Almost persuaded: A way that leads to life

by Carol Zaleski in the August 9, 2003 issue

On a summer evening in our town, Carnival came to Main Street. Biker convoys parked their gleaming Harleys outside the Internet café and flocks of teens from the suburbs rivaled the Harleys with their personal adornments of metal trimmings, tattooed limbs and orange and purple–streaked hair. To us locals all this hubbub was normal; we see it every year at Carnival time. That's why, when my husband and I caught sight of two pretty but plain young women walking past the motorcycles in white bonnets, pastel blue dresses and black stockings, our heads turned. They seemed to us a vision out of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Then our ears caught the sound of hymn singing coming from the front steps of the city hall. Under its faux-medieval turrets, 35 Mennonites were singing the praises of our Savior in shape-notes of grace:

> My hope is built on nothing less
> Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
> I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
> But wholly lean on Jesus' name.
> On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
> All other ground is sinking sand,
> All other ground is sinking sand.

Can it be, we wondered, that the name of Jesus was being proclaimed from the same city hall that in its heyday heard Jenny Lind sing, Ralph Waldo Emerson orate and P. T. Barnum crow? Had the gospel come to join the postmodern parade down Main Street?

We stayed to listen and savor the sounds of Christian assurance. Before long two young women from town drifted over: a tall girl in dreadlocks, wearing a scarf for a blouse, and her shy friend in rhinestone-studded cats-eye sunglasses. The girl in dreadlocks struck up a conversation with one of the Mennonites. "Your music is awesome. Who are you guys? Why are you wearing those clothes?" The Mennonite, a youthful middle-aged father, dressed like the other men in an unremarkable blue oxford shirt, dark belt and chinos, answered genially, "We dress the same because we spend a lot of time together. We feel that beauty comes from within and doesn't need external decoration. We're not here to promote our own church; all we want is to make known the love of Jesus Christ."

The dreadlocked girl approved, but with reservations: "I'm an individualist," she said. "I think Jesus was amazing, but I have my own spiritual practice, and I follow whatever seems good to me. Right now I'm on a fairly straight path, but if I see a side road, I'll take it to find out where it leads. I can see that what you're doing makes you happy and loving, and that's cool." The hymn singing continued:

> Are you adorning the doctrine,
> The glorious doctrine of God,
> Walking so holy before Him,
> Following where He hath trod?

And indeed our Mennonite endeavored cheerfully to adorn the doctrine to Miss Dreadlock. As she expounded her personal theory of reincarnation, he countered with heaven and hell. But no one is perfect enough to go to heaven, she objected, or bad enough to deserve hell. We all deserve hell, he responded, but Jesus died for our

salvation.

How do you *know*, Miss Dreadlock pressed, that everything the Bible says is true? Because I have experienced its truth from the hour I first believed, Mr. Blueshirt answered, echoing the verse of *Amazing Grace* that was pouring down from the steps.

As the conversation went on, it struck me that Mr. Blueshirt was sounding almost as individualistic as Miss Dreadlock. Miss Dreadlock sails her ship without a compass; Mr. Blueshirt takes the Bible for his polestar, but spurns other navigational aids. He belongs to a conservative branch of the Mennonite family, one in which the Christ-centered biblicism of Menno Simons receives a fundamentalist spin. Yet the main difference between Mr. Blueshirt and Miss Dreadlock is something else: Miss Dreadlock cherishes her individuality and is captive to it; Mr. Blueshirt consummates his individuality by giving it away in service, fellowship and submission to church discipline.

I thought of debating some points of scripture and ecclesiology with him, but I kept silent. I could only rejoice that Mr. Blueshirt had found a way that leads to life, emboldening him to proclaim Christ from the steps of city hall and to adorn the doctrine with works of mercy and peace.

Singing, “I’ve anchored my soul in the haven of rest,” husbands, wives and occasionally squirmy children projected, onto our hectic streets, an aura of simplicity, modesty and grace. “Let me find a place with that happy band,” they sang, and who would not wish to join them?

Almost thou persuadest me, Mr. Blueshirt, to go and live this way, set apart from the world in order to bear witness to the promises of Christ. In this world we are in exile and cannot expect our neighbors to see things as we do. Our society, drunk on power and distraction, is a stormy sea in which good and bad remain mixed until the great dragnet draws us—bikers and seekers, blueshirts and dreadlocks—into shore. Enough talk; it’s time to sing: “Someday you’ll answer the question of life, / What will your answer be?”