

I recently took a trip to Tulsa with my wife and three daughters. We're small town folks, so, although Tulsa doesn't impress people from large cities, it holds certain attractions for us that can't be found at home, like fancy restaurants and large bookstores.

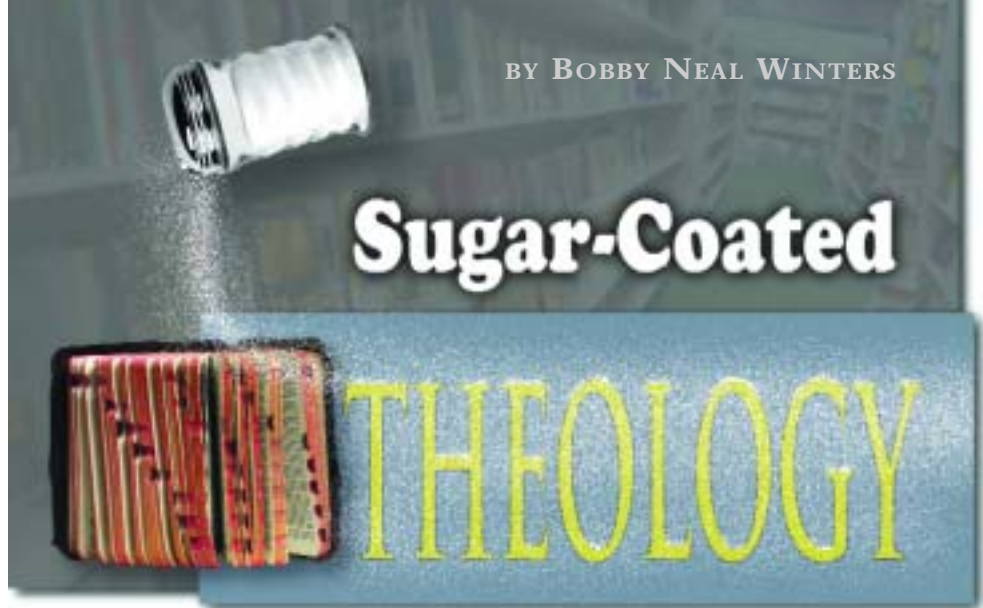
It's a two-and-a-half-hour drive from our home to Tulsa, and my brother lives a similar distance on the opposite side, so it's a logical midpoint for us to meet, visit and sample the pleasures of a city.

We all gathered at an Italian restaurant that describes its cuisine as "Country Style Italian." One might think it served authentic Italian peasant food, but one would be wrong. Instead, its cuisine is what happens to Italian food served in Yuppie restaurant chains in the Southern Crossroads states. The phrase "Italian nachos" will give you some impression of what this means on a concrete level. The purist might shudder, but this sort of thing can serve as a gateway to finer dining.

A Christian Bookstore in Tulsa

We ate there—Italian nachos and all—and afterward adjourned to a bookstore my brother said was a favorite of his. He'd mentioned it was a Christian bookstore, and when we entered, we saw Christian merchandise everywhere. Indeed, the wave of impressions I received when I went through the front door was something of a shock to the system, because Jesus' face was present in such large numbers on every wall. His likeness graced T-shirts, coffee cups, posters. If there was a product his face could be put on, it had been put there, and there was a price tag on it.

I grew up in the fundamentalist, dispensational milieu that is the State of Oklahoma, so, even though I have been a United Methodist in Kansas for 16 years, I am well acquainted with the culture to which this store caters. In my life growing up, Catholics were mythological creatures, the Episcopalians were those folks with the tiny stone churches and the



Methodists were the folks down the road in the small cinderblock building. These folks could go to heaven, we were taught, but it was harder for them because their churches didn't give an invitation to walk the aisle.

So it is understandable if I see a certain irony in the ostentatious display in an evangelical Christian bookstore of what some would call religious art.

The irony? In fundamentalist culture, many of the store's customers would accuse others (who accept images in their congregations) of idol worship because of the art in their churches and the veneration of icons. I suppose the difference is a matter of "doing it the right way."

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taste of putting that holy image on consumer products. Even icons are not free.

