

FALL 2013

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

The Fall of CAMELOT †

The Great Disillusionment of the '60s

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

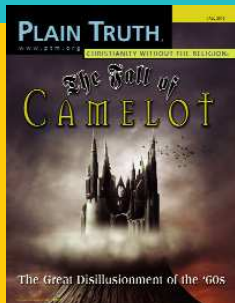
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Cover Story ⁵

The metaphor of Camelot (a legendary but short-lived kingdom of virtue and hope for the future) has often been applied to the Kennedy presidency. It's hard to deny that the assassination of John F. Kennedy marked the beginning of a cultural cataclysm resulting in a great sense of disillusionment for many. Yet there are helpful lessons to be learned from "the great disillusionment of the '60s."

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Inside This Issue

One of life's most profound disillusionments happens when religion fails us—when we discover that the "Establishment" of beliefs and institutions we have cherished for decades is corrupt or just plain wrong. The Fall of Camelot: The Great Disillusionment of the '60s. ¹¹

For a narcissistic generation, apologizing is harder than ever, because love has been subjectively redefined as the ability to do as one pleases, when and how one pleases. Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word ¹⁸

There often seems to be this notion among a lot of church folks that if you don't go to church "the devil will get ya." "Where Do You Go to Church?" ¹⁹

The doctrine of the Trinity is a biblically based attempt to express the eternal nature of God, whom the New Testament describes as "love" within the limitations of human thought and speech. The Trinity: A Beginners Guide ⁴³

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

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Church: What We Are— Not Where We Go

I enjoyed the cover story in the Summer *Plain Truth*, “Church: What We Are—Not Where We Go,” by Greg Albrecht. I very much agree that we are the church because of Jesus! It is Christ’s body which he so graciously allows us all to be part of. You addressed Hebrews 10:25 and how it is misused. I really think it is a passage about assembling in the New Covenant with Christ. This is the context and really the purpose of this book. The old has been done away—Jesus is who we meet together with, along with all those who are one in him.

New Jersey

Your article “Church: What We Are—Not Where We Go” absolutely hit the nail on the head—a resounding piece of bold, Christian journalism in the face of a religious establishment that depends on keeping people enslaved to the idea that they must attend a building—or else! The careful exegesis (and demythologizing) of Hebrews 10:25 was plain, clear and cogent.

I think this was a great piece of Christ-centered teaching! Thank you for all the great articles in this issue. May God bless everyone involved with PTM. Keep up the good work!

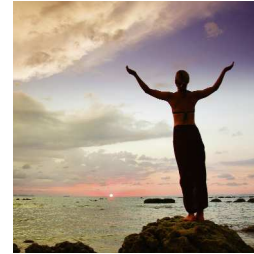
North Carolina

Oftentimes those who share a Christ-centered gospel message fail to carry their thinking through to consider what the “Church of Jesus Christ” actually entails.

I believe the Summer *Plain Truth* cover article, “Church: What We Are—Not Where We Go” is beneficial and helpful for those who “love Jesus,” but are fed up with all the shenanigans of institutional religion.

I agree with Greg’s assessment that Hebrews 10:25 is used as the “big club proof text.” Thank you for publishing this article.

California



Faith After the Religious Market Collapse?

I am thankful to have received the Summer issue of *Plain Truth*. I just started scanning through some of the articles. Scripture says that “Love believes all things and hopes all things,” so the question asked by your article “Faith after the religious market collapse?” is a hopeful one.

It can be answered either yes or no. If *no*, the “security” we enjoy in North America is an illusion. If *yes*, the security is real, and people can find liberty in the law of love.

Faith is a gift from God and it can be accepted or rejected. Am I wrong to think there is no gray area like this? I know for sure God doesn’t use force in getting us to accept the gift of faith. I look forward to reading the rest of this issue.

Ohio



Religious or Spiritual?

The distinction between “religious” and “spiritual” has definitely become an irritating burr in the saddle of those who seek to maintain the religious status-quo. They take offense to the suggestion that their attempts to preserve the historic institution is not a “spiritual” pursuit.

I appreciated Greg’s statement “Religion posits that human relationship with God can be gained, maintained and enhanced on the basis of human performance....”

Indeed, human performance is the basis of all religious law and works, but it is antithetical to the entire gospel proclamation of God’s grace which is

centered in what Jesus Christ has done and is doing.

Email



Smiley Faces

I was really touched by the article “Smiley Faces” by Roy Borges in the Summer issue. I cried! Thank you, PTM, for all your resources. You have been a great help to me.

New York



From Fine to Finished In 30 Days

Thanks for the article by Anne Wiggins “From Fine to Finished in 30 Days” and for the article “Smiley Faces” by Roy Borges in the Summer *Plain Truth*. These two articles helped to remind me that I need to put my faith and trust in God, and he will be faithful to take care of me.

When life seems to drag me down PTM helps to lift me up. Thanks so much!

Nevada



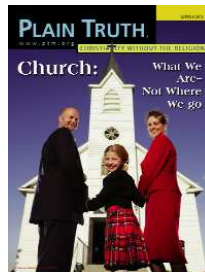
Can God Be *Too Good*?

Thank you for compiling the articles in the Spring 2013 *Plain Truth* addressing that most misunderstood area of Christian theology—what happens to the billions of people in history who have died “unsaved.” Oh, if every Christian on earth could prayerfully read these truths

you’ve shared, I’m sure our judgmental contempt would plunge significantly, and our appreciation for God’s gracious and merciful plan would rise enormously.

Even with this enlightening new understanding, I think we’ll still be shocked at the unimaginable love God has for all who have ever lived. You fill us with biblical hope and gratitude for the God we serve!

British Columbia,
Canada



Cover to Cover

When the *Plain Truth* magazine arrives, I excitedly begin reading it from cover to cover. The articles are so informative and inspiring. It is refreshing and encouraging to find those who hold similar thoughts regarding God’s word and his grace.

The *Plain Truth* has become more and more meaningful to me and such a source of “sanity” amongst the world of religion. I am happy to be able to send a donation to support this much-needed work.

Arizona



A Taste of Grace

I just read *A Taste of Grace* by Greg Albrecht. I read until I fell asleep and then I started reading again the next morning until I finished it. I’ve never heard or read anyone explain and “unpack” Jesus’ parables the way Greg Albrecht does. I will never be able to read them in the same way again. This is truly a life-changing book about God’s amazing grace. I am going to make sure my friends read this book, as well!

North Carolina

• You can order *A Taste of Grace* at our secure website, www.ptm.org, by calling us toll free at 1-800-309-4466, or you can download it at www.amazon.com.

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The Fall of CAMELOT



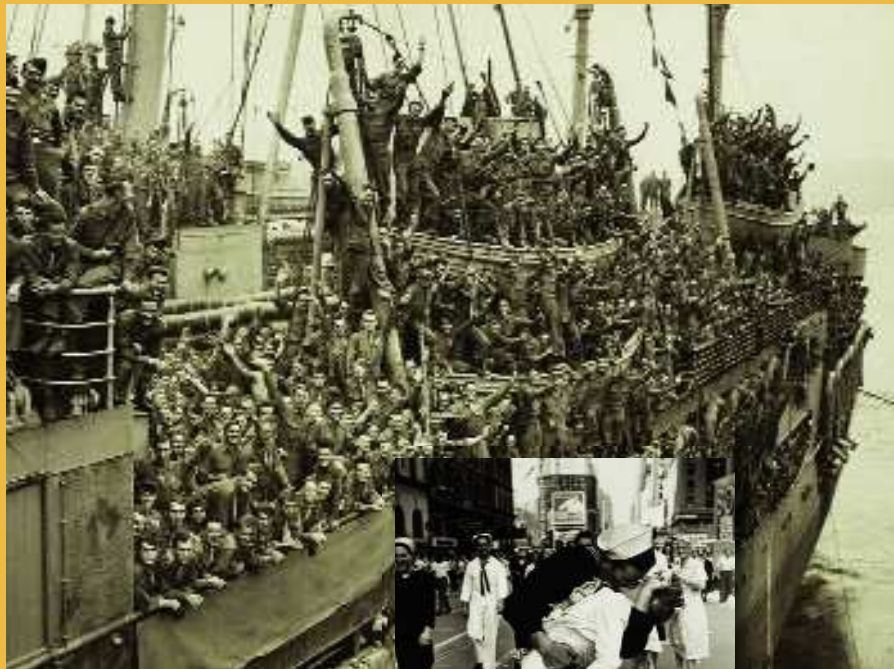
BY MONTE WOLVERTON

The Great Disillusionment of the '60s

In 1963, a new generation of American youth enjoyed their teen years, far removed from the horrific bloodshed and carnage of World War 2. Just 18 years earlier, our fathers had returned from World War 2 to marry their sweethearts, and this “greatest generation” produced a baby boom and a new peacetime America.

- In 1963, America had been transformed into a sparkling chrome and vinyl reality of pastel suburban homes festooned with TV antennas, sputnik-style barbecue grills and tail-finned station wagons.
- In 1963, while The Beatles were topping U.S. music charts with songs like “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” the full force of the British Invasion was yet to happen, and American pop music was still





Just 18 years earlier, our fathers had returned from World War 2 to marry their sweethearts, and this "greatest generation" produced a baby boom and a new peacetime America.



dominated by American artists, such as the Kingsmen ("Louie Louie"), Lesley Gore ("It's My Party"), the Ronettes ("Be My Baby") and The Beach Boys ("Surfin' USA").

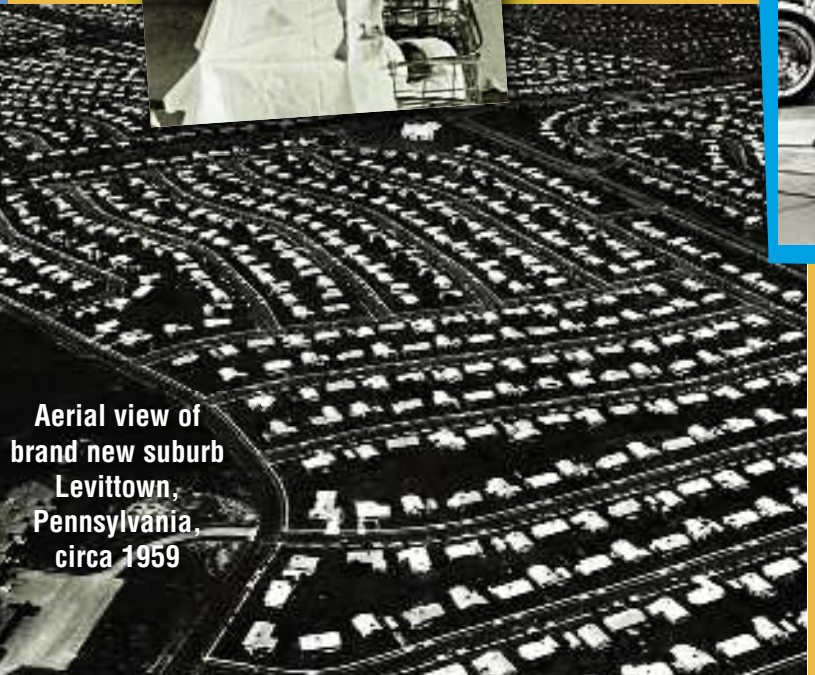
• In 1963, my friends and I were stoked on surfing and hot rod culture. Surfing's little cousin, skateboarding, was riding its first wave of popularity (it would virtually drop out of sight by the mid '60s, not to return until the '70s).

• In 1963, the Hitch Hike was the big dance craze, on the heels of several others, beginning in 1960 with the Twist—followed by the Pony, Bird, Mash Potato, Watusi, Monkey and Locomotion.

• In 1963 the top-rated TV sitcom was *The Beverly Hillbillies*, about a family of nouveau riche yokels who abandon their rustic existence for the trendy comforts of Southern California.

• In 1963, the drug of preference among older teens was still beer.

• In 1963 the preferred Friday night teen activity in my town (unless there was a high



Aerial view of brand new suburb Levittown, Pennsylvania, circa 1959



PHOTO BY CORBIS IMAGES

world were going to be solved by scientists and politicians all working together. Science told us that by the time we were in our thirties we would be living in a Jetson-like world of flying cars and space colonization. We had a new, young, cool, progressive president in the White House who embodied all our hopes and dreams for the future, leading us to a “new frontier.” In his inaugural address John F. Kennedy (JFK) called on all the nations of the world to join together to battle the “common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.”

In stark contrast to his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy was more like a youthful movie star than an old politician. His presidency made young Americans feel empowered. He was handsome, energetic and his wife Jackie was a knockout. Both of them understood how to engage the media and the media loved them in return. They were the closest thing America ever had to a royal family.

☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

Shortly after 10 o'clock Friday morning, November 22, we were elbowing each other through the high school halls, heading to a routine awards assembly. Our massive gymnasium smelled vaguely of sweat socks, nervous perspiration,



Of course, 1963 had its perils, to be sure—the Cold War, to name just one. My friends and I grew up with air raid sirens and duck-and-cover exercises. Some families even built fallout shelters. But we weren't that worried. Even in the Cuban missile crisis, when over 160 armed Russian warheads were aimed at targets all over America, we believed America was secure and free.

We were the good guys and we always won in the end. Several times a day my friends and I watched F-102 Delta Daggers scream and thunder overhead from the 142nd Fighter Wing of the Oregon Air National Guard just across the Columbia River. Our guys could blow the doors off the Russians any day.

And anyway, the problems of the

school football or basketball game) was cruisin' main street—20-some blocks up to the Dairy Queen and then back down again, keeping an eye out for Officer Farrell, who could be lurking on any side street.

- In 1963 I was 15 years old—a sophomore at Hudson's Bay High School in Vancouver, Washington, interested in photography, art, music and girls (but not in that order).

We had a new, young, cool, progressive president in the White House who embodied all our hopes and dreams for the future, leading us to a “new frontier.”





Even in the Cuban missile crisis, when over 160 armed Russian warheads were aimed at targets all over America, we believed America was secure and free. We were the good guys and we always won in the end.

the United States—not since the 1800s, anyway. What did it mean?

The assembly continued and finished. We went to lunch and classes. Within minutes the PA system delivered the news that the President had not survived. School was suspended for the day,

the flag was lowered to half-staff and we were all sent home in a state of shock. In the coming weeks and months we would begin assimilating, adjusting and reacting to the

cheap perfume and an occasional whiff of stale cigarette smoke. All 1,500 students could fit on the 30-foot high bleachers on one side of the gym, which the boys' second period PE class had been tasked with deploying. Sophomores were always assigned the wobbly top-most seats. The assembly had been going for about a half hour.

From our lofty perches we could see the balding head of our solidly-built principal, Paul Gutierrez, standing on the sidelines. His brow wrinkled as he read a note he had just been handed—he seemed more than a little disturbed.

As he stepped forward, looking as if he would interrupt the speaker, I remember thinking it was probably just another school "crisis." Someone had been laying patches in the parking lot. Someone had vandalized school property. Someone had slashed the tires of our rival school's students during a game. Someone had....

Principal Gutierrez took the microphone. "I've just been in-

formed that this morning President John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas. We don't have details right now, but we'll let you know as soon as they become available."

Someone had shot the President. The student body sat in stupefied silence. This kind of thing wasn't supposed to happen in

Kennedy carried on a secret correspondence with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev—a competitive friendship that likely saved hundreds of millions of lives in the Cuban missile crisis.



John F. Kennedy meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna.



idea that the American empire we thought was so safe and stable was vulnerable to attack—from the inside.

☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

Although born to wealth, privilege and fierce political ambi-

Dwight Eisenhower and President-elect John Kennedy—Dec. 1960



In stark contrast to his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy was more like a youthful movie star than an old politician. His presidency made young Americans feel empowered. He was handsome, energetic and his wife Jackie was a knockout. Both of them understood how to engage the media and the media loved them in return. They were the closest thing America ever had to a royal family.



tion, John F. Kennedy was no stranger to suffering. His childhood diseases and chronic back trouble had left him with frequent, intense pain. During World War 2, his desperate attempt to swim from one south Pacific island to another to get help for the stranded crew of his destroyed PT boat had nearly cost him his life. Later, his own personal indiscretions would also take a toll on him.

As a young congressman (beginning in 1947) and later as a senator, JFK took a hard-line stance on the Cold War. Along with our military leaders, he accepted the idea that the best way to end the Cold War was to win it—at all cost. But as he took on the office of president (1961), he began to understand that the cost would be too great—with the potential of nu-

clear annihilation of the entire world. He felt a strong moral imperative to seek other, more peaceful solutions. For over a year, he carried on a secret correspondence with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev—a competitive friendship that likely saved hundreds of millions of lives in the Cuban missile crisis.

But the leader of the free world was not free. As Kennedy's presidency progressed, his policies increasingly clashed with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA and other agencies. In the Congo, Berlin, Cuba and Indonesia, he favored negotiation rather than the direct confrontation and win-at-all-cost policies of many in our government. Just six weeks before his death, he signed an order for the withdrawal of 1,000 American mil-

itary personnel from Vietnam, possibly the beginning of a complete withdrawal, as he believed such a war was unwinnable and could potentially cost thousands of American lives.

