

WINTER 2013

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

NEIGHBORS & WISE MEN

A Fresh Look at Who "The Others" Are



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

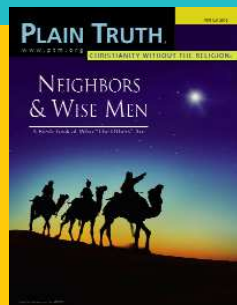
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Author Tony Kriz relates his experience as a young missionary in Albania, and how he learned some important lessons about Jesus from an unlikely source—Islamic "wise men." At this time of year we remember the "pagan" Magi who visited the newborn Jesus. Later in life, Jesus pointed to a "pagan" and said, "Nowhere in Israel have I found such great faith."

COVER PHOTO BY PHOTOMORPHIC—ISTOCKPHOTO

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God is not in control, because he doesn't do control. Rather, God rules exclusively through love, which seems as weak as that baby in the manger or as offensive as that Jew on a cross. Christ Almighty—God With Skin **23**

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The Fall of Camelot

I was impressed with Monte Wolverton's article "The Fall of Camelot" in the Fall *Plain Truth*. The assassination of President Kennedy brings back many memories. I was in the second grade, in Key Biscayne Elementary, when we received the news of the president's passing on the classroom loudspeaker.

As a young boy I was already filled with fear and trauma, having arrived from Cuba just three years earlier. My father was a retired naval commander and a professor of ballistic armaments at the Cuban Naval Academy. Since he was already disgusted with the former Batista government, and because he had no political association with the former dictator, he was forcibly reinstated after the Castro revolution and assigned to the post of port director at Mariel just as the Russian missiles began arriving at the port (I was five years old then).

That time was very stressful for my parents—they later described to me after I was an adult that they chose to betray the Cuban government for "the better good," understanding what catastrophe atomic warfare would bring to the world. At the time very few people really understood the horror of such warfare and the fruitlessness of bomb shelters or ducking under your classroom desk in such an event.

I was sent to the U.S. as one of the 14,000 "Peter Pan Kids" on a student visa. With me in the U.S., my parents had the peace of mind that I was safe. My father resigned his position as port director shortly before I left. Even so, my parents were eventually arrested and imprisoned for being CIA spies shortly after I arrived here in Miami, two weeks after my seventh birthday. I would not see my parents again for another 25 years. My limited understanding of God at the time was my only solace, yet my circumstances did drive me to believe in him, and I believe that it laid the groundwork for accepting Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. May God give you the guidance and strength to continue in the ministry of PTM.

Florida

The latest issue of *The Plain Truth*, about the decade of the sixties was a dynamic issue! I grew up in the 1960's. Since I, too, was a "product" of the sixties, this article moved me to tears. God bless PTM and keep up the good work.

Tennessee

"The Fall of Camelot" in the Fall *PT* was a masterpiece—the graphics that were chosen are remarkable, and the spiritual lesson superb. Thanks for publishing such a timely cover story!

Texas

"The Fall of Camelot," by Monte Wolverton, certainly reactivated my memories of "coming of age" in the sixties. Like Monte, I can envisage the very place and time where I was when I heard of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Linking the fall/failure of the so-called "Camelot" to the disillusionment that so many of us experienced when we realized our religious dream worlds were but a façade of reality was a "connection" that I would not have thought of. But I appreciate how it works in Monte's article. His recommendations are very practical. Thanks for publishing this helpful and timely article!

California

Thanks for the memories of JFK and the truth of the "Great Disillusionment" that followed his assassination. May God bless your efforts to help bring many to Jesus Christ—the only perfect leader the world will ever know.

Maryland



It's the People, Not the Steeple

I received the Fall issue of *Plain Truth* today and wanted to tell you that I really like Greg Albrecht's article, "It's the People, Not the Steeple." VERY clever opening and picture. My husband and I are still members of a "church," but we are more and more disillusioned all the time. We realize, more and more, that no

matter what denomination, politics rule. Unfortunately, we are losing a pastor who has had no axe to grind, no one to impress and no church politics through which to maneuver. He is being replaced with a pastor who is loyal to the “church” and its creeds and traditions.

Michigan

No one can always hit a home run (or run back a kickoff for a touchdown) but you guys seem to always find a way to score one for Jesus! The Fall issue of *The Plain Truth* was superb—I really liked the complementary articles about “church” by Greg Albrecht (“It’s the People, Not the Steeple”) and by David Yeubanks (“Where Do You Go to Church?”). I am a fairly new *PT* reader, and really new to other resources that are a part of the many ministries you offer, but I have to tell you how impressed I am so far. You face the real issues, and do so graciously, without caving in to religious pressure. Refreshing to say the least!

Washington

A few months ago I felt the freedom to leave the church I had been attending for almost seven years. Attending there seemed appropriate for a long time—and then it wasn’t! I thank the contributors to *Plain Truth* magazine for making me question my attendance. I initially felt guilty for leaving, and then such a relief to be free from the bombardment of messages that did not match my ever-increasing understanding of God’s grace. My desire for relationship with God has not diminished in any way since I gave up weekly church attendance, but it has actually increased. I thank you so much for the encouragement I receive from PTM’s commitment to tell the truth. May God continue to bless this important work.

Arizona



Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word

I want Greg Albrecht to know that “Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word” in the Fall 2013 issue just might be the best magazine article I have ever read—and by far and away it is the best *Plain Truth* article you have ever published.

California

Sometimes I overlook the regular columns in *The Plain Truth*, but I want to tell you that the four columns in the Fall 2013 issue (Greg Albrecht’s “Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word,” Steve Brown’s “What God Really Wants,” Ruth Tucker’s “Grapes of Wrath” and Monte Wolverton’s “The Illusion of Self-Sufficiency”) are the best four articles that I have ever read in one package. These four columns are far better than any four sermons I have heard in a given month. Please keep providing this incredible, Christ-centered food—thank you so much!

Florida

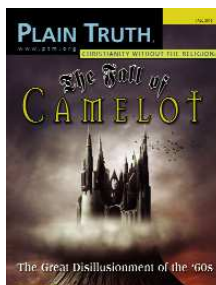


The Poison of Religion

Thanks for this article in the Summer *PT* which clearly contextualizes the Inquisition (and other historical religious atrocities) in light of religious attitudes still with us today. I was meditating on church and what it has become and what it might be, and I came to this insight:

We can choose to focus our relationship with God on correct doctrines—or on love. If we focus on correct doctrines, we will see only our differences compared to other believers and we will become a church of divisions, rancor and even hate. If, however we focus on love, we will become a unified church that will change the world for good.

**British Columbia
Canada**



I Love *Plain Truth!*

Thanks for this great magazine and for all you do to encourage the body of Christ and to help people gain a better perspective of what the real Christian life can be like. I love *Plain Truth* and I tell my friends about you guys all the time. Please send a few copies of the next issue.

Washington

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NEIGHBORS & WISE MEN

A Fresh Look at Who “The Others” Are



by Tony Kriz

F*aith is a battlefield* was one of the foundational ideas of my religious programming. I was raised to believe that there were two sides to the religious story. There are the good guys and there are the bad guys. It was absolutely necessary for me to be able to identify and embrace the good guys and cautiously but courageously confront the bad buys. *Faith is a battlefield.*

These “two sides” were the spiritual haves and have-nots. The “haves” were Christians. The “have-nots” were everybody else. Thankfully, I was a “have.”

I have many memories of Sunday school growing up. It was my second home. There were few other places where I spent more time. There were few other places where I felt more accepted or more in control.

I was a religious kid living in an incredibly nonreligious town. I was a scrawny kid, and not a particularly bright one, living in a culture of privilege, a city full of success and physical prowess. I didn't fit in.

Church, on the other hand, didn't ask me to spell correctly, dress cool, jump high, or run

I ARRIVED IN ALBANIA IN THE FALL OF 1992. I WAS ONE OF THE FIRST MISSIONARIES TO LIVE INSIDE ALBANIA'S BORDERS IN FIVE DECADES. IT WAS A WILD AND ADVENTUROUS TIME.

fast. It was one place where I could just be. I am still thankful for that.

I can remember one Sunday morning. It was much like any Sunday morning in the mid to late eighties. My pastor (handsome, charismatic and smart) was explaining the evil of other religions and the need to maintain Christian purity.

"Other beliefs are dangerous," he said. "They are not to be played with; they are not to be entertained. Anyone who has been seduced by such beliefs is lost, painfully lost."

"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers," he warned, quoting his Bible. "Don't get too close to those who are not Christians. When you do meet someone who is lost, you need to confront them. Remember that you have the truth and they do not."

My spiritual zealousness piqued at age twenty. A year later I would be done with college and fueled by an unapologetic passion to change the world for God. Only an idealist like me, drunk with religious doc-



trine, could have the audacity to even conceive of "changing the world." But there I stood, twenty-one years of age; ready to rise like Mercury carrying forth the message of God.

But where would I go? How would I change the world?

It was the early '90s. It was a

time of global cultural and social change. It marked the very beginning of the Globalization that we are so comfortable with today.

I had been a life-long churchgoer. Twenty years of Christian education had chiseled a few ideo-

1992. I was one of the first missionaries to live inside Albania's borders in five decades. It was a wild and adventurous time. We Protestants were few in number and this rugged country was

vastly unexplored (or at least it seemed to me.) My *battlefield* programming could not have felt more poignant. I was ready to do whatever it took to prove my faithfulness to God.

Life in Albania in those first years was utterly shocking to an American boy from Eugene, Oregon. There were no cinemas, no stores and scarce few restaurants. My life existed like a pendulum swinging back and forth between my home and the national university campus, an hour's walk away. There were more sheep in the streets of the capital than cars. Most winter days no electricity flowed. We relied on candles and kerosene heaters. Life was simple and that allowed for an undistracted focus on our mission.

It would not be easy.

I quickly learned that those Muslims were shrewd. They knew that Albania represented a significant beachhead into "Christian" Eu-

WE PROTESTANTS WERE FEW IN NUMBER AND THIS RUGGED COUNTRY WAS VASTLY UNEXPLORED (OR AT LEAST IT SEEMED TO ME.) MY BATTLEFIELD PROGRAMMING COULD NOT HAVE FELT MORE POIGNANT. I WAS READY TO DO WHATEVER IT TOOK TO PROVE MY FAITHFULNESS TO GOD.

logical faces into my Mount Rushmore of Evil. Two of those faces were Stalinist socialism and Islam. When I learned that Albania, a historically Muslim country, was just pulling free from fifty years of autocratic socialism, my path seemed all but set.

I arrived in Albania in the fall of

... **THOSE MUSLIMS WERE SHREWD. THEY KNEW THAT ALBANIA REPRESENTED A SIGNIFICANT BEACHHEAD INTO "CHRISTIAN" EUROPE. VAST FUNDS WERE FUNNELED INTO THE COUNTRY FROM THE ARAB LEAGUE TO BUILD MOSQUES BY THE DOZENS AND TO INDOCTRINATE THE ALBANIAN PEOPLE.**



rope. Vast funds were funneled into the country from the Arab League to build mosques by the

bound volumes could be found in most every home or dorm room.

They would also send their apologists. Muslim scholars came to educate the Albanian people and convince them to join the global cause of Islam.

I lived with an Albanian family for two years. They are as dear and precious to me as any people I have ever known.

On the far side of the university campus stood Student City. It was composed of thirty dormitories stacked up a hillside. It was easy to imagine the dream that these dorms once represented: a hillside utopia complete with an elaborate center square, several spots for cafés (now empty), even a student cinema. Seeing it now, the dream was left chipped, faded and in disrepair.

As on most days, I passed the opulent U.S. embassy compound and then a large orphanage run by Baptist missionaries before turning to climb up into the dormitory complex. I passed sports yards where basketball backboards and bleachers once stood, but which now held only bent posts and rusting metal.

LIFE IN ALBANIA IN THOSE FIRST YEARS WAS UTTERLY SHOCKING TO AN AMERICAN BOY FROM EUGENE, OREGON...THERE WERE MORE SHEEP IN THE STREETS OF THE CAPITAL THAN CARS.



Tirana's car free main boulevard, University of Tirana. Picture taken in April, 1991

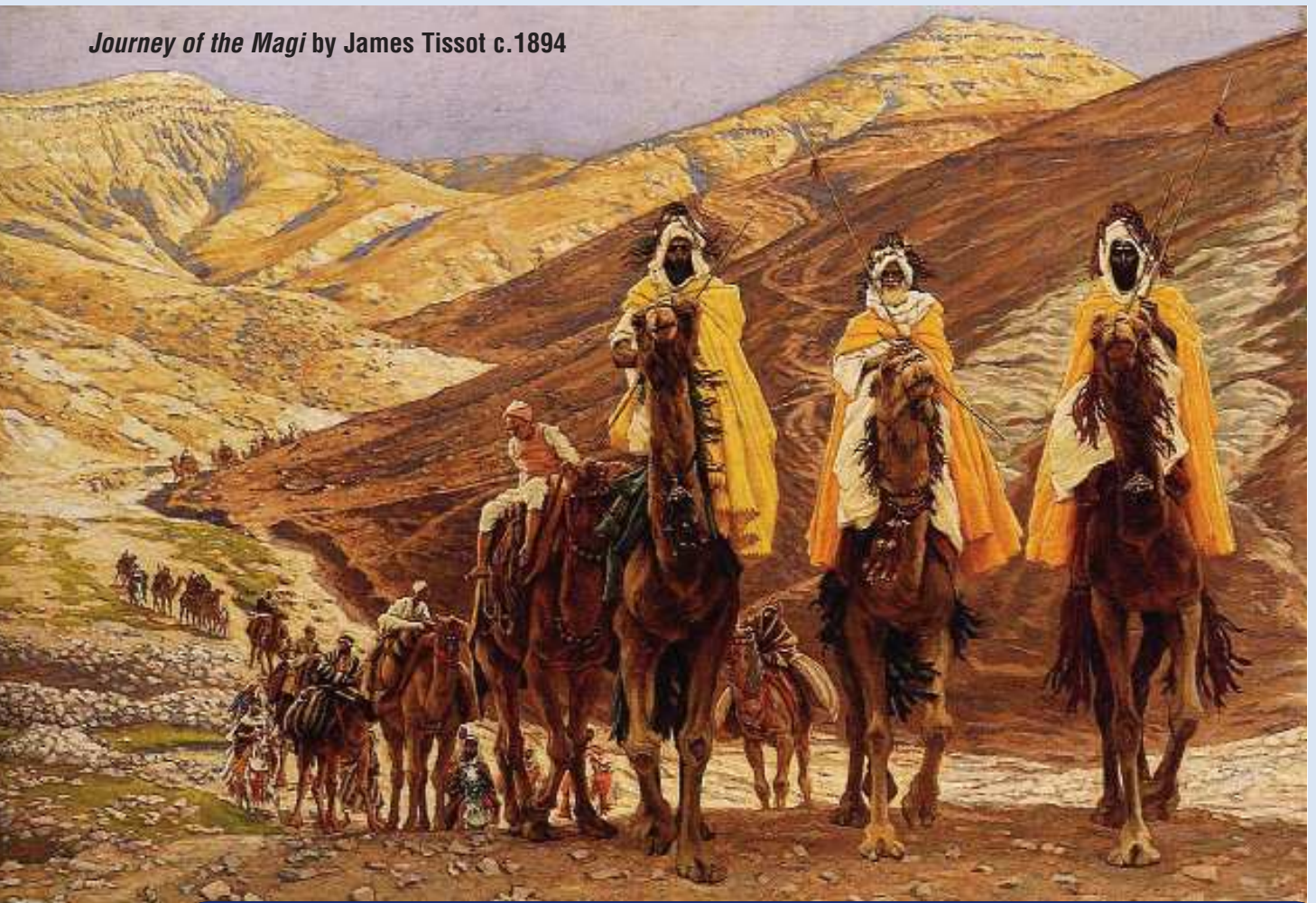
MOST WINTER DAYS NO ELECTRICITY FLOWED. WE RELIED ON CANDLES AND KEROSENE HEATERS. LIFE WAS SIMPLE AND THAT ALLOWED FOR AN UNDISTRACTED FOCUS ON OUR MISSION.

dozens and to indoctrinate the Albanian people. Boxes of books with ominous names like *One Hundred and One Mistakes in the Bible* were regularly left on street corners and at the entrances to buildings for anyone to take. And for the poorest country in Europe, a book was a great treasure. These blue

One morning, like most any morning, I rose early and prepared for the day. I had breakfast with my Albanian "grandmother" and by late morning began my hour hike to the national university.



