

SUMMER 2014

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]



“The War to End All Wars” (1914-1918)

Was It for This the Clay Grew Tall?

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

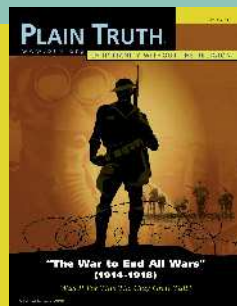
Features

- 14** **When America Went to Hell** *Unfurled flags of nationalism hide the things that make for peace.*
- 20** **Wide Open Spaces** *Grazing on grace—versus feed lot religion.*
- 25** **“Show Me the Door!”** *The “Millennials” (born from 1980-2000) are in spiritual exodus.*
- 29** **Connecting or Disconnecting From God?** *God created us with a spiritual desire to connect with him.*
- 32** **Why Millennials are Leaving the Church...** *The church needs a change in substance; not just style.*
- 34** **Jesus > Religion** *Religion is man searching for God. Jesus is God searching for man.*
- 42** **Healing the Gospel** *When did the good news become bad news?*



Departments

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



Cover Story **5**

It has been said “those who cannot

remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” A century has passed since World War I began (1914-1918). As we reflect on this “war to end all wars,” a familiar cycle emerges: optimism, tragedy, disillusionment and decline. We might clue into the important role of disillusionment... toppling our idolatrous illusions and calling us to a greater, more blessed hope.

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Inside This Issue

The dawning of the twentieth century was to be humanity’s coming of age...but the great modern project was about to implode in the bloodbath of two world wars and industrial-technological tyranny. “The War to End All Wars” **9**

Despite a great “revival,” a nation of Christians was thrust into a hell of cannonballs, Gatling guns, field hospitals and amputation saws. When America Went to Hell **16**

Christianity was intended to be an organism, not an organization. Wide Open Spaces **21**

The church is gaping down the throat of its own death and can’t face it. Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church **32**

There has been a long history of revival preachers who have proclaimed this “pre-gospel” of fear and condemnation—telling people the bad news so they could then receive the good news, wounding people first so they could then heal those wounds. Healing the Gospel **44**

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Plain Truth Ministries proclaims authentic Christianity without the religion. Our work is Christ-centered, based on God's amazing grace, giving hope to those burned out by legalistic religion.

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Escaping Shame's Holding Patterns

I wanted to tell you how much I appreciated Captain Grant Corriveau's cover story "Escaping Shame's Holding Patterns" in the Spring 2014 *Plain Truth*. The first time I read it I realized it was a remarkable article, and then at the very end there was a note explaining that Grant is a retired airline captain. About a week later the sensational drama/disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 started, and I once again went back to read, with new appreciation, the wonderful insights offered by this retired Christian pilot.

Texas

• *It is humbling and a great honor to see my words so skillfully edited and presented. Moreover, to see them included in the same magazine as professional wordsmiths such as Greg Albrecht, Brad Jersak, Steve Brown and others. Wow! God works in mysterious ways, indeed. –Grant Corriveau*



Jailbreak! The Meaning of the Cross

I agree with author Brad Jersak's portrayal of the cross as a "victorious jailbreak." His sentence "He defeated the jailor and rescued us from his bondage.... Hell's prison gates fell off and now—already—we are free to abandon our cells" is great! This takes into account the reality of Satan and evil, the Adversary. I appreciated the personal story about Peter Helms—it gives a helpful expression that makes the point of the article clearer.

California



"...I will give you rest."

Thanks for the article on "I will give you rest" by Greg Albrecht in the Spring 2014 *PT*. This is so brilliant in clarifying grace-led, grace-given work in God's restoration. Nailed it!

British Columbia, Canada

I really appreciate the approach of taking eight words from Jesus' comment in Matthew 11:28-29 and drawing interpretive application from those words. The emphasis on "Come directly to ME" is so important. What a powerful explanation of the contrast of the old covenant by noting that the old covenant begins with *work* and concludes with *rest*. While the new covenant begins with *rest* in Christ and finds expression in His *handiwork* manifest in Christian lives.

Email

Thanks for the article about resting in Christ. This is one of the clearest, most concise explanations of this concept I have ever read or heard. I also liked Greg's use of "Southern" expressions to make his point. I say "ya'll done good!"

North Carolina



Razing Hell

Thanks for your recent article on "Razing Hell" [Spring 2014 *PT*]. My story is like so many others—I grew up in a strict, rules-happy church until I left for Vietnam. When I returned I didn't go back to church. My wife and I started our family and built a life, and we avoided organized religion like the plague. It's been over four decades now and I have grandkids and I am thinking about retirement. I am also thinking that my life won't go on, so perhaps out of guilt as

much as anything, I started to go back to church. I went back to my old church and nothing has changed. They're still trying to whip everyone into shape and the threat of hell, just like it used to be, is the way they try to keep everyone in line. A while back I read an article on your website titled "Eternal Torture—Divine or Human Vengeance" that was very helpful on this topic. Keep it up PTM!

California

I am cancelling my subscription to *The Plain Truth* and I will no longer support your ministry financially. Your article "Razing Hell" (Spring 2014 *Plain Truth*) was the final straw! You are liberal; you are trying to take hell out of Christianity and I will not sit by watching it happen!

Illinois



PTM Year-End Report

Thank you for the year-end update. I so rejoice over the responses of those whose lives are touched by CWR/PTM and the list of those partnering with this ministry around the world. I really appreciate your CDs and your monthly ministry letters. Thank you for helping us to understand grace. I pray that God will continue to bless all of you at PTM.

Minnesota



Like a Phone Call From God

When I receive your publications it's like getting a personal phone call from God. I've been so blessed by PTM/CWR. I've looked into about every religion and I saw so much error with the same old stuff. They claim to be the only true way to God, but it seems all they care about is what you can give them. We even had a local church buy an ATM so we wouldn't have an excuse for not having cash for the collection plate! Thank you so much for bringing the truth of God's grace to us. Please keep it up.

Washington

The work of PTM/CWR always lifts me in spirit and gives me encouragement. I so enjoy all the writers and I pray God enables you to continue this work.

Texas



Front Page

I just read the PTM Front Page article entitled "Can we lose our salvation?" If you are saved, your life will change. It is a daily struggle for every Christian to deny ourselves. When we deny ourselves, we stop thinking so much about our needs and desires (we know God takes care of that). Thank you for "Christianity WITHOUT the religion." This is what we all need to read and hear!

Email



CWR audio

I am a former Pentecostal minister and I recently found you on YouTube. I would like permission to use CWR audio and other resources for my small Bible study group. I'm sorry to hear so many people say that because of all the religious rules and regulations it's easier to live "unsaved" than to live as a Christian. I appreciate your teaching of "Christianity without the religion" and I want to become a PTM Partner.

Virginia

Spiritual Soup Volume 2

Thank you for Pastor Greg's new book. I can't put this book down! I think that anyone who is looking for the truth about God's love will find it in these pages of hope and wisdom from the Bible. I pray it will fall into the hands of many who need help to get through the ups and downs of life—those who are feeling lost.

Delaware

• For details about how to order your copy of *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2* see page 18 of this issue.

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“The War to End All Wars” (1914-1918)

Was It for This the Clay Grew Tall?

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.

“It is sweet and fitting to die for your country.”—Horace, Odes (III.2.13)

Vivid memories of words, pictures and emotions haunt me over thirty years later. High school English, my senior year and Mr. Howell is perched on the front corner of his desk. He’s using poetry to paint traumatizing portraits of the ironically mislabeled “war to end all wars.” Words become pictures—teenage soldiers “floundering” and “fumbling” in the muddy, bloody trenches of the Second Battle of Ypres. They’re devising makeshift masks

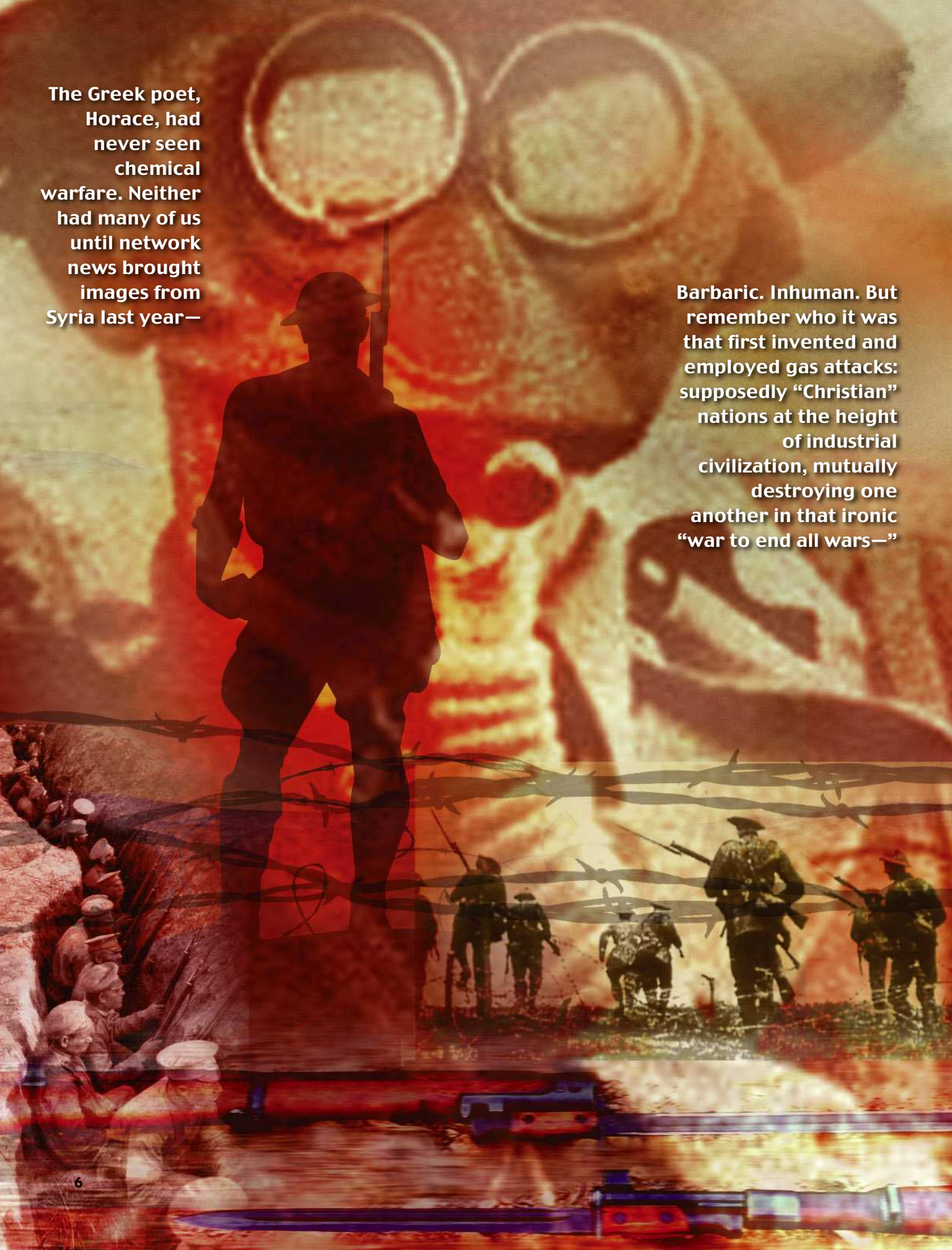
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Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling
And flound’ring like—
Dim, th

by Brad
Jersak



The Greek poet,
Horace, had
never seen
chemical
warfare. Neither
had many of us
until network
news brought
images from
Syria last year—

Barbaric. Inhuman. But
remember who it was
that first invented and
employed gas attacks:
supposedly “Christian”
nations at the height
of industrial
civilization, mutually
destroying one
another in that ironic
“war to end all wars—”



of urine-soaked rags against the apocalyptic horror of mustard gas attacks. Mr. Howell, now weeping, recites an excerpt from Wilfred Owen's poem, *Dulce et Decorum Est*:

*Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags,
we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we
turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began
to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had
lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod.
All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to
the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines
that dropped behind.
Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An
ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in
time;
But someone still was yelling out
and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire
or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and
thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him
drowning.
In all my dreams, before my
helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering,
choking, drowning...*

Dulce et Decorum Est? "Sweet and fitting"? Owen goes on to bitterly

describe the convulsive gargling of "froth-corrupted lungs" and says NO! Participants in "the Great War" would never recount such a lie to children who dream of doing or being something glorious.

The Greek poet, Horace, had never seen chemical warfare. Neither had many of us until network news brought images from Syria last year—hundreds of civilians, including children, wrapped in death shrouds awaiting burial. Barbaric. Inhuman. But remember who it was that first invented and employed gas attacks: supposedly "Christian" nations at the height of industrial civilization, mutually destroying one another in that ironic "war to end all wars"—the greatest human disaster since the Black Death (1348-50). Nine million dead before all was said and done.

Futility

Wilfred Owen knew the futility of war. Like Mr. Howell, an English teacher by profession, Owen enlisted after visiting wounded soldiers in a hospital. He fought for two years, was injured, but then returned to the front. Three months later, on November 4, 1918, he died in a machine gun attack, exactly one week before the war ended.

Perhaps Owen's most famous poem, *Futility*, asks, "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" That is, why had God formed the dust of the earth and caused it to stand erect, to live and breathe and subdue the earth? Was it for this? Had we become modern, in love with our own sense of industry and progress, only to be mowed down for a few yards of mud on an obscure Flemish hill? Or worse—to live out our days blind and maimed in some dreary veteran's hospital?

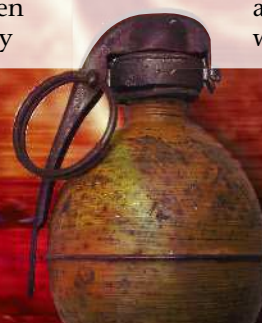
This year marks the centennial of the Great War's fateful beginning. It seems like ancient history, its lessons forgotten, but I still remember Deer Lodge Hospital in Winnipeg, circa 1970...I was six years old. We'd drive by and my mother would tell me in somber tones about so-called survivors of World War I, still confined in those old brick wings five decades later, growing old with their bedsores and respirators, their life an endless wheezing hell. *Was it for this the clay grew tall?*



The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen

The Rise and Fall of Modern Optimism

As we reflect on World War I, a familiar cycle emerges: optimism,





If we view these cycles of history from a higher vantage point, and watch patterns recur a few times over, we might clue into the important role of disillusionment—i.e. toppling our idolatrous illusions and calling us to a greater and more blessed Hope.

tragedy, disillusionment and decline. A century has passed and the old refrain plays again today. If we view these cycles of history from a higher vantage point, and watch patterns recur a few times over, we might clue into the important role of disillusionment—i.e. toppling our idolatrous illusions and calling us to a greater and more blessed Hope.

It's obvious from Owen's poetry that World War I caused devastating disillusionment, and this begs certain questions: What illusions were we under? From where did they come? What resulted from losing them?

Let's back up a few centuries. We're in first half of the 1700s. There's enormous optimism—even faith—among the philosophers and theologians in the doctrine of what I will call "*scrutable providence*." *Providence* in their view meant that God was actively involved in this world and *scrutable* meant we could understand his ways through study and observation. This was the age of Isaac Newton. The universe was God's perfect machine, happily at work through the mechanics of natural law. It was beautiful and good.

Even the imperfections and suffering in the world could be explained within the context of God's good order. Gottfried Leibniz, in his book *Theodicy* (1710)¹ declared that God had made the actual world as the best of all possible worlds. And out of this arose the popular axiom, "All is well!"² There's your optimism.

Then disaster strikes. On November 1, 1755 an earthquake shatters Lisbon, crushing worshippers who are attending All Saints' Day services. Six huge cathedrals collapse on their heads. Survivors flee the building areas to the harbor, only to face the wrath of a tsunami within the hour. The earthquake triggers fires that would last a week, destroying much of the city. Giant waves roll north to Spain and south to Morocco, engulfing entire coastal towns. The death toll has been estimated from sixty to one hundred thousand souls. There's your disaster.

The disaster demanded a response. Everyone, from John Wesley to Rousseau to Kant had an opinion. Ultimately, the theological fallout matched the physical devastation—shaking faith and drowning optimism across Europe. And here again a poet speaks. Voltaire writes his historic piece, "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster or Examination of this Axiom 'All is Well.'" His logic was as simple as it was destructive: if God is actively involved in history, he is immoral and capricious. For many, therefore, there is no God. A few lines suffice:

*O unhappy mortals! O deplorable ground!
O of all the mortals appalling assembly!
Useless pains eternal maintenance!
Misled philosophers who shout: "All is well."
Run, contemplate these dreadful ruins,
These remains, these scraps, these unhappy ashes,
These piled up women, these children one on the other ...
Lisbon is damaged, and one dances in Paris!
Will you, before this mass of victims, claim that
"God is revenged, their death repays their crimes"?*³

Philosopher George P. Grant comments on the poem:

"Voltaire's essay on the earthquake at Cadiz is mainly negative ...concerned with ridiculing belief in the providential ordering of the world. How can there be providential ordering of events when evil such as this occurs? The natural evil of an earthquake cannot be blamed on man, as can the moral evil of sin. Its cause

is elsewhere. The works of God are condemned in the name of morality, so that the idea of God is killed in man's heart. Belief in God is attacked in the name of a pessimism that cannot reconcile the evil of the world with divine purpose."⁴

There's your disillusionment. That is, owed to a particular idea of God, he is treated as the grand illusion! The West felt like it had been awakened from bad superstition. Our disillusionment opened the door for a new age that we called "The Enlightenment"!

But rather than despair, belief in providence was quickly replaced by an equally naïve optimism in what we might call *liberal progressivism*—*liberal* because human freedom is ultimate and *progressivism* because nothing can stop mankind's mad march of progress. We also call this *modernity*, in which we seek redemption through the human spirit and scientific achievement. Unfettered from divine authority, we could now spend the 19th century pursuing and glorying in our discoveries, creating and arranging our world as we want it. It was the triumph of the human will.

Divine providence is secularized into human progress—man, not God, stands as the engineer of history. Without God, the universal Kingdom of Man—the Marxist and American dreams of freedom—is to come, our will be done, on earth as it is in theory. Rationalism and romanticism were the two arms of our humanistic vision. Names like Hegel, Marx, Darwin and Freud mark the era. But so too Britain's Queen Victoria, whose reign (1837-1901) marked a long era of peace, prosperity and culture. A progressive liberal Christianity stood beside the great colonial empires touting "for God and country," eyes fixed on the coming utopia.

The Great War; the Great Disillusion

The dawning of the twentieth century was to be humanity's coming of age—the fulfillment of our hope in progress, reason and freedom. The world was optimistic again—but the great modern project was about to implode in the bloodbath of two world wars and industrial-technological tyranny.

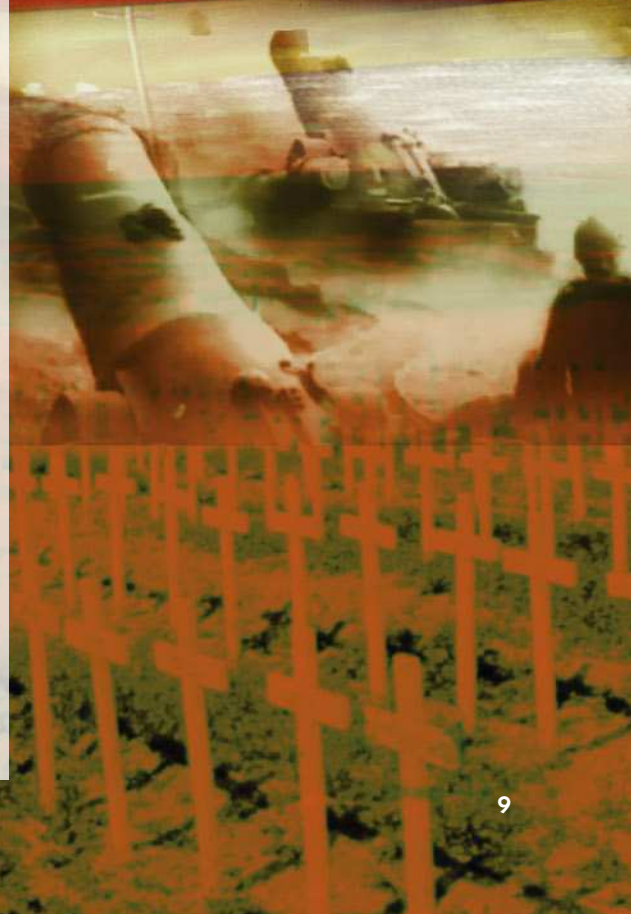
And so we can see how the disillusionment of World War I ran far deeper than revulsion for trench warfare. We had lost ourselves as badly as we lost our God!

