

Laced Straight

by Charles Partee

Unfortunately the art and science of cussing is seldom taught to Presbyterian ministers either in class or field. Since many pastors are strait-laced, they have much to learn about this vigorous mode of human expression. In these latterly inclusive days, with the ordination of women and all, I suspect an expanding number of pastors whose lace is not straight. However, this is a subject no presbytery committee should appoint male persons to investigate. Suffice it to say, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underthings" (Julius Caesar 1.2.140-1). On the other hand, cursing is something even God does. The last verse of the Old Testament warns the people to beware "lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:6). Therefore, a minister's ability to follow God's example is a legitimate topic for inquiry. Some ministers do swear on occasion, but they are mostly rank amateurs employing only a few ill-chosen, over-worked, four-letter taboo words without genuine skill. According to Huckleberry Finn (Chapter 20), people from Arkansaw (like me) talk lazy and drawly and use considerable many cuss-words.

When I was in graduate school, my wife worked downtown all day because I obeyed the biblical injunction to earn my bread by the sweat of my frau (Gen 3:19 KJV). However, man—at least this man—does not live by bread alone; he must have peanut butter. Therefore, I worked eight hours every night as a janitor. On this job I met the man who was to profanity what Mozart was to music. He was the eighth wonder of the world. Elegance in swearing seemed to be his natural gift. On only a little provocation he could peel the paint right off the wall.

One enchanted evening my co-worker planned to leave work early to attend a party. At the break he got

dressed in his party clothes (which included a white linen jacket) and joined us for supper. Somehow one of the guys, taking a hardy bite of his sandwich, managed to squirt a huge dollop of barbeque sauce on this white coat. As the sauce ran down and the stain spread out, my foul-mouthed friend cut loose with the most magnificent string of profanity it has ever been my good fortune to hear. Nothing was spared that anyone anywhere had ever held sacred and not once did he repeat a single word. It was an absolutely virtuoso performance. His face suffused a crimson brighter than the barbeque sauce on his jacket. The veins in his neck popped out in clear and pulsating definition. The vulgarity was supreme; the eloquence sublime; the intonation exquisite; the passion absolute; and my admiration was unbounded. Never before or since has an unbridled psyche been so perfect-ly united with a filthy mouth.

Like every other human being, ministers often fail. I assume that is why we were given a sacrament of failure. Jesus said when we are rejected, we are supposed to shake the dust off our feet (Matthew 10:14). Employing this sacrament, I collected a totally undeserved reputation for eccentricity because I was so often observed hopping up and down on people's front porches shaking the dust off my feet. Although the arm motions I added to this ceremony had no liturgical significance, some of them have been copied by NFL football players when scoring touchdowns.

One terrible day I was informed that an elderly and non-participating member of our little Presbyterian church had driven his pickup truck through a stop sign onto a highway and smashed broadside into a passing car. The woman sitting on the passenger side at the point of impact was seven months pregnant

and it took an hour to cut her out of the car. Not only was she seriously injured, she lost the baby. After visiting her in the hospital, I called on my parishioner at his home. I expected him to be full of remorse, and I wondered what kind of human com-fort or divine forgiveness I might be empowered to offer. I discovered, to my utter astonishment, that he was not at all interested in the beautiful young woman he had disfigured nor the baby he had killed. He only wanted to talk about how sore his back was. I suppose he could have been blocking the horror of the tragedy his awful carelessness had unleashed, but I honestly believed he was only concerned about his sore back.

I know very well that God can and does forgive us before we repent. In addition, our remorse is never adequate to the enormity of our offences. Still, the sovereign God expects us to take responsibility for our actions and to be held accountable for them. According to my best judgment, this church member did neither. Walking back to my car I was consumed by a blinding rage that I did not think entirely unrelated to the wrath of God Himself. I had never before so wished for world-class mastery of the art and science of cursing. If I had been able to express my feelings more adequately, I think I would have been a better minister. I know I would have been a minister who felt better.

According to St. Augustine, in heaven we will all be 30 years old because "the world's wisest men have fixed the bloom of youth at about the age of thirty." This means that "all shall rise in the stature they either had attained or would have attained

Laced straight... cont.

had they lived to their prime" (*The City of God* 22:15-16). I hope Augustine is right because frankly, my dear, I never did give a damn about that farmer's sore back, but I care a lot about that little baby girl who died before she was born all those years ago in an automobile accident caused by an indifferent member of the Presbyterian Church.

I expect she will be clothed in a spiritual body (I Corinthians 15:44) looking about 30 years old when she meets her now scar-less and again beautiful about 30 year old mother for the first time.

I trust profoundly that the same grace is being extended to all those other aborted babies untimely ripped from their mothers' wombs where they had been carefully placed for nurture and

protection by God the Father, Almighty Creator.

- *Charles Partee is P.C. Rossin Professor of Church History at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Most of his scholarly writing concerns the theology of John Calvin.*

Two Lives

by *Andrew Carrick*

In May of 1993, when my wife Judy was five months pregnant, her skin color suddenly and visibly turned ashen gray. She couldn't move and could barely talk. Alarmed, I got a wheel chair and wheeled her over to the hospital just across the street from us.

Emergency surgery and the threat to two lives

The doctor scheduled her for an emergency appendectomy. And he told us to prepare for the loss of our baby. Removal of the baby would make the operation simpler and safer.

Judy looked at me and began shaking her head resolutely back and forth. Forcing her lips to move she managed to whisper to me, "If he is talking about an abortion to save my life, tell him No!" The idea of losing our little one repulsed both of us.

We were in an emergency situation, but I quickly spoke for both Judy and myself when I told the doctor we wanted him to make every effort to save Judy and our unborn child.

Faith standing the test

Judy was in distress and the situation was emotionally painful for me. But we were not making an impulsive decision since, in years past, we had decided that in the same way that we would push a child away from an oncoming train at the risk of our lives, so we would treasure our unborn children. Our desire to help this third, still helpless, unborn child of ours was as strong as if it were our twelve-year-old Naomi or two-year-old Nathanael.

The doctor's response was curt. "That means it will be a much more difficult operation. We will have to have a pediatrician present to be the baby's doctor throughout the operation. It will cost you more for the extra doctor. And I cannot guarantee the results."

"There are two lives there, doctor," I replied. "Please work to protect them both."

That little child is now our eleven year old precocious Joseph.



Joseph (10) with younger sister Sarah (8), Christmas 2002

The faith we seek to communicate

In my nineteen years as a pastor I've had opportunities to counsel with young unmarried women making decisions about their pregnancies. In each case, I let the young women know that our family would love to grow by adopting their children. In our Presbyterian family, we want to give babies a chance to live.

Psalm 139 tells us that it is God who puts us together in the womb and that all our days are written in His book before we are even born. Jeremiah tells us that God knew him even before God formed him in the womb. And Jesus says the Father has no desire for any of the little ones to be lost.

- *After two pastorates in the USA, The Rev. Andrew Carrick and his wife, Judy, moved to Japan to teach English at Palmore Institute as a tent-making ministry to support their mission work on the side. After one year, they moved to Kwansei Gakuin High School, near Kobe City, where Andy taught English and worked with the Religious (Christian) Club as a PC(USA) Mission Associate for almost seven years (and weathered the big earthquake). Finally, three and a half years ago, they both became full time missionaries with the PC(USA) to work in youth evangelism with the Reformed Church of Japan. They now reside in Nagoya, the third largest city in Japan. Andy's objective is outreach to non-Christian youth through preaching, teaching, and the medium of music.*