

What if he's a Christian man?

By Robert S. McElvaine. Robert S. McElvaine teaches history at Millsaps College and is the author of "Eve's Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History." Published July 17, 2005

CLINTON, Miss. -- A Birmingham, Ala., jury's surprising acquittal of former HealthSouth CEO Richard Scrushy raises again the question of the relationship between "Christianity" and business. "I want to give all the glory to God," Scrushy proclaimed after the verdict was announced.

How easy is it to persuade a Southern jury composed of many self-identified Christians that a man who talks a great deal about Christianity is a "good man," regardless of how un-Christlike his behavior has been?

As a resident of Clinton, Miss., the town where Bernard Ebbers established his WorldCom headquarters, I have long been familiar with the issue of whether un-Christlike behavior is seen as having any bearing on a person's claim to be a "good Christian." In the wake of Ebbers' conviction in the largest corporate fraud case in American history, the comment most often heard here was: "But Bernie's a good Christian man."

When the fraud was first exposed in June 2002, Ebbers refused to comment to the media but walked to the front of his Southern Baptist church and made a statement in which he said, "I just want you to know you aren't going to church with a crook." He went on to tell his fellow worshipers, with tears in his eyes, "More than anything else, I hope that my witness for Jesus Christ will not be jeopardized." The congregation gave the unrepentant Christian a standing ovation.

Indeed, for some, the willingness to place a higher value on the claim of Christianity than on behavior extends to criminal deeds far worse than corporate fraud. We have been reminded in the past few weeks with the trial in Mississippi of "Preacher" Edgar Ray Killen for the murder of three civil rights workers that the only reason he was not convicted on federal civil rights violation charges in 1967 was that one of the 12 jurors said she could never convict a preacher.

I have slowly come to comprehend the theological beliefs upon which such attitudes are based. Last fall, two of my students independently wrote in their journals that Christianity differs from Hinduism in that Hindus believe in karma and so that what one does in this world determines what happens to him or her after death, but Christians are, in the words of one of the students, not judged "on their actions

in life but rather their belief in Jesus as the son of the one living God." The other student wrote that karma "differs from Christianity in that [Hindus] believe in good works, whereas works are not very important in Christianity."

It is unsurprising that people who believed that Ebbers and Scrusby could bring them huge wealth without effort also are adherents to a religion that might best be called Christianity Lite, which promises eternal salvation in return for nothing more than professing acceptance of Jesus as one's lord and savior. Believe in Jesus and he will instantly save you. Believe in Bernie and he will instantly make you rich.

The brand of Christianity embraced by Bernie Ebbers, Richard Scrusby and those who still see them as "good Christian men" is one that basically says all you need to do is accept Jesus and then you can do whatever the hell you want (unless, of course, your name is Bill Clinton). This perversion of Christianity reduces Jesus to a "get-out-of-jail-free" card--which is just what that good Christian Richard Scrusby got and that other good Christian Bernie Ebbers couldn't get. On the same day that Scrusby was acquitted, federal prosecutors in New York--where just saying "I'm a good Christian" doesn't go as far as it does in Alabama and Mississippi--asked that Ebbers, 63, be sent to jail for the rest of his life. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison.