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Rejected

MAYHEM ON THE AM

"O.K., hit it, Brother!" and the spirited sign-on music spins from the disk to the airways. The voice persists: "And who's the star of this show? Who's the D.J., Rod? You'd better believe it, Brother, this is Basil's Bumper Buster Club. It's mayhem on the AM!"

Radio Station KBLE, Seattle, Washington, probably has the most unusual disk jockey on the air, on either AM or FM. Basil is a forty-six inch dummy, "a nine-year-old boy who has been with me for fourteen years." He and his companion, Rod James, fill three hours of the afternoon and early^{1:30} evening with hearty gospel music laced with patter on safe-driving tips for the homegoing "Bumper Busters", Christian philosophy, and serious counsel made palatable through the fetching voice of Basil. He regularly sings part of the station break, and on occasion sings with the artists.

Rod, with apparent intent to instruct, asks, "Where do you find the Beatitudes?", to which Basil responds, with seeming equal seriousness, "Did you look in the Yellow Pages?" Or, "Yeah, he has a heart as big as all outdoors -- and just as polluted, too."

The humor is overshadowed by conversations of the goodness of God,^{2:00} the way of salvation by grace through faith, and the satisfactions of the Christian life -- all interrupted by piquant comments or supporting Scripture verses by Basil.

Basil and Rod have not always been evangelists. "Our story is like that of Jonah, with whom God dealt until from the depths

of disaster, he cried to God and committed himself to do God's will."

Twelve-year-old Rod James heard a ventriloquist and immediately determined to make show business his life work. He bought a twenty-five dollar dummy, a book on ventriloquism, another on show business, and taught himself. The dummy proved a means of expression for the introverted youth, and he found the acceptance of his peers that he craved.

After high school, despite the training of his good Lutheran home, and a definite experience of salvation at Lake-of-the-Woods Bible Camp when he was thirteen, he absorbed the vices that he found in the carnivals and the Ringling Brothers' Circus with which he traveled, and by the age of twenty-one he had become a hopeless alcoholic.

"I was in New York, and had completed a strenuous run of twenty-six weeks of thirteen working hours daily, without a day's vacation. I was sick of the life, sick in my body. I was drinking beyond control and living on benzedrine and beer. I thought, 'There must be a better way to die,' and I knew if I died where I was going. I fell on my knees, and I prayed all night. Jesus became very real to me. Finally, with an oath on my lips I cried out, 'O.K., damn it, I'll serve You.'"

The next nine years were a strange tale of a man who had accepted Christ but who lived in the misery of one who refused to commit himself to the will of God. "It was pure hell," remembers Rod. "God had saved a ventriloquist and He was stuck with one. I knew God wanted me to be in evangelism but I was determined not to be a stiff, starchy preacher; show business was still my first love."

He attended the Lutheran Bible Institute in Minneapolis for one year, where he met and married his wife. They traveled briefly in evangelism, but he had never learned stick-to-it-ive-ness. "There is no steady work in show business," is his testimony. "My employment record was atrocious."

Interspersed^{6th} with his regular acts as a showman, he sought to do the will of God his own way. At the same time that he was employed in a stage show with Bob Hope, he proclaimed the gospel on the Through the Porthole program, aired on more than three hundred stations. His act was used on the Howdy-Doody show, he appeared in children's gospel meetings, and had a program on KTIS, a Christian station in Minneapolis.

In 1954, Basil came into his life in an unusual way. A man from Germany, who had several dummies, offered to trade Basil for^{7th} the twenty-five dollar dummy Rod had used for many years. "I had told my wife that if I was going to tell Bible stories with a dummy, I would have to have a life-like one, rather than a grotesque one. When I wondered about trading for Basil, she said, 'If you're going into the gospel business, take Basil; if you're going to stay in show business, keep your own.' And I traded. I think if I had not had Basil, I would not be where I am today." He has been offered as much as fifteen hundred dollars^{8⁰⁰} for Basil.

What is Basil like? Rod says he never thinks of him as his son. Even though he is identified as a boy nine years old, he is more than that. He is a witty, precocious cross between a man and a boy. They are friends, companions.

But "Jonah" was still running from God, while being busy for God. From 1958 to 1960 he appeared on Channel 13 in Seattle, was

also employed as master of ceremonies on the "Music for Motoring" afternoon program from KGDN, a Christian radio station in Edmonds, Washington, and made frequent single appearances in churches.

