

FALL 2014

# PLAIN TRUTH<sup>®</sup>

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

## The God of the Damned

*Do You Need a Beating?*



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

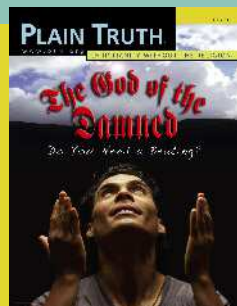
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COVER IMAGE BY ISTOCKPHOTO, JUANMONINO, AND MARV WEGNER—PTM

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## The War to End All Wars...

I appreciated the article "The War to End All Wars...Was It for This the Clay Grew Tall?" by Brad Jersak in the Summer 2014 *Plain Truth*. What an excellent synopsis and analysis of the Western social situation in the last century since the commencement of World War 1. I appreciate how Mr. Jersak keeps tying the social situation and culture wars of the century to theological tides. Above all, I appreciate how Mr. Jersak ends the article by bringing the issue back to Jesus, to the good news of the Gospel, noting that "the kingdom of God is neither an empty utopian optimism nor an escapist retreat into gated Christian communities," but to a genuine relationship with the living Lord Jesus... "a simple gospel of real-life transformation through friendship with Jesus and with one another."

Email

I don't think I will ever again think about warfare in the same way after reading Brad Jersak's "The War to End All Wars..." in the Summer *Plain Truth*. Also really liked the articles by Brian Zhand and Derek Flood—more from these guys, please!

Colorado



## Wide Open Spaces of God's Grace

I enjoyed the article by Glen Moyer in the Summer *PT* "Wide Open Space of God's Grace." I like the analogy that he draws between the wide-open spaces of the majestic free-range elk in the forest and the "elk farm" where elk are corralled with the limitations of fences

like inmates in a penitentiary. It reminds me in some ways of the analogy that Peter Lord used several decades ago in his book, *Turkeys and Eagles*.

Mr. Moyer did an excellent job of transferring the contrast of "the fence or the forest" to the comparison of the fences of organized religion with the freedom of living in God's grace. Powerful! I certainly agree, "the universal body of Christ is just fine. Perhaps it is still being formed into what God had in mind all along. Indeed, isn't God's ability to shape the visible body of Christ greater than mankind's ability to screw it up? Maybe instead of drifting toward extinction, the body of Christ is actually taking a giant step toward fruition." Well stated, Glen Moyer.

California

I haven't seen anything written by Glen Moyer in a while, and I have to tell you that his article about "Wide Open Spaces" [Summer 2014 *PT*] and the analogy between elk roaming free as opposed to those in a preserve/reserve was compelling reading.

North Carolina



## Connecting or Disconnecting From God?

I'm just now reading Greg Albrecht's article "Connecting or Disconnecting From God" in the Summer *PT*. I had to stop and go watch the video he speaks of concerning "Szekely," as I haven't seen it. What a great video—funny and so true.

Florida



## Healing the Gospel

The excerpt from Derek's Flood's "Healing the Gospel" stretched my mind

—I very much agree with what he is saying but I just haven't thought about those topics that way. Great insights.

Michigan



## Jesus > Religion

The Summer *Plain Truth* excerpt of *Jesus > Religion* has turned me on to Jefferson Bethke. As always, the spiritual food I get from PTM/CWR is truly a smorgasbord feast where the food is never-ending, and it just keeps getting better. As in regards to Jefferson—this “Kid”—to me he’s a prodigy of grace. Wow! I am jealous. Not only am I jealous of his communication skills and his ability to turn others on to Jesus but I am jealous that I wasn’t given (or better yet...I chose not to receive and accept) the gift of the true knowledge of God’s grace until much later in life. I am really learning another great aspect of God’s grace from watching videos of Jefferson online. He’s keeping it simple and he’s keeping it real. Real real.

Florida



## Is God Disappointed With You?

After reading the Commentary by Greg Albrecht in the Summer *PT*, I wonder if I fully understand God. “We become frustrated with God if and when we think of him as a god who is the product of our projections, fantasies, wishes and needs.” This has been an eye-opener for me! Thank you PTM!

New York

Greg’s Summer Commentary seems like the flip-side of Philip Yancey’s book *Disappointment with God*, published years ago. Both point out that disappointments usually reveal our inadequate perceptions of God. We seem to constantly forget that God created mankind and knows us even better than we know ourselves.

California



## Simply the Best

The collection of articles in the Spring *Plain Truth* is simply the best expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the glorious transformation that He effected in His death on the cross that I have had the privilege of reading.

This entire issue was great—the articles fit together well, conveying a united, consistent message that the reality is the living Lord Jesus, as differentiated from and contrary to Christ-less religion. This issue is a great example of your focus on “Christianity Without the Religion.”

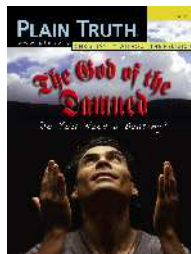
Email



## “...I will give you rest.”

Thank you for the Spring *PT* article by Greg Albrecht, “...I will give you rest.” Thank you for showing us how his yoke is easy and his burden is light. This article has helped me to better understand true freedom in Christ.

Michigan



## Keep It Coming!

Please continue to send me your quarterly *Plain Truth* magazine. I leave my copies on a table at work after I finish reading each one cover-to-cover. Each copy is quickly gone by the very next night when I go to work. Sorry, I don't use email or a computer, so I need to have hard copies sent to me by mail. Thanks and keep up the good work!

Arizona

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# The God of the Damned

## Do You Need a Beating?

*Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children.*

*Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."*

*Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.*

*When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me."*

*"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.*

*—Genesis 1:1-6*

**F**or over a decade, I have served as a pastor of a ministry to migrant farm workers called Tierra Nueva del Norte. Before that I taught agricultural development and led Bible studies in Honduras, Central America. Now, as chaplain of the local jail I also lead Spanish Bible studies to immigrant inmates.

All of the people I read Scripture with have experienced marginalization. As a white male and pastor I am automatically perceived as a representative of the dominant culture of oppression.

People often interpret their experience of being judged, discriminated against and excluded by the dominant culture as synonymous with punishment and rejection by God. Attributing hardship and calamities to God is often subtle and hard to pick up, while at other

times, these negative images of God are more overt.

One evening, while shopping for groceries, I bumped into two middle-aged Latino men, who were walking briskly toward the entrance doors.

One of them glanced back briefly at my sons and me. "Hey pastor, *como esta?*" ("How are you doing?").

I recognized Roberto from my weekly Spanish Bible studies in Skagit County Jail, and greeted him warmly: "I'm fine, how are things going for you?"

"Not too good man. You know, we're back doing things we shouldn't be doing," he said sheepishly. "I need you to come and visit me sometime," he pleaded. "I need a beating," he insisted, looking down at the pavement.

"You need a beating?" I asked, surprised. "I'd love to visit you, but I for sure don't want to come and give you a beating," I said.

"No, not from you, I mean from Him," he said, pointing up.

"You think God wants to beat you up?" I asked.

"Yeah, you know maybe that's what we need so that we will finally change our ways."

"No, I can't believe that God would want to do that. I'd be glad to visit you though," I said.

He gave me his address and took off. As I pushed my groceries across the parking lot, I mourned this

helpful and everywhere troublesome. God, unlike the police, is always watching. Unlike Immigration and Naturalization (INS) officers, you cannot escape him. God is worse than a "rata," (an informant) because unlike them, he never fails. God is envisioned as an all-powerful sovereign who controls everything that happens.

Among Central American and Mexican peasants, hurricanes, earthquakes, crop failures, dysentery and other calamities are often attributed to God's will. If an immigrant is picked up by the Drug Task Force, by INS (immigration) or by the police, God is seen as the invisible, behind-the-scenes force, ultimately responsible for their predicament.

"God has me here," they think. "When my trial comes, we'll see what God wants." They will say, "I pray to God that he'll let me out, we'll see what he decides."

Before these crushing images of an all-powerful God, people often resign themselves as "damned" and respond with either apathy, revolt or religious compliance. Rather than revolt and risk worse treatment at "God's hands," most retreat to passive acceptance

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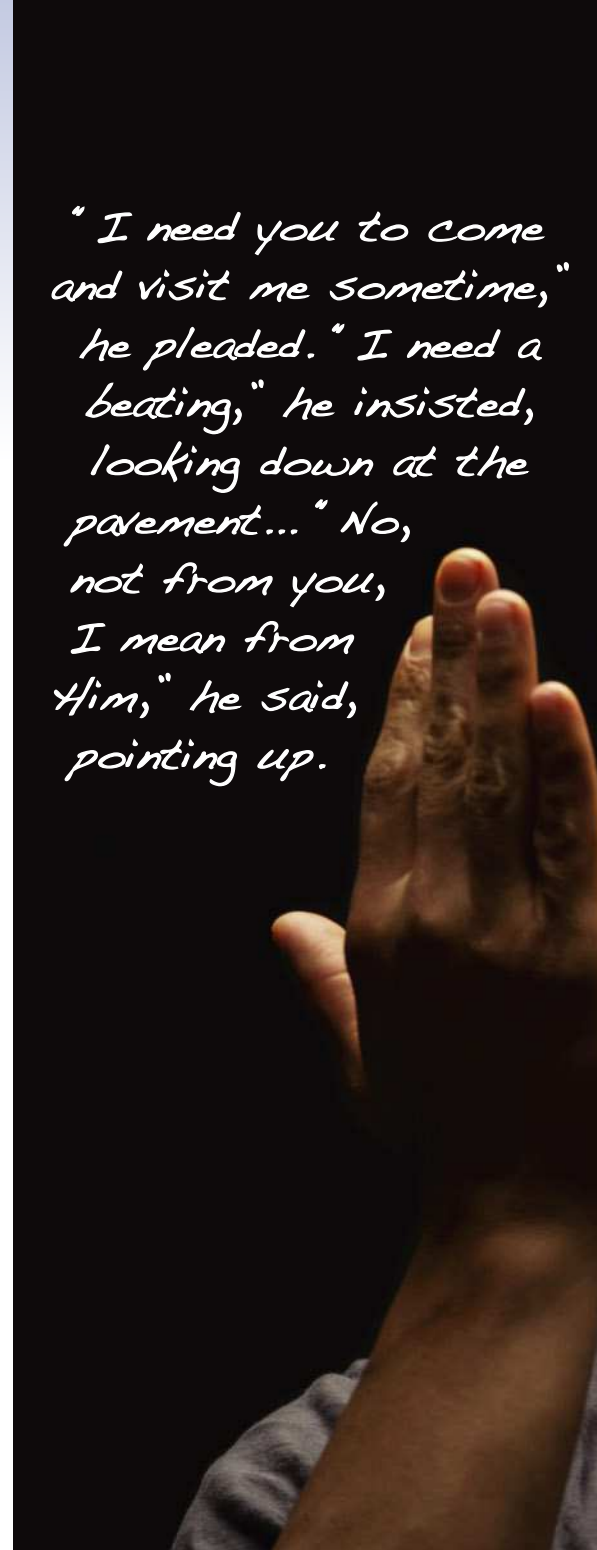
poor man's oppressive image of a punishing God. But the dominant theology reflected by Roberto reigns supreme not only among Hispanic immigrants, but across many different nationalities, social classes, races and cultures, inside and outside churches.

God is envisioned as a distant, judging force, who is both nowhere

of the accuser's charges. If God has the power and they are being punished, God must be punishing them and God must be right. They must in fact be bad and deserve whatever the system is subjecting them to.

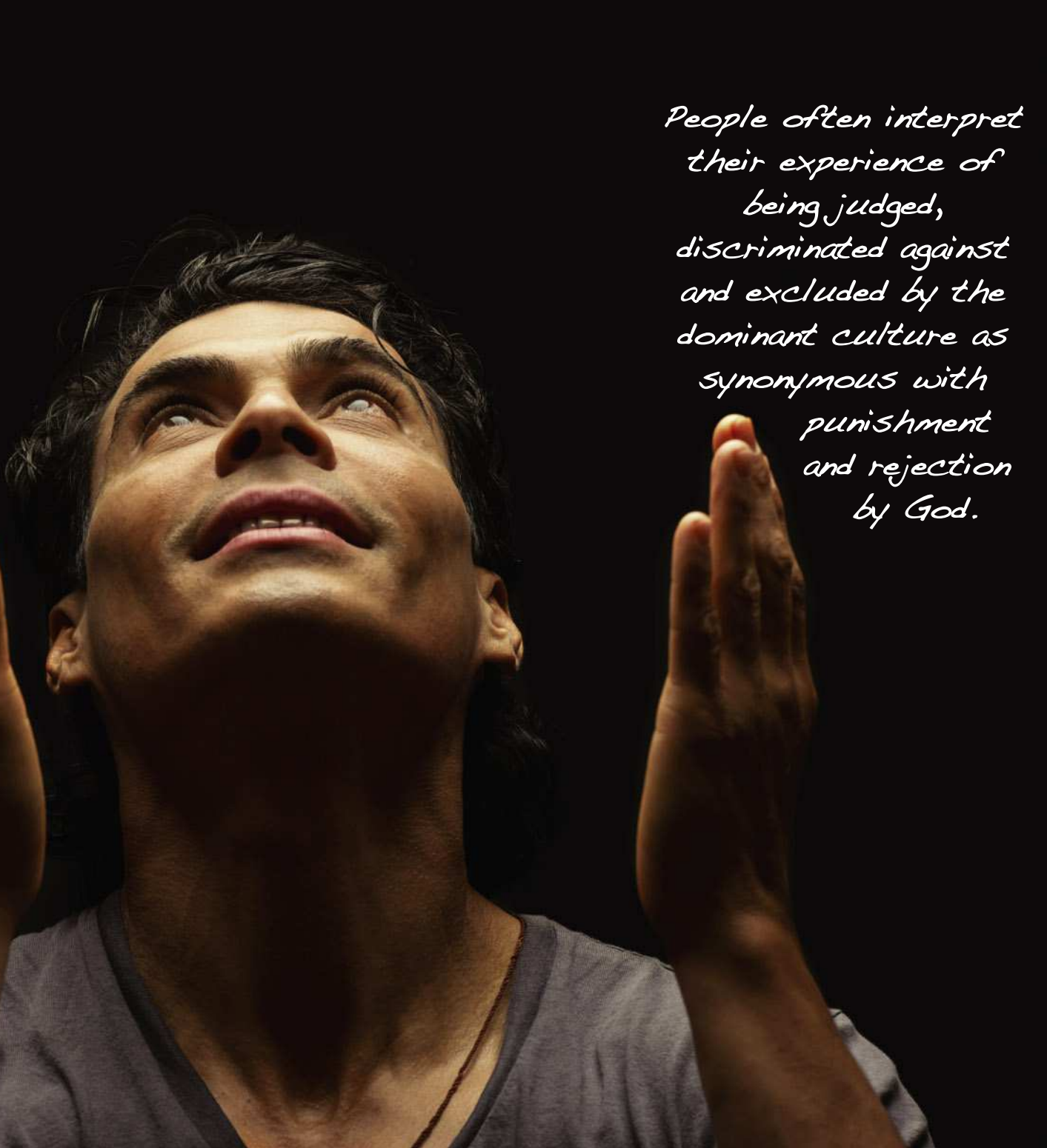
While some acknowledge that their crimes give God and the system every right to punish them,

*"I need you to come and visit me sometime," he pleaded. "I need a beating," he insisted, looking down at the pavement..." No, not from you, I mean from Him," he said, pointing up.*



others are resentful and antagonistic toward God and anything religious. If the dominant system with its glaring injustices reflects God's will, then either God is absent or he is a tyrant.

In the face of this depressing vision of God, we can understand how ex-cons might throw themselves back into the "crazy life" of



*People often interpret their experience of being judged, discriminated against and excluded by the dominant culture as synonymous with punishment and rejection by God.*

the streets and flee from God's law-enforcement operation.

The Bible, then, is viewed as the law by which God and his law-enforcement agents judge the world. The Scriptures are often feared and avoided as "bad news" rather than welcomed as words of comfort. If God is the cosmic law enforcer, Christians are therefore

seen as God's law-abiding people.

Christians, they think, are people who've made the decision to try to measure up to the rules—who find compliance effortless since they are by nature good, deserving or at least successful at avoiding trouble.

The "damned" often feel they have only one way of salvation

open to them: impossible compliance to divine authority through obedience to the laws of the land and the requirements of the Bible. Since this proves too difficult, they tend to resign themselves as incapable of staying committed to God.

Some fundamentalist churches and Catholic parishes reinforce these images by preaching legalism

*The Scriptures are often feared and avoided for the "Bad News" they are expected to contain, rather than welcomed as words of comfort.*

and judgment, serving as religious immigration agents who allow only those with the right papers (baptism, personal piety, regular church attendance, partaking of the sacraments) into the kingdom of God.

### **The Role of the Socially Engaged Christians**

Christ clearly called his followers to bring Good News to the poor. And so socially engaged Christians, desiring to reach out to the margins, must be aware of these prejudices. Distrust and discomfort in the presence of "good" Christians, compounded by differences in race, social class, language and religion, are big obstacles.

Whenever I volunteer to lead a Bible study, I win trust by first inviting people into a conversation about their lives and their problems. I ask thoughtful questions

and listen respectfully. Respectful, non-judgmental listening disarms people, relaxing their prejudices towards the authoritarian, "law-enforcer" or bearer of irrelevant, pie-in-the-sky words.

People's assumption that God is only happy with them if they are "clean and sober" and morally upright can cause them to hide or censor their true lives before the eyes of those who reach out.

