was Jim Winder's performance of his *The Hard But Right Way* show. Mr. Winder has crafted a powerful presentation that weaves highlights of the classic Christian allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, with his own infectious melodies and lyrics that stay with you long after the performance ends. Jim was gracious enough to respond to a series of questions about his presentation, his preparation and the fascinating story of a man named "Christian" and his unusual and harrowing journey to the "Celestial City".

CogentNotion: *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a classic Christian allegory, written in a poetic style, during the 17th century. What convinced you it would serve as a relevant source for a contemporary musical presentation?

Jim Winder: John Bunyan in my view really met his goals for this story using his medium – the written word. He wanted to communicate the way to faith and the walk of a believer. The track record of this story speaks for that. I saw an opportunity to underscore key points he made with the story by creating songs that emphasized Bunyan's scriptural base with elements from the story. My goal was to simply use a different medium to accomplish the same goals Bunyan was shooting for. Biblical truth is always relevant and necessary to share the Gospel and encourage contemporary believers. I am using the medium of my day to reach people for Jesus just as Bunyan did using his puritan writings.

CogentNotion: Your *The Hard But Right Way* show and CD contain beautiful songs that include acoustic guitars, percussion instruments and vocals, as well as narration. How would you describe the musical style of your performance?

Jim Winder: I would call it contemporary Christian acoustic songs based on scripture. I want them to stand alone and apart from the story as well. I have been encouraged that the music is always received well in our performances. Most people take the music home and I have received many encouraging comments over the years from folks all over the world. The most encouraging thing is that people see the clear scriptural

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Nearly a dozen books later, something happened that I hadn't anticipated. My frustration and confusion over the politicians and the platforms, turned to love and concern – not for the politicians but for the humans who personify the issues. I realized that in the midst of every issue there is a child of God deeply embroiled in a difficult situation. And I, as a Christian, am supposed to love that person - my neighbor - as myself. (Luke 10:29-37)

To begin my investigation I selected an author who was clearly a non-politician. I thought I could ease my way into the topics with Garrison Keillor's autobiography, entitled *Homegrown Democrat*. However, I was in for a rude awakening when I read this passage in the first chapter:

"Republicans have perfectly nice manners, normal hair, pleasant smiles, good deodorants, but when it comes down to cases, you do not want them to be monitoring your oxygen flow: they will set it to the minimum required to sustain basic brain function, and then they will recite a little prayer for you."

As I read this, I wondered if his description applied to ME. And if so, what sort of Christian witness does this image portray. Garrison's stories of growing up in the 40's and 50's were a delightful look at how the people of our heartland view our society and their faith. Jesus' words in Matthew 25:35-46 kept popping into my brain. (Go ahead, and take a moment and look up the verse.)

With the gears of my gray matter greased, it was time to shift my research from the witty humor of a mid-western moderate to the biting and satirical musings of a west coast leftist. In the books *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* and *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* by Anne Lamott, I began to see how a self-professed "yellow-dog liberal, born-again Christian" felt about the conservative Republican worldview. Basically, she hates it with a passion! But in her chapter titled "Loving Your President" she wrote the following:

"Lately our pastor had been urging us to act more like Martin Luther King, Jr., which I feel gives unfair advantage to the more decent and humane people. . . I wondered whether I could try to love my president, as Jesus or Dr. King would, without having to want to have him over for lunch. . . Everything was sweet at church; the singing, the kindness, and then the pastor had to go and ruin it all by giving a sermon on loving our enemies. . . The sermon ended; people were crying. [The pastor] asked if anyone wanted to come forward for special prayer. . . I struggled to keep in my seat, but found myself standing, then lurching forward stiffly. . . I whispered that I was so angry with and afraid of the right wing in this country that it was making me mentally ill. . . I felt a shift inside, the conviction that love was having its way with me, softening me, changing my

cold stone heart. The feeling grew stronger and stronger. . . I tried to hold on to what I'd heard that day; that loving your enemies was nonnegotiable. It meant trying to respect them; it meant identifying with their humanity and weaknesses. It didn't mean unconditional acceptance of their crazy behavior."

