

Dental work

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 26, 2000](#) issue

Four decades ago, when I began to write this column, my assignment was to “lighten up” the magazine by gently poking fun at the foibles and follies of the mainstream and all the other religious streams. But times have changed. Ecumenical manners no longer allow us to take potshots at one another. For a while, the evangelical cohort remained fair game: we could pun on Pentecostals, have fun with fundamentalists and chuckle over conservatives. Now we restrain ourselves and let them and some of their secular allies have their innings deriding mainstream Protestants.

What should one do, then, when religious behavior seems to cry out to be mocked? When, for instance, charismatic magazines and the secular press are full of reports that gold dust is dropping on some Pentecostal leaders while they pray, and gold is filling the tooth cavities of the prayerful.

Kimberly Winston of the *Dallas Morning News* was on the scene when Bob Shattles, an Atlanta Southern Baptist, led rallies and found gold dust falling on his shoulders. Winston quotes respected sociologists of religion who seem to take the phenomenon seriously. Does Winston herself believe in the phenomenon on which she reports so carefully?

Her account reminds me of the line, “Do you believe in infant baptism?” “Believe in it—hell, I’ve seen it.” Winston states that when *Charisma* magazine tested some flecks, “the gold ‘dust’ was found to be plastic, or plastic with a trace of aluminum.” Which shows, I guess, that even the Spirit can work through discount goods.

Winston reports on what skeptics and exposers-of-fraud have to say just as faithfully as she reports on the claims of the gold-dusted faithful and their followers. Forty years ago I would have had a good laugh, or cry, about this. But today the egregiousness threshold has been lowered and the ecumenical etiquette bar has been raised, so one withholds both consent *and* dissent.

Charisma and other magazines show pictures of the prayerful pulling back their cheeks to expose their gums and—yes, I’ve seen it, if only in pictures—display big, rich, gleaming gold fillings. The Spirit, they claim, mysteriously and instantly inserted them. And who am I to question or to laugh?

Let me dig back into the files, however, to report that when he was starting out, televangelist Jimmy Swaggart reacted memorably to the claim that God was filling teeth with gold. Swaggart asked why God would use gold. Wouldn’t he fill teeth with teeth?

So as gold-plastic-aluminum supernaturally falls down and teeth miraculously fill up, we’ll praise God for creating so many wonders—including people who tempt us to smile.