The Alpha and the Omega

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NOTHING shows on the television screen but a large and colorful stage curtain. A mild trumpet fanfare is heard and a voice announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, Orson Bean!" The curtain parts and out leaps a middle-aged man with a tidy beard, a white silk in his jacket's breast pocket, and a bow tie over his fancy turtleneck sweater.

As soon as I see him I wonder, "What about Garry Moore, the regular host, the man who resurrected the bow tie, the man who by sheer personal persistence made the bow tie acceptable to the masses, the man without whose efforts Orson Bean could not possibly be standing there on national television wearing a bow tie?"

As if to answer my question, Orson Bean begins to talk. "Ladies and gentlebeans, Garry Moore is unable to host the show tonight. It seems he is suffering from an acute identity crisis. He received a letter yesterday from a woman in Kansas troubled by the number of o's in Garry's last name. She asked how it could be that if the number of o's in his last name was less, then it would be more. Garry brooded over this mystical paradox all morning. Finally, letter in hand, he took a stroll through the garden and ended up at the post office where he forgave the befuddled postmaster for allowing such a letter to be delivered. But then, in an abrupt change of mood, he riddled the out-of-state mail slot with bullets from a forty-five caliber automatic handgun. Afterwards he voluntarily entered a private hospital, under an assumed name, where, I'm told, he is responding well to sedation, psychotherapy, and hot fudge sundaes. Of course, he will be unable to host To Tell The Truth for a few days."

"Well, that's that," he adds with finality, wringing his hands. "It looks like a far-out show tonight, though, even without Garry. Tonight's guest has one of the most interesting and controversial stories since we heard from
the checker grandmaster of Peasporridge Hot, Arkansas, who never made a move unless he found a passage in the New Testament to directly support and justify it.

“Our guest speaks of similar spiritual ties connecting his behavior with passages from the New Testament. He claims to have God-given power with which he has restored sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and speech to the dumb, though he has been criticized for offering the latter far too freely to politicians and sportscasters.

“Since I was called as a last-minute replacement for Garry, I have not yet met this gentleman, and I will be wondering along with the panel and the rest of you just who is this man when our team of challengers comes out. First we must meet our panel. And before that, I must find out what my cue-man’s gymnastics are all about.” Orson Bean whispers a hushed question to a man out of view of the cameras. “What is it, for Christ’s sake? . . . Oh.”

Orson Bean turns his back to the camera and announces over his shoulder, “But first, this important message.” He stands there smiling foolishly at the camera until the picture breaks to the inside of a church.

A collection plate is being passed up and down the rows of pews. Coins and bills are contributed by members of the congregation. Attention is shifted to the pulpit where a white-robed priest is speaking. “. . . and, aye, of course, ’tis more the blessed to be givin’ than that ye’d be receivin’. ’Cause remembrin’, we should be, that ’twas our Saviour who was givin’ most of all when He died on the cross, for the sins of me and for you, ’twas. But, even givin’ so much of Himself, still, ye must be remembrin’, that Jesus saves . . .’” Suddenly the screen shows the teller’s window of a bank. A bespectacled, conservatively attired bank clerk, who is counting money out of a collection plate, looks up. He is the same man, the priest from the church, and he finishes the priest’s sentence, but with no trace of an accent, “. . . at Futures Secure Savings and Trust of Our Holy Lady National Bank of Burbank, California. Can you do less? Remember our motto, ‘Jesus saves—so should you.’” A bass voice booms, “Thank you.” The teller casts his eyes heavenward and responds,
"Don’t mention it." He continues to count money from the collection plate, and a new voice, feminine and seductive, announces, "This message was brought to you by the California Chapter of Churchmen and Bankers—People United for Trust and Savings, who would remind you to think about the inscription before you spend that next coin, ‘In God we trust; in banks we save.’"

The screen then flashes the station’s call letters while a voice encourages all to keep watching that station for the best in entertaining programming, news, weather, and sports, and up-to-the-minute coverage of any important events on the local or national scene.

