

## Chapter 1

### Are You Worn Out by the Weeds?

We stood on a very flat piece of Texas. The sun never blinked. And the occasional breeze that wandered by couldn't be bothered to keep us company. With our ragged tennis shoes, torn T-shirts, and unkempt hair, we were a pretty sorry crew.

Shean leaned on his hoe, staring down at three strands of wheat grass, and mumbled a complaint about no one bringing a radio. Harold began to knock the yellow flowers off dandelions, one by one. Jack was busy pummeling a scrawny, non-descript weed because several burs had gotten stuck to his pant leg. J.T. slowly circled a patch of clover, asking no one in particular whether it could be considered a legitimate part of the lawn.

We were five souls in the purgatory of an extended work program, earning tuition for our year at Valley Grande Academy. Hoeing weeds occupied our hours when there were no ditches to dig or garbage bins to dump. If all else failed, the boys could always be sent out after the weeds. So we'd meander over the campus with that looping shuffle of paid-by-the-hour peons, dragging our hoes behind us, find some dandelions and slowly begin bothering them to death.

There wasn't any realistic hope of eliminating all the weeds; our campus included several wide fields. We were just putting in time under a low, gray sky. By the time we straggled back to the dorm after eight hours of hoeing and hacking, every muscle was one long groan. It was a strange kind of exhaustion, different from the mellow tiredness that follows a long football game. This left us drained and numb. So after supper we just laid around and played cards or listened to our clandestine radios, feeling like old men.

One of the reasons I can't forget those hours is because in my mind they became a picture of the religious life. What do Christians do anyway? They hoe weeds. At least that's what it seemed to most of us at the academy. You have to keep fighting off the evils of the world that creep up around you.

Look out! There's a patch of lust springing up over there - and you know how fast that stuff grows. Whoa, here's a string of Satanism subtly infiltrating the church. Oh, and right under your feet there's a thorny cluster of doctrinal error. Better cut that down.

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That was our picture of religious goodness. Hacking at weeds. Take the Ping-Pong Ball Revival, for example. One year our school principal left on a week-long business trip and put the Bible teacher in charge. Pastor Fry decided this would be a good opportunity to spark a revival. How do you do it in seven days? Well, he met with the student counsel and pushed through some quick “reforms.” Start with modesty in dress, surely a worthwhile goal. How do you ensure that the skirts are long enough and the pants aren’t too tight? Why not have the girls kneel down in the dorm lobby each morning, where the dean can check to see if their hems reach the carpet. (This was the mini-skirt era.) Let’s do that.

And the boys? Let’s line them all up on the sidewalk and apply the Ping-Pong ball test. You slip Ping-Pong balls under their belts. If they drop all the way down to the shoelaces, the pants are OK, not too form-fitting.

Isn’t it funny how styles change? Today, my son - on the way out the door with his skateboard - wears these incredibly baggy things. You could drive a pickup through his pant leg. He would have passed the test with flying colors. Our teachers fought a constant battle over hair creeping over our ears. My son’s present teachers grow pale because he continually wants to shave the sides of his head.

Well, for some reason, the revival never did get off the ground. Maybe they couldn’t get enough Ping-Pong balls. But as the thing fizzled out, one thought kept going through my head: There’s got to be more to it than this.

It wasn’t that Pastor Fry was a hard-nosed legalist. As a matter of fact, he was one of the most likable teachers on campus. But in that religious culture, when people cast around for a way to be good, the only thing they could think of was hoeing weeds, stamping out a few shoots of worldliness.

That’s our job as Christians, isn’t it? After all, we can’t just let sin take over our lives. We have to keep at it. The dark, fertile soil of carnality and worldliness is always threatening always throwing up weeds.

And that’s the rub. You never really have any hope of getting them all. You no sooner hack away at one thing than another is growing like crazy somewhere else. After a while, you start wondering what the point is. You get tired of just working by the hour, just hoeing weeds. Why not roll around in them for a while?

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In chapel services at the school, we heard a lot about how wonderful the Christian life was - transforming power available to one and all. But nothing we saw around us matched the rhetoric. The words were so big the promises so extravagant. Why then did religion have to feel so small?

None of us thought we could fit into it. And that made that scraggly line of weed-hoers out there in the wide fields quite wary of the Big Man Upstairs. Shean was a bit older than the rest of us and had been through some pretty tough times. He was sure that a little dark cloud followed him everywhere. I expressed skepticism. But once, after supper, we were walking across campus when he pointed up. Sure enough, a little dark cloud was following him. Shean suspected that God played favorites.

J.T. wanted to “expand his mind” in other directions. He wasn’t sure what that meant. He was just sure he didn’t want his life confined to the pages of our church manual. Harold was too amiable to question the Almighty. But he had no intentions of “getting under His thumb” anytime soon.

