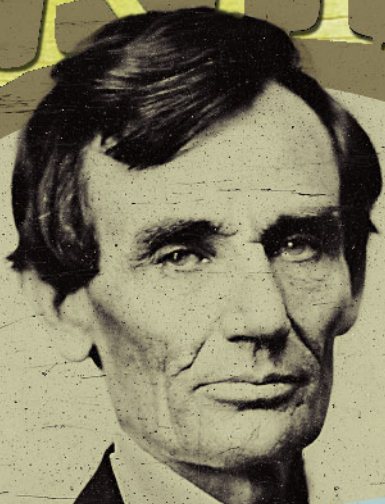


CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

ABRAHAM



A "None" Before His Time

LINCOLN

- ☐ Catholic
- ☐ Baptist
- ☐ Mainline Christian
- ☐ Christian Generic
- ☐ Pentecostal/Charismatic
- ☐ Protestant Denominations
- ☐ Mormon/LDS
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Eastern Religions
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ NRM & Other Religions
- ☒ None

What Others Are Saying...



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

When Did God Become a Christian?

I have NEVER EVER seen anything like some of the articles in a link to the PTM website I received from a friend. For anybody who has been driven to agnosticism or atheism, like myself (due, in part, to the apparent glaring contradictory messages of the Old Testament and the New Testament), then you absolutely need to read the article “When Did God Become a Christian?” in the Winter 2014 *Plain Truth*. It addresses that very issue head on without the mush, ice-skating, attempts to distract or other less-than-satisfactory methods used in so many other venues. It is an article I will be chewing on for quite some time to come. Absolutely shockingly different and thought-provoking.

That is just one of the intriguing, thought-provoking articles in the magazine that SERIOUSLY addresses concerns of atheists and others. Just amazing. There is so much in there and time has gotten so late in this day that I am forced to leave the rest of the issue to read at the next available opportunity.

Quebec, Canada

Jesus > Biblicism

I am writing to express my appreciation and admiration for the articles on “Biblicism” in the Winter 2014 edition of *Plain Truth*. Greg Albrecht and Brian Zahnd did a great job in showing how Jesus, not paper and ink, is the WORD of God (John 1:1-3, 14). Over many decades I have transitioned from the “dictation” theory of scripture held by fundamentalists to the Bible as “folklore” view of the liberals. Now I am somewhere in the middle, for I have come to understand that Jesus is the Revelation of God, for only Jesus knows the Father (Mt 11:27). Today I am no

longer concerned whether the days of creation were literal or about the exact number of angels at the empty tomb. I read the Bible now through a “Christological” lens, seeing all of Scripture in relation to Jesus. As always, thanks for the great work you all are doing at CWR/PTM.

Mississippi

• For more about Biblicism and PTM’s “Year of the Bible” see page 21-22 of this issue.

Out of Control

Thanks for the article by Steve Brown “Out of Control” in the Winter 2014 issue of *Plain Truth*. We let tiny, minute things bug us. We need to keep cool—like the lady with the flask of brandy!

Nevada

Gateway to the Gospels: Matthew

I enjoyed Brad Jersak’s first article in his series “Gateway to the Gospels” on the book of Matthew in the Jan/Feb 2015 *Plain Truth*. I look forward to reading the rest of this series by Dr. Jersak!

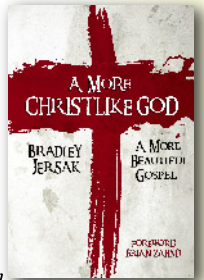
Arizona

Why We Believe What We Believe

Thanks so much for publishing Brad Jersak’s article “Why We Believe What We Believe” in the Jan/Feb 2015 *PT*. I found this article helpful, encouraging and logical. I grew up in a strict, legalistic church and it took me years to finally see and understand that I was not just indoctrinated by my church upbringing—but I was actually brainwashed.

California

• Coming soon! Brad Jersak’s new book *A More Christlike God*. Here’s an endorsement from author Frank Schaeffer, who received an advance copy: “Do yourself a favor and make this the last or better yet, the **only** book you read on Jesus. *A More Christlike God* is Brad Jersak’s bold attempt to save Christianity from Christians. Jersak offers a choice, “The Cross [as] the all-encompassing revelation of the Christlike God or the angry vengeful ‘god’ most Christians worship and have taught the world to hate. If there is any such thing as Christianity left one hundred years from now, you can thank this book.”



Pastor/Coach

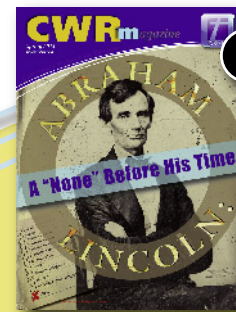
I know some people think of Greg Albrecht as their “pastor” and that works for me. But I also know he prefers to be called “Greg” instead of a title, and we all speak of ourselves as “friends.” But because of the particular ways Greg has helped me, I think of him as a “coach.”

Florida

Much Appreciated

Thank you so very much for all the resources you provide. The *CWR* sermons and all the articles are so helpful—they have helped me to know and understand God so much more.

Wisconsin



Cover Story

Abraham Lincoln was never a member

of any church. Beyond that, he seemed at one time to have rejected the Bible and Christianity altogether. Who was this man who led us to end the appalling evil of slavery in America, an evil that had persisted in the world in spite of nineteen centuries of institutional Christianity?

COVER IMAGE BY MARV WEGNER—PTM

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Welcome to CWRm!

by Greg Albrecht

During a recent dinner party my wife and I were seated with six individuals whom we had never met. When the conversation turned toward “and what do you do?” everyone (including several who did not openly espouse Christianity) was immediately taken by the concept of *Christianity Without the Religion*. One man said he didn’t know it was possible to be a Christian without being religious!

CWR (shorthand for *Christianity Without the Religion*) has been part of PTM (Plain Truth Ministries) for over a decade. In 2004 we started using CWR as the drop head to *The Plain Truth*—which was, at the time, our flagship magazine.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

Somewhat like automobile companies prepare for a new model year, our staff spent much of 2014 on our “assembly line” preparing our 2015 models. Among other improvements, a modified *Plain Truth* will roll off the “assembly line.” Here’s a behind-the-scenes look at how and why we re-tooled and re-focused subscription and circulation policies and target audiences to more effectively proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Plain Truth Ministries started publishing *The Plain Truth* (PT) magazine in 1996, but as some of you know the history of the title *The Plain Truth* goes back some 80 years. Some of you may also know that “back in the day” *The Plain Truth* published unbiblical, un-Christ-

like teaching—you may also know that the editorial content and direction of *The Plain Truth* were transformed so that a dramatic, Christ-centered reformation was achieved via spiritual “open-heart” surgery. That transformation itself is a miraculous story—some of which I detail in my first book *Bad News Religion—The Virus That Attacks God’s Grace* (2004).

Beyond decidedly erroneous content for much of its history, the PT has, over its 80-year history, been published in a variety of styles and frequency of publication. In terms of its content, the story of *The Plain Truth* is one of continuing growth in Christ—**truly by God’s grace we’re not what we used to be!**

As our flagship magazine, *The Plain Truth*, in the waning years of the 20th century

and early years of the 21st, served as a public testimony to the power of God to transform and renew—to breathe the new life of Christ into something or someone who was flawed and broken. After all, whether we’re speaking about a magazine or an individual, **when we follow Christ we will never be who or what we used to be.**

To return to the automobile illustration for a moment, when *The Plain Truth* was radically transformed, we informed readers (in a way similar to what Oldsmobile did a few years ago) that this new model carried the same name but its editorial direction and contents were definitely “not your father’s Oldsmobile.”

Enter CWR—Christianity Without the Religion

For a number of years the Board of Directors of Plain Truth Ministries has been pondering and questioning the effectiveness of the title *The Plain Truth* as our flagship magazine.

For much of its history the drop head of *The Plain Truth* explained that it was “a magazine of understanding.” When PTM started publishing *The Plain Truth* we considered that particular drop head to be at best ambiguous if not somewhat irrelevant. There was a period of time when we published *The Plain Truth* without a drop head, but then with the November-December 1997 issue we started to use the drop head, “Renewing Faith and Values.” In the early years of the 21st century, we realized “Renewing Faith and Values” was not adequately explaining our Christ-centered focus to the public at large. In May-June 2004 we unveiled the current drop head to *The Plain Truth*—“Christianity Without the Religion” to more effectively communicate one of the growing, primary themes of our ministry.

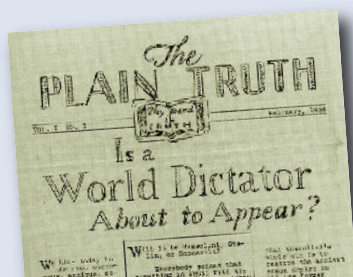
New Subscription/Circulation Policies

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* dictates and defines it as the magazine that we publish,



This is not your father's Oldsmobile.



CHRISTIANITY Without the Religion®

print and mail via hard copy to those North American Friends and Partners who consistently and generously support the ongoing ministry of CWR/PTM. The new circulation policy of *The Plain Truth* means that hard copy 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 to everyone—both the most recent issues as well as our *PT* archives. Due to budgetary considerations, we will continue to explore efficient forms and formats for print versions of *The Plain Truth*.

- We have also modified the subscription and circulation policy of *Christianity Without the Religion Journal*. With this issue, *Christianity Without the Religion magazine (CWRm)* becomes 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 at least minimal annual donations to our ongoing work.

- *CWRa*—our audio, weekly teaching ministry, offering topical, biblically based sermons—will continue as one of **three media resources identified by and with CWR**. *CWRa*, as one of our media vehicles/resources, is primarily provided digitally, but in some cases we do

Somewhat like automobile companies prepare for a new model year, our staff spent much of 2014 on our “assembly line” preparing our 2015 models.

provide “hard-copy” CDs and even cassettes. But again, we must request a minimal level of donations to help cover the expense of doing so.

- On March 15, God willing, we will launch yet another media vehicle under the generic title of *CWR*. *Christianity Without the Religion*—a video magazine (*CWRv*) will of course only be available in digital format, and only through our website. *CWRv* will offer short interviews and statements about seasonally relevant, significant topics of concern to our ministry and those we serve. As videos, and given their YouTube-like brevity, *CWRv* will be ideal for those who like to access information on their portable electronic devices, such as smart phones and I-pads.

- Several months ago we introduced our blog, *CWRb* and now you are reading *CWRm*, another media vehicle used by PTM to publish and proclaim God’s amazing grace.

Re-Tooling and Re-Focusing

Allow me to reiterate: **we continue to publish *The Plain Truth***. Earlier, I mentioned automobile companies and their new models. Think of Ford, for example. If you are “old enough” or if you (or someone you know) own an antique Ford, you may have actually taken a ride in one of the original Model-T Ford cars.

In my case, the first Fords I can remember were in the mid-1950s (I remember the launch of the Ford Thunderbird—a



dream car for this car-crazy pre-teen boy!).

But then just a few years later another “new era” dawned for Ford. The company was still Ford, and the product was still produced by Ford, but now, about the time that I graduated from high school, came the Mustang! What a car!

My wife and I have owned three separate models of the Ford Mustang—the 1966 (I wish we still had it!), the 1970 and the 1990. In addition we’ve owned a few other Fords over the years.

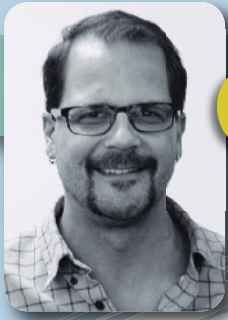
Over the years there have been many models, styles and sizes of Ford automobiles. Some are memorable for their successes, while others (remember the “Edsel”?) not so much.

Just as Ford still produces cars, PTM still publishes *The Plain Truth* as a magazine. So we might say that *The Plain Truth* is a still a Ford and *CWRm* is the new Mustang!

Our staff is excited about the wonderful new tools and direction we see ahead! We believe you will not only enjoy some of these modifications but that you will find them enormously profitable, as Christ-centered spiritual food, enabling you to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In addition, we believe these modifications/improvements will help us more effectively reach a worldwide audience with *Christianity Without the Religion*. □





CWRm

BRAD JERSAK

THE BEAUTIFUL GOSPEL

The Truth Is Beautiful

In this, my inaugural *Beautiful Gospel* column in *CWRm*, I'd like to introduce readers to all of the regular columnists who are now joining us.

