

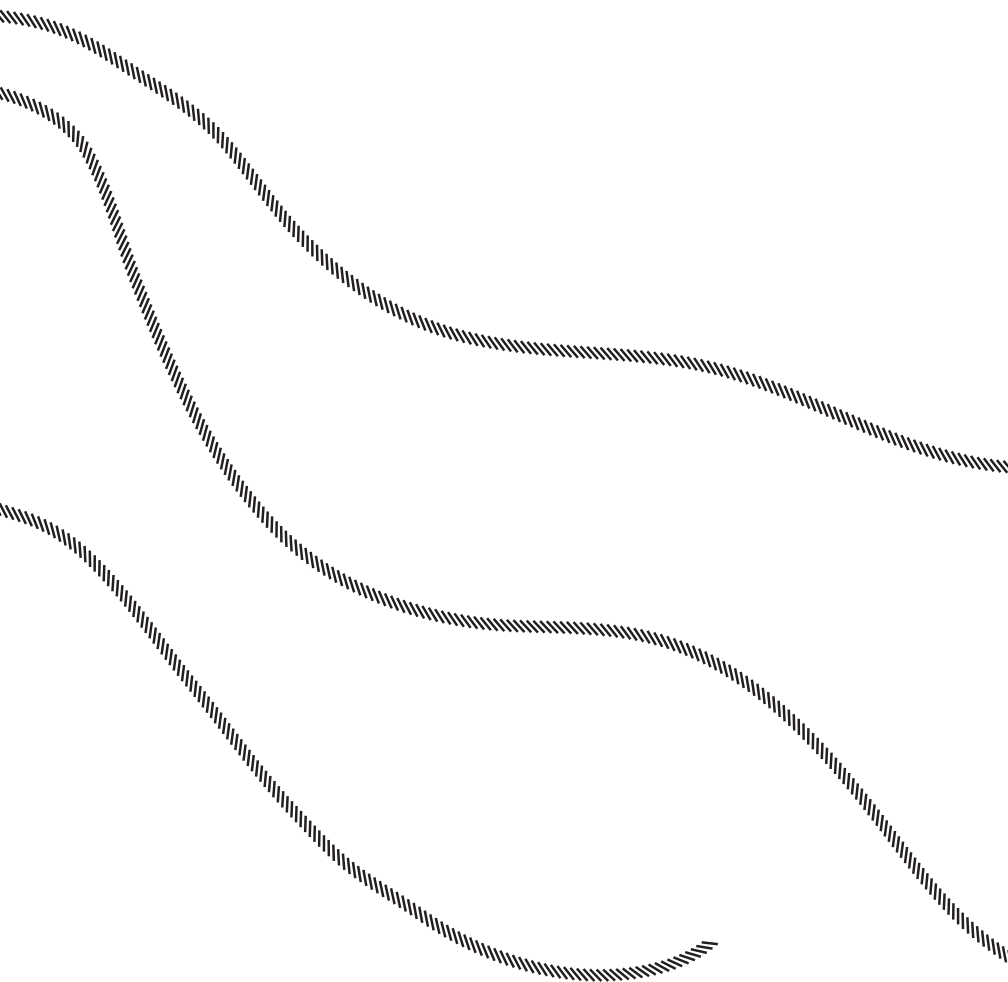
EVANGELLYFISH



A NOVEL

BY DOUGLAS WILSON

Evangellyfish





EVANGELLYFISH

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This book is for
Aaron Rensch,
who did not despair.

This is as good a place as any to insist that all the characters in *Evangellyfish* are fictional, and I made them all up out of my own head. Any resemblance to any real people, living or dead, is their own darn fault. If they quit acting like that, the resemblance would cease immediately and we wouldn't have to worry about it.

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FATHER CONFESSOR

I have only two comforts to live upon; the one is the perfections of Christ; the other is the imperfections of Christians.

Nathaniel Ward, Puritan

AS A CONSCIENTIOUS PASTOR, John regretted having given a fellow clergyman a black eye. Not entirely intentional; more a confluence of events that was larger than everybody involved. But still, hardly what he had learned in seminary.

John Mitchell was a Reformed Baptist pastor, the sort who drank a little, but not in front of folks from other churches, and made sure that nothing more exciting than ping-pong happened in the youth group. When asked what he did for a living, he would sometimes quote *Fletch*—“I’m a shepherd.” He generally had to explain the reference, and it was never as funny as he hoped. When asked what his degrees were in, he would say that his undergrad was in philosophy, and he had an MDiv from Westminster, but that everything he did was “deeply rooted in the blues.” Some people didn’t get that either.

He was a man diligent in his ways and not easily discouraged. His flock was small, in a relatively large Midwestern city, and they got along well with each other. He was not the kind of pastor that any of his flock would have guessed as capable of any kind of ministerial mayhem at all.

He had gone to junior high and high school with Michelle Lester, the wife of his adversary, but had only met Chad Lester twice before the incident. The Rev. Lester, the recipient of said eye-blackening, was the leading light and chief shaman at a mega-church across town. The two congregations, and the two men, were in the same city, but they existed in entirely different realities. Pastor Mitchell had the advantage of his reality being more or less real. Chad Lester, by way of contrast, had some time ago opted out of reading his moral compass with any reference to true north. Having inscribed directions on the edges of your moral compass, and a needle that works, was entirely too confining.

