

CWRmagazine

February 2019

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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Volume 10, Number 1
February 2019
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Changing Lives

Since I first read *Bad News Religion* in 2005, *PTM* has helped me grow immensely in my faith in Christ. I eagerly look forward to the weekly *PTM* emails and monthly mailings.

I'm writing to tell you that your 10/29/18 article, "Christ Alone: The Absolute Center of our Faith" is so very true!

So-called "Christianity" has become so consumer-based. Our materialistic society demands to see how we will personally benefit from everything. In religious matters, we want to know the very least we need to do for God to stamp our passport into heaven?"

Everything centers on ME!

Many churches have catered to this mentality, luring prospective "customers" by telling them they need only say a "Sinner's Prayer" or just believe that Christ has paid their debt. Then they're golden! But once in the door of the establishment, they're told to obey the commandments and give generously to support the "church."

I am so glad that you give us the gospel message of John 3:16 and Ephesians 2, where God, because of his great LOVE for us came down to this earth, lived, died and rose again to offer us eternal life. Jesus Christ is the

central message of the Bible. If we surrender our lives to him, our outlook will change and he will give us the grace and desire to love him and our fellow human beings. We'll want to live upright lives out of gratitude for our salvation rather than trying to earn brownie points with God.

New York

It is good for me to reflect back on how much my thought processes have changed as a result of your ministry. How inspiring it is to experience the grace of God in my daily life and be free from the fear of not knowing the loving God who was introduced to me through *CWR/PTM*. May God continue to change lives through your faithful, loving service.

Arizona

CWR/PTM's online teachings have helped me to trust Jesus Christ for my salvation. I listen daily on the internet for inspiration and guidance and I have felt the healing of Christ in my daily life. Thank you for your guidance and teachings.

Louisiana

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We appreciate you!

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Trending: DECONSTRUCTION

Brad Jersak

The God in whom the majority of Christians throughout history have professed to believe often seems evil, at least judging by the dreadful things we eventually say about him.

The God of retribution that has been proclaimed by so much of Christian knowledge is really not and cannot possibly be the God of self-outpouring love revealed in Christ. If God is the creator of all, he is the Savior of all without fail who brings to himself all he has made.

- David Bentley Hart

#DECONSTRUCTION

I agree whole-Hart-edly. If Christianity frequently devolves into worship of a retributive, counter-Christian God—then moving forward requires what is popularly called “deconstruction.” The term is a favorite among “nones” and “dones” who have flown the coop of the un-Christlike God and its institutions. It is especially used, overused and misused by “ex-vangelicals” who now often identify as “progressive.” I regularly encounter a new kind

of testimony—counter-conversion stories—that start with, “When I went through my deconstruction...” They have discovered if faith is to be retained at all, they must first pass through *the valley of disillusionment and deconstruction*.

Deconstruction is a metaphor that evokes images of jack-hammers, dynamite and building demolition. After all, don't you need to clear the lot of the decrepit ruins of a condemned building before you can build a new structure where it once stood?

On the other hand, the metaphor seems quite violent. The destructive tone of deconstruction expresses well the anger one feels when they realize they've been duped by religious doctrines and controlling leaders into life-long spiritual bondage. The lament quite rightly carries an edge to it—an impulse to raze the whole structure to the ground is understandable.

Then again, what is the “structure” we're deconstructing? It's not

actually somewhere out there—unless you're eradicating pastors, setting fire to cathedrals or actively dismantling religious institutions. Impassioned rants against something so vague as “the Church” in fact serve to deconstruct very little. No, when we speak of our deconstruction, the structure we're dismantling is first of all internal—something to do with one's own soul or faith. For that reason, I'm disinclined to the havoc and carnage inherent in the dynamite/bulldozer picture.

WEDDING DRESS STAINS

So, instead of deconstruction, I'd like to propose my own metaphor for spiritual renewal—a heart-warming illustration that comes from the biblical record, ancient hymnody and my own family. Both the Bible and the songs of the early church frequently compare God or Christ to a bridegroom and God's people to a bride. Books like Song of Solomon describe the bride's beauty and the glory of her



Demolition: Time Lapse Photo

wedding day. Prophets, such as Hosea, lament her unfaithfulness.

When the people of God rebel, they are compared to an unfaithful wife who has “stained her garments.” By contrast, redemption in Christ is said to cleanse the Bride [and/or her dress] of every stain and ultimately present her to himself at the great wedding

feast of the Lamb “without spot or wrinkle.” When you think about the beauty and expense of a wedding gown, if the dress somehow gets stained or wrinkled, how does one best restore it?

When my oldest son got engaged a few years back, Colette, my daughter-to-be, began the quest for a vintage dress. To her great joy, she found a gorgeous ivory, silk satin wedding dress—sewn in the 1930s. The size seemed right, so she ordered it and sure enough, it fit perfectly without any alterations. It was a beautiful work of art! Naturally, the dress had aged for about 80 years and was showing some wrinkles and stains.

What to do? Deconstruction? No. You don’t use scissors to cut wrinkles out or flames to burn stains away. Removing the stains was important, but not as crucial as preserving the exquisite fabric. Thankfully, “I know a guy” who shares these values. Yong’s Tailoring advertises “Expert Dry Cleaners” on his marquee signage—rightfully so! Mr. Yong invested the time and meticulous care required to restore the dress to its former glory—drawing out the

stains without overusing products that could have ruined Colette’s treasure.

While waiting for the couple to pick it up, the drycleaner proudly displayed the wedding gown at the front of the shop for other customers to see. Folks who came in would *ooh!* and *aah!* at the dress, hanging there “without spot or wrinkle.” But then she put on the dress! To me, she looked like a real princess—elegant and radiant.

FROM DECONSTRUCTION TO RESTORATION

Do you see how shifting the metaphor from deconstruction to restoration shifts our focus from the more aggressive tone of tearing down to cleansing and renewal? Like Colette’s dress, your faith is a precious gift, an apostolic treasure inherited rather than self-fabricated, passed down over many centuries. Those centuries bring with it a history of corruption and abuse, but have also increased its value.

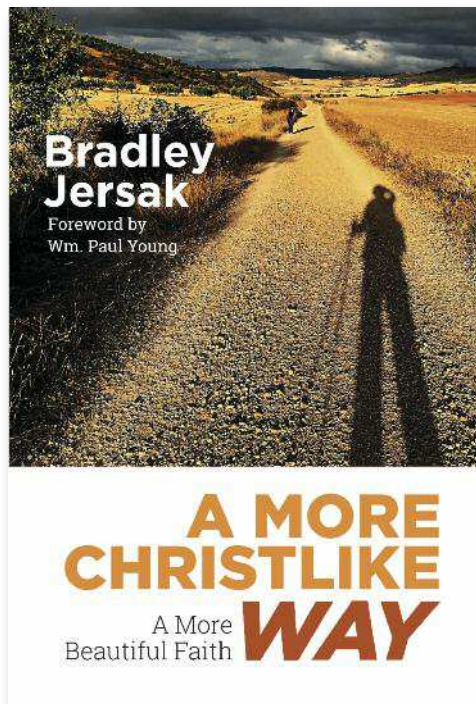
The gospel of Jesus Christ is not something you or I contrived or conceived. You didn’t sew this dress; you received it. It is the “faith once delivered” by Christ through his apostles to the church. That gospel is a like priceless wedding dress or vintage diamond ring. However tarnished, it’s a treasure worth preserving. For that reason, I find the language of deconstruction unhelpful. It focuses so heavily on what needs to go that it is prone to dishonor what must remain.



I'll speak frankly now, without metaphors. I have watched dear friends deconstruct their faith so thoroughly that they not only moved on from toxic religion—they abandoned Jesus as husband as well, as if they'd never given themselves to him. They ditched their ugly retributive theology, but then discarded the gospel too, proving right their accusers who cried "slippery slope." If their exodus from Christianity results in greater love and freedom, the detox might be worth it. But how is it that so many make the transition without the transformation? If we retain the very self-righteous and hateful posture that drove us from un-Christlike religion in the first place, what exactly have we deconstructed?

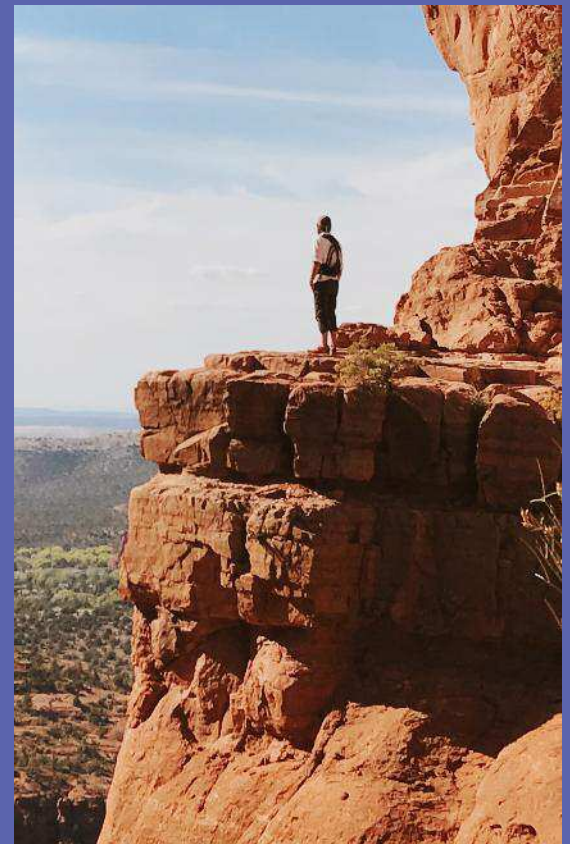
So my advice is this: Slow down. Critique your language, your tone, your metaphors. Keep close watch for your own hidden assumptions and power plays. Ephraim of Syria prayed, "O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother"—difficult, but loving correction need not condemn the erring other. Fix your eyes on Christ, who authored your faith to begin with and who alone can ultimately perfect it. Yes, learn to let things go, but leave the sledge hammer in the shed. Debate the demerits of un-Christlike doctrine and practice—but please, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. □

Brad Jersak is editor-in-chief of CWRm and Associate Dean of the Master of Ministries program at St. Stephen's University in New Brunswick, Canada.



Coming Soon!

A CWR Press sequel to
Brad Jersak's
A More Christlike God



After Deconstruction...