Journey of the Magi by James Tissot c.1894



WHO WERE THE MAGI, ANYWAY?...DID THE MAGI HOLD TO ALL THE THEOLOGICAL INTRICACIES THAT WE CHRISTIANS BELIEVE TODAY? I SOMEHOW DOUBT THAT THEY DID.

When I arrived at the Student City center square, there was an unusual happening. A crowd of a couple dozen students was gathered. Though I couldn't discern the attraction, I could see two tall woolen caps bobbing in the crowd's center.

I came closer. The students were solemn. They were intent. The wool hats sat on two regal and scholarly heads. One man had a full, white beard and was wearing a floor-length gray coat of natural fiber. The other man was younger, but equally refined; his beard and coat were both shorter and brown.

They appeared to be answering the students' questions. Each answer was a sermon, carefully and

articulately presented. The men spoke in Arabic. A middle-aged man in a tired suit translated their words sentence by sentence into Albanian. I understood none of the Arabic and only some of the Albanian. The phrases were full of unfamiliar religious jargon. I could catch the gist, but not the substance of their words.

I turned and asked a student what was going on, and he explained, "These men are from a great Islamic institute. They have traveled here from Jordan and Saudi Arabia to teach us in the Muslim faith."

This was deeply disturbing to me. Any day of the week, you could find Muslim classes and ser-

vices in the city, but this was different. These men carried so much authority. The crowd was growing by the minute. The two scholars held court deftly and persuasively.

I listened for half an hour. I tried to follow. Language learning has never been my strong suit. I found myself squinting my eyes, as if that would somehow empower my ears to understand. They spoke of the pillars of Islam, the character of Allah, and the need for absolute submission. They also extolled the greatness of Albania and how it was a bright light to the glory of the Islamic faith to Europe and, in fact, to the world.

I looked around at the students. They were rapt. Heads nodded in

LATER, I THOUGHT MORE ABOUT THOSE MUSLIM SCHOLARS IN THEIR WOOLEN HATS, BEARDS, AND LONG ROBES. I REALIZED THAT THEY LOOKED LIKE THE MAGI (WISE MEN) IN MY CHILDHOOD NATIVITY SET.



hypnotic agreement. It was clear they were not only being spiritual-ly and intellectually stimulated; their nationalism was being in-flamed. It was a powerful and euphoric combination.

I left the campus early that day. The fire that normally burned so brightly within me had been re-duced to tepid embers.

“What am I to do about these Muslim evangelists?” I thought to myself. I was really nervous. You would have thought that I would just walk away and put the thought of these regal men out of my mind. After all they would probably be gone in a few days... or a week at most...maybe two?

Yet, in only one afternoon they had hypnotized so many students (at least that is how it seemed to me.)

I had been in Albania for months. Everyday, I spoke with Muslim students about faith and argued theological differences. And yet I had never experienced fear like this. Many of my encounters had been with students who were articulate and persuasive. I am ashamed to say that I was too arro-gant to care. I had been raised in privilege in the most influential country in human history. I had studied the topics of faith for years. I had read authors like Josh Mc-Dowell and J.P. Moreland and memorized their arguments for the Christian faith. For the most part, I

had been able to maintain cool control, fueled by spiritual hubris and cultur-al classism.

But it was different with these Middle Eastern scholars. They embodied every scary sermon illus-tration and Hollywood stereotype. I was afraid. The *battlefield* paradigm slapped me across the face. It was no longer just theory. It was not some-

thing that I could observe from a distance or through a television screen. It was no longer something that could exist only in the realm of ideas or merely processed through prayer.

Back in college I had been taught a spiritual concept we called “killing the giant.” It was based on the boy David fighting the giant Goliath in the Old Test-ament. Essentially, you choose the scariest spiritual act you can think of (the giant) and go do it. It was the ultimate declaration of faith. Some of us would take a stand for Jesus in biology class. Others would share their faith with the most daunting people in their dormitory. On that day, right there in Albania, two false teachers represented a great test to my faith. Inside I wondered if they were a “giant” that I needed to face.

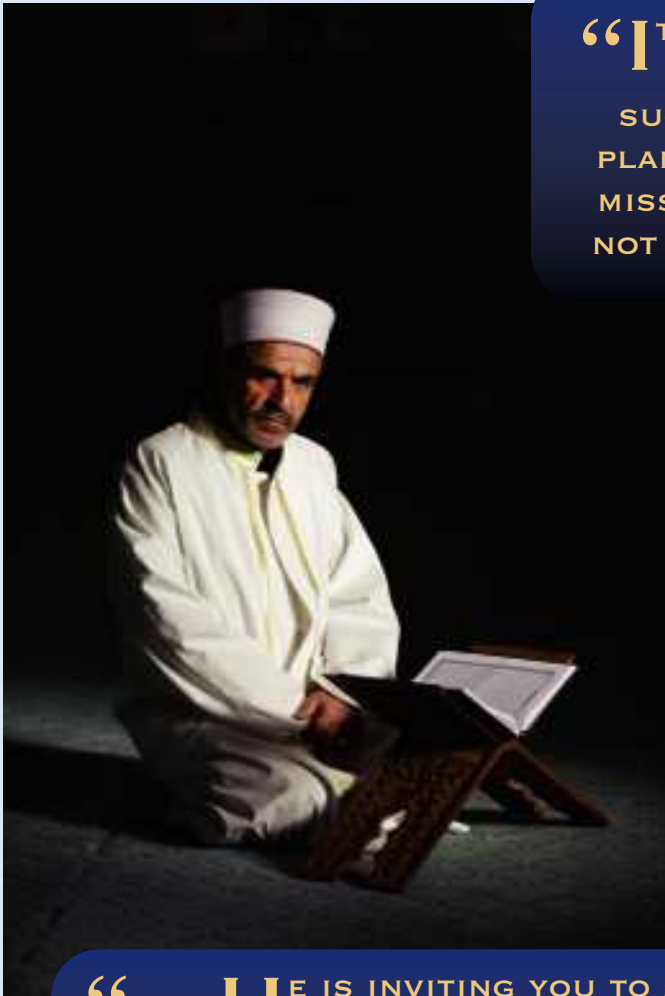
Lost in thought, I took the long route home from campus. My mind reeled. I tried to concoct a scenario where I could confront the evil I had witnessed. I tried to imagine how my faith could be proven. It seemed hopeless.

In time, my thoughts drifted away. Thoughts of “killing the giant” led me back to college and memories of the cherished friends I had left behind in Oregon. And soon, like so much adolescent fer-vor, those Muslim evangelists receded farther and farther from my active thoughts.

The next morning, I awoke into my old routine. Up at six. Cup of coffee. Light the kerosene heater. Morning of reading and prayer. Eventually I toddled off to campus.

Without knowing why, I had a spring in my step along my hour commute. I passed the embassy, the orphanage and the dilapidated sports fields and began to climb the hill into Student City. I was lost in my thoughts and not much aware of anything around me.

OUR CONVERSATION ONLY LASTED MAYBE TWENTY MINUTES. TO MY DISAPPOINTMENT (AND RELIEF), THERE WAS NO BATTLE. THERE WERE NO HARSH WORDS...THEY EVEN BLESSED ME IN MY WORK.



“IT IS GOD WHO IS AT WORK ALL AROUND US. IT IS ALSO NOT ABOUT SUCCESS OR NO SUCCESS. GOD DOES NOT NEED ME FOR HIS PLANS. HE ALSO DOES NOT NEED YOU, YOUNG MISSIONARY. GOD IS ALL STRENGTH. HE DOES NOT NEED YOU TO DO HIS FIGHTING FOR HIM.”

In a definitive move designed more to force myself to act than to make any particular dramatic point, I spun around and faced the small party head-on. They stopped and stared.

“Excuse me, sirs. I was wondering if I might have a word with you.” I don’t know why I spoke in English. I also don’t know why I sounded like a character from a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical.

The two Islamic men looked at each

ary.” *There. That should do it, I thought. This will heat up the conversation.* But I didn’t stop there, “I am here because I serve Jesus.”

“That is wonderful,” the elder scholar said. (*What did he say?*) He managed to say it with no discernible irony or condescension. “We serve Jesus as well. He is the most inspiring and honorable prophet.” Then he explained his devotion to Jesus.

Again their response was a bit of a sermon, going on and on for a few minutes, but I must tell you, I was moved by their unmistakable reverence for the historical Jesus. They spoke of Jesus like he is a real person. They quoted his teachings from memory. They were verbose in their devotion. As I listened, I found myself wishing that more Christians could speak of Jesus as these Muslims spoke.

“How has your time in Albania been?” the younger scholar asked. “How have you passed the time?”

“Our work is going quite well. Our time here has been very successful.” Then, out of habit I returned the question. “How is your work going?” I couldn’t believe that I asked it. Instead of throwing stones, I was lobbing softballs.

“I would say that we do no work at all,” he said. “It is God who is at work all around us. It is also not about success or no success. God does not need me for his plans. He also does not need you, young missionary. God is all strength. He does not need you to do his fighting for him.” Then he clarified. “Be assured, this does not mean that you are not important. It is the opposite. He is inviting you to sit and watch him perform his wonders. Sometimes he will even let you take the credit. That is what humility does.”

“...HE IS INVITING YOU TO SIT AND WATCH HIM PERFORM HIS WONDERS. SOMETIMES HE WILL EVEN LET YOU TAKE THE CREDIT. THAT IS WHAT HUMILITY DOES.”

I reached the first dormitories and the road joined another path, and both turned to the right. As I turned, I was jarred from my daydream. Just a few meters behind me, from the merging path, came the same bearded Muslim scholars. I just kept walking, stiff with surprise and fright, fighting the desire to look back. They were only a few strides behind me, so close I could hear their footsteps. They had just a few companions and appeared to be headed to another session of sermonizing in the student square.

My face went hot. My stomach swam. I could feel their eyes with the skin of my neck. Goliath was upon me. The battlefield was here. *What else could I do? If I don’t fight, who will?*

other for just a moment and then turned and answered me in flawless English. “How can we help you?”

I was completely unprepared for this encounter. And yet here I was, on the battlefield, slingshot in hand. Unfortunately, I had forgotten to gather any stones. I stammered, “I heard you speaking to the students yesterday.”

“Yes,” the older of the two said, “I remember you being there. Thank you for spending so much time listening to us. Tell me, what is a young American man like you doing in Albania?” (I was always annoyed by the fact that people just assumed I was an American. How can they always tell?)

“Well, if you must know, I [pause for effect] am a Christian mission-

Our conversation only lasted maybe twenty minutes. To my disappointment (and relief), there was no battle. There were no harsh words. These two men were humble, kind, compassionate, and encouraging. They even blessed me in my work.

Later, I thought more about those Muslim scholars in their woolen hats, beards, and long robes. I realized that they looked like the Magi (wise men) in my childhood Nativity set.

Who were the Magi, anyway? They were spiritual scholars from the East who honored Jesus. They were not Jewish; at least they didn't appear to be. They were certainly not Christians; there was no such thing as a Christian at that time.

Did the Magi hold to all the theological intricacies that we Christians believe today? I somehow



I WAS MOVED BY THEIR UNMISTAKABLE REVERENCE FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS. THEY SPOKE OF JESUS LIKE HE IS A REAL PERSON... THEY WERE VERBOSE IN THEIR DEVOTION... I FOUND MYSELF WISHING THAT MORE CHRISTIANS COULD SPEAK OF JESUS AS THESE MUSLIMS SPOKE.

doubt that they did. And yet Jesus shares his story and my Christmas crèche with them.

As I walked away from the Islamic scholars, I thought about their

precious gifts of words and encouragement. I thought about how they reminded me of God's work in the world and my place in His work. I found myself wishing I knew of God as well as they did.

It has been almost twenty years since that encounter on that Albanian university campus. Since then I have seen more than my share of the world. In spite of all those travels, there have been few places more beautiful and life giving than the

EVERY DAY I ENGAGE SPIRITUAL PLURALISTS AND RELIGIOUS ORPHANS ABOUT TOPICS OF FAITH AND MEANING. IT IS JUST MY WAY. I STRIVE TO BE WITH THE OTHER PERSON IN A WAY THAT IS NOT LOADED, AVOIDING CONDESCENSION AND HIERARCHICAL PHILOSOPHICAL CONSTRUCTS ("I HAVE THE ANSWERS AND YOU DON'T.")



HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE? IT IS ONLY POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF MEN LIKE THOSE TWO MUSLIM EVANGELISTS WHO TOOK TWENTY MINUTES ONE SPRING AFTERNOON TO BLESS, EMBRACE AND ENCOURAGE ME IN MY FAITH.

life I now have in inner city Portland, Oregon. It is a wonderful place, full of arts, bikes, and microbreweries; surrounded by waterways and forests.

It is also one of the first manifestations of post-Christian culture in North America. Less than a quarter of people in my neighborhood have ever attended church. They don't see the purpose. They don't particularly care.

I am the sort of person who lives a public life, meaning my days are spent out and about. I spend my mornings in coffee shops and my afternoons in local pubs. Every day I engage spiritual pluralists and religious orphans about topics of faith and meaning. It is just my way.

I strive to be with the other person in a way that is not loaded, avoiding condescension and hierarchical philosophical constructs ("I have the answers and you don't." "You need me, I don't need you.")

I have been blessed, informed, corrected, encouraged, rightly criticized, inspired and even spiritually healed by these children of diverse beliefs and ragamuffin ways.

How is this possible? It is only possible because of men like those



Tony Kriz is "Author in Residence" at Warner Pacific. He has a doctorate in Spiritual Formation and teaches faith and culture in numerous religious and academic settings. Tony (known by many as "Tony the Beat Poet" in Donald Miller's best-selling book *Blue Like Jazz*) has lived in many cultures including among Muslims in Eastern Europe and within post-Christian communities of the Pacific Northwest. He lives with his wife, Aimee, and their three sons alongside diverse faith-friends. Tony is the author of *Neighbors and Wise Men: Sacred Encounters in a Portland Pub*

and Other Unexpected Places (© 2012, Thomas Nelson Publishers) and *Aloof* (expected release, Fall, 2014). Learn more about Tony at www.tonykriz.com.

the world differently than I, even essential and profound ways. The question that washes over me is this: Can I simply accept them for who they are? Am I willing to honestly consider their spiritual insights, even though they were not Christians like me? Could I even allow them to teach me?

If I do, I cannot continue to hold onto the "battlefield" paradigm. It

worry about. My role is to be open to his loving voice from sources as interesting and broad as his creative capacity.

That seems to be the way it was with Jesus. He did not always teach by pointing to Temple or Torah. Sometimes his text was as unexpected as, "Look at the flower... Consider the bird."

He even had the courage to point to a "pagan" and say, "Nowhere in Israel have I found such great faith." In examples like these, Jesus seems to be making a comment on his Father, his heavenly Father, his Father who is free. He was declaring that the Father is an unhindered communicator.

Be it pub-dwelling Portland religious ragamuffins or Magi-clad Muslim scholars, my closing question is this: Can I allow them to be gift-giving characters in the Nativity play of my life? □

Adapted from Neighbors and Wise Men: Sacred Encounters in a Portland Pub and Other Unexpected Places by Tony Kriz. Copyright ©2012. Used by permission of Thomas Nelson, Inc. www.thomasonline.com.

THE BATTLEFIELD? THAT IS FOR GOD TO WORRY ABOUT. MY ROLE IS TO BE OPEN TO HIS LOVING VOICE FROM SOURCES AS INTERESTING AND BROAD AS HIS CREATIVE CAPACITY. THAT SEEMS TO BE THE WAY IT WAS WITH JESUS. HE DID NOT ALWAYS TEACH BY POINTING TO TEMPLE OR TORAH.

two Muslim evangelists who took twenty minutes one spring afternoon to bless, embrace and encourage me in my faith.

I have often thought about those regal Islamic evangelists. There were so many ways that they saw

requires a radical shift in my spiritual thinking. I must always remember that faith is essential and important. But the shift leads me to step down from the judge's seat, where I determine when and where God is able to speak to me. The battlefield? That is for God to

Is God Playing a Cosmic Shell Game?

by Monte Wolverton

It was a rough year for my late wife, Kayte. In February, 2010, she had a knee replacement. For the next several months, while she was recuperating, she managed to pack our home and prepare it for sale. Then in August she had a hip replacement. That same month she was diagnosed with breast cancer, which was treated with surgery and radiation right after our move in September. We still faced the challenge of unpacking scores of boxes (incredible how much stuff you accumulate in 40 years of marriage) and organizing a household. But at least by the end of 2010, we thought, we would be done with hospitals, doctors and operating rooms for a while.

We were mistaken.

A week or two after completing her radiation treatments, Kayte became extremely ill with distressing abdominal pains and symptoms. Tests revealed advanced ovarian/peritoneal cancer—unrelated to the earlier cancer. After the initial shock, Kayte and I resigned ourselves to more medical treatments and procedures.

We learned that this new cancer (which may have been there for

months) was more serious than her earlier cancer. Yet her oncologist offered an optimistic prognosis—if we acted quickly. He prescribed aggressive chemotherapy, followed by surgery, followed by several more months of chemo. In earlier years Kayte enjoyed sports and athletic training. She understood the discipline of working through pain toward a positive outcome. Chemo is certainly no picnic, but Kayte soldiered

...is it really productive to go on a hunting trip for some hidden purpose we think God might have?

As with so many of our problems, this idea has been religiously implanted.

through it with her characteristic tenacity.

As the news of Kayte's condition spread among our friends and family we were surprised to see our mailbox filled with cards and letters from all around the country and the world wishing Kayte well. Our network of friends seemed to cross all sorts of unlikely cultural and religious boundaries, so these cards came from all kinds of spiritual backgrounds—Christians, agnostics—even atheists. We were

pleased and encouraged by every message from every person.

Most messages were to the point. They went: "We are so sorry you're sick. We're thinking of you/praying for you/sending good thoughts your way." Other messages, more often from our Christian friends, went something like this: "Be assured that God has a purpose in all this. We may not understand his purpose, but remember he is in control and doing

all these things for a reason."

One evening we both noticed the different approach and talked about it. "It sounds like some of our friends are assuming that I'm in a quandary as to why this is happening to me, and that I need reassurance that God has some purpose in mind," Kayte observed.

Our friends' assumption was reasonable. As we are hit with life's traumas, our first impulse is often to wonder why.

God's purpose in allowing suffer-

ing had likely been a personal issue in the lives of our friends who sent such reassuring messages—and we deeply appreciated their concern.

Does There Always Need to Be a Purpose?

It's clear that all creatures who have ever lived on earth—even the “best” Christians—are subject to the ups and downs of the physical world. We have good times and bad times. We have prosperity and poverty. We feel happy and we feel sad. We feel productive and we feel useless. People love us and hate us. We have robust health and we get sick or injured. While it seems that some may get off the hook more than others—we all get it in the end. As Jesus (who suffered more than any of us) summed it up in John 16:33 “In this world you will have trouble.”

So is it really productive to go on a hunting trip for some hidden purpose we think God might have? As with so many of our problems, this idea has been religiously implanted. If we have been led to believe by religious authorities that everything we experience in this life is a result of God being pleased or displeased with our behavior—blessing us when we make right decisions—cursing us when we make wrong decisions—zapping us with some kind of spiritual cattle prod whenever we make a wrong turn—petulantly turning his back on us and “removing his hedge of protection” every time we have a lapse of judgment or a bad attitude—then we will be plagued with anxiety every time our boat hits life's whitewater.

An adult daughter of a close friend recently experienced a “week from hell.” First, she lost her boyfriend. Then she totalled her car—her only transportation to work. Then her electricity was shut off because of a misunderstanding about her bill. Then the aging van she had borrowed for transportation began having electrical problems. She was tempted to conclude that she was under some kind of curse.

It's clear that all creatures who have ever lived on earth—even the “best” Christians—are subject to the ups and downs of the physical world. We have good times and bad times...we have robust health and we get sick or injured.

Given the same circumstances, who wouldn't wonder? We might ask ourselves, “What have I done wrong?” We might agonize and try to find the “unrepented-of sin” in our life that prompted God to become angry and smite us.

Further, we might feel a need to have all the answers—to find out exactly what God's purpose is in all this adversity. Unfortunately this would leave us vulnerable for some human religious authority to come and inform us as to exactly what they believe God's purpose is for us, and begin pushing their religious pills, potions, programs and plans.

In my friend's daughter's case, the truth was that the rough patch was merely a cluster of bad events—some caused by errors she or someone else had made—others the product of time and chance. As my friend tried to reassure her daughter, there was no “curse.”

Navigating Uncertainty

Some years ago, Kayte and I would have thought very much like my friend's hapless daughter. But as our understanding of God's grace grew we learned that God does not operate that way. And maybe that's what our trial was all about. Even as Kayte fought her cancer we were not worried about any mysterious spiritual reason or purpose for her illness.

There were certainly physical causes for her illness. My family, friends and I could speculate about those causes endlessly. We do not. Those causes will never be known with certainty this side of eternity—and then I imagine it will be pretty much of a non-issue. In Christ, we were and are empowered to live with such unresolved issues.

We didn't wring our hands wondering about some hidden agenda that God has—or some cosmic shell game he was playing with us.

We understood that we could try to affect outcomes by taking certain physical or medical steps. But we conceded that aspects of our trial were simply out of our control (and in no disease is that truth more evident than cancer).

Of course we asked God to intervene, but after that we rested in faith, placing the ultimate outcome in his hands. We live by faith—not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). God's grace is sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9).

I'm not even suggesting that our faith was flawless or that there weren't times when we struggled with the uncertainty and chaos that is part of our physical existence. I'm saying that by God's grace, time after time, we came back to the certainty of Christ—and therefore enjoyed his peace.

One day we discovered that, despite the many medical steps we were taking, the cancer had mutated and grown to the point that it was inoperable (some of Kayte's story has been covered in earlier issues of *The Plain Truth*). Bad news notwithstanding, Kayte didn't waver—she continued more than ever to rest in faith as she slipped into a coma from which she would not recover.

God's intent, as we all experience the suffering that is part and parcel of our world, is not that we should have additional suffering from fear and anxiety—but that, by his grace, we should have peace and comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3). Back to Jesus' words in John 16:33: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” □

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



Quit Trying to Fix It Yourself!

Sometimes I'm so tired of me and my sin that I can hardly stand it. Who's going to forgive me? I can't even forgive myself and the forgiveness of others isn't nearly enough.

We have a lot of problems that simply can't be fixed. When God entered time and space, he did what we can't do. Grace was born. We all have what Pascal said was a "God-shaped vacuum" in our souls and what Augustine referred to—that we were created by God and our hearts were restless until they found their rest in him. The Psalmist said "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:1-2).

The problem is that there is nothing we can do about the desire so we hide it, fake it or pretend we have fixed it when we haven't. We try, of course, with the idols we worship, but we know that idolatry (whether the formal idolatry of making a god with our hands or the informal idolatry of creating a substitute god out of our sin) is silly and it never satisfies the hunger in our hearts.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....

We also have a problem with love and we can't fix that either. We were not only created with a desire for God, we were created with a desire to love and be loved. Scripture admonishes us to love our neighbor as ourselves and the cry of the Psalmist is often a cry for love.

Have you ever tried to get someone to love you, someone who doesn't and probably never will? Better to forget it and try someone else. Does God love us? What if God is a monster or child abuser? What if God doesn't care at all? What if God's love is just a hope dreamed up by silly dreamers whose hope is bigger than the reality?

Does God care? Does God love? More importantly, does God love us? And then the question that is always quietly spoken because we are afraid of

the answer: Does God love *me*?

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....

There is another problem—the problem with meaning. That was Job's problem. It wasn't just the suffering (he was willing to go through that); it was God and the purpose of the suffering. And when he challenged God to answer his cry for meaning, God refused and reminded Job that he was God and Job wasn't. Not very satisfying, if you ask me.

What is this thing all about? "Men must work, and women must weep, and the sooner it's over the sooner to sleep." Is this all there is?

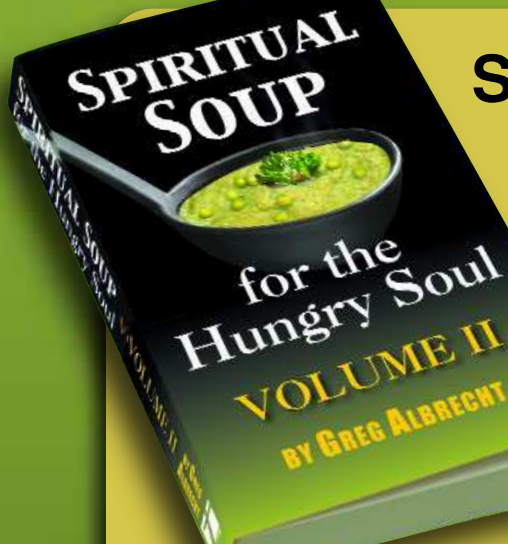
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....

Of course, we've got a sin problem, too. We can't even begin to fix that. We identify both with Paul's confession of sin and his cry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

I get that. Sometimes I'm so tired of me and my sin that I can hardly stand it. Who's going to forgive me? I can't even forgive myself and the forgiveness of others isn't nearly enough. David understood when he cried out, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....

And don't forget the problem with death. The "grim reaper" is always there in the shadows. That can scare the spit out of you if you think about it too much! Death is a one-out-of-one proposition. Job's question, "If a man dies, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14), is the question all of us have. The problem is that we can't fix the fact of our death or even find answers to our questions about what's on the other side of it.



SOUP'S ON!

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2 has just arrived from our printers.

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

PTM has already mailed a complimentary copy of Soup #2 to many of our dedicated and generous Friends and Partners. It's another way for us to provide Christ-centered spiritual nourishment—AND it's a way of saying THANK YOU!

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2 is being made available to the general

public for \$20. However, we are offering it to readers of *The Plain Truth* for a gift of \$15 or more to the ongoing work of PTM.

You won't want to miss this great collection of rich, satisfying, inspiring and Christ-centered spiritual meals.

To receive your copy of *Soup #2*, send a donation of \$15 or more to Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129 or call us at **1-800-309-4466**. Or you may donate online at our secure website, **www.ptm.org**.



he asked me...

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

That's what the incarnation is about—a great big boatload of problems that we can't fix and a God who came "at the right time" to love us, forgive us and tell us about Home. It is a celebration of our helplessness and God's antidote.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and

And at that moment, in eternity, Jesus said goodbye to the angels, acknowledged his Father, packed his bags and headed for Bethlehem to fix what we can't.

we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.... And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace (John 1:1, 14, 16).

God fixed what we can't fix long before we were born. In fact, he did it from before the very foundation of the world. God looked into the future and saw me and knew my name. He knew yours too.

He created us and saw how much we desired to know him, how much we wanted to be loved and how much we needed to be forgiven. He realized that life wasn't for sissies and that there was so much darkness in our living and dying. He knew how helpless we would be.

And at that moment, in eternity, Jesus said goodbye to the angels, acknowledged his Father, packed his bags and headed for Bethlehem to fix what we can't.

So celebrate, dance and enjoy... in God's grace and love. And for God's sake and yours, quit trying to fix it yourself.

He asked me to remind you. □
—Steve Brown



Home Alone at Christmas?

Even though the song proclaims “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” the reality is that many people are alone at Christmas. Christmas cards paint a picture of a large, extended and prosperous family nestled in a storybook mansion in some Camelot-like winter wonderland. Expensive cars are parked outside, 30 or 40 family members of all ages are neatly and warmly dressed, with joy, merriment and peace characterizing their time together.

But in “real life,” if and when families do manage to get together, there are often arguments and spats. Some families have individuals who are so alienated that they refuse to show up if someone else is “going to be there.”

Getting the family together is sometimes an impossible task. At best, because of the logistics involved, many families only see aunts and uncles and grandparents on one side of the family every other Christmas. Some members of a family live so far away they can’t afford to visit. Some family members just seem to be “too busy too care.”

No one likes to have a solitary Christmas, staring at the four walls. We all enjoy being involved in festive occasions, and when we aren’t, seeing and hearing about others doing so can accentuate the estrangement and alienation we feel.

Several close friends of mine have recently lost their wives—one of them told me that “Christmas is the hardest time of all.” I have many other friends who acutely feel the pain of separation from friends and family with whom they were once in close relationships—but now, for a variety of reasons, former friends and family members are gone.

I will never forget sitting next to a friend as he told me about arriving home from work to find his wife’s closet cleaned out, and a note on the table telling him that she had never loved him. Another friend arrived home early one day, only to find his wife in

bed with another man. Another dear friend once told me, tears running down her cheeks, that her parents had informed her they never wanted to see her again. And I have talked with many parents whose grown children have told them a similar thing.

I remember the last years of my mother-in-law’s life, when she lived in an assisted living facility. When we visited, Karen and I would often have lunch with her in the dining room, and invariably we would be eagerly welcomed by others who told us no one in their family had visited them for well over a year.

These older folks seemed to hunger for my wife and me to spend time with them—perhaps, in some cases, because we were about the same age as their own children who seldom visited.

Just before Christmas last year I was in the grocery store looking for an ingredient for a recipe my wife was making at home. As I walked down the aisle a man stopped me. He apologized if he was bothering me, but he told me his story about losing his job and his house, and now he and his wife and two teenage children were living in their car. According to him they were alone. They had no one to help them, no family and their former friends were also in desperate financial straits. He might have just been hustling me and taking me for a fool—maybe all he wanted was some booze.

But after talking with him briefly I determined that I should respond as the hands and feet of Jesus, so I gave him some money. I may never see him again on this side of eternity, but I pray that one brief interaction, in some small way, helped him and his family to realize that they were not alone.

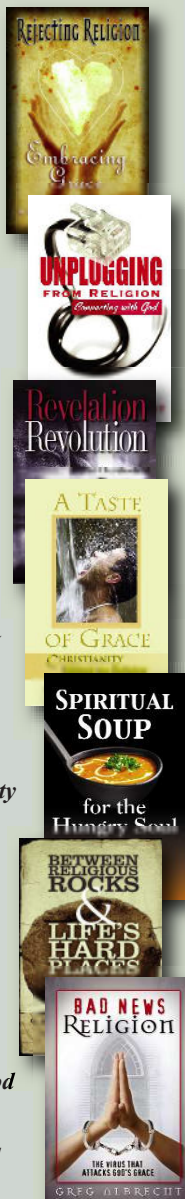
Being alone is hard—for that reason solitary confinement is regarded as the ultimate punishment for prisoners. But the company of and fellowship with other people doesn’t completely resolve our sense of being alone. One can easily feel alone in a crowd.

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commentary

A few weeks ago a friend called, upset because her grown son had just told them that he and his family were not coming for Christmas. Although he and his family only live about 30 miles away, her son had decided that he and his wife were going to be with their friends and their children's friends instead.

Our friend and her husband were devastated—for the first time in many decades they were going to be alone on Christmas—no family dinner, no grandchildren, no company of any kind. We had a long conversation on the phone about the real significance of Christmas.

Far from adding to the problem of the pain and fear of loneliness, Christmas announces the cure. God has come to become one of us, to be with us and to be for us. The incarnation of Jesus was not merely the birth of God in the flesh—it was the beginning of an eternal relationship. Jesus came, he stayed, and he will never leave us.

Jerry Sittser, a professor at Whitworth College, wrote *A Grace Disguised: How a Soul Grows Through Loss* after he lost three generations of his family in a tragic automobile accident: his mother, his wife and his young daughter.

He wrote about the stark loneliness he felt during those dark times—times when he perceived that God was completely absent from his life. But he came to believe that it is in coming to the end of ourselves that we experience a new life. In that transformation he discovered that God had never left him.

Jesus came to be one of us so that we might be one with God. *Adoption* is one of the great New Testament metaphors illustrating the invitation God extends to us all, making us his very children, heirs of his kingdom.

In the world of religion at large, God's grace is counter-cultural and counter-religious. Grace is counter-religious because Christ-less reli-

gion pretends that our performance can buy God's love. But those great theologians of yesteryear, the Beatles, proclaimed that "money can't buy me love."

God insists that we can only be in relationship with God because of his grace. Grace demands that we humans cannot do something that will in some way contribute to and help pay for what God gives us.

God's grace requires that human actions and behaviors cannot earn

Being alone is hard—for that reason solitary confinement is regarded as the ultimate punishment for prisoners. But the history of humanity reveals that the company of...others doesn't completely resolve our sense of being alone.

God's good graces. Giving and doing, programs and activities, participations in ceremonies and faithful attendance don't cause God to be more favorably inclined toward us than he would have been otherwise.

God offers to end the pain of our loneliness and separation by adopting us, so that we are given eternal relationship with him, by his love and because of his goodness.