Brian Zahnd's *Axis of Love* comes to us from a pastor and author in St. Joseph, Missouri. Brian's trilogy on the topic of Forgiveness (*Unconditional?*), Beauty (*Beauty will Save the World*) and Peace (*A Farewell to Mars*) brings an awareness of how the religion of America and the Jesus Way are deeply at odds over the nature of freedom and truth...and how the Sermon on the Mount is a radical exposure calling out, "The Emperor has no clothes!"

Derek Flood hails from San Francisco. His column, *The Rebel God*, is drawn from his work as an author (*Healing the Gospel*) and blogger. He has a keen eye for the authentic gospel and a discerning nose for toxins that religion tries to slip into the mix. For example, Derek is a clarion voice, calling out and deconstructing the false god of retribution, which always tries to supplant the Abba of Jesus. In *The Rebel God*, you'll see how Derek reads the whole Bible through the peacemaking lens of Jesus Christ.

David Hayward (*The Naked Pastor*) is a cartoonist from New Brunswick, Canada. His satire often spoofs the ridiculous and oppressive nature of religion. Like Isaiah, David's critique of religious idolatry can be biting...but also liberating. He's been a real voice against exclusion and bigotry, while also advocating for those whose voices have been muffled or even silenced—especially women.

These columnists are all becoming trusted friends of our faithful readers. We've tasted the "truthfulness" of their occasional articles, and now we're pleased to serve up a regular diet of their best offerings. Full disclosure: they're going to beckon us beyond religious boxes...but I say, "Let's go there!"

As for this column—*The Beautiful Gospel*—the title is drawn from a message composed by Fr. Anthony Karbo, entitled "the Gospel in Chairs." That sermon/object lesson was so

beautiful, that once Brian Zahnd and I discovered it, we conspired to share it around the world. My version is on the PTM website (www.ptm.org).

We've been training others to share it, too—in North America, in the United Kingdom and mainland Europe. Even as far as India. One of its heralds delivered it to over 400 prison inmates. Eventually, Brian reasoned that since the message is not about chairs *per se*, but actually about the story of Jesus, we should redub it, "The Beautiful Gospel." And so we have.

And the gospel *really is* beautiful! Through Christ, we learned that our God is always towards us, forever in wild pursuit of us and in unfailing love with us! His mercy endured the cross and the grave and now continues to extend the open hands of grace to the world.

I could have called this gospel by other adjectives—like grace, mercy, truth or love—for it is all of that and more. But I was drawn particularly to *beauty* because in our era, beauty is probably the most-neglected ancient criterion for truth. In this utilitarian age of industry, economy and technology, somehow we forgot that God and his story are infinitely beautiful. Moreover, our theology and our message should reflect that beauty. If it doesn't—if our message is *ugly*—then somehow we've distorted it with worldly religion and pseudo-divine retribution.

If our gospel is not beautiful, the world is right to resent and ridicule it. If it's not beautiful, it's likely not even true, because the true gospel is *The Greatest Story Ever Told!* Yes, worldly powers, religious systems and stubborn egos will always resist Christ—but every thirsty human heart genuinely craves the Fountain of Life. Jesus is "the desire of the nations."

In fact, as Dostoevsky reminds us, ultimately *Beauty will save the world*...and his name is Jesus! So join me as we explore countless facets of this *Beautiful Gospel*. □

—Brad Jersak

ABRAHAM

A "None" Before His Time

LINCOLN

- ☐ Catholic
- ☐ Baptist
- ☐ Mainline Christian
- ☐ Christian General
- ☐ Pentecostal/Charismatic
- ☐ Protestant Denominations
- ☐ Mormon/LDS
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Eastern Religions
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ NRM & Other Religions
- ☒ None

Editor's note: A Christian "none" is one who refuses to allow relationship with God to be defined and confined by traditionally approved and accepted religious standards.

There was the strangest combination of church influence against me.... My wife had some relations in the Presbyterian churches, and some in the Episcopal churches; and therefore, wherever it would tell, I was set down as either one or the other, while it was everywhere contended that no Christian ought to vote for me because I belonged to no Church, and was suspected of being a Deist and had talked of fighting a duel.—**Abraham Lincoln, March 26, 1843, in a letter to Martin M. Morris**

On Good Friday, 150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln was shot while watching a play at the Ford Theater in the nation's capitol city. Some say that just before John Wilkes Booth fired his .44 Derringer point blank into the back of the President's head, Lincoln had been ignoring the play and was talking with his wife about a possible visit to the Holy Land. With the long Civil War nearly over (the last Confederate general would not surrender until over two months later), Lincoln wanted to make a pilgrimage to see first-hand where Jesus was born, lived, taught and was crucified.

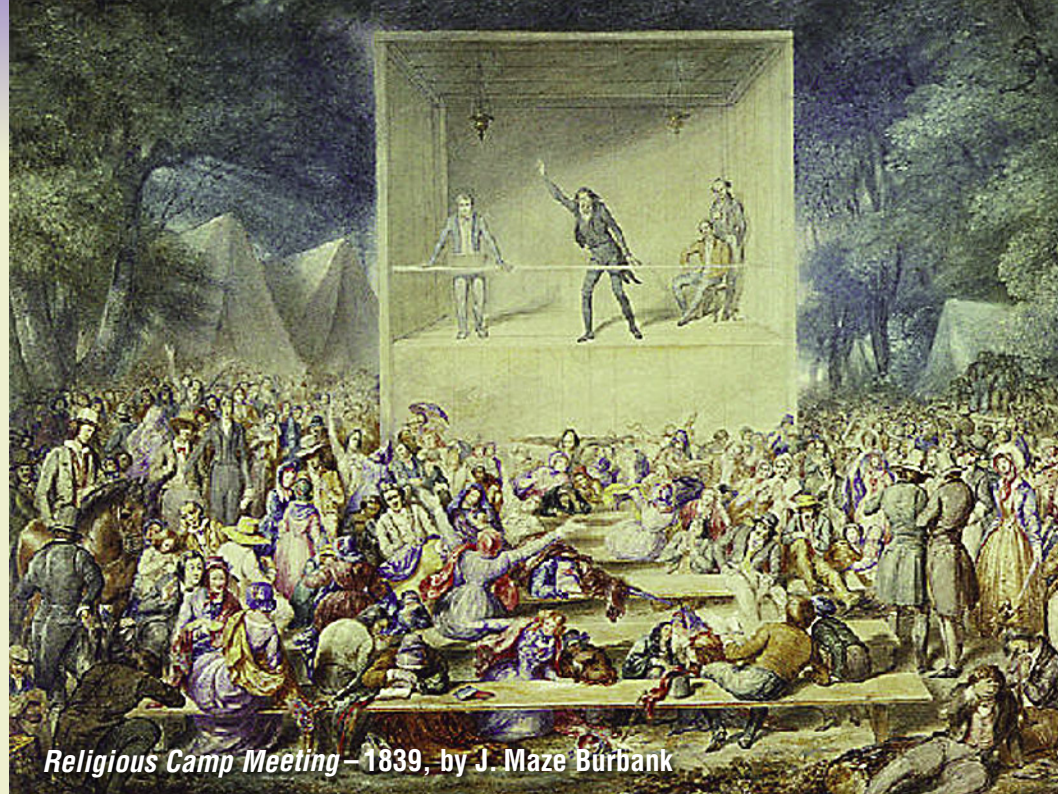
If this story is accurate, and these were the last thoughts of Lincoln, we have a quandary. Lincoln was never a member of any church. Beyond that, he seemed at one time to have rejected the

by Monte Wolverton

Bible and Christianity altogether. Will the authentic Abe Lincoln please stand up to his full height of 6 feet 4 inches?

About 15,000 books have been written about Lincoln—an honor second only to Jesus. In part, this is because Lincoln is so hard to pin down in terms of his underlying beliefs. With every book, every movie, every article about Lincoln we ask ourselves, *what spiritual perspective defined this man?* Who was this man who led us to end the appalling evil of slavery in America, an evil once accepted by a majority of Americans, an evil that had persisted in the world in spite of (and often *because of*) nineteen centuries of institutional Christianity? Did God actually choose Lincoln for this task, and if so, what kind of person (or “instrument,” as Lincoln more than once referred to himself) did God choose?

The answer is elusive. We can rummage through Lincoln



Religious Camp Meeting - 1839, by J. Maze Burbank

quotes till the cows come home, and still be flummoxed. And then there is the question of authenticity—did Abe really say many of the things attributed to him? Citing the enigmatic Lincoln is a little like quoting Scripture. It’s possible to take statements out of context and stack them up to support any agenda. To find a way out of the maze, we offer three views of Lincoln. The first two represent extreme but popular views, and the third, we suggest, is closer to the truth.

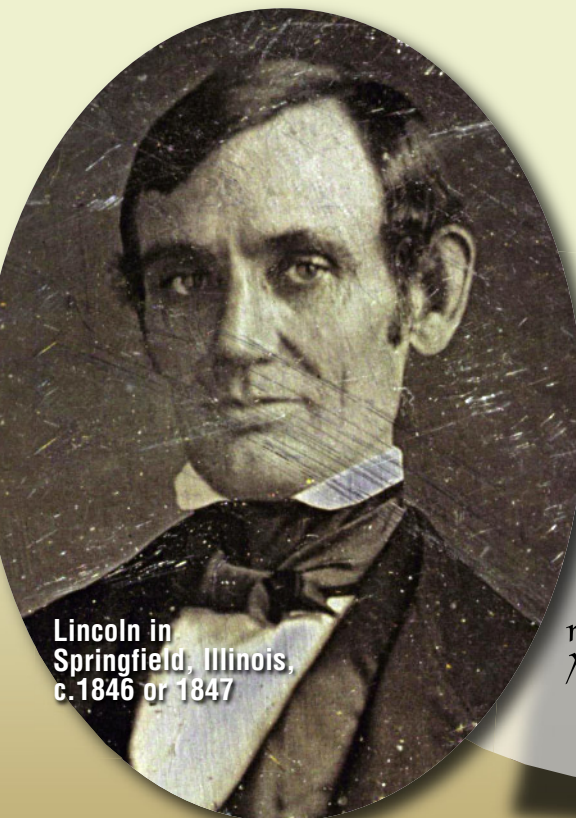
1. Lincoln the Pragmatic Politician

If you are an atheist or a humanist, you might

see Lincoln as privately skeptical (even atheistic) while publically pious. You might think he quoted Scripture merely for effect, to engage a mostly devout and religious public to further his agenda.

Ironically, some Christians hold a similar view of Lincoln. They believe the Civil War was more a dispute over states’ rights than it was over slavery. They point out that Southern states, fearing that the election of Lincoln surely meant abolition was on the way, were forced to secede to protect their sovereignty. From that perspective, Lincoln was just another big-government politician, and the

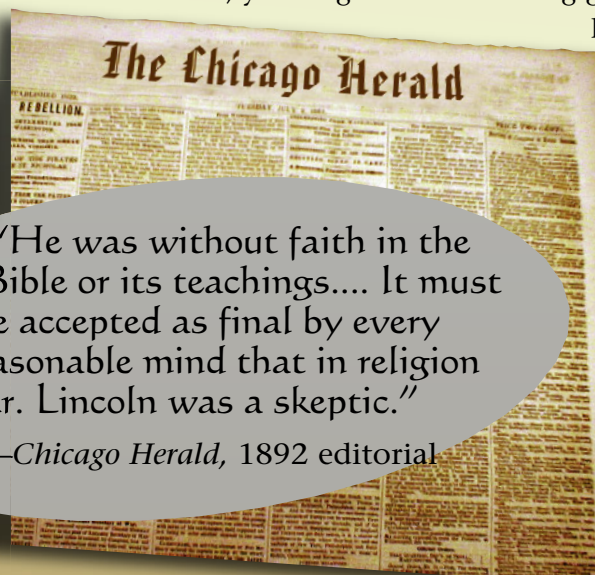
Civil War was nothing more than a war of “northern aggression.” It’s surprisingly easy to support this view of Lincoln with selected quotes and sources. Some are of



Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, c.1846 or 1847

“He was without faith in the Bible or its teachings.... It must be accepted as final by every reasonable mind that in religion Mr. Lincoln was a skeptic.”

—Chicago Herald, 1892 editorial



The Lincoln family would have seen many traveling revivalists pass through their community. In later life, Lincoln had a distaste for such emotionalism in preaching, favoring well-constructed arguments and sound reason—a later hallmark of his law practice and politics.

questionable origin, but many are well substantiated. For example:

- “The Bible is not my book nor Christianity my profession”—often quoted and attributed to Lincoln, but the source is uncertain.

