

Views from the Pews: Carts and horses

Think of a horse-drawn cart. The two make a functional unit - the horse supplying the energy, the cart holding the load. Together they have the power to get things done, but only so long as they are kept in their proper order. A horse needs daily feeding, enough proper rest, a clean secure stable, well-fitting and well cleaned harness, and regular checkups with the farrier and the vet. The cart needs only a monthly hose-down and grease. If both are given the different kinds of attention they need and are hitched up correctly, they can do a lot of work for God in this mixed-up world. A fit and willing horse called *Love* can pull a cart called *Religion* which meets the needs of people. But a neglected horse breaks down under the load of the world's desperation, and even the most lavishly cared-for cart gets nowhere without it.

If the cart gets put in front of the horse, religion, which should be an expression of our love for God, becomes an end in itself. Our once-joyful, trusting celebration of God becomes forgotten in the struggle to retain the authority of institutional religion as it was in the old days. God's message of unconditional acceptance dissolves into a need to ensure the continued existence of the traditional church as a bastion against the moral and social decay of our world.

A church that is truly loyal to the spirit of its master's own life and teaching strives to keep love, like a horse, in top condition and firmly in front of the cart, even though it is risky to put the horse first. A frisky horse with fire in his eyes might make demands on us, cause us to give up our comfortable habits. Abraham, Noah and Jacob knew the feeling. But they and many others since who have been set alight by that fire can work wonders in the darkest places. Just watch the Salvation Army at work.

Of course it is safer to put the cart first. But only when we keep the horse in front are we able to see that the temptation to worry most about the cart is just the peculiar burden of institutional religion. And the better our relationship with a strong and vigorous horse, the more courage it can give us to trust that challenging ride all the way to the gates of God's Kingdom.

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