

THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW VS. THE LETTER OF THE LAW



By Deryl G. Hunt

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Setting: Scene opens with the melody of "The Letter and the Spirit". On stage all lights are dimmed except for the one on the singer of the song and the dancer, expressing the song through movement. Camera focuses on one then on the other. After the song has been played, the monologue begins.

The Letter and the Spirit

The letter is natural
It is that which is written
It matters not if it's accurate
The letter is natural

The wind blows where it wants to
And you hear the sound thereof
But cannot tell where it came from
Nor where it is going

So is every word brought fourth of the spirit
so is every word brought fourth of the spirit
So is every word brought fourth of the spirit
so is every word brought fourth of the spirit

The spirit refers to the intent
The letter to that which is written
Between the letter and the spirit
There is a wide gulf

The wind blows where it wants to
And you hear the sound thereof
But cannot tell where it came from
Nor where it is going

So is every word brought fourth of the spirit
so is every word brought fourth of the spirit
So is every word brought fourth of the spirit
so is every word brought fourth of the spirit

Let us reason together
For we can agree in the right spirit

Let us reason together
For we can agree in the right spirit

We can agree
In the right spirit

We can agree
In the right spirit

PART 1: (Recited before the narrator's introduction of the play) Take note of the different modes of expression that you have witnessed through song and dance. Each carried a particular set of messages which complemented each other. To some, the words expressed through the song may have been self evident or self explanatory while for others, further explanation of the lyrics may be required. Similarly, to some the movements of expression in the dance may have transmitted a clear message while to others, these movements were strictly subject to individual interpretation or perception. Likewise, with great pieces of literature written hundreds of years ago, men still debate about the true meaning of the words used to express certain ideas and perceptions.

The play you are about to witness will be one that will make you wonder every time you think and speak. It will introduce you to the power of words, whether powerful or powerless, as they are taken from common everyday usage and used in a different context.

Some of you will listen with an intelligent ear and others will allow their spirit to listen. But the question to be answered in the end will be this: can words of themselves be seen as spiritual?

As you watch, consider the relevance of the issues expressed through this play in light of the recent controversies regarding free expression. In particular, in the public schools in the United States, the issue of religion in the schools continues to spark controversy. Yet it all turns on the basic concern of how words are used, what may be considered as prayer in one context, say within the confines of a particular language, religion, or culture, may be seen as merely a collection of words in another.

Remember the question to be answered is: can words of themselves be seen as spiritual? Watch, take note of key points and formulate your own considerations for further discussion.

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Narrator: Mrs. Barns is about to teach her students a most valuable lesson. You see, Mrs. Barns really does believe that her motives are right in teaching the children of her community about spiritual things. After all, she had been duly appointed to the position by the board of education and there is no question in her mind but that she is qualified to teach. However, she chose to use what some might call "less than acceptable methods" to get her points across. Let us watch as her story unfolds.

Setting: A classroom with students seated at their desks with school materials and a piece of paper at which they are intently looking. Standing in front of the class, the teacher proceeds

with her instructions.

Mrs. Barns: O.K. class, listen up. I have a treat for you today. On this assignment, you will work without assistance. Do you see the sheet I gave to you? Fill in the blanks using the following words: steal, good evil, turn the other cheek, obey, murmur, faith, unbelief, pray, fast, and kill. Each word should be used in proper order. Don't discuss your answers with anyone.

(*Some of the children whisper among each other*)

Mrs. Barns: Hep, hep!!! Don't talk, eat or chew gum during this exercise. Now I am going to read the exercise out loud and again, remember to fill in the blanks in proper order.

When a person is duly appointed to a position of authority, it is right to _____ him. There are times when the duly appointed one must face up to situations that are very trying. In one instance, a woman was slapped by a student. As the woman gave thought to how she should respond to the aggressive student, she decided to _____ _____. When she did, several students looking on began to _____. As they did, the woman asked them, where is your ____? Are you yet in ____? Think that I cannot now _____ and help will come. She went on to tell them about the _____ she had been undergoing for the past two days. To _____ the flesh is my goal, said the woman. After all, it is not right to allow another to _____ that which is precious. _____ shall always triumph over _____.