World War I knocked the wind out of many a confident progressivist, except, I suppose, for those who would spin the carnage into the lie of the "war to end all wars." They actually hoped to credit the catastrophe with ushering in a new era of peace! With this bloody antithesis to "enlightenment freedom" under humanity's belt, the world had learned its ultimate lesson in the futility of war. Bolstered by the "Roaring Twenties," the remaining optimists could now work for an epoch of peace led by a League of Nations or enlightened regimes such as the British Empire.

But truly, the disillusionment was very real and led to very real results. The following serve as examples:

- **A lost generation:** An entire generation of European (and many North American) males was dead, injured or traumatized. Some whole towns discovered that their fathers, sons, husbands

...we can see how the disillusionment of World War I ran far deeper than revulsion for trench warfare. We had lost ourselves as badly as we lost our God!



and brothers were massacred in a single battle. Out of 16,000 villages in the United Kingdom, only 52 received all their men back alive (none in Ireland or Scotland). We call these rare instances the “thankful villages.”⁵

- **The perversion of technology:** After some great victories in industry, such as the invention of the automobile and airplane, we turned our accomplishments on one another, crafting increasingly lethal instruments of death. We knew the shock and awe of a previously unimagined warfare, with exponentially more horror to come within a generation. Imagine: in 1907 the Wright brothers create the first fixed-wing flying machine. Just over a decade

An entire generation of... males was dead, injured or traumatized. Some whole towns discovered that their fathers, sons, husbands and brothers were massacred in a single battle.

later, the Red Baron is the terror of the skies...twenty-five years after that, Hiroshima is gone with a single bomb!

- **The futility of victory and loss:** At the end of the day, what had the war achieved? According to Alan Brinkley (Columbia

University): nothing. The American perspective was:

...a tremendous disillusionment, particularly among intellectuals and educated people, about the war itself and what many people believe was the fraudulent reasons for the war and for America's entry in the war.

...the war had ended nothing; the war had solved no problems; in fact, had created new problems; and that the United States had entered the war for no good reason, and had been somehow tricked into entering the war.⁶

- **The injustice of the treaty of Versailles:** The Versailles Treaty consisted of impossible demands and humiliating punishments on Germany. The allies, (England, America, France, Russia, et al)

wanted retribution and restitution for the war: basically, the loser pays. The penalties, which if enforced would have extended to the 1980s, were so harsh that they destroyed the German economy. Europe had depended on German productivity in order to prosper, so

when Germany sank, they all did—a key contributor to America's stock market crash (1929) and the subsequent Great Depression.

- **The resentment of Germany and rise of the Nazi party:** This was a second and even more drastic result of the treaty: how could a historically Christian nation be drawn into Hitler's lunacy such that a country once renowned for Luther's 95 theses now bore the proud stamp of the swastika?

- **Another blow to the credibility of the church:** Whether in Germany, where Nazi belt-buckles proclaimed “God with us,” or Britain, where the bishop of London had urged “for God and country,” a very brief spike in church attendance was followed by a steady decline in attendance, unchecked for 100 years. Where faith survived, it could no longer trust the voice of any church that claimed a divine mandate for such ridiculous bloodshed.

To these results, I've gleaned the following examples of further blowback—direct or indirect—but specific to the American scene:⁷



- **Labor radicalism and the “Red Scare”:** Long before the McCarthyism of the 1950’s, America experienced an anti-immigrant “Red Scare.” Revolutionaries who sought to radicalize unions across the nation were met with a wave of witch-hunts, especially ‘the Palmer Raids’ of attorney general Mitchell Palmer. The controversial trial, appeals and execution of Italian anarchists from Milwaukee, Nic Sacco and Bart Vanzetti, drew global attention and protests.⁸

- **American nativism and isolationism:** Given fears of an economic downturn and political infections, American imposed severe restrictions on immigration, first excluding Asians, then also Southern and Eastern Europeans. Further, after the cost and destruction of World War I, Americans wanted to avoid entanglement with a war-prone Europe. Previous treaties called for automatic involvement with allies in their wars, so the US backed off, with the Senate refusing to join the League of Nations (despite President Wilson’s wishes). This speaks later to why America waited until 1942 and Pearl Harbor before joining World War II, already three years in.

- **Backlash against morality:** Temperance leagues and anti-saloon movements had gained momentum internationally all throughout the Great War, but prohibition only passed into law in the US in 1920. Yet for a generation in post-traumatic stress, bereft of faith and meaning, drinking actually increased. Booze was a way to numb out and also protest the moralism of the fundamentalists. “Speakeasies” became popular places to drink illegally and generally snub conservative values. There were 50,000 speakeasies in New York

City alone. Picture the “flappers” in their mini-skirts—defying the old Victorianism—and listen for jazz as it became the pop music of the day. And sexuality? Even the free love of the sixties could barely compete with the “Roaring Twenties.”

- **Religious fundamentalism:** Of course, where debauchery flourishes, so does its evil twin, fundamentalism. A host of movements emerged, rejecting the bankrupt optimism and shallow faith of the progressive liberals. They battled change, resisting the immorality of urban society and opposing the social and scientific theories of Marx, Darwin and Freud. Whether right or left, aristocrat or entrepreneur, the culture wars were on with a vengeance, and with them, extremists from every side. Anarchists and communists, the Ku Klux Klan and the infamous mobsters, the flappers and the fundies...all were in their heyday.

The Disillusionment Cycle

By now readers may have noticed the cycle to which I referred earlier:

- A period of great optimism,
- interrupted by a dramatic catastrophe,
- followed by deep disillusionment,
- giving rise to radical extremes of fundamentalism and hedonism,

Where debauchery flourishes, so does its evil twin, fundamentalism. A host of movements emerged, rejecting the bankrupt optimism and shallow faith of the progressive liberals...the culture wars were on with a vengeance...

After some great victories in industry, such as the invention of the automobile and airplane, we turned our accomplishments on one another, crafting increasingly lethal instruments of death.





German Marks used for heating in 1923—cheaper than burning coal or wood.



Money swept up as trash in the street.

In 1922 in Germany a loaf of bread cost 163 marks but by the peak of hyperinflation; in November 1923, a loaf of bread cost 200,000,000,000 marks.



A familiar sight in the street, wheel-barrows full of paper money were pushed to the store to buy bread.



- economic and cultural decline,
 - until the next round of optimism and catastrophe.
- It's not always so straightforward, but consider the twentieth century in broad strokes:
- Turn of the century optimism; World War I catastrophe; Roaring Twenties extremes; and decline through "the dirty thirties."
 - Mid-century optimism (Kennedy's Camelot); the assassination and Vietnam catastrophes; free love and the psychedelic 60s; the 70s decline through Watergate and recession.
 - Late-century optimism (Reagan) up to the fall of

The Versailles Treaty consisted of impossible demands and humiliating punishments on Germany...so harsh that they destroyed the German economy. Europe had depended on German productivity... when Germany sank, they all did—a key contributor to America's stock market crash (1929) and the subsequent Great Depression.

communism; 90s prosperity (Clinton); the traumas of 9/11 and the Middle-East wars; economic collapse in 2008.

- The alcohol of the 20s-50s, psychedelics of the 60s-70s, and crack and heroin of the 80s-90s are now supplemented by ecstasy and crystal meth.
- As in the previous cycles, radical fundamentalists (Christian and Muslim) battle each other; another sexual revolution (internet pornography and global sex trafficking).

A Gospel Response

In view of the World War I centennial and how we seem to relive its key patterns, how might Christians respond authentically? It seems obvious that we should avoid the radical extremes of the previous cycles, but frankly, institutionalized Christianity has been yanked left and right across the religious and political spectrum. An attack ad here and a viral video there and we're prone to hop on the next apocalyptic bandwagon. Too often, we've been seduced by cultural fads and then over-reacted with the moralism of puritan alarmists. Surely there's another way, a higher way—one that may not break the cycles of history but enables God's people to rise above them.

That way is called the gospel—good news. The kingdom of God is neither an empty utopian optimism nor an escapist retreat into gated Christian communities. So what's the good news? I put that question to Rhosanna, a twenty-year-old



THE PLAIN TRUTH

youth leader in Wales. She works with inner city young people to proclaim the gospel in the streets with great effect. Her words of hope speak to the upcoming generation:

The good news for this generation is that Jesus wants to be part of their lives. What they need is real transformation in everyday life.

Surely there's another way, a higher way—one that may not break the cycles of history but enables God's people to rise above them.

Many are lonely and they don't even know what 'relationship' is like. But if they experience relationship with Jesus—especially through others who know Jesus inputting into their lives—their lives will be changed. They'll find out that they don't have to go it alone. Life will still suck sometimes, but how we handle crises and react to problems will be different. Painful experiences, like bad breakups for example, will no longer dictate their future or prevent them from forgiving or learning to trust again. To my generation, this is very good news!

She is not talking revolution or rapture. Her hope is not in international treaties or revivalist movements. And most striking: she is not disillusioned. She either didn't buy into worldly or religious illusions...or somehow she survived them. In any case, Rosie believes in a simple gospel of real-life transformation through friendship with Jesus and with each other. One hundred years after "the-war-that-didn't-end-wars-at-all," that's some pretty solid hope. □

That way is called the gospel—good news. The kingdom of God is neither an empty utopian optimism nor an escapist retreat into gated Christian communities.

1 <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/mickel-sen/texts/leibniz%20-%20-theodicy.htm>.

2 Voltaire would identify the 'all is well' philosophy in Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" (1733-4), in Leibniz, and in the works of Lord Shaftesbury.

3 Voltaire, "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster or Examination of this Axiom 'All is Well,'" Selected Poems by Voltaire (1911).

4 George P. Grant, Philosophy in the Mass Age.

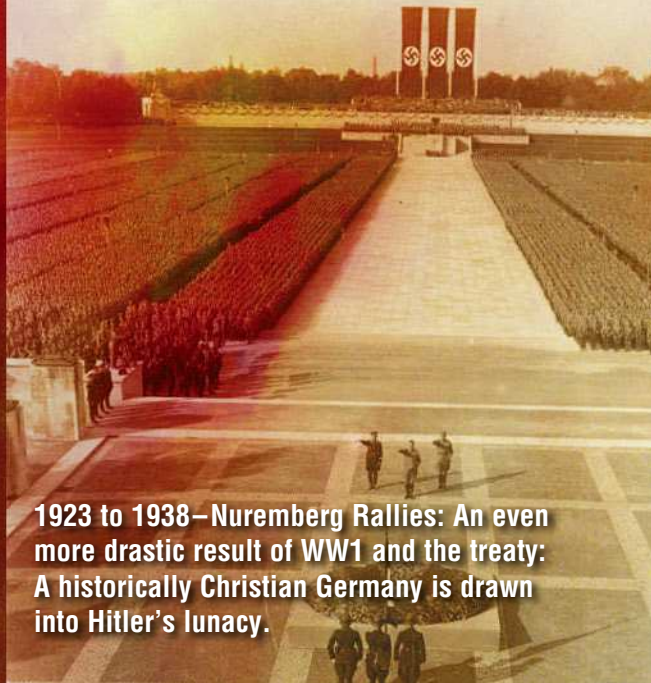
5 <http://unnamedharald.hubpages.com/hub/World-War-1-History-Britains-Thankful-Villages>.

6 Transcript, "Disillusionment after WWI," NBC Learn K-12 (10/28/2007). <http://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/flatview?cuecard=840>

7 Credit to historian Tom Jacobsen, "American Culture in the 1920's," American History II: 1877-Present. <http://tom-jacobsen.tripod.com/>

8 "Sacco and Vanzetti: Framed and put to death because of their political beliefs," http://socialistworker.org/2002-2/418/418_08_SaccoAndVanzetti.html.

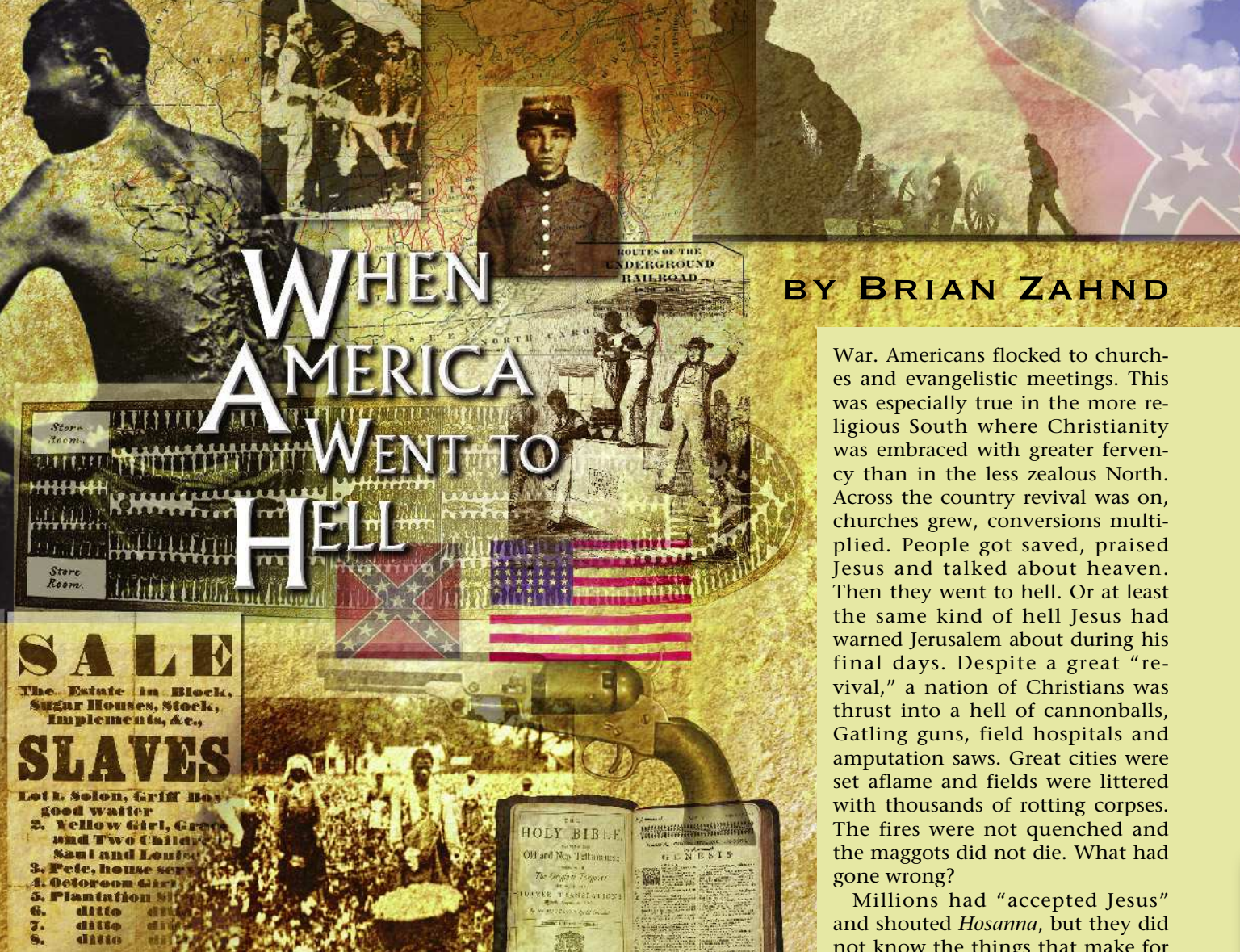
Plain Truth senior editor, Brad Jersak, is a seminary teacher and seminar facilitator. He has authored several books, including Her Gates Will Never Be Shut, Stricken By God and Can You Hear Me? Read Brad's blog at www.christianitywithoutthereligion.org.



1923 to 1938—Nuremberg Rallies: An even more drastic result of WW1 and the treaty: A historically Christian Germany is drawn into Hitler's lunacy.



1938—Kristallnacht (Night of broken glass): Scapegoated Jews paraded through the streets by the SS and local police.



WHEN AMERICA WENT TO HELL

BY BRIAN ZAHND

War. Americans flocked to churches and evangelistic meetings. This was especially true in the more religious South where Christianity was embraced with greater fervency than in the less zealous North. Across the country revival was on, churches grew, conversions multiplied. People got saved, praised Jesus and talked about heaven. Then they went to hell. Or at least the same kind of hell Jesus had warned Jerusalem about during his final days. Despite a great “revival,” a nation of Christians was thrust into a hell of cannonballs, Gatling guns, field hospitals and amputation saws. Great cities were set aflame and fields were littered with thousands of rotting corpses. The fires were not quenched and the maggots did not die. What had gone wrong?

Millions had “accepted Jesus” and shouted *Hosanna*, but they did not know the things that make for peace. They prayed “The Sinner’s Prayer,” “got right with God” and kept their slaves. They had a faith that would justify the sinner while bringing no justice to the slave. They had faith that gave them a ticket to heaven...and a highway to hell. The religious fervor in the conservative churches of the South only served to convince them that they were blessed by heaven. They were quite certain God smiled upon their deep devotion to their southern-fried Jesus. If they had to go to war to preserve their freedom, so be it—God was on their side. They were sure of it. But there would be hell to pay.

To help you comprehend how wrong the conservative churches of the Antebellum South were, despite flaunting their faith in Jesus and clutching their well-worn

“How I wish that you of all people would understand the things that make for peace.”—Jesus (Luke 19:42)

Whether or not slavery was the direct cause for the first shots fired upon Fort Sumter in April of 1861 is a matter of scholarly debate. What is undeniable is that two and a half centuries of slavery was the fuel that caused the American Civil War to ignite into a conflagration that resulted in 623,000 deaths.

From its Jamestown beginnings the American colonies and later the United States practiced one of the most brutal forms of slavery the world has ever known. The preservation of an institution that systematically dehumanized millions of people for the sake of

economic gain was not a thing that made for peace. Inevitably that kind of cruel exploitation would overflow its cup and unleash death and hell, bringing everything that is the opposite of peace.

During the horror of the American Civil War, the “land of the free” became a burning Gehenna. Thirty percent of Southern men of fighting age were slain on battlefields that saw the birth of modern warfare. From now on, war would be totalized and mechanized. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse galloped across America leaving a wake of war, disease, famine and death.

Religious Revival Leads to Hell

But in tragic irony a spiritual revival had swept through America during the decade before the Civil



Despite a great “revival,” a nation of Christians was thrust into a hell of cannonballs, Gatling guns, field hospitals, and amputation saws. Great cities were set aflame and fields were littered with thousands of rotting corpses.

Bibles, I’m going to enlist the help of someone who was there and saw it all: fellow Missourian Mark Twain. In the chapter entitled “You Can’t Pray a Lie” in Twain’s beloved novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck Finn has helped hide Miss Watson’s runaway slave, Jim.

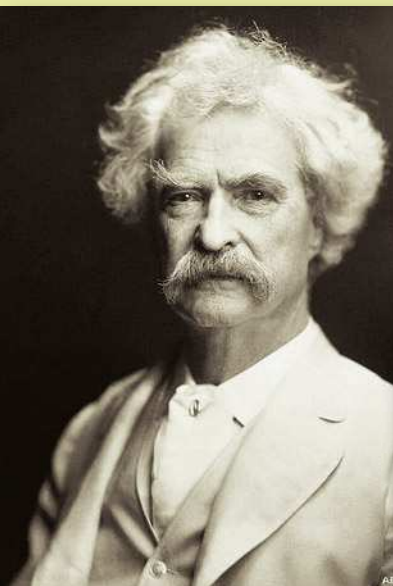


But Huck thinks he is committing a sin in helping a runaway slave. Huck had learned in Sunday School “that people that acts as I’d been acting goes to everlasting fire.” So in an act of “repentance” in order to save his soul Huck writes a note to Miss Watson and tells her where she can find her runaway slave. Now Huck is ready to pray his “Sin-

But I didn’t do it straight off but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn’t seem to strike no

ways call me honey and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world and the only he’s got now; and then I happened to look around and see the paper. It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I know’d it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: “All right, then, I’ll go to hell”—and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming.—The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

To help you comprehend how wrong the conservative churches of the Antebellum South were, despite flaunting their faith in Jesus and clutching their well-worn Bibles, I’m going to enlist the help of someone who was there and saw it all: fellow Missourian Mark Twain.



ner’s Prayer” and “get saved”....

