

“RELEASE THE OPPRESSED...”

BY GREG HARTMAN



HE WENT TO NAZARETH, WHERE HE HAD BEEN BROUGHT UP, AND ON THE SABBATH DAY HE WENT INTO THE SYNAGOGUE, AS WAS HIS CUSTOM. AND HE STOOD UP TO READ. THE SCROLL OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH WAS HANDED TO HIM. UNROLLING IT, HE FOUND THE PLACE WHERE IT IS WRITTEN: “THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS ON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO PREACH GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM FREEDOM FOR THE PRISONERS AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT FOR THE BLIND, TO RELEASE THE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD’S FAVOR” (LUKE 4:16-19).

Until April 1995, Xiaodong Li, a Chinese citizen, and a few friends, met weekly without incident for a Bible study in Ningbo, an eastern coastal city in China. That month, after Li and his friends had been meeting for more than five years, Li’s apartment was raided and Li arrested.

Police beat and tortured Li for two hours with an electric baton until he confessed to organizing an underground church. Five days later, Li’s family managed to get him released from the local jail. While awaiting trial, Li lost his job as a hotel publicist—the police forced him to work cleaning public bathrooms without pay.

Knowing he would probably be sentenced to at least two years in prison, Li decided to leave China. Thanks to poor communication

between government agencies, Li secured a visa and passport.

Using a cruise ship job to get to the United States, Li wound up in Texas, hoping to return home when and if China eased its restrictions on religion. In 1999, he requested asylum after his visa ran out.

Out of the Frying Pan

To that point, Li’s account is a familiar, happy one: a believer fleeing religious persecution and finding freedom in the West. But the asylum application brought an unpleasant surprise.

Although Li’s request received initial approval from an immigration judge, the Board of Immigration Appeals overturned it in 2003. The board ruled that Li was punished not for his beliefs, but for violating China’s laws on

unregistered churches—laws it said China has every right to enforce to maintain social order. The board concluded that Li was fleeing prosecution, not persecution.

In August 2005, a Fifth Circuit Court panel reviewed the case. And although an immigration judge on the panel considered Li’s testimony perfectly credible, the panel upheld the board’s ruling. Meanwhile, Li’s family and friends back in China were also mistreated and imprisoned after he left.

Li’s case has understandably alarmed human rights advocates and ministries to the persecuted, who point out that asylum is traditionally granted to those fleeing persecution for their race, politics or religious beliefs.

Li’s supporters say his deportation will set precedent against helping those fleeing any nation in

which their religion has been declared illegal.

Alive and Well

Despite this incident's chilling implications, North America still enjoys freedom of religion to an extent unparalleled anywhere else

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in the world—or at any other time in history, for that matter.

In 2004, the United States granted asylum to more than 10,000 applicants from China alone, many of those Christians fleeing persecution.

Our robust freedoms, largely shared by other Western nations, have arguably lulled Christians in the Western world into complacency. We think of persecution as

The Home Front

What has the church in North America done with its freedom? Laudably, many churches view their freedom not only as a gift to be enjoyed, but also as a responsibility—to be witnesses to the ends of the earth; *to release the oppressed* (Acts 1:8; Luke 4:18).

Sadly, some churches not only fail to release the oppressed, but become the oppressors themselves.

United Pentecostal Church doctrine, for instance, includes strict rules against its members owning televisions, dancing, watching or participating in sports, or watching movies. Women are forbidden to cut their hair or wear jewelry, pants or makeup. Former members testify

that women who cut their hair at all—even to trim bangs or split ends—are often accused of being backsliders.

Any number of other horror stories about legalism or spiritual abuse could be written, all stem-

ming from professed Christian churches that sound more like cults:

- Pastors who tell their parishioners how to vote.
- Church leaders who trick emotionally vulnerable women into affairs, convincing them that it's "God's will."
- Churches that order parishioners to break off contact with their families.
- Churches that require a certain number of hours spent in service per week, threatening the loss of salvation to those who balk.

Punished Most Severely

Can abusive or legalistic churches be legitimately compared to governments that torture and murder? Consider: Jesus' harshest criticism was leveled not at cruel secular leaders, but at legalistic spiritual leaders:

"Do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:3-4).


"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not

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something that happened long ago and far away—yet persecution is not only alive and well, but also more pervasive than ever.

An estimated 70 million Christians have died for their faith since the church began—45 million, or



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In short, we become just like the Pharisees, not only refusing God's gift as inadequate, but also blocking others from entering eternal life.

enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to" (Matthew 23:13).

"Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be

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punished most severely" (Mark 12:38-40).

God's greatest gift to us is the sacrifice of his Son, through which we freely enter his presence and by which we are set free from the curse of the Law (Hebrews 4:16; Galatians 3:25).

When we add our own conditions and rules to the gospel, we proclaim that his sacrifice was not enough, and that our judgment is superior to his. In short, we become just like the Pharisees, not only refusing God's gift as inadequate, but also blocking others from entering eternal life.

Little wonder that Jesus rebuked them so angrily! Similarly, Paul scolded the Galatians, who believed circumcision was necessary for salvation, far more than he did the Corinthians, who tolerated incest:

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who

called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.

Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:6-8).

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.... Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" (Galatians 3:1-5).

The essence of sin is pride (Isaiah 14:12-14), the desire to usurp God's rightful place—and that pride frequently drives us to contribute to our own salvation through works. Worse, we look for excuses to spread our legalism to others (Matthew 7:3).

Paul, it would seem, reprimanded the Galatians not because their legalism was so egregious, but because it is so commonplace.

It has been well said that we must guard our liberty in Christ jealously, for there are many eager to take it from us. True—but we may be our own worst enemies. How common—and tragic—it is for us to accept God's grace, then immediately re-enter the bondage

of legalism and insist that others join us!

History's Exception

We should never be surprised at persecution (1 John 3:13). As Jesus told Nicodemus, the mere fact that believers exist is ample excuse for persecution: "Light has come into

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the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light" (John 3:19-20). Indeed, the freedom enjoyed by the Western church over the past few hundred years is history's exception—not its rule.

Similarly, we should never be surprised by our own tendency to add to the gospel and our own willingness to turn away from freedom in Christ and enter again into bondage.

As we observe the *Day of Prayer for the Captives* this month, we would do well not only to pray for those in spiritual bondage or under persecution, not only that we might find the strength to stand firm should persecution come our way—but also that we may not become captive to legalism or spiritual abuse. □

Greg Hartman and his family enjoy their freedom in Colorado.



Selected Comments

from www.ptm.org

FIRST-AID for Legalists

A few selected comments from readers, listeners and supporters of PTM—how they were rescued from cultic beliefs and legalistic practices. You'll find much more at www.ptm.org.

I am thrilled to discover your ministry, magazine and many resources that are dedicated to helping set free those who are ensnared by legalism. My life was turned upside down when the crutch I was using to prove my worth to God was taken away from me. I discovered the gospel of grace only after I was no longer capable of performing all of the deeds I had thought were necessary so that God would respond and love me. What freedom to know that God's love is not dependent upon our works and deeds! Thank you, PTM, for your hard work on behalf of God's amazing grace.

—Michigan

I grew up in a legalistic church, almost from birth. My entire life was centered around legalism. Growing up in the southern United States, the members of my church seemed to be more dogmatic—many beliefs bordered on superstition and fanaticism—sort of like the mindset of the South during the Civil War. Now I have been delivered from legalism by the saving grace of Jesus. We look back on a lot of the ridiculous things we did and laugh. But that experience will always be with me, sort of like a drug or alcohol addiction to a recovering individual. I was angry for a time, more at myself, wondering how I could have been so blinded—even duped. I would encourage anyone in a similar circumstance to talk about their past, find a way to laugh about it, use it as a reminder of what we can become if we lose sight—and focus on Jesus, rejoicing in the redemption of his grace.

—Ohio

Because of my legalistic-cultic background, it has taken me a long time to understand the importance of Jesus. Even saying or typing the name Jesus is a little strange. An important part of what God has done in my life is to help me understand sin—and that no matter how hard I try, I can't live a sin-free life. That step is important, because it helps me to realize how much I need Jesus. I not only can't live a sin free life, there are times when I can't go a few minutes without sinning. Knowing what Jesus has done for me on the cross takes on a whole new dimension, and his wonderful gift to us is so precious. I more fully understand God's love for me. I am finally getting what grace is all about—and what legalism is powerless to do. Thanks, PTM, for what you are doing.

—Pennsylvania

I don't know whether I am recovering or just upset and angry. I believe that much hurt and pain has been caused by some who have misrepresented God, and even though my personal experiences have not been as bad as others', I still don't know what to make of what I have gone through. So, I appreciate your website, the resources you offer and the fact that you are willing to discuss this topic. Thanks from down under.