- In his early political career, Lincoln’s opponents repeatedly accused him of being a Deist (more on this later), an infidel or even an atheist—charges he never categorically denied at the time. Lincoln’s Presidential candidacy was opposed by over 85% of church pastors in his hometown of Springfield, Illinois.

- “My earlier views of the unsoundness of the Christian scheme of salvation and the human origin of the scriptures, have become clearer and stronger with advancing years and I see no reason for thinking I shall ever change them.”—1862, to Judge J.S.

About 15,000 books have been written about Lincoln...Who was this man who led us to end the appalling evil of slavery in America... an evil that had persisted in the world in spite of... nineteen centuries of institutional Christianity?

Wakefield, after Willie Lincoln’s death.

- In an 1892 editorial, the *Chicago Herald* wrote of Lincoln: “He was without faith in the Bible or its teachings. On this point the testimony is so overwhelming that there is no basis for doubt. In his early life Lincoln exhibited a powerful tendency to aggressive infidelity. But when he grew to be a politician he became secretive and non-committal in his religious belief.... It must be accepted as final by every reasonable mind that in religion Mr. Lincoln was a skeptic.”

- Mary Todd Lincoln wrote, after her husband’s death, that he “was a religious man always, I think, but was not a technical Christian.”

If you roam the Internet, you will find many more quotes at least as shocking and puzzling as these. Was Lincoln a hypocrite? He *was* a shrewd political and legal strategist who often kept his personal opinions to himself. He was also famously adept at using homespun humor to disarm political and legal opponents. But is it really possible that Lincoln was a hater of God and the Bible, all the while posing as godly? If so, maybe Honest Abe wasn’t—and we ought to consider installing a statue of someone else in the Lincoln Memorial.

2. Lincoln the Unchanging Churchgoer

Many Christians assume Lincoln was a devout, born-again believer. It would be so convenient for institutional Christendom had Lincoln been a lifelong member of some denomination, whose creeds and dogmas charted a clear course for



Mary Todd Lincoln

wrote, after her husband’s death, that he “was a religious man always, I think, but was not a technical Christian.”

him through a great national crisis, after which he would have urged everyone to accept Christ, say the Sinner’s Prayer and attend church every Sunday. While it is nearly impossible to squeeze Lincoln into that mold, he did make many statements that strongly suggest he was a believer. Again, some quotes are questionable, but many are solidly validated. Here are a few examples:

- “When I left Springfield I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ. Yes, I do love Jesus”—allegedly said by Lincoln to an unnamed White House visitor in 1864,

The answer is elusive. We can rummage through Lincoln quotes till the cows come home, and still be flummoxed.

Lincoln never joined any church or denomination. Why? Perhaps his Universalist leanings clashed with the hell-fire condemnation and exclusivism ...the my-way-or-the-highway dogmatism that characterizes so many churches and denominations.

and printed in the *Freeport Weekly Journal*, on December 7 of that year.

- As Lincoln departed from Springfield for his inauguration in Washington, he told his audience of well-wishers: "...without the assistance of that divine being whoever attended him I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in him who can go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To his care commending you as I hope in your prayers you will commend me."

But was Lincoln a died-in-the-wool, gung-ho, Bible-thumping religious zealot? The following quote better describes Lincoln's reasoned relationship with the institutional church:

"That I am not a member of any Christian church is true, but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures, and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general or of any denomination of Christians in particular. I do not think I could myself be brought to support a man for office whom I knew to be an open enemy of and scoffer at religion"—1846 handbill published by Lincoln in response to his opponent in a congressional race.

3. Lincoln the Lifelong Learner

In his book *A. Lincoln: A Biography*, Ronald C. White, Jr. paints a picture of a man

who is ever-questioning, intellectually curious and open minded. His beliefs were never set in stone, but rather grew and evolved throughout his lifetime. A brief review of the aspects of Lincoln's life that formed his religious history may help unravel the enigma.

At the time of Lincoln's birth, his parents, Thomas and Nancy, were active in a Baptist Church in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. This austere religious environment likely out-Calvined Calvin, according to one scholar. The Lincoln family would have seen many traveling revivalists pass through their community. In later life, Lincoln had a distaste for such emotionalism in preaching, favoring well-constructed arguments and sound reason—a later hallmark of his law practice and politics.

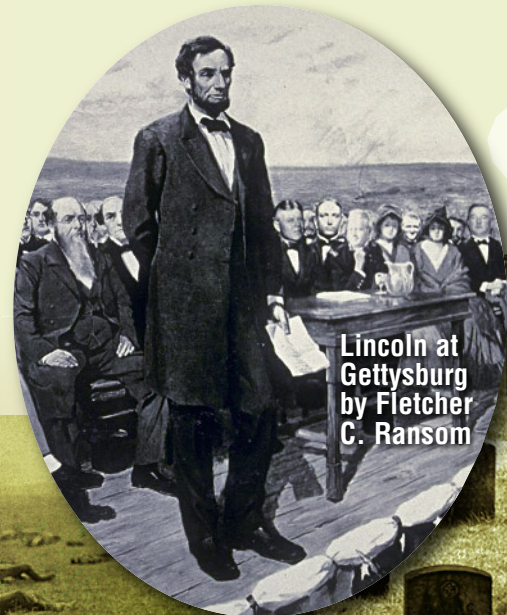
Further, the Lincolns' church opposed slavery, which was lawful in Kentucky, where slaves made up about 25% of the population. Lincoln's parents would have voiced their disapproval of the slave traders who often traveled the road that passed near the family cabin.

After the family moved to Indiana, young Abe began his lifelong consumption of books, including the Bible, memorizing much of what he read. He quoted from memory the Ten Commandments, the

Sermon on the Mount, the 23rd Psalm and many other passages. The premature deaths of his mother and sister may have driven his interest in things spiritual, but also may have contributed to his later religious disillusionment.

Sometime during his late teens or early adulthood Lincoln encountered *The Age of Reason* by Deist Thomas Paine. Deists hold that there is a Creator, but that he is not involved in human affairs. Lincoln reportedly wrote an essay against the divinity of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible.

The manuscript was allegedly destroyed by a friend to protect Lincoln's reputation. But Lincoln's teacher and friend William Mentor Graham, who claimed to have read the essay, said that it was rather "a defense of universal salvation." Said Graham, "I remember well his argument. He took the passage, 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,' and followed with the proposition that whatever the breach or injury of Adam's



**Battle of Gettysburg dead—
photographed July 5–6, 1863.**



transgression to the human race was, which no doubt was very great, was made just and right by the atonement of Christ." Historian Mark Noll agrees: "At least early on, Lincoln was probably also a Universalist who believed in the eventual salvation of all people."

Lincoln ventured into many different vocations. He piloted a flatboat carrying local produce and livestock down the Mississippi to New Orleans. He tried his hand at operating a general store. He served as a captain in the Illinois Militia during the Black Hawk War. He served as postmaster, county surveyor, and finally decided to teach himself law. One of his mentors in that profession demanded that he learn the position of his opponent as well as his own, since only then could he counter all possible arguments. This habit seemed to carry over into his thoughts about spiritual matters.

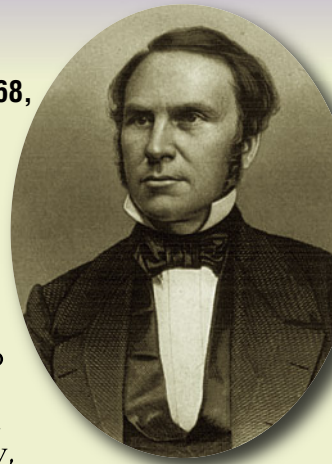
In 1846, after a decade of law practice and four successive terms in the Illinois Legislature, Lincoln was elected for one term to the U.S. House of Representatives. Afterwards he returned to his law practice in

Springfield. For the next two decades Lincoln represented a wide variety of companies and individuals. A master of legal argumentation, he appeared before the Illinois Supreme Court in no less than 175 cases.

Around 1850, Lincoln met Rev. James Smith, a Scottish immigrant and Deist who had converted to Christianity. He became pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, where Lincoln and his family frequently attended. One of Smith's books was a part of Lincoln's library, *The Christian's Defense*, a defense of the inspiration and authenticity of the Bible. Smith asserted that when it came to matters of faith, that order, logic and reason should outweigh emotion.

After his presidential inauguration in 1861, Lincoln and his wife, Mary, began attending New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, pastored by the Rev. Dr. Phineas Gurley, who was also U.S. Senate Chaplain. Gurley's coherent, reasoned and thoughtful sermons appealed to Lincoln. Gurley did not involve himself and his

Rev. Dr. Phineas Gurley, pastor of NYAPC, 1860-1868, was a friend and spiritual advisor to Lincoln



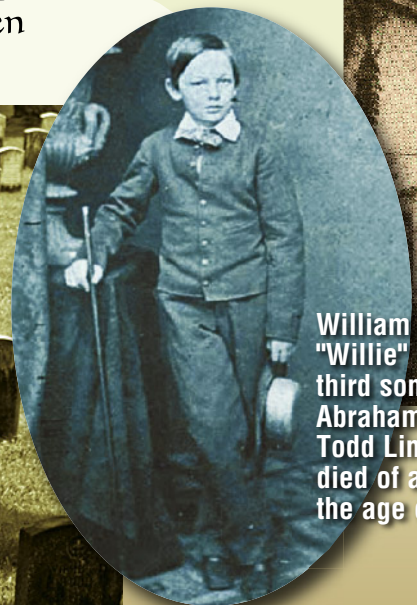
church in politics, a further plus for Lincoln, who believed God to be far above human politics. Not surprisingly, Gurley became a close friend of the President and his wife, preaching the funeral for their son William in 1862, and officiating at the funeral for Lincoln himself three years later. Many years afterward in a letter, Gurley would vouch for Lincoln's Christianity in no uncertain terms (in spite of the fact that Lincoln was not a member).

The Second Inaugural Address

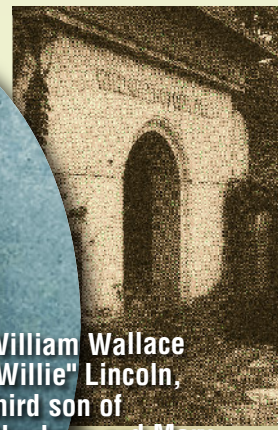
Gurley's sermons helped inspire Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address—just six weeks before the President's death. If there were a single document summarizing Lincoln's thoughts about God at the end of his life, this would be it.

The Second Inaugural Address should silence those

"When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ."



William Wallace "Willie" Lincoln, third son of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. He died of an illness at the age of 11.





The Second Inaugural Address should silence those who claim that Lincoln remained a lifelong skeptic... mentioning God 14 times in the speech.

who claim that Lincoln remained a lifelong skeptic, or that the Civil War was a mere dispute over state's rights. In this speech Lincoln goes beyond politics, attributing the events of the previous four years to the acts of God in the world, mentioning him 14 times in the speech.

Further, Lincoln unequivocally casts the war as a battle to end slavery—to free one eighth of the U.S. population. He denounces the religious institutionalism that conscripts the Bible and prayer as weapons for its own use.

He argues against the idea of a tribal god who supports one party or polity over another. "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not that we be not judged."

Lincoln does not blame the South for slavery, rather he reminds his audience that slavery was a shameful part of American culture from the

beginning. He characterizes the war as a natural consequence of slavery—or rather the judgment of God on the nation as a whole. Finally he calls for a new era of forgiveness and reconciliation, "with malice toward none with charity toward all" in the wake of the war.

Students of theology may see more than a few glimpses of the Calvinist doctrines of Predestination and Necessity woven through Lincoln's message. As his wife once commented: "Mr. Lincoln's maxim and philosophy were: 'What is to be, will be, and no prayers of ours can arrest the decree.'" But Lincoln's theology and his specific view of the nature of God are somewhat beside the point. His Second Inaugural Address clearly shows him to be a believer.

Yet Abraham Lincoln never joined any church or denomination. Why? Perhaps his Universalist leanings clashed with the hell-fire condemnation and exclusivism preached from many pulpits. Or perhaps he wanted to avoid the my-way-or-the-highway dogmatism that characterizes so many churches and denominations. Lincoln, from

Whatever teachers Lincoln read or listened to, whichever churches he attended, he never checked his brains or his capacity for critical thought at the door...

all accounts a tolerant and forgiving man, had little tolerance for this kind of intolerance. He never stopped learning and growing in his spiritual understanding.

