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THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

MARCH-APRIL 1983

Vol. 6, No. 4

\$2.00

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“I shall have glory by this losing day”

by Michael J. Farrell

Two thousand years after the event, theologians cannot make up their collective minds about the resurrection. Some say Jesus' body rose from the dead. Others say no. Some say it doesn't matter. I bet it mattered to Jesus. One can hardly imagine God making a casual "will I—won't I" decision about whether to leave that special body there or pick it up and transform it—not the God who counts every hair on all our average heads.

It is clear, in any case, that something happened that Sunday morning. A burst of energy or grace or enlightenment as spectacular as that first Big Bang that scientists say started our old world spinning.

Jesus somehow lived on. Previously cowed and ignorant folks got up on their hind legs and said so, and thousands and then millions believed them. For the first time in history death was seen to be defeated.

Without Easter Sunday, Good Friday was your all-time downer: a decent man who talked about love, peace—and resurrection—smothering on a cross with nails in his wrists amid a welter of conspiracy, betrayal and shattered promises.

But religion is full of reversals and epiphanies—the great God grinning and showing the divine hand when we least expect it. William Shakespeare's words in the mouth of defeated Brutus sum up what Easter Sunday did for Good Friday: "I shall have glory by this losing day."

Previously, losing had always been bad form, bad politics, bad theology. If you couldn't knock the stuffing out of every enemy, human and divine, you were a failure. Then Jesus got up on the cross and said, in effect, "I shall have glory by this losing day." To go against the cultural grain and the popular ethos like that, and bring the crowd with you, you had to do something spectacular—and the resurrection was it.

This turned many people's attitudes around with alacrity. "I shall glory in my infirmity," Paul, the old warrior, would say soon afterward. You could now go into Nero's circus and be eaten by the lions and yet declared a winner, whereas earlier theology had decreed that Daniel must overcome in his own lions' den. Christians learned that the folly of the cross was a fine thing. When you were being victimized you could laugh up your sleeve knowing yours was the last laugh because Jesus had shown how to turn defeat into victory.

But Christianity seems to have lost its will to lose since the days of

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TSF BULLETIN. A journal of evangelical thought published by Theological Students Fellowship, a division of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. TSF exists to make available to theology students in universities and seminaries the scholarly and practical resources of classical Christianity. *Editor*, Mark Lau Branson; *Assistant Editor*, Tom McAlpine; *Managing Editor*, John Duff; *Graphics/Production Manager*, Leiko Yamamoto; *Circulation*, Shelley Thron. For other editors, see front cover.

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TSF BULLETIN (ISSN 0272-3913) is published bimonthly during the academic year (September–June). Editorial address is Theological Students Fellowship, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703. **Subscriptions:** \$9.00 per year (\$7.00 per year for students) for five issues. Add \$2.00 per year for postage to addresses outside the U.S. U.S. currency only. Send subscriptions and address changes to TSF Subscriptions, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703. Allow six weeks for address changes to become effective. **Manuscripts:** Although unsolicited material is welcomed, editors cannot assure response in less than three months. Please enclose a self-addressed envelope and return postage.

TSF BULLETIN is a member of the Associated Church Press and of the Evangelical Press Association, and is indexed in *Religion Index One: Periodicals*. Back issues are available from TSF, and are available on microfiche from Vision Press, 15781 Sherbeck, Huntington Beach, CA 92647. An annual index is published in the May/June issue. TSF BULLETIN does not necessarily speak for Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship in its articles and reviews. Although editors personally sign the IVCF basis of faith, our purpose is to provide resources for biblical *thinking* and *living* rather than to formulate "final" answers. © 1983 by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, U.S.A. Second-class postage paid at Madison, Wisconsin. POSTMASTER: send address changes to TSF Subscriptions, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703.

the catacombs. The world is too much with us, as the poet said. Religion has become institutionalized, part of the establishment, its interests just as vested as any multinational. The attitude is one of counting and quantifying, of building a wall around what you have and want to hold, of tying a string around your neat salvation package and holding it up as the whole, unadulterated truth. Who, in such an atmosphere, will leap to the absurd as our unsophisticated predecessors dared and did at resurrection time?

The vested interests are spiritual as well as material. The spiritual heritage is, after all, the commodity to be sold. Catholics, for example, for centuries regarded Catholicism as the best and truest, hell-bent on a triumphalist march to teach all nations its exclusive package. Most mainline Protestant denominations, ditto. Evangelicals, ditto. Some recent ecumenical advances show that even in human terms you can stoop and conquer.

