

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

Volume 80, Number 5

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

We need to let it soak in that **there is nothing we can do to make God love us more...and nothing we can do to make God love us less.**
—Philip Yancey

We all need to know that **God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.** Nothing humans can do will ever decrease or increase God's eternal eagerness to love.—Richard Rohr

remember when I first heard these kind of statements and sort of cringed. I was suspicious that those who echoed Philip Yancey or Fr. Richard might employ them to imply, "So it doesn't matter what you do."

But I don't think I hear Jesus saying, "It doesn't matter what you do," and in fact, that's certainly not what Yancey or Rohr are implying either. I believe it's pretty obvious that God wants us to love others and emulate his grace and mercy in our lives. That matters a lot! And it seems God has also made it clear that harming others, or judging and condemning them, is something he'd want us to turn from. Discovering God's infinite love for us isn't simply a green light for an "anything goes" attitude.

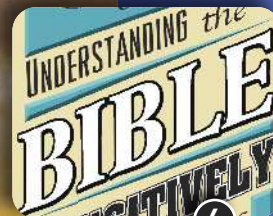
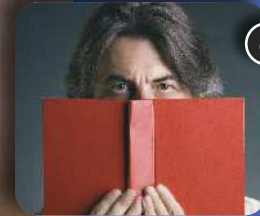
But implications and suspicions aside, the more I soak in the New Testament Gospels and epistles,

Can We "Make" God Love Us More or Less?

By Brad Jersak

and as I continue through to the early church fathers and mothers, the more I see how and why these opening aphorisms are exactly right.

First, consider the phrase, "there's nothing you can do to *make* God..." This is absolutely true: no one can "*make* God" do or be anything other than what he is. That is, God loves us with an infinite love, because God **IS** love...but nothing in heaven or earth or under the earth can *constrain* God to love us or *not* love us. God's love is what the ancient theologians called a "self-donation."



We don't seduce God's love by being either adorable or pathetic—his love flows entirely from his nature and is utterly voluntary. He is "moved to compassion," not because we "trigger" him or manipulate him with our pleas, but rather, because God is compassion itself and his love flows without ceasing

wherever and to whomever it is received. My *experience* of God's love may fluctuate as I welcome it or rebuff it, but God himself cannot be said to love us more or less, as if

We don't seduce God's love by being either adorable or pathetic—his love flows entirely from his nature... God is compassion itself and his love flows without ceasing...

his very nature were dependent on our behavior or jerked around by our emotional rollercoaster rides.

Why not? Because for God to be God means that he is the infinite perfection of all we call goodness



God Gave Them Over...

God is love. That is the fundamental and foundational identification we are given, within the pages of the Bible, of his nature. The Bible also explains and defines his love—so that we are not free to make up our own definition of that word “love” and then make God over into our own image.

But the Bible talks about God’s wrath. *How in the world can God, who is love, also be filled with wrath?*

Wrath is an English word that appears approximately 200 times in the Bible. In many cases the word “wrath” is used in connection with God—as in “God’s wrath.”

The meaning conveyed by a word includes its strict dictionary definition, but any specific meaning of a word is modified by its context. The meaning of a word is determined by “context clues.”

Example: the word “cast.” The meaning of the word “cast” is often determined by clues in its context. Sam broke his arm and had a *cast* on it for three months. The *cast* of the play had a party after their first performance. I *cast* my bait near the running water hoping to catch a fish. Who will *cast* the first stone?

In a similar way, the word “wrath” as used in the Bible should be understood by clues in its context. Most biblical descriptions of God are anthropomorphisms—words and language used of God, ascribing human attributes and emotions to God.

We read that God’s *hand* is not shortened—but does that mean he has hands like we do? We read that God *remembers*—does that mean he can forget? We read that he is *jealous, sorry* and that he has *regrets*.

Does that mean that God is *jealous, sorry* and that he has *regrets* in the way that we do?

When we read of God’s wrath, we must understand that whatever God’s wrath means it certainly does not mean that he is angry, retributive, violent or vengeful as we are.

When the Bible speaks of the wrath of God it is using a metaphor to explain that God allows and consents to our defiance and the destruction that we bring upon ourselves.

