

The Theology of West Wing

Today's Thursday Theology comes from Jim Squire. After hearing that Paul's breakthrough on faith which became Luther's (Romans 1:16-17) actually came from one of the Hebrew prophets (Habakkuk) and that there is a minor tradition throughout Judaism that, when faced with the question asked of Jesus ("Which is the greatest sentence of the Law"), a person should answer Hab. 2:4 ("Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith"), he remembered this episode of West Wing. It brings together two of Jim's passions – finding connections between the Hebrew tradition and Lutheran theology as well as between faith and pop culture. Enjoy!

Judges 12:5 through Judges 12:6

5Then the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. Whenever one of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No," 6they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites fell at that time.

I don't know if you have ever watched NBC's "The West Wing" on Wednesday nights, but this past Thanksgiving, they showed an episode of this award-winning drama entitled "Shibboleth". One of the subplots involved 83 Chinese refugees who showed up at San Diego harbor, fleeing from mainland China. This presented the Bartlett (Democrat) administration with quite a dilemma. The US is trying to forge a better relationship with China (the

fictional US, that is!). So foreign policy seems to dictate that they be returned to their home country. On the other hand, everyone knows they will be tortured and maybe even killed if we do. The INS rules indicate that we must conduct a credible fear test before we even think about letting them into the country.

Then word comes that the Chinese refugees are seeking religious asylum, fleeing from religious persecution as Evangelical Christians. Now the Bartlett White House has its familiar Conservative Christian nemesis breathing down its neck, accusing Bartlett of turning a blind eye to the issue of persecution of Christians.

His deputy chief of staff, Josh Lyman, and his deputy communications director, Sam Seaborn are at a loss to know how to proceed (they've been taking all the meetings on the subject). They present the conflicting feedback they've been given, and Bartlett interrupts:

Bartlett: You guys know what a "shibboleth" is?

Seaborn: It's a catch-phrase, isn't it?

Lyman: ... a cliché (?)

Bartlett(don't ask me what version he is quoting): Comes from the bible. "Then said now unto him, 'say now shibboleth', and he said, 'sibboleth', for he could not frame to pronounce it right." It was a password, a way the army used to distinguish true Israelites from imposters sent across the Jordan river by the enemy. I'm having one of the Chinese refugees flown here. I'll meet with him tonight.

CJ Craig (press secretary): Mr. President, I can't, ya know, ... indefinitely with the turkey.

Bartlett: Yeah. [heads toward other room for the traditional

“pardon the turkey” ritual]

Lyman: Excuse me Sir, what are you going to ask the man?

Bartlett: I’m going to ask him to say “shibboleth”.

That evening:

Mrs. L: Ah, Mr. President?

Bartlett: Is he here?

Mrs. L: Yes sir.

McGarry (chief of staff): Did we get an interpreter?

Bartlett: He speaks English. He’s a chemistry professor. There was a time I wanted to be a chemistry professor.

McGarrity: What happened?

Bartlett: I never actually took chemistry.

McGarrity: Well, a lot of these University chemistry departments are very demanding that way.

Bartlett: Yeah.

Mrs. L: Ah, Mr. President.

Bartlett: Chen We? (sp? pronounced “chen way”)

Chen We: Yes sir. [they shake hands]

Bartlett: I’m Jeb Bartlett, this is Leo McGarry

McGarry: How do you do?

Bartlett: Thank you for coming all this way.

McGarry: Fellas, would you mind waiting outside?

Bartlett: Would you care to sit down? [pause] It's perfectly alright. [they sit] There's some sandwiches here, if you should feel hungry you should eat whatever you please.

Chen We: [shaking his head slightly] Yes sir.

Bartlett: There are some questions as to the veracity of your claim to asylum.

Chen We: Yes sir.

Bartlett: How did you become a Christian?

Chen We: I began attending a house church with my wife in PhuGien (sp?) Eventually, I was baptized.

Bartlett: How do you practice?

