



The Health Club

A parody is a comic caricature, a ludicrous likeness, an absurd analogy, a ridiculous representation which exposes a particular reality by comparing it to another of a different order. Parodies can be a useful literary tool to expose the “red herrings” of diversions which distract attention from real issues. By the use of parody one can be direct yet subtle at the same time.

I joined a local health club a few weeks ago. After going through the initiatory training in the use of all the equipment, I was given a personal training schedule. Regular attendance was greatly encouraged and a trainer was assigned to oversee my progress.

To be honest, the primary incentives for joining the health club were the social benefits; I like people! With enough self-discipline anyone can exercise on their own. But I am one of those who need that encouragement of, and accountability to, other people. So I paid my dues and joined the health club.

I have noticed that the most popular piece of equipment at my health club is a computer-synchronized walking/running machine. While holding on to the rails one can dial in the revolutions per minute so as to walk, jog or run at their own pace. A button on the rail causes the incline to raise or lower, thus simulating hills and making the exercise more strenuous. Or you can choose a pre-programmed workout mode.

Through your hand on the rail, information is acquired to display a constant read-out of calories being burned per hour, heart-beats per minute and whether or not you are in your cardiac target-zone. Every participant is thoroughly monitored, and all the information is stored under your membership number.

If you choose the pre-programmed workout mode, then the color video screen asks you to choose from various scenery options. The scenery goes past in accordance with your pace as you walk, jog or run, and it does

seem to make the time go by faster. Eventually you see the same scenery going by again—it must be a circuitous course.

As you exercise there is mood music being broadcast through the earphones in accordance with the scenery you have selected. Periodically a computerized voice will speak to you over the music issuing motivational encouragement: “You can do it!” “Do your best.” “Commitment to exercise pays off.” “The world belongs to the disciplined.”

Following your workout, your weight and measurements are duly recorded. The Health Director provides personal counsel: “You need to come more often.” “You need to set a faster pace.” “You need more time on the treadmill.”

Aha! I suspected it for weeks. Despite all the technological trappings, this machine is nothing more than a treadmill that never goes anywhere and is only “for the exercise.” I have been paying for the privilege of joining other disenchanting people in this sweat-shop, while everyone complains about getting nowhere despite their best dedicated effort.

I am told that the duration of consistent participation in the program averages only six weeks. Most cannot endure the monotony of the regimen which produces such minimal results. But there are the “faithful few” who seem to find their identity in the exercise. These are those who advertise the virtues of continued attendance and rededication to the “program.”

This scenario is reminiscent of that which transpires in a church. The social benefits draw others into the club. New members are programmed into a regimen. Regular attendance is encouraged for the weekly workouts, which seem to be but a treadmill of “go, go, go and do, do, do for Jesus.”

The pastoral counsel is: “You need to come more often and get more involved.” This, too, is a tiring treadmill indeed, going nowhere! The Church must prepare people for meaningful participation in all levels of life; not in ecclesiastical programs, but involvement in life—by the life of Jesus in the Christian. □

—Jim Fowler

ILLUSTRATION BY AARON ESKRIDGE

