

SUMMER 2013

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

www.ptm.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

Church:

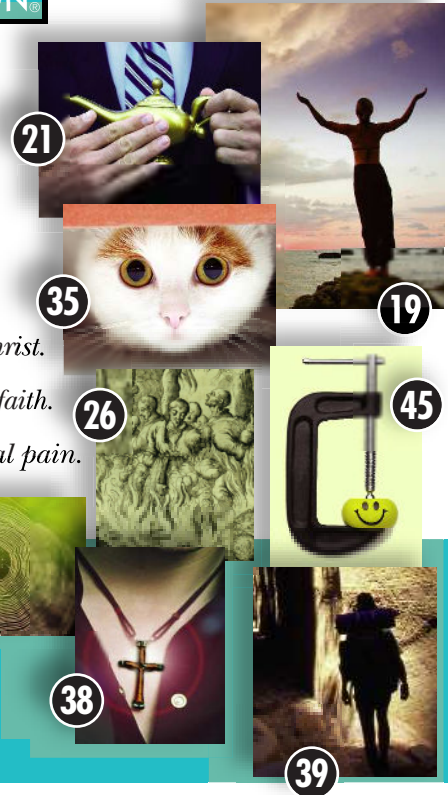
What We Are— Not Where We Go



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

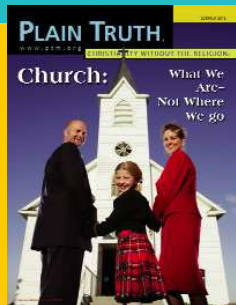
Features

- 19** **The End of Church** *Faith after the religious market collapse?*
- 21** **Faith—The Genie in a Bottle?** *Faith is often considered an attribute to be acquired.*
- 26** **The Poison of Religion** *A history of religious zeal gone wrong.*
- 35** **From Fine to Finished in 30 Days** *“I was only unsafe when I didn’t trust God.”*
- 38** **You Might Be a Cultural Christian If...** *The “Christian show” is not new life in Christ.*
- 39** **The Valley of the Shadow of...Doubt** *In Christ, we can walk through life’s valleys in faith.*
- 43** **Tangled Webs—The Lies We Believe** *What we believe is directly related to emotional pain.*
- 45** **Smiley Faces** *“As our pain intensified, we grew closer to God.”*



Departments

- 15** **He Asked Me to Remind You** *Steve Brown*
- 17** **Commentary** *Greg Albrecht*
- 42** **Tender Mercies** *Ruth A. Tucker*
- 47** **Living Room** *Monte Wolverton*



Cover Story

5

Given its long experience in the marketplace,

the institutionalized church has successfully promoted itself as the spiritual retail outlet that produces “goodness.” But according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, becoming a better person by doing religious rituals, following religious creeds and being in the same place as “good” people is not one and the same as new life in Christ.

COVER PHOTO BY RON NICKEL—DESIGNPICS

Inside This Issue

Church is not a building or a structure, nor is it a set of decrees, doctrines or dogmas. If we are in Christ, and he is in us, we will be the church. Church: What We Are—Not Where We Go **10**

Religion, policemen who give tickets for bad behavior, scary calls to obedience (“God’s going to break your legs!”), and justice for screwing up...none of that is surprising. “No jail time...that’s grace!” **15**

Americans are not rejecting faith—they are, however, rejecting self-serving religious institutions. The End of Church **20**

As the Church clarified and formalized its teaching, the lists of doctrines and creeds multiplied—as did the number of heretics. The Poison of Religion **31**

The irony of it all struck me. A total stranger, with the same name as that of my daughter, wrote me every day. Yet my daughter Rita remained silent and refused to answer my letters. Smiley Faces **45**

MISSION STATEMENT

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

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

For an electronic subscription go to www.ptm.org/sub. The Internet allows us to serve readers around the world.

Printed copies of *Plain Truth* are, at this time, a benefit mailed to ongoing PTM contributors. If you would like to join us, and contribute to our worldwide work, go to www.ptm.org/donate.

TO UPDATE YOUR ADDRESS

Be sure to notify us immediately of any change in your address by calling us at 1-800-309-4466, visiting our website at www.ptm.org/change (please have your old mailing label available for reference) or writing us at *The Plain Truth*, Pasadena, CA 91129 (please include your old mailing label and your new address).

U.S. Postmaster: Send address changes to *The Plain Truth*, Pasadena, CA 91129.

TO SEND A LETTER OR E-MAIL

Write us at Letters to the Editor, *The Plain Truth*, Pasadena, CA 91129, email us at managing.editor@ptm.org or fax us at Letters to the Editor at 626-358-4846.

The editors reserve the right to print or not print comments so addressed, in whole or in part, as deemed in the public interest, and to print your name and edit the letter for clarity and space.

We will protect the confidentiality of correspondence that we deem to be of a personal nature. Correspondence published by Plain Truth Ministries does not necessarily reflect the opinions of Plain Truth Ministries.

EDITORIAL STAFF

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Greg Albrecht

MANAGING EDITOR: Laura Urista

ART DIRECTION AND PRODUCTION: Marv Wegner

ASSOCIATE EDITORS: Brad Jersak, Monte Wolverton

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR: Dennis Warkentin

THEOLOGICAL CONSULTANT: Jim Fowler



Can God Be Too Good?

I really liked the article “Can God Be Too Good?” in the Spring 2013 *Plain Truth*. I have long looked at the three basic views—eternal torment, conditional immortality and ultimate reconciliation. If I were to choose, it would be the third view. In my mind, literally hundreds of verses argue against a never-ending punishment, punishment that would even include those who never heard of Jesus! That would be punishment without a purpose. The second view, in comparison, is much better. God gave life, it would be his right to take it away—but it is not glorious! The third view, if correct, answers a multitude of otherwise unanswered questions.

Suppose a dog has strayed, and is taken to the pound. Certainly he should not be tortured there. It would be considered humane, if need be, to put him to sleep. But how much better that he might get a good home!

The conclusions that many come to about how so many will be lost actually means that they are defining Satan as being more effective than Jesus—they seem to think that, when all is said and done, we will conclude that Jesus tried hard and wanted to save a lot of people but just could not get very many to accept him!

**Author and Evangelist
California**

I have just read the eleven page article entitled, “Can God Be Too Good?” by Monte Wolverton in the Spring issue of *Plain Truth*. Wow! This is one of the fairest and finest treatments of universal redemption and hell that it has been my pleasure to encounter—and I’ve seen a lot of them. You’re to be congratulated for having the courage to include such a controversial piece in your publication, *Plain Truth*. I’m sure you were aware that the subject has the potential to stir up both fire and favor.

Also I enjoyed your own insert about free will, especially the last sentence: “But I could be wrong. Check back with me when Jesus sits me down on the other side of eternity and sighs, and says, ‘Okay

Greg—you had a few things right, but we need to get back to some basics.”

**Author and Pastor
Iowa**



How Free Is Free Will?

I just wanted to thank you for the articles “Can God Be Too Good?” and “How Free Is Free Will?” in the Spring 2013 *Plain Truth*. My wife and I are extremely interested in eschatology and rarely find anyone we can agree with; even many of my friends. I totally agree that “love wins,” but to say that every single human will eventually be saved takes away our free choice in the matter. We believe God surely will (by his very nature) give everyone a fair chance, but to say that all will accept his love (or, worse, be forced to accept it) misses the point of what God is doing here on earth. As believers in conditional immortality/annihilationism (instead of eternal torture in hell) and a post-mortem opportunity for salvation, we feel like salmon swimming upriver to spawn; there is quite a strong current trying to force us back downstream.

Oregon



Your Mileage May Vary

Thanks for another excellent edition of your *Plain Truth* magazine. As always it is filled with many grace-based articles to help us grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. I was particularly impressed with your Commentary “Your Mileage May Vary,” which I am afraid may not get all the attention it deserves. I’ve written to you several times in the past (though not recently) and am grateful for your

always helpful responses. Like you I am a recent recipient of a Medicare card and like your friend in the next to last column of your article, my wife is still being treated for metastasized cancer, in spite of much prayer, chemotherapy and diet changes. Your premise that Christianity is not “one size fits all” and “your mileage may vary” is an extremely important truth that is not easy to accept, especially when things don’t go our way.

While I am thankful that God chose to put your wife, Karen, into remission, I also grieve that your esteemed colleague Monte Wolverton lost his wife to cancer last year, and I keep praying that it is God’s will to heal my wife. You are right on, dead center to say that God treats us as individuals as he deems is best for us in our individual circumstances! It doesn’t matter how many prayers are said or how often we go to a brick-and-mortar church, or how much we give or how many good works we do, our gracious and loving God will do what he deems best for us. All we can do is take comfort in verses like: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:1).

During these last three years of my wife’s cancer fight I have also learned to get peace and comfort from the last several chapters of Job. After Job and his friends go through chapter after chapter of trying to explain God and his ways, God comes on the scene and asks Job “Where were you when I...?”

Like Job, I have to confess that I am a man of unclean lips who doesn’t know much of anything. Now when I pray, I say, “Lord you know that I want healing for my wife. I know that this may not be in your plans for her. I’m just one of your created beings who doesn’t know anything about the great scheme of life, while You are the eternal, all-knowing, all-wise, all-loving God. My wife is in your hands and your care and I know that you will do what you know is best for her according to Your good purposes.” I take great comfort in knowing that God is all-knowing, all-wise and all-loving—and he will do what is best for all of us.

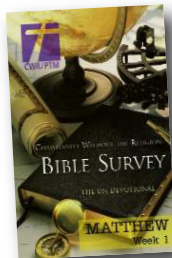
New York

Reading Greg Albrecht’s Commentary “Your Mileage May Vary” reminded me of a conversation I had with him some time ago. I told him that I raise bees, and that bee venom helps my arthritis. He asked me if I thought bee venom helps everyone who has arthritis. I responded and told him that I can only be certain it helped me. I think that was the answer he was looking for, and in fact, one that helped me to see that we are all different, in so many ways. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, but our mileage does vary.

Georgia

I really identified with your recent article in the Spring *PT*, “Your Mileage May Vary.” My mileage varied when my wife who fought breast cancer for five years passed away peacefully in her sleep on October 21, 2011. I tear up as I write this. She had six surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation and took a ton of “miracle” cancer fighting supplements and, of course, was supported with many prayers.

Kentucky



CWR Bible Survey

For a long time now I have been reluctant to open, let alone study the Bible. I’d had enough of Bible study; it being a requirement as well as the “read the Bible in a year” program at the church I used to attend many years ago. I along with the other attendees had to get at least half an hour a day Bible time in order to keep in God’s good books!

With hindsight I realize that I was reading but not really studying and certainly not enjoying or spiritually benefitting from it. I was going through the motions and my experiences in that legalistic environment put me off looking into the Bible in the years since I disassociated myself from the organization.

I came across PTM several years ago and it has been a Godsend, but although mentally noting the Bible references in the articles and sermons I would still avoid referencing the Bible. However, I recently became intrigued by your online resource entitled *CWR Bible Survey* and, wondering just what sort of survey it was, entered the “flipping-book” format. Wow!

I felt I just had to get the Bible off the shelf and out of the box and have just completed the study of Genesis—what an eye opener! I must have read that book so many times in the past but gleaned nothing compared to what I have learned and become aware of through this study.

I am amazed, humbled and grateful and actually look forward, despite a busy schedule, to the time I am able to devote to the *CWR Bible Survey*.

Manchester, England

• Sign up to receive our weekly *PTM eUpdate* by email at www.ptm.org/eUpdate. Each week the *PTM eUpdate* will include links to about seven easy installments of *CWR Bible Survey*.

COPYRIGHT & POSTAL INFORMATION

The Plain Truth is published quarterly by Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129. Copyright © 2013 Plain Truth Ministries. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. Standard flats postage paid at Pasadena, CA, and at additional mailing offices. Volume 78, Number 2: Summer 2013. Unless noted otherwise, scriptures are quoted from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. *The Plain Truth*® is a U.S. trademark.

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Join us, 24/7, at *Christianity Without the Religion*® for Christ-centered teaching. A grace-based message is available right now at www.ptm.org. *Christianity Without the Religion*® is a U.S. trademark.

OUR WEBSITE

Visit our website at www.ptm.org to browse *Plain Truth* archives for past articles, to find out more about Plain Truth Ministries and our other resources, to subscribe and to update your address.

SUBMISSIONS

The Plain Truth rarely publishes unsolicited manuscripts. Please review our writers guidelines at our website (www.ptm.org) before submitting queries. Include SASE with query. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited artwork, photographs or manuscripts.

PLAIN TRUTH MINISTRIES

The Plain Truth is published by Plain Truth Ministries (PTM). If you are interested in learning more about PTM, please request a copy of *Plain Truth Ministries...Helping Change Lives Around the World* by calling us at 1-800-309-4466, visiting our website at www.ptm.org or writing us at Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Plain Truth Ministries gratefully accepts contributions (tax deductible in the U.S.) to further the ongoing work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. We accept contributions in U.S. funds by check or credit card. Call us at 1-800-309-4466, or write us at Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129.

twitter

facebook



CWR/PTM

MEMBER  EVANGELICAL PRESS ASSOCIATION

BY GREG ALBRECHT

Church:

What We Are— Not Where We Go



An excerpt of Stephen's speech to the Jewish Sanhedrin: *However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands* (Acts 7:48). The Sanhedrin reacted to Stephen's speech by stoning him to death.

An excerpt of Paul's speech to the polytheistic, idolatrous Athenians: *The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands* (Acts 17:24). *Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill* (Acts 17:29).

Several who heard him turned from their idolatry and believed in the "unknown God"—the God they had never known.

When you are looking for tires for your car, you drive to the tire store. When you need to restock the pantry and the fridge, you visit the grocery store. If your tooth is hurting, then you head for the dentist. If you crave fast food, then you hop in the car and head toward junk food alley. And if you want a "good" place for you and your family to meet and associate with other "good" people, where are you going to go?

Given its long experience in the marketplace, the institutionalized church has successfully promoted itself

as the spiritual retail outlet that produces goodness. Consequently when parents want their children to grow up as morally responsible individuals, they take (or send) them to a building that calls itself a church.

If a family wants to meet "good" friends, then virtually everyone agrees that the best destination is a place that markets itself as a place where good people hang out. And, of course, because lots of good people congregate together, many believe that they might even meet Jesus there. Oops! Wait a minute—according to the four Gospels what happened when Jesus

If a family wants to meet “good” friends, then virtually everyone agrees that the best destination is a place that markets itself as a place where good people hang out.

...they might even meet Jesus there.

Oops! Wait a

minute... Most of the time, Jesus wasn't exactly made to feel welcome at gatherings of “good” people.



was hanging out with people generally regarded as “good?” Most of the time, Jesus wasn't exactly made to feel welcome at gatherings of “good” people. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels gives us the idea Jesus spent a lot of time with

those who wanted to be known as “better”). The translators believed that the “church” was a place, with religious beliefs and practices and procedures and programs, organized so that people could be and do good.

notion of defining a Christian in terms of “going to” church and being an involved member is not entirely consistent with what the New Testament has to say about Christ-followers.

Many of the earliest translations of the Bible into English were underwritten by established religious institutions. Thus, when many translators, working not only at the behest of institutions, but working within their own already indoctrinated beliefs, translated the Greek word *ekklesia*, which simply means assembly or gathering, they chose the English word “church”—a term generally associated with a building and physically visible institution, along with its beliefs and practices. The actual origin of *ekklesia* seems to go back to a time when the citizens of the kingdom of Greece would be called out to conduct the business of the kingdom, making a decision on a matter before them. The word *ekklesia* came to mean any assembly or gathering, for any purpose.

Given its long experience in the marketplace, the institutionalized church has successfully promoted itself as the spiritual retail outlet that produces goodness.

people who were not generally known or accepted as “good.”

From *Ekklesia* to the Church

By the time the Bible was translated into common languages, translators were schooled to believe what most church-goers today still believe—the church is a building, or a group of buildings, constructed and maintained by a religious institution. Translators who first encountered the Greek word *ekklesia*, found over 100 times in the New Testament, were already convinced that the institution they knew of as the “church,” with methods, creeds and established traditions and ceremonies, had a divine imperative to make people and their children good (or at the very least, provide an assembly for

But when we search the Bible we cannot find a single word that supports the centuries-old cherished definition Christendom has given the word “church”—or the similarly understood, popularly accepted definition which continues to this day. According to the gospel of Jesus Christ becoming a better person by doing religious rituals, following religious creeds and being in the same place as “good” people is not one and the same as new life in Christ. The popularly accepted

According to the gospel of Jesus Christ becoming a better person by doing religious rituals, following religious creeds and being in the same place as “good” people is not one and the same as new life in Christ.

...when religion became organized its leaders realized they needed buildings (along with doctrines and dogmas and ceremonies and rituals) to organize and control “their” people.

For example, when the entire city of Ephesus was in an uproar, rioting because of the Christ-centered preaching of Paul, those who gathered in angry protest were said to be an *ekklesia* (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). Of course, it would not do for translators to call this anti-gospel mob a “church” so they relented and correctly identified this *ekklesia* as an “assembly.”