Well paint me yellow and call me a dog, but that sounds like the love of Christ to me! Anne Lamott's books are filled with sophisticated and authentic accounts of her life experiences. This woman is a liberal, west-coast, single-mom who sports dreadlocks and quotes Ram Das, a Buddhist guru, but I could understand her feelings and concerns precisely.

Even so, it seemed that my research had taken a wide turn to the left and I needed to bring in material that would moderate the discussion. This brought me to the book *Living Faith* by Jimmy Carter, a man known for bringing extreme factions together. In his chapter "Crossing Barriers" I found something we should engrave on the doors of every church.

"Christians can buttress their arguments on almost any subject by emphasizing certain selected Scripture verses and then claiming that they should be applied universally. But when we do this, we're using the Bible as a rationalization for our personal preferences, which we assume are correct. The resulting divisions are usually based on the presumption of preeminence by one group over others: "God and I are right, and anyone who disagrees with us is wrong." I'm always concerned about such "true believers."

I probably learned more from Mr. Carter about the civil rights movement, the plight of the blacks and what life was like in the Deep South before and after the "I Have A Dream" speech, than I did in all my years in school.

Recently, I've struggled my way through the new book *God's Politics* by Jim Wallis of Sojourners Magazine. Wow! This is a very impressive piece of literature and Mr. Wallis brings extensive first-hand experience to his writing. The subtitle, *Why the Right gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't get it*, implies an attempt at a balanced presentation. However, the author's tendency to describe the right with horrific condemnation and the left with mild disapproval made it difficult to fully appreciate this volume. That said, his writing was very convicting. He covered it all in extensive and repeated



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grounding in the lyrics. When the Lord's words go out they do not return void so I am especially glad to have songs that deliver the Word.

CogentNotion: It is obvious to anyone watching you perform or who listens to your CD's, that you have a great passion for this material and subject matter. What influences helped cultivate the passion your audience witnesses?

Jim Winder: Max McLean and Marquis Laughlin are two performers I met a few years ago. I performed some openers for them in various NJ churches. They have memorized books of the Bible for dramatic delivery. I learned by watching them how to deliver a story, block the stage, move in and out of character etc. At the time I did not have thoughts of doing that type of work but God had a plan and used their friendship and performance to teach me.

CogentNotion: In this "Postmodern" era, experts advise us that storytelling is one of the best ways to communicate with the current generation. Have you found that your presentation is reaching across generations?

Jim Winder: Yes. For the most part I have geared the program and reached out to churches and delivered the program as an all-church event with all ages attending. I am currently creating a new version of the show that is broken into parts that can be delivered over a 3-5 day period with some video and added elements. This format is geared more for youth events that span several days and require the doling out of the show gradually each day. I hope to reach youth more effectively this way.

CogentNotion: In Bunyan's book, the character "Christian" traverses many obstacles and issues in his journey to the Celestial City. As you penned your music and lyrics, did you find yourself investigating the theological or doctrinal aspects of his sojourn?

Jim Winder: Certainly. Without the Biblical mining I could not have written the songs nor could I transition in performance to application commentary which reaches people most effectively. As Bunyan put it in his closing poem, we want the listener to get the "gold" which is wrapped up in "ore". The gold is the Gospel and the ore is the story. I want so much for God's Word to make the impression and have the story, delivery, and songs be an attractive vehicle. I believe that God's Word has transforming power and that is key in the creative realm and performance. As His Word is received He can do whatever is necessary in the hearer's heart.

CogentNotion: Some might look at *The Pilgrim's Progress* as typical of a particular doctrinal perspective. In your music you seem to address the more universal truths of the Christian faith. Have you found this helps you cross denomination boundaries?

Jim Winder: I have not had any problems denominationally. Bunyan definitely emphasized some key doctrines that I personally believe and some I am not as hard-lined on. The important doctrines are emphasized in my show though. For instance when Christian and Hopeful meet Ignorance. They emphasize that the "way" we follow the path is critical. Ignorance says "a path is a path". Christian notes that this path begins at the shining gate and points out that Ignorance came onto the path by another short-cut way. Theologically Bunyan is saying we cannot walk the path of faith by any other way than through genuine faith in Jesus. We have to come on the path through Him and come to the cross where our burden can be lifted. As Peter said to the rulers of His day - there is no other name on earth by which men can be saved. This is a key truth to convey regardless of venue.

