

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

inside

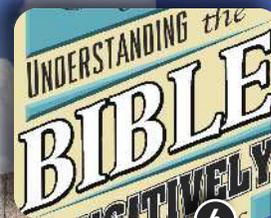
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6 to the revelation of the empty tomb?

The briefest of the Gospels, Mark is action-packed, featuring the word “immediately” at least forty times! In chapter one we read, “And *immediately*, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove” (1:10 NKJV). “*Immediately* the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness” (1:12). “When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and

THE GOSPEL OF MARK IS A POWERFUL EXAMPLE OF CHRIST-CENTERED PREACHING, DESIGNED TO IGNITE A FAITH-ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN LORD.

John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets. And *immediately* He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and

Continued on page 3

GATEWAY

to the

GOSPELS

MARK

by Brad Jersak

In approaching the four Gospels of the New Testament, we must ask not only what they say, but also how they function. Of course, they serve as authorized biographies of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But they also come to us with greater purposes than relaying history. We call the Gospel authors “the Evangelists” because they sought to announce the mind-blowing good news of God’s love expressed in Jesus. Such news would arouse faith in those

who first heard it and enable those who responded to grow in grace as followers of Christ.

The Gospel of Mark is a powerful example of Christ-centered preaching, designed to ignite a faith-encounter with the risen Lord. In fact, some scholars suggest that Mark’s Gospel was originally read dramatically for audiences.¹ Perhaps Mark himself presented it in theatres around the empire—its abrupt ending at verse 16:8 in early manuscripts may have been a rhetorical challenge to the audiences: how will *you* respond



Everything for Nothing

All *Jesus, All the Time* is my new column for this new format edition of *The Plain Truth*. *All Jesus, All the Time* will offer a brief excerpt of a soon-to-be aired sermon at CWRa (*Christianity Without the Religion* audio). Here's a highlight from our Easter sermon, April 5, 2015:

He had served 19 years hard time, and now he had just been released on parole. As he looked for work and a place to lay his weary head, he discovered that no one wanted to take the risk of giving a paroled convict a second chance.

As a last resort, he took refuge next to a church, and the bishop welcomed the ex-convict named Valjean for a hot meal and a bed with clean sheets.

You may remember this scene from the beginning of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (French for "the wretched/miserable ones").

The meal was served with a silver service. Valjean couldn't keep his eyes off that silver, which was worth a fortune and could help him get off to a good start.

Early the next morning Valjean woke up before anyone else did. He took some of the silver, stuffed it into his knapsack and ran away.

Before Valjean even had a chance to sell the silver and make some money, the police apprehended him red handed, and they took him back to the bishop.

The police asked the bishop if he knew Valjean and if the silverware belonged to the church. The bishop responded, "Of course, Valjean was my guest here last night and I gave him the silver."

And then, making eye contact with Valjean, the bishop says, "Did

you forget that I gave you the candlesticks as well? You must have forgotten to take them."

Valjean was shocked and speechless by this unbelievable, miraculous turn of events.

Up until now the story of his life had always been the result of *something being received in return for something*. Hearing what the bishop said, the police were also mystified. They had no choice but to release Valjean, because the bishop was not willing to identify him as a thief and press charges.

After the police were gone, the bishop explained to the bewildered,

The old order of things...ends at the cross of Christ. We might say that Christ-less religion itself was crucified on the cross.

paroled convict, Valjean, that he had just experienced God's grace. Valjean tried to steal the treasures of silver—but his best efforts to get wealth and resources ended with his arrest.

Then the bishop gave the priceless silver to Valjean, but the spiritual gift he gave was far beyond the material wealth Valjean would realize from selling the silver.

In the name of Jesus, the bishop passed on the grace of God to a condemned, desperate paroled prisoner—in the name of Jesus Valjean received **Everything for Nothing**.

In this early scene of *Les Miserables* Victor Hugo paints an amazing portrait of God's grace. It was Valjean's introduction to the kingdom of God.

The economy of the kingdom of

God is based on something other than receiving a reward or a punishment for our efforts—the kingdom of God is based on something called grace.

In the kingdoms of our world, when we do well, we receive rewards—and when we fail to meet acceptable standards we are punished.

