

# PLAIN TRUTH<sup>®</sup>

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION<sup>®</sup>

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## Two Parades

By Greg Albrecht

Jesus arrived riding a donkey, but that humble act didn't fool his followers as they watched the parade coming into Jerusalem. Jesus' followers believed that Jerusalem was ripe for revolution, and they knew Jesus was riding a wave of public support. After all, Jesus had just resurrected Lazarus, and the news was spreading like wildfire. What kind of man was this who could order dead bodies back to life?

Everyone was hoping that something significant was about to happen—Jesus' followers hoped that Jesus would lay down the law and give the Romans an ultimatum to get out of town and take their miserable, two-timing Jewish turncoat collaborators with them.

Jesus' followers hoped that this was the beginning of a victory parade, and that things would really get better once Jesus took charge. And they were right—something monumentally historic and new was about to take place—but it wasn't what Jesus' followers expected or wanted.

### The Triumphal Entry

Easter week in history begins with a triumphal parade, as Jesus enters Jerusalem from the east, from the little town of Bethany just over the Mount of Olives.

But while Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is the only parade the Bible records as happening on that day, **it was not the only parade in town.**

The great crowd that had come

for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him. Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:12-19)

Every year in the spring, as Passover approached, the Jews remembered their freedom from Egypt, and their thirst for freedom was heightened by the memories of Moses and the children of Israel leaving the bondage of Egypt.

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## A Son or a Hired Hand?

**T**he Prodigal Son story told by Jesus in Luke 15:14-20 begins with a young man presumptuously asking his father for his inheritance ahead of time. He left home and went to a far country, where in his lavish and wasteful spending (hence the term *prodigal*) he soon saw that inheritance go up in smoke.

His resources had seemingly caused others to like him. Now his resources and his “friends” were gone. Out of money and out of food, he found himself working in a pigpen.

He came to his senses and went home, thinking the best he could expect was a job on his father’s farm—but to his astonishment (after all, the grace of God is amazing isn’t it?) his father restored him to his previous standing, hosted a grand celebration and lavished his love on him.

**The prodigal son was living by law. The law is a contract—cause and effect—you do this and you can expect that. It’s a business arrangement.**

Living by the law is not rocket science. You get what you earn and you deserve what you get. The law is what it is—nothing more, nothing less.

But, while living by and under law is simple and straightforward, grace is over on the other end of the spectrum—**grace is complicated.**

In his parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus used an example of the prodigal son sinking to one of the lowest places a Jewish audience at that time could imagine.

The prodigal son was feeding pigs—and not only that, he was so

hungry that he longed to fill his stomach with what he was feeding the pigs.

As the Message Bible translates Luke 15:16-20:

*He was so hungry he would have eaten the corn cobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any. That brought him to his senses. He said, “All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.” He got right up and went home to his father.*

**The father did not have a sign on the gate to his farmhouse advertising jobs. God is not looking for hired hands.**

Now remember, this prodigal son was not above making outrageous requests of his father. He was not above taking advantage of his father’s “good graces.”

This was the same guy who had asked his father for his inheritance, ahead of time.

BUT, when the prodigal son *came to his senses*... he did not ask to be given something he did not deserve.

He did not ask for grace. Full restoration? Not in his wildest dreams! He just wanted a job—a chance to earn his keep and make a decent wage.

The prodigal son wanted to go home to his father, but like all human beings, the only road he knew that would take him there was the law.

He fully expected his father to respond to his egregious and flagrant transgressions with penalties, probation, penance, payback, prescriptions, programs, pledges and provisos.

The prodigal son anticipated receiving conditions, limitations, restrictions and probationary programs whereby he might prove himself.

That kind of response on his father’s part would be predictable, because when you live by the law that’s what you imagine when you really mess up.

The prodigal son did not return hoping to be given grace so he could once again be accepted by his father as his son.

The prodigal son simply hoped his father would give him a job, so he could pay his own way—and perhaps, pay back all the money he had wasted.

But his father did not have a sign on the gate to his farmhouse advertising jobs. **God is not looking for hired hands.**

Grace is the stubborn refusal of God to employ us on his farm. Nothing we can ever say or do can qualify you and me from earning or deserving God’s grace because it is not for sale.