As the year of 1963 developed, JFK apparently made private comments that reflected a sense of impending personal doom. He knew that powerful forces in the government believed him to be a threat to America—even an ally of communism—and he understood that they would stop at nothing to get him out of the way. Was it his insistence on working toward peaceful resolution of Cold War conflicts, as opposed to the dangers of nuclear confrontation, that ultimately cost Kennedy his life? That question is still the subject of much speculation.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

Vietnam—a debacle which JFK had tried to avert... at some 58,000 American deaths, remains a far greater tragedy than 9/11, Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

Shortly after Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson convened the Warren Commission to, in his words, "show the public that there was only one assassin." But in following decades, other congressional commissions would conclude that the Warren Commission had ignored or repressed evidence, or had not been provided with key evidence by the FBI and CIA. Finally, in 1979 The House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded (mostly in secret meetings) that Kennedy was probably the victim of a conspiracy, yet no conspirators were identified.

In 1992, Congress created the Assassinations Records Review Board to release thousands of classified documents—so the public could make up their own minds as to the nature of the conspiracy (although it was discovered that several pieces of evidence had been lost, altered or destroyed). The last remaining documents will be released in 2017.

Meanwhile, other documents in the former Soviet Union have been declassified, enabling us to see two world leaders, Kennedy and

Khrushchev, struggling with factions in their own governments whose policies could have led to nuclear annihilation of a good part of the world.

☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

I can't speak for everyone of my generation—if you were alive then, my perceptions and feelings may not have been yours. In the years following Kennedy's death, people reacted differently, depending on upbringing, culture, religion, political background and temperament. Some held to traditional values and continued trusting in our national leadership.

Yet, it's hard to deny that JFK's assassination marked the beginning of a cultural cataclysm. Three years afterward, I felt like I was riding a shockwave of change. My friends and I were in the middle of a social revolution. We felt like the rug had been pulled out from under us. The security and freedom that we thought we had was nonexistent—we could no longer trust our own government.

Many of us concluded that the country was run by fat, old, power-hungry men who would stop at nothing to stay in power, including the sacrifice of a president—followed by

the senseless deaths of tens of thousands of brave young soldiers in the next twelve years. The draft had gone from being an opportunity to serve to being a near-certain death sentence in the jungles of Vietnam—a debacle which JFK had tried to avert an which, at some 58,000 American deaths, remains a far greater tragedy than 9/11, Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

The thrust of pop culture changed from silly dances, surfing and teen romance to deadly serious issues and bitter protest. Rage poured from the great countercultural creative engines of Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York City in music, film, art and literature.

Many of my friends reacted to the senselessness of the world with drugs which rendered them senseless. Were we going crazy or were we coming of age? Perhaps both.

We, the emerging generation, were seeing the "Establishment" for the ugly, perverse thing it was—and wondering how (or if) we could ever replace or reform it. In any case, we felt like we had been given a raw deal and we were angry, depressed and disillusioned. And our disillusionment seemed to have begun with the murder of JFK—followed five years later by the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy.

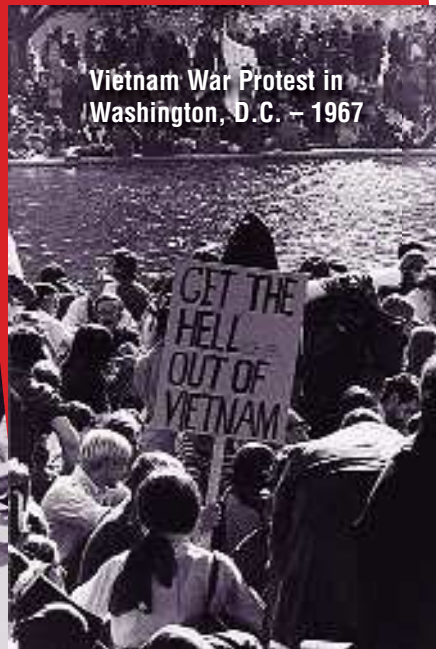
The metaphor of Camelot (a legendary but short-lived kingdom of nobility, virtue and hope for the future) has often been applied to the Kennedy presidency. It was his widow Jackie who noted that her husband's favorite song from the musical *Camelot* contained the line "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was known as Camelot." She observed, "There'll be great Presidents again, but there'll never be another Camelot again." Jackie, in spite of her own grave trials

The thrust of pop culture changed from silly dances, surfing and teen romance to deadly serious issues and bitter protest. Rage poured from the great countercultural creative engines...

Kent State shootings – 1970



Vietnam War Protest in Washington, D.C. – 1967



in the White House, believed in her husband's ability to defy the system and put it right. She was possibly as disillusioned as the rest of us.

☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

When we graduated in 1966, my high school friends and I went our different directions. Some became part of the growing counterculture. Others dutifully trudged off to Vietnam. Some never came back, and a few returned to an ungrateful America. Others went to college, followed by businesses and professions. Still others tried to make a difference in the world through socially meaningful pursuits. One of my friends eventually became the principal of our high school.

After protesting our perceived loss of freedoms so vociferously in the '60s and early '70s, it's ironic that so many in my generation fell into things that enslaved us on some level, whether it was drugs, bad relationships, financial problems or, like me, religion. I worked for decades in the service of religion, and eventually would go

After protesting our perceived loss of freedoms so vociferously in the '60s and early '70s, it's ironic that so many in my generation fell into things that enslaved us on some level, whether it was drugs, bad relationships, financial problems or, like me, religion.

through another time of disillusionment when I discovered that I was not really serving God.

There are plenty of situations in life that will shatter your illusions, where you find yourself mourning the loss of something you thought you had, but actually didn't. We are disillusioned by the failure of a relationship. We are disillusioned by the failure of a career or aspiration. We are disillusioned when we find that we don't have the freedom we thought we did.

Yet, *one of life's most profound disillusionments happens when religion fails us—when we discover that the "Establishment" of beliefs and institutions we have cherished for decades is corrupt or just plain wrong.* Religion, especially institutional



John, Jackie, and the Connallys in the presidential limousine seconds before the assassination

PHOTO BY VICTOR HUGO KING

Just six weeks before his death, he signed an order for the withdrawal of 1,000 American military personnel from Vietnam, possibly the beginning of a complete withdrawal, as he believed such a war was unwinnable...

religion, has a way of drawing us into a false sense of security, hope and freedom, but it can actually deliver none of these.

- We are awed by religious edifices.
- We are dazzled by religious spectacles.

As we gaze past the ruins of our shattered illusion, we realize it was nothing more than a grand façade.

- We discover we have been taken for a ride.
- We discover that the rules and regulations we labored so long to keep were arbitrary—even unbiblical.

• We discover that our "Christian" religion has little or nothing to do with Christ.

• We thought we were secure and free, but we discover that we are vulnerable and enslaved.

• Like my friends and I in the years after Kennedy's assassination, we become disillusioned, depressed and angry.

• We feel like we've been given a good deal, and we feel this way with good reason.

Here are three lessons we might draw from the great disillusionment of the '60s—and apply them to help us deal with religious disillusionments we may be experiencing right now.

Don't blame God. In the unrest of the '60s, more than a few young people threw faith in God out the window. Maybe some kinds of faith needed to be questioned and abandoned. However, I suspect that most people who call themselves atheists were originally disillusioned with religion, but made

From our pain, we should learn not to invest too much power in human leadership and institutions.



Posthumous official presidential portrait of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, painted by Aaron Shikler

The metaphor of Camelot (a legendary but short-lived kingdom of nobility, virtue and hope for the future) has often been applied to the Kennedy presidency.

the mistake of translating that into disillusionment with God. Yet God is not part of the illusion—never was. He is not and was not on the side of the religionists who set us up and enslaved us.

At some point, religious professionals and authorities will meet their Waterloo—they, too, will experience disillusionment with the empty dogmas of the establishment, and when they do, God is waiting to help them. He's on our side and the side of freedom. The truth is that he's been waiting all along for us to come to our senses and see Christ-less religion for the big pretense it really is.

Learn from your pain. The middle to late '60s was a painful era in many ways. But all through the '60s and early '70s America was learning profound lessons about

policing the world, about politicians' proclivity toward abuse of power and about civil rights. We came away with a healthy skepticism toward authority—essential for an effective democracy. It was also out of this turbulent period that new social movements were spawned—and others gained new energy (for better or worse).

Likewise, the pain of our religious disillusionment is

the same stages again. As with any loss, the goal is actually not so much to “get over it,” as it is to accept it, assimilate it and to integrate it into a clearer understanding of who we are and who God is.

Likewise, we can move on with life and assimilate our disillusionment with corrupt Christ-less religious institutions. How? By finding the real Jesus. One of the first things we may be shocked to discover is that he's not the bizarre, fictional Jesus that many institutional religionists (and even Holly-

As with any loss, the goal is actually not so much to “get over it,” as it is to accept it, assimilate it and to integrate it into a clearer understanding of who we are and who God is.

there to teach us to look beyond the façade before we get suckered in. From our pain, we should learn not to invest too much power in human leadership and institutions. We must continue to question them and never assume that any human, including ourselves, is free from the virus of legalistic, graceless religion. The pain and disillusionment we endure through experiences with

Christ-less religion can open our eyes to see the grace of God.

Assimilate it and move on. Sometime in the late '70s everything seemed to simmer down. The Vietnam War ended (although it would continue as an agonizing issue for over one million Vietnam veterans). My friends and I who had been teens in the '60s were moving into careers, getting married and having kids. America was headed for a decade or two of less turbulent times, albeit with new and different problems.

We got through the trauma and disillusionment—or perhaps it was absorbed into society at large. Getting past disillusionment is like getting through any loss or grief. We pass through stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, only to cycle through

wood) have foisted on us (no wonder so many normal people are creeped out around some churches and Christians!).

The real Jesus is what we in the early '60s would have called a “cool head” (except he's God). He's the Friend who will bring us through our disillusionment—whether it be from religion, politics, personal relationships or anything else that has pulled the rug out from under us.

☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

Fifty years ago we lost John F. Kennedy. We grieved the ideal Camelot that ended with JFK's murder in Dallas. We mourned the loss of his optimism, his vigor, his promise of a better world and of a “new frontier.” Of course, the chances of him or any other person being able to deliver on such sweeping promises were pretty slim.



Fifty years later, while we may have made progress on a few fronts, we have lost on others—and the net condition of the world is much the same. Thank God our ultimate hope lies in Jesus, who delivers on all his promises and with whom we will never be disillusioned. □

Syndicated cartoon artist and Associate Editor of Plain Truth magazine, Monte Wolverton lives in Washington state.




Incredibly Good News!

A performance-based world breeds fear, condemnation and shame ... because no matter how hard we try, there will always be some way in which we fall short of standards and measuring devices.




That's the way our world works – it's all about our performance, appearance and abilities. And in such a world we are doomed to failure.



But there's really good – incredibly good news! In Christ we are given rest from human standards of performance (including the standards imposed by Christ-less religion). Jesus has achieved all that is necessary.

In Christ we are enabled to trust, believe and have faith. The good news is that we can relate to God on the basis of his goodness, generosity and grace – not our own! Give that some thought.



Christianity Without the Religion

Plain Truth Ministries

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The More I Follow Jesus...

by Derek Flood

Over the years I have been increasingly troubled by the doctrine of hell. As my love for God and my neighbor increased, the horror at the thought of many of those I love suffering eternal punishment increased with it. In other words, this was not a crisis of faith, it was the *result* of my faith. The more I experienced God's grace in my life and grew to share Jesus' heart for the lost, the more I was troubled by hell.

Now what makes this even more complicated is the fact that most of the statements about hell found in the Bible are said by Jesus. The one who is leading me to question hell seems to be the very one who teaches it. Similarly, Jesus is known for preaching love of enemies and nonviolence, yet many of his teachings use very violent imagery.

Again, how can we understand these apparent contradictions? How can we think of Jesus as compassionate and loving when he says such harsh things?

Consider the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-

he concludes, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Are we to conclude from this that if we don't forgive others that God will torture us in hell forever?

IN EACH OF THESE PARABLES, JESUS IS TURNING OUR THINKING UPSIDE DOWN.

35). Jesus tells the story of a king who forgives his servant a huge debt, but then when he hears that this same servant has refused to forgive a very small debt, the king

It is crucial here to look at the context: Jesus tells this parable in response to a question from Peter where he asked Jesus "How many times must I forgive, seven times?"

DOES GOD SUFFER FROM SOME FORM OF BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER WHERE HE IS AT FIRST LOVING AND FORGIVING, AND THEN SUDDENLY BECOMES BRUTAL AND MERCILESS? ARE WE MORE MERCIFUL THAN GOD? NO AND NO!

becomes enraged. Jesus tells us that the king "handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed" and

Jesus answers "No, seventy-seven times" (vs. 21-22). So if we read this like an accountant we would need to conclude that we should

forgive 77 times, but God does not do this. Reading like an accountant, we would conclude that God does not even forgive seven times like Peter suggests, or two times for that matter—you

tators do—flies into a rage and orders torture for an ungrateful servant. Yet if we keep reading in Matthew, we see that a couple chapters later, Jesus questions the entire idea of comparing God to a king:

see God. God is the servant. Power is about lifting people up, not pushing them down.

In doing this, Jesus not only dismantles our traditional concepts of what justice and power are about,

The Less I Like His Teaching

just get one chance and that's it. God here appears at first infinitely merciful, forgiving a huge debt, and then suddenly flips and wants to *torture* us forever.

Does God suffer from some form of borderline personality disorder where he is at first loving

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.... Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to

at the same time, he also dismantles his own parables. Once we have embraced Jesus' understanding of servant lordship, we cannot accept the crude comparison of God to a volatile dictator. So when reading these parables as disciples of Jesus, we need to keep in mind that each one is beginning with the assumptions of the crowds. He begins there, with their familiar ideas of kings and slaves and torture and then introduces a radical new idea into the mix which flips one of those ideas on its head. The more we embrace these ideas of Jesus' “upside-down kingdom,” the

THE MORE WE EMBRACE THESE IDEAS OF JESUS' “UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM,” THE MORE WE WILL HAVE TROUBLE WITH THE WORLDLY ASSUMPTIONS THAT THESE VERY PARABLES ARE SITUATED IN.

and forgiving, and then suddenly becomes brutal and merciless? Are we more merciful than God? No and no! Parables are analogies, and as everyone knows, if any analogy is pressed too far it becomes absurd (as demonstrated here). The broad point Jesus is making here is that it would be really horrible if we were forgiven a great debt, but then turned around and were merciless to others. We should treat others with the same grace that we need, and which God has richly shown us.

This is an interpretation that fits with the overall point of this pericope. To read it literally would mean that the point Jesus was making to Peter was completely undermined by the parable he told to illustrate it—*be merciful as your Heavenly Father is...who is not merciful at all*. Clearly, that cannot be what Jesus was trying to convey! To understand Jesus we need to listen to the context of his larger point, which here is about radical unconditional grace.

Now, let's take this a step further: In the above parable Jesus compares God to a king who—in the way dic-

THAT'S NOT BECAUSE WE ARE DISAGREEING WITH JESUS HERE, BUT BECAUSE WE HAVE FULLY EMBRACED HIS NEW WAY OF THINKING.

serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

In other words, Jesus models the way of God, not as one who “lords it over others” but as the servant Lord. Following Jesus means rejecting the way of domination, the way of kings.

To the extent that you have embraced that idea, you will have a problem with the above parable of the king. You'll read “God is like an angry king” and think “No, Jesus teaches us that God is not at all like a king, God is like a suffering servant,” and you would be absolutely right. In each of these parables, Jesus is turning our thinking upside down. In the first parable, Jesus replaces escalation of violence with the escalation of mercy. In the second he is similarly dismantling our understanding of greatness, and redefining how we

more we will have trouble with the worldly assumptions that these very parables are situated in. That's not because we are disagreeing with Jesus here, but because we have fully embraced his new way of thinking. So the more we follow Jesus, the more we'll question the worldly values the parables are set in. □

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



What God Really Wants

Do you remember the story about the rich young ruler who came to Jesus? You will find it in Luke 18:18-27 (also in Matthew 19 and Mark 10). I've always been puzzled by that incident in the ministry of Jesus. I've often taught it, read it hundreds of times, repeatedly analyzed it—and yet, I've always felt that I had missed something important in the text.

I think I've found what I missed! Of course, I could be wrong. I once thought that I had worked out the perennial theological problem of God's sovereignty and our freedom. The problem was that it was in the middle of the night, and I was sleepy. So I said to myself, "In the morning I'll work out all the details and send the document to a publisher." The next morning I could hardly wait to get to work. But when I sat down at the desk, I couldn't remember what I had worked out the night before. Still can't!

So, let me explain before I forget. When we read or teach the story of the rich young ruler, the thing we always emphasize is his riches, "He went away sorrowful because he had great possessions." That, of course, is one way to look at it. Riches really can eat a hole in your heart and cause you to run from Jesus—and to do it with great sorrow.