In the first chapter of Romans Paul speaks of “the wrath of God” (Romans 1:18) as consequences experienced and endured by people when “God gave them over...” (Romans 1:24, 26 and 28) to the results of wrong decisions humans make.

This phrase “God gave them over” in these three verses is not at all like God throwing up his hands in disgust, saying to humanity, in effect, “you just don’t get it! I am through with you.”

The sense of this phrase is more about God consenting to humans who decide to do it their own way—and as a result they have it their own way.

God doesn’t rain down “his” wrath on us—we rain down wrath on ourselves by walking away from him and the Light of Jesus, into the darkness of our world and our own willful desires and decisions. God allows us to experience and suffer the consequences of our own decisions.

The whole idea of an angry and out of control God who threatens to spiritually nuke us by sending us to the ever burning eternal torment of hell as taught by Christ-less

religion is a wrong-headed and perverted idea of the nature of God.

Christ-less religion insists that God’s wrath is about his vengeance—another passage in Romans (12:19) is often cited in an attempt to define God as being all about revenge and retribution, but remember this:

God does not exact revenge the way humans do. God is not, by definition, vengeful. He is defined more by reconciliation than retribution, more by forgiveness than by payback.

As humans we ache for revenge. We long to see the bad guys, as we identify and define them, get what’s coming to them. We call that justice—and then we often think that God must operate and react in a similar way.

But no—we find that forgiveness characterizes the love of God, rather than retribution and revenge! “God’s wrath” is God giving humans over—giving us over to the consequences we have chosen.

God’s grace, on the other hand, which springs out of his love, is the cancelling of the eternal consequences we have chosen—even while we may still pay physical consequences, God’s grace covers us and reconciles us to God. That’s the good news!

God is not mad at you or me—and that really is incredibly good news! □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message “God Gave Them Over...” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of September 13, 2015.

Continued from page 1

and love. God can't become *more* than perfect or *more* than infinite. **God cannot become more loving or more God.** If he could become one percent more, that would mean he's only ninety-nine percent now...and that would be one percent less than God. Get it? And he cannot become *less* in any way—less God, less infinite, less love—because that would diminish him. And to diminish God even one percent would mean he would no longer be the perfection of love—he would no longer be God.

Now add to this the rather ridiculous notion that something we do could cause God to be more or less than he is. If my behavior could *make* God love me even one percent more or one percent less—that would be saying I could make God bigger or smaller, more God or less God. That seems to me the height of arrogance or the depth of ignorance, but don't we all slip into that thinking now and then? I suppose it's part of the human condition. But it's surely not part of the *divine condition*.

This can make God sound rather static. But he isn't. While God is not ever constrained or triggered or rattled or seduced or manipulated, this doesn't mean God is static or stationary. **God may be immovable, but he is not immobile.** God's infinite love (that is, God himself) is an infinite spring [the Source never diminishes] in an unceasing flow [the River never stops].

While every metaphor has its limits, imagine the love of God (and God **IS** love) as a powerful waterfall, infinitely bigger and more powerful than Niagara Falls. Imagine that no matter how much volume of life-giving water is poured out, the Source never diminishes at all. There will never be less love in the infinite Spring that sends the water. And imagine that the waterfall itself constantly and continuously gushes in a way that can't be increased or decreased...the gallons per second



My experience of God's love may fluctuate as I welcome it or rebuff it, but God himself cannot be said to love us more or less, as if his very nature was dependent on our behavior or jerked around by our emotional rollercoaster rides.

is measured as absolutely steady because it is also infinite. The fact that the waterfall never ceases, never freezes over, never runs out and never goes away doesn't really make it static, does it? It is immovable but it is not immobile. This, I believe, is what some theologians meant by "God is pure act" and others imply by "God is a verb." Of course, none of this quite gets at the mystery.