The call letters disappear, and I am anxious to see what’s going to happen on To Tell The Truth, but another commercial comes on. "Hi, folks," begins a stout Negro woman with a heavy voice. "I’m Pearl Bailey. You probably know that I have been ordained the ‘ambassador of love’. Well, this is an official message of love, then, because, honey, you’re going to love this special home recording offer that K-TEL has made available to you. That’s right, folks, K-TEL has done it again. They have put together an exceptional show for home viewing and listening. Included in this offer, called ‘Superstars of Yesteryear’, are Hal Holbrook’s portrayal of ‘Mark Twain, Tonight’, James Whitmore’s hilarious ‘Will Rogers’ USA’, William Shattner’s penetrating ‘Jesus Christ: Was He the Alpha and the Omega Or Is He Just Greek to Me?’, and other famous historical personalities all portrayed by your favorite celebrities. This wonderful treasure can be yours to enjoy right in your own home. It is offered not at $30, not at $25, not at $20, but at the low, low price of just $18.75. And, if you order yours this week, we will include at no extra charge..."

The screen becomes blank, and then the words "Important Bulletin" appear. Walter Cronkite’s voice is heard saying, "This is Harry Reasoner. There are severe weather watches out for much of southern California. A large storm front has been located by radar. It is developing eighty miles south and west of the LA area,
and it is advancing on the southern California coast at a rapid but undetermined rate. I repeat, this is a severe weather watch. It is not an alert or a warning or a crisis or a catastrophe... yet. It is still only a watch. However, rumors are afoot that forecasters at half-a-dozen prominent southern California television stations have abandoned their homes and fled with their families to the Sierra Nevadas. Also, a comment from a usually reliable fisherman in the area was, ‘Sweet Jesus! Looks like it’s going to be a big mother!’ It is, nonetheless, still only a watch, though. Stay tuned to this channel for progressive details on this interesting weather condition. We return you to the show in progress.”

Apparently the panelists had already been introduced during the break, for the screen shows all four panel members, Peggy Cass, Allen Ludden, Betty White, and Bill Cullen, chuckling good-naturedly over who-knows-what, presumably something witty that Orson Bean has said. The women sparkle as they laugh, the bright studio lights playing off their jewelry, sequins, and facial wrinkles. They wear tasteful evening gowns as if they were at a fashionable party instead of a television game show. The men wear ordinary suits and pastel shirts. Looking closely, I can almost decipher the words printed on Allen Ludden’s t-shirt which he wears underneath his lime shirt underneath his ordinary suit. It says “MATCH ME,” but his broad tie might be covering up some letters so I can’t be sure.

Orson Bean speaks, “I’ve already introduced the guests, so let’s bring out our team of challengers now.”

Three men walk to the center of the stage and stop, each in front of one of the large numbers, “one,” “two,” and “three.” They turn in unison to face the camera. A commanding voice asks the big question, “What is your name, please?” The camera is on Number One. “My name is Jesus Christ.”

The camera focuses on Number Two. “My name is Jesus Christ.”

And on Number Three. “My name is Jesus Christ.”
Orson Bean continues, "Panel, these three men all claim to be Jesus Christ, quite a remarkable man. He claims to be the Son of God, the personal saviour of everyone in the world, and a miracle worker extraordinaire. Please open your first envelopes and follow along as I read the affidavit.

"For my story to be complete it should properly begin, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," and would continue with all of the books of what you call the Holy Bible. With time such a confining restriction, I will tell only a few of the more important and interesting details of my life.

'I was born almost two thousand years ago, in the year zero by your present calendar. My mother was a woman named Mary, but her husband, Joseph, was not my Father.' I notice a few snickers from the studio audience.

'My Father is the power you call God. I am properly called, then, Son of God. I have no brothers or sisters in the biological sense, though many claim to be my spiritual brothers.

'When I was a young man I tried to live a model life, one for all to emulate. I had no vices. I didn’t drink, I didn’t smoke, I never forced myself on Gentile women. I spread my message of love wherever I went. I loved everyone, even my enemies; I tried to teach others to do the same. I also preached the joy of forgiveness. And I encouraged my fellow man to tip generously.

'My Father is all-powerful, and to demonstrate this I performed many miracles while on earth. I fed five thousand people with two fish and five barley loaves. I changed water into wine. I brought a dead boy back to life. I cured the lame. I even filled out my own 1040 long forms.

