

Walter R. Bouman, R.I.P. “God’s Yes and God’s No”

Colleagues,

Walt Bouman died yesterday, August 17, at his home in Columbus, Ohio. That day was Walt and Jan (Gundermann) Bouman’s 48th wedding anniversary. To his diagnosis 6 months ago, “inoperable cancer,” he and Jan responded with home hospice health care. Walt’s 76th birthday anniversary was July 9. We posted his last sermon at Trinity Seminary in Columbus – where he “crossed” his imminent death with the Gospel – on June 2, 2005. If interested, you will find it archived in the ThTh listings on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org>

One of Walt’s classic pieces from 35 years ago (1970) is “Yes and No in a Taxicab.” It was a major item way back then in the collected essays of “THE PROMISING TRADITION, A Seminex Reader in Systematic Theology.” It was assigned reading for every incoming Seminex student. We pass it on to you on this day after his departure as a tribute to Walt.

There were giants in the earth in earlier days, says Genesis 6:4. Encountering Walt’s large frame, his impassioned prose (regularly peppered with holy(?) humor—“A man’s best friend is his dogma”—and then followed by his own ebullient laughter), his free-wheeling gestures and riveting eyes, you knew that the age of giants had not passed. Yet he has, though his works and words are still with us. For him and them Te Deum laudamus!

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

YES AND NO IN A TAXICAB by Walter R. Bouman

[This dialogue took place approximately as described. Imagine a clergyman getting into a taxicab. The driver throws the first words over his shoulder in the direction of the clerical collar he glimpsed when the clergyman got into the cab.]

Driver: Where to?

Clergyman: Airport, please.

D: You a priest or something?

C: I'm a Lutheran pastor.

D: That so? I used to go to a Lutheran church. St. Paul's on the north side. Pastor X baptized my kids. Know him?

C: Yes, I do.

D: Yeah? I liked him a lot, but I don't go much any more. (Pause) You know, I got a theory about religion. ALL RELIGIONS ARE OKAY IF YOU PRACTICE THEM.

C: (Not interested) That so?

D: Yeah! Every religion is good so long as you put it into practice.

C: (Suddenly deciding to take the conversation seriously) Could I test your theory?

D: Sure, go ahead. Always like to talk about religion.

C: What would you say about Hitler and Nazism? Was that a good religion?

D: (Surprised) That wasn't no religion!

C: But it had many of the characteristics of a religion – rituals, doctrines, heretics. Most important, Hitler demanded and got total loyalty and unquestioning obedience. The institutions of Nazism replaced those of Christianity almost item by item. What does that do to your theory that every religion is good so long as you put it into practice?

D: Well, you sure got a crazy definition of religion!

C: How so?

D: Well, I always think of religion as, well, you know, churches and praying and preaching and that stuff.

C: And if you don't go to church you're not very religious?

D: Well, you know, like I said, I sorta got away from it.

C: Maybe you did. Or maybe you just got away from a churchly kind of religion. And maybe religion could include a lot more than church. For example, what are you loyal to? What do you care about?

D: Lots of things – like bowling. I sure like to bowl, twice a week. Pretty good average, too. 169. You bowl?

C: A little. But is bowling the most important thing in the world for you? Does it have your highest loyalty? Would you do ANYTHING to bowl?

D: No, guess not. It's not important like that.

C: What is?

D: I guess – well, my kids, maybe. They're pretty important. Even got me to go to church for a while – you know, St. Paul's.

That's how much I'd do for them! One's in college now. That's why I drive a cab a couple a nights a week – and weekends. I need the money for the kids – though I got a good enough regular job – at McDonnell's, right out where we're going.

C: You'd do anything for your kids?

D: I guess so. Anything. My boy – the one in college, you know – studying engineering – he'll be drafted when he's done. Another year. Way it looks, he'll probably go to Viet Nam. I think I'd go for him if I could. I was in the last war, you know. Germany.

C: That so?

D: Yeah. Guess I'd do anything. Wife says I care too much. But what else a man got to live for. No, take my kids away and I don't care anymore.

C: Sounds like that's your religion.

