

DECEMBER 2014

**GORDON COLLEGE  
UNDER FIRE** *p. 44*

**MY BORING  
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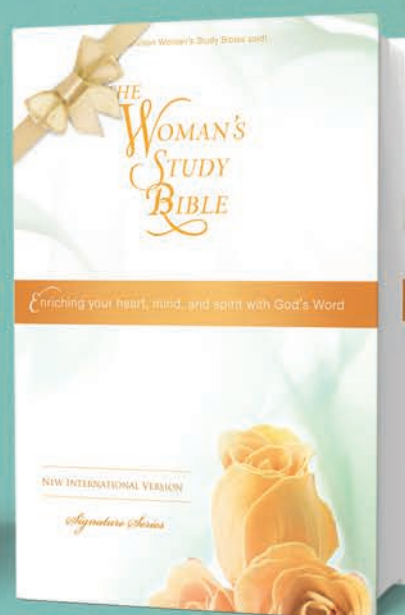
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**“There are many ways our culture distorts the gospel. But in this one weird instance, our culture is on to something.”** p. 54



Sarah has done  
Couch to 5K four times but  
has never run a 5K.



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As the father of three  
young girls, Michael (p. 44)  
has recently memorized  
"Let It Go."

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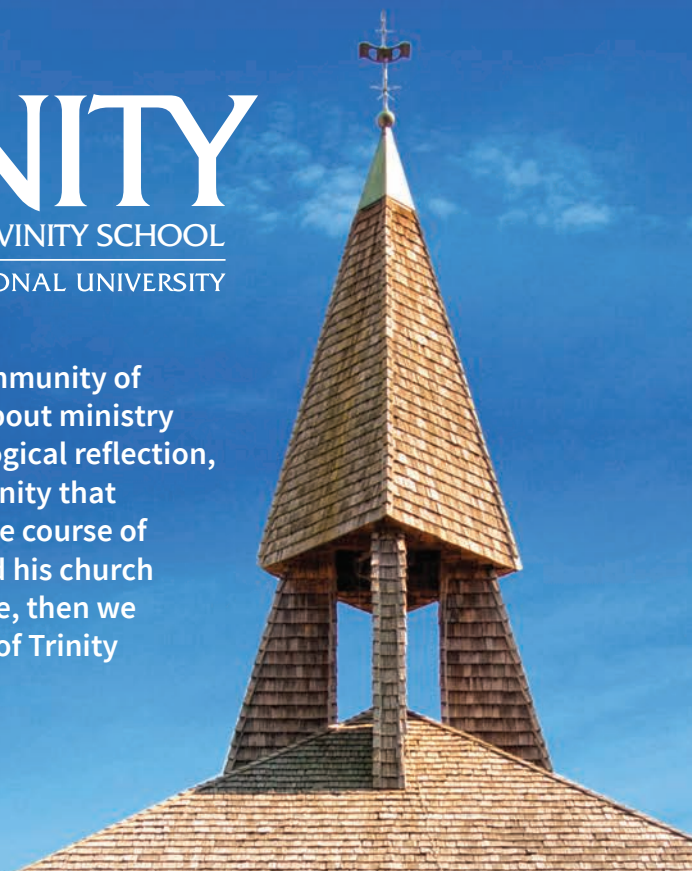
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# EDITOR'S NOTE

**W**HEN YOU SPEND EVERY MOMENT with a sibling in a faraway land, matters of the heart are bound to arise. That's what happened when my brother and I embarked on a trip to Peru this August.

During plane rides, taxi rides, long walks, and long meals, we talked about *Star Wars*, our parents, and our favorite bourbons. And we talked about Christianity—what it actually teaches, what makes it at once attract and repel “nones” like my brother. Tyler, 25, and I grew up in a “seeker-sensitive” Methodist church in Ohio. But the faith that resonated with me as a young teenager never struck a chord with him.

“Pope Francis really seems different from other church leaders,” said Ty on one of our hikes. “He seems tolerant of other people, and he cares about the poor.” I realized this was not the time for theological nuancing—*Well, the church has always cared for the dispossessed; “love,” not “tolerance” is the virtue at play*, etc. No, what mattered is that a person who currently has no interest in institutional Christianity had caught in Francis a glimmer of Christ.

Which is one reason why an evangelical publication like CT can devote a cover story to Jorge Mario Bergoglio (p. 36). Less than two years into the papacy, the former archbishop of Argentina has wooed the press and many skeptics, even as he has raised the ire of fellow Catholics and other Christian leaders. CT editors have no interest in baptizing Pope Francis's actions with quick praise. We recognize that no number of beautiful photo ops will erase real differences in how Protestants and Catholics articulate the gospel.

That said, we also recognize how much we can learn from the broader Western tradition. Just three examples from this issue: Nativity scenes (p. 54) were first created by Francis's namesake and became popular in pre-Reformation churches to teach the story of Jesus' birth to illiterate worshipers; Catholic thinkers (p. 65) help us navigate issues of marriage and sexuality with grace and truth; and ministries like the Mother of Mercy clinic in Zarqa, Jordan (p. 58), remind us to take the gospel to the most desperate ends of the earth.

In “The Joy of the Gospel,” the first major publication of Francis's papacy, he writes:

[M]ay the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor.

If my brother is any indication, we need more Christians like Pope Francis, whose glow will draw a world searching in anguish and hope.

**CT**



## THE GLOWING POPE

Why even ‘nones’ like my brother are taking notice.

KATELYN BEATY *Managing Editor, Magazine*



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## REPLY ALL



## SILENT NO MORE

Reading CT's October cover story was like reading about my family. How could that be true for a Latina like myself? Asian American Christians have distinct gifts to offer the church, given their bicultural journeys and life experiences, and that resonates with my own story.

As a young Latina minister, I too was navigating similar dynamics, and found friends, mentors, and *familia* with Asian American Christians. They have been supervisors, mentors, students, peers, and friends. Many of the people referenced in this article were a part of my spiritual journey and significantly shaped who I am as a follower of Christ and a pastor. I learned how to disciple Asian American young adults from Kathy Khang. I learned about finding my voice from Peter Cha in seminary at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Soong-Chan Rah has been a model of lament and hope. Jeanette Yep was involved in my spiritual formation. As I read their comments and many others in

Helen Lee's article, I found myself nodding and "amen"-ing. I am fundamentally a different person because of the Asian American community with which I have had the privilege to live out my faith.

Thank you for using this issue of *Christianity Today* to explore how the church will embrace the voice and gifts of my friends. My prayer for readers is that they will become curious about what they are missing in their own faith journey if they have not yet encountered the depth, passion, and leadership of Asian American Christians.

Sandra Van Opstal

Associate Pastor, Grace and Peace Community  
Chicago

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Problem w/ this month's @CTmagazine cover: By not showing one whole face it depersonalizes the Asian American. They should've just interviewed a key Asian American pastor. Reinforces the "otherness" of Asian Americans in American evangelicalism. Their eyes, nose, chin. So different.

Ronald @raddestnerd

## AFRICANS DON'T READ AFRICAN CHRISTIANS

You read what's available. Africans still find more books on the shelves by Western authors than by African ones.

However, that is changing. African publishers are beginning to overcome a historic emphasis on Western titles (often subsidized or even given away for free), and to find and equip homegrown authors. For instance, WordAlive in Kenya and Step in Ghana are publishing gifted African writers. Entrepreneurial self-published authors like Pusonnam Yiri of Nigeria (*Storms of the Mind*) and Jennifer Karina of Kenya (*Marriage Built to Last*) are building a following through social media and marketing savvy. Lawrence Darmani's *Grief Child* is required reading in freshman English classes in Ghana. Even in war-torn South Sudan, the world's newest country, efforts are underway to launch a new Christian publishing house and to equip writers for it.

When more African Christian writers are published, both Africans and readers in the West will benefit.

John Maust

President, Media Associates International  
Carol Stream, Illinois

## WHY ISIS MUST BE STOPPED

In its editorial focusing on ISIS, CT misunderstands national interest regarding foreign policy and military intervention. ISIS is destabilizing the region, attacking allies, endangering commerce, and committing atrocities against Sunni moderates, Shi'ites, and religious minorities. Further,

it seeks to expand as it inspires a global jihad. For those reasons, including the atrocities against Christians, US foreign policy dictates that ISIS must be stopped.

The United Nations, the United States, and a strong coalition of nations have tried to contain the violence. But how does the global coalition defeat an ideology? Radicalized Islam is like the Hydra: it regenerates when it is attacked. For that reason, I do not believe military intervention will stop the threat even if it might supplement a larger strategy.

Global Christian leaders have begged the United States to bring attention to their persecution. Yet what have America and other countries done on behalf of the persecuted church? Ignoring suffering Christian minorities does not demonstrate the United States' commitment to human rights, pluralism, or a global climate of religious tolerance.

I affirm that US foreign policy should "plead on behalf of imperiled Christians" and others who suffer from religious persecution.

**W. P. Payne**  
Ashland, Ohio

#### OPEN QUESTION

In order to answer "Do the Common Core education standards endanger religious freedom?" allow me to play devil's advocate. I went to a Christian school. I had a good education but missed a lot of opportunities. Numerous science subjects were omitted, which left students at a serious disadvantage in higher education. Knowing the roots of Leviticus texts did not equip anyone I know for their careers. This time could have been better spent elsewhere.

Free market is preferable, but only when that option truly enhances education.

**Kyle Matthew**  
Facebook

#### PEOPLE OF THE WORDS

Marguerite Shuster's "People of the Words" was thoughtful. By moving the pulpit to the center, though, the Reformers erred in downplaying the rest. Too often our pulpits no longer preach Christ and him crucified, but rather right theology and behavior. There is a difference between preaching and teaching. And as much as we Protestants try to

get rid of altars, they usually end up in our churches, because the altar always reminds us of the place we meet God.

My church's altar has the whole story of salvation portrayed: It is white, denoting God's holiness; it's dominated by the cross, reminding us of God's love in sending his Son; it has a Bible open and available to every person; and its candles remind us that the light has overcome the darkness.

**Russell Rohloff**  
Bethel, Vermont

Shuster takes aim at pictures, images, and other "visual works" of art, expressing how they dilute and detract from the message of the church. Yet the examples of misused art are film, video, and PowerPoint slides—forms of media that have hardly been around for 100 years. The history of visual arts in the church is much larger and broader than that.

I am similarly bothered by the idea that pictures and images can't communicate the deepest truths of the Christian faith. What about the greatest example of "visual art"—the witness of Creation? The Scriptures (not least of all, the Psalms) are written by



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those who believed that the created order communicates the goodness, faithfulness, and grace of God, all without words. Even Paul believed God has revealed himself not through words but through things he has made (Rom. 1:20).

**Jesse Nelson**  
Los Angeles

### THE UNLIKELY INNOVATOR

As Paul Glader's article shows, it is apparent that online education is a profitable business enterprise. However, pursuit of a college degree in this manner is not without a downside. In the fall of 1956, I was a freshman student at Evangel College in Springfield, Missouri. Traveling from my home in Pennsylvania to Missouri was, indeed, an experience to remember. Unlike in online education, it was my privilege to meet, in person, students from all over the country and world.

Being on campus allowed for this special experience, one cherished to this day. I would suggest that a purely online college experience cannot replicate this on-campus opportunity.

**Tim Berquist**  
Camden, New York

## NET GAIN

**Responses  
from the Web.**



"My hope is that people will not allow Satan to trick them into thinking that Pastor Mark's ministry was in vain. We must recognize God's sovereignty and realize even this has a place in his plan. I am hopeful that Jesus will turn these ashes into beauty."

**G Andrew Beresford, Facebook.**

"Mark Driscoll Resigns from Mars Hill," by Kate Shellnutt and Morgan Lee.

"This spoke to me in so many ways. Showing love even when you feel insulted and disrespected is not easy, but that's what it is to have the love and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

**Ashley LoxAnn Cornish, Facebook.**

Third Culture: "What Not to Say to a Dad With Four Kids," by Peter Chin.

"Thanks for taking a stand. Your negative reviews are never just snark-laden diatribes, which is what passes for a review these days, but thoughtful, probing, honest critiques."

**Dave Wilkie, CT online comment.**

Watch This Way: "Some Final Notes on Left Behind," by Alissa Wilkinson.

"We need both a *Radical* call such as David Platt's and the Michael Horton *Ordinary* approach. It is like getting a wakeup call and then, once you are awake, a grow-up call. I thank God for these men who reach the body of Christ in such divisive times."

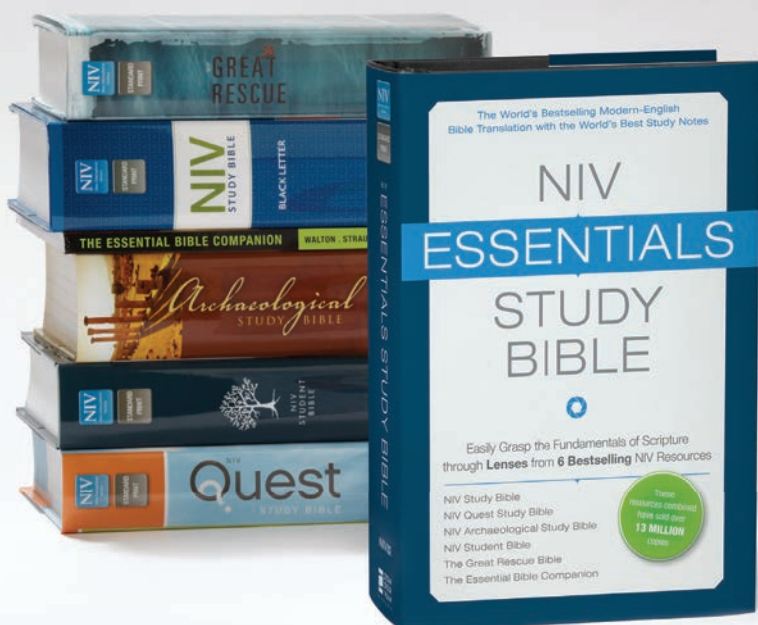
**Laurie Carr, Facebook.**

"Stay Put and Build," by Phillip Cary.

"Humor can be a great tool in dismantling stereotypes, but it is tricky and maybe doesn't always get the point across. Your analysis is really helpful in thinking about why that is."

**Hannah N., CT online comment.**

Her.meneutics: "What Does It Mean to Be Black-ish?" by Christena Cleveland.

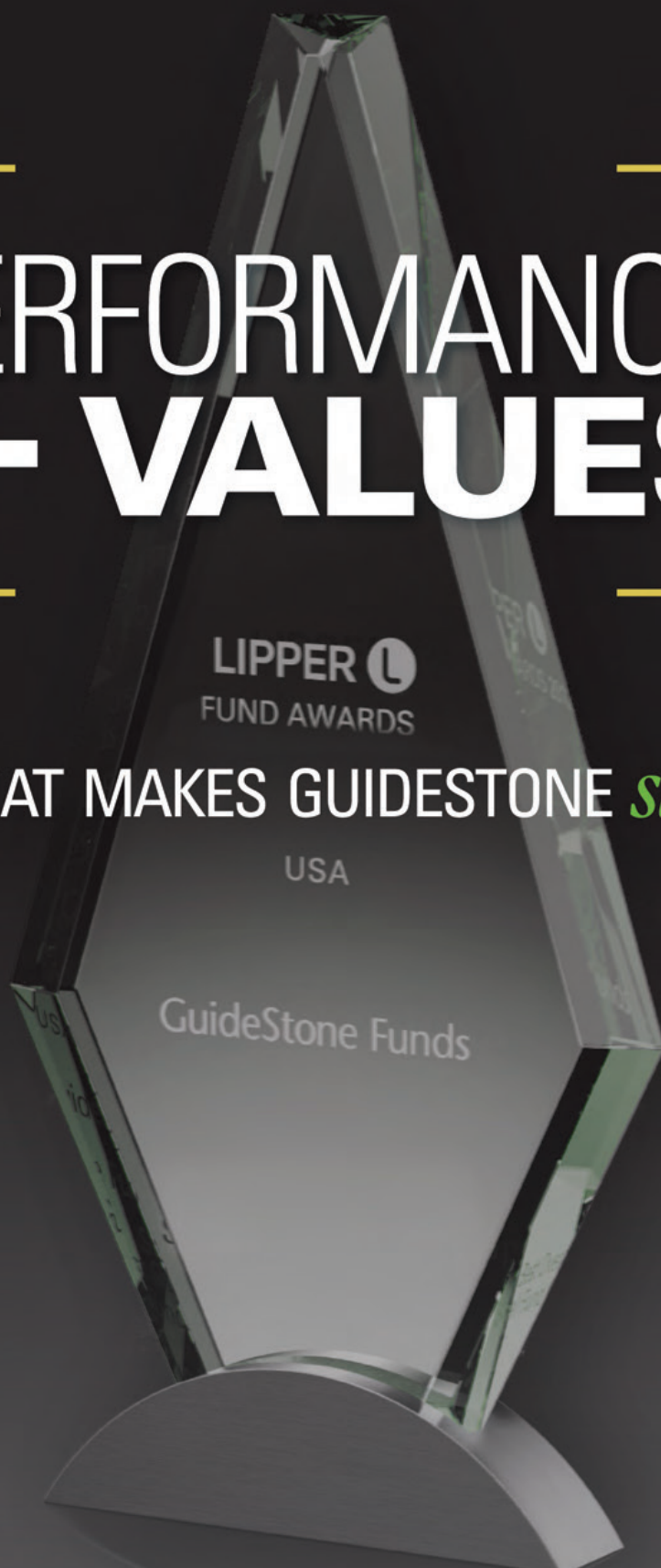


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The spiritual support I received gave me that extra little bit of something it took to continue the fight—and it's helped me concentrate on healing.

*Sybil Redmon  
Stage 4 Pancreatic Cancer Patient  
Montgomery, AL*

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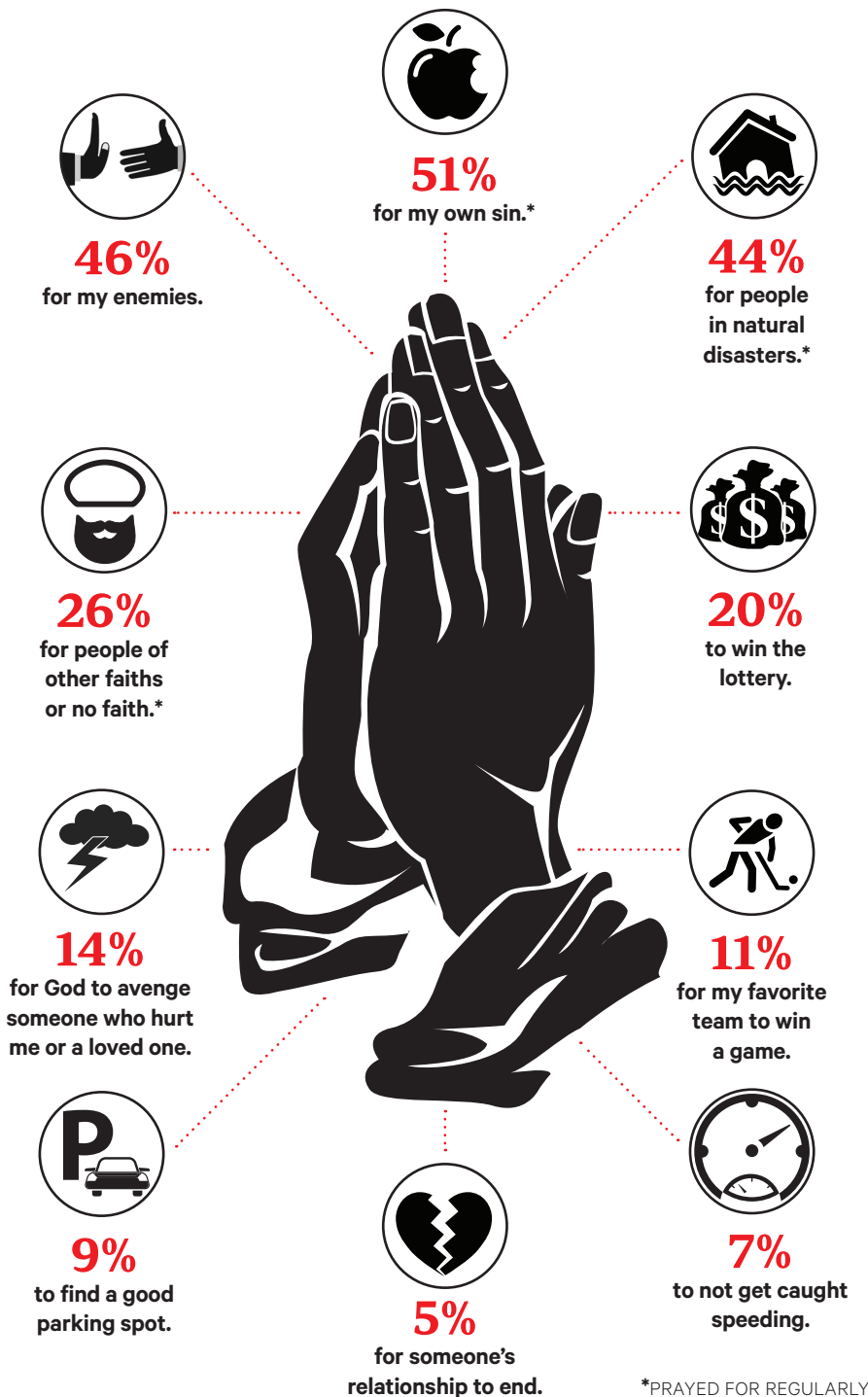
**IRAQ:** Winter is coming. So Hollywood's powerhouse Christian couple has joined with the king of Jordan to help displaced Iraqi Christians survive the cold. The United Nations reports 800,000 refugees, like this boy in Kurdistan, need shelter. Mark Burnett and Roma Downey aim to raise \$25 million for Mideast churches. "Losing the presence of Christians accelerates instability," said Chris Seiple of the Institute for Global Engagement, which manages the fund. "Rescuing, restoring, and returning them is not only the right thing to do, it is in everyone's interest to do so."

GIULIO MAGNIFICO



# Prayers of the People

Protestants who told author Max Lucado and LifeWay Research that they have prayed:



\*PRAYED FOR REGULARLY

## CHINA Hong Kong Christians drive democracy debate

Crosses and other Christian symbols were highly visible during the protests that shut down the streets of Hong Kong this fall. Several of the pro-democracy movement's top groups were led by Christians. Many churches announced neutrality but fed and housed the protesters, who objected to Beijing controlling ballots for the island city's first free election in 2017. Some worried the protests could hinder Hong Kong pastors' evangelism on the mainland, which Beijing has permitted through a partnership with its official Three-Self Church.

## President resigns from Christian college

Patrick Henry College parted ways with its second president, Graham Walker, in what he called "a healthy and amicable way as fellow servants of Christ." Walker had secured accreditation for the 14-year-old Virginia school, but he and trustees had "fundamental disagreements" over the best way to grow the 300-student body, according to Daniel Noa, president of the alumni association. Walker was hired in 2006 to bring stability after theological differences between college founder Michael Farris and 5 (of 16) full-time faculty led to their resignations.