But here is the point: what if we hopped into a little raft (our lives as individuals) or piloted a huge ship (any human movement or nation)—and what if we ventured into the waters beneath this infinite source and flow of divine love: do we think that turning right or left would *make* the waterfall increase or decrease in its infinite volume? Do we think that paddling harder or just relaxing in the boat would have any impact whatsoever on the flow? Would it diminish or supplement the bottomless Spring at all? Of course not. There is no raft or ship or dam big enough or strong enough that could clog up or slow down the *ever-enduring* mercies and *everlasting* loving-kindness of this infinite Love, this eternal God.

Now, what we do in our boats or with our boats still *matters*. God still may say turn right rather than left so you don't run aground on the rocks. God may still say paddle harder or stop paddling to help us not ram into other boats. We're not saying "anything goes" or "it doesn't matter." But we are saying, left or right, faster or slower, sink or swim (as important as they are) don't increase or diminish the flow of his love.

At the same time, just because our behavior doesn't affect God's love, that doesn't mean God's love has no

effect on us! In our analogy, I would only suggest that flowing along *with* God's love is going to be easier than fighting *against* the current. And so the great discovery and exhortation of all the great spiritual teachers and mystics has always been, "Surrender." Surrender to the flow of God's love. Let it carry you along. Join in with it. Flow with him. Imagine that Source gushing up *inside* you—flowing *through* your life through surrender.

In Galatians 2, when Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ," he means, "I surrendered. I let go. I stopped fighting the flow. Stopped

...what we do with our boats still matters ...But we are saying, left or right, faster or slower, sink or swim (as important as they are) don't increase or diminish the flow of his love.



kicking against the goads." When he says, "Nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives within me," he means that he stopped making it about religious paddling for God's love and let Christ's love carry him along. When he says, "And now the life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God," he means that he trusts the flow of Christ within him and flows with that love. He stopped trying to *make* God love him more because nothing he had done ever *made* God love him less. And so in Ephesians 3, Paul prays for us too, that we too would see how high and wide and long and deep the love of God—oceans of it—is for us. Lord, let it be! □

've been noticing a growing trend of people who are becoming increasingly unsatisfied with a literalistic approach to the Bible. The objection they have is a moral one: They observe that a "plain" reading of Scripture inevitably leads people to do things that are against their conscience, and to justify doing these immoral things "because the Bible says it, that settles it." In short, we've learned to read the Bible in a way that makes people immoral and proud of it.

One example is corporal punishment of children. Many parents feel that it is wrong to hit their kids. Pediatricians and mental health professionals agree. Yet the Bible says you should hit your kids. So people are being asked to go against their consciences and do things they feel are hurtful because the Bible says so. There are a host of similar examples you could mention here.

- Parents being pressured to disown their children who are gay.
- Women being excluded from the ministry.
- Taking a harsh and medieval approach to crime and punishment despite what we know about psychology and mental health today.

The list goes on and on. In previous years we could add issues like slavery and polygamy to the list (both are endorsed in the Bible).

The Bible is supposed to make us more moral, not sear our conscience and make us immoral. But as Pascal said, "Men never commit evil quite so gleefully and without restraint as when they do it in the name of religion." History shows this is true time and time again. People read the Bible in an unquestioning way and when it seems to permit or condone an act of violence (like genocide,



The Bible Says It ...But Does That Settle It?

by Derek Flood

capital punishment, child abuse or slavery) they turn off their consciences and do it "for the Lord!" with religious glee.

People seeing this problem become mistrustful about the Bible—not because they are immoral but because *they are moral*. Understandably, some simply discard the Bible all together. Or they discard the Old Testament (OT) where the majority of these problems come from.

This was the reaction of the early church bishop Marcion. He found the violent depiction of Yahweh in the OT was incompatible with God revealed in Jesus, and so he tossed out the OT altogether.

Marcion was declared a heretic by the early church because of this. They instead took the OT war chronicles as spiritual analogy rather than as literal history. Notice here: **both Marcion and the early church recognized that atrocities committed in God's name in the OT were incompatible with Christ.** Both declared that a God who actually commanded these things would not be good, but rather

as Origen puts it, "would be worse than the most cruel of men."

Neither takes a "the Bible says it, that settles it" approach—and both reject violence in God's name. They differ in how they then understand it. Marcion thinks OT war chronicles were intended to be taken as history and rejects them. The church fathers instead read such passages as the "battles" in our lives with things like pride or unforgiveness.

