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The Trouble With Bread

By Ron Allen

Each of the Gospels records Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist at the river Jordan. All remark that Jesus received the divine endorsement there. The Synoptics inform us that immediately afterward Jesus was sent into the desert by God where, after an extended period of prayer and fasting, he was assailed with three fierce temptations.

The first of them happened like this:

"After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said: 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written, Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'"
(Matthew 4:3,4).

This temptation challenges the preceding divine endorsement, questioning whether Jesus really is the Son in whom God is well pleased. It casts doubt on the testimony of John the Baptist, who understood that he was the forerunner of God's anointed king.

The account of Jesus' pilgrimage to Jordan and beyond, echoes Israel's story as God's chosen son (Exodus 4:22). It evokes the Red Sea baptism and subsequent trial in which, according to Deuteronomy 8, God led his people into the desert, away from all routine sustenance before assuaging their hunger with bread from the sky. This in order to teach them that 'bread' was not their principle requirement. Their underlying need was God himself.

So Jesus rehearses events in Israel's history; key episodes in their relation to God. As God's anointed, Jesus is God's chosen one. The rest of the people participate in him. He represents the reign of God—both as its sovereign and its subject. He reveals God's values as ideal king, and ideal man. From him we learn what God is like, and what human life looks like when arranged according to God's priorities.

The forty days fasting ascribes foremost ranking to the

creature's personal dealings and undertakings with God. Fasting has always had a religious meaning. It takes for granted the existence of an unseen realm. In delaying the satisfaction of physical appetite, fasting stimulates and augments apprehension of the spiritual world.

The tempter comes to Jesus at a time when his fleshly needs are in full cry. "Turn these stones into bread and appease yourself, if you *are* the Son of God." Jesus counters—not by pretending he isn't hungry; not by denying eating's legitimacy—but by putting material reality in its right place. He appeals to Deuteronomy 8, where the human encounter with God is the central and basic human assignment.

For all of history, until the 16th and 17th centuries, until the age of reason and science, men and women took for granted that the component activities of their lives derived from a



supernatural source. The getting of food, hunting and gathering, harvesting, building shelter, making clothes, being born and dying—all were conducted under the aegis of a transcendent reality called God (or Yahweh, or Allah, Great Spirit, Most High, or by some in the modern era: the Man upstairs). This was the religious worldview.

Immense change was wrought in the modern world by the sheer power of science. Science brought into play a new path to knowledge—the scientific method; a means of arriving of truth through repeated experimentation and observation. This way to knowledge was, and is, so successful it has produced steam engines, electric power, railroads, mighty ships, air travel and space ships. It has stopped diseases in their tracks. It gave us washers and dryers, motor cars, micro-wave ovens, movies, television, and now: the digital age with its instant and universal means of communication.

Imagine a missionary doctor who travels from the developed world to the Upper Amazon where there are tribes who have

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him?” (John 7:48).

Too often, good is thwarted, decency is prevented, and vice is granted license because people were too lazy to think, evaluate and choose for themselves between good and evil. They left that task to religious experts and moral police. “Why tax our minds with spiritual issues when we have professionals to do that hard work for us? They—our leaders—say that Jesus of Nazareth is a deceiver. They say he is demon-possessed, that he will destroy our temple, ruin our church. We trust our leaders. Their say-so is good enough for us. Let him be crucified!”

Near the doorway of the High Priest’s Jerusalem residence stands a girl. Jesus is under arrest inside. Just nearby, tentatively loitering, is Peter, Jesus’ disciple. He is upset and afraid. The girl points to him and calls out; “You were with him.” “You are one of his disciples.” Does she know that with so few words, she has brought Peter to the brink of execution?


Perhaps she does know; perhaps she doesn’t care, because she feels she is on sure ground. Had any of the rulers believed in Jesus? Not at all. He was a ‘threat to Israel,’ they said. How willing this girl was to put Peter at risk; how willing to join in the ‘authorized’ rush to shed blood. It is an evil too often

approved by ‘decent’ folk. How easily they yield their conscience to someone else. How sheep-like they are; and with what tragic consequence.

Those who avoid wrestling with moral issues, who refuse to contend for the right, leaving the contest for others to fight in, make themselves easy marks for the unscrupulous. Caiaphas and those who supported him cynically played the consciences of the common people for their own political advantage.

Paul wrote an impassioned letter to his converts in Galatia who were in danger of falling away from the gospel under the influence of false teachers. He said of those evil persons: “Those people are zealous to win you over. They want you to be zealous for them” (Galatians 4:17).

There have always been, and always will be, cunning operators who count on the thought laziness of their fellows in order to advance their own agenda. Many of these shysters are religious, and they are as plentiful now as in New Testament days.

