

CWRmagazine

Summer 2015
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera on a large sand dune. The person is wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants. The sand is golden-brown and has many footprints leading up to the person. The sky is clear and blue.

**I Still
HAVEN'T
Found
WHAT I'M
Looking
FOR**

What Others Are Saying...



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Abraham Lincoln: A None Before His Time

Kudos to Monte Wolverton for the Spring *CWRm* cover article on Abraham Lincoln. Really well-written, informative and interesting, as I've come to expect from Mr. Wolverton. I enjoyed and appreciated this fresh perspective on one of America's greatest Presidents.

Nevada

I have not been able to put down the Spring issue of *CWRm*! I have been reading and re-reading it, as well as the March/April *Plain Truth*. They are just that good, inspiring and informative! Your ministry has done more to enlighten me to look through a Christ-centered lens than any other source. Thank you for helping me transform through the new insights you are publishing.

The more I read and digest the information, the more blessed I feel to have my eyes cleared from former misinformation. I just viewed the *CWR* videos yesterday, and love this new additional teaching method. Words cannot express my gratitude and thanksgiving for this truth being taught to so many around the globe. It is my privilege to donate my small gift to help this work continue to help others. God bless you all at *CWR*/PTM.

Arizona

The Truth Is Beautiful

I am overwhelmed to see this magazine! All kinds of great ideas and radical too—just like me. I'll have to go back and spend some time with Dostoevsky after reading "The Truth is Beautiful" by Brad Jersak. Religion and I have never been a good fit. But maybe I can take the Christianity and leave behind the religion. Bravo!

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Deserve's Got Nothing to Do With It

Thanks to Greg Albrecht for the article "Deserve's Got Nothing to do With it" in the Spring issue of *CWRm*. I've read Greg's writing for years and I've been helped by his books and articles. But I would have to say this is definitely one of Greg's best. Greg sums it up well when he says, "Jesus didn't solve the problem of pain, suffering and abuse by beating up on the bad guys. He solved the problem of injustice by ingesting, receiving and assimilating all human hostility and hatred.... Jesus defeated death by walking into the midst of it, giving his life by meeting anger and hatred head on. He rose victoriously from the cross, and offers you and me that same victory."

North Carolina

God Lets His Children Tell the Story

Thanks so much for all the articles that explain God's love for us and how he wants us to be his children. I loved the article about how "God Lets His Children Tell the Story" in the Spring *CWRm*. Keep up the good work.

Pennsylvania

Year of the Bible

It is awesome to see how the Holy Spirit is alive and well and bringing the truth out in so many ways. I am so thankful for all the resources you are providing about the Scriptures. Your work is having a profound impact. I thank God for everyone involved in *CWR*/PTM and for allowing God to work through you powerfully!

Indiana

CWR Video magazine

I just finished viewing the *CWRv* video magazine. Fantastic! I love this format and the variety of speakers on different topics. Well done!

Florida

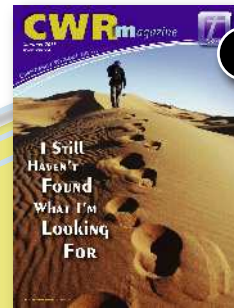
I just checked out the *CWRv* video magazine for the first time. I like this format. I watched three of the videos tonight. Nice, fresh thinking! I also enjoy reading articles in print, but this is a nice change of pace. I appreciate all the ways in which I have been blessed by God through *CWR*/PTM. How wonderful to have His light shine on us through your many efforts to spread a message of grace, mercy and love. My transformation has taken so many years and I pray I will continue to learn and grow until this physical life is complete.

Arizona

Thanks PTM!

A few years ago I set up automatic contributions to PTM because this ministry blessed me so much after I left the Jehovah's Witnesses. PTM has been my church since then and has helped me to grow. I had to stop my automatic contributions for a while, but I am happy to report that I can start up again. In addition I will send in more when I can. Thanks so much for all the hard work you do, and may Christ continue to bless this worldwide work.

Massachusetts



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Cover Story

"I Still Haven't Found What I'm

Looking For" was a number one hit by the Irish rock band, U2. It is a song of spiritual yearning with a distinct gospel flavor—a hymn of hope, a psalm of lament and a profession of faith that speaks to a universal human feeling of discontent and longing.

COVER PHOTO BY 123RF—GALYNA ANDRUSHKO



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by Bert Gary

I STILL HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT

"Well, we wrote the song, 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For'—which is a gospel song, pretty much. I mean, it doesn't sound much like a gospel song the way we do it, but if you look at the lyric, the basic music, that's exactly what it is."

—From an interview with U2 guitarist, David Howell Evans, known as "The Edge"

The *Joshua Tree* album, by the Irish rock band U2, topped the charts and sold over 25 million copies worldwide, making it one of the best-selling albums of all time. "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" was a number one hit from the album—a song of spiritual yearning with a distinct gospel flavor. The marching drumbeat and the ringing single-note ostinato on guitar are a percussive contrast to lead-singer Bono's soaring, plaintive vocals. And the lyrics are a revelation. Bono penned a hymn of hope, a psalm of lament and a profession of faith.

The songs on *The Joshua Tree* were born of the band's newfound love of America—its lands, its people and its music. Their photographer told them about the striking Joshua trees of the Southwest US and suggested shooting them for the album photos. Bono, the band's lead singer and lyricist, discovered that the Mormons named the tree after Joshua, the Old Testament commander of Israel, because it looked as though its "arms" were raised in prayer (though in the Bible it was actually Moses who raised his hand—holding his staff—to sustain a miraculous military victory for Joshua against the Amalekites in Exodus 17:11). Bono suggested *The Joshua Tree* as the album's title and the band agreed.

There is a New

Testament connection, too. The Hebrew name *Yehoshua* (meaning "God is salvation" or "God's gift," often abbreviated to *Yeshua*) translates into English as both Joshua and Jesus, and Jesus died on a tree.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13; see also Deuteronomy 21:22-23 and Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29).

In this sense, the album title (*The Joshua Tree*) connects to Bono's verse:

*You broke the bonds
And you loosed the chains*



...THE RELENTLESS SEARCH FOR...WHAT? THE SONG DOES NOT SAY. PERHAPS THAT IS THE POINT. WE ALL YEARN FOR SOMETHING ESSENTIAL THAT WE STRUGGLE TO NAME. BELONGING? TRUTH? HAPPINESS? PEACE? FAITH? JOY? LOVE? HOME? GOD?

*Carried the cross of my shame
Oh, of my shame,
You know I believe it.* ©

Whether U2 consciously matched the album title to this verse in "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," it is a fit. *Yeshua* did indeed carry the tree of shame, and his nail-scarred hands were indeed raised. As the chorus insists, however, even though the lyricist believes in the cross and has experienced its liberation from shame, he marvels and

That same tension, that same paradox of doubtful faith or faithful doubt, that same ongoing spiritual struggle with which we are all too familiar, seems alive and well in U2's contemplative anthem. So universal is the experience, it seems, that Bono's sacred song has touched our nation and his. Yea, verily, it seems to have touched the world.

There is in "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" the celebration of freedom (*you broke the bonds*), the admission

Areopagus, also called Mars Hill (Acts 17: 15-34), by interpreting Athens' religiosity as a spiritual search (though misdirected) for *Yahweh*, the one true God (and his Son, *Yehoshua*, though at the Areopagus that day Paul sensitively and astutely never mentions *Yahweh* or *Yehoshua* by name).

Paul noticed that the Athenians had all their religious bases covered, even displaying an altar "To an unknown god" so as not to inadvertently neglect and thereby offend any gods with which they might be unfamiliar.

The Apostle used the Athenian monument dedicated to an unknown god as his springboard to claim that there is one true God (without giving his name), a God who does not live in temples to be served by people as if God needed anything and a God who gives life and breath to all.

The Kingdom for Everyone

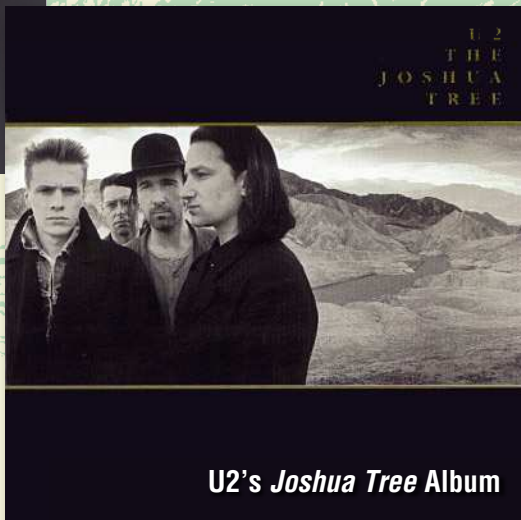
Paul's message was to and for and about "all." He noted that *all* of Athens appeared to be very religious. The one true God gives life and breath to *all*. *All* the world will be judged in righteousness by a man who died.

But God raised that man to give assurance to *all*. And then, most poignantly, Paul claims that God made *all* people and nations so that they might seek

I'M Looking For

of sin (*I have held the hand of a devil*), and the relentless search for...what? The song does not say. Perhaps that is the point. **We all yearn for something essential that we struggle to name.** Belonging? Contentment? Truth? Happiness? Peace? Faith? Joy? Love? Home? God?

The Apostle Paul likewise wrote of freedom in Christ, of sin that enslaves, and of a universal searching. He brought his message first to the synagogues and then to the *agorae* (plural of *agora*—a downtown marketplace) of the ancient Roman world. When in Athens, Paul left the door open for pagans and philosophers when asked to speak at the



U2's *Joshua Tree* Album

grieves that his heart still aches; his soul still yearns for something. **He still hasn't found what he's looking for.**

The Struggle of Faith

A man said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24)

THE SONGS ON *THE JOSHUA TREE* WERE BORN OF THE BAND'S NEWFOUND LOVE OF AMERICA—ITS LANDS, ITS PEOPLE, AND ITS MUSIC.



Yeshua did
indeed carry the
tree of shame,
and his nail-
scarred hands
were indeed
raised...

union in a lover's
embrace.
*I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing fingertips
It burned like fire
This burning desire.*©

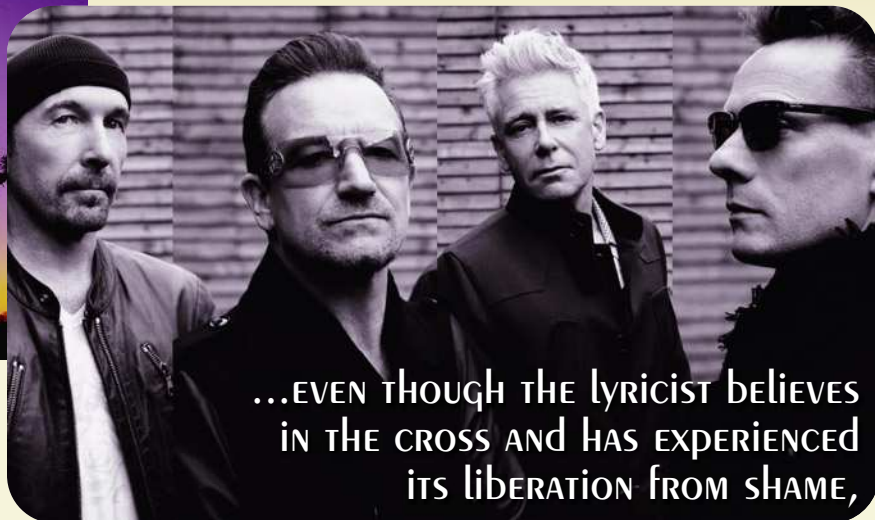
*for God and perhaps grope for
him and find him—though
indeed he is not far from each
one of us” (Acts 17:26-27, my
emphasis).*

for him, grope for him, and find
him, though God is not far from
them all. He even claims that
within God we *all* live and
move and have our being.