Nothing can disqualify you or me from God’s grace except a proud and stubborn unwillingness to reach out and embrace the grace he freely offers. □

—Greg Albrecht

*Join us for the complete message of “A Son or a Hired Hand?” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of March 19, 2017.*



Passover was also a pilgrimage festival of the old covenant—a time when male heads of Jewish households from distant lands poured into Jerusalem. Their presence added to the potential volatility, as Jerusalem’s population swelled beyond its normal numbers.

### Another Parade

Because of the emphasis of freedom as a part of the celebration, and because of the large number of pilgrims in the city, Passover in Jerusalem was a time when riots against the Romans and their military occupation were common.

So every year Pilate, the Roman Governor, rode into Jerusalem in a show of force, reinforcing the Roman garrison and ensuring that any uprising would be quickly subdued and suppressed.

The idea, of course, was that the parade of military force would be enough to deter anyone from thinking about trying to overthrow the Roman military. At this time of the year Pilate usually entered Jerusalem from the west—while this year Jesus entered from the east.

Not only did the two parades come from two entirely different geographic directions, every dimension of meaning and symbolism of these two parades was as different as night and day.

- Pilate rode a war horse.
- Jesus rode a borrowed donkey.
- As Pilate rode a war horse in his parade he was surrounded by special, elite military forces armed to the teeth.
- As Jesus rode a donkey in his parade he was surrounded by women and children, by poor peasants and by the least, the lost and the last.
- Pilate rode into town to enforce the rule of law.
- Jesus rode into town as the personification of the kingdom of grace.
- Pilate represented a kingdom that ruled by the sword—by violence, intimidation and force.
- The kingdom of God

inaugurated by King Jesus was and is all about love and grace—about turning the other cheek.

**What a contrast between these two parades—two parades that represented two diametrically opposite ways of life!**

Palm Sunday is drama on a grand scale—cheering crowds, conspiring politicians, corrupt religious professionals, strong and powerful soldiers—and poor, frightened, normal, everyday oppressed and downtrodden people just trying to live another day.

There’s the superhero on a warhorse, dressed in the finery of his military uniform. In the middle of it all is the lone figure of a man—humbly dressed, riding on a donkey—on the way to his death.

**The way of Rome** was about power and conquest—about domination and subjection of those over whom it ruled.

In the book of Revelation this ruthless system, which has characterized human history, is referred to by the term “Babylon.” Babylon/Rome is a ruthless system that steamrolls over cries of the little children and the elderly.

**The way of Babylon/Rome** is about bondage, taxation and slavery.

**The way of Babylon/Rome** is of human institutions and organizations run by cold, merciless and unbending rules used to flatten and subjugate all who stand in its way.

**Pilate’s parade** was a parade of power, wealth and oppression.

**Pilate’s parade** glorified military might.

**Pilate’s parade** impressed the masses with its mighty war



*The hopes and dreams of those who followed Jesus were brutally tortured and crucified along with him. Which parade are we marching in and cheering on?*

machine—its technology—its powerful and strong soldiers.

**Pilate’s parade** proclaimed “Might Makes Right!”

Jesus headed up the other parade, sitting on a donkey, rather than a war horse.