## Wesleyans lose a publisher

Has the only "contender against the Calvinist hegemony of Christian publishing" shut down? Such was the assessment of Ken Schenck, dean of Indiana Wesleyan University's Wesleyan Seminary, on the closure of Nazarene Publishing House. The denominational publisher's board cited "shifting cultural circumstances" and decreasing profits, but maintained that the 102-year-old institution's demise began in earnest after the "miscalculation" of selecting businessman Gerald Smith as CEO in 2012. (Smith was fired in September.) "We apologize for what has appeared as poor decisions, a failure to act sooner, or even the appearance of wrongdoing," said the board. Holiness churches will miss Beacon Hill Press books, Lillenas worship resources, and Word Action Sunday school curricula. But Ben Witherington at

SHUTTERSTOCK



**49%**

Unchurched Americans who cannot identify a single way Christianity has **positively** impacted the United States.



BARNA GROUP

**37%**

Unchurched Americans who cannot identify a single way Christianity has **negatively** impacted the United States.

Asbury Theological Seminary argues that Arminian thought will still circulate just fine via the United Methodist Church's Abingdon Press.

**EGYPT**

### Facing ISIS, Mideast Christians exchange strategies

Middle Eastern evangelical leaders met in Cairo in October to discuss damage control after ISIS displaced many of their communities. Some urged their fellow Christians to take up arms. Others met with Sunni Islam's top leader, the grand sheikh of al-Azhar, who condemned ISIS's actions and asserted Christians deserve a place in the region. Moderate Muslims can likely do more to end the influence of ISIS than Western or Christian efforts, said Mogens Kjaer of Danmission, a Danish non-profit that sponsors many evangelical initiatives in the region. Meanwhile, members of the largest Protestant church in the Middle East, Cairo's Kasr el-Dobara, have been delivering relief supplies donated by Egyptian Christians to refugees in Kurdistan every two weeks.

**SOUTH KOREA**

### ECFA launches Korea affiliate

Seoul Christians collaborated with the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) to launch the first similar entity outside of North America. While the Washington, D.C.-based ECFA can legally accredit only American nonprofits, president Dan Busby said it will share resources and knowledge with the new Christian Council for Financial Transparency in Korea, and hopes an April summit will encourage other countries to launch similar efforts. David Yonggi Cho, founding pastor of the world's largest church,

was found guilty in February of embezzling \$12 million from Yoido Full Gospel Church. That same month, the World Evangelical Alliance postponed its General Assembly scheduled in Seoul, citing "internal divisions" among the peninsula's evangelicals. A survey by the Christian Ethic Movement revealed that only 1 in 5 South Koreans find Protestant churches to be trustworthy.

### Global Christian groups combat sheep stealing

Many of the world's largest Christian umbrella groups have begun drafting a new statement on "sheep stealing" (the practice of one denomination taking members from another). Representatives from the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the Vatican, and the World Council of Churches (WCC) will recommend how congregations can work together in the same communities, and will encourage reconciliation between churches that have experienced "tension and pain" over "conflicting" evangelism methods. The WEA, WCC, and the Vatican issued similar guidelines on evangelism in 2011. The new recommendations, collected by the Global Christian Forum, are due in three years.

### Fired president settles lawsuit with CCCU

The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) and Edward O. Blews Jr. settled Blews's lawsuit one year after the former president was fired after 10 months on the job. Details remained private, but Blews and the CCCU said they "parted ways because of philosophical differences over

leadership approach vis-à-vis the culture of the council and because of fundamental differences in management style and priorities." In July, Calvin College dean Shirley Hoogstra was named the CCCU's first female president.

### Churches serve immigrants at next legal level

A coalition of 15 evangelical groups—including the National Association of Evangelicals, World Relief, and the Assemblies of God—is partnering with churches nationwide to help them get accredited as legal advocates by the federal government's Board of Immigration Appeals. Church clinics that are partially accredited can represent immigrants before the Department of Homeland Security. Those fully accredited may also go before immigration courts. Churches don't need in-house attorneys to qualify, but do have to offer a legal resource library and a legal technical support provider. "Churches are a trusted presence in immigrant communities that can—and should—help address this critical shortage of legal services," said Noel Castellanos, CEO of the Christian Community Development Association and chairman of the Immigration Alliance. The coalition wants to increase church-based legal clinics from 29 to 1,000 by 2017.

**46%**

Practicing **PROTESTANT** millennials who believe "the Bible can only be correctly interpreted by people who have years of **intense training in theology.**"



INTERVARSITY  
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## Religious Freedom

# Sorry, Tertullian

Recent research tests the most famous adage about the persecuted church.

**T**he blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Steve Green made it the chorus of “The Faithful,” the CCM singer-songwriter’s 1998 ode to persecuted Christians. But is it true?

In Carthage, North Africa, early church theologian Tertullian argued that persecution actually strengthens the church; as martyrs bravely die for the faith, onlookers convert. Some 1,800 years later, restrictions on religion are stronger than ever. According to the Pew Research Center, 74 percent of the world’s population live in a country where social hostilities involving religion are high, and 64 percent live where government restrictions on religion are high. Does this explain why Christianity is likewise growing worldwide?

Not necessarily, says missiologist Justin Long, who recently compared Pew’s latest tally of religious freedom restrictions to Operation World’s latest tally of Christian growth (see chart). His conclusion: Church

growth is “not strongly” correlated with either governmental or societal persecution. However, Christianity “tends loosely” to change more rapidly (grow or shrink) when governmental restriction is high, and stays relatively stable when such pressure is low.

History offers a “truly mixed record,” said William Inboden, a Texas scholar affiliated with Georgetown University’s Religious Freedom Project. “Even though Christ gives the Great Commission before his Ascension, it almost takes the initial outbreak of persecution [in Acts] to spread the gospel,” he said. But within 1,000 years, the once “largely Christian lands” of the Middle East and North Africa became overwhelmingly Muslim, he notes. Now their remnant Christian communities are “being driven to extinction.”

One reason the data and history are messy: Church growth or decline is not due exclusively to conversions, said Albert

Hickman of Gordon-Conwell’s Center for the Study of Global Christianity. Migration, births, and deaths also matter.

Such factors are at play in Long’s list of countries boasting both high persecution and high growth: Syria, which hosts thousands of Iraqi refugees; Iran, where increasing numbers of Muslims have converted to Christianity; and Afghanistan, where high birth rates account for more than two-thirds of Christian growth, according to Hickman.

Long believes persecution initially harms churches because it interrupts networks and prompts emigration. But given that “in times of persecution, people choose what they believe and refine their faith,” he said, persecution can boost church numbers once suffering has ended.

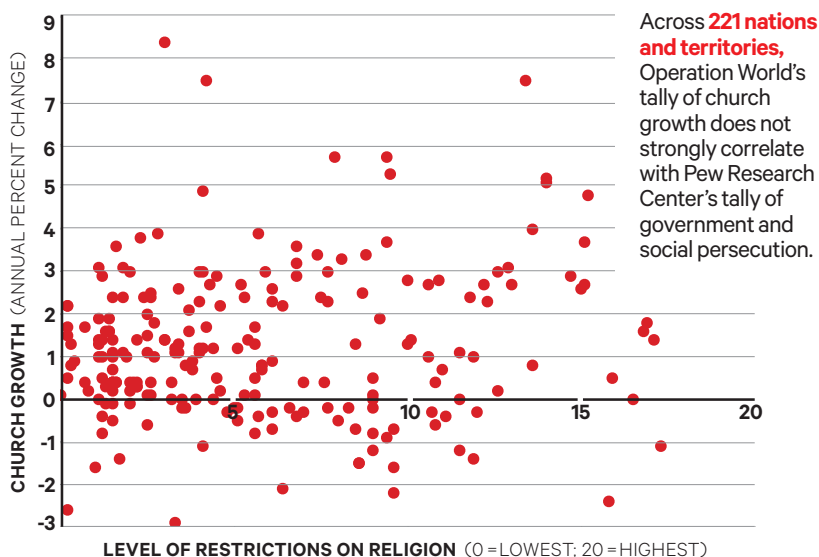
“It’s sort of a chicken-and-egg question,” said Todd Nettleton, spokesperson for Voice of the Martyrs. “The church grows, so there are more Christians to be persecuted, so there’s more persecution. So the church keeps growing because of the way that persecution purifies the church.”

Stuart George Hall, a historian at University of St. Andrews, notes the church isn’t mentioned in Tertullian’s original quote. Rather, Tertullian is arguing that martyrs have “done more to win people to patient endurance of pain and death than all the work of admirable philosophers like Cicero,” said Hall. “Their blood is not so much the seed of the church as the seed of virtuous living and dying.”

Persecution alone may not bring growth, but it often brings unity, said Open Doors spokesperson Emily Fuentes. “You see churches from different denominations working together, putting aside differences to help persecuted Christians in the area.”

Frank James, president of Biblical Theology Seminary, says Tertullian was right: Christianity “grew exponentially” under Roman persecution. But since “the number of martyrs is likely less than we imagine,” he believes the more significant factor was the Christians’ compassionate acts, such as rescuing abandoned infants and caring for the sick and elderly. Even Roman emperor Julian noted, “The impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well.”

“The gospel that persevered through persecution was a gospel in word and deed,” said James. “Perhaps Christians today could learn a thing or two from these early Christians.” **Morgan Lee**





# O Subtle Star of Bethlehem

Theory suggests wise men saw something big in something little.

**F**or 400 years, astronomers have tried to explain the celestial phenomenon that attracted the Magi to the birth of Jesus. Johannes Kepler, the pioneer of modern astronomy, was the first to analyze it in 1614. Now, scholars increasingly agree that Michael Molnar, a former Rutgers University astronomer with a coin-collecting hobby, may have figured it out.

Molnar's research was debated by scientists, theologians, and historians during a colloquium on the Star of Bethlehem at the Netherlands' University of Groningen this October. The conference marked 400 years since Kepler published his famous treatise on the star.

Initially, Molnar did not have a particular interest in the topic, though he

would describe the various theories to inquisitive students at Christmastime. But one day, an ancient coin he purchased for his collection gave him a new clue.

The coin, minted in Antioch in the early 1st century, depicted a ram looking at a star [inset at right]. As Molnar investigated the symbolism, he found evidence that Aries the Ram—not Pisces the Fish, as is commonly assumed—was the zodiac symbol for Judea.

"What I had in my hands was evidence that modern researchers really had to rethink their explanation about the star," said Molnar.

Combing ancient astrological documents, he found not a bright object but a rare conjunction that would have gotten the attention of the Magi.

Astrologists associated the planet Jupiter with royalty. So if the moon passed in front of Jupiter (called an "occultation") while in Aries the Ram, it would have royal significance. Molnar found two dates in 6 B.C. when such occultations happened. Then, reading the text of Matthew 2, he realized the Greek word for "in the East" was the astrological term for a planet

becoming a morning star.

"I was amazed to find April 17, 6 B.C., was exactly when Jupiter was 'in the East,' a morning star," he said. "So I knew I had an answer to the Star of Bethlehem."

Harvard astronomer Owen Gingerich, who opened the conference, supports Molnar's explanation but noted the conference raised many technical questions.

"It is being fairly widely accepted," he said, "but not necessarily all of the details."

For example, many astronomers are not convinced Aries the Ram symbolized Judea.

But a growing consensus confirms that the Star of Bethlehem was not a bright object, like a supernova or a comet, as others have argued. "The gospel story is one in which King Herod was taken by surprise," said Gingerich. "So it wasn't that there was suddenly a brilliant new star sitting there that anybody could have seen [but] something more subtle."

"From our modern point of view, it was not very impressive," said Molnar. "It must have been spectacular from their point of view."

**Gordon Govier**



MICHAEL R. MOLNAR / ECLIPSE.NET

## Under Discussion

Compiled by Ruth Moon



## Q: What was the best news of 2014?

Observers weigh in on the year's events that will most shape evangelical life, thought, or mission.

"Engagement between evangelicals and Catholics has gone to a whole new level. In June, I had a three-hour project meeting with Pope Francis—with no agenda. In my tenure, I have not seen that kind of openness. There's a shift taking place under Francis. He seems clearly geared toward evangelicals."

**Geoff Tunnicliffe**, secretary general, World Evangelical Alliance

"The decision by World Vision to immediately and completely revoke a new policy allowing for the hiring of persons in same-sex marriages. This was Christianity at its best. In a difficult circumstance, our brothers and sisters lovingly held accountable those in error, leading to repentance and a course correction."

**Eric Teetsel**, director, Manhattan Declaration

"Missionaries working with Ebola patients in West Africa brought attention to the continual work of missionaries around the world. Similarly, the 'We are N' movement brought more attention to persecuted minorities and made religious freedom advocacy trendy in a social media context."

**Sarah Pulliam Bailey**, national correspondent, Religion News Service

"The news of persecution of believers overseas seems to finally be shaking the North American church out of our bargain-basement prosperity gospel. As churches pray and work for freedom and justice, this could free us from the thin gruel of civil religion, and enable us to see who we are: the global body of Christ."

**Russell Moore**, president, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

"Immigrants are becoming Christians and starting new churches in large numbers. Our evangelical denominations are growing. Financial stewardship is on the rise. And most of our evangelical pastors are morally faithful and doctrinally orthodox. The good news is that there is plenty of good news about the Good News."

**Leith Anderson**, president, National Association of Evangelicals



## Denominations

# Quitting While Ahead

Why some United Methodist evangelicals suggest a split, even though their side is winning.

**E**very four years for the past four decades, America's second-largest Protestant denomination officially debates homosexuality. And each time, the United Methodist Church (UMC) affirms the position that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

Contrary to other mainline groups, the UMC's stance is increasingly unlikely to change. Approximately 5 million UMC members are in Africa, compared to 7 million in the United States. The socially conservative African contingent gains 200,000 members each year as American churches lose 100,000. And attempts to let Americans set policies without African input were soundly defeated at the denomination's two most recent conferences.

Yet this year, 80 evangelical Methodist pastors and theologians proposed that traditionalists and progressives, like Paul and Barnabas in Acts, "part amicably."

Decades of fighting over the issue have been "emotionally draining" and "spiritually nullifying," said Maxie Dunnam, a former Asbury Theological Seminary president who organized the public letter. A tipping point came when some bishops refused to discipline pastors who married

gay couples. Dunnam believes ministry by both sides would be more effective without the distracting debate.

Pastors have suggested multiple models for parting ways. Kansas megachurch pastor Adam Hamilton favors allowing each of the five regional US conferences to handle same-sex unions and LGBT clergy as they deem best. Illinois pastor Chris Ritter proposes that two ideological jurisdictions—one progressive and one traditionalist—replace geographical ones.

Finding a way to exist both separately and together would be "a kingdom kind of move," said Dunnam, who favors Ritter's solution. Such a bifurcation has precedent: Methodists split along ideological lines after the Civil War to ease the North and South into reconciliation.

But any proposal has to pass through the 2016 general conference in Portland, Oregon—an unlikely feat, given African opposition to splitting. However, Ritter's idea is gaining traction.

Such a compromise "at first seemed crazy to me," said Rob Renfroe, president of the evangelical Methodist organization Good News. But given that it could protect traditionalist Methodists from progressive leaders, he now sees restructuring

as a way "to do something no other denomination has done."

"We have a chance to write a different narrative," said Renfroe. "Which one is healthy for the church and the kingdom of God? It's not to fight each other for the next 20 years so the last man standing is the winner of a depleted, battered shell of a church."

Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, believes splitting the UMC would further enmesh its nearly 30,000 US churches in the same-sex marriage debate, involve years of litigation, and perhaps spawn new splits. He predicts that African Methodists will eventually globalize church structures to ensure church discipline. (Africans composed 30 percent of general conference delegates in 2012, up from 10 percent in 2004.)

"Some see [fighting over sexual ethics] as a distraction from true ministry," said Tooley. "But defending the faith is true ministry."

Ritter points to a maxim popular among Methodists: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

"I don't know of anyone who feels that homosexuality is a central issue in the Christian faith, but behind it lies the larger issue of biblical authority," he said. "It is difficult to see how a house divided on such a foundational issue could stand—unless perhaps it is a duplex."

Unity is itself an essential, said Methodist pastor Jason Byassee. "Every pastor has counseled married couples who say, 'It's hard to be together,'" said the Duke Divinity School fellow. "We say, 'I know. It's called cross-bearing. Figure this thing out.'"

"Staying together or separating is less important than our being a people of grace and truth," said Renfroe. "That's when God will bless our witness to the world."

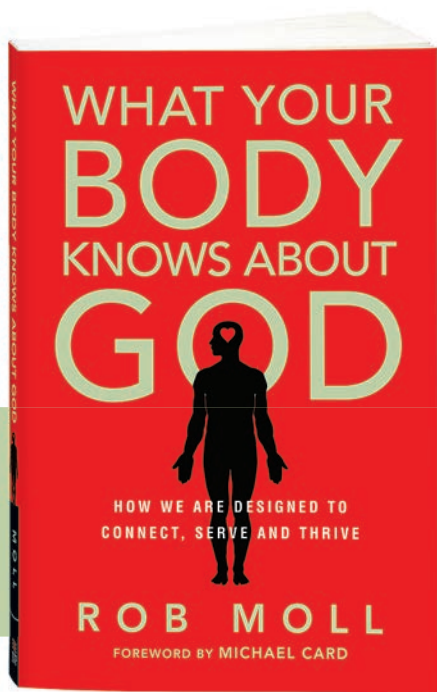
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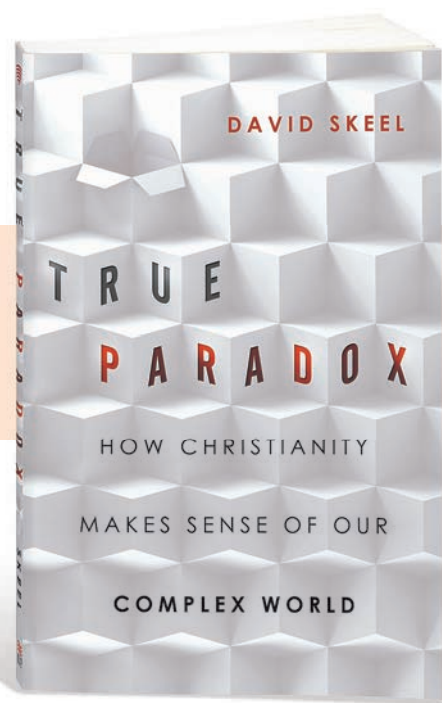
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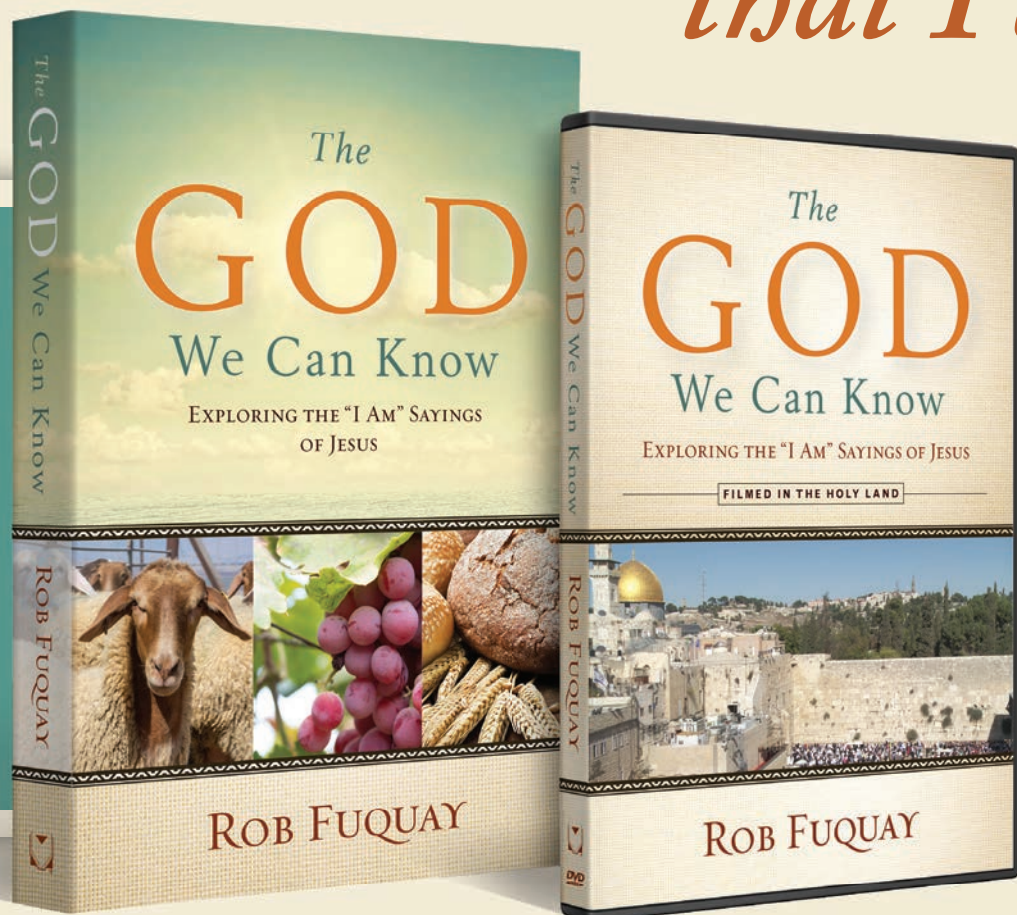
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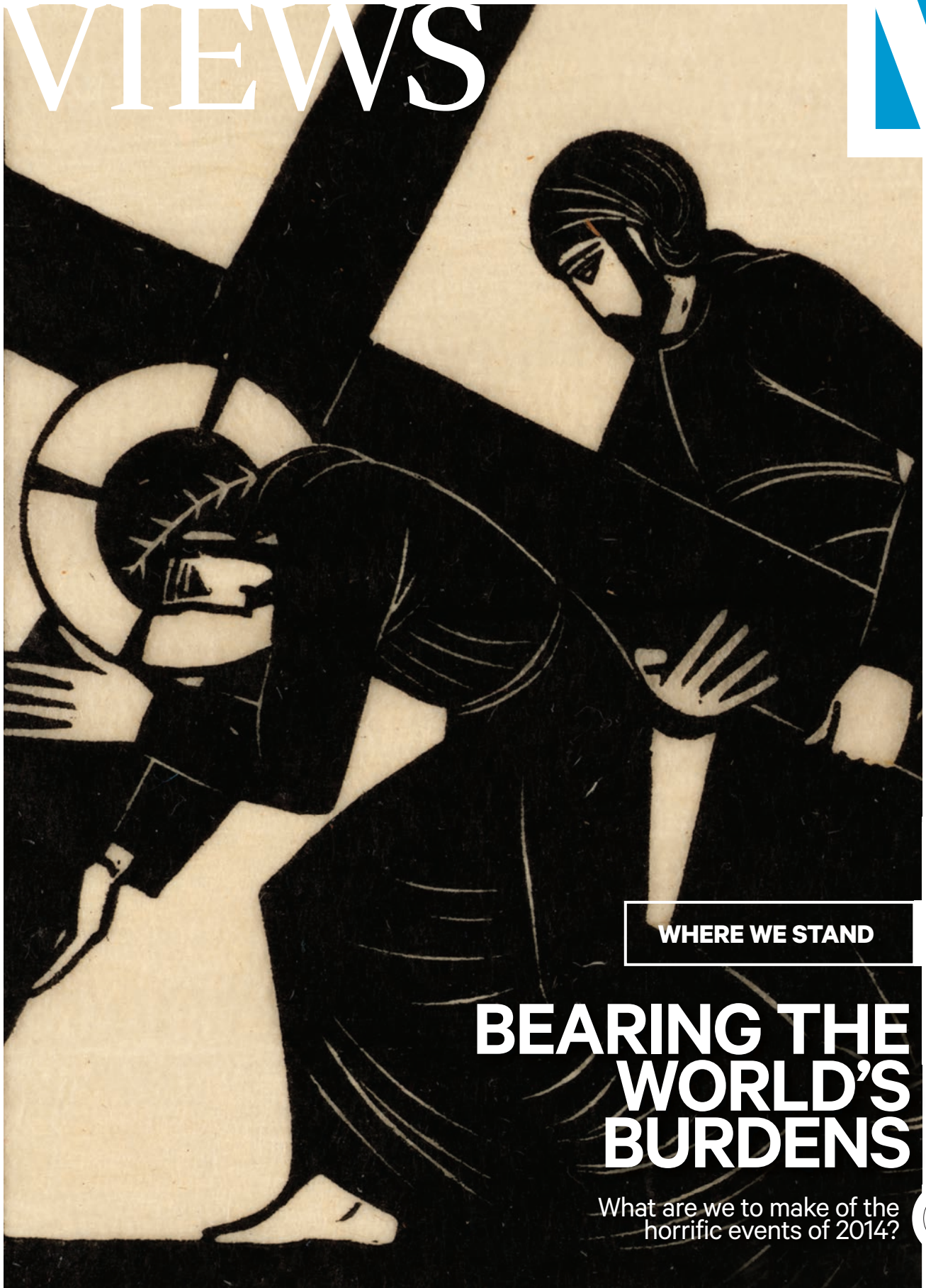
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# VIEWS



WHERE WE STAND

## BEARING THE WORLD'S BURDENS

What are we to make of the  
horrific events of 2014?



