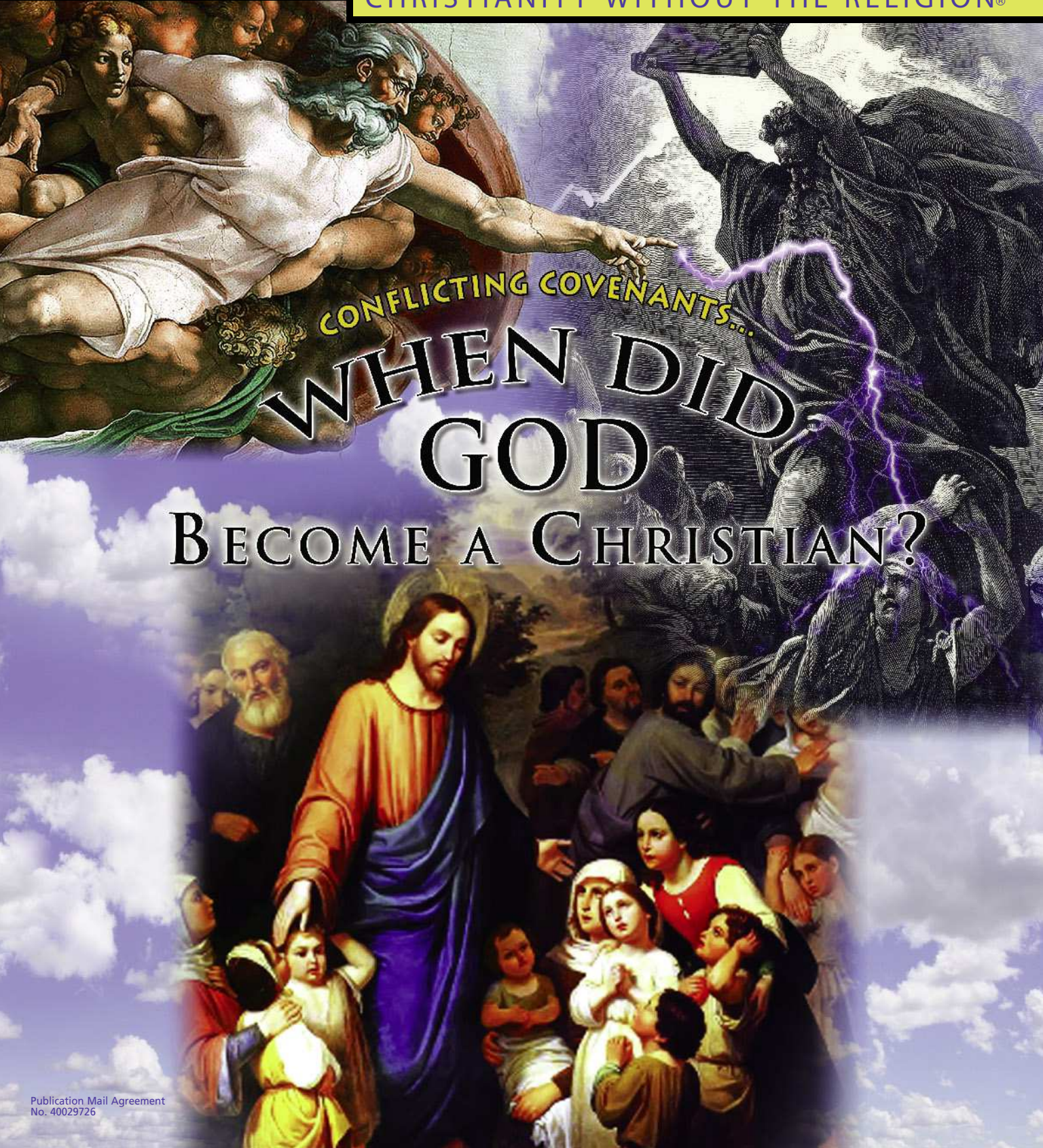


# PLAIN TRUTH<sup>®</sup>

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



CONFLICTING COVENANTS...

# WHEN DID GOD BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

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

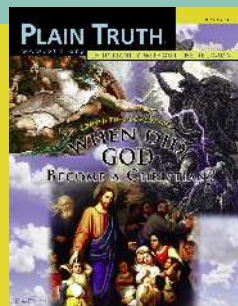
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Jesus contrasted the old and former ideas of God with new teaching that changed everything. Jesus accepted the Scriptures, but he did not worship them as infallible and inerrant. He had no problem reversing many portions of the Old Testament, and he was the Authority who could do so. The Bible is not the infallible, inerrant Word of God. The infallible, inerrant Word of God is Jesus (John 1:1).

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## 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.

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## God of the Damned: Do You Need a Beating?

I enjoyed the article by Bob Ekblad in the Fall *Plain Truth* titled "God of the Damned: Do You Need a Beating?" I remember a minister preaching something like this: "God chastens those he loves. If you don't have trials in your life, God must not love you very much." At the time my life was going pretty well, so I *almost* secretly prayed for God to give me trials...almost, but not quite!

California



## Boardwalk Buildings and Park Place Prayers

Great Commentary by Greg Albrecht in the Fall issue. I love the analogy of Monopoly and big-business religion. I like Greg's definition of religion: "the widely embraced notion that performance of good deeds and/or ongoing prescribed ritualistic behaviors will gain a higher standing with God than would have otherwise been experienced."

British Columbia, Canada



## 8 Signs of Hyper-Grace Teaching

Thank you so much for the two articles about grace in the Fall issue of *Plain*

*Truth*. "8 Signs of Hyper-Grace Teaching" by Paul Ellis was absolutely spot-on. I really agree with sign #8: Hyper-grace churches "...will look like Jesus, smell like Jesus, walk like Jesus and talk like Jesus. A hyper-grace ministry or church is attractive to sinners and unappealing to the self-righteous. It is a place where the prodigals come home and the zealots stay out. It is a family where the broken are made whole, the captives are freed and all are loved."

Perfect! I wish my church was more like that. I'm convinced that if a homeless person came in with a dirty backpack and smelly clothes they'd be shown the door. The article by Stephen Crosby, "Does Grace Need to Be Balanced?" was really good, too. The final sentence says it all... "Grace does not need to be balanced. Grace is all there is." Amen!

Email



## Silenced! Religious Discrimination Against Women

Thanks for the article by Sheila Graham in the Fall issue of *Plain Truth*. The article got me thinking about what I have accepted and taken for granted and how it's affected me, personally and professionally, as a female.

It's a far-reaching issue with reactions as biased as the bias that created them.

Washington



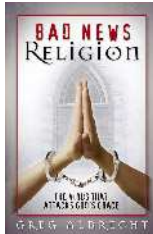
## Love Your "Haters"

Thanks for the article by Brad Jersak, "Love Your 'Haters'" in the Fall *PT*. What a timely article about Jesus' call to a different way of dealing with hatred and

conflict. With everything that's going on in the Middle East right now, the blatant displays of hatred from groups like Al Qaida and ISIS, as well as the many recent racial tensions and clashes we see on the news here in the US, this topic is something we need to think about and pray for God's guidance and intervention.

I've heard the quote Brad included ("Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping it will kill the other guy") in a slightly different way: "Holding onto a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting it to kill the other person." Truer words were never said. This bit of wisdom has helped me in forgiving others who have wronged me. I also appreciated Brad's inclusion of "Prayer for the Enemies" at the end of the article.

North Carolina



## PTM Website

I want to thank you very much for your website and for your book *Bad News Religion*. It's as if you have been sitting in my living room talking with me. The very words I have spoken are confirmed through your message. I have attended a church for the past nine years that mixes law and grace, and it just doesn't work. The very words "church" or "ministry" make me want to throw up!

I would appreciate your prayers as I walk out this journey. It has been painful. It has caused an upheaval in my life and many in leadership at my church are angry with me and telling people I'm not in a good place. I've dealt with anger, frustration and grief...but I'm going to follow grace. Thanks for being a refuge for those of us on this journey.

Email



## Front Page

I loved the article on the PTM website "Front Page" titled "How Free Is Free Will?" Some are drawn now, some will be drawn later, but that is in God's domain.

Email

Exceptional article by Greg Albrecht on the PTM home page feature "Front Page." "How Free Is Free Will?" condenses and summarizes a major in-house Christian debate.

Michigan



## Chasing 120

I want to congratulate Monte Wolverton on his first book, *Chasing 120—A Story of Food, Faith, Fraud and the Pursuit of Longevity*. When I received it the title jumped out at me. I've heard and read comments about how people in the future might live to be 120 years of age.

I'm not particularly moved by that idea, but Monte's book portrays a company that advertises health supplements which practically guarantee a 120-year life-span. The unscrupulous leader of the company influences the masses to dig deep into their pockets to follow his supposedly Bible-based program. While Monte's story is fictional, I have actually recently received a couple of very long letters advertising just that—great health and longer life if I will just use all their super special health supplements for a better life.

I read the book for only a few hours and I couldn't put it down. I recommend the book highly because it pictures what can happen when scams and claims are not officially and carefully tested.

Monte's book is a faith-building picture of how God works with his own, causing good to come out of questionable motives. Congratulations to Monte and CWR/PTM for a valuable read.

West Virginia

I wish to convey my thanks to Monte Wolverton for writing his first novel, *Chasing 120*. I enjoyed the plot and the characters. They are such that you just want to shake some of them to wake them up! I hope Monte will continue to write more books. He has the ability to weave a plot that keeps the reader turning pages until he has read the whole book.

Pennsylvania

• See page 19 of this issue for details about how to order a copy of *Chasing 120*.

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# He Walked in Our Shoes

The Advent-Christmas season is the joyous celebration of the *incarnation* of Jesus Christ—the coming “in flesh” of the eternal Word of God to dwell among us as a human being (John 1:1-3, 14). During this holy season, we anticipate the arrival of “Immanuel” (Matthew 1:23), “God with us” in the person of Jesus Christ, who “came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

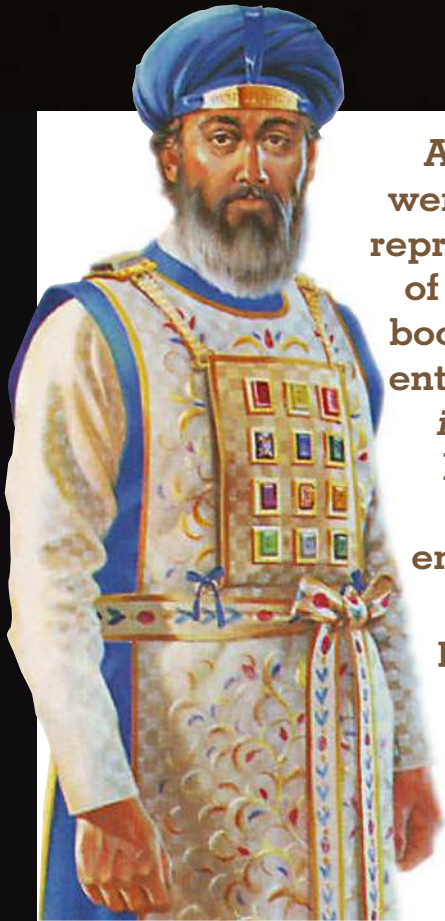
In regard to salvation, however, the Advent-Christmas season is often regarded as less important than the Easter celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because the emphasis in relation to the saving work of Christ has been on his sacrificial death on the cross, many Christians do not fully appreciate the saving significance of the *life* of Jesus Christ.

## Jesus’ Saving Life

Contrary to an exclusive emphasis on his death, Jesus’ saving “work” was not accomplished in only the few hours he hung on the cross, but encompassed the *entirety* of his life, so that the entirety of *our* lives might be affected. To be sure, Jesus’ sacrifice for our salvation did not begin at Calvary; it began in Bethlehem with the *incarnation*, when the eternal Word of God left the halls of heaven in order to take the “form of a servant” and be “found in appearance as a man” (Philippians 2:8).

The incarnation was *redemptive* from the moment of

**Contrary to an exclusive emphasis on his death, Jesus’ saving “work” was not accomplished in only the few hours he hung on the cross, but encompassed the entirety of his life...**



**Adorning his breastplate were twelve precious stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. According to the book of Hebrews, all Israel entered the Most Holy Place in the person of the High Priest... [who] vicariously confessed the sins of the entire nation, God accepted Israel as his forgiven people in the person of the High Priest.**

prescribes a remedy for illness, Jesus Christ, the Great Physician, *became the patient*, so that he might *heal* our corrupt and diseased humanity from the “inside out.”

According to the second-century theologian Irenaeus, Jesus “recapitulated” the work of Adam; that is, Jesus lived the life of perfect obedience and faith that Adam failed to live.

Where the “old” Adam breached fellowship with God through his disobedience and alienated humanity from its Creator, the “new” Adam, Jesus Christ, restored communion between a holy God and sinful humanity, thereby reconciling *all* things to the Father (see 2 Corinthians 5:19).

Atonement, therefore, encompasses far *more than the forgiveness of sins*, for the “saving work” of Jesus Christ is not so much the payment of a

“penalty” at Calvary.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the atonement begins with the “advent” of Jesus and encompasses one long saving act, stretching from Bethlehem to the resurrection. During the Christmas season, we not only celebrate the birth of Jesus as “God with us,” but also the *life* of Jesus as *God for us*.

### **The “Wonderful Exchange”**

In the incarnation of the eternal Word of God, there is a “wonderful exchange,” wherein Jesus takes *our* “poverty” in order to give us his “riches” (2 Corinthians 8:9). According to the fathers of the early church, the Son of God became “what we are,” so that we might become “what he is.” The eternal Son assumed our “mortality” so that we might receive his “immortality.” He embraced our “weakness” so that we might receive his “strength.” He took our “unrighteousness” so that we might be clothed with his “righteousness.”

The “wonderful exchange” is worked out in the depths of the sinful, Adamic humanity that the eternal Son of God assumed in the incarnation. Just as *all* humanity is implicated in the sin of the first Adam, *all* humanity is included in the salvific life of the new Adam, Jesus Christ (see Romans 5:18, 19). Throughout the whole course of his obedient life, Jesus acted

**In ancient Israel, a blood connection existed between the High Priest and his fellow Israelites. Thus, he acted “for them,” as “one of them,” so that *all* Israel might receive the forgiveness of sins.**

in *our* place and on *our* behalf, so that the “wonderful exchange” includes every aspect of our relationship with God. Therefore, the “wonderful exchange is an *atoning* “exchange,” for Jesus’ entire *life* is a sacrificial offering *for us*.

### **The One for the Many**

By looking back to the most holy day in ancient Israel’s sacred calendar, we can better understand how all humanity is included in Jesus’ sacrificial life.<sup>2</sup> The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) was the annual memorial in which Israel’s communal worship, prayers, offerings and sacrifices for the entire year were gathered together in one sacred rite.

So that the people’s sins might be forgiven in one solemn ritual of atonement, the worship, prayers and sacrifices of the entire nation were gathered up in *one man*, the High Priest, who acted *in the place of* and on behalf of all Israel, as the people’s divinely-appointed representative.

As the “mediator” between God and Israel, the High Priest enacted a “two-way” movement



**Our High Priest, Jesus Christ, however, acts for us in a far more profound and intimate way, for there is a cosmic connection between him and all humanity.**

of grace, wherein he represented God to the people and he represented the people to God.

At the most solemn moment of the annual rite, the High Priest entered the tabernacle, into the sacred chamber known as the “Most Holy Place”—the dwelling place of God. On his shoulders the High Priest bore the names of the tribes of Israel. Adorning his breastplate were twelve

precious stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. According to the book of Hebrews, all Israel entered the Most Holy Place *in the person of* the High Priest.

As the blood kin of his people, the High Priest stood before God in fraternal solidarity with those he represented—the “one” for the “many” so that all his acts were done *in their name*. After sprinkling blood onto the altar,

Jesus summons us to “repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15); ...so that we may throw down the heavy burden of religion and take up his “light yoke” (Matthew 11:28-30) of joy, peace, assurance, praise and thanksgiving.



the High Priest interceded in prayer *for* the people.

When the High Priest vicariously confessed the sins of the entire nation, God accepted Israel as his forgiven people *in the person of* the High Priest.

In the New Testament Book of Hebrews,<sup>3</sup> the “two-way” movement of grace represented by the High Priest foreshadows the ministry of Jesus Christ.

As the Son of God, Jesus *represents the Father to humanity*; as the “son of man,” born of a woman (Galatians 4:4), Jesus *represents humanity to the Father*.

In fraternal solidarity with us a High Priest made “like his brethren” (Hebrews 2:17, KJV) Jesus stands *in for us*, offering to the Father the life of perfect

faith, worship and obedience that we are unable to offer. All his righteous acts of faith and obedience are done *in our place and on our behalf*, so that the entirety of his life (and death) is a sacrificial offering to the Father *for us*.

### A Cosmic Connection

In ancient Israel, a blood connection existed between the High Priest and his fellow Israelites. Thus, he acted “for them,” as “one of them,” so that *all* Israel might receive the forgiveness of sins. Our High Priest, Jesus Christ, however, acts *for us* in a far more profound and intimate way, for there is a *cosmic* connection

between him and all humanity.

Jesus is the one “in” whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). He is the Creator and the Sustainer of the universe the one “through” whom all things were created and “in” whom “all things hold together.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Thus, in Jesus, *creation and redemption* are bound together in a twofold but unified movement of grace.

Through “union with Christ,” realized “in” us by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, we “participate” in the “vicarious” life that Jesus lived *in our place and on our behalf*.

- When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, we were spiritually reborn “in him.”

**Jesus stands in for us, offering to the Father the life of perfect faith, worship and obedience that we are unable to offer.**

- When he was baptized in the Jordan River, we were baptized “in him.”<sup>5</sup>

- In the wilderness, when Jesus overcame Satan’s temptation, we overcame temptation “in him.”



• In Gethsemane, where Jesus offered to the Father the perfect prayer of submission, we surrendered our wills to the Father “in him.”

• At Calvary, where Jesus put to death the “old Adam,” we were “crucified with Christ” (see Galatians 2:20); we died with him (see 2 Corinthians 5:14), so that we are no longer implicated in the sin of Adam but *included* in the righteousness of Jesus Christ (see Romans 5:12-19).

• When Jesus rose from the dead, we rose from the dead “in him.”

• When Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, we ascended “in him,” where we are “seated” with him “in heavenly realms” (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1), so that *our* lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3), ready to be revealed at the end of the age. Because Jesus, the son of man, lived the life of perfect faith, worship and obedience in *our* place and on our behalf—the “One” for the “many” God graciously accepts and receives us “in him.”

