

take hold of God and pull

by Calvin G. Seerveld

To understand the pinpointing yet large significance of Proverbs 27: 12 you need to recognize that 27: 13 is a quote referring to a long-standing

counsel of Wisdom against being guarantee for a stranger, or even your neighbour.

The cautiously wise fellow sees bad, wasteful trouble coming and hides himself, gets out of the way: unexperienced people, however, walk right on into it and pay the price.

[Remember:]

"Take his clothes if he stands surety for a stranger; if he makes the pledge for a strange woman, grab *him* as the bail." (27: 12-13)

That forbidding directive quoted to make the point about "wisdom" and "inexperience" recurs in the various sections of Proverbs:

You will really suffer serious evil and trouble if you have gone bond for a strange fellow: but if you shun such offhand pledges of trust, then you may live with a quietly reliable certainty. (11: 15)

A man who binds himself with a handshake to be substitute security for his neighbour simply lacks faith-guts. (17: 18)

Even association with those who try to cut corners and are free and easy with their pledges of security is appealed:

Don't become one of those glad-handers who stand guarantee for a shady loan: suppose you can't pay up? why have them take your bed from underneath you? (22:26-27)

And if you unfortunately were rash, and did not avoid the entanglement of becoming the bond for somebody who is defaulting:

Listen, my child, if you ever become the bond yourself for your neighbour, if you have given your hand to be security for somebody else, a stranger, gotten tripped up by your own tongue, that is, caught by the words of your mouth: get busy, my child, so you get yourself out of it! for you have come to be completely in the power of your neighbour, the other person!

Go sweat it hard! wear your fellow neighbour out! don't let your eyes shut in sleep - don't let your eyelids drowsily blink - get yourself out of hock! like a gazelle slips out of the [hunter's] hand or a bird escapes the clutches of the bird-catcher ... (6: 1-5)

The fervor of Proverbs 6 for getting yourself out of this bind, and the unqualified judgment (17: 18) upon those who substitute their own selves to be responsible for the plight of their neighbour - "he simply lacks faith-guts! (= heart, insightful wisdom) - may strike the modern reader as quite strange. Aren't we supposed to love our neighbour? give him whatever he needs? (Luke 6:27-38) go to bat for him? walk the second mile? (Matthew 5:38-42) Is this Proverbs reproof about bond and bail, surety, security, standing guarantee, not simply a tradition of civil law the Israelites had, reported to us in the "old" testament, and no longer really authoritative for sons of God in the "new" testament era? Is not this reluctance to vouch for a bad risk neighbour the kind of Jewishly shrewd business sense Christ freed us from! Why, we evangelical Christians should be ready to die for our drowning, unsaved neighbour, shouldn't we?

There is more than one way to close the book of Proverbs to understanding. You can read it like an infallible Poor Richard's Almanac of aphorisms, and pick and choose those nuggets which strike your fancy for certain homilies, killing the overwhelming, compelling hope the book gives. But you can also make Proverbs a dead letter simply by assuming its *authority* is dated. Then you soon walk around with less than half a Bible, and inevitably come to misunderstand and misrepresent the "New Testament" message too. Proverbs 27: 12-13 is the Word of the Lord for today as much as it ever was. (cf. Psalm 119: 105) And only if its older covenanting call is heard can we hear the rich force and directing comfort of, say, Matthew 10: 16 with which Jesus Christ sent out his first twelve disciples.

But what does Proverbs mean by "cautiously wise fellow ... gets *out* of the way" and do not be surety for another person?

It is a mark of the graciously judging mercy of Almighty God that when he gave Moses on Mount Sinai the light for his people's pathway, the Lord specified: if you take a poor man's cloak as pawn for the debt he owes, you must return it to him for the night; otherwise, what would he lie on or have to keep himself warm

with. (Exodus 22:25-27) The Lord's intense compassion for men in their broken histories shows up too in his disallowing millstones, a man's means of livelihood, from being put in hock as the pledge of making good on a loan, for then you have enslaved the man's life. (Deuteronomy 24:6) That is, Yahweh limits what a (powerful) man may demand from his neighbour as security.

And the same covenanting Lord God reveals through Solomon that there are limits to one's pledging allegiance for one's neighbour: you are a presumptuous fool asking for serious evil if you make yourself a possible forfeit for another man's deeds. So men can buy and sell you as slave instead. (cf. II Kings 4: 1) Who are you to pledge so absolutely that you will make good and atone for what another man, neighbour or stranger, fails at!? To act, somewhat thoughtlessly, as if *you* can set things straight, signing your life on the promisory line, as if *you* should assume the office of surety, is not some noble, human gesture but a bankrupt unwisdom. Something inexperienced people do: overcommit themselves to others, often in the flush of good intentions, forgetting that *God* is at hand and directly at work with His presence -