If we accept, though there are times when we will feel alone and feel hurt and pain, we will never, ever be spiritually alone again.

The birth of Jesus announces that the whole world may be one with God, in eternal relationship, for God, in the person of Jesus, has come to be one of us. The message of Christmas is that we are not alone.

We are never alone because God is with us, now and forevermore. □

—Greg Albrecht

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Christ Almighty— God With Skin

BY BRAD JERSAK

“By the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became human.” (The Nicene Creed)

“Phenomenal cosmic powers...itty-bitty living space!” (Disney’s Aladdin)

Christmas means so much more for the world than practicing “the spirit of giving” or holding another birthday shower for baby Jesus.

Historically, it is a Christian feast celebrating the “Incarnation”—the *enfleshment* of God Almighty. In this season, we remember that “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God”¹ “*became flesh* and pitched his tent among us for a while” (my translation of John 1:14). Hopefully, we relive the astonishment that overcame the shepherds as first witnesses.

So too, the nativity story signals the beginning of the only life ever lived that would

perfectly reveal the true nature of God. New Testament writers remind us that Jesus of Nazareth was more than a wandering peasant-prophet from Galilee. They insist that he was and is the *exact image* of God’s essence, the *precise imprint* of God’s being (my translations of Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:13). They testify how in Christ “the fullness of God lives in a human body” (Colossians 2:9, NLT). John’s first epistle contends for the central Christian truth:

...JESUS ON EARTH UNVEILED GOD IN HEAVEN. HIS APOSTLES CONFIRMED THAT IN CHRIST, THEY HAD EXPERIENCED THE IMPOSSIBLE: THEY HAD SEEN GOD, HEARD GOD AND TOUCHED GOD (1 JOHN 1:1-2).

that Jesus Christ came “in the flesh” (1 John 4:2). “Flesh” as in a tangible body. “Flesh” as in authentic humanity. “Flesh” as in the full range of physical limitations, human emotions and depths of suffering common to us all.

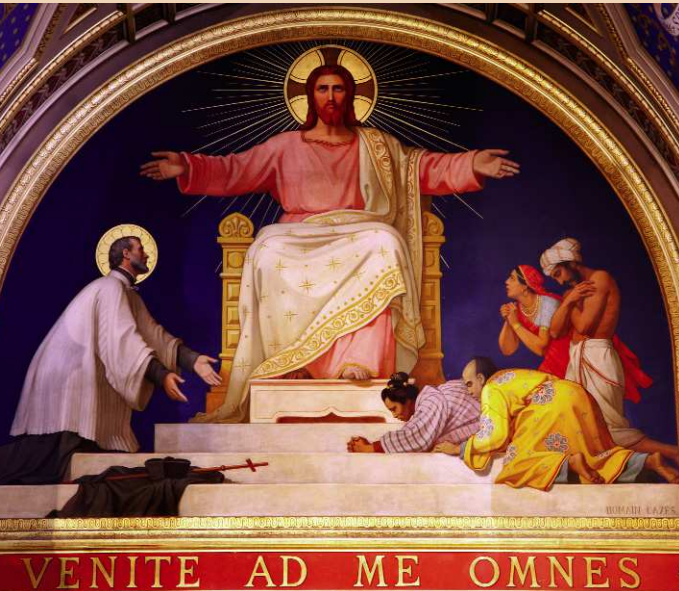
In simple terms, we say that Jesus showed us *exactly* what God is like...not just a facet of divinity; Jesus was the one true and living avatar of the transcendent God. Jesus himself declared, "I and the Father are one.... If you've seen me, you've seen the Father" (John 10:30; 14:9).

entirely Christ-like!² Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey once said, "God is *Christlike*, and in Him there is no *unchristlikeness* at all." "God is like Jesus—God has exactly like Jesus—God has always been exactly like Jesus. We didn't always know that, but we do now."³

manger-cave. Remember the newborn, humble and helpless, crying for momma's milk and many swaddling diaper-changes. Recollect a refugee family, barely ducking Herod's sword and hiding in Egypt.

Now realize that this is the way *God* came...on purpose. And *how* he came is a revelation of his nature.

The angels announced the arrival of a king—*The King*, in fact. When we think about kings and kingdoms, we think of ruling and reigning; we speak of sovereignty, authority, glory and power. So when we imagine God as king, we proclaim all this in word and song, projecting our loftiest ideas of royalty onto God. To us, Christ is crowned and



The Humble Birth of an Almighty King

The implications are unfathomable, but remember also how God Almighty came. Remember a smelly donkey, a tiny village. Recall the "No Vacancy" sign and of course, the

WHEN WE USE THE KING METAPHOR, WE MIGHT IMAGINE THAT GOD IS A KING LIKE OUR KINGS, EXCEPT MORE!

That is, Jesus on earth unveiled God in heaven. His apostles confirmed that in Christ, they had experienced the impossible: they had seen God, heard God and touched God (1 John 1:1-2). They knew face-to-face fellowship with the Almighty because Jesus was the very face of God (2 Corinthians 4:6).

These are profound claims, not only about who Jesus was and is, but even more so, Jesus is declared the decisive revelation about who God is and (re)definition of what God is like. If so, then understand: God is



LET ME PROPOSE THAT THE KING OF HEAVEN RULES AND REIGNS, NOT LIKE CONSTANTINE, BUT LIKE JESUS OF NAZARETH. IF JESUS IS A KING, HE IS NOT LIKE ANY KING THAT WE HAVE CONCEIVED.

enthroned as king of glory, majestic in his universal dominion.

All of these terms draw on the royalty theme. When we use the king metaphor, we might imagine that God is a king like our kings, except more! They are powerful; he is all-powerful! They rule nations; he rules the universe! In fact, since he is the king-of-kings, that makes him an emperor! Emperor of the universe! We may imagine the mightiest emperors of history—Tutankhamen, Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great. We picture the Roman Empire, the Chinese dynasties and the British Commonwealth. And really, history's most exceptional empire still exists: the United States of America! Yet they must all finally bow, as one day every knee shall bow, in submission to the Emperor of All and his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Such a God is very appealing. I trust a God who is "sovereign." I want a God who is "in control." I like my God to be bigger, wiser and stronger than any other...mainly because he is *my* God. And woe to the bully who picks on me! I put my hope in this warrior-king, "the mighty smiter" who avenges me and wins the day, whether now or on the Day of Judgment. Glorious!

Such glory makes for great carol-writing. Moreover, these descriptions are biblically true, right? Of course! The king metaphor reminds us that God gets the last word. It calls us to allegiance, obedience and worship. So it becomes natural for us to conceive of God's



FOR EUSEBIUS, GOD'S KINGDOM HAD COME ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN THROUGH THE WAY OF CONSTANTINE. THE EARTHLY EMPEROR WAS NOW THE IMAGE AND AGENT OF THE HEAVENLY KING.

sovereignty in terms of imperial dominance.

The Emperor Image

Eusebius certainly thought so. He was Bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century and has been called the "father of church history." Among his written works we have his "Oration in Praise of Constantine," proclaiming the thirtieth anniversary of the emperor's reign. In that composition, Eusebius reasons that through the power of the Cross, every demonic hindrance to the global reign of the Emperor in heaven has been removed and now God's kingdom will cover the whole earth.

Having defeated their false gods, the Prince of Peace will

rule over all nations in one united empire, just as the prophets foretold. Moreover, Christ's imperial kingdom was advancing rapidly through the conquests of his earthly co-regent, the emperor Constantine.

In battle after battle, Constantine subjugated all foreign enemies under the sign of the Cross, just as

Israel had behind the Ark of the Covenant. And so God's kingdom would be all in all via the imperial might of the Holy Roman Empire, baptized by the approval of the Church.

Eventually every knee would bow to Christ through the victory of Constantine, and bring about an era of eternal peace. In Eusebius' words: *...thus the Almighty Sovereign himself accords an increase both of years and of children to our most pious emperor, and renders his sway over the nations of the world still fresh*

and flourishing.... He appoints him this present festival, in that he has made him victorious over every enemy that disturbed his peace: He it is who displays him as an example of true godliness to the human race....

Invested as [Constantine] is with a semblance of heavenly sovereignty, he directs his gaze above, and frames his earthly government according to the pattern of that Divine original, feeling strength in its conformity to the monarchy of God. And this conformity is granted by the universal Sovereign to man alone of the creatures of this earth: for He only is the author of sovereign power, who decrees that all should be subject to the rule of one.⁴

Note here how Eusebius defines God's "sovereignty." It relates to victory through

violence and peace through conquest; monarchy through force and coercive power; rule through decrees and reign via subjugation. Rebellion (i.e. polytheism, pluralism and *democracy*) would be trodden underfoot for the sake of God's kingdom.

What does this imply? For Eusebius, God's kingdom had come on earth as it is in heaven through the way of Constantine. The earthly emperor was now the image and agent of the heavenly King, with the church written in as his happy chaplain and cheerleader!

Not Like Any King We've Ever Known

Wait a moment. Remember Jesus? Remember *the only perfect image* of God? Remember not only that he came, but also *how* he came. Recall *who* Jesus was on earth—*how* he arrived, *how* he lived, *how* he died and *how* Jesus overcame—his *way* of overcoming represents the *only exact* revelation we have of God's sovereign reign!

If God sent his Son to reveal himself, what does Bethlehem show us about what God is like? What does the Christmas narrative tell us about our King? If Jesus showed how true sovereignty works, what real power does, and what victory looks like—*on earth as it is in heaven*—then let me propose that the King of Heaven rules and reigns, not like Constantine, but like Jesus of Nazareth. If Jesus is a king, *he is not like any king that we have conceived*. When we remember the babe in Bethlehem, or the servant washing his disciples' feet or the crucified "King of the Jews," we say his

IF JESUS IS TO BE CALLED "KING," THEN HE IS A HUMBLE KING, AN IRONIC KING— VIRTUALLY AN ANTI-KING! CHRIST HIMSELF SAID SO...



kingdom is an upside-down kingdom! If Jesus is to be called "king," then he is a humble king, an ironic king—virtually an anti-king! Christ himself said so:

"But Jesus called them to Himself and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'" (Matthew 20:25-28 NKJV).

Derek Flood comments, "Jesus models the way of God, not as one who 'lords it over others' but as the servant Lord, and calls for us to embody that way too. Following Jesus means rejecting the way of domination, the way of kings."⁵

This is evident from birth to death and at every stage of Christ's life in between. Yes, Jesus Christ reveals the power, sovereignty and victory of the Kingdom of God. But in so doing, he totally subverts our notions of power, sovereignty and victory—in fact, Jesus forever redefines our vision of God-as-king!

Philippians 2 and Revelation

FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS REJECTING THE WAY OF DOMINATION, THE WAY OF KINGS... HE TOTALLY SUBVERTS OUR NOTIONS OF POWER, SOVEREIGNTY AND VICTORY—IN FACT, JESUS FOREVER REDEFINES OUR VISION OF GOD-AS-KING!



Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11, NASB. Emphasis mine).

The key term in this passage is “emptied”—the Greek word is *kenosis*. The meaning and significance of *kenosis* is all-important. If we read Paul carefully, he is *NOT* saying:

- Jesus was the almighty king of heaven who sovereignly



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KINGDOM!

5 help us see this perspective more clearly.

Kenosis—‘Cruciform Power’

In the great hymn of Philippians 2, we read:

“...Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and

bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus **every knee will bow**,⁶ of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus

reigned as all-powerful Lord of the universe;

Jesus temporarily became a humble, meek and even weak servant during his earthly sojourn; but now...

Jesus has ascended to his



“JESUS MODELS THE WAY OF GOD, NOT AS ONE WHO ‘LORDS IT OVER OTHERS’ BUT AS THE SERVANT LORD, AND CALLS FOR US TO EMBODY THAT WAY TOO. FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS REJECTING THE WAY OF DOMINATION, THE WAY OF KINGS.”

—DEREK FLOOD

sovereign throne where he has resumed universal dominion and control.

The passage *almost* says that. Many think it does, because the *kenosis* is framed in Jesus’ descent and ascent. But we must push *kenosis*, this emptying, even further.

- *What if...* what if Jesus’ humility, meekness and servant heart were never a departure from God’s glory and power, but actually define it?

- What if *kenosis*—self-emptying power, self-giving love and radical servanthood—is the very nature of God! What if God rules, not through imperial power but through kenotic love!

- What if the first beatitude—“*Blessed are the poor (void, empty) in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven*”—is a vision of the glory of God lived through Christ? Why? Because

wherever God, wherever Christ, wherever we risk emptying ourselves by God’s grace of self-will and self-rule, there the supernatural kingdom-love of God rules and reigns. Thus, *kenosis* (which is to say LOVE!), is the very nature of God!

Not lording over, but always coming under; not triumphing through conquest, but through a Cross.

Behold the Lion—I saw a Lamb

I often hear the gleeful adage, “Jesus came the first time as a lamb, but next time he’s coming as a lion.” Do these “prophets” realize what they are saying? They seem to mean Jesus once came as the suffering servant, but next time he will appear as the victorious king. Okay...sure.

But I also hear between the lines, “Last time he came in

love (for me), next time in wrath (for my enemies). Last time he came to save the lost; next time to punish the wicked.” Why? Because love wins...but not really, not completely? So Christ will come with plan B. “Enough!” he roars, as he pours out violence and calamitous destruction. Rivers of blood flow to the horses’ bridles as the vengeful Rider wields his cruel swift sword.

What I’m hearing is, “God once tried being like the cross-bearing servant, but praise the Lord, next time around he will be like the sword-bearing warrior.” Christ’s work on the Cross and his power in the Resurrection were insufficient? Now we’re assuming God will revert to wrath?

Where did we get this lion-lamb dichotomy? Revelation 5. But what does it actually say?

HIS DOMINION OVER EVERY TRIBE AND NATION WILL NOT BE WON THROUGH A SOMEDAY-SWORD, BUT IS ALREADY PURCHASED BY HIS BLOOD. HIS KINGDOM GROWS NOW—A PATIENTLY EXPANDING REGIME OF LOVE, FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION.

John sees a heavenly scroll representing world history. No one can open it, so he begins to weep. An elder in heaven interrupts, “Stop weeping; **behold, the Lion** that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, **has overcome** so as to open the book and its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5, NASB my emphasis).

Pause. John is told of a Lion who can resolve history (a good definition of “sovereignty”!). Why a Lion? Because lions are kings; lions are powerful; lions are victorious. Yes. That describes Jesus. Furthermore, we read that this Lion “**has overcome.**” Already. Done. Finished. Won!

How? When? John turns and looks, and what does he see? Surprise! “A **Lamb** standing, as if slain” (Revelation 5:6, NASB. My emphasis). “Standing” because he is alive, “as if slain” because he was crucified. Jesus is a Lion because he is the king who *has already* overcome; he is a Lamb because that victory came, not through violence and conquest, but through *kenosis*—through *sacrificial love*. And this Lion-Lamb is worthy to rule, why? Those at the throne tell us:

“Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9, NASB). Jesus’ eternal kingship was established at the Cross.

His dominion over every tribe and nation will not be won through a someday-sword, but is already purchased by his blood. His kingdom grows now—a patiently expanding regime of love and reconciliation.



A Breath-taking Corollary

Finally, and most surprising, when was the Lamb slain? On Good Friday, right? Yes. But what do we make of this enigmatic phrase: “The Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8)? Some believe this refers to when the Book of Life was written. Others suppose this was when the plan of redemption was conceived. I am inclined to ponder another possibility.⁷

1 John 3:16 says that we know the love of God by remembering how Christ laid down his life. That is, the crucified Christ—the apex of God’s *kenotic* power and *cruciform* love—is our clearest image of God’s very nature from beginning to end. In fact, the Cross shows us *how* God founded the world and now

reigns in it, which totally reframes the meaning of sovereignty!

How so? At the very foundation of the world, God died. Not literally, of course. But God is the Lamb slain at creation in the sense that he died to being all there is. He emptied himself to make space for creation.

In making space, God doesn’t directly interfere with every natural disaster or interrupt every wicked human act. Rather, he has always and must always suffer with us through trauma and calamity as the Lamb slain. In that sense, God is *not* in control, because he doesn’t *do* control. Rather, God rules exclusively through love, which seems as weak as that baby in the manger or as offensive as that Jew on a cross.

This is sovereignty? This is kingship?

