

Introduction

It's been said that Ernest Hemingway revised the ending of *A Farewell to Arms* over 30 times. When he was asked why he kept changing and revising he said, "Because I wanted to get it right." There is no good writing, only good rewriting. The only way to learn how to effectively communicate is to keep writing and speaking, over and over again.

Rewriting is at the heart and core of this second volume of *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul* (the first was published in 2009). Like its predecessor, this is another collection of 48 messages, originally given via audio, adapted and revised into manuscript form. When I published that first collection of sermons four years ago I thought that the task of "writing" sermons I had already given verbally would be far easier than writing a book "from scratch." Was I in for a shock! As I prepared for that book, I recall thinking that our team would choose 48 seasonal audio sermons I had already given, and then we would have them transcribed from the spoken word into print. Hey, presto, we would have a book. Like the road to hell, the road enticing one into writing a book can also be paved with good intentions!

I quickly discovered that publishing a collection of sermons isn't that easy. Extensive editing is required when attempting to make an originally oral message "read." In some respects the exercise of converting the spoken word into print is somewhat like translating a message from one language to another. At least it is in my case! Hoping that practice improves the final product, we are pleased to present Volume 2 of *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul*.

This second book of edited sermons owes its existence to the beginning of an electronic teaching ministry called *Christianity Without the Religion (CWR)*. In February 2006 Plain Truth Ministries (PTM) started to provide weekly CWR messages at our website (www.ptm.org). We were responding to hundreds of requests we had received from people who felt something was missing in their relationship with God. Many had read one or both of the books I had written by that time. Others had personally "talked" with me on our website, as I helped them work through questions and issues

they had about God, faith and the Bible. They had been reading our magazine, monthly letters, booklets and articles but they wanted more of God's grace—and less religion.

Many who asked for regular, weekly sermon-like messages were religious refugees. They had either walked out of a traditional church setting at their own initiative or they felt they had effectively been abandoned. They desired to remain connected with God, but, for a number of reasons, they doubted they would ever connect again with a traditional, brick-and-mortar church. Some had left an obviously sick or even toxic church where, in one way or another, they felt taken advantage of and wanted to receive healthy, spiritual nourishment at a distance. They didn't want to let any religious "professional" get too close to them again. Others said they were attending a "normal" church which didn't seem to be theologically unhealthy but nevertheless seemed as if it was dead or dying. They were crying out for spiritual nourishment. Many reported being uneasy and even unhappy with their church—typically they described it as a social club and they weren't "getting anything" out of the service. They arrived with spiritual hunger and though they were served coffee and cookies after the sermon, they left with the same gnawing spiritual hunger with which they arrived.

From the very beginning, *CWR* has been a different kind of church—it's a teaching experience rather than a traditional church service. We're not a brick-and-mortar church. We don't meet in a geographical location, inside a building that calls itself a church. We don't have stained glass windows or icons. We don't officiate at baptismal ceremonies, marriages or funerals—our "congregation" lives around this world, and many attend a traditional church in addition to joining us for Christ-centered teaching. Because we don't look like, quack like or walk like any spiritual duck they have ever seen, some think that *CWR* isn't a church at all.

CWR isn't "a" church in the traditional way in which "church" is defined, but in the biblical sense, we are part of "the" church, which is of course, the universal body of Christ. We are a teaching ministry. *CWR* relentlessly provides a Christ-centered, grace-based message. We believe in *faith alone*, *grace alone* and *Christ alone*. In the sense that reli-

gion is defined as a system or methodology of pleasing and appeasing God, we are ir-religious, hence the *Christianity Without the Religion*. CWR is based on God's grace, the polar opposite of the assumption that performance of ceremonies and rituals gains a higher standing with God than he would have otherwise granted.

CWR is Christianity without all of the "stuff." CWR is Christianity without religious smoke and mirrors—CWR is bare essentials Christianity. God's grace is front and center at *Christianity Without the Religion*. Sadly, many churches within Christendom so water down and diminish God's amazing grace that it seems to be stored away in church basements, "resurrected" occasionally only to be returned back to its place of confinement.

Publishing a collection of sermons is humbling. As I compiled, revised, adapted and "translated" this collection I often asked myself why I would consider anything I had once said as being worthy of repetition (hold that thought about repetition, we'll return to it in a few paragraphs). The work involved in compiling, revising and editing this book has been a refresher course in God's grace for me. By God's grace, I am simply a tool in his hands, trying to get out of his way so that he might use me, in spite of my formidable human weaknesses, to communicate the incredible and profound truth of his grace. I am humbled by my inadequacies but inspired by God's grace. Because of God's amazing grace, the core of the messages that follow are Christ-centered and grace-based. These messages are not cleverly devised stories (2 Peter 1:16), they are recitations of the central message of the gospel—*faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*.

I am often asked about the messages I preach. Where do they come from? Where do I get the ideas? As you will note in this collection of sermons, I normally begin with a "keynote passage." Sermons, I believe, should usually begin with biblical content. That said, I realize that anyone can decide to give a topical message and then go and "find" a scriptural reference that fits their already arrived at premise. I prefer to have a message "spring from" a study of the Bible, but when topics and ideas come to my mind first I do my best not to simply go on a search to use the Bible to validate what I want to communicate, but study the Bible care-

fully so that God might speak through me (and in spite of me).

