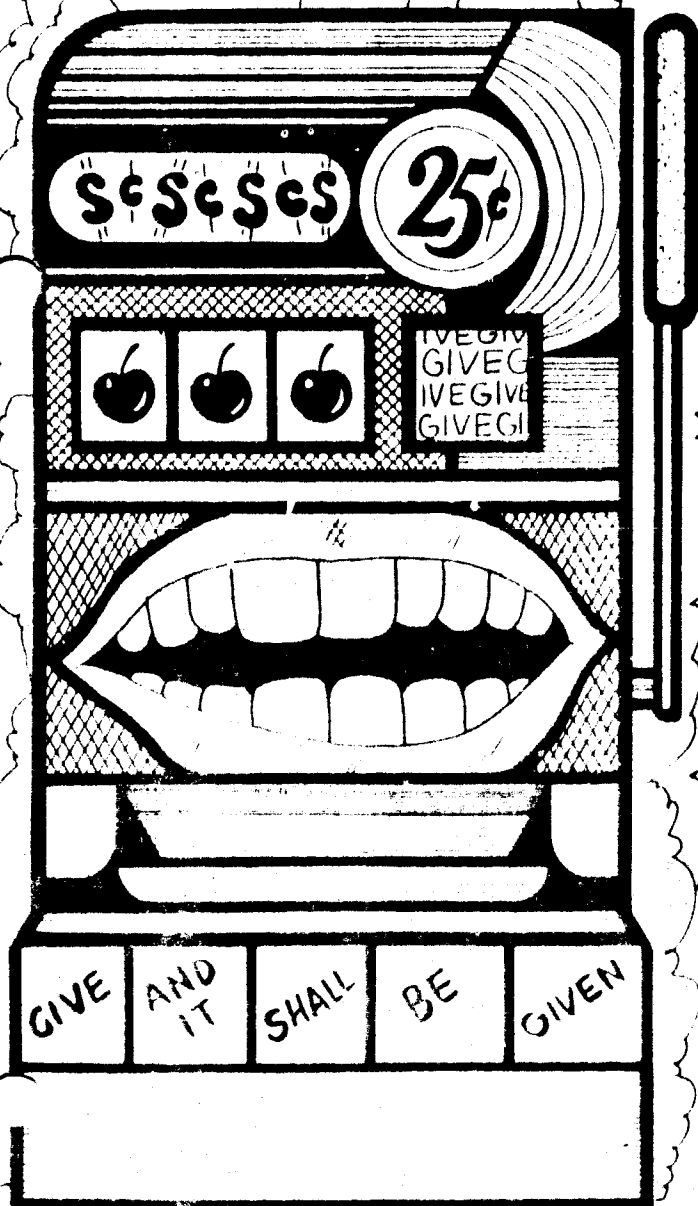


Is God a Cosmic Vending Machine?

By David Myers



When army equipment was immobilized by rains during the winter of 1944, General George S. Patton impatiently ordered all chaplains to pray for dry weather.

General Patton: "Chaplain, I want you to publish a prayer for good weather. I'm tired of these soldiers having to fight mud and floods as well as Germans. See if we can't get God to work on our side."

Chaplain O'Neill: "Sir, it's going to take a pretty thick rug for that kind of praying."

General Patton: "I don't care if it takes the flying carpet. I want the praying done."

Chaplain O'Neill: "Yes, sir. May I say, General, that it isn't a customary thing among men of my profession to pray for clear weather to kill fellow men."

General Patton: "Chaplain, are you teaching me theology or are you the Chaplain of the Third Army? I want a prayer."

Chaplain O'Neill: "Yes, sir."

The prayer, which was printed by the Army and distributed with Patton's Christmas greetings, called upon God

to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for Battle. Graciously harken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee that, armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies, and establish Thy justice among men and nations. Amen.

Patton's presumption that God is a puppet whose strings we can yank for our own purposes is shared by today's purveyors of self-serving religion. A recent mass mailing from the Don Stewart Evangelistic Association in Phoenix invited me to use a convenient clip-out form to check off my desired miracle. "Your letter is my Trigger of Faith," I was assured, triggering God to answer the prayer Stewart would offer on my behalf. All I had to do was check off my need, be it "money to pay bills," "freedom from narcotics," "solution to family problems," or a "better car." Stewart's monthly *Miracle* newspaper publishes letters which explain how, after sending Stewart money, miracles have indeed happened. A typical letter writer explained that "the last time I sent \$10 to you to be used for God's work, God blessed me with an unexpected check in the amount of \$159.74. I just can't out-give God." (If giving is that great an investment scheme, why not now put the \$159.74 back on Stewart?)