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I know’d I could pray now.



places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I’d see him standing my watch on top of his’n, ‘stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would al-

Huck Finn’s Theology

Huck Finn had been shaped by the Christianity he had found in his Missouri Sunday School—a Christianity focused on heaven in the afterlife while preserving the status quo of the here and now. Huck thought that helping Jim escape from slavery was a sin, because that’s what he had been taught. Huck knew he couldn’t ask God to forgive him until he was ready to “repent” and betray Jim. Huck doesn’t want to go to hell. Huck wants to be saved. But Huck loves his friend more. So Huck is willing



Twain does a masterful job of showing us how wrongheaded Christians can be about what constitutes salvation.... For Huck to love his neighbor (Jim) as himself he has to think he is condemning his soul to hell.

to go to hell in order to save his friend from slavery.

Twain does a masterful job of showing us how wrongheaded Christians can be about what constitutes salvation. For Huck to act according to justice he has to *think* he is committing a great sin. For Huck to act Christlike he has to *think* he is forsaking Christianity. For Huck to love his neighbor as himself he has to *think* he is condemning his soul to hell. Think about that awhile!

Mark Twain used his skillful pen to skewer the conservative Christianity of the American South. If Mark Twain wasn't a believing Christian (and he wasn't)—he was a prophet to the prevailing Christianity of his day.

This was a compromised Christianity in desperate need of a prophetic voice. In seeking to preserve an economy dependent upon slave labor, the southern churches had embraced a fatally distorted faith. Probably without even knowing what they were doing these Christians had quite effectively used Jesus and the Bible to validate their racist assumptions and protect their vested interests.

They went to church on Sunday. They got saved. They loved Jesus. They waved their palms and shouted hosanna on Palm Sunday. But like the crowd in Jerusalem eighteen centuries earlier they didn't know the things that make for peace. And Jesus wept over an America headed to hell. The churches were full and slavery continued...until the Civil War. Then 623,000 people died for the sins of America.

This is more than a recitation of history—there's a lesson to learn

here. When we don't know the things that make for peace we can barrel down the highway to hell, all the while singing about how much we love Jesus and how wonderful it is to be saved.

This should disturb us. How can it be that generations of religiously observant people can say all the right things about Jesus and still be on the wrong road? How can we know the things that make for a good church service but not know the things that make for peace? Jesus says that something has hidden the peaceful way from our eyes...and more often than not it's a flag. If patriotism simply means the pride of place that inspires civic responsibility, so be it. But if patriotism means "my country right or wrong," it's a kind of groupthink blindness that hides the things that make for peace from our eyes.

The Things That Make for Peace

Unfurled flags of nationalism have a long history of hiding the things of Christ that make for peace. Whether they are Roman, Byzantine, Spanish, French, English, German, Russian, or American flags, when they hide the things that make for peace they are no longer the innocent banners of a benign patriotism. So what are the things that make for peace? What is it we need to perceive if we are to avoid the bloody boomerang of a self-inflicted hell? Jesus told us when he said:

In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.—Matthew 7:12-14

The things that make for peace are the two great commandments:

Love of God and love of neighbor...but especially the second command. (Love of God is only validated by a co-suffering love of neighbor.) The "golden rule" of evaluating our actions through the eyes of our neighbor is the narrow and difficult road that leads to life and peace. The golden rule is the narrow gate. The narrow gate is not a sinner's prayer, the narrow gate is the practice of the Jesus way. The narrow gate is fulfilling the law and the prophets by empathetic love of neighbor in imitation of Jesus.

When we hate and vilify others for ideological reasons, when we demonize and dehumanize others for nationalistic reasons, when we use and exploit others for economic reasons, we are on the highway to hell—we have chosen the well-worn road that leads to war and destruction.

The deeply disconcerting thing is that it is entirely possible to cruise down the broad road of impending doom while singing songs of praise to Jesus.

It happened on the first Palm Sunday. It happened a hundred and fifty years ago in America. It continues to happen today. If we think Jesus shares and endorses our disdain and enmity for our enemies, we don't know the things that make for peace and we are headed for an inevitable destruction...even if it takes a generation or two to arrive at our horrible destination. If we console ourselves with the promise of heaven in the afterlife while creating hell in this present life, we have embraced the tawdry religion of the crusader and forsaken the true faith of our Savior. □

Brian Zahnd is the lead pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. He is also the author of several books, including Radical Forgiveness, Beauty Will Save the World and A Farewell To Mars (2014).





Is God Disappointed With You?

There is no doubt the “disappointed God” must be included in the Top Ten Misunderstandings of God. Here’s the heavenly picture this erroneous stereotype creates: the “disappointed God” sits, slumped forward on his heavenly throne, head in hands, peering down, sighing and frowning, disillusioned and frustrated with you and me. This misconception of God presents God as dismayed and despondent because of our seemingly never-ending failures. The “disappointed God” wonders whether you and I will ever learn.

Of course, dissatisfaction exists in our relationship with God, but the frustration is on our part, not that of God’s. The disenchantment we feel toward God comes from our perceptions of what we believe to be his failures. *God disappoints us when he doesn’t do what we think he ought to do when we believe he should.*

Disappointment with God is a deep emotional pit into which we can fall when we conclude that God is neither with us nor for us. But our failure to feel God’s presence is not proof that he is not near. *We become frustrated with God if and when we think of him as a god who is the product of our projections, fantasies, wishes and needs.* If we have such a god we will wind up blaming God. If we have such a god we will only see God as he heals and comforts us—we will only see him as being present in the bandages that heal our wounds. If we have a god who is the creation of our desires we will inevitably feel that he deserts us during affliction and adversity, disease and distress, sickness and sorrow.

Ironically, *we often become upset when we think God is failing us and then we blame him for being upset with us!* In person-to-person relationships the act of unconsciously redirecting ones feelings toward another individual is called “transference” theory. Transference theory posits that the transfer or redirection of feelings is a leading cause of

cross-generational altercations. The recriminations can travel either direction—older folks can accuse the younger generation of shortcomings that actually are the responsibility of the older generation—and younger folks can shift blame toward the older generation in a vain attempt to escape their own accountability. Jesus advised that one should first remove the plank in their own eye before accusing others about the speck of sawdust in the eye of another (Matthew 7:3-4).

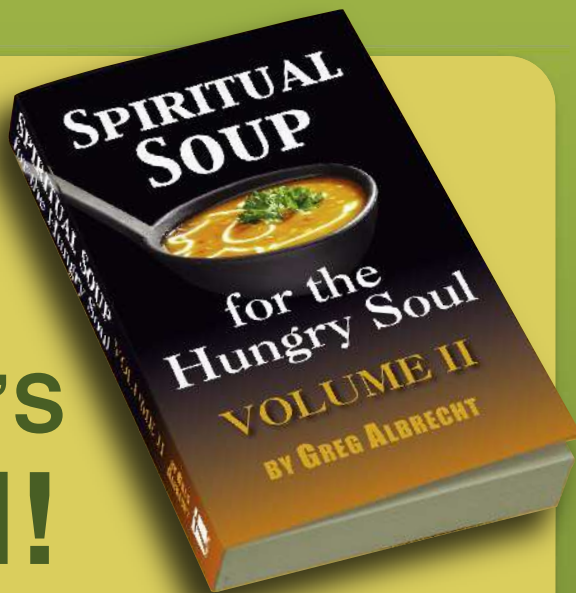
Our disappointments with God are actually disappointments with the inadequate understandings we have of and about God. *Misconceptions of God provoke us to think we know what God will or even ought to do, and given our wrong-heading misunderstandings of God we are then disappointed.* But our disappointments are not with God—they are with who and what we perceive and believe God to be.

Who we think God is and who God actually is are two entirely different matters. We may have inadequate perceptions of God, but for his part God never misjudges or misperceives us. God perfectly understands you and me, and he still loves us anyway! Therefore, any disappointment we have with God doesn’t mean he is unhappy with us.

God is not disappointed with us because he knows exactly who we are and how we operate. God is not disappointed with us because he created us. He would rather not see us wallow in the muck and mire of sin, but when we find ourselves in the gutter, God is not surprised. God may not like what we did last summer, but in spite of knowing all of the sordid details of last summer, and last year, and a decade or more ago, he still loves us.

Because God loves us he would obviously prefer that we not put ourselves through misery and pain. But, his love also means that he gives us the choice to make our own decisions. He doesn’t always miraculously remove the consequences of our decisions. While it pleases him when we completely

SOUP'S ON!



Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2 is now available. Like *Soup #1*, *Soup #2* features 48 messages, organized seasonally, providing spiritual nourishment and food for thought throughout the calendar year.

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commentary

yield our lives to Jesus, so that the life of Christ might be evident in our activities and practices, he is not shocked or disappointed when we fall “from grace.” He created us—he knows us, better than we know ourselves. He has realistic expectations about who we are and what we are capable of.

So God, having created us, is not disappointed with us. But more than that, *God is never disappointed with us, not now or not ever, because of Jesus*. God sees us in and through the lens of Jesus, and of course that's exactly how we should see God—in and through Jesus. God looks at each and every human being through the perspective of the cross of Christ. Because of the cross of Christ, God even sees those whom he has not yet “drawn” or “enabled” (John 6:44.65) as his own loved ones—men and women of hope.

God does not need to take medication because of the depression we cause him. The celestial publishing house doesn't publish books with titles like *How God Is Disappointed With Humanity*.

God is not disillusioned or shocked by anything we do or determine to do. Perhaps we might assume that God is disappointed when, in spite of all of his attempts to persuade someone to accept his grace, in the “final analysis” that individual turns him down.

With that said, I have no idea, nor do you or anyone else, when that “final analysis” might come or what circumstances might cause God to be disappointed with our choice to reject him. Given what I understand of God's nature, I don't believe that God will ever “throw in the towel” with or about anyone.

I believe God is disappointed when anyone finally rejects him, but even then he can't be totally shocked or disillusioned by such an event, since he created us and gave each of us the power to either consent to or reject his grace. □

—Greg Albrecht



"P.C." Christians

I'm having enough trouble dealing with the basic ones [rules] without adding those created by neurotic Christians who were potty trained wrong.

I don't write books on marriage. It's not that my wife Anna and I don't have a good marriage (we do) or that some good things aren't said in marriage books (there are). The problem is that when people talk about marriages and the "right way" to do it, everyone starts comparing their own marriages, trying to figure out what is wrong and to fix it...and often end up in divorce. There are, of course, some basic, clear principles about Christian marriage; but after that it's "Katy, bar the door."

Do you know one of the problems with being a Christian? It's the "oughts." I'm not really talking about legalism and rules; but rather about how "experts" tell us what we ought to say, think, wear and eat, and what a "real Christian" ought to look like, act like and be. The "P.C." (political correctness) in the church can be incredibly destructive.

Jesus wired each of us differently and rejoices in those differences. I was thinking about how Jesus dealt differently with physical blindness. There are four instances in the Gospels where Jesus heals blindness, and they are all unique.

In *John 9*, Jesus healed a man blind from birth. Jesus made mud by spitting on the ground, anointed the man's eyes with it, and then told him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Much to the consternation of the religious leaders, his sight was restored.

In *Matthew 20*, Jesus encountered two blind men crying out for help. Jesus simply touched their eyes and "immediately they recovered their sight and followed him." There is a similar account in *Luke 18*. Jesus spoke a word, and the blind man saw and followed Jesus. But in *Mark 8* it took two shots for Jesus to heal the blind man. Jesus spat on the blind man's eyes and laid his hands on him. The blind man could see...but

only sort of. He could see people but not very clearly—they looked like "trees, walking." So Jesus placed his hands on the man's eyes and then his sight was totally restored.

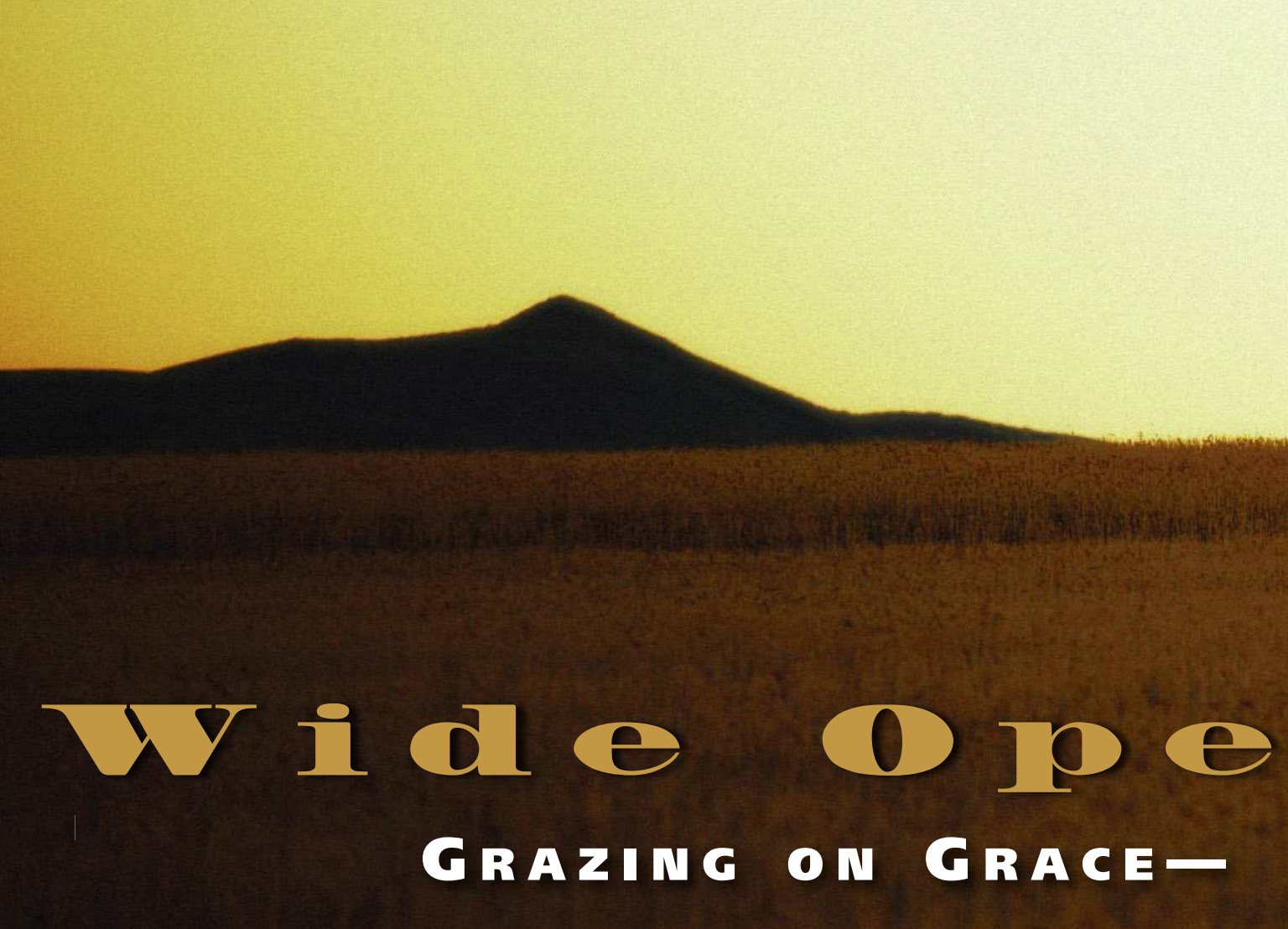
Think of how Jesus dealt in different ways with two women who had a similar sin problem. Check out what Jesus said and did in *John 4* with the woman at the well compared to how he dealt with the prostitute in *Luke 7*. Sometimes Jesus "yelled" at the Pharisees and other times he had dinner with them. Then there is *Zacchaeus (Luke 19)* who presumably went back to his tax tables as an honest tax collector compared to *Matthew (Matthew 9)* who left his tax tables and followed Jesus.

When we start defining what a "real Christian" looks like; what is proper and what isn't; what films, books and music are acceptable and aren't; what's funny and what isn't; or even what a "real Christian marriage" looks like, we move into the dangerous territory of rules-on-rules...and I'm having enough trouble just dealing with the basic ones without adding those created by neurotic Christians who were potty trained wrong.

No, I'm not talking about sin. The Bible is clear about sin and is against it. The law is perfect. Christians who understand the gift of the law know that it's a major inheritance to us from a God who loves us enough to tell us where the mines are in the minefield. As Paul said when he was accused of suggesting people go out and sin so they could experience more of God's grace, "By no means!" (*Romans 6:2*).

But I'm really tired of the P.C. that has become a part of our Christian culture. There are so many who belong to Jesus who simply don't fit the mold of "proper Christians." He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown



Wide Open

GRAZING ON GRACE—

Ilive in the Rocky Mountains of Montana with roaming herds of magnificent elk. Apart from a raise-the-hair-on-your-neck encounter with a grizzly bear, nothing can fill you with awe like meeting a herd of elk in a remote forest. I'll never forget watching my friend, a highly skilled big game hunter, lower his rifle when he had a massive bull elk squarely in his sights.

"I just can't do it," he said his voice trembling, "he's...he's so awesome. This is his land and his herd and today I just can't take that away from him."

We spent nearly 30 minutes admiring the grandeur of that bull with his herd in the lush mountain terrain before they moved on to another remote feeding ground.

Just an hour away from the remote forest of that memorable experience exists an elk farm—what a dramatic contrast.

The farm has some 100 elk, including a few huge bulls, but they are corralled inside an eight foot wire mesh fence. They feed on hay bales scattered across the worn, near-barren soil.

I suppose the elk are just as majestic as the ones my friend and I watched in the wild, but behind their high fence they look as lifeless, tired and sullen as inmates in a penitentiary courtyard. When you confine free beings you slowly erode their joy, their honor, their life.

Don't Fence Me In!

Does anyone wonder for a second what those elk would do if that farmer opened the gates to his "farm"? If the elk could exchange that fence for the forest? Sure there are challenges and dangers that come with freedom but we all know that high fence isn't to keep those dangers out, it is to keep the elk in. Elk were created to live in the risky world of freedom. So are humans.

You may not agree, but I believe organized religion is in many ways to humans what a high fence is to elk. Yes, religion provides spiritual food and shelter for people but do the ends justify the means? Institutionalized Christianity will insist its boundaries—things like orthodox doctrine, godly discipline, a valid faith confession and the like—have been erected to establish



by Glen Moyer

n Spaces

VERSUS FEED LOT RELIGION

and protect the “true church.” Its leaders would argue that the church needs fences to keep evil and deception out. They’d insist God is a God of order not disorder and without structure and boundaries the church couldn’t be the church.

I believe those fences actually serve to keep people in and create a fear of the outside world.

I agree, organizations need descriptive boundaries and means to protect the life of the institution. But I think *Christianity was intended to be an organism not an organization*. Its members, humans, are created to live and roam in the world, not be confined and corralled like elk in a farm. I contend that the boundaries of the organized church do just that; they are primarily designed to keep people in and create a sense of fear of the outside world. And while orga-

nized religion needs fences, Christianity does not.

What would happen if someone could somehow open the gates of the church? Would people stay? Or would they exchange the safety and nurture of the church for the

Christianity was intended to be an organism not an organization. Its members, humans, are created to live and roam in the world, not be confined and corralled like elk in a farm.

freedom of the world? If they had an option would they opt to worship and serve God outside the confines of the church fence?

The “Nones” Have Left the Building!

We don’t have to wonder. The gates of organized religion in America have been opened and there is a remarkable exodus taking place. By the millions, people are leaving their churches. This is es-

pecially true among the youth. A stunning sixty percent of 15-29 year olds are leaving the institutional church. That’s right, sixty percent!

But make no mistake; it’s not just the youth who are leaving.

Folks who, just a decade ago, were busy up to their eyeballs in their congregation are now pouring out the gates. And when active church members (and pastors) are asked about their commitment to their congregation most confess they are struggling to “hang in there.” They are exhausted with organized religion and exasperated with running into one high fence after another. Those open gates and the potential



Just an hour away from the remote forest of that memorable experience exists an elk farm...behind their high fence they look as lifeless, tired and sullen as inmates in a penitentiary courtyard. When you confine free beings you slowly erode their joy, their honor, their life.

of freedom is looking more and more attractive to them.

This is not to say all these folks have lost their faith. In the same way that an elk doesn't cease to be an elk just because it is no longer on an elk farm, Christians who walk away from organized religion do not automatically cease to be Christians. Most say faith is still very important to them. They have become what sociologists call "Nones."

Unlike the other kind of Nuns, these Nones are people who have no religious affiliation. This group of people includes those pesky atheists and agnostics but the vast majority of them say they still have faith but choose to not affiliate with any religious organization—thus, they are called "Nones." Not surprisingly, Nones have become far and away the fastest growing religious (or non-religious) group in America.

So who opened the gates of the American brick-and-mortar churches?

Obviously, no one person or group could pull off such an enormous feat. So many rush to the assumption that God must have opened the gates and that he is leading a modern day exodus of his people out of organized religion. This may make for a great story line but it seems dangerous

for anyone to claim to speak for God as his personal press secretary. Therefore, I will leave the "Who" speculations to others, especially when there are so many "what" questions that are rather easy to define and answer through observation.

So here are what I believe to be the four primary forces that answer the question: "What caused so many to reject and leave 'the church' as it is organized and experienced?"

1. Church Behavior.

The rise of the Nones is such an enormous problem for American congregations that the Internet and bookstores are awash in publications addressing this crisis. Unfortunately, much of that material tends to be a classic lesson on leaders missing the point. They tend to hyper-spiritualize the issue and blame anyone and anything except themselves for the predicament. I know that sounds harsh, but I was such a leader for two decades and I did the same thing.

Fortunately, there are also some very heady, deeply researched and insightful responses to the crisis of church flight. One of the best is David Kinnaman's excellent book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*. Kinnaman is President of The Barna Group. While Kinnaman studied youth flight I find much of his data multi-generational. Here is a summary of Kinnaman's *primary reasons why youth (18-29 year olds) are leaving their congregations*. (Note: Kinnaman's use of the term "church" below refers to the institutions known and defined as "the church" and Christianity in general.)

- **Isolationism.** Many churches demonize everything outside the church, including the music, movies, culture and technology that define this generation.

- **Shallowness.** Young people are increasingly saying that the faith described by the institutional church is irrelevant and God is absent from their church experience.

- **Anti-science.** Young people are astutely observing that religion at large is out of step on scientific developments and debate.

- **Sex.** Organized religion is perceived as simplistic and judgmental. Its "just say no" philosophy is insufficient in a techno-porno world. Young Christian singles are as sexually active as their non-churched friends, and many say they feel judged.

- **Doubters.** The four walls of brick-and-mortar religion are not perceived as a safe place to express doubts; and many have serious doubts they'd like to discuss.

From hundreds of exit interviews I have conducted with former church attendees I would add these prominent gate-opening behaviors:

- **Hyper-political.** After a week of being bombarded by our dysfunctional political system and the 24/7 cable news cycle, people don't want to hear more politics in a place of faith and worship; yet too often that is what they get.

- **In-Fighting.** Inner-Church and Inter-Denominational battles have done more than just create 33,000 denominations. Former congregational members say their last "church" war was indeed their last—because they left organized religion.

- **Works Centered.** For many it seems as if every week congregations are given yet another thing they must do in order to maintain their faith and their relationship with God. Members are burned-out and exhausted.

God didn't have to open the gates of churches—the church members are storming them. It doesn't matter if they are Fundamentalist, Evangelical, Mainline or Catholic; the results are the same. Huge numbers of church attendees are fed up and leaving. Denying the behavior behind this exodus certainly won't slow it down.

2. The New Age of Entertainment.

No one needs a crystal ball to know that everyone who is trying to proclaim the gospel in America is struggling to keep up with our fast changing society. Shoot, society can't keep up with society! The Internet with its social networks, online shopping and live-streaming video is just the beginning of a wild new world that is to come.

While congregations are trying to keep up with change by utilizing social networks, live-streaming worship services, interactive websites and the like—truth is they simply can't. Many who lead institutional churches grew up with rear-wheel drive cars, encyclope-

most of Christianity's history the priests, bishops and pastors were frequently the only ones in a congregation who could read and write. This left the transmission of scriptures, the formation of Christian doctrine, the administration of church policy, the preaching of sermons, etc. to an exclusive group of men. Such a concentration of power and authority over many centuries naturally led to all kinds of mischief, abuse and corruption.

Thankfully there have been reformers, naysayers and a few reformations that resulted in established doctrines and practices being held up against the light of

fact of life for centuries on end but those in power were untouchable. The bald face arrogance with which the bishops and cardinals handled the Catholic sex scandals demonstrates the depth of this depravity. But their brazen stubbornness was no match for this new age of enlightenment. They could no longer keep the truth of their evil deeds buried as in the past. Instead they were brought into the light of the whole world. As a result the Catholic Church has been forced to discipline themselves and bring about change to their corrupt institution; but not before their gates were opened and their members swarmed out in anger and frustration.

Another equally, if not more significant development in this new age of enlightenment is the ongoing battle between the established and monopolized church versus science and reason. Early battles over the earth being flat and at the center of the universe gave way to the 20th century battles over evolution and the age of the universe. Now, thanks to the worldwide battle against illiteracy and the explosion of the Internet which provides easy, instant and global access of information to nearly everyone, we are seeing a virtual pandemic of challenges to official doctrine, history and indeed the Bible itself.

Christians are no longer illiterate and disconnected from information. They know if a pastor has done his homework or not. They fact-check sermons while they are being preached. Parishioners and congregants do Google searches and they read books. They know how the Bible came to be the Bible, how official doctrines were formed and what really happened in history. Often they know more than their pastors and leaders who tend to only expose themselves to authorized insider information and often become highly defensive when they are challenged. Therefore, open dialogue is often forbidden.

Consequently, those who live within the walls of organized religion are left with a decision. Live



...we all know that high fence isn't to keep those dangers out, it is to keep the elk in. Elk were created to live in the risky world of freedom. So are humans.

dias, one kind of Cheerios, typewriters, land-lines and fuzzy television with three channels and rabbit-ears. They remember when bringing drums and a bass guitar into the worship service caused a church split. Trying to stay ahead of the next big thing is not their thing. Frankly, I'm not sure it ever should be their thing. Call this an opening of the institutional church gates from the outside.

3. The New Age of Enlightenment.

Since its conception the organized church has been ruled by a small group of social elites. For

truth. These did serve to bring some much-needed change, but generally speaking religious power structures were too powerful and engrained to truly be threatened. In other words, they were able to keep the gates of the institutional church locked. That has all changed. Today's instant access to and transmission of information can bring even the most entrenched power structures to their knees. Case in point, the recent highly publicized sex scandals within the Catholic Church.

Corruption at nearly all levels of the Catholic Church has been a

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Consequently, those who live within the walls of organized religion are left with a decision. Live with irresolvable intellectual contradictions or live without the established church. By the millions, they are choosing the latter.

with irresolvable intellectual contradictions or live without the established church. By the millions, they are choosing the latter.

4. Life Without the Established Church.

What happens to those who leave organized Christianity and become Nones? Do they fall into a life of sin? Do they begin cussing at the drop of a hat? Do they now hate God and their neighbor and follow Satan? This perilous fate is often what leaders of organized religion tell their members will happen if they neglect “the fellowship of the saints.”

Here’s what typically happens.

- First comes the tipping point when people decide the risk of going out the gate is less than the frustration of staying—regardless how dangerous and scary they have been told such a move will be.

- Then there’s an initial period of missing friends at the regularly scheduled time and place that is called “church” combined with a twinge of guilt for not going there as has been their habit.

- This is followed by a new guilt from actually enjoying not attending church.

- Then begins the realization that they aren’t growing horns, they aren’t denying Christ, they still pray, they still have morals and friends...and they often times are happier, freer and more at peace with God and others.

- They also discover there is a whole new world of opportunity to live out their faith with purpose outside the high fences of the organized church.

This process of discovery may well become the biggest threat to

the future of organized religion. People who leave the institutional church don’t leave quietly anymore. They text, call, blog and tweet others about it. Congregational and denominational leaders cannot win the public relations battle against this. Not only do threats of apostasy, demon possession or the punishment of hell from the pulpit no longer work, they are a large part of the reason why members left in the first place. And when still active congregational members observe their friends experiencing a life of faith as Nones, this becomes like nectar to those fighting their own battles with the established church. And so the numbers of those exiting the institutional church continues to grow and grow and grow.

What Now?

The institutional church is in trouble. Big trouble. For all of the things that are right about the church it is also true that something has been created that is more about institutional survival and personal gratification than most leaders of the organized church care to admit. Nevertheless, many adults and most of today’s youth are no longer willing to sustain an institution they define by such fence building terms as: building-centered, doctrine over relationships, top heavy leadership, fear-based, personality driven, us-versus-them, sexist, isolationist, irrelevant, intellectually dishonest, etc.

Institutional churches will never completely vanish from the American landscape but they may be on track to join the Grizzly bear on the watch list of endangered North

American species. And just as elk prefer the dangers of the forest to the high fences of the farm, modern day congregational members appear to be equally difficult to domesticate. The gates of organized Christianity have been opened by forces both inside and outside of the fence, and followers of Christ are opting for the wide open spaces of God’s grace over the high fences of the institutional church.

My formerly institutionalized hands tremble as I type the above paragraph. It seems so dangerous, so wild, so unpredictable. What will happen to the organized, institutionalized church as we have known it? Will Christianity even survive?

I am a None. I’m one of those outside of the fence and I’m still drawn to God. I still delight to call Jesus my Lord and my model for life. His words still nourish my soul and compel me to live a life of gratitude and service. And I find the same is true for most of the Nones I have interviewed over the years.

Perhaps the universal body of Christ is just fine. Perhaps it is still being formed into what God has had in mind all along. Indeed, isn’t God’s ability to shape the visible body of Christ greater than mankind’s ability to screw it up? Maybe instead of drifting toward extinction, the body of Christ is actually taking a giant step toward fruition. □

Amy-award winning writer, Glen Moyer is a gifted communicator of the gospel. Glen is a storyteller whose insights illuminate the depths of God’s mercy and grace. Read more of Glen’s work at www.Clothman.com.



by Brad Jersak

Let me out, I wanna
get out
Don't like this place
any more
Build me up, then set
me up
Then knock me on the
floor

People these days with
their own perfect ways
Why can't they see
their own hypocrisy
I'll never be free from
their mediocrity
Just show me the door,
Just show me the door.

—Biermann Electric

SUMMER 2014

“Show Me the Door!”

The Millennials in Spiritual Exodus

Show me the door! That's the parting shot of “20-somethings” as they continue to exit institutionalized religion in droves. Many left because they lost faith and became cynical, but for others, their spiritual journey beyond the brick-and-mortar church began because of their search for Jesus. An “Exodus” implies an escape from bondage, a perilous meandering journey, and hopes of a promised land. Millions who “left” are still looking for Jesus but without the aid of organized religion.

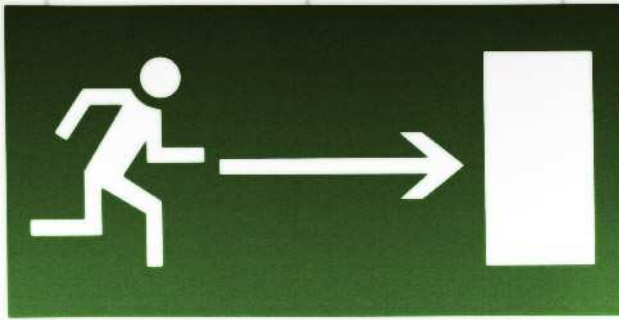
The “millennials” (the subculture born from 1980-2000) especially warrant a closer look, because they don't fit the stereotypes of previous generations of young people. We need to ask afresh who they are, why they're leaving structured Christianity, and what their spiritual journey can show us.

Who Are the Millennials?

Time magazine ran a controversial cover story entitled “The ME ME ME Generation” (May 2013). The subtitle made two provocative claims: “Millennials are lazy entitled narcissists who still live with their parents” and “Why they'll save us all.” The cover photo captures the iconic image of a young woman **a.** lounging, **b.** absorbed in her smartphone, **c.** taking a “selfie” (photo of herself)—three themes featured in the article.

The article starts by presenting evidence for the first claim, citing sociological research, health care statistics and poll results. For example, the charge of “narcissism” was not merely an insulting label. The author, Joel Stein, quotes the National Institutes of Health, which found that the occurrence of “narcissistic personality disorder” is three times higher among Millennials than in the generation that's 65 or older. I paused to research this condition in DSM-IV, the diagnostic manual for mental disorders. They describe NPD as “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or





Maybe if we listen attentively, non-defensively and without judgment, we'll find out something about our Christendom that is less like the Father's house and more like Pharaoh's court!

behavior), excessive need for admiration, sense of entitlement, and lack of empathy."

I immediately recognized these symptoms in a few of my acquaintances. Still, we're talking about only one percent of the population, so you can imagine how well broad-brushing 80 million Millennials as narcissists went over with readers! The story prompted a barrage of backlash such that the storm around the piece became its own story.

That said, the author did make that second claim: "Why they'll save us all." He argues that rather than being inherently self-absorbed, Millennials bring something important to the table. Consider: how is it that a generation grew up in the wake of 9-11 and a major economic recession, yet came out optimistic, confident and pragmatic? Their adaptability to the technological tsunami is really a wonder. Sure, they're social media addicts—but they've also harnessed that technology to burst beyond the constrictive boxes we fashioned for them. They think, act and live beyond the confines of baby-boomer

our young sheep out of the pen into a snare. As they head out the door, perhaps we imagine a prodigal generation squandering its religious inheritance in debauchery, destined for the parabolic pigpen.

But shouldn't it occur to us to just come out and ask them? Why are you leaving? Maybe if we listen attentively, non-defensively and without judgment, we'll find out something about our Christendom that is less like the Father's house and more like Pharaoh's court!

What Are the Main Challenges to Millennial Faith?

When inquiring after the faith-journey of Millennials, we should distinguish between two quite different questions. First, we ought to ask young people about the challenges they face in following Christ—in identifying as "Christian." In other words, their journey with Jesus should be of more importance to us than their attendance patterns or attitudes toward the institutional church. Our first concern is the condition of their hearts and the obstacles they face in pursuit of personal

Millennials struggle with the expectation that they should believe (or pretend to) that the Bible is inerrant. That is, that every word is divinely inspired, literally true and without error—especially in the face of observable contradictions, implausible tales, and swaths of irrelevant laws and history. Many just found the Bible confusing...so why bother?

2. The clash between the "biblical worldview" and science. They felt conflicted between what Bible authors claimed and what is taught in school about physics (creation issues) and biology (evolutionary issues). These conflicts also bled into the sciences of psychology, sociology and anthropology. It's not just that Scripture and science seem incompatible, but that the latter are often quite provable, in spite of what their church tells them.

3. The problem of suffering and the felt-absence of God. Many Millennials are not just sheltered. They have either experienced or observed terrible suffering in our world. This makes faith in a loving, caring and present God very difficult. God's apparent absence in painful trials seems like abandonment. God's presence seems so random. They ask, "Where was God then? And if not then, ever? How can I trust him?" God's eye may be on every sparrow that falls, but they still fall.

4. How Christians behave. Enns lists the following offenses, not just as reasons to leave church, but as real saboteurs of living faith: "tribalism, insider-outsider thinking; hypocrisy, power; feeling misled, sheltered, lied to by leaders; a history of immoral and unChristian behavior towards others (e.g., Crusades, Jewish pogroms)." If Christians act no differently than

Millions who "left" are still looking for Jesus but without the aid of organized religion. The "millennials" (the subculture born from 1980-2000) especially warrant a closer look...

culture—and increasingly, they practice faith outside the walls of the church-ianity compound.

Why Did They Leave?

When a modern-day Exodus is recurring, it's probably really wise to ask why. Concerned pastors and panicky parents may be tempted to assign their own meanings to this mass departure. Perhaps the world, the flesh and the devil have lured

faith in Christ. That matters far more than whether they are warming a pew or padding some membership roll.

Over many decades of teaching university Bible courses, Peter Enns (now at Eastern University), has compiled a list of five main challenges to Christian faith among his students.¹ I've adapted his findings below:

1. The inerrancy of the Bible.



For 20-somethings who felt leaving their churches as liberation—crossing the Red Sea out of fear-based religion—then scheming how to win them back equates to Pharaoh’s armies chasing them, demanding they resume the task of baking bricks for a living.

anyone else, Millennials wonder, what good is Christian faith? If it is so ineffective, how can it be true?

5. Christianity exclusivism. In light of the shrinking global village in which Millennials now reside, they ask why should we believe we are God’s favored children and privy to his care, while others are excluded from God’s family because they were born in the wrong place, brought up in the wrong religion and believe in the wrong gods? Should accidents of birth make us sure we alone are “right” and they are all “wrong”? That we are “in” and they are “out” for all eternity?

For twenty years, the majority of my own pastoral ministry was focused on young people between fifteen and thirty years old. And in my experience teaching in a college/university setting, “twenty-somethings” make up most of my class lists. So as a pastor and a teacher, when I hear these dilemmas of faith, my first instinct is to stampede to an answer, to defend the faith, to fix it and make it all okay. I feel this compulsion to use my pastoral and teaching gifts to rescue that generation—to manage

their trials, shortcut their faith journey and ultimately rob them of the dignity of self-discovery, even if that means “bottoming out” first. And behind all this lurks the precarious assumption that I (or we, or the church) have it right and they need us. Do they?

Proposed Response

In proposing a response, I would emphasize that *responses* don’t imply *solutions*. I’m not even convinced there is or should be a “solution.” For 20-somethings who felt leaving their churches as liberation—crossing the Red Sea out of fear-based religion—then scheming how to win them back equates to Pharaoh’s armies chasing them, demanding they resume the task of baking bricks for a living. On the other hand, for those Millennials who are wandering in search of a spiritual home, the following *first principles* come to mind.

1. Listen

Sounds obvious, but honestly, Christians are often the worst listeners in the city. We’ve taken the apostle Peter’s injunction to “always be prepared to give an answer” (1 Peter 3:15) to cringe-worthy extremes, answering back with knee-jerk retorts and forgetting the end of the verse, “with gentleness and respect.”

With Millennials, don’t listen

People can follow Jesus while still embedded in their own culture... Why chain them to irrelevant structures and pseudo-communities when Christ is willing to enter and transform their existing circle of friends?

with an agenda, a solution or an answer formulating while they talk. *Listen* as if they have a message for you, a lesson for you to learn, and a challenge for you to obey. You never know, they might just be God’s prophets in disguise!

2. Don’t assume

Having listened, some atrocious assumptions should dissolve. For example, we’ll stop assuming that those who leave church are automatically “backsliding” or “losing their faith.” We’ll see that many Millennials are still very interested in Jesus and in friendship with people who know how to talk about Jesus without making it about institutional church. Moreover, we may also realize that while they don’t *go to a church*, their belief in Christ means that many of these AWOL believers actually *are part of the church*, and that they can be quite adept and creative at *being and doing church*. They may discover previously unimagined forms that church can take in the coming years.

3. Don’t proselytize

Once we’ve listened and discovered this church-outside-church, hopefully we’ll give up trying to convert them back to our church-culture. The model for this is actually alive and well in second and third-world missions. The cutting edge ministries that spawn enormous house-church movements have learned the secret. People can follow Jesus while still embedded in their own culture. They can even be Hindu or Muslim followers of Jesus who learn that the living Christ can redeem their existing culture, rather than having to convert to pre-structured westernized churches.

What if we learned this with American Millennials? Why chain them to irrelevant structures and pseudo-communities when Christ



“I turned eighteen and left.”

is willing to enter and transform their existing circle of friends? This is certainly worth further exploration.

4. Partner

Forget trying to plug the gusher (face it, we're beyond a slow bleed) of young people who are leaving. If we really care about them, then that care should involve personal friendship and mutual care, not recruiting for some club.

For example, my son Stephen, an ex-church-goer, is beginning to meet socially with one of my friends (Sean, an Anglican priest). They crossed the 25-year age barrier to talk about things that matter to them—about Jesus, literature, sexuality and good beer.

