

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2015

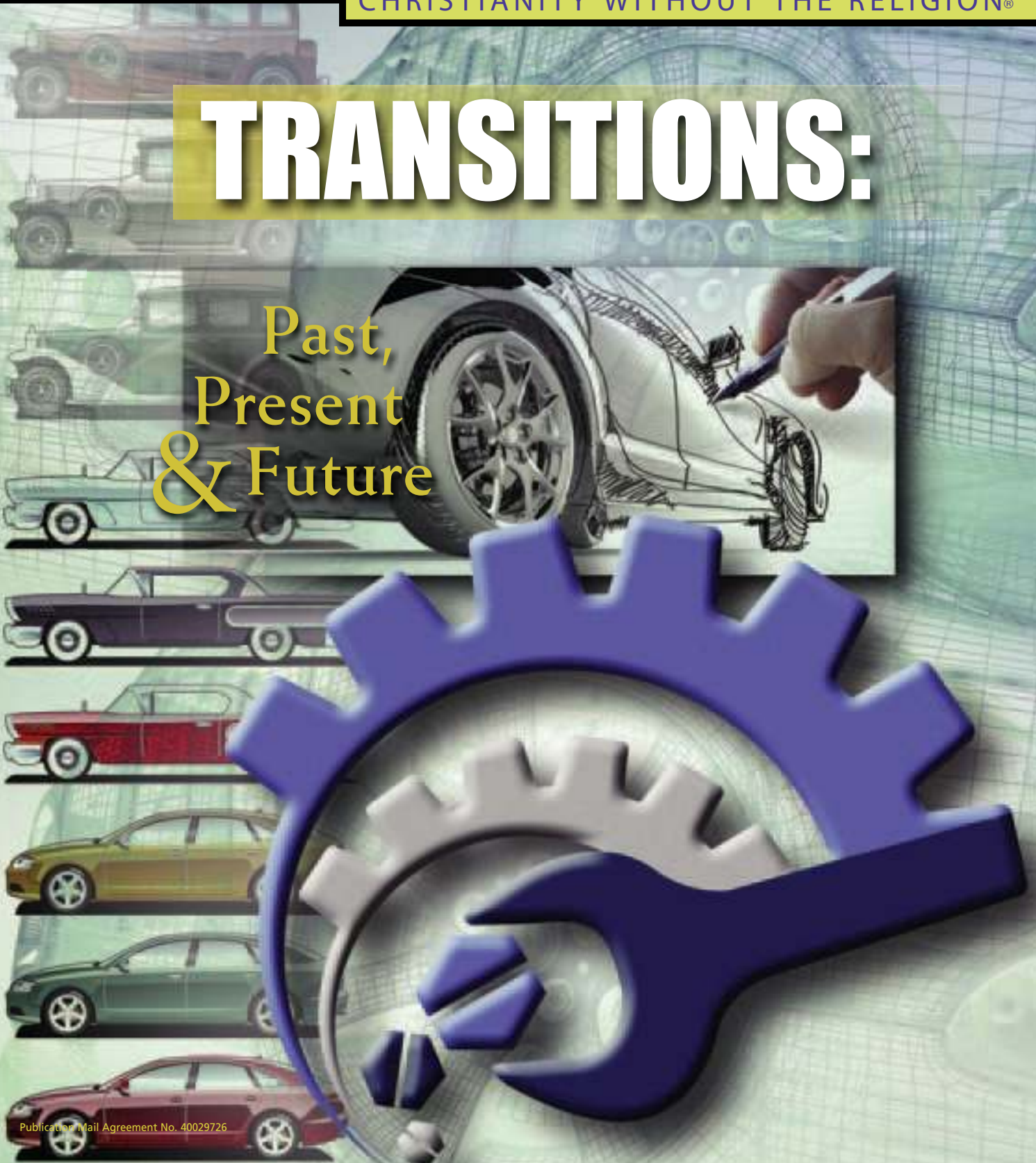
PLAIN TRUTH[®]

www.ptm.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

TRANSITIONS:

Past,
Present
& Future



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

Features

- 8** Jesus—Superior and Supreme
- 13** Gateway to the Gospels: Matthew
- 19** Grace and Response: First Things First
- 23** Why We Believe What We Believe



Departments

- 16** He Asked Me to Remind You *Steve Brown*
- 22** Tender Mercies *Ruth A. Tucker*
- 17** Commentary *Greg Albrecht*
- 30** Living Room *Monte Wolverton*



Cover Story **4**

Here at CWR/PTM, we spent much of last year on the assembly-line, preparing our 2015 models. We made several modifications and improvements, which we believe you will enjoy, and which will help us more efficiently reach a worldwide audience with *Christianity Without the Religion*.

COVER IMAGE BY MARV WEGNER—PTM

Quotes & Connections

“Indoctrination does not produce belief... Eventually it will emerge in full-on revolt.” *Why We Believe What We Believe* (pg. 23), Brad Jersak

“Grace is prior to and unconditioned by human response.” *Grace and Response: A Matter of Order* (pg. 19), Martin Davis

“You never know how much you really believe something until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you.” C.S. Lewis

“Some things have to be believed to be seen.” Madeline L’Engle

“Faith is not the belief that God will do what you want. It is the belief that God will do what is right.” Max Lucado

“A belief which leaves no place for doubt is not a belief, it is a superstition.” Jose Bergamin



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WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING

I enjoyed the new book *Chasing 120*, by Monte Wolverton. It was interesting, and it seemed more like truth than fiction. I guess I'm chasing 100—I'm 96.

Illinois

I appreciate Greg's responses to my questions. His responses give me much food for thought. I always look forward to his input and perspective that is never based on some off-the-wall, esoteric ideology, nor is it ever laced with run-of-the-mill, garden-variety "church speak," but it is deeply grounded in Christ-centered, grace based thinking and teaching of the highest order, based on Scripture. I have always thoroughly enjoyed this profound characteristic and gift that only Christ could have given Greg.

New York

My wife and I have been faithfully listening to your *CWRa* sermons for a few years now. My relationship with organized religion goes back 42 years, since I was age twenty. I started with a tremendous experience of the grace and unconditional love of God. Things were going well until I got "religious" and spent four years in the charismatic movement and became very legalistic.

After a brief stint with Jehovah's Witnesses, I realized my grave error and left. The next 20 years were the darkest of my whole life, fearing God had cut me off. I lived in constant fear and eventually turned to drugs and alcohol to numb the fear and pain. Finally I had to force myself to try and seek God again.

Then two things happened: I became aware of Steve McVey's books and ministry and then I "met" you through the video *Called to Be Free*. My wife and I were attending a little Baptist church at that time and we showed the video to our pastor who agreed to let us play the video before the whole congregation, but only after the pastor gave a big disclaimer on how the documentary was misleading on the subject of tithing.

After studying the subject in depth myself I became convinced that tithing was nowhere taught as a New Testament requirement. We resigned our membership after a few months, convinced that the Baptist church (and most churches) are still operating under Old Covenant principles while calling it the New Covenant. After this we began to really explore and question everything we had been taught by Christendom. We thank God for PTM!

Idaho

I am constantly amazed at the Christ-centered emphasis you continually provide. One of the new "ministries" of PTM is the *CWR Blog* with Brad Jersak—I am hooked. I am so happy that these solid, well-written materials and resources are available so others might access them.

Ohio

I just read Greg's article "When Did God Become a Christian?" in the Winter 2014 *PT*. Over the years I have enjoyed your writings and have read them religiously (pun intended). It is my opinion that this article is nothing less than a Christian classic. Not only is your article timely, informative and cleverly crafted, but given the delicate issue of the generally perceived "infallibility" of the Scriptures, you should get extra credit for the courage it must have taken to publish this article.

Iowa

Thank you for allowing me to be a small part in a great work. Thank you ever so much for all the articles, books and other materials you send me. I want to thank you for sending me *Many Ways to Say "Thank You"—Volume 1*. I had been saving your monthly thank-you letters since 2010, so these are some I didn't have. It was a wonderful idea to put them all together in one resource.

Mississippi

The best gift I ever received in my life was God's amazing grace of eternal life. The second best gift came from PTM—the certificate of appreciation. Thank you so much. PTM has always treated me with love, warmth and kindness—a shining example of God's grace. Your ministry has been a real blessing for my life and I thank you for that. I only wish I could do more to help. Let's give God the credit for making his brotherly love possible.

New York

Thank you for the certificate of appreciation you sent me. I am very proud of it. Thank you for all the books, articles and sermons. I enjoy listening to you every Sunday on *CWRa*, and I always pray for PTM.

New Mexico

TRANSITIONS:

Past, Present & Future

by Greg Albrecht

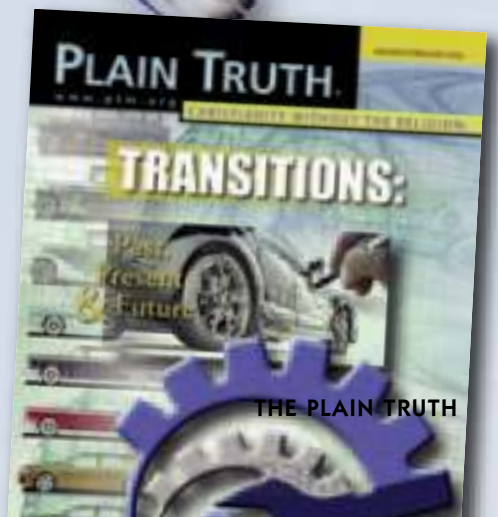
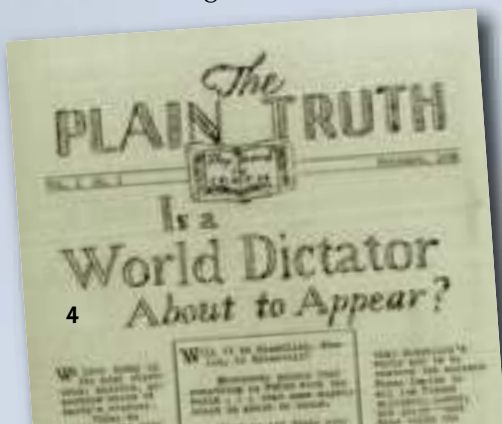
Plain Truth and Christianity Without the Religion Re-tool and Re-Focus

Somewhat like automobile companies prepare for a new model year, our staff spent much of 2014 on our “assembly line” preparing our 2015 models. Here’s a behind-the-scenes look at how and why we re-tooled and re-focused subscription/circulation policies and target audiences so that we might utilize our

two magazine titles to more effectively proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Plain Truth Ministries started publishing *The Plain Truth* (PT) magazine in 1996, but as some of you know the history of the title *The Plain Truth* goes back some 80 years. Some of you may also know that “back in the day” *The Plain Truth* published unbiblical, un-Christ-like teaching—you may also know that PTM transformed the editorial content and direction of *The Plain Truth* so that a dramatic, Christ-centered reformation was achieved via spiritual “open-heart” surgery. That transformation itself is a miraculous story—some of which I detail in my first book *Bad News Religion—The Virus That Attacks God’s Grace* (2004).

Beyond decidedly erroneous content for many decades, the



PT has, over its 80-year history, been published in a variety of styles and frequency of publication. In terms of its content, the story of *The Plain Truth* is one of continuing growth in Christ—**truly by God's grace we're not what we used to be!**

From the very beginning of God's miraculous transformation of the content and message of *The PT*, we were concerned that the continuing use of the title *The Plain Truth* might bring some negative reaction from people who desired speculation, sensationalism, rules and regimens, more than Jesus.

Indeed, during that time when we became relentlessly Christ-centered, many of our readers cancelled their subscriptions, wondering, "What's all this Jesus stuff?"

On the other side of the ledger, our stand for the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ meant that other, potential "new" readers, particularly in the latter years of the 20th century, seemed to "judge" the

After all, whether we're speaking about a magazine or an individual, when we follow Christ we will never be who or what we used to be.



editorial content and focus of magazine "by its cover"—dismissing the *PT*, assuming it still contained its historically erroneous contents, as it had for so many decades, without ever reading the Christ-centered substance of the new, transformed *PT*.

We believed that retaining the title, as our flagship magazine, would serve as a public testimony to the power of God to transform and renew—to breathe the new life of Christ into something or someone who was flawed and broken. After all, whether we're speaking about a magazine or an individual, **when we follow Christ we will never be who or what we used to be.** Many readers really liked this fact—and still do! At that time many told us something like, "Wow! This magazine really is *The Plain Truth*—finally!"

To return to the automobile illustration for a moment,



when *The Plain Truth* was radically transformed, we informed readers (in a way similar to what Oldsmobile did a few years ago) that this new model carried the same name but it was "not your father's Oldsmobile."