When I visit the marginalized, they often betray their view of me by quickly hiding their beer or masking the crack or marijuana smoke with

cologne before I enter their apartment.

### **Reading the Bible With 'The Damned'**

When we provide Bible studies, folks on the margins may reflect their skill at producing the moralistic answers they think we want to hear, rather than their own heartfelt response. They quickly correct themselves if a profanity slips out.

We run into the barrier of people's assumptions that Scripture



*Central American peasants and Mexican migrant farm workers have been conditioned to remain voiceless, passive spectators in the church, dependent upon the priest or pastor. They need to be deliberately empowered by participatory instruction.*



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has little to do with their daily struggles, along with their passivity and dependency before anyone in a power position. Central American peasants and Mexican migrant farm workers have been conditioned to remain voiceless, passive spectators in the church, dependent upon the priest or pastor. They need to be deliberately empowered by participatory instruction.

Anticipating people's assumptions about the Bible's irrelevance and their reluctance to participate, I try to choose a biblical text that might be relevant to the group. I think about some of the underlying questions addressed by the text.

Based on my knowledge of a community's struggles, I begin by asking questions about their lives that the Scriptures may address.

### **Oppression & Liberation in Hagar's Story and Ours**

I once led a Bible study with 15 Mexican inmates, focusing on Abram and Sarai's conflict with Hagar (Genesis 16:1-16). I began with the following questions: "Do you ever feel like other people or forces are acting upon you and have power over you? When have you seen this happening? What does this feel like?"

The men were quick to respond to the first two questions. "All the time," insists an undocumented Mexican man accused of dealing drugs. "The guards tell us when to eat, when to sleep. They lock us in

our cells. They handcuff us and take us down to court."

"Once the harvest is over, the INS agents pick us up and deport us back to Mexico. We are treated like objects." Heads nod in agreement and others give examples.

"So how does that make you feel?" I ask. "Humiliated," one man says, looking down.

"Powerless...very small," says another. "I feel lots of anger," says someone else. After listening to people's feelings of powerlessness

*"...We are treated like objects." Heads nod in agreement and others give examples.*



*"So how does that make you feel?" I ask. "Humiliated," one man says, looking down. "Powerless... very small," says another. "I feel lots of anger," says someone else.*

and anger in these situations, I invite them to read Genesis 16:1-6, suggesting that this story may or may not offer helpful parallels to their lives.

I invite a volunteer to read from Genesis 16:1-6, which describes Hagar's condition as a slave of Sarai and Abram.

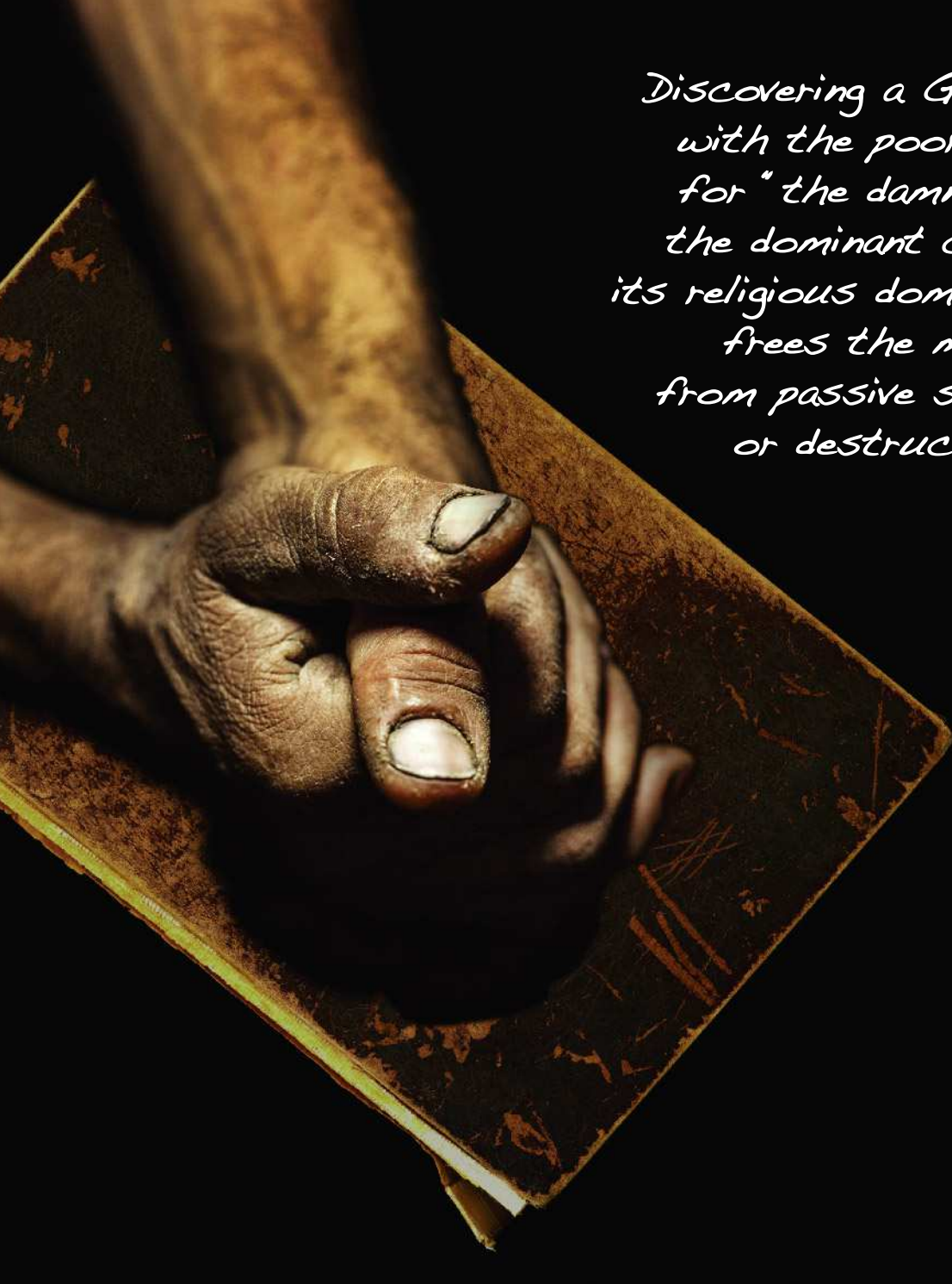
I ask the men to identify the characters in the text, based on the information the Bible provides. I invite them to discover more about these characters from the broader biblical context.

We read a few sections beginning in Genesis 11:27ff. "What do we know about Abram and Sarai from these verses?" I ask. The men observe that Abram and Sarai were migrants who had faced difficulties. Abram's father had died and Sarai was sterile (Genesis 11:30).

I ask a volunteer to read Genesis 12:1-4 and they notice that God called Abram to a mission and promised to bless all the families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:3). I point out that Abram and Sarai were wealthy (Genesis 13:2ff) and that Abram was considered righteous because he believed God.

In this story they represent "insiders"—those who have faith, blessing, God's favor, wealth and in this case power over outsiders—like Hagar, their Egyptian slave.

I point out that Hagar had not been called by God. She was a foreigner, an Egyptian, a woman and a slave of Sarai. As an Egyptian, she



*Discovering a God who is with the poor and truly for "the damned" strips the dominant culture of its religious domination. It frees the marginalized from passive submission or destructive revolt.*

reminds us of Abram's unbelief, when he deceived Pharaoh by claiming Sarai was his sister. Pharaoh gave Abram slaves and animals. Possibly Hagar came into Sarai's possession then.

From here I ask the men to talk about their views of God and their lives.

"What view of God do Sarai/Abram have?" Someone notes that Sarai thinks that God has kept her from having children (Genesis 16:2). I ask whether they know people who believe God is to blame when they cannot have children or experience tragedy. People nod and talk about how in Mexico this is common.

*Respectful, non-judgmental listening disarms people, relaxing their prejudices towards the Bible study leader as an authoritarian, "law-enforcer" or bearer of irrelevant, pie-in-the-sky words.*

“What is God like if Sarai is right?” “He gives and takes whatever he wants,” someone ventures, “A God who is in control of everything.”

“So, how did Sarai and Abram treat Hagar?” I ask. They note the obvious: “Like an object,” says one inmate, “with no respect. Sarai gave her to Abram to get a child for herself.”

The men note that Hagar was never asked permission, never called by her name, never directly addressed. She is treated like their possession. Abram uses her, and immediately she is pregnant. Momentarily empowered by her fertility, Hagar looks down on her owner. Sarai is humiliated and treats Hagar violently. Abram does not protect Hagar, but lets Sarai abuse her.

I ask the group for parallels between this story and their own. At first the men are silent, reluctant to identify with Hagar because she is a woman and abused slave. “No,” someone says, “not us.”

Another corrects him, “All the time here in the jail. Here we’re a

*At first the men are silent, reluctant to identify with Hagar because she is a woman and abused slave.*

number, or maybe a last name.”

Soon everyone is talking, making connections between Sarai and Abram and the jail guards, the police, the courts, INS and exploitive employers.

them like objects. He is a god on the side of the powerful and he’s unsympathetic to the poor and weak. Nobody notices that Sarai’s treatment of Hagar is similar to the way Sarai thinks God is treating her, but I make a note to myself and move on.

“So how does Hagar respond to this situation?” “She flees, running away into the desert,” someone says. “Maybe this is a healthy response to this kind of abuse,” I note. “If God is really the way his representatives portray him by

*People’s assumption that God is only happy with them if they are “clean and sober” and morally upright can cause them to hide or censor their true lives before the eyes of those who reach out.*

The discussion shifts to a reflection about how God promised to use Abram to bless all the nations of the world (including Hagar). I ask the men, “If Sarai and Abram represented God to Hagar, what image of God would Hagar have after this experience?”

The men respond quickly: Hagar would see God as a distant, impersonal, uncaring dictator, who uses people for his purposes, treating

their behavior, running away is a good alternative. But let’s see if Abram and Sarai are representing God correctly.”

### **Bad News Theology and the Liberating Word**

When reading the Bible, it helps to identify parallels between our stories and the place, characters and happenings in the text. Socially engaged Bible reading encourages people to directly question and challenge assumptions about God that most oppress them and invites them to consider an alternative, liberating way of reading Scripture.

At this point, we read Genesis



16:7-16 and I ask the group to identify the characters and describe what happens in this story. “Where is Hagar and what is she doing when the messenger of the Lord meets her? Was she seeking God?”

These questions highlight a surprising absence in the narrative of the holy, religious and pious behaviors they expect. This gap subverts religiosity and moralism. Readers will have trouble hearing the Good News when they are sabotaged from the start by asking, “What do I have to do to be saved?” and “Where do I have to go?” or “What do I have to know?”

They are surprised and excited to see Hagar is fleeing into the wilderness. And she has no prior knowledge of God when God finds her.

“What kind of God does the messenger of YHWH reveal through his words and actions? What does he do for Hagar?” I ask. “How is this God different than the god Hagar knew through Sarai and Abram’s treatment?”

“The messenger calls her by her name,” someone says. “But he calls her Hagar slave of Sarai,” observes another. I suggest that God might come as “the messenger of the Lord” to the “servant/slave of Sarai” as a way of meeting her as

an equal—an idea that pleases the inmates.

Someone mentions, “He asks where she is coming from and where she is going. The Lord’s messenger treats Hagar with respect and not like an object.”

“Maybe that’s like asking: ‘Tell me about your life, where have you come from, what have you done? What do you desire? What are your hopes and plans for the future?’” Another says, “This God cares about her, and even gives her a special blessing.”

Now the inmates are discovering the Good News for themselves. I don’t impose my interpretation in any way, as a religious expert dispensing “the truth” to the “ignorant.” Rather, we repeatedly invite participants to venture other interpretations by examining the details of the text.

### The God Who Sees

This discussion got animated as people discussed how this new view of God is completely different from the image of God Hagar would have inferred from her owners.

The God who meets Hagar in the desert is human, close and personal. He takes the initiative, looking for her and finding her. He is gracious, blessing her without any conditions.

*God promises blessing and liberation in spite of Hagar’s current experience of marginalization. This gives hope to the immigrant, the outsider and anyone experiencing oppression.*

This God is personal and attentive, naming her unborn son Ishmael, “God hears,” even though God knows he will be a “wild ass of a man,” experiencing continual conflict.

“Do any of you know any wild-asses-of-men?” I ask. Everyone laughs, especially two muscular, tattooed white guys who tower over us.

“God hears even the wild asses



of men who’ve got troubles, and promises that Ishmael will one day break free.”

In response to this human God who calls her by her name, Hagar feels free to name God, *El Roi*—the “God who sees”—a God not oblivious to abuse and suffering. He sees, and does something about it. This Egyptian slave woman is the first person in the Scriptures to name God!

The greatest difficulty for people is that the messenger sends her back to submit to her abuser Sarai. Yet one older inmate—a non-coop-

respects, cares, blesses and promises life and liberation.

The Good News for Hagar is that God is a respectful, personal and very human presence who promises blessing and liberation in spite of her current experience of marginalization. This gives hope to the immigrant, the outsider and anyone experiencing oppression.

Careful questioning that invites a closer look at Scripture and our contemporary context—that equips people to draw new and liberating conclusions—empowers each of us to bolder interpretations. Our probing questions can model a way of thinking critically both about people’s own lives, problems and the Bible.

Discovering a God who is *with* the poor and truly *for* “the damned” strips the dominant culture of its religious domination. It frees the marginalized from passive submission or destructive revolt. And by partnering with the poor to read the Bible afresh, together we can heal our image of God. □

*Bob Ekblad is director of Tierra Nueva, a ministry in Washington State that ministers to the marginalized (the poor, migrant farm workers, addicts, gang members and prisoners). He describes the complexities of “reading the Bible with the damned” (the title of his first book).*



## Spiritual Boredom

**D**o you know one of the biggest problems I have? It's boredom. Boredom has in it a touch of cynicism and a dash of not caring. I guess all of us have some of that, but the problem with boredom is that it spills over into things like one's walk with Christ. And if you're a preacher, that's when it gets dicey. Not only that, when spiritual boredom gets you, it smells like sin, and that particular sin has a name—*acedia*.

Acedia is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. That list has been a part of the church's teaching from as early as the sixth century with *acedia* generally the last one on the list. *Acedia* is often translated as "sloth," but that isn't what it is. Sloth isn't my sin. If anything, I'm a workaholic. *Acedia* reflects a lack of excitement and passion about the things of God. *Acedia* is a Latin word that comes from the Greek, meaning one is apathetic, listless or lacking joy. It has overtones of melancholia and often has been called the "noonday demon." It's when the flame that once burned brightly begins to flicker or when those truths that once made you dance now make you want to take a nap.

If you're a "religious professional," you're especially susceptible to *acedia*. I've read so many religious books, taught the Bible so many years, given so many lectures to religious students on becoming more religious, listened to so many confessions, prayed so many prayers, conducted so many religious services and performed so many funerals, baptisms and weddings that sometimes it goes bland on me. Sometimes the "gold has gone dim."

It's not just a preacher's sin. I bet you've experienced it too, especially if you've been a Christian for very long. You remember where Jesus found you, and the excitement and joy that you felt then. You remember the tears of

release and laughter that followed. You felt like dancing...and you didn't have to look at your feet while you did it. But then all the "religious stuff" began to overwhelm you and, over the years, something happened to the passion.

I can't tell you the number of times I've heard Christians say, "I wish I could feel the way I felt then..." *Acedia* means that one still prays, but God often doesn't seem as real as he once did; one still walks with Christ, but one's thoughts are sometimes somewhere else; and one still does religious stuff, but sometimes it's hard to remember exactly why. This "noonday demon" attacks almost without our noticing it. We don't backslide...we just get tired and slow down and then the light goes out.

*Acedia* is reflected in the words of the Psalmist: "For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! ...Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" (Psalm 43:2-3, 5).

Okay, what can we do about it? Get more religious? Read the Bible and pray more? Do more church work? Get involved in more ministry to change the world, feed the hungry and reach out to the "least and lost"?

Are you crazy? There's nothing wrong with those things; but if the sin is *acedia*, they're not the solution, they're the problem. When the gold has gone dim, getting more religious is like giving water to a drowning man. So how do you fix *acedia*?

You don't...and you can't. You can certainly stop cussing and be nicer by being intentional about not cussing and being nicer. There are many sins we can fix with "elbow grease" at least

...when one finds himself or herself in a deep hole, the first and most important thing to do is to stop digging.

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he asked me

for a while—but not acedia. Passion isn't like a faucet you can turn off and on at will. In fact, the harder one tries, the harder it gets.

When Paul talks about God's grace being sufficient and his power being made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), he is referencing a key to a solution to the problem of acedia. I don't know about you; but for me, acedia grows out of a particular kind of soil (if I were less spiritual I would say "manure"). It's the soil of my shame and guilt. That leads to my efforts to mask shame and guilt by being more religious... and when that fails, to either pretend that I haven't failed or to give up trying altogether. That's when the gold goes dim.