*I believe in the Kingdom Come
Then all the colors
will bleed into one
Bleed into one.
But yes, I'm still running.*©

In this verse Bono speaks to
the universality of the kingdom
of heaven and its coming
unity, when he sees all colors
and creeds “bleed into one.”
**But believing does not ease
the pain of the longing.** Until
the kingdom comes in fullness,
and even though we live and
move and have our being in it
now, we long for its coming
completed unity. Now, in the
meantime, the yearning drives
us, and sometimes drives us
crazy. That is why we run. We
run through the fields, we
climb the highest mountain,
we hold the hand of the devil
in our blindness and
desperation—and we search for

**ONE WILL NOT LIKELY FIND A UNIVERSAL HUMAN FEELING OF
DISCONTENT IN THE MESSAGE OF MODERN
EVANGELICALISM. IT TROUBLES ME THAT CHURCH INSIDERS
WEAR THE CLOAK OF FALSE CERTAINTY.**



**...EVEN THOUGH THE LYRICIST BELIEVES
IN THE CROSS AND HAS EXPERIENCED
ITS LIBERATION FROM SHAME,**

Yet nothing works.
We are indeed still
running because,
beyond the fields, the
mountains, the
fingertips of a lover, the hope
of the kingdom, and even the
freedom of the cross, **we still
haven't found what we're
looking for, or perhaps *Who*
we're looking for.**

*I have run, I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls
These city walls
Only to be with you.*©

U2's song of spiritual groping
syncs powerfully with the
Apostle Paul's speech to the
Athenian philosophers.

*“From one ancestor he made all
nations to inhabit the whole
earth, and he allotted the times of
their existence and the boundaries
of the places where they would
live, so that they would search*

**HE MARVELS AND GRIEVES THAT HIS
HEART STILL ACHES...HE STILL HASN'T
FOUND WHAT HE'S LOOKING FOR.**

Yearning for and Needing Him

This may disturb some but it
thrills me: U2's gospel song is
more biblical—specifically it
has more in common with
Paul's approach to
evangelism—than the modern
Evangelical playbook. Do you
see it?

One will not likely find a
universal human feeling of
discontent in the message of
modern Evangelicalism. It
troubles me that church
insiders wear the cloak of false
certainty.

But it is even more troubling
that the certainty crowd tends
to shame fellow insiders who
risk sharing their longings and
questions and that they judge
outsiders as wholly separated
from God.

Can a dominant corner of the
church today have forgotten
the words of Jesus—that the

**BUT IT IS EVEN MORE TROUBLING THAT THE CERTAINTY CROWD TENDS TO SHAME
FELLOW INSIDERS WHO RISK SHARING THEIR LONGINGS AND QUESTIONS...**

...ATOP THE AREOPAGUS, ABOVE HIM THE PARTHENON LOOMED, PRONOUNCING FROM ATHENS' LOFTY ACROPOLIS THAT ATHENA RULED AS THE GODDESS OF THE CITY. IF THE GOSPEL BELONGS IN "SIN CITY," THEN PAUL WAS IN THE RIGHT PLACE.

admission of lostness is the beginning of being found, that the recognition of blindness is the beginning of sight and those who seek will find? How can any of us lord our certainty over anyone else? How can followers of Jesus take it upon themselves to separate the sheep from the goats? How can one prodigal judge another prodigal?

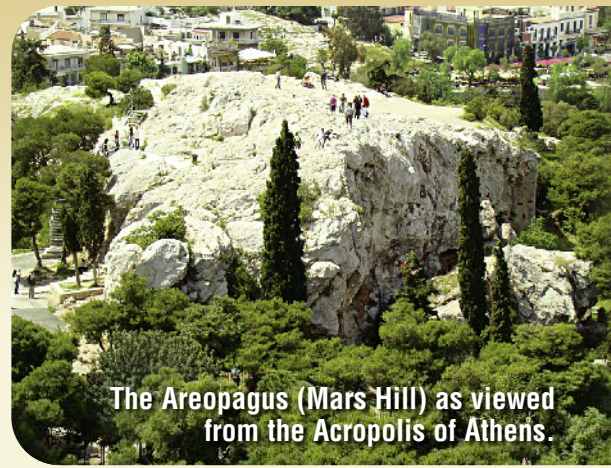
The official music video for "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" was shot in the streets of Las Vegas, Nevada on Palm Sunday, the day on which Christians around the world remember and celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus described it as "the city that stones the prophets and kills those who are sent to it," the city whose children Jesus desired to gather together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but they were not willing (Matthew 23:37).

On Palm Sunday the Irish rockers strolled the "commercial agora" of US's "Sin City" singing and playing their gospel of spiritual yearning to anyone and everyone with ears to hear. Their Palm Sunday was more

than a performance, it seems to me, the video shows an interaction, a dialogue, a meeting of minds and a sharing of hearts.

The agorae that Paul frequented were open public squares with colonnaded sidewalks lined with shops, public gathering halls, libraries, fountains, and, yes, temples—lots of them, temples to gods and goddesses and emperors. U2 sang before the casino-temples that line the Las Vegas Strip, not unlike Paul sharing his gospel song before temples dedicated to the worship of Venus, Herakles and Augustus. In Corinth, for example, some dozen temples have been excavated on or adjacent to its commercial agora. How insignificant and counter-cultural Paul's small house-church there must have felt!

While in conversation with some philosophers in the Roman agora of Athens, Greece, Paul was invited to speak at the lofty Areopagus, a place where the intelligentsia gathered to hear and debate new ideas. Paul went. And as



The Areopagus (Mars Hill) as viewed from the Acropolis of Athens.

PAUL INCLUDED HIMSELF WITH THEM BY SPEAKING TO A UNIVERSAL SEARCH FOR GOD, A UNIVERSAL SPIRITUAL YEARNING BEHIND ALL MISGUIDED RELIGIOUS IMPULSES, ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUND AND STANDING WITH THEM IN THE SEARCH.

the Jew from Tarsus stood before the philosophers atop the Areopagus, above him the Parthenon loomed, pronouncing from Athens' lofty Acropolis that Athena ruled as the goddess of the city. If the gospel belongs in "Sin City," then Paul was in the right place. So was U2.

Today, modern Evangelicalism seems of two minds about the marketplace. On the one hand, many religious professionals and their followers shy away from the agorae lest they tarnish their reputations among the

(continued on page 9)

Observations and Zingers from Bono Over the Years:

You can't approach the subject of God without metaphor...literalism like legalism is an attempt to shrink God to recreate him in our image.

When asked by British broadcaster and television personality Chris Evans what song he would start singing if the world was ending Bono responded, *Amazing Grace*.

I went looking for spirit and found alcohol; I went looking for soul, and I bought some style; I wanted to meet God, but they sold me religion.

That the Scriptures are brimfull of hustlers, murderers, cowards, adulterers and mercenaries used to shock me. Now it is a source of great comfort.

I really have had to swallow my own prejudice at times. Because I was suspicious of the traditional Christian church, I tended to tar them all with the same brush. That was a mistake, because there are righteous people working in a whole rainbow of belief systems—from Hasidic Jews to right-wing Bible beltters to charismatic Catholics.

The belief that there is love and logic at the heart of the universe is a big influence on me. It's a big subject. If there is no God, it's serious. If there is a God, it's even more serious.

U2

Among the all-time best selling music artists, with more than 150 million records sold worldwide, U2, an Irish rock band from Dublin, got its start in 1976 under the name "Feedback." By 1978 they settled on the name U2—Paul Hewson, their lead singer, became known as "Bono" and David Evans, a guitarist, became known as "The Edge."

Early in their history together the three teenage Christians in U2, with Bono as their acknowledged leader in every way, studied the Bible and were passionate about their faith—but they struggled to avoid the stifling legalistic atmosphere and

U2 inhabits that dangerous and exhilarating space that connects spiritual and physical, mortal and divine.

language that attempted to control them and their music. They discovered that faith in Jesus is not always one and the same as membership in and affiliation with organized religion.

... in the very early days when the band did not speak to Christian magazines, they were often misquoted and felt used and abused. The Evangelical Christian world seemed to claim U2 as its property, and therefore, U2's members found their faith defined and explained by magazines rather than by the members themselves. Aligning themselves with the Christian press would have pigeonholed their faith and their art, squeezed them into the mold of other people's expectations, and narrowed the focus of the band's influence and scope...

U2 inhabits that dangerous and exhilarating space that connects spiritual and physical, mortal and



U2 in 1980. Shown from left to right: Clayton, Mullen, Bono, The Edge.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DISCOGS

divine. The band's music stretches every sinew of our imaginations in a most courageous attempt to take us as far as a rock 'n' roll band can. The members of U2 have filled every millimeter of the gap with the most profound social commentaries, exposing the nonsense of post-modern life. Inside and outside the lines of their art, they have campaigned for a spiritual Kingdom that they believe in but still haven't found (Walk On—The Spiritual Journey of U2, Steve Stockman).

Many who have attended U2 concerts, even non-Christians, have remarked that while the music was great, they still felt the presence of God in the arena. This author must join that chorus, having joined more than 90,000 people in the Rose Bowl to hear them several years ago. The closing anthem for many U2 concerts in the eighties was "40"—their musical treatment of Psalm 40, combined with a line from the fifth Psalm. Tens of thousands of people left stadiums around the world, many not knowing they were humming the lines to a scriptural hymn. Bono, truly the leader of the band, has become a socially engaged activist, using the platform U2 has been given to spread the light and faith of the Kingdom, as he understands it.

In 2000, the cover of *Newsweek* asked, in reference to Bono's work on behalf of the poor and victims of AIDS, "Can Bono Save the World?" Perhaps comedian Drew Carey, hosting a humanitarian event, had that cover story in mind when he observed: *I'm so glad that God sent Bono down to save us from our sins. Do you want to see my wristband? It*

says, "What would Bono do?" He's like Christ, I'm telling you. He's like Christ and Bob Dylan rolled into one.

Bono is the kind of guy who, with his trophy in hand, can gently chide the previous recipients at the Grammy Awards Ceremony by stating: "I would like to thank God and my mother also. But I just have this feeling, this picture in my head of God looking down on people like us on occasions like this and going "Uh-oh. Don't thank me for that song. There's no hook, the chorus is weak, and they'll never play it on the radio'" (Spiritual Journeys—How Faith Has Influenced Twelve Music Icons).

When America was still reeling from the September 11 terrorist attacks, U2—an Irish band – was asked to perform at the 2002 Super Bowl halftime show in New Orleans. As the names of the victims were displayed over a huge backdrop, Bono began to



Bono and The Edge 2009

PHOTO COURTESY OF XRAYSPX

pray Psalm 51:15: "Lord, open my lips, so my mouth shows forth thy praise." U2 then launched into a stunning version of "Where the Streets Have No Name." In the firepower of the moment, Bono pulled open his jacket to display the Stars and Stripes sewn into its lining. You could almost hear the collective national gasp before the cheers crescendoed into madness. He's 100 percent Irish, but he lives the life of a resident alien that knows no borders (Spiritual Journeys). —the Editors

“sinners”—or to put it in their inspeak, lest they should “mess up their witness.” On the other hand, compelled to enter the marketplace to “save sinners from ‘hell,’” they do so in packs with tracts and rehearsed psychological-pressure techniques based on death, fear and threats of afterlife torture. None of that on the Areopagus from Paul. None of that on the Las Vegas Strip from U2.

• **What Paul did at the Areopagus:**

1) He met people where they were in the marketplace and began relationships.

2) He joined in conversation there and at the Areopagus when invited.

3) He included himself with them by speaking to a universal search for God, a universal spiritual yearning behind all misguided religious impulses, establishing common ground and standing with them in the search.

4) He lastly spoke of a just man appointed by an unnamed God of all, a God who raised that man from the dead as assurance to all people.

• **What Paul didn't do at the Areopagus:**

1) He did not intrude uninvited to deploy impersonal, decisional, fear-based, death-focused, hell-centered, hit-and-run psychological pressure techniques to emotionally manipulate them.

2) He did not mention the name of Jesus, using respectful relational restraint.

3) He did not label them or

Paul did NOT SAY WE *might*, BUT THAT WE *would* SEARCH FOR God. All of us, he said... PAUL PREACHED THAT HE AND THEY WERE IN THE SAME BOAT SAILING FOR THE HORIZON IN SEARCH OF THE SAME HOME.

judge them as separated from God, because Paul did not believe they were, and he said so, boldly and repeatedly.

4) He did not give an altar call, take up a collection, pass out a tract or invite them to church.

A Kingdom Relationship—Not a Kingdom Religion

I have spoke with the tongue of angels

I have held the hand of a devil

It was warm in the night

I was cold as a stone. ©

This verse of “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” can easily be interpreted as being all about religiosity. Speaking in tongues is paired with holding the hand of a devil, meaning that a beautiful gift of the Spirit can, in the hands of broken human beings, tragically degenerate into the deadly peril of religious proving, posing, boasting and judging. And for Bono to be *warm in the night but cold as a stone* may mean that even though the warmth of the Spirit is ever-present, broken human beings create religious proving grounds that leave one cold as a stone idol.