Valjean knew about punishment (*something for something*)—he had done 19 years hard time. Up until now he knew nothing about **everything for nothing**.

When it comes to the kingdom of God, *real life*—life of the age to come—begins only when the *something for something* concept is crucified.

You see, the kingdom of God is based on grace, and that means that *in God's kingdom something is given in return for nothing*. But, in fact, it's not just something for nothing, it really is: **Everything for Nothing**.

The grace of God—the kingdom of God appears to us at the empty tomb. Here, at the empty tomb of Jesus, new life in Christ—the risen life of Christ—begins.

The old order of things—the religious idea of being rewarded and punished—ends at the cross of Christ. We might say that **Christ-less religion itself was crucified on the cross**. Jesus Christ, in this ultimate demonstration of the love of God, saved you and me from the authority, the demands, regulations and manipulation of religion!

God's grace is the central and unifying power behind Easter because grace is all about new beginnings and fresh starts. □

—Greg Albrecht

Continued from page 1

went after Him” (1:19-20). Mark is not just expressing how busy Jesus was, but that he promptly followed the leading of his Father throughout his ministry.

Who Wrote Mark? And Who’s Behind It?

Mark the Evangelist may be the same person as John Mark, the assistant of Paul and cousin to Barnabas, mentioned throughout Acts² and in three of Paul’s letters.³ But tradition associates the Gospel writer directly

...IN THE VERY FIRST VERSE... HE CALLS JESUS “THE SON OF GOD”...IN THE ROME OF MARK’S DAY, THAT TITLE WAS RESERVED FOR THE EMPEROR ALONE... MARK BOLDLY PROCLAIMS THE THEME OF HIS BOOK, “JESUS ALONE IS EMPEROR! JESUS ALONE GETS OUR WORSHIP!”

with the apostle Peter, who seems to be the primary voice behind the book. Papias, an early 2nd century bishop says:

“This also the presbyter [John] said: Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord’s discourses.”⁴

If Peter is behind Mark, this truly is a glorious testimony on two accounts. First, at the time Mark was written, Peter was one of the most powerful men in all of Christendom. And yet, at the very top of his game, he shares intimate details about his failings and immaturity, including confessions

of the time Jesus rebuked him as the voice of Satan (8:33), and of the flailing sword incident in Gethsemane (Mark 14:47) and of course, the three denials of Jesus (14:66-72). In a manner that foreshadows Augustine’s *Confessions* three centuries later, we see the humility of someone who’s reputation is founded in God’s grace, not his own greatness.

The second striking note about

Peter’s place in Mark’s Gospel is the great contrast to the apostle’s attitude to suffering in his epistles. In Mark, we find Peter absolutely opposed to suffering, especially of his Messiah. When Jesus predicts his coming death, “Peter took the Lord aside and began to rebuke him” (8:32). How different the tune we hear in Peter’s first epistle after witnessing the death and resurrection of Jesus:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:12-13).

When and for Whom?

Mark likely wrote his Gospel first (in the late fifties/early sixties). Matthew and Luke both use it as a primary source.

Indeed, only three percent of Mark is not found in either of their Gospels! We believe Mark was first targeting Roman audiences, since he takes time to translate Aramaic words and explain unfamiliar Jewish customs. He also uses Latin expressions⁵ and time designations.⁶



A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels

When you open the book containing the Gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the Gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.”

—Martin Luther, 1521

The most remarkable of these Latin features appears in the very first verse, where he calls Jesus “the Son of God.” That seems normal to Christians today, but in the Rome of Mark’s day, that title was reserved for the emperor alone, who demanded worship from all his subjects. Mark boldly proclaims the theme of his book, “Jesus alone is emperor! Jesus alone gets our worship! Jesus alone is the Son of God!” Might I suggest that message is just as relevant today, in the face of every competing empire, including our own? Jesus, and only Jesus, is Lord! □

1. For a discussion on this, see Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2001) 2-3.

2. Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13-14; 15:37-40.

