

# Christianity Today

SEPTEMBER 2013

## Slumdog Saints

Worldwide  
860 million  
people  
live in places  
like this.

A few  
Christians  
choose to live  
among them.\*



\* Kent Annan  
walks with  
the new urban  
missionaries.

Page 24

CHRISTIAN BEARD WARS 11  
STOP THINKING SO HARD 71  
THE OTHER NYC CHRISTIANS 38



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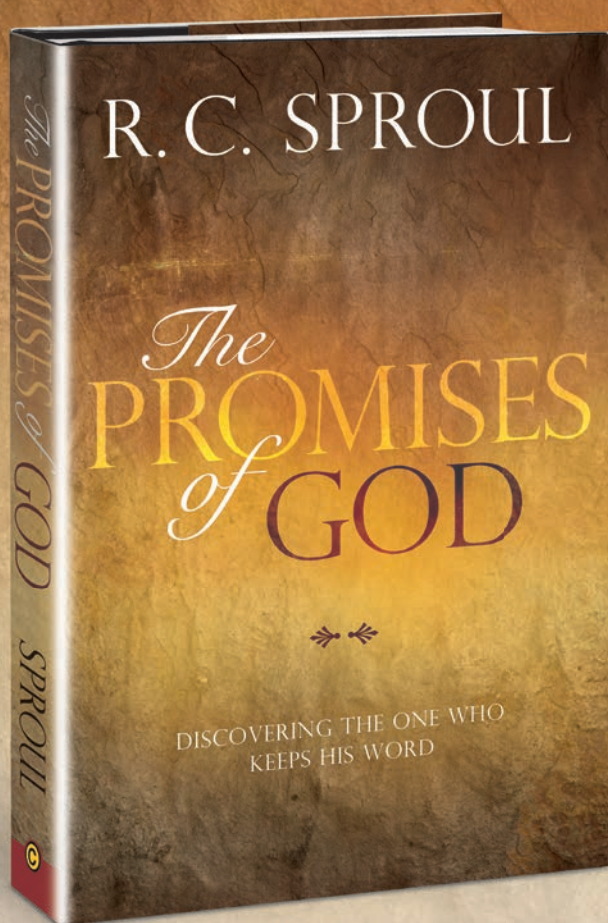


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14

## BRIEFING

11 **Spotlight** The Christian Beard Wars12 **Gleanings**14 **Headlines**

- Why America's Christian colleges are pursuing Chinese students.
- Counting the cost (accurately) of Christian martyrdoms.
- Pastors blame kids' sports for decline in church attendance.
- **IN DEPTH** Christians traffic in hope in ravaged Honduras.

## VIEWPOINTS

63 **Readers Write**65 **Where We Stand** Hungry for Outrage66 **The Village Green** Amy Julia Becker, Matthew Lee Anderson, and Laurette Willis discuss whether schools should bend the rules for yoga.69 **Wrestling with Angels** Carolyn Arends gives thanks for divine food.71 **Mud Alive** N. D. Wilson tells us to stop thinking and start looking.

## CT REVIEW

75 **Books**

- Matthew Lee Anderson's *The End of Our Exploring*
- Rachel Marie Stone: My Top 5 on the Body
- Kevin DeYoung's *Crazy Busy*
- Interview: N. T. Wright makes *The Case for the Psalms*

80 **Film**

- James Ault's *African Christianity Rising* chronicles faith in Zimbabwe and Ghana.

## IN EVERY ISSUE

88 **Testimony**

Everett Worthington's hike to the Living Water.



24

## FEATURES

24 **Chaos and Grace in the Slums of the Earth**

**KENT ANNAN** My Easter weekend with missionaries who follow Christ to the uttermost.

Global Gospel Project

34 **God's Word in Two Words**

**TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN** All that we need to understand the power of the gospel.

38 **Christ in the Capital of the World**

**MARK R. GORNIK AND MARIA LIU WONG** How global Christians are revitalizing NYC far beyond Manhattan.

44 **The Boroughs' Believers**

**CHRISTY TENNANT KRISPIN AND ROXANNE WIEMAN** Five Christians blessing their city of 8.3 million.

46 **Why We Need Small Towns**

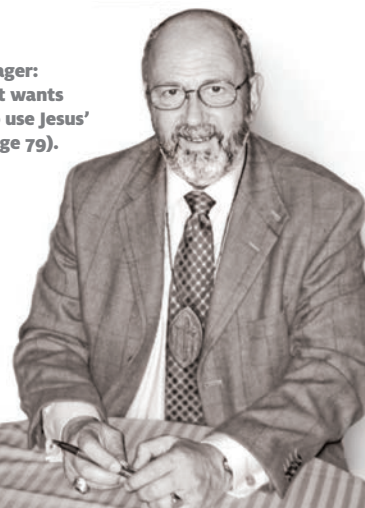
**JAKE MEADOR** How they correct our supersized spirituality.

52 **Prodigal Love**

**KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR** As we watch family and friends leave the faith, are we more like the elder brother, the father—or the younger son?



**Psalm Salvager:**  
N. T. Wright wants  
churches to use Jesus'  
hymnal (page 79).







## Join Our Story

**A**s Christians who are journalists, we tell two kinds of truth. As journalists, we are bound to tell the truth about the world, and the church, as they really are. Our job is to follow the truth wherever it leads us—including the times when what we learn about our faith, our churches, or ourselves is hard to hear.

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But you will also read about the ways the church participates, with all her flaws, in a kingdom that will never pass away, in spite of efforts to dismiss the church as fading and irrelevant.

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Andy Crouch  
Executive Editor

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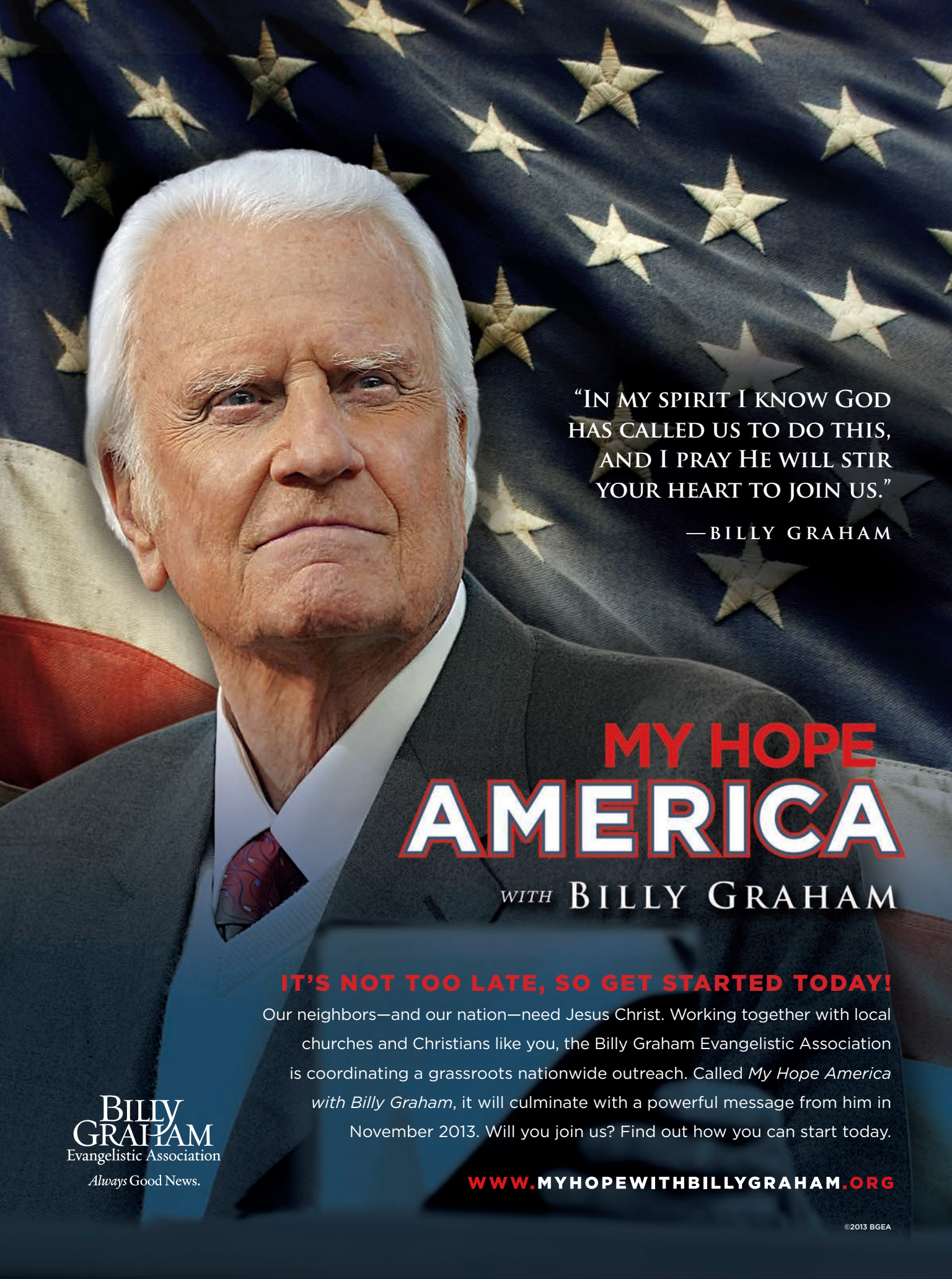
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A close-up portrait of Billy Graham, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a close-up of the stars and stripes of the American flag.

"IN MY SPIRIT I KNOW GOD  
HAS CALLED US TO DO THIS,  
AND I PRAY HE WILL STIR  
YOUR HEART TO JOIN US."

—BILLY GRAHAM

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WITH BILLY GRAHAM

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# The Gospel of Small

Why a growth-focused church needs quiet disciples.



all this our mustard-seed edition of CT.

From the slums of Bangkok to the boroughs of New York City to the quiet landscapes of Nebraska, this month we spotlight Christians who will likely never get quoted in *The New York Times*. They have negligible Twitter followings (if they are on social media at all). They are not getting book deals or speaking requests. At first glance they don't seem to be producing much "fruit."

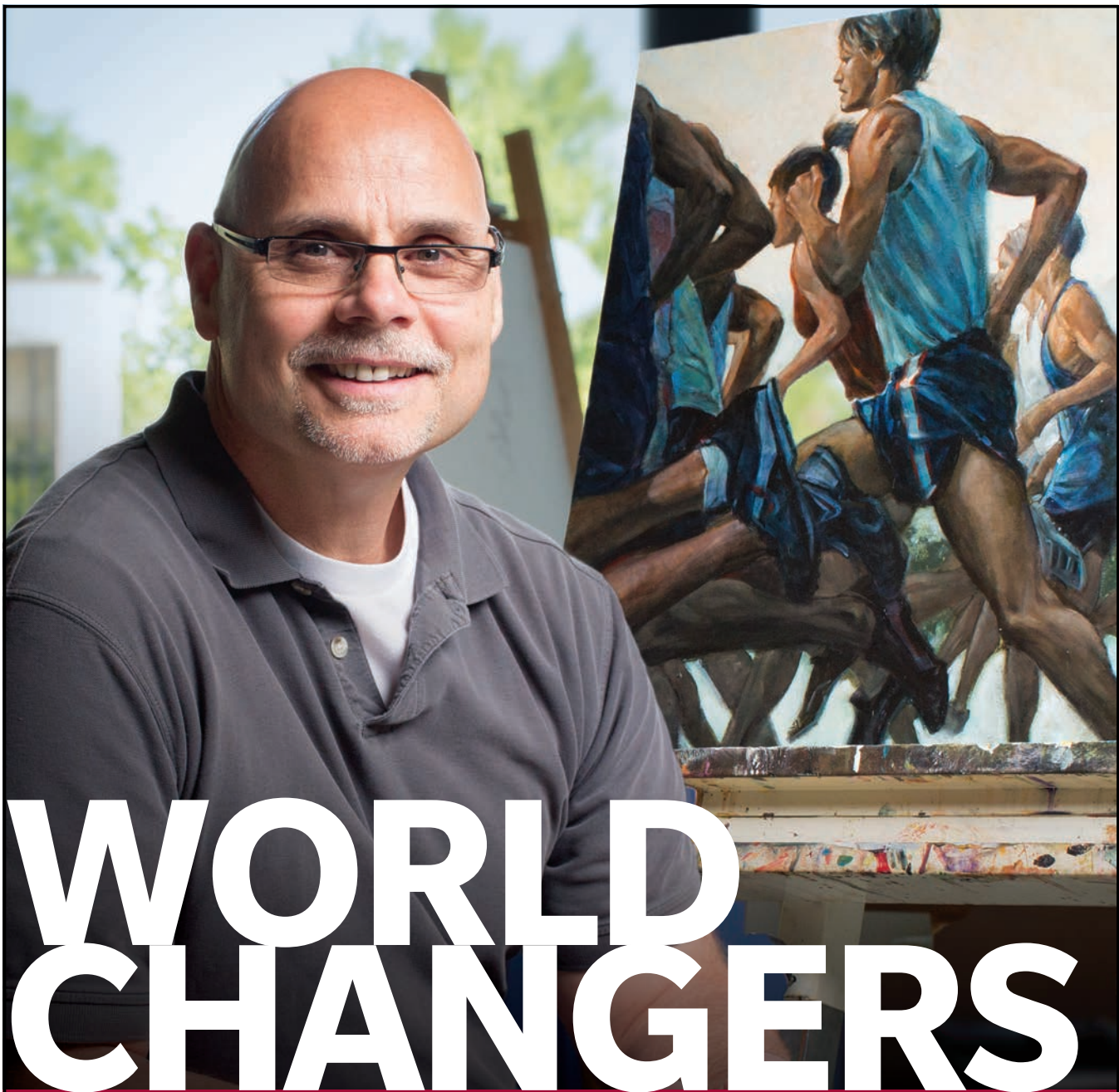
We happen to think they represent the most exciting stories of emerging kingdom work today. First meet Michelle Kao, one of the 200 missionaries who identify with the New Friars movement of urban ministry. Kao veered off the med-school track for Bangkok, where she has lived in a community of 3,000 since 2007. There she has fended off wild dogs (really) as she lives among Thai poor and directs the Thai Peace Center. Kent Annan spotlights Kao and others who are following Christ into "the mosquito buzz of concrete and corrugated tin" of the world's slums (page 24).

Next meet Alan Farrell, dubbed NYC's "fatherhood czar" in a city where almost half of all births (45 percent) are to unmarried women. A Bronx native and second-generation immigrant, Farrell has spearheaded the Mayor's Fatherhood Initiative since 2010. How does he stem the tide on such a colossal social issue? By meeting with men one at a time, at City Hall and support groups and churches. Farrell and other immigrants far outside the limelight are planting seeds for their neighbors to flourish in their hometown of 8.3 million (page 38).

Kao, Farrell, and their respective peers are timely examples of what Kentucky novelist Wendell Berry once called "stickers." These are people who "settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in." Instead of scattering their mustard seed across a wide field, they have planted one faithful seed, very deeply, in one location. Essayist Jake Meador calls this "small-town spirituality" (page 46), and says it's the antidote to our church's and culture's addiction to bigger and better. Granted, the New Friars and NYC's immigrant Christians work in some of the world's largest cities. But they seek to be faithful in every small, hidden decision. For that, their witness is huge. ✚

**Next issue:** In contrast, when your October issue arrives in your mailbox (or on your iPad), you will notice not a series of small changes but a wholesale overhaul of the magazine's look. We hope that you will, as we do, find it a far sharper way to engage our equally sharper content. Next month, that includes a cover essay from Andy Crouch on power, a look at why charity races are proving so effective for World Vision, and a profile of devotional writer-in-hiding Sarah Young. Don't miss it.





**Each has received a gift, use it to serve.  
[1 Peter 4:10]**

After Ron Mazellan read Bob Briner's *Roaring Lambs*, he prayed to God for the chance to minister to as diverse an audience as possible. An illustrator of children's books, Mazellan's work has won awards from the NAACP and the Association of Jewish Libraries. As a popular professor of art at Indiana Wesleyan University, he has mentored and inspired students in both their craft and faith. For following the call to create excellent art to bless young people and families, Ron Mazellan is a World Changer.

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# BRIEFING

REPORTING & DISPATCHES  
FROM THE CHURCH  
WORLDWIDE

## SPOTLIGHT: The Wars Over Christian Beards



**c. 195**

Clement of Alexandria calls the beard "the mark of a man [and] ... therefore unholy to desecrate" them. Other church fathers made similar remarks, but most early pastors shaved or kept their beards closely trimmed.



**c. 411**

Euthymius says only bearded men can enter his Judean Desert monastery, not boys "with female faces."



**c. 475** A rule is made that "no cleric should grow long hair or shave his beard." In the Middle Ages, it is misquoted as a prohibition of beards.

**816** The Council of Aachen requires monks to shave 24 times a year.

**1005** In England, the Canons of Edgar say no priest should "retain his beard for any time."

**1031** The Council of Bourges mandates "a shaved beard" for "all who minister within the Holy Church."



**1054**

A papal letter excommunicates the Patriarch of Constantinople. Among the reasons: "Because [Eastern Church leaders] grow ... beards, they will not receive in communion those who ... shave their beards following the decreed practice of the Roman Church."

**1096** The archbishop of Rouen threatens to excommunicate any man with a beard (or with long hair).

You're more likely to see a beard in the pulpit today than at any time since the 1800s. But beards—especially among clergy—were once serious, symbolic matters. They separated East from West during the Great Schism, priests from laity during the Middle Ages, and Protestants from Catholics during the Reformation. Some church leaders required them; others banned them. To medieval theologians, they represented both holiness and sin. But historian Giles Constable says that rules on beards sound more forceful than they really were. Clergy (especially powerful ones) were likely to follow fashion in their day, too.



**2013**

Saddleback Church hosts a beard contest as *Duck Dynasty's* bearded Phil Robertson and his beardless brother, Alan, preach.



**1864** *Punch*, the satirical British weekly, publishes caricatures of the different kinds of Anglican clergy beards in the UK.



**1547**

Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer begins to grow a beard, ostensibly to mark his mourning of the death of King Henry VIII, but also to signal a break with Catholicism.

**1531** Piero Valeriano Bolzani writes *Pro Sacerdotum Barbis*, a defense of priestly beards.



**c. 1160**

Abbot Burchard of Bellavaux writes *Apologia de Barbis*, a treatise on the biblical, theological, moral, social, and allegorical implications of beards.



**c. 1170**

Pope Alexander III bars clerical beards.

See much more at  
[MoreCT.com/beards](http://MoreCT.com/beards)





1



5



6

## GLEANINGS

Important developments in the church and the world.

### 1 Copts blamed for revolution

**EGYPT** Christians celebrated when Egypt's military ousted unpopular president Mohamed Morsi in July. But the situation quickly turned as the Muslim Brotherhood condemned the Coptic Orthodox Church for supporting the Tamarod (Arabic for "rebellion") protest movement. Anti-Christian violence surged after Pope Tawadros II publicly endorsed Morsi's removal. At least five Copts were killed and dozens more injured. Egyptians hope the intervention ignites an inclusive political process, but many fear a civil war.

### 2 Contraception mandate delayed until 2015

Amid mounting lawsuits from over 200 plaintiffs, the Obama administration expanded exemptions from the Affordable Care Act's contraception mandate. The rules now exempt nonprofit religious hospitals and institutions of higher education. And the government says it won't require religious employers to fulfill the mandate until January 2015. The new rules failed to placate some critics, such as evangelical-owned Hobby Lobby. The retail chain isn't covered by the exemption, but a court temporarily banned enforcement of the mandate against the for-profit. It ruled that challengers in the 60-plus lawsuits should not have "their legs cut out from under them while these difficult issues are resolved."

### 3 Ex-gay ministry after Exodus?

After Alan Chambers, president of Exodus International, announced in June that his group was shutting down after nearly four decades, onlookers are

debating the future of ex-gay ministry. Chambers apologized to the gay community for "years of undue suffering and judgment at the hands of [Exodus] and the church as a whole." He drew praise from many—including other ex-gay ministries. "How merciful of God to shut down Exodus" for abandoning its mission, tweeted Andrew Comiskey of the Restored Hope Network (RHN). RHN, largely composed of disaffected Exodus members, will effectively replace Chambers's group, which will relaunch as ReduceFear.org. Meanwhile, a consumer fraud lawsuit against a Jewish reparative therapy group moved forward in New Jersey. And lawmakers in Massachusetts and New York have proposed banning the practice for minors. California's first-in-the-nation ban is still tied up in court.

### 4 Shootout kills World Vision workers

**SUDAN** Ongoing clashes between competing security forces in Darfur's countryside finally spilled into its largest city, killing two World Vision aid workers. After the Nyala attack, the group suspended aid programs to 1 million displaced people in South Darfur, citing danger to staff.

### 5 Fetal-pain bill becomes law in Texas

Wendy Davis became a household name (or at least a trending Twitter topic) in June after the Texas state senator stood and talked for nearly 11 hours straight, filibustering a fetal-pain abortion ban. In the end, her effort failed: Texas lawmakers banned abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy, among other restrictions, weeks later. Ten states have passed fetal-pain bans, but they have not fared well

in court. A North Dakota judge recently struck down his state's six-week ban, after a federal court threw out Idaho's 20-week ban. But public opinion could be shifting. Three polls conducted after "the day Wendy stood" each found that pluralities of Americans (including a 56 to 27 percent split in a *Washington Post* poll) favor measures that prohibit abortions after 20 weeks versus the current 24-week limit.

### 6 Halos and cross on coin draw censure

**SLOVAKIA** A commemorative Euro coin nearly never made it to market this July because it aims to raise the profile of two ancient Christian missionaries. The €2 coins were designed in 2009 to honor Byzantine saints Cyril and Methodius for coming to Slovakia 1,150 years ago. But the European Union's executive branch said the National Bank of Slovakia had to remove religious symbols, including halos and a cross-adorned stole. France and other objectors backed down after Slovakia resubmitted its design, insisting the symbols were integral to Slovak national identity.

### 7 Mayor gives wealthy city to Jesus

**MEXICO** The keys to Mexico's wealthiest and third-largest city, Monterrey, now rest in the hands of Christ. Mayor Margarita Arellanes publicly dedicated her city "to our Lord Jesus Christ, so that his kingdom of peace and blessings may be established," at a prayer rally held by the Assembly of Pastors. The evangelical group has orchestrated similar dedications in three smaller cities. Video of her speech went viral, prompting debate over Mexico's strict separation of church and state. Last year, the constitution was amended to allow religious events in public—as long as they don't involve politics.

#### GO FIGURE Church Life

**52%**  
Weekly churchgoers who say pastors contribute "a lot" to the well-being of society.

**37%**  
All adults who say the same.

Pew Research Center



## QUOTATION MARKS

### "It's very annoying, following this person of Christ around."

**Bono**, wryly telling Focus on the Family's Jim Daly how it's "hopeless trying to keep up" with Jesus' demands on one's life.

*Focus on the Family*

### "It was like getting measles."

**Justin Welby**, archbishop of Canterbury, on his "embarrassment" at coming to Christ during college.

*The Telegraph*

### "When one part of the body of Christ is suffering, we all suffer."

**Thongchai Pradabchananurat**, president of the Thailand Baptist Convention, on Thai churches donating funds to Moore tornado victims. (Oklahoma Baptists helped his churches rebuild after a 2004 tsunami.)

*Baptist Press*

### "We always found it funny that people genuinely think we're going to hell."

**Evan Goldberg**, screenwriter of *This Is the End*. He said the crass end-times comedy was inspired by the Book of Revelation and a friend's efforts to convert him.

*National Public Radio*

### "God knows what it's like to lose a son."

**Rick Warren**, during his first sermon at Saddleback Church since his son Matthew's suicide in April.

*Associated Press*

### "The love of God was magnified."

A **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)** revision to "In Christ Alone" (the No. 11 most-popular song sung in churches), because a committee found the original lyrics' atonement language ("the wrath of God was satisfied") too controversial. Songwriters Keith Getty and Stuart Townend refused to authorize the change.

*The Christian Century*

7

### 8 Internet hacking helps persecuted Christians

Is Internet freedom vital to religious freedom? More and more so, say representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. They have asked Congress to allocate \$7.2 million toward overcoming Internet censorship in countries such as Iran, Cuba, and China. They argue that Internet freedom allows Christians to pursue spiritual development, interpret the Bible more accurately, and find "fellowship and communion" through online worship.

### 9 Christian bookstore sales mask mixed results

The 2013 health report for Christian bookstores found the overall industry doing well. But most individual stores? Not so much. Total sales at the 1,100 member stores of the Association for Christian Retail (CBA) surged nearly 9 percent in 2012, thanks to Black Friday shopping and eBook sales. But 6 out of 10 CBA stores lost sales, and 39 stores were forced to close in 2012—17 more than in 2011 (though 24 less than in 2010). However, only 2.5 percent of retailers plan to sell or close in 2013—an encouraging decline from the nearly 8 percent who said the same in 2012.

### 10 Church collapses under castle of debt

**IRELAND** Church leaders in Dublin barely avoided jail after trying to block a bank from repossessing their properties. Victory Christian Fellowship lost its tax-exempt status in 2012 because it engaged in too many commercial activities, including renting out a castle for weddings. This led the Bank of Scotland to demand repayment of €18 million worth of loans. Members staged a sit-in to stop the repossession of three properties, but a judge ruled two pastors and a trustee

12

in contempt of court. This prompted a last-minute agreement to hand over the properties after all.

### 11 Women-pastor objectors overruled

Clergy who object to female pastors have lost one more denomination to call home. The Reformed Church in America (RCA) has been ordaining women since 1979, but has also allowed clergy to conscientiously object to the proceedings. This summer's vote to remove "conscience clauses" from its Book of Church Order means RCA clergy can no longer refuse to participate in ordinations because of a candidate's gender.

### 12 First deaf Bible may come from Japan

**JAPAN** Translators in Japan are trying to create the world's first complete sign-language Bible for the deaf. The ViBi project, which uses video-recorded Scriptures, has translated 13 of the Bible's 66 books since starting in the early 1990s. The Japan Deaf Evangel Mission believes it can complete the remaining 53 books by 2023 given enough financial support.

### 13 Snowboarders defend Jesus statue

Atheists demanding the removal of a popular statue of Jesus near a Montana ski resort failed to persuade a federal judge. The Freedom From Religion Foundation challenged the placement of "Big Mountain Jesus" on publicly owned land. But Judge Dana Christensen drew on the 60-year-old statue's "irreverent" popularity with Whitefish Mountain Resort snowboarders and tourists in ruling it serves as a historical landmark, not an endorsement of religion: "Typical observers of the statue are more interested in giving it a high five or adorning it in ski gear than sitting before it in prayer."

#### GO FIGURE Jesus

The seven Wikipedia topics more controversial than Jesus (based on editing history):

George W. Bush  
Anarchism  
Muhammad  
WWE personnel  
Global warming  
Circumcision  
United States

*Global Wikipedia, Scarecrow Press*





➡ **Seeing Red:** By attending education expos in China, some Christian colleges are attracting Chinese students to meet ministry and money goals.

HIGHER EDUCATION CHINA

# Recruiting the Middle Kingdom

Why America's Christian colleges are pursuing Chinese students. By Melissa Steffan

Ivy League schools have long lured Chinese students to America, exchanging prestige for full-tuition payments. Now Christian colleges are increasingly angling for their own share.

Luckily the pool of potential students is growing—aided not only by China's booming churches, but also by widespread dissatisfaction with its schools.

Many Chinese parents are increasingly aware that a technical education alone won't ensure a prosperous future, said Brent Fulton, president of China Source. And as more Chinese enter the middle class, they gain the means to send their only child to an American liberal-arts school.

That's where some Christian colleges, including Oklahoma Christian University, Michigan's Cornerstone University, and Indiana's Huntington University, see their niche. They aim to follow the example of Alabama's

Samford University and Texas's University of Mary Hardin-Baylor (UMHB). Both Baptist schools have sent admissions counselors to college expos in China in recent years and have accepted hundreds of students.

Small schools might not be able to compete with Harvard or Stanford in overall rankings or degree programs, said Rick Ostrander, provost at Cornerstone. But they do appeal to the growing number of Chinese students who desire Christian community (or at least a moral environment) along with an American education.

"Being able to speak the language of education that shapes the whole person . . . is increasingly going to resonate with [Chinese students]," Ostrander said. "But as a private, tuition-driven institution, there's a practical benefit for us as well in recruiting students who [don't have to be] heavily scholarshiped."