Had he lived, we don't know where Lincoln's thoughts and studies would have taken him, just as we don't know precisely what he believed when he was alive. But Jesus told us "by their fruits you shall know them." Maybe we shouldn't focus so much on Lincoln's spiritual journey—since apart from Christ all of our journeys are filled with dead-ends, detours and disasters. Maybe we should focus on his enduring accomplishments—and by Lincoln's own admission, they were not his accomplishments, but those of God working through him!

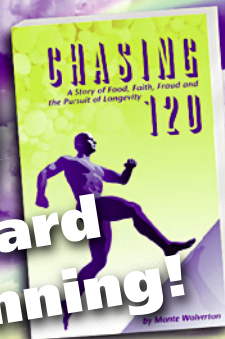
Whatever teachers Lincoln read or listened to, whichever churches he attended, he never checked his brains or his capacity for critical thought at the door. As the instrument of God who fought to free American slaves from tyranny, Lincoln maintained his personal freedom from religious tyranny. What kind of person did God choose to lead the great battle to bring freedom to all Americans? He chose a person who was free—one who was not enslaved by religious institutionalism—one who was genuinely free in Christ. □

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

<input type="checkbox"/>	Catholic
<input type="checkbox"/>	Baptist
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mainline Christian
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<input type="checkbox"/>	NRM & Other Religions
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	None



Award Winning!



A new novel from PLAIN TRUTH MINISTRIES

MORE POINTS TO PONDER:

1. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus consistently defied the attempts of religious professionals to shoehorn him into their religious practices and beliefs. Jesus was a Jew, and he faithfully observed the old covenant law. Why didn't he just agree to all standards and definitions the religious professionals attempted to impose on him?

What does a Christ-follower "look like" in your opinion?

2. Isn't one of the issues we should consider the very definition of the word "religion"? In its broadest sense, most think of **religion as a system of beliefs that offers a relationship with God, or at the very least an improved and enhanced relationship with God, on the basis of human deeds, work and performance. Even the secular use of the word "religion" speaks of something habitually done, over and over again, repetitiously, without thinking.**

3. However, Christianity is not, as originally and classically taught and proclaimed a religion. **Authentic Christianity is a relationship and way of life, given by God's grace, wherein Christ-followers live a new life, the life of Jesus, as the risen life of Jesus Christ lives within them.**

4. Is there such a thing as an ir-religious Christian?

5. Can a "none" be a Christian, while refusing to give allegiance to membership policies, initiation rites, rituals and ceremonies prescribed and ordered by a religious entity?

6. How does one become and remain a Christ-follower?

7. When the topic of "nones" is introduced, why do you feel many within organized/big business Christendom claim that the "nones" who do not attend a brick-and-mortar church are a proof that the sky is falling and that Jesus' Second Coming must be near? Do such individuals have any vested interests for making such claims?

8. Why are so many people now identifying themselves as religious "nones"?

9. Is removing oneself from what might be an authoritarian or even abusive church *de facto* proof that one is a Christian?

Chasing 120—A Story of Food, Faith, Fraud and the Pursuit of Longevity

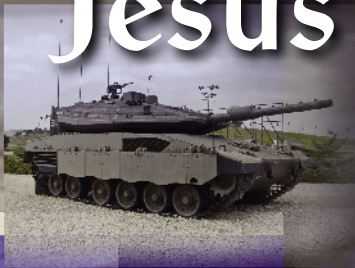
Perpetually grinning, fast-talking Texas adman-turned- preacher Dr. Tyler Belknap promises health and longevity to a cult following via his nationally televised daily infomercial programs. The meteoric success of Belknap's Wellness 120 empire is fueled by "the pursuit of longevity," touted by Belknap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

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

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

**Available at
www.ptm.org/120
and Amazon.com**

Walking Where Jesus Walked?



Recently a friend asked me for help in taking a trip to Israel. He had sold his motorcycle and pawned his wife's wedding ring but was still \$1,700 short of the \$3,000 he needed for the trip. He was going

with a group that assured him that "walking where Jesus walked" was an experience that would change his life forever. *Really?* My response to his request was four-fold:

Number one, I will not help you or anyone else go

to Israel for a "holy land tour" since there is no holy land. The whole earth is the Lord's by right of creation and right of redemption.

Secondly, much of the Western Church is based in a consumer mentality with

[My friend] was going with a group that assured him that “walking where Jesus walked” was an experience that would change his life forever. Really?

its leadership seeking to provide its members with “good experiences” for them to consume. They package those experiences in spiritual terms but the context is not the Kingdom of God. The context is the consumer society which functions to provide pleasurable, entertaining programs and events that consumers will pay to experience. Those events may be “worship” in a contemporary style with advanced sound systems, expert musicians and motivational speaking, “holy land” trips and even (might I say?) short-term mission adventure tours.

...I will not help you or anyone else go to Israel for a “holy land tour” since there is no holy land. The whole earth is the Lord’s by right of creation and right of redemption.

Thirdly, we are not Muslims with their Mecca, Mormons with their temple in Utah, Hindus with the Ganges River or Jews with their wailing wall. We are followers of Jesus who celebrate that the Triune God by the Holy Spirit indwells each one of us and makes us his temple.

It is a characteristic of all religions that the presence

of God is associated with a place where access to the presence can be controlled for money by a professional priesthood. The first martyr of the kingdom of God was killed for declaring that

...we are not Muslims with their Mecca, Mormons with their temple in Utah, Hindus with the Ganges River or Jews with their wailing wall. We are followers of Jesus who... indwells each one of us and makes us his temple.

“God no longer dwells in temples made with hands.” With that declaration the temple priests saw their positions of power and privilege made redundant and they reacted

murderously. We do not go to any physical place to find God but declare that he reveals himself to all men by the Holy Spirit and thus access to his presence cannot be purchased or controlled.

And finally, if you wish to walk where Jesus walked, simply continue what you are doing in serving the least and the last. Jesus

walked among the broken, the outcasts, the “unclean” and lepers. We serve this same Jesus, who declared that whatever we have done unto the least, we have done unto him.

Serving Jesus is not about going to Israel and having a life-changing experience. Your life has already changed in the only way

that really matters—you have been taken from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his love. This is about changing the lives of the people around you. You are doing that. Keep walking with Jesus where you are. The kingdom context is simple and often costly obedience for the benefit of others.

My friend agreed with my counsel, bought back his motorcycle, redeemed his wife’s wedding band and continues to walk where Jesus walked. □

While pursuing his degree in Philosophy and English, Steven Hill’s journey began sitting on the floor talking with students about Jesus. Steve has been on a thirty-year journey through many expressions of ministry.



GREG ALBRECHT

Q I attend a church that defines itself as Conservative, Evangelical, Bible-believing and Christian. At times I feel that anything that might be said about reaching out to the poor falls on deaf ears mainly because, being conservative, the vast majority of folks feel that those in need are just taking advantage of the taxpayers. I've been wrestling with this dichotomy and can't get a handle on it. They say they believe what is taught in the Bible and then choose to support political platforms that contradict so much of what Christianity stands for. Can you help me understand what I'm supposed to believe?

A Concern for the poor and impoverished is at the heart and core of Jesus' teaching, but the specifics as to how Christ-followers might realistically respond, with the proverbial "boots on the ground," to the physical needs of so many around this world is somewhat of a dilemma. A few thoughts:

As Christ-followers, we will, as he lives his risen life in us, respond as he did and does to the hungry and the poor. In and through Jesus, the grace of God will cause our hearts to be moved and our souls to be vexed with suffering of all kinds.

As Christ-followers, we will be confounded and even outraged by excuses that are offered by

those who are privileged as to why they don't seem to desire to react and help to the needs of the poor and impoverished. As Christ-followers we will be, I believe, sickened when such empty justifications come from houses of worship.

You appear amazed, as you observe some of your peers "believe what is taught in the Bible and then choose to support political platforms that contradict so much of what Christianity stands for." So we must ask, "Do they actually believe all that is taught in the Bible, particularly the gospel of Jesus Christ, or do they pick and choose those things that agree with their own political views?"

Politics and Christ-followers do not make good bed-fellows. The book of Revelation confirms, over and over again, that when some form of organized "religion" gets into bed with a civil government or movement, the people of faith are the ones who are invariably corrupted and besmirched.

Politics and Christ-followers do not make good bed-fellows... the people of faith are the ones who are invariably corrupted and besmirched.

Of course, pious disinterest in suffering, in the name of religion and political polarity, is horrific. But the solution is not in another political party or platform. History provides plenty of examples that will testify to the truth of that assertion.

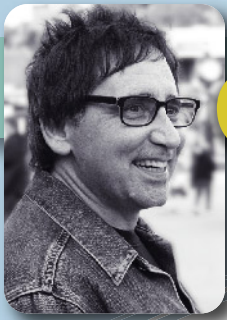
It would seem clear that we still have the poor with us, in spite of all kinds of government programs over many centuries,

within a wide variety of cultures, eras and epochs. We might argue that some programs were better than others, but at the end of the day we will have to admit that no human enterprise has solved the problem of the poor and the impoverished.

That said, the reality of the pervasive problem of the poor and the impoverished (no doubt part of what Jesus meant when he said "the poor you will always have with you..." (Matthew 26:11)) should not cause us to become hardened to what we might individually do and how we might personally help. At the same time, I believe we will also realize that we cannot solve the problem, for there are many forces at work that are beyond our grasp and control that will continue to produce poverty.

We, as Christ-followers, follow him—and when our fellows who also seem to be a part of the body of Christ on earth differ so dramatically with us (as

you described) then we follow Jesus, not men. When there is a difference of opinion, we follow Jesus rather than/instead of our church or our denomination or our political party. The kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom—it is a kingdom that is not overwhelmingly popular in political or religious circles—never has been. That is a stark reality we must all internalize as we follow our Savior. □



CWRm

BRIAN ZAHND

AXIS OF LOVE

Just How Does “Dying for Our Sins” Work?

When we say, “Jesus died for our sins,” what do we mean? It’s an essential confession of Christian faith, but how does it work? This much I’m sure of, it’s not reducible to just one thing. To reduce the death of Jesus to those tidy explanations known as “atonement theories” is an impoverished approach to the mystery of the cross.

Most of them are inadequate; others are repellent, particularly theories that portray the Father as a pagan deity who can only be placated by the barbarism of child sacrifice.

*The god who is mollified by throwing a virgin into a volcano or by nailing his son to a tree is **not** the Abba of Jesus!*

When we confess that “Christ died for our sins,” we **don’t** mean that God required the vicious murder of his Son in order to forgive. How would that work anyway?

Did God have some scale of torture that once met would “satisfy his wrath?” Was death alone not enough to satisfy this god? Did death by crucifixion have to be part of the equation? Was there a minimum number of lashes required in the scourging or thorns in the crown for this god to call the scales “balanced?”

Are you squirming yet? Do you want to say, “Well, some of the abuse Jesus suffered was gratuitous torture by the hands of cruel men.” But if that’s the case, how does this **division of labor** work? How much was necessary to “satisfy God” and how much was just for the sport of it? No, this approach to the cross clearly won’t work.

So what do we do? Let’s begin here: Before the cross is anything else, it is a catastrophe. It is the unjust lynching of an innocent man. This is how the Apostles preached the crucifixion in Acts.

“This Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men”(Acts 2:23, my emphasis).

“**You killed** the author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:15, my emphasis).

The Bible is clear, God did not kill Jesus. Jesus was offered as a sacrifice in that the Father was willing to send his Son into our sinful system in order to expose it as utterly sinful and provide us with another way.

But it was not a sacrifice to appease a wrathful deity or to provide payment for a penultimate god subordinate to Justice.

When we say Jesus died for our sins, we mean this: *We violently sinned our sins into Jesus, and Jesus revealed the heart of God by forgiving us.* When Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them,” he was not asking God to act contrary to his nature. Rather, he was, as always, revealing the very heart of God!

At the cross Jesus absorbed our sins, died because of them, carried them into death, and rose on the third day to speak the first words of the new world: “*Peace be with you.*”


When I say “we” violently sinned our sins into Jesus, I mean that we are all more or less implicated by our explicit or tacit support of the systems of violent power that frame our world. These very political and religious systems executed Jesus.

At the cross we see where Adam and Eve’s penchant for **blame** and Cain’s capacity for **killing** have led us—to the murder of God! At Golgotha human sin is seen as utterly sinful. God did not require the death of Jesus—but *we did!*

So the cross is not about the appeasement of a monster god. It is the revelation of a merciful God. At the cross we discover a God who would rather die than kill his enemies—where God in Christ absorbs sin and recycles it into forgiveness. **The cross is not what God inflicts upon Christ in order to forgive—**it is what God endures in Christ as he forgives. When we look at the cross, we see the lengths to which a God of love will go in forgiving sin.