In the midst of his apparent efforts for Christ, he was still unhappy and became addicted to drugs. "I was always a legal addict," he observed. "I was suffering intense pain from an attack of rheumatic fever and I implored my wife to get help from a doctor. He prescribed a medicine which was a combination of codeine and opium. It was wonderful! My ~~hang-ups~~ ^{hang-ups} vanished and I loved everybody! The prescription said 'one dose every six hours as needed for pain', but you can believe me that I took it every ¹⁰⁰ six hours! I had enough rheumatic fever to be able to get the prescription, but I feigned pain for four years. I found a cough medicine which had four grains of codeine, an 'exempt narcotic', and I was never without a bottle. From 1958 to 1962 I took from one to two bottles a day. I am addiction prone, but until 1961 I did not admit even to myself that I was hooked."

But what conflict of soul! "How can one witness to children about Christ in a condition like that?" His Christian life began to disintegrate. He had to have ¹⁰⁰ money for his habit, and went to rock-and-roll programs on the radio, on a Fargo, North Dakota, station. His wife, too, had gradually slipped from her Christian testimony, and became seriously entangled with the law. Their children were taken care of by neighbors, and later their home was broken by divorce. "I even hocked my wedding ring to get the codeine. In California I was a guest of the Salvation Army and the Union Gospel Mission."

But God had not forgotten "Jonah". While attending Bible

school in Minneapolis, ¹²⁰⁰ he had attended a Revival Center in Minneapolis and had become interested in the work of the Holy Spirit. He found the life and testimony of Spirit-filled people to be vibrant and appealing. In the old Arvin Theater, he had once often sat watching burlesque shows and copying risque jokes to be incorporated into his own acts. Now he sat there, for it had been converted into a Revival Center, and heard the gospel ministered by Spirit-filled people. There, too, God had renewed his call to evangelism, but he had continued to resist.

Now, in California, he remembered, as he had so many times. In his hotel room, ¹³⁰⁰ on Easter Sunday, 1962, God baptized him with the Holy Spirit, with speaking in tongues.

"Even Basil has been different since then." Rod insists that this difference is apparent even in photographs. The personality of the dummy, he asserts, is so influenced by his own changed personality that he feels a difference in the responses the dummy makes. "There are times when the Spirit of God so quickens the reactions of Basil, that I respond to that anointing as to the anointing of a second person."

Basil no longer travels in a suitcase. He and Rod are never separated, ¹⁴⁰⁰ and they witness in season and out. On buses, planes, in all traveling experiences, and in their evangelistic presentations, he and Rod dress identically in clerical garb. Rod is fond of saying, "If God can use a dummy, he can use anybody."

Basil has become the entrance to a number of varied and challenging ministries. Although Rod, as Rod, still suffers from shyness and introversion, as Basil he is open and without fear anytime and anywhere. In restaurants, in street work, while traveling, Basil need but speak and they always have attention.

"Basil learns even faster than I do!" They have appeared in French-speaking Quebec, Canada, and there Basil interprets, in French, the greeting pleasantries for Rod, who speaks only English. They also have a short children's sermon in Spanish, which has been prepared for the day when God will open a door for its use.

In all his ministries, Basil's purpose is not only to present the gospel, but to make it relevant, human, and interesting. The Children's Crusades are an important part of their ministry. Basil faithfully and cheerfully testifies of Christ and the way of salvation. Rod emphasized that their success in these crusades has been greatly augmented by the help of the David Fountain family, who built the booth and props for Basil's inimitable story-telling, and who help with music and management.

Recently Basil has been the means of the beginning of a new and important ministry as "Night Pastor". Rod has been concerned about the prostitutes, the alcoholics, and the street people in downtown Seattle. A woman who says that "Basil is my minister" called to tell of the availability of an office in a central location at a price within reach. Three days after finding these rooms, where counselling and a listening ear could be provided, God brought to them a man with counseling experience, a priest, Larry Rentaria, the "Brother Larry" who was associated with the well-publicized "Skid Road Priest" of San Diego, California.

You can be sure that Basil will have something to say, too. "They will accept things from him that they would never accept from me. So many young people are completely different deep down inside from what they appear to be, and Basil is able to speak to what they are inside." Maybe Rod and Basil are especially equipped

to minister to them for they know well what it is to be two personalities. "You almost have to be 'schizophrenic' to manage two personalities, and yet there must be a sound mind, and one must be in control."

The new life in the Spirit since 1962 has not solved all problems. His home is still divided and he is separated from his three children, but the dissonant mayhem which resulted from refusing to go God's way has dissolved into a blessed mayhem which arises from a busy, satisfying ministry in the will of God.

(1845 words)