Sometimes we’d meet people who wanted to do more than hoe weeds; people who made a big deal about religion. But they were such a peculiar breed. They always seemed to wear dark slacks and starched white shirts. They spoke a lot in King James English and appeared to be on intimate terms with the beasts of Revelation. Every encounter with these people turned into something awkward. Their religious goodness seemed wrapped around them as tightly as packing wire.

My roommate Jack had once been confronted with “what the Holy Spirit could do to you” at a school in the mountains specializing in 24-hour-a-day-holiness - and he was still running. A lanky, shy, kid, he seemed to be laboring against a divine law that stretched from horizon to horizon. There was no escape from its endless requirements.

But he did his best to defend himself. Each Sabbath, Jack faithfully carried a miniature pack of poker cards to church in his inside coat pocket. If a sermon hit a little bit too close to home, he would reach in and ringer the ace of spades or queen of hearts. The poker cards were his security, preventing the angels from getting too close.

The unspoken commitment in our dorm was: leave religion alone as much as possible. For some reason, I clung to the belief that there must be something more to God than what we were getting. There just had to be.

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But we didn't find it. Most of my peers laid aside their hoes a long time ago.

J.T. shattered his mind on extended drug trips.

Shean found employment as projectionist in a porn theatre, moving as far away from purity as physically possible.

My roommate Jack wanted more than anything else to belong to a fast car. After all, he had to keep looking over his shoulder to see if fanaticism was gaining on him. He died in a head-on collision.

Harold didn't turn against the faith in any obvious way. He just began moving in other circles, making sure that it kept a respectable distance.

I am still haunted by those faces that stare back at me from my academy yearbook. I see so many casualties, so many people who burned out trying to be good. And I still lament the fact that Christianity appeared to be an exhausting one-way street for them.

### The religion of avoidance

One of the pitfalls of a legalistic culture is that sooner or later it creates a religion of avoidance. Our faith comes to be defined by the things we avoid. That's one big reason so many people burn out on being good.

We seem to confront a world full of threats: crude rock lyrics blaring out on the airwaves, suggestive TV shows on every station, riotous parties in every neighborhood, secular humanists behind every institution. The easiest sermon to preach is one on why the world is going to hell. The quickest religious bestseller is one that red-letters a new hidden danger out there threatening the faith.

When "being good" is a matter of continually whittling life down to proper size - eliminating the weeds - then it's going to seem quite pale and stifling. Life has huge potential for good or ill, so our preoccupations with jewelry, foul language, and whether you should raise your hands in church or not don't seem very earth-shaking to a lot of people. We get tangled up in our particular denominational brand of rule-making. We have to build ever higher, ever stricter, barriers against the dandelions, ragweeds, and crabgrass of the world that keep threatening to take over the church's immaculate lawns.

Always having to say No burns people out. You always have to be on guard. Weeds are popping up everywhere. Trying to get them all wears people down; it's simply not sustainable.

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A religion of avoidance manages to be both intimidating and unchallenging at the same time. The thought of spending your life always vigilant, guarding against those little sins, fills people with dismay. It's just too hard not to fall. And yet, though terribly difficult, the prospect doesn't arise as a great challenge either; it doesn't seem worthy of life's best energies.

The religion of avoidance sometimes becomes animistic. Animism is a primitive religion that affirms that good and evil spirits inhabit all kinds of objects. In certain cultures, for example, parents may warn their young children about a certain kind of tree as a source of moral peril. Or they may point out certain stones as objects of blessing.

Christians are not animists. We do believe that we live in a spiritual world and in the midst of a conflict between good and evil. But it's important to remember that most things aren't good or evil. Holiness is not primarily a matter of getting bad things out of our lives.

Adventists (and many other conservative Christians), however, too often try to do just that. Movies are bad. Rock-and-roll is bad. Certain words are bad. Tattoos are bad. Heavy and tight skirts are bad.

All kinds of things can be abused, of course. And some things lend themselves to abuse much more than others. But when we concentrate on things, we're dealing with the wrong end of the stick. It's people who have moral problems, not things. Many movies major in gratuitous violence and sex. But I don't think anyone would want to launch a campaign against books, because many books major in gratuitous violence and sex.

In the religion of avoidance, certain styles of dress or music or worship take on moral or immoral weight. This keeps us from looking at the things of the heart that really defile human beings. Abusive anger, egotism, insensitivity - these are dangers to beware, these are things that defile us. When we just focus on the terrible things out there that are going to come in and defile us, we're not fighting the real battle. We're just subsisting on a religion of avoidance.

Where is the place for experiment and risk in such a defensive lifestyle? How can people grow as human beings if they're constantly worried about "creeping worldliness"? In the religion of avoidance, the pious see some thin entering wedge - something that could possibly lead to something evil - everywhere.

Teenagers get the usual warning: Paying too much attention to the opposite sex can lead to spending time in their company, which can lead to hand-holding, which can lead to kissing, which can lead to

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embracing, which can lead to petting, which leads to sex. In this scenario, every gesture of affection becomes one more step down that slippery slope to perdition.