(*Students look as if they are paying attention- looking straight ahead- but whispering out the side of their mouths*)

Student 1: You know, this must be the word of God. Look at it! Check out the words! This gotta be straight bible talk.

Student 2: (*Takes a glance at the sheet and then looks straight ahead.*) You're right, brother. This sure sounds like last weeks sermon.

Student 1: (*Comically imitating the stance of a preacher.*) '...and this is the word of God.'

(*Students laugh and smack hands in the air in agreement. Student 3 looks on as the interchange goes on.*)

Mrs. Barns: (*Asking sarcastically to the two students whispering*) Any questions? (*looks as if waiting for a response*) OK. Let's continue, then.

Scene 2

(*Setting: A kitchen with Mother doing the dishes and Student 3*

is doing homework at the table. Student 3 looks through his bag for something and pulls out the essay. Student 3 begins to silently read his essay and then says...)

Narrator: Though Mrs. Barns thought she had good intentions, some in her community did not share her intentions. One student took the assignment home. When he got home, he told his mother about it and showed her his paper.

Student 3: Isn't this interesting, Mom? (*showing Mother the essay*)

Mother: (*takes the essay and reads, then says...*) I'll say. And a teacher gave this as an assignment to the class? (*Asking the rhetorical question in amazement, but with attitude, continues reading the essay*).

Student 3: I even over heard a couple of religious students saying that God had used the teacher to impart spiritual knowledge to the class.

Mother: Is that right?

Student 3: Yeap. They based their assertions on the fact that the words used in the essay were all found in the Bible.

Mother: Son, go get Nana's bible please. I gotta check it out for myself. (*Student 3 looks around for the bible, finds it and takes it to her. Meanwhile mother paces around the room, paper in hand, looking upset. Mother looks in Bible, flipping pages, and then exclaims...*) I got it?

Student 3: You found the words? (*sounding excited and looking at the Bible*)

Mother: (*Close book and speak at same time.*) Yes, but that=s not what I=m talking about. I'm going to call the Superintendent's office to file charges against the teacher for violating the law which separates church and state. I have taken all that I can stand from those religious fools who think they can preach and teach anywhere they want. (*Mother picks up phone and acts as if making a call. Student 3 exclaims "Oh, Owh" as he holds his mouth.*)

Scene 3

Narrator: There occurred an interesting turn of events as Mrs. Barns and the concerned mother came before the superintendent. There was a hearing on the matter and the truth came out into the open.

Setting: Scene changes to a court-like setting with a Superintendent sitting and five other board members sitting besides her. Mrs. Barns and the mother are present and they are standing before two desks facing the board members.

Superintendent: Mrs. Barns, do you understand the charges that Mrs. Meadows brought against you?

Mrs. Barns: Yes, Madame Superintendent.

Superintendent: Here in this country we have maintained a strict policy of separation of church and state. So how then could you get your students involved in an exercise which directly challenges these notions?

Mrs. Barns: To start off with, Madame Superintendent, I belong to a local agnostic society. As a matter of fact, I am the president of that organization. I don't believe that the existence of God can be proven beyond this physical world. I for one take a neutral stand on the matter of religion.

Mother: (*Exclaims..*) She's lying. Look at the exercise she gave the students. It sounds like something straight out of the Bible; (*she points to the paper*) look at the words she used: faith, pray, unbelief, fast, good and evil.

Mrs. Barns: Again I say that I actually take a neutral stand on the matter of religion. However, I embarked upon the essay project as a way to appease some students who accused me of favoring positions similar to those of cult leaders they had heard speak, just because the words I used sounded like theirs. (*She moves forward to address both the superintendent and the audience, speaking as she does so.*) Nevertheless, I engaged in this so-called spiritual exercise as a means of showing the students that I have their best interest at heart. You see the question is, what's in the word? That is, are there certain words that are considered to be religious, or holy, or even spiritual, just because we have seen them used in the so-called biblical contexts?