'For those who heeded my word and trusted me as their Saviour I promised eternal life, not to mention shaves and haircuts at popular prices. All of their needs would be taken care of forever.

'Many people believed in me and did trust me as their personal saviour. But others did not. It was some of those others who eventually mocked me, slandered me,
crucified me, and parted my hair on the wrong side. I was
whipped and hung on the cross with nails driven through
my hands. I died. For two and a half days I lay buried in a
tomb in Galilee. The third day I performed my greatest
miracle. I conquered death and the devil by arising from
the dead. Then I showed myself to others on earth for forty
days and nights and promised to return one day. I hope the
faithful were ever expectant, but I hope, too, they had
sense enough not to hold their breath.

‘Since I left earth my Father and I have been making
preparations in Heaven for the day when I would return to
earth to reunite all believing brothers with me and the
Father in Heaven. Well, my appearance on To Tell The
Truth marks that promised return, and now it only
remains for me to separate the grain from the chaff, if I
may speak figuratively, and gather up all who know me
and take them back to my Father who art in Heaven.
There we will all live the idyllic life that was meant for
gods and angels.

Signed,
Jesus Christ.’”

The three Jesus Christs shuffle over to their seats
behind a long desk which faces the long desk of the panel.
The leftmost Christ is Number One. He has a reddish-
brown beard and matching long, wavy hair. It is slightly
unkempt. He has a serene look with soft, brown, loving
eyes and a calm, unwrinkled face. His hands appear soft
with long, delicate fingers. They are folded and lie in-
terlocked before him on the desk. His loose-fitting toga
conceals the real shape of his body. Expecting to see
worn-out sandals on his feet, I am surprised to see well-
polished wingtips instead. Those glossy shoes not-
withstanding, he would look exactly like a picture of
Christ I saw on a calendar at my grandmother’s house if it
weren’t for one small detail. Jesus Christ Number One
wears black plastic lensless glasses with false eyebrows,
nose, and moustache attached.

Number Two is a handsome, modern-looking young
man dressed as a priest. With thick, black hair, a quick
smile, and sparkling eyes, he appears bright and alert. He is wearing a stylish green sport coat and slacks with a green clerical shirt and a green and white paisley clerical collar. He has a broad smile as he leans back in his chair. I notice his hands are folded, too, but they are hidden behind his smiling head which they support.

The man on the right end of the desk, Number Three, is older and fat. He wears a red and black sport coat over a red turtleneck sweater. He is thumbing through a Gideon Bible which he has carried to his seat with him. A silver cross hangs from a chain around his neck. It isn’t a Latin cross, the usual symbol of Christianity, but rather is a Maltese cross. His bald head is coiffed by a beanie skullcap with the word “LUTHER” printed on it.

Orson Bean reappears. “I think everyone knows how the game is played; after questions and answers, the panel votes and the guests receive fifty dollars for each incorrect vote or five hundred dollars for all four votes incorrect. Peggy Cass, will you please begin the questioning?”

“Thank you, Orson. Number Two, I am so excited and amazed that you could actually be the saviour of the world; I really expected somebody much taller. I admire your work and very much appreciate what you have tried to do. What made you decide to appear on To Tell The Truth?”

“First of all, thank you for your expression of support; a little appreciation goes a long way in helping my work. I decided, after a conference with my Father who art in Heaven and a couple of angels and archangels, that I should come to the country with the best media, to guarantee optimal exposure. It had to be the US of A, of course. We didn’t want to spend holy capital for air time so we looked around for the different kinds of freebie exposure we might get. We settled on the idea of a game show for our, well, my, appearance. The To Tell The Truth format seemed most appropriate for telling my story, and there is always the possibility of picking up a little prize money, too. That, coupled with To Tell The Truth’s con-
sistently good Nielsen ratings over a lengthy history made it an easy decision to make."

"Thank you," says a breathy, excited Peggy Cass. "If only Garry were here now, he'd be so glad to hear such a fine endorsement of his show. Okay, Number Three, that's an interesting skullcap; I'll bet it helps keep your head warm. You know, my boyfriend is getting quite bald. I should get him one of those, except he isn't religious at all. Anyway, Number Three, have you any new message you'd like to try out on mankind?"