AT THE VERY FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD, GOD DIED. NOT LITERALLY, OF COURSE. BUT GOD IS THE LAMB SLAIN AT CREATION IN THE SENSE THAT HE DIED TO BEING ALL THERE IS. HE EMPTIED HIMSELF TO MAKE SPACE FOR CREATION.



Yes! God reigns through the cruciform power of love—not like worldly powers that rule by force. One theology class⁸ contrasted the two ways of ruling by brainstorming words around each:

aggression, striving, insecurity, hegemony.

Cruciform power as love: vulnerability, weakness, obedience, submission, outcast, cursed, ignored, betrayed, risk-taking, wounded, forgiveness,

...THE SLAIN LAMB, LIKE THE BABY IN THE MANGER, RECONSTITUTES EVERY WORLDLY IDEA OF KING AND KINGDOM, GOD AND POWER.

Worldly power as force: authority, recognition, strength, territory, brutality, control, weapons, fear, success, influence, conquering, fame, bloodshed, wrath, violence, glory, domination, greatness, manipulation, bullying,

suffering, thirst, dishonor, shame, lonely, empty, bloody, promise, compassionate, dependence, hope, faith, sacrifice, liberation, empathy.

Thus, the slain lamb, like the baby in the manger, reconstitutes every worldly

idea of king and kingdom, God and power. In summary:

- The kingdom of God is without coercion.
- The kingdom of God has nothing to do with the violence-based power systems of the old age. The sword and the gun are not in its arsenal.
- The kingdom of God persuades by witness, rhetoric, love, Spirit, and if need be, martyrdom. But never by force.⁹

Kenotic power may seem feeble because it is patient and humble, but in the end, God-as-love—the truly Christlike God—is the overcoming force *more* powerful because it does what no tyrant can ever do: it wins hearts, restores lives and transforms societies.

This manger-King is revealed as so glorious that we join angels, shepherds, wisemen and all of creation to willingly bow the knee in worship, singing together:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13). Amen! □

1. *Nicene Creed* (325 A.D.)
2. Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God* (PTM, forthcoming).
3. So says Brian Zahnd in most of his works, especially *Beauty Will Save the World*.
4. Eusebius, *Oration in Praise of Constantine*, 3.3, 5.
5. Derek Flood, *The Rebel God*. <http://www.the.rebelgod.com/2011/09/more-i-follow-jesus-less-i-like-his.html>
6. Citing from Isaiah 45:42-25.
7. Frequently proposed in the writings of Simone Weil.
8. Westminster Theological Centre, UK. Instructor: Lucy Peppiatt
9. Condensed by Brian Zahnd.

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by Martin M. Davis

Breaking News

Grace Has Arrived!

The angel Gabriel announced (annunciated) the staggering news to Mary, an unmarried Galilean teenager from a backwater village in an inconsequential corner of the Roman Empire, that she would be *overshadowed* by the Holy Spirit and conceive the Son of God in her womb. This incredible proclamation to a peasant girl, that she was chosen to be the virgin mother of Jesus Christ, is called “the Annunciation” (Luke 1:26-38).

The Priority of Grace

The choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus did not depend on any virtues she possessed that

would “qualify” her for the unique role she would play in God’s plan. There was nothing remarkable to commend the young peasant girl for the awesome responsibility she was to assume. She brought no resources to the God-human encounter. She had no wealth or social standing; she held no important position in society, even in her small village. In terms of worldly power, possessions and

Mary was an ordinary human being—made of the dust of the ground. There was nothing extraordinary about Mary to make her worthy of her highly favored position.

prestige, she was of no consequence. Despite her lack of worldly status, however, the angel Gabriel hailed Mary as *highly favored* and *blessed among women* because of the unique role for which she was chosen as the human mother of

the fully divine Son of God (Luke 1:28, 42).

Notwithstanding her unique status as the virgin-mother of Jesus, however, Mary was an ordinary human being—made of the dust of the ground. There was nothing extraordinary about Mary to make her worthy of her *highly favored* position.

Even Mary’s willing consent to God’s plan for her life was not a

precondition for God’s goodness towards her. The choice of the young peasant girl to bear the Son of God was not determined by any prior decision on her part. Mary could not have decided of her own accord to become the virgin

“mother of God.” As the angelic messenger announced, the divine decision to choose Mary had *already* been made *for her*.

Mary freely received the divine favor that God had sovereignly and graciously chosen to bestow upon her by consenting to the extraordinary plan God had prepared

ness and mercy are available only to those who have made a “decision for Christ,” or who have recited “The Sinner’s Prayer” and “accepted” Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Preachers and teachers with a more legalistic bent may attach other conditions to divine grace, asserting that only those who believe

trine must be fervently believed if the fires of hell are to be avoided. For many, salvation is a mere potential, waiting to be “actualized,” or brought to fruition, by some action on the part of the person who desires to be “saved.” Only when the sinner has played his or her part in the drama of salvation is he or she “saved.”

The gospel, however, is the good news that our standing before God does *not* depend upon any decision, belief or action on our part. We do not have to “earn” God’s favor. The gospel proclaims that God’s goodness is freely bestowed upon *all* in Jesus Christ. Grace cannot be detached from the person of Jesus Christ and presented as a contract whose conditions must be fulfilled if the sinner is to be “saved.” God’s grace cannot be detached from the person of Jesus Christ and constituted the sole property of an institutionalized church, so that it may be doled out to sinners via the sacraments, penance or confession.

Grace is God’s self-giving for all humanity in Jesus Christ (see John 3:16). Hence, grace is *personal*, for

According to much contemporary teaching and preaching, human salvation is not complete in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ... rather, some task remains undone, to be completed by the repentant sinner;

for her life, trusting that with God “*nothing will be impossible*” (Luke 1:37, NKJV). With simple trust and humility, she replied to the angel, “*I am the Lord’s servant...May your word to me be fulfilled*” (Luke 1:38).

The Conditional Grace of Religion

Mary, the virgin-mother of Jesus, is an outstanding example of an ordinary human being whose life is transformed by grace. Unilaterally and *unconditionally*, God graciously lavished his favor upon the young peasant girl, apart from any prior attempt on Mary’s part to earn divine favor. With trusting consent to the divine plan for her life, Mary simply received God’s goodness towards her.

We often hear “grace” defined as “unmerited pardon” or “favor.” *G-R-A-C-E* is often defined as “God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense.” And, rightly so, we often hear that we cannot earn God’s grace. Despite a proper emphasis on the unmerited nature of grace, however, there are—perhaps unintentionally—implicit, yet contradictory, conditions in much teaching and preaching.

Grace is presented conditionally when it is explained in terms of a “contract”: that is, *if* the sinner fulfils certain conditions, *then* God will be gracious. Some preachers may claim that God’s good-

specific doctrines or adhere to certain standards of behavior deserve God’s favor.

According to much contemporary teaching and preaching, human salvation is not complete in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. According to this unbiblical teaching, contrary to the words of Jesus when he hung on the cross, it is *not* “finished”; rather, some task remains undone, to be completed by the repentant sinner; some doc-

For many, salvation is a mere potential... Only when the sinner has played his or her part in the drama of salvation is he or she “saved.”



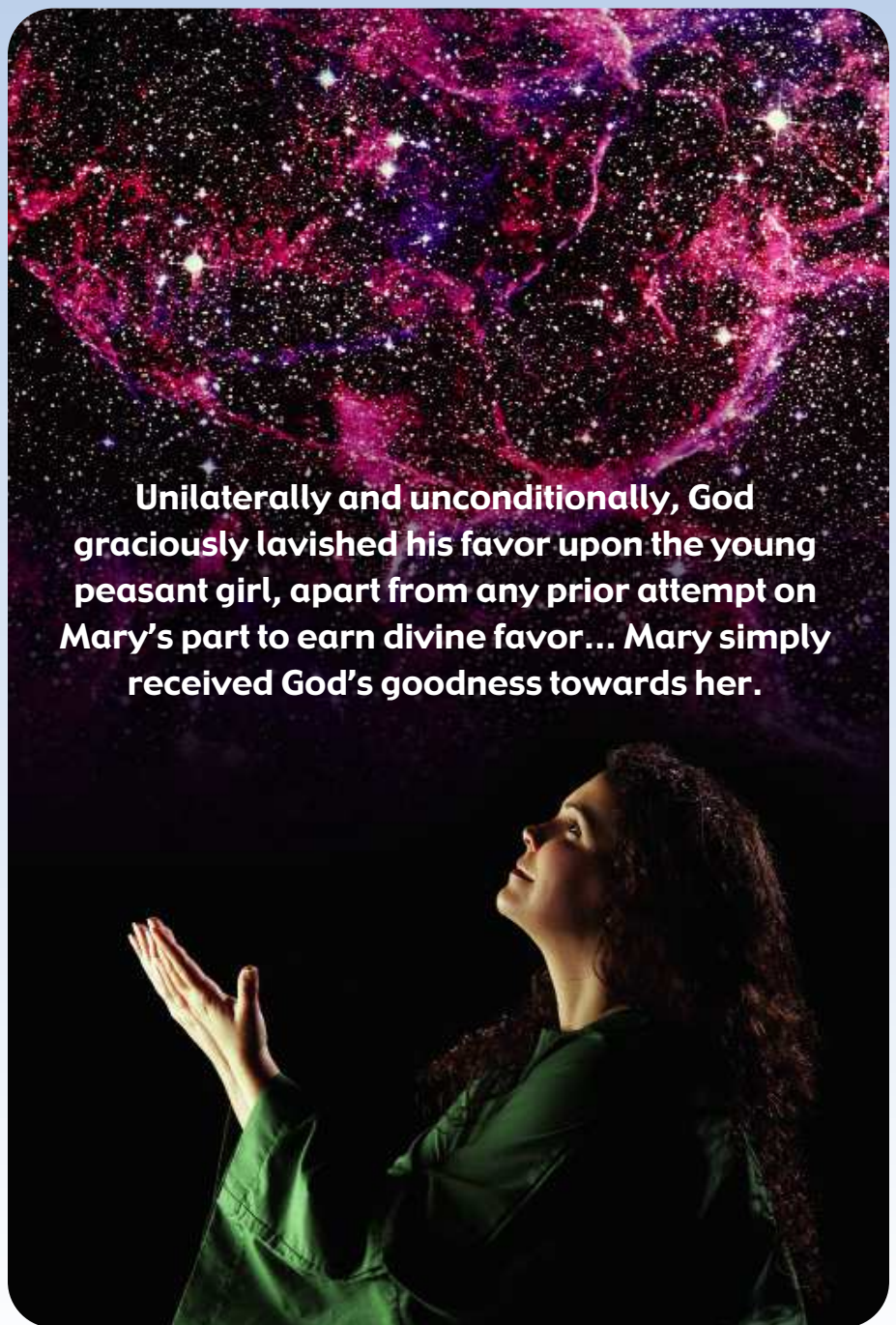
grace is identical with Jesus Christ, in whom the “gift” and the “Giver” are one and the same.

A Sinner Encounters Grace

Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus is an outstanding portrayal of a sinner’s encounter with grace as a personal reality (Luke 19:1-9). As a “*chief tax collector*,” a servant of the oppressive, pagan government of occupying Rome, Zacchaeus was regarded as a sinner—a social-religious outcast shunned by the respectable members of first-century Jewish society, who doubtless resented the wealth he accumulated by skimming money from the taxes he collected from his neighbors.

Upon hearing that Jesus was passing nearby on his way to Jerusalem, Zacchaeus, who was short in stature, climbed a sycamore tree, so that he might get a better look at Jesus. When he saw Zacchaeus in the tree, Jesus shunned contemporary social convention by inviting himself to the tax collector’s home. Jesus’ gracious intention to “stay at the house” of the chief tax collector triggered the complaints of the local villagers, who disapproved of the Lord’s willingness to lodge in the home of a social and religious outcast. As a result of his surprising encounter with grace, Zacchaeus pledged to give half his possessions to the poor and to return fourfold to any he may have cheated. Upon hearing this, Jesus proclaimed, “Today salvation has come to this house.... For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:9-10).

It is vital to note that, like the Virgin Mary, Zacchaeus had done absolutely nothing to deserve what was nothing less than a divine visitation. Zacchaeus merely climbed a tree to get a better look as Jesus passed. Yet, despite the local villagers’ contempt for the tax collector, Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus. Apart from any attempt to make himself worthy—indeed, with no opportunity to make himself wor-



Unilaterally and unconditionally, God graciously lavished his favor upon the young peasant girl, apart from any prior attempt on Mary’s part to earn divine favor... Mary simply received God’s goodness towards her.

thy—Zacchaeus freely *received* (Luke 19:6, NKJV) Jesus into his home. Through his personal encounter with grace, Zacchaeus, like the Virgin Mary, was *highly favored* by God!

Here again we see the priority of grace. Note that Jesus did not wait for Zacchaeus to accept him before expressing his wish to stay in the tax collector’s home. To the contrary: Zacchaeus did not “accept” Jesus; *Jesus accepted Zacchaeus*, who had done nothing more than

climb a tree. The sinful tax collector could only receive the favor that Jesus had already decided to freely bestow upon him, for, as Jesus proclaimed, “...the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

The Transforming Power of Grace

As the direct result of his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus was radically transformed, so that he freely and willingly reached out to his neighbors in repentance and



The Way of Grace

Returning to the much-loved story of Gabriel's appearance to the virgin Mary, the "Annunciation" appears at the beginning of the life and mission of Jesus Christ as a sign of the way God's love has taken, not only for Mary, but for each of us.¹ We too are the recipients of God's goodness, and our standing with our heavenly Father does not depend upon our "worthiness" to receive divine favor. The Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29). In Jesus Christ, the world is fully reconciled to the Father (2 Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:20), who has lavished his love upon us and claimed us as his children (1 John 3:1). Like Mary and Zacchaeus, ours is simply to receive by faith *the grace of God that is already given us in Jesus Christ.*

In the old Latin translation of the New Testament, Gabriel greets the young virgin with words made famous in Schubert's beloved song, *Ave, Maria!*

That is "Hail, Mary!" Because of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the angelic hosts joyfully proclaim: "Hail Mary!" "Hail John!" "Hail Susan!" And "hail to you" dear reader, for the good news of the Advent-Christmas season is that, like Mary, *we are all highly favored by God!*² Amen! ☐

^{1.} Torrance, T.F. 1957. *When Christ Comes to the Individual.* When Christ Comes and Comes Again. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, pp. 31-38.

^{2.} *Ibid.*

Martin M. Davis is an ordained priest in All Nations Christian Church International. You can read his theological blog at www.martindavis.blogspot.com.

The proclamation of the gospel heralds the end of religion, where "religion" is understood as any attempt to please or appease God through human effort.

restitution. The transforming power of the divine favor Jesus unconditionally gave to Zacchaeus reveals the abject failure of religion to change the human heart. Religion attempts to control external behavior by its emphasis on law rather than grace, expressed in stern-jawed demands for unquestioning submission to human rules and expectations. Yet human sinfulness is an internal problem, originating in the "heart" (Matthew 15:19), and even the most stringent outward adherence to the demands of religion cannot transform the human heart or constitute even the most zealous worthiness of the grace of God.

The proclamation of the gospel heralds the end of religion, where "religion" is understood as any attempt to please or appease God through human effort. Grace cannot be earned through the onerous demands of religion; grace can only be received by the empty hand that reaches out in trust to touch the edge of Jesus' cloak (see Matthew 9:19-21). Zacchaeus was

not transformed by the rituals, rules and regulations of the cumbersome religion of his day; rather, he was condemned by his neighbors and scorned as a sinner for his failure to live according to its burdensome demands. Zacchaeus was transformed by God's love as revealed in the incarnate Son, as Jesus graciously engaged him in intimate fellowship.