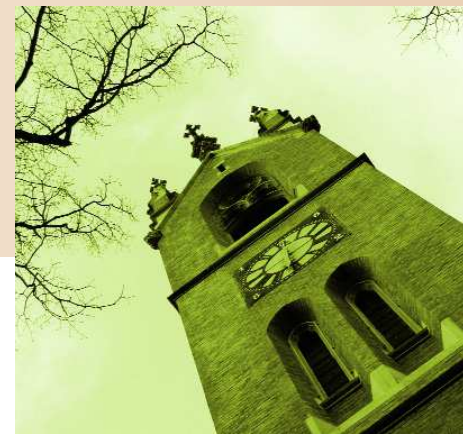
The Greek word *ekklesia* has nothing to do with buildings and clerical titles and authority and ceremonies and doctrines. The English word “church” has, with a mighty assist from organized religion, come to be accepted as meaning an external building and as a visible institution, rather than the spiritual, unseen internal life of the risen Lord. Many meanings conveyed by the English word “church” are far from the way the word *ekklesia* is used in the New Testament. The Greek word *ekklesia* from which the re-defined English word “church” is derived has more to do with what we are, by God’s grace, than it does a place we go.

The institutional church system so common to us today was completely unknown to the original disciples and apostles of Jesus Christ. When they thought of the church as being constructed and built they thought of the inner work of the life of Christ, who himself is the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20) of a spiritual building. But when 21st century Christians use the word “church” the vast majority of the time they are thinking of physical

buildings that are part of a legally incorporated institution, with a specific set of beliefs and practices.

The modern, accepted definition of the word “church” is critically important for the survival of big business religion. Whereas the first and second century Christians gathered together in any location, when religion became organized its leaders realized they needed buildings (along with doctrines and dogmas and ceremonies and rituals) to organize and control “their” people. I know many religious professionals would prefer to describe themselves as servants of a

Control is high on the agenda of Christ-less religion because control maintains the status quo. Without specific buildings with specific ceremonies and specific rules of order, “church” as we know it would not survive.



flock, and while many are, let’s get real. Control is high on the agenda of Christ-less religion because control maintains the status quo. Without specific buildings with specific ceremonies and specific rules of order, “church” as we know it would not survive. Right or wrong, for better or for worse, the institutional church needs external trappings, and therefore favors language that justifies and promotes its own interests.

The Big Club Proof Text

...not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. —Hebrews 10:25

When pastors of brick and mortar churches begin to notice increasingly empty pews and offering plates with diminishing contributions, many inflict a well-worn misinterpretation of Hebrews 10:25 on those who remain in attendance “...not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Of the many weapons in the arsenal of the professional clergy used to “control” the flock Hebrews 10:25 is perhaps one of the greatest gerry-

Whether or not (Christ-followers) choose to meet with other people in a brick-and-mortar church, Bible study, small group or prayer meeting, they are still very much part of Christ's body and will be interacting with other members of his body

mandered "proof" texts. Hebrews 10:25 is trotted out when people start to wonder about the necessity of faithful attendance to and in a physical building. The way in which Hebrews 10:25 is often preached and taught is manipulative if not abusive. I realize that's a strong accusation, but please let me explain.

Some churches and pastors use Hebrews 10:25 as "proof" that "their" members must attend a specific building ("their" church) on a regular basis (once a week, twice a week, or even once a day—depending on the regulations imposed by that religious institution) so that they might hear a specific message and participate in a specific service conforming to specific rules of order. Understood properly, this passage cannot and should not be used as a club to threaten or cajole people about attending a physical building following specific ceremonies and procedures.

This passage says *not giving up meeting together*—were the original readers of Hebrews going to a building designed and designated as a church

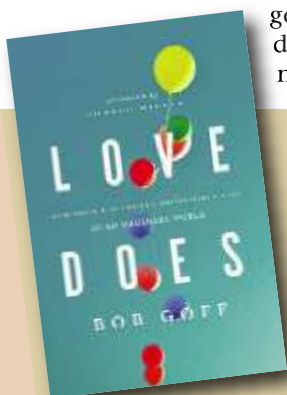


once a week? Did their children attend Sunday school and Vacation Bible School? Was this passage in Hebrews exhorting people to have perfect attendance records in a building? The truth is that the original audience to whom the book of Hebrews was written had no idea that specific buildings could be designated as church buildings. The original audience perceived church as being what they were, by God's grace, far more than a place to which they traveled.

While Christians at that time met together in homes and in public places they most definitely did not all get in their horse or donkey drawn carts to drive to a 10 or 11 a.m. service several miles or more away. This passage is not instructing original readers to travel to a building located on a piece of real estate. However, some churches and pastors still maintain, regardless of what this passage meant originally, that Hebrews 10:25 insists we must "go" to where our brothers and sisters in the Lord are. And of course many define "broth-



ers and sisters in the Lord" as being those people who belong to the same humanly organized and controlled denomination, those who take part in the same religious behaviors and ceremonies. Even if that assumption is true, since when are we justified in thinking that only people who are "just like



Excerpt from "Love Does" by Bob Goff

"Because I'm a lawyer and a follower of Jesus I'm occasionally asked about my religion. I'm not always sure what they hope to learn from me, and the first thing I tell them is that they probably shouldn't be talking to me. I don't validate my faith with a church attendance scorecard. I think of church as a vibrant community of people consisting of two or more varied backgrounds gathering around Jesus. Sometimes they are at a place that might have a steeple or auditorium seating. But it's just as likely that church happens elsewhere, like coffee shops or on the edge of a glacier or in the bush in Uganda. All of these places work just fine, I suppose. When it's a matter of the heart, the place doesn't matter. For me, it's Jesus plus nothing—not even a building."

us” are our only spiritual brothers and sisters?

What is the Church?

The church of Jesus Christ is not essentially something we do nor is it primarily a place we go. The church of Jesus Christ is not limited to or confined by a set of customs and traditions to which we pledge allegiance. The church is the body of Christ, which transcends human boundaries. The church is, by God’s grace,



something we are. We become a member in and of the body of Christ by God’s grace.

When we accept God’s grace and he transforms us into one of his children, thus making us a part of the universal body of Christ, we can also be members of many earthly organizations. But earthly organizations may or may not have a positive or negative bearing on our part, given to us by God’s grace, in the body of Christ. We can be involved with the Girl or Boy Scouts, the Rotary, the American Legion, the Red Cross, Little League, City Council—and yes, as a Christ follower we can join an earthly organization which calls itself a church.



God does not require anyone to become a card-carrying member in any earthbound, legally incorporated church. If you have accepted God’s invitation to become a part of the universal body of Christ, you are, by grace, a member of “the” church.

But none of those activities or memberships absolutely define the nature of our relationship with God, and our God-given place in the body of Christ. Organizations and affiliations do not define or confine the body of Christ. We can “do” church when we talk with our neighbors, when we have coffee with new and old acquaintances and when we are seated next to someone we’ve never met on a bus, train or airplane.

Of course, we can “do” church in a building which is designated for

that purpose. There are many Christ-centered, grace-based groups that congregate in a building popularly known as a church. But let us not be confused that we can only “do” and “be” the church in a building. There is far too much of that misunderstanding in institutionalized Christianity today, and it leads to misunderstandings of God and his nature. If people feel that God is happy with them once they fulfill their Sunday morning obligations, then they may feel justified in feeling that once they

“Many whom God has the church does not have; and many whom the church has God does not have.”

—Augustine (354-430).

Augustine’s views and teachings have profoundly influenced Christian theology and history, as well as Western thought at large.





... let us not be confused that we can only “do” and “be” the church in a building. There is far too much of that misunderstanding... and it leads to misunderstandings of God and his nature.

of the matter is that God has not awarded any exclusive franchises to religious organizations so that they and they alone have divine approval to represent him here on earth.

So when a church or pastor appears to “use” Hebrews 10:25 in such a way as to “control” people I insist on holding their feet to the proverbial fire. I am not saying that people should not attend church. Christ followers are free in him, if they so desire, to attend a healthy, Christ-centered, grace-based church. However, I believe that our relationship with God should first and foremost be with him, not with a church or a pastor. I know that a person can have a healthy relationship with God even if they don’t attend a church.

To reiterate: If we have been transformed in and through Jesus Christ we are the church, by God’s grace. Church is not a building or a structure, nor is it a set of decrees, doctrines or dogmas.

If we are in Christ, and he is in us, we will be the church. We won’t merely think of being the church only when we go to a holy huddle where everyone thinks like us and might even wear a similar uniform. If we are in Christ and he is in us we will be the church wherever we are—in the office, in schools and colleges, in halls of justice, in the supermarket, and in our homes. We don’t magically become the church when we walk into a “sacred” place. We are not transformed into the church when

have had their “God fix” by traveling to a building on Sunday morning they can get back to their real life.

God is not owned or appropriated by anyone. Of course, when it comes to the business of making a brick-and-mortar church operate

tion, in this regard, is really no different than any other business venture. Each religious institution competes for market share, with some institutions claiming that they and only they are the “true” church. Whether they claim to be “the one and only true church” or

Given their religious indoctrination, some religious captives actually believe it’s a sin for them not to attend a building on a regular basis. They somehow feel that God will not recognize them or love them as much, if they don’t attend church.

and paying the bills, it is much easier to make the church “work” when parishioners are convinced that they really must follow the dictates and decrees of the organization. The big business of reli-

not, virtually all churches make exclusive truth claims. They claim to have unique insights, heritage, traditions, doctrines and practices designed to give them an edge in the religious marketplace. But the fact

Jesus is the head of the church, and he, not any human, determines how any of us may be part of his church.



we meet with people with whom we are comfortable, who believe as we do, who think as we do and whom we might regard as our peers. Such social and external behaviors may or may not be part of being the church—but external activities, performances and habits certainly do not define and encompass the body of Christ.

The Original Setting

Let's briefly return to the original readers of Hebrews 10:25. Let's remind ourselves of the larger context. The book of Hebrews was written to Hebrew-Christians. These were people who were having difficulties coming out of their affiliation and allegiance to the religion of Judaism and fully accepting Jesus Christ. Many, perhaps most of them, while believing themselves to be Christ-followers, were still attending synagogue. Many were probably still keeping kosher and following all of the religious traditions and prescriptions of Judaism.

One of the purposes of the book of Hebrews was to help these people realize that genuinely following Christ was superior to their previous (or even continuing) affiliation with old covenant worship patterns. The book of Hebrews was not trying to get people to stay in synagogues—quite the contrary! But if we are to believe many, as they “use” this passage today, then the original readers

would have felt compelled by this passage to remain in attendance in synagogues, where Jesus Christ was normally not preached.

One of the major purposes of Hebrews was to help these newly minted Hebrew-Christians under-

stand that they needed to leave their religion and fully embrace Christ. In that regard, most scholars comment on the fact that this book was preparing these Hebrew-Christians for what was unthinkable in their minds—the destruction of “God’s own house” —the temple in Jerusalem.

Most believe that the book of Hebrews was written only a few years before the Roman war of attrition against Jerusalem (AD 69-70) when the Jewish temple was destroyed. It has not been rebuilt since that time, of course.

A careful reading of the book of Hebrews, along with Galatians and Romans, among other New Testament texts, leads me, and many others, to the conclusion that the temple in Jerusalem was one of the last remaining obstacles that prevented many Jewish-Christians from fully embracing Christ. As long as that temple stood many, if not most, Jewish-Christians would believe it to have some special and unique status, and therefore assume that they were under religious obligations in terms of sacrifices, “holy” days, rituals and ceremonies.

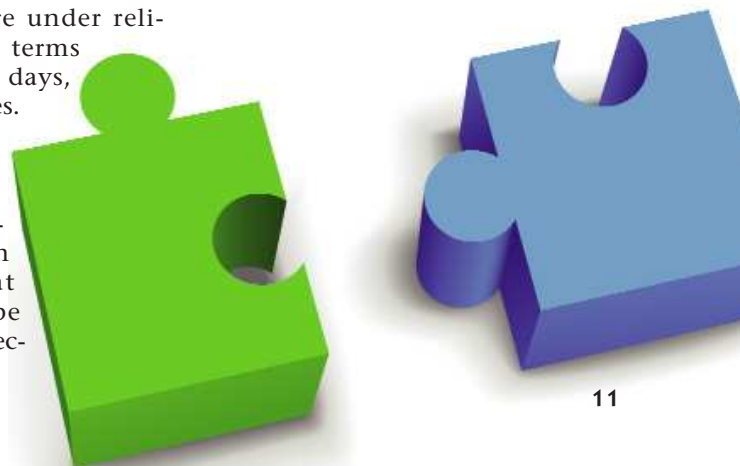
One may conclude, as I and many others do, that for these Hebrew Christians, the destruction of a building that many believed to be “God’s house” was nec-

essary to pave the way for full acceptance of Jesus Christ. Years before the writing of these words in Hebrews, Stephen, the first Christian martyr, explained to the Jews who stoned him to death only moments later...*the Most High does not live in houses made by men* (Acts 7:48).

Unlike the original readers of Hebrews, Christians in the 21st century can fellowship in a variety of ways. We can certainly “go to” church—we are free in Christ to do so. But if we “go to” church we should not be coerced by any religious power or entity, and we should ensure that the place and atmosphere is helpful to our spiritual well-being, rather than detrimental. Whether or not we “go to” church—we can “be” the church in many ways unavailable to the original readers of the book of Hebrews.

We have the full, translated Bible available to us. We have many books about the Bible, which can help us. We have many modes of communication available to us, so that we can “not give up meeting together...” We can meet together as you and I are doing right now—via the printed or digital word. We can meet together via the Internet. We can phone or text one another. We can join others in worship on television, and on radio. In those ways, and many others, we can “meet together.”

Hebrews 10:25 is encouraging us to talk about our faith with others—to share our beliefs—to never re-





Part of being the church is to talk with others about our faith. If the only time that we think we are “being” the church is when we “do” church then how, exactly, are we letting our light shine to the world?

treat into a cocoon, and so “bury our talents” in the ground, as Jesus warned against in his parable (Matthew 25:25). Part of being the church is to talk with others about our faith. If the only time that we think we are “being” the church is when we “do” church then how, exactly, are we letting our light shine to the world? If we simply retreat to religious country clubs once a week, have a little holy huddle, hear some “feel-good” message, catch up on news about others (which may or may not include gossip) and then reconvene again a week later—how exactly is such an exercise all of what it means to “be” the church? I maintain such practices can easily become nothing but dead religion.

What About Membership in a Church?

God does not require anyone to become a card-carrying member in any earthbound, legally incorporated church. If you have accepted God’s invitation to become a part of the universal body of Christ, you are, by grace, a member of “the” church. There are grace-based, Christ-centered brick- and-

mortar churches that humbly point those who affiliate with them toward Jesus, who is the head of “the” church and if that is the case then “a” church can render a great service. But again, as part of “the” church we are free in Christ. We are free not to be a part of “a” church at all, in the sense of allowing ourselves to be bound to rules about attendance, percentages about giving or quotas about volunteering and “serving.”

Given their religious indoctrination, some religious captives actually believe it’s a sin for them not to attend a building on a regular basis. They somehow feel that God will not recognize them or love them as much, if they don’t attend church. But God, of course, knows exactly where each of us is located and he knows exactly what we are enduring. He listens to us, comforts us and leads each one of us in a variety of ways, and through differing experiences and people, even if we don’t attend a building. After all, many people can’t travel to a building because their health pre-

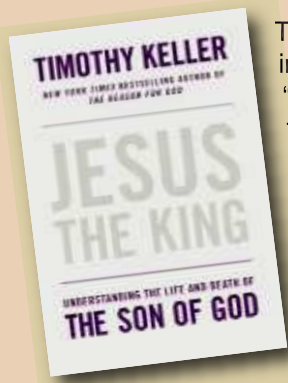
vents them from doing so. Surely God doesn’t abandon them?

But some will say that every Christian ought to be “in church” come hell or high water because Christians need to “fellowship” with those who are like-minded. According to this reasoning, if individual Christians become separated from others, Satan will pick them off like a wolf picks off a lamb who has strayed from the flock (presumably they might then become atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, drug dealers, Wiccans, terrorists, Democrats or some other terrible thing). So, goes the logic, there is safety in huddling together with a group. One problem with this thinking is that holy huddles don’t define or confine Christ-followers.

Wherever they might be, Christ-followers are always connected with the body of Christ because they are by definition connected with and indwelt by Christ. Whether or not they choose to meet with other people in a brick-and-mortar church, Bible study, small group or prayer meeting they are still very much part of Christ’s body and will be interacting with other members of his body (and those who are not members of his body) in many different ways. Many assume that anyone who frequents a building that calls itself a church is a bona fide Christian, and they are someone with whom they should “fellowship.” But many who “go to” a church building are no more a Christian than your dog, and in such cases “fellowship” can quickly become a case of the blind leading the blind.

Hebrews 10:25 also makes reference to “the Day.” What day is that? Many Christians assume this is “the Day” of Jesus’ return—hence, they believe the passage is





The renowned British minister Dick Lucas once preached a sermon in which he recounted an imaginary conversation between an early Christian and her neighbor in Rome. “Ah,” the neighbor says. “I hear you are religious! Great! Religion is a good thing. Where is your temple or holy place?”

“We don’t have a temple,” replies the Christian. “Jesus is our temple.”