Because we continued to publish the magazine by the title *The Plain Truth* it may well be that PTM has been able to proclaim and publish God's grace in a more powerful way had we not continued with the title.

Enter CWR—Christianity Without the Religion

For a number of years the Board of Directors of Plain Truth Ministries has been pondering and questioning the effectiveness of the title *The Plain Truth* as we, as a ministry, continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and

CHRISTIANITY Without the Religion®

Savior Jesus Christ. One of the ways in which we have grown is expressed by the phrase/logo *Christianity Without the Religion*.

For much of its history the drop head of *The Plain Truth* explained that it was "a magazine of understanding." When PTM started publishing *The Plain Truth* we considered that particular drop head to be at best ambiguous if not somewhat irrelevant. There was a period of time when we published *The Plain Truth* without a drop head, but then with the Nov-Dec 1997 issue we started to use the drop head "Renewing Faith and Values." In the early years of the 21st century, we



Somewhat like automobile companies prepare for a new model year, our staff spent much of 2014 on our “assembly line” preparing our 2015 models.

resource *Christianity Without the Religion*. Then, in 2010 we launched a second magazine which we titled *Christianity Without the Religion Journal*.

New Subscription/Circulation Policies

With all of that said as background, several years ago we started to plan for a **new subscription and circulation policy for both of our magazines. As of 2015:**

- The new subscription policy of *The Plain Truth* dictates and defines it as the North American magazine that we publish, print and mail via hard copy to those Friends and Partners who consistently and generously support the ongoing ministry of CWR/PTM. The new circulation policy of *The Plain Truth* means that hard copy will be used to offer topics of specific interest to the target audience of our inner-family

of core supporters. Electronic, digital copies of *The Plain Truth* will continue to be available on our website, free of charge to everyone—both the most recent issues as well as our *PT* archives. Due to budgetary considerations, we will continue to explore efficient forms and formats for print versions of *The Plain Truth*.

- We have also modified the subscription and circulation policy of *Christianity Without the Religion Journal*. *Christianity Without the Religion* magazine (*CWRm*) will become our flagship magazine—the digital version of new issues of *CWRm* will be sent without charge via direct electronic link to subscribers around the world. Given our budgetary restrictions, hard copies of *CWRm* sent through the mail will be restricted, in the majority of cases, to North Americans who provide minimal annual donations to our ongoing work.

- *CWRa*—our audio, weekly teaching ministry, offering topical, biblically based sermons—will continue so that it will be one of **several media resources identified by and with CWR**. *CWRa*, as one of our media vehicles/resources, is primarily provided digitally, but we do provide “hard-copy” CDs and cassettes. But again, we

realized “Renewing Faith and Values” was not adequately explaining our Christ-centered focus to the public at large. In May-June 2004 we unveiled the current drop head to *The Plain Truth*—“Christianity Without the Religion.”

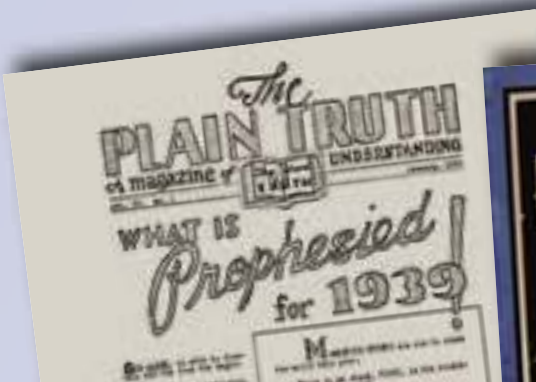
We found that *Christianity Without the Religion* effectively communicated one of the growing, primary themes of our ministry—so much so that in early 2006 I started giving a weekly sermon on our website, titling that audio media

For much of its history the drop head of *The Plain Truth* explained that it was “a magazine of understanding.” ...ambiguous if not somewhat irrelevant.

a magazine of understanding

RENEWING FAITH AND VALUES

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



must request a minimal level of donations to help cover the expense of doing so.

• In the mid-to-late Spring of 2015, God willing, we will launch yet another media vehicle under the generic title of *CWR*. *Christianity Without the Religion*—a video magazine (*CWRv*) will of course only be available in digital format, and only through our website. *CWRv* will offer short interviews and statements about seasonally relevant, significant topics of concern to our ministry and those we serve. As videos, and given their YouTube-like brevity, *CWRv* will be ideal for those who like to access information on their portable electronic devices, such as smart

antique Ford, you may have actually taken a ride in one of the original Model-T Ford cars. In my case, the first Fords I can remember were in the mid-

the 1990. In addition we've owned a few other Fords over the years.

Over the years there have been many models, styles and



1950s (I remember the launch of the Ford Thunderbird—a dream car for this car-crazy pre-teen boy!).

But then just a few years later another “new era” dawned for Ford. The



phones and iPads.

With all of this said, let me reiterate: **we continue to publish** *The Plain Truth*. Earlier, I mentioned automobile companies and their new models. Think of Ford, for example. If you are “old enough” or if you (or someone you know) own an

company and the product was still called a Ford, still produced by Ford, but now, about the time that I graduated from high school, came the Mustang! What a car!

My wife and I have owned three separate models of the Ford Mustang—the 1966 (I wish we still had it!), the 1970 and

sizes of Ford automobiles. Some are memorable for their successes, while others (remember the “Edsel”?) not so much.

Just as Ford still produces cars, *The Plain Truth* is still being published as a magazine. So we might say that *The Plain Truth* is a Ford and *CWRm* is the new Mustang!

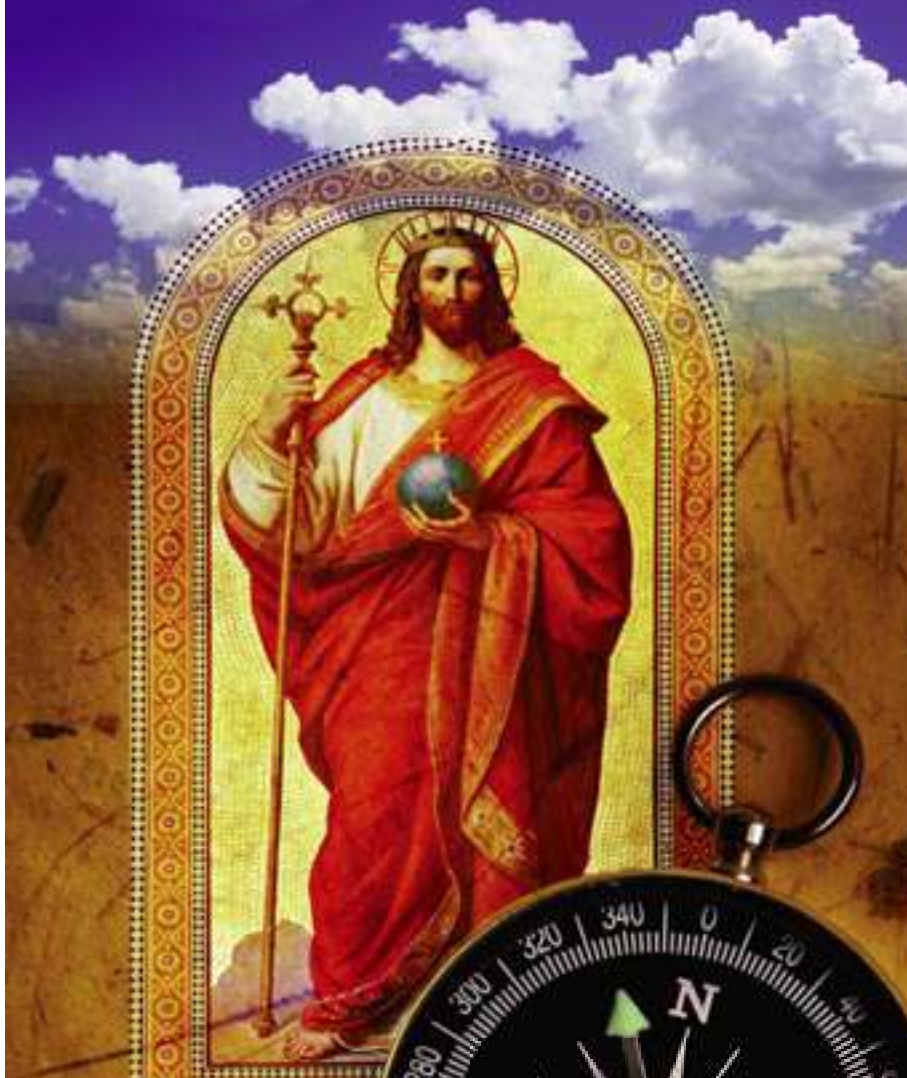
Our staff is excited about the wonderful new tools and direction we see ahead! We believe you will not only enjoy some of these modifications but that you will find them enormously profitable, as Christ-centered spiritual food, enabling you to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In addition, we believe these modifications/improvements will help us more effectively reach a worldwide audience with *Christianity Without the Religion*. □

In the early years of the 21st century, we realized “Renewing Faith and Values” was not adequately explaining our Christ-

centered focus...we unveiled the current drop head to *The Plain Truth*—“Christianity Without the Religion.”





scholars feel that the text we read today was originally given as a sermon (see Hebrews 13:22). We don't know the identity of the author, though for many centuries it was assumed to be written by Paul. On the one hand the science of textual analysis seems to indicate that this style of writing is closely related to Pauline letters in the New Testament. But, the same critical analysis reveals remarkably un-Paul-like distinctives. The book of Hebrews does not say who wrote the book, so we can't be sure.

God Was Not Finished

Leaving the matter of *who* wrote the book of Hebrews, let's consider what the author wrote. These introductory four verses tell us that the book of Hebrews deals with the superiority of the covenant given and brought to us by

JESUS: Superior & Supreme

BY GREG ALBRECHT

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.—Hebrews 1:1-3

In its first three verses the book of Hebrews gets right to the point, and for that reason, it's a letter unlike so many other books in the New Testament. There is no salutation, no greeting, no preamble. The first three verses get down to business and provide a summary statement of the book.

For that matter, the entire book of Hebrews reads, sounds and feels somewhat like a transcript of a sermon—some

Jesus, over the covenant given to and delivered by Moses. Let's carefully look at each of these verses:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways... (Hebrews 1:1)

One of the thoughts implicit within this declaration is that God had more to say than everything he conveyed to the Hebrew forefathers through their prophets. The old covenant did not represent the totality of all that God had to say. Even though the old covenant was expressed and taught, *at many*

In times past he spoke through prophets, through events, through the priesthood, through the old covenant, through dreams and visions—but now he speaks to us through his Son.

times and in various ways, God was not finished.

God started speaking and teaching to and through the patriarchs, and then through Moses, and the covenant Moses was given. God continued to teach prophets through dreams and visions. God spoke, *at many times and in various ways*, through events, such as the Exodus. God spoke through buildings, such as the tabernacle and later the temple, and through institutions, such as the priesthood.

But God was not finished. In fact, the second verse begins with the word “but.” The whole truth was not yet revealed. There was more to say.

...but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe (Hebrews 1:2).

When God gave the old covenant he gave that message through messengers—but when God gave the new covenant he brought that message himself, in the person of Jesus, the Son of God...

But in these last days... The presence of the word “but” continues to build on the implicit message of verse one—there was more to come. **God was not finished yet.**

...but in these last days... If you listen to the prediction addiction crowd that is continually trying, generation after generation, to convince

people that they are the very last generation before the Second Coming of Jesus, the words *last days* in the Bible always refer to the time just before the Second Coming.

But here the words *last days* are not in reference to the Second Coming—they are describing the First Coming! By whom is God speaking to us *in these last days*? His Son. In times past he spoke through prophets, through events, through the priesthood, through the old covenant, through dreams and visions—but **now he speaks to us through his Son.**

Not only does God speak to us through his Son, so that the Son of God is the messenger of the new covenant, but the Son of God is the message—the Son of God is the new covenant! The message is the Son himself.

Hebrews 1:2 suggests finality. This verse tells us God “has” spoken—the final revelation has been given in and through the Son. *The message is now set in stone—it will now never change.* The message continues in and through the risen Lord, but contrasted with the old covenant, there are no more changes or alterations to come. The new covenant is it—we have the final and complete revelation of God, through the Son.

The primary theme of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus is **Superior** and **Supreme**.

Jesus Is Superior

Let’s take a brief digression from our careful look at these introductory verses of Hebrews and give an overview of the entire book of Hebrews. **The book of Hebrews is all about Jesus—it is a study in Christology.** This book is

completely centered in and on Jesus Christ. The book is a detailed, careful contrast between the past religion of the old covenant and the new covenant given to us in and through Jesus.