Let not anyone make the mistake of waiting on someone else’s conscience in matters of the Spirit. What think YOU of Christ; whose Son is he? Destiny is linked, not to someone else’s answer to those questions, but to our own. 

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never yet had contact with modern humans; they still exist with the traditional religious worldview. The doctor manages to befriend them. He discovers that many die from diseases that are easily remedied with drugs like penicillin. He begins giving injections, and soon infants stop dying, mothers cease grieving. Science, with its spectacular ‘knowing’, has arrived. Something utterly new has come to the jungle people. A process is initiated which, if they do not find strength to resist, will end in the dis-enchantment of their world: just as it has succeeded in doing in the West.

The scientific worldview (or naturalistic world view) has struck deep roots in the great learning institutions of the world. It is a view that gives no quarter to transcendence. It is dismissive of an invisible reality which is beyond the reach of empirical study. Mystical experiences or revelation as paths to truth are not permitted. What cannot be examined by the

scientific method is deemed not to exist.

In the religious outlook, transcendent invisible reality is the ground of all being. Spirit is fundamental; matter is derived. The scientific worldview turns that on its head. In the religious world view, less comes from more. In the scientific worldview, more come from less.

The scientific worldview is bolted onto this maxim: ‘seeing is believing.’ In a universe where there is transcendence, seeing is also believing. Matter is real but that is not the end of it. There is so much more to reality that, ‘believing is also seeing.’

In the scientific worldview there is nothing else besides matter. Matter is decisive; matter is final. Bread is the ultimate word, not the word that comes from the mouth of God. Civilization’s loss of transcendence in the last few hundred years is an epochal development because the one permitted door to truth simply cannot discuss or answer questions of →

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meaning. It is unable to speak to our need for direction. If asked, 'How should we live?' science is dumb. There is no science of the supreme value. Values are beyond the pale of science.

Who am I? Where do I come from? Why am I here? What ought I do with my life while I am here? What will happen to me when I die? These questions loom and hover over us all our days, and that about us, which is most distinctively and recognizably human, is deeply connected to them. All great literature, poetry, art and music bears witness that humans yearn for purpose and value.



In the religious worldview there is value aplenty. Human activity; work, rest, being born, giving birth, parenting, getting old and dying—these particulars happen in a context of an all-encompassing scheme so that they make sense. The drama of personal and social interaction is lived out against a background of cosmic meaning. All human relationships assume a sacramental quality.

Humans feel more at home within an awareness of sacred reality because the sacred does not deny the material; it affirms it and redeems it. Having unilaterally decreed the non-existence of a spiritual realm, the scientific worldview leaves humans stranded with unrequited feelings and longings. A fog of melancholy has settled over the postmodern West because of this. Neal Diamond sang out our desolation thirty years ago: "'I am, I said'. 'To no one there.' 'I am,' I cried. 'I am,' said I. 'And I am lost'. 'And I can't even say why.' 'Leavin' me lonely still.'"

In a culture where the supernatural does not exist or where it is deemed irrelevant, citizens must do what they can to wrest meaning from bread alone. With no word from on high, no sacred canopy overarching their lives, economic activity is the only game in town. When culture is saturated by market values there must be more consumption, more eating—not for strength but in order to bloat. There must be more houses to live in—bigger and better ones. There must be more household goods and appliances, more cars to drive, more property to put on the rental market, more shares, more dividends, more capital growth, more hairstyles, more face-lifts, tattoos and tummy-tucks, bigger biceps, bigger abs, more technology to facilitate and ever-widening stream of



phantasms, more obsessions, addictions and therapies.

Several hundred years ago, universities were dominated by theology. During the Industrial Revolution and the age of 'inevitable progress,' universities churned out engineers and technicians who busied themselves supplying the world with machinery and gadgets. However, since learning *how* to make things, universities have turned their attention to how to make lots and lots of them—to mass production with its advertising and marketing, the stuff of corporations. In the last few decades, degrees in business and business administration have become the most sought-after courses on offer at universities.

What has happened in higher education has its counterpart in politics. Public policy is steered by pragmatic materialism. The watchword of governments more or less follows Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign slogan: "It's the economy, stupid." When it comes to elections, the hip-pocket nerve rather than a transcendent moral compass sways voters.

The tempter says to Jesus, "demand that these stones become bread." So saying, he makes political sense. 'Bread' is the warp and woof of politics. Material comfort, and its protection at all costs with military know-how and hardware, comes before piety.

However, Jesus bucks the trend. He seeks *first* the will of his father in heaven. As he does so, he is probably hungrier than he ever gets between breakfast and dinner. Nevertheless, he does not trivialize his dealing with God by yielding to common-sense political priorities. This man, Jesus—God's man, shows us what the first concern of public policy is when God reigns in human affairs: God first: God before all else. In resisting this temptation, Jesus overturns consensus politics in our time. Namely: that there are no higher values than material ones. In the desert, Jesus takes up and prosecutes the values of God.