The cross is both ugly and beautiful. It’s as ugly as human sin and as beautiful as divine love. *But in the end, love and beauty win.* □

—Brian Zahnd



BY GREG ALBRECHT

“...he does not
treat us as our
sins deserve or
repay us
according to
our iniquities.”
—Psalm 103:10

DESERVE'S GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH IT

Justice—the kind that satisfies human sensibilities—was served in the little frontier town of Big Whiskey. In *Unforgiven*, awarded the Oscar for Best Picture of 1992, Big Whiskey was ruled over by the sadistic sheriff Little Bill Daggett, played by Gene Hackman. Clint Eastwood, who both directed and starred in the

[Jesus] came to the final showdown and accepted, received and absorbed all the hatred and violence a furious and hate-filled humanity, fueled and goaded by religion, could dish out. He came to clean up every town by the ultimate demonstration of love.

movie, played the character of Will Munny, a retired gunslinger who determined to avenge a prostitute whose face had been ruthlessly slashed.

True to the genre of Western movies, and true to humanly satisfying eye-for-an-eye retributive justice, Eastwood cleaned up Big Whiskey by meeting force with superior force. *Unforgiven* satisfied movie goers because violence and death “by the sword” was visited on those who had lived “by the sword.”

The murderous rampage of Will Munny, as he purged Big

Whiskey of its sins, was terminated with a showdown in the saloon with Little Bill Daggett. Lying at the feet of Munny, bleeding out from gunshot wounds, and somehow oblivious to the mayhem he had caused in countless lives, Little Bill looks up and complains, “I don’t deserve this.” Will Munny, the avenging angel of *Unforgiven* replies, “*Deserve’s got nothing to do with it.*”

Long before Big Whiskey, another town was the setting for a radically different solution for corruption and oppression. Jerusalem, the religious center of the world, according to observant Jews, was hosting Passover. Among other things, Passover was the story of God’s dramatic rescue of Israel, achieved by the shock and awe of plagues visited on the nation of Egypt that held the Israelites in bondage. Passover remembered that God ended the “Egypt problem” with a devastating military conquest, obliterating the

armies of Pharaoh in the Red Sea. Thus Passover celebrated the superior force of God overcoming the hatred and animosity of the enemies of Israel. Passover came to be understood as an example of the justice of God.

But the Answer walked into Jerusalem, the heart and soul of religion, with a revolutionary new way of justice. In Jerusalem the military forces of the armies of Rome joined forces with the religion of Judaism to put an end (or so they thought) to the revolutionary message of Jesus, who threatened the status quo by preaching love and peace. They thought, as humans have always thought, that killing Jesus would end his message. But that didn’t work, did it?

Time stood still on that day in Jerusalem when Jesus became the once-and-for-all Answer to injustice and tyranny. In a mysterious, majestic and momentous purging of sin, Jesus won the victory by refusing to fight back. The revolution/Answer is peace achieved through his acceptance and absorption of evil and violence.

This fundamental lesson of Easter is often lost on those who throng churches clad in their Easter best. Many

“church-going,” “God-fearing” folks believe that peace and reconciliation can only be achieved when a good guy with a white hat and the fastest draw cleans up the town. Many surface celebrations of Easter completely miss the point of its mystery and miracle.

Jesus did not arrive in Jerusalem to gun down the Romans and restore the nation of Israel. *Deserve had nothing to do with it.* Jesus wasn’t a brash gunslinger with the fastest gun. He came to Jerusalem to willingly die, as the Lamb of God.

When it came to the final high-noon showdown, Jesus cleaned up the town by refusing to draw. He came to the final showdown and

accepted, received and absorbed all the hatred and violence a furious and hate-filled humanity, fueled and goaded by religion, could dish out. He came to clean up every town by the ultimate demonstration of love. He

Jesus does not demand that we deserve his love by forgiving the unforgivable. *Deserve’s got nothing to do with it.*

{That’s} the good news of Easter...

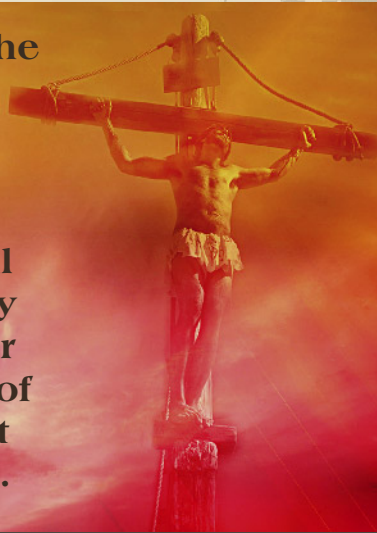
didn’t come to Jerusalem with punitive or retributive justice, but with reconciliation and love. *Deserve had nothing to do with it.*

Jesus didn’t solve the problem of pain, suffering and abuse by beating up on the bad guys. He solved the problem of injustice by ingesting, receiving and assimilating all human hostility and hatred. For Jesus, the end of

violence is not more violence. When Jesus was being beaten he said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus defeated death by walking into the midst of it, giving his life by meeting anger and hatred head on. He rose victoriously from the cross, and offers you and me

Jesus...solved the problem of injustice by ingesting, receiving and assimilating all human hostility and hatred. For Jesus, the end of violence is not more violence.



that same victory. The incredibly good news of the resurrection is that Jesus has gone to the ends of the earth to do what needs to be done so that his peace and justice may reign. We may receive the reconciliation Jesus

accomplished on his cross, but we can never earn or deserve it. Sadly, this victory is often devalued/diminished by Christ-less religion as it explains the love of God and his acceptance as a do-it-yourself project.

Jesus “marched into hell for a heavenly cause” but, ironically, religion has consigned him to a nose-bleed seat in the grandstand of our lives. Jesus

came to be one of us, which means that he came to be with us and live within us during the life-and-death battles we face in our lives.

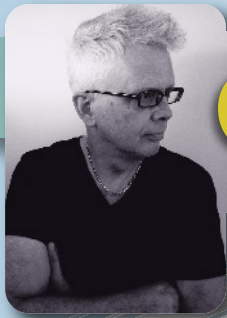
Jesus is our risen Lord—not just when we hunt for eggs or enjoy an Easter lunch, but he is our risen Lord 24/7—in our homes, factories, offices, saloons, prisons, hospitals, court houses and yes, even in our churches!

Jesus is God with us, not from a distance, but up close and personal. Jesus lives with us and in us, jointly inhabiting the foxholes and trenches of our lives. He is risen!

The message of Easter does not challenge us to do the impossible: Jesus does not ask us to deserve victory over our problems,

because *deserve’s got nothing to do with it.* Jesus does not demand that we find him and experience his peace of mind and justice by climbing the highest mountain and fording every stream. The mountains are taller and the streams deeper than our human resources and abilities.

Jesus does not demand that we deserve his love by forgiving the unforgivable. *Deserve’s got nothing to do with it.* Jesus invites us to yield to his overtures of love, admitting our own vulnerability and spiritual incompetency, and as we do he will live in and with us, enabling us to deal with the traumas and pain of our lives. The message of Easter is that Jesus Christ can do what we can never do. The good news of Easter is that *deserve’s got nothing to do with it.* □



CWR_m

DAVID HAYWARD

THE NAKED PASTOR

Up Against Religion

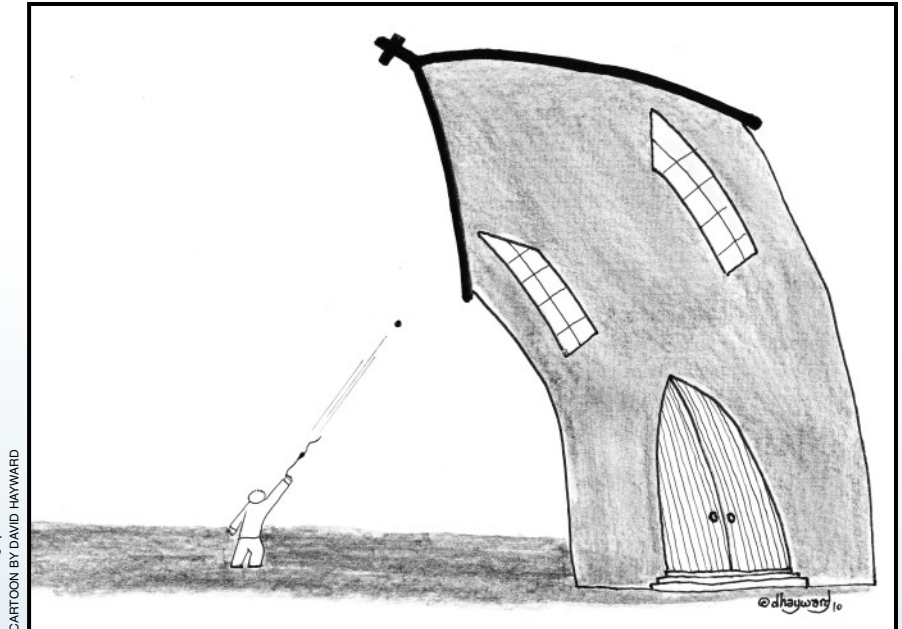
Yeah, sometimes this is how I feel. Little David with a pebble up against an ancient giant!

You know, that church building represents religion, and I meet plenty of negative religion outside of church walls as well. In fact, some of the most ferociously religious people I've met have been outside the church.

The kind of religion I'm up against is the kind that taunts and degrades people, attempts to control them, manipulates them and shames them, that limits rational thought, critical thinking and intellectual integrity, that demands blind adoration of empty leadership and unquestioning subservience.

That's the kind of religion that needs to come down! I'm still trying to find the perfect pebble perfectly placed. □

—David Hayward



CARTOON BY DAVID HAYWARD

C W R V I D E O M A G A Z I N E

ANNOUNCING

THE FIRST ISSUE OF OUR ONLINE VIDEO MAGAZINE

Circle the date on your calendar! On March 15 *Christianity Without the Religion* will introduce another electronic ministry — CWRv. You won't want to miss the seasonally relevant, thought-provoking, informative and encouraging insights offered by our guests.

www.ptm.org/cwrvideo

CWR_{video}

MAGAZINE

God Lets His Children Tell the Story



by Peter Enns

(not academic), but World War 2 got in the way. He was in the war, but I didn't dare let on that he did not fight for our side. He was born in Russia, was captured by the Germans, and was forced to be a German-Russian translator (and therefore a German soldier). He also hated guns, since his community in Russia was pacifist Mennonite. But he won a turkey shoot

My seminary Hebrew professor, former colleague, and friend, Al Groves, who is of blessed memory, was a wonderful, honest, and pastoral man. When dealing with the theological difficulties that arise in the course of reading the Bible, Al would say, "God lets his children tell the story."

That is a great way of putting it. The Bible is what happens when God allows his children to tell his story—which means the biblical writers told the story from their point of view, with their limitations, within the cultural context in which they wrote.

When children tell the story of their father or mother, parents are typically delighted by how much they get and the childlike way that they see the world. But they are also well aware that children miss a lot when they tell the story, and invariably refract the complexities of family life through their own youthful vision.

It's not a perfect analogy, I know, but roll with it: think of how young boys talk in the schoolyard about how great their father is. There are ways of telling the story to make sure everyone knows they have the best dad around.

I remember telling my middle school mates that my father was an engineer who left a promising academic career before coming to America. He

...God allows his children to tell his story—which means the biblical writers told the story from their point of view, with their limitations, within the cultural context in which they wrote.

also knew a lot about guns, since he was in World War 2, and killed bad guys left and right.

That story was genuinely connected to my real father, but honor was at stake. How I told the story was dictated, unwittingly, by rules of the schoolyard.

My father was a blue-collar machinist (not engineer) who wanted to be a school teacher

when I was young, a fact I exaggerated and incorporated into my narrative.