Chen We: We share bibles. There are not enough. We sing hymns, we listen to sermons. We recite the Lord's prayer. We are charitable.

Bartlett: Who is the head of your church?

Chen We: The head of our parish is an 84 year old man by the name of Wa Ling. He has been imprisoned and beaten many times. The head of our church is Jesus Christ.

Bartlett: Can you name any of Jesus' apostles? If you can't, it's okay. I usually have trouble remembering the names of my children or for that matter-

Chen We: -Peter, andrew, john, philipp, bartholomew, thomas, matthew, thaddeus, simon, judas, and James. [pause] Mr. President, Christianity is not demonstrated through a recitation of facts. You are seeking evidence of faith – whole hearted

acceptance of God's promise for a better world. For we hold:

THAT MAN IS JUSTIFIED BY FAITH ALONE

is what St. Paul says, justified by faith alone! Faith is the true ... [struggles for right word] uh, I'm trying to... Shibboleth. Faith is the true Shibboleth.

Bartlett: Yes sir, it is. And you just said the magic word, in more ways than one. Thank you.

Chen We: Thank you, Mr. President. [he leaves]

[Bartlett turns to look at McGarry with a grim look on his face]

McGarry: [shrugging] We're trying to sell more 747's to China, already a big customer. We want China to crack down on violators of American copyrights. We're trying to get China to negotiate a settlement with Tibet.

Bartlett: Right.

McGarry: Right.

Bartlett: We don't have to grant asylum.

McGarry: If you are suggesting what I think you are, you should know that it has happened before.

Bartlett: Where are they?

McGarry: An INS detention facility in Note Mesa (sp?), guarded by INS agents aided by members of the 22nd division of the California national guard.

Bartlett: Not the coast guard?

McGarry: No.

Bartlett: Before, when it happened before, how did it work?

McGarry: Well, you don't want to piss off China, and you don't want to send them back, so you gotta ask yourself, how secure is the INS detention facility?

[they look at each other for a moment]

Bartlett: Mrs. Landingham?

Mrs. L: Yes sir?

Bartlett: I need to talk to the governor of California.

Mrs. L: Yes sir.

The next morning:

Josh Lyman: I am assuming you've heard.

Bartlett: About the Chinese refugees?

Sam Seaborn: They escaped.

Bartlett: Yeah, can you believe it?

Lyman: No, as a matter of fact, neither one of us can believe it, sir.

Bartlett: That detention center was being guarded by the 22nd division of the California national guard. Now, what does it say about our reserve Army-

Seaborn: -if 83 men, women, and children who haven't eaten for 2 months staged a prison break?

Bartlett: Let me read this (the draft of the thanksgiving day proclamation). "Well over three and a half centuries ago, strengthened by faith and bound by a common desire for liberty,

a small band of pilgrims sought out a place in the new world where they could worship according to their own beliefs... ” “Now therefore I, Josiah Bartlett, President of the United States, by virtue of the authority and laws vested in me, do hereby proclaim this to be a national day of thanksgiving.

Seaborn: I'll see you out there, sir.

Lyman(peering curiously at the president): You asked the governor to stand down the 22nd division.

(children can be heard singing “We gather together” in the background)

Bartlett: And call in the Red Cross. We didn't do anything illegal. You're not involved in any massive criminal conspiracy. There's no way I was going to let them go, and we needed to help China save face. So, now they can tell their people the mighty American military was overpowered by-

Lyman: -yeah. {Bartlett heads for the Rose Garden} So, the guy passed the test, huh.

Bartlett: You think I would have sent him back if he had failed catechism??? Let me tell you something. We can be the world's policeman, we can be the world's bank, the world's factory, the world's farm, but what does it mean if we're not also... They made it to the new world, Josh (smile breaking out all over his face). You know what I get to do now? I get to proclaim a national day of thanksgiving. This is a great job. [“Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States”]

Lyman looks on with a smile on his face and begins to follow as the children can be heard singing:

*“We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing
He chastens and hastens His will to make known*

*The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing
Sing praises to His name He forgets not His own."*