**Jesus’ parade** underlined the way of serving rather than being served.

**Jesus’ parade** was and is about ministering to those in need.

**The way of Jesus** is about the reign of God, in the person of Jesus.

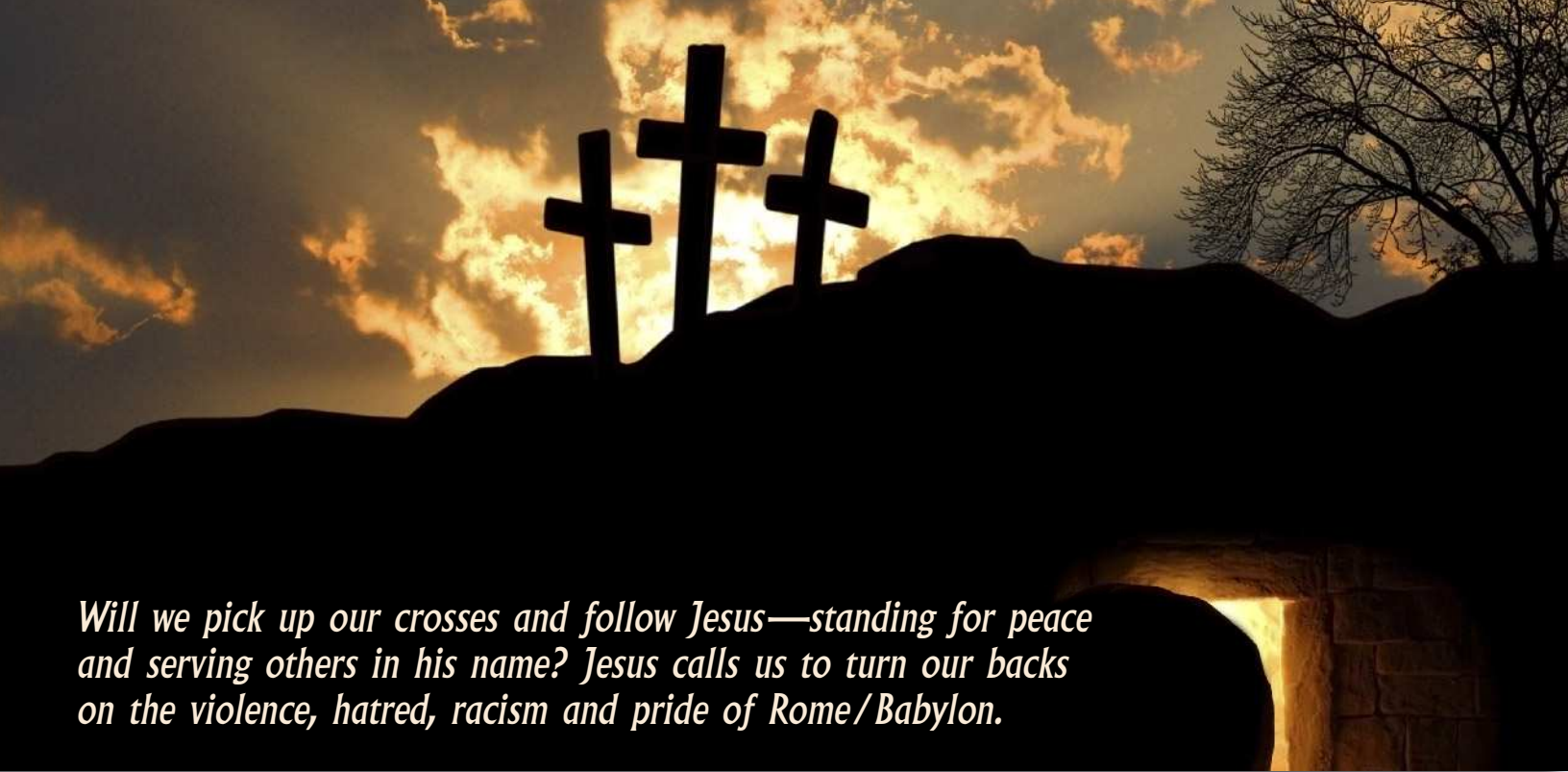
**The kingdom of God** is based on freedom from institutional oppression.

**The kingdom of God** is about spiritual and eternal freedom from all human oppression.

### The Parade is Over...and Now...

You know, it’s interesting to note the first stop that Jesus made in Jerusalem after the parade ended on Palm Sunday.

The first thing he did? Well, it wasn’t to have a meal with his disciples. The first thing he did? It wasn’t even to go to heal the sick.



*Will we pick up our crosses and follow Jesus—standing for peace and serving others in his name? Jesus calls us to turn our backs on the violence, hatred, racism and pride of Rome/Babylon.*

The first thing Jesus did was to visit the temple. The temple, with all its religious authorities and professionals, was the center of political intrigue, as the elite ruling class of the Jews collaborated with the Romans.

The temple was seen as the symbol of oppression and dominance—responsible for collecting Roman taxes and handing them over to Rome. The temple and its rules exploited the peasants for its own prosperity.

And Jesus cleansed the temple—he overthrew its tables—and he condemned the empty, corrupt religion behind it.

For those of us who have been held captive by the lies and deceptions of the kingdoms of this world—Jesus is a breath of fresh air. He is new wine—he is a new covenant. We read in Hebrews 10:20 that Jesus is a new and living way opened for us.

More than anything else, **the kingdom of God is Jesus**—not dogmas or doctrines, not priests, prescriptions and programs.

**The kingdom of God is Jesus**, who on Palm Sunday faced down the oppression of the kingdoms of this world, who marched into hell for a heavenly cause.

**The kingdom of God is Jesus**, who defied religious conventions and dogma, embracing and offering his love to those burdened by shame and guilt.