3. Philemon 1:24; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11.

5. From Eusebius, *Church History*, 34.15. <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.viii.xxix.html>>.

5. Mark 5:9; 6:27; 12:14, 42; 15:16,39.

6. Mark 6:48; 13:35.

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CWRvideo
MAGAZINE

Announcing: The First Issue of Our Online Video Magazine—March 15

www.ptm.org/cwrvideo

The Bible reveals that God has given two primary covenants: **the old covenant, which is some 3500 years old, was given to Moses.**

1) The old covenant was a conditional covenant. The old covenant was physical and temporary.

2) God said to Israel, “if you will do and follow and obey the terms of this physical covenant, then I will bless you. If you don’t—then I won’t.

3) The old covenant was a conditional covenant based on human performance—it was a covenant that promised blessings because of obedience to human attempts to faithfully obey.

4) The old covenant was based on laws, commandments, regulations and stipulations with the intent of producing human righteousness.

5) The old covenant was given to a nation—to an ethnic group—and to no one else—it’s an exclusive covenant.

The 2,000-year-old new(er) covenant is radically different than its distant, older cousin.

1) The new covenant is an unconditional love story based on relationship. The new covenant is spiritual and eternal.

2) The new covenant is a will and a testament that promises an eternal inheritance to

those who accept God’s offer, by grace, to be his adopted children, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

3) The new covenant in Christ is given in spite of human performance—it’s given on the basis of God’s goodness, not human attempts to be good.

4) The new covenant is based on new life in Christ, which, as he lives his risen life in those who accept the new covenant, produces obedience to his commandment—to love one another as he loved (and loves) us. The new covenant in Christ produces the very righteousness of God.

5) The new covenant is given to all humanity, regardless of race, creed or origin—it’s an inclusive covenant.

Here are two passages in the book of Colossians which help form the biblical foundation for the new covenant in Christ.

Colossians 1:12-14: *“...giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”*

When we accept the grace of the new covenant we

The new covenant is a will and a testament that promises an eternal inheritance to those who accept God’s offer, by grace, to be his adopted children...

The NEW Covenant

PART 1

BY GREG ALBRECHT

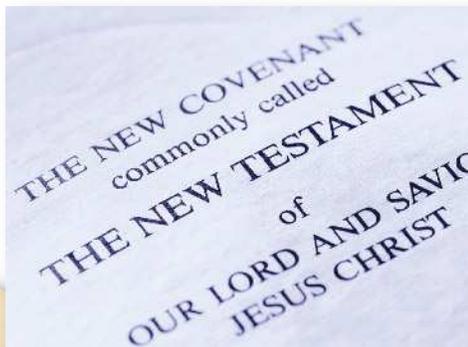
walk “with” the light. We trust the Light of Jesus, and walk with him, just as much as we trust the same instruction at an intersection. You’ve been at an intersection, waiting for the light, haven’t you? You wait for the flashing light which instructs pedestrians “walk with light.”

When that light appears at an intersection, we walk in faith—most of the time, that is. It always pays in our human world to make sure the cars really will stop for you—but the presumption is that when our light flashes “walk with light” then the cars that would otherwise collide with us stop for us.

Jesus is the **Light** of the world—he takes us out of the spiritual darkness of pain, heartache, shame and guilt—he delivers us from spiritual bondage just as he delivered the nation of Israel from physical bondage. The New Covenant is a covenant in Christ—whereby we walk in him, with him, and he with us.

Apart from Christ, we are not qualified to successfully produce a life of virtue and goodness, as we walk through the intersections and “powers of this dark world” (Ephesians 6:12), that are rife with sin, evil and corruption.

Out of his love, and by his grace, God has, in and through Christ,



qualified us (see Colossians 1:12) to receive the inheritance of the kingdom of light. The promise he makes to us about this eternal inheritance is called the new covenant—the new covenant in Christ.

Colossians 2:6-10, 13-17: *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.... When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of the legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink,*

or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. They are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”

Because of the new covenant in Christ, we are **free from** inanimate, dead efforts to produce human righteousness based on devoted, unswerving obedience to human regulations for dynamic, new life in Christ. We are **free from** the bondage of a conditional covenant, **free for** life in Christ, which Paul calls, in Galatians 5:1, freedom in Christ.