However, I think we have emphasized the wrong thing. We ought to emphasize the going away and not the great possessions. "He went away sorrowful because he had great possessions." In other words, the difficulty with the rich young ruler wasn't his riches—it was his leaving.

Let me remind you of another text. In John 6, Jesus has just said some harsh things about following him. The crowd listened, was shocked and decided that this wasn't what they had signed on for. They were packing their bags and leaving. Then, in a question reflecting great pathos, loneliness and

fear (yes, Jesus experienced those things, too), Jesus asks his disciples, "Are you also going away?" (verse 67).

That is when Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." If you came to Jesus and he found the one thing in your life that kept you from being totally committed and totally his, what would you say? Suppose that Jesus said to you: "You lack one thing. You are doing okay in most places, but you lack one thing—give up your family, career, health, home [fill in the blank] and come and follow me," what would you say?

If you're the rich young ruler you'd just leave. It would be hard to leave, but you would leave. So many of us do that. I used to do it a lot. It wasn't that I didn't want to follow. I genuinely wanted to be his totally and completely. The problem wasn't in my spirit; it was in my flesh. The beloved Son of God was totally obedient to the Father. In fact, because he was, he became our sacrifice.

However, we aren't Jesus. I know, I know, *We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us*—but can we talk? I've tried, and I can't. Yes, I can do more things than I did before because Christ strengthens me, but *all things*? What? Are you crazy?

As you know, Peter couldn't do all things either. He had problems with commitment, denial and hypocrisy (see Galatians 2:11-13). But his original statement to Jesus was still the same. He was sinful, afraid and unable to live out the kind of life he knew he should live, but he never went away.

I suspect that some of us don't go to Jesus because we aren't good enough, because we can't give up something that is hurting us, or because we feel so guilty. The greatest sin you have in your life isn't any of that—it's being away from him. *Just go to him.*

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown

...the difficulty
with the rich
young ruler
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his leaving.



Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word

*What've I got to do to make you love me?
What've I got to do to make you care?*

Sorry Seems to Be The Hardest Word, Elton John, 1976

Unrequited love normally brings to mind memories of romantic, “puppy love” that failed to hear an echo. But teenage infatuations that end in agonizing, emotional dramas are surpassed in intensity by the crushing heartbreak experienced when, for some reason, a parent or child fails to respond to each other. This is a story of a girl and the relationship she yearned to have with her father.

Like many others in her generation, Karen grew up in a home ruled over by an authoritarian veteran of World War 2. Karen, now a senior citizen, grew up craving affection and praise from her father. But the times when she received attention seemed to have been reserved for those times when she needed (in her father’s estimation) correction.

Karen left home, went to college, married and made a new life. Even after her own children were adults and had themselves become parents, Karen continued to try to build a relationship with her father. She wasn’t seeking her pound of flesh for the wrongs of the past—Karen simply wanted to create an atmosphere for reconciliation. But Karen discovered that “sorry seems to be the hardest word.” When she talked with her father her attempts to discuss the oppressive relationship she had experienced and the punishment she regularly received were dismissed with “that’s how my father treated me.” At other times her father told her that the overbearing rules and harsh treatment to which he had subjected her had helped make her strong and prepared her for a successful life. He didn’t get it. He never did.

In his early 80’s the World War 2 veteran developed cancer, and Karen again tried to seek healing and reconciliation. The last time Karen talked with her father was only a few weeks before he died. She flew in to visit him, hoping he would be willing to talk

about their shared past. She just wanted to hear one word—“sorry”—but she returned home crestfallen. When Karen, my wife, walked off the plane with an anguished look on her face I immediately knew her quest was unsuccessful.

The knowledge that she would never be loved in return acted upon her ideas as a tide acts upon cliffs.—*The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Thornton Wilder

“I’m Sorry”

It seems that the difficulty involved in articulating the words “I’m sorry” increases the closer the relationship one has (or had) with the person involved in the unresolved relationship. English poet and artist William Blake once noted that is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend.

Saying the words “I’m sorry” goes against everything that human beings naturally hold near and dear. We never want to be or appear to be wrong because such an admission of weakness or acceptance of failure and fault makes us vulnerable, and we fight for all we are worth against being vulnerable. In most cases, the goal of human life is seen as trying to become secure and safe, inviolate and immune from the actions of others. Saying “I’m sorry” is an unnatural admission of guilt which leaves us exposed and vulnerable.

However, because the need to say “I’m sorry” is a fundamental ingredient in human relationships, early in life most of us learn that failure to say “I’m sorry” will inconvenience us. At the very least we learn to mouth the words, for practical and self-serving purposes. But in many cases such expressions of sorrow and regret are empty words of someone who is “going along to get along.”

As a child we quickly learn that saying something like “I’m sorry, but I forgot to make my bed” or “I’m sorry I didn’t take out the trash” goes a long way toward avoiding painful clashes with our parents. When we grow up, fall in love and then marry, even when we genuinely feel our spouse was more at fault than we were, we learn the practical

considerations of saying “I’m sorry.” Saying “I’m sorry,” whether the words are meant or not, begins to salve wounds and prevent an un-holy war.

Seeking a simple pardon because it takes the chill out of the air is a far different matter than the painful process involved in an admission of blame, an undertaking that lays bare our deep-seated flaws and defects. For that reason saying “I’m sorry” is a road not often taken. Grievances become deep-seated as time passes.

In the 1970 novel and movie *Love Story*, my generation was assured that “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” The sentiment is so wrong in so many ways, but it has provided a tailor-made justification for people who have been convinced that their self esteem is a God-given right that no one can ever question. For this narcissistic generation, apologizing is harder than ever, because love has been subjectively redefined as the ability to do as one pleases, when and how one desires.

Virtually everyone has been hurt by someone who has not admitted

For this narcissistic generation, apologizing is harder than ever, because love has been subjectively redefined as the ability to do as one pleases, when and how one desires.

the pain they have created. We all have memories of hurts others have caused us and we yearn to reconcile them. Stop reading for about ten seconds and you’ll be able to name several individuals whom you would like to forgive, but you haven’t because they haven’t demonstrated any signs of remorse toward you. In many cases the person who caused pain is oblivious of the havoc their actions caused. In other instances, given the many forces lined up against an acknowledgement of

wrong, those who have some sense of their culpability are unwilling to pay the price of an apology.

What Are We Waiting For?

If we continue to nurse grudges and grievances toward those who have yet to ask us to forgive them, our failure to forgive will gradually erode our relationship with others and most importantly with our loving heavenly Father. If we spend our lives waiting to hear “I’m sorry” from those who have harmed us we will effectively allow them to continue to hold us hostage, emotionally and spiritually. How can we forgive those who desperately need to be forgiven, but will never ask?

Stop waiting. Don’t hold out hope of hearing “I’m sorry,” because in many cases you will never hear those words. It is only in and through the grace of God, embodied and enabled within us through the risen life of Jesus, that we can forgive others even though they have not said “I’m sorry.” By God’s grace, he gives us forgiveness and reconciliation and the gift of passing it on to others, through the ultimate act of service and vulnerability, exemplified and demonstrated to and for us by Jesus on his cross. God’s grace will also give us the humility to make ourselves small and vulnerable by seeking forgiveness from others and saying those words which they long to hear: “I’m sorry.”

Was it ruthless and unforgiving of me to speak earlier of the unfinished business my wife has with my now deceased father-in-law? I loved him, but I share this story of the pain he produced in my wife’s life because I know many will identify with it. Sadly, many people have grave difficulties distinguishing between their earthly father, who is (or was) distant, authoritarian, angry and even abusive, and their loving heavenly Father.

• For the love of God, if you think your children or anyone near and dear to you has something they really need to discuss

with you, make it easy on them to do so. Invite them to talk.

• When they lay out the details of what troubles them, even if what they say makes you uncomfortable, and even if you dispute the accuracy of every detail, don’t interrupt with justifications. Just listen. Be attentive and hear them out. And don’t just hear them out, but as hard as it may be, ask God

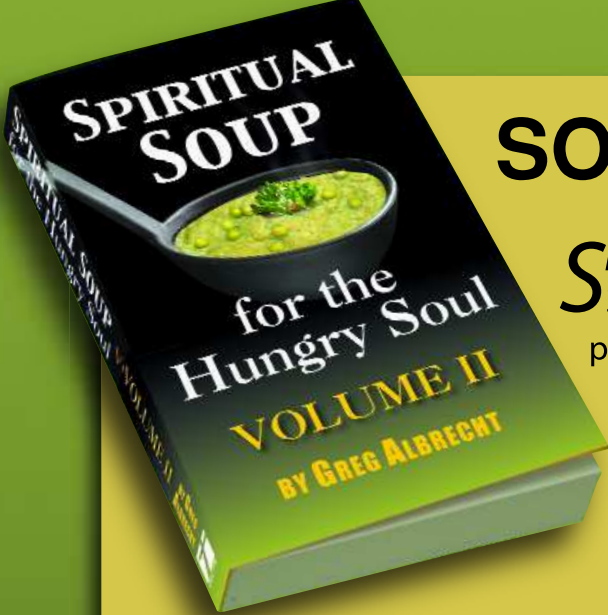
It is only in and through the grace of God, embodied and enabled within us through the risen life of Jesus, that we can forgive others even when they have not said “I’m sorry.” By God’s grace, he gives us forgiveness and reconciliation...

to empower you to listen and respond graciously.

• It is hard to be warm and engaging when someone reveals our shortcomings, but during such a discussion imagine how difficult it is for the person who has summoned up the courage to talk with you about old wounds and heartaches. You don’t have to accept the veracity of everything someone says in order to make peace. God will empower you to reconcile with a friend or loved one even if you don’t agree on all the details of the past.

Dear Lord: Empower and enable us, in Christ, to make ourselves nothing as Jesus did (Philippians 2:7). Use us as healing instruments in your hands, so that healing and reconciliation might begin when we say “I’m sorry” to those who need to hear us utter those words. By your grace, empower and enable us as Christ-followers, to forgive others before we are asked. In so doing, your kingdom will continue to be seen and known on this earth, both now and forevermore. Amen. □

—Greg Albrecht



SOUP'S ON!

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul (published in 2009) is a collection of 48 messages previously given at *Christianity Without the Religion*, PTM's online audio teaching ministry. Now, by popular demand, more soup is on the way!

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2 is close to being ready for publication. Like

Soup #1, *Soup #2* will feature 48 messages, organized seasonally, providing spiritual nourishment and food for thought throughout the calendar year.

You won't want to miss this great collection of rich, satisfying, inspiring and Christ-centered spiritual meals. We had many creative suggestions for the title of this second volume (*Return of the Soup, Soup: the Sequel* and *A Second Helping of Soup*) but we resisted a fun title in favor of the more accurate and descriptive *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2*.

Though the title may seem a little plain and predictable, its pages will deliver an exciting, perfectly seasoned adventure, discovering God's grace—a spiritual feast!

We'll announce more details about *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2* in the Winter 2013 *Plain Truth*, and on our website (www.ptm.org).





THE LAST TRUE

An adapted excerpt from their book *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?* (Thomas Nelson, Inc.)



Editor's Note: The title says it all. *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?* The agenda is obvious and overt. Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo ponder the implications of the actual words of Jesus, printed in red in so-called "red letter Bibles," in our day-to-day lives. With the gracious permission of Thomas Nelson Publishing, we excerpt one of their Christ-centered discussions as they examine how "the last true Christian" lived out his own red letter revolution.

Dialogue on Saint Francis of Assisi

TONY CAMPOLO: As we try to understand what the Bible is saying to us in our own day and age, it is important for all of us to know how Christians, down through the ages, have interpreted Scripture. The writer of Hebrews tells us to be sensitive and aware that we are encompassed with a "great crowd of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1). I have come to realize that the witnesses of saints who have gone before us can help us in our efforts to inter-



IMAGE BASED ON US POSTAGE STAMP COMMEMORATION OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI 1982

CHRISTIAN?

BY SHANE CLAIBORNE AND TONY CAMPOLO

pret Scripture. Saint Francis of Assisi is one who has had a particular impact.

SHANE CLAIBORNE: The life and witness of Francis is as relevant to the world we live in today as it was seven hundred years ago. He was one of the first critics of capitalism, one of the earliest Christian environmentalists, a sassy reformer of the church, and one of the classic conscientious objectors to war.

Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, born into a society

where the gap between the rich and the poor was increasingly unacceptable. It was an age of religious crusades, where Christians and Muslims were killing each other in the name of God. Sound familiar?

Francis did something simple and wonderful. He read the Gospels where Jesus says, "Sell your possessions and give the money to the poor," "Consider the lilies and the sparrows and do not worry about tomorrow," "Love your enemies," and he decided to

live as if Jesus meant the stuff he said. Francis turned his back on the materialism and militarism of his world, and said yes to Jesus.

One of the quotes attributed to Francis is a simple and poignant critique of our world, just as it was to his: "The more stuff we have, the more clubs we need to protect it." It does make you wonder if he'd have been on Wall Street protesting in our time.

With a childlike innocence, Francis literally stripped naked and walked out of Assisi to live like the lilies and the sparrows. He lived close to the earth and, like Jesus, became a friend of the birds and creatures, whom he fondly called

With a childlike
innocence,
Francis literally stripped
naked and walked out of
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and the sparrows.

brother and sister. In light of that, many Christians brought their pets to my church yesterday for a special all-pets-allowed service, an annual tribute to Francis. And many a birdbath wears his iconic image. But it's easy to turn our best movements into monuments. His life was a powerful critique of the demons of his day, which are very similar to the demons of our day.

One of my favorite stories about Francis was when he decided to meet with the Muslim sultan during the Fifth Crusade. It was a tumultuous time. War had become a necessity and a habit, and was sanctioned by much of the church. Francis was sent off as a soldier, but he could not reconcile the violence of war with the grace of Christ...and so he got off his warhorse and put down his sword. He pleaded with the military commander, Cardinal-Legate Pelagius, to end the fighting. Pelagius refused. Instead, Pelagius broke off all diplomatic relations with the



I have come to realize that the witnesses of saints who have gone before us can help us in our efforts to interpret Scripture. Saint Francis of Assisi is one who has had a particular impact.—Tony Campolo

and hold signs that say “God Hates Fags.” But Francis invites us to become extremists for grace, extremists for love.

Although the church is prone to forget his witness or to make a monument of his movement, we can still celebrate his critique of an economy that left masses of people in poverty, so that a handful of people can live as they wish.

We still rejoice in his love for the

sultan of Egypt, al-Kamil. The sultan in turn decreed that anyone who brought him the head of a Christian would be rewarded with a Byzantine gold piece. Francis,

earth as we work to end the ravaging of our world. We remember his witness that there is a better way to bring peace than with a sword. And we remember the whisper he heard from God, *Repair my church which is in ruins.*

Given what Francis represents, you can understand why so many young people who are turned off to religion are turned on to Francis...

These are the words of the famous prayer attributed to Francis. May they inspire us to become better people and to build a better world.

*Lord:
Make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon,*

*Where there is discord, union,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is error, truth,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is sadness, joy,
Where there is darkness, light.
O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are
born to eternal life. Amen.*

TONY CAMPOLO: Francis also was a poet. One of his poems is the prayer in which he talks about Brother Sun and Sister Moon, giving us insight into the spiritual connection he had with all of nature. That poem is a classic, and many literary experts say that it was the beginning of modern poetry. Then, of course, there’s that wonderful line of the prayer that begins, “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace, where there is hatred, let me sow love...”

Given what Francis represents, you can understand why so many young people who are turned off to religion are turned on to Francis, and why, other than the Bible, more books have been printed about Francis during the last twenty years than on any other subject. Lord Chesterton once said, “Francis may have been the last true Christian.”