"It is the step out of philosophical deconstruction and into action that I find problematic. ... as a detour, I think deconstruction is more or less indispensable for all disciples. We should all have our day in the desert, our retreat in the deconstructive klinger. But once we have fasted for forty days without food, water or shelter, there is somewhere else to go afterwards. That's important."

—Richard Kearney

Aroma of Love, Stench of Greed

Greg Albrecht

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." ⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." —John 12:1-8

It's hard to dislodge the memory of a distinctive smell. Think of the most beautiful aroma you have ever experienced.

Now, think of the foulest and most disgusting odor you can remember. That little part of the brain that records smell does an incredible job, doesn't it?

Distinctive smells pervade the story of Jesus' anointing for burial. Let's pause to imagine the aromas and odors present in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. There was the smell of the food, including freshly baked bread and perhaps barbecued fish.

If we had been guests at this dinner, as 21st century time-travellers, we would have immediately noticed the body odor. This was first-century Palestine—daily showers were not part of their culture, and neither was deodorant. We might have identified smells more common in a gymnasium locker room—stale body odor or dirty socks.



Eric Gill (1926). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK.

But I want to call two specific smells to your attention: first, **the odor of death**. This smell may not have literally lingered in their small home, but it was certainly very much alive in the memories of Lazarus' resurrection, recorded in the previous chapter. He just spent four days, dead as a doornail, in a tomb.

During those four days, his corpse was decomposing and decaying. John tells us that Jesus ordered that the stone at the entrance to Lazarus' tomb to be taken away. Martha, who seemed to be the most practically minded of Lazarus' two sisters, reminded Jesus that removing the stone that sealed the tomb would release some awful odors.

Everyone present at this dinner knew Lazarus had been dead. Even if his body no longer reeked, those present at dinner who were there when he burst out of his tomb could still remember the unforgettable stench of death.

Moreover, even if they denied it, some knew that Jesus himself had been increasingly speaking of his own death, including Mary.

But death was not the only smell on the minds of those present. In John 12:3, we read that Mary introduced **another smell** to the dinner party when she anointed Jesus' feet with the oil of pure nard, an expensive imported oil made from a root found in the mountains of India. ***The pouring out of this expensive, aromatic oil is the central aroma and scent of our story.***

When Mary poured this oil on Jesus' feet, the fragrance overwhelmed all other scents—John says it filled the house. Pouring out this expensive oil was an extraordinary act of love and worship on the part of Mary—as was the extravagant, carefree act of taking down her hair and wiping the feet of Jesus. Generally, women in that time only took down their hair for their husbands, or when emotionally distracted as they mourned someone's death.

Mary's two actions were a symbolic demonstration of the most intimate kind of spiritual love—and of her grief that Jesus would soon die himself. Pouring out expensive, aromatic oil and letting down her hair depicted the extravagant, unrestrained and reckless love of Mary for Jesus, as well as anointing him in preparation for his burial.

Another attitude was present that day—in direct contrast with the extravagant love of Mary. **Judas, who would betray Jesus just a few days later, hypocritically criticized Mary's actions as stupid and wasteful,** because he claimed the oil could have been sold and given to the poor. Jesus responds, "Leave her alone. This is about my burial. You always have the poor with you—but you don't always have me."

Was this a calloused thing for Jesus to say? Didn't he care for the needs of the poor? Jesus wasn't addressing physical poverty—he was talking about extravagant spiritual love. In pouring out this expensive oil, Mary did a beautiful thing—she demonstrated her extravagant love for Jesus. But Judas could only condemn what he didn't understand. He never understood the grace of God, poured out by Jesus.

Allow me to paraphrase what I believe is the intent of Jesus' response to Judas: ***"Mary is right and you are wrong Judas. Sure, this oil could have been sold and given to the poor. But, with you as our***

treasurer, is that what would have happened? Really, Judas? If you had an extra year's worth of wages in your purse right now, would the poor end up with it? Or would you siphon it off into your own slush fund? You are not concerned for the poor; you are concerned with fattening your own bank account."

What's the takeaway—what spiritual lesson can we "inhale" from Mary's extravagant love offering and from Judas' two-faced criticism of the love Mary poured out?

1) In just a few days, Jesus would pour out the love of God, without measure, on all mankind. God's love, demonstrated on the cross of Christ, was given lavishly and unconditionally, without any guarantee of gratitude from its human recipients.

Mary's love for Jesus was lavish, extravagant, unrestrained and reckless because it was the very love of God she had received. When God in Christ poured out his love for us on the cross, he didn't just pour out a few drops. The love poured

MARY'S TWO ACTIONS WERE A SYMBOLIC DEMONSTRATION OF THE MOST INTIMATE KIND OF SPIRITUAL LOVE—AND OF HER GRIEF THAT JESUS WOULD SOON DIE HIMSELF.

out on the cross of Christ was far more than a few dabs of perfume behind our ears or on our wrists. He opened the windows of heaven in a torrential downpour of love.

2) Judas had no idea about this extravagant kind of love. Sure, it made far more human sense to use just a bit of this expensive oil on Jesus' feet and save most of it for later. But ***Mary poured out all her love.*** God's grace enabled Mary to give freely, to celebrate Jesus, to be generous and seem reckless to those who live life cautiously or greedily.