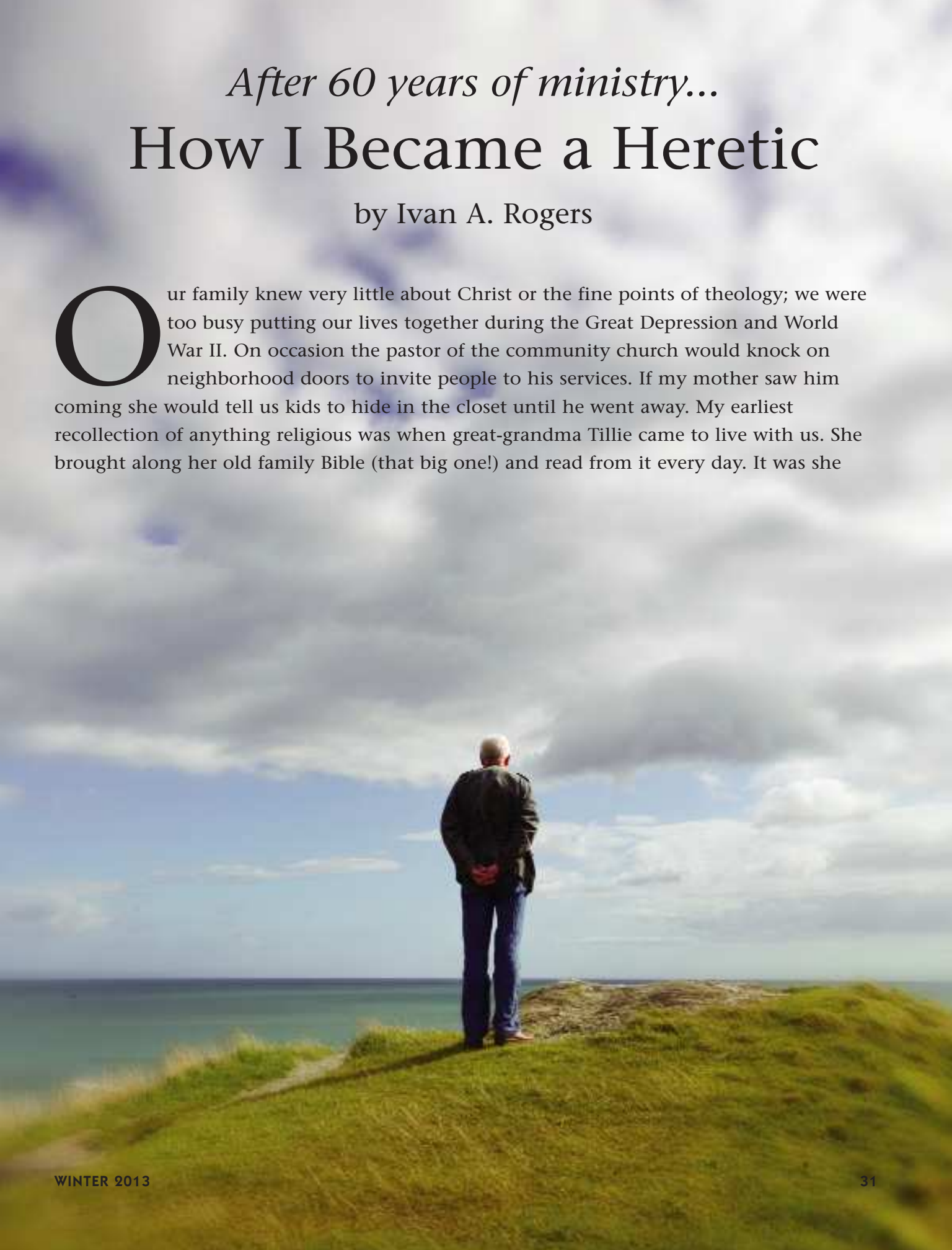
Jesus' loving, gracious engagement with Zacchaeus unveils the eternal heart of God. Because Jesus is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the "exact representation of His being" (Hebrews 1:3), the one in whom "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9), and the eternal Word who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14), his loving act toward Zacchaeus is an expression of the eternal heart of the Triune God, whom Scripture describes as "love" (1 John 4:8, 16). God engages us, even in our sinfulness, and pours himself out in self-emptying love for us (see Philippians 2:5-11)!

After 60 years of ministry...

How I Became a Heretic

by Ivan A. Rogers

Our family knew very little about Christ or the fine points of theology; we were too busy putting our lives together during the Great Depression and World War II. On occasion the pastor of the community church would knock on neighborhood doors to invite people to his services. If my mother saw him coming she would tell us kids to hide in the closet until he went away. My earliest recollection of anything religious was when great-grandma Tillie came to live with us. She brought along her old family Bible (that big one!) and read from it every day. It was she



who first taught me to pray the Lord's Prayer.

But strange as it may seem, the tragic death of my younger brother was the catalyst that ultimately led most of our family to seek the consolation of Christ. I, however, being young and rebellious, was slow to respond to the claims of the Savior upon my life. Therefore, in an effort to escape those who were trying to convert me, I impetuously enlisted in the U.S. Army.

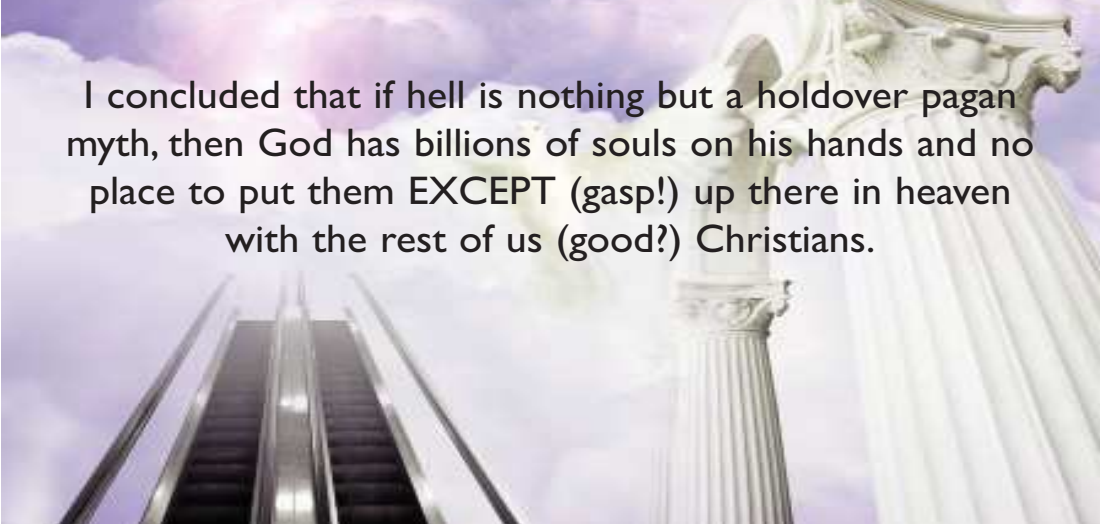
After serving in the military, I had planned to enroll in a business college, but, instead, met the beautiful young pianist from that same local church I'd been avoiding for years. She had plans to enroll in a Bible college and dreamed someday to be a minister's wife.

So, guess what? That's right! I switched my plans and enrolled with her. In time, we married and entered the pastoral ministry together. Her dream of being a minister's wife had come true at last. I had now become an ordained, orthodox, opinionated, Christian minister who was completely indoctrinated with a dispensational eschatology (i.e., end times world view).

Our pastoral ministry was well-received and eventually led us to one of the larger churches of our chosen denomination. After serving congregations for fifteen years I was called by our denominational headquarters to assume the title of Director of World Evangelism.

Over time I rose to other important assignments, such as: executive director of an eight-state area of churches; also, as president of the denomination Bible college. In the following years my leadership and speaking *bona fides* continued to be recognized; especially when I was elected to serve a term as president of our state Association of Evangelicals.

During all this time I was too busy to think much about doctrinal issues. Besides, ministers are not encouraged to question their



I concluded that if hell is nothing but a holdover pagan myth, then God has billions of souls on his hands and no place to put them EXCEPT (gasp!) up there in heaven with the rest of us (good?) Christians.

denomination "party line." Our unspoken rule regarding religious doctrine was the original "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Yet from time to time I found myself with certain questions about deeply entrenched church dogmas that were held fast by the magisterium of our faith fellowship.

In the later years of my ministry computers were coming on-line. I finally gave in and bought my first desktop. Now, at last, in the privacy of my own home I could research those difficult religious doctrines that had been "off-limits" before; such doctrines as "hell" with its implications of eternal conscious torture for the vast majority of humanity who have never heard of Christ and his gospel, or who have never prayed the so-called "Sinner's Prayer." (By the way, the term "sinner's prayer" is nowhere to be found in the entire Bible.)

The more I researched the traditional teachings of the "hell doctrine," the more I became convinced that it was not only incompatible with the true nature of the God of Love, but that the use of the word "hell" in scriptures is also an obvious mistranslation of only four key scriptural words from the original Hebrew and Greek texts. This, in turn, raised other important doctrinal issues for me about the scope of Christ's atonement. Was it only meant to embrace a certain "select of the elect" of humanity, or did it encompass all humanity from Adam forward?

Although throughout the years of my ministry I had fervently

taught the doctrine of the exclusion of most, yet slowly (even agonizingly) I finally came to accept the doctrine of the inclusion of all. I concluded that if hell is nothing but a holdover pagan myth, then God has billions of souls on his hands and no place to put them EXCEPT (gasp!) up there in heaven with the rest of us (good?) Christians.

Predictably, once the denominational officials learned that I was no longer willing to endorse the hell doctrine, they refused to renew my ordination credentials after more than sixty years of ministry with the same organization. It seems that my "good news" message of inclusion was too good to be true for them.

Happily, I have since been ordained by another reputable Christian organization and am now pastoring a non-denominational congregation of believers who accept and love me for who I really am. In addition to my pastoral responsibilities and since my resurrection from religious exile, I have been busier than ever with invitations to speak to ministers and laity at several conferences across the nation. In addition, I have written and published two books that seek to answer many of those controversial questions the church didn't want us to ask. □

Ivan A. Rogers is the author of Dropping Hell and Embracing Grace and Judas Iscariot Revisited and Restored. Both are available at Amazon.com. You can visit Ivan's website, GoodReportMinistries.com.

by Tara Johnson

SHATTERED

Fairytales



The Disney princesses messed me up. I confess I had quite a fascination with them when I was growing up (after I finished my Princess Leia phase, that is). I WAS going to be as beautiful as Aurora and I WAS going to have a grand adventure like Belle. And I WAS going to be a singer like Ariel. Or at the very least, a marine biologist...

But let's get real for a moment, shall we? There was one big problem with all those Disney beauties...they had no flaws.

Don't get me wrong. What made them such great heroines was their resilience in adversity. But they weren't real. They lived a dreamy haze of melody-filled daydreams that somehow managed to blossom into perfect endings. No residual anger. No emotional baggage. At least none that we ever hear about.

Aurora (aka Sleeping Beauty) should have had abandonment issues, not to mention a prescription for narcolepsy. Cinderella was emotionally and physically abused, yet never struggled with anger or fear.

Belle married a guy with a bad temper and mood swings. Think they might have had marital trouble down the road?

Rapunzel was kidnapped, married a convicted criminal and should have been socially backwards. Snow White had that shrill voice and Ariel changed into a

whole other species. Talk about confusion!

I think Sara Bareilles has it right in her song, "Fairytale."

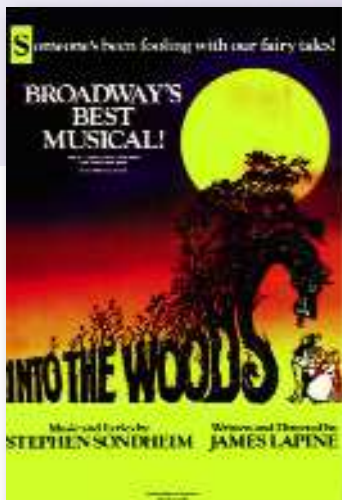
*The tall blond lets out a cry of despair
Says, "Would've cut it myself if I knew men could climb
hair.
I'll have to find another tower somewhere.
Keep away from the windows."
Once upon a time in a faraway kingdom
Man made up a story, said that I should believe him
Go and tell your white knight that he's handsome in
hindsight
But I don't want the next best thing
So I sing, I hold my head down
And I break these walls 'round me
Can't take no more of your fairytale love.*

They lived a dreamy haze of melody-filled daydreams that somehow managed to blossom into perfect endings.

Steven Sondheim had some valuable insight in his hit Broadway musical *Into the Woods*.

In this story, all of the great fairytale characters' lives intersect: Jack and the Beanstalk, Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, the baker and his wife, Rapunzel...and the first act is what you would imagine.

Beautiful arias full of hope and a longing to find their true love. And they all find their happily ever after.



...the conclusion of the musical is this: be careful what you wish for. Sometimes what we long for is truly not the best for us.

Steven Sondheim's Broadway musical *Into the Woods* follows the lives of popular fairy tale characters after the traditional fairy tale ends.

mentality and way of life is called "perfectionism."

Thankfully, I can say that I am no longer a full-blown perfectionist, but rather a recovering perfectionist. And if you are wondering, "recovering" simply means that at least I am aware of it now and am TRYING to chill.

Other than being brainwashed by the Disney princesses, here are six reasons for perfectionism:

But the second act of *Into the Woods* tells a much different story. Cinderella and her prince are bored with each other. Rapunzel has uncontrollable depression from her past abuse and drives her husband crazy with her nonstop weeping fits. Red Riding Hood had such fun killing the wolf that she becomes a blood thirsty hunter. You get the idea.

The conclusion of the musical is this: be careful what you wish for. Sometimes what we long for is truly not the best for us.

See, I have finally realized that those Disney princesses with their perfect figures, perfect hair, perfect dramas, perfect princes and perfect endings made me think that, well, that I could be perfect too.

And I'm not.

Do you know how many hours I've spent trying to live in "happily ever after"?

I'm a perfectionist. I want my house to be clean...not just picked up but CLEAN. I want to be a size 6. I want to be a beacon of spirituality that lights the path for others. And I want my neighborhood to be like Mayberry.

Can you relate to this? If I'm not mistaken, this



...Disney princesses with their perfect figures, perfect hair, perfect dramas, perfect princes and perfect endings made me think that, well, that I could be perfect too. And I'm not.

1. A need for control. Now don't get testy with me here. This isn't really as bad as it sounds. This doesn't mean that you run around bossing others with a scolding finger in their face. It might mean that you are a natural leader or that circumstances beyond your control affected you deeply when you were younger. So in turn, you have a need to control simply to maintain a feeling of security and normalcy. In many young girls with eating disorders, researchers have found that they refuse to eat simply because that is the one thing in their life that they *can* control.

Control provides the *illusion* of:

- A sense of certainty.
- Completion of items on our *to do* list, so we don't have to worry about them.
- Being able to predict what will happen.
- That people (including ourselves) and things are consistent.
- It's possible to achieve perfect peace in a messy world.

Let me stop here and remind you that it provides the *illusion* of certainty and security but that is often not reality.

I relate to this. I don't like spontaneity. It makes my stomach cramp. If I can schedule a time to be spontaneous, then I'm good. Having a change in my plans threatens my feelings of security and well-being; life suddenly becomes scary and unsafe when I have too many surprises in a day.

2. The need for approval. If you are a perfectionist, you may have learned early in life that other people valued you because of how much you

accomplished or achieved. As a result, you may have learned to value yourself only on the basis of *other people's* approval.

So you may think that your value comes to be based primarily on external standards. This can leave you vulnerable and overly sensitive to the opinions and criticism of others. I know this is very true for myself! The only way that I can protect myself from criticism is to never fail. And that is a very heavy load to carry.

3. Genetically predisposed. Did you ever hear of a "Type A" personality? Yep, that's a ranting and raving perfectionist. Sometimes it is a learned behavior, but often times the drive for perfection is often passed down from generation to generation.

Some people are just more competitive than others, more sensitive than others...God makes us all different with unique talents and abilities. If he has given a drive to strive for excellence, that is a good thing! The trouble comes when we get out of balance and begin to obsess about being perfect instead of just striving for excellence.


4. Fear of failure and making mistakes. For some reason, in my mind, mistakes often equal failure. And that is not true! Mistakes provide us with opportunities to learn, to grow, to be creative. And failing to achieve a goal does not mean that I don't have value. It just means I'm human.

Many perfectionists have, what I call, black and white syndrome. It's a viewpoint of extremes...either all or none. A straight "A" student who receives a "B" might believe, "I am a total failure."

When we are consumed by perfectionism, our lives are consumed with "*shoulds*." I *should* read my Bible. I *should* go to church. I *should* love that person that is driving me crazy. The problem with "*shoulds*" is that they stress obedience without proper motivation. To use a term oft-used here in Arkansas, it means *your heart ain't right!*

5. Fear of disapproval. For many perfectionists, disapproval equals loss of love. So they will try their hardest to hide their flaws to keep being accepted as well as working their hardest to keep everyone around them happy. Per-

fectionists may unintentionally apply their high standards on to others, becoming critical, demanding or resentful. They usually try to avoid letting anyone see their mistakes, not realizing that honesty and the ability to be "real" are attractive



Since "the Fall" in the garden of Eden, all of us have a hole inside; a cavern where we used to have a complete and perfect connection with God... And we've been trying to fill it ever since.

fectionism and people-pleasing often go hand in hand.