Proverbs 27: 12-13 is getting at something deeper still than suspect business deals and rash alliances, which also cripple God's people so they cannot walk publicly in the light. (cf I John I :5-10) God's Proverb Word here on wisdom, about not selling yourself out as surety for another - that is *not* what the Lord requires of you! (cf Micah 6:6-8) - is a hint, in mirror script, about the One coming who will be the pawn to end all pledges, who shall indeed be able to substitute his life as security to make good for another. Meanwhile, man, the Good News is: you don't have to guarantee tomorrow: it is a gift of the Lord! (27: 1-11) And in all your daily doings, remember, *you* are not to play the saviour! *Yahweh* shall finish things off! (25:22)

The Proverbs 27: 13 quote sums up the covenanting Lord God's protecting his people from heroics. Worse than bad deals are commitments made to men wherein you grantstand, (22:26-27) enact it lightly for the

nonce (11: 15) or where like an Atlas god you take all the responsibility on your own broad shoulders. (17: 18) Counter to every pagan (and secular) code, such security-giving people, says the Bible, lack guts, are deeply unwise. God takes no more pleasure in "heroic love" than he does in the well-turned leg of a man. (Psalm 146: 10-11) Yahweh calls us to neighbour service that respects the neighbour as you would your very self, and goes all the way up to giving even your enemy food (Proverbs 25:21) so long as you do not pre-empt his hoping in the *Lord* to redeem him from his misery or waylay yourself into the godless position of being security for a man.

This means that Judah was not an early type of Christ when he offered himself as bond for Benjamin (Genesis 43: 1-14,44: 18-34) but, rather, a desperate man trying to make good for an earlier evil in a way our Proverbs passages warn you should try to escape as importunately as the widow pleaded before the unjust judge. (Proverbs 6: 1-5, Luke 18: 1-8) It means that John 15: 13 is not recommending we should be prepared to lay down our life for our friend if we really love him: that would be reading Scripture like a Humanist who has never heard that Proverbs 27: 12-13 is in the Bible and foists off on unsuspecting innocents abroad, in the name of New Testament Christianity, a humanitarian type love that knows no limits, that puffs 70 x 7 confessional forbearance into a religion-ethic with no cut-off points, where *you* must be the expiation for your neighbour on pain of lovelessness.

But, No, says Proverbs. *Christ!* (through God's foolishness which is wiser than any man's calculation) went in hock for us (Hebrews 7:22) so that His followers need not emulate His example and play mediator in daily life; but, as a forgiven people securely preach and practice the healing love of forgiveness among men. (John 15: 9-17) Making-things-whole (giving shalom), as well as vengeance, belongs only to the Lord. (Proverbs 25:22, Romans 12:9-21, Philippians 4:4-7) It is redeemed wisdom not to play god, also not to act like a Christ toward your neighbour; but when things "strange-to-God" like temptation, shaped as a lion or as an angel of

light, or whatever is ominously beyond the limits of your calling, appears, it is redeemed wisdom to get out of the way. To face such matters as angels fear to meet and figure you will walk in, shoot from the hip, and let the chips fall where they may, does not honour the Lord. That is what simple simons do.

Do you mean Proverbs 27: 12-13 supports the cautious conservatism of never sticking out your neck or putting yourself on the line for your neighbour and God?

Not at all. That clever excusing of oneself from the passion of faith is built on the Thomist and Scholastic Protestant legacy of *prudence*, which has artfully covered up the old pagan heroics with a pragmatic sense of win-rather-than-lose, in the name of Christ, of course. And such worldlywise "prudence" kills Biblical obedience.

The circumspective discernment and tempered action which pleases God, according to Proverbs 27: 12-13 and Matthew 10: 16, is this: Be as non-Messiah-like as a snake in your prophetic enacting of the Rule of the Lord, and be as innocent as a dove in living the Christian life, exercising forgiveness toward men. (cf Matthew 10: 5-11) Such selfless, seasoned and trustworthy wisdom, patiently waiting on the Lord while working hard to claim his blessing, is the mark of a Christian who has Proverbs 27 in his Bible. The Way of shalom is not to be warring and standing bail for your neighbour, but to practice forgiveness, build up God's people and praise the Lord - even if it costs us our livelihood and life like sheep among wolves.

Footnote:

The cautiously wise fellow sees coming so many shopping days before Christmas and goes in hiding (although it is difficult to find even a catacomb or a church free from co-opted advertisement about Christmas cheer and putting Christ back into Christmas). A man's inexperienced kids, however, may walk right on into the trap of getting presents and pay the price.

If you and your children stand surety for the Madison Avenue economy, if you pledge your vacation days to Brewer's Retail, the Robert Shaw Chorale singing Silent Night with the five o'clock news, the Lord will grab *you* as the bail.

Christmas means Christ went in hock for us so that we and our neighbour need not be sold down the river. It will take some imaginative preparation in our evil, secular age to celebrate that fact with a birthday party of joy. That is what advent is for.