D: I thought you were gonna say that. I sorta knew what you were driving at way back when you asked what I cared about. Tried to change the subject 'cause I know what you're gonna say. You're gonna say I worship my kids – just like the wife says.

C: Well do you?

D: Aw right. Lemme tell you. Yeah! I do. And it bothers me. I used to go into their rooms at night when they were little – and they'd be sleeping – and I 'd love them so much I could just feel it. And I knew I couldn't stand to have them suffer, and when they were sick it was worse on me than it was on them. I knew if one of 'em died it would be awful. I knew I couldn't stand it. I would even pray once in a while, that God wouldn't let 'em die. I thought going to church might help. But then

there didn't really seem to be a God. "Scuse me, reverend. I don't mean to insult you.

C: That's OK. Go ahead.

D: Finally it just seemed useless, all that singing and praying and sitting and standing. Mind you, I'm not against religion. God for the kids to get some starch into their lives, something to keep 'em straight.

But I knew that if something was going to happen to 'em, it would. Nothing I could do. So what the hell – 'scuse me, reverend. You got me going here. I went to church often enough to please 'em till I got this weekend taxi job. They knew I was working for them. Keep 'em safe. Keep 'em straight. Give 'em a good education. That's all I can do. Till they get drafted and get sent to Viet Nam. And get shot to hell. And me with 'em. I know that's the way it will be. And I don't know what to do. What do I do? And don't tell me to believe in God. That don't work. I tried.

C: I'm not going to talk to you about God; but we can talk about religion because you HAVE a religion, and you're practicing it right now. Driving this cab. You don't have to believe there IS a God because you already have a god: your kids. I could say even more. You use your kids to justify your life. That's what keeps you working and living.

D: Well, what's wrong with that?

C: Why don't you tell me?

D: Oh hell! Don't play games with me.

C: I'm not; really, I'm not. I think you already told me what's wrong.

D: When?

C: When you talked about how you loved your kids and ended up thinking of one of them dead, maybe in a war, and you not able to do anything about it.

D: I still don't get it.

C: Look, the point you yourself are making is that you have a god, something that says YES to you, something that justifies your existence. Everybody who goes on living has made or found that kind of YES for life. That's why Camus...

D: Who?

C: Camus, Albert Camus.

D: Never heard of him.

C: That's all right. The point is, he said that suicide was the only important philosophical problem. If we go on living it's because we have a god, a YES, something that affirms us.

The thing you are beginning to realize is that your YES isn't all that dependable. You can't count on your kids being what you've asked them to be, your "god." That's the trouble with all our religions, all our "gods," all our causes and affirmations. They are not God. They are not able to be what we make them. We have to work overtime to pump "life" into our "gods." That's what enslaves us, finally. Our home-made gods always demand more than they can deliver.

D: But my kids are good to me. Couldn't ask for more.

C: Sure they are. But they can't be the whole ball of wax. And they won't be either. It's not just Viet Nam. They grow up, marry, move away from home. They need us less and less.

D: Yeah, that's happening already.

C: Besides, none of us ever succeeds in justifying our lives – even if our “gods” outlast us. Death says a final NO to everyone of us.

D: Wait a minute! I don't look at death like that. It's just, when your number is up, you've bought it.

C: I'm not talking about how we look at death; I'm talking about the fact of death. Some people are saying that “God is dead.” It may really be that death is God, that death is the inescapable verdict upon each of us.

D: You make it sound like I'm guilty of something. But I don't feel guilty. Nothing wrong with loving your kids.

C: Right – not if that's all you're doing. But if loving them is the way you justify what you are and what you do, then you are already living an evaluated life. And then death, too, is an evaluation. It says NO.

D: That's pretty hard to take. I didn't ask to be born. I didn't ask to be made this way.

C: That's part of my point. When we can't justify ourselves, we can always try to blame something, or someone, or the system itself. Anything to make sure that we are never in the wrong.

D: Say, aren't you preachers supposed to comfort people? None of this sounds very comforting.

C: Well, we started talking about religion, remember? Trying to test your theory that all religions are good as long as you practice them. I've tried to say that we all have a religion, a way of getting a YES for life, a way of not being in the wrong. And it seems to me that our religions really fail us, that we

are betrayed by our religions into deceiving ourselves and blaming others. The verdict on that kind of living is death.