Religiosity is the human capacity to take the Spirit’s generous gifts and universal warmth and pervert them, marketing them for the sake of self-serving (idolatrous) exclusivist institutions bent on body-count momentum and revenue generation. The hand of a devil is as cold as stone indeed. Why cannot we

humans have Spirit warmth without devil idols?

Sent by the Spirit first to the synagogues, then to the agorae of the ancient cities of the Roman Empire, the Apostle Paul had no squeamishness about entering either place, he did not worry about “messing up his witness,” nor did he judge anyone as separated from God or use threats-of-hell fear-tactics to convert them from their “godless” ways.

He crossed the thresholds of Jewish synagogues and pagan marketplaces alike, he began relationships of respectful conversation, he spoke of the yearning for something that all humans of every nation and race experience, he took the position that while gods and temples were evidence of a universal spiritual impulse these gods and temples were not what we yearn for.

Paul pointed to one God who made us *all*, and he pointed to one man whom God sent to *all*, a man who died and rose from the dead as God’s assurance to *all*. Interestingly, Paul never mentioned that God-sent man’s name—demonstrating both reverence for that name and an unwillingness to hurl that name at his hearers. More interestingly, he never spoke of or threatened “hell.”

No Hell Below Us

According to Scripture, the prototype missionary, the model evangelist if there was one, the Apostle Paul never used any of the words translated (or mistranslated) into

“You broke the bonds, and you loosed the chains. Carried the cross of my shame, of my shame. You know I believe it,”

from the *The JOSHUA TREE* album, *I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For*

PHOTO COUTESY OF INTERSCOPE RECORDS



C.S. LEWIS DESCRIBES IT AS DISSATISFACTION, RESTLESSNESS, AND HOMESICKNESS. THIS HOMING INSTINCT THRILLS, TAUNTS, AND EVEN DRIVES TO DESPAIR. AS U2'S POUNDING, RELENTLESS CHORUS INSISTS, *I still HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR.*

English as “hell.” Let that sink in: Paul *never* wrote or spoke the word, *ever*. If the word had been important to Paul or critically important to the gospel (*good news*), would he not have used it at least once?

How can it be, then, that “hell” is number one in the playbook of much of modern religion? The whole point of their “gospel” is to save people from God’s hell-bent intention to roast “sinners.” How can anyone who proudly calls himself “evangelical” replace so comfortably (and so ignorantly) Paul’s evangelical message and method with one whose foundation is fear of “hell”?

If Paul had followed the methodology of modern religious institutions, his address at the Areopagus might have been different:

“Vain ignorant philosophers, superstitious pagan polytheists, unsaved idolatrous heathens, unrepentant sinners separated from God: Do you know where you are going when you die? You are all going to hell where God

...NAMING IT DOES NOT MAKE THE EXCRUCIATING BLISS GO AWAY. PAUL LEAVES IT UNNAMED AT THE AREOPAGUS. U2 LEAVES IT UNNAMED ON THE STRIP IN LAS VEGAS.

will torture you in fire forever unless you repent of your sins, promise to clean up your act, accept Jesus Christ into your heart, make him your personal Lord and Savior, and find yourself a Bible-believing church. Amen.”

It is so ironic. Those who claim to be concerned that God will judge me have already judged me as separated from God and hell-bound. Why? Because I do not put “hell” first. In their view, those who

do not put “hell” first are going to “hell.” God, save us from circular reasoning, and, while you are at it, save us from ourselves.

The Universal Quest for God— for You Too!

*But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for. ©*

Paul declared to the Areopagites of Athens that God made *all* of us, gave *all* of us places to live, so that in our home countries and each of us in our own way “...would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). Paul did not say we *might*, but that we *would* search for God. *All* of us, he said, quoting one of the Areopagites’ popular poems (lyrics!), *all of us live and move and have our being in him, for we are all his offspring* (Acts 17:28). There is no separation. Paul preached that he was with them—they were all in the same boat sailing for the horizon in search of the

same home.

Is this the searching that C.S. Lewis wrote about—this yearning, this inconsolable secret, this overwhelming sensation of wanting, this urgent craving, this aching desire, this longing beneath all longings that dominated his life?

“I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described” (*Surprised By Joy*, p. 17).

“It is the secret signature of

each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want” (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 146).

“Apparently, then, our life-long nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off...is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation” (*The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, pp. 15-16).

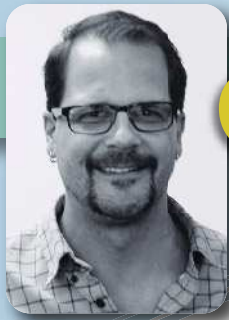
C.S. Lewis describes our search as dissatisfaction, restlessness and homesickness. This homing instinct thrills, taunts, and even drives to despair. As U2’s pounding, relentless chorus insists, *I still haven't found what I'm looking for.*

We could attempt to specifically name and dogmatically define this inescapable, universal “thing,” but it would probably ring hollow to you, as others’ pat answers often do for me. I could give it a name, but it has been my experience that naming it does not make the excruciating bliss go away. Paul leaves it unnamed at the Areopagus. U2 leaves it unnamed on the strip in Las Vegas. I will do the same here.

Their song is a proclamation to the world and an open-armed invitation to yearning hearts everywhere. U2’s gospel is for “you, too.” □

All lyrics to “I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For” © 1987 by U2.

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CWR_m

BRAD JERSAK

Would You Choose the Truth Over Christ?

Thanks for joining me as we continue to explore the countless facets of Christ's *Beautiful Gospel*. In Brian Zahnd's *Axis of Love* column (in this issue), he recalls how the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, claimed he would prefer Christ over the truth. Why is this? Because, he reasoned, who would want to live in a world where the beauty of Christ is untrue? I agree!

What led Dostoevsky to this dilemma in the first place? Why imagine a conflict between Christ and truth? He was struggling to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the Christian claims that God is absolutely good alongside the utter brutishness of God's creation. "God so loved the world," (John 3:16) but the world is burning with hatred all around us. "Jesus loves the little children," but child slavery and exploitation continue to grow. "The Light shines in the darkness" (John 1:15), but it's still so damned dark (literally). How do we find the "Good News" in the "real world" of horrid headlines? Perhaps the gospel and the truth don't intersect after all? While this puzzle was an agony for Dostoevsky—a true double bind—he resolved to cling to the crucified Christ. And so do I.

At the same time, the philosopher-activist-mystic, Simone Weil, disagreed with Dostoevsky. Her fascinating perspective shows the flipside to this grand thought experiment. She too struggles to harmonize the goodness of God with the misery of humanity. Responding to Dostoevsky, she says,

"One can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. *Christ likes us to prefer truth to him* because, before being Christ, he is Truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."

Her proposal is worth pondering. Christ does not ask us to imagine him apart from the harsh realities of life. We don't just worship him with our eyes scrunched shut. Facing into the stubborn fact of affliction—eyes wide open—and even having our "atheistic moments" is

not only allowed...it is both a requirement of the truth and a necessity for Christian belief. Anything less is neither truth, nor Christian. George Grant, one of Weil's disciples, put it this way:

"There is a ghastly way of speaking about the Resurrection in the modern world which I call the fairy-tale way. A prince is dressed in rags, and everybody scorns him. Suddenly the clothes are pulled off and he appears in his prince's costume, and everybody treats him well."

Grant is arguing that *in truth*, we don't actually find Christ skittering around in fairy wings, riding on rainbows or sprinkling pixy dust on our "happy-clappy" glory-meetings. We find him pinned to the Cross, bearing our grief, and simultaneously loving us with an everlasting love and unquenchable light. In other words, to see both the truth and Christ, we need the courage that refuses to turn its head from our groaning, weeping world, because at its very heart there stands the Cross...hideous weakness and all-powerful love in one place, on one tree, in one Man. It was only because he overcame at the Cross that Christ also defeated death and now shows up with a lantern in our dark nights.

This requires a kind of double vision (i.e. faith!) that sees how the Cross reveals both "the anguish of absence" alongside "the peace of presence." Author Harris Athanasiadis condenses this double-vision of the Cross in his article, "Waiting at the Foot of the Cross":

"On the cross, Christ revealed both the agony of the darkness and the beauty of the light of love rising through and beyond the darkness. Any spirituality that is not nourished by the truth of engagement with the darkness as possibility and actuality, as well as by the light of love as disruptive and transfiguring grace, is not true to the revelation of God on the cross."

In these beautiful, both/and cross-beams of Christ and truth, Dostoevsky and Weil kneel together at the foot of the same Cross—where the Prince of Glory was first enthroned. □



Would You Choose Christ Over the Truth?

“If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.”—Fyodor Dostoevsky

Dostoevsky said that if he were forced to choose, he would choose Christ over the truth. That is a very bold and provocative claim.

Yes, I know, we don’t have to choose. I get that. But for a moment entertain the matter as Dostoevsky intends it—as a kind of thought experiment. If it were conclusively proven that the central claims regarding Jesus Christ were outside of the truth, what would you do? Would you continue to worship and follow Jesus Christ or not? How we answer the question reveals something about us.

If push comes to shove I agree with Dostoevsky. **I would choose Christ over truth.** But this is a claim I make *only* of Jesus Christ. Which is significant.

I would not make this claim for anything else. Truth trumps everything...except the beauty of Christ.

Let me put it this way: **I do not want to live in a world where the beauty of Christ is untrue.** No matter what. (Remember this is a thought experiment.) For me, Christ is so beautiful, he must be true. And I would reject a world where such beauty is untrue. Which leads me to what I’m trying to say.

Beauty is a reliable guide to life. To choose the beautiful is a consistently wise choice. You may say, “Why not choose the true?” I’m all for it, but this will often be a matter of dispute. (Politics anyone?) It seems to me that we have a better instinct for beauty than truth. If the subject is Christ and Christianity, beauty is as reliable a guide as anything else.

Of course, I agree that we have the three prime virtues of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and we must consult all three. Yes.

But in reality we often fail to consult beauty at all. **In our empiricist age beauty ends up**

being demoted to mere adornment and is no longer regarded as a wise guide. We ask if it’s true, and that’s the end of the discussion.

We tell ourselves that if a thing is true (i.e. we think it’s true), that’s the end of the matter. But this may only lead us to an ugliness we tolerate because it is “true.” Too much harm has been done in the name of an ugly “truth.”

You can burn heretics in the name of truth, but never in the name of beauty. You can wage a crusade in the name of truth, but never in the name of beauty. You can bomb a city to oblivion in the name of truth (or freedom or liberty or justice), but never in the name of beauty. You can hate in the name of truth, but never in the name of beauty. I will reject a doctrine if it is ugly. Just as I will eternally cling to Christ based on his beauty alone.

Jesus is beautiful. His life is beautiful. His teaching is beautiful. His death and resurrection are beautiful. His gospel is beautiful. His kingdom is beautiful. If some *ology* or *ism* claiming to be Christian is patently ugly, then I am immediately dubious. Christ is so glorious that his transcendent beauty is sufficient to be my constant, my ground, my fixed point for all other realities.

I believe in truth and Christian apologetics. I believe in goodness and Christian ethics. But as an aesthete at heart, I believe first of all in beauty and Christian aesthetics.

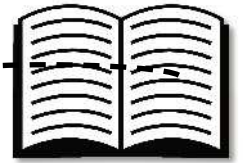
For me, I start with the beauty of Christ and then find my way into the truth of Christ. It may have been the same for John the Beloved who said, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his **glory** [beauty], **glory** as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and **truth**” (John 1:14, my emphasis).

So I’m sympathetic with Dostoevsky when he says he would choose to remain with Christ even if to do so were to be outside the truth. □



“The Bible clearly says...”

by Rob Grayson



academic study of theology and the accompanying theological debate that has persisted through twenty centuries and shows little sign of abating even today.

Second, you can make the Bible stand up and dance a jig if you want to. In other words, the Bible contains enough seemingly contradictory statements that you can pluck out a verse here and there and use it to support pretty much any position you want to. For example, there’s no shortage of passages in the Old Testament that could be used to support the argument, “The Bible clearly says that ethnic cleansing is perfectly acceptable.” Need I say more?

Third, and perhaps most important, no text says anything without *some* degree of ambiguity. Whether we’re aware of it or not, we all interpret every single thing we read. Let me try to explain.

Suppose you open up a learn-to-read book for children, and read the first sentence: “The cat sat on the mat.” Simple enough at first reading, right? Not too much ambiguity here, is there?

Well...

What we can say with certainty after reading this sentence is that a cat sat on a mat. To conclude anything more than that requires interpretation. For example, we are told nothing about the color, gender, age or size of the cat. Similarly, the size, type, material and placement of the mat are left to our imagination. And did the cat just sit on the mat once, and if so, for how long? Or was it in the habit of doing so? Why did it sit there? And when did all of this feline mat occupation occur?

To answer any of these questions requires us to *interpret* the text. I’m sure most people would be able to grasp this without much difficulty. What’s harder to see is that we interpret all the time without even being aware that we’re doing it.

When you read the sentence “The cat sat on the mat,” chances are that you immediately form a mental image of a cat on a mat. The cat you imagine will be of a certain size, age, gender, color and disposition, and the mat will be in a certain more or less specific location. A number of factors determine how you imagine the scene, including but not limited to your personal

Over the past year or so, Facebook has become a place of wide-ranging theological discussion for me. Of course, as a medium for serious, in-depth discussion, it has its disadvantages and limitations; but thanks to others of like mind, I’ve found it to be predominantly a source of life and stimulation.

Being active in theological debate on Facebook has taught me a lot, especially about things like taking time to think before speaking, giving others the benefit of the doubt and working hard to communicate clearly and unambiguously. It’s also brought to my attention certain recurring arguments that many Christians regularly trot out in defense of whatever position they’re pushing, one of which I’d like to briefly highlight—and hopefully demolish.

If I had a dollar for every time in the last year that I’ve heard or seen someone say “But the Bible clearly says...” I’d be well on the way to funding a more generous pension for my later years.

I have a number of issues with arguments beginning “The Bible clearly says...”

First, it is not borne out by two thousand years of history. If the Bible *clearly* said anything much at all, surely the world would not now have some forty *thousand* Christian denominations, many of which claim to have the correct interpretation of Scripture. Similarly, if the Bible was anything like as clear as this statement claims, there would have been no need for the

...people who routinely base their arguments on what the Bible “clearly” says often feel that they have a direct line to the Holy Spirit...

experience with and attitude toward cats, other books, pictures or TV shows in which you have seen cats sitting on mats, your favorite or least favorite types of cats and mats...and even the mood you happen to be in at the time.

You may feel that *a cat on a mat* is rather a simple example to use, but hopefully you can see the point I’m trying to make.

When we read any text, be it a novel, a newspaper, a blog post or the Bible, there’s a very small amount of information that is known and understood with absolute certainty. On the other hand, there’s a very large amount of information that is open to interpretation. It follows that our understanding of a text is based largely on our personal interpretation of that text.

As I’ve hinted already with my admittedly rather silly feline example, our interpretation of any given biblical text is shaped by many factors. These include, but are not limited to, age, socio-economic background, race, educational level, church background, personality type, personal experience, peer group influences and current life circumstances. All of these forces and more work together to form and guide our personal interpretation in ways that we are largely unaware of.

So when, in defense of your favorite theological hobby horse, you exclaim “But the Bible clearly says...” what you’re really saying is “But *my interpretation* of the Bible clearly says...!” To put it another way, it would be better to say, “For someone with my specific and

exact personal, socio-economic, political, emotional and religious history, and with the exact same personality type, memories and value system as me, the Bible *clearly* says....”

By now you hopefully realize that the only person who checks off all of those boxes is you. Your interpretation of the Bible is unique to you. It may coincide with the interpretation of lesser or greater numbers of other people, but ultimately it’s yours, shaped by your own unique set of formative influences.

It follows from all this (and my experience tends to bear this out) that people who routinely base their arguments on what the Bible “clearly” says often feel that they have a direct line to the Holy Spirit and have been given the one and only valid interpretation of Holy Scripture. To which my answer is, what about all the other good and holy men and women down through the centuries (many of whom have studied, meditated and

sacrificed much more than you or I in their quest to know God and understand the Bible) who have “received” an inspired interpretation that differs from yours?

In closing, then, let me issue a plea—if, in defending your particular theological understanding, you wish to draw on the Bible, please don’t preface your argument with “The Bible *clearly* says.” If you do, what you’re really saying is “I’m right and you’re wrong.” Instead, do me the courtesy of saying what you *think* the Bible means by what it says, and why you think what it says should be interpreted in that particular fashion. Perhaps then we can have a healthy conversation from which we might both learn something. □

Rob Grayson is a freelance translator from Coventry, England. Having recently undergone seismic shifts in his faith, he has a growing passion for amateur theology and likes to write about the deconstruction and reconstruction of faith, theology and Christian culture. You can read his blog at www.faithmeetsworld.com.



Will the real
“Word of
God”
please
stand up!



Jesus alone is the infallible Word of God (John 1:1).

During our CWR/PTM 2015 “Year of the Bible” we will study and examine the Bible (the lower-case word of God) from a Christ-centered (the upper-case Word of God) perspective. The *word* of God is inspired by the *Word* of God. But by God’s divine plan, humans have been profoundly involved in writing, editing, translating, preserving and publishing the Bible. Touched by human hands, the Bible cannot be seen as infallible or inerrant. Jesus alone, the Word of God, is infallible and inerrant. Stay tuned during our “Year of the Bible” for Christ-centered perspective, teaching and insight.

You Can't Imagine How Much He Loves You

Editor's Note: We are pleased to print the following excerpt from Beyond an Angry God—You Can't Imagine How Much He Loves You by Steve McVey. Steve is a longtime friend of our media ministry—we have collaborated with him several times over the years. We thank Steve McVey and Harvest House Publishers for granting us permission to share this brief selection from Beyond an Angry God. We heartily recommend the book to our readers.

by Steve McVey

I've been teaching the grace of God for many years, and as time passes I have seen my own thinking mature and have watched my understanding of grace change from a sunrise into the midday sun. What I saw in seminal form in the past, I am now seeing in its more matured state. I feel like Lucy must have felt in C.S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian*, when she and Aslan spoke.

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."¹

The grace of God will continually appear to become bigger and more beautiful as we grow. Grace is the expression of Love Himself, and since He is infinite, it seems reasonable to assume that we will spend time and

eternity discovering more and more about the vastness of the subject. Will we ever cross the finish line when it comes to knowing grace?

Will we ever graduate and be able to rest in our current knowledge with confidence that we have finally reached the sum of the matter and there is no more? I certainly don't think so.

God Is Love and...

God's love isn't predicated on our response. He loves because "God is love" (1 John 4:8). This aspect of God's nature is the benchmark from which we interpret everything else that can be known about Him. Is love simply one of God's characteristics? Or instead, does John's statement speak to the core essence of who He is? Are

there other aspects of His nature that need to be seen in balance with the reality of His love? The answer is a resounding no.

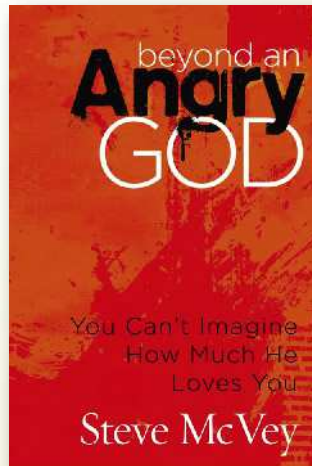
Love is our God's DNA. "God

is love" is the most definitive statement that can be said about Him. Some may think that to suggest that love is the defining factor of everything that can be known about Him is shortsighted and dangerous.

They may argue that God has other aspects of His nature that need to be seen in balance

with His love. In particular, many people point to His justice and wrath.

Critics contend that by focusing on His love to such an extent presents a lopsided view of who He is. In reality, their own viewpoint creates the exact problem they fear. Those who attempt to align justice,



My whole life was revolutionized the day I sincerely and irrevocably believed that God is love. Until then, my confidence in the constant expression of His love could be so easily shaken.

wrath, or any other divine qualities alongside His love as separate but equal realities malign His true nature.

Love isn't part of the divine nature. It is His nature. Think of it like this. Imagine you're using a pie to illustrate God's essence. How would you show the places His love, justice, and wrath hold in His nature?

Would you divide the pie into three equal pieces? Or would you have a very large piece of the pie signify His love and two smaller pieces represent His justice and wrath? How would you divide the love, justice, and wrath of God?

The fact is, such a division doesn't exist in God's divine nature. Instead the entire piecrust is the love of God, and every other aspect of his nature is a piece of the pie. In other words, God's justice, wrath, holiness, sovereignty, and all the other traits that can be known about Him must be understood as parts of His love. Otherwise, God is part love and part something else.

Pure Love

If I handed you a glass of water and told you it was pure, you would assume nothing else was in the glass but pure water. If the glass contained anything other than water, even in small traces, I wouldn't be honest calling it pure water.

Is God pure love or not? Of course He is. If anything that contradicts love were present in Him, we couldn't truthfully say that He is pure love. We would have to say He is part

love and part something else. The very idea is a scary thought.

What if God were part love, but other aspects of His character contrasted with love, as some theological constructs suggest? How would we know that at any given moment, we might see a side to God that we don't want to see? How could we ever rest in peace about our relationship to Him? How could we be sure that we would be only the objects of His love and not the targets of things that came from a place other than love? Can you imagine a deity dealing out something that didn't come from love? It's the kind of thing you might find in horror movies.

My whole life was revolutionized the day I sincerely and irrevocably believed that God is love. Until then, my confidence in the constant expression of His love could be so easily shaken. My circumstances occasionally made me wonder. Sometimes an Old Testament verse tripped me up and caused me to doubt. At other times I saw things going on in the world around me that I couldn't reconcile with the existence of a God who really is pure love.

The time came, however, when I put my eyes on Jesus.

We have seen that He is the "exact representation of [the Father's] nature" (Hebrews 1:3). Because that is true, the

question is did Jesus leave out part of who His Father is? If He did, and if His Father has a dark side that Jesus didn't bother to mention or show us, that was a *big* omission!

Reasonable people could even say it would have been dishonest to leave out such information while telling us "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Jesus didn't do that. You can count on it. There is no other side to God that Jesus didn't reveal.

Don't let anything other than Jesus Himself be your source for understanding who the Father is. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). Even insights gained from the Bible are rightly understood only through Jesus. He came to show us the Father, and what He has shown us perfectly and clearly is that our Father is love. That's it—nothing more, nothing less. □

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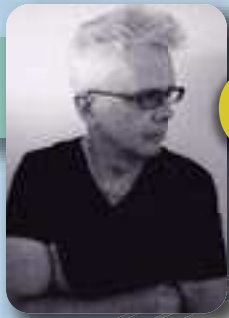
Steve McVey is the president of Grace Walk Ministries, a discipleship-training ministry. His books include the bestselling Grace Walk, Walking in the Will of God and 52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday. Steve and his wife reside in Georgia.



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DAVID HAYWARD

The Church As We Know It

Sometimes I find it strange that I still think biblically. In other words, I still look for a kind of biblical story within which to fit my own narrative. For example, lately I've been thinking just how far outside the church I have become and feel. Let me explain.

Jesus was a radical within a monotheistic culture, society and country. It was perfectly homogenous. When you were this radical the only solution was death because there were no other options. When Paul came along, there were options. There was diversity. But the way they dealt with Paul was to exile him, remove him from the community, shun and reject him.

Even at the very end of his life, Paul continued trying to make a seamless connection between Judaism and "this sect" (Acts 28: 22). Finally, he gave up and said, "... this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen." He tried for a while to bridge the gap, but after many years he finally gave up on the synagogue and even Judaism and, basically started a new religion that came to be known as Christianity. This isn't to say he didn't stay connected with some Jews and kept relationship with them. But the big picture was that Judaism could not embrace this new sect and so this sect remained outside and became something new and even separate.

This is where I feel I'm at right now. Christianity and the church, although I'm still in conversation with it, compares to the Judaism Paul was dealing with. Even though he carried within him his Jewish roots, he blossomed into something entirely new and

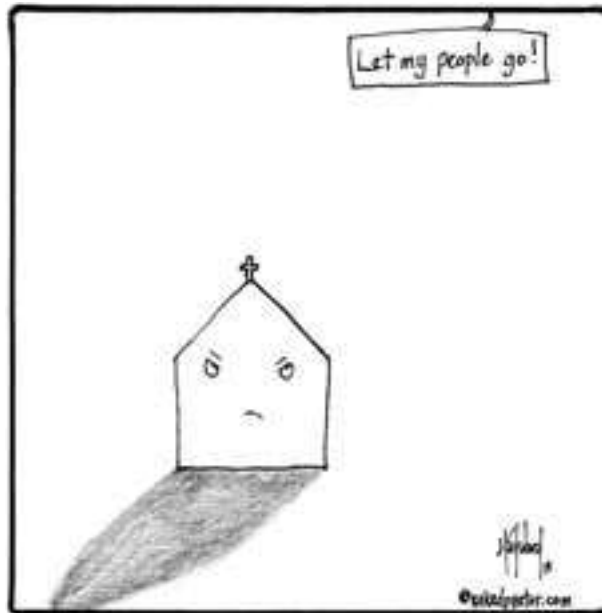
different. He left Judaism behind.