Pastor Mitchell was sitting quietly in his study after dinner, scratching his gray beard. It had been twenty-four hours since—as the diplomats would phrase it—the frank exchange of views had taken place. His knuckles were still throbbing gently. Cherie, his wife's cousin, had panicked at him over the phone, and he had hurried over to her condo, unsure what the problem was. He surprised, and was in turn surprised by, Chad Lester, who was there with Cherie trying to . . . well, it was not at all clear now what he had been trying to do. But Mitchell had *thought* at the time he knew what Lester was trying to do. Words had been

exchanged, including some bits of high-volume exegesis and penetrating theological insight. Chad had stumbled on his way to the door, lurching into Mitchell, and Mitchell had taken that opportunity to unload a punch which connected with a less-than-perfect tenderness. But as punches go, analyzed merely in the interests of dispassionate science and apart from any ethical considerations, it had been exquisite.

Afterward, Chad had straightened up, looked at him with an expression that Mitchell had interpreted as a spiritual rebuke *in excelsis*, and then staggered out the front door, his hand over his eye. The look he directed at Mitchell had actually been a look which simply acknowledged receipt of a complete novelty, but Mitchell had a tender conscience, and under the circumstances couldn't be expected to know that. Mitchell felt, down in his soul he felt, that Lester saw him as a hypocrite. And to have someone like *Lester* look down on him for hypocrisy was just the utter, frozen limit. But it seemed that Lester, if he thought that, would have a *point*, would he not? Gkkk.

So here he was, a day later, playing teeter-totter in his soul, going back and forth about what he ought to do. He really was a humble man, and did not mind seeking forgiveness where necessary. He had done so many times in his life, most recently for calling a young man a baffle-headed young dope during a counseling appointment. But this thing was different. Asking that man's forgiveness would involve *talking* with him, and talking to Lester was about as much fun as fishing in an outhouse. Of course, Mitchell had what a strict recording angel would

have called “ample grounds” for all his reluctance to talk with Lester, but he was still worked over by the whole thing. He did know that his feelings for Lester went somewhat beyond the legal limits of righteous indignation. After what Lester had done to Cherie years before, and to all the other women Mitchell knew about—and then factor in the ones he didn’t know about—the end result was a stew that Mitchell felt to be quite beyond his capacities to eat. But there was e-mail. He could e-mail an apology.

The phone rang, and John stared at it balefully. He glanced at the clock—it was a little before seven, and he had to leave about quarter after for his daughter’s volleyball game. They were playing at some obscure Christian school—he thought it must be a Christian school with a name like Joppa—located on a street he had never heard of before. He had given himself fifteen extra minutes for getting lost and found again, but he did not really have any time to chew up on the phone. It rang again, and John pursed his lips and picked it up, hoping it wasn’t Deidre Hannock. She was a solo-obsessed soprano in their makeshift choir and was always calling with criticisms of the choir director disguised as prayer requests. Mitchell’s mother had always called church choirs the war department. Luther once said that when Satan fell, he fell into the choir loft. Please don’t let it be Deidre . . .

“Mitchells’.”

But the voice was low, nowhere close to soprano, and kind of slurred.

“Hello, Pastor Mitchell?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Chad.” This was followed by what sounded like the *thup thup thup* sound of sobbing.

John Mitchell lurched forward in his chair, and without thinking, pulled open one of the drawers of his desk. *What am I doing?* he thought. *Looking for rubber gloves? A gas mask? Grace? No grace in there. None around here anywhere.*

“What do you want?” he said.

“I . . . I need help,” the voice said.

Instinct and long experience nudged Pastor Mitchell, poking him helpfully on the shoulder. “Have you been drinking?” he asked.

“Sort of,” Chad said. “I have never done anything like this before. I need help. I couldn’t think of anyone else to call.”

“I punched you in the eye. What makes you think I would help you?”

“You’re a pastor. It’s a brotherhood. I really need—” A crash cut Chad off.

“Chad? Lester?”

“Sorry. I just tripped.”

“Where are you?” John asked. He knew he was stalling.

“I am at the Hyatt. Room 306. Just a second.” A couple of moments went by with the sound of a door opening and then closing again. “Yeah, 306. You should come here. I can’t drive.”

“You’re drunk, and you want me to come over there? You don’t want my kind of help, Chad. You really don’t. I can give you all

I got right now. Stop drinking, stop screwing around, repent to your congregation, and resign your pastorate.”

“I don’t usually drink.” Chad was crying again, schlupping all over the phone.

“And read your Bible,” John added. “Start now. I’m sure the Gideons left you one.”

“John, please.”

“Sorry, Chad. My daughter’s got a volleyball game.” He took the sobbing away from his ear and looked at the phone. With one lonely beep, Lester was gone, and the room was silent.

John Mitchell just sat in his chair, trying not to think. Scenes from dozens of bad movies played through his head. Villains dangling from balconies, cliffs, various ledges, villains calling out for help. Then there was John Mitchell, pastor, follower of Christ, busily stepping on their fingers. Hanging up on the tax collectors and prostitutes. He glanced at his watch and stood up, trying to embrace the role of dutiful father—*gotta get to my daughter’s volleyball game*—but it didn’t wash. Joppa was a small school, and Sandy’s coach was almost certainly going to play the B squad. Sandy was varsity. She had told him specifically that he would be wasting his time if he came, but that she’d still love to see him going above and beyond the call of duty. He had perfect liberty to go talk to Lester, and he knew it. He had made all her other games, the ones she had actually played in. He knew he should go see Lester, but deep within the recesses of his rib cage, an insistent voice was loudly maintaining something along the lines of, “I don’t wanna!”

“Before I dipped into this novel, I was told it was a satire. What satire? Reading this made me squirm.”

Mark Galli

Senior Managing Editor, Christianity Today

Rourke spun around and stomped out the door. Bradford followed him out. “Don’t you agree? We really need to do our part to reduce this epidemic of illicit banging in the evangelical world.”

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