I think *there is actually a third way of approaching all of this that is even better.* The approach of the early church does not work for me for two reasons:

First, **it clearly conflicts with the intention of the original authors.** They were not intending to write spiritual analogies. The reading of the early church is *eisegesis* not *exegesis*; that is, it inserts a meaning into the text that was not originally intended to be there, acting as if it was.

More importantly, **it ends up whitewashing over the problem.** This is a moral/ethical objection, because it can lead to people being hurt. We see in these OT passages how religion can become abusive, leading to inhumane actions—genocide for Jesus, burning people alive for getting their doctrines wrong. We dare not whitewash that by saying "it's just an analogy" as the early church did, nor should we attempt to erase it (as Marcion did). We need to face it and have the moral courage to question it.

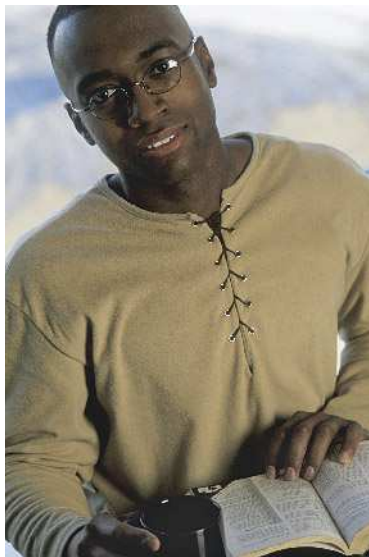
That moral questioning is what I see an increasing number of people doing. However the place to start is in recognizing that we in fact have a huge problem: The way most of us have learned to read the Bible can lead to justifying things that are simply immoral. However, a lot of people act as if there really isn't a problem, as if the solution was easy—a minor issue. **Adopting a**

completely different way of reading the Bible is not simple...as much as we may wish it was.

It does not help to uphold belief that the Bible is “inspired” or “infallible” when we have very different understandings of what that means to the person who advocates the immoral “plain reading” we are opposing.

The problem is that for those who are trying to work out how to read the Bible differently, how to read it *morally*, a simple platitude about a

The OT is a catalog of debate, a record of opposing perspectives...



People thus go through all sorts of mental gymnastics trying to harmonize it all. But once you recognize the multivocal nature of the OT it suddenly all makes sense.

book being “infallible” is not practical. Simple, unconvincing and unreasonable platitudes don’t show us how to read differently.

For example, how can contradictions that obviously appear in the Bible actually be inspired? **Contradictions recorded in the OT are not mistakes. They are intended.** If there’s a debate and someone objects, “but what this person says contradicts what the other one says” you’d answer “Of course. That’s what a debate is.”

The OT is a catalog of debate, a record of opposing perspectives. One story upholds interracial marriage which maintains that a foreign woman can be good and that Yahweh will recognize her faithfulness and “shelter her under his wing” (the book of Ruth). Along side of that we find other stories that

instead maintain that all foreign women are immoral and corrupting. They command the Israelite men to cast their foreign wives along with their children into the night (Ezra and Nehemiah).

Since Ruth intentionally contradicts Ezra and Nehemiah we can’t say that the Bible is free from error (the definition of “infallible”) since one of them must be wrong here (hint: it’s Ezra and Nehemiah). However, if we see inspiration as being found in the larger debate, rather than in particular verses, can we affirm the inspiration of the Hebrew canon as a whole? Dissenting voices can stand side by side, while at the same time being able to say that the proposals of Ezra and Nehemiah were wrong and immoral.

Now, if you are not aware of the fact that the Bible contains these opposing perspectives, and instead expect it to all fit together—infallible and free from error or contradiction—then this is of course confusing. People thus go

through all sorts of mental gymnastics trying to harmonize it all. **But once you recognize the multivocal nature of the OT it suddenly all makes sense.**

The big picture here is that *the OT has many voices which present different and opposing views.* So we need to know which to pick. We cannot embrace and adopt it all, since *it intentionally presents opposing perspectives and calls us to make moral choices.*

The solution is not to toss it all out (like Marcion) nor pretend it is something it is not (like the early church). Nor is it to unthinkingly accept it all, which creates a schizophrenic Jekyll-and-Hyde picture of God that is deeply unhealthy. These are all poor choices.

