

As the summer of '85 approached, the "Walders" youth group from Christ the King Lutheran Church (in Iowa City) geared up for the biennial Luther League Convention being held that year in Denver, Colorado. I didn't catch many details about the event itself, other than former president Jimmy Carter would be giving the keynote address, but at that age, little excuse is needed for a road trip and our destination city was a mere twenty-hour bus ride away! Of course, foremost on our young minds was that this was to be a spiritual journey, and so we looked to the Bible for guidance.

Since Pastor Johnson would not be attending the convention, Richard Tiegs served as our primary counselor. With him we studied God's covenant with the Israelites, where Moses was given the Ten Commandments, and determined it provided a sound model for our pilgrimage to the West. As a "solemn agreement that is binding on all parties," the covenant we drafted included everyone going on the trip, including the adults, Tiegs and the other counselor, Greg Ratner. It will come as no surprise that "Thou shalt not drink alcohol, do drugs, or use tobacco," was at the top of the list. I seem to remember that Ratner was a smoker, but he and everyone else pledged their commitment and then signed the carefully prepared document. Once the trip was under way, if amendments to the covenant were deemed necessary, this was to be done in consultation between counselors and youth leaders, which included the pastor's daughter, Kirsten Johnson, and myself.

We left bright and early from Christ the King in a chartered bus along with a youth group from Washington, Iowa, and except for some unauthorized tobacco chewing and general rowdiness, the ride to Denver went smoothly and without incident. However, the covenant was soon to be severely tested. Within hours of our arrival, older teens were enlisted to purchase six-packs of beer for many in the group. In addition, a few soon emerged from their hotel rooms in sunglasses and a haze of reefer smoke, while others engaged in unnecessary rough-housing and unbridled horseplay. The situation had quickly spun out of control. Perhaps it had been an honest oversight, but nowhere was it written in stone: "Thou shalt attend the convention."

The next day, while some were stranded on the bus, which had broken down in the Rockies, the mayhem back at the hotel continued and so my roommate, Tim Abel, and I decided to get some beer – hey, rules are meant to be broken, right? Everybody else was doing it! I had my doubts, but Tim assured me, "The more you drink, the better it tastes." That sounded good to me – I mean, what better time to learn how to get drunk than on a church trip? Later that night we cracked open those first Budweisers and...*Jesus Christ*, that stuff was bitter! However, with still unflagging faith in Tim's words of wisdom, I kept drinking, hoping for that elusive mellow finish. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door and looking out the peephole, much to our shock and disbelief – it was *Tiegs!* Oh, man, we were so busted! Quickly hiding our contraband, we opened the door. In a complete deadpan voice, Richard looked straight at me and said, "I'd like a word with you outside."

As the two of us walked into the hallway, I prepared to confess my sins and ask for forgiveness. But, when we stopped just around the corner, Richard had a confession of his own: "Jimmy, I've been doing a lot of thinking...wondering why I'm here, and I've come to ask you if we can revise the covenant..." He paused, and with a hint of desperation in his voice said, "*I really need a drink.*" Now, here was a man of his word, following the exact protocol as had been spelled out in the covenant. He added, "Of course, this would only affect counselors and not any from the youth group." Here I was, beer on my breath and two sheets to the wind, telling Richard he had my blessing to go ahead with the amendment – I mean, the irony was almost as bitter as the King of Beers I'd been choking down!

In the remaining days of the convention, we did eventually meet some kids from a few other youth groups, investigated the Sharper Image store at a nearby mall, and I believe most of us got out of bed in time to hear President Carter speak at 3pm on Saturday afternoon. But, after what seemed to be a much longer ride back to Iowa, when we pulled in to Christ the King, the sour look on Richard Tiegs' face as he stepped off the bus gave the anxiously awaiting parents an indication that not all had gone well: indeed, the covenant, as well as his spirit, had been broken.