God's grace has been poured out lavishly, not dispensed cautiously or frugally—God's grace is extravagant, unrestrained and yes, even reckless. □

Greg Albrecht is the President of Plain Truth Ministries.

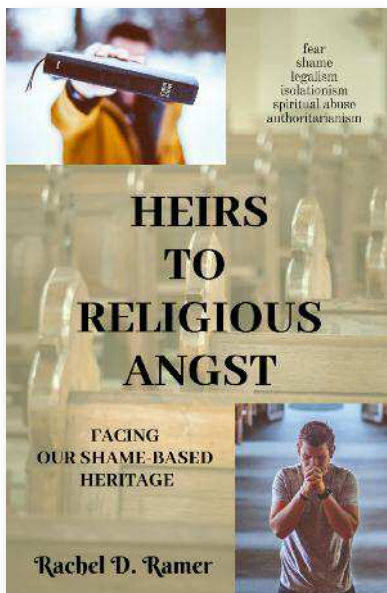
Heirs to Religious Angst

Rachel Ramer

The best argument I ever made to a religious crazy person was when I was standing in front of a mirror.

I was thirteen and my father had just given me a lecture. I slouched in the living room rocking chair—an old-fashioned, black beast of a chair with carved, austere swirls as a wooden edifice behind my head. I listened to my father's well-thought-out points which he must have rehearsed multiple times. I, on the other hand, was a novice.

The chair made a popping sound whenever I rocked. One rocker leg was loose from the bowed wood that worked against the floor. As I leaned back, the leg slightly left its slot, then snapped back into place as I leaned forward. *Pop.*



Our arguments centered on rules: length of skirts, the vanity of wearing make-up, promiscuity in the movies, the wantonness of rock music, and whether or not (not) I was allowed to visit other churches with friends.

He repeated his mantra, “I realize this is not a popular view...”

I rocked. Pop.

He sat rigid in his recliner surrounded by his Bible, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, and back issues of *The Sword and Trumpet* (much later I saw the irony of this publication's name since readership embraced nonresistant pacifism and a cappella church music). Close by, piles of recorded sermons threatened to topple over from careless stacking. He sometimes offered them at family gatherings in futile attempts to correct “backslidden” relatives.

I leaned forward, stopping the chair's protests. “But, Dad, nobody agrees with you.” Wrong answer. This was all I had in my meager, underdeveloped repertoire. I rejected his views on the shaky but democratic grounds of majority rule. This was America, after all.

But Christians belonged to a heavenly government. We were to be a “peculiar people” (I Peter 2:9), strangers on the earth. My

argument was not convincing to a man whose forefathers were martyred as part of the radical branch of the Christian Reformation. Of course, no one agreed with him; he wouldn't expect them to.

HOW COULD HE BE SO WRONG?

I was haunted by the fact that my father could pray, study his Bible, and pursue the will of God and yet get it so wrong. I recall the time he lectured his sister at a family reunion in front of her husband and her children. “I'd like to know,” he demanded, sitting across the table from her, “why you decided to cut your hair.”

She sat stunned, her curls hugging her head above her neck, a visual testament of disobedience to her upbringing. “Well, I...”

“You know what the Bible says about women having long hair. You've been taught not to cut it, but you went ahead anyway,” he scolded.

She and her husband attempted to explain their view, but my father would tolerate no other interpretation. I felt embarrassed for her and her family, and for me.

Frankly, I didn't want to be peculiar. I also didn't want to be rebellious. I wanted to fit in and

grow up normal—whatever that was. A desire for normalcy was seen as a desire to go the “way of the world” or to take the broad path to hell.

In our living room, my father leaned forward in response to my statement. “I don’t care what anyone else thinks, only what God thinks,” he clarified.

During the rocking of the chair and the pop of the loose leg, my father articulated how his views made perfect sense. His rationale etched into my brain and yanked at my emotions. His reasons faded from his tone and intonation, dislodging from his image and became my own. The echo adapted to my tone, my intonation, and my image in the mirror. The religious crazies claimed squatter’s rights between my ears.

I retreated to my room where I could formulate a defense—and deliver it to the person in the mirror.

The arguments continued between my mirror image and me. I gave up discussing religion with my father, but I didn’t abandon my internal disputes. I became a rule-keeper afraid of a misstep that would doom me to hell. Then, I became a doubting Christian, fine-tuning doctrine in frantic endeavors to avoid deception—that abhorrent category of being wrong. Next came an obsession with Christian apologetics—defending the faith intellectually—eventually acquiring a library of books in an attempt to quiet skepticism.

I had inherited a religious anguish.

The situation became markedly worse when, overcome with anxiety from my religious conditioning, I dropped to ninety-three pounds from the stress of trying to live a perfect life.

SHADOWS IN THE MIRROR

My best argument in front of that mirror was to decide I would not remain in the emotionally debilitating Christianity I had inherited. But I was boxed in, my thoughts running in grooved tracks. I could not easily correct my own flawed thinking.

For years, I thought my religious experiences were anomalies. Surely other Christians, other churches, had figured God out. Of course, there were groups with similar extremes, and occasionally I



The Christian package of that time included suppressed emotions, mimicking addictions with messages of “don’t trust” and “don’t feel.”

would hear about atrocities that surfaced revealing Christianity gone awry.