I carry within me my Christian roots. But I feel like I'm turning my back on all this and turning my eyes towards something entirely new and different. I don't know what "it" looks like because there is no "it." All I see is "them" that is now becoming "us." How this plays out practically in my life I've yet to discern.

But here's one thing: I know *nakedpastor.com* has helped a lot of people. It has been my way of tearing out of the old regime. But now I'm in the new...whatever that is. A lot of the reaction I get for what I do is hyper-religious bull...and I just can't stand listening to that completely useless drivel anymore. The reactions I get on Facebook to my cartoons and writings...

I just don't care anymore.

So now I'm asking myself how to leave behind all that crap, how to continue *nakedpastor* in a meaningful and useful way, and how to speak a new language to a new people. I don't know yet. All I know is that it is time for something new. Not a new regime. But a new spacious place for freedom. □



CARTOON BY DAVID HAYWARD

NEW CD BY MICHAEL NORTH



We're excited to announce the brand new release from Michael North, CWRa (Christianity Without the Religion audio) worship leader. *It Is Well With My Soul* is a collection of twelve popular traditional hymns produced and arranged by Northouse. It is available on CD and

digital download at michaelnorth.org/samples9.htm. These timeless gems are sure to inspire many intimate moments of praise and worship between you and our Lord Jesus Christ!

REGRET—THE SILENT KILLER

BY BRAD JERSAK

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. —2 Corinthians 7:10 (NLT)

Various diseases have been labeled “the silent killer.” For example, “hypertension” is called the silent killer because it increases the risk of heart disease and strokes, two of the top causes of death in America. Other emotional and spiritual diseases could compete for that title: fear, shame, resentment and bitterness would be high on the list. But the silent epidemic we’ll examine now is *regret*.

It’s not that regret goes unnoticed. Oodles of motivational posters decrying regret litter the Internet. I say “litter” because they largely represent a worldly wisdom that exhorts us to move beyond regret, but only leave us feeling worse—regretting our regrets. Sampling this pseudo-sage advice, obvious patterns emerge.

Three Anti-Regret Slogans

1) **Thou shalt never regret.** Henry Thoreau wrote, “*Never look back* unless you are planning to go that way.” Or “*Make it a rule of life never to regret and never to look back.* Regret is an appalling waste of energy; you can’t build on it; it’s only

HOW DO WE MOVE BEYOND THE BITTERNESS OF POOR CHOICES AND STOLEN DREAMS? HERE, THE APOSTLE PAUL WAS 2000 YEARS AHEAD OF US.

good for wallowing in” (Katherine Manfield).

2) **Thou shalt (not) regret what you didn’t do more than what you did do.** “The mistakes I’ve made are dead to me. But I can’t take back the *things I never did*” (Jonathan Foer). “Our biggest regrets are not for the things we have done but for the *things we haven’t done*” (Chad Murray).

3) **Thou shalt (not) regret not being yourself.** “One of the greatest regrets in life is being what others would want you to be, rather than being yourself” (Shannon Alder). “One of

my main regrets in life is giving considerable thought to inconsiderate people” (Jarod Kintz).

What are we hearing? You should not have regrets. Or, you’ll regret regretting, so let us “inspire” your willpower: just stop regretting! Why? Because regret is for losers. Those who have “arrived” boast, “*I regret nothing!*” They forget that Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichmann, first coined the phrase. Here’s the double bind! If you have regrets, you’re lame; if you don’t, you’re a sociopath!

Shaming Regret?

All of this amounts to shaming us for the torment of regret, attempting to punish the disease out of its victims. As if regret were a bad choice. As if my regrets were completely in my hands.

What if we made mistakes in all sincerity? Should we now feel *ashamed* for feeling the grief over the consequences? What if our dreams were *stolen* by others? Should we feel *nothing* for our losses?

What if our dreams of an education or vocation, of getting married and raising a family were stolen by an accident of birth, an abuser, or a drunk driver? The painful memories and *if only* scenarios constitute a form of bitter regret. But shouldn’t they? On the flipside, should the abuser, the DUI killer or the death dealer truly *regret nothing*? Or if remorse is eating them alive, how does that help? If regret is a disease, its debilitating symptoms will inevitably show themselves.

Do you see the problem? It’s as if regret were natural and necessary while also being a toxic contagion. And the best and most brilliant solution to which we can arrive? *Thou shalt not regret!* Really? In fact, thou shalt not let regret prevent you from doing more things you’ll soon





sorrow brings death (2 Corinthians 7:10 NLT).

First, we start with this astounding possibility—a process that leaves *no* regret! It sounds too good to be true! Recall the worst thing you ever did, the worst thing you *didn't* do or the worst thing that ever happened *to you*. Those events are long gone, the memories are not. *Memories* are like storage units in your heart and mind. Past events are recorded there. So are the consequences of those memories. And so are many of the feelings associated with that memory. So while the people and places may not even exist any more, the emotions linger; they do exist, right now, in you. The horrible deed is done; the tormenting emotions remain. When I re-enter that “memory locker,” I may feel the fear, anger, hurt, shame or guilt all over again. I relive the events to the degree I re-feel the memory.

Of course we *wish* we could stop suffering the pain housed in our memories. We wish we could stop replaying past events. In fact, we *wish* it had never happened, because it just hurts so much! That is *regret*. Wanting freedom is a natural and necessary human reaction to nasty memories...*but* as we all know, that wishful reaction can become its own obsession—a self-defeating prison.

“...and leaves no regret.”

Reading Paul carefully, he doesn't say we should or should not have regrets. He has already moved past the folly of the world, which condemns us for having no regrets and shaming us if we do. Paul simply

regret! If we “struck out” last time, should we swing even more wildly this time? Seriously? Should we trust the opinions of those who tell us we'll regret trusting other's opinions?

Defining Regret in Context

One problem is that regret is ill defined—reduced to a bad feeling about a bad memory, which we're supposed to will ourselves to stop feeling. We know instinctively that regret is poisonous, so we resonate with the song in Disney's *Frozen*, “Let it go.” Okay...but how? The Serenity Prayer suggests, “By accepting what you cannot change.” I agree, but again, how? How do we move beyond the bitterness of poor choices and stolen dreams?

Here, the Apostle Paul was 2000 years ahead of us. He directs us to an insightful definition, a context and a treatment for regret that breaks the double bind. He says,

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly

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Adolf Eichmann managed mass extermination during the Holocaust. After the war he hid out in Argentina and was finally tried and executed in Israel in 1962.

**WE ALL HAVE REGRETS...
WHILE REGRET IS AS
INEVITABLE AS INDIGESTION,
WHAT IF THERE WAS A WAY TO
LEAVE IT ALL BEHIND?**

acknowledges that we do experience regret. Why? Because we're losers? No! Because **regret is an authentic aspect of the human condition. We all have regrets.**

But Paul adds this note of hope: a way forward that "*leaves no regret.*" While regret is as inevitable as indigestion, what if there is a way to leave it all behind? Paul doesn't decree, 'Thou shalt leave it behind!' You don't *will* the regret away through inspiration or determination. Rather, he suggests there is a process that takes you *through* and *beyond* the regret so that one day, you will remember the events without feeling the pain.

Objection 1: Simple disbelief. We can't imagine recalling our greatest defeats without reliving the pain. Impossible!

Objection 2: Our deeper resistance surfaces when we cling to regret because we think it protects us—from further mistakes, from deeper hurt, from bad people...but also, sadly, from trust and from love. Regret becomes a false friend, promising protection by walling us in. It's a malicious guardian that traps in the pain it promises to keep away, but shields us from the abundant life we most want. Regret may be inevitable, but our loyalty to it need not be.

By assessing regret's broken promises and deep costs—and

becoming aware of all it steals—we become ready to break our allegiance to it. We can say to regret, "I've realized you aren't helping me at all. You're hindering me. I'm ready to try a different path that will lead to freedom." Bottoming out on regret—and our useless struggle with regret—is the first step. We are powerless to prevent regret or to drive it away ourselves, but we're *not* powerless to enter the path to freedom.

Sorrow Is Not Optional

Paul identifies two ways to deal with regret: godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. **Sorrow is not optional. That's life.** Unless we're psychopaths, life—and the journey beyond regret—will involve sorrow. The choice lies in opting for the path of *godly sorrow* (which leaves no regret) or continuing in *worldly sorrow* (which leads to death). What do these phrases mean?

Worldly sorrow re-enters and relives hurtful memories to nurture our bitter regrets. Worldly sorrow doesn't *face* the past—it *feeds* on the pain. Resentment, for example, literally means *re-sentiment...* *re-feeling*. Why? *Not* to rid

ourselves of those feelings, but to *reinforce* self-pity or self-loathing. Regret morphs from wishing away old grief or guilt into *needing* it in order to justify hating ourselves or others. Regret utilizes the past

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as a weapon, especially against ourselves. Regret is the 'ungodly sorrow' that does not free us from the past; it drives us back to it.

The obvious example is alcohol-driven domestic violence. A man gets drunk and beats his family, then deeply regrets it. The regret over his drinking and violence



UNLIKE THE POPULAR ANTI-REGRET SLOGANS, PAUL'S PATH TO FREEDOM DOES NOT DETOUR AROUND SORROW. GODLY SORROW FACES INTO THE GRIEF OF OUR PAINFUL PAST.



eats at him, driving him to get drunk and externalize his self-hatred by beating his family! It's a vicious irony, a disease... and no amount of punishment (self-inflicted or otherwise) can cure it. **You just can't regret away regret.** It's the silent killer, just as Paul warned.

Godly Sorrow

Unlike the popular anti-regret slogans, Paul's path to freedom does not detour around sorrow. *Godly sorrow* faces into the grief of our painful past. Remember, Paul knew regret from the days when he had killed Christians—family members of people he now worshiped with. Imagine trying to preach to a Christian woman whose husband you had murdered “in the name of God” ...would it ever feel “long ago” to him or them?

But Paul doesn't avoid that painful past. He wades into the sorrow, but in a *godly way*. This is the “way of repentance” versus the “way of regret.” Graceless religion has loaded so much guilt and shame into the word *repentance* that post-moderns only imagine it being shouted with a condemning snarl. But no, *repentance* is not the ungodly sorrow of demeaning *regret*.

For Paul, *repentance* is best defined as turning (with the sins and sorrows of your past) away from regret (with

its self-loathing pity-party) and turning to the kindness of God ...to heal your deepest wounds, forgive your

deepest wrongs and exchange your burdens for his grace.

In practice, we might allow Christ into those painful memories or bring those painful memories to Christ—with all the hurt, anger, fear and guilt—and we “grieve them out” in his presence. Hiding nothing, we lay all we've done or that's been done to us before him. We offer him all that's been broken or lost or stolen—including ourselves.

This is true *confession*.

We ask, “God, if I give you my regrets, what will you give me in return?” This is the

IN RECENT DECADES, PSYCHOLOGISTS HAVE DISCOVERED ISAIAH'S SECRET: PICTURING OUR EMOTIONAL BURDENS AND LETTING THEM GO...“TRADE THEM IN.”

point of exchange—the work of the Cross—described in Isaiah 61:1-3:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me...to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion....

Who receives Christ's mercy? Those who come to him, mourning

and grieving, not those who *regret nothing*. Then the trades and upgrades begin:

- to bestow on them a *crown of beauty* instead of *ashes*,
- the *oil of joy* instead of *mourning*,
- and a *garment of praise* instead of a *spirit of despair*.

In recent decades, psychologists have discovered

WHO RECEIVES CHRIST'S MERCY? THOSE WHO COME TO HIM, MOURNING AND GRIEVING, NOT THOSE WHO REGRET NOTHING. THEN THE TRADES AND UPGRADES BEGIN...

Isaiah's secret: picturing our emotional burdens and letting them go. But Isaiah knew we can't just “let them go”—we need to “trade them in.”

Then the storage rooms of our memories—the stories themselves—begin to change. Where we once *saw* ashes, we now *see* a crown. Where we once *felt* shame, we now *feel* peace. Where we once *seemed* alone, we now *experience* God with us. Our godly sorrow proceeds through repentance (turning and trading) that leaves *no regrets*.

