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THE POWER OF PRAYER

by Jonathan Wilson

“More is wrought by prayer than this world dreams of, let us pray.” Such was the standard invitation to prayer issued by my pastor father throughout his very successful ministerial career. Allen Whitfield, founder of the Des Moines law firm that still bears his name, had a plaque on his desk similarly engraved. I grew up believing it was true, a “given,” so to speak. As I grew with that as a given, I became more critical of and dissatisfied with the quality of my prayers; they seemed remarkably one-sided and consistently unanswered whether I couched them as personal wishes or sought unselfishly some benefit for others.

While on a recent trip to the Machu Picchu ruins of Peru, I was made to appreciate the Mayan knowledge of and worshipful respect for the sun, which they devoutly believed revolved around the earth. They understood its crucial importance in food production and the role it plays in sustaining life. They were intently aware that it moved to the north or south, depending on the season. The ruins to this day can be seen in alignment with the movements of the sun “god.” They knew that if ever that “god” failed to reverse direction it would vanish to the north or south and all life would vanish with it.

Most important was its maximum reach during winter; when it reversed course annually on June 21. Then the Maya knew their winter would be ending and in a few months a new planting season would begin. They kept careful track of the sun’s maximum reaches, north and south, and built their magnificent structures, their streets, and their homes in line with the shadows cast at those points. They had no reason to know why the sun “god” changed direction but, knowing how important the event was, they prayed fervently as those shadows approached the maximums around which they had built their homes and their lives. And, sure enough, their prayers were reliably answered affirmatively twice every year.

By contrast, “Christians,” who decimated the Mayan culture, language, and religion, in the name of an unholy alliance between religion and exploitation, pray to an unseen “God,” professing It to be the singular all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, just and merciful creator of all things. Somehow that “God” managed, despite those remarkable traits of power, foresight, and love, to create some mighty flawed “children.” Then, in order to fix His mistake (but, apparently, ashamed of the means by which He had made them for procreation) He impregnated with a son an unsuspecting virgin among them (rape by today’s standards), who was coincidentally born of a virgin also. He then had folks crucify him in order to pay for everyone’s sins before and since. With such super traits unconstrained by the natural order of things, a well placed supplication to such a “God” through prayer ought to be expected to do the trick every time. The reality, of course, is otherwise; and even “Christians” deep down know it.

The Bible correctly says that it rains on the just and on the unjust. We know that’s true. So much for a just “God.” Everyone also knows that bad things happen to good people, including devout, professing “Christians.” So much for an all-powerful, just, and merciful “God.” Go figure. I’ve on occasion gotten worse and better than I’ve deserved. My prayers have not appeared to correlate to avoiding the former or causing the latter. But I’ve stopped both blaming myself for faulty prayers, and blaming “God” for failing to respond positively to them.

It is said that history is written by the victors, and it’s true. The Maya were not the victors, and the “Christians” have written the history. But if we look past that historical bias, and

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CALENDAR

▼ **The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, December 4, 2009 at Hoyt Sherman Place.**

Join Peter Pintus, holocaust survivor, share his story.

▼

▼ **R.S.V.P. by Tuesday December 1 to JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com or 288-2500 by phone.**

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search our souls, which makes more logical sense to you: praying to the sun “god” for what you want and need for it to do, with reliable assurance it will consistently do so, or praying to a silent “God” that capriciously provides you with your needs, perhaps with plenty or not, and occasionally with miracles -- all absent any apparent relationship to virtue or prayer? In the end, the prayers in either case do nothing demonstrable one way or the other, but the former, at least, has a reliable outcome.

A blind belief in the power of prayer to motivate a merciful “God” who supposedly already knows without reminder or being asked was a religious view that served me as an uncritical child. When I became a man, however, I have put away such childish things, as the Bible admonishes that I should do. I have come to the conclusion that bad things will continue to happen to good people -- my betters -- and if I want anything good to happen for myself or others, its for me to take affirmative steps that might help make it happen.

The bottom line is that if we want a better world for ourselves, others, and our progeny, we need to get off our knees and get busy. As has been aptly said, “God has no hands

Speakers for October

Ronald Gottl & Bill Dessauer

Our speakers on November 6 were Ron Gottl and Bill Dessauer, a pair of financial services representatives who specialize for MetLife in offering life and health insurance and securities products planned for the households of gay men and women in Iowa (www.glbtiowa.metlife.com). As their Web site notes, Gottl and Dessauer devote their time and energy to helping people in Iowa’s gay community reach their personal and financial goals by making informed decisions about their money. As a team they focus on the unique issues that present financial challenges in the GLBT community such as:

- ◆ Is your partner (and/or children) covered financially in case something were to happen to you?
- ◆ Are you and your partner making informed decisions with your money so you can retire with a comfortable lifestyle?
- ◆ Do you maximize the options available to you in order to reduce your taxable income?
- ◆ Are you aware of the value of your estate and the issues that surround transferring it to whom you want?
- ◆ Have you evaluated your current investments as they relate to your accumulation goals?
- ◆ If you own a business, are you and your employees financially protected?