What are those values? To enact God's ways he must renounce his ego. He is the man for others. He comes not to be served, but to serve. He takes up the infirmities of mankind. He is numbered with the transgressors and bears their sorrows. He accumulates no property of his own, no place to lay his head. The one piece of clothing he has is taken from him at the end. Denied justice, he asks forgiveness for his tormentors. In order to save others, he cannot save himself.

Such are the values Jesus lays down. They are what he later explained to his disciples, "*the food that my father has given me*" (John 4:34). They are values of sacrificial service, compassion, sharing, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, courage, peace, patience, equity,

humility, loyalty and love. Materially, they do not exist; they are profoundly spiritual.

How *real* they are. When we let them fade or try to banish them; when the social consensus is no longer constrained or inspired by them, brutishness takes over. The world becomes a

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Sacred: True and False

The True Sacred, the reign of God, unmask and relativises the false sacred. It is revolutionary in the true sense of the term. The True Sacred desacralises all else and yet ironically establishes the authentic holiness of everything else. It is a paradox that the modern world resists. There is no real philosophical basis for calling something holy or sacred unless we are recognizing a transcendent origin, that which is beyond our creation and our control.

Without the True Sacred we are all at one another's mercy and subject to one another's whimsical judgments. Under the True Sacred we are at the mercy of THE ONE WHO IS MERCY. No wonder Jesus gave all his life to proclaim such a monumental liberation! Humanity has been waiting for such freedom with Messianic hope. It is the only way out of our revolving hall of mirrors, our own war of all against all, and is rightly called salvation.

Richard Rohr: JESUS' PLAN FOR A NEW WORLD, pp. 6, 7. 



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global Auschwitz; a closed hell in which we are like prisoners chained, and condemned to watch each other being slain.

If Jesus yielded to the temptation to turn stones into bread, he would have mutilated the values of God. He would debase devotion—as it has been debased in our time—by making it the servant of entirely secular political aims. Jesus' resistance to such a temptation never looked more exceptional, or more needful than it does today. One of the dreariest aspects of postmodern consciousness is increasing cynicism—even regarding science's ability to resolve problems that threaten human survival. Issues such as the proliferation of violence, and its tools, the unrelenting degradation of the ecosphere, and worsening economic inequity. It seems that without access to values above and beyond what technology can supply, humans are becoming less hopeful.

Throughout the modern era faith has often been criticized as a refuge of the weak; an escape mechanism for those who look for an easy way out. But does this critique fit all the evidence? What of individuals like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther, and Mother Theresa? These enriched humanity, but they did not look for an easy way in life.

Climbing up the twenty-eight marble stairs on his knees was no cake walk for Martin Luther. What happened to him after he learned that “the just shall live by faith” was no picnic for him either. If he had wanted to escape reality, he could have set his mind on more earthly things.

If Rosa Parks had sought the easy road, she would not have insisted on being treated equal with other human beings. Her convictions owed more to a religious outlook than a scientific worldview.

Nelson Mandela chose a set of values that saw him imprisoned for twenty-seven years, after which he helped heal his country's wounds with his magnanimous attitude. He certainly didn't do it out of weakness. It wasn't because he put bread before spirit.

Jesus blessed the world—not because he was looking for a temporal payoff. He did it for the “joy that was set before him,

enduring the cross, despising the shame.”
The cup he chose to drink was not pleasant, but bitter.

When you come to think on it, the things that make life sweet are not things at all. We feel most fully human when we are at the disposal of actions that create virtue. Virtues are like diamonds; they come into being under pressure. That which taught us to love our parents was what we realized it cost them to invest themselves in us. Love came into view in the sacrifices they made, in their longsuffering, their sympathy, their unfailing willingness to stick by us and forgive us when we messed up. Their calloused hands, the lines that deepened in their faces spoke to us of values not based in blood and dust, but in the eternal world. They mirrored the values of God to us.

Let us not be fooled by a culture of rampant materialism. The qualities that make us authentically human are those Jesus lived and taught and died for. His values are those of a divine Spirit which dominates the universe. Through him, we learn that “a man's life does not consist in the things which he possesses.” In fellowship with him, we give up “laboring for that which is not bread” and we find, to our joy, that he is the bread of life. Casting in our lot with him, we put ourselves at the disposal of the preponderant reality. We sense that this is what life is meant to be like; these are the values we are here to strive for. I was blind, but now I see. I was lost, now I am found. No longer am I an orphan in the universe. Now I belong. I'm home at last. 