(*The people in the audience murmur as though they are debating that same question. Board members also discuss among themselves for a brief pause. Superintendent calls for order.*)

Superintendent: Having heard both sides of this case, the floor is open for discussion.

Boardmember 1: (*A man speak in an excited tone.*) Madame Superintendent, if I may, we all know that I am a very religious and devout man (*members of the board nod in agreement*). However, I think Mrs. Barns frankly used poor judgement in bringing religion into the class room. It is the job of the church to teach spiritual things to its children (*He pounds his hand on the*

table as he utters those words.)

Boardmember 2: All of us here don't disagree with you but we still come to the same point of debate; namely, what makes a thing spiritual?

(Murmur is heard from the floor and among the board members. The Superintendent cries for order)

Boardmember 3: (An older lady speaks and all quiet down to hear her.) Well, the way I see it, the exercise used by Mrs. Barns had nothing to do with spiritual things.

Mother: (Stands abruptly and interrupts ...) What!! I don't believe it. You mean to tell me that she has the right to teach religion in the classroom! Next thing you know we'll have sex education being taught in the first grade.

Boardmember 3: Now hear me out. The fact is Mrs. Meadows (*she looks at Mother who is once again taking her seat*), every member of the board of education has used the same words at some point in their discussions of board matters. So then, how in the name of blazing can anyone call "steal, kill, obey, fast, murmur, etc," the words used in the essay by Mrs. Barns, spiritual words? If the definition of spiritual turns on words found in the Bible then all of us are spiritual. (*People from the audience chuckle and laugh*). As far as I am concerned, Mrs. Barns' choice of words could have come from a novel, and a poor one at that! Now take this example, for instance. Lawyers use the phrase: the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. The letter refers to that which is written whether it was precisely recorded or not. The spirit refers to the intent of the law. Between the letter and the intent, there is sometimes a wide gulf.

Boardmember 4: You know, you are right (*looking in the direction of Boardmember 3*). I , also, have noticed that sometimes when people begin to make rules to enforce these laws, great disputes occur.

Boardmember 3: (She interrupts) Precisely!!! And, in seeking to adjudicate the matter, one party may say the law did not intend to grant certain privileges as the rules allow. The other party may say that the law is clear on the point of discussion and may point directly to what is written.

Boardmember 4: Don't the courts often seek the help of the lawmaker in order to decide on what is really meant by the wording of the law?

Boardmember 3: Yes,only if the writer of the law is still living. And in doing so, the courts have established that the writer of the law knows more about its meaning than those interpreting it. Therefore, he can render to the court the true

intent of the law. Sooooo, as far as I am concerned, the teacher has revealed to us the motive for her essay. She merely wanted to make a point; namely, the letter, that is, the intrinsic meaning of words is sometimes quite different than the spirit of words, that is the intent and meaning behind the words.

Superintendent: Based upon the facts presented, we will hear a motion as to whether or not to drop the charges against Mrs. Barns.

Boardmember 5: I motion for dismissal of the charges.

Boardmember 4: I second the motion.

Superintendent: Very well! All in favor say "Aye," (*four board members say Aye, lifting up their hands*). All against say "Nay" (*Boardmember 1 says Nay, lifting up his hand.*)

Well, it seems that we have a consensus. Mrs. Barns, consider the charges against you dismissed.

(*Mrs. Barns jumps up, excited and happy. Mother acts disappointed. Focus turns to two members of the audience.*)

Christian: You know, I can really see what was said here. I'm reminded of Paul who acknowledged that Israel received the law of God at the hands of Moses but they could not keep the law the way God wanted them to.

Person 1: (*Looks at Christian in utter confusion, then exclaims...)* What ?!? Can you break it down so that **I** can understand what you're saying?