Christian schools are taking

differing approaches to their marketing. Cornerstone is emphasizing how its required core classes foster creativity and critical thinking. Huntington highlights artistic degrees that aren't widely available in China, such as film and graphic design.

The best approach is to establish a recruiting office in mainland China, said Myron Youngman, president of the Kaifa Group, which consults with Christian ministries seeking to engage China. This shows parents a sense of staying power and presence. Thus far, only Ohio's Cedarville University has attempted this.

UMHB developed its strategy through existing Chinese staff members' relationships. Of the 257 students accepted since the school amped up its China efforts in 2011, 104 have enrolled.

Other colleges are in the early stages and admit they have significant marketing work to do.

In any case, Youngman said, colleges can't just hire an agent to translate existing promotional material and expect a stream of applicants. The most successful efforts will master the art of branding themselves well to Chinese culture. For example, many Chinese may not equate a Christian education with the academically rigorous one they desire.

"There is rarely an understanding of integration—the teaching of all subjects with the understanding that all truth is God's truth," Youngman said.

That's an evangelistic goal for Huntington as well as an educational one, said Jeff Berggren, senior vice president of enrollment management and marketing. Because his school does not require faith commitments from incoming students, he hopes that non-Christian Chinese students will apply and be exposed to Christianity.

At Cornerstone, where students are required to sign a statement of faith, Ostrander sees it differently.

"Our interest is more in providing education for the growing

## GO FIGURE Homosexuality

**42%**  
LGBT adults  
who identify  
as Christian.

**29%**  
LGBT adults who say  
they have felt  
unwelcome at a  
place of worship  
(6 percent within  
the past year).

Pew Research Center

community of Chinese believers,” he said. “For us, it’s a matter of recognizing that the next Christendom . . . is in the global East and global South, and we want to do what we can to . . . be a player in the global growth of the church.”

## PERSECUTION

# Counting the Cost (Accurately)

Why tallies of Christian martyrs vary so widely.

By Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra

**A**bout 7 out of 10 Christians killed worldwide for their faith last year came from just one country: Nigeria.

So claimed a persecution report from Jubilee Campaign this spring. The report turned heads for its numbers, including almost 1,000 martyrs in Nigeria alone. Then, weeks later, Vatican officials warned the United Nations that the worldwide Christian death toll in 2012 was actually 100,000.

The disparate calculations called attention to martyrdom and how researchers measure it. Open Doors’ tally of 1,200 Christian martyrs in 2012 aligns more or less with Jubilee’s count. By contrast, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) agrees with the Vatican on a number roughly 10 times that. (Religious freedom watchdogs commonly cite both figures.)

Much of the discrepancy hinges on how researchers define *martyr*, and how closely they double-check each death.

The standard definition of *martyr* is “believers in Christ who have lost their lives prematurely, in situations of witness, as a result of human hostility,” according to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary’s David Barrett and Todd Johnson in their 2001 research tome, *World Christian Trends*.

It’s the “situations of witness” aspect that gets tricky.

Johnson, director of the CSGC at Gordon-Conwell, casts a wide net for his research. For example, he counts as martyrs Christians who are targeted for their beliefs or ethnicity, killed while worshiping in a church, or murdered because they are the children of Christians. (Ethnicity is closely identified with a particular religion in many areas.)

His count of 100,000 is a carefully constructed average over the past 10 years. “At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, it was mainly Rwanda and southern Sudan,” said Johnson. Today’s hot spots include Indonesia, China, and Nigeria.

But when Nik Ripken, a global strategist with the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board, went to southern Sudan to investigate martyrs, he wasn’t able to corroborate large numbers of them.

He did find many deaths among historically Christian families. But cultural Christians killed in political or ethnic conflicts are not necessarily witnessing for their faith. Thus, they shouldn’t be counted as martyrs, Ripken argues.

“When I asked a broad section of Christians in southern Sudan how they witnessed to Muslims, they said, ‘Bring a Muslim to Christ? Why in the world would we do that?’”

He offers the Christian exodus from Iraq as another example. “Is that real persecution? Absolutely,” he said. “Was it due to sharing their faith with their neighbors? No. It was sectarian violence—Muslim against Christian—and a lot of those [‘Christians’] can’t tell us who Jesus is.”

Frans Veerman, director of Open Doors’ World Watch List, agrees.

“The number 100,000 is a well-meant but gross exaggeration,” he said. But he also said that Open Doors’ count of 1,200 is an underrepresentation.

“There is a huge gray area around the question of ‘martyrs,’”

## PASSAGES



### Died

**Donald P. Hustad**

Billy Graham crusade organizer who inspired generations of church musicians at Moody Bible Institute and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was 94.



### Selected Gregory Thornbury

As president of The King’s College in New York City. He previously served as founding dean of Union University’s School of Theology.



### Born News

The name of the news section in the print redesign of CT, which debuts next issue. Passages has, shall we say, passed. (Find expanded coverage at [ChristianityToday.com/Gleanings](http://ChristianityToday.com/Gleanings).)

said Veerman. “When Christians are isolated and denied clean drinking water and medical care because they are Christians and refuse to become Muslims—[and thus] they perish quicker than others—are they martyrs? In a strict sense, they aren’t. But when the whole mechanism behind [their deaths] is studied, we can say they are.”

It’s difficult to tally or even properly estimate Christians who die from their extra vulnerability, he said. So Open Doors is creating a new, more accurate methodology for next year’s tally.

Does the exact number of martyrs matter? Johnson said an accurate count “tells us this is something that’s not isolated,” thus churches should be “prayerful and concerned.”

But counting too many Christian deaths as martyrdoms “takes away” from the deaths of active witnesses to the faith, said Ripken. “That reduces [their] story.”

Johnson counters that such an approach “limits the scope of the problem,” and it is important to represent the many “nameless martyrs” whose stories don’t reach the attention of celebrity-driven Americans.

“Truth matters,” said Ann Buwalda, Jubilee’s executive director. “Truth changes policy.”

## CHURCH LIFE

# Game Changer

Pastors blame kids’ sports for attendance dips. By Ruth Moon

**N**early 1 in 3 Americans told Gallup they rarely or never attended religious services in 2012. And many pastors blame the secularization of Sundays, led by a commonly perceived culprit: children’s sports.

That’s what Steve McMullin found after the Acadia Divinity College professor interviewed church

[ continued on 16 ]



## Briefing [ from 15 ]

leaders and members at shrinking congregations. His study, published in the *Review of Religious Research*, showed that pastors most often identified “competing Sunday activities”—led by youth athletic events—as the primary reason for declining worship attendance.

The sentiment echoes the 2008 Faith Communities Today survey. On its list of “obstacles making it difficult for people to regularly participate in [a] congregation,” pastors cited driving distance, conflicts with work schedules, and fear of crime (among other reasons).

But children’s school and sports activities proved to be “by far the greatest obstacle.” This held true for rural, suburban, and urban churches alike.

However, McMullin said, other studies show that children’s sports are likely not the main culprit. The families involved in sports programs are generally the families that still attend church, he said, so the real cause of shrinking attendance likely lies elsewhere.

Whether or not organized sports are Public Enemy No. 1 for churches, they still represent a symbolic

challenge: how to engage members in a changing culture.

“Sunday has lost its sacredness for most people,” McMullin said. “Churches need to ask, ‘Since that’s true, how do we then respond?’”

Rather than resenting organized sports, churches should learn to embrace their value, said John White, director of Baylor University’s new sports ministry and chaplaincy program, which accepted its first incoming class last fall.

When done well, children’s sports can show the value of play to a holistic Christian life, he said.

“Most adults don’t know how to play,” said White. “They just never learned. Oftentimes Christians are the worst at competition, and we need to educate them.”

Sports can teach discipline, friendship, teamwork, and ethics if Christians approach them well, he added. White and his family miss Sunday worship for occasional games. Those events lead to conversations about how sports can build character but shouldn’t take precedence over church.

Collin Sparks, executive director of camp ministries for Kanakuk Kamps, a sports-themed Christian summer camp, believes sports can

## DISCUSSION STARTER Church Life

An Oklahoma pastor spent five minutes of Sunday worship calling out parishioners by name for their flaws—including sleeping. “You’re one of the sorriest church members I have—you’re not worth 15 cents,” said Jim Standridge, pastor of Skiatook’s Immanuel Baptist Church, to one attendee. The incident has been watched more than 500,000 times on YouTube.

help teach character formation. But he recognizes that sports can also represent misplaced cultural values, which the church should counter.

“The things that we esteem in our culture—even in the church—are success, accomplishment, being happy,” he said. “We’ll give thousands of dollars to play these games. But we won’t give 20 minutes to sit down and read the Bible.”

Many churches are making practical changes to acknowledge the draw of sports on family life, said David Roozen, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

According to Roozen, 4 in 10 evangelical and historically black churches have at least some program emphasis on team sports, fitness activities, or exercise classes. Compared to their peers, churches with a high emphasis on such programs tend to experience more growth, according to survey data.

Some churches have shifted schedules. “Here in New England, I know congregations that shut down youth programs during ski season,” said Roozen. “Whether that’s adaptive or totally capitulating, I’m not sure. They at least recognize that no one’s going to show up. That’s the world we’ve become.”

## UNDER DISCUSSION Topics in the current debate.

compiled by Ruth Moon

# Should pastors rebuke parishioners from the pulpit?

## YES

“Prophets such as Amos or Nathan called people to account personally. It’s almost refreshing, in this age of feel-good theology, to see a preacher really get worked up over behavior and get morally indignant in the service of the truth delivered to him to speak.”

**WILL WILLIMON**

professor of Christian ministry, Duke Divinity School

“Public matters may necessitate a public intervention to ensure the health of the whole church. But it should be carried out with love, grace, and for the purpose of bringing the sinner to a place of repentance rather than public shaming.”

**HALEE GRAY SCOTT**

author, *Dare Mighty Things: Mapping the Challenges of Leadership* for Christian Women

“Preaching is personal, but it is to the entire congregation. So it is completely out of line to go after congregants by name. A preacher should focus on relevant sins. If I came across three angry husbands in my pastoral counseling, it would show up in the sermons—but anonymously.”

**DOUGLAS WILSON**

minister, Christ Church

“Pastors who call out individual parishioners during Sunday services say more about themselves and their own insecurities than they do about those they address. They turn otherwise private exhortations into public opportunities for criticism of Christ, church, and pastor.”

**MARK DEYMAZ**

directional leader, Mosaic Church

“A pastor should not call out congregants in a direct manner during the normal, regular preaching of the Word. They should not use the pulpit to browbeat, humiliate, and bully individuals in their congregations. That is unbiblical and unacceptable.”

**CARL TRUEMAN**

professor, Westminster Theological Seminary

“I can’t imagine a situation in which it is healthy or wise to attempt individual church discipline or exhortation in the context of preaching in a worship service. Such an approach easily becomes performance art and hardly brings stature or biblical weight to the pulpit.”

**R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.**

president, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary



**Cycle of Abuse:** In Honduras, prostitution is legal, but not brothels or pimping. Child sex tourism is booming in Tegucigalpa.

OUTREACH HONDURAS

# The Hope Dealers

Corruption, assassination, sex trafficking, and drug addiction thwart justice in Honduras, the murder capital of the world. By Allison J. Althoff in Tegucigalpa

**L**ate one evening in April 1997, Betsy Hake put down her felt-wrapped Bibles and gift bags and sat down on the curb between two prostitutes. A bilingual missionary from Indiana, she was exhausted from trying to reach the scantily clad women and transvestites around the downtown district of Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras.

Hake asked the two, “Is there anybody here who would like to trust Jesus? Who wants to really believe that Jesus can change your life?”

Nancy, who was younger and dressed more conservatively than Vilma, took a closer look at Hake. “Well, okay. I guess I’ll do that.” After a short discussion, Hake

guided Nancy in a prayer of confession.

Encouraged, Hake turned to Vilma.

“I’m so ashamed to tell you this,” said Vilma. “Nancy’s my daughter. The real reason I went to the streets was because I wanted to give a different life to my child. When she got halfway through high school and saw the kind of money I was making, she followed me here. I can’t make her stop!”

Vilma then told Hake that she had been praying silently alongside Nancy for an exit from the streets.

“I finally realized I couldn’t do it on my own strength—that I needed Jesus.”

That night, Vilma left the streets and never looked back. But when Hake offered Nancy a ride home, she declined.

“You know, I would like to do that. But I owe 500 lempira [US\$24] on my rent. I really need to make that money.” She left in search of her next trick.

At that moment, Hake realized it would take more than reciting the sinner’s prayer to persuade prostitutes to leave the sex trade. She decided to reshape her outreach by integrating efforts to overcome the poverty that drives generations of women into prostitution.

Hake launched Jericho Ministries as a faith-based street outreach program. The organization opened a sewing workshop in 1999 where women could gain marketable skills and sell handmade items in Christian community.

In time, Nancy reconciled with her





**On Queue:** Betsy Hake, who has adopted seven Hondurans, lines up with Villa Jericho students.

mother and joined the Jericho community. "Within five months we went from those two, mother and daughter, to eight," Hake said. "It's a generational thing. God wanted to reach not just the first generation but that next generation too."

#### OVERWHELMING PROBLEMS

Jericho now includes a private school in Tegucigalpa and a rural residential

and people, gang violence, and corruption are well established.

Honduras has the world's highest murder rate, with 86 homicides for every 100,000 residents in 2012, according to the UN. The drug trade spawns much of the bloodshed.

"Honduras is in some ways a failed state," said Joe Eldridge, campus chaplain and a senior adjunct lecturer at the School of International Service at the American University in Washington, D.C. A former missionary, Eldridge focuses on the next

program. This summer, Jericho opened K-Fe, a coffee shop in the heart of Tegucigalpa where women learn new job skills.

Jericho is just one of dozens of Christian agencies in a country that remains one of the poorest in the region. The Honduran economy is growing at a modest 3 percent in 2013, yet trafficking in drugs

generation of Hondurans and their extended families. "I see the future of Honduras in the eyes and the stories of young people who have made a conscious decision that, despite the problems, they are committed to staying."

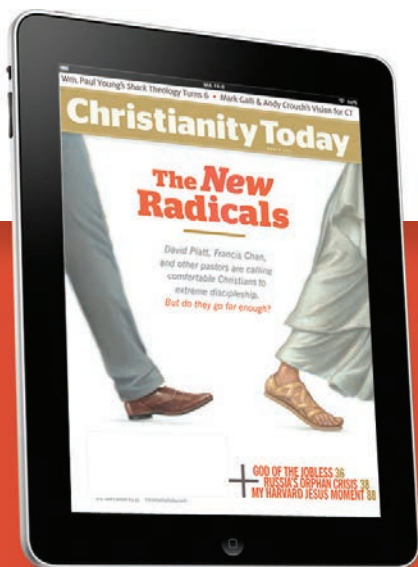
Like most Latin American countries, Honduras has had a Christian majority for generations. In recent decades, the explosive growth of the Protestant church has been the most significant change in Honduran religion. In the early 1990s, Honduras identified as nearly 97 percent Roman Catholic. According to recent Latinobarómetro research, nearly 50 percent of the population is now Protestant.

#### EDUCATION PLUS JUSTICE

In Honduras, children (age 14 and under) represent the largest subpopulation—35.5 percent of 8.4 million total.

The 2-million-plus students strain the antiquated educational system. Although primary-school enrollment is near 100 percent, only 58 percent of those students

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reach the fifth grade. Public education needs a major overhaul, said Kurt Ver Beek, professor of sociology and director of Calvin College's Honduras Program. Reformers emphasize the need to improve literacy rates and teacher training and decrease the number of dropouts.

"There are over 2 million kids in Honduran public schools. We can't send them all to private schools," said Ver Beek. "If we can make public schools work well, our impact will be 100 times greater." Since 1998, Ver Beek has addressed education and other national issues in Honduras as cofounder of Association for a More Just Society (AJS). The group seeks to increase the influence of local churches and stimulate new ideas for social reform.

At the grassroots, Villa Jericho represents an experiment by Christians to reform education. Run by Jericho Ministries, the residential facility is designed to provide intensive education, training, and rehab for the urban victims of emotional and sexual abuse.

The Villa is located in a rural area outside Danli, a city 40 miles from Tegucigalpa. The parents of some Villa Jericho children are trapped in prostitution or drug dealing. Other parents have gone through a Jericho program and have enrolled their children at the Villa school because of its superior education.

One resident, Angie, 15, was sexually abused by her father. After three years at the Villa, Angie courageously testified against him in court, and she later rescued her younger sister from the same abuse.

Hake's big idea is that Villa Jericho will prepare Hondurans to be leaders; Angie hopes to be one of them. "One dream is to be able to minister to others through worship and song, especially in healing and forgiveness," said Angie.

Ties to local church congregations are crucial to the success of ministries like Jericho. Elvia Forgas de Madrid, a lifelong resident of Tegucigalpa, has served as director of medical assistance and a high-school teacher at Jericho for 10 years. She is one of

numerous staff members who attend Iglesia Bautista America Church in Tegucigalpa every Sunday. There, Jericho students help lead children's ministry and worship.

"We live happily with the Lord here, and we've seen many miracles together," Forgas de Madrid said. "It's beautiful."

La Iglesia Santidad and Sembradores de Amor (Sowers of Love) are two other local congregations that partner with Jericho in Tegucigalpa. Sembradores de Amor's founding pastor, Francis Murillo, spearheads outreach efforts to drug lords and gang members. The partnership benefits all parties, as certified medical professionals Forgas de Madrid and Hake help lead healing seminars at congregational gatherings, while Murillo serves on Jericho's board.

Tegucigalpa's Micah Project, founded in 2000 by Michael Miller, shares many of the same strategies and aspirations as Jericho Ministries. But Micah focuses on drug-dealing boys living on the streets.

[ continued on 20 ]

# How will God fund your ministry?

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## Honduras [ from 19 ]

"We set high standards for the boys," said Miller. "But rather than the environment being strictly about discipline and rule-following, we try to set those standards through relationship—through mentoring, encouragement, and lots of one-on-one counseling." Some graduates have gone on to both public and private universities, including Universidad José Cecilio del Valle in Honduras. Miller added, "We are always amazed at how quickly the boys begin to leave the habits of the streets behind as they catch a vision for their future."

In a similar vein to Jericho, Micah is supported by two local church congregations: Iglesia Central Evangélica de Santidad and Centro Cristiano Hondureño. Miller encourages the Micah boys to join one of the two congregations to assist with service projects and learn what it means to become part of a local church body.

"It is important to give teenagers a voice in these kinds of decisions," Miller said.

By the time this article is published, Micah will have opened a new residential rehab facility 20 minutes from Tegucigalpa. Pedro Martinez, a Micah boy going on his 12th year with the program, will complete a degree in civil engineering in 2013. He used his internship at DECOESA, one of the largest construction companies in Tegucigalpa, to donate the use of equipment to the ministry that led him off the streets. "The fruit of Micah's prayers and donations in my life is the construction you see in front of you," Martinez said at Micah's rural project site.

Micah Project leader Stephen Kusmer said he calls the staff and volunteers "hope dealers in a world of brokenness."

### ENDING VIOLENCE

San Pedro Sula, an urban area of 1 million, is a major center for evangelical and charismatic renewal. (In rural areas, the Catholic Church retains a clear majority.) Recently, local Catholic and Protestant leaders joined political reform campaigns

against violence and corruption. "It's inspiring to see churches working together," Ver Beek said. "It's also exciting to see Protestants getting socially active."

In May, Catholic leaders mediated a cease-fire in San Pedro Sula between two of the country's most violent gangs: Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street gang. But working for justice can be extremely dangerous. In 2006, Dionisio Diaz Garcia, a Christian labor-rights attorney associated with AJS, was assassinated by two men who shot him in the head.

In Tegucigalpa, Karla Lazo is one of a half-million Protestant residents. As a leader at Koinonia Baptist, she reaches out to troubled youth through evangelism, public artwork with biblical themes, prayer walks, and violence-awareness campaigns.

"The gangs have started knocking on doors in my neighborhood," Lazo said. "I'm not sure how much longer we'll be able to stay where we are, but I am optimistic there is a bright future for our country."

# BECAUSE FAITH AND TRUTH Do Matter





Scholars like Eldridge readily admit that grassroots outreach comes naturally to Christian leaders, but he believes churches should also persuade politicians and policymakers to address the nation's underlying problems. "Working with young people is glorious redemptive work, but the greater political issues of governance also have to be addressed," Eldridge said.

Right now, drug lords and their trafficking networks hold the upper hand in Honduran politics. Ver Beek said, "Drug traffickers often get involved with human trafficking, arms trafficking, kidnapping, and bank robberies. It will be a long, hard effort to [first] clean up the police force and attorney general, and [then] get the violence and corruption under control."

Several years ago, Christians associated with AJS created Transformemos Honduras (Let's Transform Honduras) to reform the justice system, long corrupted by drug money. In 2008, hundreds of Christians joined a 38-day hunger strike demanding the government prosecute officials

charged with corruption.

The strike was part of a larger social movement that in 2009 resulted in the military removing then-president Manuel Zelaya from office. Prominent Honduran evangelicals supported his ouster.

#### REDEEMING 'THROW-AWAYS'

As Honduras's November presidential election draws near, more Christians are connecting their quest for nationwide reform with their neighborhood-level ministry.

In 2010, Micah Project launched a street evangelism team and hired Wheaton College graduate Kusmer, 24, to run it. He said many so-called runaways are in reality abandoned or "thrown away" by their parents.

"A generation of lost youth is being raised up here in Honduras," Kusmer said. "Sadly, they are finding a place of purpose in gangs and the drug trade."

Most drug-addicted boys are hooked on yellow glue, a cheap gateway to harder drugs. "I walk the city streets where boys

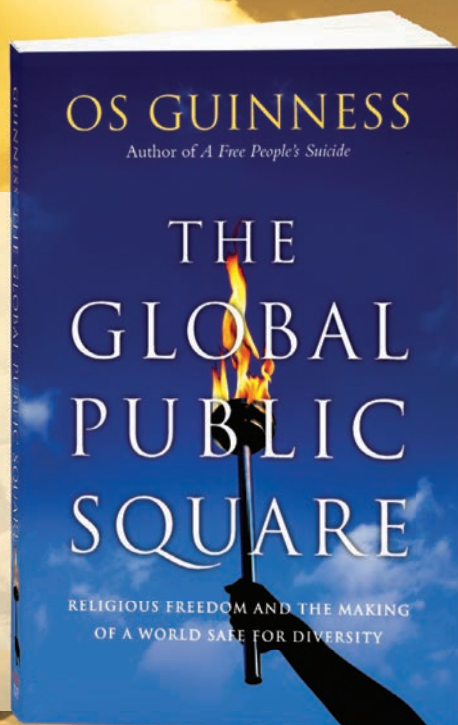
tuck themselves into bed on lonely street corners to the backdrop lullaby of gunshots," said Kusmer. "Nine-year-olds find refuge in the numbing effects of inhaling yellow glue."

"Kids can't afford to dream any further into their future than their next meal. Fatherlessness and childhood abuse have left unforgiving scars on young hearts."

While Kusmer, Miller, Hake, and countless other Christians attempt to restore individuals to health and wholeness, Ver Beek is working to foster quality of education in the city and improve the criminal justice system. (Only 2 percent of criminal cases in Honduras end in a conviction.)

"It's long, hard work trying to reform the system," said Ver Beek. "The Honduran people need to trust again." ☩

**Allison J. Althoff** is online editor at *Today's Christian Woman* and assists the Journalism Certificate Program at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.



## A GROUNDBREAKING PROPOSAL FOR A WORLD TORN BY CONFLICT

In this conflicted world of competing ideologies and religious differences, the threats to human dignity are terrifyingly real. Is there any hope for living together peacefully?

OS GUINNESS (*A Free People's Suicide*) argues that the way forward lies in promoting freedom of religion and belief for people of all faiths and none. He sets out a vision of a civil global public square, and how it can be established by championing the freedom of the soul.

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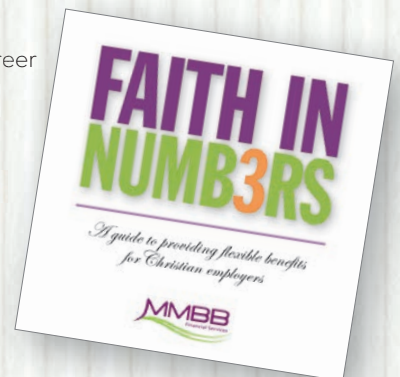
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[ COVER STORY ]

# Chaos *and* Grace in the



**Finding Home:**  
Michelle Kao was a  
premed student when  
she visited Bangkok.  
She has now served  
there for six years  
through Servant  
Partners.



# Slums *of the* Earth



My Easter weekend with missionaries who follow Christ to the uttermost.

By Kent Annan in Bangkok  
Photos by Jack Kurtz

FOR THE FIRST TIME in history, one of every two people lives in a city. Some 860 million of these city-dwellers reside in slums—uncertain, cramped, and frequently cruel. Most are there by necessity.

A small number of Christian missionaries live in slums too. They are there by choice.

About 100 of them, mostly from the United States, New Zealand, and Australia, met near Bangkok this past April. They gathered under the banner of “New Friars.”

The New Friars don’t seem to merit high-profile attention. Their efforts to alleviate poverty are small next to the work of many missionary and nonprofit groups and the problems they address.

Yet we do well to listen to the New Friars, because of the way they themselves are listening to God and neighbor, to suffering and hope on the crowded margins of society. They address vital questions about missions today, and about how all Christians might practice our vocations with sacrifice, devotion, and hope.

I knew some of these missionaries. I had read books by others. I had experimented with similar ideals in my own life. So I was eager to see their ideas in action. What better time to do so than over the weekend marking the culmination of Jesus’ life?





**A Messy, Full Life:** Kao, here in her office, has struggled with her calling to Bangkok. But 'I feel like I've found a home,' she says.

## MAUNDY THURSDAY

ON VOCATION—and *When Jesus Knelt on the Floor to Wash Feet*

Standing in line in Bangkok's gleaming airport, I pass a smarmy man in his 60s who looks like a star in a sex tourism documentary. He's not the only one. Bangkok rings luridly in the American imagination. I pray to God that some Thai woman won't have to open herself to him.

A most unwelcome thought about vulnerability.

Vulnerability of a different sort is on my mind. Most of the missionaries I'm visiting live in the urban slums where they work, because they believe their work requires them to be vulnerable. Scott Bessenecker, associate director of missions at InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, had noticed five organizations that practiced such "incarnational ministry" in slums. In 2006, he wrote a book about the organizations titled *The New Friars*, comparing them with mendicant orders of centuries past and to the U.S. urban communities known as "the new monastics."

Maundy Thursday is a fitting day to visit the New Friars as the network gathers for

the first time. (Disclosure: I'm on a foundation board that helped fund this gathering and my trip.) Their ministry helps keep our imaginations alive to Jesus' words—"You also should do as I have done"—on that Thursday as he knelt to wash his friends' feet, upending ideas of service and power. Their approach resonates with me: I lived under a tin roof without running water or electricity when I started working in Haiti ten years ago.

My taxi from the airport drops me off on a street marked 146, as I had requested. But it's the wrong place. A few Thai women call me over to see my directions. "Lad Prao? No, no, no. Need taxi!" one of them says.

Leaving your neighborhood—physically, theologically, culturally—can get you lost. But it can also lead to discovery.

The next taxi delivers me to Michelle Kao at the Thai Peace Center, on the correct 146 street. Kao, 31, was premed at Johns Hopkins when she visited Bangkok as part of InterVarsity's Urban Trek missions program. Instead of going on to med school, she joined Servant Partners, a group featured in Bessenecker's book. She moved to Bangkok six years ago.

Kao welcomes me wearing jeans, a blouse, and fuzzy red slippers. She eagerly introduces

me to Dachanee Ariso, a Thai colleague. Ariso tells me, with Kao translating, that she is working with Thai church leaders to help people who had been evicted to find land and build new homes. According to the UN, being subject to forced evictions is a defining aspect of slum life.

Kao and I then visit Samaki Pattana, her neighborhood of 3,000 people. As we walk the narrow lanes, Kao stops to talk with neighbors about the weather, jobs, and the student center. We don't go down the lane where drug deals are common and violence occasionally flares. I ask about people we meet along the way. Kao knows each person's story—a sick relative, a community education project.