This passage in the second chapter of Colossians teaches us that the old covenant was but a shadow, and that eternal, spiritual reality rests in Christ.

The shadow of the old covenant and the reality of the new covenant is often explained in terms of a lifeless photograph—the photograph being the old covenant—a shadow—while the vibrant subject of the photograph is the risen, living Jesus Christ.

I have photos of my wife, children and grandchildren in my office. My wife and I have photographs of our family and grandchildren decorating the walls of our home.

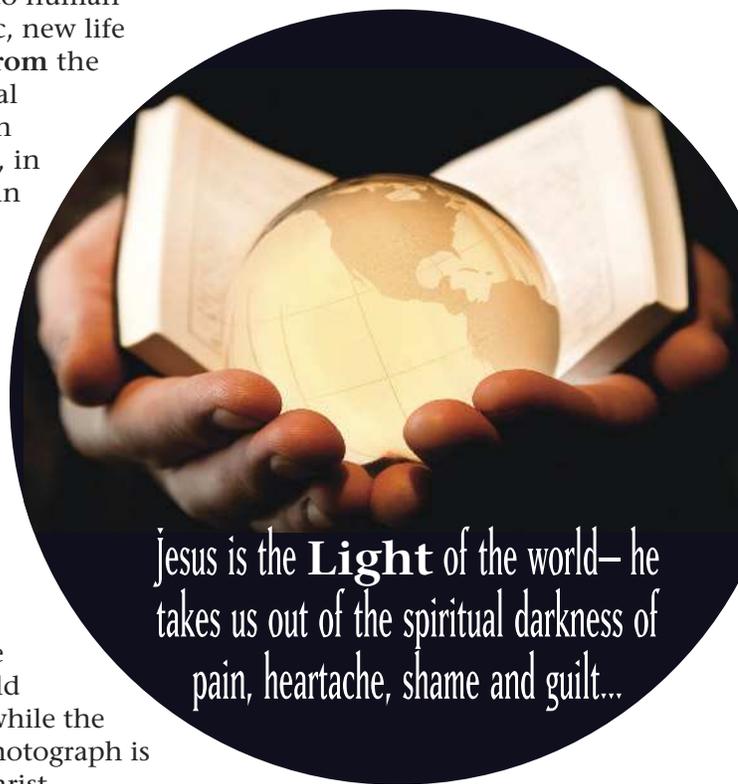
Do you suppose that if my wife and I are invited to spend time with our family and our grandchildren, we would just say “No thanks, we’ll just stay here at home and look at the photographs on the wall?”

We might conclude that at best the old covenant provides a glimpse of the new covenant, but the lens of its “camera” is

limited to a forensic, legalistic focus. After all, photographs are inert images that reduce the energy and essence of a subject into an object.

In this passage in the second chapter of Colossians, note the **emphasis on Jesus Christ**.

In vs. 6 we read “**you received Christ Jesus as Lord.**”



Jesus is the **Light** of the world— he takes us out of the spiritual darkness of pain, heartache, shame and guilt...

In verse 7 we read that we are “rooted and built up **in him.**”

In verses 8, 9 and 10 we read that once we accept the grace of God and his invitation to his kingdom we are “**...in Christ.**”

In verse 13 we read that **Jesus Christ** has forgiven us and in verse 14 that he’s taken away the debt of our sins.

In verse 15 Paul tells us that **Christ** made a “public spectacle” of any power or authority that claims any authority or control over us.

In verse 17 we are told that “the reality is found **in Christ.**”

We have two more chapters to share with you as we describe the glorious new covenant we are given in and through Jesus Christ, by God’s grace. The second “chapter” in this three-part series will appear in the May/June 2015 issue of *Plain Truth*. **Stay tuned!** □



Searching for More? Dig Deeper With...Thought-Provoking, Inspiring Christ-Centered Reading

- *Chasing 120—A Story of Food, Faith, Fraud and the Pursuit of Longevity**—Monte Wolverton
- *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It*—Peter Enns
- *Mere Christianity*—C.S. Lewis
- *Jerusalem, Jerusalem*—James Carroll
- *Parade of Faith*—Ruth Tucker

AND DON'T FORGET!