ERIC GILL / TATE





## Part of growing into the full stature of Christ is to face suffering and learn how to weep.

**IT'S DIFFICULT TO PROVE** that 2014 has been worse than other years, but it sure feels that way. The Syrian Civil War claimed another 30,000 victims this year, bringing the total dead since 2011 to more than a quarter million. Closer to home, Mexico's drug war took another 1,400 lives, bringing the total dead to 150,000 since 2006. The numbers are equally gruesome in Iraq, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, to name just a few.

Add to that the people displaced by such conflicts. In 2013 the world refugee population exceeded 50 million, and it only went up in 2014. That doesn't include internally displaced people, which the United Nations estimates to be about another 33 million.

the siege and battle of Alesia in 52 B.C., Julius Caesar's army suffered some 13,000 casualties, and the Gauls, somewhere between 50,000 and 90,000. In A.D. 79, some 16,000 died from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Then there were the diseases without cure, which resulted in an average lifespan of about 30 years.

One mistake we understandably make is to think that Jesus came to

suffering, "becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10).

We often say that to become like Christ means living holy lives and loving our neighbor. Yes and yes. It means to know the joy of salvation and intimacy with the Father. Yes and yes. But it also means to do what God did in Christ: to enter the suffering of the world. Christ bears the suffering of the world to redeem it. We bear the suffering of the world as an act of love that completes our redemption. That is, bearing others' burdens is the means by which God sanctifies us. We "complete" these sufferings when the suffering conforms us to the image of Christ. Suffering finds its goal when we become like Christ in his willingness to bear burdens.

When Jesus stood at the grave of Lazarus, he wept (John 11:35). Today, we can stand with Jesus as we behold the tomb that is the world. To be like Christ at such times means to weep. We do not weep without hope, for we know that Jesus, as he did with Lazarus, will bring new life. Yet part of growing into the full stature of Christ is to face suffering and learn how to weep.

This Christmas season, then, we might meditate on the very suffering world for which Christ died. We don't have to deny it or despair because of it. Yes, taking moments to contemplate it—to bear this burden—is painful, but a yoke that is light and easy when we are tethered to Christ (Matt. 11:30). Then our bearing is joined to his bearing, and when so joined, shapes us into the image of Christ. That in turn does something marvelous for the world: the more we are so conformed, the more we will move mountains and tombstones to bring Christ's healing balm to a world of open wounds. **CT**

**MARK GALLI** is editor of *Christianity Today*.



Terrorism seems to have gained the upper hand as well. One appalling example: In April, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 girls in Borno State, Nigeria, with the intent of selling them into slavery. And then there's ISIS, whose atrocities against civilians have become legendary, as they mass murder and behead those who don't share their beliefs.

The temptation to despair or deny is always with us. Yet at just such times, we might recall why we choose, sometimes joyfully, to let ourselves feel the weight of the world's sufferings.

### COMPLETED BY SUFFERING

Our times are not unlike the time when the Savior of the world was born. At

relieve suffering. To be sure, in the end, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Rev. 21:4). In the meantime, however, a large part of the Christian life is about learning to bear the pain of the world.

But why? To share in another's sufferings indeed brings a measure of comfort to them. Yet it doesn't take away the suffering. Paul says it's more about fulfilling the law of Christ. Elsewhere he says something even more startling: we are called to complete the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24).

Paul didn't mean that Christ's death failed to win redemption. That "is finished," after all (John 19:30). But we are not yet finished with participating in his

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# What forgotten Christmas tradition should churches revive?

Rooting our celebration of Christ's birth more deeply in our lives.



## Patricia Raybon *Relight the Way*

**S**uch a small thing: Turn on Christmas lights. Even if it's a small church. Even if it's a black church. Even if it's the cold, gray winter of a Jim Crow life. Still you plug in the bulbs and light the night sky with electrified elation. *Look at our church. Look at our Christ. Look at our happy, bright season.* And never mind the critics and their gripes

about lights: Too expensive. Too bright. Too much. In the gloomy winters of my conflicted childhood, my family's brightly lit church on a poor Denver street was joy and light, sanctuary and salvation rolled into one. Nothing was better.

"Hand me that strand."

My daddy and other church trustees gathered every year—on a Saturday after Thanksgiving—to hang the holiday lights. These "Negro men," insulted on jobs that held them back all week, showed up to untangle the snarl of electric wires and

bulbs from boxes, attach the wires to hooks, string lights over doorways, twist them around the two bare catalpa trees in the small churchyard. Then, in the fellowship hall, they flung lights over the stage, above a kitchen pass-through window, through the branches of a determined pine Christmas tree purchased on sale for the season. Finally, upstairs in the modest sanctuary, near the fine shiny cross, they draped electric strands to a fare-thee-well, adorning fragrant pine wreaths and garlands.

And then?

My daddy turned on the lights. And I was in heaven. With a flick of a switch, my dark and scary world was transformed. I credit the lights. With the lights, I forgot that four little black girls were killed that September when a timed bomb exploded under the church stairs next to their Sunday school room in Birmingham. I forgot that another black child, Emmett Till, was murdered a few summers before in Money, Mississippi. I forgot about Medgar Evers, the Little Rock Nine, and the nameless, countless others whose stories never made the news.

Of course I didn't really forget. Yet because of Christmas lights, displayed with hope in a secondhand church building, I was cheered by the audacity of joy.

So with blatant nostalgia, I sit in the chic unglitter of the fancier church I now attend in a better part of Denver. Nary a bulb gets lit outside at Christmas in this richer place. Too garish. Bad for the environment. That's what I'm told.

But what if we went back? At least at Christmas?

I argue for Christmas lights on churches for two reasons. One, my youngest daughter

JAMES O'BRIEN



has left the church, converting 10 years ago to Islam. Her children don't celebrate Christmas. Yet they are drawn to the light. As my little granddaughter whispers to me, "Grammy, are you getting a Christmas tree? With lights?"

In her question I hear this: *Will you share your light?* The world longs for it. But how will the world know him if we don't light the way?

My second reason: In Christ, we have someone worth shouting about, a true reason to light up the night—and not apologize. So come! Let us adore him! How? Let's turn on the lights. Again.

---

**PATRICIA RAYBON** is an award-winning author. Her forthcoming book is *Undivided: A Muslim Daughter, Her Christian Mother, Their Path to Peace*.

## Larry Eskridge Bring Back the Pageant

**B**ring back the Christmas pageant. When I say *pageant*, I'm not talking about Living Christmas Trees or laser-light-show musical extravaganzas, of which there is no shortage.

What I have in mind is the old-school, kids-dress-up acting out of the Christmas story. Cookies and coffee follow. The long-standing tradition in many American churches is dying out in favor of major production events executed by adults, or, in some cases (and a more frightening prospect), nothing at all.

This was certainly my sense of trends afoot among US Christians, but I wanted to make sure my perception was connected to reality. So with the help of the Internet and my office phone (my "research assistants"), I embarked on an utterly unscientific sampling of the evangelical temperature on Christmas pageants, calling dozens of churches. I contacted congregations from Washington State to Florida, surveying Baptist to Assemblies of God, from Bible church to the Church of the Nazarene.

When asked if they held an event resembling the traditional retelling of the Christmas story, the answer—by an eight-to-one margin—was "No." Pastors or church administrators noted they did hold a pageant-like event in their preschools, but that was about it. Several of the churches provided some

programming involving children, using a prepackaged play or perhaps a choral event. And then there were churches—probably more than half of those I contacted—that had collapsed all of their Christmas efforts into a single program or into their Christmas Eve service.

People demand a bigger bang for their Christmas event buck. They are looking for quality music and deep Advent thoughts, not weak renditions of "Away in a Manger" and Miss Kathy prompting 8-year-old shepherds to say their lines.

And this is exactly why we need to reconsider the pageant. We say we are pressed for time as we are flattened by the holly-jolly Christmas steamroller. Our pastors and church staff sweat eggnog trying to breathe novelty into the Advent season. Families wouldn't think of missing the annual "Elves on Ice" performance, and they make sure their kids are front and center for the public school's "winter concert."

The old-fashioned Christmas pageant writes itself with the simple story of the Nativity. Bathrobes, garland halos, and old sheet music for "The First Noel" simplify and economize, gently reproaching the Christmas machine. Our kids—reenacting the simple narrative of the second chapter of Luke year after year (like we did)—help bring home the wonder of the Incarnation that came so plainly and quietly in Bethlehem. As we share that familiar time every year at the good ol' Christmas pageant, we pause together and remember the story.

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**LARRY ESKRIDGE**, author of *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America*, is associate director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College.

## Lore Ferguson Feast Again and Again

**M**y family has few Christmas traditions—the plight of too many children spread too far apart, a divorce that left no survivors. Christmas is difficult because it reminds me of what has been lost.

When I was small, we would sing "The Twelve Days of Christmas" in our family van, each child shouting the verses, albeit incorrectly. Christmas was the first few

weeks of December—full of anticipation and fun, but void of true meaning. This prepared us to act like adults during Christmas. For most of us today, the endgame is simply to survive. Survive the family dynamics, the financial constraints, the season, and then sweep up the wads of wrapping paper, tear down the tree, and sit down with a glass of wine and declare Christmas "finished!"

In truth, we Christians have been losing our traditions for centuries. Misplaced, misappropriated, misapplied—we have pulled the rich timbre from original intent, given ourselves over to cheap plastic toys and premade wassail. We have hurried the season because to us, Christmas is a day and not a season at all.

For our Orthodox brothers and sisters, though, the feasts during the days after Christmas not only mark time but also insert intentional delay in a world gone mad for Christmas kitsch. History aside, we have for centuries chosen to celebrate his coming on December 25. It has become a placeholder of a day when some of us remember that Jesus is the reason for the season. But then we go to bed, full of Christmas spirit, and wake up to traffic and spilled lattes and kids who want to spend their gift cards *today*. Where are the good feelings now?

For the early church, the purpose for 12 days of feasting following Christmas Day was to bring them to the edge of Epiphany. If, for various reasons, we do not entertain the liturgy of the days, can we at least entertain the purposes?

Christmas Day is not the end of the celebration—it is the *beginning*. The days leading up to December 25 are pregnant with hope. But how many of us have forgotten to drink the cup of life that Christmas ushers in—in such a rush to clean up and pack up, sort out and throw out?

Christ—Savior of the world, King of the universe, Prince of Peace—came and made his home here with us. We feast for days after Christmas not because we are legalists, bound to ancient traditions, but because we are children who have seen our God incarnate on earth. This Christmas, let us feast long, 12 days long, 12 months long, every feast running gloriously into the next, bringing us again and again to the miracle of Christmas: Emmanuel, God with us. **CT**

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**LORE FERGUSON** is a Texas-based writer who blogs at Sayable and Her.meneutics.

Wesley Hill teaches New Testament at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, and is writing a book about friendship.



# Why Personal Devotions Aren't Enough

The Bible was made to be read in church first.

Each day began the same way: I would get out of bed, take a shower, and sit down at my desk. I'd place my New American Standard Bible in front of me and open it to where the bright green M'Cheyne's Bible reading calendar kept my place. I would close my eyes and ask God to illumine the texts I was about to ponder. And then I would begin to read—usually two chapters from the Old Testament and two chapters from the New.

For years this ritual was the high point of my spiritual life. Of course there were missed days. And take it from me: It's *hard* to catch up when you've missed a day or two of 19th-century Scottish minister Robert Murray M'Cheyne's calendar. (Knowing this firsthand, a friend of mine created her own irreverent alternative, "A Bible Reading Plan for Slackers and Shirkers," which you can find online.) There were days when none of the readings seemed particularly edifying or inspiring. Still, this is where I believed I encountered God most fully and immediately. This was the best way to remember God's love and demonstrate love for him in return.

I also believed God was fully present when I would open the Bible on Sunday mornings. As a growing young Christian, I attended churches whose pastors preached for 40 minutes or more, explaining the biblical texts with radiant joy and scrupulous attention, the way my science teachers had breathlessly described what I was seeing through the telescope pointed at the night sky. At the time, I would have told you that Sunday mornings were extensions of my daily meditations on Scripture. My

personal Bible reading was the center of my spiritual life. Following along as my pastor preached was like a rippling aftershock: still powerful, still moving, still transformative—but all those things the furtherance of what I already experienced on my own.

Today I think about the relationship between those two readings—private, devotional reading and Sunday morning sermon-listening—in reverse. It's not that I've given up private Bible reading. But now I think of *that* daily ritual as an extension of what I do on Sunday mornings, when I'm gathered with fellow believers to listen to Scripture expounded. First comes hearing, and *then*, by implication, comes personal meditation.

Why did my perspective change? Mainly because of what I came to understand Scripture to be. Contrary to what you might think if you only engage Scripture in bite-sized "thought for the day" morsels, the Bible isn't a random collection of profound nuggets of truth designed for silent meditation. Rather, what we know today as "the Bible" is actually a collection of books approved to be read publicly in the Christian assembly. The "canon" of Scripture is, literally, the *rule* of which books are trusted to deliver

the words of the prophets and apostles to the people of God.

Likewise, the New Testament is called that because it's titled after the Christ-centered "testament" or "covenant" that God made with his people after Jesus' resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, as promised through the Prophets (Jer. 31:31). It's a covenant I renew each week when I gather in God's presence with fellow believers to eat bread and drink wine and proclaim our faith in his risen Son.

In short, I now think of the Bible primarily as the book of the gathered people of God—the church. Notice the order of John's words in the Book of Revelation: "Blessed is the one who *reads aloud* the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who *hear it and take to heart* what is written in it" (1:3, emphases added). God's Word is proclaimed and corporately heard, and we commit ourselves to pondering it and storing it up in our memory. As early church father Theodore of Mopsuestia put it, "All of us, having come to faith in Christ the Lord from the nations, received the Scriptures . . . and now enjoy them, reading them aloud in the churches and keeping them at home." We read privately in order to remember and rehearse what we've listened to publicly.

Bible reading is still essential to my life of faith. But the reason I consider it essential has changed. It's vital to me now because I am mulling the words I've heard with fellow believers, proclaimed to me in the living voice of readers and preachers. Scripture is the Word of God for the body of Christ, and I want to keep meditating on that Word until I hear it afresh next Sunday.

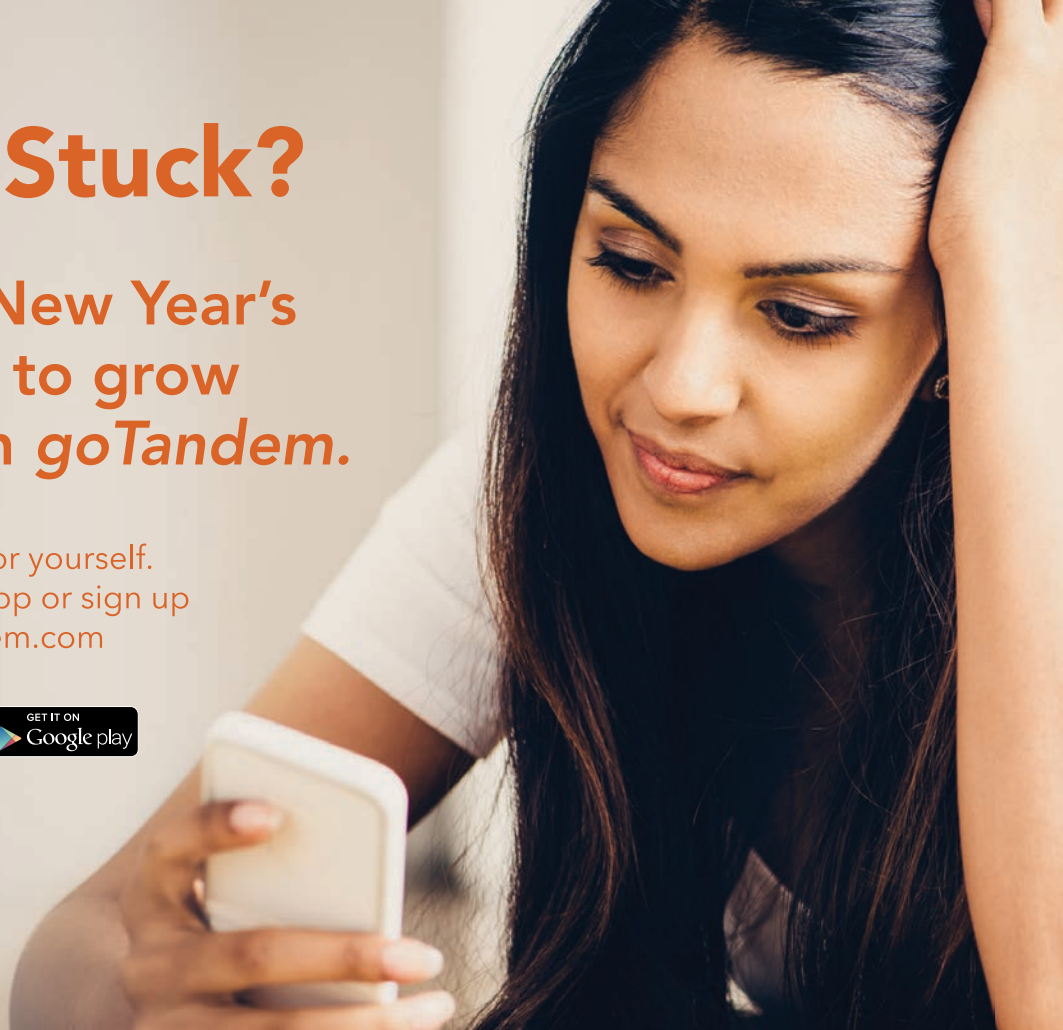
**I now think of the Bible primarily as the book of the gathered people of God—the church.**

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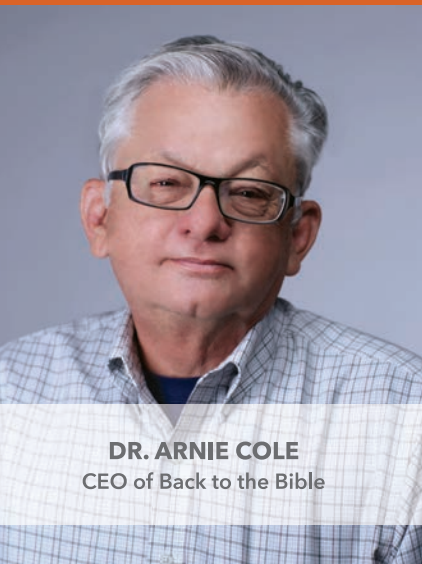
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## Red Cross Bearer

Meet the man who humanized war—and still shapes our wartime ideals.

Sometimes a little book can make a big difference in how people think about right and wrong. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, profoundly affected the way white Americans perceived slavery. Ten years later and across the Atlantic, Henry Dunant published another revolutionary book, *A Memory of Solferino*: his eyewitness account of the aftermath of one of Europe's bloodiest battles.

Dunant's book is rarely read today. But if you are outraged when bombs, rockets, or artillery shells fall on hospitals, schools, and places of worship, you can trace that presumption—that these should be safe places—to Dunant.

Dunant was a Swiss investor working in Algeria. He had been unable to get land and water rights from the colonial authorities, so he appealed directly to the French emperor, Napoleon III.

But the emperor was trying to liberate northern Italy from Austrian domination. When Dunant arrived in Solferino, Napoleon's headquarters, the landscape was littered with dead, dying, and wounded soldiers. Surprised by the scale, the two armies were completely unprepared to bury their dead, comfort the dying, or tend the wounded. Their field hospitals and medical supplies were woefully inadequate. Compassion for wounded enemies was also in short supply: both armies shot or bayoneted them.

Dunant was a natural organizer. As a teenager, he formed a Bible study group that worked for the poor. At age 22, he founded the Geneva chapter of the Young Men's Christian Union (parallel to the English and American YMCA). When some planned to create a federation of European Ys, he argued instead for an international YMCA

federation. So, at age 25, he went to Paris to represent Geneva at the first international YMCA convocation.

Dunant used his organizational gifts at Solferino. He commandeered the biggest church in a nearby village, arranged the wounded for maximum efficiency, purchased a large shipment of linen for bandages, and persuaded local women to care for the injured. He even inspired them to set aside their hatred of the enemy. *Tutti fratelli* ("All are brothers") became their motto.

In his 1864 *Letter to Atlanta*, General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote, "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it." Dunant disagreed. He believed war could and should be made more humane.

But if you were going to treat the wounded and alleviate their pain, Dunant knew, you needed to protect medical personnel, chaplains, and field hospitals. Before Solferino, medics were considered partisans. Dunant proposed that opposing armies consider medics neutral and treat medical facilities as safe zones. Before Solferino, no one would help wounded enemies for fear that they were merely posing as wounded in order to stab anyone who came near. Dunant believed that medics should help the wounded regardless of their side in the battle. Before Solferino, treating the wounded was an afterthought. Dunant proposed forming an

international organization to field medical personnel and supplies in wartime.