Just a few days after those two parades the two ways of life they represented collided head on. The collision was a titanic clash of two opposing ways of life, and no one who watched the events unfold would doubt that Jesus was clearly headed for his death.

When the crowds saw that Jesus was not going to give them the victory they wanted—when they realized Jesus would not conquer corruption and give them peace, the crowds changed their cries of support for Jesus to cries of support to release a well-known criminal named Barabbas instead of Jesus. The crowd, swayed by the military power of Rome and the oppressive powers of religion demanded that Pilate “crucify Jesus.”

In a poem equally suited for celebration of Jesus’ birth as well as his resurrection, a man named George McDonald once summed up the way Jesus completely failed to live up to the expectations of the masses—here’s the last lines of his poem, in older English:

*We were searching for a king*

*to slay our foes and lift us high,  
Thou camest a little baby thing,  
to make a woman cry.*

The hopes and dreams of those who followed Jesus were brutally tortured and crucified along with him. Which parade are we marching in and cheering on?

Listen to the voice of Jesus, who tells us in the book of Revelation to “Come out of her, my people.”

Ask yourself if it is possible that you are so deeply deceived and enslaved by Babylon (and all of its corruption, oppression and domination) that you think you are following Jesus when you are actually cheering on the other parade?

Will we pick up our crosses and follow Jesus—standing for peace and serving others in his name?

Jesus calls us to turn our backs on the violence, hatred, racism and pride of Rome/Babylon.

Jesus calls us to walk away from the physical and spiritual cheap trinkets, toys and trivia the kingdoms of our world offers.

May we all turn to Jesus and embrace him—may we welcome and worship our Lord and Savior. May we receive and give thanks for his peace, his grace, his mercy and his love. □





# Grace Notes

BY GREG ALBRECHT

**W**ynton Marsalis is an internationally acclaimed musician, composer, bandleader and jazz artist. Proclaimed as one of the greatest trumpeters of all time, Marsalis performs and loves classical music in addition to all forms of jazz.

In a Greenwich Village concert, Marsalis was pouring his heart into a performance, reaching the final dramatic notes just as a cell phone in the audience interrupted him with an electronic melody.

As the cell phone offender ran outside to take the call the glorious moment seemed to be lost. The entire performance seemed ready to unravel as the once silent room, focused solely on the magic of Marsalis' performance, started to fill with the sounds of shuffling of chairs and whispered conversation.

Marsalis paused, eyebrows arched. Frozen behind the microphone, Marsalis graciously replayed the cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it and began improvising on the tune.

The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and then he returned to the moment in time when the sour notes of the cell phone had rudely interrupted his incomparable music. As he played the last few notes of the ballad the crowd erupted, applauding his **improvised grace notes.**

## The Grace of Making Music

"The church, by and large, has had a poor record of encouraging freedom. It has spent so much time inculcating in us the fear of making mistakes that it has made us like ill-taught piano students: we play our pieces, but we never really hear them because our main concern is

not to make music, but to avoid some flub that will get us in Dutch" (*Between Noon and Three*, Robert Farrar Capon, 149).

God came to us in the person of Jesus, embracing our sour notes, improvising and transforming them, by his grace.

**By becoming one of us, he condescended to play the silly little tunes of our lives, taking our dissonance and graciously reconciling and reforming it.**

How could he have fixed the sour notes of our lives without playing our personal tune?

How could he transform us with the magic of his melody without acknowledging our discord, gracefully playing back to us our individual bleeps, and then masterfully improvising on our sour notes, transforming them into his melodious magic?

It's called grace—*God's grace as improvisation.*

Remember the old fairy tale where a beautiful princess kisses a frog and in so doing transforms the frog into a handsome prince?

When God became one of us, the fairy tale reversed itself. The beautiful princess (Jesus) became a frog like us, so that we could be transformed. God didn't just remain aloof, conducting the orchestra and correcting its mistakes from afar—but he actually stepped off the podium and joined us:

**John 1:14:** *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood* (The Message).

Religion insists that we play what it considers the "right" notes. As religion indoctrinates us, we become more concerned about not angering God than we are in soaring by his grace. God's grace frees us from the religious gravity that holds us down.

