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## Clueless! (Work Station Two)

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W O R K S T A T I O N T W O



Gary B. Swanson

Imagine yourself working for the U.S. Forest Service. You've devoted your entire career—your life—to protecting the environment so that humankind will be able to enjoy nature to its fullest. You plan and clear out hiking trails and camping sites, provide maps and guidelines, post signs to warn of difficult or dangerous terrain—knock yourself out in an effort to bring nature and humanity closer together.

You are living a mission.

And then, in your suggestion boxes, you receive feedback from campers and backpackers like these actual comments:

“Please avoid building trails that go uphill.”

“Too many rocks on the mountains.”

“The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals.”\*

Does the biblical expression

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\* *Reader's Digest*, (July 1998), p. 73.

## CLUELESS!

“pearls before swine” come to mind?

And this sentiment appears in Scripture, too. In the Book of Numbers alone, the Israelites returned again and again to complaints of hardship and discomfort. The theme always seemed to be pining for the conveniences of Egypt, apparently prompted by a kind of mass amnesia over the historical fact that these people had actually endured for centuries the brutality of enslavement in Egypt—at one point had even been expected to provide their own straw to make bricks. In those days, there had been no concept of vacation, sick leave, mental-health days, or time-and-a-half. Yet when their trip to the Promised Land proved to be more arduous than they'd expected, they had completely forgotten the cruel oppression they had suffered at the hands of the Egyptians.

In essence, they were demanding that their leadership avoid trails that go uphill, even when their immediate necessities were consistently provided for, even when there was ulti-

mate benefit to be gained, even when they could clearly see God's leading in the cloud by day and fire by night.

In all candor, it must be recognized that there is a measure of basic human nature in the way the Israelites kept returning to their complaints. All of humanity is subject to missing—or forgetting—the point, even in spiritual matters. And this cluelessness also frequently occurred in the questions and requests that Jesus and His apostles faced in their ministries.

Just a sampling from a *mélange* of possibilities:

“What must I do to be saved?”

“You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”

“Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

“Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

How to respond to approaches like these, uttered by real people—often in utmost yet misdirected sincerity? Humanly speaking, it must have taken a massive infusion of the Holy Spirit to avoid sarcasm. Or worse: to dismiss them completely.

Rooted in each of these questions and requests is a basic misunder-

standing of what it means to be a member of God's kingdom on this earth. On second thought, *misunderstanding* isn't quite the right word. Any chosen path in life depends on deliberate selection. It isn't by mere circumstance that *ignorance* and *ignore* derive from the same root. Ignorance is willful.

In 1793, a third-year university student at Cambridge, despairing over an unrequited love, ran away and joined the army. Walking into the recruiting office for the Light Dragoons, he signed up as “Silas Titus Comberbacke” and embarked on what he envisioned would be the greatest adventure of his life.

But it wasn't.

Silas soon discovered to his dismay that he wasn't cut out for the cavalry. Clearly, he had made the wrong decision. He couldn't groom his horse, couldn't keep his equipment in order, couldn't even ride. And a cavalryman who can't ride a horse has got to be a little out of place. His superior officers certainly thought so: he was assigned to clean the stables.

Young Silas was no longer despairing; now he was desperate. It wasn't as if he could simply say, “Oops! Sorry! I want out.” He sent an urgent message to his older brother James, who had to buy his release from the Light Dragoons, and he resumed his studies at Cambridge under his real name: Samuel

Taylor Coleridge.

Though the rest of Coleridge's life was hardly exemplary in every way, it can at least be said that the literary world gained when James Coleridge was willing to give his irresponsible brother a second chance and rescued him from the results of his own bad decision-making.

James didn't succumb to the temptation simply to let his younger brother suffer the ultimate consequences of his behavior. He apparently loved him too much to allow such a thing to happen. He paid the price to deliver his brother from his suffering.

From God's viewpoint, humanity—like Silas Titus Comberbacke—is experiencing the results of making wrong decisions. And this involves much more than mere observable behavior. It touches on all of the human experience: social, physical, intellectual, spiritual.

To decide, for example, that there is no God isn't an experience in which someone simply wakes up some morning and announces his or her conclusions to the world without having first examined at least some evidence and made some human pronouncements. Great decisions

are usually related to much smaller decisions. Jesus said, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10, NIV).

Atheists arrive at their position by rejecting the possibility of the immaterial, blaming God for human suffering, placing themselves in judgment over whether the idea of God makes sense—or any combination of these and other human conclusions.

Consider the audacity of this position: I reject God because He doesn't make sense to me!

God isn't in the business of proving Himself to humankind. Not in the rational sense.

Yet He has planned and cleared a path for life, provided maps and guidelines, and posted signs to warn of difficult or dangerous terrain—all in an effort to bring humanity closer to Him.

Allowing anything to get in the way of understanding this absolute truth is nothing less than intentional rejection. It is why humanity, outside of God's grace, is said to be spiritually "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked"—and clueless.