“No temple? But where do your priests work and do their rituals?”

“We don’t have priests to mediate the presence of God,” replies the Christian. “Jesus is our priest.”

“No priests? But where do you offer your sacrifices to acquire the favor of your God?”

“We don’t need a sacrifice,” replies the Christian. “Jesus is our sacrifice.”

“What kind of religion is this?” sputters the pagan neighbor.

And the answer is, it’s no kind of religion at all.

—Excerpt from *Jesus the King* by Timothy Keller

saying that we need to attend church more and more often as some religious authority tells us the “end-time” draws nearer.

If this is what Hebrews 10:25 means then we can logically conclude we should be in church buildings more and more often when we feel the “end” is near. Following that logic, then many who believe his return to be imminent will be virtually living in a physical building that calls itself a church so that they can attend services 24/7!

The original readers of Hebrews lived in the volatile political climate of mid-first-century Judea. These Christ-followers were acutely aware of how the Romans enforced their *Pax Romana*. They were aware that a huge military crisis was developing and that the Jewish zealots who were rebelling against Rome would not come out as the winners. In fact, Jesus had prophe-

sied the destruction of the temple within a generation (Matthew 24:34). While these believers also hoped, of course, that Jesus’ return was just around the corner, for them “the day,” in Hebrews 10:25 referred primarily to the coming fall of Jerusalem, which happened in 69-70 AD.

Don’t let anyone (however well-meaning) intimidate you through guilt, misquoted scriptures, and reading end-time, apocalyptic meanings into passages where there are none. Rest assured—you are “in church” all the time if you are in Christ.

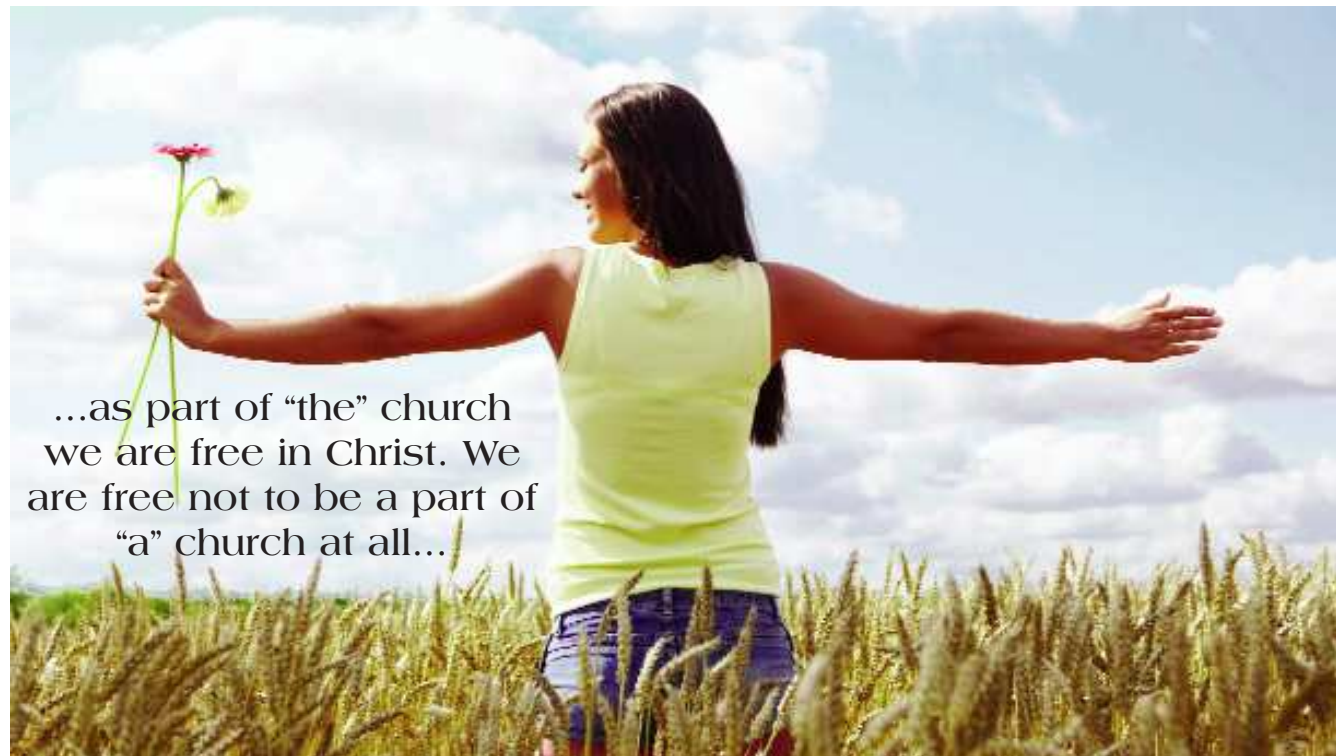
To Attend or Not to Attend— Is That the Question?

In some cases the abuse of Hebrews 10:25 include a threat that “Christians” must find the right church and attend it. The most recent statistics reveal that there are more than 39,000 denominations who

declare themselves to be Christian. If only one of them is “true” then the remaining 39,000 must be a total waste of time!

Assuming the truth of the claim that there is “only one true church” and assuming those engaged in searching for such a physical entity take one week of their lives to determine the validity of each of the 39,000 denominations, then it would take almost 750 lifetimes to find “the truth.” To help persuade those who have been duped into taking such a theological snipe hunt, some denominations actually proclaim the really big lie—that they and they alone are the one and only true church!

The vast majority of these 39,000 denominations want people to regularly attend, many saying that attendance is required. But there are tens of millions of “organic” Christians who do not regularly attend a building. Some accuse un-



...as part of “the” church
we are free in Christ. We
are free not to be a part of
“a” church at all...



...God, of course, knows exactly where each of us is located and he knows exactly what we are enduring. He listens to us, comforts us and leads each one of us in a variety of ways, and through differing experiences and people, even if we don't attend a building.

and services. Is there anything wrong with attracting folks to a church building? Not if what goes on inside is Christ-centered. However, going to a building that calls itself a church can be a spiritual mirage. Religious formulas, programs and routines can scratch a guilty spiritual itch. It's possible for some to go to a service, and having been entertained with rock music while enjoying a Sunday morning latte, they can return home thinking they are "right with God."

The mere act of going to a place where God is said to be can persuade folks to assume their attendance made God happy. It's possible that some fulfill their attendance obligations and think they have their God fix for one more week.

Some people just "feel better" if they regularly attend a brick-and-mortar church. But since we as Christ-followers are primarily defined and identified by the life of our risen Lord who lives within us, we are not necessarily better off or worse off if we attend or fail to attend a brick-and-mortar church. We might be better off spiritually if we miss the negative atmosphere and environment of an abusive or spiritually dead church. Some Christians find that it can be a tightrope act to attend a geographically-located

church while attaching your primary identity as a Christian to the universal body of Christ. Some find that insisting that their primary spiritual relationship is with God alone makes them a *persona non grata* in some religious locations. And some Christians find, when they attend a church filled with strife and bickering, that the church-going experience can take them several days to get over.

There are those who will read what I'm saying and conclude I am trying to get people to stop attending brick-and-mortar churches. There is no need to do such a thing—tens of millions have already stopped attending. Some might say I am making "church" far too convenient (what a concept!).

Jesus is the head of the church, and he, not any human, determines how any of us may be part of his church. There are many ways to "do church," as we are increasingly seeing, driven by the enormous cultural and spiritual shifts in North America. Christianity is dynamic, changing and morphing into new forms, and "doing church" in the traditional way is one of those traditions that is changing.

If all congregations and all denominations were to cease their existence tomorrow, the body of Christ would still be vibrant and dynamic. The body of Christ is not like a club in which we may hold memberships—our divinely-given part in the body of Christ is something which is not physically defined or limited.

We belong to the body of Christ, but it does not belong to us. By God's grace the church is better defined and understood as what we are rather than a place we go or things we do. □

affiliated, non-church attending Christians of being lazy and "doing anything they want." But that accusation works both ways. If doing anything you want to do is your goal, you can either independently give yourself the authority to do what you want to do, or, given the existence of 39,000 choices, you can probably find some denomination that will agree with most, if not all, of what you already believe.

North American Christendom is a market-driven church. The "successful churches" (invariably a numbers-driven criteria is used to define success) in American Christendom have adapted themselves to the culture in order to attract folks to its buildings

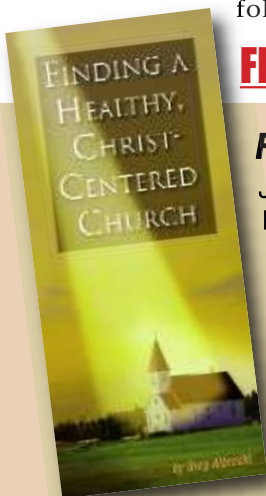
FREE Booklet from PTM

Finding a Healthy, Christ-Centered Church

Jesus said that he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Where is this church he has been building for almost 2,000 years? The church of Jesus Christ is his body, those individuals who have accepted his work on the cross as sufficient for their salvation. Request item #K180.

● Call toll-free 1-800-309-4466

Available in the U.S. and Canada—While supplies last





“No ticket...no jail...that’s grace!”

We had a great vacation in the mountains of North Carolina with our daughters, their husbands and the grandchildren. And then that was followed by a week of just hanging out. It was a nice time ...except for backing into a police car.

That was right after I ran two red lights.

I’m writing this from jail.

Actually, I’m not writing this from jail and therein is a story of grace.

It was the evening of July Fourth and we drove to Lake Junaluska to see the large firework display. There were thousands of people there, we were running late and I made a wrong turn. In an effort to get back on the right road, I ran two stoplights (well, one and a half, since my son-in-law said that he thought one of the lights was yellow) and made another wrong turn around some traffic cones. As I mentioned, there were lots of people and lots of confusion.

So I backed up. That’s when I heard the crash. I thought I had hit my son-in-law’s car (he and the grandchildren were following us) until there was this flashing red light.

Someone said that you know you’re going to have a bad day when your horn sticks and you’re driving behind a group of Hell’s Angels. That’s true. Right behind that on the list of very bad stuff that can happen to you is backing into a police car.

So while Anna, our daughters, their husbands and the grandchildren watched the fireworks, I talked with the police officer and his friend (another police officer he called), and made nice.

This was not a time to give reign to my authority problem with police. This was a time to be humble, quiet, apologetic and really, really repentant. And I was!

There is a lot more to be said, but to make a long story short, the police officer checked his car and there was no damage.

As an afterthought, he checked mine and there was very little damage there either. Then to my surprise and relief, he said, “I’ve decided not to give you a ticket.”

After I got up from kneeling before him, I walked over to where the family was and said, “He decided not to give me a ticket!”

Our oldest granddaughter (age 13) grinned and said, “I would have.”

“I would have too, honey,” I replied.

With the police officer, I didn’t have an excuse. I don’t have one with God either. If that officer had put me in jail and thrown away the keys, I simply would have had to accept his decision as just. I had nothing but his mercy and, as you know, a police officer’s mercy can be an iffy thing.

But God’s mercy never is.

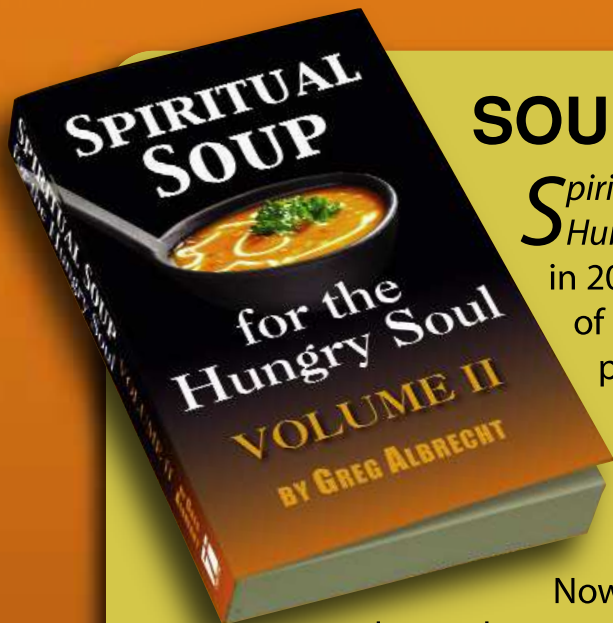
Paul said to the Romans (1:20) about those who have “seen” God’s eternal power and divine nature, “So they are without excuse.” We are without excuse too.

God and police officers are pleased with a “broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17). Self-righteousness, making excuses, pretending to be something you’re not, and self-justification can get you into serious trouble with police officers. It’s not very smart with a holy God either.

There is another similarity between my encounter with the police officer and my encounter with God. It’s the totally amazing, unbelievable and surprising grace I received from both.

Shortly after my unexpected run-in with the police officer, I met, through a friend, the District Attorney of the county where the incident took place.

**Religion,
policemen who
give tickets for
bad behavior,
scary calls to
obedience
 (“God’s going
to break your
legs!”) and
justice for
screwing up...
none of that is
surprising.**



SOUP'S ON!

S*piritual Soup for the Hungry Soul* (published in 2009) is a collection of 48 messages previously given at *Christianity Without the Religion*, PTM's online audio teaching ministry.

Now, by popular demand, more soup is on the way!

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2 is close to being ready for publication. Like *Soup #1*, *Soup #2* will feature 48 messages, organized seasonally, providing spiritual nourishment and food for thought throughout the calendar year.

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

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

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



he asked me...

The DA listens to my radio program, *Key Life*, he likes my books, and was a friend of my late brother who was DA in the adjacent county. "Do you know a police officer named Mike?" I asked him. He said he did. "If you see him," I continued, "tell him you met an old preacher who rises up and calls him blessed."

The DA asked why and I told him the story. Do you know what his reaction was? "You're making that up!"

**"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think..."
Sometimes police officers do that. God always does.**

"No I'm not. Your officer let me go without a ticket or jail time."

Paul gave a benediction to the Ephesians that begins this way (3:20): "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think..."

Sometimes police officers do that. God always does.

And the most surprising thing about that is we aren't surprised by it.

Religion, policemen who give tickets for bad behavior, scary calls to obedience ("God's going to break your legs!"), and justice for screwing up...none of that is surprising.

Grace always is.

I got it from a police officer in the mountains of North Carolina.

I got it from God a few minutes ago and there is a whole lot more where that came from...more than I can ask or think.

You be careful out there. Watch for police cars. If you hit one, you'll get a ticket and might even go to jail.

Didn't happen to me. But then, God likes me more than he likes you. But he likes you too! He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown

THE PLAIN TRUTH



Religious or Spiritual?

Missionaries of yesteryear sacrificed their health and families in order to live in primitive, isolated locales. These heroic men and women had a mission—to learn and adopt a radically different culture and language than their own for the purpose of sharing the gospel. After decades of immersion some missionaries became so fluent in the language of their adopted locale they translated parts of the Bible into what was a relatively obscure, dying language.

Reading the stories of the selfless sacrifice of such men and women takes one's breath away. The staggering price they paid in service to their mission is amazing. But there were many times when the wiles and devices of religion overwhelmed missionaries and the purity of the gospel was either obscured or lost "in translation."

At Play in the Fields of the Lord (1991) is a novel and Hollywood extravaganza that tells such a story. If you are looking for a thought-provoking movie, Kathy Bates, Tom Berenger, Darryl Hannah, Aidan Quinn and John Lithgow will lead you through the Amazon rain forest amidst complex religious and cultural themes that provide a backdrop for the work of missionaries. But I digress.

Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, when 15,000 languages were spoken, linguists estimate that between 4,000 to 9,000 languages have disappeared. Over half of all people on earth now speak one of 15 major languages.

Though the task of learning unknown languages has diminished in direct proportion to the way in which languages are vanishing, missionaries still exist.

One of the controversial topics that the work of missionaries introduces is the North American-European notion that "superior" cultures need to "civilize" savages who run around naked in rain forests (both the notion and the nudity are illustrated in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*). History demon-

strates that mass "evangelism" of less powerful peoples has effectively homogenized them into the conquering culture, appropriating their land, resources, decimating their numbers and obliterating their languages. While we hold the zeal of individual missionaries in high regard, the underlying methodologies many of them learned and subsequently taught deserve to be questioned.

Will the Real Missionaries Please Stand Up?

Fast forward to the 21st century. Within North American Christendom, missionary zeal to adapt to another culture and learn another language seems to be eroding faster than languages are. Within Christendom, a stubborn refusal to accommodate and communicate with others seems to have taken hold. By way of example, about ten years ago I realized (with a mighty assist from God's grace!) that the word "religion" is an inadequate, and more than that, misleading word to speak of the dynamic faith and belief of a Christ follower.

Religion is the universal belief that God (or the gods) is more pleased with humans after they perform duties, rituals and ceremonies than he otherwise would have been. Many who have a Christ-less religious perspective of God perceive him as a fearful deity who must be pleased and appeased—a deity who can be convinced to hold back curses and penalties after the requisite obedience is performed.

Many North Americans today, reacting to the suffocating religious climate imposed by Christendom, define their faith as spiritual, but not religious. The average Christ follower who is a spiritual refugee from Christ-less religion sees the business of big-box Christendom as fostering judgmental, entrenched dogmatism. I agree with them.