Dunant's book stirred popular enthusiasm. In 1863, just a year after he published it, he and four friends convened official representatives from 16 nations, who agreed on the key points of Dunant's vision. (Inspired by the Emancipation Proclamation, he asked President Lincoln to send a representative. Lincoln, feeling his political position was precarious, sent an observer instead.) The next year they met again and formally drafted the Geneva Convention for the Alleviation of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field. For their symbol, they adopted a red cross on a white background.

Today, 196 nations subscribe to the Geneva Convention and its later elaborations. The Red Cross and parallel organizations (Red Crescent and Magen David Adom) are internationally active not only in war-related emergencies but also in natural disasters.

Dunant was more successful as a social visionary than as a businessman. In 1867, he lost his fortune and went bankrupt. It was not until 1895 that a journalist vacationing in the Alps discovered Dunant living in a senior hostel. The journalist brought Dunant back to public attention, and in 1901, the first ever Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to this Christian visionary.

We can easily call the four Geneva Conventions the Dunant revolution. They have multiplied the list of wartime taboos. Dunant understood that all wars are great human tragedies. He hoped that by tending all the wounded and dying, friend and foe alike, the nations would learn the truth discovered at Solferino: *Tutti fratelli*. We are all one family. **CT**

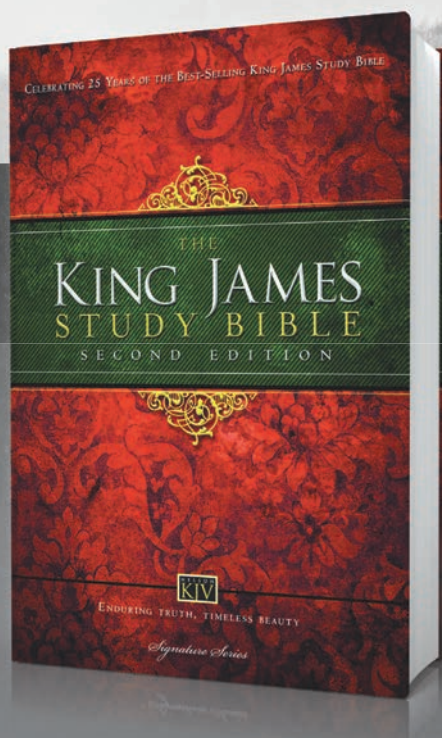
**Before Henry Dunant, treating the wounded was an afterthought.**

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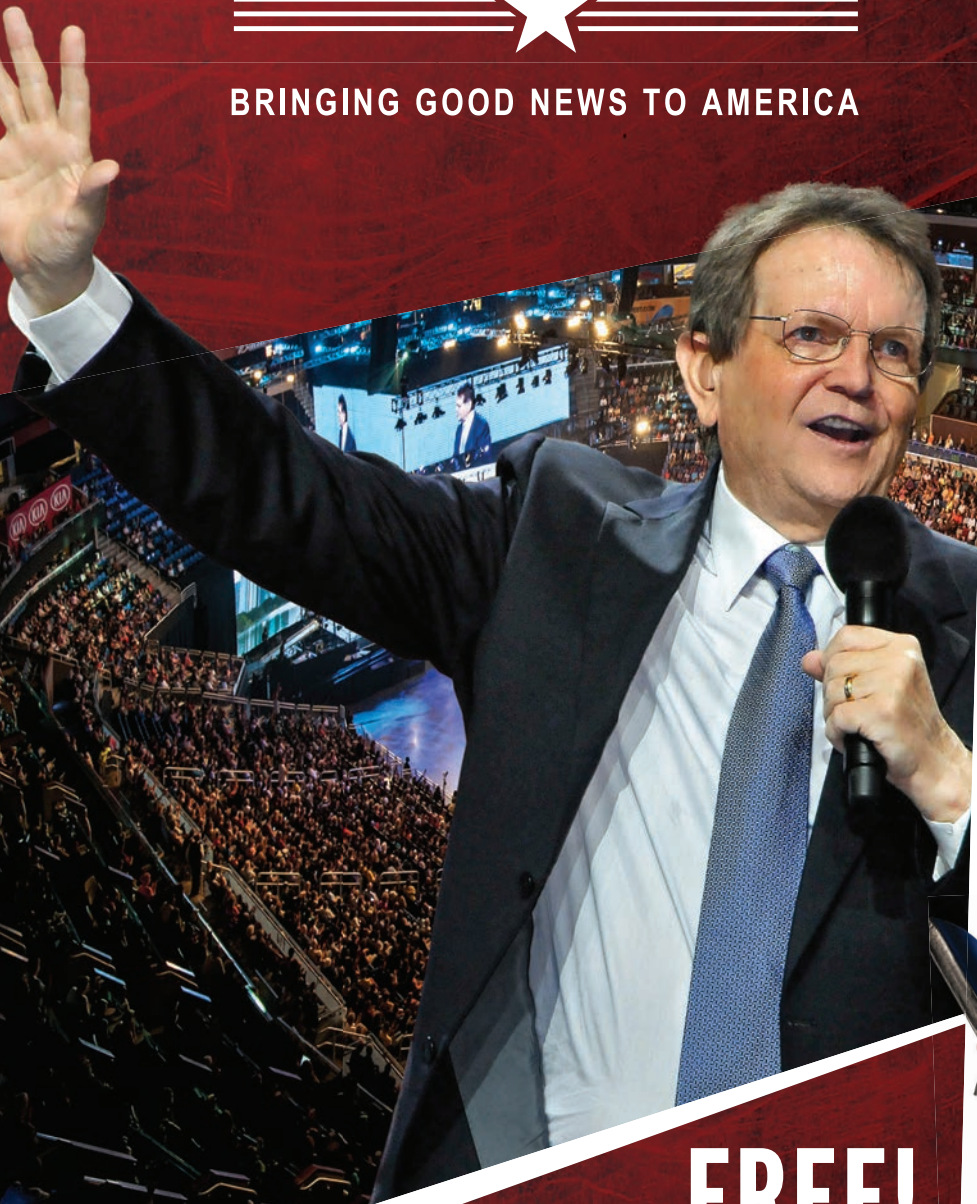




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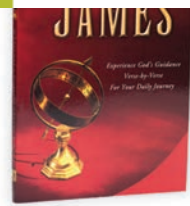
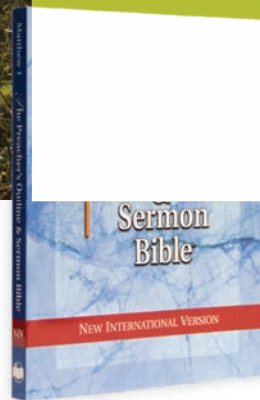
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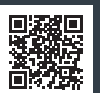
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# POPE FRANCIS

FROM SECULAR JOURNALISTS TO CHARISMATIC CHRISTIANS,  
WHY SO MANY OF US ARE TAKEN WITH THE JESUIT FROM ARGENTINA.

BY R. R. RENO

**I**F YOU WANT TO MEASURE the global acclaim of the current pope, ask 100 random people about the Roman Catholic Church. While you will see a few thumbs up, most will express ambivalence bordering on dislike or distrust. Some will be hostile. Ask them about Pope Francis I, however, and the responses will be overwhelmingly positive. The Jesuit from Buenos Aires pleases many and brings smiles to their faces.



He even made Luca Baratto smile. Baratto, a pastor in the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, heard Pope Francis apologize for the Catholic Church's complicity in the Italian government's persecution of Pentecostals and evangelicals during the 1920s and '30s. Baratto was surprised too: Francis's apology was unscripted and unannounced beforehand. That is his style, at once unpredictable and committed to breaking down the often-bitter rivalry between evangelicals and Catholics.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio's 2013 election was unexpected as well. The first pope from the Southern Hemisphere, he is also the first Jesuit pope, even though the Society of Jesus discourages its members from holding high office.

The Jesuits carry the reputation of clerical commandos. In the US Army, a Green Beret can't rise above the rank of colonel. That's because men trained to freelance as fighters aren't likely to fit well in the command-and-control system of the Army. The Catholic Church has drawn a similar conclusion about the order that Ignatius of Loyola founded in 1534. What makes for creative and effective witness on the frontiers of Christianity usually isn't what's needed for the daily running of the institutional church.

When the cardinals gathered to choose a successor for Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger of Germany), they thought otherwise about Catholicism's needs. Bergoglio was elected in large part because he was a Vatican outsider. This gave the cardinals hope that he could successfully reform the *curia*, the Catholic Church's ineffective—and in some cases criminally corrupt—bureaucracy in Rome.

The impotency of the curia has been a

problem for decades. At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church adopted a much more biblical approach, transforming its worship and fundamentally changing its relation to modern secular culture. What did not change was the church's bureaucratic structure, as well as the largely Italian and incestuous culture within said bureaucracy, perhaps a more significant problem.

The curia's dysfunctions were not addressed by John Paul II and only tentatively so by Benedict XVI. Indeed, some say Benedict resigned in 2013 because he knew he couldn't implement curial reform with enough gusto, determination, and (to be frank) ruthlessness to succeed. Pope Francis, by contrast, has established an eight-cardinal advisory council that operates independent of the existing bureaucracy. This important work of reform will not make headline news, but it bids fair to reshape Catholicism's institutional identity, making Rome more international and responsive to the challenges facing global Christianity.

Evangelical Protestants, who today find themselves aligned with Catholics on many cultural issues—especially issues of life, marriage, and human sexuality—can welcome these reform efforts. In fact, they need a healthy Catholic Church as an ally. As we see a secular vision of morality and civic life grow aggressive and hostile, we are going to need each other.

## VICAR WITHOUT GUILF

It's fair to say, however, that what made the reforming Bergoglio attractive to the cardinals comes with some problems. His often-unscripted statements since his election have given many Catholic

leaders heartburn. His famous "Who am I to judge?" response to a question about homosexuality, while entirely in keeping with Matthew 7:1, has been used by progressive US Catholics to blunt or silence the church's witness on marriage and human sexuality. Most recently, the summary deliberation statements from the Vatican's Synod on the Family have led media to describe Francis as "shifting" or "evolving" on issues of homosexuality and marriage.

The media's response is to be expected. Lacking a deep understanding of Catholic teaching, the press tends to see the world in the right/left framework of American politics. In this framework, a reformer is always a progressive. In an extensive interview published in Jesuit journals worldwide, Francis expressed dismay over "small-minded rules," chastised a certain kind of conservative mentality, and observed that the Catholic Church needs to move down "new roads" and "new paths." Of hot-button moral topics, he said, "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods."

The editorial page of *The New York Times*, so often preoccupied with sexual liberation, exults over such statements, believing, *The Catholic Church is finally joining the company of the Enlightened!* What the press generally fails to see is historical context. All the great reform movements of Christianity have called the church universal *back* to the fundamental truths of the gospel. Martin Luther was many things, but never a progressive. In the case of Francis, the media does not realize that his statements are more pastoral than doctrinal in nature. He wants to reframe the classic doctrine and morals of the Catholic Church so that a secular world can be converted and adhere to them.

There are other reasons for Francis's popularity, however, ones truer to who he really is and what he represents. He speaks spontaneously, with directness, pungency, and openness—a striking contrast to our political leaders and their poll-tested stances "messed" with 24/7 spin. Francis, by contrast, is not conducting a political campaign. He's not trying to win a popularity contest, nor is he angling to become a celebrity—all of which we find refreshing because it is so rare among public figures.

Important as these qualities may be, there's a deeper reason why so many thrill to the new pope. His namesake, Francis of



This paper stencil was made by an Italian graffiti artist who said the pope was a new superhero of faith.

FILIPPO MONTEFORTE / AFP / AP

ALESSANDRA BENEDETTI / CORBIS / AP



Assisi, was and remains a central archetype in the Western spiritual imagination. He embodied the discipleship of the New Testament and made the gospel a living reality more than 1,000 years after the apostolic age, showing us a way to do so today. When we see Francis's witness renewed, as Pope Francis has done in a number of ways, many of us swoon.

## THE WAY OF POVERTY

Bonaventure, the great 13th-century scholar and head of the Franciscan order, wrote *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*. His purpose was evangelical: to bring readers to encounter Francis as a "herald of gospel perfection." Bonaventure wanted us to follow the way of Francis, which is the way of poverty and the way of literalism.

Francis "owns," as it were, the biblical motif of poverty. A lover of "holy poverty," he embraced "sublime poverty," the so-called queen of the virtues. "None was ever so greedy of gold as he of poverty," wrote Bonaventure, "nor did any man ever guard treasure more anxiously than he this gospel pearl."

Bonaventure gives an extensive catalog of Francis's ever-renewed commitment to poverty. A particularly colorful episode involves an incident on the road when Francis refused to pick up a purse full of coins that his brethren wished to give to the poor, correctly seeing it as a snare of the Devil. In another instance, he is invited to dine with bishops but begs crusts of bread before the meal.

In these and other stories in Bonaventure's biography of Assisi, we learn that poverty is the surest path to God. Neither the church of his time nor that of later centuries made Assisi's example of poverty mandatory, but his witness has always been cherished. That's because Francis of Assisi teaches us a powerful truth: If we possess nothing, then nothing will get in the way of being possessed by Christ.

The way of poverty is arresting in part because it's a spiritual ideal we can realize in an instant. Poverty requires no resources, no talents, no achievements, no status, no family connections. Anyone can wed himself to Lady Poverty. Nothing stands in the way—except, of course, our unwillingness to travel the path of renunciation. And because Christ chose the path of poverty, to say that poverty is immediately accessible is to say that a deep conformity to Christ is immediately accessible.

As Paul puts it in his Letter to the Romans (paraphrasing somewhat), we don't need to wait around for the right set of dogmas to be defined or spiritual disciplines to be fine-tuned. No, as Moses teaches, "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it" (Deut. 30:14).

The immediate possibility of poverty is closely connected to the second Franciscan virtue, literalism. The saint's spiritual imagination is no more richly adorned than his humble hermitages. Just as Francis of Assisi stripped off life's softening luxuries, he also removed anything that might soften the Word of God. His commitment to poverty stemmed from directly applying the teachings of Jesus to his life: "Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts—no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff" (Matt. 10:9–10).

A similar literalism characterized Francis's response to a voice speaking to him from the cross of Christ when he was praying in the dilapidated Church of San Damiano in Assisi. The voice said, "Go and repair my house." So he set about to raise

## FRANCIS'S OUTREACH

*Will US evangelical leaders get a turn? By Morgan Lee*

**W**hen Bergoglio became pope in 2013, many Pentecostal leaders cheered for a man who had forged strong ties between evangelicals and Catholics throughout South America. "[Bergoglio] is passionate for church unity not just at the institutional level, [but] at the level of the people," said Norberto Saracco, an Argentine pastor-theologian.

Francis hasn't wasted time scaling such ecumenical work globally. In January he implored Catholics and Pentecostals to "encounter one another as brothers." Then he welcomed Kenneth Copeland and members of the televangelist's ministry to pray for him. Brian Stiller of the World Evangelical Alliance met with Francis twice this year and believes he "seeks true partnership . . . not clouded by an agenda of trying to convert evangelicals to Rome."

Evangelist Luis Palau considers the pope a personal friend. Joel Osteen (often labeled a "health and wealth" preacher alongside Copeland) visited the pope this summer. So did televangelist James Robison and members of the Green family, founders of Hobby Lobby.

Prominent Southern Baptists Rick Warren and Russell Moore—whose denomination boasts the largest US membership aside from Catholics—met with the pope for the first time in November as part of a Vatican colloquium on marriage and family. More American evangelicals may cross paths with Francis during his anticipated Philadelphia trip in 2015.

"Francis is still new. There are a lot of Protestant leaders and countries; that makes for a lot of meetings," said Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Francis Beckwith, a Baylor philosopher who converted to Catholicism in 2007 while leading the Evangelical Theological Society, suggests a US meeting should address Christians' witness in the public square. "His first priority should be to meet with evangelical clergy, Catholic prelates, and laypeople from both traditions who have courageously stood for religious freedom in an increasingly hostile culture," said Beckwith. "They need [his] encouragement and support."

Yet Westmont College president Gayle Beebe told CT he had "taken flak" for agreeing to meet the pope. In July, a "near totality" of Italian evangelicals warned US evangelicals against getting too cozy with the Catholic Church, stating that perceived similarities with the pope's tone were not "reasons for hope in a true change" on theological disagreements.

Still, Beebe said, "I find in him a remarkable capacity to recognize people who have put their faith in Christ differently." He added, "The focus is on Christ, not on the way churches construct that understanding. I hope that can be our focus as well."





***There's a deeper  
reason why so  
many thrill to  
the new pope.***

***His namesake,  
Francis of Assisi,  
remains a central  
archetype in the  
Western spiritual  
imagination.***



funds, triggering the confrontation with his father that led to his disinheritance and allowed him to enter into the divine inheritance of poverty. Indeed, Francis's bullheaded literalism brought him to an almost absurd state. Stripped of all resources, he was reduced to carrying uncut stones to the church to contribute to its rebuilding.

It's easy for many of us today to mock literalism as a plank in the fundamentalist platform. But this is a mistake, for literalism encourages a disposition to the Word of God that prevents us from hiding in a self-generated fog.

Some years ago, I was with an academic friend, a game theorist with a skeptical mind who is also a conservative Protestant. As he explained his work with a prison ministry in Texas, I found myself surprised and asked why he was involved. He said, "More than a decade ago, I realized that when Jesus tells us to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, and visit the prisoner, he actually means it."

The literalism of Francis is like that of my friend—it makes immediate the commands of God. The same goes for his spiritual imagination more broadly. Francis did not have a conceptual mind. He did not think in terms of *kenosis* or the "metaphysics of gift" or the notion

of "cruciform existence." Instead, he interpreted what it means to be Christlike in a literal way, which means in a this-worldly, applies-to-me way.

When Jesus tells the rich young man that he must sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor, the immediacy of literalism and poverty come together. There is no ambiguity about the command and no impediment whatsoever to its being obeyed—no impediment except for our ongoing acquiescence to, and even affirmation of, our bondage to sin and death. Moreover, we must remember why Jesus commends the way of poverty to the rich



Francis visits Assisi, the home of his namesake (left), whom he emulates through acts of compassion (bottom left) and simple dress (bottom right).

TOP LEFT: STEFANO DOTTORI / NURPHOTO / CORBIS / AP  
RIGHT: MAX ROSSI / CORBIS / AP  
BOTTOM LEFT: STEFANO RELLANDINI / REUTERS

young man. It is for the sake of perfection, which means the holiness of life in God.

By my reading of our Western tradition, both Protestant and Catholic, a literal conformity to Christ has become our spiritual ideal. That has expressed itself in some simplistic ways, with WWJD bracelets or championing a “red-letter Jesus” or pursuing a “radical” faith. But the deeper yearning reflects a sound spiritual response, a desire to be conformed to Christ. Instead of the icon of Christ Pantocrator (which is a central image for Christians in the East), in the West, we fix upon what Bonaventure described as the “luminous darkness” of the Cross.

There is a similar luminous darkness in the joy of poverty that marks Francis’s Cross-centered life. For this reason, the begging friar in his rude habit serves as an indispensable aide to contemplation. Many are bewitched by Francis of Assisi because in him we see the face of Christ.

## A SERVANT, NOT A PRINCE

There’s little doubt that Pope Francis’s background in Argentina has shaped his views. He entered the Society of Jesus as a young man, served as head of the Jesuits in Argentina during the brutal civil strife of the 1970s, was appointed archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998, and made a cardinal by John Paul II in 2001. Throughout his ministry, he has dealt with a political form of Catholic

conservatism closely allied to repressive authoritarianism, something that explains his occasional sharp rebukes that bring the media such joy. Moreover, Argentina remains a deeply troubled country with a failed economy, which contributes to Francis’s obvious antipathy to ideologies that make a god of free markets.

But this background and his episodic outbursts will not be the most important distinctions about the pontificate of the Argentine Jesuit, who is the first pope to have taken Francis of Assisi’s name. Nor will it be his efforts to reform the church’s bureaucracy, a necessary but Sisyphean labor that admits of only partial success. Instead, it’s the Franciscan dimension—which is to say the evangelical dimension. The name the pope has chosen indicates that he wishes his pontificate to draw upon the spiritual power of that great hero of the faith to strengthen the church’s witness to Christ.

The pope consistently offers himself as a servant, not a prince. This has been the trajectory of the papacy over the past generation or two. John XXIII refused to be carried on the papal throne. John Paul I refused the papal crown. But Pope Francis’s renunciations are more emphatic. It was much reported that as archbishop of Buenos Aires, he took the bus to work. Since his election, he has refused the papal apartment and red leather shoes.

These decisions are symbolic, of course, but symbols matter. A Protestant friend told me about a recent meeting he attended in Rome. His hosts had arranged a meeting with the pope during which Francis asked the group of academics to pray for him. My friend, moved by the pope’s plea, grasped the mendicant spirit of the request.

Pope Francis echoes Francis of Assisi’s

literalism. I can’t imagine him embarking on a series of sermons as intellectually ambitious as John Paul II’s theology of the body. Nor can I see him writing theologically rich and evocative encyclicals, as did Benedict XVI. His preaching is unadorned, and *Evangelii Gaudium*, his recent apostolic exhortation, is straightforward: Greed is bad. There are no throwaway people. Every Christian is an evangelist. Pope Francis seems to be the vicar of simple gospel truths simply stated. In good Franciscan tradition, he also bears witness to them more eloquently in deed than in speech.

The church has a rich intellectual tradition—artistic, philosophical, and theological. But the current pope largely renounces its use. This is not for the sake of launching some new tradition, as many progressive theologians did after the Second Vatican Council, but for the sake of a rhetorical poverty, a stripping down of the church’s witness to straightforward gospel truths: Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Bergoglio’s choice of Francis for a name doubtlessly reflects his reading of the signs of the times. Simply put, the age when Christianity reigned over Western culture and society has come to an end. We can gather in places like Wheaton College and the University of Notre Dame, creating our little Liechtensteins amid the great empire of the modern secular university. But for the most part, evangelicals and Catholics alike have neither place nor voice. Whether we like it or not, we are impoverished.

In this context, the message of Pope Francis speaks against the idea that we should form a rich, sophisticated counterculture. Instead, he seems to envision the church in a mendicant mode. We are to bear witness through our poverty of political power, social status, and cultural influence. Instead of St. Benedict, we are to imitate St. Francis.

Of course, not all of us are called to literal poverty, though perhaps more of us are called to it than we’d like to admit. Yet the simple truth simply stated remains. Whether our renunciations of the world are spiritual or literal, inward or outward, the Franciscan way of poverty is one of immediacy. We must surely renew and rebuild the intellectual life of our churches. But this project will take a long time. Meanwhile, we can conform ourselves to Christ *right now*. We can bear witness *right now*. There’s nothing about the poverty of our





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cultural dispossession and our intellectual marginality that prevents us from saying, "The Lord is risen." In fact, we are better able to say it when we are poor.