I read and listen to sermons. It has been my practice, for several decades, to read books of collected sermons. I voraciously read all kinds of books because I can't teach or inspire unless I am first taught and inspired. Popular culture, in terms of movies and music, also provides me with creative insights about God's grace. Do I copy the sermons of others? No. I don't give canned sermons. I believe God can best use a human tool when that human is authentically who they are, when God uses their personality, life experiences and insights as part of the process. That said, there are many illustrations and stories I relate that can be found elsewhere, because that's where I first heard or read them.

When I read the Bible I read it in the light of Jesus Christ. I understand that Jesus is the meaning of life. He is my center and my core, and I share him with anyone who will read or listen. In that regard, someone who has heard many of my sermons would be correct in saying a handful of Christ-centered, grace-based themes are evident in many of them. What I have to share is *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*.

If you're looking for sermons about why Christians should or must keep the Ten Commandments, then you have the wrong book. If you think a "good sermon" is a diatribe about how bad "the world" is you will be disappointed with this collection of messages. If you have been persuaded that guilt and shame should be part of the end product of how someone feels after hearing (or reading) a sermon, this collection of sermons originally delivered at *CWR* won't pass muster. If, on the other hand, you are sick and tired of legalistic hoops—if you are a spiritual refugee from Christ-less religion—if you hunger and thirst for God's amazing grace, then I believe this collection of sermons will be right on target.

Back to that word "repetition." While virtually all occupations and vocations involve some degree of repetition, I can tell you that communicating the message of Christ alone is anything but boring—it is exciting, energizing and forever new and refreshing. One of our son's friends, with whom he attended elementary, junior high and high school, is now one of the most well-known and, in my opinion, most

accomplished Elvis impersonators in Las Vegas. He really enjoys what he does, even though, as he often says, “my life couldn’t be more redundant.” By “redundant” he means that he sings the same songs, with the same choreography, night after night, but the few times my wife and I have heard and watched him we marvel at the energy and enthusiasm he brings to every performance. He loves what he does!

When I sing Elvis’ songs in the shower I think they sound pretty good, but I assure you I am well aware that I lack virtually all of the necessary skills to impersonate Elvis. Thankfully, my job is not to impersonate Jesus, but to tell anyone who will read and listen all about him. I do love what I do, and yes, there is some repetition involved in being a dedicated, devoted and thankful Christ-follower. I believe in Jesus. I believe that this sad old world needs more Jesus and less religion. That is the core message I proclaim, and I say it over and over again, in a variety of ways. I believe Jesus is the answer and Christ-less religion is the problem. So get your dancing shoes on and get ready for the gospel of God’s grace—I think you’re going to enjoy and benefit from these 48 messages.

A disclaimer is in order. I’m not claiming to be the only one proclaiming a Christ-centered message. What a sad mess that would be! I am well aware I haven’t discovered the “true” gospel no one else teaches. Thank God I am not the only person who believes in and stands for God’s amazing grace. I give thanks for the many who boldly proclaim *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*. May we all, by God’s grace, stand together against oppressive, authoritarian, institutionalized big business religion. And as we each, in our own way, proclaim the purity of the gospel of Jesus Christ, may we always remember that we stand on the shoulders of many who have gone before us.

That word picture of *standing on the shoulders of giants* is often credited to Sir Isaac Newton, who once humbly explained about his considerable insights, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” This metaphor was apparently first uttered by Bernard of Chartres, back in the twelfth century. Today this word picture is used so often some refer to it as a cliché, but it is filled with wisdom. In fact, the intent behind this wise saying goes

back further than the 12th century A.D. Speaking of human creativity and innovation Solomon said *there is nothing new under the sun* (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

The teaching conveyed in the 48 chapters of this book is not new. I did not invent nor re-invent any of it—*au contraire* (authors have to throw French and German terms around to make readers think they know something)—I regard this book as nothing but a continual restatement of the great truths expounded by Jesus and his apostles in the first century. The New Testament, and the new covenant it contains, is the genius and the glory behind anything of value I might happen to say or write.

Solomon also said of *making many books there is no end* (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Even though he didn't own any Google stock or benefit from the Google search engine to research information on the Internet, Solomon felt that "books" were proliferating even in his time. I don't think he had any idea that in 2010 the good folks at Google would estimate that since the invention of printing some 130,000,000 unique books have been published.

I don't expect that Volume 2 of *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul* will be the best book you have ever read, or that after you read it you will feel it will even be one of the top 100 books you have ever read. I realize this book will not be seen as "one in a million" by any means, but I absolutely believe there is endearing and enduring Christ-centered value in the pages that follow. The value in these pages is certainly not due to my great literary or theological talents or insights, but rather the worth of these pages is based on one beggar telling other beggars where he found the Bread of life. May these 48 messages be a wonderful devotional resource, a week-by-week guide for you throughout the year, helping you as you walk with Jesus.

Faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.