## The End of Religion

“Religion” is the human attempt to please or appease a distant, demanding deity through our own efforts.

**When he offered to the Father his life of perfect faith and obedience for us, Jesus put an end to religion and set us free from the burden of its onerous demands.**



Implicitly or explicitly, religion asserts that the saving work of Jesus Christ is *not* enough for our salvation, because religion demands that we “contribute” something in order to complete his “unfinished” work. Contrary to religion’s demand that we finish our own

salvation, however, God has reconciled the world to himself “in Christ” (see 2 Corinthians 5:19), so that all that is needed for our salvation has been “fulfilled” and “finished” in

Jesus (see Matthew 5:17; John 19:30).

When he offered to the Father his life of perfect faith and obedience for us, Jesus *put an end to religion* and set us free from the burden of its onerous demands.

Against the demeaning and shaming demands of religion, we can be confident that we have an “advocate” with the Father, “Jesus Christ the Righteous One,” who is the “atoning sacrifice” for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-3).

• Because Jesus our High Priest stands in *for us*, we can be assured that when we fall short of the intolerable goal set by religion, he crosses

the finish line of the race marked out (Hebrews 12:1) *for us*.

• When we fail to pray, Jesus prays *for us*;

• when we are filled with confusion, uncertainty and doubt, Jesus believes *for us*;



- when we succumb to temptation, Jesus has already overcome temptation *for us*;

- when we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves, Jesus loves them *for us*;

- when we balk at religion's onerous demands, Jesus offers perfect praise, worship, and obedience to the Father *for us*. Because Jesus has acted in our place and on our behalf, we do not have to rely on our own religious "performance"; instead, we rely on Jesus!

### God Provides All He Requires

Like the High Priest in ancient Israel, who represented God to the people and the people to God, the incarnate Jesus Christ *embodies* a "two-way" movement of grace: he is both the *revelation of* the Father's love and the full and complete *response* to it. In the person of Jesus, who is both fully God and fully "man," *divine* "revelation" and *human* "reconciliation" to the Father converge in a confluence of grace.

The Gospel is the good news about Jesus, in whom God *reveals* his love for the world (John 3:16) and provides the perfect and complete *response* to his will. Jesus summons us to "repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15); that is, to "change our minds"



**...salvation is not a "task" that remains to be finished through the effort of religion; rather, Jesus himself is our salvation; he is our reconciliation; he is our justification; he is our sanctification; he is the fulfilment of all things for us.**

about whom Jesus is *for us*, so that we may throw down the heavy burden of religion and take up his "light yoke" (Matthew 11:28-30) of joy, peace, assurance, praise and thanksgiving. In Jesus, our loving Father graciously *provides all he requires*.

Thus, salvation is not a "task" that remains to be finished through the effort of religion; rather, Jesus himself *is our salvation; he is our reconciliation; he is our justification; he is our sanctification; he is the fulfilment of all things for us.*

In the Advent-Christmas season, we joyfully proclaim to

a troubled planet stumbling in darkness that the Light has come into the world (Isaiah 9:2; Matthew 4:16; John 1:9).

Because Jesus has come, we may shout the good news that

our redemption is complete in him, so that our salvation is a gift to be *received* "by faith," rather than a reward to be earned through religious efforts or performance.

In this holy season, let us joyfully celebrate the good news of the birth and *life* of our Savior Jesus Christ, who is truly *God for us*. Amen.

1. "Atonement" (i.e., "at-one-ment") is the reconciliation of God and humanity in Jesus Christ.

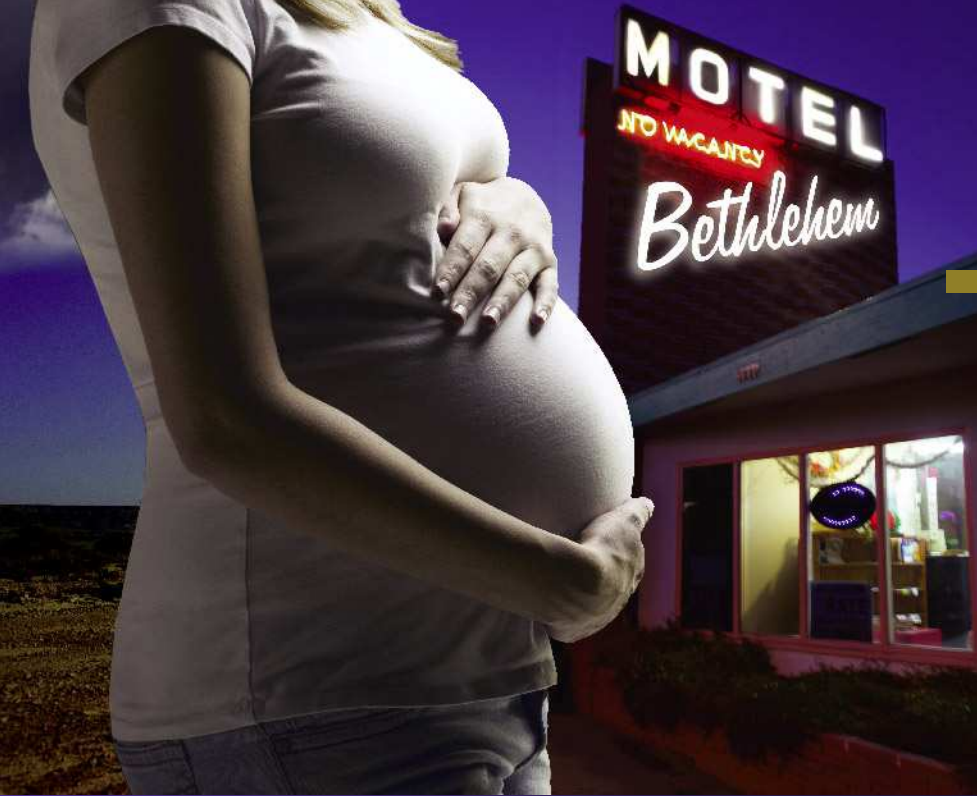
2. I am indebted to Professor James B. Torrance of Scotland for much of what follows. See his essay, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ," in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381*. T.F. Torrance (ed.). (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), Chapter 6.

3. Hebrews 3:14-18; 4:14-16; 5:1-10; 6:19, 20; 7:23-28; 8:1-6; 9:1-28; 10:1-11.

4. John 1:1-3, 14; Colossians 1:16, 17; Hebrews 1:1-3.

5. According to the fourth-century theologian Athanasius, when he was "washed" in the Jordan, we were "washed."

*Martin M. Davis, Ph.D., is an ordained minister in All Nations Christian Church International. Visit his theological blog at [www.martinmdavis.blogspot.com](http://www.martinmdavis.blogspot.com).*



# HE CAME ANYWAY

*I*t was the first Christmas— Joseph, Mary, Jesus and the animals in the stable looking so calm and serene. At least year after year that’s what the Christmas cards ask us to believe. If we accept the greeting card version of the first Christmas, we

must assume that Jesus was born in a Disney-perfect sanitized petting zoo.

But Christmas cards are not photographs, they are romanticized artistic impressions. They don’t tell the real story. If biblically and historically accurate Christmas cards were ever produced, then Hallmark would need to sell scratch n’ sniff greeting cards that release the fragrances of a barn!

But who would buy greeting cards that smell up our homes? On the other hand, maybe there is a market. Maybe there would be people to whom many would be tempted to send a “scratch n’ sniff, real first-Christmas” card!

### The Real First Christmas

If all you know about the first Christmas is a “greeting card Christmas,” then you might very well visualize an idyllic picture of the first Christmas. What really happened? A teenage girl who became pregnant before marriage gave birth to her firstborn. In her

heart she knew that she was a virgin, but she was tortured with what everyone else would surely say— about her and her son. Mary was young, but she was old enough to know that talk about her baby’s

King Herod heard that a king was going to be born in Bethlehem, and Herod wasn’t ready to give up his throne. Just to make sure this pretender to his throne would be “taken care of” King

**JESUS CAME TO MAKE ROOM FOR US, EVEN THOUGH HE KNEW HE WOULD BE GREETED WITH THE “NO VACANCY” SIGN AT EVERY TURN AND CORNER OF HIS PHYSICAL, EARTHLY LIFE.**

legitimacy would not go away. She, Joseph and Jesus would live with nasty gossip for a long time. Jesus’ birth was a scandal that compromised religious values and morality.

Mary was ready to deliver Jesus, but Joseph and Mary couldn’t find a place to stay, so they were forced to welcome their son into the world in a barn. There was no room in the inn, no room in a clean or warm environment, so a barnyard had to do.

Herod ordered all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under to be killed. As far as Herod was concerned, there was no room for Jesus in Bethlehem.

**IF BIBLICALLY AND HISTORICALLY ACCURATE CHRISTMAS CARDS WERE EVER PRODUCED, THEN HALLMARK WOULD NEED TO SELL SCRATCH N’ SNIFF GREETING CARDS THAT RELEASE THE FRAGRANCES OF A BARN!**



You know the story—an angel warned Joseph of the planned massacre, so the new family escaped to Egypt, returning only when Herod died. So Jesus, God in the flesh, came to save us, but there were no parties, no Christmas trees, no glitter, no lights, no marching bands, no pageants and no ceremonies. There was no room in Judea (the people to whom he had come) so the family had to move to Egypt, one of the places most despised by Jews. The name of Egypt itself was synonymous with brutal suffering and slavery inflicted on the Jews centuries earlier.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus became fugitives on the run, running from the very people to whom Jesus came, forced to seek refuge in a place believed to be God-forsaken. *There was no room for Jesus in God-fearing, church-going religious society.* There was no room for Jesus in the inn, no room in Bethlehem and no room in all of Judea.

Christmas cards just don't do justice to this part of the story, do they? A husband and wife running for their lives with a newborn "out-of-wedlock" child, forced to live as aliens in a foreign country—it's part of the way many people are driven to live even today—but it's not the story that Christmas cards tell.

### **He Came Anyway**

Suppose you were invited to a party, a high school reunion or a wedding. If you knew ahead of time that you would be subjected to a rude reception, why would you even show up? That's one of the amazing things about Christmas—*God knew exactly how he would be treated, and he came anyway.*

Later in Jesus' ministry Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, challenged Jesus, and their rejection of Jesus went back to that first Christmas. One of the Pharisees' claims to fame was their physical and spiritual origins. They took great pride and spiritual satisfaction in their impeccable family tree—father Abraham himself was part of their gene pool. The Pharisees believed their own birth to be

religiously pure, and now this illegitimate Jesus was questioning their religion, their traditions and their cherished ways of doing things. They determined to kill him.

Jesus reminded these religious leaders that the true spiritual descendants of Abraham would not be plotting murder. The best the Pharisees could offer in reply was that at least they were not illegitimate children (John 8:41).

The Gospel of John summarizes

## CHRISTMAS CARDS JUST DON'T DO JUSTICE TO THIS PART OF THE STORY DO THEY? A HUSBAND AND WIFE RUNNING FOR THEIR LIVES WITH A NEWBORN "OUT-OF-WEDLOCK" CHILD....

the rude reception Jesus received; "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:10-11).

So why did he come anyway? God knows the end from the beginning. He was not only the Creator of the world, but he was and is the author of our story—the God of history. *He came into our world and into our lives fully aware of the rude reception he would receive.*

God knew that humans are unforgiving. God knew that life on earth would not be easy for a child born into a heavily religious society, a child whose illegitimacy would offend established religious values. Why did God choose to be born that way?

### **He Came That We Might Be Reborn**

Birth is a foundational reason Jesus came—not his birth, but ours. *He came so that we could be spiritually reborn, so that we could leave the spiritually polluted barnyards of our lives and be given spotless, unpolluted and unsullied eternal rooms in God's house.*

Jesus came to make room for us, even though he knew he would be greeted with the "no vacancy" sign at every turn and corner of his physical, earthly life.

The next two verses of the first

chapter of John tell us why he came, and why he was born in the unorthodox way he was. As a lyric in *Mary Did You Know* goes, "Did you know this child that you delivered would soon deliver you?"

"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12-13). This is the

greatest love story of all time, there is no greater love, no greater beauty, no greater sacrifice. He "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:7).

*He came, but he didn't have to.* He came, even though he knew he would never be welcomed but always rejected, culminating with a torturous death on a cross. He accepted the ridicule that the label of illegitimacy would bring. He accepted the fact that his name would become a profane word.

*He came anyway.* He came so that we could have a way out, so that we would be given a new birth, a new name, a new life and that we would have the hope of an eternal future in God's kingdom of heaven. He came to a place of scorn, sin and corruption so that we might rise out of that same swamp of captivity, rising with him from sin and death to eternal life. He came so that we could be reborn.

The Gospel of John summarizes, "The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us.... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:14,17). Christmas is not only an annual celebration of Jesus' birth, it's an annual reminder of the great unfathomable gift of God's grace to you. Christmas is a reminder of our own spiritual rebirth—an annual, priceless invitation to escape the barnyards of our own lives. Merry Christmas! □

# JESUS > Biblicism

greater  
than

BY BRIAN ZAHND

**Editors Note:** *Biblicism* is an ideology that so emphasizes the exclusive authority and all-sufficiency of Scripture that it makes the Bible, rather than Christ, “the Word of God” and our “final authority for faith and practice.” Biblicism is committed to infallibility and inerrancy. That is, by supernatural guidance, biblical authors were incapable of error; every word was true. Thus, Biblicism is prone to forcing contradictory passages to harmonize where they are not meant to. The Bible is flattened so all texts have equal authority with the words of Christ—even when the image of God they portray conflicts with the revelation of God in Christ.

This morning I was reading Scripture. From the Old Testament I was reading Numbers and in the New Testament I was reading John. In Numbers chapter 15 we find this story...

An Israelite guy was gathering sticks on the Sabbath. This was forbidden. The guy got caught and was taken into custody. Moses inquired of Yahweh what should be done.



Yahweh told Moses that the guy had to be killed. So the stick-gathering Sabbath-breaker was taken outside the camp and stoned to death by the congregation of Israel. Sticks and stones (Number 15:32–36).

Next I read from the Gospel of John chapter 5. This is what happens...

Jesus meets a guy who has been paralyzed for 38 years. Jesus tells the guy to take up his bed and walk. The man is healed, takes up his bed, and heads for home.

But this was the Sabbath. And the guy gets busted for breaking the Sabbath. When the Judean Torah enthusiasts find out that it was Jesus who was behind all this Sabbath breaking, they are pre-

pared to kill Jesus (like Moses did in the Bible). John concludes the story like this...

that Yahweh instructed Moses to do this. This is the Moses who spoke to God face to face. (Exodus 33:11)

But in the prologue to his gospel John says this...

“The **Torah** was given by Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. **No one has ever seen God.** The only begotten God who is near the Father’s heart, he has made him known” (John 1:17–18).

We want to say, “wait a minute, John! What do you mean no one

**An Israelite guy was gathering sticks on the Sabbath... Yahweh told Moses that the guy had to be killed. So the stick-gathering Sabbath-breaker was taken outside the camp and stoned to death by the congregation of Israel. Sticks and stones. (Number 15:32–36)**

has ever seen God?! Abraham saw God under the oaks of Mamre. Jacob saw God at Bethel. Moses saw God on Sinai. Isaiah saw God in the Temple. Ezekiel saw God by the river Chebar.” To which John

pared to kill Jesus (like Moses did in the Bible). John concludes the story like this...  
“This is why the Judeans were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I am working.’ This is why the Judeans were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he **breaking the Sabbath**, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:16–18).

Look at what we have here. In Numbers a guy gets caught picking up sticks on a Saturday and is stoned to death. The text tells us



## Do you feel the tension?...It's only a problem if you confuse **Biblicism** with **Christianity**. The Bible is not the full revelation of God. Jesus is!

says something like this: "I know, I know, I know. But no matter what dreams, visions, revelations, epiphanies, theophanies, christophanies people had in the past, compared to the revelation of God that we now have in Jesus Christ, no one has ever seen God!" John stands his ground on this point.

Moses says God told him to kill the Sabbath-breaker.

Jesus says (in the context of killing Sabbath breakers) that he only does what he sees his Father doing, and that "the Father raises the dead and gives them life." (John 5:19–21) **According to Jesus, his Father doesn't kill, his Father gives life.**

Do you feel the tension? I'm not inventing this tension. It's right there in the Biblical text! It was right there in my Bible reading this morning! I just happened to read Numbers 15 and John 5 back-to-back. It's actually an excellent exercise.

In Numbers a guy is stoned to death for picking up sticks on the Sabbath.

Do you see the problem? Of course you do! Except it doesn't have to be a problem. It shouldn't be a problem. **It's only a problem if you confuse **Biblicism** with **Christianity**.** The Bible is not the full revelation of God. Jesus is! This is what John means when he dares to say that no one has seen God.

### **I don't have to pretend that Jesus endorsed every depiction of God found in the Old Testament.**

**Because Jesus did not!  
"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you..."  
Something new!**

It's Jesus who reveals God. Jesus makes a clear distinction between Biblicism and what we will come to call Christianity, when he says...

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you will not come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40).

*Jesus trumps Biblicism.*

**So if we're going to talk about what stance Christians should take on the death penalty, we can't just cite the Torah.** The Torah endorses stoning Sabbath breakers. Jesus did not! The Torah endorses stoning adulterers. Jesus did not! Moses thought God wants us to kill Sabbath-breakers. Jesus said his Father gives life to

Hebrew Scriptures as the Bible of Jesus. But I follow Jesus! **I don't have to pretend that Jesus endorsed every depiction of God found in the Old Testament. Because Jesus did not!**

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you..." (Matthew 5:38-39).

Something new!

If we could ask Jesus if he thinks God told Moses to kill people who pick up sticks on the Sabbath, I think Jesus would say something like this: "I only do what I see my Father doing. My Father gives life to the dead."

Jesus trumps Biblicism.

And I'm glad! □

\* A Marcionite believes in Marcionism—an early Christian dualist belief system originating in the teachings of Marcion of Sinope at Rome around the year 144. Marcion believed Jesus Christ was the Savior sent by God, and Paul of Tarsus was his chief apostle, but he rejected the Hebrew Bible and the God of Israel. Marcionists believed that the wrathful Hebrew God was a separate and lower entity than the all-forgiving God of the New Testament. This belief was in some ways similar to Gnostic Christian theology; notably, both are dualistic, that is, they posit opposing gods, forces, or principles: one higher, spiritual, and "good", and the other lower, material, and "evil."

*Brian Zahnd is the lead pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. He is also the author of several books, including Radical Forgiveness, Beauty Will Save the World and A Farewell To Mars (2014).*



### **...Biblicism is prone to forcing contradictory passages to harmonize where they are not meant to. The Bible is flattened so all texts have equal authority with the words of Christ...**

In John Jesus heals a guy and tells him to carry his bed on the Sabbath. Those most committed to the Torah wanted to kill Jesus.

Just like Moses killed the Sabbath-breaker.

the dead. The Torah came by Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the full revelation of the Father. Jesus is what God has to say. Jesus is God's Truth.



## Out of Control

I recently spent a weekend preaching at a church in Atlanta. The title of the sermon was “Out of Control.” In the sermon, I said some fairly intelligent and, I think, helpful and biblical things about control and how dangerous it is to our spiritual health.

In fact, as I drove to the airport, I felt really good about the sermon. That was until the guy at curbside told me that I was too late to check my bag in at the curb and then I had to stand in the long line inside...

...and I found myself in the long security line that went all the way from there to Denver, and had to plead with the security agent to put me at the head of the line or I would miss my flight...

...and I found out that the flight was delayed an hour and when they finally boarded the plane, we sat at the gate for another hour waiting for “late passengers”... and the pilot refused to turn on the air conditioning...

...and I found myself irritated by the passenger next to me who was sleeping and didn’t care at all that we were two hours late.

I was just about to yell at the flight attendant when I thought about my sermon, and I realized that I was trying to control something that was uncontrollable. It was probably God who reminded me. I hate it when he does that! Of course I repented.

I would like to tell you that I reverted (as a result of my repentance) to my normal calm, lovable, kind, gracious self. I would like to tell you that I now, having been convicted by the Holy Spirit, thanked God for the inconvenience and the hassle I had just gone through. I would like to tell you that God fixed it, and Jesus and I walked off together in the sunset.

If I did, you wouldn’t believe me. And, not only that, I would then compound my sin of trying to control with a lie. Trust me on this, I don’t need another sin. So I must not tell a lie. I really did get better.

Not great...but better.

The sleeping passenger next to me still irritated me and I was still uncomfortably hot. But I didn’t yell at the flight attendant (that’s a good thing); I wasn’t as angry as I had been (that’s good too) and the best thing—I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

Now, having confessed my sin before you, let me tell you what I said in my sermon about control. The sermon was from Exodus 17:8-16 (I’m just going to give you points and you can write your own sermon). This passage suggests that God had given the people of God:

- 1) a situation they couldn’t fix,
- 2) a battle they couldn’t win,
- 3) a limitation they couldn’t ignore and
- 4) a memorial they couldn’t write.

God still does that to and for his people.

After reading what I wrote above, it may seem that I’m treating this issue lightly. I’m not. Every day I get letters from so many people who are in horrible situations that they can’t fix. There are marriages that aren’t working, secrets that can’t be shared, sins that shame and jobs that are horrible. There are financial, emotional and spiritual devastations, as well as families that are broken and lives that are shattered.

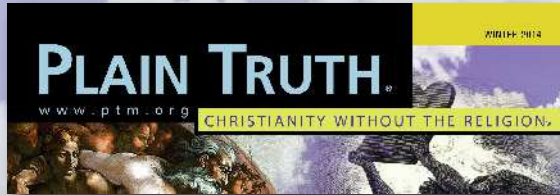
That’s hard...really hard. But it can also be a good thing if it brings us to the end of ourselves. We try and try to fix things that can’t be fixed. We worry, work, cuss and spit. And then, as with the people of God who found

God...will allow us to control whatever we want to control until it is finally so out of control that all we can do is give up.

## Plain Truth and Christianity Without the Religion Re-tool and Re-Focus

Somewhat like automobile companies prepare for a new model year, our staff spent much of 2014 on our “assembly line” preparing our 2015 models. Here’s a behind-the-scenes look at how and why we re-tooled and re-focused subscription/circulation policies and target audiences so that we might utilize our two magazine titles to more effectively proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For a number of years the Board of Directors of Plain Truth Ministries has been pondering the effectiveness of the title *Plain Truth* as we, as a ministry, continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. One of the ways in which we have grown is expressed by the phrase *Christianity Without the Religion*.



After using a variety of drop-heads over the years, in May-June 2004 we unveiled the current drop-head to *The Plain Truth*: “Christianity Without the Religion.” We found that *Christianity Without the Religion* effectively communicated one of the growing, primary themes of our ministry—so much so that in early 2006 Greg started giving a weekly sermon on our website, titling that audio media resource *Christianity Without the Religion*. Then, in 2010 we launched a second magazine which we titled *Christianity Without the Religion Journal*.



With all of that said as background, several years ago we started to plan for a **new subscription and circulation policy for both of our magazines. As of 2015:**

- The new subscription policy of *The Plain Truth* will define it as the North American magazine that we publish, print and mail via hard copy to those Friends and Partners who consistently and generously support the ongoing ministry of CWR/PTM. The new circulation policy of *The Plain Truth* will mean that it will be used to offer topics of specific interest to the target audience of **our inner-family of core supporters**. Electronic, digital copies of *The Plain Truth* will continue to be available on our website, free of charge—both the most recent issues as well as our *PT* archives.
- We will also modify the subscription and circulation policy of *Christianity Without the Religion Journal*. *Christianity Without the Religion* magazine (*CWRm*) will become our flagship magazine—the digital version of new issues of *CWRm* will be sent without charge via direct electronic link to subscribers around the world. Given our budgetary restrictions, hard copies of *CWRm* sent through the mail will be restricted in the majority of cases, to North Americans who provide occasional, minimal donations to our ongoing work.

We will provide further details about these and more upcoming improvements in the next *Plain Truth* issue. We believe these improvements will help us more effectively reach a worldwide audience with *Christianity Without the Religion*. □

he asked me...

themselves trained brick makers in a battle with trained warriors, it gets even worse. It is extremely frustrating trying to be God.

*You through?* God says, not unkindly.

When we say that, yes, we’re through, then God begins to enter our out-of-control situations with his power, his peace and sometimes even his miraculous intervention to fix the unfixable.

Did you hear about the elderly woman who was walking down the streets of London during one of the German bombings of World War II?

A bomb hit the building next to where she was walking and she was buried in the rubble. When the rescue teams saw her leg sticking out of the rubble, they figured she was dead.

But when they dug her out, she was still breathing. They found a flask of brandy in her pocketbook and, holding her in a sitting position, tried to give it to her. She pushed them away and said “Don’t do that, I’m saving that for emergencies!”

Maybe you have finally come to your emergency and it’s time for the brandy.

The only brandy, as it were, that I have to offer to you and to myself is the truth of a *God who will allow us to control whatever we want to control until it is finally so out of control that all we can do is give up*. When we give up and give it to him, there is a sense of peace and release that is better than drink or drugs.

And the best part of that text (Exodus 17:8-16) is at the end when Moses writes a memorial so that the people of God don’t forget his power, his love, his faithfulness...and his care.

The out-of-control places in our lives are the very places where we have to have memorials so that the next time we’re out of control, we’ll remember what God did the last time.

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown





## He's All In

**T**he story world painted in the first chapter of the book of Job speaks of Satan showing up at God's house for a visit. Details are not provided, but we get the idea that Lucifer did not bring flowers. It didn't take long before the Prince of Darkness started to condemn Job, one of God's servants.

Reading this story the other day, I was thinking of another way we might imagine The Evil One visiting our heavenly Father—but this visit wound up on the cutting room floor when the final version of the Bible was edited. You may remember comedian Bob Newhart, who often set up hilarious scenes he imagined happening with the phrase “it might have gone something like this.” I'm thinking that Satan visited God one day and the discussion went *something like this*:

Satan: “You know, you talk a good fight, but I don't see how you could really love the men and women you have created. Why don't you put up or shut up?”

God: “*What exactly do you have in mind?*”

Pulling out a deck of cards The Adversary gets down to business: “Let's talk about it over a hand of poker. We'll put all our chips on the table—winner takes all.”

God: “*You really don't want to play with me!*”

Never known for humility, Beelzebub blustered: “Let's get it on. Do you mind if I deal?”

God: “*Deal whenever you want—I AM ready.*”

Talking trash, Satan begins to deal the cards. God hasn't even picked his hand off the table before the fast-talking Devil boasts: “When push comes to shove, you will never gamble all that you are and all that you have on those sorry little people on earth who are such miserable wretches. I am going to force you to admit that your so-called love for them has its limits.”

With steely-eyed resolve, looking like Clint Eastwood facing down one of his adversaries, God calls Satan's bluff by pushing all of his chips into the middle of the table without even taking a look at the cards he had been dealt. “*I'm all in. All I AM and all I have is on*

*the table. No matter what I'm holding, no matter what you're holding. No matter what cards are left in the deck. No matter what, I'm all in. I AM all in with the ones you call 'sorry little people.'*”

Satan was taken aback, and replied: “What do you mean you're all in? How do you propose to prove your love for your creation?”

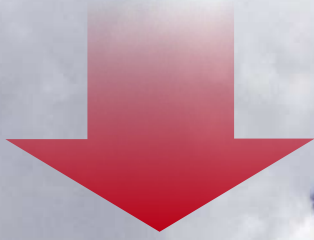
God: “*I'm going to go and be one of them. I'm going to live with them just as they live. Wherever they are, and whatever challenges they face, I'm going to pursue them. I will do whatever it takes. My entire creation, you included Lucifer, will be left with absolutely no doubt about my love. What about you—are you all in?*”

If he had learned anything, Satan had learned never to doubt God. He picked up his chips and started to walk away, and then he turned and sneered: “Surely you don't think they're going to love you back, do you? You don't think your little story is going to wind up with everyone living happily ever after, do you? You know how hateful and violent those sorry people are—they'll probably kill you.”

God: “*No probably about it. I know them. I created them. I'm going down there, and I will kiss them and hug them and love them. Of course, in the end, they will do what humans do. In return for good, they will give me grief. They will hate me because of my unlimited love. They will kill me, but that's part of my mission. My love is not based on their acceptance. I'm going anyway. I AM all in. I love them because that's who I AM.*”

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) masterfully conveys the loving pursuit of Jesus in “The Brothers Karamazov.” Dostoevsky describes the institutional church 1500 years after the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The institution had long since turned its back on the freedom and simplicity of Jesus, choosing instead to reject Jesus in favor of the survival of big business religion. Dostoevsky portrays a surprise visit by Jesus during the time of the religious inquisitions in Spain (lasting several centuries after first being established in 1478).

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## commentary

Dostoevsky pictures Jesus coming to the afflicted, abused and overwhelmed-by-institutionalized-religion people of Spain, just as he had come to the Jews in the first century. “The Grand Inquisitor” is a tale within the novel about the rejection of Jesus by organized religion, whether the first-century religion of Judaism or of 16th-century religion posing as Christianity.

Dostoevsky says it went *something like this*: The day after a hundred heretics were burned alive by order of the Inquisition Jesus walked by the cathedral in Seville as a funeral procession with a little white coffin was leaving. The grief-stricken mother of the little girl who had just died appealed to Jesus and Jesus resurrected the little girl.

At that moment the Grand Inquisitor arrived on the scene, described by Dostoevsky: “He is an old man, almost ninety, tall and erect, with a withered face and sunken eyes, in which there is still a gleam of light. He is not dressed in his gorgeous cardinal’s robes, as he was the day before, when he was burning the enemies of the Roman church...at this moment he is wearing his coarse, old, monk’s cassock.”

True to the knee-jerk response toward those who dare to challenge Christ-less religion, the Grand Inquisitor ordered Jesus to be thrown into prison for upsetting the religious status quo. Later, having seemingly recognized the actual identity of Jesus, the old man-Grand Inquisitor asks Jesus “Why have you come to disturb us?” Ironically, 1500 years after Jesus, the established religion which did its business in Jesus’ name was so disturbed and threatened by Jesus’ presence that it responded by throwing him into prison.

Still standing outside Jesus’ prison cell the Grand Inquisitor audaciously reviled Jesus and then paused to give Jesus an opportunity to answer. “He [Jesus] suddenly approached the old man in silence and kissed him on his bloodless aged lips. That was His answer.”

*When all the implications of Jesus’ arrival are considered, Christ-less religion is still disturbed by Jesus.* Christ-less religion still denies and rejects the intimate embrace and kiss Jesus offers. Many within modern Christendom trivialize, diminish and devalue the celebration of Jesus’ birth by trying to turn it into a sugar-laced fantasyland that has little to do with the endless love God offers to us in the midst of the desperately evil places in which we find ourselves. Sugar plum fairies and toy soldiers and gingerbread houses aside, the message of Christmas is that our Savior comes to us. He is here and he is after us. Jesus is pursuing us. Rather than opting for the safety and security of a fantasyland castle, Jesus has come to live with and be one of us.

It seems for many, Jesus is little more than a harmless plastic front-yard decoration made in China, purchased at Wal-Mart, stored in the attic for most of the year and exhumed and displayed for a few weeks in December. But Jesus isn’t plastic, and he can’t be stored in your attic. Jesus is alive—he doesn’t fit into the plastic molds our culture shapes for him. The risen Lord is here and he’s pursuing us. He wants to be a part of our lives—he offers us an embrace and a kiss.

If we are to truly celebrate Jesus, we will surrender all our religion, bowing before his cradle and his cross. The good news of Christmas is that all the tinsel and ornaments and Christmas puddings and concerts do not add up to even one small fraction of the enormity and totality of who God is. No matter how wonderful our attempts might be to honor and revere him, the fact remains that the love of God is always greater than we are able to conceive or celebrate.

The message of Christmas is, in its totality, a mystery—it’s always far beyond the grasp of our abilities to earn or deserve it. *The message of Christmas is in his kiss and in his embrace—and his never ending pursuit. He’s all in.* □

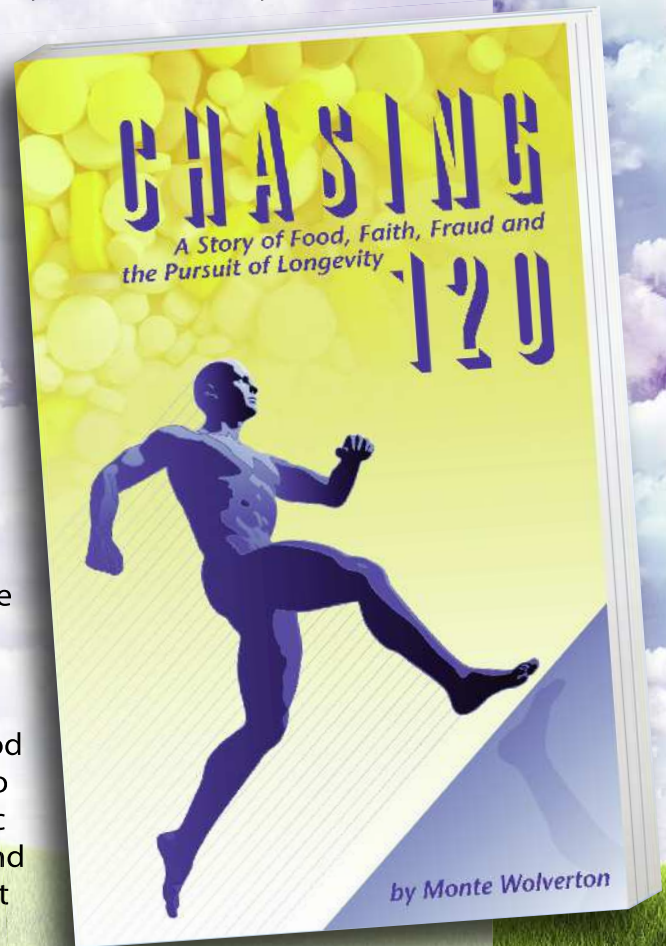
—Greg Albrecht

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

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

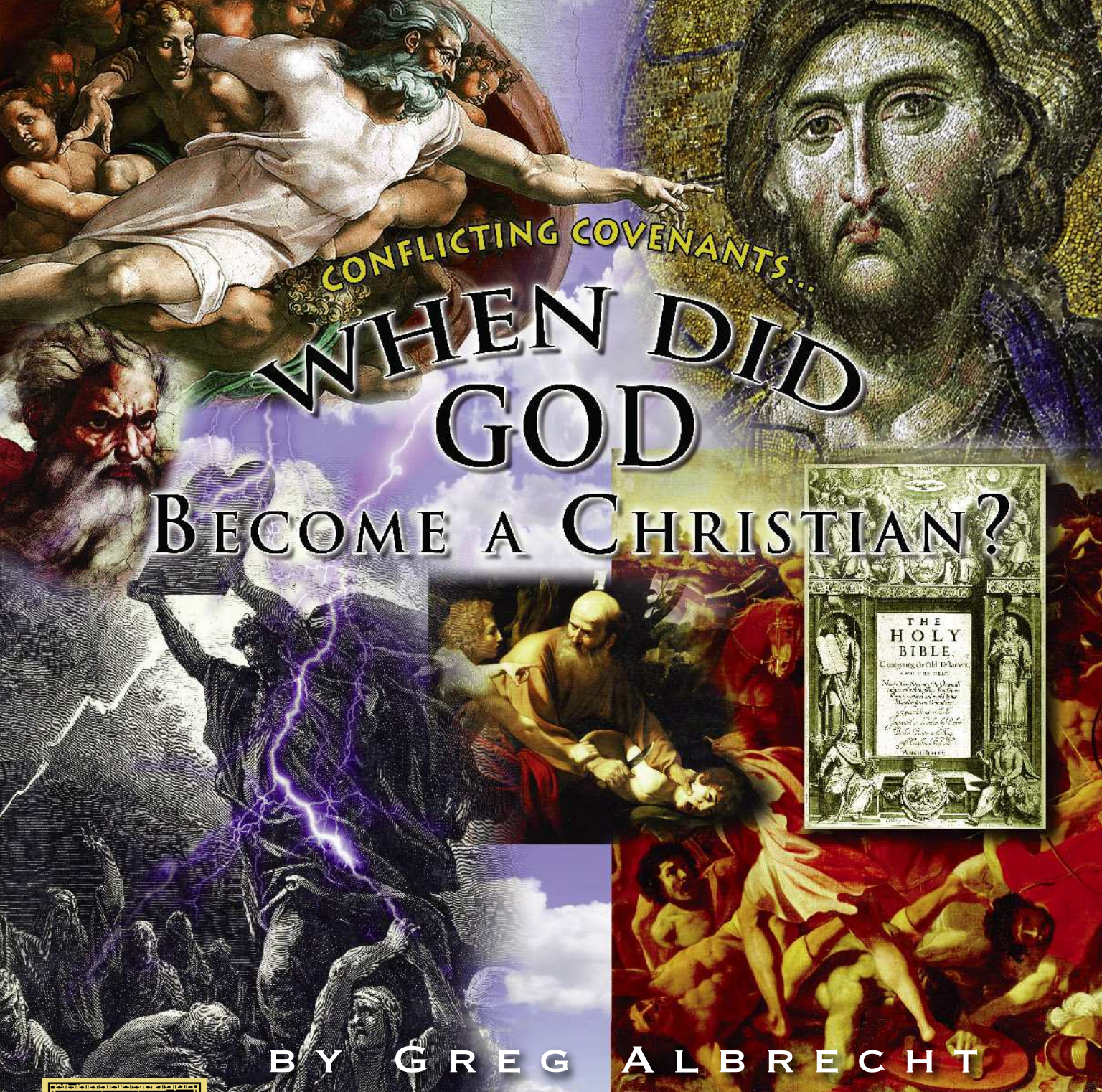
The dark side of Wellness 120 is that many of Belknop's supplements are laced with exotic substances and genetically modified plants developed in his high-tech secret research lab. Wellness 120 creative director Dave Whitman and his wife Marcia suddenly find themselves in the center of a huge crisis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

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



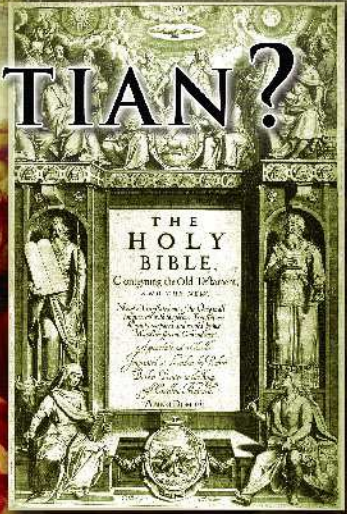
Available at [www.ptm.org/120](http://www.ptm.org/120)  
and [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)





CONFLICTING COVENANTS...