- *Bad News Religion**—Greg Albrecht

*Available from CWRm/Plain Truth Ministries—while supplies last—www.ptm.org

2015 is our CWR/PTM
Year of the Bible.

In this March /April issue we offer the first in a four-part series—with each edition in this special feature appearing in consecutive issues until our final installment in our September/October 2015 issue. Of course, digital versions of all these installments will be available on our website at www.ptm.org. We have no plans nor budget allocated to print a hardcopy compilation of all four installments.

PART ONE OF FOUR

What Is the Bible?

The Bible is a tool that can be used to illuminate, teach and inspire us [the created] about God [our Creator]. The Bible is a divine gift that helps us, the fallible and mortal, look into the infallible and eternal God. The divine teaching and inspiration revealed in this book necessitates that God stoops into our world of human language. By definition, God must condescend himself, as our heavenly Father using “baby-talk” to communicate with and to us. **The Bible is somewhat like a window** through which we may gaze and come to know more of our loving heavenly Father. The object of our worship is not the window. The window itself is flawed and imperfect, with smudges, streaks and hairline cracks, but it is nonetheless a tool through which the divine Light might enter our lives.

As baby-talk, it is written not for its absolute and “holy” literary integrity, but rather to convey meaning and significance to you and me, given our limitations.

Is the Bible the Word of God?

Many within Christendom speak of the Bible as the “Word of God.” However, **Jesus alone is the Word of God**. He alone is infallible and inerrant. The Bible is a book, divinely inspired, but it is a divine-human product—for God has used humans to author, transmit, translate, copy and publish the Bible. It is a window with smudges and streaks. It is baby-

Reading and UNDERSTANDING the BIBLE SENSITIVELY and SENSIBLY

talk that condescends to our limited abilities of understanding.

The Bible is not the Word of God, but the Bible helps illuminate the one and only Word of God, whose name is Jesus (John 1:1). The message of the Bible is inspired by God, but the book itself, composed of individual words, printed in ink on paper, is not infallible or inerrant.

Many within Christendom have the habit of speaking of the Bible as “holy” (Bible publishers define and embellish the Bible as “holy” on its cover) but God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) alone is holy. All else is impure and less than holy.

Remember: God knowingly and purposefully used humans in the production of the book we call the Bible.

Is the Bible Inspired?

Paul told Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). However, some turn Paul’s comments in this passage into a circular argument: A) Scripture is God-breathed (“inspired” in some translations) so therefore Scripture is infallible and without error, and B) Scripture is infallible and without error so therefore Scripture is God-breathed! No matter which supposition comes first, then, in the minds of those who believe the Bible to be inerrant and infallible, the other follows.

The manner of “inspiration” assumed by many fundamentalists is that God caused human authors of the Bible to fall into a trance so that their fingers moved, apart from their created capacity for critical thinking. Thus God (say the dictation theory folks) bypassed the human mind, thinking and culture.

Other fundamentalist theories of “inspiration” may not be as radical, but they all assume the *breath of God* to be without error, and somehow it transcends the fallible human authors and their own imperfections.

There is a huge debate about what the Bible means by saying that it is inspired by God, but we should remember that God *breathed* life into Adam, and Adam was far from perfect.

For fundamentalists, the next supposition in their view of the “inspiration of the Bible” follows closely on the heels of this circular argument: because God breathed the Bible and therefore it is without error all biblical passages are literally true.

Given this mindset, any interpretation of the Bible which is not “literal” is deemed to be inadequate. No interpretation of the Bible is necessary or desired because it must all be understood literally.

The Bible is inspired, but God inspired human authors, and he used those human authors, warts and all, to record a message and a story. **The Bible did not drop out of heaven—it was written by people**. God could have, of course, bypassed humanity and parachuted the Bible out of heaven, but he did not. As a divine-human document of paper and ink, the Bible is not holy nor is it inerrant or infallible. It is inspired in that God inspired the central teaching and focus of the Bible—and his name is Jesus. Jesus, the theme of the Bible, is inspired. Jesus is infallible and without error, he is the Word of God. □

—Greg Albrecht



Seeking the Kingdom?