The New Friars believe living with the people they serve helps them better understand their needs. But they also are pursuing obedience: to follow Jesus' willingness to live with us, not as a celestial commuter, but as a peasant carpenter, in the flesh.

I called Lee Kou, Michelle's mom, in New Jersey before flying to Bangkok. Mothers tend to be realists about such ministry.

"I'm a Christian, but I'm also a mom," says Kou. "I like what she's doing, but I want her to



*Working among the poor takes place on a continuum between 'being with' and 'going for.' The New Friars tend toward the 'being with' end.*

be safe. I've visited her there. She's had dengue fever. She's been attacked by wild dogs."

I appreciate how up front Michelle's mom is about the formula we middle-class American Christians have to calculate, consciously or not:

*Our personal concerns*

÷

*Our interpretation of Jesus' life  
and words about the poor*

=

*Our decisions about risks,  
comforts, and ambitions*

You want to hear about the wild dogs? I did, too.

One morning several months after moving here, Kao was walking near a small pond on the edge of the community. She had been warned about dogs that belonged to a rich family nearby, but had been able to scare other strays by "looking big." Three dogs appeared.

They didn't care how big she looked. They clamped down on her legs. Kao screamed. She walked back to her house bleeding, more embarrassed than afraid.

That's the whole story. It's not *Chicken Soup for the Missionary Soul*. It's sharing risks and discomfort with neighbors. Today Kao laughs it off.

Francis of Assisi was born in the 12th century to a wealthy family and destined for a life of privilege. Then he heard Jesus' call and walked away from it all. He launched a corrective movement that continues today as the Franciscan Order of the Catholic Church.

There are many stories about Francis, including one in which he preaches to a flock of birds. That story may be true, but it's been reduced to sentimentalism. I hereby propose that—because the dogs didn't placidly sit to hear an impromptu sermon, and because it represents the transition from

rural to urban mission—we replace "Francis Preaching to the Birds" with "Michelle Bitten by the Dogs." The bucolic birds can go to the birds. Missionaries today must figure out how to serve in the mosquito buzz of concrete and corrugated tin.

Later Kao and I walk to a nearby restaurant. Over sticky rice and shredded catfish deep-fried into a crispy tangle, Kao says, "I love what I do. But a while ago, I was questioning my calling. I had this idea that once you discovered your calling, you'd feel fulfilled, like you had *made it*. There were parts that still felt difficult and unclear, and even now I have questions about whether what I do makes a difference.

"So I called some friends in the States. I was wondering if they had figured everything out. To my surprise, every one of them felt like I did. It was good to be reminded that only God can ultimately fulfill. I feel

**Walking the Walk: Tim Hupe's daughters have grown up in Bangkok as he and his wife serve Cambodians there.**







like I've found a home in this community."

Her programs are small. She provides 17 scholarships for high schoolers, trains community leaders, leads a tiny house church, and cares for a couple dozen children after school. Might she have had greater impact as a doctor? Yet watching Kao work with such joy and fluency, seeming so clearly in the right place, brings to mind a question about our own vocations: *How are my talents and efforts responding to the world's deep needs?*

On this washing-feet day, Jesus looms with crazy encouragement about how to answer. It's uncomfortable to serve people you don't have to, but it is the way of Life.

As Maundy Thursday closes, I stay nearby in a small, sweaty room with one of Kao's talented young Thai colleagues. He was nicknamed Sprite by his grandmother, who hoped his skin would get lighter, like the soft drink.

## GOOD FRIDAY

ON SACRIFICE—and *When Jesus Was Sent On the Way of the Cross*

Jesus died for our sins. And, judging from the

first steps into the market, so does every creature of land and sea for someone's daily diet. Snakehead fish and eels wriggle depravedly, frogs thump like gray-green hearts, piles of ants and grubs writhe in slow motion.

Sayiuud Diwong is leading us through the market. Wearing a polo shirt, jean shorts, and neon-laced Adidas, she then takes us to her kitchen in the Klong Toey slum of 100,000 people. Her nickname is Poo, shortened from the Thai word for a kind of apple. Her cookbook and class are called *Cooking with Poo*. A sense of humor helps in a place like this.

Australian missionary couple Anji and Ash Barker met Poo 11 years ago, after moving into a tiny house in Klong Toey, where they've raised their three children. Diwong had the best nearby food stand. They bought meals from her often. They also saw that hustling to sell 100 plates a day wasn't supporting her family.

They listened to suffering in Klong Toey—to the cries of a child being abused at night, to the screams of a child being raped by her father, to the aching silence after another child died. They also listened to strengths

**Yielding Crops:** Amy Hupe and Mina Thapa cut basil to make and sell pesto, which helps support their work for the kingdom.

and dreams and, through friendship and work, found the resources to help those strengths flourish.

"Anji showed me that five hot peppers okay for Thai to eat, but for Americans, only one hot pepper," jokes Diwong.

She is one of the New Friars' success stories. She pairs well with Kao and the savage dogs.

Ash and Anji have ministered like this for the past 20 years, first in Melbourne, now in Bangkok, through Urban Neighbours of Hope (UNOH). Ash has written a number of books along the way, including *Making Poverty Personal*. Anji has helped start many small businesses, her irreverent humor leavening the disappointments.

*Cooking with Poo* has sold more than 11,000 copies. Diwong's daily cooking class for eight people is often booked weeks in advance. Businesses that UNOH has helped start now employ more than 100 Thais.

Maundy Thursday meets Good Friday. Diwong's business rose from the Barkers' foot-washing posture in a place where people



*With their lives, the New Friars pose questions about mission and the sacrifice of true listening by being with others in body.*

daily undergo crucifixion-like sufferings. Exaggeration? What else, O Lord, are the screams of that innocent child?

As Diwong teaches us to cook Tom Yum Gai, a soup aromatic with lemongrass and lime, I look up at the wall. On the right is a golden shelf with a pink plastic Buddha; on the left, Ganesh, the Hindu elephant god. Between them is a cross. On this Golgotha day, different companions have replaced the thieves.

The New Friars network is diverse, though not to the extent of Diwong's wall hangings. While most are living in situations somewhat like Ash and Anji's, not all are as focused on finding as many Diwongs as possible. Working among the poor takes place on a continuum between "being with" and "doing for." The New Friars tend toward the "being with" end. The Barkers see themselves *being with* so they can create opportunities for.

*Cooking with Poo* is hard to replicate and won't solve world poverty. But it raises a question on this Good Friday that many Western churches could ask more: *What cost are we willing to pay to listen to our urban neighbors, so we can provide opportunities for them to flourish using their strengths?*

Books like Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* asked evangelicals a version of this question decades ago, as books like *When Helping Hurts* and *Toxic Charity* do today. With their lives, the New Friars pose questions about mission and the sacrifice of true listening by being with others *in body*. Some answers can be heard only alongside people who, though of course their lives bear laughter and meaning, too often walk what looks like the way of the cross.

## HOLY SATURDAY

ON DEVOTION—and *When Everything Went on Hold As Jesus Descended to the Dead*

Holy Saturday marks the pause between death and resurrection, when Jesus descended to the dead. Descending to the dead came to mind

often last night as I dodged cars, bicycling behind Tim Hupe along Sathon Tai Road through downtown Bangkok.

Tim and his wife, Amy, lead the Bangkok team for Word Made Flesh, another New Friars organization. They have lived here for five years and have two girls, ages 4 and 6. They are gathering missionaries and local Thai and Cambodian leaders to serve Cambodians living in Thailand. This includes teenagers who sell flowers in the red-light district (and are pressured to sell much more).

Like much in the New Friars' approach to mission, Tim's biking is prompted by a mix of idealism (bicycling is simple, frugal, environmentally friendly), practicality (traf-

homes in 100-degree heat. They are neighbors to people who are vulnerable to more disease—and with less medical care available. They struggle spiritually and physically. They have found they need traditional practices of prayer that allow them to listen to Scripture and to God. These include the prayer of *examen*, *lectio divina*, and silent retreats. As cross-cultural missionaries working in places of suffering, they are uprooted. So they desire spirituality with roots. At their conference, along with missionaries from groups like InnerCHANGE and Servants to Asia's Urban Poor, they will spend a lot of time praying through the hours, singing worship choruses and Taizé melodies.

The Bangkok Word Made Flesh prayer room features eight crosses. Six of them are crucifixes.

Second, they recognize that, as author Leanne Payne said, "We either contemplate or we exploit." This applies especially when crossing borders into complex dynamics of culture and power.

As a group, the New Friars strive to navigate these dynamics well. As a missionary, it's important to both appreciate and be leery of the legacy in which one walks (or bikes). For example, while many missionaries spoke out against colonialism among native and aboriginal peoples,

too many participated in its abuses. The list of atrocities and absurdities perpetrated in the name of Jesus is a call to Holy Saturday pauses. They ward off efforts that try to *do for* without the compassion that comes from *being with*.

In Haiti, with complexities stretching back 500 years, I've spoken with Americans who think they know how to "turn this thing around" 72 hours into their first visit. If such thinking isn't slowed, what follows will end poorly for everyone involved.

This morning I walk from Word Made Flesh to Holy Redeemer Church nearby. The beautiful Buddhist-Thai inspired architecture



**Giving Thanks:** Kao thanks a street vendor for the fruit. Kao has 3,000 people in her neighborhood.

fic is bad), and simple preference. It is also unnecessary; safer transport is available. Yet the slow, deliberate way of the bike sometimes takes Tim through gridlock faster than the yellow Lam-borghini we glide past.

The New Friars recognize that their work requires the slow, deliberate pause of Holy Saturday, for two reasons.

First, they need spiritual nourishment amid trying circumstances.

"It's said that pregnant women crave what their bodies need, like a certain food to meet a vitamin deficiency," says Bessenecker. "I think this is true for these missionaries. They crave a spirituality that can nourish their faith in the demanding locations where they are working."

The New Friars often live in cramped



## Related Organizations

### INTERVARSITY CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

Who did you hang out with this summer? How about people with disabilities living in a slum atop a Cairo garbage dump? The Global Urban Trek program has sent over 1,200 students to slum communities since 2001. Some have later joined a New Friars organization.

### CATHOLIC ORDERS

Clearly the three hooks of any great marketing campaign are Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. It's hard to resist making vows like these and starting a lifelong adventure with the Sisters of Charity (founded by Mother Teresa), Franciscans, Benedictines, and similar orders around the world. You'd just better be called.

### INTERNATIONAL TEAMS

The wisdom of the centuries is that you probably shouldn't try this stuff alone. Teamwork is the way to go and the way to serve. So this organization commissions multicultural expat teams in 50 cities around the world. It is committed to both holistic ministry and "living with" approaches.

### YOUTH WITH A MISSION (YWAM)

Who can take you to almost any country represented in the UN? This missionary movement started in 1960 and now has more than 18,000 staff in 180 countries. It has a decentralized structure and variety of approaches to ministry. The calling card is a five-month Discipleship Training School.

### PEACE CORPS

One of the items on this list is not like the others. Yes, this one. But more than 200,000 Americans have had "living with" experiences with people across borders through this government program established by President John F. Kennedy.

### MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE (MCC)

Ever bought a free-trade gift from Ten Thousand Villages? MCC goes much deeper with a long history of patient, unflashy, effective relief and development work. They work through local groups in about 50 countries.

### L'ARCHE

The author Henri Nouwen moved to one of these communities. They enable people with and without disabilities to share their lives in community. This isn't traditional "missionary" work. But there are resemblances, and many of the New Friars draw inspiration from founder Jean Vanier.

## CHAOS AND GRACE IN THE SLUMS OF THE EARTH

had caught my eye. It was founded by Redemptorists, a Catholic society founded in 1732, dedicated to preaching and serving the poor.

Frescos that stretch 40 feet long and 10 feet high line the church walls. I spend 30 minutes with artist Virgilio Manipol's stunning portrayal of the Incarnation. The 14 Stations of the Cross merge into a kind of incarnation wrestling match: life unto crucifixion unto life. The dozens of bodies comforting Christ, mocking him, carrying the cross for him are pushing to the limit. Every face is strained.

The New Friars are trying to work out, in their lives and communities, how to at once contemplate God and serve the world. Good Friday is struggle. Holy Saturday is pause. During that pause, their lives ask us: *How can our devotional lives help us listen for God as a necessary part of pursuing God's justice?*

Faith is hoping that the struggle depicted on these frescos makes a difference now and forever. Holy Saturday reminds us not to rush toward hope that won't last.

## EASTER SUNDAY

ON HOPE—and *When Jesus Is Alive and Giving Life*

Michelle Kao's church meets at the Servant Partners office on 146 street. Three churches connected to Servant Partners are gathering this morning to celebrate Easter. The congregation consists of 23 Thais and 4 Servant Partners staff, including Kao.

The preacher, Sanyasin Charoensuksap, was once a Buddhist monk. For seven years, he came to Servant Partners' English classes. That built trust and enabled him to see something in Jesus that led him to convert. Now he's preaching a resurrection sermon peppered with references to Isaiah, Romans, Ephesians, and 1 Corinthians 15.

This worship service is on a very different scale than where Kao and I first met. The triennial Urbana Student Missions Conference, held this past December in St. Louis, drew more than 15,000 students. There I had watched Kao tie a red string around a student's wrist while praying for her in a huge exhibit hall. The string is a Thai Buddhist blessing that some missionaries and Thai Christians have adapted.

So what is the distinctive blessing that comes from the news that "Christ is risen"?

In recent decades, more American

evangelicals have embraced a holistic understanding of the blessing they are to share. Distributing tracts was a major strategy in the days when mission distinguished sharply between the physical and spiritual. In this model, mission is simply figuring out how to tell others the Good News. Today, many more see mission as sharing life with patient integrity as the faithful way of witnessing to God's love in Jesus. The blessing is now seen as applying to *life*—undivided life. Jesus came to bring abundant life that doesn't end with death, but also doesn't start there.

The gospel is physical: a baby and placenta, dirty feet and healings, mud and food, a torn curtain and a cross. And it is spiritual: forgiveness, invitation to salvation, new life. The New Friars mix the two, emphasizing church planting and community development in distinct ways, depending on the organization.

I asked the Barkers about the Buddha, Ganesh, and the cross on the wall in Diwong's kitchen. Diwong had told me she is Buddhist but likes going to church every week.

"We're trying to go slowly," says Anji, "and trust that God is as powerful as we believe. We need to see: *What does it mean to be Thai and Christian?* Not, *What does it mean to be a Western version of Thai?*"

Meanwhile, they partner with Diwong on joint business development projects. The Barkers' approach clashes both with missionary efforts that see conversion as the *raison d'être* and with development programs that see faith as irrelevant.

"I think there will be a day when there will be only [a cross on the wall]," says Ash. "That's my hope."

After Easter service and lunch at Kao's church, I cross the city to the historic district. I take a taxi to the Wat Pho temple, restored to its current appearance in 1788. Its claim to fame is the Reclining Buddha in the main building. He fills the entire temple, lying with his head propped up. He's 50 by 150 feet of shining gold. He's hugely serene.

As I take in the Buddha, I remember the frescos from yesterday, with their scenes of life, the Cross, and the Resurrection. Both images speak meaningfully to their followers. But the image of Jesus powerfully communicates *being with* in the midst of suffering and struggle.

The Easter story offers specific hope that suffering and struggle will ultimately

be redeemed. Jesus walked in the garden and asked Mary Magdalene, “Why are you weeping?” The Resurrection isn’t just the physical pressed into service to demonstrate a theological idea. It is embodied. Jesus roasted fish to share with his friends at the lakeside.

For those of us in middle-class America, the New Friars remind us that the gospel does not just rescue *from* spiritual struggle. It also invites us *into* struggle alongside others: *How do our lives embody resurrection hope—especially alongside those who need hope the most?*

Moving to a slum, taking on discomfort and risk, living with rats (the one I saw in the Hupes’ former home would have sent any sensible cat fleeing)—this is one way to live hope in Christ’s resurrection.

## MISSION MONDAY

*On Foot-Washing, Crucifixion, Waiting, and Resurrection All Over Again*

Riding down the brownish water of the Saen Saep canal on a riverboat, we pass several glittering temples. But I am more entranced by the boat itself, with its make-do tarps, pulleys, and wires. Two attendants tightrope along the boat’s edge, jumping off every five minutes at a dock, where they flip a rope around a piling to anchor the boat as people get off and on, then flip the rope back off before gliding back on as the boat pulls away. The captain and two attendants rarely speak, in sync with each other’s rhythms. They occasionally misfire, but then adjust. There is beauty in the



**Recipe for Growth:** Sayiud ‘Poo’ Diwong tells Scott Bessenecker how to make Pad Thai as Poo’s husband, Khun Kare, and Ash and Anji Barker listen in.

and Latin American pastors leading millions of people in revival and growth. And they are often caring for the vulnerable in their own communities. Holding up the New Friars too highly risks heroism of the “White Man’s Burden” variety.

But there is also the risk of understating their importance. If the church is called to do missions, then the New Friars have a place.

On this Monday after Easter, I visit Father Joe, who has lived for 40 years in the same

engagement, we need fellow Christians who aren’t dabblers. We need voices from groups like these friars (new and old) to speak alongside social media, short-term mission teams, denominational agencies, and international nonprofits. The friars take respecting and listening as seriously as we all should. My own New Friar-style years in Haiti, and the relationships formed along the way, have been invaluable to my work and a grace in my life.

The missionary life requires resurrection listening. It requires listening to how God’s hope is already present—missionaries don’t “take God” anywhere. It requires working for the common good while seeking ways to share the specific hope of Christ. The New Friars are listening for God in conditions where God’s concern for humanity can seem absent. They’re listening to people who are often ignored. And in a way, they are out there listening for us—for the Western church especially. Their lives make intensely personal the four questions I asked above.

In this, they join with the desert mothers and fathers, the original friars, the martyrs, the artists, the poets—people pushing out to the edge. They join with those who live faithfully alongside young people under gunfire in American cities. They join with the academics and the church ladies, the businesspeople and the monastics, the best practices and the grassroots insights, the mystics and the metrics. Together, we can move across the dirty canal water in beautiful ways.

Late Monday night, I walk with Amy, Tim,

*When ‘justice’ is trendy and when ‘liking’ something on Facebook counts as engagement, we need fellow Christians who aren’t dabblers.*

way the three of them move us along.

What is the place of the New Friars in the grand scheme of missions? It is easy to either over- or understate the answer.

The risk of overstating is due to the fact that this network consists of only about 200 missionaries, most of them young and white. Generally, their access to financial support allows them to serve in a way that is affordable only to the relatively rich. (They know and wrestle with this.) The truly sizable “movements” in the global church consist of African

slum as Poo and the Barkers. He’s a Redemptorist priest, which I guess makes him an “old friar.” He’s built a significant institute here, focused on education.

“I started off [living in the slum],” he says. “I couldn’t live uptown and come down and—” he puts his hands out and wiggles his fingers daintily, as though such a dabbling approach could have meaningful effect. “You’ve got to be with the people.”

When “justice” is trendy and when “liking” something on Facebook counts as



## Going Deeper

For such small, grassroots organizations, the five New Friars groups that gathered in Bangkok have produced a remarkable number of books and resources. Among the books by their community members and friends:

**Friendship at the Margins**, by Chris Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl (IVP). Explores hospitality and friendship—rather than turning people into targets—as a guide for ministry.

**Slum Life Rising**, by Ash Barker (UNOH Publishing). Both a sociological and deeply personal look at life and ministry in urban slums worldwide.

**The Urban Halo**, by Craig Greenfield (Authentic Media). The founder of Servants Vancouver recounts his experience of working with orphans while living in a Cambodian slum.

**Submerge**, by John B. Hayes (Regal). Connects the spiritual and physical needs of the poor and rich.

**Living Mission**, edited by Scott A. Bessenecker (IVP). This volume brings together 13 leaders connected to the New Friars as they articulate the vision and marks of the movement.

## CHAOS AND GRACE IN THE SLUMS OF THE EARTH

and their Thai colleague Naamfon to a nearby red-light district. Tim sits with three teenagers doing homework on a sidewalk under the glow of a 7-Eleven. He tracks their weekly progress in a binder. Amy says she's heard that about 6,000 people work as prostitutes within these few blocks. She sits on a curb with a woman they have befriended and helped over the years. She is back on drugs and in prostitution.

Nearing midnight, after a couple hours, we start walking back past the music, the bars, the lights, the men who exploit too many girls and women in too many places, the women in hip-high skirts. I'm next to Amy, but she stops to talk with a teenager who is considered a *katoey* prostitute (also known as "a lady-boy").

I step up off the street onto the sidewalk to wait. Then I feel a gentle hand move onto my chest. I turn. A young, long-legged Thai woman says, "Hiiiiiee. How yoooouuu?"

The social expectations around here are as plain as the neon is bright. She was kindly doing what was appropriate. Wanting to be clear but not rude, I say, "Oh, um, sorry, uh..."

Amy sees me and, smiling, says to her in

Thai, "Oh, hi. No, he doesn't want." On Amy's right forearm is her tattoo of Revelation 22:2 in both Khmer and Thai script:

*On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

The woman takes her hand off my chest with playful embarrassment. To Amy, she does the Thai bow of greeting and respect, bending forward with hands pressed together. Since Tim is farther back, she thinks Amy and I are a couple.

The young woman turns to me. We look at each other. Smiling, she bows to me, and I bow back. Then we both start laughing. ☺

**Kent Annan** is codirector of Haiti Partners, a nonprofit focused on education in Haiti, and author of *After Shock* and *Following Jesus Through the Eye of the Needle* (InterVarsity Press). He is on the board of directors of Equitas Group, a philanthropic foundation focused on ending child exploitation in Haiti and Southeast Asia.

“Asbury Seminary is a community in pursuit of  
*holiness of heart and life.*”

—Chris Kiesling



Dr. Kiesling is a Professor of Human Development and Christian Discipleship at Asbury Theological Seminary. His areas of expertise include campus ministry and the spiritual formation of young adults.

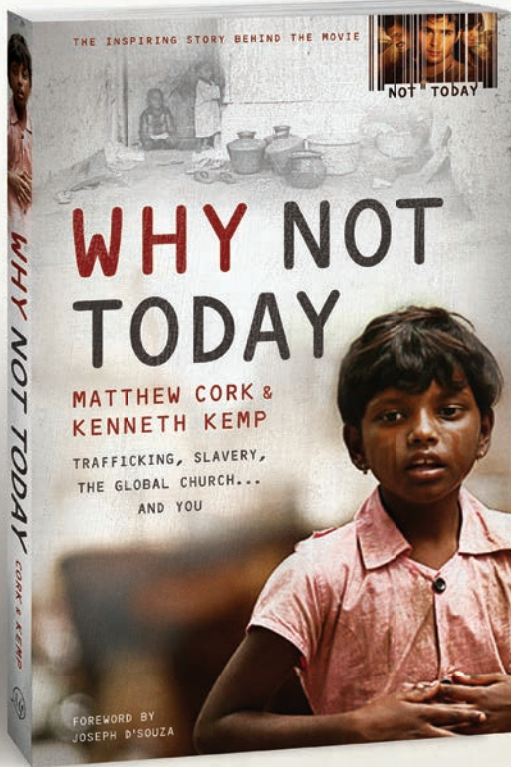
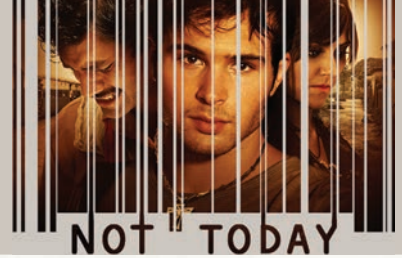
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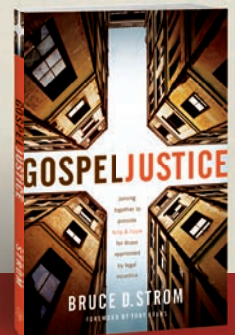
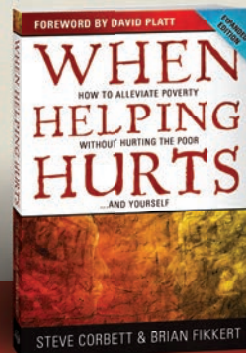
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# God's Word in Two Words

All that we need to understand the power of the gospel.

By Tullian Tchividjian

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HRISTIANS OFTEN WISH that God would speak the way that he used to speak to his people—audibly, through burning bushes, dreams, and doves descending from the sky. That way, it would seem so much easier to discern what he is saying.

Today, most Christians agree, the main way God speaks to his people is through the Bible. For too many, though, what he *says* there is a complete mystery, impossible to understand.

It doesn't have to be.

Many people read the Bible as if it were fundamentally about us: our improvement, our life, our victory, our faith, our holiness, our godliness. We treat it like a disconnected series of timeless principles that will give us our best life now, if we simply apply them. We read it, in other words, as if it were a heaven-sent self-help manual. But by reading the Bible this way, we—like the two companions on the road to Emmaus—totally miss



the point. As Luke 24 shows, it's possible to read the Bible, study the Bible—even memorize large portions of the Bible—and miss its essential meaning. In fact, unless we go to the Bible to see Jesus and his work for us, even devout Bible reading can become fuel for our own self-improvement plans, a source for the help we need to conquer today's challenges and take control of our lives.

God's goal in speaking to us in the Bible is profound, but not complicated. In fact, we can say that all of God's Word comes to us in two words. And if we are going to understand the Bible rightly, we have to be able to distinguish properly between these two words.

### DIFFERENT JOB DESCRIPTIONS

The Protestant Reformers were all in agreement that all of God's Word comes to us in two forms of speech: *law* and *gospel*. The law is God's word of demand, and the gospel is God's word of deliverance. The law tells us what to do, while the gospel tells us what God has done. If you pick up your Bible and turn to any page, you're going to find one of two things: either a passage that demands something from you (law), like "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12), or a passage that delivers something to you (gospel), like "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, ESV). Everything in both the Old and New Testaments comes in one of these two forms. "Hence," wrote Martin Luther, "whoever knows well this art of distinguishing between the law and the gospel, him place at the head and call him a doctor of Holy Scripture."

Obviously, both God's law and God's gospel come from God, which means both are good and necessary for us to hear. But they do very different things. This distinction may seem irrelevantly abstract—something that would fascinate only the theologian or linguist—but serious life confusion happens when we confuse law and gospel, when we fail to understand their unique job descriptions. John Calvin's protégé, Theodore Beza, went so far as to say, "Ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity."

So what are the "job descriptions" of God's two words? Let me answer by way of illustration.

My wife and I have three children: Gabe (18), Nate (16), and Genna (12). In order for us to function as a community of five in our home, rules need to be established. Laws need to be put in place. Our kids know that they can't steal from each other. They have to share the computer. Since harmonious relationships depend on trust, they can't lie. Because we have three cars and four drivers, our sons can't simply announce that they're taking one of the cars. Each has to ask ahead of time. Rules are necessary. But telling them, over and over, what they can and cannot do won't change their hearts or make them *want* to comply.

When one of our kids (typically Genna) throws a temper tantrum, thereby breaking one of the rules, we can send her to her room and

take away some of her privileges. But while this may rightly produce sorrow at the revelation of her sin, it does not have the power to remove her sin. In other words, the law can crush her, but it cannot cure her—it can kill her, but it cannot make her alive. If Kim and I don't follow up the law with the gospel, Genna would be left without hope—defeated but not delivered.

In Romans 7, the apostle Paul makes it clear that the law illuminates sin but is powerless to eliminate sin. That's not part of its job description. It *points* to righteousness but can't *produce* it. It shows us what godliness is, but it cannot make us godly. The law can inform us of our sin, but it cannot transform the sinner. Only the gospel can do that. As Luther said, "Sin is not canceled by lawful living, for no person is able to live up to the Law. Nothing can take away sin except the grace of God."

The law is God's first word, but the gospel is God's final word. The gospel alone is "the power of God unto salvation," which means that the law forces us to face our sin, but only the gospel can forgive us our sin. The law accuses us, while the gospel acquits us. The law exposes, but only the gospel exonerates. The law may curtail bad behavior, but only grace can transform the heart.