Christian: You see man, they were trying to keep the letter of the law, you know, what was written on stones. But God wanted them to live by the spirit of the law, that is, what God intended it to mean. Now, in this situation, it is more likely that the teacher was merely using the words in the Bible just to make her point. This is what some of us Christians call a carnal work simply because it was driven by the teacher's intellect. (*Person 1 nods with uncertainty.*) But let's say God did want to reach those students, the teacher could have been undertaking a spiritual work, not even knowing it. A work is not spiritual or carnal based on the words used or where the words come from. Rather it is spiritual if God is orchestrating it.

Person 1: Well, you know, I am like that teacher there. I don't know if God exists or not. But, I reckon you're right. The teacher could use any word she wants, if she is using her own brain to do that, I don't see how the God you're speaking about could be involved. But if God is real, it makes sense that he could make her understand and then explain what HE means by the words and that would be, as you say, a spiritual work.

Christian: You got it man.

(*The two get up as if they are walking out from the meeting. Person 1 stops Christian by placing hand on the Christian's shoulder and asks ...*)

Person 1: Okay, so explain this. How did **you** know (*pointing to Christian*) that the words did not come from God as you said earlier? Explain that!

Christian: Simple. I asked Him (*pointing up*).

(*Christian begins walking away and Person 1 stands there looking up and then tries to catch up to the Christian.*)

Narrator: And so ends this episode. It seems as though Mrs. Meadows, the concerned parent was made to look like a foolish person because she did not understand the difference between the letter and the spirit.

MONOLOGUE

PART 2: (Recited after the a narrator's closing of the play)

Now, can you answer the question posed to you earlier? That is, can words of themselves be seen as spiritual? Was the essay written by the teacher a spiritual work?..

As far as the teacher and her essay are concerned, if she had submitted the issue of addressing the students to God, then yes, the spirit of the law would have been in effect because only then would God have anointed her essay. But being agnostic, and knowing that she was duly appointed by the board of education-not God-and there was no question in her mind that she was qualified, she was teaching by way of the "letter" to make her point. And some of you already knew that. Those of you who listened with a spiritual ear knew that the essay was conceived by the mind. And those of you who thought the words used in the essay were spiritual, had listened with a carnal ear. Ironic!

Let us not be foolish with regards to the law as the mother and the Boardmember were. A wise person would seek to know God and then submit all to Him. Submission is the key to knowing the difference between the spirit of the law and the letter of the law.

Not That We Are Sufficient of Ourselves

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves
To think anything of ourselves
But our sufficiency is in God

Who has made us able ministers

Of the New Testament
Not of the letter for the letter kills
But of the spirit for the spirit gives life

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves
To think anything of ourselves
But our sufficiency is in God

Who has made us able ministers
Of the New Testament
Not of the letter for the letter kills
But of the spirit for the spirit gives life

Now the letter refers to that which is written
The spirit shows the intent
How can a man know the difference
But by revelation of God
Who has made us able ministers
Of the New Testament
Not of the letter for the letter kills
But of the spirit for the spirit gives life

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Who has made us able ministers
Of the New Testament
Not of the letter for the letter kills
But of the spirit for the spirit gives life

For the spirit gives life
For the spirit gives life
For the spirit gives life

Cast of characters:

Narrator: Tom Ellison
Monologue: Genevieve Cave
Dancer: Audrey Chisolm
Mrs. Barns: Velma Frazier
Student 1: John Carver
Student 2: Crystal Hunt
Student 3: Adrian Carter

Mother: Katrina Young

Madame Superintendent: Jennifer Ritchey

Boardmember 1: James Baker

Boardmember 2: Sara Johnson

Boardmember 3: Alicia Ritchey

Boardmember 4: Derick Lundie

Boardmember 5: Novelle Allen

Christian: Nicole Paris

Person 1: Dawn Williams

Audience: Treva Ellison