### A SIMPLE 'YES'

We live in a paradoxical time of expansive possibilities, combined with a feeling that life is a long trudge toward a distant, elusive goal. Warm, well-fed, entertained, ministered to by modern medicine, yet we feel anxious and fearful. Our first impulses are toward self-protection, which we do through accumulation. And it's striking how *much* we think we need. Getting a college degree has become a "necessity." We scramble for credentials that aren't so much stepping stones to a goal as so many layers of armor that will protect us from life's perils.

The habit of irony in our time powerfully expresses our culture's impulse to self-protect. Irony creates a safe distance, an insulating layer. It's a way to be with others without revealing ourselves, a way to cover our existential nakedness. A dismissive "whatever" insulates us from the emotional dangers of disappointment, the possibility that what we truly desire can't be had or embraced. Surrounded by unprecedented wealth, we fear deprivation. In an age of hypercommunication, we fear revealing ourselves to others.

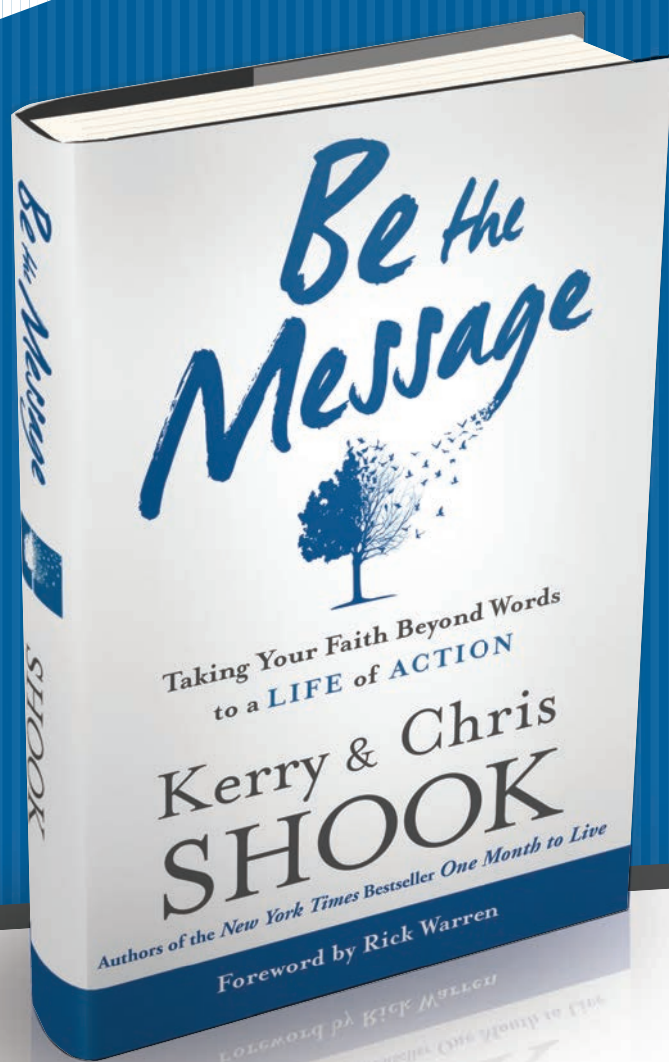
In this context of fear—and I believe we are motivated by fear today much more than by ambition—the pope's Franciscan qualities have a special resonance and importance. The way of Francis contradicts our assumption that we need to slave away to build up an invincible wall of self-protection. Fullness of life can be had in a moment, in a simple "yes" to Christ.

For this reason, Pope Francis brings us up short. His gestures of poverty and his blunt style help us to see that what we desire—the joy of genuine freedom and fullness of life—is right there for the taking. We don't need a fully funded 401k. We don't need an advanced theology degree. We don't need to be smart or good-looking. We don't even need to be good and virtuous. To Christ's clear words—"Take up your cross and follow me"—we need only to say yes. **CT**

**R. R. RENO** is editor of *First Things* magazine and author of *Fighting the Noonday Devil—and Other Essays Personal and Theological* (Eerdmans).

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# C O V and Conflict E N AT GORDON COLLEGE A N T


THE MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL HAS COME UNDER FIRE FOR BANNING 'HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE.'

**S**INCE JULY, Michael Lindsay, the 42-year-old president of Gordon College near Boston, has faced the firing line. Due to public allegations that his college supports discrimination against LGBT students and faculty, Lindsay spent much of the past five months defending Gordon's long-standing policy calling students and faculty to refrain from sex outside Christian marriage.

Earlier in 2014, Lindsay and other Christian leaders signed a letter supporting a religious exemption from the presidential executive order prohibiting employment discrimination for sexual orientation and gender identity in the federal government and for federal contractors. The executive order closely mirrors the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), a bill that has been hung up in Congress since Senate approval in November 2013. ENDA includes a broad exemption for religious organizations. President Obama's executive order, signed in July, does not.

After the letter to Obama became public, the Massachusetts cities of Salem and Lynn severed ties with Gordon. Lindsay was subject to extensive criticism, including from Gordon alumni. The college's accrediting association began asking questions about its ban just as Gordon launched a new campus-based working group to hold dialogue on its policy. Lindsay spoke recently with Timothy C. Morgan, CT senior editor of global journalism, about the working group, how Gordon responds to LGBT students, and leading in the crux of crisis.

JASON GROW

A close-up portrait of a man with short brown hair and light blue eyes, wearing a dark pinstripe suit, white shirt, and blue patterned tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

PRESIDENT  
MICHAEL LINDSAY  
SAYS THE POLICY  
IS ABOUT SO MUCH  
MORE THAN SEX.

INTERVIEW BY  
TIMOTHY C. MORGAN



**What's motivating this new working group about your policy on homosexual behavior?**

We need a way in which we as a community can talk about this issue and how Gordon ought to respond. The working group is not being asked to produce recommendations or reports. The group will enable us to [answer]: *Are there changes to the practices and protocols of the college that would allow us to affirm our evangelical identity and be as pastorally sensitive as possible?*

**Why did you sign the letter asking for a religious exemption to a federal ban on workplace discrimination?**

For a long time, Gordon has supported the right of faith-based organizations to set the conditions of employment at their institutions. Gordon is not a federal contractor. I signed in support of faith-based organizations that are federal contractors. I'm gratified that President Obama maintained the 2002 executive order, which allows faith groups with federal contracts to use religious belief in hiring. It was put in place by President Bush and basically gave the right to faith-based organizations to "hire for mission."

**The Gordon statement in question uses the term "homosexual practice." Does that cover everything, including handholding by same-sex couples?**

Gordon has never been a place that has a master list of dos and don'ts. The wider question being asked is, *Does Gordon theologically treat same-sex sexual union as sin?* The answer is yes. We don't see a place in the Bible where God appears to bless same-sex sexual union. The language of homosexual practice is really speaking to the arc of a relationship that leads up to sexual consummation.

We take seriously the challenges of our brothers and sisters who have same-sex attraction. We uphold the idea that same-sex attraction is not to be acted upon in the life of the Christ follower. Some within American evangelicalism and even within the Gordon community don't share that conviction. But that is the theological position of the institution.

**OneGordon, a group that supports LGBT persons connected to Gordon, has a public campaign to drop "homosexual practice" from Gordon's life and conduct statement. Is there**

**anything the college and OneGordon agree on?**

It's my hope that we can learn from each other. The theological positions of a Christian college are not determined by popular vote or advocacy. I appreciate the heartfelt concerns and desires expressed by members of the Gordon family in the OneGordon group who really want the college to change its position. [But] if a change were to occur, it [wouldn't be] because there were so many signatures on a petition.

What's far more likely is a deliberate, thoughtful process of theological reflection and ethical consideration undertaken by the trustees. The issues Gordon is facing are issues that every Christian college is grappling with or will grapple with. Part of it concerns the authority of Scripture and the desire for evangelicalism to be known for what it's for, not what it's against.

We're trying to model how we can demonstrate grace and truth even across differences of opinion. Gordon cares deeply about bearing authentic witness to our faith. That requires the posture of Anselm: faith seeking understanding. We start with core convictions, but we're genuinely trying to learn from folks who vehemently disagree with them. Why? I think it will help us to be truer to whom Christ has called us to be.

It will also help us to offer a more compelling, credible witness. I'm not a fan of the idea that pluralism will diminish our core distinctives. Christian colleges could very well set the example for our culture around the issues of principled pluralism. This might be the way we are able to bear witness to our faith in a very divided society.

**Some say that Christian colleges are only now waking up to LGBT issues, due to suicides, attempted suicides, or chronic depression among students. Do you agree?**

Christian colleges have engaged this issue for a far longer time and with a more sustained degree of thoughtfulness than virtually any other segment of Christendom. The reason Christian colleges are now at the front and center of the issue is because the wider culture has changed in a short time.

Christian colleges are better equipped to . . . pay attention to the challenge of being both open and faithful. That's what we have to do as a Christian community. We demonstrate love and hospitality; at



THE ISSUES GORDON IS FACING ARE ISSUES EVERY CHRISTIAN COLLEGE IS GRAPPLING WITH OR WILL GRAPPLE WITH. PART OF IT CONCERNS THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE AND THE DESIRE FOR EVANGELICALISM TO BE KNOWN FOR WHAT IT'S FOR, NOT WHAT IT'S AGAINST.

the same time, we do not abandon our core convictions.

**Critics of Christian higher education say these schools have become tolerant of homophobia because the behavioral covenants that students and faculty sign generate fear and self-censorship.**

I vehemently disagree with that assessment. The brilliance of American civil society, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted 200 years ago, was the emergence of these voluntary, moral communities that sustain civil society in ways unthinkable in his homeland, France.

Voluntary, moral communities by definition require boundaries. Folks say, “I willingly place myself under the authority of this community if I’m going to be part of it.” I made that decision when I came to Gordon. I’m willing to relinquish my individual rights out of a shared commitment to what’s good for the community.

Gordon’s covenantal documents have been in place for 50 years. We’re no different than we have been for the past five decades on this issue. The wider culture has changed, and some within our community would want us to abandon those core convictions, but this is not about Gordon becoming a different kind of place. These covenantal documents have always been the foundation of our institution. They are what legally distinguish us as a Christian institution, because we are not church-sponsored. But they have never been the front door of the institution. Over the summer, this matter was presented as our front door. But that’s not who we are. Gordon is a place of grace and truth.

**How is homophobia handled on campus? There’s suspicion that students with same-sex attractions endure hostility, stigmatizing, or shaming.**

We have a zero-tolerance policy around bullying on all issues. You would be hard-pressed to find a Christian institution that has more intentionally sought to take stock of how they care for gay students and has taken proactive steps to minister to them. I put Gordon’s track record up against that of any other institution in the country.

We work hard to recruit students. We spend money and time and energy getting them here, and we admit them because we think they’ll be great members of our community. Once students are here, we want to care for them, to help and

encourage them. That’s the reason I get up in the morning. I love our students.

I’ve probably met with two dozen gay alumni of Gordon who shared their stories. Part of my willingness to hear directly from them is to help us think: *Are there ways Gordon needs to change its posture or its protocol even while it upholds its orthodox position on this issue?* That’s a way God could actually redeem this.

**Are covenanted, church-blessed LGBT relationships essentially the equivalent of the same-sex erotic behavior that’s condemned in the Bible?**

I have never been a proof-texting kind of Christian. Gordon has never had that posture either. We reach our theological convictions from looking at the whole of Scripture, not necessarily one verse pulled out separately from other passages. If you look at the whole narrative of Scripture, you just can’t find theological justification. It requires extraordinary exegetical acrobatics to get to a place where you can somehow conclude that God would bless same-sex unions.

A more likely approach is that some folks will reach their theological conviction based on experience and what they have come to see God doing in the midst of their community and their relationships.

**How does Gordon respond to a student who identifies as LGBT or is uncertain of his or her sexual orientation?**

With late adolescence and early adulthood, we have always seen a season—that virtually all of us go through—of self-exploration and identity formation. Part of that involves our sexuality.

Today is different from previous generations. Today young people ask, “Am I gay?” We have students who come to us every year who are in various stages of figuring out their sexual identity. We have gay students who are “out.” What we ask of them is what we would ask of our gay employees—that they be celibate. We hold a theologically rich, nuanced understanding that says Scripture doesn’t actually speak on the issue of sexual orientation; it speaks on the issues of sexual behaviors and practice.

We believe celibacy is the right approach for students who identify as gay. We try to help students struggling with same-sex attraction in one way or another. We have a confidential support group in our counseling center where students can,

with support and encouragement from a trained psychologist, think about what this means for their life.

A number of our gay students would prefer not to have that orientation; they’ve told me that this was not what they wanted. It was not their choice. It was not something they walked into. But in their words, “It is who I am.” They are processing that. But sexual identity is not the sum total of our identity. That’s an important message for young people.

As students work out their sexual identity, there is vacillation that occurs: a student who identifies as gay might not in another year. What we’re trying to do is provide biblically informed support and pastoral encouragement.

**What about therapy that offers change in orientation?**

Our counseling center seeks to be pastorally sensitive to the students. To the best of my knowledge, we are not actively involved in encouraging orientation change. The kind of counseling and support we provide for students is short-term—a maximum of eight sessions. If students have additional needs, we refer them to counselors. In some ways we’re first responders to help students get to a place of healing. The major issue we deal with is student anxiety.

**You’re an evangelical expert on leadership based on your books. What are you learning?**

I’ve learned (and it’s something that I found in my research) that the crucible of crisis doesn’t develop your leadership; it just reveals it. This has been a season where it’s been important for me to be present in the life of our community. People need to see me. They need to be able to have conversations. I need to be accessible. The best gift a leader can give to his or her community is to show up. I have become the public face of Gordon College’s position. That position has been maligned. I wouldn’t be truthful if I didn’t say those critiques and criticisms hurt at times.

**Do you harbor doubts about Gordon’s long-term survival?**

Gordon is not just going to survive. It’s going to thrive as a result of this season. There are seasons of pruning and challenge that prepare you for seasons of greater fruitfulness. I have to believe that’s what the Lord is doing. **CT**



PROFILE

**MARK LANIER IS ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST SUCCESSFUL TRIAL LAWYERS. NOW HE'S TAKING CHRISTIANITY TO THE COURTROOM OF MODERN SKEPTICISM.**

BY BRET MAVRICH

# The Cont



ROUND CHRISTMAS, Mark Lanier becomes like the teetotaling Baptist brother of infamous party host Jay Gatsby. Every year since 1994, Lanier's 35-acre estate in northwest Houston is opened to thousands of colleagues, political connections, family, and friends. Visitors survey the landmarks: a replica of a 6th-century Byzantine chapel, a theological library modeled after seven Oxford libraries, and a Noahide menagerie that includes lemurs and kangaroos alongside their more pedestrian counterparts like sheep and goats. Guests ride a model train among other carnival rides brought in for the event, where Sting, Bon Jovi, Rascal Flatts, and prescandal Miley Cyrus have all performed for as many as 10,000 people.

And like Gatsby, Lanier is shrouded in mystery. I first meet him at a dinner in his home, part of a weekend of events culminating in a lecture by Lanier himself. He

JILL HUNTER

Mark Lanier's library, modeled after seven in Oxford, holds more than 130,000 volumes and is open daily to the public.



ender





welcomes 100 of us one by one, flashing a boyish grin and tossing his hair back into place. Virtually everyone at dinner knows only pieces and rumors. I meet college friends of Lanier's who are visiting his estate for the first time. Dining across from me is an elderly couple who met Lanier when they accidentally pulled onto his property thinking it was a park. We are jovial, dazzled by the opulence and enjoying an unusually cool Texas evening beneath the colonnade. Everyone has heard about Lanier's Christmas party to end all Christmas parties. But what is the meaning of all this, few can say.

Lanier, 53, is ostensibly one of the nation's most successful trial lawyers, known for convincing judges and juries to award his clients astronomical sums. The Lanier Law Firm was behind a landmark case against pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co. in 2005 where a judge awarded \$253 million in damages for the now-withdrawn pain medication Vioxx. Earlier this year, another of Lanier's clients won \$9 billion in a drug-related suit, making it the seventh-largest judgment in US history. *National Law Journal* has listed Lanier on its list of the nation's top lawyers at least four times, while *Texas Monthly* has called him a "super lawyer" more than once.

But those who only have seen Lanier while he spars on Fox Business's *Varney & Co.* know half the story. A lifelong Christian, Lanier says practicing law is not his main calling. It is studying the Bible and teaching Sunday school at Champion Forest, a Baptist megachurch in the Houston suburbs. His class draws a weekly attendance of 1,000, who are handed dense study packets on topics ranging from church history to string-theory physics.

"People don't realize I'm doing [law] because it pays the bills and is kind of fun, but I'd much rather be reading *that*," says Lanier, pointing to an abstruse book written by an Old Testament scholar. We're sitting opposite each other in his office in the east wing of his eponymous library, surrounded by dark-stained bookshelves. An imperious high-back black chair bearing the Texas State seal looms off to one side, opposite a painting of Lanier and wife Becky's five children. On the exposed-brick wall behind Lanier are sketches commissioned for a series of Byzantine paintings that now adorn the ceiling of his chapel. Off in another corner is a framed medal and certificate



**'I represent  
widows and  
orphans, and  
I cry out for  
justice for the  
underprivileged  
masses. Jesus  
would have  
been a  
plaintiff's  
lawyer.'**

MARK LANIER

of induction into the Order of Antonio José de Irisarri, one the highest honors from the President of Guatemala. (Lanier's Christmas parties double as fundraisers for Guatemalan charities; his contributions have been so substantial that the Laniers received the honor from President Otto Perez Molina himself.)

Mere seconds in Lanier's office—a library within a library, really—is all it takes to grasp Lanier's devotion to study. When I ask what he's currently reading, he pulls together the works of John Milton; a transcription of the Nuremberg trials for a lecture this evening; and the third edition of *Engineering Tribology*, part of his research for an upcoming suit involving an artificial hip implant. Lanier is known to spend 500 hours or more mastering a topic before a single deposition. He reads anything that will improve his craft in a courtroom, including marketing and communications techniques. He studies neuroscience to try to duplicate visceral experiences like motivation in the minds of a jury. In a corner of the library above an antique book press hangs a framed page from an original King James Bible. It's from the Book of Joshua: "Loose thy shoe from off thy foote, for the place whereon thou standest is holy."

Lanier understands his legal work as deeply Christian. When he spoke out against tort reform in 2003 to state lawmakers, he was trying to fix what he thought an egregious injustice: a proposed medical malpractice lawsuit cap of \$250,000, with an exception for "economic losses," or damages awarded based on the plaintiff's potential future income. Since a wealthy banker stood to lose more than a teenage girl in the inner city, Lanier found the proposed bill reprehensible. It costs \$250,000 just to push such lawsuits. At the least, he reasoned, put in an exemption for abortion providers so that underprivileged teenage girls who are victimized can get access to a decent lawyer.

Lanier's suggestions were ignored. He fielded the usual criticisms: litigation was ruining the medical profession; trial lawyers had a huge stake in keeping litigation as deregulated as imaginable. One politico from the red-as-Christ's-blood state questioned Lanier's faith, speculating whether a lawyer could also truly be a Christian.

"I represent widows and orphans, and I cry out for justice for the underprivileged masses. Jesus would have been a plaintiff's lawyer," he says. Lanier is used to beating

people to the punch. His strategy is to outthink his opponents by developing answers to questions that they've not yet formulated, questions that recede past the vanishing point of the horizon of their worldview.

## PUTTING FAITH ON TRIAL

A few hours after our chat in his office, Lanier will deliver a lecture based on his book *Christianity on Trial: A Lawyer Examines the Christian Faith* (InterVarsity Press). The book began as a teaching series at Champion Forest based on the J. B. Phillips classic *Your God Is Too Small*. A friend encouraged him to publish, and what emerged was a book about proving the reasonableness of the Christian account of reality, written by a man who proves the kinds of things in a courtroom that scientists can't prove in a laboratory.

"Mathematics measures mathematics. Chemistry measures chemistry. But they don't measure, 'Do I love my wife?'" says Lanier. "So you want to do that, you can prove it, but you prove it the way you do in court." For Lanier, the schism between scientific fact and spiritual faith comes down to a disagreement in the terms of the argument.

Lanier says people of faith have been asked to measure a mile in ounces. Since at least the Enlightenment era, they have faced the full-court press of historical-critical claims against Scripture: from Thomas Hobbes to Immanuel Kant to Friedrich Nietzsche to the Jesus Seminar of the 1980s. Recent secularists have wielded neuroscience as a challenge to spiritual life: *Faith is nothing but a predeterministic cocktail of genes and juices!* The onslaught of skepticism has taken a heavy toll on Christian college students, a full 70 percent of whom drop the faith sometime during their freshman year, according to LifeWay Research. (Some do return.)

"I believe Christianity can hold up to the highest level of academic scrutiny," Lanier says, showing how a top-shelf lawyer might be better suited than a faith-filled scientist to fight the good fight. Put faith under a microscope, and you'll determine there's nothing there; put it on trial, and you might restore faith to its respectable, reasonable standing.

His unique contribution to current apologetics is precisely his vocation as

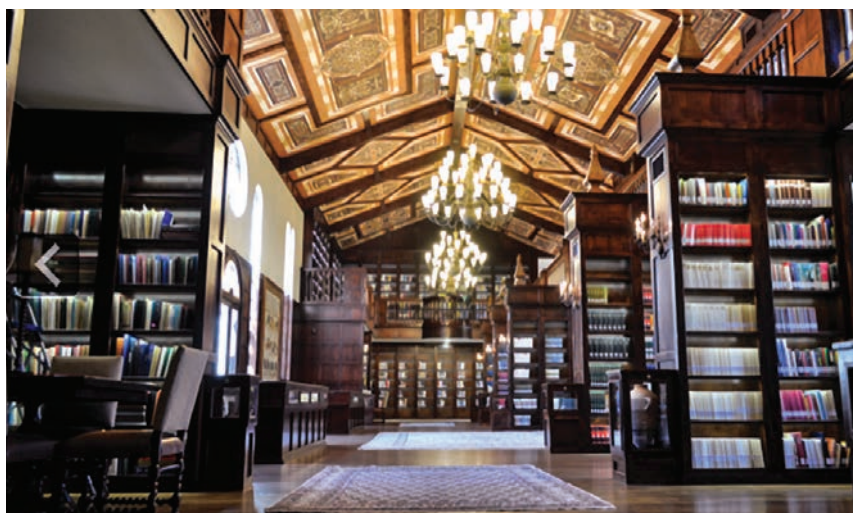
a lawyer. He insists that the tools best suited to prove the truths of Christianity are the same as the ones used in civil court. Lanier routinely convinces juries that his—beyond a reasonable doubt—is the stronger of two arguments.