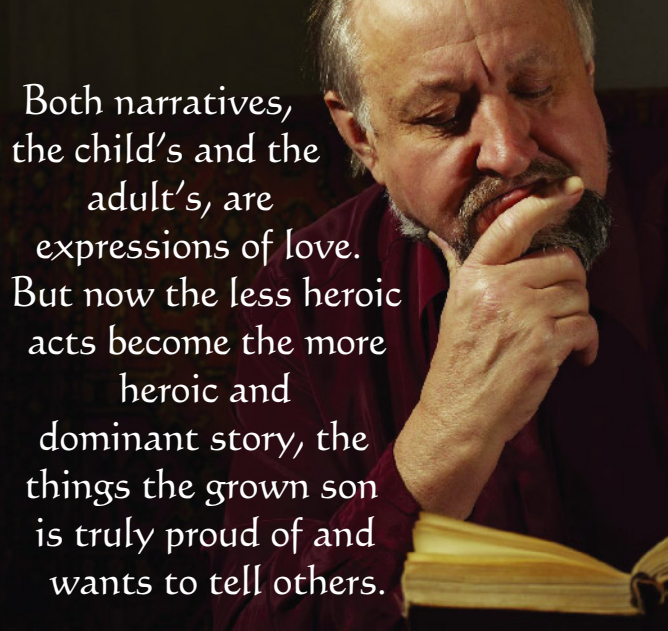
But I never mentioned the many things my father did that were also heroic but not quite as exciting—like coming to all my Little League games, working long hours to make sure we kept a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs, and cars to get around in even though money was very tight.

Had I talked like that, it would have fallen on deaf ears.

When God lets his children tell the story, the way that story is told is deeply and thoroughly influenced by the "rules of the schoolyard."

In the case of the Old Testament that means ancient tribal societies that valued in their people and in their gods such things as taking land, "vanquishing"

Both narratives,
the child's and the
adult's, are
expressions of love.
But now the less heroic
acts become the more
heroic and
dominant story, the
things the grown son
is truly proud of and
wants to tell others.



(i.e., killing or enslaving) their
foes, and generally bragging
about who has the best gods
and the best kings.

That is how people thought,
and this "rule" is stamped all
over the Old Testament. This is
a way of understanding why
the Bible behaves the way that
it does. It bears the marks of
the limitations of its cultures.

land acquisition and killing
and enslaving enemies is no
longer part of God's narrative.

It's like a boy who grows up
to be an adult, gets a job, and
has a family of his own.
Now ask him to tell his father's
story. The son's life experiences
have brought him to a deeper
knowledge and appreciation of
his father's experiences, and
the story will reflect that.

Bear in mind
this is only an
analogy, but if we
want to extend this
to the New
Testament, we can
think of the
teachings of Jesus
as a more "mature"
telling of God's
story. Jesus tells the
story in a way that
is more in line with
who God is ("you
have heard it said,
but I say to you...").
Such things as

Now he will talk about seeing
his father get up at the crack of
dawn to trudge off to work,
come home late in smelly and
filthy machinist clothes, and
then on the weekends build his
son a fort, or renovate the
basement, or sometimes just
crash on the couch.

Both narratives, the child's
and the adult's, are expressions
of love. But now the less heroic
acts become the more heroic
and dominant story, the things
the grown son is truly proud of
and wants to tell others. And
this story reflects the real thing
more closely, with greater
three-dimensional depth. □

*Dr. Peter Enns is on the faculty
at Eastern University teaching
courses in Old and New
Testaments. He is a blogger on
www.patheos.com and authored
books such as The Evolution of
Adam and The Bible and the
Believer.*



Will the real
"Word of
God"
*please
stand up!*



Jesus alone is the infallible Word of God (John 1:1).

During our CWR/PTM 2015 "Year of the Bible" we will study and examine the Bible (the lower-case word of God) from a Christ-centered (the upper-case Word of God) perspective. The *word* of God is inspired by the *Word* of God. But by God's divine plan, humans have been profoundly involved in writing, editing, translating, preserving and publishing the Bible. Touched by human hands, the Bible cannot be seen as infallible or inerrant. Jesus alone, the Word of God, is infallible and inerrant. Stay tuned during our "Year of the Bible" for Christ-centered perspective, teaching and insight.



Massacres in the Name of

by Monte
Wolverton

RELIGION

It had been some twenty years since I visited France, so when I was invited to the 33rd annual St. Just le Martel Cartoon Festival, I had to find a way to go. St. Just le Martel is a village east of Limoges, about four hours south of Paris by train. I traveled with four other American editorial cartoonists, plus spouses and significant others. Every year the village hosts hundreds of cartoonists, most from France, many from around the world. The entire town volunteers, with a sense of community that I have rarely seen elsewhere. A troop of chefs (French, of course) prepare amazing meals, served in a big tent by the village teenagers (with astonishingly cheerful, cooperative attitudes).

Many residents house cartoonists in their homes. My friend Steve Sack was hosted by one such retired couple, Irene

and Michele. We spent hours in their living room one day, enjoying a delicious lunch and eroding the language barrier with a translation app on my iPhone.

The next day Michele asked if some of the Americans would like to visit the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, where, in 1944, a company of German Waffen SS had massacred 642 inhabitants, because they had allegedly captured an SS officer. SS soldiers rounded up the residents, shot and burned the men, and burned the women and children alive in a church. Later, the SS discovered they had the wrong village. The grim details of this event can be found on the Internet at Wikipedia. Today, the preserved ruins of the village cover many acres, including a cemetery, an interpretive center and an underground memorial where the names of victims are etched in granite. Personal effects are displayed in glass cases.

This was a neck-wrenching change from the high spirits of the cartoon festival. We walked the abandoned streets of the village in a daze. Crumbling buildings still display signs for dentists, bakeries, cafés and grocery stores. Burned-out hulks of 1930s and 40s cars sit exactly where they had in 1944. In the church, the rusty steel frame of a baby buggy melts into the stone floor.

My first thought was—*how could God allow this to happen?* Of course this was only a tiny sample of the atrocities and suffering that took place in World War II—and atrocities that continue today all around the world. My second thought was—*what were the men of the Waffen SS thinking and feeling as they shot and incinerated the villagers?*

SS soldiers were indoctrinated to believe that they were an elite corps, making the world better by cleansing it of what



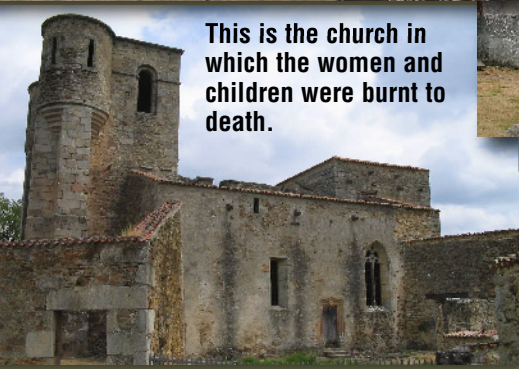
Georges Wolinski was one of the cartoonists murdered in the Charlie Hebdo massacre. I was honored to meet him in St. Just le Martel, France this last October.

they saw as evil. They were steeped in violence—trained to kill with no regard for their victims whatsoever. Emotions of love and kindness were seen as weakness.

Lost on most people,



Classes of girls and boys from schools in Oradour, all were killed by the SS.



This is the church in which the women and children were burnt to death.

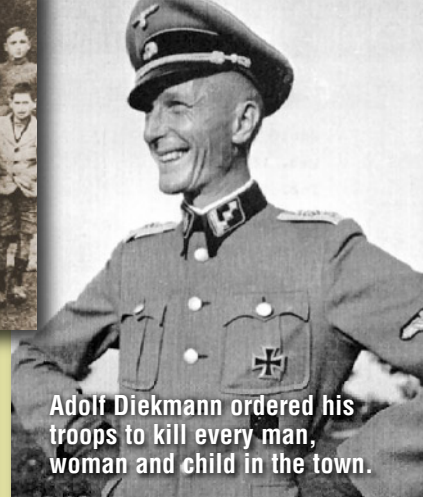


interpreted clearly through the lens of Christ.

Of the 200 SS troops responsible for the Oradour Massacre, only 65 remained alive at the end of the war. Bringing them to trial and to justice was complicated by political and legal issues. None of these men ever received the civil retribution due them in this life.

Seventy-one years after the Oradour atrocity, in January of this year, France experienced another massacre—fueled by religion. This time the victims were some of the same cartoonists I had met at the St. Just le Martel Cartoon Festival. Like many of us at the Festival, those who were murdered by Islamist terrorists at the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices just a few weeks ago were editorial cartoonists—political satirists who take the risk of confronting human power in its various forms.

That power often needs to be pointedly questioned, a task that could not be accomplished without the freedom of speech that we take for granted in the Western world. Accordingly, Charlie Hebdo has specialized in poking fun, not only at politics, but at religion—even institutional Christianity. My



Adolf Diekmann ordered his troops to kill every man, woman and child in the town.

colleague Georges Wolinski (pictured), a victim of the massacre, did not draw tame cartoons. His satire was risqué, caustic and often offensive as he held the feet of politicians and religionists to the fire.

Whichever brand it wears, religion takes itself very seriously and has little or no tolerance for mockery or satire. In this case, Islamists were filled with offense and hatred to the point of a brutal mass murder.

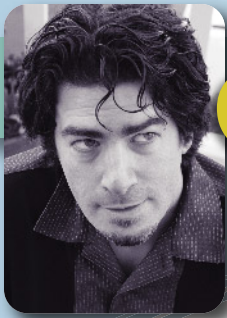
While institutional Christianity, given its bloody history, can point no fingers, there is an important distinction with authentic Christianity—unlike religion, it is prepared to accept offenses, contempt and mockery—or much worse—as a part of following Christ.

Further, authentic Christians will realize that the perpetrators of both the Oradour and Charlie Hebdo massacres have already faced the God in whom they professed belief and about whose mercy they were so clueless. My hope is that they have reconciled with him and with their victims. □

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

IN THE MINDS OF THESE MERCILESSLY OBEDIENT SS MEN, THEY WERE DOING THE RIGHT THING, JUST AS THEY HAD LEARNED FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT—CLEANSING THE WORLD OF EVIL.

PHOTOS: LOWER LEFT BY DENNIS NILSSON; BOTTOM CENTER BY TWO WINGS; CLASS PHOTO OF GIRLS AND BOYS FROM SCHOOLS IN ORADOUR; CLASS PHOTO OF BOYS—US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM



CWRm

DEREK FLOOD

THE REBEL GOD

Why the Cross Matters

We need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of Jesus in order to properly understand it the way the New Testament does. In fact, we need to take all of what we read and bring it to the cross in order to understand it correctly.

This can be clearly seen in how the cross shapes our understanding of who God's true Messiah is. Peter, along with the majority of his fellow Jews at the time, had expected the Messiah to be a warrior king who would lead Israel to conquer the gentiles by the sword, just as Joshua had done for Israel when it entered the promised land. Their hopes of having a just world free from oppression were tied up in this being brought about through violence and bloodshed in the name of God, freedom, and justice.

It is an ethos that is alive and well today as well, but it was decidedly not the way of Jesus. Jesus did not come to kill the gentiles and sinners, he came to reconcile and save them, and he did not plan on bringing about this "deliverance" by military conquest, but by giving his life on a cross.

This was an idea that was so completely foreign to Peter that when he heard it, he exclaimed to Jesus "never Lord!" Peter says this immediately after he has declared that Jesus is the Messiah. But the two go hand in hand. Peter's idea of the Messiah, based on what he saw in the OT was one of a war lord who redeems through violent force. But Jesus says to him "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:23). I'm sure you've heard many sermons on the first part of that sentence, but I want to highlight the last part: *you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men*. Jesus thinks that Peter's understanding of the Messiah (an understanding that the majority of biblical scholars would agree is solidly founded on the Old Testament texts) does not represent God's way but man's. Along with Peter **we need to**

completely redefine everything the OT says about the Messiah in the light of the cross.

We need to take the Old Testament texts to the cross and see how they are transformed by it. Take for example the story of David and Goliath. There we have the tale of how the little guy overcomes the giant. But notice that the little guy still overcomes that giant by killing him.

What we need to ask is how this story is like the cross, and how it is not. What in this story points us to the cross, and what in this story needs to die. In Jesus we have the story as well of the little "mustard seed" of the kingdom accomplishing big things, and we have the picture of Jesus overcoming and fighting evil, but the enemy is not other people, it is evil and death itself.

It is crucial that we apply the cross to all of what we read in the Bible. This will often necessarily mean deliberately subverting the intended meaning of a passage in the Old Testament—reading it in a way that may appear to be, as Paul says, "a stumbling block" and "foolishness" to some. The theology of the cross carries with it exactly such radical consequences. It means not only our dying, but also the crucifixion of destructive religion itself. This is precisely why the religious leaders of his time wanted Jesus killed.