—Australia

I have been wonderfully blessed by Plain Truth Ministries. You have helped me to understand what legalism is and how to avoid it. I listen to Greg Albrecht's sermons on the Internet. I am praying that the Lord will bless Plain Truth Ministries' worldwide efforts to reach people with the gospel of Christ. Keep up the good work!

— Ontario, Canada

I have been a Christian all of my life. I never remember having any problems with people being legalistic. It wasn't until I married my second husband and we sought out churches. My husband was a former Catholic, and I was always non-denominational. We became Pentecostal and received the gift of tongues. We thought that this was great, until we were reprimanded for not speaking in tongues enough, for wearing certain kinds of clothing, for not showing up every Sunday, for not tithing—and the list goes on. I recently opened my eyes and realized that I was caught up in legalism. I am feeling more freedom within my soul than ever before! I did not realize how bound I had become. Thank you to PTM for helping me to see the truth and error of my ways. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life! Amen!

—Wyoming

I was raised in an extremely legalistic church. Hair off your ears and off your collar! No shorts! No pants for women! Southern gospel music only! No drums! Dress your best, preferably suit and tie for men and nice dresses for women! Be at church every time the doors are open: Sunday morning and night, Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night, Thursday night, Friday night OFF—Praise God!, Saturday visitation! King James Version of the Bible only! Tithe, tithe and tithe some more! No jewelry for men. If we didn't shout, we didn't "have church." I'm sure there's more, but that's all I can think of for now. I still battle with some of these issues at times. I try to catch myself as often as I can, but it's tough still. I'm 37 years old and have been freed from so much, praise the Lord, but I'm still recovering. One day at a time.

—South Carolina



See back cover for more information.

I was taught, from a child, that there are many things that are bad—even evil. Dancing and card playing and movie going are only the beginning (to this day I can't go to a movie, even though I know there's nothing wrong with doing so, without sitting in the very last row, in case God might zot all the movie goes—I can get out quickly if I'm in the back row!).

All kinds of restrictions were added in my journey from church to church—and along with them fear and frustrations. What I could eat and not eat. What sports I could participate in and not participate in. Who I could marry. What professions I could choose. If I did attend college, what kind of college I could attend—and what classes I could take and not take.

For over 50 years of my life, I believed God to be, as PTM says, mad at us. Well, thank God I have now started to read the Bible rather than listen to preachers. And guess what I have found? God's grace! God's grace is helping me to recover from legalism.

—North Carolina

This is a long overdue letter to let all of you at PTM know of our appreciation for your ministry. Your ministry literally changed our lives.

I remember the first time I contacted you—we were in desperate need of help. My husband and I were thinking about leaving our long-time church. We had come to see that this church was controlling, manipulative and legalistic.

We had been studying God's grace, and that study led us to the work of PTM—and all that you do. You were so helpful in helping us understand what God's amazing grace is all about.

Your many timely and personal responses to our requests were an answer from heaven. When you sent us resources to help us understand what had happened to us, and what we were feeling, it was like we were reading our own story. The booklet, From Cult to Christ, was outstanding—and your book, Bad News Religion, continues to be a source of encouragement and inspiration.

We left the church we had belonged to for over 20 years. We are still young, so this was the church we had grown up in, and the only church group we had ever known. When we left, I expected people to call us, to ask us to come back, to offer to come by and talk with us and at the very least to continue to want to be our friends.

What we got was—NOTHING!!! We grew up there, had our children there, we were Sunday school teachers, faithfully paid years of tithes and offerings—nothing! Not a note, not a phone call. We sent a short but non-confrontational note to inform the pastor of our decision. Getting the silent treatment was, of course, much easier to deal with than harassment, but maybe a little "goodbye, we'll be here if you need us, thanks for all the support, you'll be in our prayers"—something—would have been nice. But nothing—nothing but silent judgment, shunning and condemnation.

For all this time we thought these people were our friends—but they were only fair weather friends—only as long as we were in their particular church. When we changed teams, it was almost like we became the enemy.

The real, authentic new life in Christ we discovered through the work of Plain Truth Ministries is the real life—the real, true Christianity we were hungering for. And thank God, we are not upset with God. By his grace we are not mad at him because of what happened to us in our former church. And again, much of that is because of your patient and caring help. Thanks for all your support—it worked!!!

—Florida

Thank you so much for your magazine and ministry. We came out of a very legalistic church, much like a cult (it had the same effect). My husband and I don't go to church. I struggle with even being able to read a Bible since leaving the group (the majority of ex-religious groupies feel the same). Your ministry has bridged a gap I could not have on my own. Thank you for teaching the truth of God's grace and exposing the lie of legalism.

—Massachusetts