"It doesn't mean there's no doubt," he says. In Lanier's line of work, 49 percent doubt is still the "greater weight of credible evidence," enough to prove truth to a jury. In one chapter of his book, he "calls to the stand" noted psychologist B. F. Skinner and linguist Noam Chomsky, along with the ancient voices of Cicero and Matthew the Evangelist, to examine whether it's reasonable to expect the God of biblical proportions to reveal himself through Holy Writ. From the testimony of these "witnesses," Lanier demonstrates that

been studying college-level ancient languages and teaching his siblings how to study the Bible.

"My oldest memory is of Mark teaching me Scripture," says Holly Roberts, Lanier's younger sister and a 20-year veteran of Bible Study Fellowship International. "He's the single most influential person in my spiritual walk." Lanier used to give Roberts quarters for memorizing verses. He taught her the *Shema*, the classic Jewish creedal confession, when she was 6.

Lanier pursued debate through college, routinely winning national championships, while working on a bachelor's degree in biblical languages and teaching the Bible at his campus ministry. When he had completed his undergraduate education, two options lay before him: he



language is the quintessential human distinctive, and that communication takes place through a medium. If we assume that God has the power and interest to communicate with humankind, then is it more reasonable to believe he would use ESP over that which science continues to prove—namely that humans are fundamentally verbal beings? "Our minds and conscious thoughts are hardwired for language," writes Lanier. "Accordingly, we might fairly expect God to use language in communicating with people. It is what people are prepared to hear and understand."

Lanier's passion for credible faith has grown alongside his success as a plaintiff's lawyer. As a teenager, he took an aptitude test that indicated he was suited for three vocations: trial lawyer, preacher, or politician. He had already

could continue on to law school or teach at a local church. He turned to Ken Dye, a pastor at his home church.

Dye, with a deep Texan drawl, is reluctant to take credit for Lanier's success. Still, "You can't underestimate small conversations," says Dye. "I think he would have become a lawyer, but sometimes you need a nudge." During a 30-minute meeting back in 1986, Dye pointed out that Lanier would be miserable as a preacher, since he didn't exactly toe the denominational line on a few doctrines. Besides, Dye told him, if Lanier were to succeed at practicing law, he could teach Sunday school and pay his own way to pursue his passion. To a 20-year-old Lanier, that sounded like sage advice. He went on to law school at Texas Tech University, and continued to pore over Scripture.



## THE BEST CASE

When his personal library outgrew his home, Lanier dreamed of building his own theological library. The library, completed six years ago, is designed to hold 100,000-plus books. Though it sits within Lanier's gated compound, it's open daily to the public and serves seven area seminaries. Its roster of guest lecturers and scholars has included Richard Bauckham, N. T. Wright, D. A. Carson, Alister McGrath, and Justice Antonin Scalia. Each lecture is accompanied by a weekend of discussions and luncheons to give attending scholars and laity alike a haven to think, doubt, and believe.

And the library is magnificent. The two-story-high stained glass windows, iron spiral staircases, and window seats are all factual imitations from Oxford libraries. The library boasts the private libraries of a dozen notable biblical scholars—each kept completely intact and separate from the larger collection of more than 130,000 volumes and 20,000 articles and journals. Each of the scholars' libraries is displayed neatly in its own recess with a name plate above, a detail that preserves an intimate sense of presence and continuity between scholars past and the students who now amble through the stacks.

"Mark is the only one who takes books out," says Charles Mickey, the library's director. "He's studying all the time on his private plane. He doesn't waste a minute." (His law firm has offices in Houston, New York, and Los Angeles, and Lanier's schedule is a dizzying succession of depositions, cross-country flights, awards banquets, trials, and short bouts of sleep.)

Mickey has the affable poise of a retired golf pro. But he is actually Lanier's former campus pastor. Mickey has stories that span Lanier's life, which he recounts while giving me the tour.

Lanier's library also houses a number of artifacts, each with a charming story tied directly to the library's founder. To wit, the mosaic: Just hours before the inaugural lecture, Mickey had hastily erected a replica mosaic, handmade by Jordanian women, only to learn that Lanier had purchased it without knowing what the Greek inscription said. Tapping Lanier's vast connections, Mickey was able to enlist the help of a monk from St. Catherine's monastery atop Mount



**The library's  
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Alister McGrath,  
and Justice  
Antonin Scalia.**

Sinai to provide the translation. Fittingly, the inscription is a note thanking two lawyers who had funded a baptistery.

But the mosaic is not the most valuable artifact in the library. Neither are the exact replicas of the Dead Sea Scrolls in their mind-boggling detail (every stain, smudge, or strand of deteriorating leather precisely like the originals).

The most valuable artifacts in the collection include a pair of original-edition King James Bibles, both open to Ruth 3:15, to demonstrate that one is a "He" Bible, the other a "She," according to a mistranslation in the earlier of the two editions; the C. S. Lewis collection, comprising 60 first-edition books as well as handwritten letters; and, the most valuable, the "Lanier shard," a scrap of papyrus from the Dead Sea Scrolls containing broken text from the Book of Amos.

Before long, I enter the cruciform chapel with hundreds of guests for Lanier's lecture. It's the culmination of the weekend's events, and in some ways, of Lanier himself. The parties and celebrities, the library and its artifacts, the chapel and the Sunday school class, the honors—all of Lanier's life spirals like a cosmos from a big bang between two basic elements in his being: the staggering success in his legal career, and a passion for God.

We file into pews, extra seating extending into the transepts. After an introduction from former federal judge Ken Starr and a performance from Catholic singer-songwriter John Michael Talbot, Lanier climbs to the lectern. A giant screen (used for Lanier's PowerPoint presentations, now studied by many law students) conceals the apse but not its depiction of a Coptic Christ returning in judgment to acquit the saints and damn the rest.

As Lanier delivers his best case for a reasonable faith, the chapel has become a courtroom, the aged pews an oversized jury box. Wearing a striped suit, red tie, and pocket handkerchief, Lanier thunders from the lectern, his arms spread wide. Suddenly his roles have blurred. Is he a lawyer? A preacher? Both? Here it's unclear. But one thing is clear: With everything within him, Lanier is vying for the truth of the gospel in a case against the skepticism of our age. **CT**

**BRET MAVRICH** is an award-winning journalist who writes about God in the world. He lives near Pittsburgh with his wife. Follow him on Twitter at @BretMavrich.

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# HAVE YOURSELF A MERRY KITSCHY CHRISTMAS





## WHAT WEIRD NATIVITY SETS GET RIGHT ABOUT THE STORY OF JESUS.

BY SARAH ARTHUR

I'M NOT A COLLECTOR, but I love the Nativity sets that begin appearing this time of year. Whether ornate, simple, ethnic, crafty, plush, porcelain, enormous, or fit-in-eggshell teeny—show me a crèche, and I'm a kid on Christmas Eve again.

But even I admit there's a point at which crèches cross into the realm of weird. Nativities starring chickens, for instance. Or trolls. Or zombies. Or any of the bizarre kitsch that youth ministry veteran Mark Oestreicher has found for his ongoing list of "the worst and weirdest nativity sets," including the Meat

Nativity—made of bacon and sausages on a bed of hash browns.

Discerning Christians in the West often protest the mishandling of Christmas: the tacky, irreverent, quaint, and theologically-problematic distortions that pass as the gospel, not to mention as art. While I find the Meat Nativity hilarious, I realize a hotdog Jesus takes the *carne* of the Incarnation a little too far. But I wonder if, in our hurry to correct such spiritual shallowness, we miss a vital opportunity to engage the broader culture at a moment when our neighbors are actually focused on the right thing: the story of Jesus.







Humans are story-formed people. Our first sense of who we are and where we fit within an often-confusing world comes through the narratives our communities tell us. And this narrative engagement is not simply a developmental stage only for children: it's a function and framework of the imagination, that part of our human mind that makes connections, discovers patterns, and processes meaning in ways that include but transcend reason. You can't get three pages into Scripture without both using your imagination and being enriched by the imaginations of others—all through the medium of story.

Yet whenever I sniff out theological distortions wafting around popular culture, storytelling is not my first instinct. My first instinct is to clear the air, to proclaim in loud, aggrieved tones—on social media, from the podium, or in my writing—that such distortions obstruct the truth. If someone asks me a catechetical question (“What is the meaning . . . ?”), they are likely to get a doctrinal response. If someone expresses even mild curiosity about Christianity, like many of us I'm tempted to share a statement of faith rather than a story about Jesus. Despite the fact that similar questions in the Hebrew Scriptures are met with stories—as in Deuteronomy 6:20–25—and that Jesus himself often answered direct questions with indirect parables, providing no further explanation, it's easy for many of us to assume narratives are meant for children or, at best, for homiletical flourish.

Granted, there are moments when theological conversation is vital: when I'm teaching a Sunday school class, when I'm asked a question by someone who desires a theologically reflective answer, or when a fellow Christian makes an absurd, problematic comment in public, leading to fallout at the local level. But such clarifiers, while important, are not the only or always the most effective mode of Christian engagement with the world. Sometimes stories are the best way to reach those who are otherwise disinterested.

## Truth through the Back Door

While I'd love to tease out the theological implications of making a crèche baby Jesus from a shotgun shell, I sense this is a moment when our culture offers a corrective by persistently, tactlessly, and childishly insisting that *the story itself* is what matters.

# SOMETIMES STORIES ARE THE BEST WAY TO REACH THOSE WHO ARE OTHERWISE DISINTERESTED.

After all, the Nativity doesn't exist in order to deliver another message or principle or idea. It exists to deliver Jesus. And there he is, right in the middle, every time. He may be portrayed as a chicken—and why not? In Narnia he's a lion—but he's there. Yes, there are many ways in which our culture distorts and misunderstands the gospel. But in this one weird instance, I think our culture—with its appropriation of a simple biblical narrative—is on to something. It has let the truth slip in.

My family and I were once given a Guatemalan crèche whose holy family looks nothing like middle-class suburbanites. Instead, it represents the very economic strata that Jesus came from: those who, in Howard Thurman's words, have “their backs against the wall.” We also have a hand-crocheted Nativity, which—rather than expressing DON'T TOUCH to little children, as collectible porcelains often do—invites small hands to pick it up, play with it, and enter and enact the Christmas story.

And then there's art—the kind that has taken time and discipline and a robust engagement with both culture and the Christian faith. Recently I've had the privilege of editing an anthology of poetry and fiction for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, in which I've encountered one astonishing, beautiful, and raw version of the Nativity after another. Take, for example, these lines from Susanna Childress's poem “Bethlehem, Indiana,” featuring a modern-day mother and child:

... Say we were  
to come upon these two as they share  
a moment while Joseph, who,  
according to St. Brigit's account,  
cannot keep their only candle lit

and so has stepped away to shake  
his lighter, slap its plastic

shell against his jeans: you would  
realize, then, from the marquee  
illuminating NO next to VACANCY,  
visible from the palm-sized window  
eye-high in the custodian's closet,  
that you've found them in the Motel 6,  
or perhaps its periphery, since there's  
no faded bedspread here, no bed,  
no lamp, no faucet or sink, no folded  
white washcloth, the undulating

highway nearer to them than the  
front desk, whose single geranium  
slouches toward discolor.

The poem ends by inviting us to seek  
the baby on a stretch of Midwestern high-  
way, where we

pull into the Quick-Mart for  
directions. The man at the counter  
whose young wife has just brought  
in her infant son for a visit  
won't look up when the bell over the  
door jangles our arrival, not  
at least, until he notices our faces,  
which are either somber or exultant  
as we say, *We're just passin' through*  
or *We've come to see—*

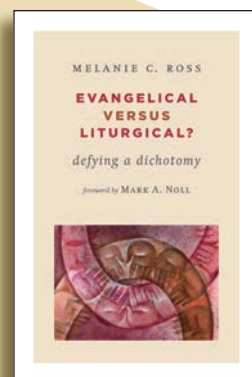
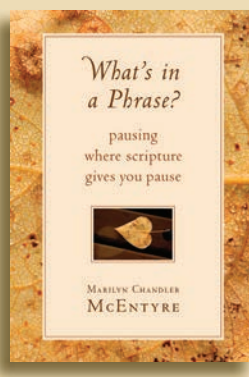
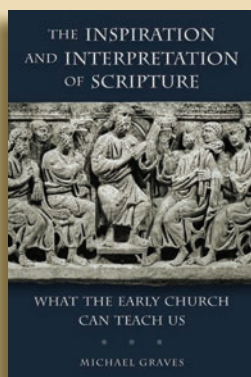
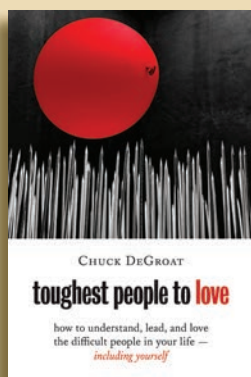
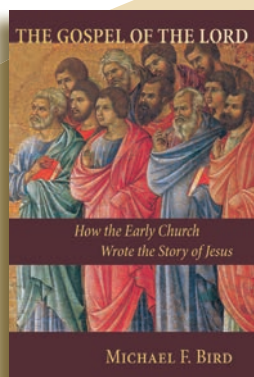
Stripped of sentiment and its usual  
props and costumes, the story is made  
strange enough to see and understand as  
if for the first time. And this is precisely  
where the Holy Spirit can make a move.  
When the front door of reason is locked and  
double-bolted against the gospel, as it is for  
so many of our neighbors, the back door of  
the imagination often stands wide open.

Perhaps our task as Christians during  
Christmastime is not to rush to confront  
and correct our culture's distorted theology  
but to let the story itself be the point. Rather  
than turn away in disdain from our culture's  
mishandling of the gospel, we have an op-  
portunity to tell the story anew, to share the  
“good spell”—the meaning of *gospel*—with  
those who, for some odd reason this time  
of year, are actually interested.

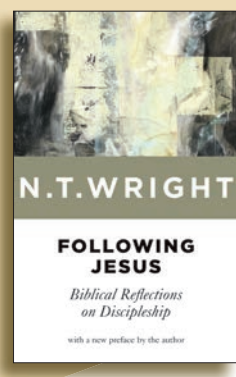
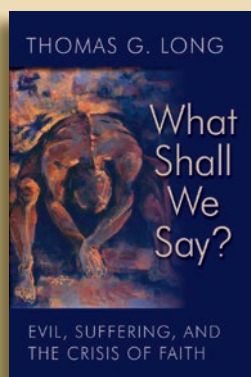
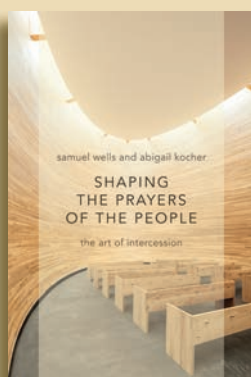
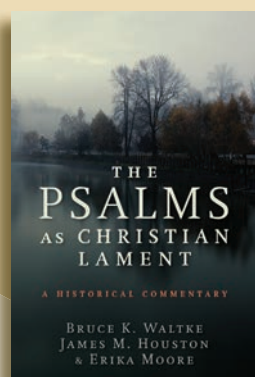
I suspect this is one of those cases  
in which a little child just might lead  
us all.

CT

**SARAH ARTHUR** is the author of numerous  
books. She most recently edited *Light upon  
Light: A Literary Guide to Prayer for Advent,  
Christmas, and Epiphany* (Paraclete Press).



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# *Relief in Wartime*




Seminary students and others study outdoors at Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary. The school's prayer tower is in the background.



**FLEEING VIOLENCE,  
NEARLY 1.3 MILLION SYRIANS  
AND IRAQIS ARE NOW LIVING  
IN JORDAN. HOW LOCAL  
AND GLOBAL LEADERS ALIKE  
ARE MEETING THEIR NEEDS.**

**BY ALICE SU IN AMMAN**



It is 8:30 on a Tuesday morning, and crises are blaring from the television in the student lounge of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), based in Amman. Only a few students—mostly Egyptian, Sudanese, Syrian, and Jordanian men—are watching. Everyone else is crowded around the coffee and tea, swirling sugar into paper cups as they review Greek vocabulary and Trinitarian theology.

A US-led coalition has just launched airstrikes on regions in Syria controlled by Islamic extremists, a reporter announces. The Islamic State (ISIS) is fighting Syrian President Assad's regime, Kurdish militaries, the Iraqi army, and rebel forces in Syria. ISIS has beheaded journalists and is holding other people hostage. Jordan participated in the airstrikes and is tightening its borders, cracking down on Islamists, and arresting terror suspects across the Hashemite kingdom.

A refugee pastor who fled Syria two years ago switches the TV off.

*"Yallah shbab [Come on guys] chapel!"*

WARRICK PAGE / GETTY



**'THE MOST POWERFUL MISSIONARIES IN THE GULF ARE FILIPINO WORKERS. WHO ELSE CAN ENTER SAUDI ARABIAN HOMES AND SPEAK TO WOMEN IN THEIR LIVING ROOMS?' HYUNG NAM CHUNG**

Upstairs a student named Mounis is leading staff and other students in worship. "*Astatih kullu shayin fil masih kuwati* [I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me]," sings an Egyptian keyboardist, eyes closed, brows furrowed.

"*Ilahi yourid an ahya fi najahi* [My God wants me to live in victory]. *Wa yuqimuni ila murtafaati* [And he enables me to walk to my high places]."

After worship, Bryson Arthur, a Scottish systematic theologian at JETS, approaches the podium to read from Matthew 8.

"God is asleep in the disciples' boat. The creator of the universe is asleep in the boat!" Arthur says. "'Ye of little faith,' the Messiah says. 'Why are you so afraid?'"

Believers can choose between two kinds of fear, Arthur continues: fear of the world or fear of the Lord. "One leaves you clutching, desperate and terrified; the other brings you peace. One seeks control; the other surrenders.

"Let us choose the latter," Arthur says. "Let us not be afraid."

Chapel is over. Outside the seminary, political and military storms swirl, giving the JETS community plenty to fear. But after class and on Sundays, seminarians and professors fan out across Amman, ministering through the city's churches, shelters, and private homes to care for the country's growing refugee population.

"The church is in pain because of what's happening in Syria and Iraq," said Yousef Hashweh, pastor of the Jordanian Alliance Church. "We need our sister churches in the West to stand with us."

## Compassionate Care

In 2010, Hanna Massad, assistant professor of theology at JETS, launched a new fellowship in Amman for refugee Iraqi Christians.

Until the protracted Syrian crisis, the fellowship mostly tended to the physical and spiritual needs of Iraqis. But no longer. Supplementing churches' relief efforts, these Iraqi Christians have begun



Jordanian children attend Camp Gilead, overlooking the Jordan River Valley. Counselors teach young people in small groups discipleship and biblical theology.

ministering to Syrians.

More than half such refugees are women and young children. Massad's congregation regularly hosts an open house for Syrian children to play. "We also visit Syrians in their homes in Jordan. We listen, drink tea, pray, and at times provide food," Massad, a former pastor of Gaza Baptist Church, told *CT*.

More than 619,000 officially registered Syrian refugees—along with 2 million Palestinians and thousands more from Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, and other countries—have flooded into Jordan. Four years into the Syrian conflict, Jordan's refugee emergency has turned into a national crisis, taxing the country's ability to sustain the masses who aren't leaving anytime soon. (Today, there are 3.2 million Syrian refugees in the region.)

As the number of refugees grows, so has the number of overseas Christian mission volunteers arriving from Europe, the Americas, South Korea, Japan, and China. By the end of 2014, more than 50 faith-based, governmental, and secular agencies will have spent more than \$850

million caring for Syrian refugees in Jordan. In October, the US-based Cradle of Christianity Fund pledged \$25 million to shelter displaced Iraqi and Syrian Christians during the coming winter. The immediate need for food, shelter, education, and medical care is overwhelming. On average, a UN hotline in Amman receives 2,500 calls for help each day.

Some Christians coming from overseas are eager to evangelize as soon as they arrive. But Jordanian church leaders caution against proselytizing. Article 150 of Jordan's penal code forbids any action that may lead to "sectarian strife," a vague term that includes proselytizing. Most of Jordan's traditional churches do not actively proselytize. Jordan, like other Mideast nations, has a large intelligence service that monitors religious activity.

Jordanian police have taken into custody and deported individual American, Korean, and other overseas Christians who allegedly shared the gospel with Muslims. In one instance, police forced a pastor to leave Jordan since he was attracting too many people to his fellowship. Even

performing worship music publicly can trigger an official inquiry.

Imad Shehadeh, president of JETS, said evangelism is often better left to individual Jordanians, given current security and cultural complexities. “It makes a lot more sense to invest in Arabs. They are just as smart as Westerners and just as godly.”

One convert, Ahmed, said that in sharing the gospel with Muslims, it is important to help individuals count the cost.

“What if the people you’re helping then go to jail? That decision changes your entire life,” he said. He said Christians should resist any pressure from the outside to show progress in terms of numbers. “Connect with people heart-to-heart, not project-to-heart,” said Ahmed.

Massad said the key to caring for refugees is compassion. Many refugee families arrive in Amman after exhausting all other options. When churches take them in, trust is established. “You need wisdom from above about when to talk, how to deliver a loving message to others,” said Massad.

One family arrived at his church after ISIS kidnapped the father. The mother and two children still don’t know if he is alive. “They have started to experience God working in their life,” said Massad. “We pray together. We laugh and cry. I could write a book about each family and what they went through.”

The ongoing conflict means refugees are arriving from Syria and Iraq every week. “These days we see history being written,” Massad said. “We should be proud we belong to the body of Christ. We can learn from each other. The needs are unlimited.”

## Long-Term Commitments

Despite urgent relief needs, some of Jordan’s most effective Christian leaders balance emergency relief with long-range development projects, such as discipleship training, health clinics, and economic growth.

Hyung Nam Chung is among those who believe this approach is well suited to the culture. Chung, a Korean pastor who has worked in Jordan for 20 years, said it has taken three generations for Koreans to establish roots in the Middle East.

When he first arrived in Bahrain in 1989, for example, the Korean Christians

there didn’t speak Arabic. They were mostly young, single men working day jobs and meeting in the evenings to pray. It was tempting to judge their success by counting the region’s “fruit” or lack thereof.

“But God doesn’t look at it with that perspective,” Chung said. “He’s not in a rush. He looks at the big picture.

“Jesus’ followers are blessed as they bless others. While you wait for resettlement or a visa or peace so you can return, you are a source of blessing,” he said. The poor and marginalized—Egyptians, displaced Iraqis, Filipino maids, and now Syrian refugees—understand this. “The most powerful missionaries in the Gulf are Filipino workers. Who else can enter Saudi Arabian homes and speak to women in their living rooms?”

Chung and other church leaders focus on resettlement. In many cases, refugees cannot safely return to their homes and are granted permanent residence. For example, the United States has resettled 85,000 Iraqis but only 90 Syrians so far. Next year it could accept up to 2,000 Syrians.

In another Amman neighborhood, several Chinese Christians have settled in for the long run. They are studying Arabic at an Islamic college that attracts religious foreigners, including Chinese students from a Muslim Hui or Uyghur minority background. Li and his wife, Jiayi, have been in Jordan for two years. They come from a large Chinese house church that sends workers to places where Asian believers are often better received than Western ones.