"Yes, I do. Man should not be overly concerned about his destiny. Fret not over your sins; you can always repent tomorrow. Remember, I will take care of you. Besides, 'Que sera, sera.'"

"Well, that's very comforting. Maybe that's why we call you the Good Shepherd." They smile warmly at each other.

A buzzer sounds, indicating it is the next panelist's turn to question the challengers. "Please continue, Allen Ludden," directs Orson Bean.

"Thank you, Orson. I'd like to follow up on an answer to a question Peggy asked which has piqued my curiosity. Just what is the difference between an angel and an archangel?"

"Did you want me to answer that?"

"Forgive me, Orson. How about Mr. Christ Number One—no, Number Two?"

Number Two tugs on his clerical collar as he clears his throat. "Well, it's simple, really," he begins, smiling and gesturing. "Every archangel is an angel, but not every angel is an archangel. Webster says an archangel is a chief angel, one of special rank, but the effective difference for our purposes is that archangels have paid their dues for the current millennium and angels have not."

"Thank you, Number Two. That makes sense, and dollars, too, I suppose. Mr. Christ Number One, I've read in the Bible that when you were confronted with the charges against you, for which you were eventually convicted and crucified, that you made no defense, that
you actually said nothing at all, and that you didn’t even retain an attorney for your defense. And yet, a story appeared recently in National Enquirer stating that evidence has been revealed in the form of heretofore undiscovered ancient scrolls which record some of your conversations of that day. The article states that when Pontius Pilate asked the crowd if they wouldn’t like to see you set free, they responded unanimously, “Give us Barrabas.” It adds that you couldn’t stand it and then begged Pilate to go for two out of three. How do you reconcile this apparent shift in attitude, from stoic reticence to last-minute grovelling?”

Jesus Christ Number One says nothing, but his eyes glare as if betrayed.

Ludden persists. “Well?”

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“Betty White, go ahead, please,” prompts Orson Bean.

“Thank you. I think we can all disregard that last answer. I’d like to start a new line of questioning. Number Three, we hear some pretty amazing things about your Father. Is it true that he created the entire universe in just seven days?”

“Six, but who counts?”

“Six, hmmm, amazing. Is that correct, Number Two?”

“Cross my heart.”

“Mr. Christ Number One?”

“You say that it is.”

“Forget it. Okay, Number Three, if your father created everything in the universe in just six days, how come it takes him almost twenty centuries to prepare Heaven for the return of the believers?”

“Because I helped him. No, seriously, I’m glad you asked that. Keep in mind that the earth and even the whole of the physical universe was never intended to last forever. Entropy and all that, you know.” He spins his beanie on the tip of his finger, and it quickly comes to a stop. “You see!” he exclaims, indicating his halted beanie. “Everything stops, eventually. For the universe,
my father had figured on a few thousand billion years, tops. Even with frequent check-ups. But preparing for eternity is another matter. Do you have any idea how long eternity is?"

Betty White shakes her head.

"Eternity is something like how long it seems to take to get through a long line in a grocery store when you’re on your way to pick up a date and all you want is a pack of breath mints and your car is double-parked in a well-polic ed towaway zone. Anyhow, the law of diminishing returns applies. Basically, it’s like this: As Father and I prepared for everyone’s needs for a period of time which continually grows, unto infinity in duration, it became increasingly difficult. With the same amount of effort that we put into preparing Heaven for the first, say, billion trillion years, we can prepare for only an additional seven hundred and fifty thousand million trillion years beyond that. So it would take one-third more work to get ready for the second billion trillion years than it did for the first billion trillion years. And so on. Understand?"

Betty White shakes her head.

"Well, think of it in terms of how much ambrosia and how many harp strings it would take to last a person forever. Then, multiply that by the total number of faithful believers who ever lived. You see, it’s like trying to . . ."

BUZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

"Bill Cullen, you may now conclude the questioning."

"Thank you, Orson." Bill Cullen sucks on the eraser of his pencil as he examines something he has just written.

"Wow! Number Two, does your estimate of the work involved in preparing Heaven for eternity correspond with Number Three’s?"

"I’m afraid so."

"But your Father is all-powerful, Number Two. It says so in your affidavit."

