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The Limits of Security

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The near bombing of the Northwest flight enroute to Detroit has brought us back to an obsession with security which was triggered by 9/11 and has spiked many times since.

The tension makes perfect sense on the face of it. Any time a would-be bomber slips through the layers of detection lives are in danger. Questions must be asked and holes plugged.

But as 2009 fades to black, I'm also reminded that the voices calling for repairs to the system are so often shrill, hysterical and utopian. They demand the kind of perfection that the Bible counsel us to avoid lest we lose our souls.

The Bible's argument, as I understand it, is that human project, while worthy, cannot avoid lapses and failures. It is our propensity toward mistake and error that can make us realize that we find our only security in Jesus Christ. Just as St. Paul said, religious law serves us by awakening us to our imperfection and the need for divine mercy.

Since the Trojan Horse got past the guards, there have been and always will be breeches in our best designed defenses. That's no reason to become less vigilant but it does caution us against expecting to build a full-proof shield while the world writhes in turmoil. That turmoil stirs the endless cycle of attack and reprisal that produces insecurity.

Much of the overheated reaction to the Northwest bomber is based on an idealism that is at odds with the Bible's call to place total confidence only in God. The outpouring of anger and blame presupposes that such an incident should never have happened. Investigations begin to root out the culprits and presumably set things right.

Attention can and should be directed toward correcting breakdowns, but not on the basis of a premise that this time we will fix it for all time. I think the Scriptures tell us that our best efforts will sometimes fail and that our salvation lies in admitting that. Only then can we do what we can do without expecting that we can do it ourselves. It's another way of saying, perhaps, that we all stand in need of forgiveness as we enter the new year.

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