

Can Spam Hold Water?

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The Internet is supposed to be a vast ocean of free-flowing ideas. Unfortunately, some days it seems like a tiny cesspool of pornography and get-rich-quick schemes. A great deal of the e-mail that pours through the "Net" each day is pure junk: invitations to VISIT XXX ADULT SITES or MAIL OUT 200 LETTERS AND RECEIVE OVER \$800,000 GUARANTEED!!

Have any of you been "Spammed" lately? If you spend any time online, you know what I'm talking about. Spamming is the sending of the same message -- usually junk e-mail -- to everyone on an e-mail list or set of electronic news groups. The "message is everywhere," says the Cyber Dweeb in The Detroit News, "polluting the electronic landscape like an indiscriminate leaflet airdrop." And where does the colorful term "Spam" come from? According to Andrew Kantor, associate editor of Internet World magazine, "Spam is what happens when you take luncheon meat and put it through a fan and it sort of sprays everywhere" ("Ask the Cyber Dweeb," The Detroit News, March 7, 1995).

Most the Spam that rushes like a flood through cyberspace involves moneymaking schemes, and most of it is very fishy. NEED A JOB? the e-mail screams at you. WANT TO MAKE \$1,500 TO \$4,000 MONTHLY, WORKING PART- OR FULL-TIME FROM THE COMFORT OF YOUR VERY OWN HOME? YOU CAN DO IT! DON'T DELAY, START WORKING NOW!!

Does an income of \$48,000 a year, working at home, sound too good to be true? If it does, it probably is. These get-rich-quick schemes rarely stand up to critical examination. We know in our hearts that the secret to success is generally not found in an offer that comes via Spam. When we see these messages on the Net, most of us say to ourselves: "That just doesn't hold water!"

(Of course, who expects a Net to hold water?!)

The people of Israel were suckers for the Spam that was being sent to them by the followers of foreign gods. They "went after worthless things," says God through the prophet Jeremiah, "and became worthless themselves." The priests, rulers and prophets of Israel failed to lead the country in the way of the Lord, and the people changed their glory for things "that do not profit." In a blistering indictment, the Lord God accuses the people of two great evils:

1. "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water," and
2. They have "dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

The God of Israel lets us know that the messages of foreign gods just don't hold water. There is no profit to be found in following Lord Delusion or Lord Useless -- two Hebrew puns in today's passage from Jeremiah, puns that make fun of the ancient fertility god Baal. The source of true abundance is the Lord God of Israel, the one who is a cleansing, refreshing "fountain of living water," not a leaky cistern. This God is the one who brings us out of captivity, gives us a plentiful land, and blesses us with rich and abundant life.

What kind of Spam are we facing today in the life of the church? What messages are bombarding us, and causing us to chase after worthless things? Let's take a look at three, and see if they hold water or not.

SPAM #1: THE MESSAGE THAT GOD CAN BE FOUND ANYWHERE. For years, golfers have skipped church and communed with God while playing 18 holes. Sailors have had religious experiences while catching a breeze and skimming across sparkling waters. And today, a bumper crop of New Age books promises "religion without the hard parts."

Newsweek's Jerry Adler is convinced that people today want "talkative spirits and a laid-back God." He points to one best seller, *Conversations With God*, in which the Lord "offers advice, jokes and opinions on a wide range of subjects, but nothing in the nature of commandments." Another book, *Talking to Heaven*, "holds out the promise of eternal life after death without the necessity of believing in **Jesus** or in anything else beyond the grasp of an average dog or cat." In this book's view of the afterlife, the spirits of men, women and dogs "are happy in their realm and full of love for those still here" (Jerry Adler, "Heaven's Gatekeepers," *Newsweek*, March 16, 1998).

This Spam simply cannot hold water. The Lord God who created the entire universe is a God who comes to us with a particular identity, in particular places, speaking particular commandments. It is not right to say that God can be found anywhere, because God revealed himself as Yahweh, not Baal. The Lord came specifically to Israel, not Canaan. God gave 10 commandments, not 25 pointers on how to

improve your golf game. If it were true that God could be found anywhere, then the Israelites would have been free to exchange gods at will. But Jeremiah warned them that only the Lord was the fountain of living water.

The God of Israel is the source of true abundance, and so is **Jesus** Christ his Son. But let's watch out for ...

SPAM #2: THE MESSAGE THAT ACCEPTING **JESUS** IS ALL YOU NEED TO DO. It is certainly true that we receive God's grace when we accept **Jesus** as Savior, but this is not the goal of our Christian journey. The grace we receive will be "cheap grace" unless we complete our acceptance of **Jesus** with a life of discipleship.

In a classic definition of cheap grace, the Lutheran pastor and World War II martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without **Jesus** Christ, living and incarnate" (The Cost of Discipleship [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., (1937) 1963], 47).

The Christian community plays an important role in the life of discipleship because this community is nothing less than the body of Christ in the world today. It is among brothers and sisters in faith that we:

- experience the presence of **Jesus** Christ, living and incarnate;
- come together for worship, confess our sins, hear the gospel, and receive Communion;
- accept church discipline through the gentle guidance of others;
- learn, through the successes and failures around us, what it means to live a life of discipleship.

"There is no substitute for living around other Christians," write Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon of Duke Divinity School. A "primary way of learning to be disciples is by being in contact with others who are disciples" (Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989], 102). We grow in discipleship as we strive with others to hear God's Word, feed the hungry, welcome strangers, and love one another.

Acceptance of **Jesus** alone does not hold water. It needs to be completed by the challenges of life in the Christian community. But let's be careful when we encounter

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SPAM #3: THE MESSAGE THAT THE CHURCH IS HERE TO MEET YOUR NEEDS. Many of today's young adults shop for the church that is most convenient, comfortable and satisfying for them. They are drawn to congregations that have plenty of parking, attractive facilities and programs that promise to meet their spiritual needs. Researchers such as Dean Hoge of Catholic University have found that many baby boomers are looking for "high-quality Sunday school and youth programs, uplifting worship experiences and meaningful, authentic small-group experiences."

Now there is certainly nothing wrong with convenient parking and worship with a contemporary beat. But we should worry when congregations hear the Spam message, "The church is here to meet your needs," and then we run the risk of forming a kind of spiritual shopping mall. We should not lose sight of what is central to the life of the church:

1. Worship is meant to be an opportunity to glorify God and encounter Christ in Word and sacrament, not a musical concert or self-help seminar.
2. Preaching should have a prophetic edge, and focus on the challenges as well as the comforts of our faith.
3. People should have their legitimate needs met, but they should also be invited to confess their sins, be reconciled to one another, listen for God's Word, and then do good work in the world. **Jesus** did not ask people to choose him and use him; instead he called men and women to follow him in a ministry of service to a troubled world.

Anything less than such a mission just doesn't hold water. The prophetic words of Jeremiah and the gospel of **Jesus** Christ are not Spam messages: They are living water, water that becomes "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Christian communities today are called to provide this water to people who are thirsty for God, for discipleship and for new and purposeful life. Our mission is to turn people away from messages that do not profit, and turn them toward the Lord God of Israel, the fountain of living water, the source of true abundance.