SHANE CLAIBORNE: We want to be alive, we want to be more like Jesus. Saints move us in that direction. Frederick Buechner said saints leave us the scent of God, the aroma of Christ. In God’s flirting with humanity, God occasionally drops a handkerchief called saints—and Francis is one of these handkerchiefs. □

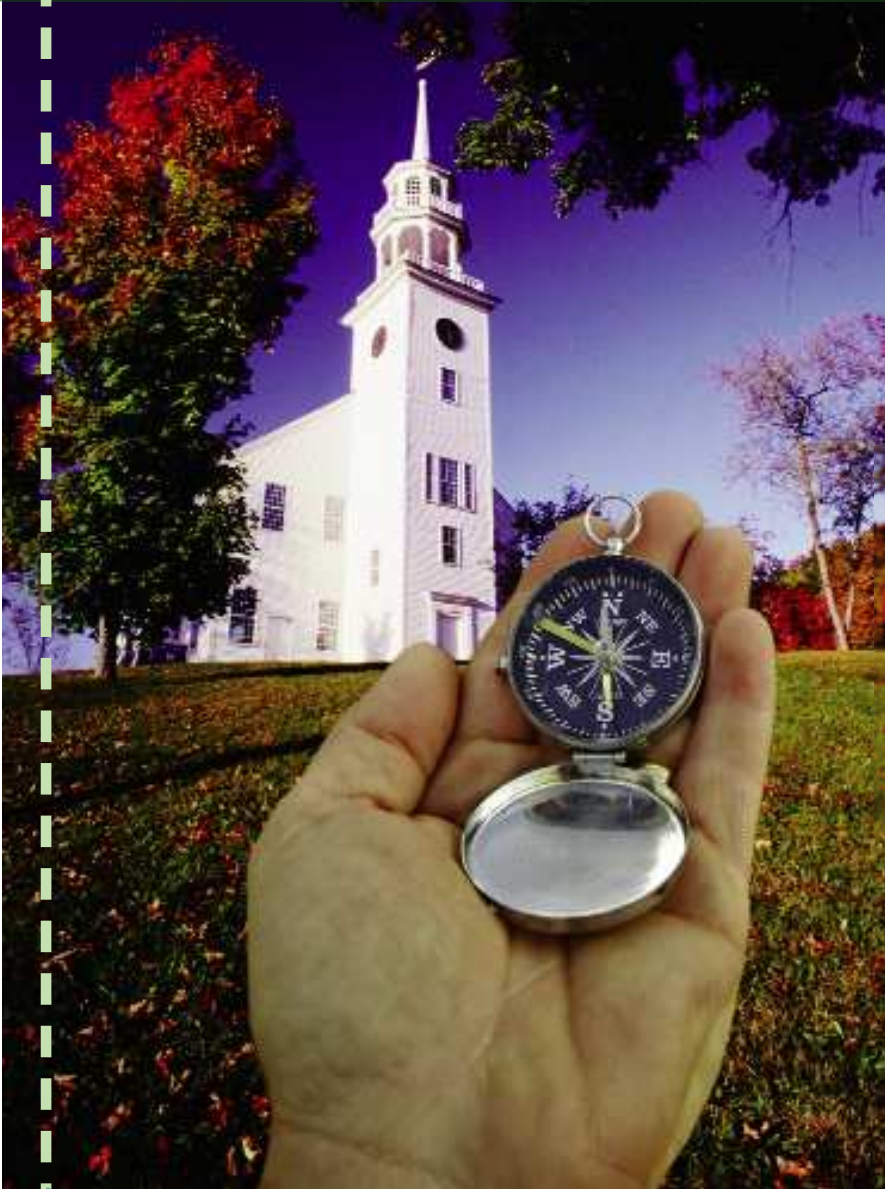
Excerpted from Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said? by Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo © Copyright 2012. Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN. Used by permission.

In an age of religious extremists, Francis offers us an alternative. We have seen religious extremists of all stripes...hijack the headlines with stories of hatred.

however, pursued his vision in steadfast faith, surmounting all dangers in a journey to see the sultan. He traveled through fierce fighting in Syria and inevitably was met by soldiers of the sultan’s army, who beat him savagely and put him in chains, dragging him before the sultan himself. Francis spoke to the sultan of God’s love and grace. The sultan listened intensely and was so moved that he offered Francis gifts and money. Francis, of course, had no desire for the money, but he gladly accepted one gift, an ivory horn used in the Muslim call to prayer. He took it back with him and used it to summon his own community for prayer. Both Francis and the sultan were transformed by that encounter.

In an age of religious extremists, Francis offers us an alternative. We have seen religious extremists of all stripes—Jewish, Muslim, Christian—distort the best that our faiths have to offer and hijack the headlines with stories of hatred. We’ve seen Christian extremists burn the Koran, blow up abortion clinics, bless bombs, baptize Wall Street,

"Where do you go to church?"



you! Where are you going to church these days?" I didn't have a clever answer, just an honest one. "I don't go to church anymore," I said. For a moment, no one said a word.

The once joyful environment of fellow saints sharing conversation about the goodness of Jesus in their lives changed to an awkward silence. The person who asked me the question just said, "Oh." After a few more seconds of awkward silence and nervous smiles, the

...the subject of where someone goes to church can so quickly change how we look at each other, rather than keeping Christ at the center of the conversation.

conversation changed from talk about Jesus to wrapping things up because everyone suddenly seemed to need to get going. I was left standing there in total amazement how one simple question could utterly destroy fellowship!

A Concise, Accurate Answer?

For a long time, after leaving behind my former allegiance to churchianity, I struggled with not being sure how to answer this question about church. At first, because I wanted to avoid the awkward reaction people sometimes have, I would say things like, "Oh, I'm not going anywhere right now...." I knew that most church folks would immediately hone in on the "right now" part of that statement, which generally led to them inviting me to their "awesome" church and telling me about

How frequently have we all heard the question "Where do you go to church?"

In many cases the question tends to be a sort of "qualifier" that will determine whether or not we, who are no longer part of that religious environment, are allowed to enjoy continued fellowship with those who pose the question. If you find

yourself outside the traditional four walls of the "church world" you know what I'm talking about.

A few years back I walked into the local Bible bookstore and ran into an old friend. We started talking about life in general and about what the Lord had been doing in our lives. It was actually a great conversation...until another friend walked up, surprised to see me, and said, "Hi Dave! Good to see

If I was granted three wishes, I can almost bet you that one of those wishes would be that the notion of organized religion and the false understanding of church would vanish from the planet. My heart is so absolutely done with churchianity.



why their pastor was so incredible. Sigh. At least I didn't have to explain myself.

But after awhile, that answer bothered me. Even though I wasn't saying anything untrue (technically speaking), it felt dishonest because I knew that most Christians would assume that I was just "in-between" churches, when the reality was, I was done with the whole thing!

But how could I explain that in a brief exchange of conversation? I didn't want to get into a debate and I didn't want someone to get the wrong idea, either. There often seems to be this notion among a lot of church folks that if you don't go to church, "the devil will get ya." I know that plenty of folks thought that about me when I left. It took a while to shake off worrying about what people think and just start trusting my relationship with the Lord.

Sometimes I would say things like, "We're both part of the same church." I, of course, meant the body of Christ. I knew that either the person would catch my meaning and agree, or they would mistakenly think I went to their (institutional) church—or, they might chuckle and then continue to want to know what institutional fellowship I belonged to. Often times, my attempt to be clever backfired and I wound up in a discussion anyway.

On one occasion I explained that

Virtually every church organization on the planet directly avoids or dismisses the teaching of Jesus on so many basic levels and exchanges his doctrine for tradition and legalism.... For this reason, going to church is absolutely against my religion!

the subject of where someone goes to church can so quickly change how we look at each other, rather than keeping Christ at the center of the conversation. To my surprise, on this one occasion, the person agreed and we spoke no more about what church either of us attended. But that manner of response was not always sufficient to deter the issue or conclude it with a positive result.

I tried talking about my own personal devotions with the Lord in the absence of church attendance.

There often seems to be this notion among a lot of church folks that if you don't go to church, "the devil will get ya."

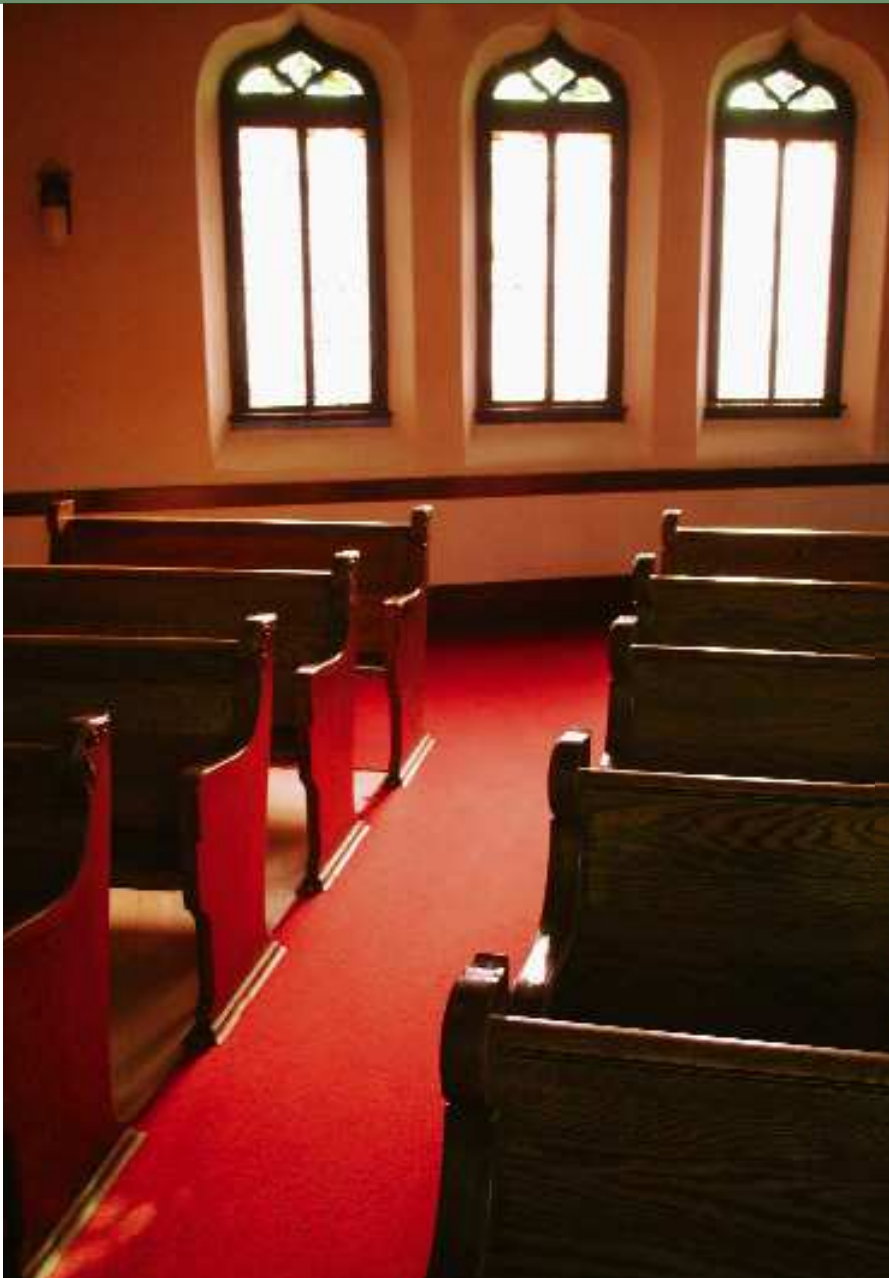
That only raised more questions and criticism. I finally got so sick of trying to manipulate the conversation and avoid scrutiny that the next time I was asked, I simply said, "I don't go to church." Once again, the responses were varied. I

quickly discovered that no matter how I answered the question, the response would be different, but in trusting the Lord with the aftermath of that statement, I found that he guided my words and I had some very fruitful conversations.

Going to Church—Against My Religion

These days I rather like the answer, "Sorry, church is against my religion," followed by a reference to James 1:27, which says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Sadly, many pastors wouldn't even know which families in the church are suffering. The pastor might know which ones aren't tithing, and he might know which ones he'll be happy to give a lecture to on the importance of sacrificial giving and serving the institution's needs, but he won't offer a dime of the organization's money or staff effort to lift a finger himself to help these individuals—especially if they do not faithfully



whole thing altogether. But then God opened a relationship for me with a man who occupies the title of pastor. I have enjoyed a number of conversations with this pastor about the subject of life in Christ versus mere churchianity. I have appreciated his openness, his humility and his genuineness, and he has become a friend as well. I know he truly loves Jesus.

I disagree with him on a number of issues and we freely discuss them at times. He (like so many of us) has been taught to think according to traditional church mindsets, but his heart seems to be eager to know the truth and allow God's Spirit to change him. This is

Some have made being "anti-church" their identification. As far as I'm concerned, that's just as near-sighted, religious and idolatrous as the most religious church-attending Pharisee out there!

my heart as well. He loves the gospel of Jesus and, as far as preaching goes, I love to hear this brother just talk about Jesus. I wish he'd stay on that simple foundation more often sometimes, but he has a true heart for the Lord and I am encouraged by it.

God has encouraged me through the insights he has shared and the testimony of Christ in his life. I've also watched as he and his wife have spent a lot of time actually reaching out to people in the community, including the impoverished—spending time with them, and helping to feed them.

So long as these folks are willing to relate to me on a simple level as a brother in Christ, without religious qualification or expectation, I am happy to spend time with them on occasion and just let the Lord lead.

The big problem is, so many "churches" blend the notion of holy and sacred along with the very place they gather.... Thus elements of guilt and ungodly pressure to conform, participate or submit are imposed on people.

plug in to the program. You'll notice that James did not say these widows and orphans needed to be faithful church attenders!

Virtually every church organization on the planet directly avoids or dismisses the teaching of Jesus on so many basic levels and ex-

changes his doctrine for tradition and legalism. For this reason, going to church is absolutely against my religion!

Once I became free of organized religion, I never thought I would find myself even visiting a church again! I could really do without the



“But isn’t attending against your religion?”

There are friends of mine who are outside the church system who believe I am compromising by having anything to do with church people at all. The sad part is, while I understand their concerns, I am sad that they have decided to so isolate themselves from allowing God to freely lead them in many ways. Some have made being “anti-church” their identification. As far as I’m concerned, that’s just as near-sighted, religious and idolatrous as the most religious church-attending Pharisee out there!

When people recognize God’s call to shed their religion and walk closely with him, they need to understand that being free from religion does not mean their new identity is to be an anti-church Christian. Our true identity is Christ Jesus!

Just because we have been set free from religion or the false concept of church, doesn’t mean we are to be any less a child of God who loves others, prays for others, forgives others, and goes where our Father leads us! I am not endorsing churchianity in any way by saying this. I’m saying, don’t let the church issue become your identity. Yes, we must be strong and bold and speak only the truth and live true to our convictions, but we must also walk with mercy, have soft hearts before God, and allow him to guide us and allow him to live through us and touch people.

If I was granted three wishes, I can almost bet you that one of those wishes would be that the notion of organized religion and the false understanding of church would vanish from the planet. My heart is so absolutely *done* with churchianity. Coming back to reality, I know that organized churches do exist and many sincere believers in

Jesus attend them for a number of various reasons.

Paul the apostle said he made himself all things to all men that he might win some. Is it so strange to presume that this could even apply to some of us that have wondered if God has called us to befriend church folks or even find ourselves in their environment on occasion?

Did Jesus do any less? He was found often among both sinners and saints. He hung out with the thieves, prostitutes and drunkards, but also with the most religious in society. He ate dinner at the home of Pharisees! He taught in the Temple! He called everyone to the Father. He didn’t call them to be the “out of temple” crowd or the “free from Judaism” believers. I think this is a most significant point to consider.

The big problem is, so many “churches” blend the notion of holy and sacred along with the very place they gather and the concept of gathering at this place. Thus elements of guilt and ungodly pressure to conform, participate or submit are imposed on people. At that point, it ceases to be just an organization in the minds of those attending, and leaders often use this notion to their advantage.

Reforming Religious Institutions?

Personally, I do not believe that “reformation” is the answer for today’s church system. I believe there is no logic in the notion that presumes

God would want to reform something he never formed/created and never called people to submit to—especially when these institutions directly offend the Lord’s teaching and when they define themselves as “the church” (a term and concept that runs completely opposite to what Jesus ordained as being his church).

If you have experienced an exodus from churchianity and have been bothered with the question “where do you go to church?” I’ll offer this: Be honest and trust Jesus to guide your answers. I don’t think there is any perfect way to phrase an answer so that everyone

When people recognize God’s call to shed their religion and walk close with him, they need to understand that being free from religion does not mean their new identity is to be an anti-church Christian. Our true identity is Christ Jesus!

will magically understand. Just don’t let a wall go up that is created by your hands! Others may throw up walls of their own. See the question as an opportunity to share the love of God and the freedom he has given you.

Be an instrument of love and truth. Be the church! □

David Yeubanks has served in many facets of organized church life for the better part of twenty years (including music ministry, street outreach and youth work). He received an AA in Theology from Christian Life School of Theology and Seminary, but feels he has learned a lot more about walking with Jesus since he stepped out of organized religion several years ago. Dave and his wife, Tammy, live in Washington state. You can visit his website at www.truthforfree.com.

It's the People,



by Greg Albrecht

not the Steeple

Most North Americans, when asked what church is, think of a building or a religious organization. For many, the church is nothing more than a group of people who join some kind of club to promote and defend morality, virtue and their idea of God.

Many religious buildings have a denominationally distinct style with a cross, stained glass windows and some religious figures or symbols prominently displayed. The “club” members usually tend toward the more serious side, taking their religion seriously, and they generally do not suffer fools gladly.

In some religious clubs people sit silently and in others not so silently while they listen to a speech (called a sermon or homily), sing a few songs (sometimes called hymns), give their weekly dues

(called offerings) and then head for the parking lot.

Surveys tell us that in the United States of America alone over 100 million club members “go to church” regularly.

Who came up with this idea of church, anyway? Is the church merely an attempt to organize people into some common purpose

tians by trusting in Jesus to give them eternal life and forgive them—God, the apostle Paul teaches, places them in the church.

The church is described in the New Testament as a body, the body of Christ. *This body is not one and the same as a building or an organization.* It is the living representation of Jesus. He lives through his

The church is described in the New Testament as a body, the body of Christ. This body is not one and the same as a building or an organization. It is the living representation of Jesus.

around shared moral values and religious convictions?