I think my son *needs* this man, because the priest represents someone he can trust to resist him while always being *for* him. And I think this priest needs my son. Stephen's Millennial-insight may dispute some of Sean's assumptions and show him that what are big issues for our generation will already be 'givens' for Stephen's peer group. As they partner up to think creatively, who knows what mutual *aha!* moments may surface.

So we stop assuming and start listening. We give up proselytizing and start partnering. And what will the result be? A living church cannot leave the church. But it may scatter, leaving behind some scaffolding, only to emerge as the living, breathing dynamo of the days of Acts. And the Millennials will not be the problem—they may be the key. □

1. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/2013/06/5-main-challenges-to-staying-christian-and-moving-forward-anyway-part-1/>.

2. Adapted from David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

Plain Truth senior editor, Brad Jersak, and his wife, Eden, live in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. Brad is a faculty member at Westminster Theological Centre (UK) and facilitates seminars in local churches around the globe.

I turned eighteen and left after the summer. I moved away from home, got my first full-time job and didn't think about church.

There wasn't rebellion, I had my Christian conditioning administered in healthy doses in a healthy environment. By fourteen I knew Darwin was onto something, my stock answer to "does God forgive gays?" was, "for

in volunteering at dinners for low-income people, and now in the city, I made time to go to a Hindu temple for free lunch Sunday afternoons. (What a novel concept for church: serve people who aren't like you, asking nothing in return, not even offering a tract.)

I'm pretty shy, the idea that strangers might approach me is uncomfortable. Bigger than that though is the imagined minefield. At eighteen if I had walked into the wrong church it might've ended in a yelling match. Now I imagine I'd walk out.

I'd love to "fellowship" and talk about Jesus and be a member of a community. I'd be a lot less thrilled to hear about the sanctity of marriage, women's roles or creation science. Peel back the euphemisms and we've got homophobia, misogyny and willful small-mindedness.

Don't tell me God'll provide health and wealth if you only follow the bits of Leviticus you like. Don't talk like you know what Hell is and who'll end up there. And if I wanna hear about warfare with demons I'll read Swamp Thing.

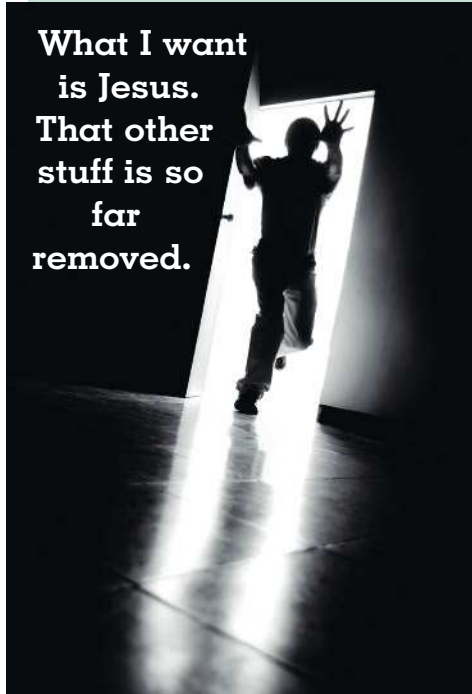
What I want is Jesus. That other stuff is so far removed. Jesus was preoccupied with how people should live and treat each other: compassionately, non-judgmentally, and selflessly. Lots of churches get that, there's just so much abusive, toxic garbage it disincentivizes taking the chance.

I don't believe in Jesus out of habit or conditioning or whatever anymore. There's some corner of my arrogant ego that's atrophying, along with my faith in reason.

I don't know best. I don't know if what I'm doing right now is defensible. I saw my family enriched by church. If I grew up in another setting I'd probably be putting my faith in something else. Maybe I'm messing everything up, but I know as long as I'm following Jesus' advice I won't f-up too badly, and if I do, he'll forgive me. □

—Jonny

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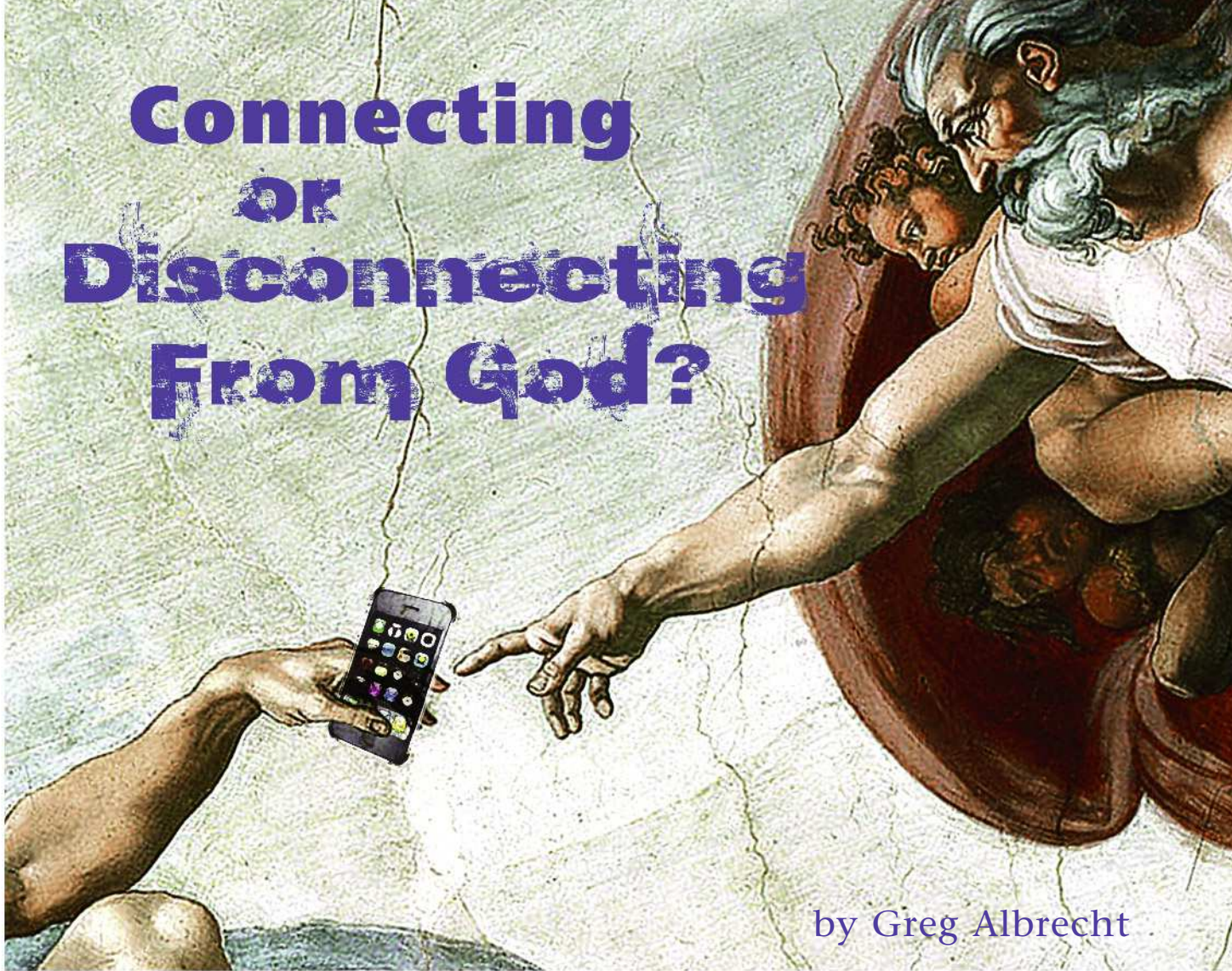


what?" and Evangelical hysteria looked like a bigger threat to the youth of America than satanic ritual abuse. I grew up at enough dinner theology discussions where no potential heresy was off the table, so I didn't fear for my soul.

So out of habit I stuck with Jesus. Hedonism looked gross anyway, and all the nihilistic books, movies and records I was imbibing (and still love) reduced down to a boring facade, with everyone ending up believing in something, usually something hollow and pointless. Outside of visiting my parents though, I've been to church once in years.

The obvious engine was and is selfish laziness. There's always an insurmountable time constraint: I worked late last night, I gotta sleep in, whatever. In my hometown I was diligent

Connecting OR Disconnecting From God?



by Greg Albrecht

During an interview several months ago with late night television host Conan O'Brien, comedian Louis C.K. ("C" and "K" are an approximate English pronunciation of his actual Hungarian surname "Szekely") delivered a withering rant about smart phones and electronic devices at large. Clothing his devastating attack with humor, C.K. described smart phones as toxic, vowing that he was not going to give in to his children's desires for the latest and greatest smart phone "just because every other kid has one."

The video of the interview went viral. C.K.'s blistering critique touched a nerve, and its YouTube link was sent far and wide: waves of 1) teachers shared it with their peers, 2) grandparents forwarded it to their grown-children-parents, 3) pastors endorsed and publicized it to their parishioners and 4) parents transmitted it to other parents. The video was even watched by

some disbelieving teenagers and 20-Somethings who couldn't believe that anyone with an ounce of intelligence would dare to object to "their" technology.

The primary objection C.K. seems to have with the electronic revolution is that smart phones/electronic devices are addictive. He illustrates his claim with an

Genesis tells us that God made us in his image... God created us with a spiritual desire to connect with him.

observation about the "checking habit"—those who are enslaved to their smart phones seem to habitually check incoming messages, calls, texts, Instagrams, Facebook pages and emails. Addicts are effectively programmed so that they habitually, with or without audible reminders, reach for their electronic device, even while engaged in a face-to-face conversation or while driving in potentially dangerous traffic. Reports, studies and surveys inform us that "average" smart phone owners (or perhaps we should say smart phone slaves?) check their incoming messages more than 100 times a day.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARY WEGNER-FTM

History not only validates our desire to connect spiritually, but it verifies our desire to connect on our own terms. In fact, human history might be seen as one long chronicle of attempts to play hide and seek with God.

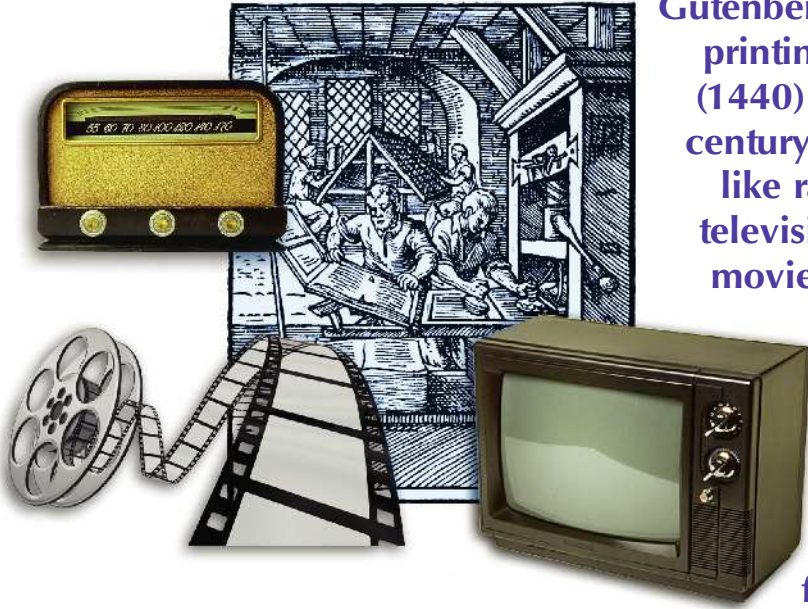
Running Away on the Information Superhighway?

When the automobile became affordable to the masses, conservative critics argued that it offered a new mobility and a new means by which one might travel to previously unavailable, nefarious places (these naysayers seemed to ignore the horse and buggy, staples of their culture, as offering similar opportunities). Almost 100 years ago some preachers railed against cars

and television also quickly morphed into a fantasyland where a wide variety of activities—ranging from purchases, personal conversations to even more private interests and preferences—under the cloak of anonymity. Early joiners of the electronic revolution who had assumed their activities and their individual identity to be unknown were rudely awakened by first generation spam—advertisements and promotions directly targeted to

powerful who thought they were insulated and immune realize that like the rest of us, they could run but they could not hide. Informed people now have no illusions that cyberspace is neither a discreet nor even altogether safe place to conduct business, research, post information, be entertained or have conversations. Concerned parents are well aware that this brave new world is a wild frontier filled with danger for their children. Is this new revolution a Frankenstein monster?

Each new technological advance, be it Johannes Gutenberg and the printing press (1440) or 20th century devices like radio... television and movies have offered ways to grow closer to God or run away from him.



as being “bedrooms on wheels.” Somewhat like automobiles, the electronic revolution offers a path/road with vehicles/devices—“ways to get away” that can traverse its highways and byways in an alternative universe.

Initially, the electronic revolution was promoted as a wonderful advance, making information sharing and retrieval widely available. The electronic revolution transformed the way national economies and individual enterprises and companies do business. But this new revolu-

tion also quickly morphed into a fantasyland where a wide variety of activities—ranging from purchases, personal conversations to even more private interests and preferences—under the cloak of anonymity. Early joiners of the electronic revolution who had assumed their activities and their individual identity to be unknown were rudely awakened by first generation spam—advertisements and promotions directly targeted to

ones’ journey across the World Wide Web. Then, Julian Assange (2010) and Edward Snowden (2013) headlined efforts to make public previously unknown electronic secrets. Revelations of the depth of intrusive snooping by the American spy agency NSA shocked the world—including many prominent political figures around the world who discovered that their smart phone conversations and electronic activities were not confidential. These revelations helped the rich and the

Hide and Seek?

After all the alarming revelations, the electronic world still thrives because it offers a place of diversion and amusement where one might presume to escape from the ugliness of reality and the mind numbing activity of independent thought. Genesis tells us that God made us in his image—and while there are many potential ways in which we might consider how we are made in his image, there is no doubt that one of the primary ways is that God created us with a spiritual desire to connect with him.

God’s intent in creating us in his image was that we might choose to trust him, yet Genesis also records that Adam and Eve established an all-too-human pattern of vain attempts to run away from God. History not only validates our desire to connect spiritually, but it verifies our desire to connect on our own terms. In fact, human history might be seen as one long chronicle of attempts to play hide and seek with God.

There have always been cheap short cuts and counterfeits that have offered ways to fill loneliness—traditional ways to find significance and meaning apart from God include travel, working, war, sex, alcohol and drugs.

Each new technological advance, be it Johannes Gutenberg and the printing press (1440) or 20th century devices like radio (young people today may be shocked to know that radio was the first to be called



Most of us have seen a prototypical family...happy to “spend time together” while being absorbed in talking with or connecting with anyone other than the family member only a few feet away.

ble transformation of faith, that an electronic revolution is a driving force behind Christ-centered reformation.

But, on the negative side, there is no doubt that deeper questions about who we are, why we are here and where we are going can be avoided and self-medicated by texting, checking email, browsing, social networking and playing video games.

Once again a technological revolution offers us ways by which we might connect with God or disconnect from him. The more recent craze of “selfies” (determined to be the most important new word of 2013 by the Oxford Dictionary—meaning self portraits that are immediately posted and made known via social networking) might give us pause to consider the introverted, self-centered attraction of electronic slavery. Indeed, Neil Postman’s perspectives in his landmark 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* might not only have been descriptive of his time but prophetic of our own.

Amusing Ourselves to Death?

We like to be entertained, and the electronic world offers constant en-

tertainment. We naturally prefer to retreat from awkward or difficult situations—electronic devices stand ready to serve. Most of us have seen a prototypical family of father, mother and two pre-teen or teenage children sitting in a restaurant, spending time together as they wait for their meal to be served. They seem to be happy to “spend time together” while being absorbed in talking with or connecting with anyone other than the family member only a few feet away.

We naturally desire others to agree with us, to reinforce and support us, but we prefer that they keep their distance so they don’t inconvenience us—so via electronic devices people “friend” strangers they will never see or meet. When all is said and done, I suspect that history will determine that our brave new 21st century world of electronic connectivity was neither completely good nor completely evil, but that it was yet another in a long line of technological advances that was used for both good and bad.

The electronic culture, with all of its toys and gadgets, can be used as just another idol to replace God or it can be used by Christ-followers to help us be far more aware of God, and thus walk more dearly and nearly with him. The World Wide Web (www) can become a toxic, addictive drug that causes people to retreat into themselves and their own darkened realities, or it can help Christ-followers connect and bond with the worldwide body of Christ in ways never before possible.

As Christ-followers each of us must determine whether a machine/gadget/technology/device controls us, or whether we control it. Will a device help us connect with God, or will it be another convenient vehicle to help us run and hide? □

“wireless” communication), television and movies have offered ways to grow closer to God or run away from him.

Then, the electronic revolution burst into our lives in the latter part of the 20th century, going forward into our 21st century. As with the printing press, which made the Bible widely known and available in common languages, the electronic revolution has offered new ways to know more about things of God. And it is not coincidental that yet again, in this 21st century as we see an incredi-

The electronic culture, with all of its toys and gadgets, can be used as just another idol to replace God or it



can be used by Christ-followers to help us be far more aware of God, and thus walk more dearly and nearly with him.

Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church...Really

BY DAVID HAYWARD

Rachel Held Evans writes for CNN's religion blog on "Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church." I like what she has to say and am in agreement with much of it. This one sentence summarizes her opinion well:

"...the assumption among Christian leaders, and evangelical leaders in particular, is that the key to drawing twenty-somethings back to church is simply to make a few style updates..."

She continues later:
"What millennials really want from the church is not a change in

as social justice. In a nutshell, she concludes:

"...we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there.... Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus."

I hear where she's coming from. I agree that the church is fascinated with tweaking but not transforming itself. I agree there needs to be substantial change. I think maybe *some* millennials might want change in substance. But not all.

So I would like to push Rachel Held Evans' argument a little further and suggest that *most* millennials

more radical form of tweaking. I suspect a much deeper change is coming because the church is becoming not only less and less relevant, but less and less necessary.

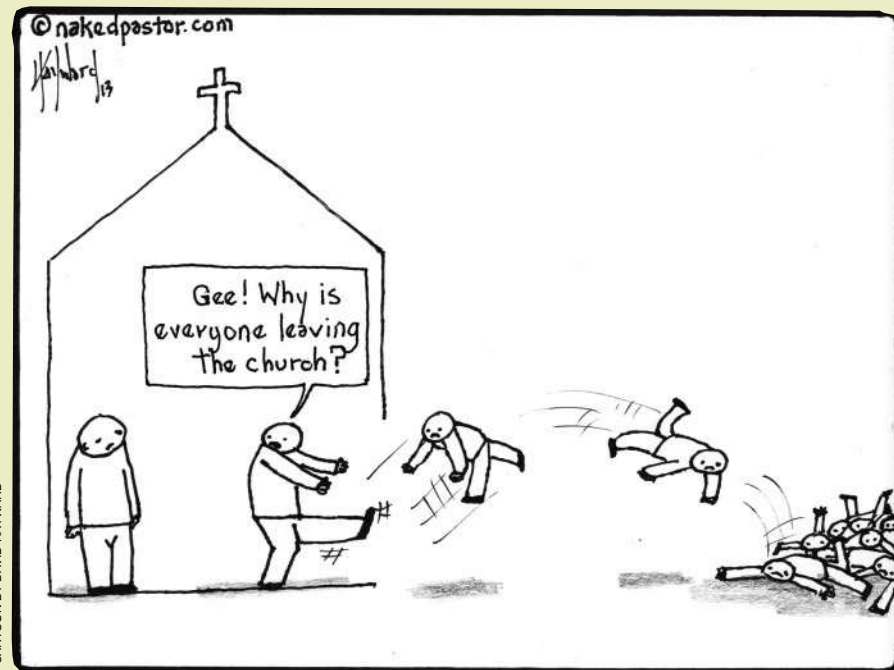
The suggested substantial changes can now be achieved without the aide or even presence of the church. This is the church's problem that it doesn't seem willing or able to admit. The church is gaping down the throat of its own death and can't face it.

The millennials I know don't even think about the church. It never crosses their minds. It doesn't appear within the scope of their needs. As their fierce sense of spiritual independence grows, the need for external spiritual authorities, institutions and venues shrinks. I think that even using such words as "belief," "faith," "church," "kingdom of God" and "Jesus" betrays a desperate devotion to a passing paradigm.