6. Caught in a vicious cycle. Perfectionists live in a vicious cycle. First they set lofty goals that are incredibly hard to reach. The constant pressure to perform leads to anxiety and reduces their ability to work effectively. Then they fail to reach those goals because they were unrealistic to begin with. Then the self criticism and guilt begin to chip away at their mental and emotional state until they are

qualities to others. They hide who they truly are and often suffer from strained and distant personal relationships.

A friend of mine put it like this:

"I think the core center of my perfectionism comes from being judged. I have always felt very judged. I get depressed because I have these lofty goals and when I don't meet them, I give up. When you give up, people judge and can be hard on you. It's a bad cycle. So basically I have learned not to

Do you know how many hours I've spent trying to live in "happily ever after"?

knee deep in inner turmoil. Yet, they think "maybe if I try harder, I will succeed" which sets the whole washing machine of perfectionism spinning again.

Then Tuesday begins.

The real tragedy of perfectionism is in the unintended results—*anxiety* and depression for starters. And without even realizing it, perfec-

judge others. Probably another lofty goal I'll never reach!"

Unconditional Love

In my own opinion, getting down to the heart of the matter is this: we all crave unconditional love.

Since "the Fall" in the garden of Eden, all of us have a hole inside; a cavern where we used to have a



complete and perfect connection with God. But when we messed up, that connection was severed. And we've been trying to fill it ever since.

In *Searching for God Knows What*, Donald Miller shares how he has come to understand this need inside of us. He says he imagines what it would be like if an alien came to our planet and observed us. He would see us watching our competitive reality shows and ball games and wonder what's wrong with us.

"'You guys,' the alien might say, 'You are obsessed. You have to wear a certain kind of clothes, drive a certain car, speak a certain way, live in a certain neighborhood, whatever, all of it so you can be higher on an invisible hierarchy. It's an obsession! It is as though something that helped them function and live well has gone missing, and they are pining for that missing thing in all sorts of odd methods, none of which are working. I know without a doubt I am a person who is wired so that some-

Those Disney princesses tried to fill that hole too, with their ideal of the perfect prince who would give them a perfect future and a perfect, unselfish love. But the only One who can give us all those things is Jesus Christ.

thing outside myself tells me who I am."

We all try to fill that hole with something: food, relationships, sex, drugs, alcohol, money, power...and yes, even approval.

Those Disney princesses tried to fill that hole too, with their ideal of the perfect prince who would give them a perfect future and a perfect, unselfish love. But the only One who can give us all those things is Jesus Christ. Yet, we all continue to look for unconditional love in conditional people.

And let me tell you through experience, perfectionism is a moving target. It can't be done. So what are we going to do about it?

Digging Deeper

Get your shovel ready. We're going to dig a little deeper here.

1. Remind yourself that God loves you no matter how well or how poorly you perform.

"In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39).

You did nothing to earn God's

love and there is nothing you can do to lose it.

2. Surround yourself with safe people. Safe people are those who love you whether you have it together or not. They encourage you to draw closer to God. They speak the truth in love and show mercy and forgiveness. They give us strength in setting boundaries and fuel your soul with encouragement. For more information on safe people (and avoiding unsafe people), check out *Safe People* by Cloud and Townsend. Run hard and fast from manipulators. If you do everything well, there are those who will take advantage of you.

3. Forgive yourself when you mess up. I know that messing up majorly is a death sentence for a perfectionist. I get it. But that doesn't change the fact that you WILL mess up. Accept it.

You're not God, which by default means that you are an imperfect creature who will let someone down at some point. When it happens, confess it to the Lord and move on.

4. Schedule times to be "imperfect." I know this is hard but do it anyway. Go grocery shopping with no make up on. Wear grungy clothes on an errand. Try painting a picture and making it as ugly as possible. I know it sounds crazy but you might be surprised at the freedom you will

discover. Find a place that you can go to totally and completely relax. No performing, just a place where you can be yourself with the Lord. That might be at a special spot in your house, on a nature walk, or in the car, for instance.

5. Confess your feelings to God. Confess it...tell him all of it. Don't hold back. The amazing thing about our Savior is that he already knows it all anyway. He listens as we cry, rejoice and pour out

I still want to run away from that ringing phone.

Why? Dig deeper.

Close friendships scare me.

Why?

Because if they get too close to me, they might see how broken I really am inside. They will think less of me. They won't love me anymore.

See what I mean? I believe that if we are fearless enough to be honest, to search our hearts and ask God to

I believe that if we are fearless enough to be honest... he can transform us to be people who live in freedom, no longer chained to the cycle of perfectionism and anxiety.

our frustrations. He is your safe haven and longs to help you walk in complete freedom.

6. Try to unearth the source of your perfectionism. This takes courage. Ask yourself about your motives. Why do you do what you do?

I have a few close friends but while being very friendly, I tend to hold people at a distance. Sometimes when the phone rings, even not knowing who is on the other end, I want to run. So I asked myself why.

Here is how the internal conversation went:

Why do you want to run when the phone rings?

Well, I want to run because it might be someone who will want me "to do" something for them.

Would that be so bad?

Not necessarily. But I've had bad experiences with needy people. In the past, they have taken advantage of me. They don't respect my boundaries and that sucks my energy dry.

Why do you think that is?
I just told you why! I'm a people pleaser!

Dig deeper. What if it isn't someone wanting you to give you a "to do" list? What if it is just someone wanting to chat?

shine his light on our brokenness, he will reveal ground-breaking and life-changing awareness to our minds and spirits. And he can transform us to be people who live in freedom, no longer chained to the cycle of perfectionism and anxiety.

Happily Ever After

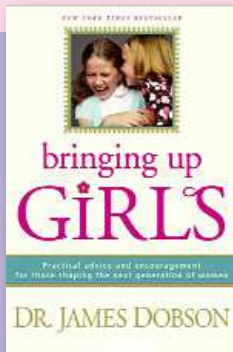
Alright, so I didn't grow up to be as pretty as Aurora or visit an enchanted castle like Belle, but my imperfect life is actually a pretty neat adventure with Christ. And I am tasting true freedom for the first time.

And I can claim that someday my Prince WILL come. He will split the sky and ride in on his white horse, transforming this broken, messy world and will take me home to live with him forever.

I will place a crown at His feet and forever sing his praises along with all the redeemed and every creature in heaven. "And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Now THAT will be a perfectly happily ever after! ☐

Tara Johnson is an author and recording artist with Incubator Creative Group. Tara travels to churches, prisons and retreats to help those battling depression and people-pleasing. Her book Hollow Victory is available at www.amazon.com. Find out more at www.TaraJohnsonMinistries.com.



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WWW.PTM.ORG has been revised and refreshed to keep it current and contemporary, attractive and compelling, so that we can reach as many around this world as our finances allow. The Internet is a valuable and necessary tool for proclaiming the good news in this 21st century—among other things we needed to redesign our website so that it would “read” on the most current tablets and portable devices. Our format needed to be streamlined in such a way that it might be easily found—watched, listened to and read—wherever the user may be and whatever device they may use.

In addition, we wanted to ensure that those who use Apps as a shortcut to reach many of our resources would have such a tool available. We are pleased to announce that an “App” for our ministry is now available. Download the new CWR/PTM App free in the iTunes App store and at Google play. The Internet allows www.ptm.org to do the work of an electronic missionary. Missionaries travel to other countries and immerse themselves in that culture and language, often at great personal sacrifice.

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Thank you for your help in this ongoing worldwide work.

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One of our Friends and Partners recently told us, "I'm so pleased and proud that PTM is providing so many resources for the latest electronic gadgets. We really need to reach this new generation on their communication devices. But, sometimes I worry that PTM may not always be able to provide resources to all us oldsters in the 'old fashioned' way—through our mailboxes!"

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As finances permit, we will continue to follow our current circulation policies, printing and mailing copies of our quarterly magazine *Plain Truth*, as well as monthly Partner letters with complimentary resource offers and bi-monthly *Updates* and *Prayer Lists*. AND weekly *CWR* sermons will continue to be available via CDs and cassettes. Our Vision Partners will continue to receive printed copies of *Christianity Without the Religion Journal*.

Thanks for allowing us to continue to serve you!

Greg Albrecht and the staff
of Plain Truth Ministries

Why I Decided to Move to a New Nation



by Jamal Jivanjee

I wanted to take a few minutes to let you know that I have decided to move to a new nation. I know that this is shocking news, but I had good reason to make the move. Actually, I am writing this in order to persuade you to make the move as well. Let me explain...

Like many of you, I have always considered myself to be pretty patriotic. I have liked the United States, and I have enjoyed the benefits of living in the land of the free. I once assumed that the American nation was the closest thing to a "holy nation" that this modern world had seen in the last couple of hundred years. I was told that this nation was founded by principled, spiritual men and women who intended this nation to be a "holy nation." I was also told that, in recent times, the American nation had forgotten our spiritual heritage and this is why America is "going to hell in a hand basket," so to speak.

Like many of you, this greatly troubled me. What should the remedy be?

Yes, you guessed it...I was convinced that America needed to get back to her spiritual roots. How else would our great country be restored?

I was convinced that what was needed was to bring prayer back to the public square and to bring in godly people to lead our nation's corporations, media, and government institutions. I believed we needed to elect godly leaders to our nation's government posts, and we also needed to amend the constitution, etc...

Like many of you, putting my faith into action meant I needed to utilize public policy to help bring about the kingdom of God. America needed to be restored, and Jesus would be the means to that end. Like many of you, a lot of my spiritual discussions revolved around

our nation's economic, political, and moral problems.

I am an avid social networker. I utilize Twitter, Facebook, and now Google+. I have noticed that many of my contacts on these social networking sites are continually posting articles and discussions about how corrupt our government is, how dire our economic situation is, and who's the latest politician that is going to help lead us back

I have liked the United States, and I have enjoyed the benefits of living in the land of the free. I once assumed that the American nation was the closest thing to a "holy nation" that this modern world had seen in the last couple of hundred years.

to strength, power, and prosperity as a nation. Still many others are discussing how the church can pray and fast to get Jesus' attention to act and save the American holy nation.

I no longer think this way, and this is why I decided to move to a new nation. I have been awakened to two major realities that have helped me make this move. I would like to share these two major realities with you here:

Reality #1: Jesus Christ is not just the means to a different end (restoring America), rather he himself is the means AND the end.

Some time ago, I attended a conference that centered around the topic of "revival" and the "kingdom of God." During the conference, someone called out the proverbial "elephant" in the room. This person began to highlight the fact that when many people talk about "revival" or the "kingdom of God," they are really talking about desiring the effects of Christ (restoration of America, physical miracles, etc...), but not Christ himself. The fact that Christ himself has not been our goal is revealing of a problem that runs quite deep.

We have wanted to start with Christ, but very few want to end

with him because he has simply become a means to a different end. Many just want Christ to establish and perfect the man-made nation we have been living in. In Revelation 22:13 however, Jesus Christ describes himself this way:

I am the Alpha & the Omega, the beginning and the end...

I have read this description of Christ in scripture many times, but it has only recently come alive to

me. Basically speaking, Christ is the "A" and the "Z," and all the letters between "A" & "Z" as well. He is the beginning, the middle, and the end. By saying that he is the "A" and the "Z," Christ was saying that he is all. There is no other worthy beginning, middle or end other than Christ himself. He is not just a means to some other end. He himself is the goal! I could go on, but I'll leave it at that for now. This brings me to the second reality that I have been awakened to.

Reality #2: The Lord already has one "Holy Nation" and there is no need for a second one.

Here is where I know I am going to lose some of you, but at least hear me out. Without a supernatural revelation of Jesus Christ, we will be destined to approach life from an Old Covenant perspective. I am convinced that most Christians today unknowingly operate from an Old Covenant perspective due to this blindness to the person and mystery of Jesus Christ. This can be clearly seen in our discourse regarding our "nation." Let me explain:

In the Old Testament, the Lord established only one specific nation that was his. This nation was to be inhabited by a people that

crossed over a river into the “promised land. This was a land that was described as being filled with “milk and honey.” The word “Hebrew” means “one who crosses over.” This nation, inhabited by people who have “crossed over” from the land of slavery to the land of milk and honey, was origi-

would be a means to the end of establishing Israel’s earthly kingdom, he opposed what Christ was actually doing. Christ needed to go to the cross so that people could be grafted into himself. This was necessary so that Christ could be given expression throughout the earth through the people who would

ing an utopian society. Some countries do a better job than others in this pursuit, but the goal is basically the same. America is certainly not an exception to this rule. Like in Jesus’ time, there is a pursuit by many in the religious community to try to utilize God to build our man-made nation.

While many Christians are frantically trying to recruit God to restore and rebuild the American “holy nation,” God is doing something quite different.

nally intended to be governed by God Himself. Each tribe of Israel was given a portion of this land as their inheritance as well.

As grand as this Old Testament “holy nation” was supposed to be, it never really lived up to the promises that were destined for this “holy nation.” There is one overarching reason for this—like everything else in the Old Testament, the Old Testament nation of Israel was never intended by God to be the reality, but only a picture of reality.

The entire Old Testament is filled with pictures. When Jesus Christ came on the scene, he was the fulfillment of all the pictures. He is the reality that the pictures pointed to. This is exactly why he made the incredibly bold statement of saying that the Old Testament scriptures were written concerning him! (Luke 24:44-46, John 5:45-47)

Obviously, the Jewish people were not completely aware of this. Christ was still a mystery to them. They mistakenly thought that their Messiah would be a means to an end. The end they had in mind was the restoration of the physical nation of Israel. This can be seen in Jesus’ interaction with Peter in Matthew 16. Peter still did not realize that Jesus himself was the fulfillment AND reality of the Old Testament picture of the “holy nation” of Israel. There was no need for a picture, however, when the fulfillment of the picture had come.

Because Peter mistakenly saw Jesus as the promised Messiah that

eventually be grafted into him.

When Jesus told his disciples that he must die, Peter rebuked Jesus with quite a bit of force. Even though Peter and Jesus spent three years together, Peter was still seeing Jesus through a “filter” that really had the concerns of mankind at heart. Peter still only had eyes for the picture, not the reality. Peter wanted a physical “holy nation.” Jesus’ response to Peter was telling.

But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.” (Matthew 16:23, NASB)

Jesus referenced Peter to Satan because Peter had the concerns of man at the center of his heart.

The Lord is wooing people who are dissatisfied with their earthly country into His holy nation. Those who live in God’s holy nation can only be made up of people who are so hungry for a new nation that they have left their old nation.

Mankind’s systems are ultimately governed by Satan. Unfortunately, many of us today still have the concerns of man as our motivation. We want Christ to build an earthly “holy nation” for us, but God is building an entirely different nation altogether.

If you travel to every nation of the world, you will find that mankind is concerned with creat-

I have news for you...God’s concerns and mankind’s concerns are completely different. Mankind wants to build his nation, but God already has a nation he is building. While many Christians are frantically trying to recruit God to restore and rebuild the American “holy nation,” God is doing something quite different.

The Lord is wooing people who are dissatisfied with their earthly country into His holy nation. Those who live in God’s holy nation can only be made up of people who are so hungry for a new nation that they have left their old nation. Consider this description of Abraham:

“By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose

architect and builder is God...And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:8-10, 15-16 NASB).



We don't have to wait until we're dead to live in the "heavenly country" that Abraham was longing for! If you would like to move to this heavenly "holy" nation now, I can tell you where this nation is located.

I have good news for you! Abraham's longing for the promise given to him was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ! Jesus said this himself (John 8:56). Because of this, there are some pretty astounding implications for us now.

We don't have to wait until we're dead to live in the "heavenly country" that Abraham was longing for!

If you would like to move to this heavenly "holy" nation now, I can tell you where this nation is located. This nation is located inside the person of Christ himself. Don't worry, Christ is big enough to contain this whole nation inside of himself. We are this "holy nation" which is located inside of Christ. Thankfully, Peter's eyes were eventually opened to the real "holy nation." Let's take a look at Peter's incredible description of the people who belong to Christ:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9 NASB).

What a beautiful passage! As you can see, the "holy nation" that God is building is a bit different than the nation that many of us seem to be so preoccupied with. You can always tell what country a person lives in because they are preoccupied with and continually discuss the affairs of that country. I don't typically talk about the issues that the Congo is facing because I don't live in the Congo. I talk about my nation. If you are truly looking for a "holy nation," you'll have to look "in Christ" because that is the only place you will truly find a "holy nation."