D: But you didn't say anything about God.

C: You said you didn't want to be told about God. So we talked about life and failure and the verdict of death. That may be all the glimpse we get of God from life and history. And the God we see there is not some grandfatherly being who makes everything come out all right in the end. You yourself said that there didn't seem to be that kind of God anyway. The only God we're likely to meet if we look for one in life and history is the God that says NO to life and history.

D: But aren't you supposed to tell us a way out?

C: I don't think so. Whatever else I might have to say, it's not a way out. Christianity is not some cheap escape from the way things are. You can invent an escape if you want, but it won't take you anywhere. You can even try to make the Christian Gospel into some kind of escape, but that's as much an invented religion as any other – and just as much a failure.

D: Well, what is Jesus supposed to do?

C: He doesn't let us off. He just lets us IN on Himself, on what He is and on what He does. He is YES to us, and He asks us to believe that and to give up our other "gods" and justifications. His best known stories were about Himself, because he was accused of saying YES to people who didn't have much going for them socially or morally or religiously – whores and traitors. He told about a son who took his inheritance and left home...

D: Yeah, yeah, I know. "Prodigal son." Right?

C: The point of the story is that Jesus is a different way of

dealing with rejected people. We might call it "forgiveness," but it does not come cheap. Jesus' death is His final and total commitment to us. It is the way He experiences the verdict, lets it happen to him, our home-made religions and our illusory justifications.

The boy in Jesus' story gets that kind of YES which sets him free to admit that he is in the wrong. We are given that YES in Jesus which sets us free to say NO to our religions, even to join in the verdict upon them because the YES is stronger than the verdict, because when the verdict has done its worst, the YES overcomes it.

D: I never heard it that way before.

C: But that's what Christians mean by "Gospel." To believe that Gospel means to entrust ourselves to the YES in Jesus, to hold to that YES against the NO of life in history. To believe Jesus is to be free for all the things in the world out of which we want to make gods – for bowling and kids and work and the wife. We are really free FOR them because we don't need any longer to try to make them what they can't be: our "gods." We're not trapped into working them up into something "divine." We're free to be FOR them as Jesus is FOR us.

D: Well, where does church and praying fit into all this?

C: It helps if we stop thinking first that church is a building or a religious organization. Church is really what happens to people when the Gospel is happening to them and through them to other people. The words that Christians share with one another about Jesus as God the forgiver are meant to set them free for one another and for all people.

D: Doesn't sound like any church I know.

C: Maybe we all have to ask where this is really going on. It's true that a lot of religious action going on under the name of church is only a cover-up for our old home-made religions. A German play written right after World War II is about a man who comes back from the war and finds himself betrayed by everything. The church is a character called "god" in the play. The character keeps repeating, 'Nobody cares about me anymore.' That's what a lot of "churches" ask for – that people care about them. But the author shouts, "Hasn't God studied theology? Who is supposed to care about whom?"

When the church cares about itself and worries about whether people care about it, then that's a sure sign that the Gospel is being missed somewhere. The Gospel sets people free from wondering who cares about them, sets them free for caring.

D: You mean even church religions aren't all right when you practice them?

C: I'm saying that churches and doctrines and even the Bible can be misused so that they become "gods" and false gospels. Right religion is where Jesus' affirmation is being heard and trusted and celebrated so that people are free for each other. Wrong religion is not trusting the Gospel that is in Jesus – and that kind of religion can be going on in the middle of churches.

D: Does praying do any good?

C: Like everything else, that depends on whether praying grows out of trusting the good news in Jesus. When you believe the good news, you can hold your whole life and people in it, your world and its destiny, before God. Praying then means getting to be a "son of God" like Jesus, that is, knowing and trusting and saying thanks for the YES that sets you free. Then you will recognize God's YES elsewhere in the world, and you will look

for ways to be part of the YES in the world . . . This the airport?

D: Yeah.

C: Here. Keep the change.

D: Thanks. If you ever see Pastor X, tell him hello.

C: But I didn't get your name.

D: That's all right. Just tell him about me. He'll know.