In the midst of this sea change of language and its meaning, how is Christ-less religion, as practiced within Christendom, responding?

Another Great Publication From PTM!



A special publication exclusively for Vision Partners

People are talking about PTM's exciting quarterly publication, *Christianity Without the Religion Journal*! This vital resource offers in-depth articles—a deeper study and perspective above and beyond *Plain Truth* magazine. *Christianity Without the Religion Journal (CWRJ)* is packed full of solid messages, questions and answers about the Bible, Christianity and God's amazing grace.

CWRJ deals with the basics—the fundamental truths of the Christian faith so essential for us to remain grounded in Jesus Christ and God's amazing grace—and free from the rules, regulations and rituals of religious legalism.

Here's a sample of features/topics Vision Partners are currently enjoying in *CWRJ*:

- Salvation—What is it? Can I lose it?
- Judgment Day
- Do we have immortal souls?
- Questions & Answers
- 3-month calendar of upcoming events
- A "sneak peek" of an upcoming *CWRJ* audio message

At this point, we're sending *CWRJ* only to Vision Partners. If you aren't yet a PTM Vision Partner, and you are interested in receiving *CWRJ*, call 800-309-4466 for details.

commentary

It's digging in. Christendom at large is refusing to send missionaries to those who want to be spiritual, but not religious. Instead, many within Christendom are lobbing theological bombs of accusation and condemnation at those who refuse to be indoctrinated with its dogmas and creeds.

Religion Under Siege

Many Christian denominations today see themselves as under siege, and consequently spend more time stocking the moats around their theological castles with alligators than they do opening their gates and sending out pioneer-missionaries to the "unsaved" heathens.

The divide is evidenced through some who refuse to read any Bible translated after 1611 and by many others who cling to antiquated church in-speak that has little or no currency today. Thus many fundamentalists find themselves speaking a dying language, yet they refuse to learn the language of their culture in order to communicate with "the world."

This refusal to translate faith and relate to those who express their faith differently is best illustrated in the "religious or spiritual" conundrum.

I have chosen to live in Christ, outside the moats and walls of religious castles. I do not doubt that some who live inside religious and denominational boundaries may also live in Christ, but it seems many of their ilk do not accord me and my fellow refugees the same grace.

Christ-followers who identify themselves as spiritual rather than religious reject the control of institutionalized, organized religion while accepting and pursuing a Christ-centered relationship with God. But these are fighting words for those inside the castle—challenges to entrenched, historic, cherished creeds and beliefs, and must be defeated!

I recently read an article (forwarded by a reader) written by a

denominational authority who critiqued those who identify themselves as irreligious Christians as practicing "cafeteria style spirituality."

According to this expert, those who think of their relationship with God as spiritual rather than religious are using "saccharin platitudes and New Age mysticism" and are guilty of self-centered "naval gazing" and idolatry (presumably because they are not accountable to an established denomination who sees itself as arbitrating between God and humanity).

As for those who do not frequent the doors of a church (gasp!), this authority condemns folks who fail to warm a pew as attempting to "keep their guilt at bay." The rhetoric is no doubt heroic and brave for religious practitioners who cheer such condemnations on, but I see such shame-induced indictments as the same old religious bull.

Where are the 21st century missionaries who will speak to a world held captive by Christ-less religion (including much of Christendom that claims to speak for God)?

Thanks be to God that grace-based, Christ-centered Christianity is insisting that authoritarian, big business religion relinquish its death grip on its followers and yield to God's grace. Plain Truth Ministries is just one of many freedom fighting missionaries for God's grace!

Join us, or join another grace-based, Christ-centered transforming movement as we all work together to reform Christ-less Christendom from the inside out! Ask God to use you as a missionary, translating the gospel away from corrupt and antiquated terms into meaningful, real and dynamic language that speaks to the heart and soul of those in desperate need of God's love.

Faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone! □

—Greg Albrecht



The End of Church

Faith After the Religious Market Collapse?

BY DIANA BUTLER BASS

Something startling is happening in American religion: We are witnessing the end of church or, at the very least, the end of conventional church. The United States is fast-becoming a society where Christianity is being reorganized after religion.

In recent decades, untold numbers of people have left the Roman Catholic Church. In a 2008 survey, Pew research found that one in 10 Americans now considers themselves an ex-Catholic. The situation is so dire that the church launched a PR campaign inviting Catholics to “come home,” to woo back disgruntled members. There was a slight uptick in Catholic

In the last 15 years, conservative Protestant denominations have witnessed significant erosions in membership, money and participation...

membership last year, mostly due to immigrant Catholics. There is no data indicating that Catholics are returning en masse and much anecdotal evidence suggesting that leaving-taking continues. Catholic leaders worry that once the new immigrants become fully part of American society they might leave, too.

The end of church, however, is not merely a Catholic problem. For decades, mainline Protestants have watched helplessly as their membership rolls dwindled, employing program after program to try to

“Spiritual and religious” expresses a grassroots desire for new kinds of faith communities, where institutional structures do not inhibit or impede one’s relationship with God or neighbor... Americans are not rejecting faith—they are, however, rejecting self-serving religious institutions.

stop the decline. In the last 15 years, conservative Protestant denominations have witnessed significant erosions in membership, money and participation—with some of the greatest drops in groups like the Southern Baptist Convention that once seemed impervious to decline. In a typical week, less than a quarter of Americans attend a religious service, down from the half of the population who were regular churchgoers a generation ago.

There are successful individual congregations—Catholic or Protestant, mainline or evangelical, liberal or conservative, small or large—everywhere. But the institutional structures of American religion—denominations of all theological sorts—are in a free-fall.

The religious market collapse has happened with astonishing speed. In 1999, when survey takers asked Americans “Do you consider yourself spiritual or religious,” a solid majority of 54 percent responded that they were “religious but not spiritual.” By 2009, only 9 percent of Americans responded that way. In 10 years, those willing to identify themselves primarily as “religious” plummeted by 45 percentage points.

In the last decade, the word “religion” has become equated with institutional or organized religion. Because of crises such as the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the Roman Catholic abuse scandal, Americans now define “religion” in almost exclusively negative terms. These larger events, especially when combined with increasing irrelevance of too much of organized religion, contributed to an overall decline in church membership, and an overall decline of the numbers of Christians, in the United States.

There may be hope, however, regarding the future of faith. Despite worry about the word, “religion,” Americans are extremely warm toward “spiritual but not religious” (30 percent) and, even more interestingly (and perhaps paradoxically), the term “spiritual and religious” (48 percent). While “religion” means insti-

stop the decline. In the last 15 years, conservative Protestant denominations have witnessed significant erosions in membership, money and participation—with some of the greatest drops

...the institutional structures of American religion—denominations of all theological sorts—are in a free-fall. The religious market collapse has happened with astonishing speed.



The end of conventional church isn't necessarily a bad thing. Christianity after religion, a faith renewed by the experience of God's spirit, is closer to what Jesus hoped for his followers than the scandalous division, politics, and enmity we have now.



Large numbers of Americans are hankering for experiential faith whereby they can connect with God, the divine... that leads to a more profound sense of meaning in the world. Maybe Americans once called this "religion," but no more. Now Americans call it "spirituality."

tutional religion, "spirituality" means an experience of faith. Large numbers of Americans are hankering for experiential faith whereby they can connect with God (the divine) or wonder as well with their neighbors and that leads to a more profound sense of meaning in the world. Maybe Americans once called this "religion," but no more. Now Americans call it "spirituality."

Some Americans want to be spiritually left alone, without complications from organized religion. But nearly half of Americans appear to hope for a spiritual reformation—or even revolution—in their faith traditions and denominations. Congregations that exhibit a

...the macro-structures of American faith—denominations—have yet to hear this message. They are still trying to fix institutional problems and flex political muscle instead of tending to the spiritual longings of regular Americans.



vibrant spiritual life embodying a living faith in practical ways succeed, even in the religion bear market. These sorts of communities are models of what might be possible to renew wearied organizations. But the macro-structures of American faith—denominations—have yet to hear this message. They are still trying to fix institutional problems and flex political muscle instead of tending to the spiritual longings of regular Americans.

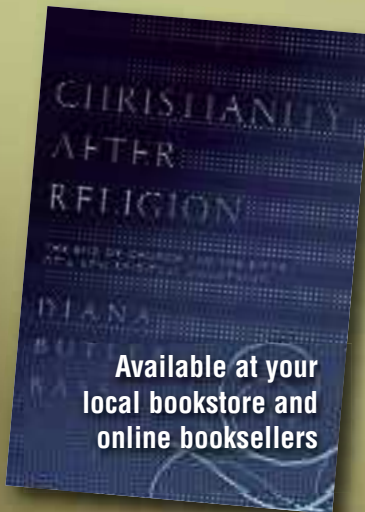
"Spiritual and religious" expresses a grassroots desire for new kinds of faith communities, where institutional structures do not inhibit or impede one's relationship with God or neighbor. Americans are searching for churches—and temples, synagogues, and mosques—that are not caught up in political intrigue, rigid rules and prohibitions, institutional maintenance, unresponsive authorities, and inflexible dogma but instead offer pathways of life-giving spiritual experience, connection, meaning, vocation, and doing justice in the world. Americans are not rejecting faith—they are, however, rejecting self-serving religious institutions.

The end of conventional church isn't necessarily a bad thing. Christianity after religion, a faith renewed by the experience of God's spirit, is closer to what Jesus hoped for his followers than the scandalous division, politics, and enmity we have now. Will there still be Christianity after the end of institutional religion? Yes, there will be. But it is going to be different than what Americans have known, a faith responsive to the longings of those who are expecting more spiritual depth and greater ethical integrity rather than more conventional church. Indeed, I suspect that

the end of church is only the beginning of a new Great Awakening. □

Used by permission. Originally published in The Huffington Post, February 29, 2012.

Diana Butler Bass is the author of Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening.



Available at your local bookstore and online booksellers

THE PLAIN TRUTH

Faith

—the Genie in the Bottle?

by Dave Price

A paradigm is a philosophical or theoretical framework of thought. The word is most commonly used in science to define theories or principles which appear to be irrefutable. A paradigm shift, then, is a framework of thought which challenges the previously accepted standard and proposes a new paradigm. The best example of this is Einstein's work on relativity, which challenged the previously accepted paradigm of Newtonian mechanics.

To make a long story short, Einstein proved that Newtonian mechanics, a principle used to measure the movement of a body under the exertion of force, was accurate but only capable of measuring movement below the speed of light.





The paradigm of faith in the Christian world today relegates faith to a thing which can be acquired and accumulated. Just listen to the way Christians talk of faith... "God will give you everything you desire if you only have faith."

Thus, Newtonian mechanics was the paradigm, and Einstein's theory of relativity was the paradigm shift.

This also had the unexpected result of producing the term "paradigm paralysis", which is described as the inability to see beyond the current model of thinking. You should understand that what follows would not generally be

accepted within the scientific realm, but I hope it proves to be a useful exercise nonetheless.

The Paradigm of Faith

The Christian realm is quite familiar with the phrase "the just shall live by faith," a verse in Habakkuk which is quoted by the apostle Paul in Romans.

What is this thing called "faith"?

The paradigm of faith in the Christian world today relegates faith to a thing which can be acquired and accumulated. Just listen to the way Christians talk of faith. "God will heal you if you have enough faith." "God will change the circumstances of your life if you only have enough faith."

Faith becomes nothing more than the genie in the bottle—rub it three times and you'll get everything your heart desires.

"God will give you everything you desire if you only have faith." Want that new car or that big house? All you need is faith. If you're unemployed or you haven't been healed, you just don't have enough faith. Faith becomes nothing more than the genie in the bottle—rub it three times and you'll get

relationship with my wife I have nothing but a piece of paper.

In both the Hebrew and Greek, the words translated faith in English are words which imply the utter truthfulness and faithfulness of one, in particular God Himself. Faith is based entirely on the truthfulness and the fidelity of God in the face of any circumstance. Faith is based on the understanding that God is always faithful, that God is

please God? The most insidious question today is, which political party is my faith affiliated with?

At best, questions like these reduce faith to an ineffective document stored in the vault of our logic. At worst, they reduce faith to the idolatry of the genie in the bottle. I am not convinced that the church as a whole can recover from the adulteration of the meaning of faith.

The question is whether

The question is whether individuals can propel themselves out of the church's paradigm paralysis, the inability to think outside of the babbling puppets in the pulpits whose only goal is job security founded on the gospel of fear.

everything your heart desires. Better collect as much as you can so that you can trot it out in the midst of your next crisis. If you are Catholic, say a few more "Hail Marys." If you are Protestant, put a little extra in the offering plate and do a couple good deeds. Then you'll have all you need when you need it the most. This is the paradigm of faith in the church today.

The Paradigm Shift

The idea that faith is something I "acquire" is as misguided as the idea that I own my wife. I may have a marriage certificate which would imply a certain set of beliefs and expectations, but unless I cultivate an active

always loving, that God is always working for our good, despite the attempt of circumstances to prove otherwise.

This is the paradigm shift which must occur in the church today. Faith is not a commodity to be acquired and possessed like stocks, redeemed when we need the interest they have accrued. Faith is a relationship.

I can only act in my marriage according to the depth of my relationship with my wife. I can only act with faith according to the depth of my relationship with God, given to me by his grace.

Paradigm Paralysis

How much faith do I have?
How much faith does it take to

individuals can propel themselves out of the church's paradigm paralysis, the inability to think outside of the babbling puppets in the pulpits whose only goal is job security founded on the gospel of fear. What is faith?

Faith is founded on the absolute trustworthiness of God derived from a direct and active relationship with the only One who can be trusted completely. God grants faith—infusing it in the spirit that abandons itself in him. From God's side of the equation, there is nothing that impedes faith. □

Dave Price is a husband, father, Marine Corps veteran and blogger (<http://daveprice.hubpages.com/>) whose life revolves around family first and church second.

Revised and Refreshed PTM Website



Like an electronic missionary—
translating the good news into a
new language and culture.

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

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

The goal of missionary work is to “translate” and contextualize the good news of God’s grace into other languages and cultures. Today, the Internet is a language and a culture that is experiencing explosive growth! PTM wants to effectively communicate and share God’s grace in this electronic culture, and extraordinary measures must be taken to make that happen.

Thank you for your help in this ongoing worldwide work.

www.ptm.org



We're Also Still Here To Serve You The Way We Always Have!



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

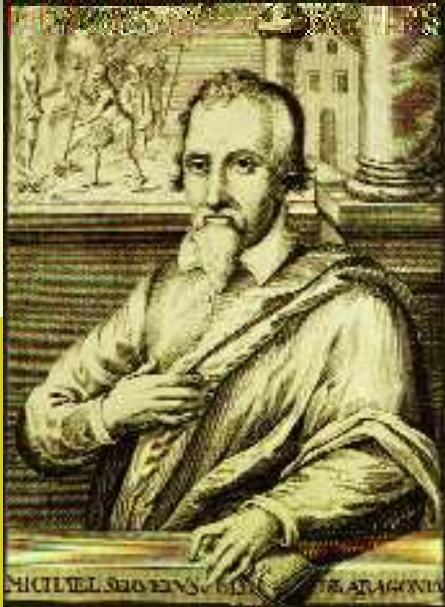
We're still here to serve you! Don't worry, we haven't abandoned those of you who haven't joined the electronic revolution and prefer to read and listen in more traditional ways. **We are still here to serve** those who want to receive our material through the mail.

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

Thanks for allowing us to continue to serve you!

Greg Albrecht and the staff
of Plain Truth Ministries

THE POISON OF RELIGION



Editor's Note: With grateful thanks to Thomas Nelson for the permission it granted, we provide a selection from Joseph Loconte's *The Searchers*. All of our excerpts are from chapter three, "The Poison of Religion." Because of space limitations we have chosen to excerpt several sections of this chapter, and we are grateful to Mr. Loconte and Thomas Nelson for allowing us to do so.

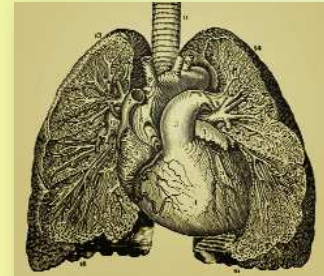
"He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him."

It is Friday afternoon, October 27, 1553, and a Spaniard named Michael Servetus is tied to a stake on a hill just outside the gates of Geneva, waiting to be executed.

Servetus is a talented physician, the first European to explain pulmonary

circulation, the movement of blood away from the heart to the lungs. Skilled in biblical languages, he is also something of a theologian. He is an opinionated man, often pugnacious, and it is his religious opinions that have gotten him into trouble.

Servetus doesn't agree with Church teachings about the Trinity: that there is one God, but that he exists as three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has published several unorthodox writings on the topic, which have incensed Church authorities; he seemed to be goading them into a fight. The Catholic Inquisitions in Spain and France have tried to arrest him for heresy. Protestant authorities in Geneva, led by John Calvin, want his head on a platter—literally.