Instead of helping kids use their minds and hearts, instead of encouraging kids to practice self-control and helping them understand what's appropriate and what's not appropriate in various relationships, we demonize the physical.

Nothing sends a chill down the spines of those caught up in the religion of avoidance like mere "amusements." Frequenting bowling alleys could lead to hanging out at pool halls, which could lead to smoking, which could lead to drugs. Associating with the "wrong kind of people" could lead to talking like them and thinking like them. Checking out a book or a TV program that's "just entertainment" could soften the brain, which could cloud our thoughts, which could make us incapable of taking in the solid food of the Word and render us helpless before the ceaseless brain-washing of the devil.

Church members are warned: listening to that non-Adventist evangelist on television could lead you into spiritual seduction. You might start speaking in tongues and fell captive to the counterfeit Holy Spirit.

Of course it's possible to be swept up by some cultic teaching - especially if you're emotionally vulnerable. Of course it's possible to waste away your life going from one amusement to another. But the religion of avoidance tends to see everything that is not explicitly religious as explicitly bad. There's the church - this particular church - and there's the world. Everything in the church is good. Everything in the world is bad.

The truth is there's every conceivable kind of good and bad both in the church and in the world. There are "secular" books that ennoble the soul. There are extremely religious books that promote a dysfunctional view of life. There are feature films that glamorize violence. There are feature films that make you ache inside because life is so precious. Some religious television reduces Jesus to salesmanship. Some religious television shows Jesus as a compelling Saviour.

There are symphonies that make you feel someone understands your deepest longings. There are pop songs that perfectly express the precise romantic moment you stand in and make you want to inhabit that moment forever. There's rock-and-roll that plugs in all your energy. There are ballads that massage your heart.

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Every kind of great, good, mediocre and bad art exists in the world. You can't just put things in boxes labeled "amusement" and store them away out of sight. You have to have discernment. You have to develop sensitivity. What blesses me and inspires me at this particular time may turn you off. What warms you in your particular emotional state may leave me cold.

Sometimes laughing your head off on a roller coaster is an escape from problems you should be dealing with. Sometimes laughing your head off on a roller coaster is the perfect way to express the exuberance about life that's welling up from your toes.

People need some measure of security if they are to grow in a healthy way. They need to know that there's plenty of good out there to experience, as well as bad to avoid. It's unhealthy to grow up always afraid that every little misstep will just lead to another and another and another until you end up helpless in the clutches of the Enemy.

Out there hoeing weeds under the big Texas sun, I imagined that there was more to religion than that - there had to be more, there had to be something healthier. But what exactly was the alternative? I didn't have a hint of what it could be until Bill Shelly came into our world of miniature rights and wrongs.

I met him the summer I started working at a furniture factory run by our academy. The first thing that struck me about Bill was that he worked rather cheerfully. I was hammering dresser drawer guides on a jig, going through the identical motions for eight hours. He was stuck in the paint room at the end of the assembly line, a pretty noxious place that left you feeling lightheaded at the end of the day. But Bill painted dressers and cabinets, grinning all the while as if he wasn't all there. And it wasn't just the fumes. He was alert, but somehow not at all trapped in that gloomy factory. I had this sense that he'd been places - and not just geographical ones.

Bill was sincere but never pretentious. We noticed he said grace at meals, and once in a while he talked about something he'd learned from the Bible. But he never wore a starched white shirt or talked King James English. That was a new trick. Bill was the first peer I had ever known who was both spiritual and normal, the first person who made religious goodness seem attractive.

I remember the evening it hit me. I was walking back to the dorm from supper and caught traces of purple, orange, and magenta flaring across the sky. Our horizon had always been rather dull - no dramatic landscape to speak of. And that summer the flat earth seemed always

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matched by that low gray sky. But on this evening the whole hemisphere was lighted up; the sky seemed enormous. I had not noticed sunsets much before. But this was quite a phenomenon. I'd never seen so much color in one place.

And as I looked west toward the dazzling sun, I noticed Bill sitting alone out on the football field bleachers. He had a book open on one knee. A bit of sunset reflected off the white pages. He was out there with his Bible, enjoying the dramatic sky. And I remembered it was a Friday evening, about the time when they dragged us into the chapel for vespers.

I stopped in my tracks. No one had told Bill he had to do this.

There were no rules in the school handbook saying you had to read your Bible on the bleachers every Friday evening. He was making something happen on his own, maybe his own version of vespers. He wasn't just putting in time, hoeing weeds.

Maybe he was even looking for God out there. And the wild idea struck me that religion could be an adventure. Maybe it could be as eloquent as that sunset. Maybe it could come out of your heart and mind instead of being imposed from the outside.

Bill seemed to be at ease out there, leaning back with his arms spread on the bench behind him. After staring a long, long time, I made my way slowly toward the bleachers.