Someone said that when one finds himself or herself in a deep hole, the first and most important thing to do is to stop digging. The Psalmist said that God said, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

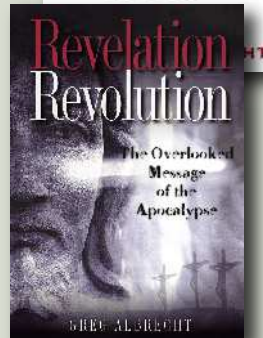
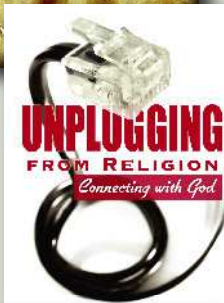
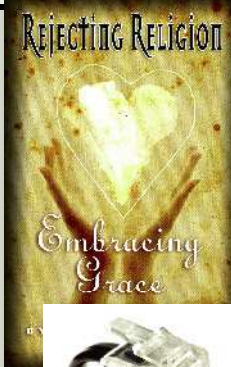
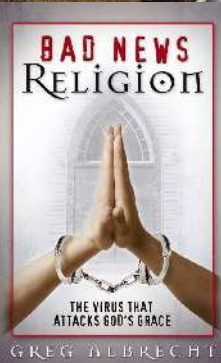
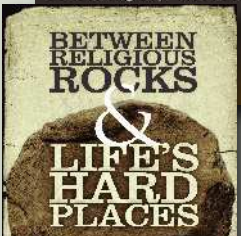
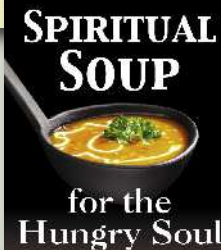
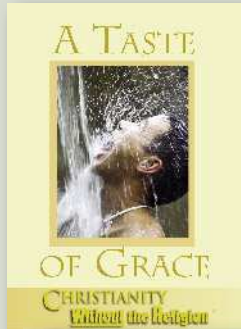
Elijah was the "poster boy" for acedia. You'll remember his encounter with Jezebel and the prophets of Baal from which he emerged victorious (1 Kings 18-19). You'll also remember his fleeing into the wilderness where Elijah "...asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers'" (1 Kings 19:4). You can file that under *Acedia*.

God then came ("the Lord passed by"), but not in the way and manner Elijah expected. He looked for God in the mighty wind, a great earthquake and a raging fire, all that God sent, but God wasn't present in any of those. Then there was a "still, small voice" (the ESV translates this as "the sound of a low whisper"). God himself was the only remedy for acedia.

Elijah stopped digging. And I have to stop writing. But for now, do know that the key to dealing with acedia is to just stop. So, hurry up and stop! He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown

THE PLAIN TRUTH





## Boardwalk Buildings and Park Place Prayers

Monopoly—*exclusive ownership and control of property, commodities and resources.*

In my younger days I had three infatuations to which I will publicly confess: *lifelong love affairs* with 1) Major League Baseball, 2) rock n' roll music, and 3) *a short-lived, but equally passionate love affair* with Monopoly, the board game.

Before other interests became a priority, I invested/wasted hundreds of hours playing the Monopoly board game. If you have ever played a game of Monopoly you will know that the goal is to become rich and powerful by essentially bankrupting everyone else who is playing the game. By exclusively controlling properties, building on those properties, and charging high “rent” to those who have the misfortune, through the roll of the dice, to land on monopolized properties, *one can grind one's rivals into the dust.* Some might think Monopoly is tame compared with modern day video games like “Gears of War” and “Grand Theft Auto”—and while the goal of Monopoly is not to torture or kill, it still encourages bankrupting and impoverishing competitors.

Leafing through an old photo album, I was reminded of my Monopoly years which in turn kick-started some thoughts about *the similarities between Monopoly and big-business religion.* With the game of Monopoly the goal is to purchase property and build hotels so that the owner may extract money from people unlucky enough to “visit” them. The most coveted of these properties being Boardwalk and Park Place. You see where I’m going, don’t you? The game of Christ-less religion follows a somewhat similar methodology: acquire property, build a building and call it a church, lure the unsuspecting into holy real estate, and then demand that members attend that building and pay money for the privilege of doing so.

If you are not tracking with this similarity, allow me to offer my definition of religion:

*the widely embraced notion that performance of good deeds and/or ongoing prescribed ritualistic behaviors will gain a higher standing with God than would have otherwise been experienced.* Once a religion succeeds in persuading individuals of this definition, the “game” is essentially over. All that’s left is the shouting.

Christ-less religion longs for a monopoly, so that its brand of religion might control the faith of a building, parcel of land, or even a state or country. As North Americans it’s somewhat easy to see how Christ-less religion oppresses people in other places, but it’s not quite as easy to see the “plank in our own eye” (Matthew 7:3).

Our insight is 20/20 as we shake our heads about women being forced to wear burkas and the imposition of Sharia law in the Islamic world. But as Christ-less Christendom shakes its head at the toxic religious effects experienced by Muslims, any superiority it feels, individually or collectively, is a mirage. As religious institutions battle for “market-share” here in North America, they employ many un-Christ-like *shenanigans* (a word my grandmother introduced me to as she helped enlarge my vocabulary).

As Christ-followers, based on our faith in Christ alone, we must stand apart from the propaganda and inquire how religious institutions feel justified in requiring a child of God to attend a particular building at a particular time. If you watch fast-food commercials, you will know that McDonalds spends big bucks trying to persuade the public that its hamburgers are superior to those of Wendy’s or Burger King. While religious promotional persuasion campaigns are a little more covert, **there are similarities between the claims of junk-food hamburger joints and junk-food religious joints.**

So far at least, McDonalds doesn’t make truly outrageous claims like proclaiming itself to be the one and only true hamburger joint or threaten its loyal clientele with eternal torture in hell if they frequent a rival. Just

imagine if McDonalds had those weapons of persuasion at its disposal!

On the surface most people would agree that God has not awarded any one spiritual enterprise an exclusive franchise to represent him here on earth. But there are many people who believe that God would be upset with them if they failed to faithfully attend *the one and only true spiritual junk-food outlet*. And beyond that, many would believe God to be more than upset if they just decided to grill hamburgers at home.

We know that the Golden Arches are not the only place to purchase a hamburger. Based on our faith in Christ alone, we Christ-followers must ask if a particular kind of architecture—or particular interior furnishings (stained glass windows, art, icons, altars and pulpits) of a self-proclaimed religious, “holy” building is tantamount to a monopoly on God?

Organized religion has attempted, wherever possible, to monopolize God (or at least their interpretation of God) in such a way that their particular brand name will profit from their efforts. **Christ-less religion is a business, and it exists to protect its market share of potential followers/clients.**

The goal at the heart of modern day advertising is to gain such a control of the market that consumers are convinced that all other “pretenders” in a particular industry are nothing less than doggy poo-poo. Real or imagined monopolies are all about asserting and claiming your product to be the only “real”, “true,” uncontested, hands-down, without-a-doubt best there is.

I will not contest that church buildings might have been originally conceived as a gathering place for the benefit of those that organized religion served. But there is absolutely no doubt that church buildings quickly morphed into serving the purposes of institutionalized religion. By the way, believe it or not, *there was a church long*

*before church buildings!* And, by the same token, *there is a church that never meets in church buildings!*

The history of buildings specifically designed and constructed as “church” buildings (as opposed to renovated houses) seems to go back to Holy Roman Emperor Constantine. After Constantine unilaterally decided that Christianity would become the accepted religion of Rome, construction of church buildings followed. Church buildings became places where the religious monopoly was exercised.

Before the Protestant Reformation, “going to church” meant not only being in a building where you could silently and privately pray, but it also meant that you could be in the presence of people who were presumed to be “holier than thou.”

### ...religious monopoly games did not end with the Reformation—they actually intensified!

Priests offered general, all encompassing prayers on your behalf. The same prayers offered at home just would not do.

Over time, for those positively impacted by Reformation principles, prayers came to be seen as offered by the common people, including outside of religious buildings. Relationship with God was accepted as a personal relationship, rather than one arbitrated and dictated by religious authorities and institutions.

However, religious monopoly games did not end with the Reformation—they actually intensified! The human desire for pomp and ceremony, not to mention for religious experts who could solve spiritual problems, meant that prayer books followed closely on the heels of the Reformation. *Protestants quickly came up with their own religious monopoly games.* Books of prayer written and edited by scholars were believed to be more effective than the bumbling and

stumbling prayers offered by “laypeople” who were not as trained and educated. And of course, the prayers within the prayer books were believed to be far more effective if they were said and prayed in a Protestant religious building. The common belief evolved, to the advantage of religious institutions, that prayers in a building dedicated to a religious purpose are more effective than those offered outside such a “holy” environment.

Nearly two years ago, on December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza killed 20 children and six staff members of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. An interfaith vigil was organized, offering a way for people to come together to express their common faith as they struggled to deal with the shock of this unspeakable massacre.

A pastor of a denomination that bears the name of Martin Luther offered a prayer at the service only to be chastised by his denomination for doing so. Why? The denomination was offended because some of the participants had beliefs that differed from their dogmas and doctrines—and thus, it seems the reasoning went, one of its pastors should not offer a prayer at a service when “outsiders” who did not accept their teachings were present. All this in the name of Luther!

Where does big business religion get off claiming that its creeds and clergy, its dogmas and doctrines, its prayers and prescriptions are better and superior? Where does big business religion get off claiming that a building makes relationship with God more likely and effective? Where does big business religion get off enforcing membership as a point of access to God?

Thank God that God is not limited to religious attempts to monopolize him. **No humanly organized and incorporated entity has a monopoly on our relationship with God.** Thank God for his grace and love—*faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone!* □

—Greg Albrecht





# 8 Signs of Hyper-grace Teaching

**Editor's Note: An unholy war against God's grace is raging within (of all places)...the church! Paul Ellis says that God's grace is being maligned as "hyper-grace."**

Using words like “decline” and “distorted” and “sexually immoral,” attacks on “hyper-grace” churches and ministries claim that the message of “free grace” is part of a “dangerous trend” that needs to be opposed and confronted.

What does hyper-grace teaching look like? According to those opposed to “free grace,” hyper-grace teaching only preaches positive messages, doesn’t insist on tithes and promotes immoral people into positions of leadership.

In the interests of balanced reporting, I thought I might offer eight more-accurate signs of hyper-grace teaching. But first, what is “hyper-grace”? Those who attack it make no attempt to define it beyond acknowledging those who preach it as placing “strong emphasis on grace.” To this I respond, guilty as charged. Grace saves us,

grace keeps us—it’s grace from start to finish!

So what’s the problem?

The problem, apparently, is those of us who proclaim grace are not preaching enough law. We’re antinomians with insufficient regard for the moral law of the Old Testament. Attacks on grace make liberal use of the word “law.”

Those offended by and opposed to grace may believe that the grace of God gets us into the kingdom but it’s our observance of the Law (with a capital L) which keeps us

in conception and a crime in execution.” They understand that what this rule-obsessed world needs is not more rules but a revelation of the One who fulfilled the law on our behalf.

In a quest for holiness a mixed-grace church may preach a little law, a little self-help, or a little pop psychology, but it’s all just a flesh trip. In contrast, a hyper-grace church preaches *Christ alone*. Whatever your need, whether it’s salvation or sanctification, your supply is found in the One who

**“No Christ in your sermon, sir? Then go home and never preach again until you have something worth preaching.”**

— C.H. Spurgeon, 1876, sermon #2899

there, or at least keeps us from upsetting a temperamental God who is intolerant of our sin.

Consequently, we may contrast the two perspectives as follows:

- Hyper-grace—we are saved by grace and kept by grace.
- Mixed-grace—we are saved by grace but kept by law.

With these distinctions in mind, we can now identify eight characteristics of hyper-grace churches:

## 1. They preach Jesus and nothing but Jesus.

Hyper-grace churches agree with C.H. Spurgeon, who said, “A sermon without Christ as its beginning, middle and end is a mistake

promises to meet *all* your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus (see Philippians 4:19). You don’t need seven steps or fifteen keys or an intensive course of study. Your greatest need is for a revelation of Jesus Christ and what he has done on your behalf.

## 2. They reveal a God who loves you like a Father.

Hyper-grace churches understand that what an orphaned world most needs is *a revelation of our heavenly Father who loves us* and cares for us and desires for us to come home. They follow the lead of Jesus who spoke again and again



...what an orphaned world most needs is a revelation of our heavenly Father who loves us and cares for us and desires for us to come home.

**“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love” (John 15:9).**

of “Our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9). They understand that everything good in life is built on the revelation that “My Father loves me more than I know.”

A mixed-grace church, in contrast, seeks to “balance” hyper-grace teaching with old covenant pictures of God as judge, jury and executioner. They say, “Yes, he is a God of love but he is also a God of justice,” as though God’s justice could somehow be understood apart from his love.

**The best picture we have of God’s character is in Jesus Christ—not a list of ancient laws handed down to a wandering tribe of ex-slaves.** “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18).

### **3. They esteem the words of Jesus.**

A common misperception is that hyper-grace churches disregard the teachings of Jesus. In point of fact, hyper-grace churches are the *only* ones taking Jesus seriously. When Jesus is preaching law, we say that’s serious law and when Jesus is revealing grace, we bow in breath-

**If you don’t settle this in your heart—that Jesus loves you as the Father loves the Son—you may run from your husband Mr. Grace back to your former husband Mr. Law (Romans 7:1-6).**

less gratitude. We would not dare to re-interpret his words with qualifiers and caveats.

In contrast, those who preach mixed-grace dismiss the hard words of Jesus as hyperbole and exaggeration. Like the Pharisees of old, a mixed-grace church or ministry picks and chooses those commands which are to be followed while disregarding others as metaphorical, unreal and not to be taken seriously.

### **4. They esteem the law and the purpose for which it is given.**

Hyper-grace churches and ministries are often accused of being opposed to the law when, in fact, they esteem the law and agree with Paul who said “the law is good if one uses it properly” (1 Timothy 1:8).

They understand that the “law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers...and those who oppose the glorious gospel of the

blessed God” (1 Timothy 1:9-11). **The law is for those who trust in themselves and their own righteousness rather than in Christ and his righteousness.**

A mixed-grace church promotes the law as a guide and standard for righteous living. Under this perspective grace is reduced to little more than a lubricant for greasing the cogs of self-effort.

Ironically, those who live this way reveal their disregard for *both* law and grace—law, since they cannot keep it yet pretend to, and grace, since they would rather trust in their own efforts than in Christ’s finished work.

*Such teaching is lukewarm.* They are neither submitting to the cold and unbending demands of the law or the white-hot love and grace of their Father.

### **5. They understand that obedience is a fruit not a root.**

Mixed-grace teaching says you

must obey God's commands in order to prove your love but hyper-grace teaching takes Jesus at his word: "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). They understand that **obedience is not birthed out of fear but love**. Those who are resting in the unconditional love of their Father will trust him and do what he says without any conscious effort. They don't need rules to tell them what to do for the Holy Spirit himself is their guide (John 16:13).

Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love" (John 15:9). The issue is not whether you will do what he says, but whether you will remain in the quiet place of trust, resting in his love. If you don't settle this in your heart—that Jesus loves you as the Father loves the Son—you may run from your husband Mr. Grace back to your former husband Mr. Law (Romans 7:1-6).

Someone who tries to mix law with grace is a spiritual adulterer. They're cheating on Jesus. While they may appear to be religious on the outside, their hearts are full of unbelief.

## 6. They empower people to overcome sin.

If you sin, a hyper-grace pastor, ministry or church won't throw stones or shame you. Instead they will point you to the living Grace of God who *dealt with all your sins on the cross*. They will say with the

**The law: "Be righteous."**

**The verdict: "No one is righteous."**

**The gospel: "Jesus is our righteousness."**

apostle John, "If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1).

Stumble and sin in a mixed-grace spiritual environment and the message you get will be, "Look at what you did!" But a hyper-grace



## Grace + Law = Law

message will say, "Look at what *he* did and what you can now do because of what he did!" Mixed-grace churches are *obsessed with sin*—resisting it, fighting it, avoiding it. In contrast, **hyper-grace churches and ministries are Christ-focused, not sin-focused.**

A mixed-grace church would have you **turn from every sin until you're a dizzy sinner**. They will do what Paul did with the sinning Corinthians and reveal *your true identity in Christ*.

You are "sanctified in Christ

**A hyper-grace ministry or church is attractive to sinners and unappealing to the self-righteous. It is a place where the prodigals come home and the zealots stay out.**

Jesus...I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. In him you have been enriched in every way (and) he will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:2-8). We are not changed by our resolve and sheer determination. We are changed by beholding Jesus who lives within us.

## 7. They promote security and trust.

Hyper-grace ministries and churches promote faith and confi-

dence by proclaiming the promises of Jesus: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them... no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:26-27).

**We don't stand on our promises to him, but on his many good and great promises to us.** Rest, be at peace, for it is God who keeps you firm to the end. The One who holds the universe in his hand can surely hold you!

But in mixed-grace churches and ministries, your standing is based on *your* promises to God rather than his promises to you. Let God down and you will need to make new promises and work harder to keep them. Where is the security in this? There is none. No guarantees are offered or even desired for a measure of uncertainty is seen as an essential for keeping the sheep in line and under control.

## 8. They will look like Jesus, smell like Jesus, walk like Jesus, and talk like Jesus.

A hyper-grace ministry or church is attractive to sinners and unappealing to the self-righteous. It is a place where the prodigals come

home and the zealots stay out. It is a family where the broken are made whole, the captives are freed, and all are loved. It is the City come down, it is heaven-on-earth, and it is God's best advertisement for the kingdom of his grace.

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Paul Ellis, a former pastor and university professor, is the author of *The Gospel in Ten Words* and *The Gospel in Twenty Questions*. He writes regularly on the goodness of God's amazing grace at [EscapeToReality.org](http://EscapeToReality.org).