CogentNotion: After your recent performance at the Ocean Grove Tabernacle, you mentioned to me that your presentation would be an excellent adjunct to a study of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in Sunday school or Small Group study. How do you envision this tie-in?

Jim Winder: I have worked with several pastors to provide this program as a kick off or a cap off to a teaching series. This past spring a pastor in Pennsylvania did a 12 week series and ended with our program. Another church in New Hope had a retreat weekend and had the program on Sunday night with a pot luck supper afterwards. We traveled to Cleveland recently to perform for a joint event of two churches as a cap off to the pastor's several week teaching series. The program has proven to be a great way to partner with pastors to meet their goals with a creative addition that is all ready to go. Rather than come in and perform a show, I want to work with pastors to help them bring a Christian classic to their people and help achieve their objectives as shepherds to their flock.

CogentNotion: *The Pilgrim's Progress* describes the journey of the character "Christian". In a subsequent publication Bunyan writes about the journey of Christian's wife and child. Have you considered expanding your presentation to include this material?

Jim Winder: Perhaps someday I will do that, Lord willing. There is more to the current story I hope to incorporate though so my work is not done on the first part. Key places like the Interpreters house, The Palace Beautiful, the Cliff of Error, and The Delectable Mountains hold more encouragement and warning for the listener. I have added some extra dialogue to various sections as I feel emphasis will benefit the hearer. It is really a joy to re-read the story now and then and add new parts to the existing performance.

For more about **Jim Winder** and his music please visit:

www.thehardbutrightway.com

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discussions of the recent political campaigns, the war in Iraq, gay rights, and the poor, oppressed and dying all over the world. Every chapter was presented with a constant reminder that reconciliation was his goal.

"To be honest, the confusion comes from many sources. From religious right-wingers who claim to know God's political views on every issue, then ignore the subjects that God seems to care the most about. . . From television preachers whose extravagant lifestyles and crass fund-raising tactics embarrass more Christians than they know. From liberal secularists who want to banish faith from public life and deny spiritual values to the soul of politics. And even from liberal theologians whose cultural conformity and creedal modernity serve to erode the foundations of historic biblical faith. From New Age philosophers who want to make Jesus into a non-threatening spiritual guru. And from politicians who love to say how religious they are but utterly fail to apply the values of faith to their public leadership and political policies. . . It's time to reassert and reclaim the gospel faith -- especially in our public life. When we do, we discover that faith challenges the powers that be to do justice for the poor. We see that faith creates community from racial, class, and gender divisions. . . and we see that "God bless America" is found nowhere in the Bible. And we are reminded that faith regards matters such as the sacredness of life and family bonds as so important that they should never be used as ideological symbols or mere political pawns in partisan warfare."

In case you missed it, Mr. Wallis is telling us to stop pointing fingers and get down to the basics of our "gospel faith", a term he later used Micah 6:8 to define; "And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your

God?" (NASB) *God's Politics* is filled with discussions of the issues and the author's recommendations for ways to resolve them. He leaves few stones unturned, and forces the reader to consider the issues not from the left or the right, but instead to view them from the Christian perspective.

My research is on-going. I still squirm whenever our political leaders speak, or when I hear about our courts banishing faith from the public square, or our religious leaders claiming natural disasters are the wrath of God poured out on the unjust. But I'm trying to keep focused on the people -- what is their predicament and how I can help. I'm making an effort to see issues for what they are and not what I want them to represent. I'm praying that I remember what J.B. Philips said in his book *Your God is Too Small*;

"The trouble with many of us today is that we have not found a God big enough for our modern needs. In varying degrees we suffer from a limited idea of God. . . centuries of Christian tradition have so permeated our life that we forget our moral sense has been conditioned by a dilute, but genuine Christianity."

Our understanding of the issues is imperfect. Our US vs. THEM approach is tragically flawed. We need an undiluted faith in the God we can trust to guide us through the storms of life. We need to dine with the adulterers and the politicians, and let our inner light illuminate the conversations. We need to hug and care for the sick and suffering and not worry about what people think. We need to reach out to those around us rather than condemn their beliefs. We need to see the entire world as God's creation, as His children, as our neighbors, and love them all - as Jesus did.

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