There was something else that disturbed me, but I have trouble putting a name to it. Let me describe one of the prints. It was a painting of Jesus with two businessmen in a plush office, high above the city. The men were clean, handsome and prosperous, and the

surroundings were luxurious. The Jesus portrayed was basically the standard Northern European one in a long white robe. His hand was on the elbow of one of the businessmen in a friendly sort of way. They were clearly "buds."

Maybe this shouldn't bother me, but it does. I will have to try to explain my conflict, and perhaps in doing so, I will understand it better myself.

It's not a question of whether Jesus was friendly with businessmen. He consorted with publicans, and publicans certainly fit the bill. In fact, Jesus associated with crooked businessmen who had cheated the people. They came to Jesus, and he offered them a way to redemption.

Maybe the message the artist intended was good and positive, yet the message I got was something different. It seemed to say in quiet seductive tones, "There is no cost to following Jesus."

It reminded me of the so-called "prosperity gospel" whose good news is that Jesus will bring profits into your coffers. This message is more like Satan's words to Jesus in the wilderness, "All this I will give you...if you will bow down and worship me," (Matthew 4:9) than of Jesus' offer to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his

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cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

The Culture of Dispensationalism

This particular aspect of the religious culture in my home state is new to me. Perhaps it hadn't developed before I left, or perhaps I was simply in an economic stratum from which it wasn't visible, but it is there now, and it galls.

However, one aspect of the culture hasn't changed and that is the dispensational element. In the church where I grew up, there were periods of time in which the world came to an end twice every Sunday and six additional times during the week if there was a revival going on. While the Apostle's Creed does acknowledge that "Christ will come again to judge the quick and the dead," it devotes about one-twelfth of its space to that item. Furthermore, the details are left cloudy. While the eschatological element in the Bible is undeniable, it is discussed in symbolic language for the most part.

However, there are those who are not so timid as to stick merely to the ancient creeds and the Scriptures. They seem to know in great detail about the Second Coming. How odd it is that they are among the fundamentalists who vigorously defend the authority of the Bible.

While the Second Coming does go back to the roots of the church, there is a new teaching about an event called the Rapture, when the church will be whisked away before the time of great tribulation. This was also part of the environment in which I grew up, but now the tares have sprouted more broadly. The teaching is based on so-called biblical evidence so scant that I won't even take time to cite it. A few verses have metastasized into the *Left Behind* series.

There was an inch-thick book on one of the shelves containing within its title the words "what Christians believe." Slightly before the middle was a chapter on the aforementioned Rapture, and the remainder of the book consisted of exploring nuances on that particular topic.

Leaving the Rapture Behind

My church taught the Rapture. When you are a child who lives in a world where your only interpretation of Scripture comes from a few sources who agree with each other, they can make a convincing case, or at least one that will convince a child. While growing up, I lived in terror of being left behind during the Rapture. If I was in the same room with someone, turned around, and then turned back to find them gone, I was terrified to the point of being able to hear my own heart because I thought they'd been taken and I'd been left to face the horrors of the tribulation.

As I've matured in my faith—and moved to another Christian tradition somewhere along the way—I've come to understand end-time prophecies are popular among the poor and during hard times, as they hold the promise that Jesus will come to save them in a concrete way. However, the Christian bookstore was geared to an upscale clientele, and times are relatively prosperous. This confused me until I realized these are people like me who were born in the fundamentalist, dispensational

tradition, have gone to college and become professionals, but have remained within that tradition and are moving forward within it the best they can.

I've been removed from it long enough now to see it with different eyes, almost the eyes of an outsider. These eyes see scenes of unreality. Sugar-coated art and sugar-coated theology capped-off with Rapture mythology. These represent a fundamentalism that has given up the living truth of the holy Scriptures for a façade constructed to support a reading of Scripture that is literal where it should be symbolic and symbolic where it should be literal.

But the most uncomfortable aspect of my trip to the bookstore was the realization that it was through that road I came to Christ. Somehow through all that was superficial, all that was sugar-coated, Christ managed to touch me as he has so many millions of others, including my brother. There is a message there more powerful than my own religious snobbery, which makes it very powerful indeed.

While I have each foot planted in a different world, my children are not so burdened. My eldest daughter, who is seventeen, came to me and whispered in my ear, "This place is creepy." I agreed, so we said our goodbyes to my brother and left, each of us going home to follow Christ in our own way. □

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