# DOES GRACE

*Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now (Galatians 4:28-29).*

**H**ave you ever noticed that for many, suffocating bondage and death-producing legalism is tolerated, encouraged, and even celebrated? Yet when grace is mentioned, people go apoplectic with warnings about “going too far,” the “dangers of the grace message,” or the “need for balance,” and so forth. Why the dire warnings about supposed “hyper-grace” but no equal alarm about “hyper-legalism?”

Is there no “danger” in the alligator-infested swamp of performance-based religion that most people swim in? The reason there is no indignation about legalism is because it enables people to be measured, controlled and psychologically manipulated. I can feel superior to you because: “I don’t \_\_\_\_\_, and you do.”

Grace frees and grace equalizes: valleys are filled, and mountains are brought low, and in so doing it is offensive to religious sensibilities. Grace frees from sin AND religion. Religion cannot withstand free people. Grace threatens human pride, our sense of fair play and justice. Yes, grace threatens “balance.” By definition, grace cannot be “balanced.”

Paul preached grace so strongly that his critics accused him of promoting sin. You will never be accused of that if you preach a “mild and balanced” grace message! No, only a radical grace message, a message that is begging to be misunderstood will get you those kinds of comments! Those who preach grace with the same urgency as Paul, will likewise be ac-

**HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED... WHEN GRACE IS MENTIONED, PEOPLE GO APOPLECTIC WITH WARNINGS ABOUT “GOING TOO FAR,” ... OR THE “NEED FOR BALANCE,” AND SO FORTH?**

**BY STEPHEN CROSBY**

**THE PLAIN TRUTH**

# NEED TO BE “BALANCED”?

cused of being soft on sin, unconcerned about holiness, encouraging lax living and so forth. These are red herrings; straw-men arguments from folks whose understanding of grace and holiness needs some development.

## How to “Balance” Grace?

What is supposed to give grace “balance?” Anti-grace? Is it a substance from a bad science fiction movie? “Aye, Captain, we need to get to Romulak 7 and pick up some anti-grace before all this grace blows out our warp drive!”

Does “holiness” preaching and teaching actually “balance” grace as if grace and holiness were somehow antithetical principles that keep the universe at a zero-sum equilibrium when they are present in equal quantity? Of course, this is nonsense, but so many people think this way. Thinking grace needs to be balanced is thinking that *fails to understand grace*.

Some think grace is some sort of “get out of jail free” card that means you can do anything you want, or as I once heard a preacher say: “I can commit any sin I want because God is in the forgiving business.” That is likewise, blasphemous nonsense.

In reaction to the above, some think preaching the “law,” or holiness, or a hard message about sin, is the antidote to “not going too far with grace.” That is equally nonsense.

Worse yet, some think we should provide “hard preaching of the law” to restrain Christ-followers from sin and by so doing “balance” grace. So-called hard preaching about the law will empower sin! Paul said it plainly: *the strength of sin is the law* (1 Corinthians 15:56).

You will never overcome sin by preaching “hard” about it, and by focusing on the law! By “the law” Paul means any principle-based-sense of living in moral indebtedness to God to “do better.” He is

not referring to just Mosaic law, but any sort of “law-based” Jewish or Gentile law life: (Greek *nomos*: law living). There is only one answer for sin, one answer for victory: seeing, knowing and experiencing the grace that is in Jesus Christ. **Period.**

## Giving Grace Its Due

Part of the problem is in our anemic and tepid definition of grace. Too often, it is defined in a very limited way as a “status of favor” or “unmerited favor.” That is true, *but it is more than that.*

Being “in grace” or “under grace” is to participate/share in the overflow of the covenantal life, love, and power of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That obviously is a “status” of unmerited favor, but it is also a transformative and empowered state of being.

Thinking that actually being in such a state condones or endorses sin or a lack of holiness is absurd. Now, if we open up the can of

elements: “You are acquitted of your sin—like a criminal declared to be innocent—now go your merry way.” Well, yes, I am acquitted, but I have also been put into the very life, love and power that abides at the center of the universe and holds this universe together!

*Grace is a transformative power, not merely a judicial decree of innocence. You are not merely an acquitted criminal, trying to live life like a parolee. You used to be a relationally alienated rebel, and now, you have been made a dear son or daughter.... Wake up to it! Come out of the slumber of sin! Live like who you are, a NEW (Greek *kainos*: qualitatively new) CREATION. Live so radically in love with God and humanity that you would no more want to sin than you would want to poke out your own eyes.*

It is in the power of grace, that assurance of Father-Son love, where I live, rest, abide and find my being...that I am free. There is no room for nonsense in that and

**YOU ARE NOT MERELY AN ACQUITTED CRIMINAL, TRYING TO LIVE LIFE LIKE A PAROLEE. YOU USED TO BE A RELATIONALLY ALIENATED REBEL, AND NOW, YOU HAVE BEEN MADE A DEAR SON OR DAUGHTER.... WAKE UP TO IT!**

worms on false converts, spurious conversions and such, well, that’s another conversation. The reason there can be so much hand-wringing about a perceived “lack of holiness” is because we are trying to conform unconverted people to God. That makes as much sense as trying to herd cats: it’s not in their nature to be herded. The problem is in our conversion theology and experience, not our “message of maturity” or “discipleship.”

When grace is usually preached or taught, the elements of empowerment and sharing in the life of the covenantal Godhead are normally left out in preference to, and overemphasis of, the “forensic” el-

no room for indifferent attitudes toward sin. Rather, it is the very atmosphere and empowerment necessary to overcome sin.

No, grace does not need to be balanced. It needs to be understood...and experienced. *Grace does not need to be balanced. Grace is all there is.* □

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# IRON-BED RELI

**I**n Greek mythology, Procrustes was a legendary bandit with a stronghold in the hills outside Eleusis. There he stopped those who traveled by and tied them to his iron bed. He fit on the bed, and believed everyone else should fit on it also. If the person happened to be too short, he stretched him on a rack until he attained the proper length; if he happened to be too long, his legs were cut off until he fit the bed of Procrustes. Thus everyone was forced to be the same.

*Based on this myth, the term “Procrustean Bed” is used to describe any*

*arbitrary standard to which exact conformity is forced.*

As we consider doctrinal beliefs that are held by Christians, can anyone rightly claim he has everything figured out, that he is right on everything? Let’s face it: if we are not right on “everything,” doesn’t this imply we may be wrong on some things? And if this is the case, why insist that everyone else should fit our Procrustean Bed?

Occasionally—I not often!—I have heard from people who say: “I believe everything just as you do!” While

this is appreciated in one way, in another way it is scary. I certainly do not claim to have the “final” or ultimate revelation.

Others may say they do not see everything the same way I do. But they count me a brother in Christ, appreciate many of the truths I

**Greek Vase depicting Theseus' defeat of Procrustes  
ca. 440 BC**





# GIORN

share—even though they do not agree on “everything.”

## Accepting—Not Rejecting

While the ideal—the ultimate goal—is that Christians will all “see eye to eye” and “come to the unity of the faith” (Isaiah 52:8; Ephesians 4:13), with the passing of many centuries this has not happened yet. So, what should our attitude be regarding the “differences” that exist within the body of Christ?

According to the New Testament, especially portions like Romans 14, the emphasis is on accepting one another, not rejecting one another. Even one who is weak in the faith should be received:

“Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things” (Romans 14:1, NKJV). Some may choose a certain diet, others may observe a day in a certain way (verses 2-6). “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ....Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another” (verses 17, 19).

If one has a sincere, honest conviction about some point—even though it may not be widely believed—he should not be put down. We can accept and honor him, even though we may not totally agree. By the same token, he should not try to force his personal conviction off on others. It seems this is what Paul was saying: “Do you have faith [a personal conviction or belief]? Have it to yourself before God” (Romans 14:22). “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind” (verse 5).

A wise pastor can stand for what he believes, without causing unnecessary division. He might say, “I believe in Bible prophecy [or some other subject] a certain way. But I also realize that some of our people believe a different way. I do not think any less of them; we are family! We are family because we have the

**Some may choose a certain diet, others may observe a day in a certain way. “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit....Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another” (Romans 14:17, 19).**

same Father—not because we all see everything exactly the same. We are all learning, sorting things out. All who know Jesus as Lord are welcome in this church. We will love you and not put you down.”

With this approach he may teach a lesson more important

**We are family because we have the same Father—not because we all see everything exactly the same. We are all learning, sorting things out. All who know Jesus as Lord are welcome in this church.**

than some doctrinal viewpoint—acceptance of one another.

If we are right on some doctrinal point and others are wrong, this is all the more reason we should not build walls or have a “know-it-all” attitude. “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies” (1 Corinthians 8:1).

We recall the time when a man was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. The disciples rejected him because, as they put it, “He follows not with us!” What was Jesus’ response? He said to accept the man, not reject him; that someone who was not against them was with them (Mark 9:38-40). The attitude of Jesus was inclusive, not exclusive.

## Religious Procrustean Beds

When religious systems make laws requiring that everyone must fit their Procrustean Bed, great harm is done. This is well illustrated in the story of John Bunyan (1628-

1688) who was imprisoned in Bedford for most of 12 years. What was his crime? “Preaching without a license”!

Having come from a poor background and with very little education, he followed his father in the tinker’s trade (mending kettles and pots). Then in 1655, a few years

after experiencing a dynamic conversion to Christ, he began preaching with marked success.

In 1660, England reestablished a law that made it illegal to “conduct divine service except in accordance with the ritual of the church, or for one not in Episcopal orders to address a congregation.” Since Bunyan’s ministry was not authorized by the established church, he was put in prison. While there, he wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*, probably the best-known allegory ever written.

Finally, in 1672, Charles II issued the *Declaration of Religious Indulgence* and Bunyan was released from prison. In the years that followed, the nonconformist congregation he established numbered as many as four thousand Christians!

A pastor friend of mine told me how he came to Christ in a certain small denomination. There he grew in the Christian life and eventually felt the Lord was calling him to prepare for ministry. This church, his home church, offered to provide financial support to attend their Bible college. But, upon entering this college he learned he must sign an agreement that he would, upon graduation, preach the dispensational, pre-tribulation rapture of the church. In his own heart, he had come to question whether this view was truly scriptural. Being honest about this, he turned down the sponsorship of his home church and chose another Bible college.

Without going into the details of the doctrine itself—one way or the other—let me simply say this: Making belief in a dispensational, pre-tribulation rapture an entrance requirement would have kept some outstanding men out of that college: Wycliffe, Huss, Luther, Knox, Calvin, Tyndale, Newton, Wesley, Whitfield, Edwards, Finney and Spurgeon—to mention a few!

Regardless of how people believe regarding the coming of the Lord, the greater issue—and on this I think all would agree—is that regardless of WHEN or HOW Christ comes, we should always be ready,



**The body of Christ is made up of individuals who may be different because of race, age, geography, travel, reading, employment, education, family, friends, heart and mind. Yet, in diversity there can be unity—when the common focus is that of “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...” (Hebrews 12:2).**



watching, living a life that is pleasing to him (cf. Matt. 24:44; Mark 13:35).

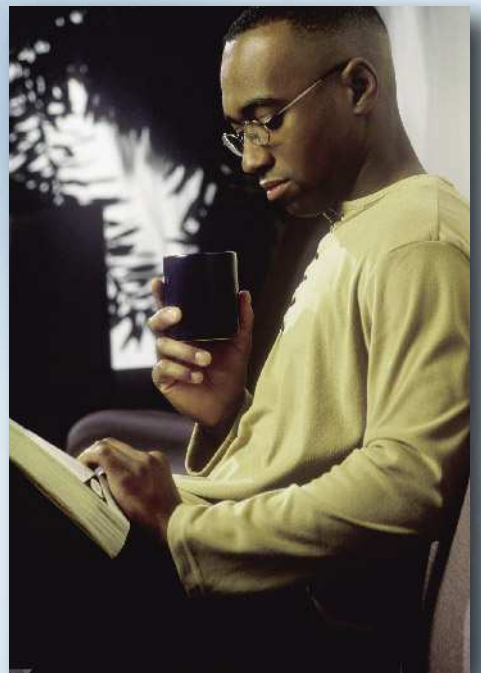
### **The Millennium—a Test of Faith?**

It is sad that some tend to make non-essential teachings a test of faith or fellowship. Take the millennium, for example. I personally

know great, dedicated Christian pastors and people who hold differing views on this. It is not a salvation issue. Questions arise as to which verses are intended in a literal sense or which may be intended in a figurative sense.

Consider this: 2 Peter 3:3-13 speaks of the “coming of the





Lord”; that it will be “as a thief in the night”; that the very “elements shall melt”; that the “earth will be burned up” and “dissolved.” If taken in a literal sense, two viewpoints emerge—commonly referred to as Pre-millennial and Post-millennial. But each raises questions:

1. If the earth burns up before a 1000-year millennial reign of Christ on earth, how would there be any earth left upon which he would rule? How would he rebuke the nations and rule over them, if no nations were left?
2. On the other hand, if the earth burns up after a 1000-year

millennial reign of Christ—making way for new heavens and a new earth—how could the Lord’s coming be “as a thief in the night” if the saints, by this time, had already been reigning with him for a thousand years?  
A pastor we know was doing a verse-by-verse series on the writ-

**We are not saying it does not matter what we believe. It does matter. We should study things out—sincerely, honestly and prayerfully. As we come to understand truth, we should hold to that truth, and firmly so.**

Are some things hard to understand in Scripture? Certainly. In this very same chapter, Peter wrote there are “some things hard to understand” (verse 16). It appears that all of God’s treasures are not right on the surface, so that those who are willing to dig deeper

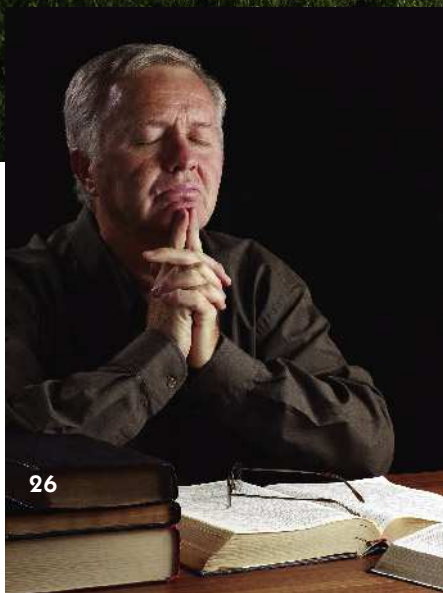


***...at the same time, keeping in mind that no one has everything figured out—nor do we need to—realizing it is more important whom we know, than what we know.***

obtain a more complete understanding of spiritual truth (see Matthew 13:11, 16, 17, 36).

It is quite evident that all Christians do not understand the book of Revelation the same way. There are very different views, like: Preterist, Poetic, Futurist, Historicist and Dispensational. But there is common ground: Regardless of some details or how we interpret evil forces like the “Beast,” “False Prophet,” “Harlot,” “Babylon,” etc., all of these are ultimately defeated by Christ!

ings of Peter. We happened to hear his message just before the 2 Peter 3 passage. When my path crossed his a few weeks later, I pointed out the difficulty inherent in the two positions (as mentioned), and asked how he handled this portion of 2 Peter 3. His response: “Very quickly!”



## What or Who We Know?

Christians may differ on which political party they favor or which candidate they voted for. But, as Christians, everyone should agree on this: “Pray for kings and for all that are in authority...for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God” (1 Timothy 2:1, 2). When Paul wrote these words, a tyrant, Nero Caesar, was king! People in places of authority can make far-reaching decisions that can help or hurt many people. So of course it is “good” to pray for them.

There are some (scattered throughout various denominations) who labor long with genealogies, trying to trace their fleshly lineage back through

there are historic churches like the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church that can trace their history back many centuries. Does this automatically make people who belong to these groups true Christians? Obviously each individual needs a personal commitment to Christ. As Jesus said to a man who seemingly had all the credentials: “You must be born again” (John 3:3).

Several years ago when Billy Graham was a guest on the Larry King program, the subject of hell came up. Graham quoted scripture, and then added: “I don’t understand hell, but I know enough about it to know I don’t want to go there! And, no one has to; Christ has made a way out for us.” Details vary among Christians on the subject as to what extent the fire is literal, its purpose, degrees of punishment, duration and location. But surely there should be agreement on the larger issue: We don’t want to go there—and we don’t have to—because of Jesus Christ! There are also differences among dedicated Christians about heaven. Some believe heaven, the dwelling place of God to which Jesus ascended, is in some remote part of the universe or beyond; there are others who believe that ultimately the earth itself will be transformed into heavenly glory.

But why divide over such points? WHAT heaven is will be overwhelmingly more important than WHERE it is! There will be no sickness, no suffering, no pain, no crime, no sin and no death! It will be great, grand and glorious!

In one church there were people who believed two different ways regarding the state of the dead. Some believed that when a Christian dies he goes immediately to be with the Lord; others believed death is a sleep until the resurrection, at which time believers will rise to meet the Lord. Each side ap-

pealed to certain scriptures. Did they throw stones at one another? No, not at all. Neither side considered it divisive because all agreed on the greater truth: Believers will spend eternity with Christ either way. They shared a common ground.

We are not saying it does not matter what we believe. It does matter. We should study things out—sincerely, honestly and prayerfully. As we come to understand truth we should hold to that truth—and firmly so. But, at the same time, keeping in mind that no one has everything figured out—nor do we need to—realizing *it is more important whom we know, than what we know*. A good rule of thumb is this:

In essentials, UNITY;

In non-essentials, LIBERTY;

In all things, CHARITY.

As Christians, belief in Jesus Christ as the son of God is an essential. We come to the Father through him. There is salvation in no other; he is the way, the truth, and the life. Certainly this is an essential of the faith.