"Yes, well, let me make a couple of points. True, my Father is all-powerful, but he’s getting old—he’s been around since before time itself—and he gets tired, the work in Heaven being so demanding. We had periodic
Sketch

coffee breaks, but still found it necessary to take off every other Tuesday to go to a ball game or something. Indeed, it is hard to exaggerate when talking about Father’s power, but to say everything is already taken care of for those entering Heaven is just a little misleading. True, food, clothing, and shelter are already arranged for everyone forever, but my Father found that even with my help there was no way to fix unpaid parking tickets and overdue book fines. So, when a person enters Heaven he might be embarrassed to find that all outstanding library debts double upon admission to Heaven and continue accruing at the usual rate until they are paid. I’m sorry, but the Interstate Library Congress has a powerful lobby group up there.’’

‘‘Hmmm. Okay, fine. But you just said up there. Is Heaven up?’’

BUZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

‘‘Well, panel, I’m afraid that is all of the questions and answers we have time for. Please consider the answers carefully, and then mark your ballot for the World’s Saviour of your choice, Jesus Christ Number One, Number Two, or Number Three. . . . Are you all ready now? Good.

‘‘Peggy Cass, who did you vote for?’’

Bill Cullen starts to say something, but, realizing he is out of turn, stops.

Peggy Cass speaks. ‘‘I couldn’t argue with ‘Que, sera, sera,’ I voted for Number Three.’’ She places a card in front of her on which is a hand-drawn ‘three’. An ‘x’ lights up on the light board in front of Number Two. Nobody seems to notice.

‘‘Allen?’’ Orson Bean asks Allen Ludden.

‘‘Well, Jesus Christ Number One couldn’t answer the simple question I asked him, and Number Three’s explanation of preparing Heaven for eternity was too well rehearsed. So I voted for Number Two.’’ So saying he places a ballot with a ‘two’ lettered on it in front of him. ‘‘Besides, he knew the difference between an angel and an archangel.’’ And an ‘x’ lights up on Number Three’s board. Again nobody seems to notice.
"'Betty.' Orson Bean alerts Betty White that she may now vote.

"Allen, honky-uh, Honey, I thought Number Three gave a perfectly splendid answer about the work involved in preparing Heaven for eternity." She holds up a card with a 'three' on it and announces, "So I voted for Number Three."

A second 'x' lights up on Number Two's panel, and Allen Ludden speaks to his wife, "But you didn’t understand a word of it."

"Yes, but, Honey, it sounded like HE knew what he was talking about."

"I'll talk to you later, Dear."

Orson Bean gently breaks them up by asking, "Bill, who did you vote for?"

"At first I felt I might have to disqualify myself because I thought I knew Christ once. In junior high school, I think it was. But I guess I was wrong, I have never met him. I didn’t like Mr. Christ Number One’s attitude, and Number Three reminds me of the janitor of my apartment building. Number Two spoke like the son of an important man; I voted for him."

A second 'x' lights up on Number Three’s panel. Nobody notices the lights.

"Well, panel, the votes are all in and split evenly between two of the challengers. I’m dying to meet Christ, myself. Let’s see how well our usually astute panel did. Will the real Jesus Christ, self-proclaimed saviour of humanity, please stand up?"

Christ Number One looks at Number Two and Number Three. Number Two nods his head and begins to rise. Number Three looks at Number Two who is no longer pretending to get up. He looks at Number One who has now arisen. There is thunderous applause from the studio audience, as there always is whether or not the panel has been stumped. Jesus Christ Number One sits again.

"Congratulations, Jesus Christ, you fooled our entire panel, sort of a modest miracle in itself. I must admit that I, myself, didn’t know it was you, either. Number Two, you received two votes; what is your real name, and what
do you really do?”

“My name is Rich Aaron Croesus, Jr., and I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles County Chapter of the Southern California District of Futures Secure Trust and Savings, one of the sponsors of To Tell The Truth.” There is more applause.

“Thank you, Mr. Croesus. You’re quite a distinguished imposter, and you played the game very well. And, Number Three, you also collected two votes and played the game well. What is your real name and what do you really do?”