The metaphor of death and resurrection applies here. Death, of course, means the end of everything. The story of Jesus' death is not a mock up, staged, or, as some gnostic theologians taught, partial. It was *total* annihilation. Complete death. An utter and tragic end to all of it.

Of course, this then sets the stage for the powerful metaphor of resurrection...something totally new and, compared to the old, barely even recognizable. This is what we are resisting because of our attachment to what is and our premonitory grief for its passing. □

David Hayward is most popularly known as "The Naked Pastor," a graffiti artist on the walls of religion, where he critiques Christianity and the church. He also launched and moderates an online community, *The Lasting Supper*, a safe space for people to transition to personal, intellectual and spiritual freedom and independence.



style but a change in substance."

The "substance" Evans is speaking of is: an end to culture wars; a truce between science and faith; positive rather than antagonistic values; the right to ask questions; kingdom of God over party politics and nationalism; LGBT rights; and holiness in matters of sex as well

just don't care what the church does. It is actually dead to them already.

You can change the style. You might keep some. You can change the substance. You might keep more. The substantial change people are talking about, in my opinion, is not substantial enough. Again, the substantial changes suggested are, in their own way, a



Naughty Boys

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

Pancreatic cancer. There is no cure. The diagnosis is chilling. My dear friend Myra died after a five-year battle with the disease. Myra was a college professor and before that a schoolteacher who had a special place in her heart for naughty boys. She had a knack for seeing beyond the broken rule—beyond the infraction—to a glimmer of greatness.

She would have been captivated by Jack Andraka. Not so his own middle-school teacher: “I swear, she has, like eyes on the back of her head or something. She sees me. And she storms up to my desk...and, like, snatches it out of my hand.”

What the middle-school teacher snatched out of Jack’s hand was a journal article on pancreatic cancer, the very disease that had recently taken the life of a family friend. For more than a year Jack had been obsessed with finding a cure.

In the months that followed this classroom incident he “prepared a test protocol for this theory and sent it out to 200 cancer researchers.” All but one rejected him, no doubt thinking, *Who does this kid think he is?*

But one acceptance was all he needed. Dr. Anirban Maitra, a professor at Johns Hopkins, opened the door a crack, inviting the boy to respond to his interrogation. Impressed with his answers, he offered Jack a corner in his own lab. For the next seven months this naughty boy spent his afternoons and evenings in the lab.

At age 15, Jack is now skipping school most of the time. As a recognized prodigy he travels around the United States and abroad to speak at scientific conferences and has four times visited President Obama at the White House.

I know Jack only from his *60 Minutes* appearance on October 13, 2013. He had

recently won a \$100,000 first prize in the Intel International Science Fair.

His competitors were older than he and behaving like adults. He was all-kid, as was evident when he bounded up to the stage, jumping and hooting and laughing, never imagining he could win.

Is he a genius? Jack responds: “You can be a genius, but if you don’t have the creativity to put that knowledge to use, then you just have a bunch of knowledge and nothing else.”

Jack is not shy about his own accomplishment: “I have enough data to prove that this works, and so now I’m going to give it to the pharmaceutical companies to run it through, like, clinical trials and stuff.”

He is convinced that “one day his invention will be in every doctor’s office and even on pharmacy shelves.” His patent attorney is working to that end, and in the meantime, Jack is consumed with new projects.

What does a teacher do with the naughty boys—and girls?

Does she send them to the principal or shoot an email to the mother?

Does she demand detention after school, boring them with busy-work?

Or, does her tender-mercy microscope help her to see right through the naughtiness where she discovers tiny cells are multiplying and taking form as creative genius?

I think of Myra often. Her beaming face with bright flowers in the foreground is captured in a photo framed in olive green that sits on a glass shelf in the hutch across from the desk where I do most of my writing.

The smiling man in the photo is my husband, John. As his dearly-departed wife and my dear friend, Myra will always have a cherished place in our home.

I wonder where Myra’s naughty little boys are today. Are any of them seeking cures for cancer?

Do they remember her tender mercies? □

—Ruth A. Tucker

I wonder where Myra’s naughty little boys are today. Are any of them seeking cures for cancer?



Jefferson Bethke's story of a painful childhood of poverty and a broken home gives him a unique perspective on God's grace. Jefferson burst into our lives in 2012 with a passionate and provocative poem, titled "Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus." The 4-minute video had 7 million YouTube views in 48 hours, now numbering, as we go to press, well over 25 million views. Jefferson is married to Alyssa—they live in Tacoma, Washington with their yellow Lab named Aslan. Because we believe Jefferson's work in redefining religion and pointing us back to Christ-centered, life-giving grace is important, with the permission of Thomas Nelson Publishers, we excerpt the following from Jesus > Religion by Jefferson Bethke.

—the Editors

Introduction: Why I Hate Religion But Love Jesus

What if I told you Jesus came to abolish religion?

What if I told you getting you to vote Republican really wasn't his mission?

What if I told you religious right doesn't automatically mean Christian?

JESUS >

And just because you call some people blind, doesn't automatically give you vision.

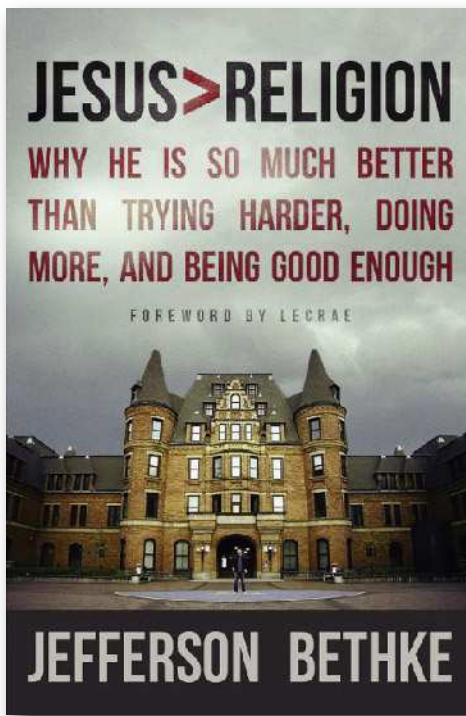
I mean, if religion is so great, why has it started so many wars?

Why does it build huge churches, but fails to feed the poor?

Tell single moms God doesn't love them, if they've ever had a divorce?

Yet God in the Old Testament actually calls the religious people whores.

A little sharp, I know. When I first wrote those lines, I didn't think so, but when almost seven million people heard me say those words on YouTube in less than forty-eight hours, I realized they resonated with more than just a few people.



MY HOPE IN SHARING MY STORY IS THAT IT WOULD SOMEHOW THREAD ITSELF INTO YOURS, ULTIMATELY WEAVING US BOTH CLOSER TO THE ULTIMATE STORY OF A GOD IN HEAVEN WHO PURSUES AND LOVES PEOPLE LIKE US.

piece highlighting the video. One of the YouTube staff even mentioned that something this serious or this explicit about Jesus hardly ever goes viral. In fact #jesushatesreligion was even trending on Twitter for a while. Immediately e-mails started to come in:

Hello, Jeff. My name is Laura. I just wanted to say thank you sooo much for your videos. I have struggled with drugs, sex, and suicide. I always thought that I wasn't good enough and didn't belong anywhere ever since I was raped when I was seven. I knew God growing up, but I thought he was just some mythical figure everyone worshiped. One day I was fed up with all of it and decided that was all I could take—I was going to kill myself after school. All day I went through my head saying, It's finally going to be done, I don't have to worry. On my

a place where I belong. Your video gave me the courage to move on and say that I can make it through life. You are my biggest role model...besides God.... When I get so low that I can't think straight, I just watch your videos over and over. They bring me peace in my mind that God still loves me even if I've screwed up.

And another:

As I moved away to college, I also moved away from the church, attempting to find my own path. When I stumbled upon your video, I was lost after being disowned by my family for moving away from the Catholic faith. Watching it opened my eyes to Jesus again and made me realize that Jesus isn't what I grew up with everyday in the church but rather loving and pouring with grace. I started going to the Christian services located on my campus and got back on the right track in life, learning that no matter what anyone else would say about my past, present, or future sins that God will still love me and Jesus is truly everything.

E-mails like these flooded in by the hundreds. What had I said in my video that struck such a chord? Why were these people sharing these things with me? To be honest, I was overwhelmed at first. I'm not a counselor.

I'm not a pastor. I'm a messed-up twenty-three-year-old who just graduated from college. I was being messaged, e-mailed, and tweeted by thousands of people who were sharing their raw testimonies with me, a complete stranger. Many even stated that it was the first time they had shared their secrets with anyone. I was wondering, What did I say? What was it about the poem that was so different?

Isn't this just the good news of Jesus that's been preached for the last two thousand years?

I realized the e-mails were showing just how right the original poem that sparked it all in the first

My best friend makes professional videos, and we thought it would be fun to shoot a spoken-word poem I had written. To our surprise it went viral overnight. At first I was excited. I was now in the blessed company of "David After the Dentist" and "Charlie Bit My

RELIGION

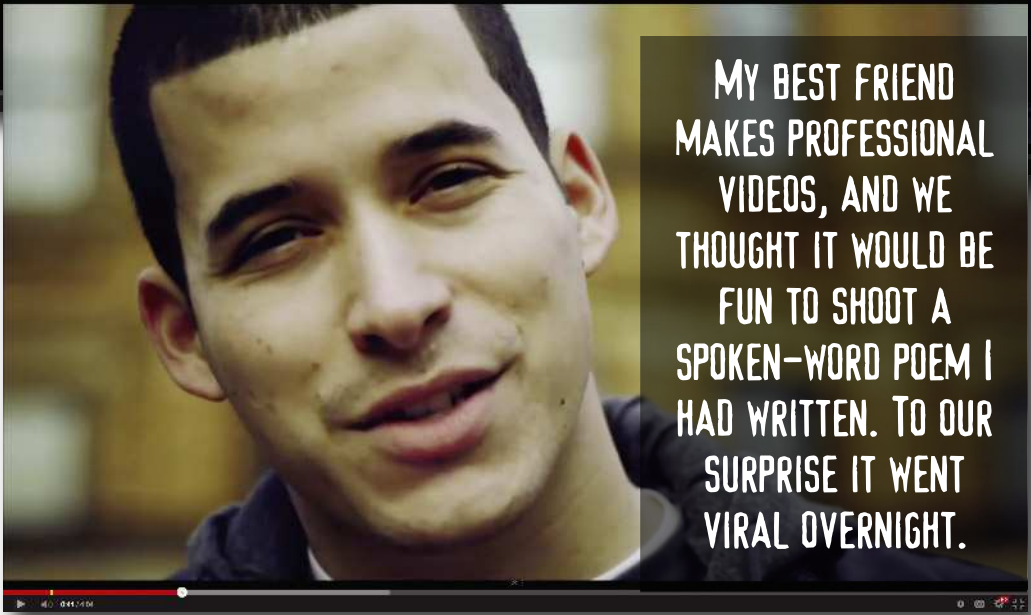
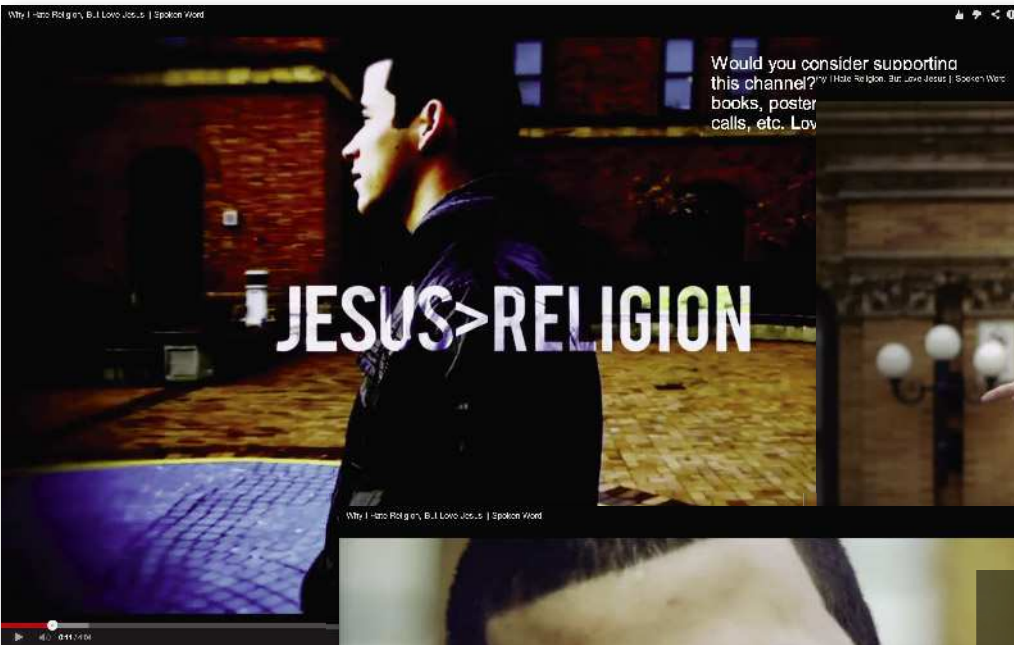
by Jefferson Bethke

Finger." Then there was panic.

The number of e-mails, messages, and requests became almost unbearable. For about a solid week, everywhere I looked, I was there: *Wall Street Journal, Huffington Post, Yahoo News, Washington Post, New York Times, CBS Morning Show, Glenn Beck*, and others either interviewed me or had a significant

way home I got on Facebook one last time and my friend had posted your video "Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus." I figured I might as well watch it because I'm going to end it all anyway. I immediately started crying because the video made me realize that it's okay that I'm not perfect. There is

I'M NOT REALLY QUALIFIED TO WRITE THIS BOOK.... I'M JUST A MESSED UP TWENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD GUY. BUT I KNOW THAT GOD HAS QUITE THE SENSE OF HUMOR. IT ONLY TAKES A QUICK PEEK INTO CHRISTIAN HISTORY TO REALIZE I'M ALMOST THE EXACT TYPE OF PERSON HE IS LOOKING FOR.



place was. Many people had been sold religion with a nice Jesus sticker slapped on it. Many people had been burned by so-called Christians. Many people had been abused, hurt, mistreated, and maligned all in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But what their souls were craving was the true Jesus. The one who heals. The one who redeems. The one who gives life.

Let me be straight with you: I'm not really qualified to write this book. I don't have a Bible or seminary degree. I'm not a pastor or a counselor. I don't know biblical languages and don't know how to do exegesis—whatever that even is. Again, I'm just a messed up twenty-three-year-old guy. But I know that God has quite the sense of humor. It only takes a quick peek into Christian history to realize I'm almost the exact type of person he is looking for.

A wise man two thousand years ago put it this way: "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27, ESV). Paul tells us that God loves using people who are useless by worldly

standards—because then he gets all the credit. A crooked stick can still draw a straight line, and a messed-up dude like me can still write about an awesome God. I've tasted grace and can't help but tell others about it.

My hope in sharing my story is that it would somehow thread itself into yours, ultimately weaving us both closer to the ultimate story of a God in heaven who pursues and loves people like us.

Chapter 1: Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

What do you believe? No, really. What do you *really* believe? I'm not talking what you put on your Facebook profile or what box you check on an application. What do you put your faith in? What drives

you? What's your identity? I'm sure we all have some canned answers to those questions, but when it gets down to it, we know that's a load of crap.

If you are anything like me, you probably grew up thinking there was a God—whatever that means, right? Soon enough reality started to clash with this idea, and the idea of a real God seemed to become more distant. I still held onto the Christian tagline simply for identity purposes, but once I got to high school, it all seemed pretty ridiculous. There really was no need for him. Sure I could still call myself a Christian, but only when it seemed to benefit me. Other than that I didn't want him anymore.

My true religion, as it is with

THE NUMBER OF E-MAILS, MESSAGES, AND REQUESTS BECAME ALMOST UNBEARABLE. FOR ABOUT A SOLID WEEK, EVERYWHERE I LOOKED, I WAS THERE: WALL STREET JOURNAL, HUFFINGTON POST, YAHOO NEWS, WASHINGTON POST, NEW YORK TIMES, CBS MORNING SHOW...

most of my American peers, was the religion of moralism dressed in Christian clothes. I believed there was a god out there somewhere, that he wants us to be good kids, and that if we are, he tells us how much he loves us, puts our pictures on the fridge, and gives us a trophy—because everyone's a winner, right?

I was a Christian by default. Everyone else said they were Christians; my mom took me to church; there was a Bible in the house. So I thought all that made me a Christian too. Saying I was a Christian seemed to get me further with my friends, family, and society than saying I was not. Being a Christian made life easier for me. But I didn't actually love or serve Jesus.

Isn't that the story for many of us in America? Christianity is our default setting. We say we're Christians because it seems nice, makes us look moral, keeps the parents off our backs, and keeps us out of hell—that is, if we even believe in hell.

My mom and I went to church enough to know the rituals and songs, but I never felt like a "church kid." I heard enough sermons to know Jesus died for me, but I also had such a broken and painful life that I figured Jesus wasn't relevant. My parents never got married, so I grew up with just my mom. She is an amazing woman

who did everything in her power to give me every opportunity possible. However, a physical handicap and mental struggles made it so she was unable to work very often. This meant Section Eight housing, welfare, social security, and food stamps. We moved around a lot—I went to eight schools from kindergarten through high school—and didn't live in the nicest areas.

I remember going to church and enjoying the games, the felt board, and the songs; but it always felt

so disconnected. All the other kids seemed to have it together, and I never felt completely comfortable in that crowd. So I decided to fake it. I figured that if I could out-good the good kids, then I'd fit in. If little Johnny got a gold star, then I'd make sure to get a platinum one.

I became prideful and religious. This attitude festered and solidified itself in me all the way into my teenage years. When I got to high school, I thought I was good because I didn't smoke, drink, or have sex. I constantly thought I was better than all *those* people. I had just enough church to think that I could be good enough for God. I had just enough Jesus not to need him at all.

The funny part is that—even though I thought I was—I really wasn't a good kid. Starting in middle school, I was a troublemaker. I

had a careless attitude toward school, my mom, and my life. I had bad grades, got kicked out of school for fighting and stealing, and developed a porn addiction that lasted more than eight years.

High school began, and things only got worse. I didn't even at-

tempt to turn in any of my assignments, and so I flunked out my freshman year. I went to school to just keep in touch with friends and talk to girls. My mom knew my friends weren't good influences, and so we moved—again—to another town about thirty minutes away.

To some degree this was an awesome fresh start. I immediately got plugged in with the "good" kids who didn't party or drink, and I loved them. I also loved baseball and made it onto the school team. My life was baseball and my friends—it was looking good.

Then, my junior year of high school, my mom told me what was devastating news at the time. She came into my room, sat me down, and told me she was gay. She went on to include that she had fought it all her life and that the woman whom she had invited to live with us months earlier under the pretense that she was just a friend who needed help was actually her partner. (She fessed up after a fight between them.)

I felt betrayed by my mom, embarrassed for not figuring out why another woman lived in our house, and ashamed that my mom was gay. What would my friends think? My attitude was so self-centered back then. All I could think about was myself. I was a good Christian kid, so I couldn't have a gay mom, right?

After that, my mom threw in the towel on the traditional Christian faith. The treatment of gays by

WE REFUSE TO TURN OFF OUR COMPUTERS, TURN OFF OUR PHONES, LOG OFF FACEBOOK, AND JUST SIT IN SILENCE BECAUSE IN THOSE MOMENTS WE MIGHT ACTUALLY HAVE TO FACE UP TO WHO WE REALLY ARE. WE FEAR SILENCE...

conservative Christians finally got to her. My initial thought was, *Well, if Jesus didn't work for her, why would he work for me?* So I gave up on God too. I was in pain. I was lonely. I wanted to escape but couldn't. I went from religion to rebellion. I figured if it felt good, I

should do it. I worshiped girls, relationships, and my reputation. If getting more girls and drinking more beer meant I'd be "cool," then why not? But I soon discovered that lifestyle was like drinking saltwater. If you are extremely thirsty, you'll settle for it, but it just makes you thirstier. Every girl eventually became tiresome, and it was on to the next one.