### Liberty in Non-Essentials

Back around A.D. 387, a custom had developed among Christians at Rome: they fasted on Saturday. When Augustine arrived in Milan, he noticed that the Christians there did not fast on Saturday. He asked Ambrose about this, who gave this reply: “When I am at Rome, I fast on a Saturday; when I am at Milan, I do not. Follow the custom of the Church where you are.” Eventually the statement went through some transition and has come down to us as: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

Customs develop among different churches for different reasons. Generally speaking, they are simply ways of doing things and are neither right nor wrong in themselves. It may be the timing when services are held, the order of worship, the design of buildings, location of pulpit, methods of reaching out to the community, how communion is served or offerings received—things like that.

the kings of England, Tea-Tephi and Jeremiah, supposing this can show they are descendants of Israel. But, even if this were true, what would it prove? The scriptures clearly show that salvation is not by race, but by grace. Fleshly descent does not count. As John the Baptist preached: “Do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones” (Matthew 3:9).

In somewhat the same way,

Sometimes churches have been divided over the type of music provided. Often younger people prefer a certain style; older people relate better to familiar hymns. There have been cases in which a young pastor feels compelled to do away with all the old hymns. But when there are people in that church for whom those hymns are meaningful, this is a foolish step. Things like this cause unfruitful and unnecessary division. The solution is simple: assuming the songs are in alignment with scripture and are God-honoring, use some of each! The Bible itself mentions variations: psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16).

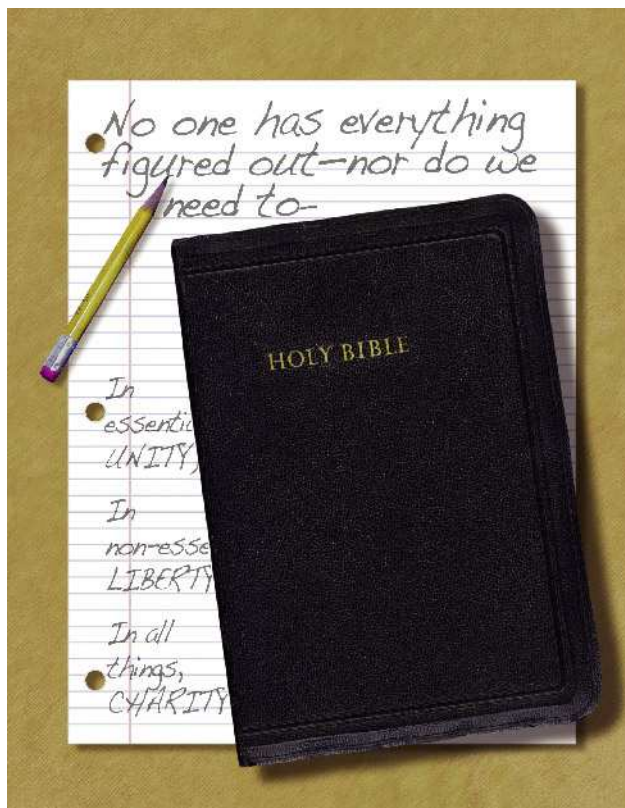
### Love Above All

Admittedly, not all differences—even on non-essentials—can be solved this easily. And so, the third part of the slogan comes into play: “In all things charity” (love).

Let’s suppose we are “right” on a certain doctrinal truth, and a fellow Christian is wrong. We will not help him by making an enemy, putting him down or trying to force him to believe the way we do. We must “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Some may recall the little children’s story that illustrates this principle:

The Sun and the Wind discussed which of them was the strongest. The Wind said he could prove he was the strongest by blowing the coat off a man who walked on the road below. So the Sun slipped behind a cloud and Mr. Wind started blowing until the man thought a tornado had come up! But the harder the Wind blew, the tighter the man held onto his coat. Finally the Wind saw that he could not blow the man’s coat off, so he gave up.



## Differences? Certainly. But, compared to an unbelieving, secular world, all Christians share a whole realm of truth in common.

Then it was the Sun’s turn to try. As Mr. Sun came out from behind the clouds, he smiled kindly on the man. Presently the warm loving rays of the Sun caused the man to pull off his coat. The Sun had proved that the power of love and kindness is stronger than fury and force!

All Christian denominations hold certain basic beliefs in common. They believe in God. Jesus, who was supernaturally conceived, lived a sinless life, and died for our sins. He was buried, but rose from the dead, ascended into Heaven and sent back the Holy Spirit. Through him we can have eternal life. Differences? Certainly. But, compared to an unbelieving, secular world, all Christians share a whole realm of truth in common.

There is no need to make a “god” out of a denomination; but

neither should we make a “god” out of not being a denomination.

There is nothing wrong with a group having a distinctive history, founder, revival or unique beginning—except when these things breed sectarianism or exclusivism. I have gleaned, directly and indirectly, from a number of different ministries, churches and denominations over the years. I will not say, “I have no need of you!” (1 Corinthians 12:21).

No one denomination or group can rightly claim to have all the truth. Some that are strong in one area may be weak in another. Some that are seemingly small and insignificant, may be sharing a neglected truth that others overlook or avoid.

Some that are not too deep, theologically speaking, may have a wonderful way of reaching new converts with the simple gospel message. Others may be so theologically deep they miss the flow of the Holy Spirit. The ideal is to worship God “in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such to worship him” (John 4:23).

The body of Christ is made up of individuals who may be different because of race, age, geography, travel, reading, employment, education, family, friends, heart and mind. Yet, in diversity there can be unity—when the common focus is that of “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...” (Hebrews 12:2). □

*Ralph Woodrow has been in full-time Christian ministry since 1958. He is the author of a number of books and articles. As an interdenominational Evangelist, over the years he has had the opportunity to speak in hundreds of churches in many states and Canada. He and his wife, Arlene, live in Palm Springs, California.*

# GETTING BEYOND

# US VS. THEM

by Brian Zahnd



Editor's Note: The cover of *Radical Forgiveness* proclaims that its author, Brian Zahnd, is “blunt, bold and biblical”—this commendation attributed to no less than Eugene Peterson, most widely known for *The Message—The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Praise for *Radical Forgiveness* continues from Miroslav Volf, professor of theology at Yale: “In a fresh and compelling way Zahnd urges all of us to give up on consumerism and hostility toward those who differ from us and practice generous and forgiving grace.” By way of introducing you, our friend and reader, to Zahnd’s literary treasure chest of grace, *The Plain Truth* highlights some of his perceptions about letting go of the “hostility toward those who differ from us.” With the generous and kind permission of Passio, the excerpt that follows is composed of three separate sections from “Killing Hostility,” chapter seven of *Radical Forgiveness*. Welcome to the Christ-centered message Zahnd shares. We believe you will find it to be exhilarating, invigorating and challenging. —the Editors

**H**ostility. Enmity. Acrimony. Animosity. Aggression. Malice. Malevolence. When these destructive vices are present in an individual, the problem is bad enough; but when they are present within groups, clans, tribes, parties, and nations, the consequences can be truly horrific. The human race has a tragic history of drawing lines in hostility and relating to the whole world as either the accepted us or the alienated them. World history is largely the story of how political borders came into being—and behind every border is a bloody story

told in terms of us versus them. In a world of alienation, the us versus them scenario seems natural to us, as though it is the only way to understand the world. We seem to lack the imagination to envision life any other way.

But must it be this way? Must *us* versus *them* be our controlling paradigm? The New Testament challenges this. Specifically, the gospel of the cross calls us to rethink the *us* versus *them* paradigm—and for very good reason. The *us* versus *them* attitude of groupthink hostility is the source of humanity's most shameful crimes: racism, torture, war and genocide. If the gospel is to offer solutions for mankind's greatest problems, and if the gospel is to have relevance beyond the realm of private piety and afterlife religion, it must be able to address the curse of deep-seated and historic hostility. The apostle Paul's theology of the cross is a gospel that addresses this very

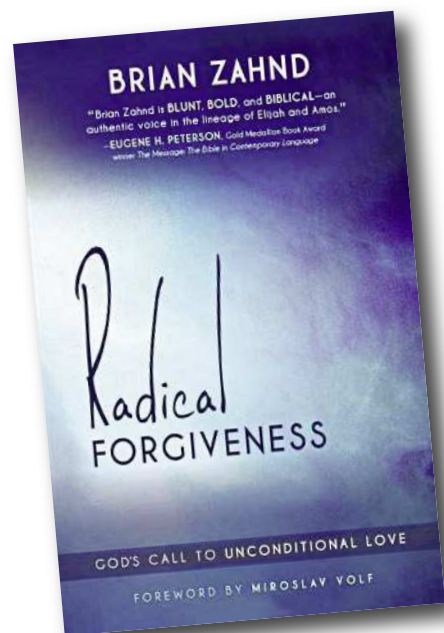
issue. Paul boldly states that the cross kills groupthink hostility. In the increasingly hostile world of the twenty-first century where the church is all too prone to participate in the *us* versus *them* mentality, this is a gospel we vitally need to recover.

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One of the primary problems between Jesus and the Pharisees was the difference in their approaches to the *us* versus *them* attitude. While Jesus constantly challenged this attitude, the Pharisees tended to cherish it. It was religiously inspired hostility that the Pharisees cherished and Jesus challenged. This set Jesus and the Pharisees on an inevitable collision course. The Pharisees understood the kingdom of God as requiring the vigorous defense of the righteous *us* against the sinful *them*.

Their interpretation of who was righteous and who was sinful was nonnegotiable—they were the righteous and those outside of their movement were the sinners. Black and white. Plain and simple. *Us* versus *them*.

In considering their approach to the *us* versus *them* divide, it is important to remember who the Pharisees were. The Pharisees were a conservative religious-political party who saw it as their mission to *take back Israel for God*. They attempted to do this by identifying, denouncing and distancing themselves from those whom they perceived to be the sinners within society—the nonobservant (what we would call *secular* today) and the immoral. They speci-

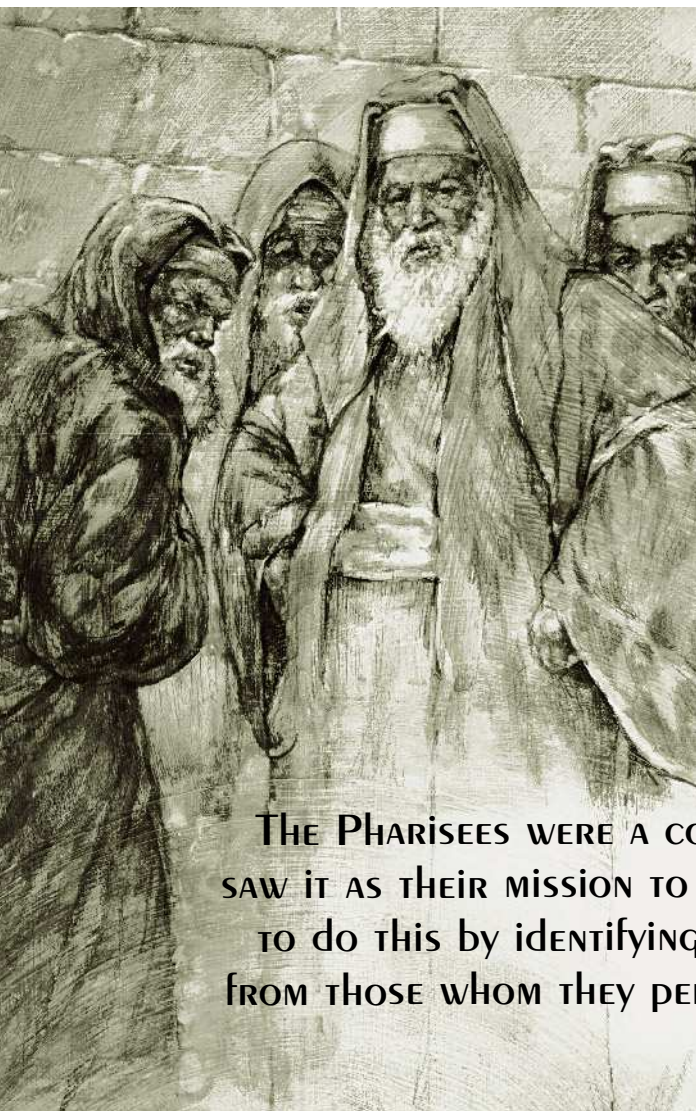


cally regarded tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, drunkards, Sabbath breakers and other nonobservant Jews as the sinners who prevented the kingdom of God from coming in its fullness. The Pharisees were convinced that if they could convert a majority of the population to their movement, then God would send Messiah and restore Israel. Thus, the Pharisees saw those outside of their movement, those whom they identified as sinners, to be the reason why the full reign of God had not yet come to Israel. If they could ever produce a "moral majority" for the Pharisee party, at last the kingdom would come. Or so they thought.

Jesus' approach was the opposite. Jesus' practice was to welcome the very people alienated by the Pharisees. Jesus invited sinners to his table and offered them respect and forgiveness. Jesus called this practice *the kingdom of God*. Thus the battle lines were drawn between Jesus and the Pharisees. The fundamental disagreement was this—is the kingdom of God advanced through the *erection* or the *removal* of barriers? For the Pharisees, the kingdom of God would come

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ILLUSTRATION BY JODY EASTMAN



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when sinners were sufficiently marginalized within society. For Jesus, welcoming sinners to his table *was* the kingdom of God. For Jesus, the eradication of the *us* versus *them* attitude and the hostility it creates is a central ethic of the kingdom of God. Should the hostility between *us* versus *them* be enshrined or eradicated? The answer depends on whose approach to the kingdom of God you embrace—the approach of Jesus or the approach of the Pharisees.

It's no exaggeration to say that the Pharisees showed their faithfulness to God by hating the right people. No doubt they could produce scriptures to support their position of religiously endorsed hatred. For example, David says in the Psalms, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred" (Psalm 139:21-22).

The incredibly radical thing Jesus did was to dare to challenge conventional (and even scriptural!) concepts based on his own authority. So despite a scriptural endorsement for hating enemies, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:43-48). For the first-century Jew, the effect was the same as if a preacher stood up today and said, "The Bible says...but I say unto you...." Upon his own authority Jesus dared to countermand any scriptural endorsement for hating enemies. Instead of endorsing Moses or David, Jesus called for his



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**BECAUSE JESUS WOULD NOT STONE AN ADULTERER DID NOT MEAN JESUS WAS PRO-ADULTERY.**

disciples to love their enemies, and Jesus insisted that this alone is a mature imitation of our heavenly Father (see Matthew 5:43-48).

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I fear that far too many followers of Christ have been sucked into the angry political polarization that characterizes our culture—a culture that has come to venerate

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ART FORM.**

the enraged rant as an art form. And when we do this, the name *Christian* is diminished to an adjective for modifying certain political positions rather than a noun for a person who is deliberately attempting to imitate Jesus Christ. This absolutely must change. We can hold all the convictions we want, as long as we can hold them in love. But we must take our culture war hostility to the cross and kill it!

For one thing, I'm not sure it is helpful to automatically identify secularists, homosexuals, and Muslims as enemies. But even if we do, the fact remains that Jesus calls us to love and bless our enemies, and not mock and revile them. Let's get this clear—loving the homosexual is no more an endorsement of homosexuality than Jesus' refusal to stone the adulterous woman was an endorsement of adultery. Because Jesus would not stone an adulterer did not mean Jesus was pro-adultery. Because

Paul addressed the pagans of Athens respectfully did not mean Paul was pro-paganism. As we learn to sincerely love and respect secularists, homosexuals and Muslims it does not mean that we advocate secularism, support gay marriage or endorse Islam. It simply means we are attempting to be authentic followers of Christ by granting everyone respect and dignity.

We must not be intimidated by the advocates of hostility who set up a false dichotomy and insinuate that a refusal to express

**BECAUSE JESUS did NOT PRACTICE THE HOSTILITY OF THE PHARISEES TOWARD SINNERS, HE WAS ACCUSED OF BEING A GLUTTON AND DRUNKARD (SEE MATTHEW 11:19).**

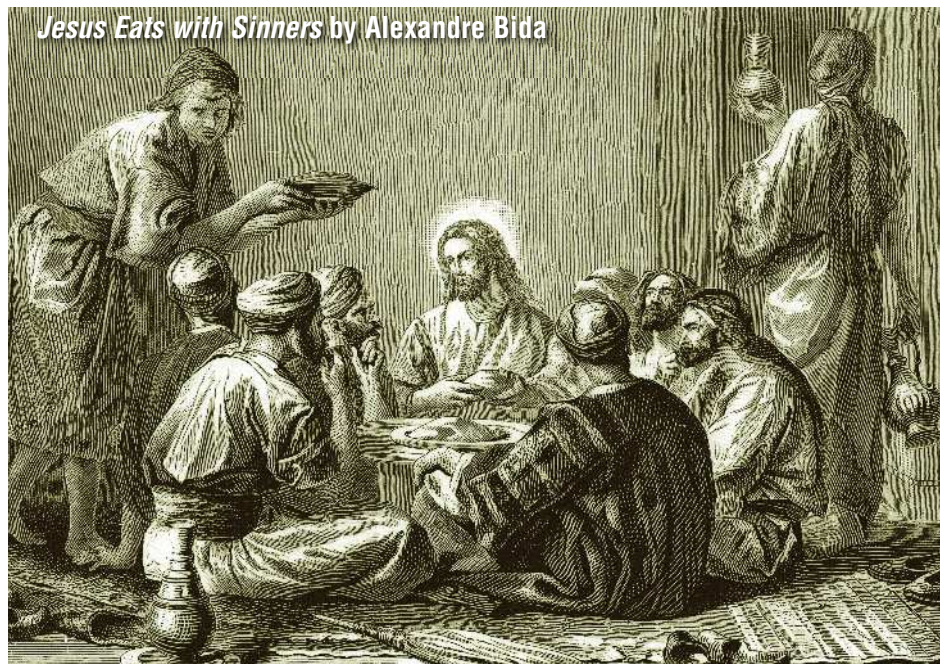
animosity toward non-Christian groups is a *de facto* collusion with their position. Because Jesus did not practice the hostility of the Pharisees toward sinners, he was accused of being a glutton and drunkard (see Matthew 11:19). Of course, Jesus was neither. Jesus simply refused the false notion that holiness can be demonstrated by hostility. A mistaken understanding of holiness has a long history of getting mixed up with hostility.

