

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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March 21, 2021

Volume 41, # 12

THE CATTYWUMPUS

"Mr. Whitson taught sixth-grade science. On the first day of class, he gave us a lecture about a creature called the cattywampus, an ill-adapted nocturnal animal that was wiped out during the Ice Age. He passed around a skull as he talked. We all took notes and later had a quiz."

"When he returned my paper, I was shocked. There was a big red X through each of my answers. I had failed. There had to be some mistake! I had written down exactly what Mr. Whitson said. Then I realized that everyone in the class had failed. What had happened?"

"Very simple, Mr. Whitson explained. He had made up all the stuff about the cattywampus. There had never been any such animal. The information in our notes was, therefore, incorrect. Did we expect credit for incorrect answers? Needless to say, we were outraged. What kind of test was this? And what kind of teacher?"

"We should have figured it out, Mr. Whitson said. After all, at the very moment he was passing around the cattywampus skull (in truth, a cat's), hadn't he been telling us that no trace of the animal remained? He had described its amazing night vision, the color of its fur and any number of other facts he couldn't have known. He had given the animal a ridiculous name, and we still hadn't been suspicious. The zeroes on our papers would be recorded in his grade book, he said. And they were."

"Mr. Whitson said he hoped we would learn something from this experience. Teachers and textbooks are not infallible. In fact, no one is. He told us not to let our minds go to sleep, and to speak up if we ever thought he or the textbook was wrong."

– David Owen, "Best Teacher I Ever Had," *Life*, October, 1990; 13:70.

It's been nearly twenty years since I first read this story, but I remembered it recently, while studying a tale of three cities in Acts 17.

At Thessalonica, Paul's method for introducing the gospel to a Jewish audience is explained this way: "And Paul, as his manner was... reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ" (17.2–3).

That Paul "reasoned" with them tells me there is an intellectual component to the gospel. Christianity is a thinking man's religion. And so effectively did the gospel grip the mind and fire the imagination in the first century that those bent on maintaining the status quo in Thessalonica accused Paul of "turning the world upside down" (17.6).

At Berea, (just down the road from Thessalonica) Paul encountered a group of Jews who "received the word [he preached] with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (17.11). For doing this—for not taking Paul's word for it, but for verifying his propositions and premises for themselves—Luke termed them "noble" (17.11). Before God, true nobility is accorded those who think, those who use their mind.

At Athens, the "most famous of all ancient centers of intellectual activity" (Wilbur Smith, *Therefore, Stand!*; New Canaan, CT: Keats Publishing, 1981, 203), Paul was completely disgusted when he found a city of the gullible, rather than the noble, for Athens was a "city wholly given to idolatry" (17.16). Known in history for its thinkers (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle), Athens is known in Scripture as the place that believed in the cattywampus.

If there is anything we tend to resist, it is thinking for ourselves. Our readiness to consign our thinking to a preacher, priest, scholar, expert, parent, etc., rather than engage in careful thought and analysis ourselves, is a denial of our humanity and invites a stupidity that winds up believing in the unbelievable—thus opening the door to religious, political, social, chemical, etc. enslavement.

In a time when ignorance is in the ascendancy, the story of the cattywampus ought to remind us of what God designed us to do. In Luke 12.57, Christ asked, "Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?" (NIV); in other words, why don't you use your brains? Good question.

- Kenny Chumbley [slightly edited, GFS]

HARDENING THE NECK

In Proverbs 30:12, we have the words of Agur: "There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes, Yet is not washed from his filthiness." These words describe the haughty heart

condition that makes the instructive warning of Proverbs 29:1 applicable: "A man who hardens his neck after much reproof Will suddenly be broken beyond remedy."

The hardened neck, or similarly the charge of the powerful preacher, Stephen, to the spiritually blind Jews of his audience of being "stiffnecked" was an expression of familiarity to the Bible student who read of Israel's repeated resistance to God's lordship over His people. The expression was taken from stubborn animals that stiffened themselves in refusing submission to the yoke of a master. When the Lord spoke of His people to Moses, He called them "obstinate" (Their perverse path was fixed and unyielding, Exodus 32:9; 33:3, 5. The Lord would have destroyed them for this condition!). The prophet Nehemiah describes the condition in his confession of the attitudes and actions that led to their punishment: "Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your ordinances, By which if a man observes them he shall live. And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen." (Nehemiah 9:29; cf. Deuteronomy 31:27 and Hosea 4:16).