The largest group of development agencies in the country comes from North and South America. Canada and the United States alone have more than 20 groups in Jordan, and many of them focus on training leaders and supporting new churches.

Some South American Christians are also serving through education and microenterprise. Maria and Juliana, two single Brazilian women in their early 30s, moved to Amman two years ago without knowing English or Arabic. After picking up both languages, they now regularly visit Syrian refugees, teaching women aerobics and how to sell handicrafts, and hosting youth camps. Despite the language barrier, Maria said, she slips easily into Arab culture, especially among other women.

## Outreach Is Risky

For the most part, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant leaders in Jordan have kept to themselves for years. But some pastors hope the refugee crisis will forge a new sense of unity. “We have to act as one group—one body of Christ,” said Noor Sahawneh, pastor of the National Christian and Missionary Alliance Church of Mafraq.

Open to all, Mother of Mercy in Zarqa, a Catholic medical clinic recently profiled by *One* magazine (published by the Catholic Near East Welfare Association), is an example of Christian unity in action. The small, church-based center typically treats more than 100 patients daily, many of them expectant mothers referred from the northern cities of Mafraq, Jerash, and Irbid for prenatal care.

“We cannot talk about spirituality in our work,” Sister Najma told *One*. “What we do and how we do it shows our spirituality. We’ve devoted our whole lives to helping people. This is our message.”

Fifty-six percent of Jordan’s population is 24 or younger, and young Jordanian, Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian families scramble to find low-cost health care. That’s where Mother of Mercy’s staff can play a role, attracting mostly non-Catholics as patients.

Another area of focus is interfaith ministry, an extremely sensitive area among church leaders. Changing one’s religion is illegal, dangerous, and sometimes deadly.

Persecution ministry Open Doors reports religious freedom in Jordan has declined in the past 18 months. Regional crises have heightened conservatism, making many Jordanians resistant to interfaith interaction. At the same time, the pain of terrorism has opened up many individuals to new questions about their own religion.

If believers can strengthen their unity at this time, said Jordan’s leaders, the gospel will blaze stronger in the Middle East than ever before. “There is no Eastern, Western, Jew, or Greek in Christ,” pastor Hashweh said. “If one member aches, the whole body is in pain.”

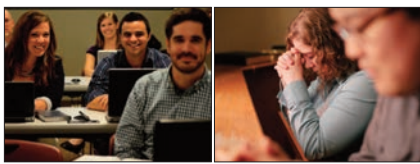
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ALICE SU is a journalist currently reporting from Jordan and Iraq. She has written for *The Atlantic*, *Wired*, and *Columbia Journalism Review*.





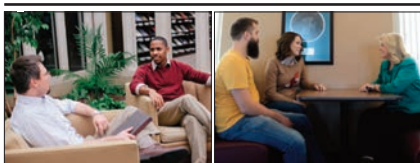
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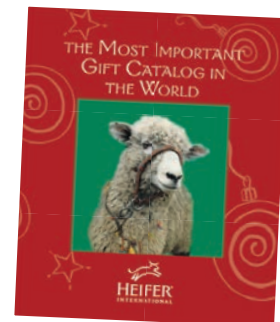
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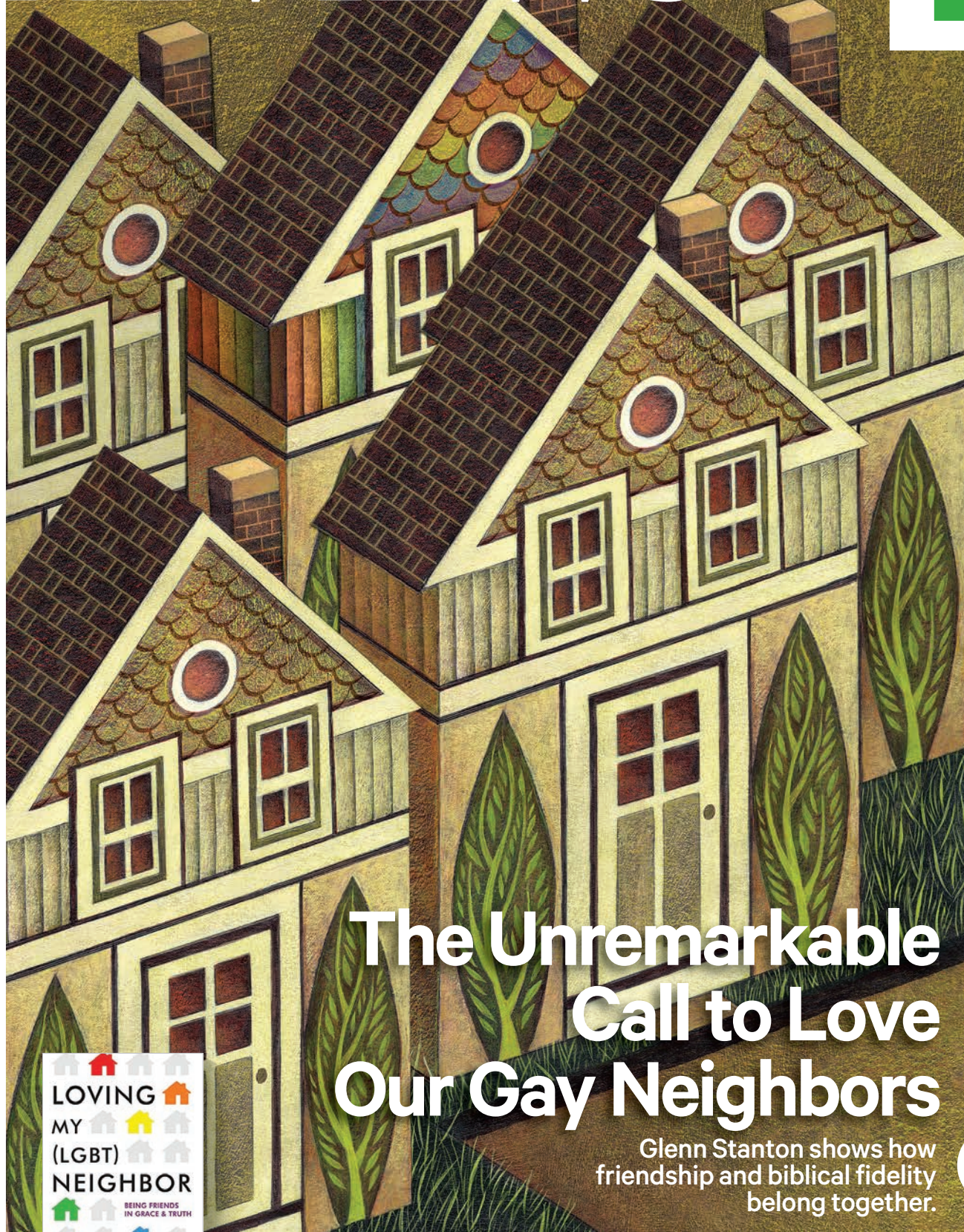
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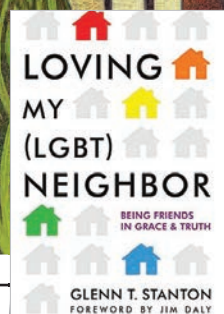


## The Unremarkable Call to Love Our Gay Neighbors

Glenn Stanton shows how  
friendship and biblical fidelity  
belong together.



SARA TYSON







**N**ot long ago, a former student of mine wrote an article for *The Atlantic* describing his experience coming out as gay at Liberty University, the evangelical school where I teach. He described how, after confiding his secret to me, I responded by saying, “I love you.” After the story was published, I received messages from across the country, some taking issue with my response, some affirming it. Either way, the messages indicated that assuring a gay student at a Christian university that he was loved was somehow remarkable.

Perhaps, then, the most helpful feature of Glenn T. Stanton’s book *Loving My (LGBT) Neighbor: Being Friends in Grace & Truth* (Moody Publishers) ★★★★★ is simply that it exists. Stanton is director for family formation studies at Focus on the Family. The Southern Poverty Law Center (which supports gay rights) lists the Colorado Springs organization as one of a dozen major groups that allegedly “help drive the Religious Right’s anti-gay crusade.” It’s noteworthy, then, to encounter a Focus on the Family scholar—someone known for debating LGBT advocates across the country—who authored a book calling Christians to love, befriend, and respect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons.

The book reflects a shift in both the tone and tactics of an organization that critics charge with linking homosexuality with pedophilia and otherwise misrepresenting social science research. While Stanton does not waver in affirming the orthodox biblical view of sexual relations as designed for one man and one woman within marriage, neither does he waver in affirming that Christians must handle LGBT issues and people with love and grace.

#### A UNIQUE SITUATION

Stanton notes that today’s church is facing unprecedented questions. “The mainstreaming of homosexuality in society and the redefinition of marriage and the family,” he writes, are “historically and culturally unique” phenomena. And in our pluralistic society, traditional views

on marriage and sexuality seem increasingly weird and bigoted.

But Stanton reminds us that the Bible calls each generation to understand the particularities of its culture in order to better serve it. With no obvious precedent for the situation the church finds itself in today, the way it deals with LGBT issues will unavoidably set a pattern for the future, for better or worse. Getting it right—or at least better than we have so far—is of crucial importance.

The book’s strength lies in providing clarity on fundamental points of the discussion (including definitions of terms as basic as “gay,” “transgender,” and “queer”). It also helpfully treats more complex questions, like whether to attend a gay wedding or how to welcome unrepentant, partnered gay and lesbian couples into a congregation without compromising church teaching. Often, Stanton says, we are in greater need of basic information than moral passion:

We can’t talk thoughtfully and productively about what we don’t understand. And the fault is not in not knowing the facts and truth about something, for not one of us can understand everything accurately. The fault lies in assuming and acting like we do.

Instead, Stanton urges us to “step out of the safe, neat Christian boxes” we’ve made and cultivate understanding and friendships with those who are LGBT. But we should not, Stanton emphasizes, make such friendships *only to share the gospel*. We should share the gospel just as we always might with anyone we are in relationship with, but developing friendships solely for that reason, Stanton writes, is “not a friendship; it’s a project.”

The first step toward understanding

**The book helpfully treats whether to attend a gay wedding or how to welcome unrepentant, partnered couples into a congregation without compromising church teaching.**

and friendship is getting beyond stereotypes. The LGBT movement, Stanton points out, is much like the Christian community in that it draws from diverse backgrounds and moral beliefs. Drawing on his own friendships and experiences, backed by solid biblical principles, Stanton portrays gay and lesbian neighbors as authentic, three-dimensional human beings.

The book wisely—if not always winsomely—calls for both sides of the LGBT debates to come in from the extremes and look past prevailing assumptions, stereotypes, and false dichotomies. Christians especially must strive for more nuanced positions on LGBT questions. Stanton advises adopting neither what he calls the “abusive” posture at one end of the spectrum nor the “sentimental” stance at the other.

To stake out this more moderate ground, the book devotes a chapter to explaining the biblical design for human sexuality, a rendition undoubtedly at odds with the understanding of most gay-rights advocates. However, Stanton gives attention to a host of other sins addressed in the Bible—lying, arrogance, pride, and scoffing—in order to discourage undue focus on homosexuality. He remains biblically faithful while offering a humanizing and sympathetic portrayal of same-sex attraction and behavior, noting that a universal desire for intimacy lies at the root of nearly all sexual sin. The chapter closes with a list of “nonnegotiables,” beginning with the reminder that all people are made in God’s image and have “equal dignity and value.”

The book also addresses some trickier issues with wisdom, humility, and generosity. For example, Stanton’s call to accommodate transgender persons in their use of public restrooms is as commonsensical as it is refreshing. Further, the book provides helpful, practical examples of churches and Christians who have handled various relationships and questions with love and grace, both inside and outside the faith.

#### FACILE TREATMENT

Despite offering the church such a singular and important contribution, *Loving My (LGBT) Neighbor* has weaknesses both in style and substance. For instance, Stanton’s overly earnest attempts at folksiness fall flat more often than not, and the jokes he relays from conversations don’t translate well into writing.

More serious is Stanton’s sometimes

facile treatment of key points of debate. He proclaims, for example, that Christians cannot support same-sex marriage as a civil matter because it would pave the way for an “experimental family form.” But this line of attack is insufficient to refute same-sex-marriage arguments that currently prevail outside the church and are gaining traction within. To say that same-sex marriage is an experiment is not to demonstrate that it is unjust or unwise. Our public witness on the sanctity

of marriage has to go beyond opposing departures from the status quo.

Similarly, in calling for mutual respect from both sides of the cultural divide, Stanton challenges those who liken opponents of same-sex marriage to racists and Nazis. But in dismissing all such analogies as “simply beyond the pale,” he misses an opportunity not merely to expose their faultiness but also to sympathetically acknowledge why some gay-rights advocates find them persuasive. Inflammatory

charges of bigotry may be grossly unfair, but readers need to know why.

These faults aside, Stanton deserves applause for exhorting believers to love their LGBT neighbors unconditionally. His book may indeed hasten the day when such an idea is truly unremarkable. **CT**

**KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR** teaches English at Liberty University. She is the author of *Fierce Convictions—The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist* (Thomas Nelson).

# Using— and Abusing—Hell

How the doctrine stirred moral urgency in early America. By Thomas S. Kidd

**Damned Nation:  
Hell in America from  
Revolution to  
Reconstruction**  
Kathryn Gin Lum  
(Oxford University Press)



**H**ell mattered a lot before the Civil War. The prospect of eternal torment was cited to bolster the urgency of missions, campaigns against alcohol abuse, the abolition of slavery, and other moral crusades in our nation's history.

The sheer pervasiveness of the doctrine of hell struck me as I read Kathryn Gin Lum's revealing and engaging *Damned Nation: Hell in America from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press) ★★★★★. Americans believed in and invoked hell regularly. But their polemical uses of the threat of damnation seemed, at times, to treat hell more as a tool of political motivation than a spiritual reality.

Gin Lum, an assistant professor of religious studies at Stanford University, introduces a startling range of people who talked about hell in early-19th-century America. They included evangelical believers and critical skeptics, African American slaves and proslavery whites. Belief in hell helped to inspire the evangelistic efforts that came to define the Second Great Awakening and the “Great Century” of domestic and international missions.

Charles Finney, the definitive evangelist of the Second Great Awakening, did not hesitate to speak about hell. He

once told a dying Boston woman he considered unregenerate that her nominal faith would not win her salvation. On her deathbed, the woman seemed to have a vision of God, but the imagery led her into terror, not comfort. She “exclaimed that she was going to hell,” Finney wrote, and in that desperate frame of mind, she died. The thought of countless millions plunging into fiery torment prompted legions of ministers and missionaries to risk their lives and fortunes to bring as many as possible to Christ.

For a book on hell, *Damned Nation* is quite circumspect. Gin Lum is not a fire-and-brimstone historian. Her account is thorough and engaging, if slightly cautious. She takes seriously people's belief in hell, refusing to see the doctrine as something that elites forced upon the masses as a means of social control. But people creatively appropriated the doctrine, too, as when African Americans and Native Americans used the threat of eternal torment to turn the tables on their oppressors.

It's not until the final chapter that Gin Lum hints at her own thoughts on hell. She notes that the disappearance of hell as a commonplace belief could make it difficult for people to believe in a just God who will ultimately right all wrongs. Henry McNeal Turner, a key

political leader after the Civil War and a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, thundered that, in spite of the “machinations of the wicked,” God “never fails to vindicate the cause of justice, and the sanctity of his own handiwork.” But Gin Lum notes that Turner's hell was populated not so much by sinners who broke the Ten Commandments but by those who oppressed African Americans. Heaven, by contrast, was reserved for the friends of civil rights.

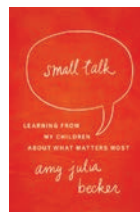
Such visions of heaven and hell can have a strong appeal. But politics have a way of watering down and confusing Christian teaching on humans' eternal destiny (as is the case with any piece of orthodoxy). Some Christians today might be tempted to envision heaven as a Republican Party reunion. But we should always guard against mixing the Bible's transcendent message of sin and salvation with any political cause of the day. Nevertheless, Gin Lum shows that belief in God's final, eternal judgment has the power to stir evangelical zeal, inspire prophetic witness against sin, and fuel a quest for justice on earth. **CT**

**THOMAS S. KIDD** is professor of history at Baylor University and author of *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (Yale University Press).





Small Talk:  
Learning From My  
Children About What  
Matters Most  
Amy Julia Becker  
(Zondervan)



# Wilson's Bookmarks

From John Wilson,  
editor of *Books & Culture*.

## Jingle Bell Jesus

An excerpt from *Small Talk: Learning From My Children About What Matters Most*.

I used to think that Christmas should be divided into two categories—“American Christmas” and “Christian Christmas.” American Christmas involved Santa Claus and presents and eggnog and tinsel. Christian Christmas included the mournful expectation of Advent that led to our celebration of Jesus’ life.

Then one day, Penny comes home from school singing and dancing to “Jingle Bell Rock.” There’s a performance coming up, and she practices daily. She knows every motion, and she sings loud and clear, if somewhat off-key. Her face is aglow with the light of a child who couldn’t be more content or more excited.

It is at that moment that I start to wonder whether American Christmas and Christian Christmas are more closely related than I had suspected.

I think back to the way Jesus’ birth upended traditional assumptions that the spiritual world and the physical world must remain distinct spheres. Jesus’ birth signaled the entrance of God into time and space. And despite Jesus’ condemnation of evil, his life attests to his ongoing affirmation of the goodness of our physical reality.

Christmas celebrates material reality, through gifts and glitter and extravagance. When we place the Nutcracker characters on the branches of our tree, when we bake molasses spice cookies, when we dress up in fancy clothes, we are participating in God’s declaration that this world matters enough to enter into it, to upend the evil within it, to hold tight to the good, forever.

So I begin to think about embracing gift giving, but I’m weary of our stuff. I don’t want my kids to feel entitled to a new bike or book or toy. I don’t want to fill another bin with items to give away. I think perhaps we should all pull names out of a hat and only give one gift apiece, or give the money to charity, or forget about presents altogether.

But I remember that Christmas is also about *receiving* gifts. Instead of purchasing what I want for myself, I submit to what someone else wants me to have. At least in theory, receiving gifts prompts a recognition of all the things in life that come, not because of hard work or because we deserve it, but simply because we are loved. My children, who have no income, who depend on us for each bite of food and each piece of clothing and toy and book and game, know how to receive gifts. With simple joy. With great delight. With gratitude. The same way I want to receive God’s gifts to me.

When Penny comes home singing “Jingle Bell Rock” with all her heart, I realize there is no dividing line for her. Shaking those sleigh bells and belting out those lyrics are part of the celebration. After all, without Jesus’ birth, there would be no reason to throw a party.

CT

Taken from *Small Talk* by Amy Julia Becker. Copyright ©2014 by Amy Julia Becker.

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### MISSING

VIVIAN CHURNNESS (BELIEVERS PRESS)

We’re overloaded with memoirs, yes. But now and then, amid the buzz and the din, a voice catches your attention. So it was for me when I opened this book, by a woman whose husband took off one day with their 3-year-old son, Philip. Thirteen years passed before she saw the boy again. Churnness had been a medical missionary in India, and her faith sustained her throughout the ordeal. Her story is moving precisely because it hasn’t been shaped into a slick narrative or loaded down with minutiae. A rare memoir in which there isn’t a single false note.

### ALADDIN

AGNESE BARUZZI (TANGO BOOKS)

Who would have guessed that just now—when so many experts are predicting the demise of the traditional book, and kids are being wooed with all manner of “devices”—we would be enjoying a cornucopia of superb children’s books? Case in point: Baruzzi’s rendering of the Aladdin story, with elegant cut-paper illustrations. This tale of a magic lamp—which appears in *The Thousand and One Nights*—was one of the first I remember encountering as a small boy. It’s nice to think of kids in 2014 hearing and seeing it for the first time in this gorgeous new version. (Now I must find a copy of Baruzzi’s edition of *Pinocchio*.)

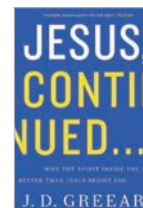
### BASEBALL’S GREATEST COMEBACK

J. BRIAN ROSS (ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS)

If you are a bookish baseball fan, December is not merely the dead center of the off-season—it’s also a time to relish the Hot Stove League with a slice of the game’s history. This year marks the centennial of the “Miracle Braves” of 1914. Boston’s National League team, mired in last place in July, staged a wildly improbable comeback, overtaking the New York Giants to win the pennant and face the Philadelphia Athletics, the reigning dynasty, in the World Series. Historian Ross’s account is a bit clunky but always entertaining, loaded with colorful characters and illuminating glimpses of the era.



**Jesus, Continued:**  
**Why the Spirit Inside**  
**You Is Better Than**  
**Jesus Beside You**  
 J. D. Greear  
 (Zondervan)



# The Holy Spirit Wants You!

J. D. Greear says that's the most important thing to know. Interview by Jen Pollock Michel

**H**ow does the Holy Spirit manifest in the lives of believers? In *Jesus, Continued: Why the Spirit Inside You Is Better Than Jesus Beside You* (Zondervan), Southern Baptist pastor J. D. Greear steps back from secondary debates surrounding specific charismatic gifts to emphasize how the Spirit enlivens our relationship with God. Hermeneutics contributor Jen Pollock Michel spoke with Greear, pastor of the Summit Church in North Carolina, about his hopes for ordinary Christians living Spirit-empowered lives.

## How would you characterize your relationship with the Holy Spirit?

I had always been a little frustrated, because it just seemed like people in the Bible had a fundamentally different relationship with God than my own. There was a hollowness in my spiritual life. God was more a doctrine than a person. I also felt crushed by the amount of stuff that needed to be done in the world. There was always one more orphan, always one more unreached people group.

I began to discover that an understanding of our relationship with the Holy Spirit helps to soothe these anxieties. Instead of saying, "Look at all that God needs me to do for him," the Spirit reminds us to say, "Look at what God is empowering me to do."

In Luke 24, when Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, the first thing he told his disciples was to *wait*. No one cared more about the spread of the gospel than Jesus, but he knew they couldn't do anything for him until the Holy Spirit came. The Spirit would do more through them than they could ever do by themselves.

**You ask readers to move beyond theological debates over miraculous gifts (healing, prophecy, speaking in**

## tongues). Why?

Too often, discussion about the Holy Spirit runs on two tracks: the conservative track and the charismatic track. Secondary issues create a quagmire, and both sides miss the most important thing: that the Spirit of God wants to have fellowship with us.

I heard a charismatic theologian talk about how the theme of Galatians was the fullness of the Spirit. Instinctively, I wanted to say, "No, it's justification by faith." But when I reread Galatians, I realized he was right. For Paul, the two things are one and the same. The deeper you go into understanding you've been justified by faith, the more alive you become in the Spirit.

## You nudge readers to reflect on their lived experience of the Holy Spirit. What are the advantages and pitfalls of this approach?

The advantage is that a living God has uniquely designed our stories, before and after conversion, to teach us about him and prepare us for ministry. Like most believers, I can look at my life and see clear evidence of God's activity. He has given us particular experiences, passions, skills, and gifts. One way to discern what God wants for your future is to trace his hand in your life in the past.