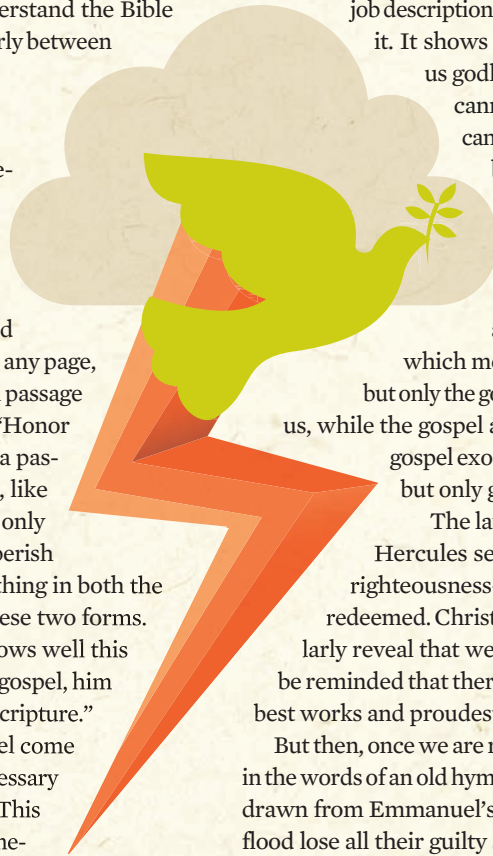
The law, to paraphrase Luther, is a divinely sent Hercules sent to attack and kill the monster of self-righteousness—a monster that continues to harass the redeemed. Christians, in other words, need the law to regularly reveal that we are worse off than we think. We need to be reminded that there is something to be pardoned even in our best works and proudest achievements.

But then, once we are recrushed by law, we need to be reminded, in the words of an old hymn, that "there is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains." We need to hear that the sins we cannot forget, God cannot remember, or as another old hymn puts it, that "though th' accuser roar, of ills that I have done, I know them well and thousands more; Jehovah findeth none." We need to hear over and over that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, that nothing can separate us from God's love, and that Christians live their lives under a banner that reads, "It is finished."

### CHEAP LAW

Christians who talk a lot about grace are thought to have a low view of God's law. Correspondingly, those with a high view of the law are thought to be legalists. But the late Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen said this gets the matter backwards: "A low view of the law always produces legalism; a high view of the law makes a person a seeker after grace." This is because a low view of the law encourages us to conclude that we can keep it—the bar is low enough for us to jump over. A low view of the law makes us think that its standards are attainable, its goals reachable, its demands doable.

A high view of the law, however, demolishes all such confidence. It leaves us no room for supposing that God supplies helpful tips for practical living, rather than demanding absolute perfection. We'll always be suspicious of unconditional grace as long as we think our





own moral efforts are sufficient. Only an inflexible picture of what God demands reveals the depth of our ongoing need for the gospel.

This means that, contrary to what some Christians would have you believe, the biggest problem facing the church today is not “cheap grace” but “cheap law”—the idea that God accepts anything less than the perfect righteousness of Jesus. Essayist John Dink writes, “Cheap law weakens God’s demand for perfection, and in doing so, breathes life into the old creature and his quest for a righteousness of his own making. . . . Cheap law tells us that we’ve fallen, but there’s good news, you can get back up again. . . . Therein lies the great heresy of cheap law: it is a false gospel. And it cheapens—no—it nullifies grace.”

Only when we see that the way of God’s law is absolutely inflexible will we see that God’s grace is absolutely indispensable. A high view of the law reminds us that God accepts us on the basis of Christ’s perfection, not our progress. It reminds us, then, to seek deliverance only in the gospel. In other words, a high view of the law produces a high view of grace. A low view of the law produces a low view of grace. God’s good law reveals our desperation; God’s good gospel reveals our deliverer. We are in constant need of hearing both.

#### LITTLE-L LAW

When talking about “the law,” we need to know the difference between what I call “big-L” law and “little-L” law. Big-L law is what I’ve been writing about so far. It comes from God and is outlined in the Ten Commandments, reiterated in the Sermon on the Mount, and summarized by Jesus as the command to “love the Lord with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength” and “love our neighbor.”

But there’s another law (little-L) that permeates daily life. Paul Zahl, in his wonderful little book *Who Will Deliver Us?*, writes that “law with a small L . . . is any voice that makes us feel that we must do something or be something to merit the approval of another. . . . In the Bible, the Law comes from God. In daily living, law is an internalized principle of self-accusation. We might say that the innumerable laws we carry inside us are bastard children of the Law.”

You’re familiar with this kind of “law,” even if you’ve never described it that way. It comes in the form of internal “musts.”

The “oughts” of life are numerous. You feel them every day: commercials promising a better life if you work at getting a better body, a neighbor’s new car that you can’t afford, a beautiful person you can’t hope to compare to, the success of your more talented coworker. All of these things have the power to communicate, “You’re not enough.” Maybe you feel that you have to be on top of everything if you’re going to make it; that you have to infallibly parent your kids if they’re going to turn out okay; that you have to control what others think about you if you’re going to get respect; or that you have to be successful to satisfy a deep desire for parental approval.

Not long ago, I was driving down the road near my house, and I passed a sign in front of a store that read, “Life is the art of drawing without an eraser.” Meant to inspire drivers-by to work hard, live well, and avoid fretting over possible mistakes, it instead served as a booming voice of little-L law: “Don’t mess up. There are no second chances. You better get it right the first time.”

How do we deal with these ruthless musts and demands? Is there any hope?

At least twice in the past year, I’ve been late for a meeting or an appointment and haven’t been able to find my car keys. Certain that either my wife or one of my children had misplaced them, I’ve frantically run from room to room assigning blame. “Who was playing with my keys? I put them right here on the counter and now they’re gone. They didn’t just vanish into thin air! Who picked them up? Where are they? I’m late.” And right when I’m about ready to order mass executions, I walk into my bedroom one last time to look (huffing and puffing, moaning and groaning), put my hand in my pocket, and find my keys. They’d been there the whole time.

Every time I tell that story, people laugh. And rightfully so. Who frantically looks for car keys that are in his pocket? Me. That’s who.

The truth is, we all typically live this way: frantically and frustratingly searching for something we already have. The gospel is God’s good news announcement that everything we need we already possess in Christ. Because of Jesus’ finished work, Christians already have all of the justification, approval, significance,

security, freedom, validation, love, righteousness, and rescue that we desperately long for, and look for in a thousand things infinitely smaller than Jesus. When we work so hard to appease those little-L judges, we forget that the big-L judge—almighty God—has already been appeased in Christ. We allow our internal voice, one that constantly says, “Do this and live,” to drown out the external voice that shouts, “It is finished!”

#### THE WORK OF THE REDEEMER

Before God’s holy law and our own personalized laws, we are judged and rightly found wanting. I am not the follower of Christ that I ought to be, nor am I the father, husband, pastor, or friend I should be. I wish I could say I do everything for God’s glory. I can’t. Neither can you. What I can say is that Jesus’ blood covers all my efforts to glorify myself.

I wish I could say Jesus fully satisfies me. I can’t. Neither can you. What I can say is Jesus fully satisfied God for me.

If law were the one word of God—if the Bible were basically a book of instructions—we would be doomed. Jesus announced that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus fulfilled all of God’s holy conditions so that our relationship to him could be wholly unconditional. The primary message of the Bible, then, is this: The law-maker became the law-keeper and died for me—the law-breaker.

The Bible is one long story of God meeting our rebellion with his rescue, our sin with his salvation, our guilt with his grace. The overwhelming focus of the Bible is not the work of the redeemed but the work of the Redeemer. Which means that the Bible is not first a recipe book for Christian living, but a revelation book of Jesus, who is the answer to our un-Christian living. ✚

**Tullian Tchividjian** is senior pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He is the author of the forthcoming *One Way Love: Inexhaustible Grace for an Exhausted World* (David C. Cook).





By Mark R. Gornik  
and Maria Liu Wong

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N A BRISK October Saturday in 2012, hundreds of teenagers, young adults, and youth leaders gathered at Battery Park in Manhattan. In earlier days, the historic public park facing New York Harbor was the first place to receive immigrants from Europe and elsewhere. But this morning, it received members of black and Latino Pentecostal churches nestled throughout Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island. The crowd donned T-shirts and jerseys proclaiming GOD BELONGS IN MY CITY (GBIMC). They were embarking on a rolling prayer meeting that would make its way from the southern tip of Manhattan up to Times Square.

The youth were not tourists. They did not gape at architectural landmarks like the Flatiron and Empire State along the way. Instead, they sang and laughed as they

MARK GORNIK AND DANIEL GORNIK





**Grand Central Faith:** Over 1,500 black, white, and Latino youth marched to Grand Central Terminal last fall to declare 'God Belongs in My City.' Apple Store shoppers in the background stopped to watch.

walked and talked, texted, and tweeted about their journey. Many stopped to scribble GBMC and John 3:16 in chalk on the sidewalks. They walked the city with purpose and possibility. They knew where they were going.

They intermittently bowed their heads and lifted their arms, blessing and praying for “this great city,” for “the unity of the church and the city,” for “the government and leadership,” and for Mayor Michael Bloomberg. They prayed for public officials and city employees, especially for teachers, firefighters, and police.

A sister contingent of New York youth started from Central Park up in Harlem. A few hours later, the two groups met in Times Square at the TKTS discount Broadway ticket booth. Cheers, prayers, and



improvised signs went up as the youth watched themselves on a giant video screen overlooking the bustling median. Now one entity, they moved eastward to Grand Central Terminal.

The few hundred who had started in Battery Park and Harlem had blossomed into some 1,500 marchers. They overflowed the cavernous hall with its central clock tower, and they spilled out into the passageways and onto the busy streets and sidewalks. Customers at the Apple Store, perched on the mezzanine at Grand Central, stopped to see what was happening.

As they started to kneel in prayer, however, the transit police arrived. “You cannot stay,” they announced. And they were serious.



The entire station seemed to pause, waiting to see what would happen next.

### A WORLD OF FAITH IN THE CITY

There are two ways Christians tend to see the city and God in the city. The first peers through a lens that sees primarily what is wrong with it. It can miss seeing the city as God's good gift, and the church already active in the city. Because it often moves quickly into problem-solving, like a missions trip to "save" or "bring God to" New York, it can overlook what many churches are already doing and the dynamic ways that cities work.

The second way is to try to see the city through the eyes of God. Listening to the Holy Spirit, it seeks to build on what is already happening, working within existing structures and relationships. Change comes from the inside out, through people who know and live there. They can make a longer commitment and deeper difference than those who stop in and just as quickly leave.

Many forces can prevent outsiders from seeing what God is doing in New York. The city's booming media industry, from television to film, to fashion and music, has reinforced for many non-New Yorkers an image of sophistication on one hand or urban grit on the other. But rarely does pop culture capture the religious ferment going on underneath.

We at City Seminary of New York see God at work in ways that confound stereotypes of a secular landscape. That work is led by grassroots ministries energized by an influx of Christians from around the world coming to New York City. Their work is less about setting up specific programs or starting new churches—though they do that in great numbers—than about enabling fellow Christians to live out their faith in the city, in order to bless their neighborhoods and neighbors.

GBIMC is one such grassroots ministry. It launched in 2009 at Brooklyn's Park Slope Christian Tabernacle, a Latino Pentecostal congregation located a few blocks from the new Barclays Center, set in place before recent gentrification. Members of the church's CrossOver Youth Ministry had picked up a newspaper in the subway that read "Got God?" highlighting a campaign to fill the subways with the message, "A Million New Yorkers are good without God. Are you?"

It would be easy to see GBIMC as a counterpoint, a protest, to a secular age. But that would be wrong. Instead, they believed that whatever people thought about God, the question pointed back to them: Was the church a living demonstration of his kingdom?

With youth minister Daniel Sanabria, and harnessing new social media matched to relationships in the city, CrossOver members embarked on their first prayer walk, the one that ended with 1,500 crowding Grand Central Terminal (and is now an annual event). With a vision rooted in Jeremiah 29:4–7, and a desire to make their faith public, GBIMC has now spread to 30 other cities.

GBIMC is a moving and festive demonstration of the vitality that global Christians bring to New York. Nancy Foner, professor

of sociology at Hunter College, says that in 2009, immigrants and their American-born children composed 55 percent of New York City's population.

Previous waves of immigrants to NYC came from Europe. Today, the newest New Yorkers arrive from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the West Indies, places where Christianity is already flourishing. Cities like Seoul and Hong Kong; Monrovia, Liberia; Accra, Ghana; Kingston, Jamaica; and Buenos Aires are centers of vibrant Christian growth. The global church is on the move, and cities play a central role in connecting its members.

Just as financial networks flow through New York and connect to other cities, so do circuits of faith. As people move to New York City to build a better life for their families—a dynamic that has shaped the city since its founding as New Amsterdam in 1624—many are bringing their churches and distinct ministry practices. Of course, migration as a primary means of church expansion is not a new trend, but instead goes back to the earliest Christians. But because of technology and greater access to air travel, this movement runs in both directions.

As a result, New York City has arguably the greatest global diversity and density of Christianity of any city. As you travel eastbound on the #7 subway line from Times Square to Flushing, Queens, the number of languages you hear multiplies. As *The New York Times* has noted, perhaps one in ten New Yorkers is now a Pentecostal, most likely with ties to Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the West Indies. Our research at City Seminary suggests that 2,000 new churches have been established by the newest New Yorkers since the 1980s, and that estimate may be conservative. While many of these churches are Pentecostal, they represent a wide range of denominations and theological traditions. They are crossing borders both physical and intangible.

There is a single Baptist church building in Queens that hosts Korean, Indonesian, and Punjabi congregations. Many Catholic parishes, such as one in the Bronx, offer services in English, Spanish, and Twi. As the historian Andrew Walls writes, "The Ephesian moment—the social coming together of people of [different] cultures to experience Christ"—has come again, describing a church that is more diverse than ever. And that global church is *here* in New York City.

Manhattan continues to see churches thrive in stately buildings, school auditoriums, and music clubs. But the centers of Christian life and growth are increasingly found where immigration has had the greatest impact—in the borrowed church buildings and repurposed spaces in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island. This development, however, is not about numbers, but about how the young Christians of GBIMC and others are doing theology "on the ground," working out the gospel in every sphere, culture, and segment of life.

Living in New York and teaching at City Seminary has helped us see a more global and complex New York City. As a seminary community we bring our stories together, seeking to discover how we can more deeply enter God's story and understand

***Manhattan continues to see churches thrive. But the centers of Christian life and growth are increasingly found in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island.***



**Dynamic Team:** Pastors Abosede and Adebisi Oyesile moved from Nigeria to Brooklyn for their family. Adebisi (right) leads a church, works on Wall Street, and teaches at City Seminary.

this “Ephesian moment.”

To illustrate how this boundary-crossing faith is being lived out, we look at three stories, starting in Brooklyn.

#### **‘WE WILL NOT GO HOME THE SAME’**

“It’s going to be an awesome day in the kingdom!” says pastor Abosede “Abby” Oyesile on a Sunday morning at Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Chapel of Hope. “We will not go home the same.”

The air in the overflowing storefront church in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, is swaying. For nearly an hour, the largely Nigerian church of over 100 members praises God in song and dance. The choir, drummer, and keyboardists lead the choruses, while others bring together hands, tambourines, and shakers: “Awesome God, mighty God, You are lifted up / Awesome God, you are highly lifted up.” Young and old are dressed in a mix of traditional African and contemporary Western clothing. Some wear brightly patterned, flowing garb while others sport business-casual attire.

Pastor Adebisi Oyesile, Abby’s husband, wears a suit that would blend in on Wall Street. When he steps forward to preach, he kneels and begins to pray: “You are so good, blessed be your name.” Standing up, he instructs each person to say, “Thank God I am here,” and then preaches on how “the spiritual presence

of God will always be with you.” He should know.

Oyesile moved to New York from Lagos in 1974, at age 22, to study accounting and finance, making his home in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Those were among the city’s toughest days; “Bed-Stuy” was, and still can be, among its roughest parts. In 1981, Oyesile was shot in an attempted robbery, the bullet going through his chest.

A few years after graduation, Oyesile went back to Lagos. A decade later, he returned to Brooklyn, seeking more opportunities for his children. He became one of the earliest members of RCCG in Brooklyn, a Lagos-based Pentecostal ministry that is thoroughly global in scale. In New York, RCCG started with a handful of parishes; within a decade, it grew to more than 50 congregations throughout the five boroughs. To belong to a local Redeemed church is to be part of a ministry where leaders, themes, and songs continually cross back and forth between continents and cities.

In 2006, Oyesile and Abby’s pastor, Nimi Wariboko, sensed it was time to start a new church. With money for a few months’ rent and musical equipment, some Bibles and folding chairs, and a few family and church members, they were off. Next stop: Bedford-Stuyvesant, the very neighborhood where Oyesile nearly lost his life some 25 years earlier.

Oyesile juggles multiple jobs and ministers in a variety



of worlds. He is a pastor with two doctorates who works at a Wall Street insurance firm. Every available hour, evening and weekend, he devotes to his church. He is also on faculty at City Seminary. And he is a father of five.

Oyesile is one example of the entrepreneurial energy and passion that has taken root in New York City for the kingdom. “How do you implement your vision?” Oyesile asks. “Not me,” he says, “but the power of the Holy Spirit.”

At the end of the service, the doctors, taxi drivers, lawyers, nurses, security guards, students, musicians, and parents at Chapel of Hope spill out onto the streets of Brooklyn. As Oyesile reminds them, “This is your city. God is with you. Go out. You are filled with hope.”

#### LIVES OF TESTIMONY

Priscilla Walton and her younger sister, Kat Pan, hail from Queens. They are committed to living and working in the city long-term, sharing the gospel in the everyday.

Their parents, from Taiwan and South Korea, worship at Christian Testimony, an immigrant Chinese church in Elmhurst in western Queens. Members for years, they brought their daughters and the girls’ two cousins each week (one of the cousins now plants churches in Queens).

Pan, a recent college graduate, carries on the family legacy by leading the Christian Testimony youth group. “I want them to see more than what is in front of them and to help them think through what it will be like in college as a believer.” Each Friday night and Sunday afternoon, she and co-leader Jonathan Zee challenge the youth to take their faith seriously, even recruiting them to attend seminary for urban youth leadership development. “I want to invest in New York City,” she says.

“They helped me understand the gospel was not isolated,” says Walton of her parents and church. “I grew up with a strong understanding of myself as a Chinese American Christian.”

At age 9, Walton helped her mother, a retired educator with the NYC Department of Education, prepare and perform skits for children’s Sunday school. Later she helped with the youth ministry, which took a missions trip to Trinidad. She was surprised and encouraged to see 17-year-olds serving as deacons in the Trinidad church; they were involved as leaders, getting up as early as 5 A.M. to serve. She realized that she could do something now.

After graduating from Goucher College in Maryland, Walton’s

passion for justice led her to become an elementary teacher in inner-city Baltimore. One day a second-grade student asked her, “Why are the teachers always angry, the hot lunch always cold, and the boys’ bathroom floor always wet?” This prompted her to think more creatively about what it meant to love her neighbor.

When she returned to New York City, she arrived with a renewed vision as a teacher and leader in a charter school network, first in Harlem and now in Elmhurst.

Her husband, Jonathan, heads New York City Urban Project, a campus ministry of InterVarsity. Priscilla says, “If we want to change the city, we have to start in our home. Our ministries will thrive if our home thrives.” Newly married and in their 20s, this is reflected in part in the Waltons’ decision to eat LOGOFF (local, green, organic, fair trade, slave free), and to worship in a multiethnic church in Elmhurst, New Life Fellowship,

where they hope to raise their biracial children.

#### PUBLIC SERVICE IS MINISTRY

Alan Farrell believes that God is using his efforts “to redeem God’s creation.” In particular, he is “committed to strengthening fathers and families,” which is one reason he was grateful for the chance to lead NYC Dads: The Mayor’s Fatherhood Initiative.

In his early 40s, Farrell is a second-generation Trinidadian raised in the Bronx by his mother and grandmother. Growing up he had little contact with his father, though today they enjoy a relationship. While his father would send birthday cards through

his teenage years, they only reconnected at Farrell’s college graduation. “Fatherhood is never too late,” he says.

Farrell came to Christ in college, after which his faith was formed at Miracle Provider Church, which serves a largely African American and Caribbean community in Wakefield, a neighborhood in the Bronx. There, new immigrants work hard to establish a future for their families. The Miracle Provider community, some 300 people strong, encourages

their young people in their faith and life path.

After college, Farrell earned a master’s degree in urban policy from the New School, attended City Seminary (where he met his wife, Janice, who serves on the faculty), and today works at City Hall. He spearheads

NYC Dads, coordinating 12 city agencies that help fathers become better dads.

Farrell’s work takes him from meeting with young men at

***As widespread demographic change comes swiftly to the United States, what is happening in New York City can be a window into the future of the church.***



**Called Home:** Priscilla Walton, a teacher, returned to NYC to work in charter schools. “Our ministries will thrive if our home thrives.”

GARY GNIDOVIC

CHRISTINA TSUEI



**The Dad Doctor:** Alan Farrell, who works at City Hall, spearheads the Mayor's Fatherhood Initiative.

City Hall to speaking on a panel on faith and fatherhood at a Queens church, to attending a fathers' support group in Harlem. He regularly convenes city agencies to review how they can better support all fathers, especially black and Latino fathers.

Through it all, Farrell doesn't come in with all the answers. "When I work with citywide organizations and nonprofits, I start from a point of learning. My conversations are invitations and pilgrimages into communities."

What Farrell does know is that God cares about families and fathers and the communities where they live. He's committed to living his faith with passion and commitment through public service, caring for the common good wherever God gives him an opportunity. It is a story that flows from his being in the city and seeing it through the eyes of faith. As he says, "public service is ministry."

#### **FLOURISHING FAITH**

The Oyesiles, the Waltons, Pan, and Farrell are, without calling attention to themselves, demonstrating a lasting engagement in the life and health of New York. Ministry is woven into everyday life. In tune with how the city works, they are thinking and living in Christian ways whereby small changes combine to make critical differences.

As the Lord told Paul when he first arrived in Corinth,

concerned about his ability to do ministry and find partners there, "I have many people in this city." Christian faith is growing through the unpredictable energies of the Spirit and the dynamics of a globalizing city. Flowing from the love of God for the city, its shoots are sprouting in ways no one could have planned.

And as widespread demographic change comes swiftly to the United States, what is happening in New York can be a window into the future of the church and faithful activity in other cities across the country.

No one expected hundreds of diverse people to fill Grand Central Terminal last October—especially ones wearing shirts that proclaim GOD BELONGS IN MY CITY.

When the transit police told them to disperse, they did. But instead of returning to their homes or churches, everyone fanned out across the sidewalks over a stretch of several blocks. Kneeling on the pavement, hands lifted up, they offered prayers to God for the peace and flourishing of the city. It was an impromptu yet perfect ending to a day spent moving across the city, and one symbol of the vibrant Christianity there. ✚

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**Mark R. Gornik** is the director of City Seminary and the author of *Word Made Global: Stories of African Christianity in New York City* (Eerdmans). **Maria Liu Wong** is the dean of City Seminary and a doctoral candidate at Teachers College at Columbia University.





# The Boroughs' Believers Five Christians blessing their city of 8.3 million.



## George Zaloom > Missional Mechanic

Before doing oil changes and tire rotations, George Zaloom wants his customers at Zaloom's Auto Repair Shop to know one thing: that God loves them. The native Staten Islander of Syrian descent has been a businessman in NYC's "forgotten borough" for over 35 years. "It's a beautiful day at Zaloom's," he says each time he answers the phone, and then, hanging up, "God bless you!"

However, if actions speak louder than words, it is Zaloom's efforts in Staten Island that communicate his hope in Christ. An elder at Salem Evangelical Free Church, chairman of Pregnancy Care Center (formerly Crisis Pregnancy Center of Staten Island), and an active member of the Bucks Business Network, a weekly gathering of Island business owners, Zaloom works tirelessly to embody the gospel and bless his community. After Superstorm Sandy pulverized parts of the Island in 2012, he entrusted his business to his son Joseph so he could volunteer as a relief worker and community organizer. Today he divides his time between running the shop and continuing his work on Sandy relief efforts, which are expected to take years.

Neighbors and colleagues who do not share his faith ("yet," says Zaloom) speak highly of him. When his Jewish accountant arrives to work on his books, the men greet with a bear hug. "I'd trust George with my last dollar," he says—proof that Zaloom defies the shady auto-mechanic stereotype. A hair stylist next door to the auto shop, a self-described atheist, agrees that the community is better because Zaloom is in it. "George does a lot of good," he says.

"God has been faithful," Zaloom says. "Whether it's the integrity we demonstrate in our shop, the way we offer to pray with customers who are going through something, or our commitment to helping our community heal after Sandy, I want the Lord to be glorified." —Christy Tennant Krispin



## Sandhya Boyd > Legal Luminary

When Sandhya Reju Boyd, 40, graduated from George Washington University and began interning with a public defender in inner-city Washington, D.C., she discovered how desperate poor people are for good legal services. "I had no idea what life was like for some people in my city."

But working for a public legal services agency left Boyd frustrated. "I wanted to help people spiritually." With support from her church, Brooklyn Presbyterian (now Resurrection Brooklyn), in 2006 Boyd founded Brooklyn Jubilee, a Christian nonprofit offering free legal advice and advocacy. "We found that our clients' three basic needs are affordable housing, access to food, and health care. Our primary focus is helping people with these three areas."

Running a legal nonprofit in New York, where the needs are exponential, is a tremendous task. Three days after Superstorm Sandy, Boyd and her colleagues visited evacuation centers in Brooklyn where they met supervisors responding to the immediate needs. "We knew from 9/11 that there would be a lot of legal questions, and that it would take months and even years for victims to be served."

Today Boyd oversees Brooklyn Jubilee's staff of nine working in five mobile sites and a trailer office established in Coney Island immediately following Sandy. As they care for Sandy survivors, they continue to help the dispossessed and disempowered understand their legal rights as they seek housing, food, and health care. And Brooklynites have taken note. "You are the best thing that has happened to us," says one resident.

"I could be making more money as a legal secretary, but for me, helping people is addictive. This is what has anchored me for 20-plus years," says Boyd. "This is what God made me for." —Christy Tennant Krispin



## Erin Layton

### > One-Woman Show

When Erin Layton decided to pursue acting a decade ago, moving from St. Louis to New York City was the most logical step. After years spent working day jobs and auditioning, Layton felt called to develop her own project that would be sustainable and would give her complete creative license.

A member of Ascension Presbyterian Church in Forest Hills, Queens, Layton credits her faith community with encouraging her to pursue her vision. She raised money through Kickstarter to produce *Magdalen: The Play*, a one-woman show about commercial laundries run by nuns in Irish convents. The play premiered at the 2012 New York City International Fringe Festival, where Layton received popular and critical acclaim.

Layton says “good” theater reflects the human experience: “Trials mold us and shape us as people, and when you’re watching a powerful story unfold onstage where the characters are battling obstacles, you become part of their story. Any good show has either taught me more about myself or about the world.”

This July, *Magdalen* made its West Coast debut in the Santa Cruz Fringe Festival, and more productions are scheduled on both coasts (including in Layton’s church). *Santa Cruz Sentinel* critic Max Lopez noted, “Layton’s performance... was so vivid and intense that the audience stood to applaud as she took her bow.” Layton says that audiences who care about social justice, especially trafficking and the plight of women, are particularly receptive.

“Theater requires an enormous amount of risk and trust,” she says. “I wouldn’t have made the strides that I’m making without faith in Christ. I credit God, specifically God’s community, the church, for their steadfast support.” —Christy Tennant Krispin

## Lolita Jackson

### > Led to Safety to Serve

“If you’re going to get killed going to work, you better love what you do.” Lolita Jackson, 46, says it matter-of-factly now, but those words come with the weight of 12 years and a split-second decision to pause instead of go.

Working in the Twin Towers on 9/11, Jackson fled her offices with a friend. At the last minute, she didn’t get on an elevator with him. Seconds later, when the second plane hit, the elevator cables snapped and her friend perished. Jackson credits God with leading her safely out—audibly, she says.

It was the same audible voice, she says, that led her to resign as a vice president at Morgan Stanley and take a year off to volunteer throughout the city. She soon joined the Bloomberg campaign and his administration, where she’s served for the past eight years. Today she is the director of special projects, a role in which she daily interacts with residents in all five boroughs. From rat infestations to celebrity visits to subway projects, Jackson coordinates a variety of stakeholders in the community to resolve community issues.

“The items that irritate you most are often the issues you encounter in your immediate surroundings,” she says. “I can get people to come together around a table to have conversations. My role affects how people are able to live in the community—in harmony with one another and with institutions—to have a better quality of life.”