The loud-and-clear message from Proverbs is that only a fool will ignore wise counsel and good advice. As a result, the wisdom-rejecting fool suffers ruin (13:13), being broken beyond remedy (29:1), poverty and shame (13:18), and even death (19:16). Pharaoh's stubbornness quickly brought ruin to him and his people. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, refused to hearken, and both, on the same day, died (1 Samuel 2:25, 34). The stiff-necked king Ahab refused to listen to the godly prophet Elijah and attempted to make his condition appear better by calling God's spokesman the "troubler of Israel" (1 Kings 18:17). Truthfully clarifying the situation, Elijah declared that Ahab was the real troubler of Israel because he and his father's house had "forsaken the commandments of the LORD" and followed idolatry (v.18). Published in the Bible for all to see: death came to Ahab as a result. Truly, after much reproof the hard-necked Ahab was "broken beyond remedy."

In Jeremiah's day, God graciously held out His hand of great blessings, but He was refused by a stiff-necked people:

"But this is what I commanded them, saying, 'Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people; and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.' Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward. Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have sent you all My servants the prophets, daily rising early and sending them. Yet they did not listen to Me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck; they did more evil than their fathers. You shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you; and you shall call to them, but they will not answer you. You shall say to them, 'This is the

nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God or accept correction; truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth." (Jeremiah 7:23-28).

The ineffectiveness of verbal rebukes emphasizes the futility of trying to reform a stiff-necked fool. The stubbornness is so severe that even multiple beatings will not remove it (Proverbs 17:10). The hard-necked person stops his ears against the words of God, thus inviting His wrath. Repeated counsel, censure, warnings and corrections fall on deaf ears as the incorrigible person persistently refuses to change. This obstinacy sows the seeds of its own self-destruction:

"Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention; And you neglected all my counsel And did not want my reproof; I will also laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes, When your dread comes like a storm And your calamity comes like a whirlwind, When distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; They will seek me diligently but they will not find me, Because they hated knowledge And did not choose the fear of the LORD. They would not accept my counsel, They spurned all my reproof. So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way And be satiated with their own devices. For the waywardness of the naive will kill them, And the complacency of fools will destroy them. But he who listens to me shall live securely And will be at ease from the dread of evil." (Proverbs 1:24-33).

It is certainly a strange contradiction that this obstinate rejection of the word of the Lord should bear any semblance of spiritual devotion to Him. But Ezekiel described this very stubborn, recalcitrant refusal to obey the Lord, and yet keeping up appearances of being righteous: "They come to you as people come, and sit before you as My people and hear your words, but they do not do them," (Ezekiel 33:31). Quite often the hard-hearted, unyielding self-deceiver attempts to compensate for his failure to love God above all else by the performance of some external duty. Godly service turns hypocritical (See Isaiah 1:11-15), and that sickens the Lord. A man's stiff neck renders his prayer to God "an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9). Mere acts of devotion cannot compensate for refusal to heed wise instruction concerning God's way of doing things righteously. Closing our ears to the word of the Lord will ensnare us in troubles of our own making. Who will bail us out then?

- Gary Smalley

* "All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing!"

* "Blessings hemmed with praise will not unravel!"

* "A ton of religion doesn't equal an ounce of salvation!"

* "A wise child hears his Father's instruction!"

* "Are you at peace or in pieces? Tell the Lord about it!"

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

HEAR THE GOSPEL

(Romans 10:14-17; John 20:30-31; Romans 1:15-17)

BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

(Acts 8:37; John 8:24; Hebrews 11:6)

REPENT OF PAST SINS

(Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30)

CONFESS CHRIST

(Romans 10:9-10; Acts 8:37)

BE BAPTIZED

(Romans 6:3-4; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36-39; 1 Peter 3:21)

LIVE A FAITHFUL LIFE

(Revelation 2:10; 2 Peter 1:5-11; John 15:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25)