But it can be unhelpful if you divorce your lived experience from God's revelation in Scripture. Don't put too much weight on interpreting your life.

## Why caution that the Holy Spirit's activity is a mystery?

God never spelled out, *This is how you know I am speaking to you*. How did Paul know in Acts 16:6 that God was telling him not to preach in Asia? What does it mean in Acts 15:28 that "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"? Nehemiah concluded that God had given him the job



J. D. Greear

of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, but we never encounter a direct command.

We see the Holy Spirit's presence in many ways: through Scripture, our spiritual gifts, the work of the church, and our life circumstances. We hold these all in tension, and we hold them loosely—except for the Word of God. Much harm has been caused in the church by people who have said, "God has told me."

## You argue that conversion is a "greater work" of the Holy Spirit than, say, physical healing. Does this reinforce the idea that the gospel obligates us to care for the soul but not the body?

There are lesser works of the Spirit that point to greater works. Any time the gospel is preached faithfully, acts of compassion for people in physical need will follow. But even Jesus' miracles were signs of his most important work, which was to open the eyes of the blind soul. So while we must meet physical needs, we should focus on the greatest miracle, the conversion of the soul.

CT





MxPx, Tooth & Nail Records' biggest band, was known for Christian themes, though lead singer Mike Herrera (center) no longer goes to church.

# Safe and Subversive

Tooth & Nail Records let Christian teenagers be both in an age of squeaky-clean pop.  
By Joel Heng Hartse

**L**ike every theological tradition, US evangelicalism is as much a sub-culture as it is a set of beliefs. It's a community built on shared practices and products, and few have been more commercially successful in the past decades than contemporary Christian music (ccm). That phrase may evoke squeaky-clean pop playing in the minivans of many an evangelical childhood. But as those children of the '80s and '90s came of age, many of them began looking for something more potent. For them, the Christian music worth listening to came from a record label called Tooth & Nail.

Since 1994, out of a nondescript

office building in an upper-middle-class Seattle neighborhood, Tooth & Nail and its associated imprints have released 600 albums by 200 bands. There's the wall-of-sound guitar sludge of Starflyer 59's "Blue Collar Love" and the raucous anarchy of MxPx's "Punk Rawk Show"; the paranoid shouts of Roadside Monument and the high-energy ska of the O.C. Super-tones; the guttural growls of Underoath and Norma Jean; the strained emotion of Pedro the Lion and the Juliana Theory.

To celebrate its 20th anniversary, Tooth & Nail has commissioned a short documentary, *No New Kinda Story*. It details the genesis of the label and the alternative

Christian music scene it spawned throughout the 1990s. Directed by Jesse Bryan, the film is not an exhaustive history as much as a record of Tooth & Nail's early years, starting as a gleam in the eye of Brandon Ebel, the son of a megachurch pastor.

In keeping with Tooth & Nail's alternative ethos, *No New Kinda Story* is less sanitized than you might expect from a label-sponsored project. Its black-and-white, one-on-one interview format gives it the air of a reality-show confessional. Ebel admits to paying Christian indie rock legend Mike Knott to pretend to be the label's president in order to attract bands.

COURTESY OF TOOTH & NAIL

# How many people in 1994 wanted to hear deafening, abrasive, grating songs about Jesus? The answer, it turns out, is quite a few.

He also says he borrowed \$60,000 from his grandfather (essentially his life savings) at a critical moment.

But there's a limit to the candor. Last year, I met a musician who had signed with Tooth & Nail in the 1990s. He told me that an entertainment lawyer had called his band's contract the worst he had ever seen. A song by MxPx on the album *Slowly Going the Way of the Buffalo* seems to criticize the label for "steal[ing] from kids who don't have a clue." Is there any merit to these complaints? You won't find out from *No New Kinda Story*, which feels mostly like a rough-around-the-edges puff piece.

Even so, there's something compelling about how it depicts Ebel's irrational vision: that Christian punk, hardcore, and alternative music was worth releasing, even to what must have seemed like a tiny audience. How many people in 1994 wanted to hear deafening, abrasive, grating songs about Jesus?

The answer, it turns out, is quite a few.

## MOMS LIKE US TOO

Indeed, what can't be captured in the one-hour film is the cultural, musical, and even spiritual impact of Tooth & Nail over the past 20 years. Other chronicles of 1990s Christian rock and its fallout have taken an outsider's perspective (documentaries like Heather Whinna and Vickie Hunter's *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?* and J. L. Aronson's *Danielson: A Family Movie*, about eccentric Christian rock mogul Daniel Smith, and Andrew Beaujon's insightful book *Body Piercing Saved My Life*). But none of these forays have quite nailed (if you will) what Tooth & Nail and its bands have meant

for Christian culture.

In a nutshell, Tooth & Nail created a safe, subversive space for Christian teenagers who felt torn between youth-group subculture and secular counter-cultures. The label's bands were sonically diverse, exploring various corners of the indie rock, emo, punk, and hardcore genres. But what they had in common, as Ebel and many others have said, is feeling "too Christian for non-Christians, and not Christian enough for Christians."

It is difficult to overstate how important this was for developing an evangelical creative culture. We saw musicians that looked like us—nerds in ripped jeans, skinny guys with glasses, and girls with shaved heads or dyed hair playing aggressive music, expressing passionate beliefs about ultimate things. To see this was to know, as one interviewee puts it, "I'm not a Christian alone in this universe."

It was to feel free to be a punk kid and still wear a cross around your neck, to go to church with a Dead Kennedys pin on your hoodie. Even though Tooth & Nail was part of the evangelical subculture, it also helped open up a new, integrative vision of Christian faith and identity for many young people.

One of the label's early slogans, "Moms Like Us Too," playfully suggested that Tooth & Nail was viewed as a "safe" Christian label. Parents could trust that the lyrics wouldn't expose their children to sex, drugs, and swear words. Young people also trusted Tooth & Nail, but for a different reason. By and large, we knew we were *not* getting something "safe," but something dangerous and real: an alternative vision of faith and art we didn't always find in mainstream CCM.

## A BIT LESS ALONE

The work of a band like *mewithoutYou*, which released four albums on Tooth & Nail over the past decade, is a shining example. A high-energy blend of hardcore guitar riffs and shouted spoken-word poetry by frontman Aaron Weiss, the music is an unsettling revelation. It's a remarkable thing to hear a "Christian band" sing prayers in Hebrew and Arabic, declaring, "you're afraid / and I'm afraid / and everyone's afraid / and everyone knows it!" To hear Christian music address a desperate yearning for God as well as suicidal thoughts, sexual temptation, alienation, and forgiveness. The band's lyrics offer an expansive vision of what it means to follow Christ, and this is reflected in the music itself: relentlessly loud, daring, and creative.

A generation who was weaned on Tooth & Nail culture has learned from the label's bands and carried these ideals into adulthood. Art is more important than propaganda; punk ideals are compatible with the gospel; and sometimes God seems easier to find at a rock show than at a Christian conference.

The scene that Tooth & Nail helped create has largely disappeared. Both the Christian rock scene and the wider music business have contracted. Tooth & Nail recently sold its entire back catalog to EMI (one of the "big four" corporate record labels). But there's a saying in independent music circles: The Velvet Underground's first album sold very few copies, but everyone who bought a copy started a band.

This has been Tooth & Nail's legacy, too. Even if you haven't heard of the label, the Christian musicians, writers, and thinkers you know likely bought these records, loved them, and lived them. Ask a young missional evangelical pastor, a tattooed worship leader, or many a *Christianity Today* contributor, and you'll likely find a kid who spent afternoons absorbing a CD by Ninety Pound Wuss, Further Seems Forever, or Slick Shoes. Sitting there poring over the liner notes, chances are they felt a bit less alone in the universe.

CT

JOEL HENG HARTSE has written about music and faith for CT, *Christ & Pop Culture*, *Geez*, and many other publications. He is the author of *Sects, Love, and Rock & Roll* (Cascade).





# New & Noteworthy

Compiled by Matt Reynolds

*"The enemy of God is relentlessly committed to fouling both immanent pleasure and transcendent joy. Evil hates sex and is ruthlessly committed to tearing down the bridge between desire and holiness."*

~ from **God Loves Sex**,

by Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III



## GOD LOVES SEX

An Honest Conversation about Sexual Desire and Holiness

DAN B. ALLENDER AND TREMPER LONGMAN III (BAKER BOOKS)

Sexual desire, corrupted by the Fall, has a nasty habit of veering off into strange and unhealthy territory. In *God Loves Sex*, Allender (a Christian therapist) and Longman (a biblical scholar) combine forthright discussion of sexual struggles among believers with insights from the Song of Songs. They show how our disordered desires can be redeemed and transformed. "God intends to purify our desire in the holy consumption of his love," write Allender and Longman. "We must take the risk of bringing our desire—holy and impure before his eyes—to be caught up in what sex is meant to offer: the arousal of our deepest desire to be in union with him."



## AMERICAN APOCALYPSE

A History of Modern Evangelicalism

MATTHEW AVERY SUTTON (BELKNAP PRESS)

*American Apocalypse* focuses attention on the network of "radical evangelicals—preachers, evangelists, broadcasters, businessmen, Bible-college professors, publishers, and laypeople"—who predicted the looming end of the world at the turn of the 20th century. In this sweeping history, Sutton (a historian and biographer of Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson) argues that apocalyptic fervor exercised an underappreciated influence on believers, churches, and institutions. It helped to propel the evangelical resurgence after World War II and continues to shape the movement ever since. The consequence has been a "distinct religious culture and a distinct form of Christian cultural engagement that has impacted the world in profound ways."

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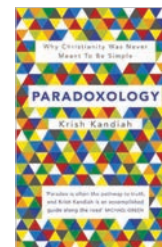
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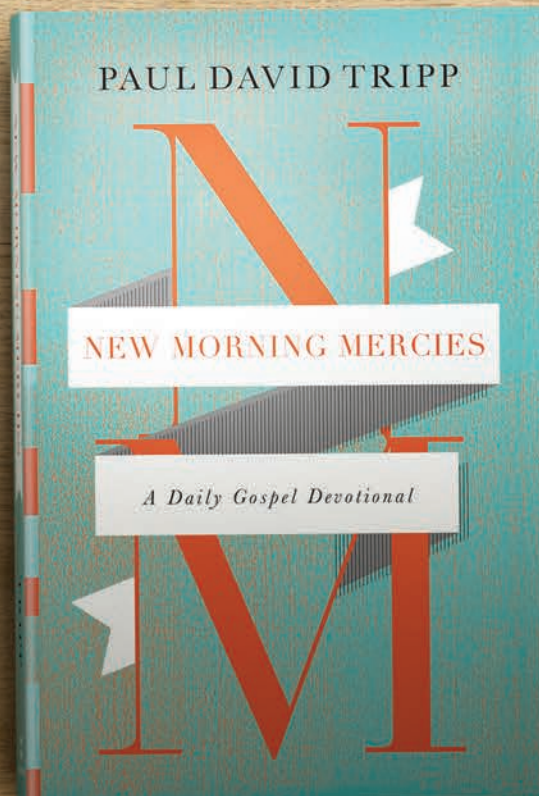
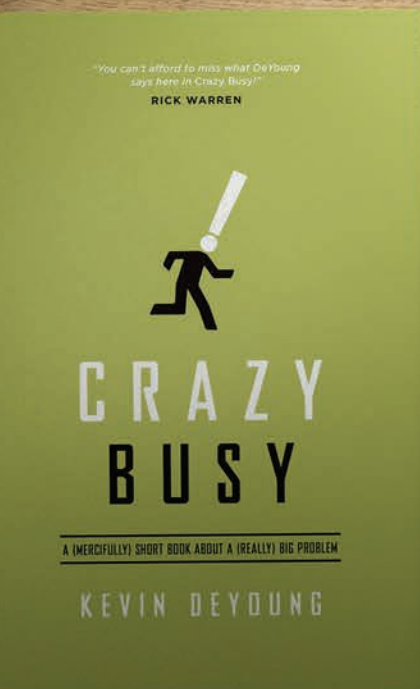
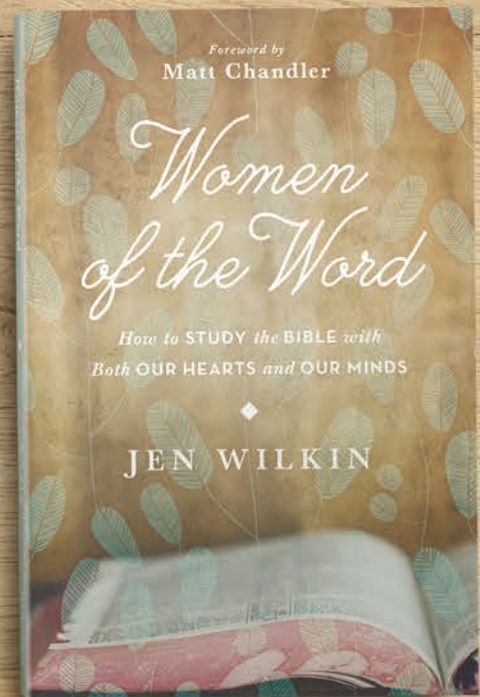
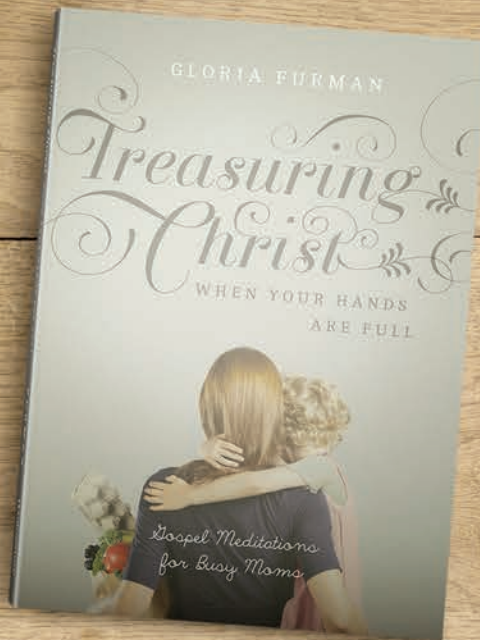
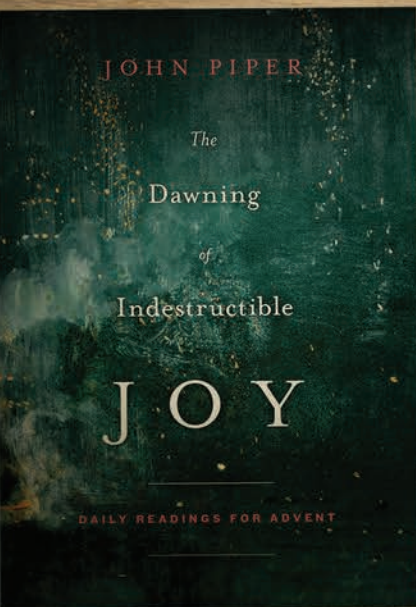
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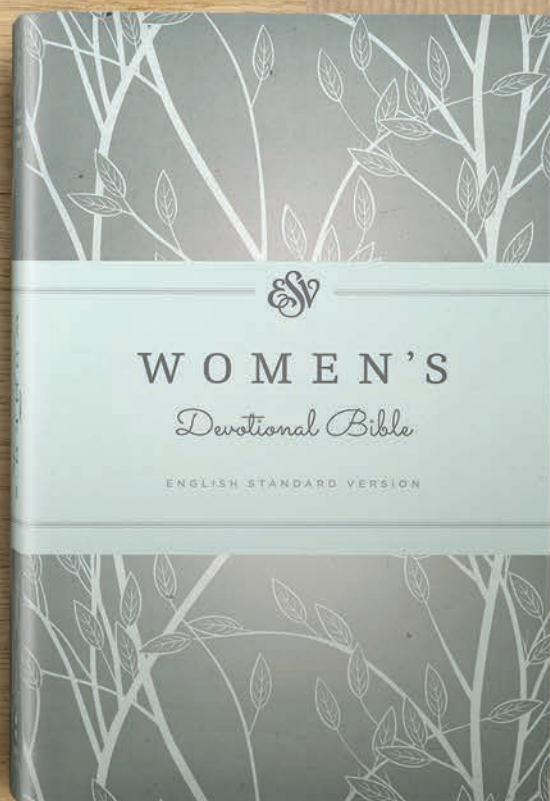
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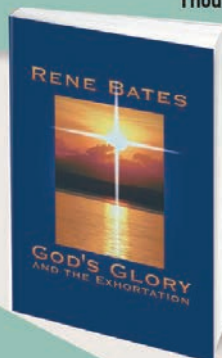
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 80

life, I embraced by age 3 or 4. God my Creator, Jesus my Savior, the Spirit my Helper, the Bible my rule. To someone who didn't come from a Christian home or grow up in the church, this probably sounds lovely. But it took me most of my life to appreciate just how extraordinary was the grace I had received in ordinary circumstances.

In fifth grade, I began to attend a school where dramatic testimonies were a regular part of morning chapel. Week after week, speakers—a drug addict, a party girl, an atheist—told of God's rescue. I loved these stories, and today I am thankful for revivals of such "testifying" in places like this regular feature of cr.

In retrospect, though, I'm not sure why the administrators chose to feature only the extraordinary. The pews, after all, were filled with church kids whose parents were committed to their religious education. I suppose such testimonies were meant to broaden our awareness of the world outside our youth groups; possibly the faculty wanted to encourage students who were struggling with sin or doubts. But I am baffled that I never once heard a testimony like my own.

And so I began to fear that I hadn't really been saved—or, at least, that my story of being saved wasn't quite legitimate. My before-and-after-conversion pictures (assuming I could even pinpoint a particular moment) didn't look that different. With no outward markers of coming to Christ, I questioned whether I had at all. Perhaps I was floating on other people's convictions, happily living in a Christian environment without actually being a Christian.

If I didn't have a specific moment of repentance, maybe my repenting didn't count. I became convinced that my boring testimony was inferior.

### NO GREAT TERRORS

Nearly 250 years before my birth, the town in which I grew up, Coventry, was mentioned in the narrative of pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards. In 1736, he recorded his observations of the Great Awakening, what he called "the *late wonderful work of God*, in this and some other towns in this country":

There have been some who have not

had great terrors, but have had a very quick work. Some of those who have not had so deep a conviction of [their sinfulness] *before* their conversion, have much more of it *afterwards*.

Like some of the New Englanders that Edwards described, my great terrors and deep conviction lagged behind my childlike faith. By the time I was a teenager, I knew my sins well. The old man in my heart displayed a shocking amount of wickedness: lusts and selfishness and idolatry. And I realized that if these sins, which I sincerely attempted to fight, were only the shudders of a defeated enemy—if these were not sin set loose but sin restrained—I could only imagine the extent of my offense before I came to Christ. As idyllic as my childhood seemed, I knew it was marred by nothing less horrible than my own sin.

Yet I was thankful for the church that had validated my testimony. In December 1989, I approached the elders of the church and asked to become a member. They, who had heard all kinds of stories from all kinds of people, declared my testimony to be a work of God. A few weeks later, I stood in front of the congregation and received the right hand of fellowship from those who had been lost but now were found. My testimony may have been boring, but it was welcomed.

And I was also thankful for grace. As Puritan preacher Thomas Watson wrote:

The Lord does not tie himself to a particular way, or use the same order with all. He comes sometimes in a still small voice. Such as have had godly parents, and have sat under the warm sunshine of religious education, often do not know how or when they were called. The Lord did secretly and gradually instil [sic] grace into their hearts, as dew falls unnoticed in drops.

I knew that I had been blessed. I found tears in my eyes when, as a teenager, still

sometimes doubting that my testimony was valid, I sang the words of Isaac Watts: "Why was I made to hear thy voice, / And enter while there's room, / When thousands make a wretched choice, / And rather starve than come?" But it still seemed a bit prideful, a little rose-colored, to stand up and say I was practically born with "Jesus Loves Me" on my lips and in my heart.

It wasn't until I became a parent, at 27, that I began to see that in all testimonies, it is not the outward circumstances that are amazing. It's the grace.

### TINY REBELS

I am giving my three sons the same ordinary Christian childhood that I had. Their Sunday school attendance charts are dotted with stickers; their minds are filled with memory verses and catechism answers. But without a doubt, each of my children is a rebel against the King. Whether they embrace faith tomorrow or spend hard years going their own way first, their salvation will be the work of amazing grace.

There is no dull salvation. The Son of God took on flesh to suffer and die, purchasing a people for his glory. As Gloria Furman writes, "The idea that anyone's testimony of blood-bought salvation could be uninteresting or unspectacular is a defamation of the work of Christ."

For myself, I cannot point to a specific day of spiritual awakening. I can point only to my Lord, who says, "All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37). My Jesus, I come. Every day in need of grace. And I find myself not cast out.

When I don't tell my story, I deprive the church of what should be one of its sweetest gifts. Boring stories like mine are just what the church, especially its young people, need to hear. Testimonies of childhood faith have all the elements of God's amazing grace—beginning, middle, and end. And when I look at my children, I pray that their testimonies turn out to be just as amazing as mine. **CT**

**MEGAN HILL** lives in Mississippi with her husband and three young sons. She blogs at [Her.meneutics](http://Her.meneutics) and [SundayWomen.com](http://SundayWomen.com).

Go to [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com) for "An Unremarkable Testimony," a Bible study based on this article.

**It is not the outward circumstances that are amazing. It's the grace.**



# TESTIMONY



ROBBY FOLLOWELL

## Humdrum Hallelujah

My testimony is a bit boring. It's also, still, amazing.

By Megan Hill

**Editor's Note:** This issue marks two years since we launched *Testimony*, *cr*'s back-page feature spotlighting stories of conversion to Christ. One of our most popular features, we've heard from ex-atheists, ex-Muslims, and ex-bank robbers, from football stars to LDS Church escapees to media pundits visited by Jesus in a Taiwan hotel. We celebrate both the dramatic and the normal, day-to-day ways Jesus reaches us, precisely because it is Jesus doing the reaching. In Christ, no testimony, including the following from Megan Hill, is unremarkable.

I have no memory of becoming a Christian. I didn't pray a prayer or walk an aisle or have a eureka moment. In fact, I don't remember a time when I didn't love the Lord Jesus. My Christian testimony—the story of how I came to faith—is downright boring.

I was born in 1978 and raised in Connecticut by godly

Presbyterian parents. I ate my peanut-butter sandwiches with a prayer of thanks, recited answers at bedtime from the children's catechism, and the songs I remember my dad singing to me invariably were from either the Beatles or the hymnal.

But mine was not merely a private religion. Church life shaped the weekly rhythms of my childhood. The Sunday school teachers and eventually youth group leaders reminded me by their very presence that other people love Jesus, too, and we sang "Amazing Grace" (I can think of three different versions) together.

To this day, many of the Scripture verses I keep in my mind and heart are from the King James Version, a sign that I memorized them early in life, before copies of the New International Version appeared in my church's pews. To me, John 3:16 will always be a child's linguistic challenge: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

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