Jackson, who keeps the Sabbath every week despite the pressures of a nonstop job, is a New Jersey native and moved to NYC after college to work on Wall Street. She has a message for the local church as well: “Be involved in your community. Many churches lack political capital and haven’t engaged with local institutions. But from the inside I can tell you, it’s really important to have those relationships before you need them.” —Roxanne Wieman

## Ruben Austria

### > Called Back Home

Ruben Austria spent six years in upstate New York—“not in prison,” he quickly clarifies, “but in an Ivy League university.” It makes sense when you learn that Austria leads an organization that seeks alternatives to incarceration. It’s also what brought him back to a city he never planned to return to. “Once I was [at Cornell], I started feeling a burden: Why was I blessed to go to college when other people my age were dead or in prison?”

It wasn’t a hypothetical question. Austria hails from the South Bronx, the poorest congressional district in the country. It has one of the highest rates of youth admitted to detention centers. “The South Bronx is the perfect example of what happens when there’s a failure to invest in the social infrastructure to support poor communities,” Austria says. And it’s here that Austria’s organization, Community Connections for Youth (CCY), focuses. “We take the resources that have been used to incarcerate youth and get them back into the hands of the people who will do the best job of caring for youth—the people who live in their neighborhoods.”

CCY connects the juvenile justice system to churches, community centers, and neighborhood associations. There, CCY has developed “community alternatives” ranging from community gardens to arts, media literacy, and antiviolence programs. “All the programs are in the neighborhood and have staff who care about the youth,” Austria says. Many staff have been in prison, and so can legitimately tell youth how to stay out of trouble. It’s a biblical model, says Austria.

“God used Miriam to advocate for Moses to be returned to the care of his own community. God used Moses to go to Pharaoh and say, ‘Let my people go.’ I believe I’m being used to advocate for young people to be returned to the care of their own communities, and to say to the criminal justice system: ‘Let them go.’” —Roxanne Wieman





[ CULTURAL TRENDS ]

# Why We Need Small Towns

How they correct our  
supersized spirituality.  
By Jake Meador

SCOTT SPESE / FLICKR





**T**HE NEW YORK TIMES released a documentary film this summer that captures a place and its people.

The film features residents from a wide range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and jobs. Their disparate stories are knitted together by their affection for their city. In many ways, the film captures a love of place and holistic mission that has captivated

many evangelicals as of late. There's one major difference: The place is McDowell County, West Virginia, population 21,729.

The residents of McDowell County remind an American church intent on doing and being more that sometimes, the best life is given to quiet, simplicity, and smallness. It's a lesson that also appears in a marvelous recent book, *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*. Part memoir, part biography, part



meditation, *Little Way* is the story of journalist Rod Dreher's younger sister, Ruthie, who at age 40 was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. Watching her community rally around her, Dreher awakens to the beauty of life in a small town. More than that, it alerts him to his fixation on big cities and their big dreams and big projects, and how he has disdained the ordinary pleasures of life in his hometown of St. Francisville, Louisiana. Dreher writes of his sister's home and how it shaped her affections:

The love that had sustained Ruthie through her cancer, and that now surrounded and upheld her family, came from somewhere. Like Ruthie, my mother and father had cultivated it, in this little patch of ground, all their lives. They had no grand gestures of philanthropy or goodness to their name, but rather they were always faithful in small things.

Dreher notes that his way of life—as an accomplished editor and religion columnist—had failed to create the commitment, fidelity, and long-term community found in Ruthie's. To the world, Dreher was the noteworthy sibling. But as he watched Ruthie's town love her, her life seemed to offer depths that were unknown to him.

#### STICKERS AND BOOMERS

Of course, American Christians know something of the little way. The evangelical movement has always had its share of what novelist Wallace Stegner famously called “stickers.” In the words of Wendell

***Impressive buildings, major missions campaigns, and citywide revivals all have their place. But what happens when our ambitions and fondness for big run amok?***

Berry, a student of Stegner's, stickers are people who “settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in.” America's first great theologian, Jonathan Edwards, spent much of his life serving in a single small parish. Presbyterian theologian B. B. Warfield spent nearly his entire adult life in Princeton, New Jersey, where he taught at the university and cared for his sick wife. The late Dallas Willard taught and ministered in the same philosophy department for nearly five decades. Just recently, my pastor interviewed a dozen fellow pastors who have served in Lincoln, Nebraska, for over a decade. All of them are committed to staying at their churches indefinitely.

But, like so many Westerners, we don't always practice the virtues of the little way in our communities. Evangelicals are a people of megachurches, national conferences, city-centric thinking (which often comes with derision for small-town life), and ever-expanding religious empires, be they church-planting networks or the Twitter feeds of celebrity pastors. Consider just one example: the rise of video preaching and podcasting, and the cultlike following they have generated around certain leaders.

The point is not to demonize cities or the prominent ministries that grow out of them. God does work through these and other large endeavors. Indeed, if stickers have always been a part of American evangelicalism, so too have their more ambitious counterparts, the

“boomers.” In Stegner and Berry's use of the term, boomers are people driven by dreams and ambitions. They are always moving to the next project, always imagining a new idea or movement to pursue. If Ruthie Leming was a sticker, Rod Dreher is a boomer (or has been for much of his life, at least).

Boomers have a long tradition within evangelicalism as well. George Whitefield was our first celebrity preacher, traveling all over the country to lead revivals that drew hundreds to thousands of attendees. Much of 19th-century evangelicalism was marked by the spirit of revivalism, a boomer movement if ever there was one. And today's U.S. megachurches—which have exploded in number in the past few decades—certainly reflect a boomer ethos, and their bigness has its value. For example, the 6,000-person congregation has resources that my 350-person one could never dream of. It would take us years to raise a mercy fund that the megachurch could raise in one week. Impressive buildings, major missions campaigns, and citywide revivals all have their place.

But what happens when our ambitions and fondness for *big* run amok?

#### ECCLESIAL DESERTS

First, we'd expect to see rural places become ecclesial deserts, marked by dying mainline congregations starved for orthodox preaching. We'd see Catholic parishes in similar disrepair. In the suburbs and cities, we'd expect to see wide-scale burnout among church leaders—leaders who feel trapped in unsustainable ministry models that, due

to crazy workloads and job responsibilities, leave little room for family, the Sabbath, or simple pleasures. We'd expect to see young people grow disillusioned with the project-oriented

nature of church, longing instead for small-scale intimacy. We'd expect, in other words, to find a church with plenty of accomplishments, but lacking spiritual formation and deeply woven community.

Pardon my bluntness, but we'd expect to find something that looks like what we have today.

True story from the ecclesial desert: A good friend of mine recently filled the pulpit at a United Church of Christ in small-town Nebraska. He thundered away from his text, preaching sin and repentance and redemption in Christ. When he was done, an old farmer from the church came forward to shake his hand. The farmer said, “Usually the preaching here is awful. I sleep through the sermon more often than not. But what you said today, young man—that was *preaching*.”

Of course, paltry preaching can be found everywhere. Likewise with strong evangelical preaching. But small towns struggle to secure pastors in a way that urban churches often don't. In an urban context, elderly believers can usually find within a couple miles a church where the preaching consistently centers on the gospel. For the farmers here in Nebraska, that's not really an option. The mainline church is often all they have. This means that churchgoers often have young, inexperienced, and extremely liberal pastors who have been forced into the job and will leave at first opportunity. Poorly taught but basically orthodox Christians in small towns often must choose

between consistently bad preaching or no church at all.

In our presbytery here in Nebraska, we currently have one pastor planting a church in Fremont, a town of 25,000 north of Lincoln. Another pastor is serving at a church in Ashland, a town of 2,500 about halfway between Omaha and Lincoln. But the need is still great. Nebraska, like the larger Midwest, is dotted with small towns of a few hundred to a few thousand residents. Many of these towns lack even one evangelical church, or an orthodox minister serving in one of the more liberal churches. One town of about 1,000 people had the local Methodist and Presbyterian churches merge. (Church history buffs will know what an unlikely match that is.) The issue wasn't lack of attendance but lack of pastors. For the longest time, the denominations kept sending young pastors who were not committed to the place. At the first chance they would leave. Then the denominations just stopped sending anyone at all, forcing the churches to merge or close up shop.

In a nearby town of several hundred, the local PC (USA) church had to reschedule its Sunday services so that the local Assemblies of God minister could fill their pulpit. Read that again: Small-town Nebraska is so desperate for pastors that the local PC (USA) church, one of the most liberal mainline denominations in the nation, is being shepherded by a Pentecostal preacher.

Of course, Christians are called to live and work in cities. Like many Americans in the 20th century, we left these areas of great promise out of fear and for new opportunities in the budding suburbs. Tim Keller and others have rightly called us back. But Christians

are also called to live and work in small towns. It's just that no prominent church leaders are talking about this. Of the students in my campus ministry at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, over half left Nebraska after graduating. Of all the students from small towns in Nebraska, I know of only one who returned. And small-town residents are not the only people who suffer when we ignore small towns and their way of life. Those of us who embrace bigger ways of life do as well.

#### LEARNING FROM JAYBER

Wendell Berry's work is far from perfect. But we would do well to attend more closely to the agrarian writer who has spent much of his life farming in Kentucky near a village of 100 people. Often when city-minded evangelicals read Berry, we pick up on the themes that already appeal to an urban readership. We note the environmental message of his work and go off to buy our food at a local co-op or farmers' market. These may be good decisions. But if that's all we take from Berry's work, we have missed the spiritual underpinnings that inform so much of it.

In the best page of fiction he will ever write, Berry lays out the reason for the little way. The page is in *Jayber Crow*, the story of a barber in the fictional town of Port William, Kentucky. In the portion quoted below, Jayber is a divinity student at a denominational college. Jayber has long felt called to preach due to the pressures created by the fundamentalist director at the orphanage where he grew up. But he felt swept away by lingering questions brought up by

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his studies, and he wondered if he was fit to preach. He talks to one of his professors, an old man named Ardmire. After a few minutes, he realizes he can't be a preacher:

I said, "Well," for now I was ashamed, "I had this feeling maybe I had been called."

"And you may have been right. But not to what you thought.

***Of course, Christians are called to live and work in cities. But they are also called to live and work in small towns. It's just that no prominent church leaders are talking about it.***

Not to what you think. You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps."

"That could be a long time."

"I will tell you a further mystery," he said. "It may take longer."

Over the next 300 pages, Berry tells the story of how Jayber lives his questions out. In time, Jayber arrives at peace. The novel ends with a beatific vision in which Jayber says that he "was covered all

over with light." His orphaned soul finally is restored.

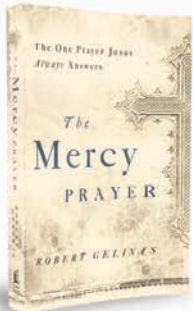
But living out the answers took time—52 years, to be exact. Ardmire spoke with Jayber in 1935. The story ends in 1987. When I realize this, the devastating question hits me: Do we American Christians create communities where answers can be lived out, decade by decade, over a lifetime?

No, we don't all have to move to small towns to find these communities. But small towns make that sort of community more plausible. Big cities run on transience and mobility. They are filled with rental housing and freeways designed to make movement over large areas easier. And they are supported by an economy that assumes people will switch careers and homes several times in the course of their lives.

In such a world, the memory of small-town life is an antidote to the frantic pace that defines the city and deadens the soul. But with small towns withering away, what will protect us from the hectic, hypermobile life of the city? In a world where so many of us are like Jayber—haunted by the pains inflicted upon us as well as our own sinful heart—where will we go to be healed and restored? How many of us will be given the time to slowly, quietly live out the answers to the most important questions?

**Jake Meador** is a writer and editor from Lincoln, Nebraska. He writes for Mere Orthodoxy and Fare Forward.

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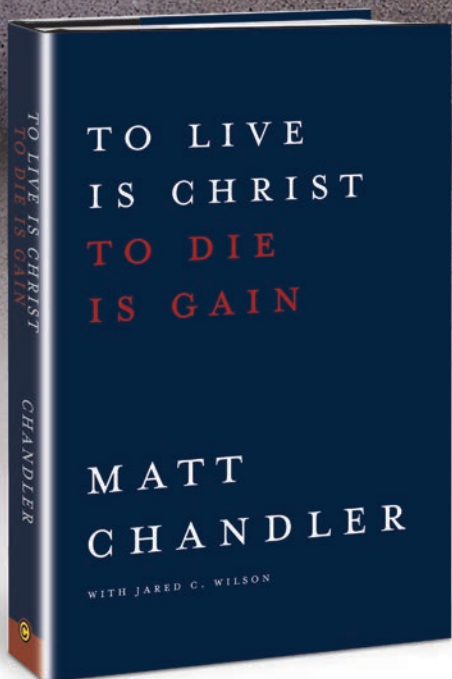
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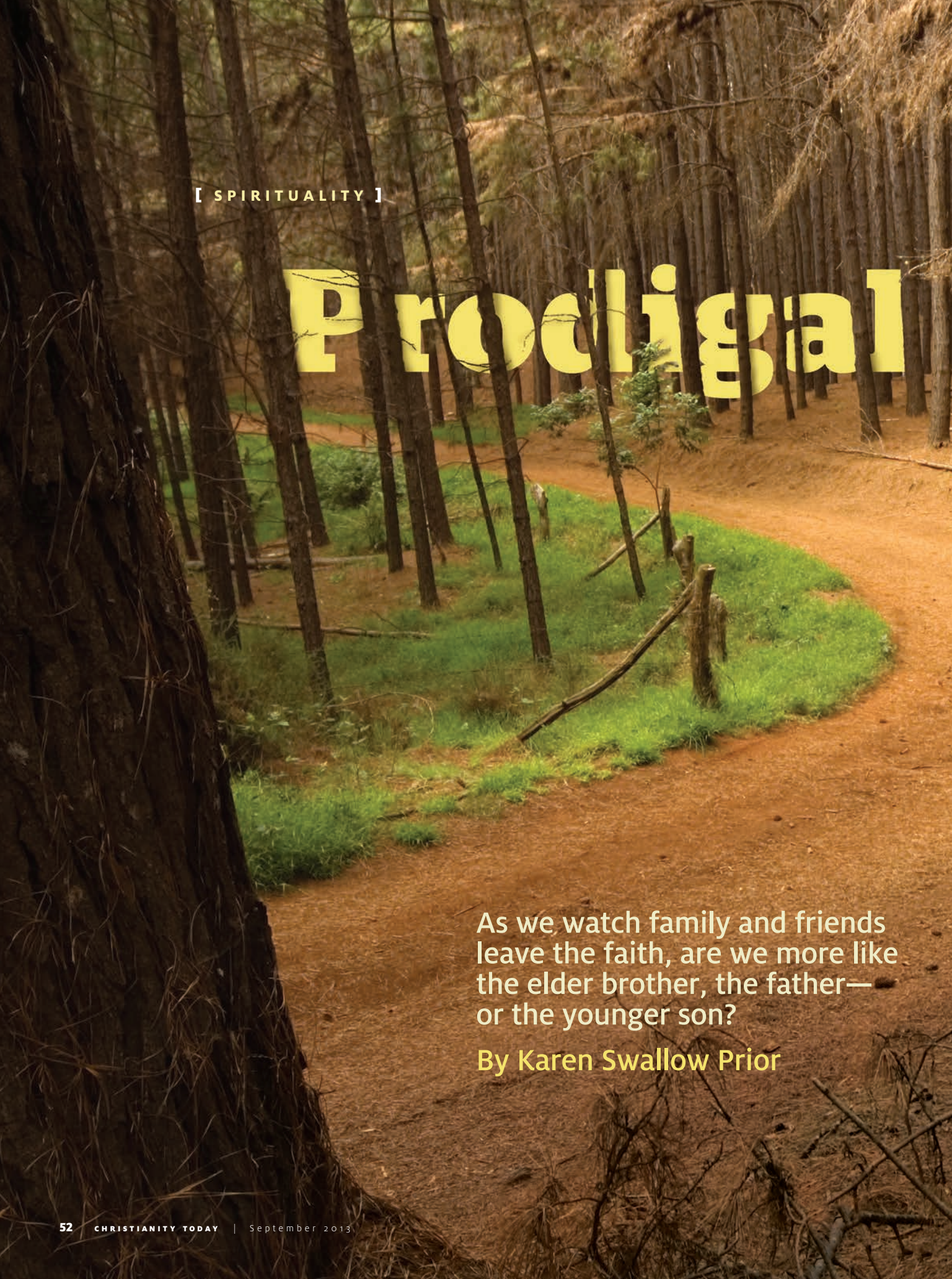
# Matt Chandler on Philippians



Using Paul's radical letter to the Philippians as his road map, Matt Chandler forsakes the trendy to invite readers into an authentic Christian maturity.

The short book of Philippians is one of the most quoted in the Bible yet Paul wrote it not for popular sound bites, but to paint a picture of mature Christian faith. While many give their lives to Jesus, few then go on to live a life of truly vibrant faith.



A photograph of a forest with a dirt path and a grassy clearing. The path is made of reddish-brown dirt and leads into a clearing with green grass and several thin, dark tree trunks. The background is a dense forest of tall, thin trees. The overall tone is warm and slightly somber.

[ SPIRITUALITY ]

# Prodigal

As we watch family and friends leave the faith, are we more like the elder brother, the father—or the younger son?

By Karen Swallow Prior





# I Love

**D**ANIEL SMITH, 23, arrived as a freshman at Cedarville University in 2008. Outwardly he was a Christian, but inwardly he was a prodigal. Doubting some essential doctrines, he was afraid to ask peers and professors about God, hell, and Christianity's dark moments in human history. "Others probably perceived me as a typical, good Christian kid," Smith says. "I worked hard to keep up that perception. But inside my faith was completely dead."

Steven\* (\*not real name), also a freshman, was immersed in all that life at a Christian college offered. His charisma, activism, and faith were infectious to others—including Smith. "We bonded over our bookish pretensions and freshman philosophizing. The world was in our pockets, and we were like brothers," Smith says. The two decided to room together sophomore year.



Early that year, Steven's mother began having health problems. Soon she was diagnosed with stage IV cancer. Before school was out, she was dead. During her illness, Steven grew frustrated with Christians' trite responses to his mother's suffering. He was angry at God. By the time she died, Steven had turned to meditation and Eastern mysticism for solace. By senior year, he had come out as gay and walked away from the faith. Steven's journey gave Smith a lot to think about.

When Lee,\* Michele Sterlace-Accorsi's husband of 24 years, walked away from Christianity, he walked away from his family, too. Much of their marriage had been difficult, says Sterlace-Accorsi, but the years of raising their four children were mostly good. The couple built a large home in upstate New York on a plot of land with woods and a pond. The family went to church each Sunday, the children attended Christian schools, and prayer began and ended the days and preceded family meals.

One of those prayers was the turning point, recalls Sterlace-Accorsi, 48, sitting inside the condominium on the West Coast where she moved after the divorce. "We always held hands around the dinner table. One night—it was right after Lee lost his job as a museum curator—he refused to hold hands with us. The kids were confused and urged him to pray. He finally gave in and held our hands, but just stared ahead. You could see something inside him was changing."

Lee swiftly took more steps away. He began to doze off in church as soon as the sermon began, then stopped going. He started to mock the music Sterlace-Accorsi and the kids listened to. Family fights

and attended church and prayed together. They were raising their four children in the faith. Then, 12 years into their marriage, Jason declared himself an atheist.

"I was terrified," Alise says. For two weeks, neither spoke about it. Alise only cried. She feared Jason would no longer want to be married to a Christian, while Jason wondered if Alise would stay with an unbeliever.

They both stayed.

After she and Jason began to talk about the sudden turn in their marriage, they shared with family, then their church, and, finally, their children. Now, four years later, her husband remains her "closest friend," says Wright. But the situation is complicated. Wright wrote recently at her blog:

The emotions catch me off guard. A sense of loneliness on a Sunday morning when I'm in the middle of a worship song that we used to sing together. A hint of frustration when I am unable to ask my spouse to pray with me about something troubling. A feeling of gratitude that I am able to navigate this road with the person that I love the most in the whole world.

#### MORE THAN TEEN ANGST

Sandra's\* prodigal story more closely resembles the one found in Scripture. Her daughter exhibited a strong faith as a child. "Jennifer\* was the youth group superstar, leading worship, inviting friends to church, reading her Bible, and searching out mission trips," Sandra

***It is crucial that periodically we preach on the Prodigal Son. Like the Easter story and the Christmas story, it bears repeating, for the story of the Prodigal Son is the gospel in capsule.*** ~ P. C. Ennis Jr.

escalated as Lee alternated between being volatile and withdrawn. "He was either angry or depressed, yet he continued to reject God," says Sterlace-Accorsi.

Ezra, the youngest child, recalls one day when he and his father were riding in the car. "I was worried about his salvation, so I begged Dad to pray the sinner's prayer with me. Finally, there in the car, he did." But regardless of any spiritual shift, Lee soon disengaged from church and the family's prayer life entirely. Within a few years, he left the family.

Of course, some prodigals stay with their family. But being married to a spouse who has renounced a faith once shared brings its own kind of pain.

Alise Wright was in the living room of her family's West Virginia home in the fall of 2009 when her husband, Jason, returned from meeting with a therapist. After a few minutes of rehashing the session, Jason said that he no longer believed in God.

Wright misunderstood. From the time they had first met, it was Jason who had been "completely on fire for God."

"My husband grew up in a Christian home," says Wright. "When we started dating, he was attending Bible college and helping to lead worship. There is no question to me that his faith was genuine. It always seemed much more secure and passionate than my own."

United in a love of worship music, Alise and Jason had married

says. But during Jennifer's teen years, now over a decade ago, battles began emerging over clothing, curfews, and house rules.

At first the fights seemed like a mere product of teenage angst. As a homeschooling family in a conservative Midwest town, Sandra and her husband were more lenient than most families in their circle. But looking back, Sandra realizes that Jennifer was rebelling against a legalistic Christian culture. During one fight, Jennifer told her parents that she didn't believe "the world" was as bad as they had made it out to be. She vowed to prove it to them.

"That vow was as deep and real as any other commitment she'd ever made in her life," Sandra says. "Including the commitment to Christ she made when she was 6."

At age 18, after dropping out of college and returning home, Jennifer took everything out of her room and left. Sandra can't erase from her mind the moment of standing in Jennifer's old bedroom, the bed stripped bare, the dresser drawers pulled open, the closet cleared out. "It was like the aftermath of a devastating storm," Sandra says, the pain fresh in her voice. She watched Jennifer drive away, not knowing where she would sleep that night or the next, not knowing to what distant country her beat-up car would take her.

Kristen's\* experience puts her in the company of the elder son in the parable. Kristen has believed since age 4, she says: attending a Christian school, a Christian college, and then seminary. Her brother



**Waiting Wife:** Michele Sterlace-Accorsi's husband of 24 years left the family when he left God. She has begun to see him as a 'lost soul,' not just her ex-husband.

## GIVING UP GUILT

At some point in their lives, one of every three Americans will leave Christianity, according to a 2011 study in the *Journal of Religion and Society*. Called “leavers,” “deconverts,” or “ex-Christians,” they are targets of fresh concern among church denominations watching their numbers shrink. Pollsters and bloggers tick off reasons why so many are leaving, such as intellectual hurdles to belief, immoral or intolerant church leaders, and profound suffering. But the leavers phenomenon is nothing new. It goes back at least to the parable of the Prodigal Son, told by Jesus and recorded in Luke 15:11–32.

What about the people whom the prodigals leave behind? The ones who love the leavers? The ones left to hold down the forts of remaining families and faith communities? Few theological and practical resources exist for the two out of every three Christians who remain with the Father while they watch their “younger brother” leave.

The biblical parable centers on the relationship between a father and his two sons. But the essence of the story remains the same, whether the prodigal is a child, sibling, spouse, parent, or friend. This is why P. C. Ennis Jr. argues in the *Journal for Preachers* that “it is crucial that periodically we preach on the Prodigal Son. . . . Like the Easter story and the Christmas story, it bears repeating, for the story of the Prodigal Son is the gospel in capsule.”

The father, in his eager rush to reconcile with his son, is understood to represent God

the Father, or Christ, who is telling the story. The resentful elder son is linked to the Pharisees, who were part of Jesus’ original listeners. The parable makes clear which attitude we believers, saved by grace, are to have. But chances are that when confronted with a flesh-and-blood prodigal, we are neither the father nor the elder son. Usually we are both.

The anguish of Sterlace-Accorsi, Wright, Sandra, and Kristen reflects the love of the father. Yet for most of us, it is easy to be swayed, too, by the exacting calculus of the elder son. It is hard, after all, to love a God of justice and righteousness and not to love those very qualities overmuch. It strains our human frailty to hate rebellion, squandering, and wantonness—prodigality—and yet be able to embrace one so wasteful.

Helmut Thielicke notes in his classic commentary on the parable, *The Waiting Father*, that the elder brother is outraged because his father’s lavish welcome is “uneconomical.” As in the parable of the day laborers (Matt. 20:1–16), it is a bitter pill that those who arrive late get the same welcome as those who have been faithful all along.

Nathan\* first professed faith at age 9. Yet “he was always drawn to the flashiest, most popular, most expensive, and most fun,” Kristen says. When their school outside of Pittsburgh put on the Christian children’s musical *Antshillvania*, Nathan landed the part of the fast-talking dragonfly who leads the protagonist ant away from the colony. Nathan was praised by everyone as a “natural talent,” and he and Kristen joked about the typecasting.

“He has an extremely charming and witty personality,” says Kristen, “so everyone wanted to be his friend. And he always seemed to gravitate toward those the Scripture would call ‘fools.’”

By the time Kristen came home the summer after her freshman year in college, Nathan’s flirtation with fools had turned into something more serious. Instead of discussing with her what she was doing and learning at school, her parents were consumed with Nathan: the pornography in his room, his late hours, and the friends he was making. Kristen grieved with them. But it was hard not to resent him, too, for taking so much away from their family—and from her.



Yes, we want grace, but in the recesses of our hearts, if we are honest, we want it doled out with justice.

This economical attitude is exactly what Wright feared she would encounter at church after Jason revealed his atheism on his blog. She suspected that fellow Christians would point to her progressivism and blame that—*her*—for his leaving the faith, as if she hadn't done enough. Before church that first Sunday back, she went to an empty room to be alone. She tightened when she heard someone enter. But when that person walked over and gave her a long, silent hug, it was “the expression of love that I needed,” Wright says.

Yet Wright believes some members think more prayer, greater conservatism, or sharper apologetics will bring her husband back into the fold. That if she was doing more or doing it better, he would believe again. “It can feel unsafe when someone wants to fix things. It hurts,” Wright says. “The Great Physician is Jesus. He can work with our prodigals in a way we can’t.”

“One of the deceptions that befalls those who love prodigals is the notion that the prodigal’s decision to head for the far country is somehow all about us and, correspondingly, it is our total responsibility somehow to bring them home,” says Jeff Lucas, a teaching pastor at Timberline Church in Fort Collins, Colorado. Describing itself as a “prodigal-friendly church,” Timberline aims to reach nonbelievers or ex-Christians wandering in and out of the faith.

Believing that we faithful Christians can fix our prodigals adds

justification—that they or their [prodigal] will be judged, lose status, and even lose fellowship.” Yet, Barnier says, it is important to tell fellow Christians, not only to gain support but also to show other “elder brothers” that they aren’t alone.

Further, sharing is one of the few aspects of dealing with a prodigal that one *can* control. It’s “something proactive, something you can do today, something you can make happen that actually makes things better . . . in the lives of you and others near you,” Barnier says. “Allow the body of Christ, which is to reach out to the world, to also reach out to you.”

## MERCY AND MALICE

But the church does not always know how to minister to either the prodigals or to those who love them. Wright says one of the greatest difficulties in being married to a prodigal is how it has affected her relationships with Christians. “I often feel protective of him, and as a result, I sometimes hold others who I perceive as a threat to him at arm’s length.”

Sterlace-Accorsi struggled less with her church than with her ex-husband. Certainly she had just cause to feel the elder brother’s resentment—and more. But the bitterness she bore was hurting her most. Her children insisted that she begin to see her former husband as they do, as a “lost soul.” Her oldest son welcomed his father—and new girlfriend—into his home on the occasion of a family celebration.