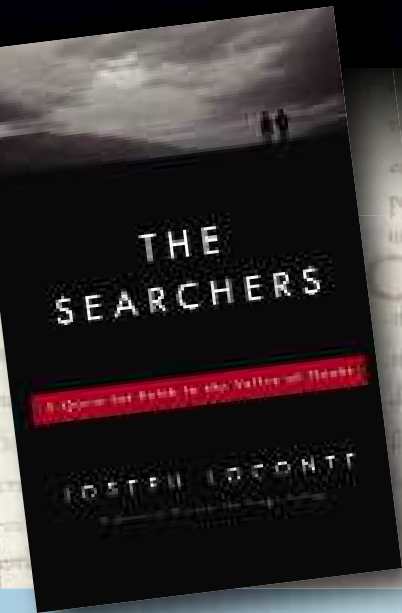


"When religion is shaken to the core," Calvin warns, "when God is blasphemed in a most loathsome manner, when souls are led to perdition by godless and destructive teachings, then it is necessary to find the remedy which will prevent the deadly poison from spreading."¹ Many Church leaders, in fact, believed that the best remedy for the malignancy of men such as Servetus was execution.

For years Servetus lived as a hunted man. Even his brother, Juan, a priest, was sent to convince him to return to Spain for questioning. "I was sought up and down," Servetus writes, "to be snatched to my death."²

After escaping from a Catholic prison, Servetus makes the mistake of attending a Protestant church, where he is recognized instantly. He is arrested, tried, and found guilty of heresy, like thousands of others before him. He begs in vain to be killed by the sword instead of by fire. His last words: "Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me."





Jesus over the centuries. Skeptics seem acutely conscious of the divide. I was reminded of this fact years ago when I first saw the Woody Allen film *Hannah and Her Sisters* at a university theater. One of the characters in the film, a cynical artist, gets into a discussion with his lover about God: “If Jesus were to come back and see what people have done in his name, he’d throw up.” The campus crowd erupted into applause.

THE REAL DANGER IS THE PRETEND FACTOR, THE HAZE OF RELIGIOSITY THAT TRIES TO CONCEAL THE SHALLOWNESS— AND THE DEEPENING ROT UNDERNEATH.

So let us be frank, without being unkind, about the failures of contemporary Christianity. For all the talk about “new life” and “amazing grace,” most Christians appear to be living their lives more or less like everybody else. Many, in fact, seem to be doing worse. “Too much of the good life

Religious leaders have always worried about the poison of heresy, ideas that seem to deny or denigrate the faith. Yet there is another kind of poison, that of religious zeal gone wrong, what might be called the *poison of religion*. Much of the history of the West, and the world at large, has been tortured and debased by it. Maybe half of the wickedness in all the world is committed under its name. “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully,” observed Pascal, “as when they do it from religious conviction.”³

The Inquisition Tribunal (*Spanish: Auto de fe de la Inquisición*) is a painting produced by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya. It shows an *Auto de fe*, or accusation of heretics, by the tribunal of the Spanish Inquisition, being held inside a church. The accused sit in chains and pointed hats in front of a large audience.

An *auto-da-fé* was the ritual of public penance of condemned heretics and apostates that took place when the Spanish Inquisition had decided their punishment, followed by the execution by the civil authorities of the sentences imposed. The most extreme punishment imposed on those convicted was execution by burning.

Counterfeit Faith

Christianity—or, more accurately, the church acting in its name—has inspired an awful amount of human carnage. Many believers have failed to grasp just how far the church has drifted from the life and teachings of





...TOMÁS DE TORQUEMADA WAS KNOWN AS “THE HAMMER OF HERETICS,” AND FOR GOOD REASON. IN THE FIRST EIGHT YEARS OF OPERATION, “THE HAMMER” STRUCK DOWN 700 PEOPLE, ALL BURNED AT THE STAKE. HE SET THE TONE FOR THE CHURCH IN SPAIN. BY THE 1540S, MORE THAN 20,200 PEOPLE WERE EXECUTED, INCLUDING PROTESTANTS, MUSLIMS, AND JEWS.

ends up being toxic, deforming us spiritually,” confessed author David Goetz in *Death by Suburb*. “The drive to succeed, and to make one’s children succeed, overpowers the best intentions to live more reflectively, no matter the piety.”⁴

By the poison of religion, I don’t mean the problem of Christians who live safe, middle-class, unremarkable lives. The real danger is the pretend factor, the haze of religiosity that tries to conceal the shallowness—and the deepening rot underneath.

We know the telltale signs: thundering preachers who bilk their congregations to support their own lavish lifestyles; politicians who trumpet their Christian faith while cheating on their wives; church leaders obsessed with the sins of others but who can’t imagine iniquity in their own tent. A church in Kansas, for example, eager to see America suffer divine wrath for its sins, famously deploys its members to military funerals with signs that read “Thank God for Dead Soldiers” and “You’re Going to Hell.”⁵

Or consider the crisis of child sexual abuse that has seized the Catholic Church for more than a decade. There seems to be no bottom to it. Even Pope Benedict XVI has been criticized for his role in the Church’s failure to discipline abusive priests and remove

them from ministry. The problem first arose in the United States, but thousands of similar cases of the sexual exploitation of children have been reported—from parishes in Ireland, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy.

What has emerged is a pattern of institutional denial and cover-up. A Church commission in Dublin concluded that Catholic leaders were concerned only with avoiding scandal, protecting the reputation of the Church, and guarding its financial assets. Even as credible stories of abusive priests came to the attention of Church authorities, “the welfare of children, which should have been the first priority, was not even a factor to be considered.”⁶ Church leaders, rather than repentant, have been defensive. During a Good Friday service in St. Peter’s Basilica, a senior Vatican priest even complained that attacks on the Church were like the history of persecution and “collective violence” against the Jews.⁷

What kind of religion, we are entitled to ask, puts the well-being of children at the bottom of its priority list? What kind of spiritual leadership condones the sexual exploitation of children and then claims the role of helpless victim?

“If ever the book which I am not going to write is written, it must be the full confession by Christendom of Christendom’s specific contribution to the sum of human cruelty and treachery,” writes C.S. Lewis. “Large areas of ‘the World’ will not hear us till we have publicly disowned much of our past.”⁸ Lewis might have added that we need to disavow much of the present as well.

The Spirit of the Inquisition

A good way to understand the present state of affairs, though, is to reflect for a moment on the past. We must try to understand the remarkable capacity of organized religion to produce outwardly devout individuals with hearts of greed and malice.

The great Catholic reformer Erasmus of Rotterdam brilliantly satirized the problem in his sixteenth-century blockbuster *The Praise of Folly*. Erasmus accused religious leaders of confusing their impenetrable speculations about God with real wisdom about holy living. At one point he poked fun at the elaborate headgear worn by professors of divinity, a status symbol denied to lesser mortals. “Don’t be surprised when you see them at public disputations with their heads so carefully

wrapped up in swaths of cloth," he wrote, "for otherwise they would clearly explode."⁹

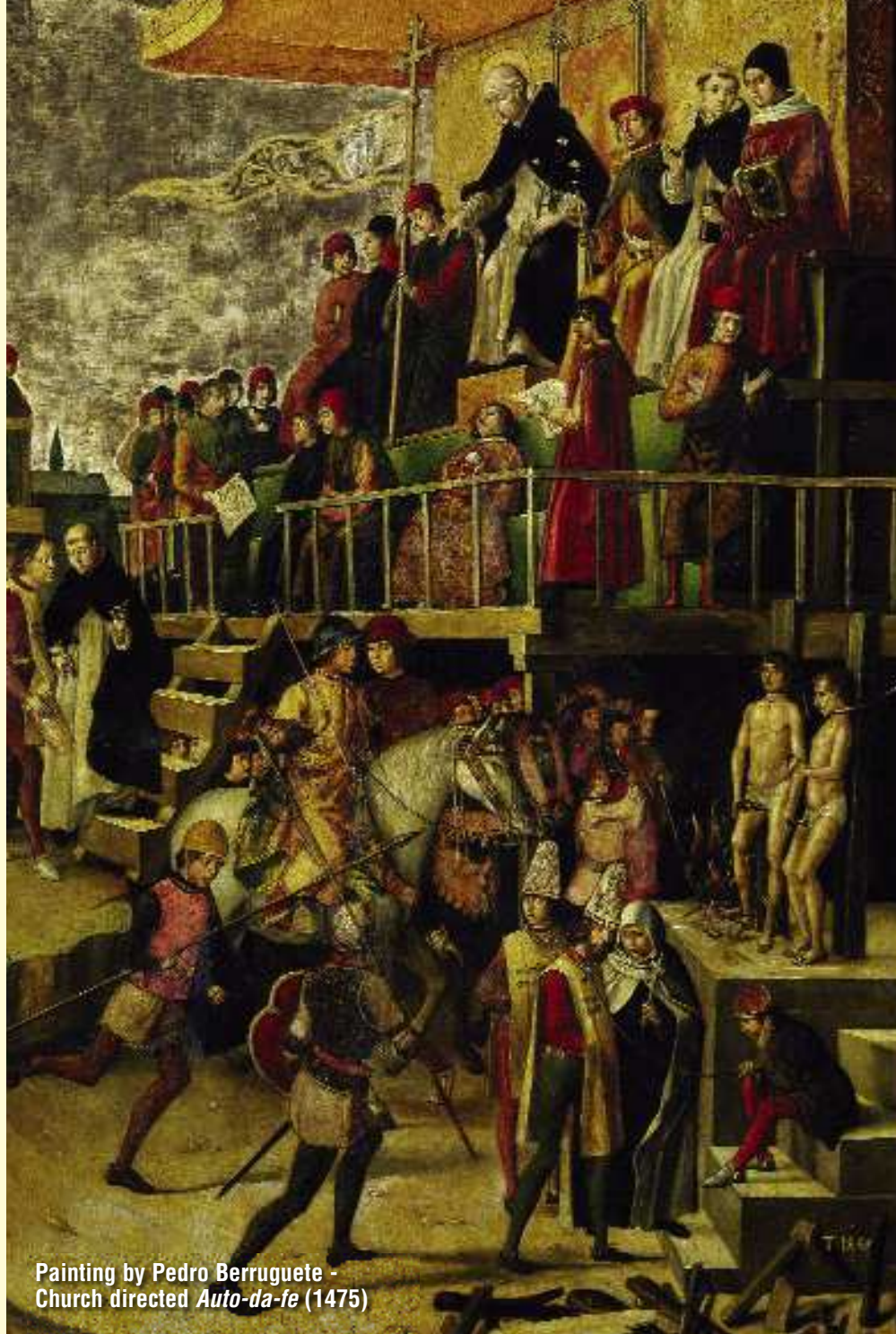
This was one of many complaints against the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, when the machinery of the Inquisition slipped into high gear. Church Inquisitors were neither the moral equivalent of the Nazis nor the bumbling clerics of Monty Python skits. They were ordinary men who unleashed atrocities in the name of God. Before it ran its course, the Inquisition robbed thousands of their property, sent thousands more to their deaths, and created a culture of fear and betrayal that threatened the entire social fabric of Europe. In a 2001 examination of clerical responsibility, Pope John Paul II called the Inquisition "a tor-

WHY DOES THIS LEGACY OF SHAME MATTER TO US TODAY? BECAUSE THE ARCHITECTS OF THE INQUISITION DID NOT SET OUT TO WREAK SUCH HAVOC. THEY WERE MISLED BY THE SAME SPIRIT OF HYPOCRISY THAT HAUNTS CONTEMPORARY RELIGION.

mented phase in the history of the Church."¹⁰

Why does this legacy of shame matter to us today? Because the architects of the Inquisition did not set out to wreak such havoc. They were misled by the same spirit of hypocrisy that haunts contemporary religion.

Let's look at it briefly.



Painting by Pedro Berruguete - Church directed *Auto-da-fe* (1475)

Launched in the thirteenth century, the Catholic Inquisition was composed of a series of Church courts, spread throughout Europe, with one function: to root out and prosecute heresy. A heretic was a person who had accepted Christianity and was baptized, but promoted doctrines contrary to those upheld by

the Church. From the Catholic perspective, the purpose of the Inquisition was pastoral. It sought, first, to lead the accused toward repentance and, second, to protect others from the danger that heresy created to their own spiritual lives. Whatever its motives, the Inquisition quickly became an instrument of terror leveled



AS ONE CATHOLIC HISTORIAN HAS WRITTEN, WHEN GIAN PIETRO CARAFA WAS NAMED POPE IN MAY 1555, A "NEW HARSH WIND" BLEW THROUGH ROME. "EVEN IF MY OWN FATHER WERE A HERETIC," THE NEW POPE DECLARED, "I WOULD GATHER THE WOOD TO BURN HIM."¹²

thousands of dissenters from the Catholic Church almost immediately. From the Catholic standpoint, they were heretics who had to be confronted and overcome. Thus, the Roman Inquisition was set up in 1542, as the Church was composing its theological rebuttal to the Protestants at the Council of Trent.

Compared to Spain, the Roman Inquisition was less violent and systematic. There were fewer executions. Nevertheless, it was no pajama party; the same pattern of suspicion and persecution prevailed. Leaders such as Pope Paul IV made sure of it. As one Catholic historian has written, when Gian Pietro Carafa was named pope in May 1555, a "new harsh wind" blew

accused, harassed, arrested, and sent to the gallows for one reason: they failed to adhere to Church teaching and practice. Unlike the secular courts, the proceedings of the Inquisition were kept secret and the laws of evidence were often ignored. Whether falsely accused or not, thousands perished in the flames and tens of thousands were sent to prison. And it all proceeded in the name of Christian truth, under the authority of the highest officials of the Church.

What were the motives of the

against all the perceived enemies of the Church.

The Spanish Inquisition, probably the most savage of all the Church Inquisitions, was set up in 1481 under the control of a Dominican friar, Tomás de Torquemada. He was known as "the hammer of heretics," and for good reason. In the first eight years of operation, "the hammer"

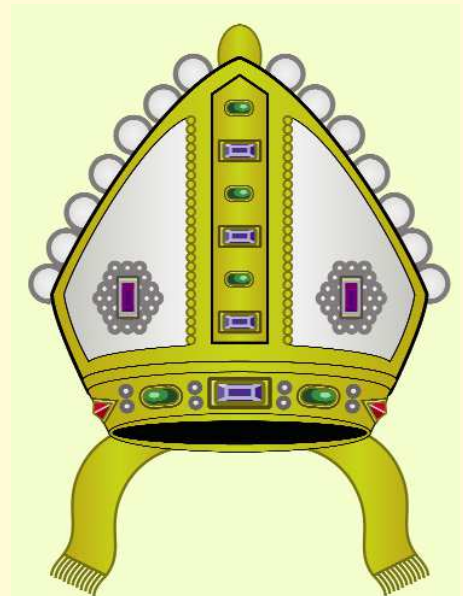
...IT IS IMPORTANT TO REALIZE THAT THE INQUISITION WAS A SELF-FINANCING INSTITUTION, DRAWING ON THE PROPERTY OF THE CONDEMNED. CHURCH AUTHORITIES THUS CREATED A FINANCIAL INCENTIVE TO SECURE CONVICTIONS—HENCE THE USE OF TORTURE.

struck down 700 people, all burned at the stake. He set the tone for the Church in Spain. By the 1540s, more than 20,200 people were executed, including Protestants, Muslims, and Jews. Torquemada was so hated that he traveled with a bodyguard of 50 mounted guards and 250 armed men.¹¹

The onset of the Protestant Reformation—the spiritual revolution launched by Martin Luther in 1517—created

through Rome. The Jesuit leader, Ignatius of Loyola, said that his bones quaked when he first learned of Carafa's election. "Even if my own father were a heretic," the new pope declared, "I would gather the wood to burn him."¹²

Historians debate the lethality of the Inquisition, but whatever the actual death toll, the blight on the Christian gospel remains. Ordinary people were spied upon,



MEANWHILE, THE SUREST ROUTE TO ADVANCEMENT IN THE HIERARCHY WAS TO PROVE YOUR ZEAL TO PUT DOWN HERESY. NO MAN EARNED A CARDINAL'S HAT BY SHOWING MERCY TOWARD THE GODLESS.

Inquisitors? No doubt some acted out of concern for spiritual truth, twisted as it was. But it is important to realize that the Inquisition was a self-financing institution, drawing on the property of the condemned. Church authorities thus created a financial incentive to secure convictions—hence the use of torture. Meanwhile, the surest route to advancement in the hierarchy was to prove your zeal to put down heresy. No man earned a cardinal's hat by showing mercy toward the godless.

Here is the poison of religion: the use of coercion and violence to serve the Will to Power, all under the pretense of piety.