“My name is Quentin Peabody III, and I am the Custodial Maintenance Supervisor and Head of the Leasee Concerns Bureau of the Cunningham Terrace Hotel and Motor Inn of Beverly Hills. In other words, the janitor of Bill’s apartment building.” With that, Mr. Peabody tips his beanie to Bill Cullen who, in turn, claps and nods approvingly.

“Well, there you have it, four incorrect votes. So, that means $500 to split among our team of challengers. It’s not often that our expert panel is blanked. Imposters, this must be your day.

“So, Mr. Christ, here you are, returned almost two thousand years after your crucifixion and nobody knows you—including me—how do you feel? Would you like to tell us the truth, what you have planned for the world?”

“I sure would, Orson.” Jesus Christ folds his hands and bows his head onto the desk. His head yet bowed, he rubs his folded hands through his brown-red hair, and its color changes to white right before my eyes. As he raises his head he removes his plastic glasses with the false moustache, nose, and eyebrows attached. Without his disguise he looks almost familiar. But his face has changed dramatically; his eyes are wild now. He rises, without standing, and he remains suspended in midair over the desk. The camera closes in on his face and he appears dynamic and almost mad. His beard and hair look like snow-white wool. His whole head glows as if the sun shone from within. His eyes are ablaze and, when he
speaks, his voice is like the sound of much water running down a tub drain.

Looking first to Orson Bean and then around the stage and then into the camera, Jesus Christ begins, "My friend Orson, fellow imposters, panelists, studio audience, and those watching on your sets at home, there's going to be a scene like never before and it's happening soon. Brace yourselves; it's not all pleasant. Here goes:

"Just before sunset, the sun is going to turn black and start to shrink. The earth will become very cold and people everywhere will start fires and write letters to the power companies. It will be so cold that people will burn anything and everything to stay warm. They will be so desperate they will burn their homes and some will even burn old copies of National Geographic. Except right here in southern California, where none will be burning anything because they will be under water. A large Pacific front which is already advancing on the coast will deliver a gigantic wall of sea which will flood half the state. All unrepentent nonbelievers will drown.

"As the earth cools, because of the absence of radiation from the sun, it will contract and great fissures and earthquakes will tear the surface of the earth. Some of the larger ones will swallow up Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., and most of New York City.

"One third of the heavenly bodies will crash to earth, starting more fires, crushing buildings, and opening new craters in the earth. 'Stars Fell on Alabama' will be more than a Golden Oldie; it'll be a way of life, and death. More buildings will crumble from the quakes. People will burn from the fires. Others will freeze from the cold.

"The moon will turn to blood. Rivers will also turn to blood and then will form immense scabs, destroying any possibility of continued inland shipping. Vampire bats will feast on the rivers, where they will reproduce spontaneously. They will be legion, and those people who don't drown, burn, freeze, or get swallowed up by the earth, are likely to contract rabies from the bats.

"A bottomless pit will form in southwest Iowa and
nobody will notice the improvement. Out of the hole will spring hordes of locusts. Each will have a chitinous body armored like a Sherman tank, the head of a lion, the teeth of a beaver, and the appetite of a pot freak. They are going to ravage the corn and soybean crop of the entire mid-west, though we have asked them to spare some popcorn for the righteous.

"There is more, but it does not get better. Shall I go on?"

Jesus Christ looks first to Orson Bean whose quick nod belies the terror in his eyes. The panel is all dumbstruck. Orson Bean keeps muttering, "Flooded, flooded, flooded." Then he makes an excruciating revelation, "This is very bad news for a man who just made a down payment on a new home in Huntington Beach." He puts his head in his hands and begins to weep profusely.

"You may as well continue," suggests Bill Cullen. "What could be worse than what we've heard?"

At that Jesus Christ continues. "After the locusts destroy the foodstuffs for the nation, thousands of great hairy beasts will clamber out of the pit. They will each have the body of a bear, the legs and neck of a giraffe, the feet of a lion, the face of your mother-in-law, and breath like the neighbor's dog. They will be armed with address lists of country club members, whose houses they will visit. They will sell a copy of Darwin's *Origin of Species* at each house, after which they will eat the shrubs. Before leaving they will deposit excreta in large conspicuous piles on the manicured front lawn."

Betty White and Peggy Cass grimace sickly.