Then, I found similarities elsewhere, as when I overheard friends chastening themselves into restrictive lifestyles to please God. Later, I heard a student use the Bible to shame classmates.

I watched pastors in less rigid churches than my own apply the same methods with similar outcomes. Those who spoke of grace could deftly walk back from grace with little prompting.

While my experiences were somewhat extreme on the scale, I soon discovered other Christians quietly populated the spectrum. While contemplating what had trapped my father in his thinking, I wondered, could all of Christendom be wrestling with shame and doubts? Could I see

the shadows of others in the mirror?

WHAT HAVE WE INHERITED?

While sorting through what I was taught about God, I didn't fully realize the influence of the time period in which I was born. I didn't understand how that contributed to my anguish. Here are a few of those influences:

+ Theories

My shame and fear were the result of particular theories of Biblical interpretation—hermeneutics—the words of the Bible filtered through human constructs. Even a preferred fundamentalist's "plain reading" is a theory, which can be a complicated, intricate system with elements of recklessness.

+ Minimized emotions

The Christian package of that time included suppressed emotions, mimicking addictions with messages of "don't trust" and "don't feel." Christian practices developed, in some cases, into spiritual abuse or religious trauma while discrediting emotional monitors.

+ Taking God to court

While modern atheists advocate taking God to court, Christians have developed their counter version of defending God. There's much to glean from apologetics but there is needed caution.

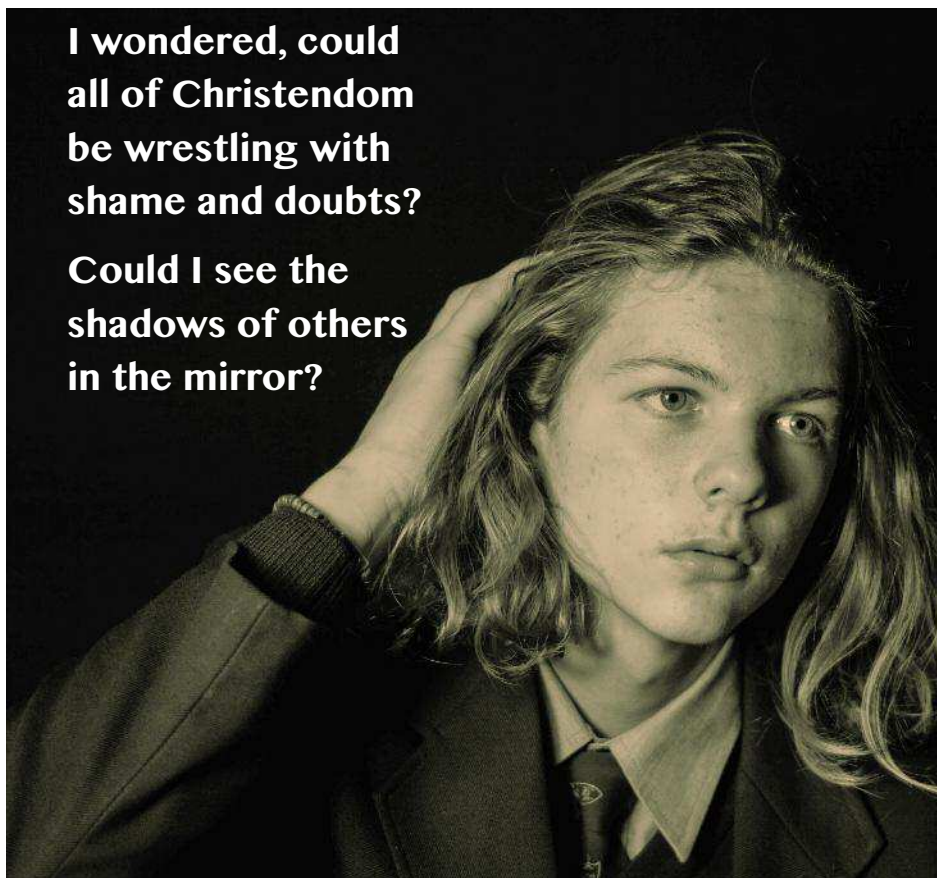
Spiritual dynamics cannot be measured in modern courtrooms or science laboratories.