# WHEN DID GOD BECOME A CHRISTIAN?



BY GREG ALBRECHT



They arrived in Jerusalem with their camel caravan after spending more than a month on the road. These wealthy and wise men called

the Magi were clearly men of means— their style of travel was the first-century equivalent to a sleek, sophisticated Motorhome more

than it was an ancient VW bus. On-the-street speculation about the purpose of this visit quickly ended when these dignitaries started to inquire about a newly born king of the Jews to whom they had come to pay homage.

Herod (the Great) was more than a little interested when he heard what had brought these esteemed men all the way to his kingdom.

Appointed by the Roman Senate as king of Judea, Herod was, though he was a non-practicing convert, popularly known as “King of the Jews.” As King of the Jews Herod naturally viewed any baby considered to be an heir to his throne as an eventual threat. Herod called some of the same Jewish scholars with whom the Magi consulted, and learned that the baby king had



*Herod's attempt to save his throne from Jesus by ordering the deaths of all the boy babies in the vicinity... was but one of many in a long chronicle of depraved acts of bloodletting...*

praved acts of bloodletting. Then, as now, benumbed citizens had become somewhat calloused to news of unspeakable acts, not just at the behest of Herod, but of kings down through time.

*The Bethlehem abomination was not the first massacre of children, nor was it the last.*

Diabolical and sadistic brutalities inflicted on vulnerable, helpless children by military, governmental and yes, religious leaders are outrageous—sadly, the suffering of the innocents in Bethlehem is but one of many unconscionable atrocities against children recorded in the annals of history. To this day, our modern, “civilized” world continues to witness and to some degree turn a blind eye to the sexual abuse of children.

Like many other nations, the Jews were proud they had spilled the blood of their enemies on battlefields. Not only did the Jews glory in their past military conquests, their own Bible (known as the Old Testament to Christians) insisted that some of the massacres their soldiers carried out had been commanded by YHVH (some time before the first century Jews avoided saying the name of God and substituted another Hebrew word—“Adonai”).

These apparently divinely ordered and approved blood baths on Old Testament killing fields included the wholesale slaughter of defenseless children (Deuteronomy 20:16; Joshua 6:21, 11:14-15; 1 Samuel 15:3 and Hosea 13:16, among others).

Given the accepted religious belief that past massacres the Jews had carried out were divinely approved and directed, Herod, King of the Jews, may well have attempted to justify the slaughter of

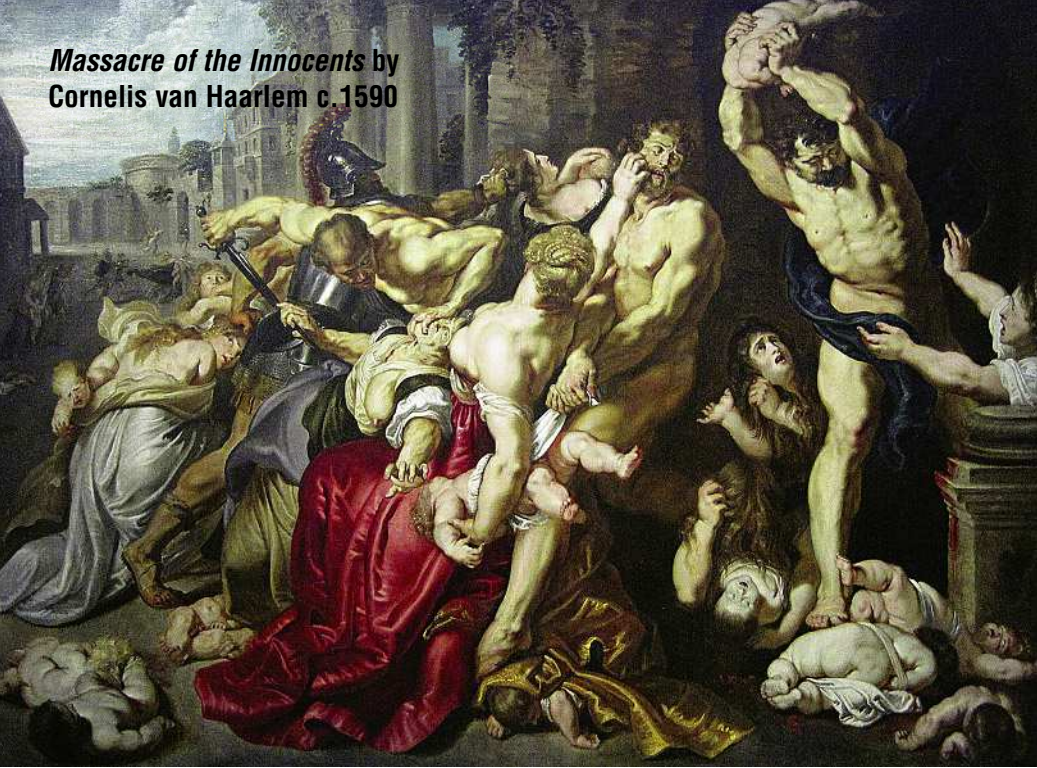
maze of plots, lies, treacheries, corruption, backroom deals, political chicanery and executions. Herod's willingness to do whatever was necessary to serve his own interests makes modern day, ruthless gangsters like the fictional Godfather seem almost charming by comparison. Herod was a first century despot every bit the equal of 21st century madmen, intent on violently obliterating any and all potential threats to their selfish desires.

Herod's attempt to save his throne from Jesus by ordering the deaths of all the boy babies in the vicinity of Bethlehem, two years old and under, was but one of many in a long chronicle of de-

been prophesied to be born in the little town of Bethlehem, a suburb of Jerusalem. Pretending that he too wanted to worship this baby in Bethlehem, Herod told the Magi to let him know when and if they found him.

We know the rest of the story, don't we? The story of Herod's absolute, iron-fisted sovereign power over Judea takes one through a

**Massacre of the Innocents by  
Cornelis van Haarlem c. 1590**



cents in Bethlehem, King Jesus insisted that little children be allowed to come to him (Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus was the king who would *change everything!*

When King Jesus explained his kingdom, and when he exemplified his kingdom, it was a *completely different kind of kingdom and he was a completely different kind of king* than anyone had ever heard of or known before. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, “A king who dies on the cross must be the king of a rather strange kingdom.” The upside-down, completely unexpected irony of Jesus’ humble beginnings is only surpassed by the willing vulnerability he expressed, the very love of God, at and on his cross.

The wailing of the newborn child in the midst of the muck and mire of a barnyard in Bethlehem was a new beginning for the entire world—the love of God was being made known in the most unlikely place and circumstances. That newborn child was the good news that peace had come to replace the sword. Remember those mysterious wise men outsiders, the Magi, followers of other gods, who came to honor and worship the newborn Jesus? I like to visualize the Magi sporting bumper stickers plastered on the rear ends of their camels proclaiming to fellow travelers—*The Beginning Is Near!*

*He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.—2 Corinthians 3:6*

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!—2 Corinthians 5:17*

Jesus came to *change everything* — to make everything new. He came to clear up misperceptions and set the record straight. He came to reveal God in his ministry, his actions and his teachings. What Jesus said and did was a shocking revela-

*A king like no other had been born—a king who served those who opposed him rather than brutalizing and executing them... Instead of ordering the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, King Jesus insisted that little children be allowed to come to him (Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus was the king who would change everything!*

the innocents at Bethlehem by saying that he was merely following the script of the “Old Testament God?”

### **The Baby Who Changed Everything**

Before the birth of Jesus, God could only be known on the basis of the law of the old covenant (John 1:17). The birth of Jesus caused the river of time to reverse its course, as it opened the door of eternity. On this side of Jesus’ birth, history flows toward God, for all are invited to come to fully know God, as he is revealed in and through Jesus. Jesus brought a new way of knowing God—Christ followers call it the new covenant. *Jesus changed everything.*

He wasn’t born into a place where humans might expect God to be born—his birthplace was Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. He wasn’t born in a castle or a mansion. No servants were bustling around,

servicing Mary and Joseph. In the person of Jesus, God came to be one of us, to serve us, rather than demanding our service (Matthew 20:28). *Jesus changed everything.*

Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem was the announcement—the grand proclamation—that the hope of the ages had arrived. This was the baby who would *change everything!* Jesus was Immanuel (God with us — Matthew 1:23). Jesus was the Eternal Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). Babies are born every day, and people die every day, but the birth and death of Jesus was once for all (Hebrews 9:26). *Jesus changed everything.*

A king like no other had been born—a king who served those who opposed him rather than brutalizing and executing them. This king would triumph by being executed rather than executing those who opposed him. Instead of ordering the slaughter of the inno-

tion—Jesus turned religion upside-down and inside-out. Jesus was (and is) an entirely different King and a completely different God than the world of religion had known and taught.

- King Jesus was filled with love and grace. Even a casual reading of the Gospels forces us to realize that Jesus always reached out, always listened and always responded. He was not too busy, but was patient and he cared! Jesus did not threaten or cajole. Jesus was not filled with wrath, but filled with grace and mercy. Jesus never crucified anyone—but he willingly, as the greatest demonstration of love ever, accepted hatred and violence on his cross so that he might transform the kingdoms of our world into his own kingdom of peace.

- King Jesus completely identified with the lost, the aliens, the marginalized and impoverished. He himself was an outsider. Jesus valued and loved everyone on the basis of their existence rather than on the basis of their accomplishments.

- King Jesus was relational. He didn't spend his nights under 600-thread count Egyptian cotton sheets in a palace in Jerusalem while the disciples lived rough in their sleeping bags in some dusty campsite. Jesus was one of us. He was not the exception, he lived the way we all do. **He came to be one of us, so that he was not way up there, but down here, with us, in the barnyards of our lives.**

What does God becoming one of us mean for you and me? Who was this Son of God, Jesus, God in the flesh, exactly? How is he a king like no other? How and in what way does he bring peace and the favor of God? Questions like those have captivated and confounded men and women ever since his birth in Bethlehem. We can't fully grasp all that is involved in God becoming human, but we can conclude, in faith, that *Jesus changed everything*.

*Jesus changed everything because everything needed to be changed—everything—including religion and its interpretation of God. This sad*

*The upside-down, completely unexpected irony of Jesus' humble beginnings... the newborn child in the midst of the muck and mire of a barnyard in Bethlehem was a new beginning for the entire world—the love of God was being made known in the most unlikely place and circumstances.*



old world needed the good news. Everything was broken, rotting, polluted and corrupted. Jesus was good news because he came to proclaim the true nature of God the Father, and the relationship he offers to all mankind. God came to be one of us in the person of Jesus so that all mankind might be invited to come to know God as he is.

Jesus was good news because he proclaimed God's grace (John 1:17). God's grace is the best news ever—God's grace is a new and revolutionary way of knowing God. **Grace is great news because God is revealed as a God of love and mercy rather than being passionately consumed to vindicate his holiness by unleashing wrath and violence.** Before Jesus came, humans could only struggle to know God on the basis of their performance. Before Jesus, humans had little or no idea at all about the nature of God.

*Jesus changed everything* because he came to reveal God, and to make the love and grace of God available to all mankind. Jesus

*Jesus changed everything because everything needed to be changed—everything—including religion and its interpretation of God. This sad old world needed the good news.*

proclaims such a remarkably different God that many find they must think of, on the one hand, the "God of the New Testament (covenant)" and on the other the "God of the Old Testament (covenant)." It goes without saying that Jesus, the God of the New Testament (covenant), never ordered the mass killings of men, women, children and animals—*Jesus changed everything because everything needed to be changed.*

### **When God Was Born Again**

William Barclay, in his *Daily Study Bible Series* on The Gospel of John tells about a "little girl who was once confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament." The little girl explained the paradox this way: "But that happened before God became a Christian!"

One day, as Jesus and his disciples were travelling through Samaria on his way toward Jerusalem the people of a particular Samaritan village did not welcome him.

*When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village (Luke 9:54-56).*

Much has been made of the impulsiveness and hot tempers of James and John. But didn't James and John have good reason to assume that Jesus, the God-man,

*Joshua's Victory over the Amalekites*  
by Nicolas Poussin c.1625–1626



*The “inerrant, infallible” Bible insisted on by religious Biblicists tells us that God told Samuel... to kill every man and woman, all children and all animals of the Amalekites... There are many explanations that attempt to explain why God would have demanded such carnage—I’ve heard them, taught and preached many of them and by God’s grace I now rest in him, knowing he has forgiven me for doing so.*

would react in such a way? After all, they had read and studied their Bibles (the Old Testament). James and John had read many texts that implicitly and explicitly identified God as directing atrocities. Jesus’ disciples were among the first of many who would follow them, over the many centuries, who experienced problems reconciling the “God of the Old Testament” with Jesus, the “God of the New Testament.”

Maybe James and John were hot-heads, but they also had every reason to assume that the wrath of God did not suffer fools gladly. Jesus rebuked James and John—

instead of destroying a village that refused to roll out the welcome mat Jesus just kept walking to another village. Was Jesus rebuking the common assumption about a God of wrath commonly believed to have directly ordered “ethnic cleansing”? The Old Testament presents God unloosing mass destruction, yet Jesus insisted on turning the other cheek.

Jesus said that we should not only love those who love us, but we should pray for our enemies. *Jesus proclaimed an upside-down kingdom, wherein people do not get what they deserve, but rather are*

*given, by God’s grace, what they can never earn.* And perhaps most puzzling of all, Jesus died on the cross, out of his love. Truly no man had ever been like him before—*Jesus changed everything.*

And make no mistake—the birth, the cross and the resurrection all worked in triune harmony to ratify and forever usher in the new covenant. But just as James and John assumed that Jesus would be perfectly happy to destroy the entire village in Samaria, so too do many within Christendom today continue to misunderstand the cross of Christ. It is not



surprising that much of Christendom today explains the cross of Christ as the Father pouring out his “wrath” on the/his Son. *Such a conclusion and interpretation is not surprising when religion feels it necessary to explain the murder of children as the infallible command of God.* After all, if God murdered anything that breathed in the Old Testament, what would stop him from demanding the torture and murder of his own Son in order that his justice could be satisfied?

This is the conclusion that Christ-less religion must support when it denies that Jesus, God in the flesh, willingly, out of an incredible act of love, accepted and absorbed the hatred and violence of humanity, with religion leading the charge.

What actually happened at the cross of Christ is normally denied, because the true motivation and explanation of the cross is a counter-intuitive, upside down head scratcher.

The message of the cross is this—Jesus, in an act of love, restored us to God by absorbing our anger and our wrath. The anger and wrath Jesus experienced on his cross was human anger and wrath—anger and wrath that Christendom at large has laid at the doorstep of the “Old Testament God.” Jesus truly *changed everything.*

*No one knows the Son except the*

*Jesus teaches non-violence, avoiding retaliation, and loving and praying for our enemies (Matthew 5:38-39, 43-44). Why would Jesus say such a thing and insist on such a thing if he, Creator of all things, actually directed and commanded the nation of Israel to massacre men, women, children and animals?*

*Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.—Matthew 11:27*

Because Jesus revealed God the Father, we must inevitably address apparent glaring inconsistencies



*...a “little girl who was once confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament.” The little girl explained the paradox this way: “But that happened before God became a Christian!”*

between the “Old Testament God” and the “New Testament God.” Assuming and accepting that 1) God is one, and 2) Jesus came to reveal the Father, and 3) Jesus was God in the flesh, 4) how can the “God of the Old Testament” be so radically different from Jesus, who brought us the new covenant?

**God Is Violent—Stay Out of His Way!**

*Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.—1 Samuel 15:3*

The “inerrant, infallible” Bible in-

sisted on by religious Biblicists tells us that God told Samuel, the prophet, to tell Saul, the first king of Israel, to kill every man and woman, all children and all animals of the Amalekites.

Then, when the armies of Saul actually captured Agag, the Amalekite king alive, and kept some of the cattle and sheep as plunder, God rejected him because of his rebellion (1 Samuel 15:23).

There are many explanations that attempt to explain why God would have demanded such carnage—I’ve heard them, taught and preached many of them and by God’s grace I now rest in him, knowing he has forgiven me for doing so. Perhaps the most well known and oft-used explanation that attempts to get God off the hook for such a brutal ethnic cleansing is that the Amalekites were so perverted and corrupt that nothing at all of their culture deserved to remain.

Of course it’s possible to allow yourself to be bent into a theological pretzel in an attempt to vindicate Old Testament massacres by



Of course, as a Christ-follower I must not only ask such questions of this passage, but of many others where God is depicted as demanding total annihilation (see Deuteronomy 13:15-16; 20:16-18; Joshua 6:21).

### The Infallible God or an Infallible Book?

As a Christ-follower, when I read such passages, here's my dilemma and my solution, measured in steps:

1) I believe that God is one, and that he has eternally existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe that Jesus, God in the flesh, is the Eternal Son of God, the

*The Bible is a book that can only help me in as much as it helps me see Jesus. I interpret the significance of all biblical teaching in the light of Jesus and his teaching... I believe that all Christ-followers must read the Bible through the eyes and lens of Jesus.*

saying that the "God of the Old Testament" had every right to make any demands he wanted. Well, of course God can do anything he wants, but surely we can see that assuming God orders or sanctions behavior that completely contradicts his own nature and then justifying such an assumption with a flippant "God can do anything he wants" leaves much to be desired.

Since I believe that Jesus was and is the "express image" (Hebrews 1:3 Colossians 1:15) of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) this "Old Testament God" brings me into conflict with Jesus. And when anything or anyone conflicts with Jesus, Jesus wins!

Jesus teaches non-violence, avoiding retaliation, and loving and praying for our enemies (Matthew 5:38-39, 43-44). Why would Jesus say such a thing and insist on such a thing if he, Creator of all things, actually directed and commanded the nation of Israel to massacre men, women, children and animals? After all, *if making sure people "get what's coming to*

*them" was God's primary motivation, he could have brought the judgment of death on evil-doers without commanding his followers to kill those evil-doers!*

I am a Christ-follower. I believe all the Bible from a **Christ-centered filter**. All history and all reality centers in and on Jesus Christ. When I try to make sense of the reality I live today, or the Bible I read today, I do so through a **Christ-centered focus**. He, after all, makes all things new and *he changed everything!*

So I must ask, about this passage in 1 Samuel:

- was Samuel accurately reporting what God told him, or
- was Samuel, motivated by good religious intentions, putting words into God's mouth because he thought that was what God ought to say, or
- did later editors/redactors put words into both Samuel's mouth as well as God's, because their religious beliefs informed them that must have been what really happened?
- is this unspeakable genocide recorded in 1 Samuel 15 a revelation about divine or human retributive "justice" and violence?

second person of the triune God, and among other things, was the creator of heaven and earth (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16 and Hebrews 1:2). Since God is one, and since Jesus is God, then he was very much "alive and well" during the time of questionable (in the light of Jesus) actions attributed to the "Old Testament God."

2) My faith, as a Christ-follower, is based on the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. My faith and practice is **Christ-centered**. Jesus is my priority. The Bible is significant and meaningful only from a **Christ-centered perspective**.

I will always choose Jesus over any version or translations of the Bible. *The Bible is a book that can only help me in as much as it helps me see Jesus.* I interpret the significance of all biblical teaching in the light of Jesus and his teaching. Jesus came to bring us a new covenant, which is new and radically different than anything before. I believe that all Christ-followers must read the Bible through the eyes and lens of Jesus.

3) Christ-less religion can bring us to a crossroads where it, and its

# TAKING THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY



“There can only be One final authority for faith and practice. And mine had a beard.”—Brad Jersak

Jesus took his Scriptures very seriously. So must we! He also warned that even by diligent study and veneration of Scripture we may still fail to hear God’s word (see John 5:37-40). Today, these cautions especially apply to *Biblicism*, *Biblical literalism* and *Bibliolatry*.

## Definitions:

**Biblicism:** an ideology that so emphasizes the *exclusive* authority and *all-sufficiency* of Scripture that it makes the Bible, rather than Christ, “the Word of God” and our “final authority for faith and practice.” Biblicism is committed to *infallibility* and *inerrancy*. That is, by supernatural guidance, biblical authors were incapable of error; every word was true.

Thus, Biblicism is prone to forcing contradictory passages to harmonize where they are not meant to. The Bible is flattened so all texts have equal authority with the words of Christ—even when the image of God they portray conflicts with the revelation of God in Christ.

**Biblical literalism:** a theory of interpretation that privileges by default a literal reading of any Scripture unless to do so is impossible. In practice, biblical literalism often imposes literal meanings onto the text where they were neither intended by the author, nor advisable given the genre, nor possible in light of the revelation of Christ.

**Bibliolatry:** a reverence for Scripture that becomes worship of the book itself—where the Bible is described in terms only attributable to God himself—and loyalty to one’s interpretation of the Bible trumps faithfulness to the Gospel.

## Critiquing the 3 B’s

Claiming to defend the inspiration and authority of Scripture, Biblicism is really guilty of undermining it. Biblicists fail to take seriously the text by denying and sanitizing its

multiplicity of voices. The Bible is a lively conversation in tension and even conflict, compiled to deliver powerful overarching revelations. Biblicism fails to appreciate the beauty of the various genres and the genius of their intended more-than-literal interpretations. It fails to recognize the way Scripture testifies—and bows—to the living Word, Who predates, challenges and fulfills it. The Bible is a shadowy glimpse of the living Reality. To all of this, the Bible itself bears witness.

## Thoughts on Key Biblicist Passages

**Matthew 5:17-18:** Jesus said, “I didn’t come to abolish (break) the Law, but to fulfill it, even dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s” (not literally!). In Ephesians 2:15, Paul proclaims that Christ *did* fulfill the Law, abolishing (*setting aside*) its commandments and ordinances.

**John 10:35:** Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken,” turning the Bible on some Biblicists who sought to trap him. He cites a Psalm and thus drives them into their own trap.

**2 Timothy 3:16-17:** Paul wrote that all Scripture is inspired by God [*but written by men*] and yes, profitable for instruction and correction. This includes providing *negative examples* to avoid (1 Corinthians 10:6). But Matthew 17:1-6, John 1:17-18 and Hebrews 1-2 make it clear that Christ alone is *perfect* theology, eclipsing every other claim to revelation as inferior to Jesus.

**2 Peter 1:21:** Peter claims the prophecies of Scripture didn’t come by human opinion, but through men carried by the Holy Spirit. He combines his personal experience with these written prophecies as witnesses in agreement to the glory of Christ alone.

All these passages affirm the importance of the Bible and God’s hand in it. But they never magnify the book to equality with Christ, nor make claims for it that it cannot bear.

Recommended reading: Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*.

interpretation of the Bible, demands as much or more allegiance to itself, its rituals, traditions, creeds and interpretations of the Bible than a Christ-follower owes solely to Jesus.

4) There are *two basic ways to understand the Bible*:

4a) it is a collection of the infallible and inerrant words of God virtually dictated to humans. The inspired, inerrant, infallible interpretation of the Bible presumes that every word of the Bible miraculously bypasses human imperfections, so that all scientific truth, historical judgments and spiritual insights are absolutely set-in-concrete infallible and inerrant words penned by human authors. This fundamentalist view insists that every word is absolutely accurate, even when judged by 21st century science and history.

But if this view is correct, why did God include human beings as a central part of the writing, editing, translating and preservation of the Bible? *If God intended the Bible to be 100% error-free, in every way, then why didn’t he write, produce, and publish it in heaven, and then parachute the perfect package to earth?*

If absolute literary perfection was intended, then why not deliver the infallible book via an-



*The Children Destroyed by Bears by Gustave Doré*

gels, in a similar way that storks are superstitiously presumed to deliver new babies?

Perhaps it is easier for those of us who have never been intimately touched by the teachings of Islam to consider the errors caused by fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran. Instead of allowing for the biases and prejudices of the time and without due consideration of and for human sources of its time of writing, no-nonsense, radicalized Muslims interpret the Koran as writings infallibly written in heaven before it was delivered to earth. *The intent of the Koran, deified through beliefs about its absolute inerrancy, is now believed, by funda-*

*mentalist Muslims, to enshrine the will of God, in absolute detail. And how exactly is this religious mindset working out? This interpretation allows for the use of force against those who do not subscribe to the teachings of the Koran, as well as polygamy, slavery and of course terrorism and jihad—so called “holy” war.*

*We can easily perceive this progressive, Christ-centered view of the Bible... In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us how to understand the “God of the Old Testament” and how to interpret the Old Testament.*  
*“It has been said.... BUT I TELL YOU.”*

Begging the question as to whether they are truly followers of Mohammed or Jesus, fundamentalists in the world of Islam or of Christendom perceive God as unquestioned authority, filled with wrath, threats and the potential of violence. Those who deify any book see truth as a past tense event that must be recaptured—absolute truth as edicts, attributed to God but authored by humans—absolute, set-in-concrete, never-to-be-questioned truth.

4b) But there is another way to read and understand the Bible without falling into the ditch of inerrant infallibility. The Bible is an inspired record of the progressive revelation of God, so that it moves from use of force to the greater value of love, from polygamy to monogamy, from slavery to freedom, from the unquestioned, sovereign ancient potentate “God of the Old Testament (covenant)” to the humble, vulnerable, merciful, gracious and loving “God of the New Testament (covenant),” revealed to the world through the incarnate Son of God.

We can easily perceive this progressive, Christ-centered view of the Bible through the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus offered his own authoritative distinction between the “God of the Old Testament” and the “God of the New Testament.” In the fifth chapter of Matthew Jesus contrasted the old and former ideas of God with his new teaching that changed everything (see Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44).

In these six antithetical teachings when he spoke of Old Testament law Jesus said something like “it has been said” or “you have heard that it was said.” When describing these old covenant teachings and

*In the light of Jesus I must begin to see and comprehend Old Testament references to barbarities in the name of God as someone's incomplete and inadequate idea of God.*

traditions Jesus never said "God said" or "I, God in the flesh, the Creator of all things, said." By contrast, in every one of these six teachings Jesus then followed this inadequate understanding of the "Old Testament God" with the emphatic "But I say unto you."

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us how to understand the "God of the Old Testament" and how to interpret the Old Testament.

"It has been said/You have heard that it was said.... BUT I TELL YOU."

*For Christ-followers, truth lies in the dynamic and progressive revelation of the living, dynamic risen Lord Jesus Christ, who was and is and is to come.*

### **How Jesus Interpreted the Old Testament**

5) Because my faith is Christ-centered I take directions from the way in which Jesus himself interpreted "the Bible." Remember, the religious authorities of Jesus' day had a Bible too—it just didn't include what we know as the New Testament. Jesus repeatedly challenged the way in which the Bible was understood by religious leaders of his day. To the religious leaders who rejected him Jesus said:

*You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.—John 5:39-40*

Jesus accepted the Scriptures, but he did not worship them as infallible and inerrant. He had no problem reversing many portions of the Old Testament, and he was the Authority who could do so. **Jesus alone is worthy to tell us who God is and who God is not. As we have seen in the fifth chapter of Matthew,**

**Jesus did not absolutely believe every word of the Old Testament to be inerrant or infallible.** Jesus discriminated in favor of God's love and grace. Jesus interpreted the Old Testament by the love and grace of God.

The Apostle Paul was once well known in the religious world as Saul, a religious authority who zealously tried to wipe Christians off the face of the earth. But after Jesus appeared to him, Saul became Paul, and in Philippians 3:8

*In this fifth chapter of Matthew Jesus contrasted the old and former ideas of God with new teaching that changed everything.*

Paul said he considered the life he once led based on his former religious interpretations of God and his nature, based on an interpretation of the Old Testament, as "garbage" (New International Version), "so much garbage" (The New English Bible), "rubbish" (New Revised Standard and New King James), "dung" (King James Authorized Version) and finally, the icing on the cake translation: "dog

*Jesus accepted the Scriptures, but he did not worship them as infallible and inerrant. He had no problem reversing many portions of the Old Testament, and he was the Authority who could do so.... Jesus discriminated in favor of God's love and grace.*

dung" (*The Message*).

6) I see nothing at all in the New Testament about Christians being commanded to kill any man or woman, let alone children and animals. So what do I do with this "Old Testament God" command-

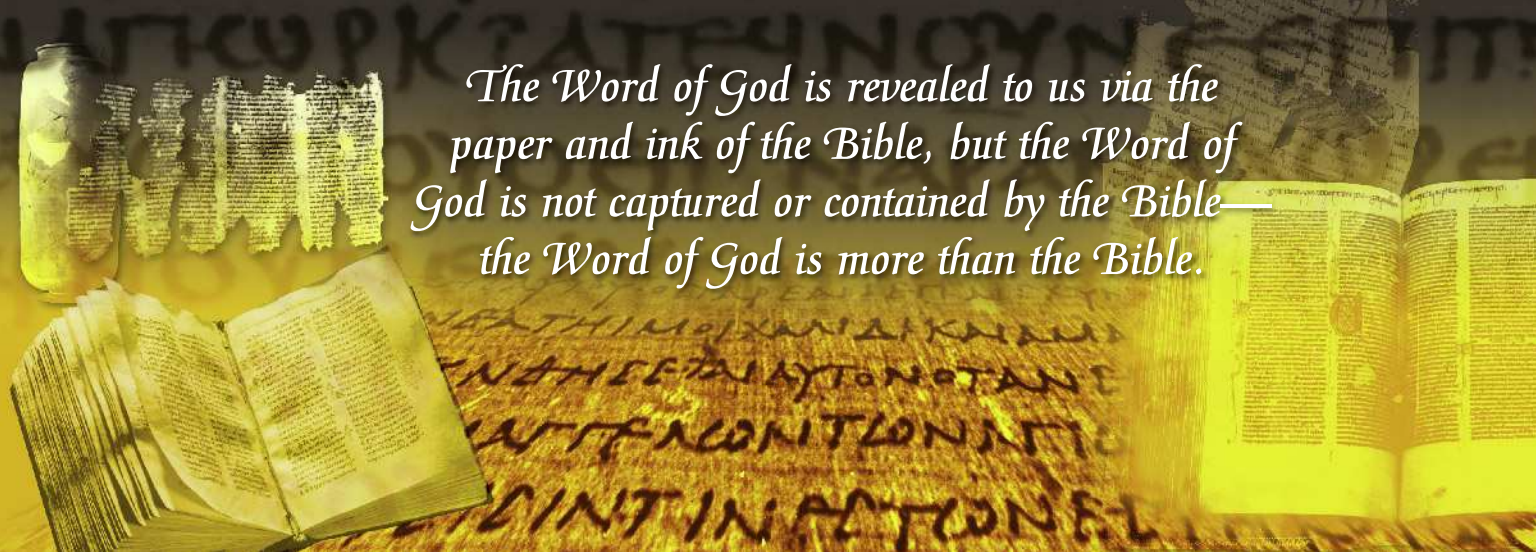
ing brutalities in a completely un-Christ-like manner? I follow Christ. In the light of Jesus I must begin to see and comprehend Old Testament references to barbarities in the name of God as someone's incomplete and inadequate idea of God.

As we ponder this question perhaps we should consider how Christian history can *help us to understand and interpret what the Bible says and does not say about the nature of God*. What about those times when "Christian" religious authorities assured their followers of what God wanted them to do?

For example, shortly after Constantine conveniently determined that Christianity would be the state religion of the Roman Empire, Christians started enlisting in the army and killing the enemies of their country and empire. By the decree of Constantine, the "Holy" Roman Empire was then like the nation of Israel in the Old Testament—the nation was "the church" and "the church" was the nation. This was a radical departure from the Christianity of the first few centuries, which more closely followed the teachings of Jesus. In fact, Christianity as a state religion was actually a complete revision of the very nature of what it meant to be a Christian.

Skipping over many other examples, we must wonder about the Inquisition, one of the times when "the church" decided that it would kill those whom it determined to

be opposed to its interpretation of the gospel and of "God's will." Religious authorities claimed God's direction as they attempted to convert heretics through torture. The justification for such a divine mandate was that the physical pain



*The Word of God is revealed to us via the paper and ink of the Bible, but the Word of God is not captured or contained by the Bible—the Word of God is more than the Bible.*

caused by torture was only temporary.

“The church” claimed it was directed by God to save the soul of a heretic (someone who was not “in line” with official “church” teachings and practices) from eternal torture in hell, which was, as they believed and taught, the God-ordained end of all heretics and unfortunates who happened to believe the wrong doctrines and creeds. At the time “the church” assured its followers that God wanted “lost” souls saved even if “evangelism” included torture! Surely we can see that such religious professionals and authorities were putting words in the mouth of God. Were they the only religious authorities to ever presume to speak for God?

7) Conservative, fundamental Protestants have a rigid teaching about the nature of the Bible. At the time of the Reformation Protestants rightly rejected the absolute power and authority of

*...the Bible is not the infallible, inerrant “holy” Word of God. The infallible, inerrant Word of God is Jesus (John 1:1). The Word of God is not Jesus plus anything—not even Jesus plus the Bible.*

the Pope of Rome, but unfortunately they decided to fill the authority vacuum with a book. **When Jesus fills a spiritual void, then we have authentic Christianity. When a book fills a spiritual void, then we will always experience some form of Christless religion.**

As many have noted, the Protestant teaching of “Sola Scriptura” effectively replaced a human Pope with a paper Pope. The teaching of “Sola Scriptura” places the Bible on the throne, as an infallible document rather than an infallible human authority. Like other conservative, fundamentalists of other religious traditions, conservative, fundamentalist Protestants claimed that their “Holy” book, the Bible, is inerrant, without any error whatsoever, at least in the original manuscripts. Saying that the Bible

we know is without any error whatsoever, at least in its original manuscripts, is somewhat like me saying I think my great-great grandfather never told a lie. I can believe that, but I have no proof since I never knew him. Original manuscripts of the Bible do not exist.

8) It therefore seems to me that



**POWER**

“One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power—political power, military power, economic power or even moral or spiritual power—even though they continued to

speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are. We keep hearing from others, as well as saying to ourselves, that having power—provided it is used in the service of God and your fellow human beings—is a good thing. With this rationalization, crusades took place; inquisitions were organized; Indians were enslaved; positions of great influence were desired; episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals, and opulent seminaries were built; and much moral manipulation of conscience was engaged in. Every time we see a major crisis in the history of the church, such as the Great Schism of the eleventh century, the Reformation of the 16th century, or the immense secularization of the twentieth century, we always see that a major cause of rupture is the power exercised by those who claim to be followers of the poor and powerless Jesus” (Henri Nouwen, *The Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* pages 75-77).



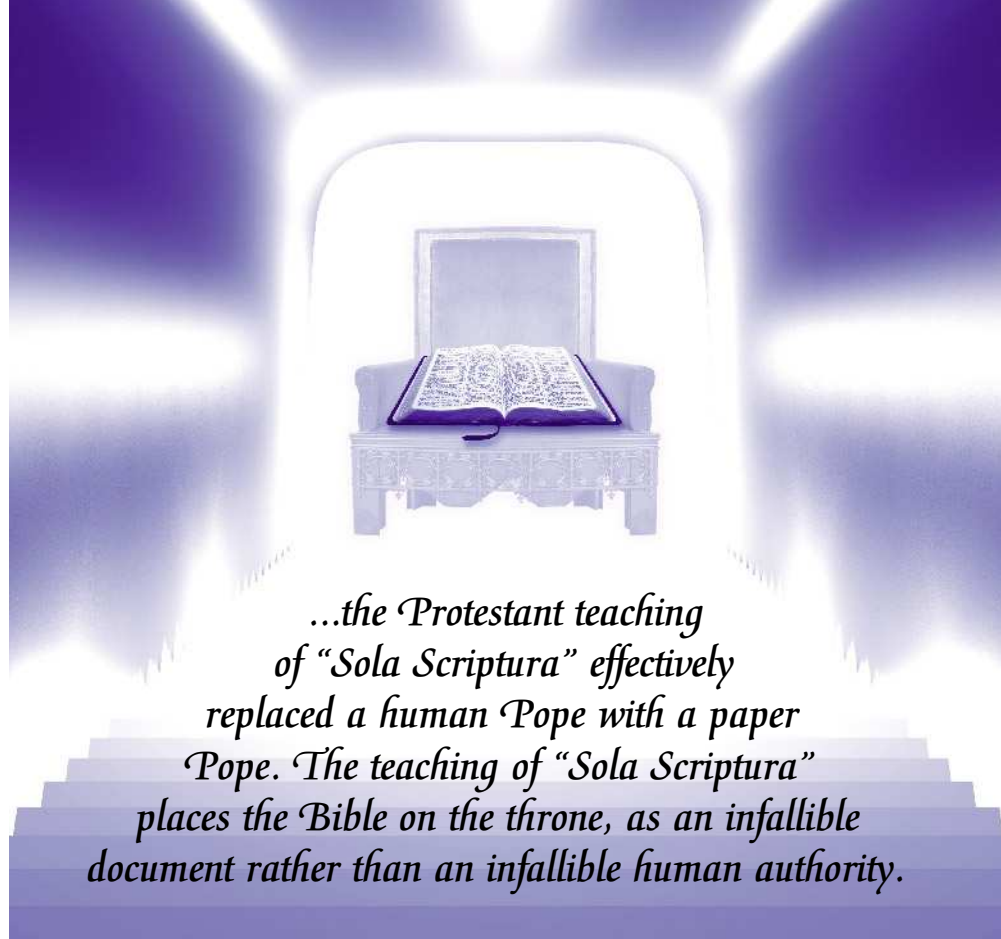
it's either Jesus or the inerrant, infallible Bible. When it comes to depraved barbarity that is obviously at complete odds with the teachings of Jesus I have to assume that in some way Old Testament leaders or later editors were putting words into God's mouth. Only a few hundred years ago the "only true" church (as believed by hundreds of millions) put words into God's mouth when it claimed that its Inquisitions were directed by God. What about those people in the Old Testament, who lived under the old covenant? Was it possible for the early authors and editors of the Old Testament, who were just as human as any Pope, to feel they were justified in engineering and carrying out genocide?

9) Forgive my temerity, but in my thinking, Jesus clearly explains that God is "off the hook" for the atrocities that he is represented as absolutely commanding and demanding in the Old Testament. In this regard Jesus cannot be one and the same as the barbaric "God of the Old Testament."

### **The Infallible, Inerrant Eternal Word of God Is Jesus**

1) If we accept every word of the Bible as infallible and inerrant, without any human prejudice or editing, and 2) if we understand every word of the Bible as "literal" in the sense that it is a manual we must follow implicitly, without question, and 3) if we blindly follow the dictates and dogmas of human interpretations of the Bible, then we must conclude that God commanded massacres, and as Christ-followers we are in a world of hurt.

But the fact is that the book we know as the Bible is not the infallible, inerrant "holy" Word of God. The infallible, inerrant Word of God is Jesus (John 1:1). The Word of God is not Jesus plus anything—not even Jesus plus the Bible. The Word of God is not Jesus plus paper and ink. *The Word of God is revealed to us via the paper and ink of the Bible, but the Word of God is not captured or contained by the Bible—*



*...the Protestant teaching of "Sola Scriptura" effectively replaced a human Pope with a paper Pope. The teaching of "Sola Scriptura" places the Bible on the throne, as an infallible document rather than an infallible human authority.*

*the Word of God is more than the Bible.*

The Bible is a record of what God inspired to be recorded for our benefit. The Bible is not entirely prescriptive nor does it always accurately depict God any more than any one religious tradition, authority, doctrine or dogma absolutely, without error in any way, accurately explains the nature of God.

Some of the Bible is *prescriptive* and some of the Bible is *descriptive*—a record of incredible evil—evil which happens when human lust is unleashed. Christians in North America today are intimately aware of the blood chilling cry "Allah Akbar" ("God is great") which often accompanies bloodletting by Islamic extremists. But depraved evil is not legitimized, excused or "baptized" simply by perpetrators (either Inquisitors of Rome or Islamic extremists) claiming that what they do is the will of God.

The vast majority of the people the Bible talks about had no idea who God was. The very disciples of Jesus had little or no idea who he

was, until his cross and resurrection. People in the Bible talked about God. They felt they knew God. They thought that they had a good idea of what God wanted and what he didn't—but *the real story of the Bible hinges on that baby born in Bethlehem.*

Jesus came to reveal God—he came to reveal the Father.

- If all we needed to know about God was bound up in the old covenant rules and stipulations, why bother with the Incarnation?

- If the Father was already sufficiently revealed in the Old Testament, why bother coming to be one of us?

- The incarnation of Jesus—the coming of God to us in human flesh involved his suffering and death. If humanity already knew all it needed to know about God, why bother?

With some notable Old Testament exceptions (noted and explained in the New Testament), I believe God was not fully and widely known until Jesus came. Therefore, when I see "God" saying, doing and directing certain



non-Christ-like actions in the Old Testament, I must evaluate and critique such references in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus.

God is not fully known ever—then or now, in history, until Jesus is fully embraced, accepted and known. **We know God through Jesus. If we don't know Jesus, we don't fully know God. Period.**

So who was this God of the Old Testament ordering unspeakable atrocities? I absolutely believe it was not the same God who came to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus would never have ordered such a thing.

Therefore, somehow, in some way, the god who commanded atrocities and massacres is not the God of the Bible. *I must conclude that there are cases in the Old Testament when humans presumed to speak for God, putting words into his mouth, supplying motives for him—and thus they have interpreted and depicted God just like any other mad man, butcher or earthly king or despot.*

### **Are Christ-Followers Bad Christians ...or Even Heretics?**

As I look around me today I hear and read all kinds of things being said and done in the name of God by individuals who presume to

*...who was this God of the Old Testament ordering unspeakable atrocities? I absolutely believe it was not the same God who came to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus would never have ordered such a thing.*

have the weight of religious tradition and ecclesiology behind them. They and their institutions and many of their followers would have me believe that what they say and do is one and the same as God's perfect will. I'm not buying that rhetoric, just as I don't buy the butcher-God of some parts of the Old Testament.

Does my refusal to accept God as a heartless monster, according to descriptions in the Old Testament, make me a bad Christian? Some might say so.

Does that statement mean I am a heretic, less than a Christian? Some might say so.

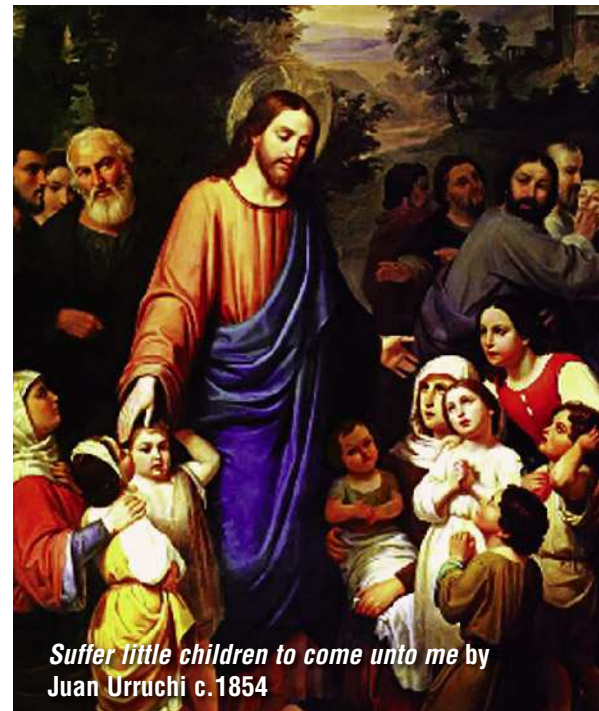
I might be a bad Christian or a heretic, but not because I believe in and follow Jesus. With Paul I say, *Let God be true, and every human being a liar* (Romans 3:4). **Jesus and the butcher-god in the Old Testament are not one and the same.**

I cringe when I hear people talking about the paper and ink of a book they know as the Bible as being the Word of God. Take a look at history—take a look at now! Some truly pathetic and corrupt things happen when the subjective desires and opinions of people became known as the Word of God.

Someone might say, "Well, your teaching sounds convenient, but it seems like a slippery slope to me. If you claim that God was misrepresented in the Old Testament, why wouldn't someone offer the same interpretation of the New Testament?"

Answer: **My measuring stick and standard is Jesus.** I have no hermeneutic (the art and science of understanding the meaning of biblical literature) other than Jesus. Jesus is the infallible Word of God, the standard by whom we understand the Bible.

The religious authorities in Jesus' day minimized and devalued his healing powers by saying that he



*Suffer little children to come unto me by Juan Urruchi c.1854*

was healing by the power of Satan—"Beelzebub, the prince of demons" (Matthew 12:24). Jesus told them that healing by the power of Satan would be a case of Satan working against himself.

Why would God the Son oppose God the Father?

Why am I a Christ-follower? Why do I denounce Christ-less religion as an imposter?

Why do I insist on *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*?

Because *Jesus changed everything.*

Everything! □





## Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

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

**M**ore than a decade ago when I was recovering from an illness I listened to an audio version of the Pulitzer Prize winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard. All my life I had been reading books on the run. This volume seeped into my soul at a slow pace.

I identify with Annie. We were born the same year—our birthdays a few months apart. Her hard questions about faith and life are mine. She had Tinker Creek; I had the Yellow River. Hers, a stream rippling through a valley in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Mine, a river running through the forests and meadows where I grew up in northern Wisconsin.

I loved that river and I spent countless hours getting to know its meandering melodies and rhythms. I was a child then. Now the river is far away except for brief weekend visits every autumn. But when I read the words of Annie I'm brought back to a world I once knew so well in my childhood. I realize too that in such a frame of mind I sometimes, like her, see life most clearly:

*The sky is deep and distant, laced with sycamore limbs like a hatching of crossed swords.... My back rests on a steep bank under the sycamore; before me shines the creek...and above it rises the other bank, also steep, and planted in trees.... When we lose our innocence—when we start feeling the weight of the atmosphere and learn that there's death in the pot—we take leave of our senses. Only children can hear the song of the male house mouse. Only children keep their eyes open....*

In an era when the voices on talk radio and cable TV, whether preachers or politicians, are absolutely sure of themselves, Annie's cautious understandings and modest

self-identification are refreshing: "I am a fugitive and a vagabond, a sojourner seeking signs."

She is tentative about theological proclamations even as she expresses awe and a healthy fear of God: "I have never understood why so many mystics of all creeds experience the presence of God on mountaintops. Aren't they afraid of being blown away.... It often feels best to lay low, inconspicuous, instead of waving your spirit around from high places like a lightning rod...invisibility is the all-time great cover.... And we the people are so vulnerable."

When she wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie identified herself most closely with the Episcopal Church but, with her sly sense of humor, she saw right through the pomposity that often doubles as true religion. "In the high churches they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches you expect it any minute. This is the beginning of wisdom."

Since winning the Pulitzer Prize some four decades ago, Annie has written other books and taught college courses on writing. From her official website I note that she no longer travels or gives public readings or meets with strangers. Unlike so many authors she engages in no self-promotion. She is inconspicuous and laying low. She has no desire to wave her flag from high places.

Annie is young, my age, not yet three score and ten. I wonder about her, hoping she is well and that she is not only covered by invisibility but also by a deep sense of tranquility that she once found along Tinker Creek.

My dear Annie, thank you for making my life richer through your writings. And may the Lord crown you with tender mercies. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

"...It often feels best to lay low, inconspicuous, instead of waving your spirit around from high places like a lightning rod...invisibility is the all-time great cover...."

# Why I'm an Atheist

Frank Schaeffer, the son of Francis and Edith Schaeffer, is a bestselling author, movie director, blogger, speaker, artist, father of three and grandfather of five. Frank Schaeffer's parents, Francis and Edith, founded the L'Abri community in Switzerland in 1955. As a study center, L'Abri provided a nexus between philosophy and religion, attracting thousands of young people who were that generation's "seekers." By virtue of three honorary doctoral degrees, Francis became known as Dr. Schaeffer.

Dr. Schaeffer's 22 books helped to catapult him to fame among conservative and Reformed (Calvinist) Christians, providing them with an iconic hero who popularized and defended their version of Christianity. Schaeffer advocated a return to the historic teachings of the Reformers and decried the secular humanism of Europe and North America. He put intellectual meat on the bare (some would say "dried") bones of evangelical and fundamentalist teachings, and with his opposition to abortion fueled conservative religious activism.

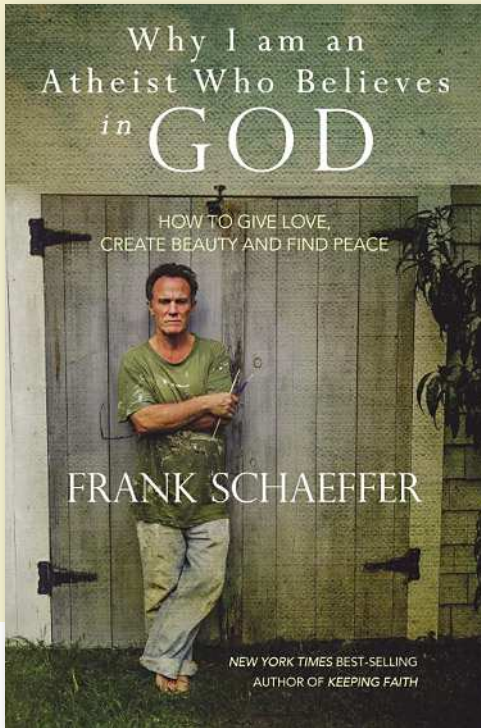
Dr. Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) was a man of many talents, including history, art and culture. Perhaps in large part due to his dysfunctional childhood home, Francis Schaeffer became a parent who doted on his children—one of whom was Frank, who was born in Switzerland in 1952.

Frank Schaeffer's own books and writings describe the troubled spiritual journey of a child who desires not simply to blindly adopt his/her parents' faith, but rather come to know God personally. Frank Schaeffer says that he had to overcome home-schooling and dyslexia and describes himself as a survivor of both polio and an evangelical/fundamentalist upbringing. Frank described what it was like to grow up and live in what some think of as the

hallowed ground of the Schaeffer home in L'Abri in his 2007 book, *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right and Lived to Take All (Or Almost All) of It Back*. In his 2010 book, *Patience with God: Faith for People Who Don't Like Religion (or Atheism)*, Schaeffer provides an insight into his spirituality after leaving evangelical fundamentalism. Schaeffer's newest book is entitled, *Why I'm an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to Give Love, Create Beauty and Find Peace*. What follows is an excerpt of chapters 3 and 24. The back-cover summary of the book reads as follows:

"Caught between the beauty of his grandchildren and grief over a friend's death, Frank Schaeffer finds himself simultaneously believing and not believing in God—an atheist who prays. Schaeffer wrestles with faith and disbelief, sharing his innermost thoughts with the lyricism that only great writers of literary nonfiction achieve. Schaeffer writes as an imperfect son, husband and grandfather whose love for his family, art and life trumps the ugly theologies of an angry God and the atheist vision of a cold, meaningless universe. Schaeffer writes that only when we abandon our hunt for certainty do we become free to create beauty, give love and find peace."

—the Editors



**M**y youngest grandchildren Lucy and Jack are still comfortable with a paradoxical way of seeing reality where make-believe and the material universe merge and that in a poetic non-literal way mirrors the scientific finding that one particle can instantaneously affect another particle light years away or even be in two places at

once. Schrödinger, the Austrian physicist who developed the field of quantum theory, called this idea "entanglement." Einstein called it "spooky action at a distance." Lucy and Jack just accept that life is weird, wonderful and defined by imagination.

Lucy and Jack seem to accept that something may never have happened, but can still be true. They take Bible stories we read at face value and yet I see a flicker in their eyes that tells me that they already know the stories are not

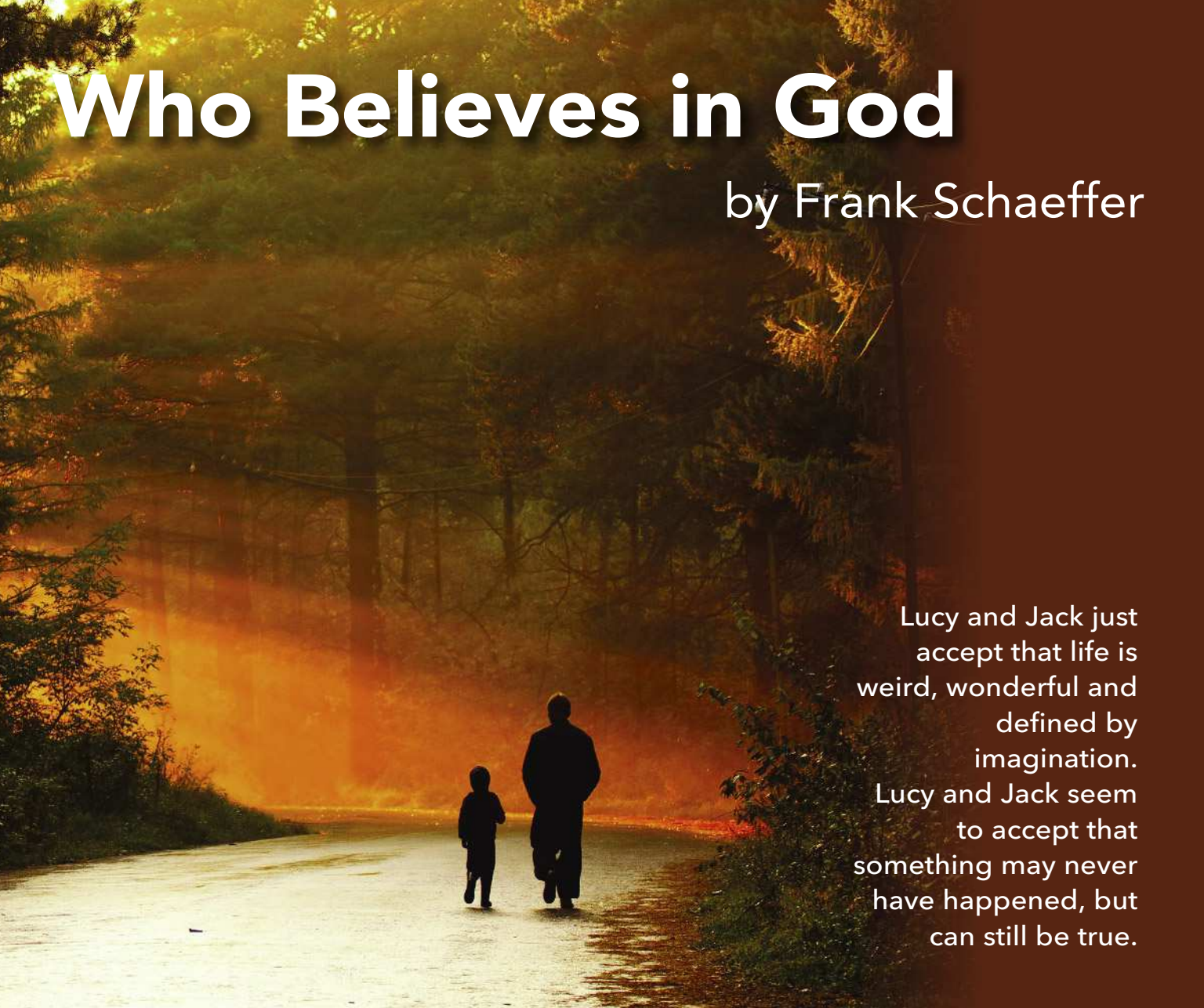
true in the same way boiling water is true and can be tested—it's hot!

Lucy and Jack's universe is more dependable and predictable than mine. They still think that what they observe is what is there. Their world is a safe place where parents stay married....

My son John and his wife Becky come home after work each day and routines are kept. Ba (that's me) and Nana (that's Genie) are always "at Ba and Nana's house." And Jack and Lucy still believe that Genie and I can answer their

# Who Believes in God

by Frank Schaeffer



Lucy and Jack just accept that life is weird, wonderful and defined by imagination. Lucy and Jack seem to accept that something may never have happened, but can still be true.

questions, even guarantee the future.

At the ripe old age of five, Lucy was pondering death. She asked why my mother had died and I

Lucy and Jack's universe is more dependable and predictable than mine. They still think that what they observe is what is there. Their world is a safe place where parents stay married.... My son John and his wife Becky come home after work each day and routines are kept.

told her it was because "Mom was very old...." A few weeks later as we walked up the drive, Lucy took my hand and quietly said, "Ba, when you pray in the morning, please

ask God to make you grow old slowly."

"Okay, I will," I said.

A few days later we were walking up the drive again, and I said, "How

long do you want me to live?"

Lucy thought about it for a long moment then answered, "I want you to live until my children are... twelve years old."

"Okay, I'll try," I said.

Of course, I have no idea what the right age is to die, just as Lucy thinks that 12 is old. She also told me, "The sun is really big, even though it looks small." I asked her how big, and she said, "It's *really* big, as big as a tree!"

Lucy's sense of time, place and scale is no more or less misinformed than mine. The only things in life I have fairly complete information about are minor household appliances. As for when to die, what to believe, whom to marry, where to live, whether or not God exists, when to have children, and what work to do, I think all this big stuff—stuff as "big as a

I've never met an unequivocal atheist or religious believer. I've only met people of two, three or four or more minds—people just like me. Atheists sometimes pray and eloquent preachers secretly harbor doubts.

tree!"—is best left to chance. My illusion of control over my life is long gone. I am *part* of a story; I am not *the* story. I've given up on planning. Rather, I plan while hoping that my plans won't work. I've experienced the serendipity of my plans failing, then my failures opening doors to things better than those I'd wished for so many times that I sometimes hope I won't always get what I want....

Anyway, since no one is ever just one thing, who are we planning *for*? Which "me" should be running the show? We're all in the closet, so to speak. We barely come out to ourselves and never com-

We're all of at least two minds. We play a role and define that role as "me" because labels and membership in a tribe make the world feel a little safer. When I was raising my children, I pretended to be grown-up Daddy. But alone with my thoughts, I was still just me.

pletely to others. I've never met an unequivocal atheist or religious believer. I've only met people of two, three or four or more minds—people just like me. Atheists sometimes pray and eloquent preachers secretly harbor doubts. The evangelist Billy Graham preached certain salvation and heaven guaranteed yet privately told my dad, a friend and fellow evangelist, that he feared death and had many doubts.

We're all of at least two minds. We play a role and define that role as "me" because labels and membership in a tribe make the world feel a little safer. When I was rais-

ing my children, I pretended to be grown-up Daddy. But alone with my thoughts, I was still just me. I'm older now, and some younger people may think I know something. I do! I know how much I can never know.

Muslim, Jew, Hindu or Christian, you are that because of where and when you were born. If you are an atheist, you are that because of a book or two you read, or who your parents were and the century in which you were born. Don't delude yourself: there are no good reasons for anything, just circumstances.

Don't delude yourself: you may describe yourself to others by claiming a label of "atheist," "Jew," "evangelical," "gay" or "straight" but you know that you are really lots more complicated than that, a gene-driven primate *and* something *more*. Want to be sure you have THE TRUTH about yourself and want to be consistent to that truth? Then prepare to go mad. Or prepare to turn off your brain and cling to some form or other of fundamentalism, be that religious or secular.

You will always be more than one person. You will always embody contradiction. You—like some sort of quantum mechanics physics experiment—will always be in two places at once....

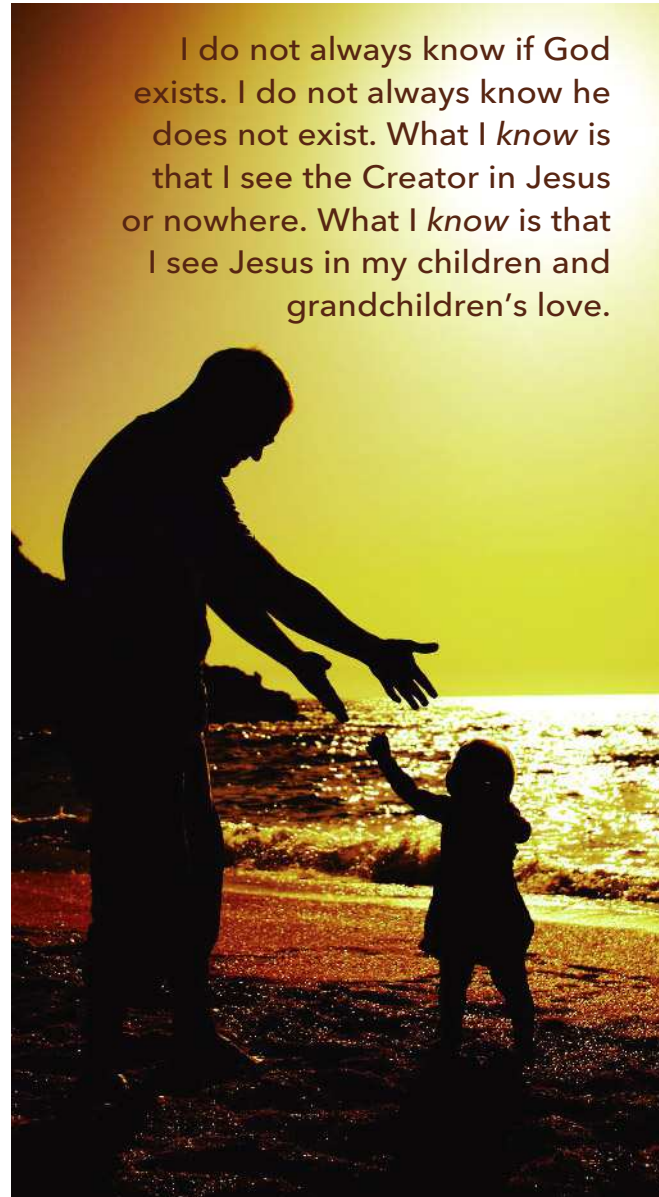
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Lamby emphatically must *not* be in two places at once! Lamby is not

quantum, apophatic or mysterious! Lamby is not a metaphor. Lamby is real.

Lamby became a pale, gray, tattered, ghost-lamb-guardian-angel long ago, a falling apart shadow of her former stuffed animal self that graced Lucy's crib. Lamby—the Lamby—has been clutched nearly to death. She's been dragged along

I do not always know if God exists. I do not always know he does not exist. What I know is that I see the Creator in Jesus or nowhere. What I know is that I see Jesus in my children and grandchildren's love.



to doctor's appointments. She's been vomited upon and soaked up many a hot tear from Lucy's face. Since Lucy can't get to sleep without Lamby, John and Becky know that Lamby must never be lost, washed or changed in any way that defiles her identity or even al-

Lucy and Jack's universe is more dependable and predictable than mine. They still think that what they observe is what is there. Their world is a safe place where parents stay married.... My son John and his wife Becky come home after work each day and routines are kept.



ters her familiar musty scent. Above all, she must survive—forever! So Lamby is delivered periodically to Genie's sewing room, where Lamby is resurrected.

Genie is the goddess who makes Lamby grow old slowly. Someday Lucy will say goodbye to her Lamby. For now, Genie answers her prayers. I hope God is as dependable, as real, and half as nice as Genie. This hope may be the only real indication that perhaps God exists.

Be that as it may, God is my Lamby even when I don't believe in him, her or it. And if I change my mind someday, choose to think in black and white categories and become a single-minded atheist, I'll bet the first thing I'll do is ask God to help me to forget him,

her or it. Then I'll cry myself to sleep, because I need my Lamby. In other words I am inconsistent and vulnerable.

I say the Nicene Creed. I say the words "I believe" this and that. I say these words in good conscience, because saying I believe in God is not the same as saying I *know* what those words mean. I don't. Words fall short. I don't know what words such as "Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father" mean. Then again I don't know what the words "I love you, Genie" mean either. I say those words with all sincerity, too, but also in blind ignorance of their ultimate meaning.

Rational argument is not the point. I know I love Genie because I find myself cleaning the house in

anticipation of her return from a trip. I find myself putting flowers in her office and in the kitchen. I do these things without thinking. These actions are as close to proof of love as I'll get.

The actions are not an argument but evidence of a love that seeks to make the daily life of one woman as blissful as possible. Neuropsychology and religion are not the point. The point is that Genie walks into a clean house, and there are flowers. And that is in spite of the fact I have sometimes treated her horribly.

I say the words "I love you." I know I mean them though because I take half a day to clean, to shop for flowers, to think about taking Genie to bed, to experience a flutter of anticipation as she walks out of the airport concourse and I see her again....

The words of the Creed and my words of love are metaphors for something that is ultimately indescribable but ever present and never perfect. What I *know* is *whatever* the Creed means, I have been overwhelmed by love. I have seen “Light of Light” in action, *felt* its power while not understanding from whence the light pours into me....

\*\*\*

I was shuffling forward in the communion line, with Lucy in my arms. I was lost in gloomy thoughts, brooding on my past and on my doubts, failures, and my meanness to Genie when I was young, stupid and so woefully controlling. I was feeling that going to church was a

waste of time. I was feeling unworthy in every sense of the word and sinking into a gray depression.

Lucy and Jack are always in and out of my arms in church as they have been since they were born. So I'd actually forgotten I was holding her. These days I hardly know how to be in church without a grandchild riding on my hip.

With my head bowed and my eyes closed I shuffled forward to the chalice to receive the “body and blood” through a ritual I don't comprehend and that seemed entirely pointless that day. I was adrift in my melancholy. Then I felt the touch of Lucy's hand on my face and—startled—opened my eyes.

It took me a moment to remember where I was. Lucy was gazing into my face. She wasn't smiling, just gazing at me in that straightforward way that only a child achieves: with serious concentration and offering me a transparent “look” that had no agenda. She wanted nothing from me. All I saw in Lucy's expression was unconditional trust. All I saw was a child who knows me *now* and who never expects anything but kindness from me. She did not know of my past sins, failings and bitter self-accusing regrets. Lucy was not judging me. I was accusing myself while she was just gently touching her Ba's cheek, checking to see why my eyes were closed.

Lucy inclined her head and kissed me. This thought crashed into my brain: I am being seen *as I'd like to be perceived*, not as I see myself. I have seen the face of God....

\*\*\*

I do not always know if God exists. I do not always know he does not exist. What I *know* is that I see the Creator in Jesus or nowhere. What I *know* is that I see Jesus in my children and grandchildren's love. What I *know* is that I rediscover *hope* again and

Genie is the goddess who makes Lamby grow old slowly. Someday Lucy will say goodbye to her Lamby. For now, Genie answers her prayers. I hope God is as dependable, as real, and half as nice as Genie... Be that as it may, God is my Lamby even when I don't believe in him...



The truest mirror of my wife's youthfulness is found in my eyes, not in a dermatologist's scalpel or injection ... When we lose hope, we're seeing everything, so to speak, from the dermatologist's point of view and not through the lens of love.

again through Genie's love.... What I *know* is that sometimes something too good to be true, is true.

I have seen Genie forgive me. She has been my co-sufferer rather than my judge.... The way I see Genie is as true as any scientific measurements a dermatologist might take while preparing to do fractional resurfacing to lessen the effects of sun damage. Both truths—the dermatologist's and mine—are equally genuine. Both ways of seeing are valid, even empirically true, notwithstanding they contradict each other. Genie is *actually* ever young to me. She's also *actually* 62. The dermatologist has his science to prove a point about the condition of Genie's skin. I have the truth of a 44-year love affair to offer her as an equally valid fact. That truth is "only in my head." So is everything else....

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If Genie were fixated on the literal aging process, she'd be more in the grip of aging than ever, not less. The truest mirror of my wife's youthfulness is found in my eyes, not in a dermatologist's scalpel or injection. Our fear of meaninglessness comes from allowing ourselves to be forced to make a choice, as it were, between the science of what Genie looks like and



Christ's love unto death and resurrection—however we interpret those words—is a means of freeing us from the anguish of mortality... Our best hope is that love predates creation and thus that the Creator sees us as ever young.

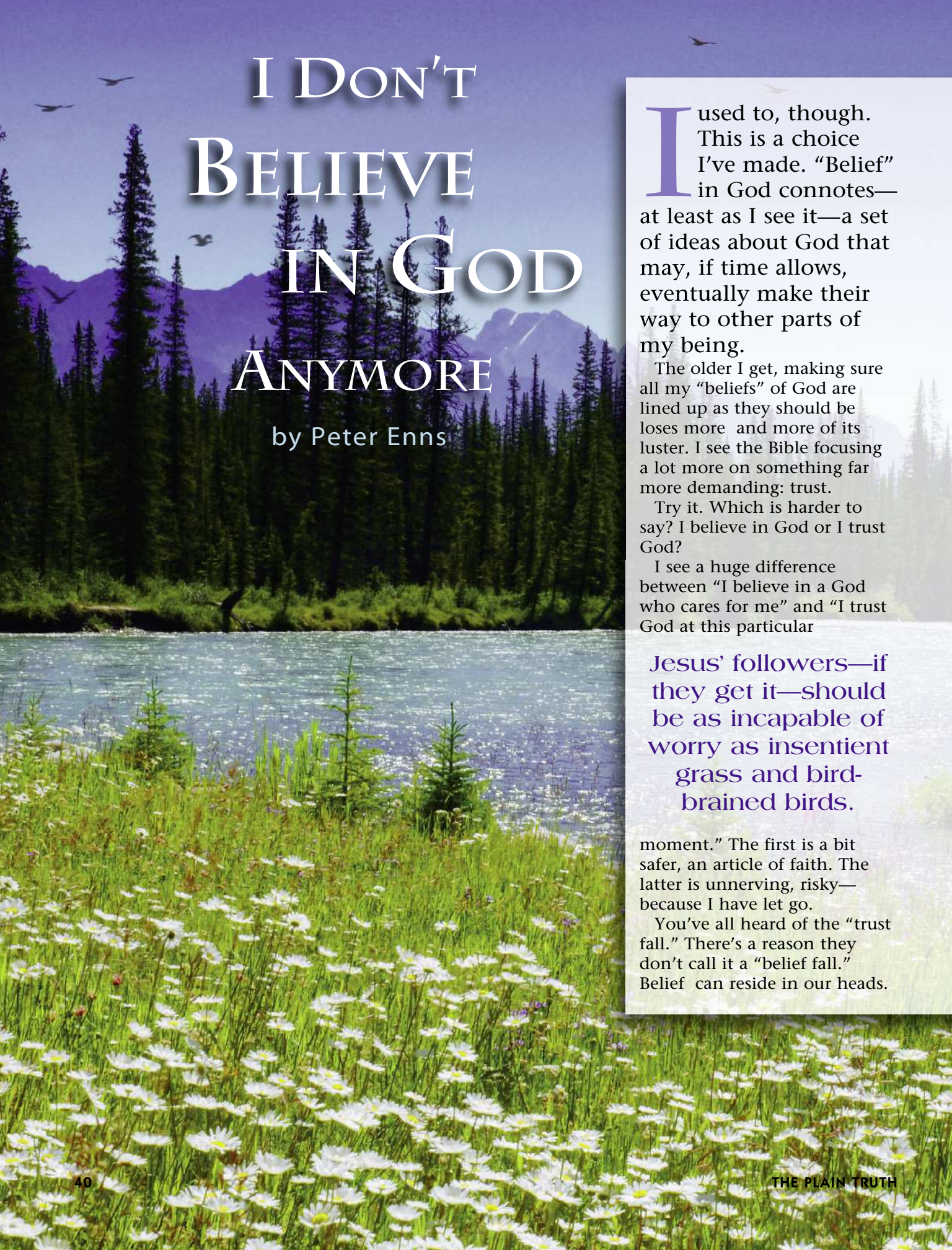
the truth of how she looks to her lover. When we lose hope, we're seeing everything, so to speak, from the dermatologist's point of view and not through the lens of love.

