

The Trial

The room was packed. The gallery was full. Prosecutors had taken their place at the appropriate table; and filled it with legal briefs, attaché cases, and bagels with cream cheese. The defense table was barren, save one lonely, ragged, bespectacled gentleman with a bag of Cheetos and a straw hat. There was a hush in the assembly as the judge ascended the throne (er, the bench). It was the trial of the century.

“Hear Ye. Hear Ye. The court of Ekklesia is in session. The honorable Reverend R. U. Kidding presiding. Ordained the fourth son of Zebedee in the house of the setting moon, to hear all matters that may come before the court, and whatever else he decides he wants to do. All rise and bow humbly.”

The Reverend mosies in through the proper entrance, takes his proper place, surveys the surroundings to determine who is in attendance, looks towards the prosecutors’ table, and queries, “Is the prosecution ready?”

“We are, your horror...I mean, your honor.”

“And I suppose,” the judge wonders aloud, “that the defense is ready?”

Ahhh, yes sir, I reckon-if it matters,” comes the reply.

Reverend Kidding is no novice-otherwise he would not meet the qualifications for being a Reverend. He has expended years in preparation for this moment. He has read the appropriate books on how to conduct a business meeting. He knows the seven habits of highly successful people. He wears a WWJD? Pin on his lapel. He has memorized Roberts Rules of Order. He even passed an interview at Dairy Queen once, and has taken a speed-reading course. Opportunities to officiate at such adjudications as these are scarce, and he does not take it lightly. His decisions will determine the very will of God for the matters being presented at his bench. And it doesn’t hurt his resume, either. He may want a good job some day.

“So let us proceed,” states the judge. “The bailiff will read the charges.”

“Very well. Hear ye, Hear ye and Ye, too. We, the government of the Ekklesia of the Right of Way (We know who we are.), do charge the defendant, Brother Earnest (Ern, for short) A Fortune, with the high crime of thievery (or takus expendus, in the Latin) from the kingdom; lack of respect

to his Reverendness R. U. Kidding; improper conduct among the heathen; and obtaining friendship, advice, and forgiveness from other than the proper authorities. We request that he be banished from the kingdom, that his children be cut off from among his people, and that he be forced to conduct his ministry (if, indeed, he has one when we get through with him) in misery and degradation as a vagabond the rest of his natural days. If that is not possible or the charges cannot be proven, we suggest that we give him a love offering and a wonderful recommendation to another body, stating to everyone else that it is the will of God that he move on, and that we all love one another.”

“Very well,” says the judge sternly. “That certainly sounds like a tried and true method. I even think we covered that in leadership training when I was in school. Mr. Prosecutor, you may call your first witness.”

“We intend to cut right to the chase, sir, and only call the defendant, Mr. Fortune, to the stand. There is no need to hear what a lot of other people have to say, anyway. They just confuse the issue, and we are confused enough already.”

The judge looks over to the defense table. “Is the defendant here?”

The bespectacled man replies, “Well, I called him a few minutes ago. He should be here shortly. Seems no one let him know that this was going to take place, and he was out trying to find some used smiley-face stickers to take back to the mission field, so he could show the heathen what a smile was. So one of the prosecutors asked me to leave my janitorial engineer duties and sit here until he comes in or until the trial is over, whichever comes first. It is over, isn’t it? Are there more Cheetos?”

“Well, no, it’s not over. Oh wait, here he comes now. By the way, are those my Cheetos?”

Mr. Fortune enters the room and approaches the bench. “I’m sorry, your honor, but no one told me, and I had a few things I had to do.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No, sir, you are Kidding.

“A likely story. Well let’s get on with it.”

The prosecution begins.

“What’s your name?”

“Ern A. Fortune.”

“And what do you do, Mr. Fortune?”

“I’m a missionary.”

“And what do you do as a missionary, Mr. Fortune?”

“ Well, I preach the gospel, establish churches, train men for the ministry, erect buildings, try to keep my family from going crazy, rebuild engines, run a transportation system, provide counseling, repair roads, ride donkeys, build dug-out canoes, teach my kids, correspond with all the supporting churches, answer inquiries about the work, fill out questionnaires from pastors, raise cows and sheep, support the long distance telephone industry, cut paths through the rain forest, shovel all the snow, fight forest fires, write material for Sunday School, keep up with all the current doctrinal disputes, fix the coffee maker and the washing machine , and try to keep foreign slithering creatures out of my house. And pray always.”