The crucifixion became the high, holy moment of improvisational grace. Jesus took the ugliest tune of all and sang it with all his heart, so that the depraved theme of human violence and hate, sin and death might not be the last note. The cacophony of the crucifixion was sung by the Creator, such that the most strident noise imaginable was transformed into the song of angels:

**Revelation 5:12:** *"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"*

**Jesus doesn't condemn our tone-deaf chorus. He joins the choir.**

Look who he selected for the original choir. Peter, a brassy fisherman whose song always seemed to fall flat, was handpicked by the Lord to tune the orchestra. God transformed the Saul of religion, an insufferable music snob, into a performance artist who gave concerts of grace.

**Jesus is not looking for people with perfect pitch** (just another reason why the gospel really is good news!). What he is looking for is people who will invite him to sing along with them, and yield to his grace improvisations.

Listen to the squawking coming from so many of our churches! The acrimonious bellowing and griping sounds we produce are like the screech of fingernails on a chalkboard to God.

Are we so preoccupied with patting our feet to silly little religious melodies that we can't hear the music of the Master? Have we grown so weary of working in religious salt mines that we give no thought to the un-Christlike martial music religion plays for us, as we march along endlessly attempting to please God?

## The Music of Our Master

And yet, the Master came to be one of us. Can you hear him? He is even now playing back the empty, soul-destroying religious dirges, improvising on them so that by grace we can become free. With Paul (Romans 8:38) I am convinced that neither squawk nor squeak, neither sour note nor tone deaf wail, nor any droning organ prelude, neither contemporary praise and worship nor Pentecostal polka, nor any gospel music in all creation, will be able to separate us from the melody of grace that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The word reconciliation means to *bring back a former state of harmony*. Reconciliation between humanity and God is a done deal:

**Romans 5:10-11:** *“For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”*

When “God showed his love among us” (1 John 4:9) he did all that was necessary: “He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” He stepped into our lives—he made the first move:

**John 1:14:** *“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood”* (The Message).

## Condescending to Our Level

When I think of God, in Christ, moving into our neighborhood and making the first move, I recall a story about my all-time favorite president, Abraham Lincoln. While campaigning for the presidency, he received a letter from an eight-year old girl. The little girl suggested that Lincoln should grow a beard to

hide his rather homely face.

Lincoln wasn’t offended—he read the letter and sent a thank-you to the young girl. He told her that if his campaign travels ever took him close to her hometown he would like to meet her. As it happened, the young girl’s father was one of the civic leaders in their small town, so when his daughter received a letter from Abraham Lincoln promising to visit her he shared the good news with other leaders in the town.

According to the story, Abraham Lincoln informed his staff that if his campaign train was scheduled to travel through that town he wanted to stop. It turned out that his schedule did include travel through that area, so the little girl (and all of the officials in the town, through her father) heard that Abraham Lincoln was coming to town!

When the day came, the vast majority of the small town gathered at the train station. Everyone was dressed up, the band was waiting—everyone except, it seemed, the little girl to whom Lincoln had written.

Just before the train arrived at the station, it had to stop for repairs. According to the version of the story I’ve heard, because the train was so close to the station, Lincoln decided to walk into town. He walked past the train station unnoticed, and through the somewhat deserted streets of the town until he found the little girl’s house. He knocked on the door, introduced himself to the maid (who was speechless) and asked to see the little girl.

The little girl and a friend were having a pretend tea party. They invited the dignified Mr. Lincoln to join them. So he lowered himself to their level, sitting on the floor, and they poured him make-believe tea



***“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matthew 19:14***

into a little tea cup. After a while he asked the little girl if she liked his new beard, and then excused himself to walk back to his train.

When God in Christ harmonized the music of our lives to his own, he condescended to our level, so that we might know him. Remember that time when Jesus’ disciples were trying to keep little children away from Jesus because they felt Jesus was just too busy to be bothered? Jesus told the disciples, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14).

We can easily fall for the idea that God is so busy with important high-level, far-reaching meetings and appointments he would never have time for us. But God is available, always and forever. He seeks us out, knocks on our door and drinks pretend tea with us.

**John 1:14:** *“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood”* (The Message).

The Word got off the train and walked to our neighborhood. He has gone the extra mile to harmonize our sour notes into his kingdom of heaven. God in Jesus reconciled himself to all things, and by not holding our sins against us God made peace with us on a cross that bleeds eternal forgiveness. □



## No More Gatekeepers

In my daughter, Robin DeMurga's blog, *No More Gatekeepers*, she references the changes that have taken place in the church, and in Christian publishing/broadcasting. She wrote that years ago there were gatekeepers (self-appointed "mothers")—mean, angry and vigilant. Those theological, cultural and institutional gatekeepers were in control and determined who was "in" and who was "out," who had the power and how much, and who was "Christian" and who wasn't "Christian."