The Bible teaches that the church is actually one large body, the living body of Christ upon the earth. When people become Chris-

tians by trusting in Jesus to give them eternal life and forgive them—God, the apostle Paul teaches, places them in the church.

The church is described in the New Testament as a body, the body of Christ. *This body is not one and the same as a building or an organization.* It is the living representation of Jesus. He lives through his

age, but all those Christians of the past, and all those who will live in the future. They constitute one large family—the family of God. Some of these believers are children, others are senior citizens. They come from every race, tongue, tribe and place.

Whether the church is in Indonesia or Japan, Germany or Russia, Africa or North America—regardless of different languages or

clear that the body of Christ, a metaphor for the church, had begun at that historic moment when God joined all the Christ-followers together in what he called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The birth of the church was God's idea. It wasn't started by a group of religious leaders trying to "plant" a church and/or exert control over those who attend.

Explaining this brand new com-

building that calls itself a church does not make one a Christian.

As Billy Sunday, an evangelist of an earlier generation in America once said, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile." God places us in the universal body of Christ when we place our trust in Jesus as our Savior and surrender our lives to him.

What Is the Purpose of the Church?

Why did God create his church? Some have the idea that the church is a place where Christians gather together and put up walls in an attempt to keep the world out. Occasionally, they venture out far enough to make some judgment upon society, then dash back to the safety and cover of their church fortress.

And in some cases this wrong-headed notion of "doing" church prevails. There are many who attempt to "do" church in such a way. Their concept of church is a "holiness club" whose membership standards and requirements insist upon near-perfect behavior by its individual members. Yet God's purpose for the church is much different.

The church isn't a sacred holding tank for Christians until their death. It is a hospital for sinners,

The birth of the church was God's idea. It wasn't started by a group of religious leaders trying to... exert control over those who attend.

cultures—Christians are part of this body. Their relationship with God is defined by who they are, in Christ, more than a geographically located place to which they go. *Church is who they are more than a place they go.*

The church includes Christ-followers who are part of many different denominations. Though it may look and sound differently in different parts of the world, those who have trusted in Jesus alone for their salvation are part of his body.

Whose Idea Was the Church?

The body of Christ is not just another human political enterprise or social gathering. On the day of Pentecost, a few weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christ-followers who had been waiting for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit suddenly experienced his arrival (Acts 1:5, 2:2).

With great signs and wonders, the church was inaugurated. A loose collection of individuals was suddenly and miraculously knit together into one marvelous body by the divine act of God. A brand new family had been born, a revolutionary new society had been created.

No vote was taken—no sanctuary or fellowship hall was constructed. There were no by-laws, no stained glass windows, no steeples, no choirs—no one even took an offering! But the universal body of Christ had miraculously begun.

Later, the apostle Paul made it

munity, Paul described how the church is one body, with the same characteristics of human bodies: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

When a person becomes a Christian, they are placed into the body of Christ on earth, not by church policy, or group vote, or by how much they donated to the building fund—but by an act of the Holy Spirit. They are born into this fam-

The church isn't a sacred holding tank for Christians until their death. It is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.

ily and become a vital and necessary part of the body, the church. The church encompasses all believers in Christ.

The body of Christ was God's idea, not man's! God calls humans to his church and places them within it. The church is not a social club which we join—the church is a divine community to which we are called and invited. By God's grace, Christ-followers *are* the church!

Meeting certain requirements or performing specific rites and rituals does not obligate God to give us membership in the universal body of Christ. Merely attending services in a

not a museum for saints.

Physical corporations called churches are filled with people who do not perfectly represent the teachings and ideals of Jesus. In a hospital you will find people at all levels of health, and others much further along in their recovery.

The body of Christ is not contained within a religious shrine—a museum-like place where trophy cases display perfect Christianity. Rather, the church takes place in the lives of people who are being slowly transformed from what they once were into what God wants to make of them. This transformation takes time.

The New Testament is frank and honest about the failures and shortcomings of New Testament Christians. Those who commit themselves to the universal body of Christ are transformed and become, in Christ, forgiving, kind, compassionate and patient. But the transformation is gradual, and is accomplished by God within the lives of imperfect people whom he calls “the church.”

As Christ-followers, we are the church. Christians may be Christians (and tens of millions are), without attending a geographically located church building.

It is not church attendance that makes someone a Christian, but placing their trust in Jesus, and his work on the cross. All Christians, regardless of how, when and where they reflect the new life that Jesus lives within them, are part of the universal body of Christ.

There are no “second string” Christians, those who just warm the bench while others do the important work. God has given each Christian some special and unique ability or gift of service to be useful to the whole body.

Which Church Is the True Church?

Can you imagine how delighted Starbucks would be if it were able, in some promotional fantasyland dream world, to convince coffee lovers everywhere that Starbucks sold the only authentic, real and “true” coffee?

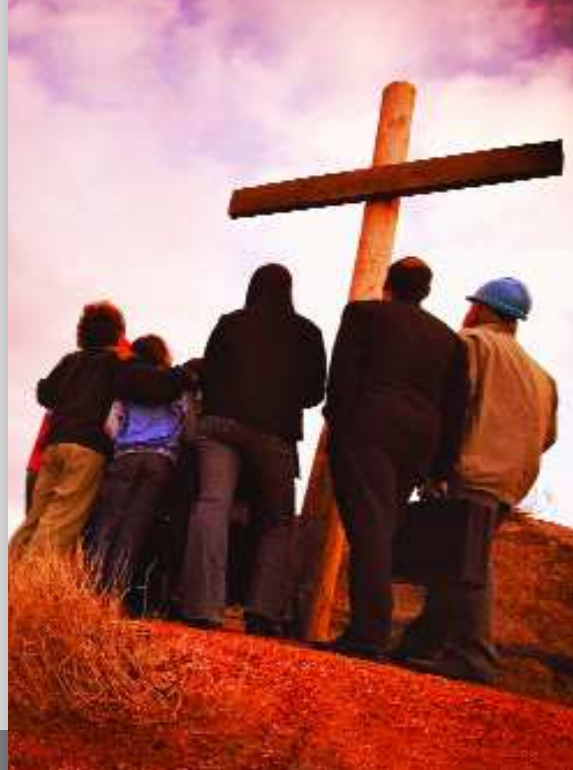
If Starbucks were able to convince/persuade/indoctrinate/brainwash vast numbers of the population it “serves” that drinking coffee made at home would not cut the mustard with the coffee god, then they would be looking at an incredible increase in sales. What a mind boggling business proposition!

If Starbucks were able to convince countless millions of people that the only real caffeine benefit they could ever receive was from coffee served by Starbucks baristas (priests) then Starbucks would have a virtual monopoly on coffee sales and consumption in the lives of those convinced of such a proposition.

In this dream world Starbucks would be able to meet the daily caffeine needs of its followers through its baristas in a similar way as some brick-and-mortar churches provide communion. So Starbucks really needs to get into the religion business!

After all, isn’t this fantasyland monopoly what some churches and denominations already “enjoy”? Some churches and denominations have successfully convinced their followers that the spiri-

It is not church attendance that makes someone a Christian, but placing their trust in Jesus, and his work on the cross.



tual meal of the body of Christ provided to all who trust and believe in him is best served, or perhaps only served, at the locations where its franchises are in business. Then, when a church or denomination is able to add the claim that it and it alone is the “true” church and the only divinely approved franchise here on earth, we are talking about a religious monopoly!

But these religious claims are far from true, they are fabrications, deceitfully manipulating followers that they cannot make coffee in their kitchens, they can only drink and imbibe divinely approved caffeine at appropriate religious franchises.

The truth is that there is no coffee god who has given an exclusive franchise to any retail outlet—whether the outlet actually sells coffee or the presumed favor of God. With the coffee metaphor in mind, one may brew coffee in their kitchen and one may go to Starbucks or some other retail brand (of course, the coffee brewed at home tends to be a little less expensive!).

No physically incorporated entity exclusively represents God here on earth. The style and peculiar

doctrinal distinctives of a particular group or denomination are not what constitute God’s church. Dogmas and creeds are not the absolute means of identifying a Christ-follower.

*God loved the birds, so he invented trees.
Man loved the birds, so he invented cages.*

The true church is not entered by a physical door, or by attending membership classes, but by a spiritual re-birth by which God joins you to his body, the church. You may be part of the body of Christ whether you frequent a building that calls itself a church—or not.

In all of the various parts of the body of Christ—whether inside official congregations, denominations or ministries, or outside of official institutions—within institutions and small groups of believers—you will find people growing in Christ. They are not perfect, but they are in process, just like you and me.

If you have believed in Jesus, and have been spiritually transformed and given a new birth by God’s grace, they are your family. They are a part of the body, just as you are. □



The Grapes of Wrath

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

Raised an Episcopalian, he abandoned the church as a teenager but not the faith, and surely not the Bible. Indeed, references and allusions to the Bible are found in virtually all of his novels and essays. Reflecting on his hometown of Salinas, California, John Steinbeck wrote humorously about the various sectarian preachers and their churches—“churches [that] came in swinging, cocky and loud and confident.” In a very serious vein, however, he goes on to say that these churches all brought the same thing: “the Scripture on which our ethics, our art and poetry, and our relationships are built.”

One does not have to dig deep into Steinbeck to find scriptural themes. *East of Eden*, for example, parallels stories in Genesis, especially the one of Cain and Abel in chapter 4. But it is in his classic *The Grapes of Wrath* that he borrows biblical themes most liberally.

When I first read this book in high school, I somehow missed Steinbeck’s dependence on Scripture, completely missing the similarities with the stories I was so familiar with. I was much more consumed with the obvious devastation caused by massive dust storms. My folks had often spoken of severe hardship during the Great Depression, but they and other poor upper-midwest farmers fared far better than did those from the southern plains that were so painfully ravaged.

There are histories and first-person accounts that tell this sad story, but none with the emotional power of Steinbeck. And his novel is not simply one story of family life and land. Steinbeck’s classic penetrates the human condition with biblical precision—a story that finds its heartbeat in every culture and every age.

For the Joad family, all *twelve* of them complete with a “traitor,” their circumstances are mirrored in the book of Job, who also loses his wealth (and much more).

Noah is the name of the oldest son, and the jalopy-truck that is driven out West is no less than the *ark*. But if the reader is still not convinced, California is surely a Promised Land as real as Canaan ever was, and like the biblical Promised Land, it is not easily settled or conquered.

There’s a preacher in the book, Jim Casey, whose initials are reminiscent of another preacher some two thousand years ago. Jim abandons his traditional religious vocation to simply go out and preach a radical form of good news that speaks to the hearts of hurting people.

The title, of course, like the story-line and characters, is drawn from scripture. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a phrase that comes straight out of Revelation 14:19: “The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath.”

Steinbeck was right when he credited the Bible as the foundation for “our ethics, our art and poetry, and our relationships.” But in a more personal realm, the Bible became the spiritual foundation for countless individual families as impoverished as the fictional Joads.

The Nutter Murphey family is representative. When they arrived in the little town of Shawnee, Kansas in 1859, the only vacant building they could secure as a residence was a storeroom filled with whiskey barrels. “That night the family Bible rested in the center of the room,” recalled daughter Lydia. They gathered around and sat on boxes to listen to the words from that singular book.

Amid long, arduous days of hardship and privation, this devotional time was treasured. In fact, according to Lydia: “During the fifty years of his Kansas citizenship, this morning and evening scripture reading and prayer was not once omitted in my father’s house.”

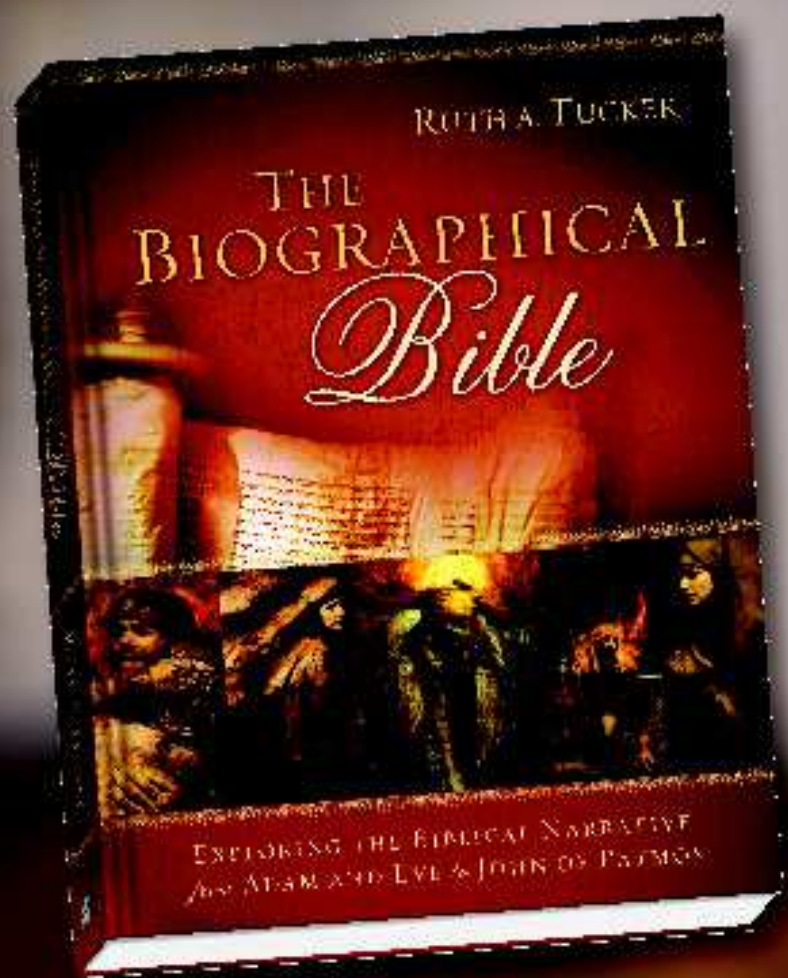
For a girl growing up on the rugged prairie of wind and dust these were treasured moments. Tender mercies. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

Steinbeck’s classic penetrates the human condition with biblical precision—a story that finds its heartbeat in every culture and every age.

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**THE PERFECT
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RUTH A. TUCKER (PhD, Northern Illinois University) has spent more than twenty years teaching and was the first woman to hold a faculty position at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is the author of many books and lives in Michigan.





by Monika Spykerman

I read Rachel Held Evans' book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated*

Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband Master, during a particularly difficult time in my life. My mother was in the hospital, succumbing to the final stages of ovarian cancer. My mind was restless and not easily engaged with any task; I was always mentally elsewhere.

I tried knitting, I skimmed through magazines and I played

During the long nights sitting by my mother as an array of machines beeped and tweeted and wheezed and pumped, I discovered a haven in Evans' words.

games on my cellphone. If I read any other books during those weeks, I don't remember them. But

A Year of Biblical Womanhood immediately hooked me. During the long nights sitting by my mother as an array of machines beeped and tweeted and wheezed and

In October, when she explores the virtue of gentleness, she sits on her roof (à la Proverbs 25:24) as public contrition for arguing with her husband, Dan.

pumped, I discovered a haven in Evans' words.

I'd already read *The Year of Living Biblically*, by A.J. Jacobs and found it utterly enjoyable—pithy, personable and wise. I was delighted to learn that a woman had decided to experimentally obey and literally implement all biblical teaching. Like Jacobs, Evans documented her experiences in a blog before re-

working the posts into book form. But why undertake such a project at all, if it's already been done?

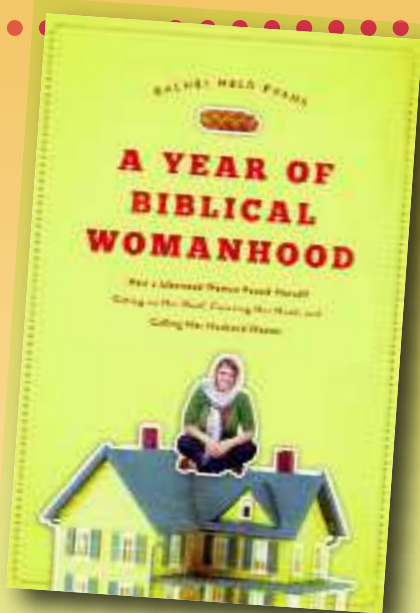
What makes "living biblically" different for a woman than for a man?

If life was tough for men in the Bible, it was even tougher for

women. Women in ancient Israel were instructed to separate themselves during "that time of the month," and anything that they touched became "unclean." If a menstruating woman sat on a chair, the chair would be considered unclean, and so would any man who sat on the same chair.

And, *God forbid* (in fact, he did!) that a husband should touch his wife for seven days after her period (Leviticus 12:2). If a woman gave birth to a son, she was considered ritually impure for 40 days (Leviticus 12:4), and (dirtiest of all) her impurity lasted for 80 days if she bore a daughter (Leviticus 12:5).