The two agents’ PowerPoint presentation was both enjoyable and personable, and you can review its content and much, much more at the Web site cited above--an exceedingly complete and user-friendly site. At our breakfast, Ron and Bill emphasized in particular the necessity of paying careful attention to how joint property is titled (e.g., always pay the mortgage with two checks--one from each owner) and to will-making (“Don’t try this at home,” said one, referring to Internet-downloaded will forms. Consult professionals!). Questions afterward from the group included term vs. universal insurance, taxation of state bonds, and disability income.

Following their presentation, Jonathan Wilson noted that “we had a presentation at our meeting designed to heighten knowledge of financial and estate planning issues and an appreciation for the value of planning in advance of any immediate needs. Much of the information was necessarily general in nature; the real value is to be found in making direct contact and consulting with a financial/estate planning professional, so that recommendations can be made in the context of individual circumstances and wishes. If you have an interest in contacting either of the presenters, or one of the four financial planners who are FFBC members (Rick Davis, Brad Holland, Scott Johnson, Ryan Weidner), let me know and I’ll assist you in making that contact.”

Reason for the Holiday Season?

By Tony E. Hansen

An NPR commentary in 2008 expressed resentment toward holiday greetings that include pictures of their families or of a recent paradise trip. In his description, he questions why people would replace the “meaning of the season” with one’s self or things that do not appear to have anything to do with the season. The commentary misses what really diminishes the reason for the season.

The seeming secular (or the commentator’s hinted narcissistic) replacement of a supposed “holy” meaning in greeting cards seems to be a moot point against the holiday season that we have today. Greetings are somewhat reflective of people and some people enjoy getting or receiving those pictures (not thinking anything degrading of this). Some are just grateful to receive a card, but the cards are not the problem.

The holidays have been commercialized while the good humanity of the season gets lost in the rush of shopping, Santa Claus, and gimmicks enticing you to *buy* into the holiday rather than enjoy the season. That commercialization represents what is wrong and perhaps reflects upon our society’s priorities. There is a prevailing sense of entitlement to receive gifts or an induced *need* to buy the latest sparkle in order to please someone.

Expecting gifts is actually selfish and presumptuous. Especially in these hard times, do people need to feel compelled to buy anything? In contrast, the best times of the holidays are those times when we are sharing laughs, quality time, and each others’ company, not gifts.

Time heals almost everything. If it possibly can, let it.

This is It

Starring Michael Jackson

Directed by Kenny Ortega

1 Hr 51 Min

Review by
Gary Kaufman

I have never been a tremendous fan of Michael Jackson. Oh, I enjoyed a number of his dance tunes and innovative videos, but I was only sort of a lukewarm fan of the other material. However, I AM a tremendous fan of his final adieu, **This Is It**, a film documentary that had been intended just to be a background piece about the production of his upcoming concert tour, which he prophetically called his final curtain call, "This Is It". You can forget about the weirdo Michael Jackson, the man with the strange relationship with a chimp, propensity to surround himself with young boys, and all that. This is Michael Jackson the creator, the artist, the performer, at which he truly was a genius. The film was made by his co-creator of the concert, Kenny Ortega, and it includes insights as to film and concert techniques as well as incredible footage of the songs that were to be in the concert. For instance, the stage lifts, and dancers and singers first appear rising from the floor, have two speeds, "elevator" and "toaster". At toaster speed the dancers have to anticipate the sudden stop and use it so they emerge with this incredible leap coming from the floor.

The film shows use of green screen staging, where not only is the background screen green but also is the entire stage, with short risers in place so the actor knows what objects to move around. By filming Michael Jackson on this set, it was possible to place him into the Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson movie, **The Big Sleep**, for a shootout. However, instead of just being in front of a green screen and having Michael projected into the foreground, with the whole staging set out in green, Michael's image is then placed into the movie three-dimensionally correct. The director also shows the creation of a background concert film for the song, "Thriller," which was very ghoulish and produced in 3-D. Not only would the concert have had the 3-D movie projected on the back screen, but also corpses emerging from graves would be on stage while enormous male and female ghosts would float up the aisles of the theater toward the stage. The staging of the concert had many jaw dropping moments, including a 5-story steel construction site backdrop for one song, and a trap door with a bulldozer coming out and just about creaming Michael as he sings a song about the destruction of the earth by man.