Adopting a completely different way of reading the Bible is not simple...as much as we may wish it was.



No, the solution is in joining into the ethical and moral debate found in Scripture. We need to learn to read the Bible honestly and ethically.

If we look at how Jesus read Scripture we can observe that this was his approach. I demonstrate this in detail in my book, *Disarming Scripture*. As I argue there, we need to not only adopt his conclusions, but to adopt his *approach*, his way of thinking and questioning, so we can use it to address the many issues in our day that he did not face in his. That’s what following Jesus is all about. □

Derek Flood is the author of Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did, and Healing the Gospel. Derek is a featured blogger for the Huffington Post, Sojourners, Red Letter Christians and writes regularly at theRebelGod.com.



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EDITOR'S NOTE: Here is the final installment in our four-part series dedicated to helping our readers develop sensible traits and habits of understanding the Bible.

PART FOUR OF FOUR

Five points to consider when studying Scripture:

1) The meaning of any word is itself not the final determination as to what that word might mean. You might tell a friend that when you went to a gathering of old friends, you had a *ball*. You might be watching a baseball game and the umpire calls a pitch a *ball*. While playing a game of golf you might be looking for a lost golf *ball*. You may read the story of Cinderella to your child or grandchild, describing how she went to a *ball*. In each case, the context of the word itself determines the meaning of the word.

WHEN WE UNDERSTAND THAT JESUS IS THE FOCUS AND THEME OF THE BIBLE, THEN THE CLEAR AND PLAIN TEACHINGS ABOUT HIM ARE OBVIOUS.

2) Remember the principle of progressive revelation. The New Testament explains and interprets the Old Testament, not the other way around. The New Testament fulfills the Old Testament, the Old Testament points to the New. The message of the Bible thus builds, brick by brick, from the elementary beginning in the first book of Genesis to the grand climax contained in Revelation, the last book.

3) Remember that the applications and teachings

Reading and UNDERSTANDING the BIBLE SENSITIVELY and SENSIBLY

of some passages are timeless and universal, while others are local and culturally bound. We do not believe we MUST greet each other with a kiss but we intuitively harmonize with Jesus when he instructs us to love our neighbor and to treat them as we would have them treat us.

4) Remember that while the central truth of the Bible (Jesus) is *actually* true, not everything in the Bible is *literally* true. The Bible says that God the Father has a hand, fingers, mouth, a nose, ears and feet. Is this literally true, or are such passages speaking metaphorically? Jesus taught that

if our right hand offends us we should cut it off and throw it away (Matthew 5:30). Not everything in the Bible is literally true—but points to the truth.

5) When studying unclear or obscure passages, always ask what this passage means from a Christ-centered perspective, and how this passage might be more easily understood by clear, unambiguous passages addressing the same or a similar topic. This process is often spoken of as allowing the Bible to interpret itself—looking for all passages on a particular topic rather than confining your study to just one or two.

When the entire Bible is studied from a Christ-centered perspective, then many obscure passages will remain somewhat obscure—but we will see that while we might speculate on obscure passages, they are peripheral to the primary teachings of Scripture—which is Jesus and his gospel. When we understand that Jesus is the focus and theme of the Bible, then the clear and plain teachings about him are obvious. From a Christ-centered perspective, we can say that the *plain* things of the Bible are the *main* things and the *main* things are the *plain* things. □



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.

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MAGAZINE

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Whiskey and Cigars?

just came home from speaking at a conference in Fort Lauderdale. I generally don't like conferences and don't much like speaking at them. But this was different for a lot of reasons. One reason was the whiskey and cigars.

Whiskey and cigars? Wait, wait...let me explain.

When one is a conference speaker, those who sponsor the conference will almost always give him or her a gift of a fruit basket, candy, special coffee, etc. They think it lessens the pain. Anyway, that's what happened at this conference. When I checked into the hotel, there was a gift for me at the desk. It was heavier than most, and it made me wonder.