On top of all this, I began to resent my mom. I despised her. Bitterness grew heavy. We lived in the same house but rarely spoke. I partied even harder and cared even less. I stopped looking for the right girl and started looking for an easy girl. I had the world's idea of pleasure at my fingertips, but something deep inside kept gnawing at me. Most of the time I was going too fast to notice it. It was only those few minutes before I'd fall asleep at night that my soul would be quiet enough to tell me what I was doing wasn't working.

I hear a lot of people say that the fear of death and the fear of public speaking are two of the main fears in my generation, but I disagree. I think it's the fear of silence. We refuse to turn off our computers, turn off our phones, log off Facebook, and just sit in silence because in those moments we might actually have to face up to who we really are. We fear silence like it's an invisible monster, gnawing at us, ripping us open, and showing us our dissatisfaction. *Silence is terrifying.*

Then I graduated, had a fun summer, and headed off to a Christian college. In San Diego. Completely on my own. I didn't go because the school was Christian. I went because they had an awesome baseball team and a beautiful field. The campus—and baseball field—is literally on the ocean; you can almost hit a home run into the water. It's no surprise

that within the first semester, I got put on academic probation, cut from the baseball team, and dumped by my first serious girlfriend. Because baseball and girls were my life, I felt I had lost everything important. It was devastating, and for the first time in my life, I wasn't "good enough." I was broken.

Initially I blamed God for the pain in my life, but slowly I started to hear the whisper of his grace. I didn't know it then, but God broke me to fix

day, and it played out when I finally started to get drawn in by grace. I had to investigate. I had to have the answers. I had to know if grace was real.

I still remember going to the college library one day and asking how many books a student could check out at one time. The answer was fifteen, so I went back to my dorm room with fifteen books on Jesus, Christianity, and apo-

WE HAVE COMPLETELY NEUTERED GRACE.. AND TURNED JESUS INTO MR. ROGERS.



HE'S A ROARING LION.
THAT'S WHAT THE REAL
JESUS IS LIKE. HE ISN'T
SAFE... HIS GRACE IS
DANGEROUS, FEROCIOUS,
VIOLENT, AND
UNCONTROLLABLE. IT
CAN'T BE TAMED....

me because he loved me. Author C. S. Lewis said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹

Because of this, I was finally ready to listen. It was a messy process, however.

Looking back, I can't pinpoint one day when it all seemed to click. It was more like a period of three to four months when I stood at arm's length with Jesus. I really had nothing to lose, but this whole grace thing didn't make much sense to me.

My mom said I was the annoying kid who always asked "why" after everything. (I pray to Jesus this particular character trait doesn't get passed down to my future kids.) I am still like that to this

day. Through some of those authors, God's grace slowly melted the crust off my heart. I started to see an enormous difference in the Christianity I thought I knew and the Christianity proclaimed in the New Testament. I finally started to see:

The Bible isn't a rule book. It's a love letter. I'm not an employee. I'm a child. It's not about my performance. It's about Jesus' performance for me.

Grace isn't there for some future me but for the real me. The me who struggled. The me who was messy. The me who was addicted to porn. The me who didn't have all the answers. The me who was insecure. He loved me in my mess; he was not waiting until I cleaned myself up. That truth changed my life, and I'm convinced it can change yours.

GRACE ISN'T THERE FOR SOME FUTURE ME BUT FOR THE REAL ME. THE ME WHO STRUGGLED. THE ME WHO WAS MESSY. THE ME WHO WAS ADDICTED TO PORN. THE ME WHO DIDN'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS. THE ME WHO WAS INSECURE.

Finding the Real Jesus

After my head-on collision with grace, I couldn't get enough of Jesus. It wasn't that everything difficult disappeared, but I now felt an anchor amid the pain. Being a new Christian, however, I didn't know what to do, how to act, what Bible studies to go to, or what CDs to listen to. I had a lot of friends, but not many of them were Christians. The first six months of my new life with Jesus, I was alone and guessing how to "do" the Christian faith. I spent a lot of nights in my dorm room reading my Bible—which was better than going out and partying like I did the semester before.

Though I didn't have many Christian friends, I was at a Christian university. So I decided to copy what "being a Christian" was all about by watching others. I took off my earrings, stopped wearing basketball jerseys, tried my hardest to memorize Hillsong United's greatest hits, and listened to the Christian radio station. I thought that if I did enough Christian things, it would bring peace to my life. It didn't work.

Six months in, I had done everything I thought I should be doing as a Christian, but I still had desires I thought were supposed to disappear—lust, pride, and pleasure. Wasn't Jesus supposed to make my life better? I had been duped. My "Christianity" was once again just the American religion of work hard, do good, feel good, and maybe God will say, "We good."

I realized I was following the wrong Jesus—not that there is a "wrong" Jesus—but I was following a fake version of the real one. This realization came to me as I listened



HE LOVED ME IN MY MESS; HE WAS NOT WAITING UNTIL I CLEANED MYSELF UP. THAT TRUTH CHANGED MY LIFE, AND I'M CONVINCED IT CAN CHANGE YOURS.

to a Christian radio station one day. During a commercial break, they did a fifteen-second spot about the station that consisted of kids laughing, happy music, and the slogan, "Music you can trust, because it's safe for the whole family!"

I remember thinking, *Safe for the whole family? Is Jesus really safe for the whole family?*

I realized we had created a Jesus who's safe for the whole family. But if we were honest, we'd ask, how is a homeless dude who was murdered on a cross for saying he was God safe for the whole family? Not to mention that Paul told us if we choose to follow his example as a follower of Jesus, we will be treated the way that he was.²

We've lost the real Jesus—or at least exchanged him for a newer, safer, sanitized, ineffectual one. We've created a Christian subculture that comes with its own set of customs, rules, rituals, paradigms, and products that are nowhere near the rugged, revolutionary faith of biblical Christianity. In our subculture Jesus would have never been crucified—he's too nice.

We claim Jesus is our homeboy,



but sometimes we look more like the people Jesus railed against. The same scathing indictments Jesus brought against the religious leaders of his day—the scribes and Pharisees—he could bring down on many of America's Christian leaders.³ No wonder the world hates us. Most of the time we're persecuted not because we love Jesus, but because we're prideful, arrogant jerks who don't love the real Jesus. We're often judgmental, hypocritical, and legalistic while claiming to follow a Jesus who is forgiving, authentic, and loving.

Sometimes people will hate us because we preach the same gospel Jesus preached, and sometimes people will hate us because we're jerks. Let's not do the second one and blame it on the first. If we honestly reflected on Scripture and the state of American Christianity today, we'd be hard pressed to say we haven't exchanged the real Jesus for one of our own invention.

God didn't create us to work at the food bank once a year and feel good about ourselves. He didn't create us to say looking at porn

MOST OF THE TIME WE'RE PERSECUTED NOT BECAUSE WE LOVE JESUS, BUT BECAUSE WE'RE PRIDEFUL, ARROGANT JERKS WHO DON'T LOVE THE REAL JESUS. WE'RE OFTEN JUDGMENTAL, HYPOCRITICAL, AND LEGALISTIC WHILE CLAIMING TO FOLLOW A JESUS WHO IS FORGIVING, AUTHENTIC, AND LOVING.

only once a month is a victory. He didn't create us to walk by a homeless guy begging for money and think, *He'll probably just buy some beer.* God didn't create us to come to him only when we need him—like he's our eternal dentist or something.

The Jesus of the Bible is a radical man with a radical message, changing people's lives in a radical way. In the Scriptures, Jesus isn't safe. No one knew what to do with him. The liberals called him too conservative, and the conservatives called him too liberal. I mean, think about it: His first miracle was turning water into wine. He made a whip of leather and went UFC on people who'd pimped out his father's temple. He completely disregarded any social, gender, or racial boundary his society imposed. He called himself the Son of God. He called himself the judge over everyone, determining who goes to heaven and hell. He said things like, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."⁴ That's dangerous—and weird.

I don't care what church you grew up in, that sounds less like the Jesus we think we know and more like Hannibal Lector. Jesus also forgives sins, which is dangerous because only God can forgive sins, yet the religious people claimed Jesus was just a man.⁵

But we don't like a dangerous Jesus because a dangerous Jesus isn't a profitable Jesus. So, we've made a safe Jesus:

We don't celebrate the gift of Jesus on Christmas.

We celebrate the gifts we get.

We don't celebrate his triumphant resurrection and victory over Satan, sin, and death on Easter. We talk about the brunch.

We don't call Jesus God. We call him good.

We don't tell people they're sinners in need of a savior, because they might stop coming—and giving—to church.

In many ways, Christianity has become all about those green pieces of paper with dead presidents on them. In 2010 Americans spent a little over \$135 billion on Christmas and another \$13 billion on Easter.⁶ Who would have thought a little baby born in a filthy animal barn some two thousand years ago would be such a great excuse to feed our material addictions?

We have branded Jesus beyond recognition. Church has become a business. Jesus is our marketing scheme. We create bookstores, T-shirts, bracelets, bumper stickers, and board games all in the name of Jesus. In 2007 some woman even made national news for selling a pancake with Jesus' face on it on eBay.⁷

Now don't get me wrong. There's a degree to which that stuff is okay. I mean, chances are you bought the book you're reading right now. I know I buy my fair share of Christian books—in fact, my wife says I buy too many, and I'm going to make us broke. But

questions continue coming back to me: Are we really getting it? Have we made that stuff more important than Jesus? How come American Christianity is so different from the Bible's vibrant, uncontrollable, and unpredictable Christianity?

The reason we aren't fulfilled or satisfied by our version of Christianity is because it *isn't* Christianity.

We have religion, but we don't have Jesus.

We have a good role model, but we don't have God.

We have theological debates, but we don't have the living Word.

We have good works, but we don't have the source of good works.

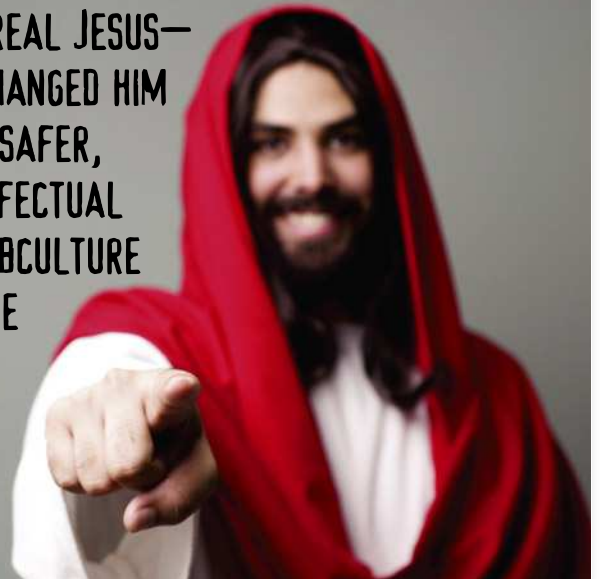
We have love, but not the God who is love.

We have completely neutered grace (my good works save me, but we still call it grace), made God a math equation (God will like me if I'm good), and turned Jesus into Mr. Rogers. "Howdy, neighbor." But Jesus isn't rocking a cardigan, and he doesn't talk softly through his nose. He's a roaring lion.

In author C. S. Lewis's classic book, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the kids ask if the lion Aslan—who represents God—is safe. "'Safe?'" said Mr. Beaver; 'don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'"⁸

That's what the real Jesus is like. He isn't safe. His words, his life, and his cross completely destroy the notion of him being safe. His grace is dangerous, ferocious, violent, and uncontrollable. It can't be tamed....

**WE'VE LOST THE REAL JESUS—
OR AT LEAST EXCHANGED HIM
FOR A NEWER, SAFER,
SANITIZED, INEFFECTUAL
ONE.... IN OUR SUBCULTURE
JESUS WOULD HAVE
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THAT'S WHEN I STARTED TO NOTICE AN INTERESTING TREND: WHEN I JUXTAPOSED RELIGION AND JESUS IN MY CONVERSATIONS, THEY TOOK A DIFFERENT TURN. IT ALLOWED PEOPLE TO PULL BACK A LITTLE AND SEE IT IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT.

I sat in bed one night and wondered, *When on earth did "hates gays, can't drink beer, and no tattoos" become the essence of Christianity?* It hit me that my friends weren't the ones to blame for their confusion. They had gotten this idea from people they grew up with, churches they went to as kids, or preachers they saw on TV. It was the church's fault that they thought this was what real Christianity was all about....

My peers couldn't separate Jesus from religion because they weren't reading the Bible to learn about Jesus; they were looking to the Christian religion to understand him. What they were rebelling against was *religion*. People lamented that they had tried Christianity, and it didn't work. But last time I checked, you don't *try* Christianity; either your heart has been transformed by Jesus or it hasn't.

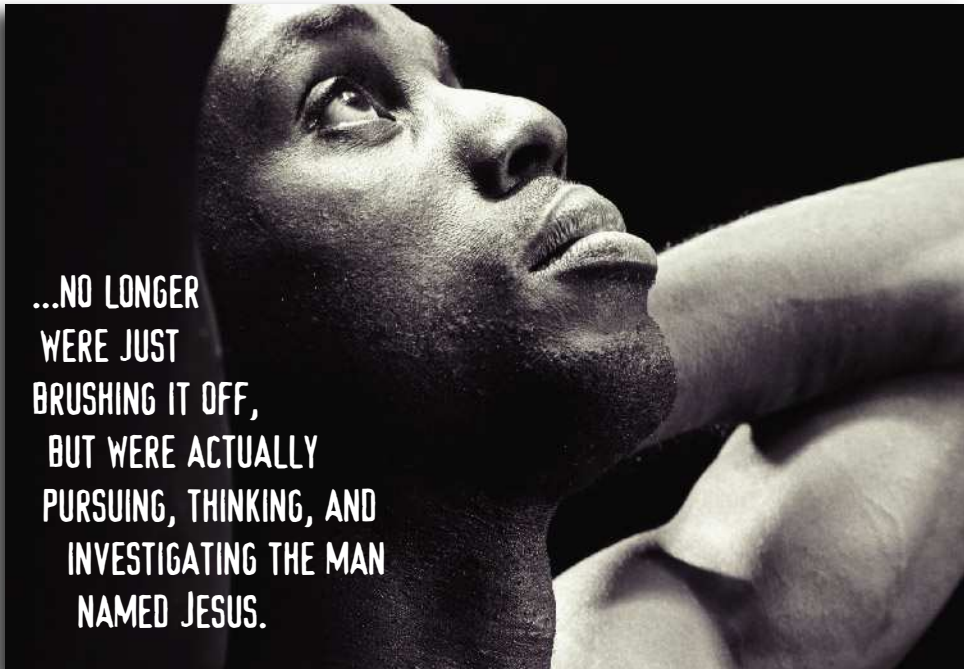
But you can *try* religion.

You can *try* to follow the rules.

You can *try* to climb up to heaven.

But all you'll do is white knuckle your way to religious despair. It won't work. It never does.

That's when I started to notice an interesting trend: When I juxtaposed religion and Jesus in my conversations, they took a different turn. It allowed people to pull back a little and see it in a different light. They no longer were just brushing it off, but were actually pursuing, thinking, and investigating the man named Jesus. And that's when I started to write the poem, "Why I Hate Religion But Love Jesus."



...NO LONGER WERE JUST BRUSHING IT OFF, BUT WERE ACTUALLY PURSUING, THINKING, AND INVESTIGATING THE MAN NAMED JESUS.

Saying Nothing New

Some of you may be thinking, "Wait a minute: you can't hate religion and love Jesus. Jesus IS a religion." To which I'd answer yes and no. If you mean by religion, "a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe," then yes and amen, Christianity is a religion. But by that definition, *so is Atheism*. But if we mean by religion, "what one must do, or behave like, in order to gain right standing with God" then real Christianity isn't a religion.

I had been a Christian for about a year when I realized Jesus isn't just one of many saviors. Following him is fundamentally different from practicing other world religions. There was something almost upside down or antithetical to him.

All the other religions center on people's righteousness—what we do and how good we are. Real Christianity centers on Jesus' righteousness—what he has done and how good he is.

All the other religions essentially say, "This is what you have to do to be in right standing with God." Jesus comes to earth and says, "This is what Jesus has done for you to freely put you in right standing with God."

Religion says do. Jesus says done.

Religion is man searching for God. Jesus is God searching for man.

Religion is pursuing God by our moral efforts. Jesus is God pursuing us *despite* our moral efforts.

Religious people *kill* for what they believe. Jesus followers *die* for what they believe.

That's when it hit me: No wonder Christianity and Jesus' message of salvation is called *good news*. It isn't just good advice (religion); it's good news (Jesus). It's not declaring what we must do, but declaring what he has already done. It's almost as if Jesus is the eternal paperboy delivering a newspaper declaring something that has already happened. The only question with Jesus is, will we follow him? □

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1. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain, in The Complete C.S. Lewis (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002)*, 406.

2. 2 Timothy 3:12.

3. Matthew 23.

4. John 2:1-11, 13-22; 4:1-42; 5:18-29; 6:53.

5. John 8:1-11.

6. "Holiday Spending Sized Up," IBIS World, <http://www.ibisworld.com/Common/MediaCenter/Holiday%20Spending.pdf> (accessed January 23, 2013).

7. "Holy Pancake Auctioned on eBay: Woman Says Jesus Appeared on Breakfast," WPBF News, November 13, 2007, <http://www.wpbfl.com/Holy-Pancake-Auctioned-On-eBay/-8789538/5117954/item/0/wwoodsaz/index.html> (accessed January 23, 2013).

8. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: A Story for Children (1950; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2009)*, 77.



HEALING THE GOSPEL

*When Did the Good News Become
Bad News?*

*Derek Flood is one of many bold and courageous voices who are challenging traditional interpretations of the significance of the cross of Christ. Derek illustrates the dilemma—if God the Son died to appease the wrath of God the Father, then Jesus died to save us from God. Derek’s thesis is that this traditional Christian interpretation (penal substitution) is wrong because it opposes the good news of restorative justice. He argues that the cross is God’s gift that saves us from retributive justice. With the permission of Wipf and Stock, we reprint the first chapter of *Healing the Gospel*, by Derek Flood. —the Editors*

Penal Substitution and the Failure of Retributive Justice

When I was a teenager I had the typical born again experience, complete with all the strong emotions and tears. Only it wasn’t typical at all for me. I had not been raised in church. I was an agnostic, and so had always assumed that God was just an idea in your head. So to feel God’s loving presence, to hear that still small voice telling me, over and

over again, that I was loved, that I was not alone, was simply earth shattering for me. I can hardly express how profoundly it changed me to experience being loved by God like that. It turned my whole world around.

Naturally, I wanted to share this with everyone I met, so when they handed out tracts for us to distribute and told us how to “share the gospel” at my church, I was the first in line. Only, I quickly discovered that the message I was taught to share with others was very dif-

ferent from what I had actually experienced. It seemed more like bad news, and led to all sorts of awkward conversations like this:

Jesus died for you!

Why did Jesus have to die?

Because of our sin.

What if we haven’t sinned?

“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” No one can keep the law.

But if no one can keep it how can we be blamed for that?

Because “the wages of sin is death” and so justice requires that you be

IT IS THE KIND OF SHAME... THAT "CONSUMES YOU WITH ANGER, THAT RENDERS YOU PASSIVE, THAT SWALLOWS YOU IN DEPRESSION, THAT KEEPS YOU FROM LOVING AND KNOWING YOURSELF TO BE LOVED."

Can't you see this is God's mercy and love? Don't you want to open your heart and let him into your life? I think I have to go now.

The above dialog is of course overplayed in order to drive home this simple point: The way many of us have learned to present the "good news" can sound like anything but good news. I had experienced God's overwhelming love and grace filling my life. Yet I was taught to tell people that they deserved to be punished by God forever. Taught that we should see ourselves as worthless, totally depraved, capable of nothing good apart from God. I was taught that the reason Jesus died was because God demanded that someone had to suffer the penalty of sin, someone had to be punished to appease God's wrath. No wonder I got a

roast in hell forever; that God was enraged at us enough to kill us; and finally, that, in spite of everything, God loved us enough to rescue us by sending his son as a sacrifice to die in our place.¹

Bondi goes on to tell how this led her to internalize a sense of self-loathing that robbed her of joy. It is the kind of shame, she says, that "consumes you with anger, that renders you passive, that swallows you in depression, that keeps you from loving and knowing yourself to be loved."²

Faith motivated by fear, threat and feelings of worthlessness. Her story is, sadly, not uncommon.