Of course the concert film we see is an unfinished product. What is generally shown is each song in various stages of development. But the timing of Michael Jackson numbers is so precise that the filmmaker would intercut from as many as four different rehearsals of a particular song and never miss a beat. Perhaps the film works so well because we don't see the final product. It makes the audience imagine how incredible the

final concert performance would have been. You get enough glimpses to realize that the culmination of this vision would have pretty much blown away any previous concert.

If you like Michael Jackson music at least a little, you **MUST** see this movie.

When someone says, "I'm not book smart; I'm street smart," they're really saying, "I'm not real smart, but I'm imaginary smart."

Reason for the Holiday Season (cont)

The holidays provide an opportunity to decorate, entertain, visit good people, and simply smile more often the good parts of humanity. This season involves more than just one holiday or culture where people enjoy the great aspects of our shared humanity. For a few weeks, we get to be selfless regardless of which holiday someone celebrates this season. We have an opportunity to reflect upon what we have and hope about where we can go in the upcoming year. We should share the experience of time and people that is the true meaning of the season, instead of the overtones of Santa and malls.

There are people that mean something to you and the holidays is a time to remind them of that (beyond the token gift of appreciation). I bid you, your friends and your family a safe, happy, and healthy holiday season with a prosperous new year!

Peace be with you!

BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the December 4 meeting no later than December 1. E-mail JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com or call him at 288-2500. Our speaker will be Peter Pintus, Holocaust survivor.

▼ ▼ ▼
Thanks to Rick Davis for his introduction of our November speakers, financial planners Bill Dessauer and Ronald Gottl.

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NOTICE: SINCE THE FIRST FRIDAY IN JANUARY 2010 IS ON JANUARY 1, THE JANUARY MEETING HAS BEEN MOVED TO JANUARY 8. BE SURE TO MARK YOUR CALENDAR

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Consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the First Friday Breakfast Club Scholarship Fund



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Des Moines, Iowa*

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My M. O. (Monthly Observations)

Books to Consider

Holiday gift-giving time quickly approaches, and I have a few of suggestions for those of you who have readers on your gift list. Some of these selections I would recommend highly while others are of mediocre interest. However, since each person's taste in reading material differs, it might be better to give a gift certificate from your favorite book store rather than the book itself.

Of genuine interest for those who prefer nonfiction is Barbara Walter's **Audition**. Walters has interviewed over her 50-plus years as a journalist practically every major politician, celebrity, and world leader worth hearing. In addition to recounting the circumstances of hundreds of her interviews, Walters examines her own life from childhood into maturity. She not only exposes her weaknesses but also celebrates the successes she achieved as a woman in a "man's business". The book is dedicated to the memory of her sister Jacqueline Walters and her daughter Jacqueline Walters Danforth. As the reader gets further into the book, it is obvious why she dedicated the book to them.

Another nonfiction book that recently hit the shelves is William Shawcross's official biography, **The Queen Mother**. (In England the book is entitled **Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother**, but since most Americans don't know the difference between the Queen and her mother, Queen Elizabeth, the title was dumbed down for the American audience.) Shawcross had unprecedented access to the archives at Windsor Castle as well as to the Queen Mother's voluminous correspondence. Unfortunately, as is the case with most "official" biographies, the author's first priority is to please those who allowed him to write the book—namely, The Royal Family. He conveniently leaves out of the biography the fact that Queen Mary was an accessory to the euthanasia of her husband, King George V, in 1936, so his death notice would appear in the more fashionable morning newspapers rather than in the less-than-chic afternoon tabloids. Likewise, Shawcross does his best to perpetuate the myth that the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936 was the fault almost entirely of Wallis Simpson (later Duchess of Windsor) rather than acknowledging the fact that Edward VIII, his prime minister Stanley Baldwin, and the stuffy courtiers of that time were actually the key players in the abdication episode. The book is nearly 1000 pages long, so be ready to commit a lot of time to the reading of it.

For those who prefer fiction, a good book to consider is the 2010 All Iowa Reads book, **Driftless**, by Wisconsin writer David Rhodes. I have not yet read the book, but Alan Cheuse of **The Chicago Tribune** says it "is the best work of fiction to come out of the Midwest in many years." Other All Iowa Reads titles include 2009's **The Rope Walk** by Carrie Brown; 2008's **Digging to America** by Anne Tyler; 2007's **Splendid Solution: Jonas Salk and the Conquest of Polio** by Jeffrey Kluger; 2006's **Gilead** by Marilynne Robinson; 2005's **The Master Butchers Singing Club** by Louise Erdrich; 2004's **Niagara Fall All Over Again** by Elizabeth McCracker; and 2003's **Peace Like a River** by Leif Enger.

Whatever your choices in gift giving, I hope you will encourage others to read. Happy Holidays!

Steve Person