But for the truly converted corporation mentality we must turn on the TV and listen to the electronic preachers. There we find that the Panama Canal, U.S. military strength and other such spiritual considerations are part of the salvation you buy with your donation. If Jesus had not risen, he would be turning in his grave. Where is the letting go? Where is the kingdom not of this world?

Our common creed is that the mustard seed must die to bear fruit, but in practice there is little letting go or giving up, only a few like St. Francis and Mother Teresa, most instead building and consolidating and taking the collection money to the bank on Monday morning. Hard to blame them, because life is insecure, but then Jesus and his crowd were risking it all and losing—it is a baffling conundrum.

The easiest target for potshots here is Ronald Reagan and his international counterparts. If Reagan decreed tomorrow to cut his nuclear arsenal in half, would he be remembered as a fool or a saint? Would he have glory by his "losing" day? Would it, in fact, be a losing day? Would "the enemy" gladly reciprocate or avidly take advantage?

There would be no glory if he knew these answers in advance. The glory is proportionate to the risk. And it seems easier to take the risk if you are prepared to settle for heavenly glory rather than seek political gain or fame in the history books. Y'all pray for Mr. Reagan that he decides wisely.

At a lower, personal level, it is not much easier when the chips are down: to give ground, to concede an argument, to make an apology, to go to jail for a principle, much less to risk your possessions or your life. As poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote,

***Losing had always been bad form,
bad politics, bad theology.***

***But some who tried the less
traveled road claimed to find
happiness in their forlorn hope.***

Those down
Can creep in the low door
On to heaven's floor,

but there is so little incentive in the world for being "down" or a loser when everyone is shouting "win." And who but a loser would settle for the low door to heaven? We want pearly gates.

We have been saying for centuries that the resurrection is our hope. Ah, there's the rub, the all-time, outrageous, ironic rub. If an individual's or an institution's bag includes (in addition to God's mighty metaphorical right hand) a bank account against tomorrow's uncertainty, a nuclear arsenal against the godless enemy, a reputation to be polished and promoted, what you have is not hope but confidence—if you're lucky.

Hope is what you have when you have nothing else. Hope doesn't come into its own until the situation is hopeless. Like when you're on a cross having passed up the good times. Or when you're in jail or in the doghouse for having said what's true rather than what is expedient. Or when you give away your last pair of shoes (forget the Panama canal) and there's snow in the forecast.

It sounds like a callous doctrine. But most of those running with the present system of having and hoarding admit privately that Earth '83 is neither much fun nor a great success. And some at least who tried the less traveled road claimed to find happiness in their forlorn hope. And many went out smiling, having the last laugh at our expense in collusion with a good-natured God who could have given us the resurrection straight but threw in the curve of Good Friday as a backward way to happiness.

THE CHURCH & PEACEMAKING IN THE NUCLEAR AGE: A CONFERENCE ON BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

This conference, to be held May 25–28, 1983 in Pasadena, California, will provide the first opportunity for a large representative group of evangelical Church leaders to meet to address the nuclear arms race. The unique emphasis of this national conference is its balanced educational approach. Many responses to the issue will be presented by leading evangelical voices of different Christian traditions. An unprecedented coalition of over fifty evangelical organizations, including Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, has initiated this Church-wide event. An additional thirty groups are contributing to the diversity of the conference by providing in excess of one hundred practical and technical workshops to some two thousand participants on a first come/first served basis. In America, many churches have taken an active role in the nuclear arms discussion. Until now, however, evangelical participation has been minimal. This conference could prove to be a major watershed in evangelical thought regarding faith issues raised by the nuclear weapons buildup. For more information contact Jim Brenneman, The Church and Peacemaking in the Nuclear Age, 1539 E. Howard St., Pasadena, CA 91104.

INTRODUCING A NEW THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Readers of *TSF Bulletin* may be interested in *Evangel*, a new quarterly review of biblical, practical and contemporary theology. Edited by scholars and church leaders in Scotland, the first issue appeared in January, 1983. Committed to the essentials uniting British evangelicals, the journal is intended for thoughtful Christians, especially those with preaching and teaching responsibilities. For subscription information write Evangel Subscriptions, Rutherford House, 17 Claremont Park, Edinburgh 6, Scotland.

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