This kind of religious self-loathing is often expressed as pious devotion:

"I feel myself to be a lump of unworthiness, a mass of corruption, and a heap of sin, apart from His almighty love."³ These are the words of Charles Spurgeon, a preacher who genuinely intended these words to be understood as an expression of love and gratitude towards God. People offer such prayers thinking this is what the Bible says about them, and believing that it is what God wants to hear us say. But consider for a moment how you would feel if your own child said such things to you: It would devastate you to hear your own son or daughter speak of themselves this way, and all the more to know that this is what your child thought you wanted to hear. If we as parents would

feel this way about our children, how much more would it break God's heart to hear us say such things? Isn't God the father who runs out to meet the prodigal son? Isn't God the one who loved us even in our estranged state?

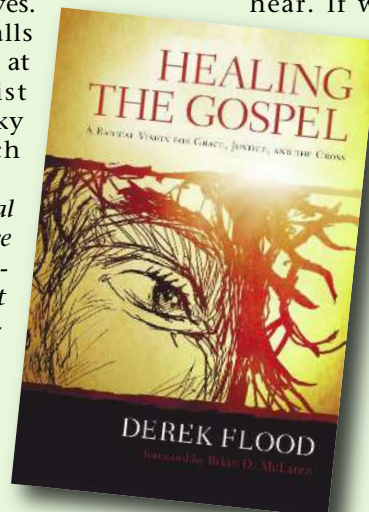
How could things

THIS MAY INDEED BE TRUE FOR SOME, BUT FOR OTHERS IT AMOUNTS TO LITTLE MORE THAN ABUSE, AND HAS RESULTED IN A HURTFUL IMAGE OF GOD...AND DRIVEN THEM AWAY FROM FAITH.

cold shoulder when I tried to share this "good news" with people.

Countless people filling our pews have internalized this hurtful view of God and themselves. Roberta Bondi recalls the revival meetings at Pond Fork Baptist Church in Kentucky she attended each summer as a child:

The goal of a revival was to create or revive in everybody the three-fold conviction that each of us was so rotten to the core that we deserved to die and



THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THIS STRATEGY [OF FEAR] IS THAT PEOPLE NEED TO BE SHAKEN OUT OF THEIR COMPLACENCY AND MADE READY TO RESPOND TO THE GOSPEL.

by Derek Flood

sent to be tormented in Hell for all eternity.

That's awful!

Yes, but there's good news: God has provided a way out by sacrificing his Son.

God kills his own son?

Yes, that's how much he loves you.

Why would that make anything better?

Because it satisfies God's need for punishment. Sin must be paid for with blood because "without blood there is no forgiveness."

I feel ill.

**BIBLICAL MERCY MEANS ACTIVE
COMPASSION, NOT INACTIVE
LENIENCY. IT IS NOT ABOUT CLOSING
OUR EYES TO SIN AND SUFFERING, BUT
JUST THE OPPOSITE...**

have gone so wrong? When did the good news become bad news?

Behind all of this lies an image of God as a judge who is primarily concerned with satisfaction of punitive justice. This is the image of God that plagued sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther with the horrible sense that he could never be good enough. The weight of this became so pronounced that at one point he confesses bitterly, "I did not love, and in fact I hated that righteous God who punished sinners...I was angry with God...I drove myself mad with a desperate disturbed conscience."⁴

It is not insignificant that Luther's own father and mother were both harsh disciplinarians, but regardless of the cause, Luther had clearly internalized a crippling image of God as judge that tormented him until he discovered grace. This message of grace and forgiveness has been a life-changing one to many people over the ages since Luther rediscov-



**BECAUSE OF THAT COMPASSION JESUS LONGED
TO BRING [SINNERS] JUSTICE, TO RELEASE THE
OPPRESSED, HEAL THE AFFLICTED AND FORGIVE
THE CONDEMNED.**

demnation—telling people the bad news so they could then receive the good news, wounding people first, so they could then heal those wounds. The philosophy behind this strategy is that people need to be shaken out of their complacency and made ready to respond to the gospel.

This may indeed be true for some, but for others it amounts to little more than abuse, and has re-

to the first person, is poison to the second.

For people like Luther, Bunyan, or Wesley (all of whom have deeply shaped the character of evangelicalism), I would suggest that their true struggle was not one of guilt at all. Their problem was not the petty infractions they would constantly accuse themselves of (Wesley, for example, after doing some good deed for the poor, would often condemn himself for feeling pleased about it⁵). No, their real struggle was with the devastation done to their souls through self-loathing masquerading as piety.

So they struggled with their feelings of shame and worthlessness, desperately longing for grace, longing for God's assurance and love, yet continuing to assume that their broken view of an angry, condemning, punishing God was the correct view, the biblical view. What I want to propose is that this is not in fact what the New Testament teaches at all.

A History of Violence

For centuries the assumption of punitive justice has saturated nearly every segment of our Western society—shaping how we approached child rearing, education,

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ered it, but it has often been tragically accompanied by a message of fear and condemnation itself. Luther, for example, preached that one must face the horrors of wrath before one could come to grace. In other words, he believed that everyone needed to be forced to go through the horrible struggle he did before they could hear about grace.

Ever since then, there has been a long history of revival preachers who have proclaimed this "pre-gospel" of fear, threat and con-

sulted in a hurtful image of God being hammered into their heads that has estranged them from God, and driven them away from faith. For a person struggling with moral failure, facing up to their brokenness and realizing that God loves them and died for them despite it is a crucial step towards life. But to tell a person whose sin is self-hatred that they need to face how bad and worthless they are is like making them swallow the wrong prescription medicine—what was healing

FOR CENTURIES THE ASSUMPTION OF PUNITIVE JUSTICE HAS SATURATED NEARLY EVERY SEGMENT OF OUR WESTERN SOCIETY—SHAPING HOW WE APPROACHED CHILD REARING, EDUCATION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND OF COURSE OUR CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.



mental health, and of course our criminal justice system. It was common in the past for instance to think it was good to beat children at home and at school, or to beat one's servants and workers.

Over the last century however, there have been major shifts in how we understand justice and its relation to punishment. Far from being good for a person's soul, today we have increasingly come to realize that such violence instead can cause significant psychological damage that stunts a person's healthy development. As I am writing this for example, the Twitter universe is exploding with the shocking story of school officials who put an autistic boy in a closed gym bag and left him in the hallway to discipline him. People across the country are understandably outraged, but this is exactly the kind of thing that we used to do to people all the time, believing that inflicting this kind of discipline would "make him come to his senses." The outrage people express now reflects the broad shift throughout our society away from that punitive model.

One of the last places where we still embrace the idea of punitive justice today is in our prison systems. Yet even within the criminal justice system there is an increasing awareness that a strictly punitive approach rarely produces reform. Offenders who simply serve their time commonly go right back out and commit more crimes because the root factors have not been dealt with. In fact, the violent environment of our prison system becomes a breeding ground that turns petty offenders into hardened criminals. Rather than learning empathy and how to manage their impulses and emo-

tions, the brutal culture of prison life teaches people that one must be brutally violent in order to survive. Because of these patterns learned in prison, the alarming repeat offense rate is sadly not at all surprising. Locking someone up in the hell of prison life naturally breeds violence, not reform or repentance.⁶

People do not learn empathy by being shamed and dehumanized. On the contrary, developing empathy has a lot to do with a healthy sense of self-worth. So while we may feel an impulse to want to punish and hurt those who have hurt us, this does not mend the hurt, it simply perpetuates it. In other words, punishment and shame are not the solution, they are a part of the problem. Punitive justice does not make things better, it makes them worse.

As a society we are increasingly coming to realize this. Across the broad fields of child rearing, educa-

restorative one, most of us continue to think that punitive justice is what the Bible teaches. As a result, many Christians defend a punitive model, even when it conflicts with their own values. As the painful testimonies of Bondi and so many others illustrate: We struggle to believe it, even though it seems wrong and hurtful to us. We hate it, but think this is what God wants us to believe.

More specifically, we think that the gospel is rooted in the idea that Jesus had to die to fulfill the "demands" of (punitive) justice. This is an understanding of the atonement known as penal substitution, "penal" meaning punish, and "substitution" meaning that Jesus is punished instead of us. It is the most common understanding of the atonement today.

Penal substitution classically sees a conflict between God's desire for

WHILE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTICE HAS SHIFTED AS A SOCIETY AWAY FROM A PUNITIVE MODEL AND TOWARDS A RESTORATIVE ONE, MOST OF US CONTINUE TO THINK THAT PUNITIVE JUSTICE IS WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES.

tion, and mental health (and slowly within the criminal justice system as well) there has been a major shift over the last half-century away from a punitive model, and towards a restorative one. Towards a model that fosters empathy, restoration and healing.

Two Kinds of Justice

While our understanding of justice has shifted as a society away from a punitive model and towards a

mercy (which in this legal framework refers to God's desire to be lenient and not punish), and the demand for justice (which it sees as focused on punishment). In this view, love is viewed as sentimental, weak, and opposed to justice. It represents leniency and inaction. God wants to be lenient, but justice requires punishment. So Jesus is punished in our place, fulfilling the demands of justice and appeasing God's anger.



...THE NEW TESTAMENT UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTICE IS ULTIMATELY NOT ABOUT PUNISHMENT, BUT ABOUT MAKING THINGS RIGHT AGAIN.

story of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is the story of restoration, redemption—at-onement. This meta-narrative of redemption is rooted, as Marshall says, in the idea of restorative justice. That is, justice understood in terms of God in Christ restoring and making things right again.

Restorative justice comes through mercy because it has to do with acting to make things right. In contrast, the model of punitive justice—which penal substitution is based on—reflects an understanding of both justice and mercy that is in conflict with the vision of the New Testament. In the following chart we can see the two contrasting models of justice side by side:

Criminal Model	New Testament Model
Justice=punishing	Justice=making things right
Mercy=leniency and inaction	Mercy=the act of making things right
Mercy and justice are in conflict	Acts of mercy are the means to justice

What I want to propose is that the above is not at all what the Bible teaches, and instead is the result of people projecting their worldly understanding of punitive justice onto the biblical text. The New Testament, in contrast, is actually a critique of punitive justice. It presents it as a problem to be solved, not as the means to the solution.

The problem of wrath (that is, punitive justice) is overcome through the cross, which is an act of restoration—restoring humanity to a right relationship with God. In other words, restorative justice is how God in Christ acts to heal the problem of punitive justice.

Love is not in conflict with justice, love is how justice comes about because the New Testament understanding of justice is ultimately not about punishment, but about making things right again. After his book length study of biblical justice, Chris Marshall concludes, “The justice of God is not primarily or normatively a retributive justice or a distributive justice

Biblical mercy means active compassion, not inactive leniency. It is not about closing our eyes to sin and suffering, but just the opposite: Jesus had compassion for sinners not because he was denying their sin but precisely because he did see, and their estranged plight agonized Jesus. Because of that compassion Jesus longed to bring them justice, to release the oppressed, heal the afflicted and forgive the condemned. Restorative

Conclusion

As we have seen, punitive justice has had devastating effects on many people’s lives, leading to all sorts of hurt over the centuries (beating children, torturing prisoners and heretics, etc.) and producing a deeply hurtful understanding of who we are and who God is. In contrast, I have argued for adopting a restorative understanding of justice. This restorative model not only reflects a major shift in how our society as a whole has come to think, but is also the core narrative of the New Testament.

However, centuries of projecting our cultural assumptions of punitive justice onto the Bible are not easy to shake off. It has become so ingrained, so indoctrinated, into our religious imagination that it seems self-evident. Therefore, we will need to take a fresh look at Scripture in order to recognize this model of restorative justice at the heart of the biblical narrative. □

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1. Bondi, *Memories of God*, 116.
2. *Ibid.*, 144.
3. Spurgeon, *All of Grace*, 6.
4. Quoted in McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 97.
5. An example is Wesley’s sermon Number 14, “Repentance of Believers” 1.12–13, “When they are comforting the afflicted, or provoking one another to love and to good works, do they never perceive any inward self-commendation: ‘Now you have spoken well?’...So that they are now more ashamed of their best duties, than they were once of their worst sins.”
6. See Zehr, *Changing Lenses*.
7. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 53.

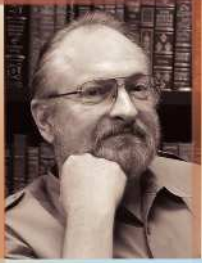
Derek Flood is the author of Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice and the Cross. He is a featured blogger for the Huffington Post, Sojourners, Red Letter Christians and writes regularly at his website theRebelGod.com. Derek’s focus is on wrestling with questions of faith and doubt, violence in the Bible, relational theology and restorative justice.

...CENTURIES OF PROJECTING OUR CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS OF PUNITIVE JUSTICE ONTO THE BIBLE ARE NOT EASY TO SHAKE OFF.

but a restorative or reconstructive justice, a saving action by God that recreates shalom and makes things right.”⁷

This is not simply one theme found in Scripture, it is the core narrative of the gospel—the master

justice likewise is rooted in compassion and reflects a desire to see things made right, to see relationships restored, to see broken lives mended, to see hurtful and hurting people come to their knees in repentance and be made new.



Unlikely Sources of Wisdom

The best sources of wisdom God has provided us to confront life's knotty problems are right under our noses....

Years ago, a young friend was visiting with my wife, Kaye, for a few days at her apartment in downtown Portland, Oregon. When Kaye's young friend suddenly disappeared from the living room, Kaye was concerned. It was the middle of a big city and anything could happen. Kaye stepped outside the door of her apartment building and looked up and down the street. No friend in sight. Frustrated, Kaye offered a quick prayer: "Help! Where has she gone?"

Just then a disheveled man came reeling down the sidewalk, stopped, looked at Kaye and asked, "Where you goin' lady? To the library?" and staggered off. Kaye took that as an answer to her prayer and headed for the Portland Public Library, where, of course, she found her friend.

Who exactly was this intoxicated guy on the street? Was he a Christian? Based on his appearance and all available evidence, most Christians watching this scene on a Portland sidewalk would have assumed this "drunk" to be far from being a Christian. Do Christians have drinking problems and get intoxicated and stagger down the street and talk to strangers? Yes, sometimes. Perhaps he was an atheist. Perhaps he was a common thug, even a murderer. We just don't know. But if we take Kaye's account at face value, it seems that God, in immediate answer to Kaye's prayer, may have used this wayward son of his to help Kaye locate her wayward young friend.

Granted, God doesn't always work this immediately and directly. And this is not to say that every intoxicated person staggering down the sidewalk is a source of wisdom. The point is that God can work through anyone—and often through people we might least expect—people whom we have written off as thugs, gangsters, addicts and ne'er-do-wells.

Years ago I wrote off all but a select few people as sources of spiritual wisdom. The people I wrote off were far from being thugs. I wrote off my own grandmother, because she was a Methodist. I wrote off my Christ-

ian relatives and friends because they didn't believe like I did—after all, Catholics, Nazarenes, Lutherans? What did they know?

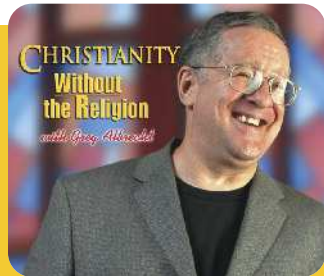
I listened only to those who believed exactly like me. Why listen to anybody else when you have all the pat answers? If you believe you have the pure "faith once delivered," wouldn't it be immoral to compromise it by reading or listening to different perspectives? I was living in a closed system—padlocked and nailed shut.

Then in the early 90s I found myself managing a group of brilliant creative people. It was like herding weasels. I decided I needed more education in management, and opted for Goddard College in Vermont, whose program allowed me to tailor my studies and specialize in management of creative groups. Yet, because Goddard has a longstanding reputation for alternative education, it seemed to attract alternative lifestyles and philosophies.

Each semester of the off-campus study program began with a week-long residency. In my dorm, I stepped around fellow students who were meditating and doing strange things with crystals. My faculty advisor, Dr. Dean Elias, had among his other degrees, a master's from Union Theological Seminary. I remember sitting with him in a grassy meadow in Adirondack chairs, discussing how we hold our beliefs—with a clenched fist or with an open hand. I learned many things from him and my fellow students there, as my fist of belief slowly unclenched.

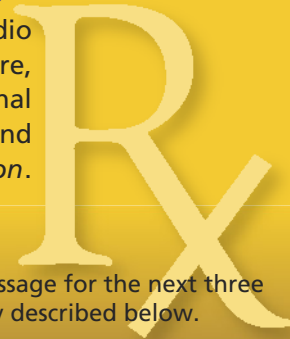
The best sources of wisdom God has provided us to confront life's knotty problems are often right under our noses in the form of our own friends and family—if we will only pay attention. Yet we may be tempted to write them off because we know their flaws and foibles. We need to look past those. My wife did that some 45 years ago when she listened to the voice of a drunken vagrant and heard Jesus. □

—Monte Wolverton



The Perfect Prescription for Legalism

Join Greg Albrecht at www.ptm.org for a Christ-centered audio teaching ministry. You'll find the freedom of authentic, pure, genuine Christianity—Christianity without walls or denominational barriers—Christianity without humanly imposed rules, rituals and regulations. You'll find *Christianity Without the Religion*.



WARNING: CWR may cause the following side effects:

- Lowered tolerance for legalistic, self-serving, Christ-less preaching.
- Insatiable appetite for Christ-centered teaching.
- Increased peace of mind as you grow in God's amazing grace.
- In some cases, spontaneous outbursts of joy, punctuated by exclamations like, "Free at last, free at last!"
- If it takes you more than four days to recover from a religious meeting or gathering, be assured it wasn't CWR!
- CWR is not for everyone. Ask a religious professional—or better yet—ask someone who has suffered at the hands of one—if CWR is right for you!

Each weekly message for the next three months is briefly described below.

Be sure to join us at www.ptm.org for services every Sunday morning—or anytime throughout the week for *Christianity Without the Religion*.

From Garbage and Manure to New Life The riches and treasures of God's grace arrive in amazing ways, often coming from something that seems to have little or no value. God is in the recycling business! Week of June 1.

The Dark Night of the Soul In Christ, even during dark, troubling times of suffering we may find significance and purpose. This week Greg discusses how Paul yearned to know the power of Jesus' resurrection. Week of June 8.

Let's Make a Deal! If you want to make a deal and bargain, then you'll want performance-based, Christ-less religion. Bargaining with God is the heart and core of religion. God doesn't do religion—God does grace! Week of June 15.

How Grace "Works" God "works out" and produces his handiwork and workmanship in us, because he has already "worked in" the life of our risen Lord and Savior. Week of June 22.

Trusting in God Alone Though a husband or wife, son or daughter, parent or friend might fail or betray us—should the banks close and the stock market crash—our ultimate and unreserved trust is in God alone. Week of June 29.

Always Obey Governing Authorities? Since Christ-followers hold dual citizenship, what happens when civil authorities seem to cross the line, imposing or demanding un-Christ-like action? Week of July 6.

The Road Less Taken The road, path or way we walk is a symbol of our commitment to the direction we are headed and evidence of our thanksgiving to Jesus who invites us to walk with him. Week of July 13.

A 58-Word Sermon How long must a sermon be, or how short can it be? Join Greg as he looks at the example of Jesus, and at how Jesus must be the center of all sermons. Week of July 20.

Grace = No Condemnation There is no place in the gospel for continually finding fault, nor is there room for threats and intimidations, even when Christ-less religion says that the end justifies the means. Week of July 27.

Grace Poured Out The elements of bread and wine/juice instituted by Jesus are symbols of the limitless favor and lavish grace of God, poured out on us without measure. Week of August 3.

Samson and ...? The life of Samson is filled with scandal and sleaze, yet perhaps one of its great lessons for us is seen in the context of Christ, so we realize that no matter how far we may run from God, God is always near. Week of August 10.

The Cross—Anger or Love? When the love of God is stripped away from the significance of the cross of Christ, revenge and violence is all that is left – but that anger is not the wrath of God. Week of August 17.

He Lives IN Us Muslims do not speak of Muhammad living in them, nor do Buddhists speak of Buddha inhabiting them. Yet as Christ followers we believe that Christ IN us is the hope of glory. Week of August 24.

Spiritual Forces The basic religious forces of our world enslave us to false gods that intimidate us. But these religious forces are paper tigers—powerless and bankrupt because they provide no eternal inheritance. Week of August 31.