One of Stewart's mailings enclosed a "miracle prayer cloth" which had touched his body. Like the woman who was healed upon touching Jesus' garment, I, too, could unleash God's miraculous power for whatever need I felt

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if I would write a wish for myself and for a friend on the prayer cloth envelope, put it under my pillow for the night, mail it to Stewart first thing the next morning, and then know that after three days and nights of ardent fasting and prayer by Stewart:

(that's how long Jesus was in the tomb before He was raised by a miracle) **THIS VERY SAME PIECE OF SHIRT MATERIAL** from my body will be sent back to you in the very envelope where you wrote your request. This is our point-of-release to expect something better from God. When you get this prayer cloth back, you are to carry it with you as a sign of our united faith for your **SPECIAL MIRACLE**.

Monetary offerings are, of course, also encouraged (with the reminder of Jesus' words, "Give and it shall be given").

I decided to test the Stewart miracle system. I asked this "man of the cloth" to get God "to stop Don Stewart from exploiting suffering people with his arrogant self-deification." A week later, right on schedule, my prayer cloth returned along with a letter (printed to appear handwritten) in which Stewart assured me that "for 3 days and nights your special prayer requests and prayer cloth have been in my private prayer chamber and I've been praying. I've asked God to give you this special miracle you need and to put His hand on your loved one. I really feel good about it! Victory is coming." I hope he is right, although I suspect it will indeed take a miracle.*

Last night, in preparation for today's writing, I viewed Pat Robertson's "700 Club" on the Christian Broadcasting Network. When I tuned in, Robertson was eliciting from God various cures, ranging from the sudden reconstruction of a polio-withered leg to relief of someone's nasal drip. Robertson also enjoys a hotline to God (via his "Prayer of Knowledge") by which God announces to him each one of these healings as it occurs. "A woman's bad hip socket has just been healed," he proclaimed. "If you have a malformed hip socket, stand up. If the pain is gone, then it's you—God has done a great thing for you." (Implication: if the pain is still there, sit down—it's not you. God hasn't done anything for you; it must have been that woman in Peoria this time. But hang in there; God, like Santa Claus, may get to your house yet.) One common characteristic that Robertson and other faith healers share with Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Sun Myung Moon, and most

*I am sorry to report that the miracle has not yet occurred. Stewart's latest mailing, a computer-produced letter,

is the most important personal confidential letter I have ever written to you. That's why I sent it to you personally.... Kathy and I prayed and we felt led to tell YOU all about this. If I can't talk to you, then who could I tell about it?

Stewart goes on to explain that God spoke to him, explaining what I am to do with my money. Funny thing, God said I was to give some of my money to Don Stewart, to send him \$20, even if I must borrow it. And when this mass mailing produces its expected donations it will, no doubt, be another victory for the Stewart miracle system.

founders of religious sects is the claim to special revelations from God, revelations not available to the rest of us mere mortals.

One wonders about such faith healers—do they and their followers have longer than normal life expectancies? (If so, they should get a break on life insurance rates.) If St. Paul were here today might he say again, "I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened" (Rom. 10:2). And does God really play favorites? Do some people really have a special "in" with him or a privileged influence upon him? "The refused prayer of Christ in Gethsemane is answer enough to that," suggested C.S. Lewis.

Perhaps there is a real power at work in faith healing—the sort of inner healing power drawn upon by modern holistic medicine. Norman Cousins's account of how he mobilized positive emotions such as laughter and the will to live as weapons against serious illness provides a striking example of the healing resources that lie within us all. All who harness the psychic contribution to healing—whether doctors, clinicians, or faith healers—seem most successful with ailments amenable to psychic modification. Occasionally, miraculous instant alterations of physical structure are claimed, but they are generally of hidden, internal ailments, such as tumors, where the probability of misdiagnosis is higher. Those who proclaim the healing power of faith seldom claim external physical changes, like the replacement of an amputated limb. Obesity is probably the most widespread American malady, especially among the people to whom faith healers minister, but one strains to recall any testimonies of how hands were laid on and 100 pounds of excess fat vanished.

Tension always exists between religion focused on worship of God and religion focused on meeting our needs. Since God is "for us," worshiping hardly violates our needs. However, when the worship of God recedes into the background and the satisfaction of one's needs moves to the fore, various techniques for "manipulating God" begin to pervert religion into mere superstition. Such activity is not authenticated by being carried out in the name of Jesus and Christianity. Recall Jesus' caution that some who preach and cast out devils in his name will be told at the end of the world that he never knew them. Not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" is a part of kingdom.

Self-serving religion has become big business. For those of us who think ourselves too sophisticated for blatant superstition, Jesus the candyman also comes in more respectable packages. The book racks at Christian bookstores are filled with re-psycholed paperbacks offering "the" Christian formula for how to get God to meet our needs for happy homes, robust sex, easy money, inner peace. The new mass circulation inspirational magazines offer the religious equivalent to the do-it-yourself kits of pop psychology. One can find all sorts of success formulas here,

like a "Christian weight loss plan" which promises results superior to pagan weight loss plans.