The Inquisition finally petered out by the early nineteenth century. The last official Spanish execution for heresy was in 1826, when a schoolmaster was hanged for substituting "Praise be to God" in place of "Ave Maria" in school prayers.¹³

Dogma vs. Charity

What contributed to this long, black episode in the history of the Church? In a word, *dogma*. As the Church clarified and formalized its teaching, the list of doctrines and creeds multiplied—as did the number of heretics. Catholic thinkers such as Erasmus complained that the thirst for persecution had become insatiable. "Once faith was more a matter of a way of life than a profession of articles," he wrote. "Articles increased, but sincerity decreased: contention boiled over, charity grew cold."¹⁴

In other words, the Church became obsessed with correct doctrine rather than with the kind of life modeled by Jesus in the gospels. Protestant theologian Philip van Limborch, in his 1685 work *The History of the Inquisition*, criticized the Church for being led by "men of corrupt minds" and "strong prejudices." He declared that anyone unfamiliar with the teachings

CHURCH INQUISITORS WERE NEITHER THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF THE NAZIS NOR THE BUMBLING CLERICS OF MONTY PYTHON SKITS. THEY WERE ORDINARY MEN WHO UNLEASHED ATROCITIES IN THE NAME OF GOD.

of Jesus in the gospels would look at the violence meted out by churchmen against their neighbors and come to one conclusion: Christianity "was one of the worst religions in the world."¹⁵

These habits of mind were not confined to the Catholic Church, of course. Protestants added more than their fair share to the record of militant religion. When Calvinists came to power in places such as Scotland or the Netherlands, violent crackdowns on religious dissent were the norm. It is hard to imagine today, but even the Anglican Church—known for its spirit of moderation—took a lead

AS THE CHURCH CLARIFIED AND FORMALIZED ITS DOGMA, THE LIST OF DOCTRINES AND CREEDS MULTIPLIED—AS DID THE NUMBER OF HERETICS... IN OTHER WORDS, THE CHURCH BECAME OBSESSED WITH CORRECT DOCTRINE RATHER THAN WITH THE KIND OF LIFE MODELED BY JESUS IN THE GOSPELS.





JOHN TILLOTSON, AN ENGLISH MINISTER OFTEN AT ODDS WITH THE PROTESTANT ESTABLISHMENT, DESCRIBED A KIND OF MORAL INVERSION AT WORK: THE DEEPER THE VOID OF SPIRITUAL LIFE, THE STRONGER THE IMPULSE TO PERSECUTE OTHERS OVER DIFFERENCES OF BELIEF OR PRACTICE.

role in the Protestant campaigns of repression following the Reformation.

By 1660, when the Church of England was restored after the English Revolution, a new policy of intolerance was put in place: worship outside the official Anglican establishment became a criminal act. Virtually overnight, an entire subculture of dissenters, numbering in the tens of thousands, faced the threat of fines, arrests, and imprisonment. Ministers who failed to tow the line lost their livelihoods. Disobedience to the national church was seen as disloyalty to the Crown—an act of treason. “If Restoration England did not see a return to the burning of heretics,” writes British historian John Coffey, “it did witness persecution on a grand scale.”¹⁶

The pattern was repeated in other Protestant states—as was the problem of counterfeit religion. John Tillotson, an English minister often at odds with the Protestant establishment, described a kind of moral inversion at work: the deeper the void of spiritual life, the stronger the impulse to persecute others over differences of belief or practice. “It is very possible,” he warned from the pulpit in 1694, “that

men may be devout and zealous in Religion, very nice and scrupulous about the worship and service of God; and yet because of their palpable defect in points of justice and honesty, of meekness and humility, of peace and charity, may be gross and odious hypocrites.”¹⁷

The English philosopher John Locke, who read and admired Tillotson’s sermons, based much of his famous appeal for religious liberty on the scandal of hypocritical religion. Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) took aim at Protestant ministers who enlisted the gospel of Jesus only to treat others in ways that Jesus could not possibly condone. “At last it appears what zeal for the church, joined with the desire for dominion, is capable to produce,” he wrote, “and how easily the pretence of religion, and of the care of souls, serves for a cloak to covetousness, rapine, and ambition.”¹⁸

The problem of the “pretence of religion”—otherwise known as hypocrisy—is an old one. It was a frequent subject of the teachings of Jesus. He likened it to the tiniest of organisms, which nevertheless spreads and overwhelms its host. It was a condition to be avoided at all costs. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees,” he warned, “which is hypocrisy.”¹⁹

What Holiness Looks Like

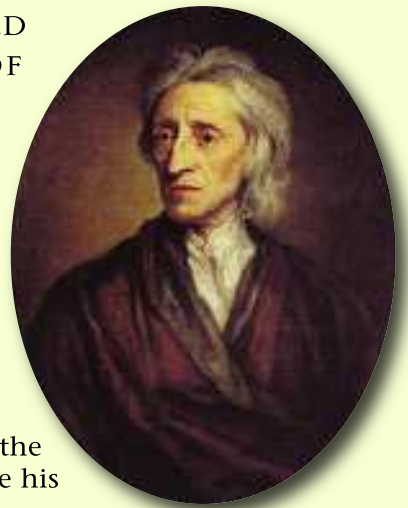
The point that must not be missed is that the Bible is utterly realistic about the poison of religion. Jesus was no fool about human nature. He was well aware of our inclination to abuse religion for our own selfish ends.

Consider an encounter that Jesus had at the home of a religious leader, a Pharisee, named Simon. As was the custom, Jesus and Simon were sitting on the floor, reclining at a table as lunch was being served. Suddenly, a woman—delicately described as someone who “lived a sinful life” in town—made a surprise appearance. In other words, a known prostitute walked into the equivalent of the High and Holy Tabernacle on Bible Belt Boulevard. It was scandalous. Yet there she stood, beside Jesus, overcome with emotion. There were no words to say. All she could do was weep.

Why was she weeping? Perhaps because one morning this woman wandered into the crowds around the Teacher, and as she listened to him speak, she was filled with regret. But not only regret, for there was hope in his message, and something he said stirred her. “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick,” Jesus said. “For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”²⁰ If God is really anything like this, she thought, maybe there was a chance for her to start over, to put things right. So she broke all



THE ENGLISH PHILOSOPHER JOHN LOCKE, WHO READ AND ADMIRERD TILLOTSON'S SERMONS, BASED MUCH OF HIS FAMOUS APPEAL FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ON THE SCANDAL OF HYPOCRITICAL RELIGION.



conventions and entered a fortress of religious rectitude, the house of a Pharisee.

As soon as she saw Jesus, her tears flowed so freely that they soaked his feet. She wiped his feet with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume over them from a bottle she brought with her.

Simon could hardly contain himself. The scornful look said it all: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."²¹ In the sanctified cocoon of the religious professional, prophets and prostitutes don't eat at the same lunch buffet. This man, Jesus, was clearly on the wrong side of God.

But Jesus understood the holiness of God much differently than Simon. To help him grasp it, he told a story about two men in

debt to a moneylender. One man's loan was fifty times the size of the other's—yet the moneylender canceled both their debts. "Now which of them will love him more?" Jesus asked. Simon replied, somewhat grudgingly: "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."²²

Here again we see how religion can operate like a cancer in the bloodstream. As a Pharisee, a stickler about observing every rule in the Jewish law, Simon had lots of theology under his belt. But he suffered from a deficit of faith; he lacked a heart of gratitude for the kindness God had shown him in his own life. As he dressed himself in the robes and rituals of religion, his self-image skyrocketed. Yet the more he approached faith as a public pose, as a performance

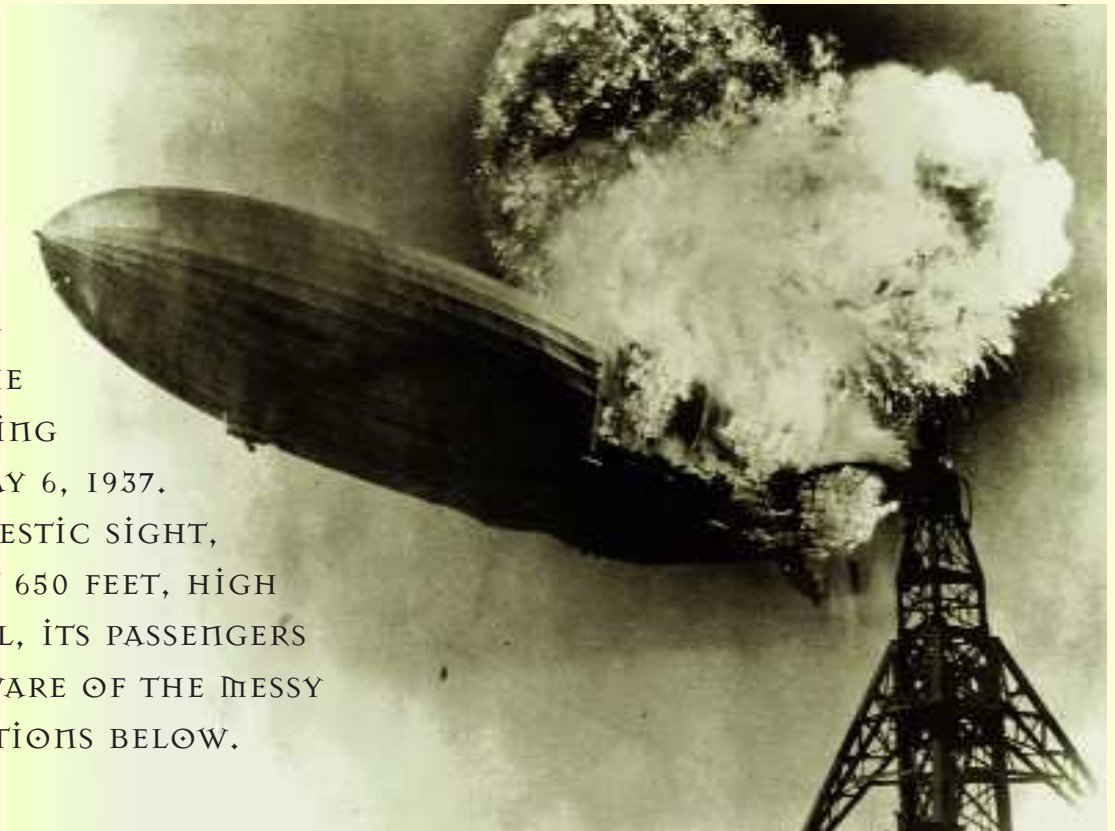
act, the more his soul withered. As Abraham Heschel once observed, "Hypocrisy rather than heresy is the cause of spiritual decay."²³ Thus, in Simon's cynical eyes, the wayward woman was not just an irreligious person; she was a contemptible person, deserving only to be judged, despised, and marginalized.

Simon's spiritual condition was like the *Hindenburg* airship in the early evening hours of May 6, 1937. It was a majestic sight, soaring at 650 feet, high above it all, its passengers

IN THE SANCTIFIED COCOON OF THE RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONAL, PROPHETS AND PROSTITUTES DON'T EAT AT THE SAME LUNCH BUFFET. THIS MAN, JESUS, WAS CLEARLY ON THE WRONG SIDE OF GOD. BUT JESUS UNDERSTOOD THE HOLINESS OF GOD MUCH DIFFERENTLY THAN SIMON.



SIMON'S
SPIRITUAL
CONDITION
WAS LIKE THE
HINDENBURG
AIRSHIP IN THE
EARLY EVENING
HOURS OF MAY 6, 1937.
IT WAS A MAJESTIC SIGHT,
SOARING AT 650 FEET, HIGH
ABOVE IT ALL, ITS PASSENGERS
COZILY UNAWARE OF THE MESSY
DISTRACTIONS BELOW.



cozily unaware of the messy distractions below. The zeppelin offered astonishing luxury: fine food, a baby grand piano, breathtaking views. As one passenger described the ride: "You feel as though you are carried in the arms of angels."²⁴ At 7:25 p.m., as the airship prepared to land at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey, a small flame appeared on the top of the tail section of the vessel. Within thirty four seconds, the massive blimp was engulfed in flames and burned to the ground.

Jesus made it his business to bring down the spiritual blimps of his day. Now it was Simon's turn. "You did not give me any water for my feet," Jesus told him, "but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped

kissing my feet.... Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."²⁵ □

Copyright ©2012, Joseph LaConte. Published by Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN. Used by permission.

1. Hans R. Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio*, 1515–1563 (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 79.
2. Juan Naya and Marian Hillar, *Michael Servetus, Heartfelt: Proceedings of the International Servetus Congress*, Barcelona, October 20-21, 2006, xvi.
3. Pascal: *Pensees*, 265.
4. David L. Goetz, *Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 9.
5. Ben Conery, "Supreme Court Hears Arguments on Church Protests at Military Funerals," *The Washington Times*, Oct. 6, 2010.
6. Patsy McGarry, "Commission Finds Church Covered Up Sex Abuse," *Irish Times*, Nov. 26, 2009.
7. Michael E. Ruane and William Wan, "Vatican Priest Likens Criticism of Church on Abuse to Anti-Semitism," *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2010.
8. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 49.
9. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 97.
10. *The History Channel* (1999), *The Inquisition*.
11. Michael C. Thomsett, *The Inquisition: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 158.
12. Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, 298–99.

13. *Ibid.*, 308.
14. John Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1987), 195.
15. Philip van Limborch, *The History of the Inquisition* (London, 1731), 124–125; 17.
16. John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2000), 166.
17. John Tillotson, "Of Sincerity Towards God and Man," Sermon the First. Preach'd at Kingston, July 29, 1694, London: 1735, 11–12.
18. John Norton and Susan Mendus, eds., *John Locke: A Letter Concerning Toleration in Focus* (London: Routledge, 2004), 38.
19. Luke 12:1.
20. Matt. 9:12–13.
21. Luke 7:49.
22. Luke 7:41–43.
23. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 10–11.
24. Jill Sherman, *The Hindenburg Disaster* (Minneapolis: ABDO Pub., 2010), 52.
25. Luke 7:44–47

Joseph Loconte Ph.D is an associate Professor of History at The King's College in New York City, where he teaches Western Civilization and American Foreign Policy. His commentary on international human rights and religious freedom has appeared in the nation's leading media outlets, including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post and National Public Radio.



From “Fine” TO “FINISHED” IN THIRTY DAYS

by Anne Wiggins

It was the first time I had ever walked around a hotel crying. I'd been in tears a lot lately, but not for the same reason I was this morning. Guests of the hotel frequently stopped me in the halls to see if I was okay. When I told them I had lost my cat, their invariable response was, “What does your cat look like?” I politely described Nibbles while thinking, *Umm...it's a cat. If you see one in this hotel, it's probably mine.*

I was driving 2,000 miles across country with my 12-year-old daughter, Noelle and Nibbles...my rescue-cat. As I pulled out of my house for the last time, I couldn't even look back.

We moved to our little town out west to pastor a church of about 70 people back in 1997. We were newly married at the time and ready for whatever God had in store for us. My husband, a natural leader, ministered to that congregation of 70 people as if they were all VIP's. In his mind,



Now tears of relief spilled down my cheeks, which were already red with embarrassment at this situation. As I held my shaking cat, all I could think was, “Oh, Nibbles, if only you would trust me. You’re only not safe when you don’t trust me.”

that’s what they were. No wonder our tiny church began to grow.

As the Word of God was taught, more and more people began to check us out. Most stayed. We outgrew our little building and moved into the local high school auditorium. Still growing, we then purchased 25 acres of prime property and built our first auditorium in 2006. By spring of 2011, we were debt-free and ministering to about 3,000 people each weekend.

Life was smooth. We had been on *Outreach Magazine’s* list of “Top 100 Fastest Growing Churches” twice. In our 14 years there, we never experienced a tense meeting. Never a cross word. Our church was characterized by peace, and the community flocked to it.

Until the phone rang one

Saturday afternoon. My husband had finally hired someone to help him lead the staff a couple of years before, but this leader began to feel the church needed to move in a different direction than it had been going for over a decade. It was a philosophical disagreement—not a moral one. The quiet lack of support spread through the staff, culminating in a total meltdown by the pastors and directors one morning.

The board, shocked and trying to settle things down, put my husband on an instant 30-day sabbatical (translated:

“suspension”). The phone call on Saturday afternoon informed him he would not preach again until further notice, and he was not to be around the church or office during this forced sabbatical. In a moment, our lives turned upside down.

Over the years, my husband and I had occasionally talked (just between the two of us) about what it would take for us to ever leave our beloved church. We concluded that in order to go to another ministry, we’d have to take the entire staff with us! After all, they were chosen

We didn’t believe God had caused the situation, but what if He allowed it in order to move us somewhere else? We concluded that to protect the name of Christ in the community and prevent potential factions in the church, we would probably need to quietly disappear.

because we thought they were phenomenal pastors and directors. How could we ever go somewhere else? We guessed we'd be at our church for the rest of our lives. There was no way we'd leave without the staff.

When things blew up, we instantly read each others' minds—God had just removed the one obstacle that prevented us from ever leaving. We didn't believe God had caused the situation, but what if he had allowed it in order to move us somewhere else? We concluded that to protect the name of Christ in the community and

It's not easy to find a decent hotel that accepts cats for the night, but we found a lovely one in Tulsa. Weary from so much solo driving, I looked forward to a good night's sleep. I wanted to get on the road early in order to get as far as possible the next travel day. So that morning, after loading up the car, I told Noelle to grab the cat so we could leave. When she called Nibbles, there was silence.

That brings me to wandering around the hotel in tears. We'd scoured the room many times and concluded that my cat (who is afraid of everything in the

would trust me. You're only *not safe* when you don't trust me."

I don't know what it says about my intelligence, but God used a cat to remind me of an important truth. I feel silly just writing about it, but it was so true: I was scared of the unknown. My settled, happy world had been horribly upset. And yet, in that moment I realized that I was only unsafe if I *didn't trust* God. He knew exactly where we were headed.

That was five months ago. This is where you expect to read how God provided an amazing ministry opportunity for us, but as I write this, we still wait. My husband has had numerous offers, but they weren't accompanied by a divine assurance that we were supposed to move forward. So we prayerfully seek, even now.

I can say, however, that in the past five months, we've seen and felt God's presence more strongly than ever. We've truly refueled and are ready for whatever is next. We have, in fact, been totally safe in the will of the One who knows where we're going.

Proverbs 1:33 says, "but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm." So we listen and wait in the security of the One who knows the destination.

I don't understand why it took a cat to help me remember a lesson I knew a long time ago, but I'm glad God gives us visual reminders. And the next time we have to travel with Nibbles... I'm flying! ☐

Anne Wiggins is the author of the book Parenting From the Heights. She has been married for 18 years and has two children, ages 12 and 14. She speaks at conferences and seminars around the country and enjoys freelance writing.

I don't know what it says about my intelligence, but God used a cat to remind me of an important truth. I feel silly just writing about it, but it was so true: I was scared of the unknown.

prevent potential factions in the church, we would probably need to quietly disappear.

Our feelings were confirmed at the end of those 30 days. The neutral, third party mediator who had been brought to facilitate reconciliation recommended we simply take this as a sign from the Lord that we were to move. My husband drafted a resignation letter and signed it. We went from "fine" to "finished" in one month. It was over that fast.

The morning after he resigned, I began to crumble. I told my husband I had to get out. NOW. He helped me pack our car with clothes and supplies for the journey. I took my daughter and my kitty. My son Matthew wanted to stay and help his dad pack up the house.

Now I headed across the country to be with my supportive parents until we could figure out what to do next.

world, including squirrels) had darted out unbeknownst to me as I hauled luggage to the car.

Soon the hotel staff was on alert. Many neatly-uniformed employees traversed the hallways with walkie-talkies, peering behind washers and dryers and checking in stairwells. After two futile hours, the manager wearily suggested we comb our room one last time. In an act of desperation, we even dismantled the entire bed...and found my cat crouched between the box springs and the floor. She had apparently crawled up *over the top* of the mattress and down under the bed, which was securely bolted to both the floor and the wall with solid wooden boards.

Now tears of relief spilled down my cheeks, which were already red with embarrassment at this situation. As I held my shaking cat, all I could think was, "Oh, Nibbles, *if only* you



by Paul Angone

You Might Be a Cultural Christian If...

1. Somewhere in your house you have a 5-by-5 plaque that says, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" hung for all to see.

2. You only tithe or give an offering when the Pastor gives his tithing and/or offering speech.

3. You read your Bible mostly when things are not going your way.

4. You say phrases like "Read the Word," "Joy of the Lord," "How is your Walk going?" etc.

5. You try to drop hot Christian

8. You make a point to cheerfully smile at strangers or other Christians to make sure they know you have the "Joy of the Lord" upon you.

What Is a Cultural Christian?

I got to thinking about being a cultural Christian as I was talking to a stranger who told me they were a cultural Catholic. *What does that mean?* I thought to myself. And then I began thinking about all the ways that I, too, have become

doing the same old "Christian" things hoping that it will somehow change me or my situation. When saying "I'll pray for you" becomes more important than actually doing it. When the show of Christianity becomes more important than the real work going on backstage.

It's all the trappings of Christianity without the power or life of God breathed into it. To me that's what being a cultural Christian is really about.

The power of God is his ability to create something from nothing or to take evil and turn it into good or to raise something that was dead and make it new.

Certain areas of my life lack that power most times. And I can't make up for it with my Christian T-shirt that says "Prays Well With Others." □

Paul Angone is a writer, athlete and avid old school Nintendo player. He recently received a Master's degree in Organizational Leadership from Azusa Pacific University. Paul and his wife, Naomi, are enjoying life as new parents and watching their baby daughter grow up.

Sometimes I know that I lack the power of God in my life when I am not changing or allowing myself to be transformed or made new everyday, and instead I just keep doing the same old "Christian" things hoping that it will somehow change me or my situation.

words like "Blessed" or "Prayer" when talking to strangers to test whether or not they are Christians too.

6. You do the Christian side hug.

7. Your automatic reaction to anyone's misfortune is "I'll be praying for you," when you know, and they know, you won't pray one word.

more of a cultural Christian as well: someone who follows the traditions and quirks of Christianity as a substitute for the real relationship.

Sometimes I know that I lack the power of God in my life when I am not changing or allowing myself to be transformed or made new everyday, and instead I just keep



The Valley of the Shadow of... Doubt

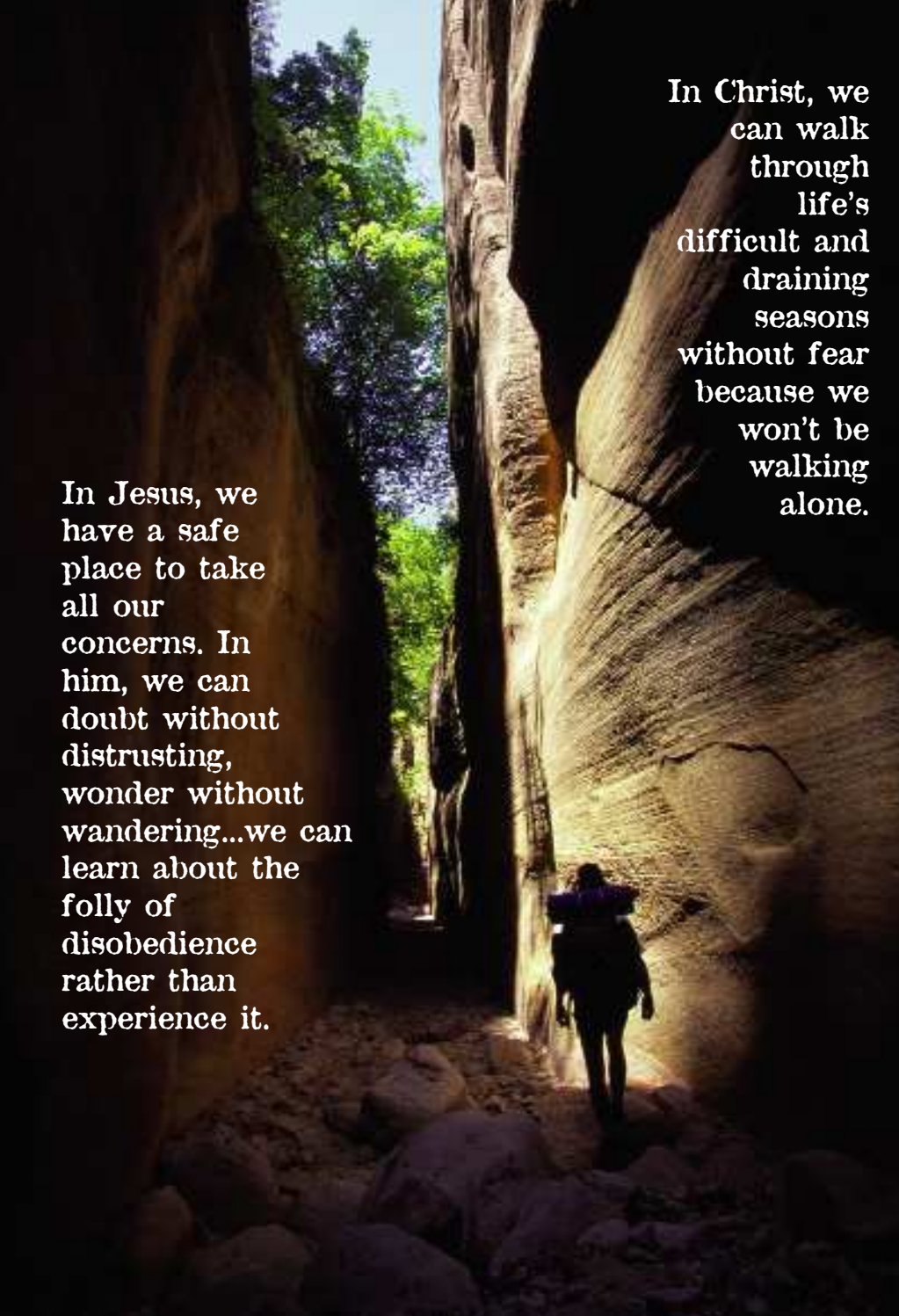
by Hiram Claudio

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...—Psalm 23:4 (NKJV)

Ever have doubts? Of course you do, we all do. The idea that we can move through life completely certain about everything we encounter is absurd. It just seems that doubts are a natural part of our human condition, something we all truly have in common. And the reality is—we always have.

Perhaps the greatest evil the enemy ever inflicted on the human race was not simply the overall reality of sin but in introducing doubt into our daily lives. He began with Eve, getting her to question truth...and we've been doing it ever since.

From the very beginning, I want to be clear. I don't believe for a moment that doubting



**In Christ, we
can walk
through
life's
difficult and
draining
seasons
without fear
because we
won't be
walking
alone.**

**In Jesus, we
have a safe
place to take
all our
concerns. In
him, we can
doubt without
distrusting,
wonder without
wandering...we can
learn about the
folly of
disobedience
rather than
experience it.**

is sin all by itself. Eve's main stumble was not that she doubted but how she handled it. She is the first recorded evidence we have that doubt is natural for us. You see, both Adam and Eve were still in their sinless, unmarred state. They stood in the presence of such tremendous wonder and

indisputable proof of God's majestic creativity. They also knew firsthand of the security of His faithful provision. And yet, they still were able to experience doubt.

In looking at the first couple's story, we get a glimpse of where doubt can lead. If not faced correctly, doubt can lead

to death. Now Adam and Eve didn't immediately die physically. But spiritual death, which didn't exist previously, became a present reality. Its *shadow* loomed over everything. Yet, to be intentionally redundant, the issue isn't that they doubted. That is normal. What caused their separation, and what causes ours, was the choice of how to respond.

I'm one who believes that having a mind that questions is a good thing. I don't blame anyone, especially in a world that puts forth so many competing ideas, for raising honest questions. I welcome those who engage me with *why* inquiries regarding my faith. It makes me dig deeper, makes me better able to...*be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks....* (1 Peter 3:15, NKJV). But I'll admit, there are times the questions raised by others create doubts in me. In response to their questions, I find myself looking for answers to ones I now have.

This can lead to one of the greatest dangers presented by doubt...*fear*. Eve stopped trusting God. Eve started to believe that her connection to her Creator was causing her to miss something in life. She wondered whether

following the Lord's commands was a good idea. Thinking was not the problem. The problem was that her doubt led to disobedience, her fear led to foolishness.

All of us walk through valleys of doubt. We all experience things we don't understand or reach places in life that make

I'm one who believes that having a mind that questions is a good thing. I don't blame anyone, especially in a world that puts forth so many competing ideas, for raising honest questions.

us wonder, *Did I miss something?* And with that, we can begin to question foundational truths that have guided us. While in this place, fear can arise. And from our valleys of doubt, if not properly and honestly faced, can come valleys of death.

But Christ gives us good news! He doesn't promise doubt-free life. But with him we can walk through even the darkest valleys without fear. Why? The second part of Psalm 23:4 gives the answer, *For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me* (NKJV).

In Jesus, we have a safe place to take all our concerns. In him, we can doubt without distrusting, wonder without

to Easter, our focus often turns to the sacrifice of Good Friday and the victory of that amazing Sunday morning. But this season always helps me meditate on a particular scene...the garden of Gethsemane. In this unique place, Jesus asks the Father, *Are You sure about this? Can we not do it this way?* Basically, for a moment, he wondered. The gospels are clear that he knew the purpose of his earthly journey and the specifics of how it would all play out. And yet, when faced



I encourage each of us, when we face times of doubt, to follow the Master's example. He went to the Father. It's only in God's presence that doubts don't become deadly. Only in His loving embrace can fears lead to faith.

wandering. By turning to the Lord with our questions, we can *learn* about the folly of disobedience rather than experience it. In Christ, we can walk through life's difficult and draining seasons without fear because we won't be walking alone. We can, even in most unsettling times, know comfort.

During the weeks leading up

with the weight of his very immediate future, he wondered.

I encourage each of us, when we face times of doubt, to follow the Master's example. He went to the Father. It's only in God's presence that doubts don't become deadly. Only in His loving embrace can fears lead to faith. The process may still present hard times. But his

promise is that by walking with him through every valley, and doing it his way, we can reap Psalm 23's blessed conclusion of... *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* □

Hiram Claudio is an ordained minister in the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), a retreat counselor and speaker. He has been married for 28 years and has two sons. Hiram has been blessed to travel to eight different countries, preaching and teaching church leaders practical insights to better equip their congregations.



Plant an Artistic Seed

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

We wring our hands over the education crisis. What's the solution? Some would say *more math and science teachers*. Maybe. But what would happen if educators and heads of state all over the world put out a call for more music and art teachers? What if corporate America focused on beauty more than money? What if the President's cabinet took time each week for finger painting? What if the Senate devoted half its days to choir practice and then gave monthly concerts? Would Washington be any less dysfunctional than it is now?

Imagine a world of harmony—musical harmony and relational harmony. How might such a world look to an artist? For Adonna Khare this world is filled with strange, albeit recognizable, animals who get along despite their differences. A lion licks a lollipop, a goat walks a trapeze, elephants are entwined with orangutans and fish walk upright.

Last October my hometown of Grand Rapids was all abuzz about art. For three weeks the fourth annual ArtPrize dominated conversation while politics and the price of gas were almost forgotten. More than 1500 artists from all over the world vied for recognition and the \$560,000 in prize money. Except for a juried prize, ordinary people determined the outcome by means of electronic voting.

Most artists, including Adonna, never really imagine that when it's all over they will say goodbye to cheering crowds, \$200,000 richer with a first-prize purse. She knew she was taking a risk when she purchased airfare and arranged for lodging, leaving her husband and three-year-old daughter behind in Burbank.

Although spending a month in Grand Rapids was surely not a contest requirement,

she needed the time to finish her work. (No rule bans procrastinators.) She arrived in town with a paper mural, 8 feet high and 35 feet long that she had drawn in her garage. For most of the next three weeks she added to it as crowds of people passed by and children joined her cross-legged on the floor, hoping her spirit and techniques might rub off on them. By the time the work was completed it extended onto the wall of the museum and had grown to 13 feet high and 40 feet in length—the square footage of a spacious mobile home.

The crowds loved the drawing and the artist's homespun spontaneity, and not just because she is an elementary school art teacher devoid of professional arrogance. Above all they recognized her incredible talent. The skin on the legs of the elephants and the fur on the primates conveyed texture and depth and shading that almost made you feel as though you were in the drawing yourself.

But whimsy won the day. Crazy creatures by the dozen crowd together in community while guarding their individuality. Giant elephants mingle with miniature hippos and giraffes. Mammals with wings or with human legs and feet perch precariously on other equally quirky creatures. All in all, a menagerie—garnished with teapots, ladders, pears, rubber duckies, bird mobiles, balloon animals on strings and lighthouses topped with high-efficiency bulbs.

Her advice for would-be artists does not involve specialized classes or a satchel of tools. Her recipe is simple. Start with a piece of paper or even a wall. Add a pencil, an eraser and a sock and you're good to go.

Growing up in a small Iowa town, Adonna began drawing when she was three. Art after all is not rocket science. Yes, of course, we need math and science. But plant an artistic seed in a little one's mind and you've crowned her with tender mercies. □

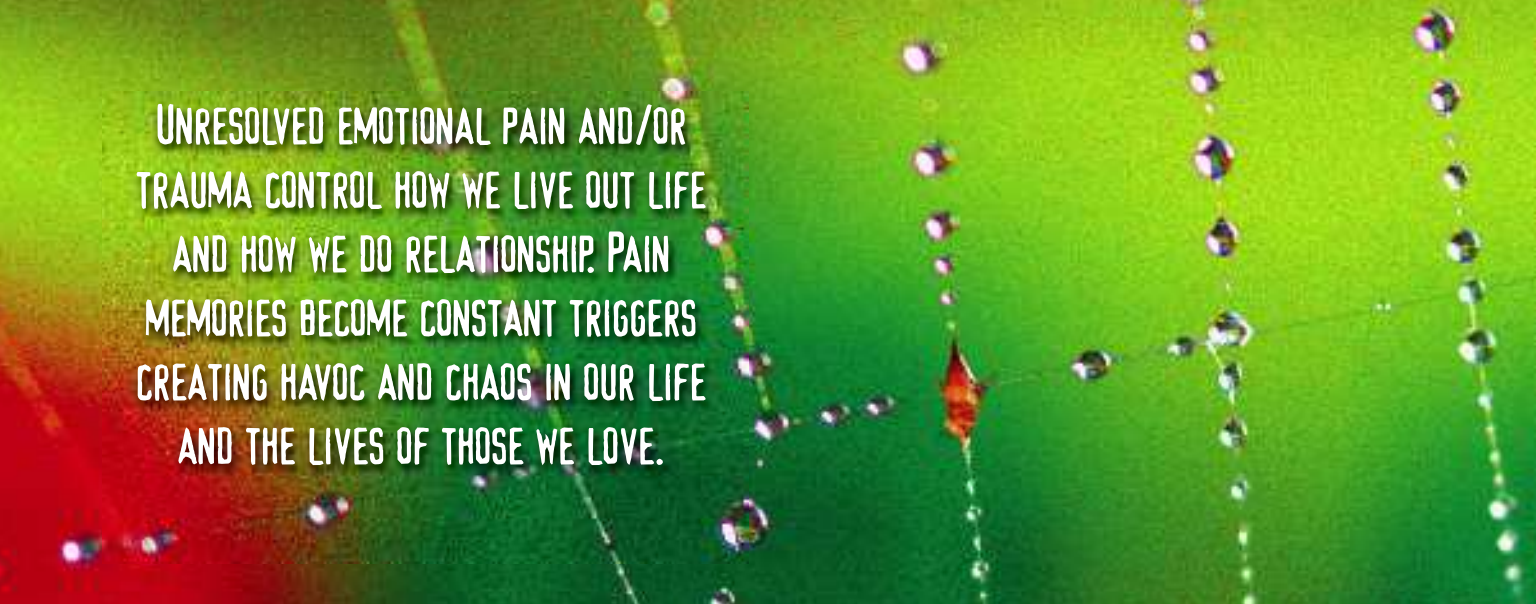
—Ruth A. Tucker

What if the Senate devoted half its days to choir practice and then gave monthly concerts? Would Washington be any less dysfunctional than it is now?

TANGLED WEBS —THE LIES WE BELIEVE

BY KATHY MULLINAX

There is an old saying from my childhood that bounces around in my head: *Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.* It just pops in on its own and goes round n' round in my head. As a child, I did not understand or appreciate that little saying, but after many years of pondering the subject of lies and deception, I have determined that what we take in as truth is critical to how we live out our life. It is possible to believe something is truth when



UNRESOLVED EMOTIONAL PAIN AND/OR
TRAUMA CONTROL HOW WE LIVE OUT LIFE
AND HOW WE DO RELATIONSHIP. PAIN
MEMORIES BECOME CONSTANT TRIGGERS
CREATING HAVOC AND CHAOS IN OUR LIFE
AND THE LIVES OF THOSE WE LOVE.

in fact we have been deceived into believing lies.

I like the way David Takle, author of *The Truth About Lies And Lies About Truth*, addresses the topic of what we believe and the art of deception. He uses the illustration of C. S. Lewis' book, *The Screwtape Letters*, saying it gives us a vivid picture of how pervasive the problem of deception really is in our lives.

A demon apprentice by the name of Wormwood is being trained by his demon uncle, Screwtape, in the art of deception and temptation. Following Wormwood's education, we observe a very narrow set of methods that are repeated over and over to the person being targeted: **distract, distort, confuse, and misrepresent all elements of reality!** We can all relate to the manipulative and deceptive methods presented by the demons, Wormwood & Screwtape, who keep people off balance through confusing and distorting reality! *The methods of deception are powerful and destructive tools that affect every aspect of life for those targeted.*

Deception is a subject that is repeatedly revealed throughout the Bible as the weapon of choice which is meant to destroy us. It is so powerful it can render our lives completely broken and ineffective. That said, it stands to reason that what we believe matters more than we can imagine and it is truly the life force that drives us.

There is a relationship between what we believe and emotional pain. Think about that statement for a moment and let it sink in—**there is a direct relationship between what we believe and emotional pain!**

If emotional pain is present, unresolved and/or trauma related, there is a lie that we are believing—a lie that we have taken in as truth! What we believe constantly operates in the background driving

**IF EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PRESENT, UNRESOLVED AND/OR TRAUMA
RELATED, THERE IS A LIE THAT WE ARE BELIEVING—
A LIE THAT WE HAVE TAKEN IN AS TRUTH!**

us in some fashion, shape or form.

If the above is true then we have to ask the questions: What **lies** are we believing; in what way have we been deceived; and, how in the world did those **lies** take root in a way that created emotional pain and trauma? Tackling the subject of truth and challenging our beliefs, especially discovering the lies we believe, becomes an important task if we desire to live life in intimate and authentic relationship with God and others.

Unresolved emotional pain and/or trauma control how we live out life and how we do relationship. Pain memories become constant triggers creating havoc and chaos in our life and the lives of those we love.

If we desire intimate and authentic relationships then the unresolved emotional pain that drives us must be resolved. Healthy relationship can only thrive in an atmosphere of trust and truth! Therefore, it is worth repeating, **there is a direct relationship between what we believe and emotional pain.**

This is not a simple subject and cannot be fully explored in an article about truth and deception. It

takes a lifetime of input coming from many different directions and experiences that form our beliefs about our identity and our relationships. Truth is vital to restoration and healing of broken places and it is critical for growth and change.

There is freedom in the truth and it is life-giving, while the lies we believe—deception—bring about bondage and death. □

Kathy Mullinax is a writer and blogger who loves to “dance with God” and share how God has healed her and helped her grow. Her passion is working with others as they seek healing and restoration in their lives. For more of Kathy's writings visit DancingwithGodblog.com.

Smiley Faces

by Roy Borges



Rita sat in her doctor's office looking through a magazine. I'd written a story of how God used an obstinate prison cell mate of mine to teach me about love and obedience. In the article I also revealed I have a daughter named Rita. I wrote how prison had separated me from my daughter and how I longed to establish a relationship with her.

Rita was touched by the story. She, too, had been separated from her daughter. The court had finally granted her custody. Now she and her twelve-year-old daughter were

Rita didn't see cancer as a tragedy but as an opportunity to tell others about Jesus Christ. She was full of life and energy. She refused to allow this disease to get her down.

together. Their love for each other was growing daily.

Then the doctor told Rita she had cancer. The prognosis was not

good, but she reached out to me with understanding because she knew how it felt to long for a relationship with one's child. She was more concerned about my sorrows than her own and began to write to me regularly.

It was easy to tell when I had a letter from Rita. She covered the envelope front and back with smiley faces of all sizes and colors. Sometimes she even put them on the letter inside the envelope.

It was easy to tell when I had a letter from Rita. She covered the envelope front and back with smiley faces of all sizes and colors. Sometimes she even put them on the letter inside the envelope.

"She must spend all her time decorating envelopes," said one of the men in the mailroom. Rita wanted to know everything about

me. Her letters were long and frequent. She wrote every day.

Rita didn't see cancer as a tragedy but as an opportunity to tell others about Jesus Christ. She was full of life and energy. She re-

fused to allow this disease to get her down. When she started chemotherapy, she wrote, "My hair is shedding like a dog's. Don't be

surprised if you find hair in my letters. Next time you write, you can call me Baldy."

I addressed my next letter to her, "Dear Rita, a.k.a. Baldy." I always promptly answer anyone who writes me. Still, I couldn't keep up

with Rita. The same was true with her questions. The more questions I answered, the more she asked. Sometimes I didn't know what else to write. What could I say to someone who was battling cancer?

Anyway, I had to deal with my own catastrophe—a forty-five-year sentence for robbery. I saw no future. However, Rita was persistent

One part of me was afraid to get involved; a relationship with Rita would only lead to more pain. Another part reminded me not to fear pain. God has been able to teach me the most through the things I have suffered.

and didn't complain when I failed to answer her questions or respond right away. Instead, she would put a self-addressed, stamped envelope in her letter. When I didn't answer all her questions, she'd highlight them with a marker. Or she'd write a categorized list of questions on a separate piece of paper and title it, "List of questions for Roy to answer."

The irony of it all struck me. A total stranger, with the same name as that of my daughter, wrote me every day. Yet my daughter Rita remained silent and refused to answer my letters.

Prison, like cancer, can become an indescribable fear. It can dominate, cripple and make life useless to God, or it can draw me closer to him. Rita taught me that life's circumstances are not the problem; the problem is not trusting God.

According to the doctors, life for Rita was going to be very short. She wasn't going to see her daughter graduate from high school. Nevertheless, for Rita every day was a blessing. Every day she saw something beautiful to appreciate, such as reading stories with her daughter curled up beside her and tickling her when she was mad to make her smile. She took one day at a time, cherishing every moment.

One part of me was afraid to get involved; a relationship with Rita would only lead to more pain. Another part reminded me not to fear pain. God has been able to teach me the most through the things I have suffered.

In spite of myself, I began looking forward to Rita's letters. Rita and I shared our feelings, regrets, hopes and dreams. The loneliness of prison and the loneliness of cancer drew us to one another. We both grew closer to God as we shared our lives. Being Christians didn't give us a free pass from the pain of life. Instead, as our pain intensified, we drew closer to God. He understands our greatest need. He knows our anguish, hurt and pain. The sorrows of life will come, but God has a plan. That hope makes the bitter tears of today bearable.

We both grew closer to God as we shared our lives. Being Christians didn't give us a free pass from the pain of life. Instead, as our pain intensified, we drew closer to God.

Rita seldom complained about her pain. She was full of encouragement, as if what I was facing was worse. She told me to think of others first: "Be a light in the dark, Roy, and God will bless you. Let others see how you handle your circumstances. By your life, become an ambassador for Christ."

Nine months after we began writing each other, Rita wrote that the chemotherapy wasn't working. The cancer was spreading rapidly. The doctors said they would have to operate. It didn't sound good, but Rita didn't give up hope. The smiley faces kept coming. "If Jesus doesn't heal me, I'll be waiting for you in heaven," she wrote.

Before the operation, I asked several of the Christian brothers in my dormitory to pray for her. We gathered around my bunk. Men

According to the doctors, life for Rita was going to be very short. She wasn't going to see her daughter graduate from high school. Nevertheless, for Rita every day was a blessing. Every day she saw something beautiful to appreciate...

who did not know Rita prayed for her. We all signed a get-well card, and I mailed it to her.

After the operation, Rita wrote that it had been a wonderful surprise to find the card waiting for her. "Nothing could have made me happier," she wrote. She promised to write every one of them back, but she was unable to keep that promise.

I should have known something was wrong when I didn't get any mail from her for a week. Finally, Rita's sister wrote to tell me she

was back in the hospital. It dawned on me that Rita might die.

"Lord, please don't let her die," I prayed. I knew God could perform the impossible—he had changed me.

Yet the impossible wasn't going to happen for Rita. I knew it before I read the words of her sister's next

letter. "Rita went to be with the Lord May 16," it said. Later in my bunk, alone in the dark, the tears flowed. Rita was gone. We had known each other for only a year, but it seemed like a lifetime.

As I reminisced about Rita, I remembered how she signed her letters: "Agape, Rita." She told me it meant she had unconditional love for me.

Prison, like cancer, can become an indescribable fear. It can dominate, cripple and, for inmates, seem to make life useless—or it can draw one closer to him. Rita taught me that life's circumstances are not the problem; the problem is not trusting God.

Two days before Father's Day, I received a card from my daughter

Rita. My prayers were answered. She wanted me to become a part of her life. The best part was the way she signed off: "Love, Rita."

Later, as I walked the prison exercise track, I thought about my friend Rita. I pictured her on her knees, praying for me. I missed her.

Suddenly it began to rain. The rain poured down like giant teardrops. Everyone ran for cover. I stood there getting drenched, but I didn't care. The rain mixed with tears in my eyes.

Just as suddenly as it had begun, the rain stopped. I looked at the blue sky and saw a beautiful rainbow.

It reminded me of what Rita once wrote: "Stay on your knees and remember that the God who makes rainbows appear makes dreams come true."

A smile crossed my face as I thought of her in heaven somewhere over the rainbows, waiting for me with a smiley face. □

Amy-award winning writer, Roy Borges, writes from a prison cell in Florida.



Road Trip Reminders

When you're lost, what's the first thing you do? Look around you, of course!

After my wife passed away last year, I decided to take a road trip across America's heartland from Washington state to Washington D.C.—where I had a conference coming up. Although I'm no novice at long road trips (including one across Europe), I've never driven all the way from American sea to shining sea. I thought my family's reaction would be "Oh no, Dad! You'll fall asleep at the wheel—you'll have an accident—you'll be mugged and robbed." But surprisingly, they liked the idea. "You're 63—you'd better do this now before you're too feeble." Disturbing logic, but even close friends thought it was a good idea (even Greg, my friend and editor). When the time came, I loaded my two Rat Terriers into my Honda CR-V and headed eastward up the Columbia River Gorge. I was away for two and a half weeks.

Some might find a 6,000-plus mile car trip tedious and boring. Admittedly, it helps if you enjoy driving and coffee as much as I do. But I also delight in long stretches of road in wide, open spaces. More about that later.

I stayed at cheap motels (mostly the chain where they "leave the light on for you®," because dogs stay there free) and I tried to eat at locally owned places. I saw cities from the ground that I had previously only flown over—and hundreds of small towns. I shared a few laughs with my comrades in the American Association of Editorial Cartoonists. I shook hands with one of my favorite U.S. Congressmen. I explored a mysterious, little-known pre-Columbian archaeological site. With my dogs, I floated for miles in a canoe down the Allegheny River. I visited with old friends and met new ones. Beyond all that adventure, here are four important lessons I learned—or already knew but had to be reminded of.

1) The United States is really, really big. That thought was hard to avoid as I crossed vast, rural stretches of Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana,

Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana and Washington state. Ninety percent of America is the land between cities, but only 16 percent of us live there. The other 84 percent of us are crammed into congested urban areas. Air travel ignores these boundless stretches of country. In our more rural past these places gave us a healthy sense of connection with the land and geographic community—a thing we are rapidly losing in our frantic, urbanized, consumer society.

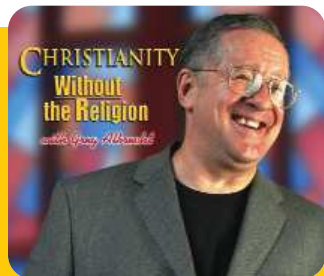
2) Friends mellow with age. I spent time with people I hadn't visited in decades. One former coworker—a past graphics editor for this very magazine—taught me the basics of design over 40 years ago when I was beginning my career. I was impressed by how many of these friends had matured and broadened in their spiritual perspectives over the years.

3) A little solitude can heal. Hours of driving through open country gives you time to meditate. After a major loss we often try to assuage the pain by constantly staying busy or being with others. While this has its place, it can also put off the prayerful reflection that helps us face our loss, find ourselves and reorient our minds to Christ. Being alone with God in wide open spaces can help that process.

4) Get out and look around! When we experience loss or trauma, we may either feel disoriented and lost—or confined, as though life is closing in on us and we have no more options. But when you're lost, what's the first thing you do? Look around you, of course! Stepping out of our familiar little space reminds us that God has a vast world of possibilities beyond our problems. God is not confined, either—to our church, city, region or nation. He's everywhere, living in all kinds of people.

Back home, I found myself re-energized and ready to move on with life, with all its ups and downs. There is plenty of living room. Life is not closing in—it's eternal! □

—Monte Wolverton



The Perfect Prescription for Legalism

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

WARNING: CWR may cause the following side effects:

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

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

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

Eternal Life – Now Guest speaker Brad Jersak explains that we need not fix our exclusive focus on some yet-to-be-realized future realization of eternity, for eternal life is happening, right now. Week of June 2.

Small Is Beautiful The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. God grows the kingdom according to his timing and plan, by his grace. But human efforts often get in the way and pervert the idea of God's kingdom. Week of June 9.

"My Father and your Father..." As we celebrate Father's Day we celebrate earthly fathers and we worship our heavenly Father, giving thanks that 1) we have a heavenly Father who is God and 2) a God we know as Father. Week of June 16.

Us AGAINST Them or Us FOR Him? When the ministry of Jesus and his gospel is so inclusive, why is it that so many churches make it so hard to be a part of his kingdom? Week of June 23.

God and Caesar When Jesus was asked a trick question, he responded with timeless wisdom about the nature of the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of this world. Week of June 30.

Power, Love and Sound Discipline What are YOU afraid of? What are your biggest fears? Join us as we discover how God's grace deals with the shame that is at the root of our fears. Week of July 7.

Lessons Learned Greg shared five of the lessons he has learned, in his journey in and with Christ, and invites you to make your own list. For that matter, think about the lessons we ask God, by his grace, to continue to teach us. Week of July 14.

Growing Old(er) Grace-fully No matter how old you are, God is not yet finished with you! We'll concentrate on four keys to growing old grace-fully. Week of July 21.

The Cost of Following Jesus Christ-followers are willing to "throw off everything that hinders" them and place him first and foremost in their lives. Week of July 28.

Who Gets In? In the book of Acts God directs Philip to meet the Ethiopian eunuch—that event guides our thinking as we contrast religious exclusivism with the inclusive invitation and welcome God extends to everyone. Week of August 4.

Our Sure Foundation The foundation is the most important part of any spiritual or physical building/house, yet it is normally unseen and unappreciated. What does biblical teaching about our spiritual foundation being in Christ alone specifically mean for us? Week of August 11.

"...Of Whom the World Was Not Worthy..." Hebrews 11 is filled with praise for world changers who, as revolutionary Christ followers, believed and practiced the life-changing extreme grace of the gospel. God is calling each of us to be world changers! Week of August 18.

"Love Your Enemies" As we study the radical call of Jesus to love our enemies we realize that the "business as usual" teaching of Christ-less Christendom allows for Christians to kill their enemies—in fact it allows for Christians killing each other! Week of August 25.