The clerk laughed and said, "Maybe it's booze." "Are you crazy? I'm a preacher and this is a church conference. We don't do booze," I responded. I was really curious to open the package. There was (I'm not making this up) a bottle of 12-year-old-whiskey and two fine cigars.

Now before you jump to conclusions, try to remember that I'm a lifelong teetotaler and have never been able to get that stuff down. God has made it simply impossible for me to drink adult beverages. Not only do I not drink alcohol, I don't smoke cigars either. I'm a pipe smoker.

So why give me the gift? I think it was a statement. In the conference publicity, they quoted me as saying that Christian freedom meant "You should live your life with such freedom that uptight Christians will doubt your salvation." The people who organized the conference decided to take me

seriously. By the way, that idea of offending uptight Christians didn't come from me. It was from Martin Luther who wrote:

There are some who have no understanding to hear the truth of freedom and insist upon their goodness as means for salvation. These people you must resist, do the very opposite, and offend them boldly lest their impious views drag many with them into error. For the sake of liberty of the faith do other things which they regarded as the greatest of sins...use your freedom constantly and consistently in the sight of and despite the tyrants and stubborn so that they may learn that they are impious, that their law and works are of no avail for righteousness, and that they had no right to set them up.

I didn't drink the whiskey or smoke the cigars nor did the people at the conference expect me to. They wanted to tell me that this conference would be different—that man's rules would bow before the radical grace of God. They wanted me to see they "got it" and to feel affirmed. I did...and loved it.

I have a friend, Justin Holcomb, who just wrote a book on grace, and we recently interviewed him. We asked him where he first learned about grace. Justin said he learned it from his father. Then he told us this story.

When he was seven years old, the neighbors decided to move and put their house on the market. Justin snuck into the house, stopped up all the drains and turned on all the faucets, flooding the house and causing thousands of dollars of damage.

The next week was horrible for Justin. He was eaten up with shame and guilt. He prayed that God wouldn't let anybody find out and repeatedly asked God to forgive him. God answered the second prayer.

A neighbor told Justin's father he had seen Justin go into the house and was sure Justin had done the deed. Justin was out playing with his friends when his father told him he wanted to talk with him. Justin came in and sat down.

His father asked, "Did you have anything to do with the damage to our neighbor's house?"

Justin lied and swore he had not been there and had not done anything wrong.

Then his father said "Justin, our neighbor saw you go in the house. I'm angry at you for what you did, and I'm even more angry that you lied to me about it." Justin started crying and said, "I've asked God to forgive me over and over again."

"You asked God to forgive you?"

"Yes, every night."

"Oh, that's different," his father said. "If you asked God to forgive you, you're forgiven. Go out and play."

You're probably thinking that Justin must have become the world's worst juvenile delinquent. Not so—just the opposite.

Just as we're "constrained by the love of Christ," Justin was constrained by the love of his father.

Justin is now a pastor telling others about another Father who sent his Son to take our sin so that we might "go out and play."

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown



Quotes & Connections



"Grace is given to heal the spiritually sick, not to decorate spiritual heroes." —Martin Luther

"I read about an Eskimo hunter who asked the local missionary priest: 'If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?' 'No,' said the priest, 'not if you did not know.' Then why," asked the Eskimo earnestly, 'did you tell me?'" —Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

"If somebody claims that you have to take the Bible literally, word for word, or not at all, ask him if you have to take John the Baptist literally when he calls Jesus the Lamb of God. If somebody claims that no rational person can take a book seriously which assumes that the world was created in six days and man in an afternoon, ask him if he can take Shakespeare seriously whose scientific knowledge would have sent a third-grader into peals of laughter.... If you look at a window, you see fly-specks, dust, the crack where Junior's Frisbie hit it. If you look through a window, you see the world beyond." —Frederick Buechner on reading the Bible

Bumper stickers:

"Find God?
Why? Is
He lost?"

"O Lord, deliver me
from thy followers."

"Never trust a preacher who
wears a \$5,000 suit preaching in
a \$25 million church."

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