A woman's vows could be negated by her husband or father (Num-



...the public response to her biblical womanhood project was overwhelming. It's not too difficult to understand why. She's addressing a timeless topic in an approachable manner, and with an irresistible twist, because she doesn't merely discuss these issues in the abstract—she's actually living this stuff.

bers 30:1-16). A widowed woman was *required* to marry her brother-in-law (Deuteronomy 25:5). And if, say, a fight broke out between a woman's husband and another man, and she grabbed the other guy's, uh, *package*, in order to give her husband the advantage, her hand had to be cut off (Deuteronomy 25:12).

And that's just some of the overt laws directed toward women in the Old Testament!

In the New Testament, women were supposed to keep their hair long (1 Corinthians 11:15), their heads covered (1 Corinthians 11:6), remain silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34), stay at home (Titus 2: 5), never teach a man anything (1 Timothy 2:11-14), dress modestly (1 Timothy 2:9), never wear braids or jewelry (1 Peter 3:3-4), and ask their husbands if they had any theological questions (1 Corinthians 14:35).

Then there are the million other things a godly woman really *ought* to be doing—at least according to Proverbs 31, the Gold Standard of Biblical Womanhood: She should work all night (vs. 18) and then rise early to prepare breakfast for her family and her servants (vs. 15), make clothes to sell (vs. 24), invest profitably in real estate (vs. 16), wear only the finest fabrics (vs. 22), extend charity to the poor (vs. 20), know everything that happens in her house (vs. 27), and

laugh at the future (vs. 25). *Busy, busy, busy!*

So literally adopting a biblical woman's lifestyle in this day and age—"biblical" meaning any instructions given to women between Genesis and Revelation? Well, it's *complicated*. Evans prudently decides not to keep *all* the rules *all* year long. Instead, her book is divided into twelve chapters, one for every month, each chapter examining a single facet of biblical womanhood: gentleness, domesticity, obedience, valor, beauty, modesty, purity, fertility, submission, charity, silence and grace.

Living Biblically, Month by Month

During April, the Month of Purity, she lives in a tent for the duration of her period and for seven days afterward, and carries a cushion with her wherever she goes, so she won't accidentally make anything unclean.

During November, the Month of Domesticity, she sews her own clothes and improves her cooking skills (as per Proverbs 31:15) by roasting a turkey, Martha Stewart-style, while examining the Gospel story of Mary and Martha.

Lacking a contemporary Christian example of full-throttle Old Testament womanhood, Evans adopts an Orthodox Jewish woman, Ahava ...teaching her how to bake the perfect loaf of challah

In October, when she explores the virtue of gentleness, she sits on her roof (*à la* Proverbs 25:24) as public contrition for arguing with her husband, Dan.

In January, she stands at her hometown city limits of Dayton, Ohio, holding a sign proclaiming "Dan is awesome!"—a tribute to Proverbs 31:23.

In August, she attends a Quaker worship service and visits a monastery to learn about silence. In March, she gives up jeans and trousers in favor of full-length skirts, keeps her head covered with a scarf or shawl, and hangs out with Amish women to learn more about modesty.

In May, the Month of Fertility, she and Dan—who don't (yet?) have children—spend three days caring for "Baby Think-It-Over," a computerized infant-doll that cries and coos and excretes at all the most inconvenient times, just like a real baby; and she interviews the daughter of a Quiverfull family, who believe that a woman's uterus should always be open for business.

In July, she travels to Bolivia with World Vision in order to learn about justice, and also gives up coffee to protest the unfair wages



and inhumane conditions for coffee farmers and workers. And from the beginning of the project to the end, she never cuts her hair.

There's something for everyone in her story—a little bit radical, a little bit traditional, a little bit edgy, a little bit centrist. Furthermore, she's eminently readable. She isn't shy about voicing doubts, or cracking mildly irreverent jokes, or revealing personal shortcomings, but she is never flippant about her faith or her desire to know God more intimately. Evans self-identifies as "liberated," yet she attempts to live in an excruciatingly traditional matter, following rules so obscure and restrictive that most Christian women, no matter how traditional, would never even consider trying to incorporate them into their faith-practices.

In January, she stands at her hometown city limits of Dayton, Ohio, holding a sign proclaiming "Dan is awesome!"—a tribute to Proverbs 31:23.



...Evans wants to illuminate Scriptural teaching on womanhood instead of outright dismissing the Bible's strictures as disparaging and oppressive. She takes things literally, obeying the letter of the law in order to better understand its spirit.

Lacking a contemporary Christian example of full-throttle Old Testament womanhood, Evans adopts an Orthodox Jewish woman, Ahava, as a sort of "old school" mentor. Ahava advises Evans on some finer points of Old Testament living, as well as teaching her how to bake the perfect loaf of *challah*, a deliciously soft and egg-laden bread, sweet but not too sweet, eaten on the Sabbath and other Jewish holy days (I had to eat some—for, uh, research purposes).

Silence—The Ultimate Challenge?

Every chapter was fascinating. I enjoyed reading about Evans' misadventures in the kitchen as she hones her domestic skills, and eagerly followed her foray into pseudo-parenting. However, the chapter that most captivated me was "August: Silence," during which Evans remains completely quiet at church, cancels all her speaking engagements, takes a "vacation" from the Internet (including her blog), and spends several silent days at St. Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Alabama.

She writes that she "wants to explore what you might call the upside of silence, the sort of silence that has been practiced by contemplatives for centuries to quiet the spirit and turn the soul toward God."

She sits on a bench by a lake, after a morning in which she fails to sufficiently empty her active mind, and notices the breeze rippling the water and a tiny turtle poking its head above the surface. She remembers Psalm 131:2: "But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am

like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content."

Even those who support an entirely literal interpretation of the Bible—such as most Evangelicals and many other mainstream denominations—don't completely forbid women to speak during church, although that's exactly what Paul seems to be saying, in four different ways, in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35: women should remain silent in church, they are not allowed to speak in church, it's disgraceful for them to speak in church, and if they have questions about what they heard in church, they should ask their husbands when they get home.

This must have been a prickly subject for Evans, who is extremely gifted at *not* remaining silent. Before beginning her biblical womanhood project, Evans had already authored a book, *Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions*, published by Zondervan in 2010.

She was, perhaps, accustomed to writing and talking about theologically ticklish issues, but the public response to her biblical womanhood project was overwhelming. It's not too difficult to understand why. She's addressing a timeless topic in an approachable manner, and with an irresistible twist, because she doesn't merely discuss these issues in the abstract—she's actually living this stuff.

Her popularity soared. Evans appeared on "The Today Show" and "The View," and she's been featured on NPR, Slate, the BBC, *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*, and Oprah.com, among other media standard-bearers. Her book is a *New York Times* best-seller. Her fans include Christian women, as well as men, atheists, lapsed Christians,

Mormons and Catholics, Taoists and Buddhists (and probably a few Wiccans). Evans is a sought-after keynote speaker at religious conferences, colleges, and churches.

She's planning another book, and continues to write about faith-related issues on her blog, rachelheldevans.com, which garnered 7.3 million page views last year.

Not Everyone's Cheering

Whether Evans wished to be or not, she's become a controversial figure. Although countless Christians revere Evans for undertaking such a spiritually and physically monumental task, some say she seeks only to turn Scripture on its head and incite women to become feminists (the term "feminism" here meaning something slightly sinister, rather than—to borrow the words of the popular bumper sticker—the notion that women are people, too).

In the book's last chapter, "September: Grace," Evans relates how "a shared hatred of the project developed between two unlikely groups: atheists who assumed I was a naive religious nut doing this as an act of piety to glorify the patri-

I don't know if, by some standards, [my mother] could be called a model of biblical womanhood. But she gave me a moral compass that pointed to God, and then gave me the freedom to find my own way home.

archal elements of Scripture, and evangelicals who assumed I was a raging liberal feminist doing this as an act of rebellion to make the Bible and those who love it look stupid."

I don't view her as especially controversy-worthy, though I can see why lots of people would think so. The way she explores *elements* of womanhood, rather than systematically refuting individual laws and commands, suggests that Evans wants to illuminate Scriptural teaching on womanhood instead of outright dismissing the Bible's strictures as disparaging and oppressive. She takes things literally, obeying the letter of the law in

In my opinion, Evans' year of biblical womanhood wasn't undertaken to provoke Christians or feminists or conservatives or liberals or anyone... She fearlessly turned words into actions. She was so invested in getting to the heart of her faith that she went to extremes.

order to better understand its spirit. Evans is, in a word, *bold*. But isn't that the opposite of what a woman is supposed to be?

In her book and in her blog, Evans continually revisits the concept of *eshet chayil* or "woman of valor." *Chayil*—employed in the original Hebrew of Proverbs 31:10—is variously translated as "excellent," "virtuous," "capable," "valiant," or "noble." *Chayil* can also describe a man, and is used elsewhere in the Bible to denote might in a military context.

The imagery in Proverbs 31 is overtly militaristic, and repeatedly emphasizes the ideal woman's strength and intelligence. This is a woman who doesn't back down in matters of principle, tirelessly sees to the needs of her household, and

upholds the rights of others. She's an extraordinary woman who does big things in her sphere of influence. For Evans, her sphere is words, and she backed up her words with deeds.

What Being a Woman Means

A Year of Biblical Womanhood might seem an unusual book to draw my attention while preparing for the impending loss of my mother, but in retrospect, I think maybe it was not so strange. Maybe I was thinking about what it means to be a woman. Maybe I was considering my mother's spiritual legacy to me, and the values I'm imparting to my own daughter.

It's now—as I write this—about six months since my mom died. Today would have been her 65th birthday. I miss her all the time, even though she never made *challah*, or called my dad "master," or sat on the roof as public penance for starting a fight.

My mother wore jeans, she spoke up in church, and she sported short hair. She gave birth to only one child—me. I don't know if, by some standards, she could be called a model of biblical womanhood.

But she gave me a moral compass that pointed to God, and then gave me the freedom to find my own way home.

In my opinion, Evans' year of biblical womanhood wasn't undertaken to provoke Christians or feminists or conservatives or liberals or anyone.

She used the Bible as her guide, did exhaustive additional research, and she spoke to hundreds of people to try and understand things that didn't immediately make sense to her. She prayed, she meditated, she contemplated. She fearlessly turned words into actions. She was so invested in getting to the heart of her faith that she went to extremes.

I don't know how you can get more sincere or more valorous than that.

Eshet chayil, indeed. □

Monika Spykerman lives in Camas, Washington, with her husband, Simon, and daughter, Annika. She is a contributing writer for The Plain Truth and explores subjects related to the family, relationships, parenting and womanhood. This is the first article she's written that she didn't get to show to her mom.



THE TRINITY: A BEGINNER'S

Years ago, when I was a family therapist in the counseling ministry of the local megachurch, a young couple recounted a hurtful, destructive argument that occurred when the young bride asked to put a “chair” in her husband’s office so she could be near him when he

worked at home. Because his office was quite small, the young husband was irate and annoyed because there simply was not enough room for another “chair.” The young wife felt hurt and rejected because she thought her husband did not want her near when he was working.

As the couple disclosed their feelings in counseling, the wife revealed that she had merely wanted to put a small straight-back chair in a tiny corner of the room, where she could read as her husband worked. With some embarrassment, the young husband admitted that he thought she wanted to



by Martin M. Davis

GUIDE

bring in a large “easy chair” from the living room, one that would take up far too much space in an already overcrowded room. Even though they were using the same word, the couple had argued because they attached very different meanings to the word “chair.”

Language matters; words are im-

portant. Moreover, the meaning attached to words is crucial if confusion and misunderstanding are to be avoided. Perhaps nowhere is language more problematic and the meaning of words more subject to misunderstanding than in the doctrine of the Trinity—the belief that the One God of the Christian faith eternally exists as three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Do the Math—1+1+1=3?

Recently, as I quickly flipped through the surplus of “Christian” channels invading my home via satellite, I stopped at an Australian broadcast when I heard the word “Trinity.” The host was asking her guest, an “expert” on the doctrine, “How can God be one and three? How can one ‘equal’ three? she asked. “The ‘math’ just doesn’t add up,” she said. Her questions betray the com-

PERHAPS NOWHERE IS LANGUAGE MORE PROBLEMATIC AND THE MEANING OF WORDS MORE SUBJECT TO MISUNDERSTANDING THAN IN THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY...

mon misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity as a “mathematical” puzzle.

A few years ago, a survey was taken among a group of church members in London, who were asked, “How can God be three persons in one?”

Showing their misunderstanding of the “oneness” of God, about one-third of the respondents replied that God was “one” in the sense of being “one person.” As one respondent typically affirmed, “The three are one person; they’re all one person.”¹

To be sure, much confusion ex-

TO BE SURE, MUCH CONFUSION EXISTS REGARDING THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY.... IT IS NOT TRUE, HOWEVER, THAT THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IS BEYOND OUR UNDERSTANDING.

ists regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. The confusion is exacerbated by preachers who describe the doctrine of the Trinity as a mind-boggling mystery or an incomprehensible enigma far beyond the limits of human understanding. While it is true that we finite humans are incapable of fully comprehending the infinite God, it is not true, however, that the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our understanding.

A “doctrine” is simply an attempt to put into words what we do know about God based upon God’s self-revelation of himself. The “doctrine of the Trinity” is an attempt to make sense of the fact that the “one God” of the Christian faith has revealed himself in the Holy Bible in “three persons”—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The

biblical narrative of the Father’s reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ, as well as his bringing that work to fruition by the Spirit, implies a Trinitarian understanding of God (see 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Romans 5:1-5; Ephesians 1:3-14).

The early church was composed, at least initially, of Jews. In distinction to the cultures around them who worshipped many gods, the Jews worshipped one God. At the same time, the early Jewish Christians believed that God had come in the flesh and dwelt among them in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14). They believed that Jesus is “Immanuel”: God with us (Matt 1:23). Moreover, the early Chris-



1 CORINTHIANS 13... NOTE THAT PAUL DESCRIBES LOVE IN INTERPERSONAL TERMS; THAT IS, HE DESCRIBES LOVE IN TERMS OF RELATIONSHIP. GODLY LOVE IS RELATIONAL, FOR BY ITS VERY NATURE, LOVE REQUIRES ANOTHER.

tians believed that the crucified Christ remained present among them through the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17, 18).

Christ-followers of the early church, many of whom were slaves who could neither read nor write, did not concern themselves with abstract speculation about the nature of God; yet, their worship and practice was distinctly Trinitarian in character.

Following the commandment of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19), the early church baptized in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, even as they declared the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14). Early second-century writings—including the 1) *Didache*, an early writing on church order and practice; 2) Hippolytus' Holy Communion prayer and baptismal formula, and 3) Justin Martyr's early description of a Christian worship service and baptism—portray Christians baptizing and celebrating Holy Communion (or the Lord's Supper) in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

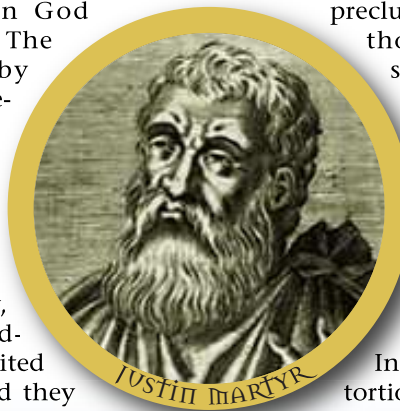
Distortions of the Triune Nature of God

Christian theologians began their construction of the "doctrine" of the Trinity from the "raw material" describing the worship and practice of the early church. The starting point for Christian reflection on the nature of God is the relationship between God and Jesus Christ. The problem faced by early Christian theologians, as they pondered the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ,² was not whether Jesus was God, but how, within the boundaries of their inherited monotheism, could they maintain the unity of God while confessing the deity of Jesus who is distinct from God the Father. How could the early church claim that Jesus is one with God while maintaining there is only one God?

As the early church began to pro-

claim the deity of Christ, they encountered opposition from those who distorted the New Testament witness to the Triune nature of God. In the second century, some incorrectly argued that the terms "Father," "Son" and "Holy Spirit" are merely different "names" for God, each designating a different "role" played by a "one-person" God, like a single individual who plays the roles of spouse, employee and soccer coach on a given day. Others wrongly argued that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct "individuals," like the coach, quarterback and wide receiver on a football team.

The first error, known historically as *modalism*, preserves the one "being" of God but loses the specific identity of the three persons of the Godhead by reducing the Father, Son and Spirit to one person. The second error, *tritheism* (or "pluralism"), stresses the "distinction" of the three persons of the Godhead at the expense of the "unity" of God and results in "three gods," rather than "one God in three persons." Both errors fail to express the essential Trinitarian element of relationship among the three persons of the Godhead. *Modalism* precludes relationship by reducing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to "one person." *Tritheism* precludes relationship, for though the three persons may function together in a limited way, they are not "one" in terms of sharing a common "being."



Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian

In the face of these distortions of the New Testament witness to the nature of God, early Christian thinkers struggled to accurately express God's triadic self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while stringently maintaining the unity of the one God of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

Justin Martyr, the great “apologist” who defended the early second-century Church against false charges brought against Christians, invoked the image of light to capture the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son. Justin captured both the *equality* and the *distinction* of the Father-Son relation by arguing that the Son is indivisible from the Father in the same way that light emitted by the sun is indivisible from its source. His metaphor became a favorite among the Church fathers and was later enshrined in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, where one of several phrases used to describe Jesus Christ is “Light from Light.”



