

The Amazing Race

Once again, I am delaying the issue on Apocryphal Apocalypses because (1) I've been traveling a lot and haven't had time to do the background research, (2) after reading dozens of apocryphal works for the earlier issues (34, 39, 65, 69, 78), I find myself undermotivated to read more gnosense, and (3) today is my birthday, so I'm giving myself a present. I'll get back to the Apocalypses shortly - maybe even next week if I can find the time, although I'll be attending the American Christian Fiction Writers conference in Dallas later this week.

Now

Sunday night was the premiere of the tenth installment of CBS's wonderful reality series (otherwise an oxymoron), [The Amazing Race](#). Part competitive event, part travelogue, *The Amazing Race* is highly entertaining and mildly informative. Inevitably, stress will build up on the contestants over time and the uglier sides of their personalities will emerge, as they have in previous races, but the magnificent venues they visit more than compensate for such silliness.



One of the reasons the critics generally praise *Race* is the diversity the contestant pool, and this time is no different. With two Muslim men, a Hindu couple, a father-daughter, two blonde beauty queens, a pair of recovering addicts, Asian-American brothers, a Kentucky coal-miner and his stay-at-home wife, a couple of cheerleaders, two African-American single mothers, a disable woman and her boyfriend (who makes prosthetic devices), a dating couple, and the inevitable pair of gay men, *Race* contestants are said to reflect the diversity of twenty-first century America. To those who might decry the apparent absence of evangelical Christians, I would respond that it's just as well. Evangelicals on television reality shows haven't usually represented very well - whether they have been slandered by cynical editing or simply been all-too-human.

Last night, the teams left from Seattle, where my first grandson was born several weeks ago (can't miss the opportunity to get that in) and where I will return for a visit in about a month. They arrived there at the seaplane port that was across the street my wife and I stayed while I was there in early August. Once the race began, they struggled through the infamous traffic on I-5 to get to Sea-Tac airport, where they boarded commercial flights for Beijing. Ultimately, two teams were eliminated in one of the new twists host Phil Keoghan promised. I suppose the craziest of our brethren might suggest that it was God's will that the first casualties were the Muslims and the Hindus. On the other hand, given the number of times the Muslims mentioned Allah or stopped to pray, the show's producers may be relieved to now have what appears to be a thoroughly secular crowd. I'm sure there are Christians in the group. After all, polls tell us that 84% of Americans claim to be Christians. I suspect the most relieved group must be American Muslims, who now don't have to worry about Muslims looking as bad as Christians on TV.

One notable feature of *The Amazing Race*, as opposed to CBS's other hit reality show, *Survivor*, is that while some contestants will resort to misinformation and subterfuge, the worst offenders have never won any of the previous nine races. Usually, the winners are ones who have at least been civil to their competitors.

I look forward to the remaining episodes because it's the kind of mindless entertainment I enjoy at times, but the premiere got me thinking about several things. The first is the total contradiction in the term "Reality TV." How one can consider a diverse group of people running around the world together for a million dollar prize "reality" is beyond me. They will perform in contrived events sometimes reflecting local culture. The favorite of these - and the first competition last night - is the ingestion of regional "delicacies." Last night it was fish eyes - not tapioca, as my father always called it, but eyes extracted from boiling fish heads. When those competitions come on, my wife always says, "You'd have to do that one," as if I'd ever consent to displaying my own less than admirable characteristics on national television.



More importantly, the show reminded me of the biblical comparisons of Christianity to a race. Sometimes we may think that sports are a modern invention that had little influence in the lives of ancient people, but the fact that Paul used the race analogy proves otherwise. Paul was a master of using the cultural environment of the cities he visited to make his points about Christianity. He sought to teach important spiritual issues to people in everyday terms to which they could relate. Sports (sometimes using the term loosely) were an important part of Roman society, particularly in the large cities like Rome, Corinth and Ephesus. Paul liked the comparison to athletic endeavors because of the discipline and perseverance required of athletes as well as the prize at the end of the contest:

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Paul points out the difference in the prizes (perishable vs. imperishable, but the prize for "winning" the Christian race is also not limited to only one person because following Jesus is not a competition - everyone can win. In fact, God wants everyone to win this race, which is not against other people but against our own natures, which tend to run from God at every opportunity. The author of *Hebrews* also employed compared Christianity to a race, advising his readers to constantly keep their eyes fixed on the finish line represented by Jesus' own endurance on the cross:

*"...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In **your struggle against sin** you have not yet resisted to the point of **shedding your blood**" (Hebrews 12:1-4, emphasis added).*

Finally and poignantly, in Paul's last extant letter, written from his Roman jail cell to his protégé Timothy in Ephesus, he returned to the race analogy:

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

As his life neared its end at the hands of Nero, Paul could look forward confidently to the imperishable crown of righteousness that awaited him on the other side. In his mind's eye, he seems to envision the scene: standing before the Father, Christ Jesus at his side, Paul bows as the crown is placed on his head. Tears stream from his eyes as God tells me, "Well done, good and faithful servant Paul." God brings him to his feet and embraces him. Paul thinks of the races he has witnessed during his lifetime on earth and thinks of the joy each winner displayed on the stand, but he also thinks of the other runners. Even though they did their best, having lost, they walk away disconsolate, and at that moment, the joy of having won his race is overwhelmed by the even greater joy of knowing that his victory is one that has and will continue to bring others to the feet of the Father where they too receive a crown.

CBS labeled its contrived race show "amazing," but upon reflection it is not really so amazing. Sooner or later, some contestants will cheat or lie to get ahead because they know there can only be one winner. That's too much like life to be genuinely amazing. In life, there are winners and losers. Some win by hard work, others by good fortune. Too many win on their backs of other people. Some lose through their own laziness, others merely by the circumstances of their birth. Hard work may matter, but in life, it does not guarantee success. But the Christian life is different - the "luck" of your circumstances plays no role in winning. Running the race with faith, discipline and perseverance assures the victory. Now **that's** an amazing race!



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Co-workers: Epaphroditus (October 3)

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