The book of Hebrews was written because the first Christians, who were primarily Jewish in their race and culture,

The book of Hebrews is all about Jesus—it is a study in Christology. This book is completely centered in and on Jesus Christ



The book is a detailed, careful contrast between the past religion of the old covenant and the new covenant given to us in and through Jesus.

were struggling with what it meant to be a Christian. When Hebrews 1:1 says *our ancestors* it has reference to the ancestors of the Hebrews—both physically and spiritually.

These Jewish Christians to whom this book is directed and for whom it was originally written felt that they needed to continue to pay attention to

the requirements of the old covenant—they did not fully realize how broad and sweeping the new covenant was. They didn't realize, as Jesus told John's disciples, that the new wine of the new covenant would burst the wineskins of the old covenant (Matthew 9:17).

As a result of the dynamic, effervescent nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ the old covenant was blown up—it became obsolete.

Over and over again Hebrews contrasts the past with Jesus.

- In the introductory verses of the book we start to read of a better, **superior** Messenger—as chapters one and two reveal, a Messenger who is **superior** even to the angels. This entire book of Hebrews is a painstakingly careful and complete demythologizing of the old covenant idea that the law is on the throne. The book of Hebrews insists that Jesus is **superior** to any and all law, and that he alone is on the throne!

- In chapters three and four we read that Jesus is **superior** to Moses, and of all things, Jesus is **superior** to the sabbath, the crowning glory of the old covenant. He is **superior** because He is the Sabbath! Jesus proclaimed himself as Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). In chapter four we read of the sabbath rest given to us in Jesus, not a physical rest on a special

day, which is repeated every seven days, but an eternal and final spiritual rest, given to us in and through Jesus. As Matthew tells us, Jesus said, "Come to me and I will give you rest..." (Matthew 11:28).

- Hebrews 7:18-19 is part of a section of Hebrews that consists of the last verses of chapter four through the end of chapter seven—this section contrasts the priesthood of the old covenant with that of the new covenant. This part of Hebrews insists that Jesus, our high priest, is superior to the priesthood of Aaron.

- Here's what we read in Hebrews 7:18-19:
The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

- Then chapters 8 and 9 of Hebrews explain that the new covenant is better and **superior** to the old, because of Jesus. Nothing will ever come along that is **superior** to Jesus. He is the best, he is the ultimate.

- Hebrews 10 tells us that Jesus fulfilled the law, with all of its stipulations, which of course included animal sacrifices—for Jesus is a better and superior sacrifice, who gave himself for us on his cross.

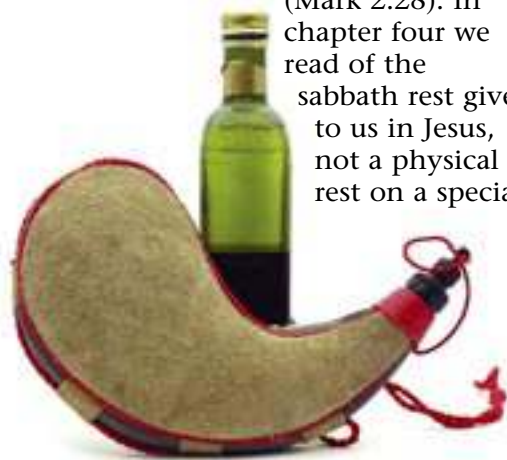
- The last chapters of Hebrews—Hebrews 11-13 provide practical examples of supreme and better Christ-centered faith—of Christ-centered daily living and Christ-centered spiritual sacrifices. This joy-filled life flows from Mount Zion...the city of the living God...the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22) in obvious contrast with Mount Sinai. The old covenant mountain was a place of fear,

These Jewish Christians to whom this book is directed...didn't realize, as Jesus told John's disciples, that the new wine of the new covenant would burst the wineskins of the old covenant (Matthew 9:17).

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The book of Hebrews insists that Jesus is superior to any and all law, and that he alone is on the throne!



of *darkness, gloom and storm* (Hebrews 12:18).

With that brief overview in mind, let's return to our text in Hebrews 1:1-3.

Jesus Is Supreme

1) Hebrews 1:2 tells us that God the Father has appointed God the Son *heir of all things*. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are one God who exists, or subsists, eternally, in three divine Persons, who, though distinct divine Persons, exist in complete harmony—a perfect state of oneness. One God. These three divine Persons are distinct, yet they are one—and we see this as God the Father appoints God the Son as heir of all things. By this divine appointment heirship becomes the property of the Son of God—all things are eternally and forever his. So we see the **supremacy** of Jesus Christ, for all things are his.

2) Hebrews 1:2 tells us that God the Father has made the universe through the Son—so we see the **supremacy** of Jesus Christ, for he is the creator of all things, visible and invisible.

3) Hebrews 1:3 tells us that *the Son is the radiance of God's glory*—that is, the Son of God radiates the brightness of the glory of God. Jesus is **supremely** radiant, the Light of the world, reflecting the glory of the Father.

4) Hebrews 1:3 also tells us the Son is the *exact representation of his being*—that is, the Father's being. Jesus **supremely** and uniquely reveals the Father. Here is the core foundation of Christology—the study of Christ, the eternal Son of God, co-equal and co-essential with the Father, one with the Father, while being a separate

divine being, the second Person of the Godhead.

5) And finally Hebrews 1:3 tells us that the Son of God sustains all things. He sustains everything physically—he holds the universe together. More than that, this verse teaches Jesus is **supreme** in that he brings everything to its final and logical spiritual conclusion.

We read in the book of Revelation that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. In its first chapter, the book of Revelation introduces Jesus, the Son of God, as the One *who is, and who was and who is to come...* (Revelation 1:4,8).

All things come together—all things are completed—all things are made significant and meaningful in Christ. He is **superior** and he is **supreme**.

A Rich Man With Two Loves

One of my favorite stories sums up the superiority of Jesus Christ. It's the story of a rich man who had two loves in his life—his art collection and his son.

As his son grew his father taught him about art and then later when his son became a young man the father took his son with him on trips all over the world when he purchased great works of art.

The son and father were, as Forrest Gump said, *like peas and carrots*—not only were they father and son, they were

inseparable as friends and co-workers, building the father's art collection. In time the father assembled a private collection of art that was the

...the Son of God sustains all things. He sustains everything physically—he holds the universe together.



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envy of the world.

When a World War broke out, the son enlisted to serve. His father was proud of his son, but like all parents, he did not want his son to go to war. So before his son left, the father had a portrait of his son made. And then the son was off to war.

Months dragged by, and one day the father received a letter from his son's commanding officer telling him that his son had been killed in combat. This news demoralized the father, and he retreated into his mansion, seldom going out, and in his grief stopped eating, and eventually, not long thereafter, the father died.

“...He who receives the Son receives everything.”



After the rich man's death an announcement was made that his great art collection would be auctioned off. Art dealers and collectors from around the world could not wait to attend—finally the day of the auction came.

When everyone was assembled, the auctioneer started by displaying the portrait of the rich man's son and inviting bids on it. The portrait was a fine painting,

***All things come together—all things are completed—all things are made significant and meaningful in Christ.
He is superior and he is supreme.***

but it was no match for the priceless masters that the art dealers wanted to bid on.

The crowd murmured, and a voice cried out, “Put that worthless painting aside—let's get to the treasures of the collection.”

The auctioneer held his ground. “I'm sorry,” he said, “but the will insists that the portrait of the son is to be sold first.”

“All right” said an impatient voice in the back, “I'll bid one dollar—let's get on with it.”

Sitting near the front was a dear friend of the family. He didn't have the hundreds of thousands of dollars necessary to bid on any of the fine art—he hadn't come to buy art, he had only come as a final gesture of friendship to the father and his son.

This dear friend couldn't abide the thought of this portrait of his friend, the son of the father, being sold for only a dollar, so he blurted out, “One thousand dollars.”

The art experts in the crowd couldn't believe the stupidity of someone who would bid \$1,000 for a painting that was worth \$50 at most.

The auctioneer quickly announced: “One thousand dollars, going once”—he paused for any other bids, but the room was silent—“Going twice”—again he paused inviting any additional bids for the portrait of the son but the room remained silent—finally he said, “Sold.”

The auctioneer then addressed the crowd saying, “Thank you all for coming today. This auction is now closed.”

The crowd of art experts and rich collectors stood as one, protesting, “What do you mean, it's closed?! We're here to bid on the treasures of the old man's collection.”

The auctioneer replied, “The treasures of the collection have already been sold.”

With one voice the crowd said “Sold?! How is that possible?”

The auctioneer answered, “The will clearly states that the person who purchased the portrait of the son becomes heir to the entire collection of his father. He who receives the Son receives everything.” □



Chasing 120—A Story of Food, Faith, Fraud and the Pursuit of Longevity

Perpetually grinning, fast-talking Texas adman-turned-preacher Dr. Tyler Belknap promises health and longevity to a cult following via his nationally televised daily infomercial programs. The meteoric success of Belknap's Wellness 120 empire is fueled by “the pursuit of longevity,” touted by Belknap as a biblically-based promise of 120 healthy years for those who follow his regimen and purchase his nutritional products.

The dark side of Wellness 120 is that many of Belknap's supplements are laced with exotic substances and genetically modified plants developed in his high-tech secret research lab. Wellness 120 creative director Dave Whitman and his wife Marcia suddenly find themselves in the center of a huge crisis when their robustly healthy teenage son suffers brain damage from one of Belknap's psychoactive, genetically modified food products. The Whitmans must come to grips with the fact that the charismatic leader they once admired is a crook and charlatan whose empire has been built on false promises and religious fraud.

Chasing 120, written by author, artist and syndicated cartoonist Monte Wolverton, reflecting many of his life experiences, is an easy, entertaining read, filled with intrigue and authenticity—a story that speaks to the shattered dreams of so many who have experienced their house of pseudo-religious cards falling around them.

**Available at
www.ptm.org/120
and Amazon.com**

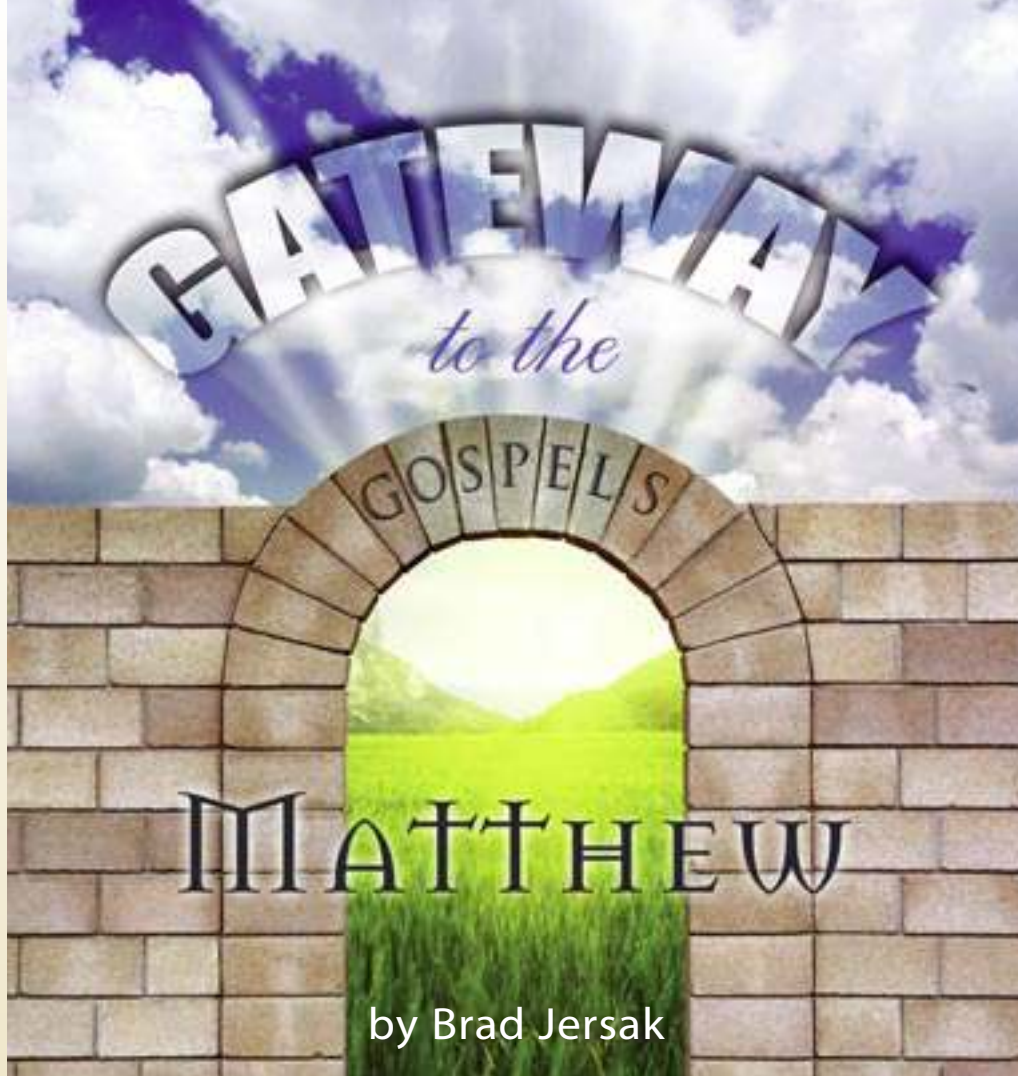
Understatement alert! The first four books of the New Testament—the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—are the most important pieces of literature ever written. They stand together as the authorized biographies of the most influential person who ever lived. Indeed, they imply that he was more than human and is, in fact, still alive!