African lawyer Tertullian coined the word “Trinity” (Latin: *trinitas*) and argued that Christians worship “one God in three persons.” For Tertullian, “being” or “nature” is the unifying principle of the Godhead, that is, what the three persons of the Trinity have in “common.” “Person” is the principle of “distinction” or “otherness”; that is, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, and the Father and Son are not the Holy Spirit. Rather, each person of the Triune God is “distinct” from the other.

Arius Versus Athanasius

The fourth century was a time of great conflict among the theologians of the early Church. Since the time of Tertullian, confusion had existed between the Greek-speaking theologians of the eastern Mediterranean and the Latin-speaking theologians of the west regarding the proper translation of important Trinitarian terms such as “being” and “person.” To add to the confusion, these terms were often used interchangeably, much as today when a single individual may be described both as a “person” and as a human “being.” Prior to the fourth century, the universal Church simply lacked the conceptual and linguistic resources to express how God is both one and three.

This confusion in terminology climaxed in one of the greatest theological conflicts in the history of the church. Arius, a deacon from Alexandria, argued that the “one being” of God cannot be “divided,” for such would result in more than one God and compromise the inviolate principle of *monotheism*. For Arius, therefore,

Jesus Christ cannot participate in the “being” of God; that is, he is not fully divine; rather, he is “subordinate” in being to God. Much like modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses, Arius argued that Jesus is a *created* being, that is, an exalted “creature,” like an archangel, who is less than fully God.

Athanasius, one of the most important theologians in the history of the Church, stalwartly defended the deity of Jesus Christ against the *subordinationism* of Arius. As



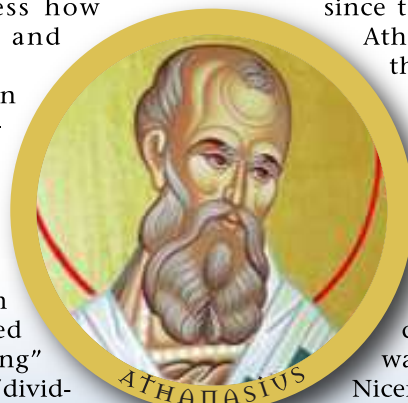
Athanasius understood, if Jesus is a “created” being, he cannot be the “eternal” Word of God “incarnate,” that is, God in human flesh (John 1:1, 14). For Athanasius, this was no mere academic theological squabble; to be sure, nothing less than salvation was at stake, for if Jesus Christ is not fully God, then we are still in our sins, for only God can save.

In what has been called the most important theological statement since the New Testament, Athanasius argued that the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, is “of one being with the Father.” That is, Jesus Christ is fully God, just as the Father is God. Athanasius’ defense of the full deity of Jesus Christ was enshrined in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 A.D.), where, in accordance with the apostolic witness recorded in the New Testament, the church fathers declared



Irenaeus, an important theologian of the second-century, developed his Trinitarian insights in contention with the Gnostics, who erroneously thought of God as utterly transcendent and completely separate from the taint of the “evil” material world. To the contrary, Irenaeus argued that God the Father interacts with creation through his “two hands,” that is, the Son and the Spirit. For Irenaeus, the Son and Spirit belong intrinsically and eternally to the being of God, as the hands of a sculptor belong intrinsically to the artist and are the means of his or her creative expression.

In the third century, the North



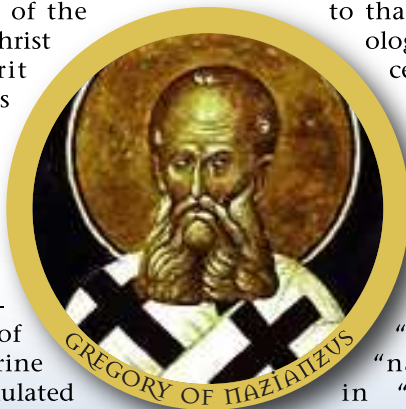


Icon from the Mégalo Metéoron Monastery in Greece, representing the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea 325 A.D., with the condemned Arius in the bottom of the icon.

that Jesus Christ is “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, Of one being with the Father.” At the same time, the fathers asserted the full deity of the Holy Spirit.³

One Being, Three Persons

With the assertion of the full deity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit against distortions of the New Testament witness to the triadic nature of God, the way was cleared in the late fourth century for the classic, orthodox statement of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, formulated by a trio of theologians—Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus—known collectively in Church history as the



“Cappadocian Fathers.” By precisely defining important Trinitarian terms such as “being” and “person,” these Greek-speaking theologians were able to conceptually express the *unity* (“one-ness”) and *diversity* (“three-ness”) of the Trine Godhead in a way similar to that of the Latin theologian Tertullian of a century earlier.

In view of the *triadic* pattern of God’s self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Cappadocians argued that God exists as “one being” (i.e., “nature,” “essence”) in “three persons,” where “being” is the principle of *unity* and “person” is the principle of distinction or *diversity*. As the Cappadocians argued, the

divine persons of the Trinity share a common “being”; at the same time, they are three distinct “persons.” In other words, “what” Father, Son and Spirit are is the same; “who” each is is distinct and unique.⁴

It is important to note that the terms “being” and “person,” as used by the Cappadocian fathers, are not interchangeable. If we say God is “three beings,” we commit the error of “tri-theism.” If we say God is “one person,” we commit the error of “modalism.” The Cappadocian formula—“one being, three persons”—preserves both the “unity” (one-ness) and the “diversity” (three-ness) of the Godhead, while articulating the Trinitarian grammar that would allow the Church to speak of God as “one being in three persons”—*One in Three, Three in One*.

In addition, it is essential to note that the Father, Son and Spirit cannot be thought of as independent, autonomous “selves,” as the modern use of the term “person” suggests. For Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers, the term “person” inherently includes relationship, for the terms “Father” and “Son” are necessarily relation-



al. There can be no “Father” apart from the “Son”; there can be no “Son” apart from the “Father.” Thus, the divine persons in relationship constitute the “being” of God.

At the same time, each divine person is unique in terms of “origin.” In Trinitarian language, the Father is “un-begotten,” the Son is “begotten” and the Spirit “pro-

ceeds.” The language of relationship captures the “unity” of the persons of the Holy Trinity, while the language of origin captures the distinctiveness or “diversity” of the divine persons.

Finally, at the heart of the Trinity, the Cappadocians saw an interpersonal communion (*koinonia*) or “fellowship,” where each divine person is intimately related to the other two in reciprocal joy and delight. The internal relatedness of the divine persons is expressed in the Trinitarian concept, *perichoresis* (Latin: “coinherence”), where the divine persons are said to mutually “indwell” and permeate one another in a divine “dance” of intimate fellowship and communion.

Putting all this together, we can say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, mutually indwelling one another in an intimate communion of love, is the “one God” of the Christian faith. As the Cappadocian father Gregory Nazianzus put it, “When I say ‘God’, I mean the



THE CHURCH FATHERS’ ASSERTION THAT JESUS IS “OF ONE BEING WITH THE FATHER” CONCISELY EXPRESSES... THERE IS NO DARK, INSCRUTABLE GOD HIDDEN BEHIND THE BACK OF JESUS CHRIST,⁵ BUT ONLY THE GOD WHO HAS LOVED US TO THE UTMOST IN SENDING HIS SON TO BE OUR SAVIOR.

ply one person who plays three roles (*i.e.*, *modalism*) or even three different gods pursuing their own ends (*i.e.*, “tritheism”)?

The church fathers’ assertion that Jesus is “of one being with the Father” concisely expresses the biblical truth that the loving heart of Jesus is a window into the inner

Moreover, if God is only “one person” who plays three different “roles,” then the apostolic witness to the nature of God is called into question. According to the apostle John, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). For John, love is not one characteristic among many that we “attribute” to God; rather, God *is* love.

Trinity=Relationship

Yet, what is God’s love like? In his memorable treatise on love (see 1 Corinthians 13), the apostle Paul writes that love is patient and kind. It does not envy or dishonor others. Love is not self-seeking. It keeps no record of wrongs. Note that Paul describes love in *interpersonal* terms; that is, he describes love in terms of relationship. Godly love is *relational*, for by its very nature, love requires *another*.

...A ONE-PERSON GOD ISOLATED IN ETERNAL “ALONE-NESS” MAY CREATE FROM A NEED FOR FELLOWSHIP. IF SO, THEN CREATION IS NOT GOD’S FREE AND GRACIOUS ACT FOR US BUT IS, RATHER, A SELF-FULFILLING ACT DESIGNED TO FILL THE ONE-PERSON-GOD’S NEED FOR COMMUNITY.

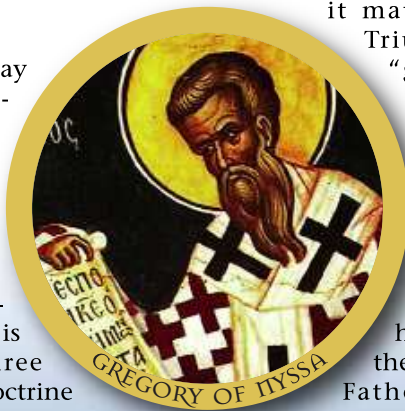
THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IS A BIBLICALLY BASED ATTEMPT TO EXPRESS THE ETERNAL NATURE OF GOD WHOM THE NEW TESTAMENT DESCRIBES AS “LOVE” WITHIN THE LIMITATIONS OF HUMAN THOUGHT AND SPEECH.

Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” The Cappadocian formula—“one being, three persons—with its regard for the importance of “relationship” as an integral aspect of the “being” of the one God, is enjoying renewed appreciation today among contemporary Trinitarian theologians.

Just Theological Hairsplitting?

In light of what may appear to be theological hair-splitting about the nature of God, does the doctrine of the Trinity really matter? Does it make any difference whether God is “one being in three persons,” as the doctrine of the Trinity asserts, or sim-

heart of the triune nature of God. The unity of “being,” as well as the unity of will and purpose between the Father and the incarnate Son (John 5:30) assure us that there is no dark, inscrutable god hidden behind the back of Jesus Christ,⁵ but only the God who has loved us to the uttermost in sending his Son to be our Savior. Thus, it matters whether the Triune God is three “gods,” each independently seeking his own ends, or “one God in three persons,” who enjoy unity of being, harmony of will and singleness of purpose in creating humanity to share in the life and love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



THE NATURE OF GOD – A GLOSSARY

Arianism—the belief that Jesus and the Holy Spirit, although in some ways divine, are created. Arianism thus denies the full deity of Christ. Far from being merely an ancient heresy, Arianism is still alive—preserved in the doctrines of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other groups.

Bitheism or binitarianism—the belief that there are two separate (and therefore limited) God beings: the Father and the Son. This is similar to Tritheism, but portrays the Holy Spirit as a force rather than a person. While some scriptures speak of the Holy Spirit in nonpersonal terms, it is clear from others that the Holy Spirit is a person.

Homoousios—a Greek term used in the Nicene Creed to describe the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as being “of the same substance.” Often translated into English as “consubstantial.”

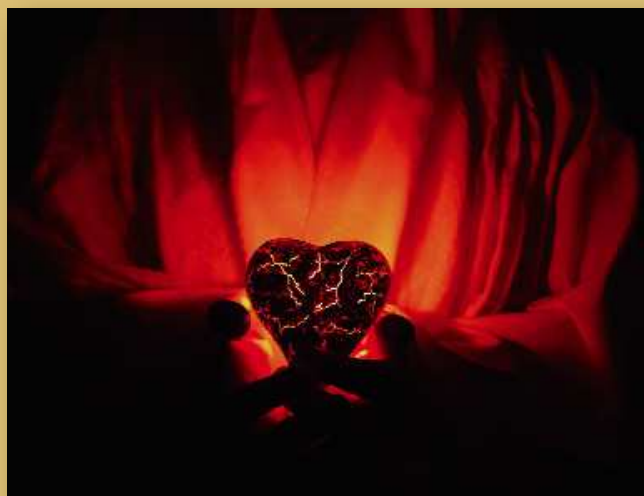
Hypostases—a Greek term meaning “existence” or “substantive reality,” translated as “person” in the Nicene Creed, and translated as “person” in Hebrews 1:3 KJV. God is three hypostases in one ousia (essence or being).

Koinonia—the ideal state of community and fellowship that should exist among all believers—characterized by communion, participation, sharing and intimacy.

Modalism—the belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three different faces, modes or aspects of one God, rather than three distinct Persons in the Godhead. According to this doctrine, God plays three

roles to perform different functions. Also known as Sabellianism, from Sabellius, the 3rd century proponent of this belief.

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Monism—the belief that there is only one person in the Godhead. This teaching denies a distinction of persons within the Godhead.

Perichoresis—a word used to describe the intimate relationship of oneness between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ.

Polytheism—once common in ancient religions, and still found in Hinduism, this belief takes on a pseudo-Christian form in the idea that God is reproducing himself and that humans are Gods in embryonic form. This teaching is popular

among word-faith teachers and others. But humans are created beings—they have a beginning, and therefore can never be omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent in the same way as God, who is without beginning and without end (Hebrews 7:3). While humans can be glorified as children of God (Galatians 3:26) and can be given eternal life (John 5:21), they cannot become God as God is God.

Subordinationism—the erroneous belief that the Son and Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father in

nature and being. This is not the same as Arianism, which goes beyond subordinationism to teach that the Son was created and did not share the fully divine nature of the father. Subordinationism is also distinct from the Relational Subordinationism, which correctly holds that the Son and Holy Spirit always do the will of the Father and never command the Father.

Trinitarianism—the belief that there is one God in three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is one being in three distinct persons, but they are of the same essence, co-equal, co-eternal and consubstantial.

Tritheism—the belief that three separate beings make up God. Although this is sometimes confused with Trinitarianism, the difference is clear: the Trinity is one being, not three. Three separate beings would necessarily have limitations—and God has no limitations. He is all knowing, all-powerful and everywhere.

—the Editors



GOD CREATED THE WORLD IN ORDER TO SHARE HIS DIVINE LIFE AND LOVE WITH ALL HUMANITY. THAT IS WHY WE WERE BORN: TO BE INCLUDED IN THE DIVINE LIFE AND LOVE OF...THE ETERNAL COMMUNION OF FELLOWSHIP SHARED BY THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT.

In regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, “Father” and “Son” are terms of *relationship*. God is not an “in-itself,” apart from others, but is “the epitome of love in relation.”⁶ God is not alone, in isolation from relationships, but is eternally *related* within the Holy Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The one God of the Christian faith eternally exists in a Triune *communion of relationship* whose nature is “love”: the Father loves the Son in the Holy Spirit; the Son loves the Father in the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, if God is unitarian rather than trinitarian, that is, “one” divine person who plays three different “roles,” then God cannot be *eternally* love; rather, God *becomes* love when he creates another. In that case, we cannot be certain of God’s purpose in creation, for a one-person god isolated in eternal “alone-ness” may create from a need for fellowship. If so, then creation is not God’s

free and gracious act for us but is, rather, a *self-fulfilling* act designed to fill the one-person-god’s need for community.

Because Scripture reveals that God is a divine communion of love, eternally existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we can be certain that there is no lack or necessity in God. God did not create us to fill a void or need in the Godhead; rather, God created us as an act of overflowing love, for by its nature God’s love cannot be contained; it reaches out in self-giving *for us*. God created the world in order to share his divine life and love with all humanity. That is why we were born: to be included in the divine life and love of the Holy Trinity, to participate in and enjoy the eternal communion of fellowship shared by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit

The doctrine of the Trinity is a bib-

lically based attempt to express the eternal nature of God whom the New Testament describes as “love” within the limitations of human thought and speech. God’s self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is finally God’s self-witness to his eternal, loving purpose for the whole world. Most importantly, the doctrine of the Trinity is the assertion that God is antecedently and eternally the same God who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In short, we know who God is from what he does. There is no other God than the loving Father who has loved us to the uttermost in the sending of his Son and the gift of the Spirit—all *for us* and for our salvation. “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). □

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1. In Fiddes, *P.S. Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 4-5.

2. See, for example, John 1:1, 14; 10:30; 14:9; Colossians 1:16, 17; 2:9; Hebrews 1:3

3. Regarding the divinity of the third person of the Godhead, Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as one who is a “personal, encountering, interacting Thou” clearly distinguishable from the Father and Son. The Spirit speaks in the first person (Acts 10:20; 13:12), teaches (John 14:26), stands as witness (Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13, 14), sends (Acts 13:2), grieves (Ephesians 4:3), struggles with other persons (Genesis 6:3; Isaiah 63:10) and gives gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 6). Moreover, the names (Acts 1:8; John 4:24; 14:21; 15:26; Romans 8:14), attributes (Hebrews 9:14; 1 Corinthians 2:10-12; Luke 11:20; Romans 15:18-19) and works (1 Corinthians 2:10; Acts 5:30-32; 28:25; Titus 3:5; 1 Corinthians 6:19) of God are ascribed to the Spirit. See Oden, T.C. *Systematic Theology, Volume One: The Living God*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), p. 199.