So, authentic repentance is *not* guilt-tripping regret at all! It's your invitation to turn from the toxic tables of regret and instead, dine on the extravagant kindness of God! Perhaps it's time for a fresh upgrade to grace! ☐



Now available—a new book from CWRpress! *A More Christlike God*, written by Senior Editor Brad Jersak. Brad is a wise and patient guide, walking us toward the beautiful gospel while never shirking the hard questions. With the keen mind of a theologian and the tender heart of a pastor, Brad knows the way beyond the ugly parodies of Christianity into the beautiful gospel of a more Christlike God.

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Rx for Remorse, Regret, Resentment

by Marv Wegner

We seek God. But we are often satisfied with a substitute. A short cut. A convenient idol. A comforting substitute religion when the real thing we crave delays his arrival, and based on our schedule, God is late.

God has left the garden. Moses has left the camp. And we are left to our own devices. And oh, what devices we can craft with the aid of technology. Shining, beautiful, beguiling as they are addictive.

Man's first attempt at a solution, as always, involves building some *Thing*. Problem: God not present. Solution: Build idol, e.g., the golden calf.

know what has happened to him'" (Exodus 32:1).

And when the party's over we are left to drain the dregs of our misguided, reckless binge. "And he [Moses] took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it" (verse 20).

Addicted to Regret

No one escapes. It is the price we pay for being human. Our former beloved idol is ground to dust and we are forced to drink up. Yes, remorse is a cup from which we all drink.

Remorse itself is not a problem—in fact it is a vital

Unless we keep focused on who our Savior is, what he has done for us and what he intends for us, our memories will return time and again, binding us to our painful past. And even more difficult than putting our own misdeeds behind us can be the offenses we have suffered at the hands of others.

Letting the painful past go is most difficult when we lose sight of the God who has promised he will personally wipe away "all tears, all sorrow" (Revelation 21:4). He has assigned the job of judging the world and setting all wrongs right to himself alone.

When we have trouble trusting God to complete this task and fear he has abandoned us, we start thinking it is all up to us.

Just like our distant religious cousins in the wilderness, we hurry to short and poor conclusions. We reason if God is not on the job then *we* must take care of business.

So we fashion a substitute religion, a golden calf, and make up our own system of rules and regulations which includes dispensing our own justice. Vengeance is ours.

Flashing Red Lights

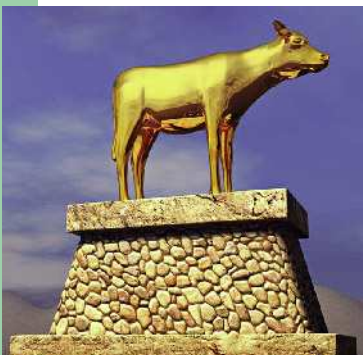
Yet as Christ-followers, we don't truly fit into this here-and-now

Man's first attempt at a solution, as always, involves building some *Thing*. Problem: God not present. Solution: Build idol, e.g., the golden calf.

part of the process of repentance. A necessary stage that signals our intention to change direction.

Yet remorse, regret, resentment and the compulsive reliving of the past often becomes more than an occasional drink. Tarry too long over this bitter wine and we are likely to become addicted. The cup becomes as deep as an ocean.

"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't



system. We don't fit into any man-made religion or nation. We are actually resident-aliens, sojourners belonging to another completely unique national identity (John 18:36, 1 Peter 2:11).

Every nation has its distinct culture, its own standards and values. When we forget one of the key cultural norms of God's Kingdom, which is forgiveness, we lapse into the surrounding culture's belief system where a real man is expected to take care of his own vengeance.

When in this state of mind we forget our adoption, our citizenship, our allegiance to the King and his vaules. We turn down Christ's offer of light and turn back to love the darkenss of our past (John 3:19).

When my mind drifts to this godless place not only do my sins live forever, every wrong that has ever been done to me, every injustice, real or perceived, is dredged up from the distant past to haunt me.

Fantasies of vengeance appear unbidden, so lurid can these thoughts be it would make the punishments Dante dreamed up for wrong-doers in "The Inferno" look like high school detention.

Though I am alarmed as a Christ-follower to still harbor these recurring thoughts, I also have come to see them as an important bellwether of my spiritual condition. A condition that keeps me from experiencing God's grace fully.

Recurring regrets, accompanied by shame and hostility, are somewhat like warning lights on my dashboard. The flashing red lights are not the trouble, the trouble is deep within the engine. The gauges are merely faithfully reporting the current

conditions, warning me that something must be put right. They are alerting me to the distance I am from the man Jesus wishes for me to become, as I learn to do it his way.

Certainly holding onto these resentments is anathema to the basic tenant of Christ's Kingdom based on love, for "Love...keeps no record of wrongs." (1 Corinthians 13:4)

Record-keeping of wrongs



The flashing red lights are not the trouble, the trouble is deep within the engine. The gauges are merely faithfully reporting the current conditions, warning me that something must be put right.

will only result in even more anger and resentment. Such "bean-counting"—this compulsive hoarding of painful memories—only perpetuates itself, spreads its poison to other parts of our lives, freezes spiritual growth and bursts out inappropriately to harm those we are closest to.

Experiencing Grace by Letting Go

"Hoarding: Buried Alive" is a popular documentary television series that airs on The Learning Channel. "Hoarding..." focuses on those who suffer from "hoarding disorder" a mental illness characterized by the excessive acquisition and unwillingness to discard belongings (often trash) that make the living areas of the home uninhabitable.

Do you see any possible

connection with our failure to regularly take out (give up and let go of) our own stockpile of mental trash?

This habitual focus on the past robs us of any joy and freedom we may now experience in Christ.

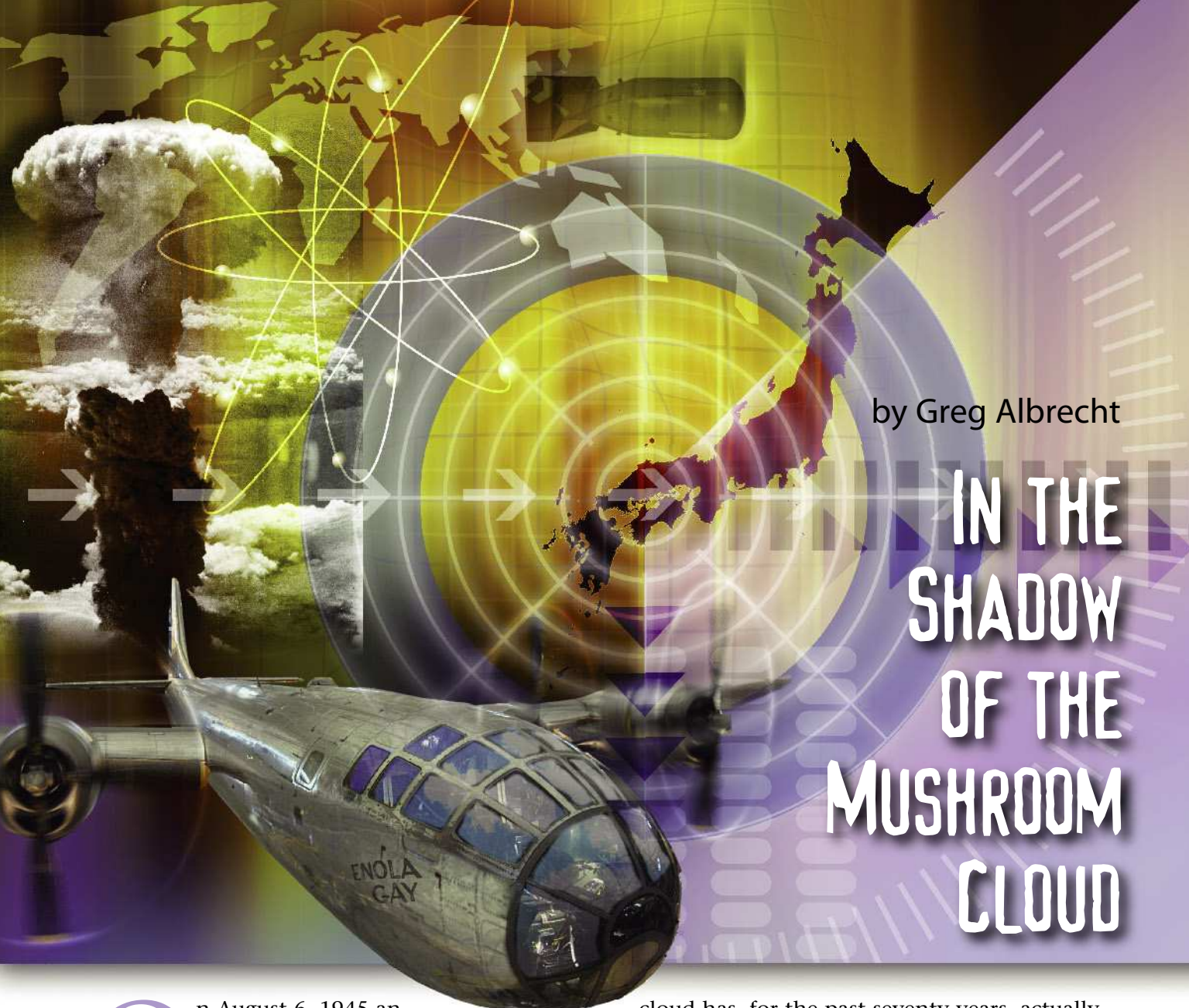
When, by God's grace, we make less room for what might have been, we will find we have more room for what is.

Forgiveness does not come

because we are sorry. Forgiveness is not given only when we do something. Forgiveness has been offered freely to us by God's grace, paid in advance "while we were yet sinners." It came before our *mea culpa*, before our acknowledgment of sin (Romans 5:8).

Without fully accepting unmerited forgiveness we are left with only unremitting regrets and resentments that, if left to flow, will drown us in their bitter waters. □

Marv Wegner has served as the art director for Plain Truth Ministries since 2000. Marv and his wife, Paula, live in Altadena, California and gratefully look forward to visits from their three grown children and two grandchildren.



by Greg Albrecht

IN THE SHADOW OF THE MUSHROOM CLOUD

On August 6, 1945 an American bomber named the Enola Gay dropped the first atomic bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The resulting explosion wiped out ninety percent of the city and immediately killed 80,000 people. Tens of thousands of others died later, slowly and agonizingly, of radiation poisoning. In the immediate aftermath, survivors whose seared and blackened skin fell from their bodies were seen wandering, aimlessly, like walking-dead zombies.

The unbelievable and catastrophic suffering and death caused by the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and three days later in Nagasaki is forever immortalized by the symbol of the mushroom cloud.

Some believe that the image of that mushroom

cloud has, for the past seventy years, actually given the world a measure of peace (at least as defined as a cease-fire). Some believe that the mushroom cloud brings peace because its image forces humanity to recognize and remember that such suffering must never be unleashed again. Thus, some postulate superior weapons of mass destruction under the control of “sane and reasonable people” are a deterrent to war and result in peace.

But it’s also possible that many who have desired to unleash apocalyptic suffering during the past seventy years have failed only because of fortuitous circumstances, some of which may have been divine and miraculous interventions. No one can convincingly conclude that the world at large has been spared from another Hiroshima/Nagasaki, or far worse, because

weapons of mass destruction have been under the control of “sane and reasonable” people.

George Zabelka was a Catholic chaplain who served as a priest for the airmen who dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the decades that followed, Zabelka experienced a profound crisis of faith that caused him to realize that he, as a Christian, had been brainwashed by institutionalized religion into believing that some wars can be “just.”

He concluded: *“the follower of Christ cannot participate in mass slaughter. He or she must love as Christ loved, live as Christ lived and, if necessary, die as Christ died, loving his enemies.”*

Zabelka, who died in 1992, gave a speech in 1985, on the 40th anniversary of these twin bombings, concluding that *“mass butchery cannot be found in the teachings of Jesus Christ.”* Here is a brief excerpt of how he later repented of his involvement:

“Modern war and oppression are carried out by a long chain of individuals, each doing his job meticulously while simultaneously refusing to look at the end results of his or her work.... In August of 1945, I, as a Christian and a priest, served not as an agent of reconciliation but as an instrument of retaliation, revenge and homicide... I was the officially designated Catholic priest who by silence did his priestly patriotic duty and chose nationalism over Catholicism, Caesar over Christ...the fact that I was not physically on the planes [that dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki] is



CAN NATIONALISM BECOME IDOLATRY, SO THAT ACTIVITIES AND INVOLVEMENT IN HUMAN PRIORITIES BE FALSELY ATTRIBUTED TO GOD? WHEN AND IF PUSH COMES TO SHOVE, WHOM WILL WE SERVE, CAESAR OR CHRIST?

morally irrelevant.”