If we do not learn how to bring the cross into our exegesis and let it shape how we interpret Scripture, we will likely end up like Peter misreading the Bible and promoting "the way of man not God." This is exactly what Paul did before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He had read Scripture and saw that the way to defend God was through violent zeal, and he exercised that zeal, that violence in the name of God, in persecuting the church. But after he met the crucified Lord, he read those same Scriptures and saw a completely different narrative. So he proclaims boldly "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). □

—Derek Flood



MORE THAN A MAGAZINE

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ONGOING WORK OF PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

www.ptm.org

SPECIAL 2014 YEAR-END REPORT:

"I just felt overwhelmingly inspired to thank you, once again for all you and the staff at PTM do and accomplish in the work of PTM/CWR. You have no idea how much your ministry has transformed my life... I pray with every fiber of my being that God continues to bless PTM with all his riches."—New York

CWR/PTM brings Christ-centered peace and comfort to those in desperate need. By God's grace, in 2014, PTM helped many escape the wrong-headed teaching of an angry, vengeful god, ready to send those who displease him to an ever-burning hell. Through this ongoing ministry many realize that God is not mad at them! *More than ever, the world is full of anger, fear and violence*—much of it produced by Christ-less religion. But our heavenly Father is neither the author of performance-based religion nor the guilt and shame it produces. At CWR/PTM, our work and your support is validated when we receive letters like this:

Christianity Without the Religion audio Bringing hope and peace of mind to thousands each week

Every week, thousands know they can count on the teaching ministry of Greg Albrecht for inspiration, hope and encouragement. Greg is a missionary to religious refugees and spiritual prisoners. Whether broadcast on radio stations, online or via CDs, CWRa is available around the world!



Your monthly letters are so uplifting, inspirational and eye-opening, and you continue to enlarge our understanding and appreciation for God's "economy of grace." The work God is doing through CWR/PTM counts with me as it enriches the lives of so many of the world's spiritually hungry. You have effectively pointed out that CWR/PTM needs our support—I am delighted to give mine. Ohio

YOU ARE HELPING TO BRING THIS MESSAGE OF JOY, HOPE AND FREEDOM TO UNTOLD THOUSANDS!

When God uses PTM to help open someone's eyes—to bring profound joy to someone who has lived life in fear and anxiety—he's using your support and contributions to make a lasting difference.

The comments below tell what your support means to people whose lives have changed, as God has used PTM/CWR to open their eyes to his amazing grace.

God has blessed me so much through CWR/PTM. I have been so heartbroken and depressed. I have no family at all. I sit at home alone watching the news. I didn't know where to turn. So I prayed and then you sent me the study of the Psalms in the mail at just the right time. God knew the right food I really needed, and he made sure I got it. That I truly believe with all my heart. I love to study the magazines and materials you publish so much. Thank you and may God bless everyone at CWR/PTM! Tennessee

I grew up in a legalistic, controlling church. My life has been a mess. I thank God for every message you bring me. I am blessed beyond measure. I count myself among the richest on earth because of the relationship I have through Jesus. This significance to me is astounding and humbling. God carried me to this point and now I want nothing more than to take his hand and walk. Thank you so much! Iowa

Thank you so much for your monthly letters. I pass them and your other literature along to my daughter and her husband. I have to tell you again how much these letters mean to me—they always bring tears of joy to my eyes and pure joy to my heart. To know and experience the true love of God is what keeps this old heart beating and a smile on my face. I love PTM! Oregon

I belong to the Hindu religion but I am interested to learn about other religions. I came to know many things about Jesus Christ when I visited your website. I found so much I did not know about Jesus before. I just knew Jesus as a prophet. **Pakistan**

Thank you for helping liberate me from the shackles and bondage of religious legalism. I thank the entire PTM family for helping to spiritually support and care for me through www.ptm.org. **Nigeria**

Thanks to a patient I have just discovered your ministry. Your website is filled with incredible resources. I deeply appreciate your emphasis and the quality of the materials you make available. Thank you! **Hospital Chaplain, California**

Because I live in England, all of my contact with you is via your website. But you know, I don't feel left out in the least. You provide so much on your website, and of course I should not just thank you, but for those who financially enable you to keep this ministry and all of its resources available. It's so good to be a part of CWR/PTM. **England**

Newsmakers of 2014

PTM collaborates with many other grace-based ministries, pastors and teachers—a network of Christ-centered people and organizations. Here are just a few of the people with whom PTM has been privileged to work in 2014. When you support PTM, you are helping us to proclaim the gospel of God's amazing grace!



Monte Wolverton

In 2014 *Plain Truth* associate editor, author and syndicated cartoon artist Monte Wolverton released his first novel, *Chasing 120: A Story of Food, Faith, Fraud and the Pursuit of Longevity*. This suspenseful, entertaining read portrays a company called Wellness 120, which advertises health supplements that 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. Things seem to be going smoothly until...the plot thickens! Monte's story, reflecting many of his life experiences, speaks to the shattered dreams of so many who have experienced their house of pseudo-religious cards falling around them.



Derek Flood

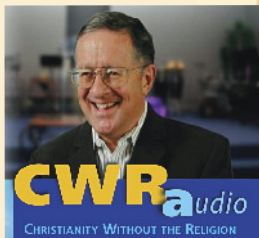
By now many of our readers will be familiar with the work of author and internet blogger Derek Flood. In the Fall 2013 *PT*, we published his article, "The More I Follow Jesus...the Less I Like His Teaching," and in the Summer 2014 *PT* we reprinted an excerpt from his book, *Healing the Gospel*, titled "When Did the Good News Become Bad News?"

Beginning this Spring, Derek will write a regular column for *CWRm* (*Christianity Without the Religion* magazine), titled "The Rebel God." Derek will be one of three new *CWRm* columnists, including Brian Zahnd and David Hayward, as well as a new *CWRm* column written by *Plain Truth* senior editor Brad Jersak.



Brian Zahnd

In the Summer 2014 issue of *The Plain Truth* we published Brian's article, "When America Went to Hell." We also reprinted an excerpt of Brian's book, *Radical Forgiveness*, titled "Getting Beyond Us Vs. Them" in the Fall *PT*. We are pleased to announce Brian as yet another new columnist for *CWRm*, with his column "Axis of Love."



CWRa and CWRb

In 2014 we expanded radio coverage of *CWRa* (*Christianity Without the Religion* audio weekly teaching ministry) to seven radio stations across the U.S. We also expanded the reach of PTM/CWR on the Internet with *CWRb* (*Christianity Without the Religion* blog), hosted by senior editor Brad Jersak.



David Hayward

The third of a new trio of *CWRm* columnists. David's art, along with his wit and wisdom, will be enjoyed by our readers beginning in 2015 with the column "The Naked Pastor."

Plain Truth Ministries brings hope and encouragement to thousands burdened by legalistic religion—and YOUR FAITHFUL SUPPORT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

In 2015, look for—

- ▶ "A More Christlike God" by Brad Jersak, published by PTM.
- ▶ PTM's continuing commitment to faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.
- ▶ MANY changed lives as CWR/PTM continues to minister to the least, the lost and the last.

PTM is your ministry! We rely solely on the support of our individual Friends and Partners to keep bringing hope to untold thousands of hurting people. We have no big corporate or institutional sponsors—it's up to you and others like you! So if you've been helped—help others with a gift to PTM! Your prayers and regular financial support help bring the comfort and healing of the gospel.

Thank you to our faithful and dedicated CWR/PTM Partners!

Whitney Houston

Was She...

or Wasn't She?

by JOHN FARMER

self-disclosure of one of the ladies at that Bible Study. She confided that she had drifted away from God to such a point she felt that if she had

died suddenly she would have forfeited her salvation.

My wife countered with the fact you couldn't lose your salvation because once you become a child of God your eternal relationship with him can't be undone or terminated simply because you are, at that particular moment, experiencing a "season of the flesh."

This Christ-centered assertion, on my wives' part,

Christian? Was she "saved" as that term is often used? Was she...or wasn't she? Many who felt she was no longer a Christian at the time of her death pointed to the many questions surrounding her passing from this world to the next—the supermarket tabloid exposés, all the drinking and drug abuse and the bizarre behavior even

THIS SCENARIO [HAS] BEEN PLAYED OUT COUNTLESS TIMES. —FAMILY AND LOVED ONES WORRY WHETHER SOMEONE WHO DIES WAS REALLY "SAVED" EVEN THOUGH THEIR BEHAVIOR DIDN'T REALLY SEEM TO MATCH UP WITH THEIR FAITH.

I was sitting at an intersection waiting for the light to turn green. Through my open window I heard the speakers on a nearby vehicle blast out the familiar lyrics: *And I- I, will always love you-u -I, will always lo-ve you... I will always love you!* Of course, the angelic voice was none other than the beautiful and talented late Whitney Houston.

Whitney had recently died (February 11, 2012) and the radio station was playing many of her hits.

A Question for All Time

Not long afterwards, I became aware of an in-house debate among some Christians: Was Whitney Houston a "real"

hours before her death.

Then, one evening after my wife returned from her Ladies Bible Study, she informed me of the heated discussion about Whitney Houston that captivated the group that night.

The discussion my wife had with her group centered on the

was greeted with mixed emotions. Some said that as long as you "keep short accounts" with God and regularly confess your sin you will be pleasing to God, but if you go too long with unconfessed sin in your life you just might cross a line where there's no coming back.

CAN A PERSON BELIEVE IN AND TRUST JESUS YET STILL BE ENSLAVED TO WHAT THE BIBLE CALLS “SIN THAT SO EASILY ENTANGLES”?

All of a sudden one of them fired out the question, “Well then, do you think Whitney Houston was saved?” To which my wife’s response was, “I don’t know. Only God knows. Only he knows the heart of anyone.”

This scenario and the questions that surround it have been played out countless times—family and loved ones worry whether someone was really “saved” at the time of their death even though their behavior didn’t seem to match up with their faith.

The new covenant declares,

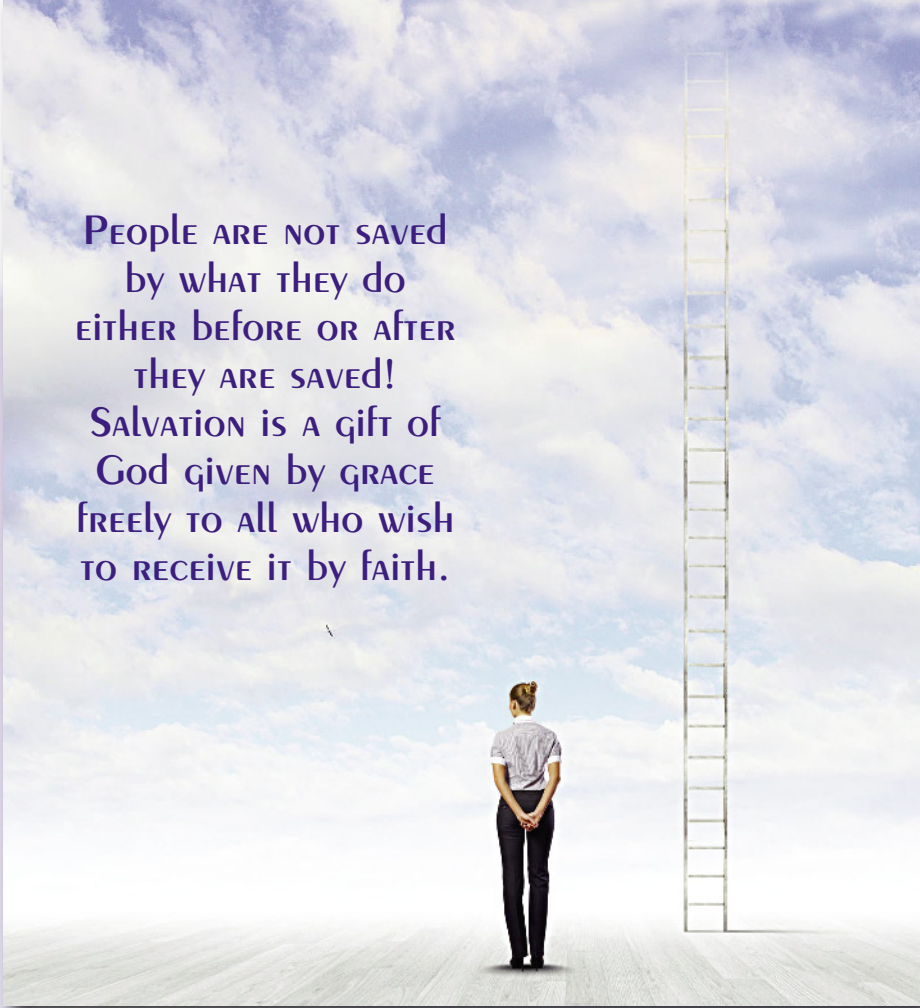
I KNOW BECAUSE I’VE BEEN THERE. A SLAVE, AN ADDICT TO A LIFESTYLE OF DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE FOR MANY YEARS, ALL THE WHILE A PROFESSING BELIEVER IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST! IMPOSSIBLE? No.

