

The Feast of God
(*an old essay*)

When those rascals, Bilgewater and the King, sold the runaway Jim back into slavery, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn decided to free him. They knew Jim was locked in a cabin on Silas Phelps' farm. So Tom suggested he and Huck both think up a plan to get him out. Huckleberry recommended they steal the key out of farmer Phelps' britches when he was asleep and open the cabin door. "Wouldn't that plan work?" asked Huck. Tom said of course it would. The problem was: it was too simple. A good plan had to be more complicated than that! So then Tom laid out his plan and Huck had to admit: "It was worth fifteen of mine and would make Jim just as free as mine, and maybe get us all killed besides." Tom, you see, was what you might call your quintessential thinker. For the job to be done right, it had to be made as complex as possible - and had to include all the detail of prior escapes like that of the Count of Monte Cristo.

So that night they approached the cabin to get the lay of the land. Huck noticed a window high up on the cabin wall with only a board nailed over it. "Here's the ticket," says Huck. "This hole's big enough for Jim to get through, if we wrench off the board." Tom shakes his head and says, "That's as easy as playing hooky." Ignoring the window, Tom chose to enter the cabin by way of an attached lean-to. The shed was full of picks and shovels, but Tom felt protocol required they dig their way into the cabin with penknives. He figured that would take them several months and still fall short of some of the greatest escapes in literature, which took years. (Huck worried whether Jim would live that long.)

Tom also needed a saw to cut off the bed leg to which Jim was chained. Huck wondered why they couldn't just lift it and slip the chain off, only to be accused again of having the "infant-schooliest" ways of doing things. Tom actually regretted the cabin wasn't surrounded by a moat, like a castle, and even suggested he and Huck dig one. Though the cabin was only one story high, he felt a rope ladder was in order as well as many other items - and all the while, *Tom knew that Jim was already free! He had been emancipated in the late Widow Douglas' will and they only needed to let Silas Phelps know.* Clearly Tom was a person so interested in the means that the end became irrelevant. One might wonder whether in adult life he graduated to become a member of the committee that designed the tax code. True, achieving some goals in life (like peace or the reunion of Christendom) may not be easy. But how much of the complexity of human problem solving is traceable to a nit-picking that precludes all play of the human heart and imagination.

Way back in the fourth century, churchmen undertook a major project - to explain as clearly as possible the nature of God. Now that's a much bigger challenge than getting Jim out of a cabin. Understanding God will always be a stretch for the human mind. But when you toss into the process the politics and conflicting philosophies of the theologians involved, it's no wonder it took a century of bitter strife to come up with the conclusion that God is One but also Three. There's no denying that the product of their work (the dogma of the Trinity) is a work of intellectual architecture that has left saints spellbound. But thank goodness there was one early churchman around (like Huckleberry Finn)

named John, author of the briefest of New Testament letters, who saw and said quite simply: “God is Love, and whoever abides in Love, abides in God and God in her and him.”