The debate about whether the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was “just” and justified has raged for seventy years, and it is not our purpose here to re-examine both sides. We do not pretend to be geopolitical experts, nor do we attempt to condense and interpret the best minds and thoughts of war colleges. Rather, we serve Jesus, and thus we recall his words:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
—Matthew 5:9

Jesus’ beatitude describes peacemaking as a divine blessing of bliss and joy. He does not define peace, in this passage, or anywhere, as a temporary cease-fire from an otherwise hostile and violent action. Jesus is speaking of peace as his presence, received by God’s grace—peace personified in and through Jesus, who is the Prince of peace. Those in whom Jesus,

the Prince of peace lives, will, among other things be known as peacemakers.

As Christ-followers we must ask how peacemakers live in this world—or rather, how does Jesus live his life within us? Can extreme devotion to one’s country undermine and weaken the divine gift of peace?

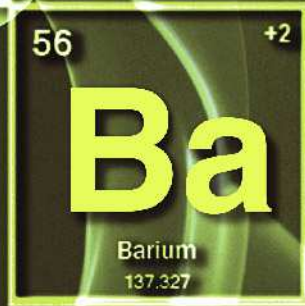
Is war ever “just”? Can nationalism become idolatry, so that activities and involvement in human priorities are falsely attributed to God? When and if push comes to shove, whom will we serve, Caesar or Christ?

As we consider the grace of our Lord and as we follow him and live as peacemakers, let us ponder the following excerpt. “The False God of Nationalism” was a sermon given by Martin Luther King Jr., on July 12, 1953, only a few years after the horrendous tragedy at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

“If we are to avoid being plunged over the abyss of atomic destruction, we must transcend the narrow confines of nationalism. This does not mean that we must not love our native lands. No other nation can mean to us what our nation means. So it is not the total concept of nationalism that I am condemning, it is nationalism perverted by chauvinism and isolationism that I am condemning.

“One cannot worship the false god of nationalism and the God of Christianity at the same time. The two are incompatible... We must choose whom we will serve. Will we continue to serve the false god that places absolute national sovereignty first or will we serve a God in whom there is no east or west...the God who makes love the key which unlocks the door of peace and security?” □

by Monte Wolverton



Two ranch-style, sixties-era homes sit side by side in a tidy suburban neighborhood.

Residents of the respective homes talk across the low picket fence that divides their front yards. They differ in age by about 30 years. Emma is a successful realtor in her early 60s, divorced decades ago. Gil, 30-ish, is married with one toddler, and is an up-and-coming manager for a business software company. They are comparing notes on a challenge they share: family

"She was such a good girl in high school—active in our church youth group... Then all of a sudden she moves in with some awful friends..."

members run amok.

"I raised her with high Christian values—I steered her clear of the trouble most teens get into," says Emma, about her 26-year old daughter Lisa. "She was such a good girl in high school—active in our church youth group—went to community college, got a nice job as a dental tech. Everything

seemed so safe. Then all of a sudden she moves in with some awful friends and now its like she's a whole different person—partying till three in the morning—piercings, tats, the whole thing. It's like the wild teenage life she never had. And I'm not too happy about the kind of men she keeps company with."

"It's strange, but I feel the same way about my dad," says Gil, referring to his 72-year-old father, Morgan. "He was tough on us growing up—we couldn't get anything past him. But

right after mom died he fell into a deep depression. Then, just as we thought he was ready to move on with life, he just...changed. First he bought that crazy Mustang convertible,

"...she's a whole different person—partying till three in the morning—piercings, tats, the whole thing... I'm not too happy about the kind of men she keeps company with."

and now he's running around with the kind of women that make me concerned. He goes to parties all the time and I think he's blowing through his retirement money like there's no tomorrow. I really don't know what to do."

"I don't either," says Emma. "This isn't how I raised Lisa."

"And this certainly isn't what my dad taught me," adds Gil.

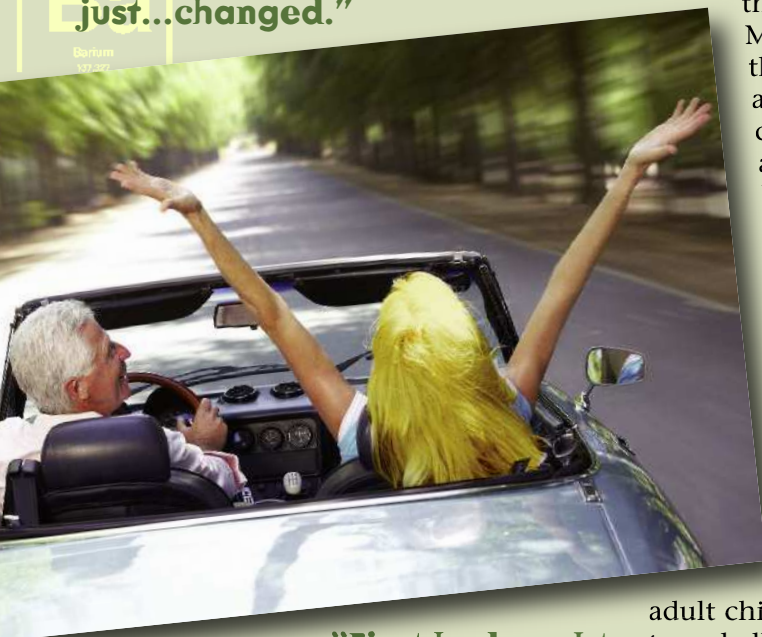
A rumble of dual glasspack mufflers grows in the distance. Gil recognizes it as his dad's tricked-out Mustang GT CS Drop Top. Emma's and Gil's heads rotate toward the sound. Around the corner comes the Mustang with grinning, silver-haired Morgan at the wheel. Beside him, with her arm around him, and sporting an

equally broad grin, sits, of all people, Lisa!

"I Didn't Think They Would Turn Out Like That!"

If your experience is like that of my wife and me, you spent a couple of decades doing what

"...right after mom died he fell into a deep depression. Then, just as we thought he was ready to move on with life, he just...changed."



"First he bought that...convertible, and now he's running around with the kind of women that make me concerned. He goes to parties all the time and I think he's blowing through his retirement money like there's no tomorrow."

parents are supposed to do for their children: feeding them, providing for them, protecting them, teaching them, educating them. You tried to pass on values, ethics and morals. Then suddenly your kids were adults. They left home and assumed responsibility for themselves.

Your work was done (or so you thought).

Inversely, you may have experienced your parents doing the same thing for you (to a greater or lesser extent). Then perhaps you left home, thinking of your parents as rock-solid anchor points for your life.

If that's the way it worked out for you, consider yourself blessed. But this is not exactly the way many parents of grown children would describe the process. More typically they would tell a tale of disappointing and blindsiding turns of events, accompanied by debilitating anxieties and huge financial bailout(s). They would bemoan how their

adult children have tossed all their values and common sense aside. Ironically, many adult children of aging parents would tell a similar story, complaining that their parents have abandoned everything they taught their kids and have become

impossible to deal with. Suddenly, they are *behaving badly*.

Just What Do You Mean... "Badly"?

We all have somewhat differing definitions of "badly." So the first question we need to ask is

...you spent a couple of decades doing what parents are supposed to do for their children: feeding them, providing for them, protecting them, teaching them... Your work was done (or so you thought).

what is "bad" behavior? Consider this rough classification of bad behaviors, from the least to the greatest:

- Actions that are not your style, that you may find **inappropriate**, that may involve some risk or may seem a little unwise.
- Actions that are moderately unwise or risky, or that are questionable legally or possibly **inappropriate by Christian standards**.
- Actions that are highly unwise, risky, clearly **illegal, dangerous and immoral**—or that threaten the safety of the individual or others.

Okay—we may have to admit that much of what we think is "bad" falls into the first category. In our introductory story, is 72-year-old Morgan within his rights to invest in a Mustang? Certainly. Is it a wise investment? It may or may not be, depending on Morgan's financial resources and risk tolerance, but that's his decision.

More to the point, can Lisa and Morgan choose to have a relationship? Yes they can. Should they consider their age difference, as well as their motives? Probably. Can they decide to have a relationship anyway? Yes. Have they asked their families' opinions? Have they prayed about it? Have they seen a counselor? And what, exactly, is the *nature* of the relationship? *And are these details any of our business?*

I'd rather not bring this up, but...It could just be that we are being judgmental. Really? Sure. Why not? Christians are notoriously judgmental. Jesus knows that.

This all can be subjective. If you're an older single man, Morgan's behavior might sound pretty darn reasonable, yet it might sound outrageous if you're the son or daughter of an active senior like Morgan—or if you're the concerned parent of a young single woman like Lisa. So, “badly” can be a matter of opinion and perspective. Maybe it would be better, in some cases, to say that our adult kids or parents are behaving “non-preferentially.”

Here Comes the Judge

I'd rather not bring this up, but in the interest of being thorough, I have to. It could just be that we are being *judgmental*. Really? Sure. Why not? Christians are notoriously judgmental. Jesus knows that. It's the reason he gave us the lesson of the Mote and the Beam in Matthew 7:1-5, and a similar discourse in Luke 6:37-42.

Jesus also knows that the strongest driving force behind judgmentalism is religious legalism, although we may paint it with virtuous-sounding words like “Christian Values” or “Christian Morality.” We need to consider the likelihood of our own judgmentalism before we go any further, because, according to Jesus, we won't be able to see clearly to help our loved ones—even if they really need it.

Judgmentalism can thrive in families, where nearly any action on the part of a given family member automatically convenes a “jury” of other family members. This is understandable, because the actions in question may disrupt family dynamics—or

may impact the family financially. Yet few of the family jury's decisions are welcomed by the “defendant,” and most are ignored.

Beyond that, “concerned” friends and perhaps church members are quick to swoop in with their opinions and solutions. If we are genuine friends, and if we are fellow Christians, this is a good time to be quiet and offer support rather than opinion.

If we have considered our own judgmentalism, then we can safely proceed. We still have two more categories of behavior to examine.

Let's consider category 2. **Inappropriate by Christian standards?** Surely this must be bad. But what if our standards are derived from a misapplication of Scripture? For example, what if your 30-year-old son has tossed aside the family tradition of strict church attendance every week—or what if he is enjoying a beer now and again with his friends—is he really violating biblical Christian standards, or just human religious traditions?

In this category we might also include parents or adult children who, through poor decisions, place themselves in harm's way or allow themselves to be taken advantage of or victimized.

When it's time for mom to move from the home she has lived in for 30 years to a retirement or nursing facility, we might encounter protests, end-runs to other family members, and refusals to budge, perhaps on issues of needed medical procedures and health care. Is this really “bad”

behavior or is it just a difficult and frustrating life transition, and a matter of our own sympathy and communication skills?

Finally, there's the third category—**illegal, dangerous and immoral**. Here we can say with confidence that the behavior in question is bad.

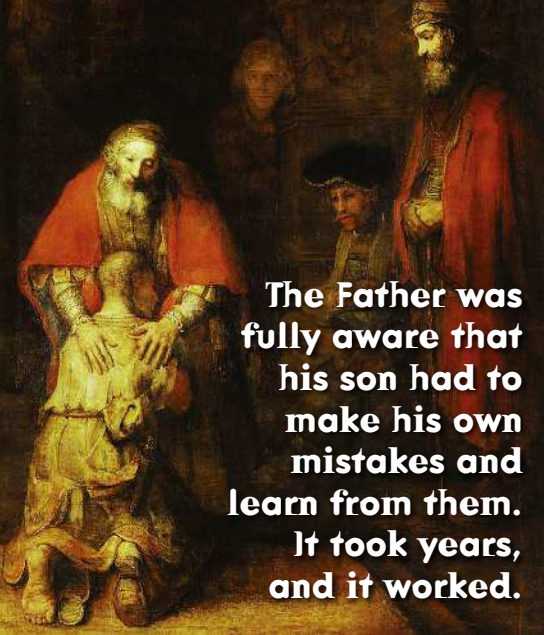
How could this happen? How can a person who has been benign, cooperative and law abiding through one stage of life suddenly become a different person? One reason may be that those who have been protected from misbehavior in restrictive religious upbringings sometimes feel compelled to let loose when life circumstances offer them new freedom. Finally, they can sew the wild oats they were never allowed to in the past. Protected from the ups and downs of the real world, they were not able to make mistakes and learn from the consequences, leaving them open to all kinds of trouble later in life.