All of a sudden, the gatekeepers lost their power—or maybe more accurately, their power didn't matter. Nobody cared. I have hundreds of friends who have been criticized, marginalized and rejected by the gatekeepers, and who have suffered great damage to their ministries and reputations. It's a "gotcha" game and it isn't pretty.

I recently attended and spoke at a conference where the leaders and scholars who taught and preached were powerful, the worship was a bit of heaven, and the people there were unified in their belief that God wasn't angry with them and the finished work of Christ was really finished. The conference wasn't about what we could do for God, but what God had done for us. The conference was about radical grace, and I loved it.

Do you know what really touched me? I stood in the back of that auditorium with tears streaming down my face, thinking of the years I had walked a lonely road believing that I was the only one. (That thought, of course, was extremely narcissistic and insane; but nevertheless, there were times

when I wondered.) I wanted to be accepted and affirmed, and while there was some of that, there were the voices that warned, "You have to be careful about Steve and this teaching on grace. People will take advantage of it." Sometimes they said, "Steve is sincere but he never draws the line and we must, for God's sake, draw the line." I was (and still am) called antinomian and irrelevant and a preacher of a message of "easy believism" and "cheap grace."

As I stood there I realized that something had changed. In fact the

**He refuses to be told who  
he can love and can't love...  
His message is "I love you, is  
that okay?—Jesus."**

whole landscape had changed. As I watched those people, young and old, tattooed and necktied, bald and pigtailed, wing-tipped and sandaled, high-heeled and booted, dreadlocked and barbered—I wept with joy at what God was doing. In fact, I believe that we are sitting on top of an awakening in America led by the kinds of people who cause the gatekeepers to wince...the people who refuse to build walls or to pretend that they are anybody's mother. These are the "terrible meek" who lift up Jesus and say to the world "Run to Jesus! He's not what they told you! He'll love you and forgive you no matter where you've been, what you've done or who you've hurt."

In an old play by John Masefield, *The Trial of Jesus*, Longinus the centurion who oversaw Jesus' crucifixion, reports to Pilate.

Pilate's wife, who had dreamed about Jesus the night before, asks Longinus to give her details of how Jesus died. After listening to Longinus, Pilate's wife asks, "Do you think he's dead?" "No, I don't," Longinus says, "He's been let loose in the world where neither Roman nor Jew can stop him."

I have a friend who says the message of Easter is "you can't keep a good man down." It's not just that a dead man got out of the grave and said we could too. It has to do with a living Messiah/King who has been let loose and is now moving among his people. He doesn't give a rip about gatekeepers.

He refuses to be told who he can love and can't love; he doesn't allow others to decide who he invites to the dance; he refuses to draw lines and throw rocks at sinners. His message (on a Northern Ireland billboard) is "I love you, is that okay?—Jesus."

That's how I feel about Jesus. The gates were lifted and the doors battered down, and the "King of glory, the Lord of hosts, mighty in battle, walked through."

Gatekeepers scare me to death. I like to be affirmed and loved. I don't like to stand outside the house where so many I admire and respect are patting one another on the back. I want to be part of the "in" group because I'm...well, that insecure.

But he's the man—the glorified risen Christ. I want to be with him and go where he goes, love the people he loves, weep where he weeps and dance to the music he provides. And when I don't, I'll rejoice that he still likes me.

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown





## Quotes & Connections



God's love is so far beyond our comprehension that it seems too good to be true. During the spring, when the passion of Christ is front and center, when we think of the unbelievable love of God demonstrated on the cross of Christ, Christ-followers who speak French often greet one another by saying: *L'amour de Dieu est folie!* ("the love of God is folly").

"Jesus is the Light of the world—he produces the light and he works in us to reflect it. There are two ways of spreading the light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."—Edith Wharton

"All the kings in history sent their people out to die for them. Jesus was the only king who died for his people."—Charles Colson

Who is stronger: he who says, "If you do not love me, I will hate you," or he who says "If you hate me, I will still continue to love you"?

W. Paul Young, author of the best-selling book *The Shack*, sat down with *CWRm* Editor-in-chief Brad Jersak for an interview about the upcoming movie based on his book. The movie is scheduled to open in theatres March 3rd. Be sure to read the interview with W. Paul Young in our April issue of *CWR magazine*.

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