+ Enlightened arrogance

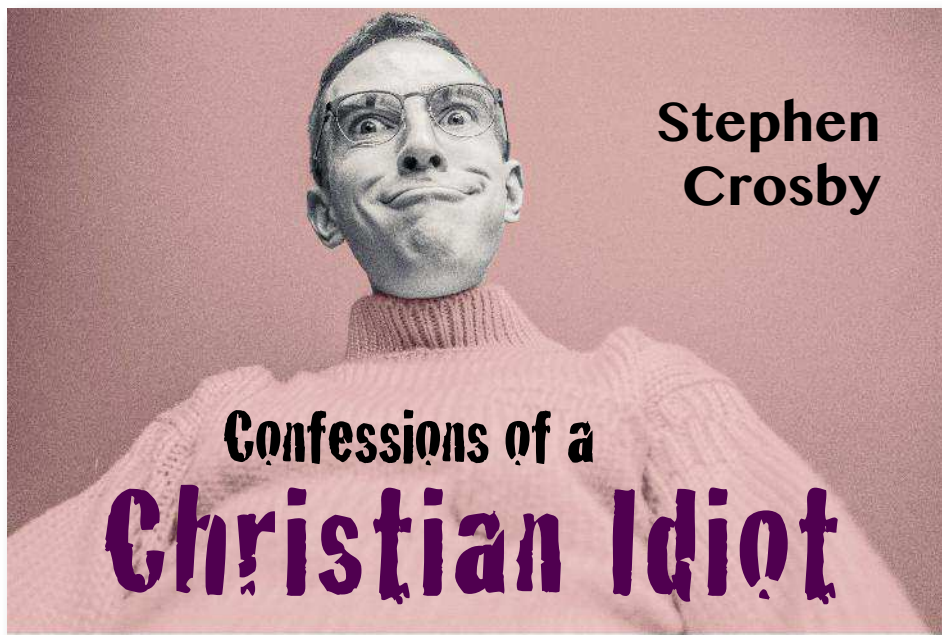
The Enlightenment's historical pivot towards knowledge and reason made significant advances for humankind. For Christians, this also shifted the focus to knowledge about God instead of knowing God. C.S. Lewis called this "walking alongside ourselves." The modern obsession with doctrinal certainty can be spiritually strangling. The Enlightenment redefined faith and altered how we apprehend God.

Learning how to address this historical positioning helped free me from the crippling Christianity I had inherited. □

Rachel D. Ramer is a writer and teacher. She has an M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition. Read her next installment of Heirs to Religious Angst at www.narrowexit.com.



I wondered, could all of Christendom be wrestling with shame and doubts? Could I see the shadows of others in the mirror?



Stephen
Crosby

Confessions of a Christian Idiot

In the early days of my Christian experience, I had a debilitating case of Christian idiocy. *Christian idiocy* is a relationally toxic and dangerous mix of sincerity, ignorance, zeal and self-righteousness.

Rita, my wife, and I spent the first thirteen years of our Christian experience in a hyper-separatist group for whom everything but breathing was a sin, and that could only be done between ten and noon on Sundays. Okay, some hyperbole there, but not by much!

Out of a sincere, but misguided understanding, we were trained (with proof texts in hand) to avoid contamination that would assuredly come by associating with non-believers. That included family members.

We were taught to leave contact with nonbelievers to the Baptists. We were taught that Baptists and other preached the “nominal gospel,” but we proclaimed the “deeper things of God.” After all, “the

Bible says,” (sigh—the bane of proof-texting and rabid typology!) the Gentiles will come to the light of our rising. So, if we just shine brightly enough, we don’t have to worry mixing with the unwashed masses of humanity, God will bring them to us.

Our wanna-be clever one-liner was: “The Baptists will catch the fish, but we will clean them up.” My brain cramps even recounting this, but it is the truth. Not only is this horrifyingly bad theology, it is also a formula for unhealthy human relationships.

As toxic as this was, I cannot blame my *Christian idiocy* solely on what others did to me or what others taught me. In that message, my own personal brokenness found a sense of wellness and elitism. In many ways, I did not know any better.

However, I was afraid to confront authority figures. I also needed the fellowship for my self-perceived needs of socialization. As the saying goes: It takes two to tango. If

my soul had not been so needy, I would not have swallowed the bait. It was spiritual Velcro: a toxic message hooking to an unwell soul.

This meant, if at all possible: no family celebrations (birthdays, anniversaries) and no holiday celebrations. If unavoidable, we were taught such celebrations should be reluctantly endured as tossing a sop to the dregs of humanity who were beneath our spiritual brilliance. As you might guess, my *Christian idiocy* caused great harm in our extended family, especially to my wife’s siblings.

FROM ABANDONMENT TO HEALING

Rita was one of eleven children. Her father abandoned the family when the youngest was an infant. Having POA (Power of Attorney) for his elderly parents, he literally sold his parents’ home out from under them, kicked them to the curb, took everything they had and hooked up with another woman out of state and propagated a half dozen or so more children: not a poster boy for sons or fathers.

The family went from prosperous restaurateurs to welfare overnight. On the heels of this, when she was eighteen, Rita’s mother passed away from cancer on Christmas day. Her mother’s dying request was for Rita to promise to take care of the siblings.

Rita went from sister to

mother overnight—to a family only a few years younger than herself. Needless to say, such a dynamic presented lots of opportunities for deeply hurting one another.

Combine this much later with our own marital issues and the toxic holiness of our first church affiliation, and it should come as no surprise that thirty years of relational alienation resulted. Fast forward through forty-three years of the grace of God and His transforming love working in our lives.

Seven or eight years ago we visited someone in the Dallas, Texas area. One of Rita's younger sisters lived in the area. Rita took a longshot chance and reached out to her for a visit. Her sister took a longshot chance and said yes.

That began a difficult and honest adult process of mutual repentance, forgiveness, and understanding. At that time, little did we know that seven or eight years later we would be moving to Texas, literally twenty minutes from where her sister lived! Thirty years of alienation, erased! A sister and a friend recovered, plus geographic proximity!

Rita's older sister also happened to move to the area. She heard of the renewal of relationship of her younger sisters. So with trepidation she took a chance and agreed to meet with Rita. In the middle of a series of pleasant, but tentative, rebuilding connections, this sister and her husband had a life-changing encounter with Christ.