Child psychiatrist and author Rudolf Dreikurs summed it up: “Children never learn to think for themselves if we do it all for them and hand it down ready-made.”

Even for older adults, a life of restrictive routine and religious regimentation can produce a similar phenomenon. Retirement, the death of a spouse or other abrupt life changes can mean a new dimension of freedom. To them, it may feel like a welcome rebirth, but to a concerned adult child, it may seem like total anarchy.

What Can We Do?

What *should* you do? While there are myriad bad choices (and then we would find



The Father was fully aware that his son had to make his own mistakes and learn from them. It took years, and it worked.

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt, circa 1668

ourselves behaving badly), our wise choices boil down to three:

1. Do nothing. This might be the hardest choice, because chances are we will do *something*, even when we should have done nothing. If an adult loved one is simply stepping outside the box of our definition of propriety, it's probably better for us to resist the urge to intervene—even if a behavior seems unwise. Premature intervention and unsolicited advice have ways of backfiring and hardening our loved ones against any advice whatsoever. Often the most effective thing we can do is pray—asking God to do what we cannot do—and asking him to help us know when and if we need to act.

2. Offer advice. Is the situation more dire? We can diplomatically offer an opinion, advice or admonition. A few well-chosen words can make a huge difference. In more extreme cases an intervention, including other family members, may be in order. But be prepared for nothing to change immediately. Remember that

Remember that our adult kids and our parents don't ultimately answer to us—they answer to a Higher Source, who is working with them in spite of how it may look to us.

our adult kids and our parents don't ultimately answer to us—they answer to a Higher Source, who is working with them (or will work with them) in spite of how it may look to us. We need to pick our battles carefully. The Apostle Paul encourages us, "Brothers and sisters, what if someone is caught in a sin? Then you who live by the Spirit should correct that person. Do it in a gentle way. But be careful. You could be tempted too" (Galatians 6:1).

3. Get professional help. If a loved one is breaking the law, or presenting a clear and present danger to themselves or others, the situation is probably out of your control. Are there medical or psychological issues that should be investigated? We may need to talk to a medical doctor, professional counselor or social worker who will point us in the right direction. Are there legal issues? We don't want to make the mistake of thinking it's "cheaper" to handle it on our own. We may need to consult with an attorney, or talk with the police. Our loved one may not take this well, to say the least—but we are taking steps to provide them with the help they need.

At Your Wit's End?

All through this, your only viable option may be prayer—effectively turning the matter over to God. This can feel less than satisfactory, because *God has a habit of not moving as rapidly as we would like.* His solutions can take decades. And in any case, our main job is

simply to be there with love and support when our loved one's chickens come home to roost (or when their wild oats sprout and wither).

Consider the Parable of the Prodigal Son (or with a little rearrangement, it could be a parable of a prodigal parent). In Luke 15:11-32, the Father didn't run frantically after the son when he left home with his inheritance. The Father didn't sermonize, threaten, cajole, angrily fulminate or terrify his son with hell-fire-and-brimstone rhetoric. He merely let him go.

The Father was fully aware that his son had to make his own mistakes and learn from them. It took years, and it worked. At the end of the learning process, the Father received his son back—no judgment and I-told-you-sos. The son didn't even have the best reason for returning, yet the Father welcomed him home without reservation.

After all, this long-term process is the teaching method God uses with most people in the world. While there is often much pain involved because of our own intractability, it's the method that teaches most effectively.

Whether we find ourselves in the role of a Morgan, a Lisa, a Gil, an Emma, another family member or a concerned friend, if we can trust God to do what only he can, we can also trust that his ultimate outcome will be the best possible. □

Award-winning author, syndicated editorial cartoonist and Associate Editor of Plain Truth and Christianity Without the Religion magazines, Monte Wolverton lives with his wife Kaye in Washington State, near enough to their kids and grandkids.

THE CALF PATH

Editor's Note: Parents habitually caution their teenage children about the dangers of blindly conforming "because everyone else is doing it." But when many of those same parents are asked by their children why they believe and practice specific religious traditions, their answers seem somewhat hypocritical—"because we've always done it this way" or "because that's what our church/denomination/pastor/minister/priest says."

But what does Jesus say? Jesus warned his disciples about the dangers of turning our God-given ability of critical thinking to blind religious guides. "If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14).

As Christ-followers we question religious authority and traditions while realizing the distinction between *traditions* and *traditionalism*. Some *traditions* may express living faith (and some may not). *Traditionalism* more accurately describes the dead faith of the living

who are now in fact the walking dead, spiritually dead because they are enslaved to Christ-less *traditionalism* that has "an appearance of wisdom" (Colossians 2:23).

That said, we share the thoughts of American poet Sam Walter Foss (1858-1911) encapsulated within his tale of a "primeval calf."

*One day, through the primeval wood,
A calf walked home, as good calves should;
But made a trail all bent askew,
A crooked trail as all calves do.*

*Since then three hundred years have fled,
And, I infer, the calf is dead.
But still he left behind his trail,
And thereby hangs my moral tale.*

*The trail was taken up next day
By a lone dog that passed that way;
And then a wise bellwether sheep
Pursued the trail o'er vale and steep,
And drew the flock behind him, too,
As good bellwethers always do.*

*And from that day, o'er hill and glade,
Through those old woods a path was made;*

*And many men wound in and out,
And dodged and turned and bent about
And uttered words of righteous wrath
Because 'twas such a crooked path.
But still they followed—do not laugh—
The first migrations of that calf.
And through this winding wood-way stalked,
Because he hobbled when he walked.*

*The forest path became a lane,
That bent, and turned, and turned again;
This crooked lane became a road,
Where many a poor horse with his load
Toiled on beneath the burning sun,
And travelled some three miles in one.
And thus a century and a half
They trod the footsteps of that calf.*

*The years passed on in swiftmess fleet,
The road became a village street,
And this, before men were aware,
A city's crowded thoroughfare;
And soon the central street was this
Of a crowded metropolis;
And men two centuries and a half
Trod in the footsteps of that calf.*

*Each day a hundred thousand rout
Followed the zigzag calf about;
And o'er his crooked journey went
The traffic of a continent.
A hundred thousand men were led
By one calf near three centuries dead.
They followed still his crooked way,
And lost one hundred years a day;
For thus such reverence is lent
To well-established precedent*

*A moral lesson this might teach,
Were I ordained and called to preach;
For men are prone to go it blind
Along the calf-paths of the mind,
And work away from sun to sun
To do what other men have done.
They follow in the beaten track,
And out and in, and forth and back,
And still their devious course pursue,
To keep the path that others do.*

*They keep the path a sacred groove,
Along which all their lives they never move;
But how the wise old wood-gods laugh,
Who saw the first primeval calf!
Ah! Many things this tale might teach—
But I am not ordained to preach. □*

BY SAM WALTER FOSS



CWRm

DEREK FLOOD

The Only Way to Really Get It

What is the source of theology? Some would say it is *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone. Others cast the net a bit further and say that it is the quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition and experience. That last one, *experience*, always comes in last. Lots of people are really wary of experience. It makes them think of uncontrolled emotion, subjective feelings, and stuff out of control. But I'd like to make the somewhat radical proposal that experience should be the central category for how we do theology, and that this is a deeply biblical position to take.

By *experience* I simply mean actually knowing God in a relationship, so that faith is lived and is not merely theoretical. That has very little to do with emotions (although there is nothing wrong with emotion!), and everything to do with *living* our faith, with actually loving God, ourselves and others. I imagine everyone is with me so far, but what about the Bible? Isn't that a matter of objective detached study?

That is certainly how you learn to study it in seminary. But nevertheless I insist: No! this is not what understanding the Bible should be based on. In a nutshell I would say that Scripture is primary because it informs *experience*, shapes *reason* and is the source from which *tradition* develops, as well its constant spur to reformation. At the same time however, Scripture ultimately serves a servant function of leading us into relationship with Christ so we can live out Christ-like relationships. So the goal is experience, namely the experience of meeting God and having that transform all our other experiences.

The unforgivable sin, Jesus says, is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says this in the context of the Pharisees rejecting the work of the Spirit happening among them through the healing ministry of Jesus because it conflicted with their understanding of the law. Here *experience* of what God was doing in Jesus trumps their *tradition*, and their reading

of *Scripture* and their *reasoning*. There is nothing worse, no greater crime, Jesus says, than missing out on what the Spirit is doing right in front of you. It is, Jesus says, the biggest sin possible. Those are some pretty strong words.

With that in mind think about Paul's conversion: His experience on the Damascus road causes him to re-read Scripture anew in light of that encounter with Christ. Paul's experience of Christ caused him to completely re-think (reason) his whole tradition as a Pharisee, and how he had read Scripture. Experience *precedes* exegesis.

Likewise, the council of Jerusalem (in the book of Acts) included gentiles in the gospel (which was a huge decision!) based primarily on the *experience* of what the Spirit was doing among them as testified to by Paul and Peter. Acknowledging this, James then connects their experience to what was foretold in the Scriptures. *Experience* again precedes and shapes biblical interpretation.

From that I want to argue that in order to really get the Bible, you need to get grace, and the only way to really get it is to *experience* it. The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears understood much more deeply than any of the religious scholars sitting at that table and looking down their noses at her did. We need to know grace like that, so its unconditional love brings us to our knees in gratitude, and makes us want to love that way too. Before he knew grace, Paul read the Bible and got it all wrong. After he met God in Christ on the Damascus road and was struck blind, it was a disciple who was willing to love his enemy who healed him. Think how it would effect you to be healed by the people who you had tried to kill. That's grace. After that he suddenly got the Bible. We need to get some of that. So my prayer for you is that you would find grace in your life, that you would know what it means to be unconditionally loved, no matter how broken you are, and that being loved like that would change how you see everything. □

Welcome to the Wide Open Spaces of



- Tired of being exploited, treated like part of a captive herd, branded with the dogma of denominationalism?
- Tired of being rounded up by religious authorities who fatten you up with spiritual junk food in their “holy” feed lot?
- Tired of humanly imposed restrictions, walls, fences and denominational boundaries?
- Tired of being told that Jesus can only be found within the confines of a particular parcel of religious real estate?
- Tired of being told God is mad at you and the only way to make him happy is to appease him by continually being in the “right” place at the “right” time doing the “right” things?

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What Would Jesus Do? WWJD is often used to take the wind out of the sails of an adversary, but one should carefully consider dogmatic and triumphal declarations about exactly what Jesus would do. Week of June 7

Your Money Is No Good Here No humanly derived resources are accepted as valid currency in the kingdom of heaven. Religious currency is counterfeit money! Week of June 14

We’ve Always Done it This Way Join us as we give thanks that God doesn’t play by religious rules. That’s why the kingdom of God is such incredibly great news! Week of June 21

Where God Lives We can never say it too often or too dogmatically: all that we are and all that we will ever be is a product of God’s grace! Week of June 28

God OR Country? Which kingdom truly encourages and enables us to love our neighbors as ourselves—kingdoms of this world or the kingdom of heaven? Week of July 5

Children and Parents The lessons we learn as parents and children illuminate the supreme and matchless love of our heavenly Father and the relationship he so freely gives us. Week of July 12.

True Confessions The Bible instructs us to “confess our sins”—but to whom and how? Week of July 19.

The House of the Rising Sun We can all identify with mournful, blues-like lyrics that speak of addiction and slavery, for we have all been prisoners. We’ll carefully study the glorious significance of “redemption in Jesus Christ.” Week of July 26.

Grace at His Table “Working” for good is far more common than accepting an invitation to a fully paid, no strings attached banquet—but that’s the incredible, too-good-to-be-true invitation God extends. Week of August 2.

Grace A L or Grace Alone? Almost everyone loves to hear about God’s grace—they love to hear grace a *lot*, but when the message is grace *alone*, then almost everyone gets a little worried about the absence of law and regulation. Week of August 9.

What Doesn’t Kill You... When viewed through a Christ-centered focus, the saying “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” is not about revenge, but rather all about how God enables us not to simply become stronger, but to receive life of the age to come. Week of August 16.

Our Passionate Lover Pain is inevitable in our lives, but, as we see it modeled in the life of Jesus, the suffering of sacrificial love is a choice. Week of August 23.

Faith or Denial? Greg proposes 1) while denial and deception lie at the heart of Christ-less religion, faith in Jesus is not blind, and 2) Christ-centered faith always makes room for doubt, while the dogmas of Christ-less religion allow no place for questions. Week of August 30.