***‘We think of ourselves as extending grace to prodigals, but we are simply sharing grace we have received and are still receiving.’*** ~ Jeff Lucas, pastor

an undue burden of guilt, as it did for Sandra for years. When she remembers the fights over Jennifer’s Britney Spears-inspired clothing, she realizes they were about much more than fashion. “Those fights were like I was going after her personhood,” says Sandra. Counseling has helped Sandra give up the role of the elder brother; she can’t shoulder responsibilities that are the Father’s alone. Being a “perfect” parent does not guarantee a child’s faith. After all, Adam and Eve’s Father was perfect, and still they rebelled.

“This trial has clarified a lot in my life,” Sandra says. “I wouldn’t trade what I’ve learned about God in this for anything—anything except seeing Jennifer restored to God, to herself, and to our family. We have learned that God is there, he is for us, and he is good. He loves us. He loves Jennifer. I have learned that waiting can be prayer.”

Kristen’s parents, meanwhile, are not quite there. Embarrassed, they haven’t told fellow church members about Nathan, who was kicked out of his Christian college, then moved far from home, and has worked for years in the nightclub industry. Unfortunately, says Carol Barnier, author of *Engaging Today’s Prodigal*, such secrecy, while understandable, prevents the church from functioning as the body.

A pastor’s daughter who returned to faith after 13 years of atheism, Barnier describes walking into a room once where she was to speak about prodigals. The downcast demeanor of the people trickling in was unlike any gathering she’d seen. She realized that the atmosphere was due to one emotion felt by everyone in the room: shame.

“People with a prodigal don’t share because they fear a very different response,” says Barnier. “They worry—often with some

Slowly, Sterlace-Accorsi was won over. “The kids have ministered to me. They’ve helped me see that that’s the way I’m supposed to look at him.” Although she has moved on in her life, she says that if Lee were to return to God and reconcile with his family, “I would be that father in the parable. I would welcome him home 1,000 times over.”

This mercy mingled with malice arises, in part, from the legacy of evangelicals as “a holiness people,” says Lucas. We don’t know how to reconcile our particular Christian tradition with the universal truth that “church is for ‘the messed up,’” he says. “We have a theology that says church is for the pure. But the same passages from Paul we use rightly to stand firm against sin provide the very evidence that such sins have been prevalent in the church from the start.” Why should we expect the modern church to be any different from the first-century church?

Rather than seeing ourselves as the father and, in so doing, only continuing to play the part of the elder son—after all, the elder son was essentially usurping the authority of the father in upbraiding him—we should instead consider ourselves as equals of the prodigal, equals in need of grace and equals in recipients of that grace. “We think of ourselves as extending grace to prodigals, but we are simply sharing grace we have received and are still receiving.” We should stop “feeding the Christian obsession with fixing everybody,” Lucas exhorts. There is no magnanimity in extending grace, he explains, because we all need it.

Likewise, UK pastor and business leader Rob Parsons says, “The great problem with the church in the Western world is that half the prodigals are still in the pews.” In other words, coming home is not

about returning to church, but rather despairing over our own sins as the Prodigal Son does in the pigsty. The elder brother “did his sinning without ever leaving,” Parsons, author of *Bringing Home the Prodigals*, notes. He “needed to ‘come home’ every bit as much as his brother.”

This is what happened to Daniel Smith. In the midst of his roommate Steven’s doubts, he found himself drawn to God. “The peak of Steven’s questioning was probably my most potent period of growth,” Smith says. Steven’s agonized wrestling seemed to free Smith to seek answers for himself.

Although they stayed roommates, Smith and Steven spoke less and less. After graduating last year, they went their separate ways. Smith is now strong in his faith and hopes to teach theology someday. In watching his roommate and best friend walk away, Smith came home.

### AN IMPOSSIBLE PRAYER

Whether in the church or out of it, wandering in the hills or working the Father’s fields, we need the Father’s radical love equally—the elder son no less than the prodigal. Helmut Thielicke noted that we easily dismiss the attitude of the elder son as “nothing more than dull, Philistine respectability.” But the compassionate father, Thielicke writes, “sees the life of the elder brother too from the inside, from the point of view of his heart, and he says to him, ‘Yes, you are my beloved son, you are always with me, and therefore we share everything.’”

The cloud of the father’s rebuke of the elder son’s resentment carries the silver lining of “the dependability of a heart surrendered to him.” Thielicke marvels, “How broad is the love of the Father! It spans the whole scale of human possibilities.”

Thus, at the heart of the very notion of prodigality lies an intriguing paradox. For the word *prodigal*, meaning “profuse,” carries with it both the negative sense of “wastefulness,” the meaning understood as applied to the younger son, but also “extravagant,” “luxuriant,” or “flamboyant.” In this way, it applies equally to the younger son and to the father in corresponding polarity.

The love of the father is *more* prodigious than the son’s waywardness. The love the father shows the Prodigal Son—both in the son’s leaving and in his returning—is nothing if not extravagant. It is a love that is blind to past wrongs and present accounting. It is a love that offers the loved one the freedom to squander, without cajoling or badgering or wrangling the prodigal into wisdom. It is a love that waits with patience and prayer.

It’s like Kristen’s love for her brother.

Late one summer night while on school break, Kristen woke up again to the sound of her parents arguing with Nathan after he had come home hours after his curfew. She put her head under her pillow, but it didn’t help. The arguments had gone on all summer and the summer before. But this night, Kristen recalled a convocation speech recently given at her college. The speaker had urged the students to honor God by praying for the impossible. Kristen sat up,


**Sticking It Out:** After 12 years of marriage, Jason Wright told Alise he was an atheist. That was the day ‘everything and nothing changed,’ writes Alise. They remain married with four kids.



turned on the light, opened the prayer journal at her bedside, and wrote down three impossible prayers. One of these was that Nathan would return to God.

That was ten years ago.

Today, Kristen teaches at a Christian university. As she prepares each day to teach, she glances at herself in a mirror surrounded by photos. The photo in the upper-right corner where her eyes most often land depicts a handsome black man, a Creole woman, and a little girl with bronze skin, curly dark hair, and sparkling eyes. The man in the photo is Nathan, the woman, her sister-in-law, and the child, Kristen’s only niece. Each morning when she looks at the picture, Kristen feels a punch in her gut: Nathan has yet to make the prodigal’s journey home. But every day, Kristen offers up that impossible, immoderate, and extravagant prayer.

Many theologians have pointed out that because the Prodigal Son requested his inheritance from his father, his petition was tantamount to wishing for his father’s death. Given the death required for the salvation of all of us, our prayers for prodigals ask no less. We are prodigals, all of us. 

**Karen Swallow Prior** is a professor in the English department at Liberty University and author of *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me*. A Hermeneutics contributor, she is writing a book about abolitionist Hannah More.

**Go to** [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com) for “Waiting for a Prodigal’s Return,” a Bible study based on this article.





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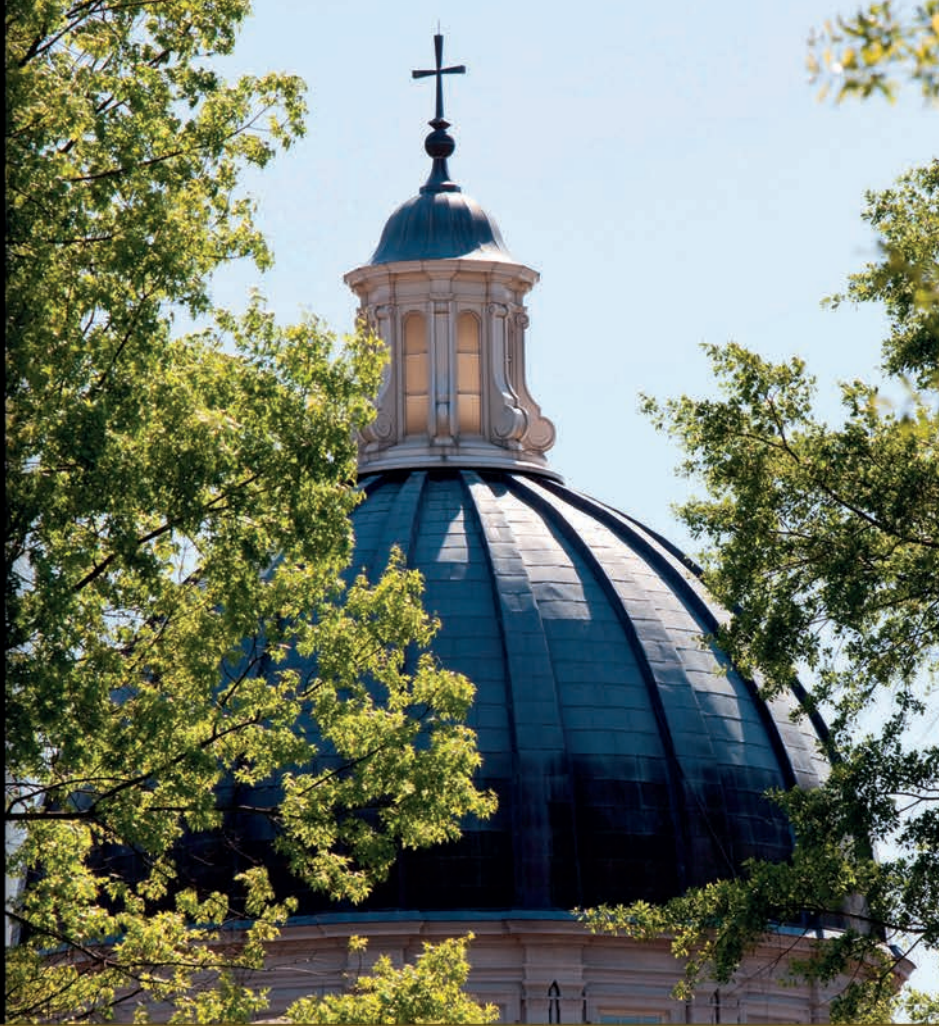
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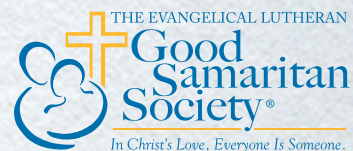


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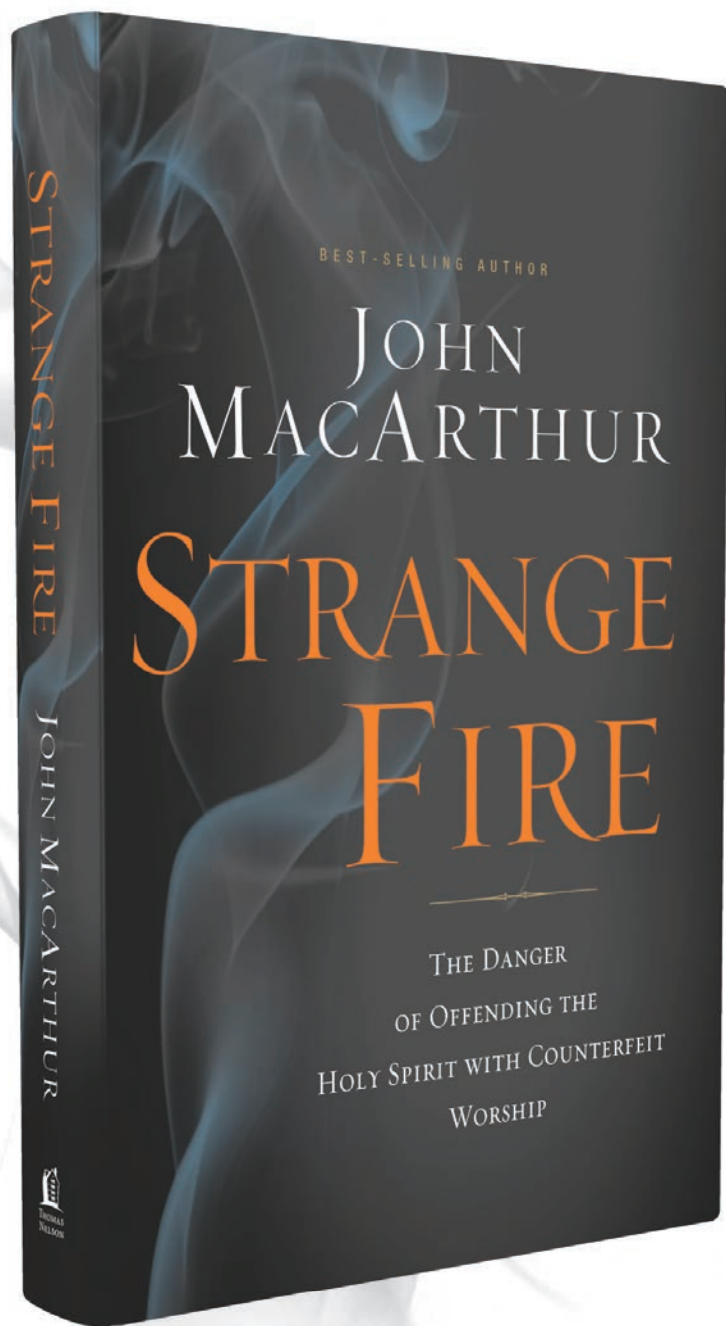
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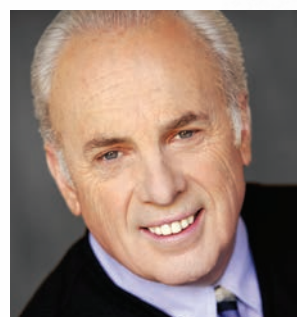


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OPINIONS AND PERSPECTIVES ON ISSUES FACING THE CHURCH

# Viewpoints



**Thank you, Compassion. We now have statistics that prove sponsoring children does make a difference.**

Bev Bellamy  
E-mail

## Positive Proof

"Want to Change the World? Sponsor a Child" [June] is excellent. Thank you, Compassion, for having your program used in this study so that we have statistics that prove sponsoring children does make a difference. We support several children through Compassion Canada and give thanks for the opportunity to impact their lives.

**BEV BELLAMY**  
E-mail

I am a missionary in West Africa in a country where Compassion does not work. We missionaries all have protégés: children we are personally sponsoring through school. Last year my husband and I ended up with 13 and ran out of money, so I was able to find sponsors among friends in the United States. I am deeply thankful for your article, which affirms our personal commitment to the children. I will recommend it to the sponsors we found. When we show mercy to "the least of these," we are in some mysterious way serving Jesus, and it certainly honors him.

**LINNEA BOESE**  
E-mail

## We Can't Hide

I appreciated the refreshing transparency of "A Terrifying Grace" [June], in which Mark Galli observed that we never reveal all of ourselves even to the ones we love. God knows what we try to conceal, and that is a needed message for Christians everywhere. It brings to mind the most convicting yet comforting prayer I pray, the Anglican Collect for Purity: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name: through Christ our Lord. Amen."

**STEVE RINDAHL**  
Black River, New York

## Health and Poverty

"The Fitness-Driven Church" [June] ignored the major contributions of John Wesley and the early Methodists who were health reformers and relentless advocates for both spiritual and physical fitness. Back in the 18th century, Wesley was concerned that only the rich could afford doctors. He wrote a book about

### TOP 3

**What got the most comments in June's CT**

**35%**  
**A Flood of Arks**  
CT Spotlight

**19%**  
**Want to Change the World? Sponsor a Child**  
Bruce Wydick

**15%**  
**A Terrifying Grace**  
Mark Galli

### READERS' PICK

**The most praised piece in June's CT**



**Want to Change the World? Sponsor a Child**  
Bruce Wydick

simple preventative health to help the poor and pastors stay healthy. Far from being the "health and prosperity gospel," Wesley's gospel might have been called "the health and poverty gospel."

In Memphis, family physician and Methodist minister Scott Morris is following in Wesley's footsteps. Years ago, Morris founded the Church Health Center to provide quality, affordable health care for working people without health insurance. The center cares for over 55,000 people and focuses on spiritual fitness and prayer, physical fitness, daily exercise, and good nutrition.

**CAL SAMRA**  
Editor & Publisher, The Joyful Noiseletter  
Portage, Michigan

## Sing in His Name

Thank you for discussing a richly complicated subject in "Love the Lord with All Your Voice" [June]. Athanasius stressed unison Psalmody so that the people of God might "sing with one voice." Humbly singing and purposefully blending together can tear down the distinction between prayer and performance.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer beautifully expressed the fact that when we feel uncomfortable with Psalm texts, we should remember that we are often praying the words of Christ. Only Christ

### COMMENTS? QUESTIONS?

CT'S EDITORS WOULD LOVE TO HEAR THEM.

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is worthy to speak the way many of the Psalms speak and to sing what he sings, so we sing in his name.

**SUE TALLEY**  
E-mail

## Baptist Tension

"The Unorthodox Baptist Bishop" [June] is quite good in several respects. But in the areas that dealt with Malkhaz Songulashvili's problems with other Baptists in Georgia, and the tensions with other Baptist unions in Eastern Europe, it badly mischaracterizes the situation.

Baptists who have left Songulashvili's leadership in Georgia are pro-Western and against President Putin's policies toward Georgia and the West. If the Eastern European Baptists wanted to partner with someone who was anti-Western, they made a terrible mistake. It is also nonsense that tensions arose with Songulashvili's group because of his ties to evangelical groups. Baptists in Georgia have ties to many evangelical groups. If the Eastern Europeans desired to work with Baptists who rejected ties with evangelical groups, they failed.

So why the opposition? The short answer is the theological liberalism that Songulashvili adheres to. He obscures the gospel and the believers' need for a real relationship with Jesus Christ by adopting Orthodox religious reforms. Members of the Georgian Association have no problem working with their brothers in the East on a range of issues. This is despite differences over alcohol consumption, dress codes, and politics in the former Soviet Union. Also, there was no "rush" to recognize the Association

by the Eastern European Baptists. The majority of our churches left Songulashvili's group 16 years ago. They were organized together 13 years ago and recognized just last year.

**BRIAN WOLF**  
Missionary, International Gospel Outreach  
Telavi, Georgia

## Faithful Where We Are

I am blessed to still call Eric Metaxas a friend and a brother ["The Golden Fish," June]. I often share the story of meeting Eric to encourage people that the Lord is asking us to be faithful where we are. I was not out to get Eric saved, nor was I out to do a "big thing" for God. I enjoyed his company and answered whatever questions I could answer. We never know God's plans for the people who cross our path.

**EDWARD TUTTLE**  
E-mail

## CLARIFICATION

With "A Flood of Arks" [Spotlight, June], readers wanted to know more about our summary of *Answers in Genesis*. We used multiple independent sources, the Ark Encounter fundraising website, and senior vice president Michael Zovath's statements to various news outlets and local government officials. All consistently stated that the economic downturn has significantly hurt Ark Encounter fundraising and construction.

## CORRECTION

In "The Unorthodox Baptist Bishop" [June], the correct name of the American pastor quoted in the first paragraph is *Cuttino Alexander*.



compiled by Elissa Cooper

## WORTH REPEATING

Things overheard at CT online.

**"As someone who yearns for Jesus' vision and prays for his kingdom to come, how can I be okay with this inequity?"**

**JS Boegl**, on the death of Trayvon Martin and the ensuing trial.

*The Exchange*: "3 Things Privileged Christians Can Learn from the Trayvon Martin Case," by Christena Cleveland

**"The decision did nothing to hinder our preaching the same love that Jesus taught and spoke."**

**Norman L. Martin**, agreeing that the Supreme Court's definition of marriage doesn't affect our calling as Christians to share the Good News.

*The Exchange*: "Prop 8, DOMA, and the Christian Response," by Ed Stetzer

**"It's not wrong to find comfort in imperfection."**

**Heather Eure**, finding that sharing our brokenness helps us see our need for God.

*Her.meneutics*: "The Very Worst Trend Ever," by Megan Hill

**"No two people seem to use the same definition of modest—which makes this debate so difficult."**

**Ann Olson**, noting that Jessica Rey's "modest" swimsuit line would not be considered modest in her childhood church.

*Her.meneutics*: "Don't Blame the Bikini, Blame the Bikini Culture," by Sharon Hodde Miller with Caryn Rivadeneira and Rachel Marie Stone

**"You may see more leaders fail. But that does not mean that the work and the ministry are not well."**

**Manny Dee**, on how some ex-gay ministries provide healing even though they do not receive the attention that Exodus International did.

*"After Exodus: Evangelicals React as Ex-Gay Ministry Starts Over,"* by Melissa Steffan

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# Hungry for Outrage

Indignation is the discourse *du jour* on the Internet. We can do better.

**P**ardon the bloated metaphor, but imagine for a moment that the Internet is a buffet. A lot of what's served is lukewarm macaroni and cheese, passable but forgettable. Sometimes you stumble upon a dish that is both delicious and good for you. BuzzFeed is cotton candy, *The Economist* steamed broccoli. And *Christianity Today*—well, you can decide what culinary comparison fits best by the end of this editorial.

Recently, it seems, someone on the wait staff put out a heaping plate of sour candy. We are all going back for more, and it's making us quite sick.

Call it the tart deliciousness of moral outrage. From mayors' sex scandals to pastors' oddball comments to judges' incoherent rulings, we are reminded 24/7 of the extent of human folly. If anything, a nonstop news cycle gives us nonstop proof that sin pervades every person and institution. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, original sin "is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved"—and tweeted, we might add. There is no shortage of reasons to be outraged.

When justice is dashed and human dignity is maimed, anger is our right response. But what we *do* with that anger is the line between wisdom and our own folly. Increasingly, it seems, many of us are using it to show our social media and blog followers that we are on the right side of contentious issues. Who knew that being offended tasted so good?

Two recent examples of outrage from online Christendom: As much of the world welcomed Prince George Alexander Louis this summer, some Christians reacted by harumphing that secular media were inconsistent in calling him the Royal Baby, not the Royal Fetus. "How grand that the clump of

cells in Kate's womb has now, as of today, crossed over the threshold of personhood!" snarked Baptist blogger Owen Strachan on Twitter. Strachan's pro-life point is well taken. But his reaction carried the whiff of a party pooper, out to set straight everyone who was simply celebrating the birth.

Another example came when, the day after the May tornado swept through Moore, Oklahoma, John Piper tweeted two passages from Job about calamity. Hours later, Rachel Held Evans launched a takedown of the Reformed pastor's entire "abusive" theology. The popular blogger even linked his teachings to the Sovereign Grace Ministries abuse scandal. (Evans quickly apologized for jumping the gun.) The Moore tornado seemed more a chance

to rally the troops than to mourn for 23 victims and consider the church's practical response.

And this is to say nothing of Mark Driscoll, who gives fans and haters alike plenty of sour candy to satisfy our outrage hunger. Outrage at his comments, or outrage at comments about his comments. Whatever one thinks of the Seattle pastor's teachings, our virulent reactions keep us spinning in the dirt, each side further convinced of the rightness of its views.

## THE RISE OF 'OUTRAGE PORN'

Political cartoonist Tim Kreider put his finger on our problem in a recent essay: "So many letters to the editor and comments on the Internet [come from] people who have been vigilantly on the lookout for something to be offended by, and found it."

Kreider admits that his job requires him to be "professionally furious." Yet he has come to lament the rise of "outrage porn." "Some part of us loves feeling (1) right and (2) wronged. But outrage is like a lot of other things that feel good but, over time, devour us from the inside out."

Outrage begins to eat us alive when it is not channeled into creative love. It does not produce the righteousness we seek (James 1:20), and there is only so much love you can demonstrate in 140 characters on a glowing screen.

But there's something more insidious about our outrage. Journalist Katie J. M. Baker wrote that one reason she indulges in "hate-reading"—wherein one visits a website just to feel outraged—is that it "never makes me feel

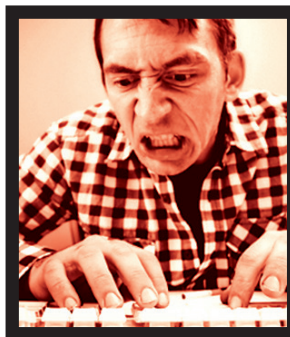
inferior. Instead, I've realized, it makes me feel superior."

I wonder if at the root of our Internet outrage is the need to show that we are righteous—specifically, more righteous than others. If the ancient impulse to justify ourselves apart from Christ is driving so much Twitter and Facebook rage (including my own). It wouldn't be the first time that religious folks "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt" (Luke 18:9, ESV).

The Reformed and the progressive bloggers, the Driscoll lovers and haters, the proponents of modesty culture and the despisers of it—all of us are equally under the power of sin. All of us receive the righteousness we so long for only through redemption in Christ Jesus. We can cultivate an online culture where we speak the truth in love only when we set aside the sour candy and feed on him instead.



BY **Katelyn Beaty** MANAGING EDITOR



**I wonder if at the root of our Internet outrage is the need to show that we are more righteous than others.**



**A Church-State  
Stretch****Should yoga be banned from public  
schools as a religious activity?****SET LIMITS, NOT A BAN**

**Amy Julia Becker** blogs for Her.meneutics and is the author of several books, including *Why I Am Both Spiritual and Religious*.

My children began to learn yoga through our local public preschool a few years ago. They came home eager to show me “butterfly,” “snake,” and “dog” poses. At the school’s Mother’s Day celebration, they showed off their skills with a mixture of stretches, creative movement, and feeble attempts to sit still and breathe calmly.

Although I attended a regular yoga class myself, I was somewhat concerned that my children were learning yoga in school. I knew about its Buddhist and Hindu roots. I didn’t want my kids to be indoctrinated. And it felt almost like an affront that they might be taught yoga in school, but wouldn’t learn about Christmas or Easter there.

Once I thought it through, I realized that my kids were benefiting from the same aspects of yoga I experienced in my local studio. My kids weren’t being asked to raise their hands in prayer or to chant, “Om.” There were no statues of the Buddha. Rather, they were learning strength, balance, and flexibility. They were learning how to quiet their minds and bodies. They were learning that physical challenges can happen beyond the athletic fields and competition.

Yoga in public schools is appropriate as long as it is practiced within parameters that separate church and state. As far as I can see, two possibilities exist. One follows the model of my children’s school. If yoga is a school-wide aspect of physical education or other classes, then it should be permitted only within proper and appropriate boundaries.

Yoga can be practiced in a purely physical manner as a way to provide students access to strength training, flexibility, and balance, as it was for my children. But just as a physical education teacher shouldn’t quote the apostle Paul before asking students to run a lap, the spiritual aspects of yoga have no place in a public school.

But yoga could also be practiced, even in a spiritual way, if done through a student-initiated voluntary group. Although public schools need to protect the separation of religion and state when it comes to any mandatory activity or curriculum, schools also should allow students freedom of religious expression.

Just as student-initiated Christian prayer groups should be allowed on public school campuses, voluntary student-sponsored yoga that draws on Buddhist or Hindu practices should likewise be permitted.

If my kids continue practicing yoga, inside or outside school, I will teach them that yoga has its roots in a spiritual tradition. And I

will teach them that the Christian tradition also seeks to connect the mind, body, and spirit. I will explain to them how yoga has become one way for the Holy Spirit to work in me to begin to integrate these parts of my being. And I will be grateful that they learned the physical benefits of yoga at a very young age.

**CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING**

**Matthew Lee Anderson** is author of *Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith* and lead writer at [MereOrthodoxy.com](http://MereOrthodoxy.com).

Should yoga be banned from public schools? The answer is short and complicated: It depends. Whether yoga should be banned in public schools depends entirely upon the range of activities we include beneath the umbrella terms at stake, namely *yoga* and *religious activity*.

To see how contested the meaning of yoga is, try telling any Christian who practices yoga that it can’t be extracted from its ostensibly



Hindu roots. They will likely point to the physical benefits of posture, breathing, and so on, while denying that there has to be any spiritual content to it.

Then go tell a Hindu apologist that, in fact, yoga has roots in early-20th-century British “physical culture” and was an Indian reaction to the YMCA’s attempt to Christianize India through importing Swedish stretching (as Mark Singleton argues in his excellent book, *Yoga Body*). They will not like that story much.

The fact is, though, that whether yoga is a religious practice has a good deal to do with who is leading the particular event and what it involves. Some people approach it as an aggressive form of calisthenics. If that is the context, there is no reason to ban it from schools. In that case, in fact, such an exercise wouldn’t qualify as a religious practice at all. There would be good reason to drop the term *yoga* altogether and perhaps replace it with a new label, to make the point clear.

But others are intent on keeping the physical exercise tied to its alleged Hindu roots. In such a case, incorporating yoga into the schools should be subject to standard rules regulating religious activities in public schools.