In this four-part series, we will dip into each of these Gospels, exploring their background, purpose and key themes. We start by noting that “Gospels” are historical biographies of a particular kind.

- They recall the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.
- They proclaim his message of the kingdom of God and eternal life.
- They arouse faith in Jesus as Lord—that he is the Christ, the Son of God, Israel’s Messiah and Savior of the world.

As a collection, the Gospels offer four perspectives, address different audiences and varying purposes. Within these books, we see many genres, including proverbs and parables, sermons and debates, narratives and signs, apocalyptic visions ... even trial transcripts. These combine as Christianity’s official eyewitness accounts of the life and works of Jesus Christ. But even today, they continue to function as venues for a fresh encounter with the risen Lord.

With each Gospel, standard questions arise: Who wrote it? When? To whom? And why? The answers aren’t always clear



...some are based on ancient traditions, others in wild speculation. Scholars often disagree, ranging from complete skepticism to dogmatic certainty. Herein, we’ll try to be accurate and fair, showing confidence and humility in what we know, or simply believe...and when we’re merely guessing.

Who Wrote Matthew’s Gospel?

Did you know all four Gospels were written anonymously?

The titles were attached in the 2nd century when they became the foundational sources for a Christian Bible. In modern times, huge doubts developed about their authorship and

authenticity as historical documents. But today, there is increasing confidence that the Gospels represent reliable testimonies of material witnesses of Jesus’ life—written by his apostles or their protégés.

Tradition assigns the first Gospel to Matthew (aka Levi), the tax collector who became one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. Our earliest evidence comes

[The Gospels] stand together as the authorized biographies of the most influential person who ever lived.

from Papias, the bishop of Hieropolis from 100-140 AD. He loved interviewing friends and students of the original apostles, probing them for every tidbit they had learned

“...let your kingdom come...” We aren’t merely pleading for Christ to hurry up with the end of history. Rather, we’re asking for his presence to manifest in our lives in our own here and now.

about Jesus. Papias says, “Matthew collected the logia [sayings of Jesus] in the Hebrew dialect, and each one translated them as best he could.”¹ From this detail, our best theory is that Matthew first kept notes of his life with Jesus in Aramaic. Then he translated and compiled these, along with big chunks of Mark (Peter’s apprentice) and other sources, to write his final version in Greek.

When Was It Written?

We don’t know when Matthew was written, but we know Bishop Ignatius quoted it by 115 AD, so it’s a 1st century work. Nor do we know when Matthew died, but legend says he shared the Gospel for years in Africa—first in Alexandria, then in Ethiopia (where he was martyred).

One hint indicates Matthew might have been written before 70 AD (the year Jerusalem fell)—within one generation of Jesus’ ascension. Matthew wants Jewish readers to know Jesus was their Messiah, so whenever Jesus fulfills a Jewish prophecy, Matthew connects dots. He repeatedly says, “This was to fulfill what was said [or written]...” (Matthew 4:14, 8:17, 12:17). Yet when Jesus prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24-25), Matthew doesn’t mention that it was fulfilled. Why not? Maybe it hadn’t happened yet. Or perhaps Matthew didn’t feel the need to state the obvious.

To Whom It May Concern...

Matthew is predominantly addressed to Jewish audiences. How do we know? Five clues emerge:

1. Notice the beginning of the book—a Jewish genealogy. Who cares? Only Jews, for whom establishing Jesus’ family tree back to David and Abraham was a big deal (Matthew 1:17).

2. Matthew proclaims Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and calls him the “Son of David” six times. Jesus was the Jewish Davidic king predicted in the Hebrew Bible.

3. We’ve already noted that Matthew frequently identifies how Jesus fulfills OT prophecy. This kind of “proof” would impress only Jewish readers.

4. When other Gospels say “kingdom of God,” Matthew’s parallel passages use “kingdom of heaven,” sensitive to Jews who preferred avoiding the divine name.

5. Finally, the Gospel is structured to highlight the many ways Jesus’ ministry parallels and exceeds that of Moses. For example, as Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Law, so Jesus ascends a mount to deliver the great Sermon on the Mount. And just as there are five books of Moses, so there are five sections or discourses in Matthew.

Key Theme in Matthew: the Kingdom of Heaven

The first three Gospels all share one powerful, overarching theme: the gospel of the Kingdom of heaven/God. What is the Kingdom of God? What did Jesus mean by it? How did his listeners understand it? Mainly, they didn’t. And usually, neither have we. Volumes of books have been written about it, and many preachers studiously

avoid teaching about it. We can only share a few keys here:

In Matthew 4:17, we are introduced to the message of Jesus: “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, ‘Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (NKJV).

For the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel, the good news is the announcement that Israel’s long expected kingdom is being established and going global through the life and ministry of Jesus. Said another way, the Kingdom of heaven is God’s reign through Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and the Gentiles’ Lord.



When Is the Kingdom?

On one hand, Matthew’s Jesus says *the Kingdom is already here*. God’s reign had arrived and was active among them in the Messiah himself—the person of Jesus.

Jesus preaches this “*already-kingdom*” when he announces, “The kingdom of heaven *has come near*” (Matthew 10:7). He also shows the *already-kingdom* through his mighty works: his authority over sickness, over nature and over evil spirits. And Jesus celebrates those who *have seen* and experienced his kingdom through the ministry of healing and forgiveness (Matthew 13:16-17).

How the Gospels Emerged

Some would have us believe that the Gospels are the result of many decades of oral history, passed from generation to generation, accumulating foreign agendas, factual errors and fanciful legends along the way. As such, they tell us little about the historical Jesus, if he even existed. Such skepticism is becoming passé—the wishful thinking of willful doubters.

Today, a more sensible observation is winning the day. Consider this progression.

1. Jesus identifies twelve people who had witnessed his ministry from baptism to death as well as his resurrection appearances.

2. The “Synoptic Gospels” (Matthew, Mark and Luke) purposely list the twelve as credentialed witnesses of the whole life of Christ.

3. These twelve establish the “mother church” in Jerusalem. They are the first to collect, sort and establish what we call the “apostolic tradition” or “the faith once delivered to the saints.”

4. As the twelve begin to pass away (all but John were martyred), a written account of their eyewitness testimony becomes necessary so that it can be passed on accurately.

5. Four Gospels were written—by different men, with

diverging points of view and for diverse people groups, all who needed to hear the good news. They confirm one another’s message, but vary enough so we know they’re not always comparing notes to keep the story straight.

6. The four Gospels we have were recognized by the early church as having apostolic authority and treated as Scripture, no later than the time of Irenaeus (185 AD), who had personally been taught by Polycarp, a disciple of John the Apostle.

7. What’s going on here? Quality control from beginning to end! Jesus intentionally establishes a process that ensures his ministry and message will be passed on as he intended it...an unbroken chain of multiple witnesses who bring us to the final form we have today.

And it worked! The idea that the church “chose” these four Gospels and excluded scores of others for nefarious reasons is a fairy tale. One of the best exercises in verifying the inspiration, authority and genius of these Gospels is to read them—then read the rest (they are available) and compare. There is no comparison...these four stand as symphonies beside noise, Shakespeare beside sloppy sci-fi. Their inspiration truly becomes obvious to all open-hearted seekers.

But there’s also a sense in which *the Kingdom is not yet here*. The Jews were still waiting and praying for a host of Old Testament prophetic promises—especially for “the kingdom of Israel to be restored” (even after Jesus’ resurrection—Acts 1:6).

And Jesus, too, promised and expected the establishment of a *coming* Kingdom. In his parables (especially Matthew 13 and 22), Jesus’ Kingdom is associated with the coming of God in the flesh (the Incarnation) but at other times, with the harvest or the banquet at the “end of the age.”

Moreover, while Jesus associates the Kingdom of God with both his first and second comings, he also teaches believers of every generation to pray, “Our Father...let your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). We aren’t merely pleading for Christ

to hurry up with the end of history. Rather, we’re asking for his presence to manifest in our lives in our own here-and-now.

The Kingdom Way: The Sermon on the Mount

This request, from the Lord’s prayer, is central to Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the Mount,” found in Matthew 5-7. In it, Jesus starts with his glorious Beatitudes... “blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is *the kingdom of heaven*.”

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11) are sort of the Christian equivalent of Moses’ Ten Commandments, but so much more! They’ve also been called:

- The Constitution of the Kingdom of God;
- The Magna Carta of the Christian faith;
- Jesus’ distillation of the prophetic tradition;
- The “Way of the Cross,” transposed into the life of daily discipleship.

As the sermon progresses, Jesus offers his core teachings on heart-righteousness, love, prayer and forgiveness. He teaches us the Golden Rule and extolls the generosity of his Father. He closes with a call to true wisdom: by hearing his word and putting it into practice.

These gems are just the beginning of Matthew’s treasury! A storehouse of spiritual wealth is available: “Seek and you will find!” (Matthew 7:7).

We hope you’ll pick up Matthew afresh and cash in on its many riches. Then in our next issue, on to the dramatic Gospel of Mark! □

¹. Cited in Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3.39.14-17.

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Death, Loss, Pain and Laughter

Just got off the phone with Mervat Nuwayhid. She and her late husband, Omar, were missionaries working with refugees and came to study at the seminary where I teach. During his days as a student, Omar was diagnosed with ALS...and over the next many months we watched as Omar died a very slow and painful death. Before Omar knew about his own disease, Joseph, the youngest of their four sons, was diagnosed with leukemia. After his father's death, Joseph died too.

What do you do with that? Frankly, I didn't know. Still don't. I told God that...and I told him quite often. My prayer time each morning is the most honest time of my day. The safe place of prayer I have is with a Father who loves me without condition and before whom I don't have to pretend. I can't count the mornings when I said harsh things to God about Omar and his family: "If you really loved them you would treat them better. Is this any way to treat people you say you love?"

God was mostly silent. Sometimes I sensed that he cried tears with me. At other times in the silence, I felt loved. Most times I had to cling to what I learned in the light in order to believe it in the dark. But I always heard him softly say, "I know."

Countless times I've stood beside hospital beds of people who were suffering and graves of people who died too soon. I've often been the one to tell families that a loved one died. I'm a pastor, and if you think that being a pastor (trying to be calm, wise and say the "right thing") is easy, then you're crazy.

One of my favorite quotes is from C.S. Lewis' book, *A Grief Observed*. He wrote that book using a pseudonym, while going through the pain of his wife's death. "The terrible thing is that a perfectly good God is in this matter hardly less formidable than a cosmic sadist. The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness...suppose that what you

are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder, more conscientious he is, the more he will go on cutting. If he...stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless."

Because God's "ways are not our ways nor his thoughts our thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8) it's often hard to see the compassionate God. Pain and suffering can make us blind to truth. When it hurts, the truths that seemed so clear in the light have a tendency to get hazy in the dark.

With that said, there are three things that are absolute promises we need to remember:

First, God promised it'd sometimes be hard. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation..." (John 16:33). Peter said, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes..." (1 Peter 4:12). We can never say to God, "You never told me about this!" **It's a lot harder when you think God lied to you.**

Second, God promised not to leave us...ever. Jesus said that he would never leave us "comfortless" and that he would always be there to "hear the sound of our tears as they strike the ground." When Jesus faced the cross alone, he showed us a resource that is always available to us: "Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me" (John 16:32). **It's a lot harder when you think God left you.**

Third, God promised supernatural and unexplainable joy. We would laugh a lot and the world would be drawn to him because of that joy. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." There is something crazy about laughter in graveyards, jokes in hospital rooms, and mirth between bouts of pain...crazy like a fox. It is the surprising and supernatural reality of what it means to cling to Christ in the dark. **It's a lot harder when you can't laugh.**

Death, loss, pain and laughter. They go together for Christians.