*And in the distance the Jesus-lovers sat with hard condemning faces and watched the sin.*

Thus John Steinbeck depicts the world-denying Pentecostals in *The Grapes of Wrath* as self-righteous, self-appointed morality police who take perverse pleasure in condemning the Saturday night square dance in the California migrant

camp. Steinbeck's terse portrayal of the "Jesus-lovers" is unflattering but not an unfair invention of fiction. Unfortunately, such people do exist, and in their existence they horribly distort the good news of Jesus Christ. The worst way to define ourselves as Christ-

icals believe, and odds are he or she will *not* speak in terms of a personal salvation experience (the classical marker of evangelicalism), but will give you a summary of political positions and a list of cultural issues evangelicals are opposed to. That these issues may indeed be



**OF COURSE, JESUS WAS NEITHER. JESUS SIMPLY REFUSED THE FALSE NOTION THAT HOLINESS CAN BE DEMONSTRATED BY HOSTILITY.**

ian is in the negative—what we are *against*. Steinbeck's migrant camp Jesus-lovers were against dancing (and most other expressions of humanness).

Of course, it is a caricature, but only in that it is perhaps an exaggeration. Sadly though, there remains the misguided tendency to identify ourselves by what we condemn. And thus the *us* versus *them* paradigm of religious hostility lives on.

I fear that through the cultivation of an *us* versus *them* attitude, we as evangelical Christians are communicating a subtle (or at times not so subtle) hostility toward the wider culture. The wider culture of "blue state America" is well aware that we hold them in contempt. Ask a non-evangelical to define what evangel-

real evils and not the innocent dance of Steinbeck's novel is beside the point. The question remains: Do we really want to be primarily identified by what we are against? Do we want to be known for our angry voices and furrowed brows? Don't we have some good news to identify us? And at the heart of that good news don't we find the embracing message of acceptance and forgiveness? □

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# SILENCED!

by Sheila Graham

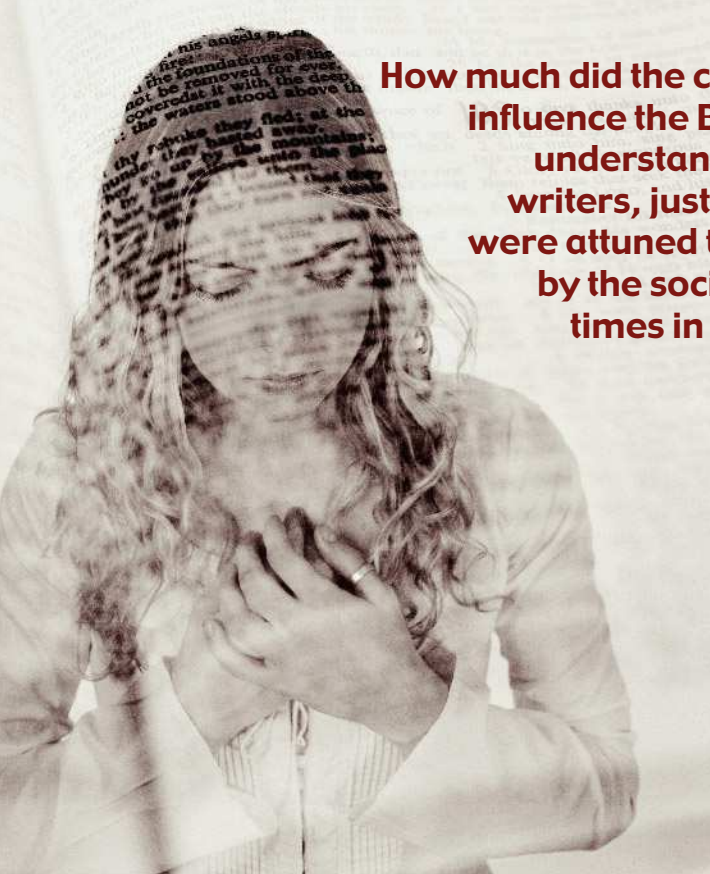


## RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

**Y**ou're a woman who's sick and tired of being discriminated against, not only in the workforce but at church as well? Yes, you say? Well, who's to blame for that abuse?

Several months ago now I was asked to be one of the speakers at a conference on domestic violence. I had just published a book on how women were discriminated against in an authoritative, legalistic, religious organization.

About the same time, in my research on discrimination against women, I came across an article by an atheist who blamed all three Abrahamic religions



## How much did the culture of the time influence the Bible? We need to understand that the biblical writers, just as we are today, were attuned to and influenced by the social realities of the times in which they lived.

### But what about today? ...If Paul lived today, would he command women to wear head coverings and keep silent in church? No, I think not.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for the centuries of discrimination against women. He quoted the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament and the Quran to prove his point.

#### The Hebrew Scriptures

The 19th-century women's rights activist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), said of the Bible, especially the first five books of the Old Testament: "I know of no other books that so fully teach the subjection and degradation of women." (*Eighty Years and More*, 1898, p. 395).

Are they right?

As the events in the Hebrew Scriptures are acknowledged in some form in all three religions, let's take a look.

Genesis, chapters 1 to 3, describes Eve as being made from Adam's rib to be his helper. Eve took the first bite of the forbidden fruit and encouraged Adam to do

the same. God then put Eve under the rule of her husband.

God is referred to as father, not mother. Women could not divorce their husbands, but men could divorce their wives. If a woman was raped or committed adultery, it was a crime against men's rights of ownership. Women were considered unclean because they menstruated.

#### The New Testament

It doesn't look good for the Hebrew Scriptures. Let's look at the New Testament.

Jesus was male. He also referred to God as father. He chose no females to be among his twelve disciples.

Paul and Peter cautioned wives to be subject to and in full submission to their husbands. Women were to wear head coverings and to keep silent. (See Ephesians 5:22-23; I Timothy 2:9-12; I Corinthians 11:3-15; 14:34; 1 Peter 3:1-6.)

What about the Jewish rabbis and the Christian church fathers who came after Christ?

One of the more well-known quotes from the rabbinical tradition advised Jewish men to repeat daily: "Thank you God for not making me a gentile, a woman or a slave" (Menahoth 43b-44a).

Even the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1138-1204) was a man of his time when it came to the status of women. His instructions to a good wife included submission to her husband as to a prince, acting with total fear and honor. She should anticipate his desires and

follow his commands. (Mishneh Torah Ishut 15:20).

From the church fathers:

Third-century Christian theologian Tertullian (155-245) described women as "the devil's gateway." Though he left the church and formed his own sect, his writings were a great influence on the church fathers who followed him. "As the initiator of ecclesiastical Latin, he was instrumental in shaping the vocabulary and thought of Western Christianity for the next 1,000 years" (Robert L. Wilken, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Martin Luther (1483-1546): "Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house and bear children."

#### Muslim Teaching

We've heard from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jewish rabbis, the New Testament writers and the Christian church fathers, what about Islam and the Quran?

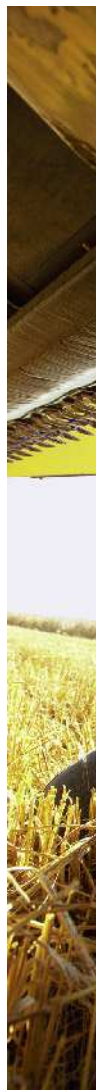
"Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and forsake them in beds apart, and beat them" (Quran 4:34, "Women," N.J. Davood translation, p. 83).

"A male shall inherit twice as much as a female" (Quran 4:11, "Women," Dawood, p. 77).

It can't be denied, in so many cases, religious teachings can be factors in discrimination against women and have been and are used as justification for violence against women.

Of course, what I have just done is at the core of the problem. I have pulled out a few of the most negative statements about women from the religious writings of the three religions. It's called proof texting, quoting a list of scriptures or writings to prove your point while ignoring those that don't.

But for now, let's deal with the





**As my Oklahoma sister would say, you want to be a liberated woman, marry a farmer. Hers was the voice of experience.**

obey his wishes. It is fitting that a woman of a well-ordered life should consider that her husband's wishes are as laws appointed for her by divine will, along with the marriage state and the fortune she shares. If she endures them with patience and gentleness, she will

rule her home with ease; otherwise, not so easily" (Aristotle: "On a Good Wife," *Oikonomikos*, c. 330 B.C.).

Though women weren't treated as strictly in Roman times, Cicero writes: "Our ancestors, in their wisdom, considered that all women, because of their innate weakness, should be under the control of guardians." The guardians, of course, were male. First her father, then

her husband, or if widowed, a male relative named in the husband's will.

negatives and ask, are Abrahamic religions to blame for all discrimination against women over the centuries or was discrimination already extant in the world? How much did the norms of the surrounding cultures influence the religious world? First, let's look at how women were treated in ancient Greece, one of the strictest cultures when it came to how women were treated.

### **Greek and Roman Culture**

Quoting Aristotle: "But in all other matters, let it be her aim to obey her husband; giving no heed to public affairs, nor having any part in arranging the marriages of her children. Rather, when the time shall come to give or receive in marriage sons or daughters, let her then hearken to her husband in all respects, and agreeing with him

### **The Impact of Culture**

What does this tell us about the origins of discrimination against women, not only religiously but culturally? How much did the culture of the time influence the Bible? We need to understand that the biblical writers, just as we are today, were attuned to and influenced by the social realities of the times in which they lived.

This explains why Paul wrote what he did in I Timothy and I

Corinthians. Jesus had released women to be full members of the congregation, but at that time and throughout the ages before and since, the cultural norms of the times weren't ignored.

However, when comparing the scriptural references to women and how women were treated culturally, not possible in this limited space, you find a greater compassion toward women in the Scriptures than how women were treated in the general culture of the times. Religious views on women were actually more moderate than many of those of the surrounding civilizations.

And, of course, many of the examples we have from the Bible and from pagan antiquity deal with wealthy women with servants. These women may have had more or less restrictions than the majority of women in their cultures. Certainly peasant women were working the soil right alongside their husbands, and merchant women were tending to the goods in the market place.

As my Oklahoma sister would say, you want to be a liberated woman, marry a farmer. Hers was the voice of experience. The lives of women in the general public were then and are now quite different from the lives of women of means.

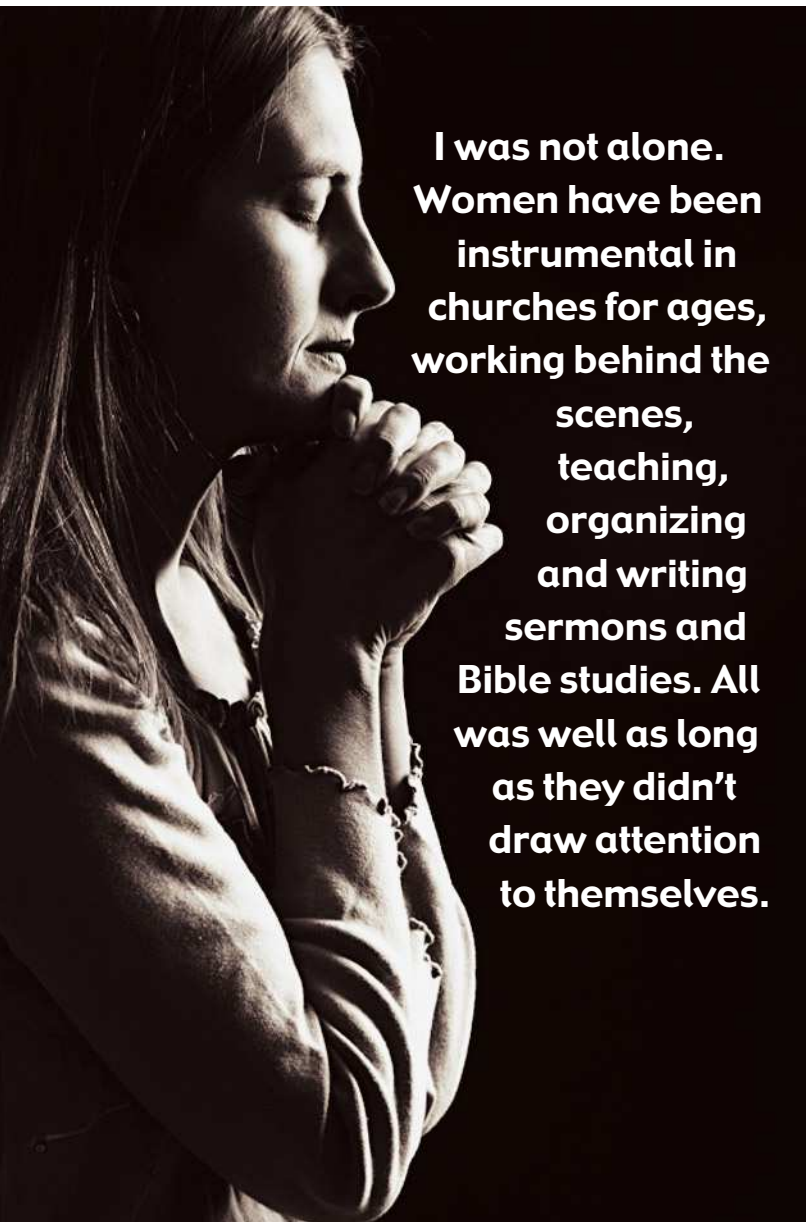
But what about today? Not even the apostle Paul could envision the

**...you find a greater compassion toward women in the Scriptures than how women were treated in the general culture of the times.**

freedoms women experience in today's society. If Paul lived today, would he command women to wear head coverings and keep silent in church? No, I think not. A close study of his writings show he didn't command it in every circumstance for every woman even then.

### **My Own Story**

When I entered the working world, my first job interview included personal questions illegal to ask of



**I was not alone. Women have been instrumental in churches for ages, working behind the scenes, teaching, organizing and writing sermons and Bible studies. All was well as long as they didn't draw attention to themselves.**

a woman today: "Planning to get pregnant any time soon?"

Later on when I wrote for religious magazines, I was not allowed to use scriptural references in my articles. Even then I was questioned about a woman writing on religious subjects for both men and women. It would be rare for that to happen in today's culture.

Does that mean women have "made it"? No more discrimination? We know that women are still discriminated against, especially in the religious world. And, while there's still discrimination in the workplace, the culture has forged ahead of the religious world in its treatment of women. That's unfortunate, but true. While Christ was ahead of his time, many churches today are lagging behind.

Some years ago, I attended a women's Christian leadership conference in Dallas organized by a major evangelistic denomination. While there I happened to meet a woman professor who taught Jewish studies at a large university. She had been asked to be a presen-

ter at the conference, but when it was learned she was a divorcee, her session was canceled.

This woman had left an abusive husband. These women conference organizers were discriminating against another Christian woman because she had had to free herself from an abusive husband. To be fair, they were probably following the guidelines of their religious denomination, but nevertheless, I was appalled these women leaders would discriminate against this gifted woman.

Even in the organizations that ordain women, how many women are in the top administrative positions or even on the denominational board? As they say, old traditions die hard.

I grew up in a Christian tradition, which, for the most part, didn't question that the leadership roles in the church were filled only by men. It was just assumed that, whether actually true, men were in charge at home and in the churches.

My childhood was a happy one, with loving parents and an egalitarian father who was proud of his daughters and taught us skills he would have taught a son. So I grew up fearless, believing I could do about anything I chose to do in life. Marriage was an option, but not high on my list.

As it turned out, I learned not all was open to me as a woman. I ended up married with children. The children were the only good that came out of that union. After my disastrous marriage ended, I eventually worked for a religious denomination.

Happily, I was allowed to write, edit, manage, but not for the same pay as my male colleagues and not with a title that befitted my job description and duties. As long as I stayed under the radar of denominational administration—ghost writing for men, not using scriptures when I wrote—I could work the long hours I did, without appropriate compensation, and continue to keep my job.

I was not alone. Women have been instrumental in churches for ages, working behind the scenes, teaching, organizing and writing sermons and Bible studies. All was well as long as they didn't draw attention to themselves.

Women have been missionaries for decades, preaching, planting churches, counseling—every task a man would do, as long as they didn't do it in the United States.

Once I wrote an article encouraging mothers to stay home with their children, not to work outside the home unless absolutely necessary. I got a flurry of hate mail from feminists who had been fighting for years for women's rights in the workplace. They would have expected a man to write such an article, but a woman?

I admit I was somewhat naïve in writing what I did, and it didn't take me long to realize maybe the feminists had a point. Why was I encouraging women to stay at home while ignoring men, in the church and out, who had been sacrificing their families for their careers for decades?

Was the culture getting ahead of the church? It did-



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n't seem right that Jesus was ahead of his time in his treatment of women, and now, outspoken women were ahead of the religious world in their fight for women's right to be treated fairly in the workplace.