I should note, though, that I’m not arguing for incorporating yoga simply by changing the name. To treat these two forms as identical, we would have to argue that there is something inherent in the particular poses and forms that draws people away from knowing the real God.

That sort of argument could have merit—I see no viable possibility, for instance, that Christians should ever take up “pole dancing” as a meaningful athletic activity. Pole dancing is clearly and inherently tied to objectifying and sexualizing women and is an activity

Christians should avoid. But given yoga’s similarity to other, Western, purely athletic forms of exercise, decrying the poses and contortions that in part make it up is considerably harder.

## IT’S DISGUISED HINDUISM

**Laurette Willis** is a Christian fitness expert and founder of PraiseMoves, a Christian alternative to yoga ([PraiseMoves.com](http://PraiseMoves.com)).

If religious activities like Christian, Muslim, and Jewish prayers are banned from public schools, then yoga should also be banned.

“But yoga is just exercise!” many exclaim. Hindus, however, view yoga as part of their religion. Professor Subhas Tiwari of the Hindu University of America acknowledges that yoga originated in Hindu Vedic culture. He says it is impossible to separate yoga as a physical practice from yoga as a spiritual practice.

I consider yoga a missionary arm of Hinduism and the New Age movement. I was involved in yoga and the New Age movement for 22 years, from age 7 to 29. I know firsthand that yoga offers much more than physical exercise. Before I became a Christian, I was a student of Hatha Yoga and Kundalini Yoga and an instructor of Hatha Yoga, as was my mother.

My mother and I became involved in yoga through a daily television program. She found that the exercises relieved her stress. She became a yoga instructor, and I followed in her footsteps. Little by little, we began to favor visiting the ashram in upstate New York over church activities. As we became more involved, it also opened the door to other New Age interests and practices.

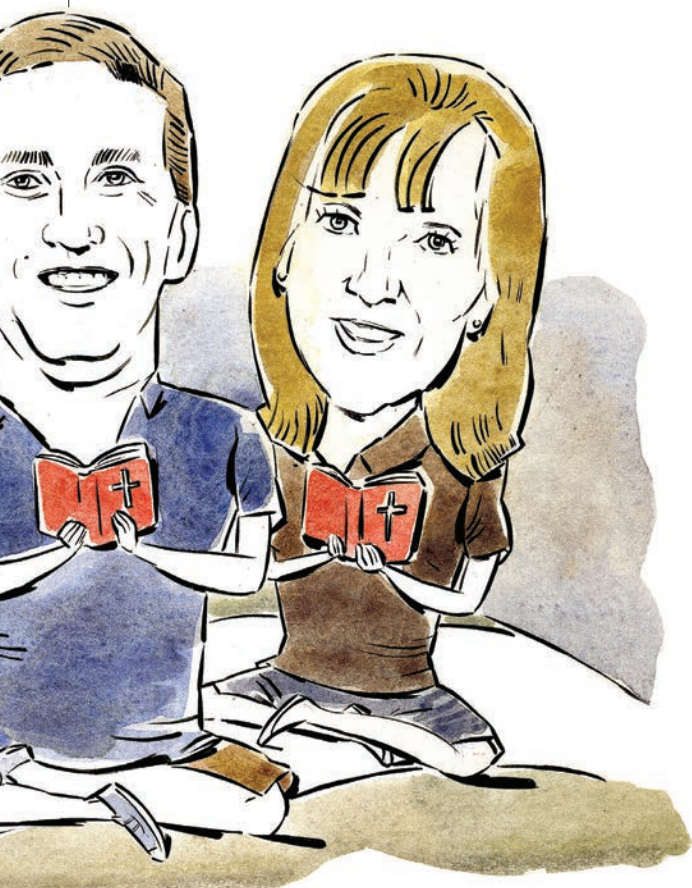
Yoga postures represent offerings to millions of Hindu gods. In fact, there is a dedicated “Lord of Yoga.” His name is Shiva, a supreme divinity. Yoga in Sanskrit means *yoke* or *union*, and famous yogis teach that, “yoga unites the individual self to the universal self.” Thus, yoga practitioners are, however unintentionally, attempting to unite themselves to Hindu divinity.

This is antithetical to the Christian faith. We are told to “abstain from things offered to idols” (Acts 15:29, NKJV). Jesus tells us to take his yoke upon us and follow him to find rest, “for my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30).

But surely a public school’s yoga class would be completely devoid of all religious aspects. Some promise this. But years later, when your child as an adult is visiting a bookstore and passes by the Eastern religion section and sees books on yoga, he or she may very well equate it with the warm fuzzies felt during those supposedly religion-free yoga sessions in third grade.

One option for schools is to use our PowerMoves Kids curriculum. It focuses on character education and fitness, not religion.

Christians realize there is a spiritual realm we cannot see. Paul warned that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12, NKJV). These spiritual forces have power, and they do influence us. They have a way of subtly and deceptively pulling us away from the one true God, our Lord Jesus Christ.



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# Worship con Queso

How sensual delights prepare us for the eternal feast.

**T**here is a Tex-Mex restaurant in Houston I have visited on three occasions. Each meal has begun with *chile con queso*. The cheese at this particular restaurant is the most delicious food I have ever tasted.

With every bite, I have been overcome with gratitude to God for creating taste buds, cows, and human ingenuity. And that gratitude has led to praise.

Some folks understand this. Some think I'm kidding. And others are skeptical that such a carnal thing as a Tex-Mex appetizer could provoke genuine worship.

We Christians have a long history of mixed and sometimes openly hostile attitudes toward sensual pleasure. Augustine is the fourth-century poster boy for our dilemma, struggling in Book X of his *Confessions* to rein in each of his five senses. He attempts, for example, to "take food at mealtimes as though it were medicine" and to "fight against the pleasure in order not to be captivated by it."

I appreciate Augustine's caution that pleasure in created things never replace our desire for the Creator. But lately I've been discovering an emphatically pro-pleasure voice in the writings of another Christian guide.

C. S. Lewis is known, of course, as a literary scholar, novelist, and apologist. He is also, consistently, a curator of pleasure. Where there is beauty to be received, music to be heard, laughter to be welcomed, and (especially) food to be eaten, Lewis attends, celebrates, scrutinizes, describes, and partakes.

In *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, Lewis argues that the pleasures derived from

forest moss and sunlight, bird song, morning air, and the comfort of soft slippers are "shafts of [God's] glory as it strikes our sensibility." Our task is not to guard against sensual enjoyment, but to allow our minds to run "back up the sunbeam to the sun"—to see every pleasure as a "channel of adoration."

Lewis even argues that there is no such thing as a "bad" pleasure—only pleasures "snatched by unlawful acts." But he is not blind to the "concupiscence" (lustfulness) that so haunts Augustine. When our response to pleasure is greed instead of adoration—when we seek to grasp and possess rather than receive—our healthy cry of "This also is Thou" distorts into "the fatal word: *Encore*."

In *The Four Loves*, Lewis distinguishes "Need-pleasures" from "Pleasures of Appreciation." The enjoyment we get from a Need-pleasure, such as water to quench thirst or the scratching of an itch, is intense but short-lived. But with Appreciation-pleasures—smells, tastes, and scenes of beauty that awaken us to delight—the sensation intensifies over time. Greed—the repeated cry of "Encore!" to, say, rich black coffee or extra-creamy queso—may transform a Pleasure of Appreciation into a Pleasure of Need, draining out all the lasting enjoyment.

The answer, Lewis contends, is not to avoid pleasure but to "have" and "read" it properly: to receive it, openhanded, as both a gift and a message. "We know we are being touched by a finger of that right hand at which there are pleasures for evermore. There need be no question of thanks or praise as a separate event, something done afterwards. To experience the tiny theophany—the small sign of God's presence—"is itself to adore."

In many respects, Augustine and Lewis concur. But there is a major point of divergence. Augustine sees our sensuality as a threat to be managed until God "consign[s] both food and belly to destruction." Lewis views every earthly pleasure as an apprenticeship in adoration for what will go on forever in heaven.

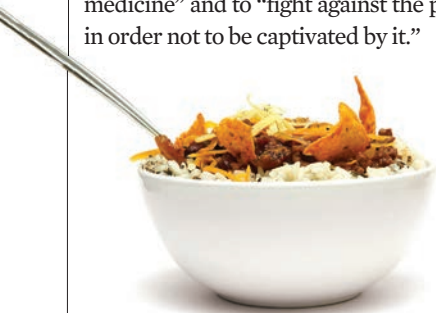
Biblical writers seem irresistibly drawn to an image—part metaphor, part promise—of "the sacred meal with God." From the table prepared for the psalmist (Ps. 23:5), to Jesus' story of a great banquet (Luke 14:15–24), to the Revelation 19 vision of a wedding supper, the Scriptures are filled with the anticipation of feasting together in the presence of God forever. The prophet Isaiah (25:6–8) takes particular pleasure in this vision:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty  
will prepare a feast of rich food for  
all peoples,  
a banquet of aged wine—the best of  
meats and the finest of wines.  
On this mountain he will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.

For Lewis, earthly meals are chances to practice the gratitude and adoration that will accompany our everlasting feast with God. Just as trials train us in patience, pleasure trains us in worship. Every sensual enjoyment (properly received) is a "tiny theophany"—a chance to "taste and see" that God is good, and a reminder that there is a whole lot more where that came from.

I rest my *queso*. ✦

**For Lewis, earthly meals are chances to practice the gratitude and adoration that will accompany our everlasting feast with God.**







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# To Tame the World

What terrifies us about reality pushes us toward its Creator.

I've spent hours frittering away in college philosophy clubs, alongside people who use words like *prolegomena* and *quiddity*. These intellectual dignitaries purse their lips and allow their brows to crease neatly above their noses. They express thoughts like men with tweezers trying to extract splinters from the marble toes of the goddess of reason.

If you want to know what I learned from them, I can count it on one finger: Thinkers are terrified of this world.

The truth is, I don't blame them. We—thinking, feeling, yearning life forms—are more than a little bit out of our depth.

We can't walk out our front doors into the summer air without tiny creatures trying to suck our blood, while the authorities do nothing. Or without a flaming star leering at us so brightly that our skin spots and burns if we don't coat ourselves in protection.

We're that vulnerable. That small.

The world that we live in is fundamentally at odds with human self-importance, the drive behind so much intellectual chatter. Mountains have no guardrails. County officials can ban spitting fireworks, but meteorites go unregulated. Clouds drench us whenever they like without fear of reprisal. Winds cheerfully vandalize and even demolish buildings that were appropriately permitted and approved. Birds fly. Tadpoles sprout legs and belch through the night regardless of noise ordinances. Monkeys are for real. So is what they fly.

We can understand why man, modern man in particular, would like to mop the floors and bleach the walls. We might not be able to tame reality, but we can tame our *perception* of reality. We intellectualize in order to feel in control.

But God's personality—his fingerprints—won't wipe off. His incredible, untamable, transcendent personality is everywhere. It

oozes out of an aphid's hindquarters for an ant to savor. It slams against jagged cliffs in the North Sea and glows with pride at the birth of a star and flings the cold moon like a yo-yo trick and laughs when a too-green apple makes our insides panic.

This raucous place *does* have a steering wheel. But that steering wheel is far from our hands. Accepting this requires humility. It requires us to seek our knees and then our



faces. To let this world suck us down while we form words of awe and repentance and affection for the One who crafted such beings as us in such a place as this.

Still, we are thinkers. Bombarded with glorious song from a heavenly chorus, we become defensive philosophers. We ponder and discuss reality, thereby ignoring it. We grow numb to the roar of glory, looking past the magic woven into our own lives by becoming hooked on *Game of Thrones*. Or politics. Or obsessing about bills. Or expending the entire quota of our mental energy on the pursuit of gadgets and doodads just shiny enough to keep a human from seeing the sun for what it actually is—a seething star, holding its position only by grace.

The modern intellectual makes one of two mistakes. She either clings to “realistic” stories, which have the audacity to claim to reflect the world as it truly is. These are stories without magic. Without the supernatural. The boring world of white suburban angst and pointlessness. Or she retreats into escapism—hyperfantasy and wish-fulfillment. Ironically, those fantastical stories are often powered by the same resentment of the real, the same implicit claim that the world is dull, purposeless, and in need of a literary boob job.

But Christians, who believe that the world is God's and is good, don't need to subtract the supernatural or escape our boring world. Indeed, we need to open our eyes wide to the wildness of God's art on earth. We need to see fantasy in the tides and the spring, in childbirth and love and sweat, in eyeballs that see and tongues that taste, in the blazing star above us and the forests grown with its energy, rustling in the wind.

Our stories and philosophies should help widen our eyes to the glorious personality of our Father. We are here, in a place where words are made flesh all around us, where dragonflies dart like living metallic origami while kids jump off docks into liquid. Where the Word himself was made flesh and showed us love stronger than the armies of Pharaoh.

The real *is* fantasy. Live in it, and trust the One who writes it. ⊕

**N.D. Wilson** is a best-selling author, observer of ants, and easily distracted father of five. His latest book, *Death by Living*, is a creative nonfiction celebration of mortality. When he isn't writing, you can find him on Twitter @ndwilsonmutter.

**We might not be able to tame reality, but we can tame our perception of reality. We intellectualize in order to feel in control.**



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- Reinhard Bonnke -

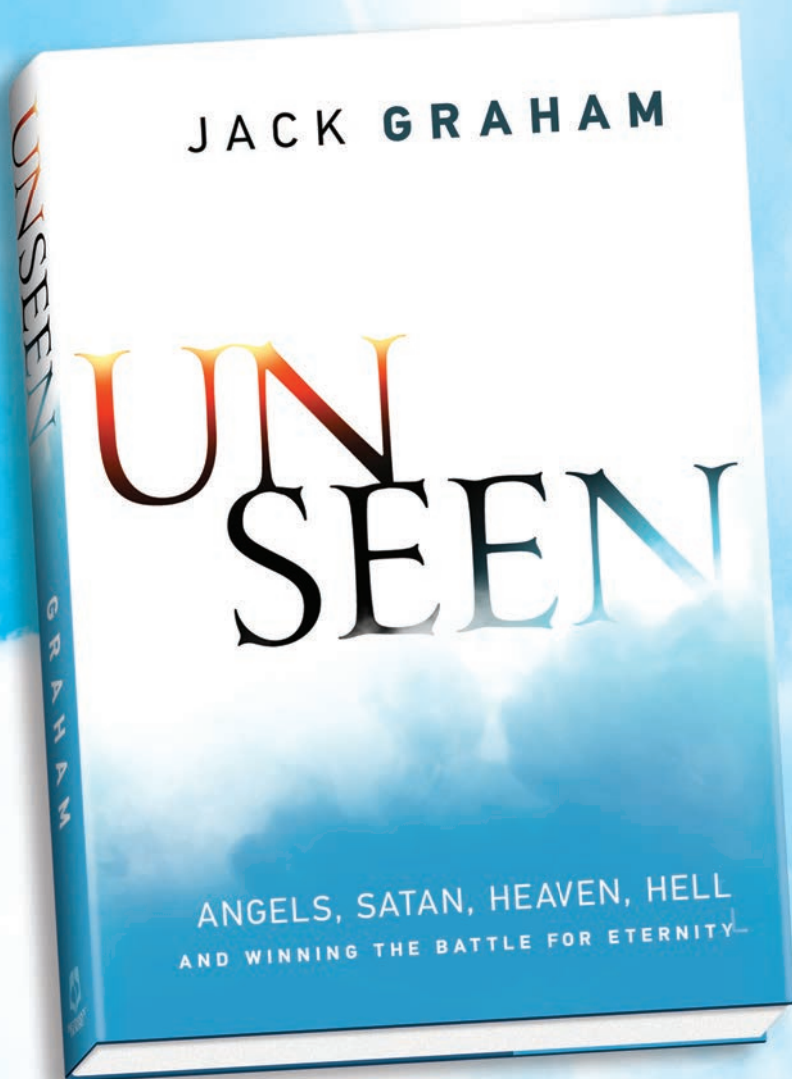


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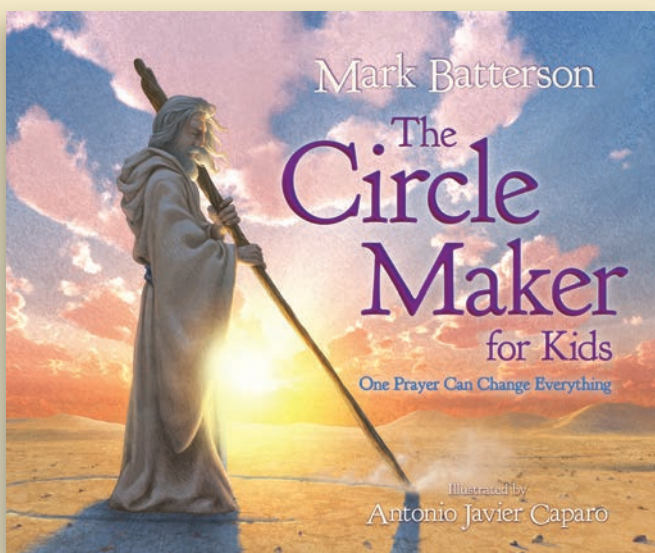
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BOOKS, MUSIC, AND THE ARTS

# CT Review



## Faith Outside the Bubble

Matthew Lee Anderson's new book offers doubting Christians soil where they can grow. By Alister McGrath

**T**he riddles of God," said G. K. Chesterton, "are more satisfying than the answers of man." This sparkling one-liner from the 20th century's best theological journalist could serve as a motto for Matthew Lee Anderson's new work, ***The End of Our Exploring: A Book About Questioning and the Confidence of Faith*** (Moody Publishers) ★★★★★. Like C. S. Lewis before him, Anderson sets out to explore a middle way between free-floating skepticism and dogmatic certainty. The first perspective sees any form of commitment

as betraying integrity, holding that the wise are characterized by permanent questioning. The other refuses to think about questions, seeing them as a slippery slope leading slowly but surely to unbelief.

This is no mere academic tension. Anderson's book has emerged from reflection and dialogue with colleagues and friends, particularly at the Torrey Honors Institute of Biola University (the author's alma mater). Like many—myself

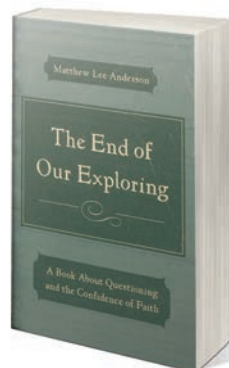
included—Anderson is worried about young believers who lose their way through well-intentioned guidance of the "just trust, don't think" type. He's also concerned about a Christian subculture that fails to prepare young Christians for life outside the "bubble." Within this subculture, excessive reliance on slogans and clichés can act as substitutes for thinking. As Anderson rightly notes, "It is the nature of clichés to avoid examination."

Anderson is good on why we need to ask questions if we are to grow in our faith, and why so many pastors feel threatened by them. Sadly, some interpret the questions of those who are genuinely exploring the faith as challenges to their authority, or blasphemous attacks on the gospel. What is really a kind of spiritual growing pain is misunderstood as rebelliousness or subversion. Anderson reminds all of us who pastor such people that rather than slapping such questions down, we need to examine the context within which they arise.

Anderson cuts to the quick, avoiding scholarly detachment and academic jargon. A series of well-chosen examples allows him to probe why we are reluctant to engage questions, while at the same time illuminating how such questions can enrich faith. We need to do more to help Christians—especially those attending college—to internalize their faith, gain a proper confidence in its roots, and learn to express this in gracious responses to the questions they will inevitably encounter.

### WEAK APOLOGETICS

In *The End of Our Exploring*, apologetics—or, at least, a certain kind of apologetics—comes in for critique. "The work of providing reasons for Christianity has teetered on overcompensating for the anti-intellectual strains in American Christianity and the





rise of a noisy atheist opposition.” I know what he means. Christian apologists (like me) who have taken the lead in engaging the “New Atheists” (like Richard Dawkins) have tended to focus on the intellectual arguments for and against belief in God. While this leads to some good outcomes, there is a downside, and Anderson is right to note this.

On the one hand, we need to show that there are answers to the New Atheists’ arguments. If we don’t respond, people will assume that we *can’t* respond, precisely because we have no answers to give. Anglican theologian Austin Farrer made this point years ago, and Anderson endorses it. Reason doesn’t create faith. But a public perception that faith is irrational creates a negative cultural predisposition against faith.

Anderson supports Christians engaging with this noisy yet somewhat superficial atheism. It needs to be done, and on the whole, it has been done well. Despite lingering media sympathy for this aggressive godlessness, it’s on the way out. In the United Kingdom, Dawkins is so yesterday. He is

## Certain apologetics can encourage people simply to learn the answers, without having internalized the deep logic of the Christian faith.

increasingly becoming a figure of amusement on account of the sheer predictability of his godless rants.

On the other hand, this way of engaging atheism suggests that Christianity is just a set of ideas, and it neglects the crucial relational aspects of faith. More problematically, it also encourages people simply to learn the answers, without having internalized the deep logic of Christianity. Anderson worries—with good reason—that a faith that knows the answers, but doesn’t understand the questions, is both superficial and vulnerable.

That’s why Anderson is right to emphasize the need for recovering “the practice of catechesis,” meaning a deliberate education in the fundamentals of the faith. When done

well, it cultivates our “ability to question and live into the answers.” The rise of the New Atheism showed clearly that many Christians weren’t good at connecting the dots of their faith. They knew their Scripture well, but hadn’t quite figured out how to weave its themes together to yield a coherent way of thinking. They trusted and loved God, but they had neglected Jesus’ command to love God with one’s mind.

In Anderson’s phrasing, we need to be able to “show our work.” By this, he means that we need to commit to explaining why we believe certain things, rather than simply asserting them. “We may,” he writes, “have grasped our understanding intuitively, without reflection.” Anderson makes this point partly to help readers see why discussing

## MY TOP 5 BOOKS ON THE BODY

By Rachel Marie Stone, author of *Eat with Joy: Redeeming God’s Gift of Food* (InterVarsity Press)



### BORN AGAIN BODIES

*Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*

R. MARIE GRIFFITH (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS)

This is a serious yet largely accessible scholarly study on the long history of American Christian body projects—from 19th-century health food evangelists to more recent evangelical weight-loss programs. Griffith talks to Christians involved in these projects, seeking to understand how they view the relationship between their bodies and their souls.

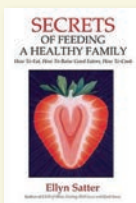


### THE SUPPER OF THE LAMB

*A Culinary Reflection*

ROBERT FARRAR CAPON (MODERN LIBRARY PAPERBACKS)

Capon, a priest and amateur chef, offers a theological treatise on the goodness of the body and its appetites, and the astounding creativity of the God who has so richly provided not simply for our sustenance but also for our satisfaction and pleasure. This book is well on its way to becoming a spiritual *and* culinary classic. There are even recipes to get you started.

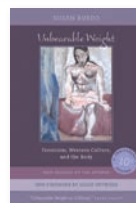


### SECRETS OF FEEDING A HEALTHY FAMILY

*How to Eat, How to Raise Good Eaters, How to Cook*

ELLYN SATTER (KELCY PRESS)

Satter’s concept of “eating competency,” while not explicitly Christian, has helped me understand the goodness of the body and of its needs and appetites. Satter urges us to give ourselves “permission to choose enjoyable food and eat it in satisfying amounts.” But she also urges us to have “the discipline to have regular and reliable meals and snacks and to pay attention when eating them.”

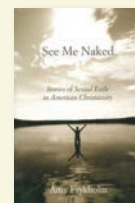


### UNBEARABLE WEIGHT

*Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*

SUSAN BORDO (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS)

Scholarly and challenging, this book has me returning for its insightful analysis of the meaning of eating disorders and the social pressures that conspire to make women and girls fear their own appetites. It is an indispensable starting point from which to understand the complexity of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction.



### SEE ME NAKED

*Stories of Sexual Exile in American Christianity*

AMY FRYKHOLM (BEACON PRESS)

Frykholm says that rules “can guide people onto solid ground,” but she’s concerned that rules have become almost the sole way that American Christians talk about sex and bodies. Sharing very different stories of young people growing up Christian, Frykholm urges more compassionate conversations about how difficult it is to be spiritual beings with feet of clay.

differences needs to go deeper than assertion. We need to explore why we arrived at our conclusions, and to have a degree of openness or “hospitality” to other viewpoints—even if we may, for good reasons, ultimately reject them.

#### MORE TO BE SAID

I liked Anderson’s book and would not hesitate to recommend it, especially to pastors. Yet more needs to be said. Yes, we need to learn from the past, from voices scattered across the Christian tradition. But I found myself wishing the book had expanded on this, delving deeper into both the questions this raises and the answers that others, such as Lewis, have given. Anderson himself has read both Lewis and those thinkers to whom Lewis pointed. I would have loved more detailed examples of how engaging the past enriches the faith of the present, and perhaps a brief discussion of the flaws inherent in what Lewis called “chronological snobbery”: our lazy assumption that *modern equals better*.

Yes, Anderson is right to point out that the current emphasis on “dialogue”—particularly within emerging church circles—can stand in tension with a commitment to truth. But it doesn’t need to. I wish the book had included more on the role of dialogue as a form of apologetics or a means of spiritual development. And I would have liked more on the role of friendship as a way of helping us to cope with doubt, of deepening our appreciation of aspects of our faith, and as a context for exploring disagreements without provoking division.

But on the whole, this wide-ranging and well-written book does a fine job of opening up the place of questioning in the Christian life. Anderson has insightfully explored how questioning can be a legitimate form of intellectual inquiry, and a means of growing in faith. Further questions remain, not least about how to convert these ideas into pastoral practices. But it’s a great handshake to begin a conversation. ➤

**Alister McGrath** is professor of theology, ministry, and education at King’s College London, and president of the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics. He is the author of *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Tyndale House Publishers).

# Taking Care of Busyness

It’s about much more than managing your Google calendar. By Alissa Wilkinson

I suppose there was a time in my life when I would answer that friendly conversation opener—“How are you?”—with something like, “I’m doing well. How about yourself?”

But I (and, I suspect, at least a few million other Americans) have a new default answer: “Busy.” I don’t have the space to list what I’ve been up to for the past year, but let’s just say that I have impeccable busyness bona fides.

Or have I? In a blog post on *The New York Times* Opinionator last summer entitled “The ‘Busy’ Trap,” Tim Kreider pointed out that most people who reply this way aren’t working three shifts to make ends meet. They’re people “whose lamented busyness is purely self-imposed: work and obligations they’ve taken on voluntarily, classes and activities they’ve ‘encouraged’ their kids to participate in. They’re busy because of their own ambition or drive or anxiety, because they’re addicted to busyness and dread what they might have to face in its absence.”

For those of us shifting uncomfortably in our chairs right now, pastor and author Kevin DeYoung has written **Crazy Busy: A (Mercifully) Short Book About a (Really) Big Problem** (Crossway) ★★★★★. The book, though informal and friendly, should prompt readers to take a long, unsparing look at the things they say and do.

DeYoung offers up three dangers that busyness presents: ruining our joy, robbing our hearts, and covering up the rot in our souls. He then lists seven diagnoses to help the harried reader start to discern the root of her busyness. Those diagnoses, full of gentleness and truth, can sting a little: You might be beset by pride, or freaking out too much about your kids, or too focused on people-pleasing, or unwilling to put down your iDevice.

All true, but all easily found in other books and articles in the genre. What sets *Crazy Busy* apart is its

seventh diagnosis: “You Suffer More Because You Don’t Expect to Suffer At All.”

The Bible is clear: Tedious labor and sweat are part of the Fall, but *work* was there from the beginning and will continue into eternity. God is renewing creation, even now, and so we have things like washing machines, lawn mowers, and cell phones to help relieve some of the labor.

This is great, but it can make us long to “escape 9–5, live anywhere, and join the new rich,” as Timothy Ferriss’s best-selling book, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, promises in its subtitle. And if, despite all today’s innovations, we still feel busy and tired, well, we must be doing something wrong. In the West, we love to believe that suffering indicates not growth but failure. However, as DeYoung wisely reminds us, “Effective love is rarely efficient. People take time. Relationships are messy. If we love others, how can we not be busy and burdened at least some of the time?” Even Jesus got so worn out that he had to paddle a boat out onto the Sea of Galilee to rest.