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown



“All Jesus All the Time”

Vince Lombardi, the legendary football coach of the Green Bay Packers, often gave a “this is a football” lecture to his team at the beginning of the season. Those Packer teams, including some of the best football players of that era, were composed of veterans and rookies—but regardless of their tenure and skills, all of these gifted athletes could easily have taken offense with the simple contents of Lombardi’s annual *This Is a Football* lecture.

Holding a football in his hands Lombardi would explain what seemed patently obvious to these athletes—“This is a football.” Of course it was a football! But what did Lombardi mean to accomplish with this self-evident observation?

Seemingly oblivious of the football intelligence of his audience, Lombardi laboriously lumbered through simple instructions about all of the basics of playing football—as if these professionals knew nothing whatsoever about the game.

Sometimes, at the end of the lecture, Lombardi marched his giants of the gridiron from the locker room out to the football field, continuing to patiently rehearse the dimensions of the field and the elementary rules governing how the game is played. Even rookies don’t like to be treated like novices, and of course veterans could easily have found Lombardi’s presentation insulting and demeaning.

John Wooden was another equally famous and successful coach, but instead of coaching professional athletes on a football field like Lombardi, Wooden coached college students in gymnasiums on basketball courts. And John Wooden was not just any coach. ESPN, the sports network, named Coach Wooden the Coach of the Century (20th century) of all sports.

Lombardi and Wooden both knew that without fundamental and basic principles, endeavors on or off the field or the court would fail. At the beginning of every season Coach Wooden gave his *socks and shoes lecture*.

He sat his young charges down, and told them to take off their shoes and socks. Then “Coach” showed them how to put on their socks so they wouldn’t get a blister and how to tie their shoes so they wouldn’t come untied in the middle of a game.

Wooden insisted if one is going to play with greatness, one has to start with the little things. Little things, he said, make big things happen. To this day many of his once young student athletes, though their prowess on the hardwood courts is now but a distant memory, say that they think of the man they reverently call “Coach” each morning when they put on their socks and shoes.

When the basics are forgotten or discarded the nature of the “game” can quickly morph and deteriorate so that the essence of the discipline is corrupted and perverted. Christless religion thrives within Christendom by directing those it says it serves (who are in fact slaves) away from the fundamental principles of the gospel of Jesus, disdainfully brushing aside the basics as boring and elementary. Instead, big business religion grows and prospers by accentuating trivial pursuits like:

- Insisting that its followers will be in a world of hurt if they don’t please and appease God, whom they identify and describe as filled with wrath and anger.
- Convincing its followers that they are special and unique, directing their attention to the teachings of dead theologians rather than the risen Lord Jesus Christ.
- Offering flamboyant pomp and ceremony “worship services” that tantalize ears and eyes, filling pews and parking lots, but at the end of the day amount to a handful of spiritual wind.
- Taking “stands.” Crusading and picketing against infidels and heretics, including abortion clinics, the “wrong” political party, Muslims, Jews—and truth be told, anyone who is not a member of “the true/best/better” church.

The materialistic bumper sticker advises that

he who “dies with the most toys wins.” In a similar way, Christ-less religion insists that the accumulation of good deeds ensures that the reservations it has made for its followers will be honored on their arrival at the gates of heaven.

Religious slaves are advised by their taskmasters that they must earn God’s love and favor.

Religious professionals urge their “members” to “tote that barge and lift that bail” in a never-ending attempt to get their one-way ticket to heaven punched.

Christ-less religion ushers Jesus off the stage and replaces him with priests, prescriptions and programs.

With Vince Lombardi, we ask, “what is a football?” Remembering Coach Wooden we realize that something so simple as putting on our socks and tying our shoes is fundamentally important to our “game.” As we follow Jesus, the Captain of our salvation, we, as Christ-followers must always focus on Him. We must look to Him.

Plain Truth Ministries (PTM) is all about Christianity Without the Religion (CWR). We insist on Jesus as our center and core. We advise leaving behind ceremonies and rituals and required observances that fuel the increase and prosperity of religion. Yes, I know—some religious professionals will tell you that their little storms in a teacup are “advancing” and “growing” the kingdom but the only kingdom that increases with such an emphasis is the kingdom of Christ-less religion. PTM/CWR believes in *all Jesus all the time*.

All Jesus all the time is our mission—it’s simple, it’s

foundational and it’s the absolute core of what it means to be a Christ-follower. It’s as basic as “this is a football.” It’s as elementary as putting on socks and shoes. PTM/CWR proclaims Jesus in every practical and economically feasible way we can. We do not place a premium on specific media vehicles and formats. *We*

**Jesus did not hang out a sign advertising prophecy seminars or healing crusades....
*Jesus went to where people were...***

don’t love the medium, we love the message. Jesus is our focus and he is our message. With that in mind we are announcing some changes in this ministry vehicle we call *The Plain Truth*.

With this next issue, we will begin to print *The Plain Truth* magazine six times a year, instead of the four times a year as we have for some time. But while we increase frequency, we will decrease the size of each issue. Each issue will be shorter than our previous issues, but each issue will be jam-packed with Christ centered teaching.

As you know, our generation is experiencing a revolution in the way people learn and how they receive information. Among other things, the technological revolution has incredible consequences for the printing industry.

PTM/CWR is aware that most people today are reading less, and that their (our) attention span has been increasingly diminishing over the last 50 years.

Our mission is to reach people *where they are*. Our core

gospel message of Jesus will not change—but following the example of Jesus, we will continue to teach people *where they are*, as he did when he personally proclaimed the kingdom of God in his ministry here on earth.

Jesus did not hang out a sign advertising prophecy seminars or healing crusades. He didn’t build a big amphitheatre and call it a mega-church, basing his success on how many donkeys were tied up outside during “services.” *Jesus went to where people were*—emotionally, physically and geographically. He didn’t quote dead theologians, but he was the great I AM who was with them, one of them and for them.

Our next issue of *The Plain Truth* (March-April 2015) will be mailed along with our monthly Friends and Partners letter—it will be shorter, easier to read and dare we say, fun and entertaining (who said embracing, loving and following Jesus involves boring, stuffy academic exercises that overwhelm our abilities?). We will continue, with your help and support to proclaim *all Jesus all the time*.

With his lectures titled *This Is a Football*, Vince Lombardi called the attention of his team to the central, foundational issues of the game of football. Coach Wooden reminded his teams that how they put on their socks and tied their shoes really mattered.

The Plain Truth—along with all of the resources and vehicles of Plain Truth Ministries and Christianity Without the Religion—will always talk about embracing Jesus and following him. Damn the torpedoes of religion—full speed ahead with *all Jesus all the time!* □

—Greg Albrecht

GRACE & RESPONSE

keeps count of our sins and shortcomings so that he can finally mete out the just and terrible punishment we deserve. Decades later, after years of study, I realize that the doctrine of God I was taught in that quasi-Christian “Bible” college described a deity far different from the loving Father that Jesus Christ came to reveal (Matthew 11:27).

First Things First

Many years ago, when I was a young man in Bible college, one of my theology professors sternly proclaimed to the class, “When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is fall out of bed onto my knees and pray that I don’t sin!” I distinctly remember the discomfort I felt upon hearing this stunning revelation. I knew immediately that I was a wash-out because the first thing I did in the morning was reach for the coffee pot. Still today, I have to knock back at least two cups of “Joe” to clear

my head before I can vaguely contemplate the sins I am liable to commit before lunch.

Even as a naïve and inexperienced nineteen-year old, I knew that there was something fundamentally wrong with my professor’s view of God—at least I hoped there was! It seemed that his “God” was more to be feared than loved. Behind his staggering confession lurked a harsh taskmaster who meticulously

Purveyors of Legalism

Since that time, I have encountered other preachers and teachers of “religion” who are fond of portraying “God” as a harsh judge whose primary concern is crime and punishment or sin and guilt. Because of their one-sided emphasis on law, judgment and penalty, they insist that the most important aspect of

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Christian life is obedience, which often includes strict adherence to humanly-devised codes of dress, diet and lifestyle.

For these messengers of the “bad news” anti-gospel, obedience and discipline take priority over relationship and grace. God is a judge to be feared or a taskmaster to be served rather than a Father to be adored. *Where legalism*



(i.e., “law”) takes center stage, discipleship and Christian living are reduced to obedience without faith, service without joy, and worship without gratitude. These important aspects of Christian life become burdensome duties to be performed out of fear of retribution rather than grateful responses to the Father’s love revealed in Jesus Christ.

According to the ministers of legalism, grace, forgiveness and justification are *conditional*. Rather than gifts to be gratefully received, these gospel promises are held out like carrots to spur overburdened believers to obedience. For the purveyors of religion the gospel is a threat rather than a promise, so that discipleship is reduced to a fearful response rather than a joyful encounter with the Father’s love.

The purveyors of law present the gospel in terms of a “contract”: “If the ‘party of the first part’ (you and me) meets certain conditions, then the ‘party of the second part’ (God) will be gracious.” God’s love and goodness are not offered as gifts to be received but favors to be earned. Rather than the lavish outpouring of God’s innermost heart, divine love is “conditioned” by performance; that is, God will love us “if” we meet the required standard but woe to those who fall short, for surely they will be “left behind.”

The purveyors of law present the gospel in terms of a “contract”.



In addition, a persistent fear lingers among the purveyors of religion, who insist that an emphasis on grace will lead to antinomianism (“lawlessness”). They refuse to spare the “rod” of law for fear their congregation will be spoiled. With furrowed brow and pointed finger, they try to coerce repentance and piety with the threat of judgment, hellfire and ever-impending doom. The “submission” coerced by the purveyors of religion, however, does not glorify God. Rather, obedience coerced under threat of punishment is “sin,” for it is not of “faith” (Romans 14:23).

Relationship Between Grace and Response

Legalism, with its emphasis on law, judgment and penalty, is founded on a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between grace and law, forgiveness and repentance, and justification and faith. Legalism reverses the proper relationship between divine grace and human response portrayed in scripture, so that grace is conditioned by performance and forgiveness is begrudgingly bestowed following repentance. The legalist bellows, “If you repent, you will be forgiven.”

Grace is not a wage to be earned, however; it is a gift to be received. The gospel proclaims, “You have been forgiven in Jesus, the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world; therefore, repent and believe the good news!” The gospel calls us to “change our mind” (i.e., “repent”) about Jesus, repudiate the demands of religion with its “conditional” grace, and

Rather than the lavish outpouring of God’s innermost heart, divine love is... God will love us “if” we meet the required standard...

embrace the Father’s love that is unconditionally poured out for all in the incarnate Savior of the world.

In the Book of Exodus, we find the paradigmatic indicator of the proper relationship between grace and response. After he miraculously saved the people from bondage by a series of plagues that devastated the Egyptians, God led the Hebrew slaves to Mount Sinai, where he “introduced” himself to his people. Speaking through Moses, God said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me...” (Exodus 20:3).

Notice the “order” between divine grace and human response that is revealed in Exodus. *First*, God introduces himself as the God who saves: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the bondage of Egypt.” *Second*, God summons the people to respond to his gracious initiative: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

After saving them from bondage, God gives the people the law as an act of grace, so that this stubborn, stiff-necked band of slaves may learn to live in right relationship with God and neighbor. In turn, God graciously provides the ceremonial-sacrificial liturgy so that the people may *respond* to divine revelation in an appropriate and reverent manner (Exodus 20-40; Leviticus 1-27). In regard to the relationship between grace and human response, grace is prior, so that law and liturgy is a response to grace, not a condition for it! This passage clearly establishes the

relationship between divine grace and human response and sets a pattern that runs throughout both the Old and New Testaments: **grace is prior to and unconditional of human response.**

The relationship between grace and response is clearly evidenced in the New Testament. Jesus said to his disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). The priority of grace is glaringly apparent: "As I have loved you [*grace*], so you must love one another [*response*]." Again, Jesus says (John 15:9), "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you [*grace*]. Now remain in my love" [*response*]. Perhaps the clearest indication of the relationship between grace and response is found in 1 John (4:19): "We love *because* he first loved us" (emphasis added).

Grace Before Dinner

Luke (19:1-10) describes an encounter between Jesus and a notorious sinner that perfectly illustrates the relationship between divine grace and human response. When Jesus was passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem near the end of his earthly ministry, Zacchaeus, who was short in stature, climbed a sycamore tree so that he might see Jesus pass. Seeing him in the tree, Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

Upon hearing Jesus' gracious request, Zacchaeus came down from the tree and welcomed Jesus gladly. Immediately the local villages began to mutter among themselves, for Zacchaeus, like other tax collectors, was regarded as a swindler, who collaborated with the oppressive Roman regime. Because he was a

...the relationship between grace and human response, grace is prior, so that law and liturgy is a response to grace, not a condition for it!

"sinner," Zacchaeus was a social outcast, ostracized by the respectable community. Jesus' surprising request to dine at his home, therefore, was cause for scandal.

At dinner, however, Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Then Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

This story perfectly illustrates the relationship between grace and response. In the light of Jesus' *love* for him, Zacchaeus sees the darkness of his own sin. In *response* to the love and acceptance he encounters in Jesus, Zacchaeus repents! His repentance, however, is not a shame-based response coerced by law and condemnation; it is a joyful, grateful response to the love and acceptance he encounters in Jesus. The grace of God embodied in Jesus is the immediate cause of the tax collector's repentance. Zacchaeus' repentance is not a condition for grace; it is a joyful *response* to grace!

Grace Is Always Prior

In the great Reformation of the 16th century, the Protestant reformers challenged purveyors of religion in order to re-establish the proper relationship between grace and response that had been obscured by the "works" mentality of medieval Catholicism.

With their strong emphasis on "justification by faith" rather than works, the reformers repudiated the medieval teaching that grace had to be "earned" by penance and the payment of indulgences, wherein Jesus' "superfluity" of grace could be purchased and credited to the buyer's eternal account.

The rediscovery of the God of grace revealed in Jesus Christ enabled the reformers to reclaim the New Testament promise that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). The Reformers rediscovered the Gospel truth elegantly illustrated in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. In the good news of God's love for humanity revealed in Jesus Christ, grace is *prior* to human response. Divine love is the *cause*, repentance and faith are the *consequences*.

When grace is properly related to response, legalistic demands for obedience and conformity accompanied by the slandering invectives of hellfire and damnation may be repudiated in favor of the Gospel proclamation of the good news of God's love for *all* revealed in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

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The “Typhoon of Steel”

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

War is foreign to me. Like most Americans living today, I’ve never been in a war zone amid sounds of machine guns and missile launchers. I’ve never raced for shelter as fire rained down from heaven. War truly is hell. Yet we celebrate the anniversaries of battles and admire advanced weaponry.

The unspeakable horrors of World War II ended nearly seventy years ago in the summer of 1945. One way of understanding history is to place ourselves in the story—to somehow find a connection with past events. I was born July 17, 1945, the opening day of the Potsdam Conference that brought Stalin, Churchill and President Truman together in an effort to seek a settlement. But try as I may, I cannot relate to that event or place myself in that setting.

Through Wendell Berry’s fictional Hannah Coulter, however, I begin to comprehend the ramifications of that horrific war. Living in the hills of Henry County, Kentucky, Hannah might have escaped, but the war took a heavy toll on her close-knit community. By her own testimony, she “married the war twice.” Her first husband Virgil was reported missing in action, leaving her in limbo with ever dimming hopes.

After the war she married Nathan, a returning soldier whose stony silence about his fighting at Okinawa spoke louder than words. Indeed, the Battle of Okinawa, remembered as the “typhoon of steel,” lasted 82 days, and when it was over the casualties numbered well over two hundred thousand.

Years later, after Nathan had died, Hannah was determined to understand that awful victory. Through books and articles she began to comprehend the carnage:

Death falls from the sky. It flies in the air. The ground fills with the dead.... The dead are blasted

out of their graves.... You are wet, muddy, soiled.... The battlefield stinks of rotting flesh, excrement, vomit, the smoke of explosives.... You performed the cruelties that were required and sometimes cruelties that were not, and what would your folks have thought?

And then there were the civilians, the farm families like those living in Henry County whose livelihoods and very lives had been destroyed in those dreadful seven weeks of war. “Before that spring,” Hannah learned through her research, “Okinawa had been a place of ancient country villages and farming landscapes of little fields perfectly cultivated.” Like her neighbors in Port William, “they hated violence” and “made music and sang when they rested from their work in the fields.”

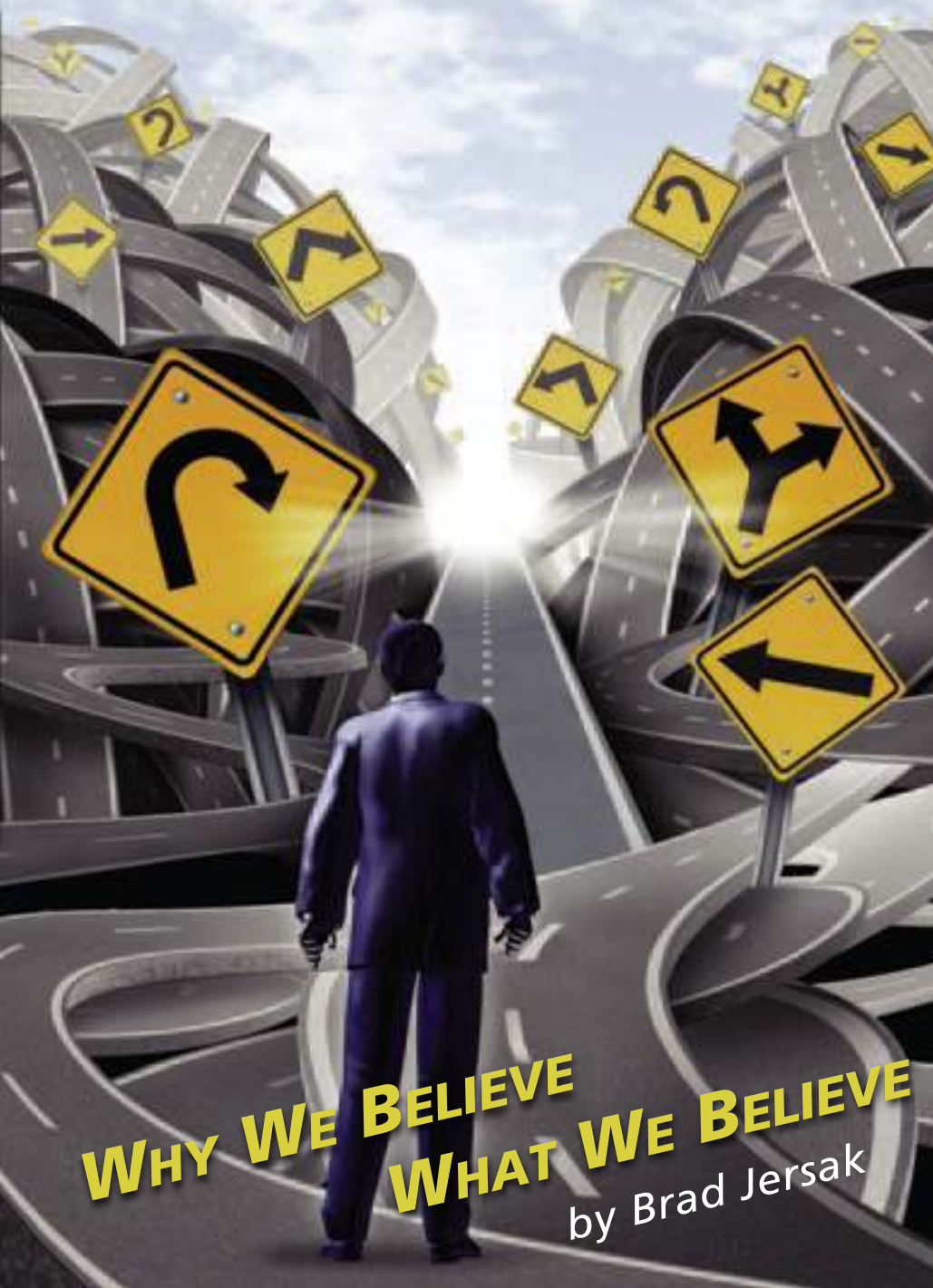
Through the eyes of Hannah, I also see those farmers who were in many ways so similar to those in the rural Wisconsin community where I was born in that summer of 1945. Like the young soldiers blown to bits, these innocent civilians were simply waste products of the military machinery of war. Among them, perhaps a pregnant woman whose baby girl would have been born on July 17.

Yet entwined in all this carnage, as Hannah realized, there were incredible stories of heroism and tender mercies. Drafted by the US Army in 1942, Desmond Doss refused to fight, to carry a weapon, to kill. He was a Seventh-day Adventist, a conscientious objector and a coward in the eyes of those preparing for the assault on Okinawa. But when President Truman later awarded him a Medal of Honor, the citation clearly stated otherwise:

Doss refused to seek cover and remained in the fire-swept area with the stricken, carrying all 75 casualties one-by-one to the edge of the escarpment and there lowering them on a rope-supported litter down the face of a cliff to friendly hands.

Tender mercies amid that “typhoon of steel.” □

—Ruth Tucker



WHY WE BELIEVE WHAT WE BELIEVE

by Brad Jersak

In 1995, ninety-five million people were mesmerized by live TV news coverage of police cars chasing O.J. Simpson's white Bronco down the 405 freeway in Southern California.¹ For 133 days, America was glued to a media circus murder trial, described then as "a great trash novel come to life." Over 91% of all American television viewers

tuned in for the stunning verdict.

Do You Believe He Did It?

Did he do it? Was the NFL superstar actually guilty of killing Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman? Did the jury get it right? Why was O.J. acquitted at his criminal trial but declared guilty at the civil trial? Guilty or not guilty: what do you believe? Can we ever know for sure?

The trials of O.J. Simpson provide a clear illustration of **two competing ways of defining belief or knowledge**. The criminal trial was based on proving with certainty that O.J. was guilty of murder. Because the court could not establish 100% proof of certain guilt, he was acquitted. Any doubt at all meant the judge had to release him, even though a 1999 Gallup survey showed 75 percent of those polled believed he either definitely or probably was guilty. But when Simpson's trial went to civil court, guilt was determined not by absolute proof, but by "preponderance of evidence."

The prosecution was only required to show sufficient cause (not airtight proof) to *believe with confidence* (not certainty) that he did it. In the end, a reasonable doubt was allowed, but enough accumulated evidence led to an assured guilty verdict. It appeared that justice and truth were served better by moving from criminal court to the civil court, with the understanding that we can be very confident of something we can't

absolutely prove... enough to say, "We believe he did it. Indeed, we know he did it."

What Do You believe?

Why do you believe what you believe? For example, if you believe in God, can you *prove* he exists and that he knows and loves you? In spite of reasonable doubts, would your confidence in God lead you to say, "I *know* he loves me"? Would you bet your

We all seem to believe that before creation, there was God or there was not God. Why?

Because we want to...I promise you: it has nothing to do with evidence.

IMAGE COURTESY OF NASA

life on it? Or your soul? How about your children? Under that pressure our list of certitudes shrinks, often only to what we think we can prove.

We might believe and even know the sun will rise tomorrow. But in matters of faith, we often feel shaken with secret doubts and at the same time, face external pressures to appear sure...even dogmatic. We feel we must publicly confess fragile convictions as certain while on the inside, our fingers are crossed and we are just trying to

both sides and given the reasons why we must believe it. The lose-lose choice seemed to be between idiocy and heresy.

Because I loved God, I remember attempting to bolster my convictions with Josh McDowell's book, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. I hoped he would provide me with enough proof to prepare me for the "perilous paganism" of university, where it seemed all my peers lost their faith unless they chose the Bible college alternative. Oddly, in the end my faith survived, not by

The battle continues on some fronts, where Richard Dawkins and his "New Atheists" continue to butt heads with the "young-earth Creationists" of the Christian right. Thank God, others like Conor Cunningham of Nottingham University are doing the deeper work that defuses the tension.³ Meanwhile, **belief seems to function on an entirely different plane, as something more intuitive.** Something more akin to preference! We all

Nowadays, we tend to think the highest way of knowing is to prove something in a court or test it in a lab.

"fake it 'til we make it."

Such a dilemma deserves pondering. What do we believe? Why do we believe? What can we know? What is knowing?

The Battle for Belief

As a Christian adolescent in the 1970's, the battle for belief raged within my mind. My science teachers showed me how evolution disproved the "God-delusion." My pastors taught me that faith in God refuted the Darwinist lie. What is a youngster to believe? My peers and I were not asked what we believed, except by ultimatum. We were *told* what we *must* believe—indoctrinated from

...in the days of the ancient philosophers, thinkers like Plato did not regard "proving" as the most significant way of knowing.

fleeing science or immersing in apologetics,² but through simple wonder as I dissected a cow's eyeball in the biology lab!