CATHOLIC MASS... SERIOUSLY?

In her joy of conversion, Rita's sister asked if Rita would attend a Catholic mass with her! Now wait, just a minute! For conservative Protestants like us, Catholics were suspect—if Christians at all. Rita accepted.

Rita participated fully in the service (except communion), and observed her sister weeping with joy that they were being restored and could share a common experience of Christ.

Rita took it a step further. She decided to buy her sister a very expensive and engraved rosary to celebrate her sister's new birth! That would never have happened in our days of *Christian idiocy*. I mean after all, how could I encourage someone in a "false religion" and endorse "unbiblical practices"?

I will tell you. When love compels you. When care for another human being outranks your own need for perceived doctrinal purity. When love triumphs over *idiocy*. When love is the highest virtue, at the apex of your inner truth hierarchy, it is not only an easy thing to do, but it is the obvious thing to do. Love never fails.

Well, the gift of the rosary pushed things over the top. It is something Rita's sister will treasure forever. Her sister said it was the kindest thing any human being had ever done for her! Imagine that—the transformative and liberating power of human kindness—love extended for love's sake, needing no reciprocation or

agreement in doctrine. Jesus was willing to go to a manger, a cross, and a grave to win us. How far are we willing to go?

To wrap up the story, it's a "two-for-one deal": thirty years of relational alienation between sisters overturned, relationship reclaimed, and sisterly happiness for all. When considering this marvelous family story, Rita encapsulated the dynamic in one pithy sentence:

"It took God thirty years to make me safe and to make them ready."

There is a universe of insight in that simple sentence. *Christian idiocy* is dangerous—unsafe—poisonous. *Christian idiocy* alienates us from others and betrays the Lord and the gospel that we profess. John said it this way:

He that does not love, does not know God.

If you or a loved one suffers (or has suffered) from a bad case of *Christian idiocy*, take heart. Don't lose hope. Don't burn your relational bridges. You can never know when God's powerful, transforming, grace and love will reach you and/or another person. Isn't that the nature of God's wild goose grace?

The ancient Celtic Symbol of the Holy Spirit was a wild goose. The idea behind the symbol was that God's grace, given by the Holy Spirit, is neither controllable nor predictable. □

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NO CONTRADICTIONS IN THE BIBLE! YOU HEARD ME!

PETER ENNS

1. If I say, "I hate oatmeal" and then turn to someone else and say "I love oatmeal," I am contradicting myself.

2. If I said 20 years ago "I hate oatmeal" and now say "I love oatmeal," I am not contradicting myself. Rather my view of oatmeal changed over time.

3. If I say "I hate oatmeal" but my son says "I love oatmeal," that would not be a contradiction. We are two different people voicing our opinions.

The Bible works more like the second two examples, and not at all like the first. We create problems for ourselves when we assume the first example is relevant. It isn't.

Someone might say, "Aha. I've got you, Enns. The first example IS the right example because

God inspired the Bible, and therefore there is only one voice in the Bible: God's. So for God to say one thing and then the opposite is a contradiction (and we can't have that) so we know there are no contradictions."

But surely that is simply a wrong way of thinking.

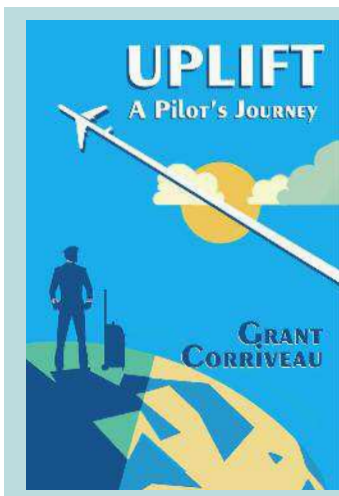
However inspiration works (and I defy anyone who thinks they have a handle on it), the following is demonstrably true:

1. The Bible is written by **real live people over a long period** of time (2nd oatmeal example). In some cases, the effect of time and circumstance can be seen in one person (more closely in keeping with the 2nd oatmeal example), for example Paul, whose letters show differing

tones, emphases, and even shifts in thinking.

2. The Bible records the voices of different people who have **different points of view** on the same topic (3rd oatmeal example), including what the Law of Moses says, how God acts toward outsiders, how many gods exist, whether the reign of Manasseh was positive or negative, when Jesus cleansed the Temple, what Paul thinks of the Law, and on and on.

The writers of the Bible spanned centuries, lived in different times and places, faced different circumstances (personal and political), and responded to those circumstances from the point of view of their settings in life. A book that brings all of this



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under one cover is, of course, going to exhibit a lot of diversity.

“Contradictions” are only so if one assumes that the purpose of inspiration (however it works) is to align or override the down-to-earth diverse voices we actually encounter in the Bible.

But if inspiration means that God is all about corralling these different voices because “God wrote the Bible” then God did a pretty bad job of it.

So maybe “Does the Bible contradict itself?” is posing a false question rooted in a bad theology.

The “contradictions” in the Bible aren’t contradictions, for the Bible does not reflect the “perfectly consistent mind of God,” but the diversity of time and place of the writers.

I don’t know how else to respect the Bible and what I read there but by arriving at a conclusion like this.