4. As an aid to memory, we might say that, in the Holy Trinity, there is one “what” (“being”) and three “whos” (“persons”).

5. This phrase was commonly used by the 20th century Scottish theologian, T.F. Torrance.

6. Sanders, J. *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), p. 148.

THE TRINITY AS A WEAPON

Maybe you thought that, following the Council of Nicaea, the church adopted the doctrine of the Trinity and everyone lived happily ever after. Not so. Like so many things in life, it gets complicated. And in institutional Christianity, it gets brutal.

The concept of the Trinity, of course, is the only logical Christian view of the nature of God that allows for the full deity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It was intended not only to be sound doctrine, but also a wonderful divine mystery and a topic of contemplation. Instead, when organized religion and politics got involved, it became an unnecessarily divisive element in Christianity, and a weapon of political power.

When Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be a politically acceptable faith in AD 313, he understood that religious disputes often led to societal unrest. He therefore took

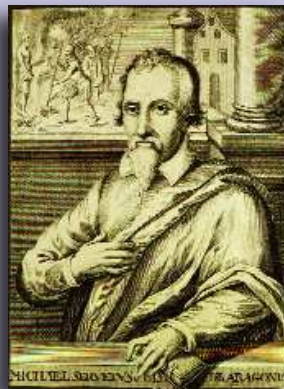
a direct and heavy hand in church councils, sometimes appointing himself as the final judge in ecclesiastical matters. Accordingly, the outcome of the Council of Nicaea (325) was not merely doctrinal—it had the force of Imperial Law.

In 333, Constantine issued an edict against the Arians, the nontrinitarian followers of Arius, demanding the destruction of Arius' writings and making it a capital crime even to possess them.

In addition, if any writing composed by Arius should be found, it should be

handed over to the flames, so that not only will the wickedness of his teaching be obliterated, but nothing will be left even to remind anyone of him. And I hereby make a public order, that if someone should be discovered to have hidden a writing composed by Arius, and not to have immediately brought it forward and destroyed it by fire, his penalty shall be death. As soon as he is discovered in this offence, he shall be submitted for capital punishment....

Ironically, while Constantine may have been nominally Christian, he did not exclusively support Christianity. Like most politicians today, his religious policies and profession were driven by political expediency. To curry the favor of pagans, he freely employed pagan symbols, observances and ceremonies in his reign. Although he apparently exiled Christians who refused to accept the Nicene Creed, he became more lenient later in his reign, allowing some exiles to return. Shortly before his death he was baptized by a bishop



Not so elsewhere in Western Europe, where Roman power had collapsed. Many Germanic tribes were Arian. While some of these tribes were tolerant of Nicene Christians, others used military force to persecute them. Battles between these tribes and Rome were as much religious as they were political. By the 8th century, however, Nicene Christians had successfully crushed Arianism through a long series of political and military conquests. It remained dormant until the 16th century Protestant Reformation allowed it to resurface.

Michael Servetus, a brilliant Spanish physician, mathematician, geographer and theologian, was among several nontrinitarian Christian leaders in Europe. Servetus had corresponded at length with reformer John Calvin, but the two men failed to arrive at theological agreement. Servetus, having been arrested on charges of heresy in Vienna, escaped from prison and made the mistake of stopping in Geneva to hear Calvin preach.

He was arrested, tried and condemned to death for preaching against Trinitarianism and infant

SUCH A VIOLENT HISTORY IS A LARGE PART OF THE REASON MANY THINKING PEOPLE TODAY WANT NOTHING TO DO WITH CHRISTIANITY.

who had been an ardent supporter of Arius.

Constantine's son Constantius II was an Arian Christian. After his father's death, he reversed many of his father's policies, promoting Arianism and exiling the Trinitarian theologian Athanasius. He also exiled the Trinitarian Pope and installed his own. For the next half-century, Arianism thrived in the Imperial Court and among top church officials. But with the 400s, after much political struggle and debate, Trinitarianism came back into fashion and prevailed in the Roman Empire.

baptism. His accusers also implied that he had homosexual tendencies, was a friend of Jews and Turks and had studied the Koran and other "profane books." Calvin wanted Servetus decapitated, but the Geneva Council insisted that he be burned alive. His last words, as he writhed in pain, were "Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me."

Such a violent history is a large part of the reason many thinking people today want nothing to do with Christianity. Yet this sad chronicle of atrocities flies in the face of Jesus' words "By this everyone will know that

you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

While we as modern, civilized Christians like to believe that these barbarities are in the distant past, we still think nothing of harboring animosity or even hatred toward those who hold aberrant doctrines—



GOD'S LIMITLESS LOVE DOES NOT STOP AT THE BOUNDARIES OF TRINITARIAN FAITH. I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT ALL THOSE WHO FAIL TO BELIEVE IN THE TRINITY ARE OUTSIDE OF HIS GRACE, AND ARE, BY DEFINITION, UNABLE TO KNOW HIM AND ARE THUS UNLOVED BY HIM

including present day Arians, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, and other cultic groups—dehumanizing them and consigning them to the fires of hell.

We would do well to follow Jesus' command: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:43-45).

If we should love our enemies, how much more our friends who may simply have a different doctrinal perspective?

—Monte Wolverton

DOES THE TRINITY REALLY MATTER?

"You believe in the Trinity but I don't," said my friend. But I still believe in God. Are you saying that I don't really believe in God unless and until I accept your definition of God?"

Is God only known by those who accept a particular definition of him? Does God love Trinitarians more than non-Trinitarians? Here are some thoughts I shared with my friend:

- I believe that the Trinity is the best human attempt, based on the biblical revelation, to comprehend the nature of God.
- I also believe that it's possible to academically embrace the belief system that surrounds a Trinitarian God, knowing facts about God without fully knowing him as a loving, personal God. Memorizing and reciting a creed does not equate to authentic relationship.
- I also believe that God's limitless love does not stop at the boundaries of Trinitarian faith. I do not believe that all those who fail to believe in the Trinity are outside of his grace, and are, by definition, unable to know him and are thus unloved by him.

Why then do I believe that God is a Trinity as defined by traditional Trinitarian beliefs? In my experience it seems that those whose understanding of God falls short of the biblical revelation of God are more vulnerable to cultic, abusive and toxic faith. While endorsing the humanly derived definition of God as Triune certainly does not guarantee healthy, grace-based Christianity, the historical record confirms that the Trinity is foundational in those who fully experience God as revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus. I believe that the Triune God is the very fountainhead of Christ-centered faith.

The historical record also confirms that those who, for whatever reason, do not embrace the profound love and unity of the Triune Godhead, and its implications for humanity, will be far more likely to be deceived and thus accept some lesser god. Believing in the nature of a lesser god leaves humans far more exposed to twisted faith and religious abuse.

On the one hand it is true that a rejection of the Triune God of the Bible is one of the common denominators of Christ-less religion. On the other hand, if we understand the gracious invitation of the gospel, passing a doctrinal litmus test is not the sign of Christianity. The doctrine of the Trinity is not the gospel—but the gospel assumes a Triune God. Jesus taught the religious authorities of his day, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 38-40). I believe that Jesus makes virtually the same

observation about doctrines and creeds, in essence saying (my paraphrase), “Diligent study of and affirmation of all the orthodox and accepted creeds and traditions does not amount to eternal life.”

Signing on the bottom line of a humanly formulated doctrinal statement, however accurate and beneficial that doctrinal statement might be, is not the sign of being a Christian. The sign of being an authentic Christ-follower is, of course, the love of God produced by him in their lives (John 13:35).

Since the sign of authentic Christianity is love, Christ-followers must reject any and all calls to condemn or relegate all non-Trinitarians to some lesser status than Trinitarians. While correct belief and teaching is absolutely important, it is also vital for us to understand that human pride has no boundaries. We must realize the grave temptation of exalting ourselves because of what we believe to be superior doctrinal creeds and doctrines. Many proudly proclaim their membership in or identify with a long history or tradition that generally goes back to the historic creeds of Christianity. But our identity as Christ-followers is *love*, not a doctrinal statement.

What is a creed? A creed is a biblically based, historically and traditionally affirmed statement of Christian faith. A basic Christian creed (like the Trinity) has been historically accepted and historically tested—“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). While the history of the universal body of Christ is filled with flaws and foibles (what else would we expect from imperfect humans?) Christ-followers accept, as an article of faith, that God the Holy Spirit, our Comforter/Advocate is the “Spirit of truth” (John 15:26) and that the Spirit of truth has historically guided the body of Christ in its core, central teachings, as Jesus promised (John 16:13).

By the same token, Jesus is the

risen Lord, alive and dynamic, the head of the universal body of his followers and believers. Christ-followers do not view humanly produced creeds and beliefs as eternally closed, but always subject to fresh and inspiring insights directed by God the Holy Spirit.

Some view the study of doctrine and theology as boring and unnecessary and attempt to rally others to their position through the cry—“deeds not creeds.” Those who favor “deeds not creeds” often say that they prefer to follow what Jesus said and did—without realiz-

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ing that their statement is itself a creed. They say that their creed is doing what Jesus said. But that creed is, of course, not enough—it must be and is followed by interpretations as to what he said and did, and how we should then live our lives. Doing deeds based on the foundation of what Jesus said and did is a *de facto* creed.

Most human beings, including those outside of Christendom at large, follow and give allegiance to some sort of creed. Our actions and behaviors flow out of a central belief or philosophy we embrace and by which we live our lives. So it is somewhat silly to suggest that Christ-followers depart from a creed and simply pay attention to their deeds.

Further, there is a huge danger in proclaiming the centrality of deeds. The idea that what we do is more important than what we believe invites legalism, which is a way of life that purports that God favors those who please and appease him more than he would have otherwise.

There is no doubt that deeds matter, but the deeds that matter

most, and are eternally significant, are those of Jesus Christ which are given to us and which he lives in and through us by God’s grace. Deeds that we produce through human effort and performance are meaningless. We must therefore conclude that neither getting our doctrinal ducks and creeds lined up, nor working hard to ensure that our personal deeds and works please God are the basis of true Christianity.

We must examine the entire argument on its face. Pitting one belief against a differing or seemingly

contradictory belief or practice is called a dichotomy. Whether the cry is “deeds, not creeds” or “creeds, not deeds”—we are dealing with a false dichotomy. Two things: 1) deeds and creeds are not mutually exclusive, but they feed off each other, and 2) neither deeds nor creeds are the basis or

foundation of true Christianity. Jesus is the center and core of our faith. So does the Trinity really matter? As Christ-followers:

- We do not worship our deeds, as if they gain us merits with God. We worship Jesus alone.

- We are not ashamed of our guilt, as if our sins and shortcomings are demerits that God will eternally hold against us. “...There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...” (Romans 8:1).

- We do not worship the creeds that define our faith, as if our acceptance of something humanly devised, however good it may be, will ensure God’s love of us. We worship God whom creeds fall short of perfectly defining. Creeds do not confine or limit the one, true God.

- We do not dismiss those who do not accept the creeds we embrace, gifts we feel God has given us, by his grace—as if they are diminished or less worthy in God’s sight.

Faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone. □

—Greg Albrecht



The Illusion of Self-Sufficiency

I slouched into the kitchen early one rainy morning last winter to discover a puddle on the floor. No, it wasn't one of my dogs—and I hadn't spilled water the night before. I looked up. Was that a drop? Well, at least it was conveniently in the kitchen and not on my living room furniture, modest though it is. I set a pan on the floor and drilled a hole in the ceiling to drain any accumulated water.

I don't know why my modular home doesn't have attic access. It would make roof leaks much easier to locate. I got out the ladder and climbed up to the roof. As far as I could tell, the shingles all looked good. I climbed back down and drove to the hardware store for three gallons of roof patching tar. I came home, lugged it up the ladder in the rain and slathered it over a few square feet of shingles above the area of the leak. I climbed back down, went inside and waited. The leak continued. I climbed up and slathered more tar. The leak continued.

After I'd repeated this process several times, the sun was going down. At bedtime I used earplugs to stifle the sound of dripping. I was discouraged. The column you're reading was due and I should've been working on it.

The next day I was happy to see my neighbor, Jeff, at the door. Jeff is a construction guy and has experience with this kind of thing. We spent some time moving a small tarp around on the roof in the general area of the leak, and timing the drip frequency below until we had localized the leak on the roof. Now, with more accurate tar slathering, I was able to stanch the leak!

Jeff offered to do more permanent repairs in the spring, when the rains let up (if ever, in the Pacific Northwest). I'll happily pay him for that, of course.

I've done many half-baked home repairs over the years, because I like to think I'm self-sufficient. Over the years I've tried my hand at wiring, plumbing, framing and sheetrock. If I don't know the right way to

do something, I'll find a work-around which often involves duct tape. I suspect some of these projects weren't quite up to code.

While the coin of self-sufficiency may be valuable, it has two sides. The good side is that being resourceful can save time and money, and helps surmount many of life's small challenges. The bad side is that it sometimes costs more time and money than it's worth—and you may fail to take advantage of all the knowledge, experience, encouragement and help that is available from others who have tackled the same problem many more times than you have. So really, self-sufficiency is often just the illusion of self-sufficiency.

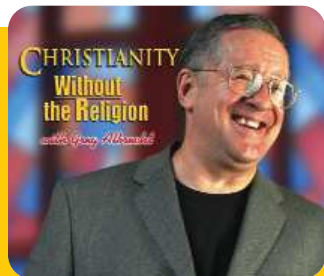
This illusion of self-sufficiency is at its most dangerous when it creeps into our spiritual life. It goes without saying (or does it?) that none of us can work our own way into heaven. God knows—plenty of people have tried.

In addition—just check the Internet and you'll discover countless people whose take on things spiritual seems to have not been informed by anyone except themselves. Their bizarre ideas have gone unchallenged. They've done their own theological wiring, plumbing and roof repairs—beyond that, they've built whole spiritual edifices that don't even come close to meeting the codes of sound biblical interpretation or even sound reason. You wouldn't want to live in one of those places.

While most of us have nothing so grandiose in mind, we can still benefit from help that's available from others as we get to know God. You're holding one such resource in your hands right now, where scores of informed fellow Christians are sharing their thoughts with you. Plus, we all have circles of friends where "iron sharpens iron," who can help hone and refine our spiritual understanding. Most importantly, we have Jesus himself—who alone is able not only to repair our sadly dilapidated spiritual homes, but to build in us a home worthy of his presence. □

—Monte Wolverton

While the coin of self-sufficiency may be valuable, it has two sides.



The Perfect Prescription for Legalism

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

WARNING: CWR may cause the following side effects:

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

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

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

"Christ in You, the Hope of Glory" Jesus Christ is "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations" (Colossians 1:26). In Christ we find significance and hope, even in the midst of suffering. Week of September 1.

The Supremacy of Jesus Christ Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, Jesus is the one "who is, who was and who is to come" (Revelation 1:8). He is supreme—the center of all that we believe and the completion of our faith. Week of September 8.

It's a Covenant, NOT a Contract! While many make the mistake of assuming the relationship God offers each of us is more like a contract than a covenant, we should not make another mistake by assuming covenants don't involve counting the cost. Week of September 15.

The Best Wedding Ever! To know Jesus is to know and experience new wine, the dynamic message of God's grace that frees us from restrictive old wine skins of stale, oppressive institutionalized religion. Week of September 22.

Beatitudes # 1 Join us for this first sermon in our five-part series about the Beatitudes. This message will discuss the blessing of being "poor in spirit" and provide an overview of all eight blessings that form the introduction to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Week of September 29.

Beatitudes # 2 We continue our series on the Beatitudes by considering what it means to be blessed and by studying the beatitudes/blessings of mourning and of being meek. Week of October 6.

Beatitudes # 3 As we ponder what it means to be blessed by hungering and thirsting for righteousness and being merciful, we remember that these Be-attitudes are God's gift, lived in our lives by and through Jesus. Week of October 13.

Beatitudes # 4 Keeping in mind that these eight fruits of God's favor are descriptive of what he does rather than prescriptions for what we must produce via our own hard work, we'll take a closer look at how God empowers us to be pure in heart and to become peacemakers. Week of October 20.

Beatitudes # 5 In this fifth and last sermon in our series, we ponder why we would ever be persecuted for "righteousness sake" and why a Christ-follower experiences inner peace and joy while being persecuted. Week of October 27.

Resting in Christ Alone Christ-less religion explains that we must work first, and then God will give us his rest. But, as it so often is, the truth of the gospel is the precise opposite! The invitation of Jesus is to his rest, in which he then empowers us to work and become the workmanship of God. Week of November 3.

Our Partner in Prayer When we pray we want to say the right thing using the right words, but sometimes the right words don't come—at such times we have a Partner who helps. Week of November 10.

"Clothe Yourselves With Christ" The Bible has a lot to say about clothing and its significance, and it is never more meaningful than when it speaks of being adorned with Christ. Week of November 17.

The Grace of Gratitude Grace produces Thanksgiving! The more we realize how undeserving we are of God's amazing grace the more his grace produces profound gratitude in our lives. Week of November 24.