I'd like to leave you with a few introspective questions:

- 1. Are you dissatisfied with the nation you came from?**
- 2. Have you left this nation yet for a better one?**
- 3. Which nation's affairs are you preoccupied with?**
- 4. Where do you live?**

Let's make the move! □

Jamal Jivanjee, director of Illuminate America, is an avid blogger about the American Church, life in Christ and current events. Growing up in the Columbus, Ohio area, Jamal was raised by a devout Shiite Muslim father and a conservative Catholic mother. Jamal's quest for truth led him out of Islam and eventually to Christ as a young adult. He went on to graduate from Liberty University where he studied Pastoral Ministry. Jamal and his wife, Brandie, currently live in Nashville, Tennessee.



“Till death do us part.”

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

Till death do us part. Despite changes in language down through the centuries, this phrase from the sixteenth-century Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* has stayed the same. But while the wording of the promise endures, too often the promise itself does not.

I was reminded of this again today as we laid our beloved father, Albert Kraker, to rest in a little rural cemetery surrounded by the farmland where he lived his entire life. It was a gloomy day, rain off and on, appropriate for our sad hearts.

After more than seventy-two years of marriage, Al and Sue Kraker are now for the first time truly *parted*. Dad had served in the South Pacific during World War II, during which time they were separated. But not until last Thursday was that marriage bond broken. Mom, 95, is no longer a wife but a widow.

How often we spoke of theirs as the almost perfect marriage. Different personalities blended seamlessly together. Mom is feisty, outspoken and stoic. Dad is the emotional one, the gentlest, sweetest man you could ever know—never an unkind word for anyone.

And they both opened their arms to me, as a daughter-in-law *once removed*.

Ten years ago, only days after Christmas, my husband said his final good-bye to Myra Jean, the daughter of Al and Sue Kraker. Theirs was a short *till-death-do-us part* of less than four years. And prior to that, he had said that painful farewell to Ruth Ann more than three decades after they had vowed *till death do us part*.

Is the parting easier for folks in their nineties than it is for those decades younger? For Mom, it surely is not. The indescribable pain she feels is assuaged only by her bedrock hope of being reunited with

Dad again soon. Their union has been a partnership in the truest sense of the word. They were farmers—not merely a farmer and a farmer’s wife. Dad was in charge of the cattle and the fields, Mom was the *queen of the chicken coop*. And not just a few dozen hens; they sometimes numbered into the hundreds.

But their partnership went far beyond their farming endeavors. Through ups and downs they have been each other’s primary caregivers over the decades and to the very moment of Dad’s death.

We had visited them out at the farm the previous evening, catching up on the latest news and swapping stories of farm life long ago—a longer visit than usual. Amid our talking and laughing, time got away from us. Mom put out cookies and coffee, and after we left, Dad had his usual dish of ice cream and then they went upstairs to bed.

They got up as they normally did the next morning, as Mom would stoically relate later that same evening: had breakfast, did some household chores, ate lunch, took their usual naps, got out good clothes to wear to a funeral at the church. Mom showered, then Dad.

He came out, dried off, sat down on a chair. Mom helped him get his underwear on and bound up his perpetually sore toe. He commented that he could not even take a shower anymore without feeling tired.

He was sitting right there in the chair. He put his head back. His mouth fell open. Mom asked if he were all right. He didn’t answer. She asked again and again and asked if she should call an ambulance. No answer.

If these final details appear almost too private to publish, all I can say is that to me they comprise a beautiful story of mutual care-giving and partnership—and of *tender mercies*—that continued for more than seventy years to the very moment of *till death do us part*. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

After more than seventy-two years of marriage... Mom, 95, is no longer a wife but a widow.

WHEN GRACE HAPPENS

by Max Lucado



More verb than noun, more present tense than past tense, grace didn't just happen; it happens.

Ten-year-olds take Christmas gifts very seriously. At least we did in Mrs. Griffin's fourth-grade class. The holiday gift exchange outranked the presidential election, NFL draft, and Fourth of July parade. We knew the procedure well. On the day preceding Thanksgiving break, Mrs. Griffin would write each of our names on a piece of paper, dump the slips of paper into a baseball cap, and shake them up. One by one we stepped up to her desk and withdrew the name of the person to whom we would give a gift.

Under the Geneva Convention's Law of Gift Exchange, we were instructed to keep our beneficiary's identity a secret. Name disclosure was not permitted. We told no one for whom we were shopping. But we told everyone what we were wanting. How else would they know? We dropped hints like the Canadian winter drops snow, everywhere and every day. I made certain each classmate knew what I wanted: a Sixfinger. In 1965, all

Editor's note: We are grateful to Thomas Nelson for allowing us to reprint "When Grace Happens"—Max Lucado's conclusion to *Grace: More Than We Deserve—Greater than We Imagine*. Lucado is not only a widely known, respected and appreciated inspirational author and teacher, he is one of today's foremost teachers about God's amazing grace.

red-blooded American boys wanted a Sixfinger. We knew the slogan by heart: "Sixfinger, Sixfinger, man alive! How did I ever get along with five?" The Sixfinger was more than a toy. Yes sirree, Bob. It could fire off a cap bomb, message missile, secret bullet, and SOS signal. Why, it even had a hidden ballpoint pen. Who could live without a Sixfinger? I couldn't.

And I made certain the other twelve students in Mrs. Griffin's class knew it. But Carol wasn't listening. Little Carol with the pig-tails, freckles, and shiny black shoes. Don't let her sweet appearance fool you. She broke my heart. For on the day of the great gift exchange, I ripped the wrapping paper off my box to find only stationery. You read the word correctly. Stationery!

Brown envelopes with folded note cards that bore a picture of a cowboy lassoing a horse. What ten-year-old boy uses stationery?

There is a term for this type of gift: obligatory. The required-to-give gift. The "Oops, I almost forgot to get something" gift. I can envision the scene at Little Carol's house on that fateful morning in 1965. She is eating breakfast. Her mother raises the question of the class Christmas party. "Carol, are you supposed to take any gifts to class?" Little Carol drops her spoon into her Rice Krispies. "I forgot! I'm supposed to bring a gift for Max."

"For whom?"

"For Max, my handsome classmate who excels in every sport and

discipline and is utterly polite and humble in every way."

"And you're just now telling me?" Carol's mom asks.

"I forgot. But I know what he wants. He wants a Sixfinger."

"A prosthetic?"

"No. A Sixfinger. 'Sixfinger, Sixfinger, man alive! How did I ever get along with five?'"

Carol's mom scoffs at the thought. "Humph. Sixfinger my aunt Edna." She goes to the storage closet and begins rummaging through...well, rummage. She finds paisley tube socks her son discarded and a dinosaur-shaped



Ten-year-olds take Christmas gifts very seriously.

scented candle. She almost selects the box of Bic pens, but then she spies the stationery.

Carol falls to her knees and pleads, "Don't do it, Mom. Don't give him stationery with a little cowboy lassoing a horse. Forty-seven years from now he will describe this moment in the conclusion of a book. Do you really want to be memorialized as the one who gave an obligatory gift?"

"Bah humbug," Carol's mom objects. "Give him the stationery. That kid is destined for prison anyway. He will have plenty of time to write letters there."

And so she gave me the gift. And what did I do with it? The same thing you did with the coffee cups, the fruitcake, the orange-and-black sweater, the hand lotion from the funeral home, and the calendar from the insurance company.



What did I do with the stationery? I gave it away at the class Christmas party the next year.

I know we shouldn't complain. But, honestly, when someone hands you a bar of hotel soap and says, "This is for you," don't you detect a lack of originality? But when a person gives a genuine gift, don't you cherish the presence of affection? The hand-knit sweater, the photo album from last summer, the personalized poem, the Lucado book. Such gifts convince you that someone planned, prepared, saved, searched. Last-minute decision?

No, this gift was just for you.

This is the gift that God gives. A grace that grants us first the power to receive love and then the power to give it. A grace that changes us, shapes us, and leads us to a life that is eternally altered.

Have you ever received such a gift? Yes, you have. Sorry to speak on your behalf, but I know the answer as I ask the question. You have been given a perfect personal gift. One just for you. "There has been born *for you* a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11 NASB; emphasis mine).

An angel spoke these words. Shepherds heard them first. But what the angel said to them, God says to anyone who will listen. "There has been born *for you*..." Jesus is the gift.

He himself is the treasure. Grace is precious because he is. Grace

shapes us, and leads us to a life that is eternally altered.

Do you know this grace? Do you trust this grace? If not, you can. All God wants from us is faith. Put your faith in God.

And grow in God's grace. More verb than noun, more present tense than past tense, grace didn't just happen; it happens. Grace happens here.

*The same work God did
through Christ
long ago
on a cross
is the work God does
through Christ
right now
in you.*

Let him do his work. Let grace trump your arrest record, critics, and guilty conscience. See yourself for what you are—God's personal remodeling project. Not a world to yourself but a work in his hands. No longer defined by failures but refined by them. Trusting less in what you do and more in what Christ did. Graceless less, grace shaped more. Convinced down deep in the substrata of your soul that God is just warming up in this overture called life, that hope has its reasons and death has its due date.

Grace. Let it, let him, so seep into the crusty cracks of your life that everything softens. Then let it, let him, bubble to the surface, like a spring in the Sahara, in words of kindness and deeds of generosity. God will change you, my friend. You are a trophy of his kindness, a partaker of his mission.

Not perfect by any means but closer to perfection than you've ever been. Steadily stronger, gradually better, certainly closer.

This happens when grace happens. May it happen to you. □

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In 1965, all red-blooded American boys wanted a Sixfinger. We knew the slogan by heart: "Sixfinger, Sixfinger, man alive! How did I ever get along with five?"

changes lives because he does. Grace secures us because he will. The gift is the Giver.

To discover grace is to discover God's utter devotion to you, his stubborn resolve to give you a cleansing, healing, purging love that lifts the wounded back to their feet. Does he stand high on a hill and bid you climb out of the valley? No. He bungees down and carries you out. Does he build a bridge and command you to cross it? No. He crosses the bridge and shoulders you over.

"*You did not save yourselves; it was a gift from God*" (Ephesians 2:8 NCV).

This is the gift that God gives. A grace that grants us first the power to receive love and then the power to give it. A grace that changes us,



Power Tools

The Bible is a little like such a power tool—but far more dangerous. When it is misused, it can lead to the loss of one's head.

I have quite a few power tools in my garage. Some might say I have too many—that I'm addicted to collecting tools. But I believe otherwise. Using the wrong tool for a job can be time-consuming, destructive and even life-threatening. So I prefer to think that I have collected the appropriate tools over the years—table saw, radial arm saw, circular saws, saber saw, jig-saw, band saw, drill, drill press, lathe, router, belt sanders, orbital sanders, circular sander, bench grinder, angle grinder, a small rotary tool and a chainsaw (which gets us into yard tools, and I won't even go there). Every tool has its purpose, and many are extremely dangerous when used incorrectly.

Take a router, for example—a potentially vicious little tool. A bit, rotating at about 23,000 rpm, is used to cut grooves of various shapes into wood, or to plane uneven edges. A few years ago I was using a router to carve a groove in a small piece of hardwood. I should have used some device to hold the wood, but I was holding it only with my hands. Unexpectedly, the piece of wood broke and went flying across the garage as if it had been pitched by Roger Clemens.

My fingers, which had been firmly pressing against the wood, suddenly had nothing between them and the router bit. I was able to pull them back—but not before the bit had sliced a clean little chunk off the tip of the ring finger of my left hand. Thank God it didn't go too deep, and today I can barely see a scar.

Since then, I keep several inches between any part of me and the router bit, band saw, circular saw or any other tool capable of slicing off a finger in a fraction of a second.

I've noticed that the Bible is a little like such a power tool—but far more dangerous. When it is misused, it can lead to the loss of one's head. When operated responsibly—when read, studied and interpreted in the context of sound scholarship and through the lens of God's grace, the Bible can be a

powerful tool in building a relationship with Jesus Christ—the ultimate Word of God.

Of course, a tool is not one and the same as the product that the tool is being used to create. Neither is the Bible one and the same as the Word of God. The Bible is a tool that helps to reveal the Word of God in our lives.

There are plenty of teachers who don't seem to understand this. At best they are misusing the Bible and at worst they are abusing it. Some are like a raving lunatic running around with a screaming 36-inch chainsaw (high on anyone's list of things to avoid). They are misusing the Bible in ways such as:

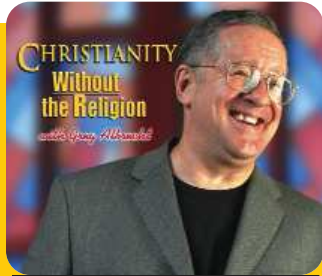
- Idolizing the Bible—as if it were the Word of God (Jesus is the Word of God—John 1:1).
- Taking the entire Bible literally (many portions of the Bible are meant to be taken figuratively or poetically).
- Reading ideas or presuppositions into the text.
- Failure to read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament.
- Taking passages out of their scriptural, historical or cultural context.

So when you're looking for a good Bible course, or any biblical teaching, you need to be careful, or you may find yourself deeply wounded and bleeding profusely (financially and spiritually).

If you suspect that I might be using my column to make a pitch for PTM's *CWR Bible Survey*, you are right. Our *Bible Survey* is free. It takes you through the entire Bible in 42 months. It gives you sound, Christ-centered perspective on the world's most important book. You don't have to go anywhere or meet with anyone. You can do it at your own pace right in your own living room, with your computer, laptop, I-Pad or even smartphone (yes, we have an App).

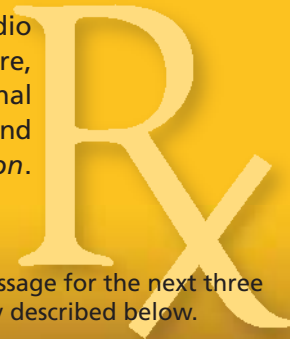
Try it. This powerful power tool will never hurt you—and it can help to build an eternal relationship with God. □

—Monte Wolverton



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*.

It's Not All About Mary God came to our world in a completely unexpected, miraculous way through Mary, an ordinary teenager. Jesus is still coming, to completely unexpected, ordinary people, like you and me! Week of December 1

That Baby Was God! It's so easy to sugarcoat Christmas, turning it into a dream world of decorations, gifts and inspiring music. It's so easy to miss the fundamental, mysterious truth of the incarnation of God. Week of December 8

"Change Don't Come Easy" The birth of Jesus announces the radical transformation of God's grace, a change that angers and upsets performance-based religion. Week of December 15

The Light Enters Our Darkness Join us as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, as we give thanks for who Jesus is and how he, the Light of the world, is with us now and forever! Week of December 22

God's Grace Fills Our Emptiness! Much emptiness and disillusionment is caused by a cheap substitute for the God revealed in and through Jesus. God's love and grace is vast—more than enough for all of our needs. Week of December 29

The End-less Choices of Christ-less Religion Is your relationship with God best defined by the choices and decisions you make, or the choice God has made in extending an invitation to you? Week of January 5

Dancing With God We can better understand the love relationship God extends to us, and the relationship which defines him as who he is, as a dance of grace and harmony. Week of January 12

Extreme Love or Extreme Hate We remember the historic contributions of Martin Luther King Jr, who, as a Christ-follower, confronted extreme hate, standing by the extreme love of God, which produces freedom in Christ. Week of January 19

Jesus—The End of Religion The gospel of Jesus Christ has already declared Christ-less religion to be as dead and obsolete as the Dodo bird. Jesus, on the other hand, is the epitome and personification of God's dynamic, enduring and eternal grace. Week of January 26

Surprised by Grace The parable of the Sheep and the Goats teaches us that God's grace is shocking because it insists that Jesus is absolutely the center of our lives—far more important than paying our dues and keeping our religious accounts in order. Week of February 2

See How He Loves You Join Greg for a discussion of God's love, as centered and defined in the cross of Christ, illustrated by the differences C.S. Lewis noted between all-too-human *Need Love* and divinely given *Gift Love*. Week of February 9

Little People Inside a big, ornate religious building Jesus pointed out one of the little people to his disciples—a defenseless, vulnerable and preyed-upon woman who was in religious bondage. Week of February 16

Reckless Love Everyone knows that dying on a cross is unsafe, but that's exactly what Jesus did. The cross of Christ is the perfect illustration and demonstration of God's reckless love. Week of February 23