Others may argue that (1) since [as we all know] God *DID* “write the Bible” and (2) since God by definition *can’t* be self-contradictory, therefore (3) any

contradictions are only “apparent contradictions”—they appear so to us, but are easily resolved in God’s mind. In that case, our job is simply to trust that this is so and defend the Bible against the charge of contradiction.

But that has always struck me as a very, very bad solution.

It seems nonsensical to me to argue “God inspired the Bible, and therefore the Bible doesn’t contradict itself,” and yet—that divine inspiration produced a book that seems so untended and raises so many questions.

And it seems even more nonsensical to me to think that, in response to this untended Bible, the “truly faithful” are called by God to see past all that self-evident messiness and affirm with absolute conviction that behind it all God is completely consistent and one day when you’re dead and you face Jesus you’ll see for yourself, but in the meantime your job is not to accept the presence of “contradictions” but to defend the Bible against the charge, knowing by faith that whatever the Bible seems to be doing it isn’t really doing if you

had enough faith in God to see past what you’re seeing.

And I’m exhausted just writing that.

How about another way of thinking about what appear to be contradictions in the Bible:

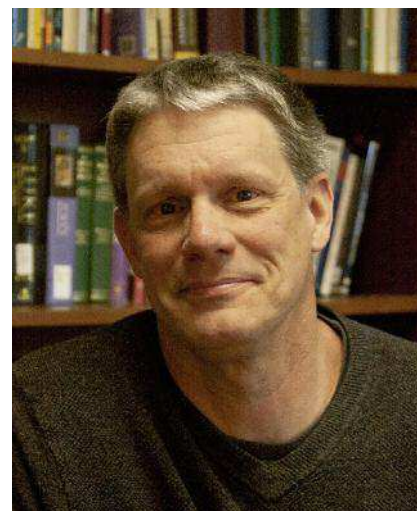
1. Inspiration is a matter of faith, and no matter how fervently it is believed that doesn’t mean it is comprehended.

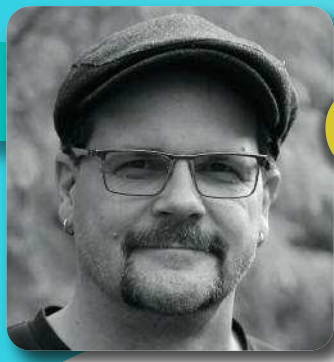
2. The Bible we have is a diverse and complex literary product, not reflecting consistently one point of view.

3. Because of #2, we can and should say that inspiration, however it works, must include in its definition the notion that the Bible was written and then edited by people living in and reflecting their particular time and place.

4. If we believe by faith that God inspired the Bible, we need also to believe that God is OK with how the Bible actually works and therefore, by faith, so should we. □

Peter Enns teaches Biblical Studies at Eastern University. He’s the author of The Bible Tells Me So and The Sin of Certainty.





“According to the Scriptures”

I was once scheduled to deliver a weekend seminar at a local church, but my appearance was canceled at the last moment because the interim pastor wanted to know why my church’s doctrinal statement didn’t include anything affirming the inspiration, infallibility or inerrancy of the Bible. I explained that we confessed the Nicene Creed and didn’t feel the need for more. Indeed, his own confession of faith seemed questionable to me because it was self-written and exclusionary of most other Christians. Why would we want to make the same mistake? And that was that.

But we both overlooked an obvious fact. The Bible *does* figure in the creed and does so by citing Scripture directly:

“... He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

That phrase is a direct quotation from Paul: *“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve”* (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

In other words, there is a historical dogma of the faith regarding the Bible. But it is not about what the Bible *IS*—it is about what it *DOES*.

The Scriptures witness to the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Period.

We may hold many and various views about the Bible, but when it comes to non-negotiable doctrine, the apostolic gospel affirmed in Christian baptism was never about what the Scriptures *ARE* but what they *DO*. And what they *DO* is confess the gospel of Jesus Christ. The rest was and is open for debate. To distort Scripture with a crass dictation theory or discard it as no longer necessary is to forget this gospel affirmation: Christ came, died and rose again—we know this *“according to the Scriptures.”*

Over the first four centuries, *“according to the Scriptures”* would never expand beyond the testimony of Christ and his gospel. But it did specify that Christ “was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, became man, was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried, and rose again according to the Scriptures.” *This testimony was their doctrine of inspiration.* Not the nature of the Bible, but of the One to whom it points.

Note too that initially, for Paul and the other apostles, these Scriptures were specifically the Hebrew Scriptures—our Old Testament—since the New Testament was still being composed.

Remember Christ’s words to the disciples on the road to Emmaus? *“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”* And beginning with **Moses and all the Prophets**, he explained to them what was said in **all the Scriptures concerning himself**” (Luke 21:25-27).

This is why Christ, the apostles and the early church recognized our Lord’s birth, death and resurrection in the Exodus Passover, the stone that gave water, the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness, David’s near-death experiences in the Psalms, Daniel’s “Son of God” in the fiery furnace and Jonah’s three days in the belly of the fish.

Everywhere they looked—in the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets—early Christians saw and confessed that Christ would come, die and rise again “according to the Scriptures.”

What is our doctrine of Scripture? Yes, we believe the Scriptures are Spirit-inspired revelation (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). But for what purpose? Just this: to proclaim the faith once delivered: the gospel of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, *according to the Scriptures.* □

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