Indoctrination does not produce belief. All it can manage is to press one into a mold of religious conformity to which the heart resists with passive-aggressive resentment. Eventually it will emerge in full-on revolt.



seem to believe that before creation, there was God or there was not God. Why? Because we *want* to. Why do we want to? What is it about belief in God that draws me and repels Dawkins? Whatever it is, I promise you: it has nothing to do with evidence.

More likely, we hunt for data that verifies what we already *want* to believe.

Enlightened Ways of Knowing

These questions have been very much alive since ancient times, with a special focus on a hierarchy of knowing.

Nowadays, we tend to think the highest way of knowing is to prove something in a court or test it in a lab. We look for airtight logic and irrefutable evidence as if these are the only and best ways to know truth for sure. And on the other hand, most moderns treat belief or faith in God as much more iffy—as less than knowing or even the opposite of knowing.

We inherited this mindset from the “Enlightenment Era” (1650-1800), when teachers like Immanuel Kant argued that if you can’t *prove* it, you can’t *know* it (but you can still *believe* in it). Before long, this idea broadened to say, “If you can’t prove it, you can’t know it and you shouldn’t believe it, because it’s not real.”

Applying this to God, Kant said you can’t *know* God exists because you can’t prove it, but you can still *believe* in God. But eventually, those who followed would say, “You can’t prove God exists, so he doesn’t.”

Ancient Ways of Knowing

But in the days of the ancient philosophers, thinkers like Plato did not regard “proving” as the most significant way of knowing. Instead, they said the highest form of knowing is to fix our hearts and minds on eternal and invisible things, with God at the top, followed by the ideals of

...ultimate truths...could be revealed to us from above and seen with the eyes of the heart.



This is the true “enlightenment”—that God’s light of truth shines, opening our eyes to see the reality of God, the world and ourselves. This is the truest and purist kind of knowledge.

beauty, truth and justice. Plato described this heart-focus on God’s eternal attributes in grand terms like *knowledge* and *understanding*. He felt these ultimate truths could not be figured out or proven by any human mind. But they could be *known*! They could be revealed to us from above and seen with the eyes of the heart.

This is true “enlightenment”—that God’s light of truth shines, opening our eyes to see the reality of God, the world and ourselves. This is the truest and purist kind of knowledge.

Below these eternal truths on Plato’s scale, we also conceive and ponder abstract mathematical or scientific objects with our minds. For example, we imagine and illustrate points, lines, cubes and spheres. On this secondary tier, Plato used words like *thought* and *reasoning*, which he took to be lower forms of knowing.

This is key: **reason was perceived as a lower form of knowing than revelation!** As the great mathematician, Blaise Pascal said many centuries later,

“The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. It is the heart that experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason.”

Another rung down this ladder of reality we find the visible world of temporal (time-bound and temporary) things. We observe this world directly with our five senses. But even though we can measure, dissect and diagram time-bound and temporary things scientifically, they are not eternal—they perish.

Furthermore, our senses can deceive us. So the words Plato used for this level of knowing were *belief* and *confidence*. Belief and confidence are good—and often quite accurate. But even when it comes to scientific evidence, our knowledge is limited by the possibilities of doubt and disagreement.

Finally, at the bottom of Plato’s heap, he reckons people spend a lot of time mesmerized by images and shadows, mere



The School of Athens by Raffaello Sanzio, 1509, showing Pythagoras

ardent rationalists because we read them through modern lenses. But the truth is that all their philosophy, science, mathematics and art were a quest to discover how the goodness of a transcendent God is mediated into this world.

Remember Pythagoras' theorem? $a^2+b^2=c^2$. It helps to realize that the Pythagoreans were not just messing with triangles and geometry. They were on a *spiritual* journey. They asked, "How does eternal truth, beauty and justice find its way into a living human soul or a society?"

Their search anticipates Christ during roughly the same timeframe that Isaiah prophesied the coming of God's suffering servant.

But as valuable as the Greeks' work has been for civilization, the prophets and apostles of our faith contribute additional keys that are essential to knowing and believing. They offer a serious upgrade over the philosophers, essential for leading us into face-to-face fellowship with God.

Biblical Knowing

First, by way of agreement with the ancient Greeks, the Bible confirms that knowing God is the most important kind of knowing available. Jeremiah writes:

This is what the Lord says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

Jesus adds, in his "high priestly prayer" to his Father:

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

For the apostle John, *knowledge* of God and *belief* in Christ are virtually the same, resulting in eternal life. Thus I will make a shift in language now, referring to this life-giving relationship with God as *faith-knowledge*.

Faith-Knowledge Is Revealed by the Spirit

Moreover, the apostle Paul confirms Plato's belief that faith-knowledge is not figured out. Rather, it must be and has been revealed from above. But how? The New Testament offers critical keys to *how* or *why* we believe that eclipse the insights offered by Greek philosophy. First, Paul ascribes this revelation as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

"What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

At the end of chapter two, Paul recalls Isaiah's bewildered question,

"Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" (restated from Isaiah 40:13).

For Isaiah, the answer is a rhetorical "No one!" but for Paul, there's a new answer in town: *But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16).* By God's Spirit, our hearts have been enlightened to behold and reflect the glory of God in

Pythagoreans were not just messing with triangles and geometry. They were on a spiritual journey. They asked, "How does eternal truth, beauty and justice find its way into a living human soul or a society?" Their search anticipates Christ...

reflections of reality. We convince ourselves that the passing fads, fashions and whims of our society are somehow real, but actually, what we think we know amounts to *opinion* and *conjecture*, *illusion* and *delusion*. Vanity, as it is called in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Vanity is the combination of pride and worthlessness. It's "dust in the wind," as the band Kansas sang. But also, never forget that vanity can be malicious. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, the citizens of Vanity Fair burned the character, Faithful, at the stake.

I find much of Plato's ladder of knowing extremely helpful and consistent with a biblical worldview. Too often the Greeks are misrepresented as

the face of Jesus Christ
(2 Corinthians 4:6)

Faith-Knowledge Is Revealed by the Gospel

Faith-knowledge also comes by hearing *the word about Christ* (Romans 10:17). Indeed, the “word about Christ” is *what* we believe and *what* the Spirit has revealed. The *what*—the content—of our belief is the story of Jesus! We call this the gospel: that God loved us all so deeply that he sent his only Son into the world to show us the gracious love of his Father. The “greatest story ever told” is about the death and resurrection of Love incarnate. As we hear the good news story of this God-revealing Son, faith is aroused in us; eternal life is birthed in us (John 3:16).

As my friend Brian Zahnd likes to say, the gospel is not a plan, a formula, a theory, three steps or four laws. The gospel is the story of Jesus. Mysteriously, hearing it sets a spark that ignites belief and deposits in us the knowledge of God.

Faith-Knowledge Is Revealed by Love

The third unique Christian contribution to epistemology (the study of how we know) is that knowledge and love cannot be separated. *Rationalists* like Rene Descartes believed human reason is the highest path to knowing. “I think, therefore I am,” he said. *Empiricists* like Francis Bacon believed physical evidence is the best route to knowing. But the Scriptures teach us that *love is the height of knowing*, with the love of God as the apex of all knowing. Here is Paul’s prayer to that effect:

*And I pray that you,
being rooted and
established in love, may*

have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17-19, my emphasis).

For Paul, the Holy Spirit empowers us with the capacity to *grasp* (understand) the immensity of the Father’s love. Our knowledge of God—our belief in him—is rooted in the soil of love, and our faces are directed Son-ward, from where the Father pours out Son-showers of love upon our hearts. This whole passage in Ephesians 3 speaks of *grasping* and *knowing* as nothing less than the *experiential* knowledge of love. That is, I don’t know God “objectively”—like a scientist might *know* the human genome. Rather, the highest form of knowing is more analogous to the intimacy of lovers. I may not be able to *prove* that I love my wife or that my wife loves me... nevertheless, I *know* it with enduring confidence.

The Fallacy of Objectivity

Rather than perceiving this kind of love-experienced faith-knowledge as the zenith of human understanding, modern-minded critics often lampoon it as terribly “subjective” and far less reliable than the detached

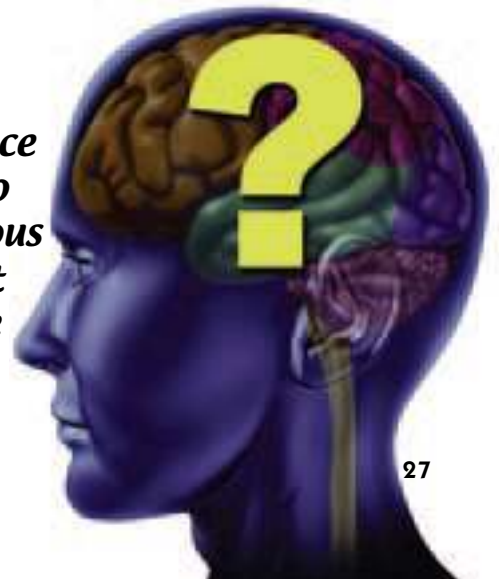
Indoctrination does not produce belief. All it can manage is to press one into a mold of religious conformity to which the heart resists with passive-aggressive resentment. Eventually it will emerge in full-on revolt.

“objective” facts. Worse, the supposedly clear-minded posture of “objectivity” has somehow become a spiritual virtue! What does this mean?

The idea is that the subject or observer mustn’t pollute their object of study with personal interpretations or biases. As a theologian, when I introduce love as essential to interpreting a Scripture, I may be (and have been) accused of *sentimentalism*. As if love will lead me away from the truth and into error. So then, we are meant to stay detached and neutral towards our object of study, whether it’s a piece of bark, a human being, a biblical passage or God himself!

Subjective involvement—worst of all *love*—would surely taint the data. The problem provides countless examples: results of medical studies manipulated by those biased with a cause, client transference in the counselor’s office, or sentimentalism infecting our Bible hermeneutics. Love has no place in a laboratory, a psychiatrist’s office, or a Hebrew word study—“rose-colored glasses” represent a distortion of knowledge.⁴

But this thinking will *not* do! The most obvious problem is that objectivism reduces others, including God, into the role of inert objects. We hear that pornography is bad



because it *objectifies* women. But theology becomes just as bad when it objectifies God and neighbor!

The ancients argued that higher levels of reality (God, truth, beauty, justice) *require* higher ways of knowing that are suited to the task. To really know the highest realities requires love. Consider the importance of love in practice: the scientist's love of beauty (wonder) or a counselor's love for people (compassion) are often the driving force for scientific and medical research. The most severe mental and physical disabilities respond better and sometimes *only* to loving-care. And the living God, whose presence can't be proven in a court or measured in a lab, *can* be known and experienced through love.

On the negative side, when we have undertaken biblical and theological studies as a sterile analysis of old manuscripts and dead folks, what was the fruit? Such "objectivity" is loveless and graceless and inevitably spirals into violence. For example:

- History has shown repeatedly how the so-called "objective" study of God's word makes for a comic-book read of Old Testament. Whenever we have hardened our hearts to the graphic genocides portrayed there, the next move was to dehumanize our own living enemies in order to kill them in God's name.

- "Objective" interpretation of the Bible often leads us into an oppressive quagmire of legalism. When we reduce the will of God to loveless laws with no regard for their human consequences, we become as condemning as the Pharisees. How many young people have taken their own lives as they

struggled with gender identity and were bullied by hardheaded Christians?

- Through the "objective" application of isolated texts, we condemn the brokenhearted with our rigid demands around family ethics and church practice. How many women have stayed in abusive marriages for life as victims of domestic violence because the church made leaving taboo? How many others have been shut down or shut up in their Spirit-given gifts and callings solely because of their gender?

Such are the expected fruits of religion co-opted by modern objectivism. Thank God for the gifts of the Spirit, the gospel and love, through which we come into Christ-centered and grace-based faith-knowledge!

Confidence Versus Certainty

In reaction to the black-and-white, either/or and us/them thinking of modernity (where Christendom at large remains stuck), postmodern thought frequently rides the pendulum wildly into radical skepticism. Many postmoderns would say you can't know truth because (a) *there is no such thing as absolute truth* and/or (b) *each society and each individual constructs their own truth*.

Moderate postmoderns would say there might be absolute truth, but we can't say for sure what it is, and therefore, can't claim to know it. Even if I think I know the capital-T truth, certainly not everyone will agree with me. So is it fair to say "I know"? Are we left with Kant's less-than-knowing kind of belief?

IMAGE COURTESY OF NASA



The Christian philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, has broken through this impasse in his series of works on *warrant*. His core idea is that in their lust for certainty, moderns reduced knowing to what we can prove. But, he says, certain rational or empirical proof is neither necessary nor even adequate for real knowledge, especially when it comes to our faith-knowledge of God. That is, I don't *need* scientific proof to know that God exists and even if I had such proof, it would be insufficient in order for me to know him.