DeYoung’s remedy, then, is not about calendars or systems. It’s not about getting rid of interruptions or paring down your relationships. Instead, it’s about ordering our lives properly—for starters, reading the Bible and praying every day, thereby reminding yourself that your inbox isn’t your first priority. Doing this consistently forms you into the sort of person who instinctively keeps priorities straight, knows what to turn

down, and welcomes the suffering that comes from doing the right kind of work. You may—and probably should—still be busy. But you’ll begin to understand why, and for whom, you labor. ➤

**Alissa Wilkinson** is CT’s chief film critic.





# Conversion or Death

from **BLASPHEMY: A MEMOIR  
SENTENCED TO DEATH OVER A CUP OF WATER**

ASIA BIBI WITH ANNE-ISABELLE TOLLET (CHICAGO REVIEW PRESS, 160 PAGES)

*Editor's note: Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, has been imprisoned since 2009, when she was sentenced to death under Pakistan's blasphemy law. While picking fruit in the fields, she drank from a well used by Muslim companions, who angrily accused her of contaminating the water. The following depicts the mob attack that preceded her arrest.*

I've almost filled my bowl [with fruit] when I hear what sounds like a rioting crowd. I step back from my bush, wondering what's going on, and in the distance I see dozens of men and women striding along towards our field, waving their arms in the air. . . .

Then I catch the cruel eyes of [my accuser] Musarat. Her expression is self-righteous and full of scorn. I shiver as I suddenly realize that she hasn't let it go at all. I can tell she's out for revenge. The excited crowd are closer now; they are coming into the field and now they're standing in front of me, threatening and shouting.

"Filthy bitch! We're taking you back to the village! You insulted our Prophet! You'll pay for that with your life!" They all start yelling: "Death! Death to the Christian!" . . .

I'm half lying on the ground when two men grab me by the arms to drag me away. I call out in a desperate, feeble voice: "I haven't done anything! Let me go, please! . . ."

Just then someone hits me in the face. My nose really hurts and I'm bleeding. They drag me along, semi-conscious, like a stubborn donkey. I can only submit and pray that it will all stop soon. I look at the crowd, apparently jubilant that I've put up so little resistance. I stagger as the blows rain down on my legs, my back and the back of my head. I tell myself that when we get to the village perhaps my sufferings will be over. But when we arrive there it's worse: there are even more people and the crowd turn more and more aggressive, calling all the louder for my death.

A woman I can't see screams hysterically, "She insulted our Prophet, she should have her eyes torn out!" while another yells: "Put a rope around her neck and drag her through the village like an animal!"

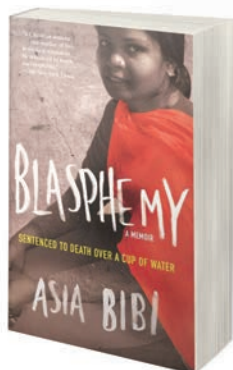
More and more people join the crowd as they push me towards the home of the village headman. . . . They throw me to the ground. The village imam speaks to me: "I've been told that you've insulted our Prophet. You know what happens to anyone who attacks the holy Prophet Muhammad. You can redeem yourself only by conversion or death." . . .

Sobbing, I reply: "No, I don't want to change my religion. But please believe me, I didn't do what these women say, I didn't insult your religion. Please have mercy on me." . . .

"You're lying! Everyone says you committed this blasphemy and that's proof enough. Christians must comply with the law of Pakistan, which forbids any derogatory remarks about the holy Prophet. Since you won't convert and the Prophet cannot defend himself, we shall avenge him." . . .

And they go on beating me with the same fury as before. ☘

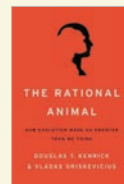
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## THE RATIONAL ANIMAL

*How Evolution Made Us Smarter Than We Think*

DOUGLAS T. KENRICK AND VLADAS GRISKEVICIUS (BASIC BOOKS)



Many of my friends wring their hands over the failure of so many evangelical Christians to acknowledge the insights of evolutionary science. I share their frustration, if not their degree of angst—but what about (on the other

hand) the Evolutionary Explainers of Everything? Consider, for example, Douglas Kenrick and Vlas Griskevicius, who routinely say things like this: "Finally, if you find yourself really wanting something you can't afford, ask yourself a deeper question: What evolutionary need is this purchase attempting to fulfill? The answer will often come back to one of seven subelves." Indubitably.

## PTEROSAURS

*Natural History, Evolution, Anatomy*

MARK P. WITTON (PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS)



Speaking of evolution, I've been smitten with pterosaurs ever since my younger brother and I saw (and heard) ads on TV, around 1957, for the movie *Rodan*. And then there was Arthur Conan Doyle's

novel *The Lost World*. If you share a more-than-casual fascination with what Mark Witton describes as "the diversity and sheer awesomeness of everyone's favorite leathery winged reptile," I have the book for you. Beautifully laid out, clearly written, loaded with handsome illustrations, Witton's book invites you to dip in for delicious tidbits or hunker down for the equivalent of a superb lecture series.

## IN THE KETTLE, THE SHRIEK

HANNAH STEPHENSON (GOLD WAKE PRESS)



"We talk to people / through our fingers, a typed out / stage whisper aimed at one / listener or all. The @ sign / is conversational, shows how / words can be loosed deliberately, / shows our hand steadying the arrow / of speech." Hannah Stephenson

is a good listener and an all-around good noticer, as you can confirm for yourself by getting a copy of her first book of poems. The one I have just quoted from is titled *Psalm Dot Com*. Among my other favorites are *Sanity Prayer*, *Drowning*, *Enchanted/Haunted*, and the title poem.

# Saving the Psalms

**N. T. Wright** urges the church to stop neglecting Jesus' prayer book. Interview by Andrew Byers

**N**. T. Wright wants to see today's media-saturated church shaped anew by a form of worship and prayer that has shaped the people of God for centuries. In **The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential** (HarperOne), the churchman and biblical scholar calls our casual neglect of the Psalter a crisis in contemporary Christianity. Andrew Byers, a chaplain at St. Mary's College at Durham University, spoke with Wright about aligning our values, theology, and perception of reality with the songs, poems, and prayers that saturated the hearts and minds of both Jesus and Paul.

## INTERVIEW

### Why would anyone need to make a "case for the Psalms"?

Over my lifetime, I have watched churches cease to sing the Psalms in weekly worship and often substitute them with modern worship songs. There is nothing wrong with modern worship songs. But the Psalms get a little neglected, then altogether ignored. At the same time, many churches that retain the Psalms use them in a way that fails to do justice to their richness and depth.

### Why is this so problematic?

The Psalter is the prayer book Jesus made his own. We can see in the Gospels and in the early church that Jesus and his first followers were soaked in the Psalms, using them to express how they understood what God was doing. For us to distance ourselves from the Psalms inevitably means distancing ourselves from Jesus.

The Psalms contain unique poetry expressing the biblical faith in God as Creator, Redeemer, judge, lover, friend, adversary—the whole lot. There is nothing like them. The Psalms go right to the depths of the human emotions. They explore what the great promises of God mean and what we do when

those promises do not seem to be coming true.

### What do you mean by the phrase "non-psalmic worship"?

When people give up using the Psalms, they often invent poor substitutes—songs, prayers, or poems that have a *bit* of Christian emotion and a *bit* of doctrine, but nonetheless lack the Psalter's depth, passion, and rich variety of expression. If one tries to do *without* the Psalms, there is an identifiable blank at the heart of things.

### How can the Psalms transform us?

Within the Jewish and Christian traditions, you get your worldview sorted out by *worship*. The Psalms are provided to guide that worship. When we continually pray and sing the Psalms, our worldview will actually reconfigure according to their values, theology, and modes of expression.

It's not that the Psalter gives us "Five Rules for Constructing Your Worldview." But it does embody the worldview that is to shape the people of God. And somebody who is regularly exposed to certain media forms (like a sequence of films, or a radio talk show with a particular bias) will begin seeing the world through those ideas and values.

### Are songs and poems from the ancient Near East really sufficient for shaping our worldview today?

There is a prejudice in the contemporary West that imagines that humankind grew up sometime in the 18th century, that everything *before* then is sort of silly, and that everything *after* then is sophisticated, intelligent, and informed by science.

But what is true today was true in the first century: There was a clash of worldviews. The early Christians discovered themselves drawn into the

Psalter's ancient Jewish way of seeing God as both totally *other* than the world and radically present—*dangerously* present—within it. And of course, this description of God is also the description of Jesus. The Psalms enabled the first generation of Christians to navigate the world of *their* day, a world not all that different from our own.

### How does Jesus' entrance into human history affect how we read the Psalms?

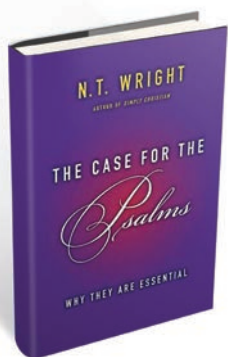
Since Jesus was raised from the dead, the first Christians understood that he was the expected Messiah. So their approach to the Psalms had to be reconceived. We have to assume that as good Jews, the first Christians were praying the Psalms day by day, but now with this wholly new and unexpected focus.

It was actually quite disorienting. Instead of the temple, *Jesus* is the place where God has decided to dwell on the earth. And since the Spirit has been poured out upon the church, somehow God's presence is everywhere, rather than concentrated in one place. The Psalter needed to be re-read from top to bottom and radically refocused around Jesus and the Spirit. This made the first Christians newly aware of Jesus' personal presence in their worship and prayer.

### Much of the Psalms, especially the songs of lament, can be unnerving. What should we make of these raw, brutal pleas? Can we pray, with Psalm 139, that God would "slay the wicked"?

Human beings find themselves overcome, from time to time, by extreme anger and hatred. These emotions shouldn't determine how we live. But we must have a way of saying, "Yes, that is actually where I am right now." And the safest place to do this is in God's presence. The Psalms offer a way of worshipping God amid any and all emotional states.

They also help us see that God wants a world in which there will be no evil. If there is injustice, if the poor are being oppressed, then it is right to pray that God will rid the world of that. Part of our reaction to the so-called "cursing Psalms" is that we think the modern world basically has the problem of evil solved. The Psalms bring us up short and say, "No, evil is real, and some people are so wicked that we simply must wish judgment upon them."





# A Front-Row Seat to African Faith

James Ault's magnificent new documentary gives a firsthand account of global Christianity. By Philip Jenkins

**T**here are plenty of books describing the rapid growth of African churches. Those who can't travel to witness this growth firsthand, though, can find it difficult to grasp. But now we have a set of impressive films: James Ault's new series, **African Christianity Rising**. It is a superb resource for anyone who wants a front-row seat to the explosion of this part of global Christianity.

Ault, whose acclaimed 1987 PBS documentary, *Born Again*, set a new standard for covering American fundamentalism, began filming in African churches in the late 1990s. Funding hurdles made the process agonizingly slow, although the opportunity to revisit his subjects over several years gives us interesting insights into how their stories have developed.

In its final form, *African Christianity Rising* comprises two DVDs, one each on churches in Ghana and Zimbabwe. (An educational edition includes a treasure trove of additional materials.) The films cover a wide spectrum of churches, each with its distinctive historical background and worship style. We see independent evangelical congregations, a classic African initiated church (Zimbabwe's Zion Apostolic Church), and a surging Pentecostal megachurch, Ghana's International Central Gospel Church, founded by Mensa Otabil. We also learn about Ghana's Roman Catholic Church and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Zimbabwe.

Much of the material, though, concerns what North Americans would regard as mainline Protestant congregations—Grace Presbyterian in Akropong, Ghana, and St. James United Methodist in Mutare,

Zimbabwe. So initially familiar to North Americans, the “mainline” setting makes the differences all the more startling when they emerge.

What makes the series so powerful is the believers we meet. Yes, Ault does present learned experts, including the late and much-lamented theologian Kwame Bediako and Ghana's former Catholic archbishop Peter Sarpong. Both discourse eloquently on “inculturation,” the process of taking faith out of the European envelope in which it was brought to Africa. But most of the people we hear are quite ordinary, and that is their glory.

Ethnographic films run the risk of making their subjects appear so alien that they seem to belong on another planet. Ault's work, in contrast, introduces people we come to care about and would love to have as our neighbors. We see the Zimbabwean Methodist congregation through the eyes of Dorcas Bwawa, a widowed schoolteacher facing difficult family circumstances, but who is nevertheless a towering figure in her church's lay leadership. We also come to know and like the church's female pastor, Tsitsi Moyo, who at first sight seems conventional enough as a thoughtful and dedicated leader.

Further conversations, though, supply a backstory startlingly different from anything Americans might expect. Moyo turns out to be prophetic royalty, the daughter of a charismatic healer from the profoundly African

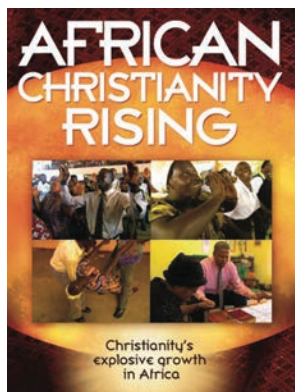
Zion Apostolic Church.

## A VERY DIFFERENT MAINLINE

For me, the best single feature of the series is its seamless integration of the thoroughly familiar with quite different African contexts and assumptions. Just when we become comfortable with these pleasant Methodists or Presbyterians, we start to count the ways in which their world is not that of most American congregations.

For one thing, we are struck by the sheer size of the African churches, not to mention their numerical expansion. We might expect mushrooming growth in a Pentecostal megachurch, but the mainliners are just as successful. We first see Grace Presbyterian as a church plant, and return to it several years later when it is becoming what we might consider a megachurch, but which in Africa is a normal congregation. If the concept of women's lay leadership is quite familiar, we are still taken aback by the near-military organization (complete with uniforms) that women's groups have developed in the Zimbabwean Methodist church.

We also learn the very different boundaries that divide denominations in African contexts. Decades ago, scholars coined the term “African Independent Church” to characterize new prophetic groups grounded in local traditions. Today, though, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Catholics are all completely independent, and their worship and church music proclaim them unquestionably African. If viewers should take away one point from the series, says Ault, it is that “Christianity's explosive growth in Africa depends upon the powerful and inexorable process of



**Ault's work introduces people we come to care about and would love to have as our neighbors.**



Labor of Love: Ault and his crew filmed over 350 hours for this two-part series.

believers' rooting their faith more authentically in their own cultures."

Let me stress a point about music, one that Ault brings out expertly. I wonder whether any era of church history—even the Protestant Reformation, with its profusion of hymns and psalm settings—has been so immersed in music and song as contemporary Africa. Groups both formal and informal break into hymns and spiritual songs with little prompting. Believers' daily lives are saturated with songs of God and faith.

Across the denominational frontiers, too, we see consistent fascination with ministries of deliverance and spiritual warfare, whether "mainline" or Pentecostal. Repeatedly, believers turn to their churches for help with problems that we might frame in social or family, rather than explicitly spiritual, terms—unemployment, substance abuse, and family stresses. While churches supply the material help they can—often with startling generosity—at least part of their response involves spiritual relief, with deliverance and exorcism. Believers understand curses to be routine and frequent obstacles to health and harmony.

Exorcism episodes appear so regularly in the films that we begin to take them for granted. For many American viewers, the shock is not seeing an exorcism in its own right, but realizing that the participants are pleasant, smart, and quite ordinary church

members whose company we had been enjoying just minutes before. And they're... Presbyterians? As Ault says, starkly, "You can't be a minister and not heal."

#### BEYOND POLITICS AND PROSPERITY

Ault makes no claim to be offering a comprehensive account of Christianity in the specific countries he visits, and certainly not in Africa as a whole. He does not address some topics in church life that concern many American Christians, such as attitudes toward homosexuality. Nor does he touch on relations with Islam, a matter of lively concern to Ghanaian Christians.

I asked Ault about a couple of issues that the films treat lightly. One involves politics in Zimbabwe, which for 30 years has been in the hands of a ruthless despotism that has devastated civil society and extinguished any semblance of a functioning economy.

Obviously, Ault did not want his subjects discussing political topics that could get them into trouble with the regime's thugs. But he also reminded me that in the context of the revolutionary growth of Christianity in black Africa, our justified worries about political repression can easily become "the tail that wagged the dog." Certainly even well-informed Westerners who turn to mainstream media to learn about Zimbabwe are likely to know far more about the Mugabe regime than about the extraordinary growth

of the church that has occurred through it all.

Ault has a similar attitude to another area of relative silence in the films, the so-called prosperity gospel. At least some of the appeal of Africa's booming Pentecostal churches lies in teachings that faith reliably produces wealth and health. That teaching is proclaimed in the mass meetings and crusades that are now such a staple of African urban life. One of the best studies of modern African religion, Paul Gifford's *Ghana's New Christianity*, focuses heavily on prosperity teachers, including Otobil himself.

Ault pays little attention to these themes, chiefly because he is anxious not to let them distract from the main argument. "Doesn't Africa get enough bad press?" All eras of

Christian history have thrown up sharks and showmen, "self-aggrandizing abusers," so should we really concentrate so mercifully on isolated African examples?

Ault also observes that prosperity preachers cover a wide spectrum. Some really try to improve the well-being of their congregations, and at the same time build their communities and nations. In one independent group that the film depicts at length, members learn that God gives prosperity, but in nuanced and practical terms. They "are also coached in good business practices and offered microfinancing for their enterprises." Other observers might treat these matters differently, of course, and their concerns should be addressed in discussions arising from the films.

In any event, no criticism that I could raise detracts in the slightest from the magnificent achievement that these films represent. They are informative, inspiring, and a delight to watch. There really is nothing like them. Now that we have them, there is truly no reason not to experience the astonishing phenomenon that is African Christianity, especially with such a generous and sensitive observer behind the camera.

**Philip Jenkins**, author of *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press), is distinguished professor of history at Baylor University and codirector for Baylor's program in Historical Studies of Religion.



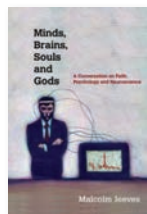
## New & Noteworthy

Compiled by Matt Reynolds

### MINDS, BRAINS, SOULS AND GOD

*A Conversation on Faith, Psychology and Neuroscience*

MALCOLM JEEVES (IVP ACADEMIC)



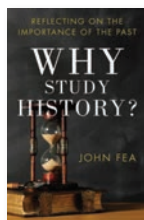
Christians often grow uneasy when they encounter certain teachings of neuroscience about free will and human nature. Jeeves, a leading expert in neuropsychology, addresses difficult questions about the plausibility of Christian faith amid the persistent crossing of new frontiers in brain research.

### WHY STUDY HISTORY?

*Reflecting on the Importance of the Past*

JOHN FEA (BAKER ACADEMIC)

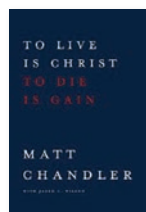
Fea, chair of the history department at Messiah College, devotes himself not only to his own highly-regarded historical scholarship but also to



training up new generations of historians. In this introduction to historical study from a Christian perspective, Fea shows how serious thinking about the past can equip believers to better serve God and neighbor.

### TO LIVE IS CHRIST, TO DIE IS GAIN

MATT CHANDLER WITH JARED C. WILSON (DAVID C. COOK)



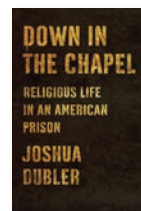
Chandler's growing family has him thinking more and more about bringing young men and women to Christian maturity. *To Live Is Christ, To Die Is Gain* is the Resurgence director's attempt to glean wisdom on this subject from a careful study of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

### DOWN IN THE CHAPEL

*Religious Life in an American Prison*

JOSHUA DUBLER (FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX)

Dubler, professor of religion at University of

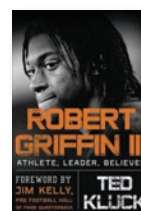


Rochester, spent more than six years observing events at a maximum security prison in southwestern Pennsylvania. His research uncovers the complex web of relationships linking prisoners of diverse religious backgrounds, prison guards and chaplains, and volunteers from outside organizations.

### ROBERT GRIFFIN III

*Athlete, Leader, Believer*

TED KLUCK (THOMAS NELSON)



The star quarterback known as "RGIII" has legions of fans who delight in his gridiron prowess and outspoken Christian faith. Kluck's biography, releasing as Griffin rehabs from injury and looks to build on the astounding success of his rookie year, touches on the athletic abilities and character traits that have fueled his immense popularity.

### MAKING NEIGHBORHOODS WHOLE

*A Handbook for Christian Community Development*

WAYNE GORDON AND JOHN M. PERKINS (INTERVARSITY PRESS)



Perkins, hero of the civil rights struggle in Mississippi, founded the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) to assist urban churches in ministering to poverty-ridden neighborhoods. Perkins and CCDA's

current president, Gordon, team up here to look back at the organization's history, give examples of its foundational principles at work, and ponder the future of Christian community development efforts.

### PREACHING IN HITLER'S SHADOW

*Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*

EDITED BY DEAN G. STROUD (EERDMANS)



While many German churches caved under Nazi pressure, compromising their doctrines and moral integrity, others courageously held firm. This volume, edited by a former Presbyterian pastor, examines sermons from Dietrich

Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and other preachers who refused to be intimidated into silence on the many evils of the Third Reich.

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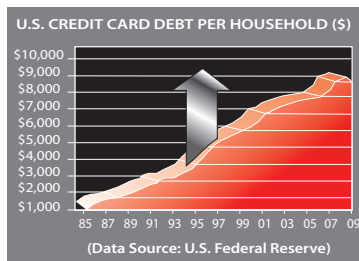
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A photograph of three African men sitting in front of a red brick building. The man on the left is wearing a light blue and white striped shirt and khaki pants. The man in the middle is wearing a purple and white diamond-patterned sweater over a purple collared shirt. The man on the right is wearing a grey zip-up sweater over a patterned shirt and tie, and khaki pants. They are all looking towards the camera with slight smiles.

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afterward, when I was in the Navy, I made a commitment to Christ. I quickly got involved with church. Kirby and I co-led the youth group. But I didn't know Jesus personally—and I didn't know that I didn't know him.

At a youth conference in California in 1971, I was leading a breakout session of youth who clearly had been randomly assigned. When my group convened, the "youth" I was to mentor were a Lutheran pastor, a church elder, a missionary, and a Christian college student. And I—who had known the meaning of Christianity for only months—was supposed to mentor them.

After a plenary by pastor Don Williams of First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, our group mused on God's sense of humor to convene a mentoring group of five adult Christians. Then I spoke up.

"Don kept talking about a 'personal relationship with Jesus,'" I said, "but I don't understand what that means."

Silence. I could feel the pastor's head whip toward me. "Would you *like* to understand?" he said. Soon he and I bushwhacked through 2,000 talking teenagers, and by the time we arrived at a quieter room, there must have been 25 people with us. We sat in a circle as the pastor explained to me "a personal relationship with Jesus" and asked whether we could pray that I would experience one.

Such was the depth of my spiritual maturity at that time, I decided to test them. I thought, *I'll open my eyes and look around. If any of them are peeking, I'll know they are not sincere.* Gideon and his wet and dry fleece had nothing on me. I snapped my eyes open, and they darted around the circle. Every person was fervently praying for me. The absurdity of my spiritual test suddenly hit me, and I belly laughed. I couldn't stop. I experienced Jesus' joy for the first time. I must have laughed out loud for ten minutes.

I don't think I knew it, but for years I had been walking between conversions up that mountain in the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit. There were many trails up the mountain, but only one source of water and one narrow way winding to the top. I am still walking the twists and dips of that path.

At a New Year's Eve party, I met Nick, who taught me more deeply about that invisible presence. He said that he had been

diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. After reading about healing in James 5:14–16 late one night, he had phoned his pastor.

Nick said, "Do you know what it says in the Bible? In James, it says if anyone is sick let him call for the elders and they will anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray the prayer of faith, and he will be healed."

The pastor yawned. "That's called the last unction. When someone is dying, we pray that."

Nick said, "That's not what it says. Read the verse aloud." Later, the pastor started rounding up elders, who anointed Nick and prayed. Nick was healed. Years later, he stood in front of me, very much alive. I

change. We appropriate it by recalling Christ's death on our behalf to open up the way to the Father's forgiveness of our own many sins.

The essence of the forgiveness model is taking the hard step of seeing things through the offender's eyes. Through prayer, I could see the young man's fear of prison and anger at having his plans spoiled. Being able to empathize with him didn't mean I accepted what he had done. But it did help me forgive him.

Almost ten years later, another spinoff tornado from my mother's murder rocked me. My brother, Mike, had been the one to find her broken body. In 2004, he told me that he still had flashbacks and was severely depressed. As a clinical psycholo-

## When I was in the Navy, I made a commitment to Christ. But I didn't know Jesus personally—and I didn't know that I didn't know him.

was once again converted, this time to know an active, powerful God.

### FORGIVING A MURDERER


Nick went through storms, and so have I. On New Year's Day in 1996, I woke up to the aftermath of my mother's murder. For years I had dedicated my professional life to researching forgiveness. As a clinician I had counseled many couples to forgive, and had written several books about the psychological and spiritual dimensions of forgiving. Yet my faith and my identity were tested.

Thinking no one was home, two teenagers broke into my mother's home, seeking treasure. My mother did not drive (hence no car in the driveway) and had gone to bed early (hence no lights). She awoke and confronted one of the youths, and he bashed her repeatedly with a crowbar.

Trying to forgive my mom's killer was like standing in a storm on top of Mount LeConte. My instinct was to huddle down in pain. But that personal relationship with Jesus that had transformed me at the youth conference set me on a different path. I thought through the forgiveness model my colleagues and I had developed and tested over the years. The model provides five steps that act like wooden forms a builder might use when pouring concrete. God pours in the substance of

gist, I was unable to help him because I let our childhood dynamics get in the way. Mike soon took his own life. That set off waves of self-condemnation that led to a dark time of anger at God. Yet eventually I was able to forgive myself for my failures. Even better, I found that the personal relationship with Jesus I had discovered in my immaturity—peeking to see whether people were sincerely praying—was robust. It stood a second huge test and helped me face my own spiritual crisis.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow has said that life is made of times of dwelling comfortably with God and times of seeking God. We never know which is around the corner. Although we might have walked a trail often, each trek is new. When the sun breaks forth, we can discover the day's beauty. When it storms, we must beware of treacherous footing.

There are many trails up the mountain, but there is only one way to the summit. We can't always tell, but we are not walking alone. It is a beautiful trip when we stop watching our own feet and gaze at the One who goes before us. 

**Everett L. Worthington Jr.,** PhD, is professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. His most recent book is *Moving Forward* (WaterBrook Press, [forgiveself.com](http://forgiveself.com)).





# Summit in the Spirit

Key turns in my hike with God. By Everett L. Worthington Jr.

I grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, a hop, skip, and a jump from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. I love to hike the Smokies, particularly the climb up Mount LeConte, one of the highest peaks in the Appalachian Mountains.

I usually take the steep, 5.5-mile Alum Cave Trail, stopping at multiple lookout points. But occasionally I choose the 6.9-mile Rainbow Falls Trail, which winds through forest and feels at times like a never-ending trudge. A couple of times, I've walked the 7.8-mile Boulevard, up and down from the high starting point of Newfound Gap. All three hikes lead to a drink of cold water at the water pump next to LeConte Lodge. Refreshed, I walk the narrow half mile to

the summit. Although I've hiked LeConte at least 25 times, every trek has been different.

There are many ways to walk with God. Some, like the Boulevard, are smooth, like being born and raised in a Christian home and making a natural transition to personal faith. Others, like the Rainbow Falls, take people so far from the mountain peak that they forget where they are headed. They slog through a leg-wearying, back-wrenching hike until they suddenly break out into freedom.

Others are like the Alum Cave Trail. It moves from Arch Rock to Inspiration Point to, perhaps, catching a glimpse of "the eye" (a gap that sunlight can stream through). The Alum Cave journey to God moves from vista to vista. Not seeing the endpoint until that

drink of living water, the hiker is led upward by memorable experiences.

I am an Alum Cave kind of Christian.

## HOLY BELLY LAUGHS

I grew up poor, but not dirt-floor poor. Daddy was a railroad man, on the road three out of four days. Mama stayed at home. Chronically depressed, she was hospitalized in the state mental facility several times. Nonetheless, they transmitted to me and my siblings, Mike and Kathy, a rudimentary faith, one that developed over the years and has helped me to face difficult turns on the climb.

In August 1970, I married Kirby, a crucial event in my spiritual journey. Soon

[ continue reading on preceding page ]



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