Christ's love unto death and resurrection—however we interpret those words—is a means of freeing us from the anguish of mortality. Our desire for some sort of guarantee of eternal life and all fundamentalist attempts to describe it are self-defeating. Trying to nail down theological certainties is putting faith in our imagination rather than in God's. It is like me demanding an explanation from Lucy in that communion line as to *how* her love for me *works* rather

than just holding her a little closer. Or put it this way: The clean kitchen Genie walked into and the flowers on her desk didn't need a card to explain them anymore than great art needs a curator's wall notice to make it intelligible.

Our best hope is not found in correct theology, the Bible or any other book, but in the love we express through action rather than words. Our best hope is that love predates creation and thus that the Creator sees us as ever young. Our hope is that when we look at God through the eyes of the loving Christ we'll see who he, she, or it really is looking back at us. □

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# I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD ANYMORE

by Peter Enns

I used to, though. This is a choice I've made. "Belief" in God connotes—at least as I see it—a set of ideas about God that may, if time allows, eventually make their way to other parts of my being.

The older I get, making sure all my "beliefs" of God are lined up as they should be loses more and more of its luster. I see the Bible focusing a lot more on something far more demanding: trust.

Try it. Which is harder to say? I believe in God or I trust God?

I see a huge difference between "I believe in a God who cares for me" and "I trust God at this particular

Jesus' followers—they get it—should be as incapable of worry as insentient grass and bird-brained birds.

moment." The first is a bit safer, an article of faith. The latter is unnerving, risky—because I have let go.

You've all heard of the "trust fall." There's a reason they don't call it a "belief fall." Belief can reside in our heads.



Jesus illustrates the point... He tells us to consider the grass of the field and the birds of the sky. Look at them, Jesus says. They're doing just fine and they don't worry for a second.

Trust is doing it, risking it. Trust is humility, putting ourselves in the hand of another. Trust requires something of us that belief doesn't.

**“Believing in God” doesn't get you to that place Jesus is describing here. Belief leaves room for worry. Trust explodes it.**

When God promises Abraham that he will have more offspring than the stars in the sky, translations of the next verse conventionally say that Abraham “believed” God. (Genesis 15:6)

“Believe” isn't the right word there. “Trust” is. The Hebrew word is the same one we get “amen” from. “Amen” is not a social cue that grace is finished and it's time to eat. It is the final word in the prayer: we're done talking now, Lord, and we now move to trust.

God promised an old man a lot of kids. Abraham trusted God to come through. That is way harder than believing. Believing has wiggle room. Trusting doesn't.

The same thing holds for the gospel. “Believing” in God—or

even having “faith” in him—doesn't cut it. At least the way these words are used today.

Beliefs can be collated into a “belief system”—an intellectual construction of what sorts of things are right to think and not think about God. Followers of Jesus, however, are called to do something much harder.

Jesus tells a famous story about why those who follow him need not worry about anything. Don't fret about how much you have, what you wear, or what you will eat. Don't worry. Trust. (Matthew 6:25-34)

Jesus illustrates the point in

**God promised an old man a lot of kids. Abraham trusted God to come through. That is way harder than believing. Believing has wiggle room. Trusting doesn't.**

what at first blush seems rather off topic—at best marginally helpful. He tells us to consider the grass of the field and the birds of the sky. Look at them, Jesus says. They're doing just fine and they don't worry for a second.

Of course they don't worry, Jesus, because they are—if I'm not mistaken—grass and birds. Grass doesn't have a brain and birds are skittish little things that fly into windows. These things aren't really relevant,

Jesus, because, you see, by definition, Jesus, these things are incapable of worry.

And when you put it that way, you can see the profound point—and challenge—of what Jesus is saying: worry should be as impossible for us as it is for grass and birds. His followers—if they get it—should be as incapable of worry as insentient grass and bird-brained birds.

“Believing in God” doesn't get you to that place Jesus is describing here. Belief leaves room for worry. Trust explodes it.

What a way to live.

The older I get, the less interested I am in believing and the more I am in trusting. That takes a lot of practice. In my experience, God seems more than willing to provide plenty of opportunities. □

Peter Enns is a controversial Bible scholar and author of *The Evolution of Adam* and *The Bible Tells Me So*. Trained as an evangelical Bible scholar, Peter Enns loves sharing the Scriptures.



**O**ne day, an Australian seminary student met a teenager living on the streets of Melbourne and struck up a conversation. As he tried to share the gospel, the boy asked pointedly, “What is God like?”

What a loaded question! The seminary student had one chance to share the Good News and felt pressured to come up with just the right answer. His mind raced. Reflecting on what he’d learned in his recent studies, he replied,

by S. J. Hill

# OUR LOVING FATHER...

## AFFIRMING, APPROACHABLE AND AFFECTIONATE

sister. The word “father” had dredged up all kinds of emotions and terrible memories.

This story vividly illustrates the relationship between the impressions left on us by our earthly fathers and our perceptions of God.

Because this teenager had a bad experience with his own father, he was unable to grasp the goodness, kindness, and loving nature of the heavenly Father.

Ideally, our experiences with our fathers should point us to the heart of a greater Father who loves us more than any earthly father ever could.

Unfortunately, this is not

usually the case. Maybe you’ve felt the sting of a clenched fist or recall the haunting, cruel words of a childhood incident. Maybe you never heard your father say, “I love you.”

Countless people have told me, “I have no problem believing Jesus loves me, but I can’t seem to relate to God as my Father.” More often than not, they were emotionally or physically abused while growing up, or their fathers were never there for them.

If you’ve had a bad experience with your father, it may not be easy to relate—consciously or subconsciously—to God as your Father.

“God is like a father.”

Without hesitation, the teenager snapped, “Well, if he’s anything like my old man, you can have him,” and walked away. Later, the student learned from a social worker that the boy’s father had repeatedly beaten his mother and raped his

PHOTO BY DENISE DOOHERTY

Countless people have told me, “I have no problem believing Jesus loves me, but I can’t seem to relate to God as my Father.”

So what do you think God is like? How do you perceive Him?

### **The Affirming Father**

Many of us grew up in homes that were performance-driven. Our father may have only expressed approval after he thought we’d accomplished something of significance. The pat on the back, the words “Well done!” or an extra long embrace were only given after we had excelled in something like education, sports, music, or employment. While our achievements should have been recognized and celebrated, they should never have been a prerequisite for receiving our father’s love and affirmation.

This performance-oriented mentality eventually spills over into our Christian lives. Initially as young believers, we may sense God’s unconditional love and enjoy the simplicity of relationship with Christ, but it’s not long before we think we aren’t doing enough. This mindset ingrained in us from childhood rears its ugly head and starts haunting us again. It suggests to us that we can’t run hard enough, chase God fast enough, pray enough, serve enough or be in church enough.

But our heavenly Father never bases his love and affirmation of us on what we do for him—his acceptance is completely unconditional. You can’t do anything to win his approval. He loves you fully, and that will never change because you are in Christ. And grace can never

be repaid. It carries no price tag—not because it’s worthless, but because it’s priceless.

Merely disciplining ourselves in Christian practices will never produce lasting joy in our lives. Many are doing things out of duty rather than delight. We’re praying and reading our Bibles out of routine rather than enjoying our relationship with God. We live with continual guilt, feeling that we aren’t doing enough for him. We try to get up early every morning and spend quality time with him, but it’s never enough. We memorize Scripture but always come away feeling we haven’t accomplished enough. We’re consumed with a fear of punishment for not measuring up.

We have been programmed to believe that our success in life is based on what we do.

But what is our Father’s view of success? The Scriptures clearly reveal that what makes a man or woman successful is not what they do; true success is *being loved by God and being lovers of God*. Psalm 18:35 says, “You give me your shield of victory, and your right hand sustains me; you stoop down to make me great.”



*The Shoe Carrier*  
by S. Braswell

What makes our lives valuable? It’s God’s extravagant love for us—not our accomplishments. Our worth is defined by the fact that he created us for himself; he doesn’t want our efforts as much as he wants us. He certainly does enjoy what we do for him. But most of all, he enjoys us!

### **The Approachable Father**

Some of us also had fathers who were overly strict and stern. They placed demands on us that often broke our spirits, ruling the home with a mixture of fear and guilt. Instead of offering love and affirmation, they may have continually pointed out our faults and mistakes—perhaps thinking they would motivate us to “try harder.”

Like a beaten puppy, you may actually be afraid of God, assuming he’s just like the other authority figures in your life. But you must realize that he is different from any other authority figure you’ve ever known.

Ideally, our experiences with our fathers should point us to the heart of a greater Father who loves us more than any earthly father ever could. Unfortunately, this is not usually the case.

If you grew up with a dad who was demanding or abusive, you may have difficulty receiving your heavenly Father's love; you may tend to think he's always looking for some fault in you. As a result, it may be hard for you to picture him smiling over you in loving approval and acceptance.

Like a beaten puppy, you may actually be afraid of God, assuming he's just like the other authority figures in your life. But you must realize that he is different from any other authority figure you've ever known. He isn't perpetually angry with you or just putting up with you; he enjoys you even in your struggles.

I've been blessed with two sons. When they were babies, they couldn't communicate with me. They couldn't even play golf with me. All they did was eat, sleep and make messes. But I loved them intensely! Now that they are adults, I don't love them any more than I did when they were babies.

1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." Do you get the message? God is not an authoritarian Father. He doesn't want you shrinking back in fear or apprehension of him.

The true fear of the Lord is not a tormenting fear or an emotion-

al fear. It's not even a fear of punishment in this life or the life to come. The fear of God is the sense of *awe* we experience when we're brought face to face with the transcendent (unequaled, surpassing, matchless) splendor and beauty of who he is and the incredible love that he has for us. It is this awe and reverence that can bring us close to the Father's heart and lead us into a life of spiritual and emotional wholeness.

Because of our past experiences, many mistake divine correction for divine rejection. But the Father's correction is deeply rooted in his affections for us. While he may be displeased with a certain area in our lives, he is *not* displeased with us as individuals—as Proverbs 3:12 says, "the LORD disciplines those

he loves, as a father the son he delights in." Although he sees the undeveloped areas of our character, he also hears the willing cry of our spirits. As we set our hearts on loving and obeying him, he will make adjustments in our lives until we come to maturity.

### The Affectionate Father

In 1996, Christopher Robin Milne died in England. You may recognize the name. His father was the famed children's author A.A. Milne, who named the lead human character in his *Winnie-the-Pooh* books after his son.

But according to Christopher Milne's tragic obituary, his father spent little time with him. He was too busy making other children laugh and smile through his writ-



I've been blessed with two sons. When they were babies, they couldn't communicate with me. They couldn't even play golf with me. All they did was eat, sleep and make messes. But I loved them intensely!

He can't wait to hear your first thoughts. He looks forward to accompanying you throughout the day and talking with you. He loves watching you enjoy his creation. He smiles when you look at the mountains, sea, or sky and think of him. Just being with you is enough.



ings to take time for his own son. Christopher died in his 70s, hating his world-renowned father because he failed to live the kind of life he depicted in his books.

Like the younger Milne, a lot of us grew up with passive fathers. They seemed distant and rarely got involved in our personal lives. They weren't very affectionate and rarely showed any emotion. So we have difficulty understanding God as our Father, because we view him as distant and aloof. Our earthly fathers never expressed their love and affection for us or spent quality time with us. They didn't seem to notice our joys, our sorrows, our struggles or our successes. This has led us to believe that God doesn't care about the details of our lives. We then find ourselves running to him only in an emergency. Our relationship with him never deepens

or becomes intimate because, in the back of our minds, we fear that God is not really interested in us.

But just the opposite is true! You are special to him (Psalm 139:13-18). There has never been another human being quite like you, and there never will be. You make him smile. You make him laugh. In Zephaniah 3:17, the Bible even says you make him sing for joy. Whether you understand that or not doesn't stop God from responding to you in this way.

He looks at you and grins. You are your Father's unique boy or girl, bringing him pleasure and delight in a way no one else ever could. He loves your freckles and funky-shaped toes—and he loves your heart. He loves you when you're awake, vibrant, and full of life. And he loves you just as much when you're down, struggling, and

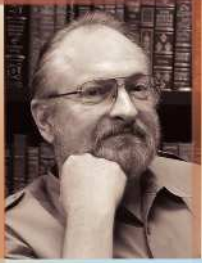
lethargic. He even loves you when you're sleeping. He loves you when you wake up—even with morning breath and “sleep” caked in the corners of your eyes. He can't wait to hear your first thoughts. He looks forward to accompanying you throughout the day and talking with you. He loves watching you enjoy his creation. He smiles when you look at the mountains, sea, or sky and think of him. Just being with you is enough.

The truth is, God really likes you. In fact, he enjoys you.

You may not think you measure up, but he does. He isn't just tolerating you. He isn't waiting for you to become more mature in your Christian walk; he loves you right where you are, even in your weakness and immaturity. He's not keeping a record of your mistakes or the times you blew it. Thanks to the gracious act of his Son, God sees you perfectly redeemed! □

*S.J. Hill is a Christian author and teacher with over 43 years of experience in the ministry. He has pastored, as well as traveled throughout the United States and around the world. His all-consuming passion is to see individuals grow in a deeper intimacy with their heavenly Father and come to an understanding of the beauty of the Lord's fascinating personality. S.J. has authored four books, including his latest, Enjoying God. you can visit his website at [www.sjhillonline.com](http://www.sjhillonline.com).*

...a lot of us grew up with passive fathers. They seemed distant and rarely got involved in our personal lives... This has led us to believe that God doesn't care about the details of our lives. We then find ourselves running to him only in an emergency.



## Stepping Out of the Box

About a mile from our home in southwest Washington sits the Heisson Store. It has been there since 1906, when the now-miniscule community of Heisson was a booming logging town. When I was a kid, my dad and I often stopped by this little country store to pick up supplies for our fishing forays on the nearby Lewis River. For decades the store continued to sell pop, beer, snacks, bait and tackle. The aging store was in dire need of repairs and upgrades.

Then along came Eric, a trucker for a heating oil company, who was fascinated by the idea of running a country store. He cashed out his retirement funds and bought it. Eric and his family worked hard to repair the store, diversify the inventory, transforming it into a hub of activity for the area. If you need anything from a carton of milk to a cup of coffee to a t-bone steak to a pack of hunting ammo to refinished furniture to the local gossip to general advice from Eric and his family, you can find it at the Heisson store.

I have another friend, Randy, who early in life aspired to be a singer. Randy and I performed together in a high school garage band. When we all went our separate ways, he was the only one to seriously pursue music and songwriting as a career, taking music and English courses in college. He was employed for a while by a well-known L.A. pop and country record producer, and wrote several songs which continue to bring in royalties. But after a few years in the volatile music industry, he decided to get his teaching certificate, marry and have a family. He has been a high school English teacher for over three decades.

A couple of years ago, with retirement looming, Randy decided to tackle a long-standing dream. He would select his favorite songs, add a few new ones, and publish a CD. He dug into his retirement savings and hired local musicians to perform his songs in a professional recording studio—by no means an inexpensive process. Little by little, over the last year or so, he has assembled an outstanding collection of his best musical work.

Neither Eric nor Randy *needed* to step out of the box—to venture from the security of the well-worn trail with its safe routine. They both could have continued plodding a path that seemed far more sensible. They have no guarantee that their respective ventures will bring in truckloads of money. But if they had to do it over again they would probably still make the same decision.

If you're like me, you admire people with the courage to hack their own trail though the underbrush. But it's quite another proposition when you attempt it yourself. In contrast to your buzz, friends and family may shake their heads. Your accountant may tell you it's just too risky. The costs will almost always be more than you expect (and not just financially). You will experience acid reflux and rising blood pressure. And right after you cross the point of no return, you may have bouts of panic, paranoia and depression, wondering why you abandoned your safe (if restrictive) routine.

There's probably no better example of safe, restrictive routine than institutional religion. And there's probably no better example of venturing off the well-worn trail than daring to step outside institutional religion's confining box. That bold action carries all the risks cited in the above paragraph and many more.

In fairness, you may have little or no reason to take such an action. Your house of worship may be wholly grace-based and Christ-centered. But if it's not, it may be time to make a move in the near future—a seemingly reckless deviation from the predictable course—a course with which you may have become far too comfortable.

But like my friends Eric and Randy, you just might discover that your venture outside the safe box has big rewards. And—if your decision involves departure from oppressive religion—you might find that there is far less heartache, stress and anxiety than if you had stayed the safe and “comfortable” course. Is it time for you to step out of the box? □

—Monte Wolverton

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## Welcome to the Wide Open Spaces of



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

Come experience freedom in Christ! Come experience free range Christianity! Come and be part of *CWRa (Christianity Without the Religion audio)*—a worldwide, grass roots movement of Christ followers.

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

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

**Is God Crazy, or What?** We don’t give him anything he needs. Yet God is madly in love with us... is he crazy, or what? Week of December 7.

**Shame and Scandal** Jesus’ birth, as well as his life and death, were surrounded by shame and scandal, yet the real shame and scandal was not then easily observed nor is it easily believed now. Week of December 14.

**“He Set Aside the Privileges of Deity”** The birth of Jesus cannot fully be appreciated or experienced apart from the immense mystery of what God in the person of Jesus did in what is often called, in theological terms, the Incarnation. Week of December 21.

**Nothing but Jesus** While it probably wasn’t a New Year’s resolution, the Apostle Paul made a resolution that can inspire and direct us as we prepare for a New Year. Week of December 28.

**Sympathy and Empathy** Sympathy involves knowing about and feeling *for* someone who is in pain while empathy is all about experiencing the pain of another *with* them. Jesus came to be one of us, to be *with* us—he is always “there” for us. Week of January 4.

**The Jesus Train** The lyrics of the old gospel song “This Train is Bound for Glory” proclaim that it doesn’t carry “no gamblers, smokers, two-bit liars or small-time jokers”—but “The Jesus Train” welcomes all those people and many more. Week of January 11.

**“My House Will be Full”** While good, church going folk of Jesus’ day excluded many “non-members” and those they determined to be ne’er-do-wells from their banquets and festivities, Jesus proclaimed that all are invited—he said “my house will be full.” Week of January 18.

**Transforming Prayer** If you’re looking for some direction about how your prayers can rise above the level of “give me this—give me that: help me, save me, heal me” then you will want to join us for “Transforming Prayer.” Week of January 25.