As Richard Bube has observed, "The world is so full of people needing love, comfort, reassurance, relief from loneliness, deliverance from despair and healing for physical and spiritual illness, that any declaration of the availability of these blessings is certain to be popular." Listen to the Sunday television preachers to whom people flock. The message of many of these inspirational pep talks is clear: like picking wild fruit, all you need do is pluck the benefits, cost free. What a deal! Not only will such faith bring no more suffering, but it also will provide an escape from any present suffering. After all, Jesus did promise that "all things shall be added to you" (never mind that he prefaced this with "seek ye first the kingdom" and "take up the cross"). With this faith one can, like the singers on the Lawrence Welk show, smile forever. For things to go your way, all you need is faith. This, however, carries the cruel implication that if things do not go your way, then something is wrong with your faith.

Does faith really produce such deliverance from problems? Dare we question whether there is in this movement something more than another "placebo effect"? (Before 1600, most medications were pharmacologically inert. They were placebos—treatments which were effective solely because of the physician's and patient's faith in the medication's curative power.)

Miracles are certainly possible; if the God in whom we believe exists, he can do anything he pleases. If the universe has been created and is sustained by a living God, surely a being could surely give material success, serenity of mind, a cure for cancer, or even an instant 100-pound fat loss. The question here is not whether God can do these things. Rather, the question is whether God is a cosmic vending machine to which self-proclaimed Christians can drop in a "coin" and get a cure. When religion is sold as a device for eliciting health, wealth, and success, what is really being merchandized? Is this faith, or is it faith's counterfeit, a glib caricature of true Christianity?

Religious thinking, being deductive, frequently goes unchecked by systematic observations of how people actually live and die. As such, it is vulnerable to illusions, like an illusion that our actions manipulate events which are really beyond our control. Although faith benefits us by satisfying some deeply felt human needs, Job's experience nevertheless reminds us that the rain still falls on everyone. Some of the questions asked about Job can also be asked of each of us. Would we love God for naught? Is our devotion to God a response to who he is and what he has already done, or does it merely hinge upon what we can yet get him to do for us? Despite Scripture's repeated admonitions to count the cost of discipleship, to worship God because of who he is regardless of benefits, and to serve God by serving others, we are constantly inclined to accumulate fame and fortune and to try to harness God for our own immediate purposes.

It is ironic that "pop Christianity" is a religion practically guaranteeing its followers what they want when the Bible itself depicts God's people receiving so little success. Contrary to the claims of "perfectionist" or "holiness" Christianity, there is little evidence—either scientific or biblical—

that self-proclaimed Christians are freed from sin or perfected in thought. In actuality, the "heroes of the faith" were seldom successful. They were backsliders, not backslappers. They experienced tribulation more than triumph. They grimaced more than they grinned. In the Old Testament one seldom finds a saint. Noah became a drunken fool, David committed murder out of lust for a woman, and the prophets were hardly well adjusted and serene. Jacob broke nearly all the Ten Commandments: he cheated and stole; he was a blasphemous, polygamous, ungrateful scoundrel. Yet, God declared himself "the God of Jacob," renamed Jacob "Israel," and made him father of the Jewish nation.

Likewise, looming figures of the New Testament are also portrayed in all their frailty. Paul was ever afflicted and struggled constantly to resist doing that which he ought not do. Listening to the disciples, one hears no glamorous testimonies of how they overcame anger, selfishness, and doubt. Although Judas was the most notorious, at one time or another each disciple became angry, selfish, or despairing. Peter lost his temper, was prejudiced against Gentiles, and denied Christ. After nearly three years with Jesus, Andrew would not conceive the possibility of a miracle with loaves and fish. Nathaniel, when skeptical that anything good could come out of Nazareth, revealed his pride and prejudice. Unless Jesus would "show us the Father," Philip refused to believe that Jesus and God were one. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, craved the highest positions of status in the kingdom for themselves. Thomas not only doubted Christ's resurrection but was also skeptical of Jesus' promise to prepare a place in the Father's house. Simon the Zealot, Bartholomew, Matthew, and Jude could not even stay awake during Jesus' agony before his betrayal. The Bible is remarkably straightforward—it harbors no illusions about the successes of its own people. It has no need for illusion; its hope rests not in the power of human faith but in the steadfast love of God.

Martin Luther once likened humanity to a drunkard who, after falling off his horse on the right, falls off it next time on the left. Those of us who believe that much of present-day Christianity is falling off on the right in its current infatuation with the supposed therapeutic benefits of faith are vulnerable to falling off on the left by dismissing this version of Christianity altogether—its wisdom along with its errors. Surely, however, the sages are right. Those who seek comfort before truth will eventually find the greater despair if their illusions crumble. Despair results from the lack of trust that demands God's promises be fulfilled *now*, on our terms, lest we shrivel in resigned hopelessness. If we build our hope on the rock of truth, we will have to search deeper for comfort, but, if we find it, we will ultimately know a more enduring peace. Give people only what they want to hear, and you give them a lifeline that may snap under stress. Give people *truth* and you give them a lifeline that, while harder to hold, will endure life's perils. As C.F.D. Moule concluded:

We can make a long list, from the Bible, of objects in which people from time to time reposed their hopes, only to find that all proved false.... God is continually weaning us from our false hopes in order to lead us instead to the one Hope, which is—himself. †