"Finally, a band of mariachis with twelve heads and ten horns will be turned loose to roam from coast to coast and border to border playing Spanish love songs off key. Their strains will be penetrating and inescapable."

Allen Ludden winces and cups sympathetic hands over his ears. "That sounds terrifying, awful. If it's true, how do you know that good people won't be destroyed with the bad?"
"We give them earplugs."

"But how do you know who to give them to? How do you tell the saints from the sinners?"

"Remember, I am the Alpha and the Omega. I will instruct all my believers to take a burned stick and draw the letters 'alpha' and 'omega' on their foreheads in charcoal. I will send seven seals to find the holy ones and to kiss the foreheads of all those who have an 'alpha' and 'omega' printed there. Then winged angels will come look for the believers and will deliver all those faithful whose foreheads have letters kissed by a seal. They will fly them to the alfalfa refining plant in Ogallala, Nebraska, where a fortress will be erected by other angels of the Lord. Secure there, we will munch our popcorn as we unhappily watch the slow and painful destruction of the earth. Well, that's that." He is finished.

Betty White releases a slow and painful sigh. "I guess we don't need these anymore," she says. As she tears at her hair, a wig comes off and a tightly curled head of black hair is revealed. She grabs her forehead and pulls off her face. Where there had been a sad faced Betty White, now sits a sad faced Nipsey Russell holding a wig and mask. The other three panelists respond simultaneously and identically by shedding their own wigs and masks. Peggy Cass, Allen Ludden, and Bill Cullen reveal themselves to be Kitty Carlisle, Gene Raeburn, and Peggy Cass, respectively.

Kitty Carlisle says as dignifiedly as possible, "It was fun while it lasted. I guess we all knew it would end someday."

Orson Bean is still crying and mumbling about his home.

Christ seems to falter from his perch. While trying to regain his balance his toga slips from his shoulders unmasking a grey suit with a bow tie at the neck. He pitches forward and wires are seen for the first time coming from a harness on his back. He is lowered to the floor. With fire in his eyes, he squirms on his belly as he tears off his toga
and struggles to undo himself from the wires.

Finally free from the harness and standing now, he speaks. "I guess everyone may as well know." Jesus Christ pulls off his beard and then a wig disclosing a butch haircut over the face of Garry Moore.

"Yes, I, Garry Moore, am really Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour of the World, and vice versa. I’m sorry I had to reveal myself this way, Orson. The earth will perish. Everyone had to know. All is fulfilled. The time is now.

"All of my sheep out there, today is ours. We will be with the Father. Eternity is today and forever . . ."

Three brisk men in white lab coats are approaching Garry Moore. They escort him offstage, and the camera returns to Orson Bean. He is shaking, but appears relieved. He reaches for his breast pocket to pull out his handkerchief. It is a fake one from Happy Day Cleaners. Not noticing it, he smudges tears and sweat all over his face with the little cardboard square that the dummy silk corner is sown to.

The panel appears relieved, too, and the members help each other replace their masks and wigs. Nipsey Russell becomes Betty White once more. Kitty Carlisle becomes Peggy Cass. Gene Raeburn becomes Allen Ludden. Peggy Cass becomes Bill Cullen. After making final touches on their disguises, they look just as they did before Jesus Christ became Garry Moore.

Bill Cullen says, "I knew all along it wasn’t really Number One." The rest of the panel choruses, "Me, too," and "Of course."

Orson Bean seems to have regained his composure enough to close the show, though his voice wavers slightly as he says, "I’m not sure what is happening tonight, but I guess that’s show biz. Anyway, we thank our panelists, as usual, all of our imposters, you in the studio audience, and you at home for a wonderful show tonight.

"This has been a Mark Godson-Bill Toodman, I-I mean a Mark Goodson-Bill Todman Production. Be sure
to tune in again next week, and, until then, drive safely, God bless, and don’t you forget To Tell The Truth.”

“Far-out,” I say aloud as I click off the set. With the television quiet I can now hear what sounds like water sloshing around in my bathtub. “Jesus Christ! If that damn drain is backing up again . . .” I start for the telephone, but suddenly realize that all is hopeless; there on the floor I notice the headline of this morning’s paper: California Plumbers Strike Today.

“Well, that’s that.”