There's an old story about some kids who, as a practical joke, slipped into a department store and changed all the prices. The next day, some of the customers were overjoyed with the bargains, while others were shocked by the grossly overpriced items.

Oscar Wilde once suggested that people know the price of everything but the value of nothing.

Do you know why? Because everybody tells us the price and, in doing so, thinks they've defined the value.

The voices are everywhere and those voices are passionate. They come from the politicians, the preachers, the authors, the con artists and the "sellers of the trinkets," and they seem so sure.

Then they remind us that we "only go around once," so we have to get it right the first time.

I'm old—old as dirt—and over the years I've listened to so many of those voices. It took me a long time to have an "attack of sanity" and to realize that those voices didn't know any more than I knew. And I found out that most of them were wrong. Late at night, an old man knows that sometimes he, as Mark Twain put it "paid too much for his whistle."

I have a preacher friend who resigned from his church after serving there for only two years. He had been offered a very large church and more money...to say nothing of the prestige. Most preachers would have said something about how they had agonized over the decision and God had made it clear; so as painful

as it was to leave, they must "follow Jesus."

Not my friend. He said to the congregation, "I love you guys but I've been offered _____ Church. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and all my life I've wanted to be the pastor of _____ Church. I'm not going to get another chance so I'm out of here. Do pray for me and I will pray for you."

The question isn't the authenticity of what my friend said to his congregation, but whether or not

What if seeking the kingdom of God is about spending time with friends and family...instead of going on the "mission field"? What if God doesn't require greatness of you... but just faithfulness in the "normal" of life?

he made a wise decision. At the time, I thought he was both authentic and wise. Now that I think back on it, I still think he was authentic but he may not have been very wise.

He served that big church for a lot of years and, I suppose, enjoyed some of it. I suspect, though, he sometimes thought about the church he left and wondered if maybe his decision had been wrong.

Do you grow tired of being challenged to "make your life count"?

Do you grow tired of those who admonish you to "change the world" or "make an impact for God"?

Do you wince at the calls for excellence?

Do you feel guilty after some very godly people say they want to "burn out" for God?

I do.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for excellence, success and making an impact for God (not to mention motherhood, apple pie and the flag).

The problem isn't that those things are bad. The problem is that they aren't necessarily the places where God is calling us.

What if seeking the kingdom is about spending time with friends and family?

What if seeking the kingdom of God is about taking your wife to dinner, or playing ball with your son or dancing with your daughter instead of going on the "mission field"?

What if God doesn't require greatness of you...but just faithfulness in the "normal" of life?

In his book, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, Henri Nouwen wrote:

"I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self.... The leaders of the future will be those who dare to claim their irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation."

The "irrelevant" part is hard, but it is also the path toward incredible freedom and joy. It is about Jesus—once we see that, we discover it's about us, too. He asked me to remind you! □

—Steve Brown



Quotes & Connections



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"If in the last few years you haven't discarded a major opinion or acquired a new one, check your pulse, you may be dead."—Frank Gelett Burgess (1866-1951)

"Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."—Blaise Pascal

"One of the dangers and inherent deceptions of institutionalized religion is the presumption of innocence afforded it by the masses. Evil outside of a church building is more obvious than that which is disguised within a 'holy' environment and ambience."—Greg Albrecht

"One hundred religious persons knit into a unity by careful organization do not constitute a church any more than eleven dead men make a football team."—A.W. Tozer

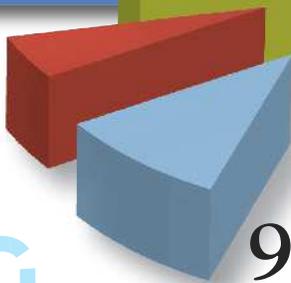
"Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst."—C.S. Lewis



Did You Know?

Responses given by a wide variety of people to the question: **If Jesus suddenly came back to earth today, would he approve or disapprove of modern Christianity?**

4%
Don't know



87%
Jesus would disapprove

9% Jesus would approve



Five Life Lessons from Noah's Ark:

- 1) Don't miss the boat.
- 2) Remember: we are all in the same boat.
- 3) Plan ahead: it wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.
- 4) No matter how big the storm, God always provides a rainbow at the end.
- 5) The ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals.