

Suffering foolishness: Perils of the open door

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

Let's face it. Christianity is a spectacular means to an end. We have a power structure that is open and accessible to people who have not earned or been granted much power from our culture. In local churches, there is money to be made, power to be had and opportunities to be seized. A man or woman who may not be successful in the business world can be chairman of the deacons, head of the parish committee or a member of the board of directors.

For some, Christianity is only the means to an end, and whenever that happens, things turn ugly.

Take Perry. I ran into Perry recently at a local restaurant. How many years has it been, I wonder? My eyes were drawn to the large Bible lying open on the table in front of him. I recognized the typeface and the double columns with no headers. King James, of course. I saw his eyes glance quickly at the book in my hand, a book whose cover screamed "Science Fiction." His face betrayed nothing, nor did mine, but I don't think he was any more surprised by my book than I was by his.

I came to know Perry at least five years ago when he visited our church a few times with his father. He was about 30 when I met him, a young man remarkably void of masculine energy. He was a man with no passion of his own. He walked powerlessly from church to church and seemed to come to life only when he discovered some well-hidden heresy or doctrinal error. Everything he said and did was in reaction to something.

He tried college but never finished. He got involved with Amway, then went through a series of jobs, each one promising financial gain for very little effort, and each one ending with a spectacular failure, always due—at least in his mind—to some unforeseen disaster or betrayal. Because each failure left him feeling farther behind and more in need of a big payoff, he was always on the lookout for shortcuts.

I've always suspected that Perry became a Christian because he thought it was something that could be easily mastered. By making a slight vocabulary change and reading the table of contents of a few simple books, he soon found a place in a Pentecostal congregation that accepted his verbiage and fast talk as evidence of God's work in his life. In no time he was a junior Bible scholar and practicing theologian.

Perry's father was a new Christian and a member of our congregation. In Perry's eyes, our church was an improvement over the secular life his father had lived before, but many steps shy of the deeper, more passionate kind of Christianity practiced at his own church. He was polite but very straightforward when he gave me his uninvited assessment of our church's spiritual shortcomings.

Once Perry attended a Bible study at our church with his father. When the teacher suggested that Paul might not have authored one of the pastoral epistles, Perry leapt to his feet, pointed at the man and proclaimed him to be a false prophet. There was some arguing and further comments from Perry that brought a rather sudden and unpleasant end to the meeting. We had to ask him not to come back.

Perry stayed away after that, but sometimes I would find violently illustrated religious tracts tucked here and there around the church like sickening little Easter presents. I watched for them and slipped them into my pockets so that none of our children would find them.

Eventually Perry managed to convince his father that it was time to take a step forward in his spiritual journey and leave our church. His father began attending church with Perry, who then shook the dust off his feet and took his witness elsewhere. The religious tracts disappeared, and I didn't see either of them for several years.

I later heard that Perry's father, a successful businessman, had set his son up in a real estate venture. I saw one of his brochures and marveled at how quickly Perry had become an expert in his new field. The brochure sported a cross, a nifty quotation from Proverbs and a fish or two. I couldn't help but notice that many of his earlier failures, proudly listed in his résumé, now sounded like successes.

My most generous assessment of Perry is that he does not realize how self-serving his religion is. He truly believes that he works hard for the cause of Christ and in the service of God. But his own needs are so great and so poorly attended to that he is

always seeking the affirmation he desperately needs and the power he craves.

The church of Jesus Christ is extremely vulnerable to people like Perry and to others who are not as innocent as he, and know exactly what they are doing. Our open-door policy makes it possible for anyone to grab a Bible, claim the name of Christ and march straight out into the world to speak for us.

And they do speak for us—loudly and publicly. Con artists, treasure seekers and hucksters of all kinds wrap themselves in a robe they found at the base of a cross and go to all the nations, baptizing the innocent in their sexual and financial schemes and teaching them to obey the law of Caveat Emptor—let the buyer beware.

In the eyes of the world there must and will always be something foolish about the church. Every pilgrim who walks through our doors and takes up the journey will be accepted and trusted. Our church doors are unlocked, and inside is a terrible power wrapped in velvet and lying in full view on the communion table. It is a temptation beyond what the weak can bear and an easy mark for those who seek spiritual levers and religious fulcrums to move their tiny worlds.

There is no response that can easily undo harm done in the name of religion by those for whom religion is such a tool. There is no protection we can seek that will not destroy us by removing our vulnerability, which is, after all, our greatest power and most precious inheritance. We therefore must carry their reputations along with the reputations we have rightly earned.

Our living must be right enough, our devotion deep enough and our love strong to speak for itself. We will have to be large enough to swallow what they have done and still carry on with our work. And all of this must happen without us becoming defensive or wasting our time explaining ourselves or answering for their sins.

It is a high calling, this business of being the church. We are called, like Simon of Cyrene, to take up crosses that are not our own. Burdens are laid upon us by those who cannot bear them themselves. And we are instructed not to strike back or respond in kind, but instead to open the arms of the Church and display our own wounded hands and side.

It has been given that our lives should bear witness to the presence of the Holy Spirit. So we pray earnestly that our lives will indeed be a good witness. But at the end of the day, the Spirit of God speaks for itself.