“by grace you have been saved through faith...it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). People are not saved by what they do either before or after they are saved! Salvation is a gift of God given by grace freely to all who wish to receive it by faith. Even the faith to believe and receive it comes by way of hearing the message about what Jesus has already done (Romans 5:1-2; 10:17).

But, can a person be truly, genuinely “saved” yet, at the

same time, not be “set free” from a sinful lifestyle by the truth? Can a person believe in and trust Jesus yet still be enslaved to what the Bible calls

death and declaring himself to be the Light of the world and giver of “the light of life” (John 8:12) Jesus once again grappled with those legalistic Pharisees



**PEOPLE ARE NOT SAVED
by WHAT THEY DO
EITHER BEFORE OR AFTER
THEY ARE SAVED!
SALVATION IS A GIFT OF
God GIVEN BY GRACE
FREELY TO ALL WHO WISH
TO RECEIVE IT BY FAITH.**

I OFTEN THOUGHT IF THE SUBSTANCE ABUSE DIDN’T KILL ME FIRST THE HYPOCRISY CERTAINLY WOULD HAVE. BUT MY TRUE IDENTITY WAS AND IS A “SON WHO ABIDES FOREVER,” EVEN THOUGH I SUFFERED IN BONDAGE AS A SLAVE TO MY ADDICTIONS TO SIN.

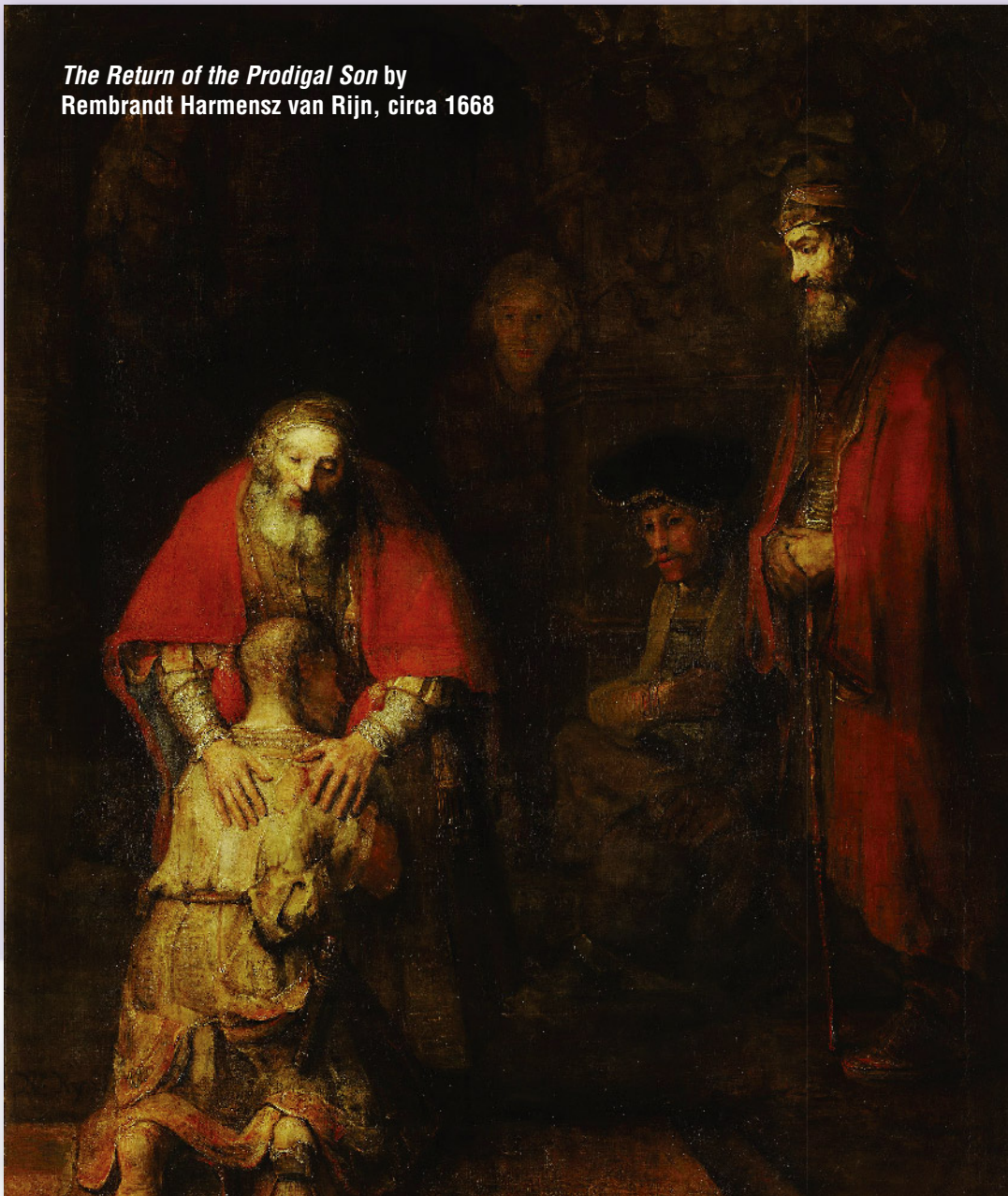
“sin that so easily entangles”?

The Truth Shall Make You Free

In the 8th chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus talked about being set free from sin by the truth he was teaching. Background: After saving a woman caught in adultery from being stoned to

who carefully tithed tiny spices but missed the big picture (Matthew 23:24). He told them, after foiling their plan of entrapment with the adulteress, “You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true” (John 8:15-16).

The Return of the Prodigal Son by
Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, circa 1668



HE LOVES YOU AS HE DOES THE PRODIGAL SON WHO'S JUST RETURNED HOME—HE LOVES YOU AS HE DOES THE SON WHO NEVER LEFT.

Then Jesus told them three times in verses 21-24 if they didn't believe he was the expected One, the Messiah they had been waiting for, they would in no uncertain terms "die in their sins." To which they replied, "Who *are* you?" (vs. 25).

Now, I find it interesting that not only was the adulterous woman on trial, the validity of

Jesus' own *identity* was also in question here ("Who *are* you?"). Verse 30 says that many believed in Him. Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and *the truth shall make you free.*"

Those who absolutely opposed Jesus responded, "We

are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, you will be made free?" Jesus answered them, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if **the Son** makes *you free*, *you shall be free indeed* (John 8:30-36 emphasis mine).

It's true that our spiritual condition can become so lax that we can get to a place Jesus called "lukewarm" and not realize we are actually "wretched, poor, miserable, blind and naked" (Revelation 3:15-16). I know because I've been there. A slave, an addict to a lifestyle of drug and alcohol abuse for many years, all the while a professing believer in the Lord Jesus Christ!

Impossible? No.
Incongruous?
Absolutely!

I often thought if the substance abuse didn't kill me first the hypocrisy certainly would have. But my **true identity** in the family was and is a "son who belongs to it forever," even though I suffered in bondage as a slave to my addictions to sin.

Jesus is the Truth personified who has been nailed to a wooden, bloodied cross,

coupled with an overwhelming grace that says to the believer in Christ, "I love you, my son or daughter, **in spite** of any sin that may be ruining your life at this moment."

You may have failed miserably for the "umpteenth" time, despite your diligent efforts to overcome, and subsequently say to yourself "That's it! I've crossed the line. I've gone too far. God's got to be finished with me now!" And believe me I've been there. I know the guilt and I've felt the condemnation.

But Paul tells us, "Therefore, there is *now* no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). So, just because you're feeling condemned and hypocritical at the moment doesn't mean God sees you that way. He looks past and beyond what you and I see.

"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height.... The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'" (1 Samuel 16:7).

How do we humanly "see"? "You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right..." (John 8:15-16).

Why is the Lord's judgment right and ours flawed much of the time? Because Jesus doesn't judge or condemn anyone based on outward appearances, but as God revealed to Samuel "the Lord looks at the heart." That's how Jesus could forgive the woman "caught in the act of adultery" and dispel her accusers—not because she or they were innocent of sin, but

**WHEN WE TRUST IN WHAT AND WHO WE KNOW TO BE TRUE,
THEN WE KNOW THE TRUTH THAT SHALL MAKE US FREE.**



**WHEN YOU ACCEPT
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CAN EVER SEPARATE
YOU FROM HIM
AGAIN.**

because he was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Paul says, "You have been given fullness in Christ" (Colossians 2:10). When God looks at you and me, what he sees is the complete fullness of Jesus himself—one-hundred percent perfection.

There is no guilt here, there is no shame. No pointing fingers, there is no blame.

What happened yesterday, has disappeared. The dirt is washed away, And now it's clear—

There's only grace, there's only love. There's only mercy and believe me, it's enough!

Your sins are gone, without a trace. And there's nothing left now, there's only grace!

—Matthew West, *Only Grace*

When you accept the grace of God and embrace Jesus, nothing can ever separate you from him again. "You have been given fullness in Christ"

and filled with the fullness of God himself.

He loves you as he does the prodigal son who's just returned home—he loves you as he does the son who never left. We are called believers for a reason. As Christ-followers we believe in what we cannot see and what we cannot see is what we know by faith. When we trust in what and Who we know to be true, then we know the Truth that shall make us free.

So was Whitney Houston "saved" when she died? Was she...or wasn't she? I would like to think she was—what about you? □

John Farmer has served the Body of Christ as a pastor and worship leader. He has an overwhelming desire to connect people to the true grace of God, by helping them recognize their identity in Christ via the finished work of the cross. John lives in Southern California with his wife of 26 years, Mitzie.

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Yesterday, Today and Forever “Flood waters can’t drown love, torrents of rain can’t put it out. Love can’t be bought, love can’t be sold—it’s not to be found in the marketplace” (Song of Solomon 8:7, *The Message*). Week of March 1.

“Jesus Is Here—Not Over There!” On our annual Day of Prayer for Religious Captives we examine far-fetched attempts made by some religious professionals and the institutions they represent, in a vain attempt to own Jesus. Week of March 8.

Love or War—Peace or Fear? Many believe that the opposite of love is hate, but fear is the real opposing force, for it drives and motivates hatred and war and everything that stands against Jesus Christ. Week of March 15.

Crucified Identities “How are you?” is a common greeting. Even when the person who says those words really wants to know *how* we are, and while *how* we are is important for the here-and-now, *who* we are is critically important on this and the other side of eternity. Week of March 22.

Two Parades On Palm Sunday we consider Pilate, riding a high-spirited war horse into town to enforce the rule of law. Jesus rode into town on a borrowed donkey as the personification of the kingdom of grace. Week of March 29.

Everything for Nothing Escape the misery of a life governed by *something for something*. Join us on Easter, and embrace our risen Lord, and his invitation to receive *everything for nothing*. He is risen! Week of April 5.

The Power of Touch In Christ, God not only touched our world, he came to be part of it, becoming one of us. Jesus Christ longs to touch our hearts and souls with his life transforming touch. No one is considered untouchable by Jesus. Week of April 12.

These Little Ones Jesus insists the greatest in the kingdom of heaven are those who are regarded as least in the kingdoms of our world. Week of April 19.

Embezzling, Insider Trading and Grace What does a sordid and sleazy story of naked lust and greed—of shameless and unrestrained desire—have to do with God’s amazing grace? Week of April 26.

Eating and Drinking Religious professionals accused Jesus and his disciples of “eating and drinking.” Why did they take exception with Jesus, who was often involved in banquets and parties, enjoying life? Week of May 3.

“Here Is Your Mother” Celebrate Mother’s Day in the context of the love and admiration Jesus had for his mother. Week of May 10.

Last Words The last words of Jesus on his cross are a condensed sermon-like summary of his gospel. Week of May 17.

You Are Unsnatchable! We consider the bold, audacious words of Jesus as he said, “No one will snatch them (his sheep) out of my hand.” Week of May 24.

Married to Jesus Being one *in* and *with* Jesus is not a quick-fix relationship; it’s a long-term commitment. Week of May 31.