“Is that all you do?”

“Huh?”

“Well, what do you do in your spare time, Brother Fortune?

Specifically, we are concerned with how you finance your ministry. We have some reports that you have been out talking to churches. The churches might get the idea that you actually need financial backing for your mission work. Do you think its right to ask for money under the guise of letting folks know of your needs? Isn’t this a little underhanded? (By the way, the treasurer says we haven’t gotten your tithe check this month.) So what have you been doing, my Brother?”

Before Brother Fortune can answer, the prosecution continues. “ And we have reports that you have been asking for advice from someone other than your own pastor, R.U.Kidding. Are you kidding? And if you are, who do you think you are kidding?”

“Well, to be honest, I think I did mention to someone that we needed some material, and might have even asked someone to pray about it. Ahh, by the way, would you be interested in becoming a missionary, or maybe even helping a missionary?”

The prosecution is incredulous. “We all know that’s not the scriptural way to get missionaries-just one more charge. We have to wait until someone

stands up and says he is called. Do you wish to be labeled a heretic as well as a beggar?"

"Well, just thought I'd give it a try. That's how Paul got Timothy-remember Acts 16:3?" mumbled the missionary.

"We are not here to discuss my calling, sir. Are you admitting, then, that you beg for funds?"

"Well, I'm not sure it's begging. I try to give people the opportunity to contribute to the work of God, and thereby earn great rewards. If you give to missions, and your resources are used to increase the kingdom of God, you have a part in a great work and lay up treasures in heaven. Would you be interested in donating some roofing-or a lawn mower?"

"I am not on trial here, sir, and I don't do roofing. Have you, in fact, spent donated money on your family?"

"Well, my family is very important to me. They are the reason I can do what I do. If I don't keep them around, I fail my commission and become disqualified for service. And they like to eat. Would you like to cook for a missions retreat?"

"No, Mr. Fortune, I do not cook for missions. I uphold the faith. Certain things are important to this assembly. Don't you agree, judge?"

The judge ponders the question-or has dozed off. "Just continue, Mr. Prosecutor."

Very well, your honor. Now, Mr. Fortune, can you deny that you sought out pastors other than your own, and actually asked them what they thought you should do about certain aspects of your work?"

"Well, I just thought that, since a couple of those guys had thirty years more experience than my pastor, they might know something. Did you know that Rachel was a pastor? In Genesis 29:9-keeper of sheep-same word, you know? By the way can you do some visiting with me this week?"

"No, I don't have any time for visiting. I'm preparing a legal paper on the doctrine of apostolic survival. Now then, where were we?"

"I think we were about done-unless you want to go through the part about comparing me to the Levite-with the offerings and all. Or perhaps you could go into the 'Pastor is Moses' thing."

“Very well, the prosecution rests. I believe, your Reverendness, that we have shown that this missionary, Ern A. Fortune, is just kidding himself. He is obviously guilty of trying to advance his ministry by whatever methods he can muster, and using the Word of God as an excuse to do it. He should be censored for his conduct, and made a public disgrace. What do you think?”

Silence in the courtroom while the Reverend ponders the great implications of his decisions-and displays a certain knack for theater.

“I have made a decision,” said the Reverend. “I hereby decide that I am not going to make a decision. I had the foresight to find another church to take him off our hands. Although this particular trial would not have been necessary, I thought it would help to clear the air. That way we can give him a good send-off, and no one will know why. That must be scriptural, because it feels good.”

Brother Fortune is confused. “Am I free to go?” I have to get the letters to the Thessalonians translated before Saturday. Can you just tell everyone whatever it is I’m supposed to say, so I won’t mess it up?”

“Oh, yes, we can take care of it for you. Don’t worry,” says the Reverend. “By the way, we’ll all see you at the next fellowship. Brother Ample always puts on quite a spread. And make sure that you sign the guest book on your way out, now that you’re just a visitor. Say hi to the wife and kids. We’ll be in touch. Is there anything else?”

“Well,” stutters the missionary, “would you happen to have any spare blankets?”

“No, no, no spare blankets. I just bought new furniture-and a new preaching Bible. Mr. Prosecutor, would you be so kind as to dismiss us in prayer, and retrieve my Cheetos?”

So the trial is concluded in prayer, and scripture reading:

Hear the Word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word; Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name’s sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified: but He shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed. (Isaiah 66:5)

The next trial may have a different outcome - different judge.