Rather, Plantinga proposes that instead of demanding *certainty*, Christians can pursue *confidence*. Instead of airtight *proof*, we ought to accumulate sufficient *warrant* until it is true to say, "we know." Warrant in this context means the whole variety of reasons we come to believe something.

What if we can't and don't even need to make an airtight case? What if our faith is derived from *many* legitimate warranting factors? These may include rational arguments and scientific evidence, but so much more. To these we add our own intuitions, feelings, senses, experiences and memories. They range from the authority of eyewitness reports (as we have in the four Gospels) and testimonies of

Young-Earth Creationism

Definition: Young-earth creationism is the belief that God created the universe over the course of one literal week, roughly 6000 years ago. The primary concern of young-earth creationists is to defend a literal interpretation of the Bible's creation story using scientific evidence. Their specific foci include denying a "big bang" creation billions of years ago, refuting Darwinian evolution re: the origins of mankind and defending a literally global flood at the time of Noah.

Sample History:

Some of the church fathers assumed a young earth creation, but most interpreted Genesis allegorically with no doctrinal demand other than the belief that God created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). There was not a scientific concern with when or how creation happened, but simply that God was responsible.

But later, the great reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546) favored the round number 4000 B.C. as a date for creation.

Astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) concluded that 3992 B.C. was the probable date.

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1623), the character Rosalind says, "The poor world is almost six thousand years old."

Bishop James Ussher (1650) literally calculated Bible dates and times, setting creation at 4004 B.C. These dates were then included in future printings of the King James Bible, including those distributed to hotel rooms by the Gideons.

In the Scopes Monkey Trial (1925) Clarence Darrow used Ussher's dating in court in his examination of William Jennings Bryan.

Twentieth century apologists like Henry Morris and John Whitcomb established ICR (Institute for Creation Research) to document scientific "proof" for a young earth.

Problems:

Young-earth creationism falls into the modernist trap, assuming that the Bible's concern is scientific literalism. Like their opponents, young-earth creationists get hooked into the Enlightenment mentality that the highest way of knowing is scientific proof. Thus, they often confuse and replace evangelism (sharing the good news of Jesus) with apologetics ("defending their interpretation of faith").

On the other hand, while they use science to support a literal and recent seven-day creation, they also vocally demonize science, as if faith and science are at war. This presumed conflict becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, with repeated battles fought in courts and at school boards over control of public school science curriculum. These clashes are usually fought uncharitably, and its warriors are criticized for distorting data committing perjury.

More recent creationist theories, such as ID (intelligent design) argue that the young-earth creationists try to prove too much, and thus weaken the case for a Creator whose work may have spanned billions of years through divine origins and natural processes, observable as scientific facts. Thus, science and faith are friends committed together to the joyful discovery of unfolding truth.

The real problem, says Conor Cunningham (*Darwin's Pious Idea*), is the angry fundamentalism of radical Darwinians on the left and extremist creationists on the right. Both are heresies of their respective disciplines, "cooking their books" to spite the other, and perverting the truth in the process.

Scientific and biblical scholarship at their best play well together as they pursue truth along different paths. In Cunningham's model, solid scientific exploration and top-notch biblical studies are of no threat to each other.

fellow believers, all the way to personal encounters with God's presence, answers to prayer and the Spirit's gifts. On their own, none of these constitutes proof, but together, they count and they grow until we truly come to believe in our hearts and know with confidence that God not only exists, but that in Christ, he knows and loves us.

How You Came to Believe

Let me ask the reader. Why do you believe what you believe? How did your faith honestly begin? For many, it began with the instruction of a parent—and that counts. For others, it was

through the testimony of a friend—and that counts. Some may have spontaneously believed while reading Scripture or watching a sunset—and that counts. Others came to belief through a slow nagging conviction or a dramatic encounter—either is a valid beginning. For some, the beginning of faith is a mountaintop experience, while others meet God at rock-bottom in their despair.

No matter how you first came to believe, I encourage you to grow in confidence and feed your faith-knowledge of God in all these ways and many more. But remember: at

the end of the day, even your faith is a grace-gift (Ephesians 2:8). Jesus authored your faith in the first place, and you can trust him to bring it to perfection (Hebrews 12:2). □

1. Full details at <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/simpson/simpson.htm>.

2. 'Apologetics' is not apologizing—it is the study of how to defend/argue for the faith.

3. Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Eerdmans, 2011).

4. I describe this in my dissertation, "We are not our own: the Platonic Christianity of George P. Grant" (Bangor University, 2012), 156.

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The Kiln

You need a kiln! Tony, my ceramic sculptor friend was steering me into clay. My wife, Kaye, agreed. I was already selling a few sculptures in other, less enduring media and had already produced a few ceramic pieces. It seemed like the next logical step. So I did my research and ordered a ceramic kiln—a high temperature oven that solidifies clay. Kaye generously contributed most of the cost. I'm still experimenting, but I think Kaye eventually expects some return on her investment. If that doesn't happen, the kiln purchase will absolve her of my birthday gifts for the next 20 years.

Our kiln is relatively easy to operate. All the complicated temperature adjustments and kiln-sitting of the past have been replaced by programmable electronics. What can go wrong? Many, many, many things.

The inside of a kiln is both hellish and glorious. Heat in excess of 2,000 degrees does far more than bake clay—it actually transforms particulate silica and other elements of fragile, dried clay into something completely new and enduring.

But the heat of a kiln also creates huge stresses in clay objects. Trapped moisture can turn to explosive steam, straining hidden flaws, causing objects to crack or shatter.

My first experiences with our kiln were both delightful and catastrophic. Being thrifty, I made some tiles from a block of clay left over from years ago, but I couldn't remember its firing temperature. I fired the tiles much too hot. The result was something like large, melted, volcanic chocolate chip cookies (which ruined some of the shelves in my kiln). I was deeply depressed for about five minutes. Then I saw their potential, splashed some glaze on them, refired them, cut them out with a tile saw, hung them on the wall of our front porch and called them art. I've received several compliments, thanks to my lack of skill.

One larger sculpture looked great—until I fired it. A weakness or air pocket in the clay caused a quarter of the figurine to shatter in

the kiln. Again, I was depressed for several minutes. Not to be thwarted, I used ceramic putty to patch it together. I ground off the rough edges, painted it with automotive enamel, and it ended up in a gallery.

I'm too cheap to throw away perfectly bad clay. But there's another angle. I've seen too many accidents yield really cool art. And that's a good thing—because even the best potter (or ceramic sculptor) can't be 100 percent sure that there won't be some flaws among the many variables involved in the process.

You've probably read Bible passages that talk about God as the potter and us as the clay. Sometimes we read into these passages the idea that God is sculpting perfect little Christians on an assembly line. As we move down the conveyor belt of life, he grinds off rough edges and polishes us until we are paragons of godly character, at which time we flit off to our eternal reward. Meanwhile, over in a dark corner of God's workshop is a scrapheap of ugly, misshapen, broken vessels that didn't pan out for God. Periodically, he angrily hurls them into the everlasting, fiery torture of his hell-kiln. I won't go any further because this doesn't comport with reality, the Bible, logic or the nature of God as I understand him.

I'm not sure about the theological correctness of this, but I think that God's kiln is the world. Of course, we forget that life in the kiln is not the goal—it's the process that we all have to live through. Yet God's method of working his clay is radically different than my method. To begin with, in Christ he gets in the kiln with his clay, enduring the stresses and explosions along with us. Sure, from appearances it may seem that some of us are destined for the scrapheap. But God's fire is not there to destroy—it's there to transform. In the end, his fire transforms our fragile, flawed, broken shapes into magnificent works of his art, each one totally unique, yet reflecting the image of Jesus.

If only my kiln worked like His. □

—Monte Wolverton

You and Me and Our Father

The famous poet Robert Frost once said that *home is a place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.*

If I went back and reviewed the sermons I have given over the last 15-20 years, there is no doubt in my mind that the parable of the Prodigal Son (with its epic story of homecoming) has been the one biblical passage I have most often studied, reflected on and attempted to explain.

In the course of these studies I have discovered erroneous assumptions we have about this parable. Here are two conclusions to which I have come, which might also help you identify the real message and theme of this parable:

1. Jesus didn't give this parable its name.

You and I know this parable by the name it's been given by religious professionals, by translators and editors and preachers. But wait just a minute—who decided to name this parable so that our direction is focused on the youngest son who leaves home and squanders his inheritance—and were they correct in doing so?

If we start out reading this parable assuming that it is a story about a wasteful son, who took all the money his father would leave to him as an inheritance, and walked on the wild side only to wind up broke and living on the streets a short time later—how is that a news flash? That happens all the time.

For almost 50 years of my life I thought this parable was a story about repenting of bad things that we do and how when we repent and change our ways then God will forgive

us. Reading this parable as if it's intended as a story to motivate people to repent is a huge mistake.

People making a mess of their lives is hardly a news flash. That happens all the time—you and I have done that many times. Of course there's a lesson to be learned from the school of hard knocks—but is that the primary message of this parable? The real news flash in this story is the father—he is the one who plays an unpredictable, unbelievable and shocking role.

2. I think the parable is equally, perhaps more importantly, named the parable of the Prodigal Father.

Notice the first words of Jesus as he introduces the parable: "There was a man who had two sons..." (Luke 15:11). There was a *man*, not there was a *son*.

As we read the parable from the perspective of the father, and from learning what our heavenly Father is like, we learn some things normally not taught or emphasized by Christ-less religion:

- Here is a father who seems to let himself be taken advantage of.

- Here is a father who does not demand that when his son comes home he promises to never, ever run away and disgrace his father again. There are no payments to be made before favor is restored... because the favor of the father never diminished.

- Here is a father who we might initially characterize as a doddering old fool, who apparently accepts a half-baked apology from his spoiled brat of a son without critical thought.



- Here is a father who apparently doesn't believe in discipline—who absolutely ignores all of the principles of "tough love."

- Here is a father who is so prodigal, so irresponsible, so wildly extravagant that he seems to cast aside all rules. *The father seems to love his son more than rules!*

- Here is a father who, once he is acknowledged as playing the leading role in Jesus' story, gives performance-based religion no end of difficulties trying to associate him as being the heavenly Father. After all, it seems that the father's actions mean that any son of his can go and live life any old way he wants to—it doesn't matter, he will always welcome his children home.

You know, some people think the most important question about God is "Does God Exist?" No, the most important question about God for you and me is "who is this God and how can we embrace his incredible love and grace?"

The one who wrote the script of this parable tells us who God is—so this parable is truly all about **You and Me and Our Father**. □

Join us for the complete message "You and Me and Our Father" at Christianity Without the Religion Audio, the week of February 1, 2015.

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Below please find a summary of each weekly *CWRa* sermon for the next two months. Join us and tell a friend!

Sympathy and Empathy Sympathy involves knowing about and feeling *for* someone who is in pain while empathy is all about experiencing the pain of another *with* them. Jesus came to be one of us, to be with us—he is always “there” for us. Week of January 4.

The Jesus Train The lyrics of the old gospel song “This Train Is Bound for Glory” proclaim that it doesn’t carry “no gamblers, smokers, two-bit liars or small-time jokers—but “The Jesus Train” welcomes all those people and many more. Week of January 11.

“My House Will Be Full” While good, church-going folk of Jesus’ day excluded many “non-members” and those they determined to be ne’er-do-wells from their banquets and festivities, Jesus proclaimed that all are invited—he said “my house will be full.” Week of January 18.

Transforming Prayer If you’re looking for some direction about how your prayers can rise above the level of “give me this—give me that: help me, save me, heal me” then you will want to join us for “Transforming Prayer.” Week of January 25.

You and Me and Our Father Religious hard-liners choke on the beauty and depth of God’s love, accusing those who believe in God’s love as being permissive fools, soft-headed and soft-hearted, lacking standards and rules. Funny—that’s what a well-known parable seems to say about our heavenly Father and his no-limits love for you and me. Week of February 1.

Love Is Action God’s love, in action, is far from a dream-like-never-never-fantasy-land. God’s love is real, it exists in and through the tough times, the trenches, the pits and ditches into which we fall—it is with us as we walk through dark valleys of our lives. Week of February 8.

“Just a Cold and Broken Hallelujah” Join us as we ponder and meditate about the love of God expressed to us and for us and with us in the life of Jesus, who experienced the disappointments, betrayals and rejections common to us all—and through it all served us with his love—and he still does! Week of February 15.

Giving Up... There is no doubt that sacrifice, giving up and surrendering are hallmarks of Christ-centered faith—but, do we give up something in order to convince God to love us, or do we willingly surrender to him because he has already given us his abundant love? Week of February 22.