### **Rhyme/Reason Behind Stipulations?**

I began to wonder why religious organizations pick and choose some of the cultural stipulations of the first century for their treatment of women. For example, have you seen any men lately, at least in North America, greeting each other with a holy kiss?

Some women have to wear head coverings in church, others don't. Some can teach both girls and boys up to a certain age, others can't even hand out church bulletins at the door. And then, in some organizations, women can do just about anything men can, as long as they don't stand behind a lectern on Sunday morning in the role of a pastor.

I say cultural stipulations because these church officials aren't following how Jesus treated women, allowing them to follow him and to be taught by him. They aren't following what the New Testament Christians did, permitting women to prophesy (preach and teach) and be leaders along with the men in the congregations. The earliest Christians were still open to Christ's example.

Religious types, including his disciples, were shocked when Jesus talked to women—Samaritan women, women of ill repute, "unclean" women. Culturally, Jewish religious leaders avoided contact with women.

Jesus made women the first witnesses of his messi-

ahship and of his resurrection. Jesus valued women and empowered them to serve. Yes, Jesus chose only men for the Twelve, but he also chose only Jews.

Many of the apostle Paul's writings to the churches include his accolades to Christian women. Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Syntyche and Eurodia are his colleagues. And let's not forget, all Christians are called to be priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Nothing is said here about limiting that calling to Christian men alone.

So who's to blame for the discrimination women have suffered and are still suffering? The purpose of this article is not to go in depth into the various vagaries of religious thought on women, positive or negative. But, unhappily, religious teachings have been a factor.

My hope is that discrimination against women in the religious world would be recognized and not be considered the status quo. Why should half of God's called-out servants be denied the use of their God-given spiritual gifts?

As women and men of faith, let's not hide from the truth. Though we've come a long way, we can't deny that religion is still being used to discriminate against women. Let's examine our heritage and traditions without bias, and, if possible, remain loyal to our calling and seek change within whatever religious system we happen to be a part of.

I added "if possible" because in some religious organizations, it is impossible. Beware of authoritative churches with leadership that restricts its female con-

**Jesus made women the first witnesses of his messiahship and of his resurrection. Jesus valued women and empowered them to serve.**

gregants to what is referred to as "women's role." Your God-given spiritual gifts will be limited and efforts to use any gifts or talents not approved by the organization will certainly not be appreciated.

Women, and men, don't allow yourselves to be entrapped by religion, be followers of Jesus. □

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## Love Your "Haters"

**H**atred is nothing new. From the time Cain cast an evil eye on his soon-to-be-dead brother, human society has suffered—indeed, was founded on<sup>1</sup>—the primordial infections of jealousy, hatred and violence. After many millennia, the development of our species has augmented, rather than eliminated, the specter of hatred. And since the first murderous wooden club, our genius for technological advancement has invested voraciously in the industry of death-dealing...with outstanding returns! All one needs is a market. That market is hatred; the clientele are enemies.

In our era, the growing edge of enemy-hate is the capacity to attack others ever more remotely. With a

laptop and good Wi-Fi connection, a qualified techie becomes the war hero of a drone attack. But never mind the military specialists: more broadly, any spiteful accuser can now enjoy anonymity through the Internet, a fertile breeding ground in which to spew malice and slander across the cyber-world. This phenomenon has produced a popular new label: "haters."

Haters, in the popular sense, may be defined as those who stalk and berate public figures online, hop-

***Sadly, the most vicious haters are those who incite violence and terror under the banner of Christ-less religion.***

ing to draw a reaction and so attain a moment of pseudo-infamy. Unfortunately, the Internet empowers thoughtless agitators to say anything about anyone, however harmful, with impunity. Even outright lies about godly people of integrity become part of the permanent public record thanks to our web-browsers.



***Religion had said, “If you’re good, God will reward you. If you’re bad, God will punish you. If you experience blessing, it’s because you earn it. If you face calamity, it’s because you deserve it...”***

Haters count on the old adage, “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” but as the epistle of James reveals, the fire of the tongue is actually ignited in ‘hell’ and bursts from the tongue of the accuser.<sup>2</sup> These verbal infernos are that much more devastating when amplified globally over the Internet!

Sadly, the most vicious haters are those who incite violence and terror under the banner of Christ-less religion. I need not sicken you with heinous examples; your inbox is likely flooded with email “Forwards” of fear-filled, alarmist vitriol—often, ironically, in the name of Jesus. And here’s the hard truth: that won’t change. Sad to say, haters, by nature, don’t back off. Due to their obsessive jealousy and insatiable ego needs, resistance only energizes them.

Certainly our heroes of the faith had haters. Serious haters! Worse than cyber-bullying or lawsuits, they experienced ferocious beatings, imprisonment, tor-

ture and martyrdom throughout the ages—often at the hands of religious authorities. Of course, the great Hero of our faith, Jesus Christ, faced the wrath of his haters—including the Temple establishment—who used the state to mock, scourge and crucify him.

Nor has this changed. Religious hate-crimes abound, whether it’s Christians lynching a gay teen or the rising wave of persecution of Christians in nations like Egypt and Syria. And there’s no end in sight.

If haters are truly incorrigible—if faithfulness in Christ actually stimulates enemies to hate—how shall the faithful live?

### **Love Your Haters!**

Of course, we know very well Christ’s straightforward response. I feel the urge to respond to haters in kind, infected with my own bitterness, malice and vengeance—all very justifiable in my mind. But Jesus intrudes: “Love your haters!” Remember his words in the Sermon on the Mount?

“You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, *love your enemies, bless* those who curse you, *do good* to those who hate you, and *pray* for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for

He makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:43-45, emphasis added).

It’s Jesus’ version of the modern bestseller, *Eat, Pray, Love*. In Jesus’ rendition for haters, it’s *Love,*

***But Christ says, “No, that’s not actually how it works. Your Father is gracious, generous and good to all... It’s about a Father whose grace-DNA is being replicated in us, energizing us to walk step-in-step with his love, including love of enemies.”***



1. When Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” he actually means for us to obey him. He is not merely making the point that we can’t do it. Jesus’ injunctions to love are sincere “commandments.”

2. Obeying Jesus is not legalism

**After many millennia... our genius for technological advancement has invested voraciously in the industry of death-dealing... All one needs is a market. That market is hatred; the clientele are enemies.**

*Bless, Do Good, Pray.* And why? Because, he says, this grace, this generosity, this indiscriminate goodness is the very reflection of our Father in heaven.

Religion had said, “If you’re good, God will reward you. If you’re bad, God will punish you. If you experience blessing, it’s because you earn it. If you face calamity, it’s because you deserve it”—exactly what my religious flesh would like to dole out on those I deem evil, hateful and offensive.

But Christ says, “No, that’s not actually how it works. Your Father is gracious, generous and good to *all*, whether they’ve been ‘naughty or nice.’ It’s not about earning or deserving. It’s about a Father whose grace-DNA is being replicated in us, energizing us to walk step-in-step with his love, including love of enemies.”

The apostle Paul was once a notorious Christ-hater, a sanctioned assassin with a religious “license to kill.” But after his momentous con-

frontation with a blinding Light, his conversion was in great measure a turn from religious hatred. He didn’t merely change sides to become a Christian Jew-killing machine...his heart changed; the hater became a lover. He echoes the Jesus Way when he says,

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Repay no one evil for evil. Therefore, ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink, for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:14, 17, 20).

We know this. But far too often, we just don’t like it. We cling to our notions of what is unforgivable, hold on to our resentments until they drive us mad and eventually kill us. Lord have mercy!

### **The Fruit and Test of Enemy-Love**

In my own faith journey, I have come to hold these truths in tension:



or Christ-less religion. Obeying Jesus is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *the Cost of Discipleship*. Jesus called us to “follow” and defined this as *hearing* his words and *doing* them.

3. Nevertheless, *trying* to obey Jesus’ commands through *willful self-effort* to gain meritorious bit-coins is pointless and impossible, a regression from the grace of Christ. Actually, “enemy-love” is the quintessential test of whether I’m living under the law (the flesh) or living in grace (the Spirit). How so? Because I simply *can’t* do it in the flesh. Unlike a thousand other virtues, this one can’t be faked—not for any length of time. Indeed, I won’t even want to.

4. Obeying Jesus involves my *willing participation in the empowering grace* I have been given. I have all the grace I need to do it...but willingness? Hmm. Enemy-love is not attained through self-effort, but it is a real struggle. Why? Because it involves death of the old



self (my own inner hater). Painfully, this death “on the installment plan” happens through one opportunity for grace after another. To be honest, “opportunity for grace” is a code-phrase for “people I despise.”

So here’s my dilemma. I’m not there yet. But I really want to learn to love my enemies as Jesus does, for several reasons: First, I do have enemies in real life—people who believe God has called them to ruin me and who’ve told me so. If I don’t learn to love them, what will this do to my heart? Bitterness and resentment will eat me up. As the saying goes, *resentment is like drinking poison hoping it will kill the other guy.*

Second, I want to love my enemies because Jesus has it on the front burner of discipleship, especially right now. Personally, I think enemy-love is “in my face” these days precisely because Jesus

How can I know whether I am walking in grace or living a delusion? Grace alone generates the power to love my enemies.

If I am an arrogant ass who despises his enemies and reacts harshly to them, no amount of religious striving can change that. Only God’s love is able. And that’s what makes enemy-love such a good test of whether or not we are in the truth, whether we are living in and by God’s grace.

So how do I get there? *Not* by running on the same treadmill that already failed me for fifty years. Instead, I look for mentors who are further on in the struggle, and I ask them.

### **The Sage Speaks**

I made a pilgrimage to Alkmaar, Netherlands to visit veteran peace advocates, Jim and Nancy Forest.<sup>3</sup> Over lunch, I asked him outright, “How do I love my enemies?”

**Jim Forest:** Love of enemies

***In our era, the growing edge of enemy-hate is the capacity to attack others ever more remotely.***

***With a laptop and good Wi-Fi connection, a qualified techie becomes the war hero of a drone attack.***

wants to give me (and you) that special gift of grace! If that offer is on the table, yes please!

Third, I want to love my enemies because it’s a sign and fruit of the *grace* of the Holy Spirit. St Silouan, an Orthodox monk from Mount Athos, Greece, put it like this: “The Lord has commanded us to love our enemies, and the Holy Spirit reveals this love to us. One can only love one’s enemies through the grace of the Holy Spirit. When you will love your enemies, know that a great divine grace will be living in you.”

starts with prayer. It starts with a prayer of *confession*: confession of my hate, of my fear, of my dread. Confession that I would not be sad if they die. That I find it difficult to care about them.

And it comes with an *openness to serve* God. Is it our heart to serve God? What if serving God includes extending the kindness of God to them? Doesn’t serving

God also include asking what you can do, how you can be part of their salvation journey?

**Brad Jersak:** When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, what do we mean by “love”? And who is included in “enemies”?

**JF:** “Love” of this kind is not merely a sentimental feeling of warmth and affection. It includes a way to pray and a way to live in relation to our enemies, the Way Christ taught and lived.

“Enemy” is a term that came from the Latin word, *enimicus*. Literally, a “non-friend.” That is, someone I wouldn’t want as a friend; someone whose wellbeing is of disinterest to me. Or somebody where there’s ill will between us.

**BJ:** Where did love of enemies start for you?

**JF:** In the Cold War era, I thought, how can we love our enemies if we don’t even know them? So I began to make trips to Moscow to connect with the Russian Orthodox Church there. This

***But never mind the military specialists: more broadly, any spiteful accuser can now enjoy anonymity through the Internet, a fertile breeding ground in which to spew malice and slander across the cyber-world.***





**Jim and Nancy Forest with author Brad Jersak**

was very difficult because we had to cut through a lot of red tape with the KGB, but eventually we connected. Even Gorbachev came to some of these meetings.

**BJ:** And I guess you've experienced some ill will throughout your life as a peace activist.

***Especially troublesome for me, since the time I was bullied as a child, are a pattern of vengeance fantasies. When someone is mean to me, thoughts of revenge plague me.***

**JF:** Definitely, even including others in the peace movement who disagreed with some of my positions. They did great harm by accusing me of being in the CIA! And of course, what could be more impossible to deny?

**BJ:** So when you pray for your enemies, what do you pray?

**JF:** Nancy and I keep a name-list of our enemies, and we present it to God every night. We offer their names to God without instructing him what to do or trying to manipulate the outcome.

**BJ:** And how does living with ongoing enemies work?

**JF:** We consider how best to contribute to their salvation journey or at the least, we don't want to become an obstacle to it.

**BJ:** Some folks think love of enemies and peace-making is no more than a modern revulsion against violence—a trendy thing Madonna and Lady Gaga are into for the sake of liberal tolerance. But what I'm trying to grasp is the deeper well of Christ's teachings. Surely enemy-love is at the heart of the Gospel.

**JF:** Of course, and so we must immerse ourselves in the Gospels, where Jesus teaches us to love our enemies. But if you can't un-

derstand what Jesus *says*, then watch what he *does*:

Remember, his last healing miracle was to heal the wound of a policeman, a servant of the High Priest, who had come to harm him.

Remember also the total body count of all those whom Jesus killed throughout his entire life and ministry. Zero.

**BJ:** But we resist this because we feel victimized and therefore justified in our hatred. And to be fair, we also don't want to collaborate or enable evil. "Evil prospers when good men do nothing."

**JF:** Right. And so St. Paul says, "Do good to them. Overcome evil with good." James says it's like putting burning coals on their heads. Why? Just to torment them? No, remember Isaiah 6? The burning coal purified Isaiah's lips. So too, loving our enemies applies

***...remember what Mark Twain said: "Anger is an acid which destroys the container that holds it." Understand what it does to you.***

the burning coals that can purify their souls.

**BJ:** When I think of hatred (and especially hating my haters), it's such a contagious virus. I become a hater. Especially troublesome for me, since the time I was bullied as

## **PRAYER FOR THE ENEMIES** **by St. Nikolai Velimirovic**

**(St. Nikolai Velimirovic, was a Twentieth Century Serbian Orthodox bishop who opposed Nazism and was eventually taken to Dachau).**

**B**less my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

Enemies have driven me into Your embrace more than friends have.

Friends have bound me to earth, enemies have loosed me from earth and have demolished all my aspirations in the world.

Enemies have made me a stranger in worldly realms and an extraneous inhabitant of the world.

Just as a hunted animal found its safe shelter, so have I, persecuted by enemies, found the safest sanctuary, having ensconced myself beneath Your tabernacle, where neither friends nor enemies can slay my soul.

Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

They, rather than I, have confessed my sins before the world.

They have punished me, whenever I have hesitated to punish myself.

They have tormented me, whenever I have tried to flee torments.

They have scolded me, whenever I have flattered myself. They have spat upon me, whenever I have filled myself with arrogance.

Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

Whenever I have made myself wise, they have called me foolish.

Whenever I have made myself mighty, they have mocked me as though I were a dwarf. Whenever I have wanted to lead people, they have shoved me into the background.

Whenever I have rushed to enrich myself, they have prevented me with an iron hand.

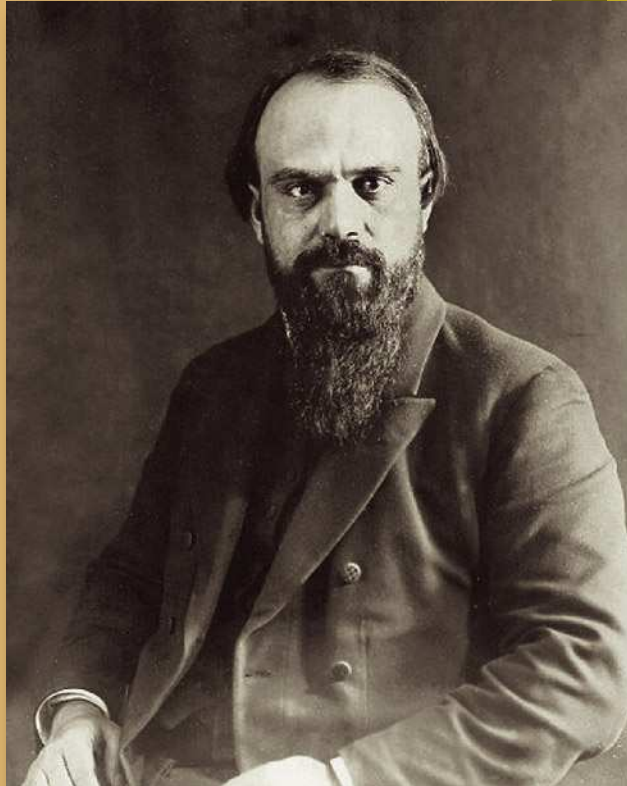
Whenever I thought that I would sleep peacefully, they have wakened me from sleep. Whenever I have tried to build a home for a long and tranquil life, they have demolished it and driven me out.

Truly, the enemies have cut me loose from the world and have stretched out my hands to the hem of Your garment.

Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

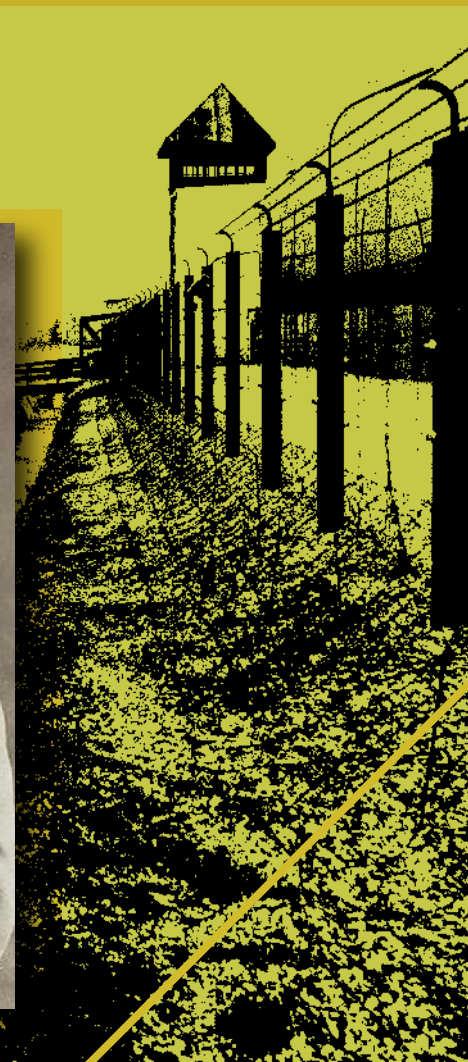
Bless them and multiply them; multiply them and make them even more bitterly against me: so that my fleeing to You may have no return; so that all hope in men may be scattered like cobwebs; so that absolute serenity may begin to reign in my soul; so that my heart may become the grave of my two evil twins: arrogance and anger; so that I might amass all my treasure in heaven;

Ah, so that I may for once be freed from self-deception, which has entangled me in the dreadful web of illusory life. My enemies have taught me to know what



hardly anyone knows, that a person has no enemies in the world except himself. One hates his enemies only when he fails to realize that they are not enemies, but cruel friends. It is truly difficult for me to say who has done me more good and who has done me more evil in the world: friends or enemies. Therefore bless, O Lord, both my friends and my enemies. A slave curses his enemies, for he does not understand. But a son blesses them, for a son knows that his enemies cannot touch his life. Therefore he freely steps among them and prays to God for them.

Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.



Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

A slave curses his enemies, for he does not understand. But a son blesses them... for a son knows that his enemies cannot touch his life. Therefore he freely steps among them and prays to God for them.



PHOTOS AT RIGHT BY MARY WEGNER—PTM

**When I think of the martyrs, I feel like I'm whining... Whine away, but remember what others have endured and how they forgave...**

a child, are a pattern of vengeance fantasies. When someone is mean to me, thoughts of revenge plague me. It's not that I think I'm especially violent, but in my powerlessness, they pop up. What can we do about vengeance fantasies?

JF: I've experienced this too. When I was overwhelmed by such fantasies, I was so frightened of myself. I mean, what if I acted on them? So I went to a priest and confessed how I was feeling. He

**They didn't need to hate their enemies because they knew their enemies were ultimately powerless over them because of the resurrection. As one of them said, "I will rise and there is nothing you can do about it but speed me on my way."**

completely surprised me by giving them a blessing.

BJ: He gave your vengeance fantasies a blessing?!

JF: Yes! He said to me, "Don't be ashamed. They are one way you experience who you are at this moment." And he made me laugh out loud at my fantasies. How ironic that a peacemaker would have them!

BJ: What about my own haters? How do I love them? Can you give me some practical pointers?

JF: First, remember what Mark Twain said: "Anger is an acid

which destroys the container that holds it." Understand what it does to you.

Second, when doors are locked because of your enemies, look for other doors. God will open doors to the people and places that will welcome you.

And third, look at their provi-

dential role in your faith journey, how your enemies are saving you from pride and arrogance. They will confront issues in your character that your friends would be unable and even unwilling to crucify.

BJ: Well, they have pushed me to clarify and purify my understanding and presentation of the Gospel.

JF: Good! And remember to read the lives of the saints—specifically the martyrs.

BJ: When I think of the martyrs, I feel like I'm whining.



**The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence by Titian, c. 1558**

**I think of St Lawrence, the first deacon of Rome, who was fried to death on a grill. He said, "You can turn me over. I'm done on this side."**

JF: Whine away, but remember what others have endured and how they forgave. Then your trials will not seem as big a deal in the big scheme of things. Remember,

they are only monumental in the universe of Self.

Read them, and see their boldness and lack of fear. I think of St Lawrence, the first deacon of Rome, who was fried to death on a grill. He said, "You can turn me over. I'm done on this side."

They didn't need to hate their enemies because they knew their enemies were ultimately powerless over them because of the resurrection. As one of them said, "I will rise and there is nothing you can do about it but speed me on my way."

With this we parted, but Jim left me with a prayer composed by St. Nikolai Velimirovic. I pass it on to you in the sidebar. In the meantime, I have some enemies to go pray for. Peace out. □

1. See for example the works of sociologist René Girard (e.g. Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World) who traces 'mimetic violence' back to the story of Cain.

2. James 3:6.

3. Jim Forest leads the Orthodox Peace Fellowship and has authored books such as For the Peace From Above. He co-labored for peace with Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and "Milwaukee 14." He is currently writing a book on enemy-love.

Plain Truth senior editor, Brad Jersak, and his wife, Eden, live in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. Brad is a faculty member at Westminster Theological Centre (UK) and facilitates seminars in local churches around the globe.



## Saluting Schweitzer

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

Unlike most growing churches today, my church is a stately old downtown structure. The ministers wear robes, the liturgy and hymns are traditional, and the sanctuary is banked on three sides with stained glass windows.

The windows on the sides tell the story of the gospel, while the set of Great Commission windows in front features the risen Christ, the apostles and great men of faith, including Luther and Calvin. That there are no women is to be expected. What has surprised me, however, is the inclusion of Albert Schweitzer. Except for Jesus, he is the most prominent—the largest full-bodied figure in this wall of stained glass that towers behind the pulpits and choir loft. John and I give him an inconspicuous salute every Sunday.

Schweitzer was a great missionary medical doctor to Africa, as well as a widely recognized musician, philosopher and theologian. But not just any theologian. He was a heretic in the minds of many, particularly with regard to his book, *Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

Decades ago when the window was first installed, church leaders were upset. But what could they do? It was too late to send it back. So the minister at the time decided to simply deny that the man in glass was Schweitzer.

It may look exactly like his unmistakable figure, but it was not. Rather he was to be regarded a generic person.

I admire Schweitzer because he demonstrated his faith in Christ as though he were a first-century disciple: “He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and set us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time.”

In 1952 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. After that his fame soared. But he never lost sight of Lambaréné, his beloved

hospital in Gabon, West Africa, where in 1965 he died and was buried at age ninety.

Because of his drivenness, Schweitzer was a difficult man to work with. But he also had a light-hearted side that especially shines through in his children’s picture book, *The Story of My Pelican*.

His pelican tells the story in first person, and doesn’t mince words about the doctor’s bad temper. On the day the little pelican arrived, along with two older *brothers*, Schweitzer himself prepared a proper cage, as the pelican recounts:

*He busied himself all afternoon under the house, crawling about and making no attempt to hide the bad temper these extraordinary activities put him in. I never had any experience of man and I found it very strange that such a good man could grumble such a lot.*

Soon a close friendship developed and the little pelican is now content and most grateful.

*At night, I love more than anything else to be near where he is and mount guard over him.... Whoever wants to come up on the porch gets warned off by my hissing.... After dinner, when the Doctor is sitting by the light of a lamp at his work table, I fly to the door of the enclosure surrounding our old shelter and perch there facing him. When I hiss or click my beak, he says to me, ‘Dear pelican, dear pelican!’ Sometimes he stops writing and talks softly to me in the night. Those night hours spent with him are very precious to me.*

We can just picture this gruff doctor late at night, the scene lit only by a kerosene lamp. Papers are piled everywhere. He takes a brief break from writing and talks in soft tones to his beloved pet.

Amid all the pressures of a hectic schedule, tender mercies are showered on a mere pelican. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

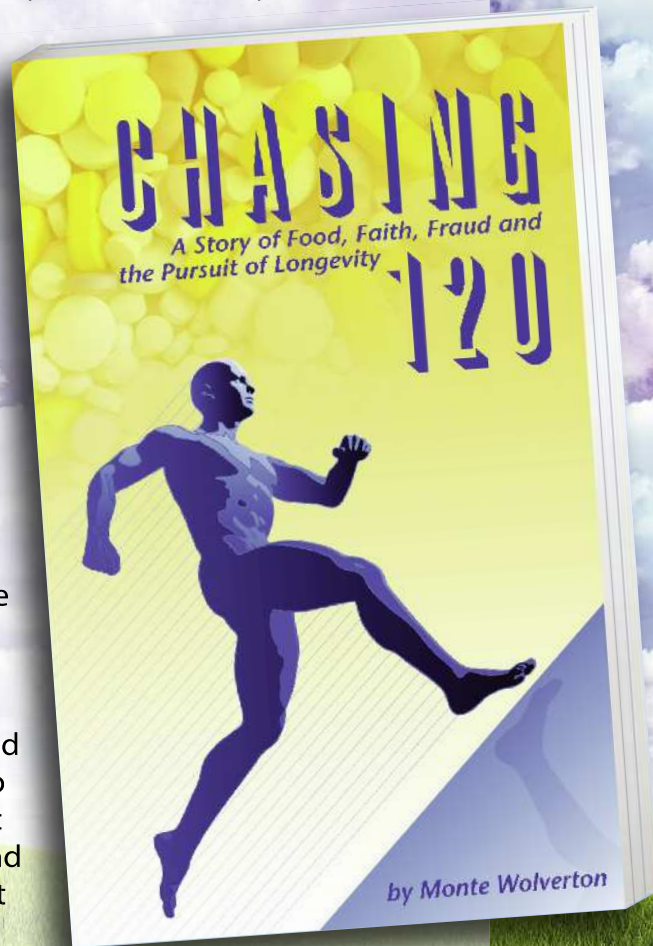
Schweitzer was a great missionary medical doctor to Africa, as well as a widely recognized musician, philosopher and theologian.

# ***Chasing 120 – A Story of Food, Faith, Fraud and the Pursuit of Longevity***

**P**erpetually grinning, fast-talking Texas adman-turned-preacher Dr. Tyler Belknap promises health and longevity to a cult following via his nationally televised daily infomercial programs. The meteoric success of Belknap's Wellness 120 empire is fueled by "the pursuit of longevity," touted by Belknap as a biblically-based promise of 120 healthy years for those who follow his regimen and purchase his nutritional products.

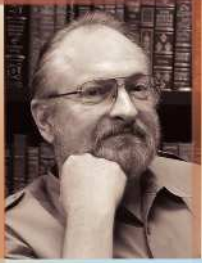
The dark side of Wellness 120 is that many of Belknap's supplements are laced with exotic substances and genetically modified plants developed in his high-tech secret research lab. Wellness 120 creative director Dave Whitman and his wife Marcia suddenly find themselves in the center of a huge crisis when their robustly healthy teenage son suffers brain damage from one of Belknap's psychoactive, genetically modified food products. The Whitmans must come to grips with the fact that the charismatic leader they once admired is a crook and charlatan whose empire has been built on false promises and religious fraud.

*Chasing 120*, written by author, artist and syndicated cartoonist Monte Wolverton, reflecting many of his life experiences, is an easy, entertaining read, filled with intrigue and authenticity—a story that speaks to the shattered dreams of so many who have experienced their house of pseudo-religious cards falling around them.



Available at [www.ptm.org/120](http://www.ptm.org/120)  
and [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)





## "We see through a glass darkly."

This particular kind of religious filter distorts God into an enraged executioner, waiting for us to cross the line so he can lop off our heads...

There was a time in my life when living in a 55+ community was unthinkable. What? Hanging out with a bunch of old people? How dull! Well, young whippersnappers, if you still think that way, you need to pay attention! If you have children, they eventually leave the nest. No more noise, loud music or teen drama (yes, they may come back someday but that's another topic). Gradually, you get used to the idea of having a quiet, orderly household. About that time the idea of a 55+ community begins to sound attractive. Coincidentally at this point you are around 55 years of age—or more.

My wife and I recently moved into one of these tranquil communities. Our home is small, but it has a big living room with plenty of space for often-visiting grandkids. Before the move, while the property was still in escrow, we drove two of our grandkids by to take a look. This particular night the nine and fourteen-year-old girls were both wearing sunglasses. We asked the youngest, Justice, what she thought. "I don't know," she answered. "It seems so dark and gloomy."

Her big sister Kiah snarked, "You have your dark glasses on, moron." Dark glasses are a kind of filter. As a photographer, I know something about these handy little tools. A filter works by allowing certain colors of light through and blocking others. In addition to altering color, filters can be used to increase contrast, to remove unwanted reflections or highlights and to blur parts of the image. Filters are used to separate a picture into component colors for printing, digital photography and video. Even our own eyes use built-in neurological filters to allow us to see color and prevent us from seeing parts of the electromagnetic spectrum that we don't need to.

Not only is everything we see filtered, but every bit of information we receive is filtered, since our human minds are not capable of processing all the data around us at any given instant. Although we may try

to compensate for this human limitation through technology, the downside is that we are left to draw conclusions and opinions with incomplete information.

Here's the ironic thing: Instead of trying to be as aware and informed as possible, many of us do just the opposite. We add self-imposed filters to limit our information. What forms do these self-imposed filters take? Lots. Intoxicants, amusements, diversions, addictions, prejudices, opinions. Some may not be inherently bad—but we may retreat into them far too often. It's a shame we all can't recognize when we're forming an opinion with filters on our eyes. If we admitted that we were wearing filters as easily as my granddaughter Justice did, then we might see clearly to make better life-choices.

It seems the greatest and most dangerous filters are imposed by religion. Religious dogma, duties and denominational devotion not only distract us from an authentic relationship with God, they totally obscure and distort our view of God. When we see ourselves and others through religious lenses we fail to recognize each other's full humanity.

In my experience, religious filters are at their worst when we look in the mirror. They may act like rose-colored glasses—spotlighting our virtues and giving us a sense of arrogant self-sufficiency. Or they may have the opposite effect, intensifying our guilt and shame and giving us a dark, hopeless picture of ourselves, like Justice's gloomy impression of our home at night through dark glasses. This particular kind of religious filter distorts God into an enraged executioner, waiting for us to cross the line so he can lop off our heads—a dismal worldview indeed.

God, of course, wears no religious spectacles. He sees all his children for what we are and what we can become through him. When we allow him to remove our institutional and religious filters, we free ourselves to enjoy genuine friendship with others and with God. □

—Monte Wolverton

## Welcome to the Wide Open Spaces of



- Tired of being exploited, treated like part of a captive herd, branded with the dogma of denominationalism?
- Tired of being rounded up by religious authorities who fatten you up with spiritual junk food in some “holy” feed lot?
- Tired of humanly imposed restrictions, walls, fences and denominational boundaries?
- Tired of being told that Jesus can only be found within the confines of a particular parcel of religious real estate?
- Tired of being told God is mad at you and the only way to make him happy is to appease him by continually being in the right place at the right time doing the right things?

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Come and join Greg Albrecht at [www.ptm.org](http://www.ptm.org) for *faith alone*, *grace alone* and *Christ alone* teaching! Come join *CWRa*—a grace-based ministry free from religious additives and preservatives—where you will always be pointed to our religion-free Bread of Life.

You'll find a summary of each weekly *CWRa* sermon for the next three months below. Join us and tell a friend!

**Christ-Followers Cannot Not Forgive** C.S. Lewis insisted “If God forgives we must forgive. Otherwise, it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than him.” A Christ-follower in whom Jesus lives cannot not forgive. Week of September 7.

**Old Time Religion Is Not Good Enough!** The cherished hymn, which dates to 1873, declares “Give me that old time religion, it’s good enough for me.” Really? Week of September 14.

**Dangerous Unselfishness** The day before he was assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a sermon in which he encouraged “dangerous unselfishness.” Join Greg to consider what it means to be dangerously unselfish. Week of September 21.

**Is God Fair?** We’ve all asked this question more than once, and before it’s all said and done, we’ll revisit the dark dilemma of God’s seemingly unfair decisions. Week of September 28

**“More Blessed to Give Than Receive”** Join us to discover the immense, far-reaching dimensions of grace-based teaching behind this short saying of Jesus, proclaimed by Paul in Acts 20:35. Week of October 5.

**Giving and FOR-Giving** God’s forgiveness means that we have been forgiven once and for all. Once we have received his forgiveness, there is no need for us to feel un-forgiven until we formally ask God to forgive us again. Week of October 12.

**He Knows Just How You Feel** While it is physically impossible for a family member or friend to know exactly how we feel as we suffer and endure, we may be assured that Jesus knows JUST how we feel. Week of October 19.

**Looking for Jesus** Unless we realize that Jesus is often experienced and found in unexpected places and in the lives of those we would least expect, when we look for Jesus we may be looking in all the wrong places. Week of October 26.

**Communication, Community and Communion** The eternal relationship God gives us, by his grace, can be defined and understood by the meaning conveyed by “Communication, Community and Communion” and how they cooperate with and complement each other. Week of November 2.

**The Jesus I Know Is Who I Am** Join Greg as he discusses how our lives truly become significant when we know Jesus and when he lives his life within us. Week of November 9.

**On the Road With Jesus** During his earthly ministry Jesus was always on the go—he didn’t expect people to come to him, rather he went where they were. As we follow Jesus, he calls us to join him on the road. Week of November 16.

**Thankful for Life in Christ** When we give thanks to God we recognize we are not entitled to anything from him, for he owes us nothing. Yet, while we do not deserve his grace, he lavishes his grace and mercy on us. Week of November 23.

**The Crib and the Cross** The crib and the cross of Jesus Christ are the bookends of his human earthly life—the bookends of the greatest love story ever told. Week of November 30.